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Fantasies of Authenticity, Anxieties of Culture: Global Capital, Entertainment and
Cultural Nationalism in the Contemporary Popular Cinemas of India and China since
1990¹

DPhil Oriental Studies

¹ This thesis is dedicated, with gratitude, to all my family, friends, and mentors. You always had faith in me, and your generosity of heart made this achievement possible.

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Thesis Title: *Fantasies of Authenticity, Anxieties of Culture: Global Capital, Entertainment and Cultural Nationalism in the Contemporary Popular Cinemas of India and China since 1990*

Thesis Abstract

My thesis is dedicated to the study of popular, commercial cinema as a force within the discourse of national and personal identity in the rapidly changing mega-economies of India and China, and their diasporas, since the watershed year of 1990. Its purpose is to reveal the unique pattern of *like* and *unlike* that exists between the “Social Representations” (Serge Moscovici 2000) of contemporary India and China on screen through a juxtapositional comparative approach, close visual analysis, and the development of original theoretical tools. Tense networks of fantasy and anxiety emerge as popular culture actively circulates their shared experiences of changing global status, uneven economic growth (Gong Haomin 2012), and social change. Transnational subjects, *Hua* and *Desi*, arrive on screen ready to carve out culturally inflected modernities, in search of “tradition” and “values” to suit contemporary *cultural-nations-beyond-borders*.

I treat film as consumer product, diegetic entity, and text: hence narrative, visual, linguistic and contextual aspects of over fourteen popular commercial films (“Bollywood” and “*Yulepian*” 娱乐片), are explored. My analysis comprises two interlocking halves: the first two chapters focus chiefly on identities - *Hua* and *Desi*, and diasporic persons. The former, conduits for the cultural nation to re-think modernity, the latter a dreamed vanguard of “claim-staking” ethnicised global consumers, defenders of the cultural nation in the “host” country. Chapters Three and Four focus on genres - comedy and history films. Through comedy, these films create state-serving heterotopias or challenge the status quo; perhaps they build cultural nationalist mythos, or lace cynical questions through lavish history film. To understand internecine relationships between economics, society and the imagination, entertainment film cannot be dismissed – in India and China, where change has had intended and unintended consequences unfolding even as uncertainty looms, I show that fresh study, especially in comparison, is absolutely essential.

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Introduction: Cultural Identities in an Age of Modern Fantasy and Fear

This thesis is dedicated to the study of popular, commercial cinema as a force within the discourse of national and personal identity in the rapidly changing mega-economies of India and China, and their diasporas, since 1990. Its purpose is to reveal, through a juxtapositional comparative approach, close visual analysis and the development of theoretical tools, differences and similarities that emerge from the unique pattern of *like* and *unlike* existing between the “Social Representations” of contemporary India and China³. It will show that popular cinema serves as one means by which perceived contradictions between “development” and “authenticity” are both provoked and resolved in the cultural sphere through the creation of alternative modernities, and culturally inflected transnational Subjects to inhabit them, on screen. I posit, on the one hand a convergence between actors or forces invested, for one reason or another, in the development of such subject identities. On the other hand, I suggest a layered tension between the nation states of India and China, and their respective e related transnational cultural nations. These, I propose, are interlocking phenomena reflective of the economic and social changes that have arisen from that landmark year of 1990 until today⁴.

³ This is a theoretical concept advanced by Moscovici in response to Emile Durkheim. In this case, referring to the set of beliefs brought about through their histories, societies, their process of cultural production, and the cultural products in Mandarin and Hindi themselves

⁴ The cut-off date of the analysis in this thesis is 2014, where it is bookended by the official visit of Xi Jinping to Delhi, a landmark in the development of new trade and cultural relations between the two countries that pre-figures future change, however in the introduction and conclusion to this thesis I am taking a slightly broader view and bringing considerations up to date to time of writing.

Indeed, from 1990 until very recently, India and China have both seen a strong, if bumpy⁵, period of growth and complex political and policy change, as well as a boom in the film entertainment⁶ and satellite movie channel industries⁷. Over the same period, they have *also* both been witness to the rise of new forms of Nationalist discourse in their politics⁸; these discourses being chiefly linked to ethnic, religious, and philosophical interpretations of the constituent nature of their nationhood⁹. The majority of these, moreover, express both a deep-seated anxiety with regard to retaining their

⁵ Asian financial crisis, Bird Flu and the Great Recession are some of the main road humps to which neither India nor China have succumbed for long. As I later suggest, more recent global geo-political and economic developments also present risk and opportunity.

⁶ Box office receipts hit an all-time high for domestic film in China again in 2012, according to official statistics from the SARFT. Although it is necessary to take official statistics in the PRC with a grain of salt, by all accounts the upswing in both attendance and takings over the past 20 years has been unmistakable.

⁷ One suggestion for an underlying reason for this to happen can be inferred from Gong Haomin's statement that "The sheer emphasis on economic development inevitably resulted in deflation of the value of culture and depreciation of the intellectuals' social status". Although Gong identifies this process as starting with Reform Opening Up in the late 70s, I suggest that it has been particularly the case since the early 90s when the idealism of the 80s had been somewhat emptied out by the 1989 massacre at Tian'anmen. It is ironic to imagine that intellectuals were held in high regard during the years prior to Reform and Opening Up, which were, after all, the years of the Cultural Revolution, however we must consider that even the Cultural Revolution was enabled by adherence to an intellectual and philosophical set of ideas. If we take Gong's statement to be true, we can see how an emptying out of value in the field of more intellectual cultural production simultaneous with a booming economy would come to give rise to a blossoming of popular culture. We can see further, how it is possible that the explosion in numbers, success and sheer spectacle in the arena of Bollywood since the early 90s, the ever-increasing costs, and use of locations and effects, can also have come to be through similar circumstances of economic change. See Gong (2012).

⁸ In the case of India this comes in the particular form of Hindutva, and its extremes, which are part of a spectrum of "Hindu Nationalism", that can range from the patriotic to the zealously Hindu. These forces are intimately involved in what Bhowmik calls the *vox populi* component of contemporary Indian censorship. Bhowmik (2009) 288-98.

⁹ In many respects these are simply outgrowths of the varied understandings of Nationalism that emerged in the 19th Century, enumerated very lucidly by Smith (2001) 5-6: "

- (1) a process of formation, or growth, of nations;
- (2) a sentiment or consciousness of belonging to the nation;
- (3) a language and symbolism of the nation;
- (4) a social and political movement on behalf of the nation;
- (5) a doctrine and/or ideology of the nation, both general and particular."

differentiating identities in the face of global commercial flows, and a (sometimes defensive) pride. These are two large, linguistically diverse nations with complex and varied histories of global and regional relations. It may be the case that in the coming years they both will face unprecedented economic challenges; nevertheless, the positions that they are now in with regard to their global profile, and the images they have of themselves¹⁰, are substantially different than they were 20 years ago. Both have strong, and increasingly globally visible cultural products in their *linguae francae*, or *vehicular languages*, Hindi and Mandarin, respectively, both of these languages being connected with the history of modern state power, and of modernity itself in their countries of origin¹¹. Entertainment film in these languages¹² now has the widest cultural circulation of any globally, and one that continues to grow¹³ due to concerted

¹⁰ The means of such project for such images of themselves can be through, for example, media, including popular film, political campaigns or slogans, stances and policies both international and domestic, the arts, advertising or communities of various types, as well as pedagogy.

¹¹ Modern “Mandarin” Chinese, or *Putonghua* (also, interestingly called *hua yu* 华语 in the diaspora), even before the simplification of characters under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), had been created in an effort to move towards a more colloquial language akin to spoken language, as authors of the Republic of China (1911 to 1949) moved from the more literary (but still relatively modern) *wenyanwen* 文言文 to the plainer *baihua* 白话. As described in the 1950 constitution of India, Hindi is the official language of India, the grammar of which was not standardized until 1958, though it has its origin in the language of the Mughal court. Modern Hindi itself, is often referred to as *Hindi-Urdu* or *Hindustani* (meaning “Indian”). In the political language of the Swaraj movement, it was chiefly referred to as *Hindustani*, and was intended to combine in a syncretic form the best of Sanskritic languages / Hindi-related languages of the Delhi area and Urdu.

¹² Largest both as opposed to the scale of film production in other languages from those countries e.g. Cantonese or Telugu, but also, entertainment as the genre which currently predominates. Further, when taken together, by some measure they have the largest circulation for entertainment films full stop.

¹³ As opposed to the products of the also very popular Malayalee, Tamil or Telegu film industries in India, or the Cantonese Film Industry, based in Hong Kong. Importantly, while it is true that Cantonese entertainment films were really the pinnacle of *yulepian* and that the New Year’s Film *hesuipian* 贺岁片, an annual much-anticipated comedy blockbuster, was invented in originally a Cantonese format, the Hong Kong film industry did in the past produce Mandarin language films as well, and further, there has been a notable movement towards making Mandarin language films in Hong Kong since the handover in 1997.

efforts of state and business¹⁴. Whether this be for good or ill, these Mandarin and Hindi industries are expanding both in numbers and in their ability to serve as a potential conduit for soft power¹⁵, so they are the films on which I will be focusing¹⁶. This is not to unquestioningly suggest that these forms are “national cinemas” but to recognise them as the primary cinematic tools of influence and modernity-myth-making as exercised within and without the nation. While, we must also consider the outputs of these two cultural nations in English, products in Mandarin and Hindi speak inclusively to certain populations: popular film, including the better-known products of “Bollywood”, nevertheless get relatively little attention on the international stage, and from foreign audiences. That is, they are designed with a culturally continuous viewer in mind. Nevertheless, shifts towards English language film constitute an effort to further expand, even universalise, contemporary constructions of Indian and Chinese values in some cases, in a manner still relevant to members of the cultural nation, while striding ahead in their expansion of soft power¹⁷. They also indicate fluency with globalised culture and industry, as I show in my Chapter Two.

¹⁴ Bhowmik suggests that Hindi language film’s:

“imagined pre-eminence rests on its supposed role as the disseminator of “official” language. It has received enthusiastic encouragement from a politician-businessman-bureaucrat nexus. They are now making conscious efforts to project the Hindi film industry’s product as *the Indian cinema*. Even an international brand identity called *Bollywood*, was invented for this purpose to act as an indispensable element of *Brand India* or *India Inc.*”

¹⁵ As diaspora spreads and occupies new and varied economic positions globally, and as India and China themselves continue to gain clout and presence on the world stage.

¹⁶ As Li Ruihuan is quoted as saying in Chua (2003) and Lu (2001), “It tells us that an artistic work must entertain first or it is useless to talk about educating people with it. The influence we exert must be subtle, imperceptible, and the people should be influence without being conscious of it. In order to make socialist principles and moral virtues acceptable to the broad masses, we must learn to use the forms that the masses favour.” Lu (2001) 207-08, and Chua (2012) 25-26.

¹⁷ The forthcoming *Great Wall* (Zhang Yimou dir. 2016), starring Matt Damon, can be put in this category.

Methodologically, my juxtapositional approach, and process of arriving at films for close study emerges from two main factors gleaned from initial research of primary and secondary resources. “Juxtaposition” as I elaborate in greater detail in the first chapter of my thesis¹⁸, is intended to be a mode of comparison that allows for contextual information to be present, and connected, and a set of criteria to be evident and measured, while avoiding an evaluative agenda. This is a developing approach that attempts to be flexible to the input of other disciplines on methodology, and to changes in the field. It is formed in response to the tendency of comparative studies of India and China to fall into two main traps, and in the case of the Humanities, South/East Asia comparative projects are thin on the ground to begin with.

Firstly, much of comparative study of contemporary or modern India and China tends to be in search of a value judgement: which country has developed faster, or better? Which has a better effect on global capital or peace? And crucially, which is *ahead* and which is *behind*? More often than not, the conclusion either comes down on the side of efficiency, favouring China’s authoritarianism, or of democracy, where India is the exemplar, depending on the bias of the author, and inevitably falling into a gross oversimplification of both situations. Secondly, the other pitfall that I have noticed in my reading of comparative studies from sociology and economics, particularly theory of the same, is the goal to provide a simple template that can be applied absolutely equally, forcing the two nations and their products together, often times ignoring contextual factors, under a logic of cultural relativism; Martin Jacques’ idea of the “Civilisation State” is a good example of this. Both of these approaches, the works utilising them, and the speed

¹⁸ I have also been working on this approach in other other papers, and in the Juxtapose Project (www.juxtaposeproject.org) conference series I co-founded and ran during my DPhil study.

with which their ideas are taken up by the media and the States of which they speak, are worthy of serious attention, and my thesis certainly does not dismiss this circulating influence. However, this does not mean that repeating such methodology is appropriate to a sensitive study of primary materials.

Here, a *juxtapositional* approach attempts to glean from a large body of information - popular film over a period from 1990 until 2014 - certain overall themes or questions that are returned to repeatedly in *both spaces*, but, crucially *not* with the plan to simply force a “both or neither” answer upon the materials, or to make a teleological evaluation. Rather, after a broad-based view of the field, I have sought what questions are asked within the texts/films, reflecting on ways in which these are linked to their socio-political and economic environments, and narrowed my scope to a few of these questions accordingly to see how they are answered. This approach has informed the ways in which I have focused down from a very large volume of potential sources, but crucially, has not forced conclusions on the process: often the responses share commonalities, often there are significant differences, sometimes subtle ones. In order to define these parameters in an overall sense, I based my *initial* pool of possible sources on overall trends, box office takings, and cultural impact (for example, the creation of sequels, the influence of aesthetics on later films, the extent to which a film affects the future of an individual actor, or the volume of articles or blogs produced about the film in its aftermath). Naturally, the extent to which a film has been viewed can be linked to its penetration into the public consciousness, but I have deliberately *not* stuck to a strict model based on top box office takings for each year in my study, which in any case would leave me with far too many sources. In fact, such figures conceal much. They are often unreliable, for reasons of politics or corruption, and may be arrived at in different ways from year to year and between the two industries. Further, they simply do not account for other crucial factors

to my inquiry including the frequency of screening of individual films on cable and internet outlets, and moreover illegal viewing of films, which is very pertinent in the crucial transmedia space. Far from hunting for one or two films that meet my needs in each chapter, in order to accomplish my analysis, rather than taking an over-selective view of my sources to find a film appropriate to a foregone conclusion, I have had to limit, and remove sources for reasons of space, time and again.

For example, in my fourth chapter, which handles mythic and modern history films, I had thought to include a more detailed study of *Asoka* (Sivan, Santosh dir. 2001), and *1942* (Feng Xiaogang dir. 2012), among others. I had further originally planned to include an additional section thinking about sport and competition as a way of creating myths of nationhood in a time of peace, or while emphasising the will to peace. I did not include the latter for reasons of space. I did not include the two films mentioned above, which are only two among many that I had initially planned, again, because of space, but also because I tried to choose films that *best* fit the criteria of being roughly similar in that they were popular, successful, influential, and asking similar questions. *Jodhaa Akbar* (Gowariker, Ashutosh dir. 2008) and *Chi Bi* (Woo, John dir. 2008/9) are both glamorous, multi-star, box-office successes, released at more or less the same time. On the one hand, they appealed to the desire for spectacle, and on the other hand, applied modern aesthetic sensibilities of such spectacle to *semi-historical* subject matter, which I present as Mythic¹⁹. In appearance, they are quite different, characterisation is substantially different, and of course acting style is relevant to the individual industries. Yet they share much, using contemporary reworkings of “authentic” aesthetics, and focusing on central

¹⁹ My use of “mythic” is clarified in the thesis. I do not mean to suggest that events such as the battle at Red Cliff did not occur, but rather that in this mode, such history feeds into a *myth of origin*.

romances, for example. I point out both the similarities *and* the differences. I suggest ways that both films do answer questions about the way that the contemporary audience can relate to a cultural history from which they are at a remove, one that they must be included in as an Imagined Community through such devices as film, to create a relationship that can strengthen cultural nationalist impulses of the like seen in Confucius Institutes, transnational Hindu holidays, or the 2008 Olympics' opening ceremony, designed by a director, of course. Further, I acknowledge in my work that such *Mythic History* films can be responded to both positively and negatively, or even in a mixed fashion.

As another example of the ways in which I might assess a film for inclusion in the study: films such as *Fengkuang de Shitou* (Ning, Hao dir. 2006) was a surprise hit, with its mishmash of styles and dialects. It had an enormous effect on the aesthetics of films which followed and the trajectory of actors that appeared in it: Xu Zheng and Huang Bo's careers, for example, took off to a new level following it, while Ning Hao also benefitted. A film like *Tianxia Wu Zei* (Feng, Xiaogang. 2004) was key to establishing actor Wang Baoqiang's status, some may say typecasting, as an innocent, based on his character in the film, Shagen. The film *Dostana*, was not among the top 5 most successful Bollywood films of 2008, *but* was protested, lauded, and much commented upon in the media because of its handling of GLBT issues, approach to the "Pink Rupee", and the controversial famous (near) kiss between Abhishek Bachchan and John Abraham. It also led to a sequel. In other words, although it was the 8th most successful film of the year, rather than being number 1, it is arguable that it had more lasting cultural significance for the audience than

*Ghajini*²⁰ (Murugadoss, A.R. dir. 2008) or *Rab ne Bana di Jodi (A Match made in Heaven)* (Chopra, Aditya dir. 2008), which occupied the first and second spots, respectively. Moreover, of course, some phenomena simply cannot be ignored: given his substantial economic success as well as cultural influence, it would be remiss of me not to include the work of a director such as Feng Xiaogang, for example.

In sum, this study treats film as product, diegetic entity, and text: hence exploring visual, linguistic and contextual aspects and drawing from a perspective rooted in economics and sociology as well as cinema and cultural studies. My approach seeks to remain sensitive to the role of the audience, but also that of technology and its various media in actively affecting viewing experience(s) and social solubility of film. Thus, I move from a focus on film as an object, an experience within a theatre, to the world of streaming. The analytical section of this thesis is organised into four units, the first two of which focus on the portrayal of different aspects of culturally inflected modern identity on screen in India and China, *Hua* 华 and *Desi* देशी/देसी²¹. Having built up praxis and theory based on these terms as used in popular discourse, and their functional purpose as analytical tools, the third and fourth chapters are built around genre themes. These genres not only represent substantial portions of the current entertainment market, but also highlight mechanisms at work related to identity building: popular comedy, and history

²⁰ *Ghajini* was aesthetically a very significant film, and could have been included, even alongside *Dostana*, despite the near complete opposition in their styles, as its principle character suffers from amnesia and therefore presents some interesting possible questions on the nature of identity, however, I felt that *Dostana* better fit the pairing in the chapter.

²¹ The “s” rather than “sh” version of pronunciation is possibly derived from Panjabi ਦੇਸੀ, possibly as a consequence of the prevalence of the Panjabi community in the Indian diaspora particularly in UK, USA and Australia. I use Chinese characters and Devanagri script here, and in a few other places in this thesis to avoid ambiguity, or to allow inherent meanings to emerge without translation. However, in keeping with MLA style as used in many volumes on Asian cinema, I do not use characters in my bibliography, or for each instance in which a character or Hindi word appears.

films. These four segments in concert are designed to bring about exploration of concepts and concerns resonating through the popular culture and political climate of both countries in this important moment, and feed into new formulations of political and national identity. For example, concerns of internal and external migration, brain-drain, family structure, gender, race, place and morality will arise naturally from exploration of the concepts of *Hua* and *Desi*, and related themes of humour, heroism, enmity, and “Othering” within Asia. In looking to a cultural product to speak about identity however, I will not simply be following the Jamesonian “national allegory” thesis: not all love stories are really about the citizen and the nation-state in that direct a way. Neither am I wholeheartedly arguing that we are still facing a didactic “Obsession with China”²² (or India, as the case may be) legacy of 20th century literature and arguably 5th Generation Chinese cinema. Further, there is an increasing body of evidence that it makes no sense to set up 6th Generation directors, or in the case of India, Parallel Cinema²³ directors, as authentic voices in opposition to commercial cinema. In the case of China, both 5th and 6th Generation directors have come under harsh treatment by the state in the past, and both 5th and 6th generation directors are now at least partially operating in the mainstream, whether directing the Olympics opening ceremony²⁴, collaborating on the production of so-called

²² This term was coined by China literature scholar pioneer C.T. Hsia.

²³ “Parallel Cinema” tends to refer to more “artistic” film, less concerned with popular or commercial success write large.

²⁴ In the past, it was possible, as Gary Xu did in his excellent book *Sinascapes* to argue that 6th Generation directors were still operating as free and independent agents of realism outside of the state’s control through their increasing ability to put together production capital. In the second chapter of his book it was possible for him to critique Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige on that score. While Zhang Yimou, through his artistic direction of that spectacular of soft power, the Olympics opening ceremony, has now well and truly captured his place in the official cultural hierarchy, despite previous problems with the censors, members of the so-called 6th generation have also taken their mainstream box office spot. Jiang Wen’s recent film in which he both starred and directed, *Rang Zi Dan Fei* 让子弹飞 / *Let the Bullets Fly* for

“main melody” films²⁵, even acting in them²⁶, or engaging in the market economy by shooting advertisements for TV or real estate (Braester 2005). In India, actors like Irrfan Khan have made a start in theatre and teleplay, and ended up in Hollywood, commercials, TV, independents and Bollywood, seeming equally at home in all worlds. Hindi film stars like John Abraham, Rani Mukherjee, and Vidya Balan fluidly participate in all kinds of films²⁷, from the artistic to the blockbuster, indicating the symbolic power they wield and the role Parallel Cinema plays in the production of the contemporary market. Given the porous nature of the borders between cultural and commercial spheres, I will not seek an “authentic” “national cinema”. Instead, for this project, I am accepting contemporary entertainment products as indicative and reflective of ideals and values in society, whether positively or negatively correlated. I take them to be sandwiched, sometimes uncomfortably, between popular consumer desires and the demands of censorship.

“Identity...is not an achievement but a process constantly threatened with rupture by forces from within and without” (Kakar (1995) 158)

Predicating my arguments on an acceptance of identity as constructed and imagined, authenticity in any empirical sense becomes less important than what images are created, what “facts” are believed, what beliefs are commonly held. This is to say

example, while still bearing the impression of his unmistakable style, could hardly be called avant-garde or identified as an indie film: indeed, it was one of the top grossing domestic films of 2010.

²⁵ As in the case of films like *Jian Guo Da Ye* and *Jian Dang Wei Ye* that are “main melody” films directed through a collaboration between 5th Generation and government directors

²⁶ For example, *Jian Guo Da Ye* featured, among the huge array of celebrity cameos, an appearance by one of the most successful directors of Chinese popular film in the period under study here, Feng Xiaogang himself.

²⁷ John Abraham, for example, has appeared in the controversial, Oscar winning Deepa Mehta directed *Water* (2005) and in the farcical comedy *Dostana* (2008).

that in this study, commercial or entertainment film as a cultural product and accretion, is looked at as a symptom of the so-called “Structure of Feeling” in India and China, and as an active contributing force in the creation of “Social Representations”²⁸.

The aim is to learn how the above-mentioned political and social concerns are being handled and explored in the pervasive, and, I will argue, *political* arena of entertainment as it functions within the changing global socioeconomic climate. This is an attempt at an inter-Asian project, a pursuit sadly thin on the ground in academia, especially if taking South and East Asia together as subject matter, and particularly in the humanities. It is an intercultural and interdisciplinary inquiry, with the intersection of economics, politics and entertainment, of the personal and the popular at its centre. It attempts to explore both plot and aesthetic analysis in film while not neglecting the real link between money and culture in a context of imagined communities, imagined nations and imagined identities²⁹. But first and foremost, it is based upon the relationship between screen-based media and their role in our sprawling contemporary cognitive landscapes, whether we accept the visions - and values - they put on display, or not.

0.1 Cinema, Media, Enjoyment and Use

I argue that film, and screen-based media generally, has become more and more integrated into our psychological lives, not less, even despite what we might like to think of as a certain gloss of knowing cynicism permeating the post-modern audience globally. Postmodernism has not stopped us from being susceptible to marketing, itself

²⁸ This refers to Moscovici’s theoretical formation which builds on the work of Durkheim and is posited as a set of beliefs and practises that are indicative of a cultural state.

²⁹ I refer specifically to Benedict Anderson’s concept of Imagined Communities applied to national and personal identities and their constitution.

an increasingly important part of cinema in India and China, and it has not stopped us from integrating images deeper into our lives, even, arguably, our psyches. Indeed, over the last twenty years, as the global economy has undergone massive upheaval, technology has changed ever more rapidly and the both accessibility, and screens themselves have proliferated to the point that pocket cinemas with a near-infinite library of films is a reality. In addition to having substantial fan cultures, celebrity-led marketing (in all formats), and histories that blend, to a lesser or greater extent, film with social modelling³⁰, the changes to the industry and modes of cinema viewership is combining powerfully to create more compelling entertainment products in both markets. Fan clubs have long existed, but now viewership is used as a data point. India's screen penetration is increasing, mobile markets are expanding; China's internet connectivity is growing, and had 45.8% penetration by the end of 2013, with many users accessing the net through the Smart Phones³¹ according to the CINI³². What we watch, how we watch it, who we watch it with, and how we view it all, whether we accept, reject or remain indifferent -- these have all now become accepted as important questions about individual identity in the public domain, and not merely the province of propagandists and law-makers. Our opinions and "favourites" are to be shared via social media, -whether it be Facebook, WeChat, Orkut, *Renren Wang* or *Weibo*³³, our thoughts

³⁰ The *yangbanxi* 样板戏 or "model drama" being just the most obvious example

³¹ See "The 33rd Statistical Report on the Status of Chinese Internet Connectivity Development" (*Di 33 ci Zhongguo Hulianwangluo Fazhan Zhuangkuang Tongji Baogao*) http://www.cnnic.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxzbg/hlwtjbg/201401/t20140116_43820.htm for further stats and information.

³² China Internet Network Information Center (Zhongguo Hulianwangluo Xinxi Zhongxin)

³³ Orkut is a social media outlet affiliated with Google, presumably to be replaced by Google +, that was overwhelmingly utilized by Indians and the Indian Community abroad, and, interestingly Brazilians.

to be blogged on mushrooming fan-sites³⁴, our habits to be collected by marketing agencies and web analytics. Thus, beyond the immediacy that cinema has as a medium of storytelling and communication, one that can tap fluidly into cultural values and subconscious desires as even the earliest film theory suggested³⁵, cinema is taking on new roles in our construction of contemporary identity. It is becoming a badge of belonging.

Cinema is historically a transformative medium; as such it has a particular stake in the cacophony of images now being produced. It now finds itself in the unique post-capitalist situation of being squeezed between the scrutiny of censors, and the whim of market forces in countries such as India and China. Entertainment film is particularly susceptible to this squeeze since it is widely viewed, thus catching the censor's eye, and as box office records in China, and total profits in India show, it *can* be profitable³⁶. In fact, foreign films make up a small portion of revenue in the Indian industry (including all Indian languages), of about 8-10%, and since 2004, the majority of revenue from China's domestic box office has gone to home-grown film, although one should be sure to take such statistics with a pinch of salt, also being aware that that majority is not terribly big.³⁷ Actually, this is an area that China's current film industry, encouraged by

Renren Wang is the social media outlet that can be accessed and is thus most popular with Mainland China.

³⁴ This is an especially important aspect of course in the Asian context where fan culture is a huge industry. In fact, the level of cross over of pop, film and advertising in both the Indian and Chinese context is notably similar.

³⁵ I am particularly thinking of Krackauer's essays of the late 20s such as "The Little Shopgirls go to the Movies" and "The Cult of Distraction", which particularly explore the experience of cinema-going and the effects of narrative on the audience.

³⁶ The expanding ranks of the 100 Million Yuan or the 100 Crore "Clubs" of directors are testament to this.

³⁷ Zhu Ying and Seio Nakajima pointed to this trend in their essay on the historical balance of power between domestic and foreign films in China since the 1920s, "The Evolution of Chinese Film as an Industry": 17-34 in Zhu & Rosen *Art, Politics and Commerce in Chinese Cinema*, 2010

the State, is attempting to redress both by growing the domestic production in a way that will increase market share, and in that respect following a *Bollywood* model, but also by becoming involved with film production elsewhere in the world, thereby perhaps beginning a project of “Sinifying” both the values and aesthetics of even those films being brought in as foreign under the current quota system (Brzski 2016).

China’s domestic film industry proves both the power of entertainment and a heightened understanding on the part of the Chinese Communist Party that entertainment can provide an excellent “sugar coat” for ideological pills. Directly state orchestrated *zhuxuanli* 主旋律 or “main melody” films have themselves become more and more “entertainment-ized” over the last decade in the wake of a spate of big-ticket-taking entertainment films or *yulepian* 娱乐片. I elaborate on this in greater detail in the relevant chapter. On the other hand, it shows the ways in which Beijing can allow a modicum of creative freedom, and utilize cinematic enjoyment in exchange for the opportunity to retain a subsuming role over the creative process³⁸.

³⁸ Baronovitch’s *China’s New Voices* (2003 [268-72]) discusses the complex power relations around contemporary cultural production, in his case, popular music, very well, pointing out the many different motivations for the different actors’ involvement with the state, and willingness or resistance to acting with it.



Fig.1: Jian Guo Da Ye (The Founding of a Republic. *Huang Jianxin and Han Sanping* dirs. [2009]) and its sequel Jian Dang Wei Ye (The Founding of a Party. *Same dirs.* [2011]) sometimes referred to by the title The Beginning of the Great Revival show the substantial effect that the rise of entertainment film since the 1990s has had on the aesthetic language and marketing of “main melody” films. The film features cameos from dozens of stars from all over “Greater China”, and forces us to think carefully about the relationship between these stars, the filmmakers who made the film, and the State. I discuss the film’s aesthetics and ideology in Chapter Four.

That is, by allowing even a little space for the moderately, but not radically controversial, in “the forms that the masses favour”, as former Chairman of the National Committee of the CPPCC, Li Ruihuan put it³⁹, the state can benefit its own self-image at home and abroad, and appear more rational when junking that which is “unacceptable”. This is in sharper focus in the PRC context, and is a policy format that can be seen stretching back since the beginning of the reform era as Andrew Jones

³⁹ Li Ruihuan quoted as saying in Chua (2003) and Lu, Sheldon, (2001),

points out in his book with regard to the case of popular music, and its uses (Jones [1992] 1). However, it can be argued that this is a game of hegemony that exists globally, and certainly in the Indian context where censorship and *self-censorship* are still strong currents in the release of entertainment films today, and the state has only recently loosened the more didactic aspects of its grip on the State Board of Film Certification.⁴⁰

Hindi language filmmakers were liberated from seeking funds from the black market in the 1990s by being given industry status by the State. However, this came with strings attached: they are subject to the involvement of censors at every stage in their process. A commitment to “the values and standards of society” and “social change” did indeed remain alongside the imperative for “artistic freedom” in the revised *Film Certification Guidelines of 1991* (Bhowmik 272-73). But most marked in interviews with actors like superstar Shahrukh Khan and directors like Farah Khan is their acceptance of both the power of the cinema to affect a sometimes infantilized public, often referred to in terminology reminiscent of the Communist state, as the “masses”, and their obligation to protect the “decency” and morality of this group through self-censorship of their films. Despite the challenges to censorship from films like *The Bandit Queen* (Kapur dir. 1994) in the 1990s, the paternalistic attitude taken by filmmakers in this is pervasive and in some respects pernicious in reinforcing structures of class and caste. So, it remains difficult to square these assertions logically with the increasing flesh on display, particular in “item numbers”, as non-sequitor dance sequences involving eye candy are known, in today’s Hindi cinema. One possible way to interpret it is purely as a manifestation of symbolic power for a patriarchal society,

⁴⁰ For an excellent survey of censorship and self-censorship in India, see Kaur, Raminder, ed. *Censorship in South Asia: Cultural Regulation from Sedition to Seduction*.

taking on an extra dimension if the dancers involved are of different races and origins. As in the Chinese context, two facts become clear if we look at the overall message of the films, and their success: despite the display of bodies, usually female, moral order is, more often than not, re-exerted, and a sense of good and bad behaviour rarely leaves the films. Secondly, that the market is, at the end of the day, a huge contributing force to how the story of Hindi cinema is written today. Ultimately a national subject who not only desires “freedom” from proscriptive social roles, but is a consumer of global culture and sex as a global sign, while nevertheless still interested in purchasing and participating in a specialised, culturally inflected, market of their “own” culture and cultural goods, is more lucrative than one that chooses one of these options over the other. Not having to choose between going out for a foreign meal and celebrating Diwali, without in some sense infringing upon either one’s own authenticity or one’s status within a global class, does seem like a liberating prospect, and we can identify this hybrid consumer identity as indicative of new modernities taking hold in both India and China. However, we cannot simply sing a song of liberation here while ignoring the fact that exploiting and even deliberately enhancing these niches, through the strategy odiously described as the “glocal”, makes real financial sense for both international players and home-grown companies, if they strategize intelligently.

0.2 Theory and Theories

In performing the analysis in this thesis, both of cinematic products and of their modes of production, it is my belief that it is desirable to engage in a *balanced and critical use* of theoretical tools that moves away from rehashing logical cul-de-sacs. At its best, “Theory” gives us new ways of seeing, and engaging with subject matter, providing incisive clarity in argument, and challenging lazy thinking. At its worst, it pushes the subject aside, makes all reading an obfuscating chore, and chokes out the generation of

new theoretical approaches, particularly those that are more grounded in analysis of source subject-matter. I acknowledge, as all contemporary academics are wont to do, that the very questions at the heart of this project rest upon the foundations of current academic engagement with modern theoretical works, and that they are situated in a particular moment in the Western Academy. Particularly, I acknowledge, that in the case of this inquiry, there is debt to Michel Foucault and Benedict Anderson, among others. However, this volume sees theory as guide, counterfoil, agonist, antagonist, catalyst, *not* as blueprint, and so theory is used in a variety of ways, from the *contextual* to the *instrumental*, and taken from a wide variety of sources. I also place particular emphasis on using this grounding of theory together with primary *and secondary* source materials in Mandarin and Hindi to generate my own key theoretical concepts.

On the instrumental side, my work in this volume is backgrounded by two key theoretical constructs/concepts, both derived from sociology: the theory of “Social Representations”, developed by Moscovici from the theories of Emil Durkheim, and the “Structure of Feeling”, which is taken from Raymond Williams’ work.

“Social Representation” is a useful and pithy way of describing a set of shared values, beliefs and practises within a society that works in a complimentary way to Foucault’s theories on power and epistemology, Gramsci’s “hegemony”, and contemporary audience/reception studies. It presents us with a sense of the Representation as an object that is both *constructed by* and *forced upon* society, on individuals. But it also does not confine the Representation to one aspect i.e. the creative realm, the political or the economic, or another, but allows us to think of these forces as interacting in its construction. The “Structure of Feeling” is a valuable counterpoint to Anderson’s “Imagined Community”, especially in an arena that is so tied to emotionality and engagement for its success. In his book *The Country and the*

City, Williams is able to draw out the importance of what amount to myths about the past, both recent and distant, to people's sense of self and identity, allowing us to acknowledge that often, whether a belief (about oneself or one's nation) is true or not, in no way equates to its value as perceived by the community that holds it.

Moving to the contextual, because this thesis addresses cinema as a phenomenon, but also as a medium for the negotiation of such lofty concepts as "identity", the "Nation", and "entertainment", the theoretical aspects principally comprise *critical* engagement with the philosophy of cinema in for example the work of V.F. Perkins or Rick Altman, and phenomenological works of Adorno, Kracauer, Benjamin and Horkheimer in an effort to focus on cinema viewing as part of lived experience. However, questions of identity and contemporaneity, power, process and discontents, tend to invoke Foucault, Lacan and other so-called "post-structuralists". Gender is an aspect of contemporary life in India and China which cannot be ignored, and consequently my use of contextual theory also draws upon feminist theoreticians like Judith Butler and Toril Moi, feminist cinema critics, as well as the wealth of work on gender in the study of contemporary Chinese and Indian literature and film, listed fully in my bibliography.

But in referring to any Western philosophers, my thesis is intended to do two things. In the first instance, to examine Chinese and Indian academics' theoretical exploration of topics related to my aims, specifically including Asian language sources produced within and without the Asian academy to enrich this basis with the use of Western theory outside of the West. Secondly, I seek to avoid over-use of such theory, since, as Margaret Hillenbrand points out in her 2007 book, the tendency in the Western academic context to use Asian language sources as subjects to be analysed, but almost exclusively Western sources for the purposes of creating an analytical framework. This

tendency not only has within it the possibility of re-creating the Orientalism it might seek to avoid, but also myopically does not allow for recognition of the development of theory outside its country of origin, or at least, its *region* of origin. Moreover, as described, I do not confine my use of such sources to the realm of cultural theory however, which I feel can have a tendency to unbalance engaged analysis of sources that is essential to contemporary work. Instead, I attempt to provide a viewpoint that grounds analysis in economics, sociology and industry contours in the places that affect my subject matter the most.

For although we might consider that the thoughts of the philosophers of the Vienna school have been augmented and enriched in the USA, somehow we seem unable to acknowledge developments as they occur in China or India in this regard. For example, we do not regard Judith Butler as being a practitioner of *German* philosophy, though much of her writing is based in the logic of Kant. We do not generally view Slavoj Žižek as merely using *French* Philosophy because his thought (and much of his career) has been based on Lacan. So then, why should we not acknowledge Dai Jinhua as having contributed to the advancement theory as well, and not accuse her of *using* “Western” theory or *abusing* it, or in fact, as some authors have done, accuse the whole of China of being unable to produce theory at all⁴¹? This is surely a matter of egotism on the part of the Western academy, which has only been taken up with gusto by the ruling regimes that would seek to reject certain aspects of the same in order to advance an “Asian Values” thesis, while nevertheless making hay with theories that back their own position⁴². Moreover, it fails to acknowledge the role of post-colonial and cultural

⁴¹ Shu Shimei makes a number of interesting points on the creation of foreign policy and the uses of postcolonial circulations of shame in her 2010 essay “Theory, Asia and the Sinophone”, but in the end she concludes that it is a consequence of this discursive milieu that China is “unable” to produce theory.

⁴² Cultural nation, or Civilisation State, for example.

studies in advancing theory, an advancement that is highly indebted to diasporic academics, many of whom have/had South Asian origins. Therefore, I actively engage with a wide range of theorists and thinkers like Wang Hui and Zhu Dake, and have actively immersed myself in the extraordinary array of cyber criticism and blogging on film and culture currently available online in Mandarin in addition to English language Bollywood fansites. Keeping in mind Hillenbrand's conclusions, these are specifically to be employed as theoretical sources to cite, and bring to the table, even to bring to the study of Indian film, not to be used as subjects for examination under Western theory alone.

With regard to my own theoretical contributions in this thesis, there are two among them that I especially wish to highlight here, which are key to the overall premise of my argument, and are borne out through close analysis of film and social context. These are outlined in the first chapter of my thesis, with an exploration of their historical contexts and alongside a detailed filmic analysis in order to provide grounding for the rest of the volume that follows, and are elaborated upon in greater detail as the analysis within the thesis continues.

First, I argue for a refreshed approach to analysis of nationalism in India and China and particularly *cultural nationalism*, through the use of the terms *Hua* and *Desi* to define the blend of cultural, racial and linguistic identity that reaches the diaspora as well as operating in the domestic environment itself⁴³. I suggest that these terms represent a component of the soft power nexus, that is inherently non-inclusive for those members of the society that do not fall within the purview of these signs that are

⁴³ *Hua* and *Huaren* have been used to describe members of the Sinophone world by authors like Chua Beng Huat but the practice has not been taken up on a wider scale, and neither have the terms been used alongside other endonymic terms to discuss phenomena of identity in contemporary Asia.

linguistically and geographically inflected as belonging to populations that are Han Chinese, or Hindi Speaking/North Indian in the case of *Desi*. Yet the terms are endonymic, and therefore under constant negotiation. Thus these terms are particularly useful because they both describe a state of cultural nationalism that does not refer to specific nation states within their very terminology (unlike *Chinese-ness* or *Indian-ness*) and because they also refer to a specifically edited version of this cultural ideal that is nonetheless fluid, and operating in both informal and state-mediated spaces. As I argue, this mobility from the diaspora to the “homeland”, from the informal to use by the state, is another key source of the power of these terms.

My second main theoretical point is that entertainment and politics in the film of India and China have a history of being intertwined and that this trend for “social” films is, contrary to the opinions of many critics in the Chinese and Indian contexts, as well as some academics, *not* going away. The explorations of the ideals of *Hua* and *Desi-ness* on screen that make up the remainder of this volume give numerous examples of this point. With regard to my criteria for selecting certain films over others, I concentrate my analysis on films that have either done extremely well in the box office, entering the year’s top ten for ticket sales, and/or their cultural effect, whether they can be said to have been much discussed in media or in cyberspace, or otherwise achieved cult status. Acknowledging the data to be inherently imperfect, I do focus on the *domestic* performance of the films⁴⁴, as stories about the nation and how they are told *to* the nation form the basic architecture of my inquiry. However, as transnational cultural identity is the key form that I argue the imagined nation is taking at this time, I also pay

⁴⁴ Using data from domestic newspapers and publications like *Zhongguo Dianying Shichang*, *Boxofficeindia.com* and *Indiafilmtrade.com* and as well as the *Focus* series of annual global film industry reports.

attention to the success of films in major diaspora communities. Further, it is important not to downplay the proliferation of modes of viewership, and the changing meaning of being a member of a film's "audience". This has not been lost on film distribution and production companies, where, for example, the sales of rights to television channels (predominantly satellite) far outstrip the financial gain to be taken from theatre ticket sales, and the viral capacity of mobile devices is unprecedented. As is pointed out by Wang Shujen (Zhu & Rosen ed. (2010) 71-84), piracy has also had an enormous effect on the ways in which companies go about distributing films for home viewing and cinema display.

In addition to these, I suggest other key concepts for tackling the content in each chapter. While in Chapter One, my emphasis is squarely on making a clear demonstration of the two tools outlined above, predominantly focused on the portrayal of tension between authenticity and development and the methods of their resolution, Imagined diaspora individuals are an essential conduit for the development of *Hua* and *Desi* identity in the context of the rise of Indian and Chinese "Dreams" in political discourse. Chapter Two explores the intertextual construction of changing meanings about *Hua* and *Desi* identity revealed by the portrayal of such diaspora characters on screen, from *Wangluo Shidai de Aiqing* (*Love in the Internet Age*. Chen dir. 1998) and *Dilwale Dulhania LeJayenge* (*The Brave Hearted Will Take Away the Bride*. Chopra dir (1995)) to *Zhongguo Hehuo Ren* (*American Dreams in China*. Chan (2013)) and *Ra.One* (Sinha dir. 2013). I trace change in the depiction of diaspora characters as *dreamers* and *dreamed* over my period of study that reflects change wrought by increased economic liberalisation and changing visions of identity within the two countries, revealing startling similarities and intriguing differences. I do this through focusing on three phenomena as they are manifested particularly in arena of judgment:

the workplace, airport, courtroom, party and school. The phenomena brought to the fore in these contexts are ‘Disillusionment, Confrontation, and Claim-Staking’, which I suggest constitute the portrayal of different power relationships between so-called ‘guest’ and ‘host’ cultures. Further, I contextualise the visual and textual analysis within the economic and political policy approaches to diaspora in the present era. In conclusion, I suggest that the figure of diaspora as representative of “Greater”, “Cultural” or “Civilisational” (China/India), and how they are achieved, has a significant impact on the countries’ perception of themselves as entities, the version of *Hua* and *Desi* that is promulgated domestically, and their strategies of soft power, the version of *Hua* and *Desi* that is sold to the world.

In Chapter Three we move onto the genre-based half of this thesis. The analysis here focuses on popular comedies, which I suggest give us an especially informative viewpoint in that, through mechanisms of release, which I link to Foucault’s “Heterotopia”, and controlled challenge, normative values are reinforced. In particular, I posit a formulation of what I call the “Consumer Grotesque”. I suggest that this is a form of grotesque associated with economic globalisation and change and confronted by audiences under the signs of *Hua* and *Desi*, in an era of commodification then expressed through protagonists on screen. These confrontations may be derived from sceptical impulses as in the literature of Wang Shuo and its sizable impact on cinema of the PRC, and it may be idealistic at the same time, as in the works of Chetan Bhagat as brought to the screen by Rajkumar Hirani. They may also be derived from a deliberate social strategy as put forward by the state, or some combination of the two, filtered through the genuine anxieties of the audience. And yet, the privileges of laughter remain subversive. I make a special parallel study of two popular filmmakers, David Dhawan and Feng Xiaogang, their development, themes and styles, and how their work is

produced through their relationships with key stars in their films: Govinda and Ge You, respectively. In addition, I look at the next stage. In the last 5-7 years, a new crop of comedy artists and directors have broken onto the screen and into the top-grossers clubs. This is true both in China, where films such as *Ren zai Jiong Tu* and *Fengkuang de Shitou* were surprise hits, and in India, where the multiplex cinema has allowed the growth of alternative comedy to a point where it occupies a mainstream box office standing, and has been very influential. Films such as *Delhi Belly* attest to this.

In Chapter Four, I work with what are arguably the most obvious staples of identity formation on film writ large: history films. Taking into account that “History Film”, sometimes referred to as “Historical Film” is, as a category, broad, and unstable, I suggest two groupings for the purposes of our analysis of the origins and rootedness of *Hua* and *Desi* identities that feed into the tensions between “authenticity” and “development”, and even seek to resolve it. Firstly, mythic history films, which take place in the pre-modern, and are, I suggest, more related to the claim of ethnicity grown within Cultural Nationalism, a powerful and integral claim to authenticity as interpreted in contemporary screen politics. Secondly, I show how stories of *modern* history are utilised to communicate myths of origin for the Nation State. Told, as they are, with the lens of contemporary struggle with change and re-assessment of the Nation’s view of itself, these are essential components in the creation of *Hua* and *Desi*. In this chapter, while I use theoretical concepts from cinema studies, particularly a reciprocal interpretation of Chakravarty’s “Structure of Myth” (1993), the analytical tools that I put forward in this section are chiefly based on aesthetics and materiality, and their role in communicating affect. For example, I suggest “fabrication” and “patterning” as two paradigms that can lead us to meaning through mis-en-scene, props and costume.

The Conclusion to my thesis considers the overall effect of all of these factors together with some forward thinking about what Asian-ness, Chinese-ness and Indian-ness will come to mean in an age of *Hua* and *Desi*, with economic challenges and political upheaval on the horizon, written with a view to the outcomes of recent co-production deals between India and China that promise some new possibilities on the interaction between *Hua*, *Desi* and “Asian Values”. I also include a translation of the important speech by character Arjun Singh (Akshay Kumar) from the film *Namastey London* which excellently exemplifies the mode of *Desi-ness* in discursive confrontation, where the noble diasporic character, in this case, acts as (erudite) spokesperson for the nation.

Chapter 1. *Hua and Desi*:

Contemporary Identity Politics on the Commercial Screen

“Culture sets the stage, the economy sings the opera”

(“文化搭台，经济唱戏”)

- Chinese government slogan, circa 2008

“Without our culture and traditions, the country would be like a body without a soul.”

(“परंपरा और संस्कार के बिना हमारा देश यूँ होता जैसे आत्मा बिना शरीर”)

-Swades: We the People (Gowariker dir. [2004])

Among Siegfried Kracauer’s Weimar essays, “The Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies” (1995) is particularly succinct in outlining the arc by which entertainment cinema, as a cultural product, shapes desires and norms, by way of an aesthetics of consumption. In her study, Miriam Hansen (2012) rightly points out that although for Kracauer the film enjoyed by this new class of consumers is designed to maintain the status quo, he also acknowledges throughout his work that its very superficiality had the potential to make it a tool for social change. The superficiality of entertainment lends itself to transmission, escapes the serious attention of critical forces, and enters the consciousness easily. In addition, entertainment, and *amusement* are important parts of the origin of film as a medium. This fact is often neglected, as philosophical debate on whether film is capable of being “art”, rather than reproduction, and if so, how, has historically preoccupied theorists, as V.F. Perkins points out in his seminal work *Film as Film* (41-42). Entertainment can both indicate the contours of everyday life, and also spill over to serve as an instigator to change by creating banality and malaise, if we

follow Kracauer⁴⁵. We may even follow Hansen's conclusion in an earlier study (1991), that "publics" themselves can be created by entertainment film in particular. In the contemporary global entertainment economy, we can acknowledge that cinema's power is part of a *multi-directional* web, including state, market, audience and filmmakers. Thus perhaps the publics and the entertainment make each other. At the same time, we should still recognise that in an era of proliferating screens and data analytics, what we watch, how we watch it, and with whom, is at least as important as it ever was in defining us.

The properties of influence unique to entertainment cinema have been well understood throughout the history of film in India and China, and are explicitly evidenced in cultural policy and censorship regulations in China and India respectively⁴⁶. Early classics of Chinese popular cinema followed other arts of the period in their preoccupation with spreading a message of social change by highlighting injustice, seeking redress, and motivating film fans. The overtly political films of China's Communist Era, by their use of folk songs, opera and melodrama within the context of socialist realism, showed the importance of "*popular*" devices, at least theoretically, in those products created "*for the people*". These films can even be said to use the entertainment aspect of cinema as a method of glamourizing political ideology or movements within the confines of Communist aesthetics (Berry & Zhang 2013). In India, the period following independence and partition saw both epic and kitchen-sink

⁴⁵ Kracauer also pointed out how the debate over whether cinema constituted an art often muddied the waters, as Perkins reminds us (30).

⁴⁶ Limits set on the number of foreign film in China, for example, show the power of cinema. India's 1991 censorship regulations (published here: http://cbfcindia.gov.in/html/uniquepage.aspx?unique_page_id=1) are both vague in criteria, and clear in their recognition of cinema as potential instigator for social good or ill.

dramas in Hindi cinema take on the mantle of “social film”. Issues such as poverty, gender discrimination and caste prejudice, were tackled within the *popular* format, before a popular audience, complete with successful songs. In this chapter I explore the relationship between entertainment and the social project of creating ideals of Chinese-ness and Indian-ness in India and China, arguing that this project does not only exist in classic films of their socialist eras, but remains in the post-reform taste for “frivolity”, even alongside product placement, and global referents, as part of a vision of contemporary Asian cultural identities. In other words, I argue that the possibilities of the link between entertainment and social modelling of ideals are alive and well.

In fact, the post-socialist years since 1990 have been characterised by social and economic change that has affected the notion of what “Chinese-ness” and “Indian-ness” should actually comprise. In the context of a utilitarian view of history on the part of the Chinese state, and an effort to create “India Inc.” on the part of Indian elites, these identities have been in need of redefinition, on the one hand because of growing international power, and on the other, in recognition of deepening social problems. As I show in my analysis of three pairs of films, these phenomena, faced to a greater or lesser extent by both India and China in this period, have been reflected on screen, where rampant consumerism, successful living, true love for family and country, selflessness, excess and cosmopolitanism are all on display. In this chapter, I show, through visual and textual analysis, how these factors contribute to the central tension at the heart of identity politics as portrayed in entertainment film, and perhaps generally in popular media today in India and China. That is, the tension between global success and perceived cultural authenticity, and consequently the creative need, especially as directed by the state, to come up with a new iteration of national/cultural identity that can safely encompass all factors without losing its ‘Asian characteristics’.



Fig.2 Swades: We the People (2004) *Four scenes from a song sequence. The lyrics to the emotive song Ye Jo Des Hai Tera (This is Your Country. Music and lyrics by A.R. Rahman) give voice to the need for modern Indians, or Desis, to resolve the paradox between material success, -indicated by the rocket in the background of the low angle shot that follows principle character Mohan (Shahrukh Khan), a NASA engineer-, and the romantic tug of the “motherland”, or “swades”. The latter is indicated in this sequence by a succession of intercut images in montage during this song, depicting the village that Mohan remembers from his recent trip back to India, and that has changed his life. One of the most poignant images is that of a hero of the Indian independence movement, as he dies, pictured above. Song lyrics are often very revealing of the internal struggles of characters, and messages in Hindi films, and this is no exception.*

As in the film *Swades: We the People* (Fig.1), Chinese or Indian characters who enact these dilemmas are not always un-problematized domestic citizens, but sometimes ethnic diaspora, foreign-educated, living abroad or returning to their home countries. Their global-ness reflects the rising international profile of India and China, the changing nature of the state in an era of globalisation (Carroll & Choi ed. (2006) 310-19) and the desires of the state to interpolate a “Greater China” or “Greater India” to its cause. This global-ness also represents the concerted efforts -whether accidental or deliberate- to create images of Asian subjects who are participants not only in the project of cultural nationalism, but in the consumer economy. These are Subjects, and not “Others”. In light of this context, I argue that the words “Chinese” and “Indian” become both problematic and inaccurate: since each contains the name of a discrete,

bordered, nation state. Therefore, in this chapter I suggest the use of two ethnonymic endonyms, that is, names that ethnic groups ascribe to themselves to denote a series of perceived characteristics, instead. These are *Hua* and *Desi*. These terms encompass the ambitions of cultural nationalism on the part of the state, and simultaneously, the flows of popular culture, economics and style within publics formed by their consumption. The terms themselves are both traditional in origin and modern in usage. I will show that in *Hua* or *Desi* characters, symbols and spaces on film, we see attempts to transcend the paradoxical relationship between development and the re-inscription of tradition on screen.

In this chapter, firstly I will provide a brief outline of the historical relationship between entertainment and social modelling in India and China. I will then argue that this relationship is on-going, and explain briefly the mechanism by which state, market, audience and filmmakers' interests are converging in the instigation of the production of new ideals, referring to Serge Moscovici's concept of "social representations". In the centre of the chapter, I will give a detailed account of the terms *Hua* and *Desi*, including their origins, their meanings at the present time, and their usefulness, as opposed to other terms in defining identities today. I will then suggest some possibilities for the actual content of *Hua* and *Desi*, including a discussion of femininity⁴⁷, as introduction to my filmic analysis. I quickly underscore the distance between the ideal -which I take to be essentially mutable- and real, lived experience here, while acknowledging the value of both categories, making reference to Raymond Williams' "structure of feeling". I make efforts throughout this methodological section to link filmic images and practices to theory, however my methodology is necessarily somewhat protracted as

⁴⁷ The question of *Desi*, *Hua* and gender is covered, to the extent that space permits, in Chapter Four.

it must take into account the history and contexts for two sets of films in order to allow a juxtapositional comparative approach in the analysis that follows.

Thereafter, the second half of the chapter will be taken up with analysis of three pairs of films, as mentioned above. These are: *Ren Zai Jiong Tu (Lost on Journey*. Yip dir. 2010⁴⁸) and *3 Idiots* (Hirani dir. 2009); *Fei Cheng Wu Rao (If You are the One*. Feng Xiaogang dir. 2008) and *Dostana (Friendship*. Mansukhani dir. 2008); and finally, *Tianxia Wu Zei (A World Without Thieves*. Feng Xiaogang dir., 2004) and *Swades: We, the People* (Gowariker dir. 2004)⁴⁹. My analysis will utilize several different approaches, informed especially by the work of V.F. Perkins. These films, as all the films in this thesis, were chosen based on their success at the box office, cultural currency, award achievements and ability to speak to the questions at hand. The films are all in Hindi or Mandarin as these represent the *linguae francae* of India and China respectively, and in many respects, the language of the state. They thus also represent the languages that have the most ability to transmit works of culture to the widest possible audience domestically, in the diaspora, and with the support of the state seeking to promote its own soft power, in subtitled form. The films are examined based on their status as cultural product, as visual medium, and text, looking at such elements as mis-en-scene, soundtrack, dialogue, and characterisation. Further, I have paired films released at similar times in order to take a juxtapositional approach with regard to the social and economic dynamics under which they were produced.

⁴⁸ Box Office RMB 46.5m

⁴⁹ Reliable statistics for all of these films are not forthcoming.

1.1 A Legacy of Cinema as Instrument of Social Change

The history of social modelling, entertainment and the modern state are deeply enmeshed in India and China. Progressive director Saeed Mirza once said⁵⁰, “A certain kind of film exists only because a certain kind of state exists”. As independent modern nation states in their current forms, India and China only came into being in the mid-twentieth century⁵¹. In both cases, though out of different circumstances, their births occurred in the midst of a heady mixture of political violence⁵² and cultural idealism. In both cases, too, they were foregrounded by an (at the very least rhetorical) commitment to social change and equality through explicitly socialist or communist models⁵³. Their cinemas⁵⁴, from the start, reflected this; indeed, it can be argued that the cinema, and particularly entertainment cinema, helped to facilitate their very success in becoming countries at all, in the most practical sense⁵⁵. For these new states, cinema and other

⁵⁰ A director of both “Parallel” and popular cinema, Mirza was quoted thus in Prasad (1998) 1. Mirza is probably most famous for his 1980 film *Albert Pinto Ko Gussa Kyoon Aata Hai (What makes Albert Pinto Angry?)*, an award-winning socialist morality play against false consciousness.

⁵¹ China became a republic in 1911, officially establishing itself as such in 1912, however the entity that it was at that time can be seen as quite distinct from its current incarnation as the People’s Republic because of the obvious distinctions in purpose and basis of establishment between the 1911 Republic and the 1949 PRC.

⁵² Both modern India and China were born partially out of WW2/Sino-Japanese War, and domestic unrest which in China became the Civil War between the KMT and the CCP. In India the pains of fighting for independence from Britain were at least equalled by the inconceivably large, and bitterly violent movement of people under Partition of August 1947 where at least 12.5 million people were displaced.

⁵³ In fact, the Republic of India came into being in the same year that the People’s Republic of China was established, 1949, when it ratified and implemented its constitution, parts 2 and 3 of which specifically deal with individual rights and equality under the law. <http://www.constitution.org/cons/india/const.html>

⁵⁴ Early Indian social film not only included the Hindi language films that I will go on to pay particular attention, to but also the strong Bengali cinema tradition of Satyajit Ray et al.

⁵⁵ The socialist bent in entertainment cinema preceded the creation of the PRC, and was a substantial tool for not only the resistance of the Japanese during their occupation of China during the Sino-Japanese war, but a conscious method for filmmakers with socialist leanings to promote their politics and aims, as Pang Laikwan’s *Building a New China in Cinema* documents well. In India’s case, cinema served as a method

transmitted forms of entertainment⁵⁶ served to communicate not only the news and/or stories that formed the outlines of the “imagined nation’s” (Anderson) image of itself, but also as conduits for new forms of “vehicular” language: Mandarin and Hindi⁵⁷. And though the cinema was, like popular music, an innately urban form,⁵⁸ to be trained to reflect a non-urban social reality and political aim⁵⁹, it was also, from the first, considered a powerfully immediate one⁶⁰, exclusively fit for purpose. Popular film, again like popular music, is a special kind of cultural product, “for (it) exists simultaneously as a market commodity, a form of secular entertainment, and an element of a larger socio-political and cultural system.” (Jones (1991) 7). In films widely acknowledged as high points of Hindi language cinema, such as Mehboob Khan’s 1957 classic *Mother India*, or the 1953 Bimal Roy film *Do Bigha Zamin (Two Thirds of an Acre of Land)*, the social messages verge on the didactic, as ideal Indian mothers,

to promulgate Indian indigenous cultural pride, to send messages of resistance, and to communicate to wide swathes of the community.

⁵⁶ Under the category of entertainment in this period we can include radio, tv, film and print media, although, even in the case of the PRC which would come to have a high level of literacy, the comprehension of written text was extremely variable across the country.

⁵⁷ The “Vehicular” is a level of language address outlined as part of the Tetralinguistic model put forward by Henri Gobard and popularised in the writings of Deleuze and Guattari on Minor Literatures. The Vehicular is described as the language of business, bureaucracy and government, the ubiquitous, or “everywhere”, in opposition to the “Vernacular”, “Referential” and “Mythic” that make up the rest of the quartet.

⁵⁸ See Jones, *Like a Knife*. Hence the need to adjust the focus of the arts, even the popular forms, to the peasant and rural populace.

⁵⁹ Zhu and Nakajima discuss the changing content of the “masses” as a category in their essay “The Evolution of Chinese Film as an Industry” 17-34 in Zhu & Rosen ed., 2010

⁶⁰ Indeed as late as its 1983 ruling on film censorship, (a statute still current) the Indian supreme court found,

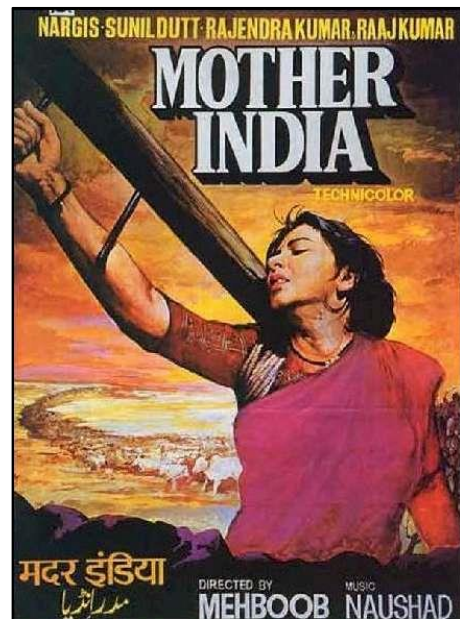
“The combination of act and speech, sight and sound in semi darkness of the theatre with elimination of all distracting ideas will have a strong impact on the minds of the viewers and can affect emotions.”

Source: Website of Indian Central Board of Film Certification:

http://cbfcindia.gov.in/html/uniquepage.aspx?unique_page_id=6

fathers, sisters and brothers are sketched through their unflagging faith, hard work, and sacrifice. From the first, then, the idea of what it was to be a good Indian and a good citizen of the PRC in their newfound independence was to be found on screen, in explicit and implicit ways.

Fig.3 & 4: *Familiar socialist iconography displayed in the mis-en-scène and promotional materials of Mother India. Note the Christ-like form⁶¹ employed in the classic painted poster drawn from a frame in the film.*



In China, as Laikwan Pang points out, even before acquiring an overt, state-directed political purpose through policy arising from Mao's Talks at Yan'an (*Yan'an Wenyi Zuotan Hui*), the cinema of the 1930s saw the marriage of aesthetics and politics with social aims in mind. So, although today they seem heavy-handed, by the time the first masterpieces of Communist cinema, films such as *Jimao Xin* (*Letter with Feather*, Shi Hui et al. dir. 1954) and *Baimao Nü* (*White-haired Girl*, 1950), were brought to the public, a good portion of their audience had already been steeped in socialist romantic

⁶¹ As evidenced time and again in films from *Bobby* to *Dilwale Dulhania Lejayenge*, Christian iconography is at least somewhat recognizable to the popular audience of Hindi-language films, most often expressed through the vehicle of Christian communities from Goa, and later in encounters with European Christian countries and their populations.

classics like Fei Mu's *Xiao cheng zhi chun* (*Springtime in a Small Town*. 1948), or the epic *Yi Jiang Chun Shui xiang Dong Liu* (*The Spring River Flows East* Cai and Zheng dir. 1947). For such an audience, the idea of politics in entertainment cinema, or entertainment in political cinema, where even the ideal revolutionary child could be shown on screen, would not have seemed as alien as it might now do.

Fig. 5 & 6: *Scenes from Yi Jiang Chun Shui xiang Dong Liu*. *The mis-en-scène recalls socialist dramatic forms while characterisation blends Chinese popular theatre and naturalistic "modern" drama.*



Fig.7 (below): *An example of product placement, in this case for Canon, whose logo appears alongside a stylus drawn image of Andy Lau's character, Wang Bo, in Tianxia Wu Zei (A World without Thieves). Can we imagine entertainment cinema to be political in countries that have products⁶² appearing, sometimes with something akin to equal billing, alongside stars on screen?*

⁶² Product placement is a very obvious, increasingly prevalent phenomenon in the popular cinema of India and China. Particularly noticeable examples include Feng Xiaogang's *Shouji* (*Cellphone*. [2003]) which has been much criticised, not least by Dai Jinhua, for being essentially a commercial for China Mobile and Motorola. Drinks, shampoo and mobile phones have shared the stars' limelight in Bollywood.



1.2 Contemporary Iterations

It may seem paradoxical, but in contrast to prominent scholar Dai Jinhua's conclusion that "a cinema of advertisements⁶³" would invariably fail to serve any social purpose of critique ("Feng Xiaogang Guilai" 2005)⁶⁴, in this chapter I suggest that the "social film", the film with a social message, has never really gone away in the face of the marketization and reform that has occurred in the film industries of India and China since the late 80s⁶⁵. My aim is to show that a new idealised citizen, or rather set of ideal attributes, is evolving as a response to the changing process of production and reception of popular culture today, and as a consequence of the political, social and economic change with which film dynamically interacts. In contrast to the opinions of Dai and others, we may observe that advertising itself "serves as a lexicon of current cultural meanings" (Chu & Sung 2011), and therefore does not automatically represent a cause

⁶³ This is Yomi Braester's term (2005), and a play on Kracauer's "cinema of distraction". It is nearly exactly the terminology used by Dai in her critique.

⁶⁴ In her 2005 CCTV lecture "Feng Xiaogang Guilai" Dai critiques Feng Xiaogang's *hesuipian* 贺岁片 (New Year's Comedy) *Dawan* (*Big Shot's Funeral* [2001])

⁶⁵ Zhu & Nakajima in Zhu & Rosen ed. ([2010] 17-34) provide detail on the "structural overhaul" that occurred studios and production companies demanded autonomy from the China Film Corporation in 1986-87. Gokulsing & Dissanayake ([2012] 143-167) provide description and statistics on the rise of advertising and the multiplex, as well as the changing role of the government in film production and industry support in the Indian context.

for the jettisoning of serious study of content, or critique as a possibility for these films. In fact, as V.F. Perkins argues, the origins of cinema are not only to be found in the photograph, but in the magic lantern, the toys and amusements of action that preceded it: so the perceived “lightness” of entertainment cinema, and even its connection with advertising may be understood as part of its history, as much as its present.

Entertainment films have their own referents, and because of their combination of political history, and unabashed connection with other forms of amusement, they are arguably more fit to comment on the contemporary milieu than any other film form.

Since the 1990s, success has come to popular film in Hindi and Mandarin in fits and starts⁶⁶, with commercial growth demonstrated by the swelling ranks of the elite “100 Crore” and “billion yuan” (*yi wan yuan julebu*) “clubs” of directors. The market, and the films that go to it, have changed substantially over that time. Despite the expansion of a commerce-driven “cinema of pleasure” in both India and China, entertainment and political idealism nevertheless remain closely intertwined. We must recall that both countries are, in their own ways, “Postsocialist”, a situation where global capital blends with the fact that, “socialism, conceived either as an historical heritage or as an ideological antidote, can still inspire, both substantially and imaginatively, an active critical discourse.” (Gong (2012) 4). Indeed, in India, Communism, and even Maoism still has ideological currency in some states and quarters.

Film continues to provide a vision of the ideal, with a moral conclusion. Further, it acts as a means of critiquing society and its hypocrisies, and as a tool for myth-

⁶⁶ China’s domestic film has experienced several slumps since 1990 as I document further down. India’s Hindi film market has suffered at times due to unstable financial circumstances, and withdrawal of direct support by NRI initiatives from the industry.

making, while at the same time serving the demands of an ever-more sophisticated consumer market. It is continuing to create new images of the ideal citizen, albeit a different ideal citizen, a different ideal Chinese or Indian *subject*, to that we would have seen 30 years ago. In other words, “Big Picture Consciousness”⁶⁷, -that is, emphasis on the big budget, high-tech spectacle, as success in film- which has ostensibly given rise to successive waves of bigger budget, bigger effect films in both China and India, has changed the market, but not, in the end, depoliticized popular film. This is true whether the film in question falls into that “big picture” category or not. Even at its frothiest, and seemingly most inconsequential, even such attempts at de-politicization in the face of a history of dogma on screen, can be seen as an exercise in “functional ambiguity”⁶⁸ or at the very least open to political reading through a hermeneutics of suspicion⁶⁹. For example, any romantic comedy butts its head against the politics of gender, and often of family dynamics, both of which are extremely important issues in countries like India and China that share problems of gender imbalance and changing family structure. Thus, even projects we might not consider to be espousing ideals or identity politics, can be seen to be affected by these, even perhaps despite the overt intentions of their creators. However, in today’s political, economic, and social milieu, the social and moral message of many films remains more overt, as we shall see. Much more is evidently plot-embedded, clearly emotively expressed in visual, musical, or

⁶⁷ Zhu and Nakajima point to the view of China’s critics in the 90’s that the success of domestic film was down to an increased “big-picture consciousness”, which seems to be a prevailing strand of argument (Zhu & Rosen ed. 17-34)

⁶⁸ Perry Link uses this term in his study of popular fiction in early modern China, *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies* (1981) to define the subtle politics of the vague.

⁶⁹ Paul Ricoeur described his own methodology thus (Simms [2002]).

characterisation elements, than one might imagine in a postmodern context, especially in cinemas that are thematically marked by deep-seated ambivalence towards the political establishment⁷⁰. Why?

Taking a *meta* view that includes the economic and social factors writ large, we can get a sense of how the relationship between entertainment and idealism is taking on an increasingly complex turn under the particular conditions of contemporary globalised capitalism, and how such social messages and ideals are coming into being. I argue that in order to understand why these ideals are appearing in the way that they are on the popular screen, we must consider the ways in which the state⁷¹, filmmakers, audience⁷², and market⁷³ converge in their interest in creating new ideals in the Indian and Chinese contexts. Each party has its own set of purposes for either embarking on such a project, endorsing it, or acquiescing to it. We can consider some of these, and how they interlock, below.

Since 1990, the states of both India and China have sought stability, whether in reaction to violence, feared threat of violence, or perceived increase risk as a consequence of rapid development and/or its uneven distribution. A set of values,

⁷⁰ Many films in Hindi and Mandarin entertainment industries depict corrupt or inept officials, or at the very least, bureaucracy that is so, and the attempts of young people and outsiders to re-establish righteous governance of one kind or another, although their attempts may not be successful. Examples would include: *Rang de Basanti* (Mehra [2006]), *Yuva* (Ratnam [2004]), *Jijie Hao* (Feng dir. *Assembly* [2007]), *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaron* (Shah [1983]), and *1942* (Feng [2012]).

⁷¹ By state here I mean the government and all of its arms and semi-autonomous arms such as state-supported film production houses. This includes censors, and state bodies/functions that otherwise affect the distribution and exhibition of film such as taxation or the police.

⁷² “Audience” refers here to those consuming the cinematic product both domestically and abroad, via all channels (cinema, satellite TV, online streaming etc.), include illegal channels.

⁷³ In this case, market refers to the domestic and diaspora market for film. It also includes distribution and all ancillary filmic products, and the marketing and advertising industry that supports the whole.

whether attached to an individual on screen or suggested by their absence through on-screen critique, is thus appealing as a strategy for aligning the ideals of the populace with the ideals of the state. One can argue that the creation of such an ideal is evidence of doubt about the masses and their qualities on the part of the state (Kaur and Mazzarella (2009) 90). In any case, it stands to benefit economically from the success of the industries, by tax, or profits gained by more direct involvement.

Filmmakers⁷⁴, including “independent” filmmakers, obviously wish to put their films to market, and this can only be achieved, for the most part, with the blessing of the state, in the form of passing censors at the very least. This is especially the case in markets that are increasingly integrated from producer to consumer (i.e. vertically) and across distribution and production outlets (i.e. horizontally). Moreover, we can point to the participation of filmmakers in state projects, to present another possibility: that in some cases filmmakers, and actors, may actually *seek* to involve themselves in the creation of stabilising state ideals, for many reasons. In the Hindi context, involvement of actors such as veteran, award-winning actor Anupam Kher, in the formal censorship of their own industry, is combined with a pervasive self-censorship that is evidenced in interviews with noted filmmaker Vivek Vaswani and megastar Shahrukh Khan, among others (Kaur & Mazzarella (2009) 94-115). The participation of actors in politics in a wider sense in India is very clear⁷⁵: even superstar Amitabh Bachchan entered politics briefly in the 1980s. In China, we can see the dramatic contribution of Zhang Yimou to the soft power spectacle that was the 2008 Olympics opening ceremony, and the style of

⁷⁴ “Filmmakers” in the context of India and China should rightly include directors but also producers, actors, musicians and cinematographers, whose combined efforts and influence have a huge effect on the look and feel of a film, and its overall success in reaching market, and doing well there.

⁷⁵ Tamil cinema is probably most famous for producing political figures but this trend also exists in the world of Hindi film, as show above.

the statist “main melody” (*zhuxuan li*) films *Jianguo Daye* (*The Founding of a Republic*, 2009) and *Jiandang Weiye* (*The Beginning of the Great Revival*, 2011). These films, in keeping with the legacy of blending entertainment with politics in the Chinese context, were very conspicuously “entertainment-ized”: directed by 5th Generation directors (Han Sanping and Huang Jianxin), featuring special effects and an A-Z of popular actors from Jackie Chan to Zhang Ziyi. The audience must, we can safely assume, identify with or accept the ways in which this is achieved, otherwise the success of these films, notwithstanding the imperfections of some statistics⁷⁶, cannot be accounted for.

Companies entering China and India’s markets have been engaged in the project of creating brand consciousness, developing locally inflected market niches, and designing consumer profiles. Thus, in a sense they are already engaged with the project of creating ideals before entering into relationships with cinema through product placement and “support”. In addition, companies, especially large and/or foreign ones are subject to a web of state regulation and involvement, from state partnerships to simply getting past corrupt officials. Thus, in some senses the companies that involve themselves in advertisement through cinema link all the other parties - consumer/audience, filmmakers and the state- together. Their relationship with the state also means that they also have an interest in backing, at least tacitly, projects promoting ideal social values.

⁷⁶ *Jian Dang Wei Ye*, for example is popularly rumoured to have had its ticket takings bolstered through the distribution of free tickets to many universities and work places by the Party.

1.3 “We are Hindustan”⁷⁷

“हम हिंदुस्तान हैं”

Here we will look at the economic and cultural growth of the film industry in India and China in this period, and begin to delve into the ideals that were created out of this environment. Growth in India and China has brought positive and negative outcomes, both of which are manifested in the push towards defining identity, or *Hua* and *Desi*, within a “cultural economy” (Chua (2012) 10). Since the early 1990s both India and China have undergone a process of “opening up” economically, by force or choice⁷⁸. The period from 1990 to time of writing has included the fiftieth anniversary of both modern states and has seen growth in the double digits, now levelling out at about 7-8% for their current Five Year Plans. The middle class has expanded, and with it, consumerism and urbanisation⁷⁹, which is also a manifestation of internal migration and structural changes in these economies.

With the growth of the middle classes, domestic entertainment cinemas of India and China have, on the whole, also flourished during the period from 1990 to present, gaining an improving reputation. However, as recognised by critics and the state, China has far to go in order to catch up with India in terms of the share of the market in entertainment films being taken up by domestic product (Hong 2014).

⁷⁷ This is spoken by Mangal Pandey (Aamir Khan) in *Mangal Pandey: The Rising*, (2005)

⁷⁸ India, of course, had put its gold reserves up as collateral in order to secure the \$2.2Billion loan that saved it from default in 1991. Part of the loan agreement as defined by the IMF was the introduction of a raft of economic reforms that would see India move further away from the Nehruvian socialist model economy that it had been vacillating at the edge of since first attempts at economic liberalisation in 1967. In China the economic liberalisation (改革开放) that had begun in the late 70s began to heat up and bear fruit in the late 80s and 90s as private businesses began to flourish and the private sector grew.

⁷⁹ According to the current, 12th Five Year Plan, China is predicted to exceed 50% urban population immanently.

As a consequence of increasing availability of technology, films are fluidly accessible through a wide range of legal and illegal means. The Hindi film industry – Bollywood – finally achieved “industry status” in 2001, recognised by the state, enabling access to legal loans and finance, which had been forbidden, and decreasing reliance on the black market or criminal sources. While individual ticket prices remained low, turnover and the growth of both multiplexes and alternative exhibition avenues like cable television, have led to continuing growth of over 10% – although, as Ernst & Young note in their industry report, such figures, in India as much as in China, should be taken with a grain of salt. As in the Chinese entertainment film industry, international collaboration has grown during this period, signifying the industries’ growing clout. Government support has at times helped the industries, even as direct state production involvement has reduced. China’s entertainment cinema reached its first peak of the period during 1995, which at the time was dubbed “The Year of Cinema”, the late 1990s seeing a relative slump as Hollywood films gained traction. Resurgence in the entertainment sector in the early 2000s, however, started an upward surge that has not yet ceased. And if the involvement of films makers and actors in advertising is anything to go by, popular culture has never been more influential, nor more imitated.

In terms of the cultural content of this growth, the 90s saw the explosion of Hindi cinema, of Bollywood as a “soft power” brand, onto the global stage, and a series of films enormously successful with the Indian diaspora as well as domestic audiences. Films like *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (*Sometimes Happiness, Sometimes Sadness* Johor, Karan dir. 2001), and *Pardes* (Ghai, Subash dir. 1997) showed the growing influence of the diaspora as an audience on filmmakers’ choice of topic, and their manner of expression, while also giving good domestic box office returns.

Nevertheless, a later backlash to these family-focused melodramas has led to a proliferation in styles within the entertainment genre and diversification in the mainstream market. Niches within entertainment cinema have emerged for films like the successful black comedy *Delhi Belly* (Deo, Abhinay dir. 2011) or *Dev D* (Kashyap, Anurag dir. 2009) that break away from the Bollywood formula of songs and melodrama, to an extent. In China, the new-style urban (black-) comedy, exemplified by the works of director Feng Xiaogang, began to develop alongside the rapid uptake of Chinese diaspora actors (from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Malaysia, for example) into Mandarin language films – now no longer poorer quality cousins of their Cantonese counterparts, but the best bet for the biggest market. The influence of Korean (Chua, Beng Huat 2008) and Taiwanese aesthetics as visions of contemporary development that originate from East Asian culture, but from non-Japanese sources, contributed to the growth in a taste for light romantic comedy (Chua, Beng Huat 2012).

As a reflection of social change, and nations going through a process of recreating themselves in the face of it, these cinemas represent ideals. Given the process for the production of these ideals on screen that I have described, we can identify an example of emerging “Social Representation”, as put forward by Serge Moscovici in his extension of Durkheim’s work on representations (Moscovici 1961): a set of shared beliefs, metaphors and symbols that may or may not have reference to an empirical reality, but which represent a sort of semi-accidental consensus, arrived at multi-directionally. A brief look at the plots of two recent blockbusters, *Ren Zai Jiong Tu* (*Lost on Journey*) and *3 Idiots*, can give us examples of the plot-as-social-messenger at this stage.

Ren Zai Jiong Tu, concerns Li Chenggong⁸⁰ played by Xu Zheng, a self-centred businessman who attempts, in the style of John Hughes' *Planes, Trains & Automobiles* (Hughes dir. 1987), to traverse the country to get home for the Chinese New Year Holiday and see his wife and child for the first time in a year.



Fig.8: *Ren Zai Jiong Tu*. *Li Chenggong and Niu Geng make the best of what condiments they have to enliven their meal when their car turns over, leaving them in the middle of nowhere. The drab colours of their clothes, lit solely by the glow of the disorganised fire, are sharpened by a subtle, and very contemporary blue/orange contrast. Nevertheless, the overwhelming feeling as Niu Geng burns their dinner is one of desperation. The disintegration of Chenggong's sharp clothing with the addition of a scarf around his head that almost feminises him, adds to this.*

Chenggong leaves behind his doting young, urban mistress, and office, where he is a loathed boss. He encounters his opposite number in the form of Niu Geng (Wang Baoqiang), a rustic, healthy, happy-go-lucky wise fool, with an ability to call on bad

⁸⁰ Chenggong's name itself literally means "success".

luck, known as a “crow mouth” or *wuzui*⁸¹, played by Wang Baoqiang. Niu Geng is on a mission to retrieve money he and his dairy plant co-workers are owed from investors in the same city Chenggong is traveling to: Changsha. The film contrasts Niu Geng’s naïve purity, affability, faith in human kind, honesty and kindness, with Cheng Gong’s material success, his fear, loathing, distrust and lust, and his inherent weakness, confusion, intelligence or cunning, that in the end make him human and likeable. However, even this simple outline of the plot also highlights issues of work-related migration, breakdown of the family unit, and the importance of the New Year holiday as a social and economic event in contemporary China, beside the inherent contradictions brought up by the two visions of contemporary China that the men represent.

3 Idiots, which achieved box office success not only in India and the diaspora but in East and Southeast Asian markets, falls into the “Bollywood” category of the “college movie”⁸², conceived as coming-of-age films of one kind or another that take place during the relative freedom from parental control that is symbolised by years at “college”. The single-sex context allows a little bit of frat-house humour, but these are generally solidly family films, that use the “college years” as a fantasy space, mythically free of economic responsibility⁸³. In the case of *3 Idiots* however, the reality of study, and the lives of (middle class) young people in the period before marriage and work responsibilities truly take hold is more seriously addressed. Student suicide under

⁸¹ Interestingly there is an almost perfect Hindi equivalent to this phrase in the superstition of a “black tongue” or “black tongued” person being capable of unconsciously bringing about that which he says, sometimes good, but especially in the case of bad things/events.

⁸² The “college movie” in the Hindi context is akin to the “high school” movie in the United States, especially in the 1980s where the “coming of age” depicted in mainstream cinema like the work of Deutch and Hughes was not normally very graphic or challenging.

⁸³ This periodization is linked to the traditional Indian view of the cycle of life stages that each individual (read male) goes through as outlined by the *Manu Smriti* (Jha [1924-29]). The first stage, which covers the individual to age 24, is known as stage of studentship, the *Brahmacharya*.

the pressure to succeed, what success means for a family's future and status, the stress of a rote-learning-focused education system that inhibits creativity, are all issues that arise repeatedly, albeit in a context where levity is attempted through a gurning, lipping, misfit physical comedy character headmaster, "Virus" (Boman Irani). Gross-out comedy aside, the film's principal character, Rancho, played by Amir Khan, has the sole purpose of disrupting the status quo and encouraging both social boundary transgression (in a limited way and always to highlight hypocrisy in society or do right) and creative learning in the interests of serving society, as well as himself. *3 Idiots* may be light-hearted in tone, but it certainly does not exchange its moral centre for commercial success. Neither does it shrink away from meditating openly on what it is to be a good *Desi*, to benefit India and its future in the contemporary, where India is being called to account for itself by a changing population and a changing world. *3 Idiots* shows the tyranny of the traditional system of learning, which in the stylised shot pictured in Fig.8, comes in the form of equations that literally hem in the students, and obscure their field of vision. The equations, as if to emphasise their incomprehensibility, are presented such that they are backwards for the audience, and their uniform whiteness contrasts sharply with the colourful clothes worn by the members of the class, evoking perhaps their youth and vibrancy.

Fig.9: 3 Idiots. *How can one be creative in a corrupt system of learning? Become guardians of an invigorated set of Desi values.*



1.4 What are *Hua* and *Desi*⁸⁴ ?

Hua and *Desi*⁸⁵, are essentially ethnonyms whose attributes are not directly fixed to a nation state. They are made more complex because in this way they stand for structures

⁸⁴ As mentioned in brief prior, in Hindi, this word is pronounced “Deshi” and would normally be spelled out in roman letters in this way, or else as Deś, however, the influence of other related languages, particularly Panjabi, and their pronunciation patterns, has led to an alternate pronunciation following Panjabi, of Des. Therefore, in order to encompass all the possible permutations of pronunciation attached to this word, which is very transparently comprehensible to all the parties using it, I am leaving it unmarked, simple as *Des* and *Desi* in most uses in this volume except when discussing its linguistic origins.

⁸⁵ I would like to briefly highlight why in this thesis I prefer to use these terms, rather than the popular “Sinophone” and, presumably “Hindiphone”(?). The latter term highlights one aspect of the problem, in that one can see that there is necessarily an imbalance of terminology here: a comparable term for Indian language would be Indophone but such a term would be completely useless and absurd as commonality between the many different Indian languages does not exist.

The case of “Sinophone” meaning “Chinese-speaking” is, perhaps, less extreme in its lack of clarity, but it is generally understood to refer to the population speaking Mandarin. However, as I mentioned briefly in the Introduction, its actual meaning can spread, with debate, to include Cantonese, Hokkien, Hakka: if we are talking about “Chinese-speaking” populations, we must ask, ‘which Chinese’?

Under certain circumstances this is not a problem: if our investigation were into the circulation of written sources, which although they reflect local grammar and usage, do all use the same characters (albeit in full and simplified forms), then perhaps the problem would not be so thorny. However, in the context of our investigation into identity in contemporary *film*, which perforce includes the politics of language use in the same, both on the Chinese and the Indian side, “Sinophone” does not do the job of accurately highlighting a population, nor does it point to a problematic. Furthermore, if we are to be strict to the meaning of “Sinophone” as a theoretical term, as it has been expanded on by Shih Shu-mei and others, and extend the logic to our comparable, as-yet-unnamed Hindi-related language term, we would have to

of culture, race and nationality that bypass their normal guardian in modernity⁸⁶. Consequently, one of the reasons that *Hua* and *Desi* have such huge potential as tools in our discussion of identity in Asia today is that they are *endonyms* that, as shown below, have evolved from ancient sources through the global interaction of the Chinese and Indian communities within and without their respective countries of origin. This link with the globalising aspect of China and India, internally and externally, highlights the role of cultural flow in creating identity, and also, is one way in which we can see a comparability of these two terms that they share with few other ethnonyms. As signs, they encapsulate special attributes, such as, but not limited to, integrity, dedication to one's family, respect for elders, hard work, and a proud consciousness of presumptive historical roots, attached to cultural identity in ways that avoid the nation-state-focused "Chinese-ness" and "Indian-ness". In doing so, however, we must keep in mind that their special terms of reference are being consistently and consciously invoked by those nation states as part of their political agendas, which I will discuss in more detail below.

acknowledge that primarily it was intended as a way of understanding as a kind of continuum the Chinese-speaking diaspora populations of countries where they were in the minority.

⁸⁶ Before delving further, it is important to discuss and be clear about this aspect of "race", a topic that, in the context of a humanist academy that holds multi-culturalism and egalitarianism in high regard, can be highly problematic. Race, we can increasingly see from both scientific and historical research, is largely socially manufactured, based upon preconceived ideas of descent, of appearance, or influence. To put it another way, it is "imagined" just as the "nation" or "community" is. This of course does not diminish it as an issue, but it is one where we must accept that the goalposts move depending on history, geography and society. For the purposes of our discussion of *Hua* and *Desi* as being signs that include within them an understanding of *racial* belonging, we have to understand that this racial belonging has very little, if anything to do with any real, categorical "genetic" difference, but much more to do with perceptions of *relatedness* and *belonging*. Sometimes these have to do with so-called racial markers that, more often than not, have their own complex relationship with the legacy of colonialism and the current global market, like skin colour, for example. But often these can be ineffable signs that distinguish one clan or "racial" group from another in subtle ways only to be understood by the groups involved.

First, let us look more closely at the two terms themselves. Both *Desi* and *Hua* have links linguistically with the very core of nationhood and national identity, while also having accrued a layer of popular culture meaning and usage. *Desi* is a word that is available in the vocabularies of Hindi, Panjabi and other related Indian languages and has been adopted into other less linguistically close Indian languages as well as into Hindi-Inflected English (or “Hinglish”), and Indian English⁸⁷, as well as the many other languages used by the Indian Diaspora all over the world through its contemporary popular meanings. Also because of its linguistic form, and endonymic nature, it can also be found to by diaspora from other parts of the Indian subcontinent, e.g. Pakistan, in much the same way that Taiwanese use *Hua*.

Where does the word come from? If we isolate our enquiry to the Hindi current usage and variants, since the cinematic source material of this inquiry is also in Hindi (and Hinglish), we can see that the word takes the ending –i which indicates possession or belonging (as in *Japani*, *Inglistani*, for Japanese, or English, for example), and adds it to the word *Des*, *Deś* or *Desh* meaning “land, country or place” in modern Hindi. *Deś*, and indeed *Deśi* have however come, perhaps simply by the virtue of the language context in which they find themselves, to mean “India” or the Indian subcontinent, which is to say, for an *Indian Hindi* speaker, “my native country, land or place”, and thus things or people that belong to the *deś*. *Deś/i* is a component of many commonly used words pertaining to belonging and identity: “*pardeś/pardeśi* (abroad/foreign), *videś/videśi* (abroad/foreign or alien.), and *swadeś/swadeśi* (one’s own country/of one’s own country⁸⁸), which is linked to the discourse of self-governance. *Deś/i* finds its

⁸⁷ “Indian English” refers to the *actual* set of dialects used in the Indian subcontinent, *not* merely an accent.

⁸⁸ We can compare this to the concept of *Swaraj* or “self-rule” that was so important during the campaign for independence from Britain.

linguistic roots in Sanskrit, where the word *Deśa* appears indicating a range of meanings over history, from the particular indication of one area of India, to India as a whole, to a place in general, and it is found indicating within this range of meaning in the cultural cornerstone that is the *Bhagavad Gita*. In India itself, in recent history it has often been used as a term of authenticity for products or things, as being authentically Indian:

“Pure Desi Ghee” for example. It can also take on a derogatory cast at times in referring to a person who is un-sophisticated or rustic. However, especially over the past 10 years the use of *Desi* in India, and in products emanating from there has become increasingly influenced by how the term is used in the diaspora, used now for clothing labels (Desi Vibe), radio stations (Desi Radio India, Desi Mix etc.), and cable tv (MTV Desi), for example. The change has come about mainly by way of popular culture products like popular novels, music and film, that circulate domestically and within the diaspora. This change in the use of the term domestically in India, is such that we now have films and songs, with titles like *Desi Girl* (Vishal-Shekhar [2013]), *Shuddh Desi Romance* (Pure Desi Romance. Sharma dir. [2013]), *Desi Boyz* (Dhawan dir. [2011]) etc, and the use of the term to designate that which is culturally Indian has become commonplace within all formats, especially those consumed by urbanite Hindi and Hinglish speakers. *Desi*, one can say, has almost become a brand in itself.

Hua has a complex, layered history. According to most contemporary reference sources, including *Baidu* (part search engine, part media source) and Chinese language Wikipedia as well as modern iterations of the super-reference work, *Cihai* (1999), it first appears meaning “belonging to the *Han* Chinese ethnic group”, or “from (the area now known as) China”, or the Yellow River basin, when used in conjunction with the word *xia* 夏, i.e. 华夏. *Hua* itself also has the literal meaning of “flowery” or mottled, and the relationship between the two meanings designated, if any, is unclear, though it

is an ancient character and first appeared in bone inscriptions of divination (*jiaguwen* 甲骨文, from at least 1050 BC) and may have had multiple pronunciations or iterations. Further, some sources point to a change in meaning during the Tang dynasty (618-907 AD), where the word became used to indicate the first person pronoun, and/or the Tang itself. Obtaining a detailed philological account of *Hua*'s changing nuance over the centuries is not a project for the current study. However, in its modern usage we can say that it is deeply imbricated in the web of terms and signs that refer to the elusive category of "Chinese-ness"; it transparently has this meaning to people familiar with the character. It is applicable to things, people and language, and moreover, is even part of the name of the official name of the PRC in Chinese: *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo*, forming part of the designation for the "Chinese People". It is used in compound words commonly used to describe various kinds of Chinese-ness, in a way that is reminiscent of the root use of *des* and *Desi* e.g. *huaren* 华人 (ethnically Chinese person), *huaqiao* 华侨 (the normal expression for "Overseas Chinese"), *huayu* 华语 (*Hua*-language, i.e. Chinese, almost always Mandarin). Thus *Hua* is also deeply linked to both the political entity of mainland China and also to its cultural heritage. It is a common character in institutions of all kinds in the diaspora and domestically, from book shops to restaurants, and is used by Chinese populations in Taiwan, Malaysia and Singapore as well as diaspora further afield, in the same way. *Hua*-ness in the sense of cultural belonging, values or heritage is one of the key ingredients in much of the cultural output of the PRC at the present time. Its globalness, the fact that we are able to attach it to people outside China whom we can indicate as culturally "authentic" by its use, is what makes it possible for it to also be cosmopolitan, to encompass the trappings of success and development. In sum, it is the succinct brand name for the popular qualifier "with Chinese characteristics."

Also of consequence in defining the scope of these terms is the “historical” link between *Hua* and *Han* 汉, as in *Han* Chinese, the majority racial-ethnic group in China today, and the presumptive link between *Desi* and Northern, particularly North-Western Indian culture (Uttar Pradesh, Panjab, Rajasthan etc.), as tied currently to Hindi and related languages like Panjabi. Again this creates an unmistakable cultural tension both within India and China and between them and their neighbours. It is a crucial component of the construction of Others in the inter-Asian context, and an example of the ways in which the romantic flavour of cultural nationalism is in itself restrictive of diversity, although this restriction is frequently challenged by lived experience. *Hua* and *Desi* are wandering categories: one can be Indian but not very *Desi* (although often that is expressed as “*not Desi enough*”), or one can reside elsewhere and be *Desi*, in Canada, for example. However, it would be very difficult if not impossible for a person of non-South Asian origin to be understood as *Desi*. The above holds true in the case of *Hua*-ness as well.

So, *Hua* and *Desi*, as terms of identity, are both concrete and ineffable. We may find the concept of the rhizome, as advocated/described by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari⁸⁹ in the introduction of *A Thousand Plateaus* useful. The idea of an interconnected assemblage that can reconstitute itself from new or old points of departure as the situation demands is a useful kind of metaphor for the fantastical, never-ending nature of the search for authenticity. A rhizomatic structure may actually be more helpful than the more commonly used “tree” model of hierarchical logic that Deleuze and Guattari seek to interrupt. A rhizome “ceaselessly establishes connections

⁸⁹ “The Principles of the Rhizome” are enumerated in Deleuze & Guattari (1980) 7-13 and expanded throughout the Introduction.

between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles” (Deleuze and Guattari, *ibid.* 12). Ideals of identity surely behave thus, as do the values that fill them in. Can we attempt to flesh out an approximation of the present content of *Hua* and *Desi*?

Beginning with aesthetic values, *Hua* and *Desi*, perhaps because of their racial overtones, are linked to ideals of form, including gendered form, masculinity, and especially femininity. This creates complex formations of authenticity surrounding the physical body and what it should look like and/or wear. The sari, of course, is conceived of as the ultimate symbol of Indian femininity, but the desirable bodily form, which in Hindi film can be seen to have become slimmer and narrower since the 1990s, skin tone and hair colour all play a part.

Language and habits like swearing, smoking, and drinking, are significant in marking the characterisation of a stereotypically more “corrupted” or “westernised” *Desi* or *Huaren nüzi* 华人女子 (*Hua* girl. Also *Huanü*). Women on screen will often be seen to enact these habits for comic effect, as in *Dilwale Dulhania Lejayange* (Chopre, Aditya dir. 1995) drunken song sequence *Zara Sa Jhoom Loon Main* (*I Will Be a Bit Unsteady*) or the darkly comic drunken apartment scene in *Guasha* (Zheng, Xiaolong dir. 2001) complete with over-the-top swearing as the couple head into despair. However, the story arcs of popular film tend to either portray these as lapses of emotional incontinence that are soon rectified, or periods of “corruption” from which the women emerge into their proper *Hua* or *Desi* roles.



Fig. 10: Guasha. Tellingly, the swearing dialogue is actually in English, here “translated” for the “Huayu”-speaking audience. Original quote is, amusingly, “You are a son-of-a-bitch fucking bullshit.”

These are replete with social values such as deference to one’s elders, or overall sense of shame.

Confining our discussion as closely as possible to the limits of aesthetics for the moment, in Fig. 11 below, John Abraham and company watch the swaying hips of Priyanka Chopra as she performs in the song *Desi Girl* in the 2008 hit film *Dostana*. We can immediately see the difference in the admiring, besotted expression on Sameer (John Abraham)’s face as opposed to the predatory, overtly sexual gaze and expression of the Caucasians present. We may perhaps infer that the difference lies in Sameer’s ability to appreciate the cultural content of Chopra’s dance, which conforms to the admiration trope often seen in Bollywood films, where males follow the swaying hips of female dancers performing “jhatka matka” or free-style Bollywood dance⁹⁰. Similar scenes are to be found in recent hits like *Omkara* (Bharadwaj, V. dir. 2006) and *Om*

⁹⁰ Thus, in a sense, his *Desi* identity is to some extent produced by contrast with non-*Desis*.

Shanti Om (Khan, Farah dir. 2007) as well as films of the 70s and 80s. The song's chorus seems to underline this exclusivity: "Who is the hottest girl in the world? My *Desi* girl, my *Desi* girl!". The lyrics, in the main, are in Hindi, and the word *Desi* is of course endonymic, so the singer is presumptively also *Desi*, also capable of understanding the specialness of *Desi*-ness. The song and the movie were both high grossing hits. So, are the men here watching Priyanka's *Desi*-ness? What is *Desi* about her? Does her *Desi*-ness make her more of an object to be gazed at, or an individual to be appreciated? How does the *Desi*-ness of males affect their interaction with the female body and how does it affect their own habits and bodies on film?



Fig.11: *Desi* dance in Dostana dance sequence: My *Desi* Girl.

Dance is relatively scarce in contemporary filmic visions of *Hua* but we might also consider other "Chinese" or *Hua* ideals of beauty that still have contemporary currency, such as the *guazi lian* 瓜子脸 (lit. pumpkin seed face) used to describe a woman's face that has a sharp narrow jaw line, rounded forehead, and very white skin: the shape and colour of a pumpkin seed.

Hua and *Desi* seek a cultural authenticity predicated on ethnicity, and tending toward the creation of a *mainstream modernity*, though linked to an invented, perhaps

folkloric, or romantic nationalist past⁹¹. History is there to be exploited within the creation of the identities, the recalling or creation of “Structures of Feeling” like those that Raymond Williams identified in his examination of traditional tropes that had grown up around the portrayal of town and country in literature. The reality, he found, was in some senses subservient to the *idea* of the place, no matter how distant from that grounded reality it was. He also traced the way in which nostalgia was a pathway to produce a sense of origin. What all these pursuits share, and what one may say is at the heart of looking for roots per se, is a pre-occupation with *authenticity*, presumptively of an authenticity that is distinct from all other formations. This preoccupation may lead to all manner of ends, from the formation of political movements, such as Hindutva in India, to new forms of censorship that seek to protect a fabulous authenticity, the “alien-to-our-culture” argument for what Bhowmika calls “vox populi” censorship. This is increasingly used to bury identities under the theoretical rubric of multiculturalism⁹² and/or mutual respect and tolerance.

I suggest that in many respects the entertainment films of China and India in Hindi and Mandarin present multiple facets of a root-seeking tendency focused on *Hua*-ness and *Desi*-ness. They do not, however, always privilege a rootedness based on ancient practices. Rather, they seek to restructure and reimagine a *Desi* or *Hua* identity

⁹¹ Gong (2012) gives a good summary of the revival of traditional intellectualism and *Guoxue* in its second chapter.

⁹² Immediate examples include particularly the status of gay people in countries like India, China and Singapore where things have changed somewhat for the better with regards to access to rights under the law etc. but also Russia, where recent law ostensibly designed to protect “traditional Russian culture and values”. We can also think of other causes that may be seen as liberal, such as women’s rights, or even the status of the mentally ill. The trend for pointing out the alien “Other” that is-not-of-here of course also includes a great deal of anti-Islamic and racist dogma that is both fringe and mainstreamed in, for example, British, French and US societies, where issues such as the *hijab* or *niqab* arouse high passions with or without reasoned argument.

confidently fit for the contemporary, with its economic successes and social changes, that is, nevertheless, privilege in its “authenticity”.



Fig. 12: *In a St. Louis courtroom Xu Datong, successful video games designer hero of Guasha (Zheng dir., [2001]) angrily guards Chinese culture, embodied in the character Sun Wukong, the Monkey King from the classic Xi You Ji (Journey to the West) in the course of defending himself against accusations of child abuse. Subtitles: “(Sun Wukong) represents our traditional system of values and ethics.” The film is predominantly filmed in English, but was released in a Mandarin-dubbed version which was both successful and award-winning in the PRC. Datong’s struggle as the America he had fallen in love with attacks his cultural traditions is indicative of the defense of authenticity.*

1.5 *Hua* & *Desi*: What Values?

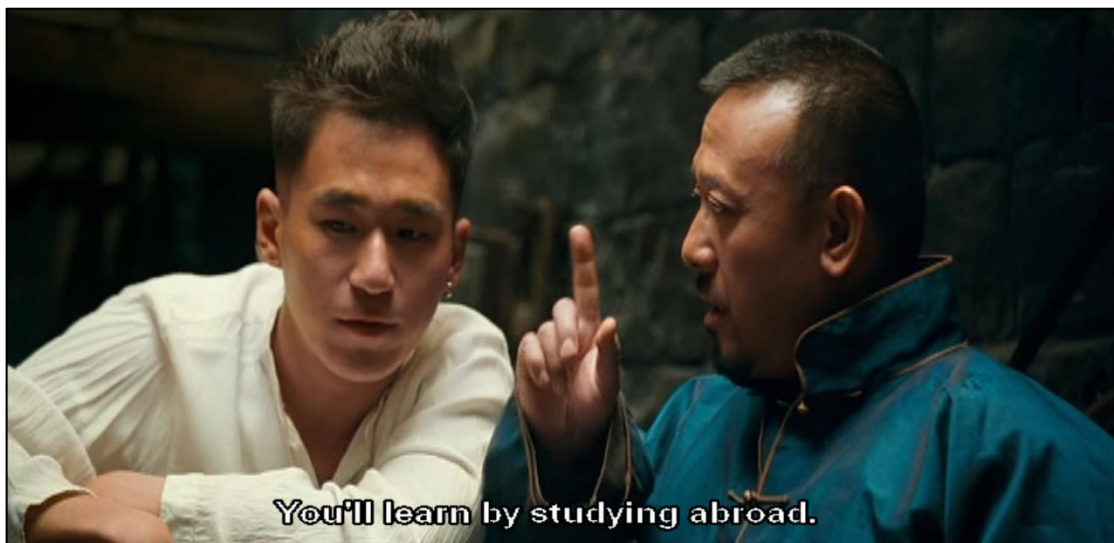


Fig.13: Republican era bandit Zhang Mazi, played by actor/director Jiang Wen, advises his adopted son on the best path for future success in the high-grossing action-packed comedy Rang Zidan Fei (Let the Bullets Fly 2010). Is it more *Hua* to leave for perceived future benefit for self and family, or to stay and help his adopted father?

This section explores how to *feel* authentic, and what “values” enable that. In the collection of studies contained in a special double issue of the periodical *Chinese Education and Society* entitled *Attitudes and Behavior of Contemporary Chinese Youth* (Rosen and Chen 2011) many revealing, and conflicting trends emerge on the subject of perceived success, loyalty and patriotism among the young in China. Only 52.1% of young people surveyed said that they would support a family member’s decision if he/she decided to move abroad to North America or another Western country (62). However, the rest of the article more or less confirms the hypothesis that there is a substantial uptick in patriotic and nationalist sentiment among the young in China. While the studies in *Chinese Education and Society* reveal a strong vein of nationalism, they also show the mixed feelings that young people, and the public at large currently have about goods, people and concepts, perceived of as foreign, and about what is patriotic and thus, *Hua*. We also see the emerging re-assessment of both foreign-ness and its relationship to modernity: the belief that development and modernity can be

arrived at in a *Hua* way. This thrust towards a newly defined modern trajectory combined with an anxiety about what is truly *Hua*, is, as we have observed, reflected in film, and is in large part mirrored in contemporary Indian life. As for Mazi's beloved adopted son in *Rang Zidan Fei*, pictured above in Fig.13, he lives in a diegetic space where the beauty of foreign classical music, and foreign learning are contrasted with a corrupt knowledge of the foreign. This includes deliberate swindling of fellow countrymen, and use of English to create an illusion of knowledge, on the part of the villain, played against type by Chow Yun Fat.



Fig.14: Rang Zidan Fei. Evil local boss Huang, played by Chow Yun Fat, explains how the rich families in the area make their money. “We have two wealthy families in Goose Town. They sell people to America to build railroads, in return for dollars.” (“我们鹅城人有两个大家，都是把人卖到America修铁路。挣的都是dollars” “women echeng ren you liang da jia, dou shi baren maidao America xiu tielu, zheng de dou shi dollars.”) *Italicised in both English and Chinese version of quote is said by Huang in highly accented English, much to the confusion of his dinner guests who do not understand any English at all. Huang himself, it is implied, has a hand in this “selling of people”, and also is said to supply opium, and be a “runner” for a general who engages in a variety of nefarious businesses. Huang’s grand, westernised home and punctilious personal grooming habits, which are highlighted throughout the film, reveal a slick, corrupt individual able to comfortably grow rich on the misfortune of others.*

Such a problematized relationship with foreign-ness is, obviously, by no means unfamiliar to the audience. In any case, he neatly avoids the dilemma through his

bloody death for a point of honour, left to embody whichever version of heroic *hua* the audience may have for him, as the child of a bandit who uses his outsider status to subvert the corruption of the official system. He, Mazi, and many like them in contemporary Chinese and Indian film, take on, to a lesser or greater extent the mantle of true *Hua* or *Desi* values, offering a cynical, yet idealistic, kind of heroism, against the corruption, of mind, body and soul they view around them. They do this, as in this film, often against a background that is ambivalent about success, and that seeks to disaggregate development and westernization.

Political engagement, and patriotism as a theme, alongside wealth and attainment are a significant facet of heroism in Hindi cinema, and in Indian popular writing on *Desi-ness* as well, at the very least for men. Chetan Bhagat's 2012 collection of essays, many of which have previously been published in periodicals like *The Hindu*, speaks not only about the necessity of creating a more organised, unified set of "Indian Values" but also about the struggle to fight the prevailing air of cynicism in order to tackle the many-tentacled monster that is the political status quo. These are sentiments that echo again and again through popular cinema, in more challenging films like *Rang de Basanti* (Mehra, Rakeysh Omprakash dir. 2006), and *Yuva* (Ratnam, Mani dir. 2004), but also in *3 Idiots*, *Delhi 6*, and *Swades*, where an NRI regains his "authentic" Indian self through falling in love and challenging the injustices inflicted by the local *panchayat*, or "council of five".

But what are Indian values? Bhagat offers the following, which gives some insight:

"When we think of Indian values, we normally think of personal values such as family, religion and respect for elders. However, ask someone to articulate Indian community values and there won't be a clear answer. Do we value

wealth or education? Do we value democracy, where people have a greater say in how they are governed, or do we believe in power in the hands of a select few to whom the laws don't apply? Do we value frugality or do we want to show off our wealth? Do we value our local communities or do we value being part of India?" (Bhagat, Chetan (2012) 3-4)

We can reflect on the extent to which the personal values articulated are part of the pan-Asianist concept of “Asian” values, akin to the ideology of Tagore, one that skims over gender, class and caste inequalities. Or perhaps we can connect it to the more practical motivations of Mahathir bin Mohamad and Lee Kwan Yew’s “Asian Values” ideologies. We may find resonances here, and in other expressions of “Indian Values”, with the emphasis on the concept of “Harmony” *he* 和 that has dominated state discourse on domestic values in China for the last decade or so⁹³. *He* is very much understood to be at the heart of a soft power campaign or “National PR” (*guojia gongguan*) campaign launched in earnest at the 2008 Olympics and continued through the 12th 5 Year Plan, but it is a piece of soft power symbolism that is used domestically *and* abroad, as I argue film is used in both India and China. *He*, at least in some of its more recent outings (e.g. Zhang Lihua 2013), has been interpreted to emphasise harmony in diversity: accepting that there are different components to society, but that

⁹³ “Harmony” is a much used word and much repeated concept since the unevenness of China’s development has become more and more apparent and since the *relative* loosening of centralised control since the beginning of the reform era (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放) has thrown ethnic and cultural divisions more noticeably into contrast. I provide here 3 key examples. Firstly, in the writings of Li Ruihuan, in particular his essay who I find particularly interesting, and germane as a source for this thesis as he not only is a noted theorist within the Party, but because he has particularly written and spoken about communication, politics and the arts, as well as other matters. Secondly in a very interesting piece by Zhang Lihua published through the Carnegie Tsinghua Foundation in November 2013 on “Chinese Traditional Cultural Values”. The piece relies heavily on classical texts, particularly Confucius, and represents a good example of *official* cultural nationalism in a soft power forum. Thirdly, we can recall the use of the character 和, as shown in Fig. 9 in the aesthetic pageant of *hua* that was the 2008 Beijing Olympics opening ceremony.

they must all operate together harmoniously if the country is to succeed. This is a convenient way to draw on philosophy to resolve questions around uneven development, to be sure. The real situation on the ground in the Chinese case requires no doubt as much soul-searching as Bhagat gives to the question of Indian values. Certainly we can see this question echoed in contemporary film, not least in *Rang Zidan Fei*, mentioned above, where deference to privilege is lampooned. We can see also, that many of these dilemmas have been sharpened by rapid development, and expansion of the consumer and marketing sectors, whether, for example, wealth should be on display, or not. In this, as in the endless reinterpretations of Hinduism, of *He*, of Confucianism, or the legacy of Mao, of Gandhi or of Indira Gandhi, the functional use of history, and the rhizomatic nature of Asian values, of *Hua* and *Desi*, are revealed. How are these paradoxes and instabilities shown on screen? Are any of them resolved?



Fig.15: *The character he is formed both by a mass of performers and through digital means at the lavish opening ceremonies for the 2008 Olympics in Beijing.*

1.6 Hua & Desi on screen: The Romantic, the Authentic, the Fantastic, the Modern

This section will provide more detailed examples of *Hua* and *Desi* on screen through analysis of pairs of films, examining visual, characterisation and linguistic aspects. In some of the examples that we have already seen, in *Ren Zai Jiong Tu* and *3 Idiots*, a

vision of the contrast between sophistication and authentic experience has been heightened thematically. Yet, to a certain extent this paradox has been resolved when we consider the films as products: they have been crafted with high production values, even though both were relatively cheap to make, compared to the expanded budgets of the current market. With a combination of techniques, from atmospheric colour control and absurd juxtapositional framing in *Ren Zai Jiong Tu*, to fast paced songs and slapstick combined with cinematic sepia sequences in *3 Idiots*, they exemplify a kind of reverential pastiche and the modern flexibility of film as a form. In this way, they can be said to be as sophisticated as their market will allow, yet authentic in message.

They have both experienced huge profitability and status as cultural touchstones in the popular realm, both exceeding the entry requirement for their countries' "high earner's" clubs. Thus, they exemplify, as products, the development and modernity of a domestic market that is profitable: they do not only reach out to the diaspora to promote the market's values, its status, and much less do they seem to crave the attention of foreign film festivals to the exclusion of the domestic audience. Moreover, they represent fine examples of products in the cultural economy, as Chua Beng Huat describes it: products that matter, and are desirable for what they *mean* and symbolise (Chua (2012) 10).

At the same time, at the heart of each is a lesson against endless competition and consumerism in favour of humanist values, and respect for moral order. There is a search for authenticity, in the face of societies awash in counterfeit goods. In both cases we must understand that the moral or ethical ideas shown are certainly modern moral structures, though they invoke tradition rhizomatically, they must be re-inscribed in new, modern ways. The hero of *3 Idiots*, Rancho, played by Aamir Khan, repeats a phrase, "All is Well", to himself. He does this in the face of increasing social pressure,

in the face of the race to earn enough money, value goods, fall into line with a corrupted tradition. In the film, it is this pressure that leads other students to suicide. He even awakens the film's heroine, Pia (Kareena Kapoor) to the pettiness of her fiancé's materialism by spilling food on his shoes, and hearing him exclaim their price as he bristles with anger. In *Ren Zai Jiong Tu*, Chenggong (Xu Zheng), learns about humanity and how to value human, indeed family relationships, rather than the cost of his train ticket, through his comic encounter with Niu Geng (Wang Baoqiang)⁹⁴. We are also shown further the underbelly of "uneven modernity" in the pursuit of success through the desperation of a charity worker forced to beg to keep helping children in her care. Thus, both contemporary life, its excesses, and the self-interested corruption of "traditional" values are rejected in favour of a development with humanist, but nevertheless Asian, characteristics.

We can see these attempts at resolving questions around authenticity and material development as ultimately the creation of a reappropriated subject position. Visually we see style borrowings from domestic and Western cinema and others in, for example, the classic Hollywood dance sequences, frat house humour reminiscent of *Porky's* (Clark dir. 1982), and sepia-tinged references to melodramatic classic Hindi social cinema. All these styles are reflected in the soundscape and sunk into a fresh, colourful context that strikes a balance between the bright innocence of earlier college films such as *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (*Something Happens to Me* Johar dir. 1998) and a sense of real space, place and problems.

⁹⁴ This kind of "Consumer Grotesque" as I call it, is something that I look into in greater detail in Chapter Three which concerns comedy in particular.



Fig. 16: Frat-house style hazing upon arrival at college in *3 Idiots*. Of course, Rancho, the eccentric genius of the film, gives the perpetrators their comeuppance.



Fig. 17: The home of Raju, one of the “3 Idiots” of the film’s title lives in a home described as “out of a black and white movie from the 50’s”, full of tragedy and poverty. Note the Chinese subtitles. This film has been very popular in China.

In studying film over the past 20 years in India and China, we must, as study of *Desi* and *Hua* as categories reveals, think about the visual or aesthetic, the story or moral, and the function of language. As a function of the reappropriation of contemporary subjectivity, a completely different set of uses of English emerges. This is particularly noticeable in contemporary Chinese cinema, where in films like *Ren Zai jiong Tu* English use is beginning to closely resembling the syncretism displayed in Bollywood’s “Hinglish”. Whereas in older films, including many from the 90s, English

usage is almost exclusively the province of the corrupt and the villainous, *here* English is employed for minor pleasantries and apologies without derision, but as a clear marker of social class. The difference between the biting satire of early Feng Xiaogang films like *Da Wanzi (Big Shot's Funeral)* and his later films, or indeed Yip's *Lost on Journey* is quite clear: foreign goods, language and markers are no longer suspicious unto themselves and irredeemable. The irony that Feng's films are perhaps richest in product placement is not coincidental. Thus, the social conflicts of these films are *both* solved, marketised, made into a highly successful domestic niche, and problematized.

As in the case of *Ren Zai Jiong Tu's* Li Chenggong, we can observe that at times the “corrupting” influence of economic affluence, that separates a successful protagonist from “the people”, can be tempered by interaction with the common man, or even the wise fool that is the *sha gen*, or “stupid root”, a term itself coined from the name of the character played by Wang Baoqiang in *Tianxia Wu Zei (A World without Thieves*. Feng, Xiaogang dir. [2004]). If the loveable innocent (or idiot) is associated most often with actor Wang Baoqiang in Chinese cinema, it is most often synonymous with the comedies of actor Akshay Kumar in Hindi cinema, for example, *Namastey London*. This character ostensibly cannot interact well, if at all, in English, indicating a low social status, but also a “purity” of ethnicity, *and of heart*. Characters that are unable to cope with conversational Hindi, such as the (not incidentally) foreign-educated Sri Lankan (i.e. distanced from “traditional” *desi*-ness) anti-hero of *3 Idiots* Chatur Ramalingam (Omi Vaidya), are the butt of jokes. Chatur's unfamiliarity with Hindi is derided publicly when words in the Sanskritised high-Hindi speech he has been coached on are replaced with swearing. We can contrast this with the fate of Roshan, the Indian-American hero of *Delhi-6*, played by Abhishek Bachchan, who speaks more and more

Hindi as the film progresses, and as he visually and linguistically re-embraces his putative homeland, and his Desi-ness.

Fig.18: *Scene from Ren Zai Jiong Tu. Chenggong, having excused himself, in English, into his seat, is interrupted by his erstwhile accidental travel companion, Niu Geng, who has a ticket for the same seat. In the end, Niu Geng is willing to stand although he has a ticket, because he is more familiar with the trains, and defers to others. Chenggong, who acquired his ticket through professional arm-twisting, later discovers that a counterfeit ticket has been purchased on his behalf. His own distance from life, and the vicissitudes of the Chinese market are revealed.*



The films of Feng Xiaogang often deride the wealthy, Westernised individual as foolish, affected, inauthentic and un-Chinese, and the two films of the *Fei Cheng Wu Rao* (I & II) enterprise are no exception. We can immediately see that compared to *Ren Zai Jiong Tu*, the use of English and other foreign languages in his films is complex, at times suggesting power, or at least the desire for power in those characters that use them. In both *Feicheng Wu Rao (If You are the One 2008)* and *Tianxia Wu Zei (A World Without Thieves 2004)* for example, middle-aged, pampered, English-learning or

English-wielding men are revealed to be morally corrupt, and/or sexually deviant, attributes which we may connect with Feng's early collaboration with popular author, Wang Shuo.



Fig.19: Fei Cheng Wu Rao. *An angel investor awakes.*

They are contrasted, by shot colour, and by pure physique (they tend toward the plump) with the rough authenticity of actor Ge You and the fit and lithe Andy Lau.



Fig. 20: Tianxia Wu Zei. *Bonnie and Clyde-like protagonists Wang Li (Renee Liu) and Wang Bo (Andy Lau) blackmail Li's English student, a wealthy businessman, after he forces himself on her. The General Manager's pronunciation is not what it should be, as shown above.*

Let us create a parallel in our thinking now between the 2008 films *Fei Cheng Wu Rao* (*If you are the One*) and *Dostana* (*Friendship*. Mansukhani, Tarun dir.). The films are very different: *Fei Cheng Wu Rao* is the tale of a returned *huaqiao*, who having

returned to China with nothing to his name, and no prospects, sells an absurd peace-making “invention” to a dim angel investor, and becomes a millionaire overnight. He then starts on the project that takes up both *Fei Cheng Wu Rao* and its 2010 sequel: trying to find a wife, and, having found the woman that he wants, trying to make her fall in love with him – despite a significant age gap – or at least marry him. The film is a tragi-comic masterpiece of uncomfortable silences and outright laughter, including a great deal of commentary on the growing “practicality” of society beside Qin Fen’s diamond-in-the-rough idealism. The film eschews the magical realism to be found in some of Feng Xiaogang’s other films, and favours a muted colour palette with a dampened down version of the heightened red/green colour contrast that Feng used to full effect in *Tian Xia Wu Zei*. Locations are suffused with a sense of cosmopolitan and *Hua* accented success as Qin Fen plays Badminton, goes to beautiful restaurants, and takes first class flights in seats embroidered with the Chinese character *fu* (fortune/wealth). There is no dirt in this diegetic world, no poverty, only emotional preoccupations, what we might call first world concerns, and a sense of Chinese aesthetics in Feng Xiaogang’s choice of canaled Hangzhou and tropical Hainan as locations, aerial and establishing shots replete with greenery and lotuses. Feng includes many restaurant locations that in some way aesthetically Chinese in flavour, with screens, or tea house musicians, blended with contemporary, hip sophistication. The locations, I suggest, reflect the “traditional” values in modern setting that Qin Fen is looking for, and that in some senses, he embodies, while the overcast weather generally seems to invoke love interest Xiaoxiao’s unhappiness as she is resigning herself to life without the man she loves, and trying to love Qin Fen for his good qualities.

Dostana meanwhile, is a Hindi-language re-invention of *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* (Dugan dir. [2007]), where two men pretend to be a gay couple in

order to get a beautiful apartment in Miami, where they are living as NRIs, and to get closer to their beautiful roommate, played by Priyanka Chopra. However, what the films do share, very strongly, is a sense of ownership of modernity, luxury and development. *Fei Cheng Wu Rao* is awash in mobile phones, computers and other devices, emails, texts, internet dating. Humorous critique of society abounds, as Qin Fen (Ge You) encounters many strange prospects in his search for a partner, but all the while, the prism through which we view proceedings is one of a successful China, in which individuals can afford holidays abroad to Japan. *Dostana*, filmed exclusively on location in Miami, continues the tradition of exotic Bollywood locations, but in this case, the protagonists are not visiting, or studying: they live there. They all have successful jobs, and they are all single, enjoying a glamorous lifestyle of nightclubs, models, and penthouse pools. Nevertheless, they are still interrupted in their enjoyment of the Miami lifestyle by calls from their mothers, or aunts: the influence of tradition on their lives is still palpable, even in the sense that they, especially the male “couple” Sameer and Kunal, defy it deliberately at times. Neha, the heroine of the piece, is perhaps to the letter what Qin Fen had requested in *Fei Cheng Wu Rao*: modern (even racy at times), on the outside, but with a “traditional”, romantic, family-loving heart.



Fig. 21: Title song of *Dostana* includes this party scene glamorizing the location and providing visual contrast where the perfection of white clothes on the principle male protagonists seems indestructible.

In some senses these are fantasies. In another sense, we can see the emergence of a new, ideal, contemporary, successful protagonist, a *Hua* or *Desi* subject with access to modernity in all its forms, both abroad and at home.



Fig. 22: *Fei Cheng Wu Rao*. We can contrast the ridiculous, almost cartoonish excess of the angel investor character above, complete with his velvet robe, gold dripping home and buxom assistant with the ordinary, yet extraordinary, and cleverly successful *Qin Fen* (played by *Ge You*) below. Indeed, this film reflects the ordinariness, the quotidian atmosphere visually: the scene above, from the first sequence in the film, where *Qin Fen* sells his “invention” to an angel investor, is bathed in yellow gold light. The film is thereafter characterised visually by a greyish, overcast light that is only relieved at the very end, and follows the characters to Hainan, and Hangzhou.



Fig. 23: Qin Fen exemplifies a certain perfectly imperfect vision of Hua: He lived abroad for more than a decade, returned with no accomplishments but made good using his street sense. He actively seeks out a woman who is, as the Chinese says above “Modern on the outside, conservative on the inside.” Throughout the film, he gives examples of his “good guy” character, despite his many flaws: he is filial, having come back to China to make sure that his aging mother was not alone, and believes wholeheartedly in traditional ideas of the family. He is also patriotic, as shown below. And yet he is progressive enough to seriously contemplate what it would be like to be gay.



Fig. 24 & 25: Director Feng Xiaogang uses shot and countershot techniques to create a mild tension in the interaction between Qin Fen and his Taiwanese blind date (Vivian Hsu) in *Hangzhou*. They agree to disagree on matters of cross-straits relations but fail to hit it off romantically.

Furthermore, in both *Dostana* and *Fei Cheng Wu Rao*, I suggest that the heroines themselves are transformed into repositories of *Hua* and *Desi* modernity in a consumer sphere, their bodies made into glamorous objects of desire to be acquired in order for success to be achieved. It is through the women in these films that the problematic relationship between “tradition” and contemporary luxury and success is raised⁹⁵. In *Fei Cheng Wu Rao*, it is Qin Fen’s love interest Xiaoxiao who has difficulty in navigating the dilemma of how to define true love, and whether it could be morally right for her to

⁹⁵ We can compare the use of these gendered bodies to their purposes in history films, as described in Chapter Four.

be with someone she does not love romantically, or morally wrong to reject someone who obviously cares for her and is devoted. Sincerity, (诚 *cheng*), is, ironically in a comedy, a key concept in these films, even in the funniest sequences. And *cheng* itself is a complex moral value, in a world that is, as Feng Xiaogang's films reveal, awash in scams. In *Dostana* Neha at once embodies sexuality and desire through the endless shots of her body, her own access to the desired apartment, which she owns, and conservative sexual values, in an irony rife in Hindi language cinema. She, and her aunt, also a moral guardian, are only willing, to have men, Sameer (Abhishek Bachchan) and Kunal (John Abraham) as roommates on the understanding that they are gay, after all. And she further expresses her own conservative, but gay-friendly views of romance throughout the film: she is, after all the *Desi Girl* of the film's song. The extent to which Chopra's body is objectified is only balanced by the fact that Abraham and Bachchan are also used as eye candy, albeit to a lesser extent, in a way that reflects both the trend in Hindi film for ever more muscular forms, and also the filmmakers' attempts to reach out to a gay audience.



Figs. 26 & 27 (above and below): A sleepy Kunal looks for breakfast after a one-night stand. He appears as another finely formed object in the chic, urban flat into which he blends, tonally. Images like this and the somewhat pornographic partial body shot objectify the male body and its physicality in a way alien to contemporary Chinese film,

and are related to a trend for body-building in Bollywood. Such images were taken to be a nod to the gay community, and Dostana was understood as a liberalising film.



Sameer's mother, upon learning the catastrophic news that her son is presumably gay, is the final example of the female as value guardian in the film. Her eventual acceptance of her son's fictitious sexual orientation is one of the most ground-breaking aspects of the film, even using the conventions of a Bollywood-style traditional wedding, such as the bride kicking an urn of rice over the threshold of the couple's home to symbolise fertility, to parody gayness, and Bollywood, but also to present a genuinely subversive spectacle in Miami, a city that is itself a global hub of Gay culture. Yet in both Dostana and Fei Cheng Wu Rao, the polish of the production quality of the films themselves and the glamorous contexts allow this kind of cosmopolitanism to flourish, even through its paradoxes.



Fig.28: John Abraham dressed in traditional bridegroom's Sherwani holds the hand of Abhishek Bachchan, awkwardly in bridal dupatta while Kiron Kher, playing Sameer (Bachchan)'s mother, worries over the future happiness of the couple.

Authenticity, modernity, romance and fantasy come together in informative ways in *Tianxia Wu Zei* and *Swades*, and we can see quite clearly the progression of these problematics from this earliest of the pairings under discussion. In *Tianxia Wu Zei* we see the arc of change that occurs in the female protagonist Wang Li, when she realises she is pregnant by her lover and partner in crime, Wang Bo. Not only does she reject her former unlawful/transgressive behaviour⁹⁶, where she had been a successful con-artist, but moreover, she rejects the trappings of this “sin”, including foreign trophies like the BMW she and her partner had risked so much to steal, or rather extort, from their wealthy victim. Instead, she enthusiastically embraces Buddhism, values of social responsibility, and at the very end of the movie, duck pancakes. She takes on Sha Gen, a

⁹⁶ She had been allowing herself to be sexually assaulted by her wealthy employer in order to get grounds on which to extort.

youth she meets at the temple where she prays, and who saves her from exposure when she walks away from Bo's BMW, as her adopted younger brother. His name, or nickname, literally meaning "stupid root", is appropriate to this naïve and innocent soul who announces loudly that he is carrying home 60,000 RMB on the train, his saved earnings for his time working away from home as a painter in the temple. He is not aware that in addition to Wang Bo and Wang Li, the train harbours a gang of thieves and undercover police. The film is preoccupied with the processes by which Sha Gen can be protected, not only from being robbed, but from the knowledge that thieves are all around him.



Fig. 29 & 30: *Sha Gen* (Wang Baoqiang) 's face is bathed in a shaft of light as he sleeps. Note the red/green colour contrast, which is more subtle here than at other points in the film.



I suggest that in the context of *Hua* and *Desi* as images and values in the contemporary context, we should properly see this as not only a rejection of those foreign-inflected signs but also a simple rejection of contemporary consumerism. This is an important point, for while things that are obviously foreign are therefore not *Hua*, values and behaviours that do not align with the vision of true Chinese-ness are also there to be rejected, *not* because all consumerism is portrayed in this film or others, as being Western, but because it is a dream of corruption away from the constructed notions of integrity and piety. In this film, this is particularly important because of the way in which heroism and purity are characterised and visually portrayed, and because of the ever-present irony of heavy product placement in it.

Wang Li's spiritual awakening occurs in Tibet, which is invested with all the mystique of a spiritual place, and awash with golden glowing light in Feng's film.



Fig. 31: A computer augmented utopian vision of Tibet from Tianxia Wu Zei.

The remainder of the film displays a strong red/green contrast. The majority of it takes place on a train, where the enclosure and inescapability of a moving vehicle presents a classic dramatic device, but also provides a cultural trope shared with Indian cinema: the train as the transport of ordinary people, and at times, as ordeal. This also appears in *Ren zai Jiong Tu*, as we have already noted. The red/green contrast can also be said to invoke a kind of nostalgic feeling in this film, as it recalls the colours of

Communist Era propaganda posters, and films. The combination puts us into a heroic space, where Wang Li is trying to improve her karma by protecting her adoptive brother. Upon learning that he is going to be a father, Wang Bo, -played by Andy Lau, one of the Four Heavenly Kings (*Si Shen Wang*) of Hong Kong pop and film, now speaking Mandarin- overcomes his natural inclination to steal the money and instead dedicates himself to helping Li, and beating the gang of thieves, led by “Uncle Li”⁹⁷ (Ge You). As exemplified by the stills above, Sha Gen is usually given key lighting of one kind or another to illuminate him as a symbol of purity. Wang Bo, usually in shadow, is bathed in light as well when he dies heroically protecting Sha Gen’s money and innocence.

Fig.32: *As a cinematic pop tune plays, Wang Bo, now a hero, is lit up in the darkened frame.*



Wang Li’s wide-eyed, simple and clean face is contrasted with the assistant of Uncle Li, Xiao Ye. Her exotically manicured nails, complicated and varied coiffures and flirtatious style are heightened in their effect by Feng Xiaogang’s direction which

⁹⁷ Uncle Li’s name, Hu Li, is a homophone for the Chinese word for “fox”, giving a flavour of his cunning nature.

provides objectifying “up-skirt” shots, and lingering disembodied body parts, in contrast to the covered body and glowing skin of Wang Li.



Fig. 33: *Xiao Ye sensuously pulls up her dress strap which had fallen as she was enjoying herself in the “bar car” of the train.*

Xiao Ye, played by Li Bingbing, is stripped and objectified. She is associated with smoking and drinking in the film. She is a perfect foil, therefore, to Wang Li’s moral awakening.



Fig. 34: *Xiao Ye enjoys a drink with a foreigner, doing a good job of product placement for Carlsberg.*

As illustrated above, modernity, consumer goods, luxury and success can all be integrated at times into a contemporary *Hua* or *Desi* subject but it is the balance of these things with the aesthetics and ethics of “authenticity” as constructed in the contemporary, that allows this to take place in a way that gives rise to the ideal. This

ideal can be perceived as embodied by a protagonist, such as Wang Li, or *Swades*' Mohan, or as something that is being attempted, and indicated by the ways in which a character may perceive themselves to fall short, as Qin Fen and Rancho do.



Fig.35: Wang Li prays fervently in an intimate and emotional frame from *Tianxia Wu Zei*

Finally, the film *Swades* (2004) stars Shahrukh Khan as Mohan, a talented scientist who works at NASA in the US, living a Westernised life with a fulfilling career until he realises that he has lost touch with the nanny, Kaveriamma, who brought him up after the death of his parents. He has nightmares that she is alone, and feels that he has neglected his filial duties to her, who he identifies with Yashoda, the foster mother of Krishna⁹⁸. Although he has just been granted US citizenship, he seeks her out in her rural home town to bring her with him to the USA.

⁹⁸ Tales about Yashoda and Krishna are to be found in the popular *Krishna Leela*



Fig. 36: *American citizenship and Coca Cola, together at last. Product placement in Swades: We the People.*

While back in India he is at first anxious, symbolically staying away from integration with the villagers of Charanpur by sleeping in his luxurious rented caravan and drinking bottled water. But he falls in love with the land, the people and a woman, Geeta. Moved by the plight of people around him caught in an oppressive web of caste and gender discrimination, he challenges corrupt authority, and anti-humanist traditions, in what is a very Gandhian film. He also gives up the habit that causes him shame: smoking. Ashutosh Gowariker's direction in this film does not focus on creating moody colour contrasts, although magical realist elements, especially during the performance of the *Ram Leela*, and of course during songs, do occur. Gowariker is more preoccupied with composition, and juxtaposition within frame to communicate the ideas of the film. He contrasts high technology with simple poor, facilities, bright colours with profound darkness.



Fig. 37: *Mise-en-scene in Swades. Mohan (Shahrukh Khan) 's rented caravan makes its way down the narrow lanes of Charanpur to the home of Kaveriamma (Kishori Ballal).*

Geeta (Gayatri Joshi), Kaveriamma's blood granddaughter, who initially feared that Mohan would take Kaveriamma away with him, falls in love with him as well. When he must leave to complete his project for NASA which he has been attempting to work on all the while, she significantly reminds him of his origins by giving him a wooden box that synecdochically represents *Des* and *Sanskriti* (culture), containing earth, grain and other symbols.



Fig.38: *Above: Geeta's box for Mohan, containing what she describes as the sum of India's traditions and culture including vermillion, sandalwood, rice, turmeric and tulsi. The frame is totally taken up by the vibrant colours of the box's contents and we are invited into it in an almost tactile way.*

Mohan completes his NASA work, and, finding that he cannot leave the project of helping his country, or the woman he loves behind, he shortly leaves his life in the US, to apply his talents in his *Swades*. After all, he has been unable to persuade his nanny, who is consistently identified with the *des* through characterization and *mis-en-scene*, to accompany him to the West.

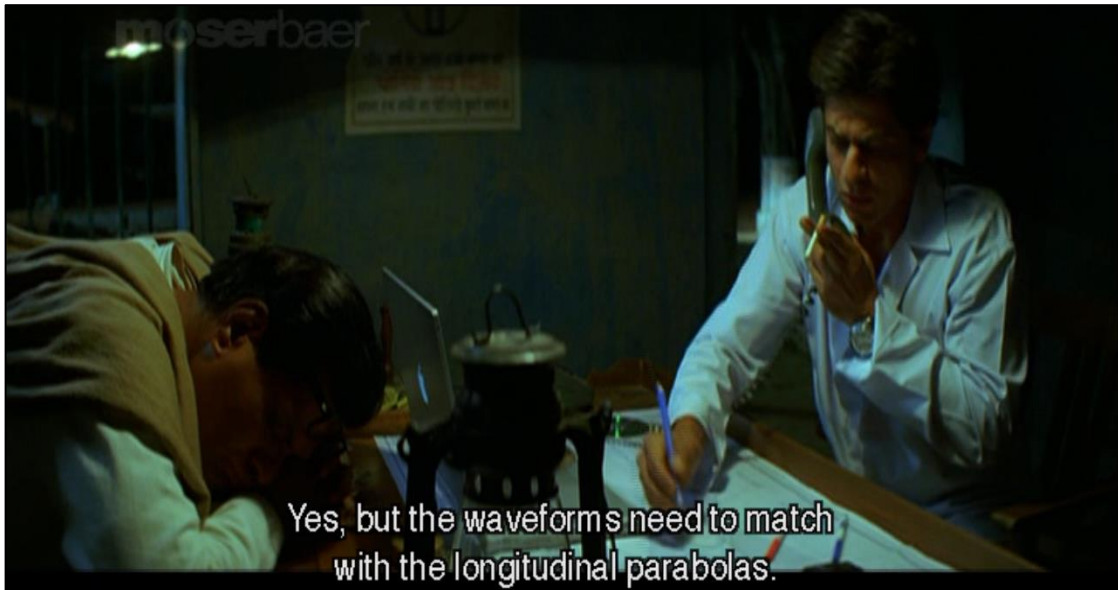


Fig. 39 & 40: *Mis-en-scene* in *Swades*; Above: Mohan brings high technology into a rural context, where his Mac laptop and his Western shirt stand out against the gas lamp of the village post office as he attempts to continue his work.

Below: Mohan's former nanny Kaveriamma grinding spices in her home as Mohan finally crosses the threshold to sleep deeply and happily in a traditional cot instead of his caravan's bed.



As I show in the next chapter, Indians abroad make up a large portion of characters in today's Hindi entertainment films. In fact, in today's Hindi films the relationship between being abroad and behaving in a "foreign" way is beginning to be disentangled on a consistent basis, and the use of the concept of *Desi*-ness is key to how that is being accomplished. Khan's character Mohan, for example, is not only redeemed simply by his return to India but by the *necessity* of his return as a consequence of his having embraced his presumably innate *Desi*-ness. India, *Des* and *Desi*-ness are presented visually, musically and through plot as life-changing, addictive and infectious regions of sentiment in countless films, such as *Namastey London*, and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*, but also as morally distinct from the foreign environment. In this we may see echoes of the sentimental pull of the idealised fantasy *lao jia/cun*/ 老家/村 or village⁹⁹, and indeed the extended family, in Mandarin language films like *Shouji* (*Cell*

⁹⁹ In fact, both Hindi and Mandarin have specialized terms for one's "native place" or "village". Going back to the village is often presented as a bucolic antidote to cut-throat urban modernity in Hindi films, despite the reality of rural Indian life, and the village or country side, either as a native place, or as an

Phone 2003), or the call of culture that eventually brings characters like Xu Datong to the defence of his country and culture in the face of Western onslaught where once he “lived the American Dream”¹⁰⁰ in *Guasha*.

We have seen above some examples of ways in which the perceived paradox between material development or success and authenticity are being worked out in strategies of being *Hua* and *Desi* on screen today. We can trace a trajectory towards more complete flexibility in embracing these aspects together, and yet more complete integration into the logic of the market. I think it is important to stress that it would be a mistake to simply view these tensions as negative tensions, or a ‘crisis’ though essentialism and/or self-stereotyping are two of the potential effects of this process. Neither should we reduce this to a West/East dichotomy. Looking at these films from a comparative perspective we can see that much of the modernity, globalism and success portrayed is portrayed at home. This is especially true in Mandarin language entertainment film, where a glossy Beijing or Shanghai appears with far greater frequency than a high-tech expat office in NY. We can see, through looking back over even the past 10 years, that in films like *3 Idiots* and *Ren Zai Jiongtu*, more sophisticated resolutions are being arrived at both from an industry perspective and from an aesthetic and diegetic analysis. Paradoxes are no longer destabilising to the being of the protagonists, as they could be in the 90s and early 200s in films like

exoticized putative originary land is emerging as a theme in Chinese entertainment film as well, in large part, we may guess, in response to increasing urbanization.

¹⁰⁰ Virtually the first thing that happens in the film is a speech made by Xu Datong, played by Tony Leung, upon receiving an award for his computer game design, where he describes himself as an American, and someone who is “living the American dream”. The rest of the film is basically a melodramatic study in cultural misunderstanding as he and his wife are accused of child abuse when marks from traditional Chinese *gua sha* medical treatment are revealed on the back of their small son during an unrelated visit to the emergency room. Xu Datong is shown to be realizing his hyphenated status as a *Chinese-American*.

Wangluo Dai Shidai de Aiqing (Love in the Time of the Internet) or *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham*, but rather, are problems to be worked out for the subject, by the subject, and with the subject's interaction with a society portrayed as *complex*, and multi-dimensional whether linguistically, or in terms of money, power or indeed sexuality. Entertainment, as a consequence of its heritage, and position as a product, is the most symptomatically able to comment on society, and to connect with it to create new ideals. Nevertheless, we must continue to ask who these subjects serve, and whether a creation brought about by state, market and audience can ever really escape the impulses of hegemony, even if they are nominally market driven.

Chapter 2. “It is the destiny of ice to melt in its own water”¹⁰¹: Diaspora Figures as Agents of Cultural Dreaming and National Desire

The 2013 film *Zhongguo Hehuoren* (*American Dreams in China*, Chan, Peter dir.) concludes with a montage of successful Chinese entrepreneurs¹⁰², and a tentative statement (shown in the still below): “Perhaps their story is also your story” (“tamen de gushi huoxu ye shi nimen de gushi”).

Fig. 41: Still from *Zhongguo Hehuoren*.



This sentence, against a blurred crowd of anonymous determined faces, is replete with possibility. It is, without doubt, a provocation to identify with a new model of success, particularly through the three protagonists of the film: Wang Yang (Tong Dawei), Cheng Dongqing (Huang Xiaoming) and Meng Xiaojun (Deng Chao). Through the rapidly changing society of Beijing from 1980 to the early 2000s and a plot-driving

¹⁰¹ “अपने ही पानी में पिघल जाना बर्फ का मुकद्दर होता है” “*Apne Hi Paani men Pighaljana barf Mukaddar Hota Hai*”.

Quote from the 2004 film *Swades: We the People* (Gowariker dir.) with reference to a grandmother trying to persuade her grandson, an NRI character, to return to India to live. I have examined the film *Swades* in some detail in Chapter 1 and have chosen this quote as a form of link between the two chapters.

¹⁰² Predominantly those mentioned current members of the powerful, and exclusive *Zhongguo Qiyejia Julebu* (Chinese Entrepreneurs Club), including global successes like Jack Ma, developer of Alibaba, and Xu Xiaoping, founder of the Zhen Fund, and co-founder of an educational institute with similarities to “New Dream”, the private education institute founded by the characters in *Zhongguo Hehuo Ren*.

diaspora story of prejudice and pain, they achieve not only financial success, but a return to friendship, and to China. And this provocation of identification is indeed a provocation to dream, but the “dream” that director Peter Chan leads us to is *not* an “American Dream”, as the English-language title of the film suggests. Rather, I propose, echoing the name of their education services company, *Xin Mengxiang* (New Dream), it is a new dream, a *Chinese Dream*¹⁰³, that is, an aspiration with a contemporary, cultural nationalist aftertaste, and an origin in the rhetoric of modernity¹⁰⁴. This dream is brought into existence on screen through the portrayal of the *huaqiao*, diaspora figure Meng, his colleagues Wang and Cheng and the circling narrative connecting their experiences across space and time. They all exist in a state of the ‘in-between’, through teaching English language, American culture and GRE/IELTS strategies, preparing an army of *liuxuesheng* (Chinese foreign students abroad) for a playing field that “has never been even”¹⁰⁵. As exemplified by this film, diasporic figures comprise substantial symbolic value. This is true for their creators, implied spectators, and actual audiences in both India and China. It is even true at times for the characters themselves within

¹⁰³ The *Zhongguo Meng* or Chinese/China Dream has been the focus of Xi Jinping’s aspirational rhetoric, since the phrase came into directed use in 2013, the same year that *Zhongguo Hehuoren* was released. Countless articles are available elaborating on it and its many pathways through the Communist Party’s Journal *Qiushi*’s Theory website <http://www.qsttheory.cn/ztck/2013nd/xjpzgm/> including both individual, social and foreign policy aspects of the theoretical development which departs significantly from the nation-state based, more superficially quantitative rhetoric of the past.

¹⁰⁴ In his 2013 article for the communist party journal *Qiushi* Bing Rong outlines a heritage for the newly minted theoretical model of the “Chinese Dream” (“*Zhongguo Meng*”) that even traces its origins in the Opium War, and the discourse of National Humiliation, developing into a coming-to-terms with modernity itself. As effectively an official guidebook to how to interpret the Chinese Dream, this article is very valuable.

¹⁰⁵ The character of Cheng Dongqing, argues against the American lawyers that accuse New Dream of fraud/cheating partially in this way, by saying that Chinese students will take any opportunity that they can and work as hard as they can, by any means they can, because “the playing fields has never been even.”; I will explore this scene in more detail later on in the chapter.

their own diegetical universes. The diasporic figure described in *Zhongguo Hehuoren*, however, has evolved to take on new proportions, away from his (and diaspora is usually figured as male) more traditional literary incarnations¹⁰⁶; he embodies new possibilities in a logic of cultural nationalism, rather than being crushed beneath the weight of his own idealism. Such change exists in both Hindi and Mandarin popular film and screen-based media, and has both echoed and spurred real changes to their diverse diaspora populations, and their relationship with the ‘homeland’ in both economic and cultural terms. For, simply put, despite the reality, complexity, and beauty of the many hybrid identities represented by pockets of diaspora throughout the world, it is attractive to find belonging in a transnational cultural nation. *Hua*-ness or *Desi*-ness are enticing - especially as the nation states to which they are related gain global influence; from participation in these cultural nations, diasporas gain a certain kind of power¹⁰⁷. However, where power can be gained, and members of the diaspora can become influential, they can also be interpolated, and subsumed. Diaspora is, in fact, a *pre-requisite* for India and China to have global reach and exists as transnational cultural nations, to create a powerful *Desi* and *Hua* culture. That is, as much as the cultural nation is therefore to an extent dependent upon diaspora, the establishment of these connections also represents a powerful tool for domestic market and state. In fact, on screen, both these functions occur simultaneously, creating an influential, cosmopolitan figure, ultimately at the service of hegemony. Further, diaspora in film

¹⁰⁶ The more traditional literary incarnations of the *liuxuesheng* and *huaqiao* in sources such as Bai Xianyong’s “Zhijiage zhi Si” (“Death in Chicago” [1964]), and their more recent challengers, are traced in Hillenbrand “Letters of Penance: Writing American in Chinese and the Location of Chinese American Literature” *Melus* 383 (2013) 44-66.

¹⁰⁷ Having hybrid identity, or distinguishing oneself against larger cultural nationalist identities can of course be very useful, and provide a different kind of power, whether used outside the bracket of the cultural nation, to present a possibility of a radical outside option, or as a way of constructing a distinctive community within the cultural nation.

creates a theatre for past humiliations, dreams of success, and foreign policy fantasies to be played out. In this chapter, I explore the diasporic figure on screen as a vector for dreaming, for struggle, and for national identity, albeit one that is subject to varying levels of “reflexive spectatorship” (Kaur 2005). Typically conceived as first or second generation diaspora in contemporary popular screen media of both India and China, I also take time to explore some contextual reasons *why* he has come to be as he is. This endeavour forms a critical stage to the inquiry of my thesis.

In the introductory section to this thesis I defined terms, and argued for the project as a whole. The basis, reasoning and methodology behind this India/China comparison are outlined in a detailed manner. I give background to the use of the term “cultural nationalism” and its application in the Asian context, and indeed a brief discussion of the category of “Asia” itself. I further gave an industry outline for Hindi and Mandarin cinema and how the categories of “Bollywood”, and indeed “*Huallywood*” have emerged, as well as introducing the chapters that follow.

In Chapter One, I described the ways in which “commercial” or “popular” films in India and China are indeed political, far from the frothy excess they may at first seem to represent. I showed three principal ways in which they are ideal products through which to learn about the change we have witnessed over the past 25 years in the two countries. Firstly, by the very fact, they are subject to both political pressure¹⁰⁸ (and

¹⁰⁸ Political pressure can refer to both popular political pressure, and state intervention, i.e. top-down, or bottom-up. Most of the time these are in any case interlinked in the two countries when it comes to matters of censorship and/or acceptability. China’s state involvement in film is obviously more integrated, and certainly more apparent, but the embedded nature of India’s political and entertainment spheres, especially following the granting of so-called ‘industry status’ in 2000/2001, has only increased. The state now consistently uses Bollywood imagery and music in its soft power agenda. These facts certainly destroy the idea that the two realms are separate. As in China, the role of the government in policing

involvement) and the demand to be profitable. Secondly, by reason of both their cultural solubility and fluid availability through legal and illegal means via technology that is global in nature¹⁰⁹, thus working through both financial and cultural economies;

Thirdly, that the principal popular film industries in both countries, despite the existence of media in other local languages, are the industries deployed deliberately in the profile of national soft power, and performed in the *linguae francae* Mandarin and Hindi. These are languages of state power, both of which are inextricably linked with the establishment of the modern nation states of India and China, are thus front and centre in any soft power game, intended or coincidental, that involves these films. We began to explore their content, and how this is reflective of the shifting environment in which they are produced. In particular, I delved into the social, cultural and racial matrix that moulds Indian and Chinese identities under the signs of *Desi* and *Hua*¹¹⁰, and how these terms, and their content, are being incarnated and invigorated to create a means by which a cultural nationalism *beyond* the nation state can be established¹¹¹, something we

censorship *specifically* on ‘cultural’, and ‘sentiment’ grounds is also particularly pertinent here, and is at variance with other countries.

¹⁰⁹ Typically now this refers to the many legal and illegal streaming websites, and downloading sources, but in the past legal and illegal DVD, VCD and videocassette distributed very effectively through networks of diaspora trading and sold in venues that provided cultural links to the ‘homeland’ would have been the chief means of solubility to the transnational culture world.

¹¹⁰ These two terms refer to a complex assemblage of racial, cultural and linguistic factors that define an identity linked to China (*Hua*) and India (*Desi*) without clearly indicating the nation state (i.e. not “Chinese” or “Indian” (*Zhongguoren* or *Hindustani*), and thus are indicative of citizenship and/or participation in a cultural identity that I argue is being deployed and embodied for complex reasons including personal agency, commercialisation, and political hegemony.

¹¹¹ This is to suggest a method of, if not overcoming, then diffusing the problem of *guojia rentong* or national identity through hegemonic means that take advantage of globalisation oppositionally. Men Honghua (2014), of the Party School of the Central Committee of the CPC makes the nature of the challenge under globalization clearer, “Where China is concerned, national identity interacts closely with ethno-cultural identity (*minxu rentong*) and cultural identity (*wenhua rentong*); thus it faces great challenges as well as the pressure of reshaping itself.” (190). Tu Weiming, a prominent, returned-diaspora intellectual who has influenced zeitgeist and official policy in China, himself offered a very telling definition of Chineseness which can very easily be seen to be related to the Chinese character *hua* and its

may think of as akin to Appadurai's "Transnations" (1996). We further looked at examples of the gap between "development" with its notions both of "consumerism" and "modernity", and "authenticity", and how this gulf is being bridged through the use of *Hua* and *Desi*-style categories. Indeed, the words themselves are often used in the creation of a culturally inflected vision of modern life, consumerist subjectivity, and financial independence. This new "(post)modern"¹¹² as it is born into the era of global capitalism is both product of and instrument upon a converging nexus of actors: Audiences, the State, Filmmakers, and the Market. I demonstrated use of cultural tropes, motifs, and the concept of return to authenticity, or tradition, in the visual and textual landscape of a range of films. It soon became clear, that there were three principle places where questions of contemporary Indian and Chinese identity were being particularly sharply brought to the fore, albeit in different ways: in the stories of diaspora, where we can further explore the content of *Hua* and *Desi* identities; through the genre of urban stories, particularly comedies; and finally, the genre of history film, both recent and mythic.

In this second chapter I begin with the premise that diaspora characters serve as particularly important conduits for the development of *Hua* and *Desi* identities in a globalized landscape. Tragic figures or superheroes, lovers or fighters, they are

full measure of meaning. He states: "Educated Chinese know reflexively what China proper refers to; they may not be clear about the periphery, but they know for sure that the center of China, whether Xián or Beijing, is in the north near the Yellow River." (Tu, "The 'Moral Universal' from the Perspectives of East Asian Thought", *Philosophy East and West* 31.3 (1981) 146.)

¹¹² Although probably in the main stream discourse of both India and China, the state of being "world-class", successful, and having access to resources both technological and monetary would be described as living a "modern" life, the reality of an existence awash with brands, and dislocated signs, the commodification of experiences, can all be thought of as post-modern in nature, if not in the theoretical miasma that has developed post-PoMo.

aspirational, and increasingly *entrepreneurial* in nature. My examination covers ten films and one television series and displays variance and similarity between the Hindi and Mandarin language popular cinema industries. Through textual and visual analyses, I show examples of the ways in which the growth, and evolution of the diaspora figure can be traced intertextually¹¹³. By performing analysis situated in the economic and social context, while simultaneously linking the individual films forward and backward in time to other films they refer to intertextually, we are able to see how ideas develop, and cinematic experiences reflect and construct reality. Further, by conducting a comparison that is clustered thematically, we are better able to reveal both a set of phenomena, and the process through which they have changed. Our comparative inquiry is enriched, as the similarity between the strategic trajectories in which Hindi and Mandarin popular film appear headed is revealed. For political, commercial, and/or artistic reasons, diaspora figures are intended by those that craft them as repositories of strong emotions and huge hopes, that stretch out to reach communities abroad, but are nevertheless reflections of the desires of the state and public *domestically*¹¹⁴.

In the first section of this chapter's analysis I will discuss ways in which diasporic communities are engaged in a kind of "return" through both the discursive economy, and the real economy, which is to say, how they are being deployed to construct culture, identity and economic growth at home. I will address the *economic* impact of diaspora to both India and China, reading the statistics on inward investment

¹¹³ There are two sets of intertextual dialogue ongoing here, if we delve a bit: firstly there is an intertextual, referential, very real circulation within the relation of films in a given industry with each other. Secondly, we can see an intertextual relationship between these films and philosophical and news/economic media "texts".

¹¹⁴ Iris Vandeveldt neatly clarifies the necessity of separating the NRI character, in the case of Hindi popular cinema, from the diaspora audience, where often the two are conflated (2013: 49)

alongside essays on strategies for box office success in a globalised world, and the ever-expanding reach of Indian and Chinese cable and satellite television that serve to unite the cultural nation. This economic impact of diaspora is linked to the uptake by state and market, through deliberate action or zeitgeist, of the concept of the “cultural nation” and the related “civilisation state”. The diaspora, is a potential market for the “home” nation (and for multinational companies interested in the economy of market segmentation). It also constitutes a potential standard-bearer at the edges of the cultural nation, a bulwark against dissipation that must be shored up by the state, by means of direct overture and soft power. But how are depictions of the diaspora experience, as both domestic symbolic goods, and interpolations to the diaspora employed through the medium of popular cinema? The second section of this chapter aims to provide some answers to this question.

Through close textual and visual analysis, I identify trends emerging in the portrayal of the diasporic experience on screen: Disillusionment, Confrontation, and Claim-staking. These phenomena provide moments in which diaspora character can fully act as spokesperson for the cultural nation, thus creating potent symbolic interactions. While these are defined by plot, to be sure, they are created in their totality through cinematic devices: mis-en-scene, camerawork, colour, and the like, as well as the sonic landscape. I argue that the interactions described, most often between so-called “guest” diaspora, and representatives of the “host” country, give rise to countervailing forces that have continued to shape the diaspora figure on screen, if not in Social Representation (Moscovici). These forces are one symptom of the underlying “Pessoptimist” (Callahan 2012) attitude prevailing in both China *and* India, although this attitude finds somewhat different expression, and arises from varying roots.

I will show that intertextual “conversations” occur between each industry’s films, developing these themes of disillusionment, confrontation and claim-staking; they often quote each other obviously, as if to signpost change. These films are prize-winning, iconic, and/or box-office successes¹¹⁵. However, they are not merely brought together based on their success, but also by direct relationships in the filmmaking industry. For example, in China, a real relationship exists between the 21-episode television series *Beijingren Zai Niuyue* (Henceforth *BzN*¹¹⁶), 1997 film *Wangluo Shidai de Aiqing* (Chen Jin dir. Henceforth *WSdA*), diaspora comedy *Bu Jian Bu San* (*Be There or Be Square*. Feng dir. 1998. Henceforth *BJBS*), *Guasha* (2001), and the 2013 film *Zhongguo Hehuo Ren* (Henceforth *ZHR*). Stock characters emerge, situations repeat, intertextual jokes and references are made, some shots are even replicated. We see the influence of directors, actors and producers who arguably have been responsible for much of the aesthetic invention of diaspora in film, including Feng Xiaogang¹¹⁷, and Zheng Xiaolong.

This conversation is no less alive in India. From the 1990s the visual representation of India’s relationship with its diaspora changed. The developments between *Dilwale Dulhania Lejayenge* (Chopra dir. 1995. Henceforth *DDLJ*), *Kabhi*

¹¹⁵ As I have discussed in chapter 1, box office numbers are of only limited use in assessing a film’s success, as they do not include film viewership via satellite screening, or online viewing, legal or illegal. Especially in light of the number of satellite entertainment channels both domestically and abroad for both the Indian and Chinese market (the films may be watched by non-Mandarin, or non-Hindi speaking audiences via these means), and the growth of online streaming, ignoring this category would be a mistake.

¹¹⁶ I have found that, quite apart from the fact that many Hindi films in particular, are known by their acronyms, writing out the full name of each film puts me at considerable disadvantage viz. word count, hence abbreviations are used.

¹¹⁷ Feng Xiaogang’s comedies are addressed in more detail in Chapter 3.

Khushi Kabhie Gham (Sometimes Joy, Sometimes Sorrow. Johar dir. 2001. Henceforth *K3G*), *My Name is Khan* (Johar dir. 2011) *Namastey London* (Shah dir. [2007]), *Desi Boyz* (Dhawan dir. [2011]) and *Ra.One* (Sinha dir. 2013) highlight change in the cultural world, and status particularly of first and second generation diaspora, both within and without India.. Half of these films have involvement from the director/producer/costume designer/actor Karan Johar, and four of them star the actor probably most associated with the NRI in the world of Bollywood: Shah Rukh Khan (aka SRK). However, the current hold that the diasporic figure has on the contemporary imagination exists due to histories in both India and China that put diaspora into public consciousness in a way permanently linking them to modernity.

3.1 Desirable, Hateable Diaspora and the Modern Nation(s)

Whether portrayed “at home” or “abroad”, diaspora figures in culture often occupy the hinterland between admiration and suspicion. Nevertheless, they are crucial to the real history, and onscreen presences shaping current understandings of national identity in “Greater” India and China. As both of these nations-beyond-borders develop their contemporary visions of identity, diaspora, instead of falling into the background in the face of cultural nationalism, is brought to the fore. Let us begin with India.

The “use” of diaspora characters, builds on a cultural legacy central to political and artistic development in the modern Indian state. Indeed, and as the rhetoric of the annual “NRI day” (*Pravasi Bharatiya Divas*)¹¹⁸ reminds us, the father of the nation, Mahatma Gandhi grew up and formulated his philosophy within the diaspora

¹¹⁸ Celebrated every year in Gandhi’s home state of Gujarat on the anniversary of his return to India after life and study abroad.

community of South Africa, with significant consequences to his thinking, and therefore for the future of India, Indian-ness (and *Desi*-ness) as Devji points out (2012).

In China, Mao Zedong's initial plan to study in France may have been derailed on account of finances, or a change of heart, but certainly foreign learning and Chinese foreign students were at the centre of Chinese leftism, and the early Communist Party¹¹⁹. The diaspora experience underpinned the approach to modernity in literature and politics of China. And on a profound, almost subconscious level, the foreign student, and the influence of "abroad" in the figure of a national agent, is a central building block to the modern nation state. Knowledge of Marxist thought, imported from abroad, forms the core of the modern Chinese state, even today, when its values are rendered into cultural nationalist discourse, exercised through "post-socialist", centralised, state power and market economics. In sum, the person of the foreign student in general terms looms large in both the political and literary realm of China from the early part of the 20th century to this day, as argued by Hillenbrand (2013). In both India and China, the diaspora figure looms large in the creation of modernity.

Having discussed the general cultural significance of the foreign student and diasporic individual, let us briefly consider the history of the diaspora character on screen. We can see that in the Chinese case, the contemporary visual presence of the diasporic figure has arisen from the 80s onwards from a virtual absence. This *Hua(qiao)* (overseas Chinese) figure comes into being with contours informed by the newly

¹¹⁹ Li Lisan and Zhang Guotao, are two prominent examples of foundational members of the CCP that were educated abroad in France and Russia. Many essential figures of the leftist modern literature pantheon also studied abroad in Europe, the USA and other parts of Asia, the primary example being Lu Xun who like many of his generation, studied in Japan, and whose basic experience of being abroad, seeing China from the outside, and being an outsider at once proud and defensive, instigated his most famous works.

emerging economic, sociological and political landscape of the rapidly changing era of “Reform and Opening Up” (*Gaige Kaifang*) but with roots from a literary and political sphere mentioned above.



Fig. 42: Wangluo Shidai de Aiqing (Love in the Internet Epoch. *Jin Chen dir.* 1998) *Maomao* (Hu Jing) and *Bingzi* (Sun Xun) become reacquainted after years apart through the popular emerging technology of the ICQ. *Maomao* is a relatively early example of a member of the diaspora on film since China’s reforms, and one of the very few women occupying that role. Her life abroad remains virtually absent, told to the audience rather than shown. The culmination of this is the revelation, made in a shaded room far from China where bright sunshine is tamed by beige blinds, that *Maomao* is pregnant out of wedlock.

During and after economic liberalisation, as diaspora in India and China has become central to the building of renewed transnational, *Hua* and *Desi* identities, the focus has been turned decidedly to the first-generation student, entrepreneur or wayfarer; as if resetting a clock, previous generations of diaspora are discounted. We view him going abroad to make his fortune, or chase a dream, though not necessarily with a plan to return. Second generation characters also make an appearance, especially

in Hindi films, but despite the factual existence of large Indian and Chinese diaspora communities dispersed throughout Asia as well as Europe and the USA, established communities are largely under erasure or placed as separate. For example, in *Bu Jian Bu San* (*Be There or Be Square*, Feng dir. 1998), both lead characters are unenthusiastic about the prospect of living in what they refer to as LA's "Little Taiwan", earlier *Huaqiao* owners of the house the leading lady initially looks after are totally absent, and the separation between the Westernised Chinese New Yorkers of *BzN* is a significant aspect to the narrative arc. As shown below, *Namastey London* makes the break significant, as does *DDLJ* though its purpose is to show the bridge between Second Generation diaspora and their "home culture": a cultural nationalist project of interpolation.

Indeed, this interpolation must be placed in the context of the portrayal of diaspora in Hindi popular film, which has a significant filmic history. I argue that, at their core, current incarnations blend two major streams of influence already present in Hindi film since the 1950s. Unlike the political circumstance in the PRC which placed significant curbs on the ability of the Socialist Realist film world to portray the *Hua* and *huaqiao* abroad in the pre-reform era, Hindi cinema has an enduring relationship with

movement, and diaspora, arguably in part rooted in traditional practices¹²⁰, and epics¹²¹. Hindi film before 1990 was already replete with iconic wanderers, wayfarers, and orphans from Raj Kapoor's *Awaara* (1951), to Dev Anand's 1971 morality play *Hare Rama Hare Krishna*, to Manmohan Desai's *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977), and can in fact be characterised in its contemporary incarnations as having the fate of the wanderer further afield, the *Desi* abroad, as a major preoccupation, even beyond the constraints of the so-called NRI film-genre¹²². This portrayal has moved from characterising the Indian abroad as more likely than not villainous, wealthy, and synonymous with vice, in pre-economic reform India¹²³ to a more complex one¹²⁴. Now, representations centrally incorporating the dynamic of anxiety over tradition and its relationship with modernity

¹²⁰ Wandering is a feature of religious and spiritual pursuits in the Indian subcontinent. This tendency can be found in for example the movement of Sadhus or holy men, ascetics, and mendicants. Indeed, such wandering was ostensibly responsible for one of the most significant interactions between Indian and Chinese culture that has existed throughout the history of their relations: the transmission of Buddhism from India. Sikhism and the subcontinent's incarnations of Islam also contain features of wandering. This wandering not only serves as a means of pilgrimage, but also as itself a meditative tool. A linkage between this history of "wandering" and the Indian diaspora experience today has been explicitly made, most recently in the Welcome Address by Minister of External Affairs Smt. Susma Swaraj at the 2015 Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (Non-Resident Indian Day) Conference in Gujarat.

¹²¹ In the Ramayana, Rama the heroic warrior king endowed with the essence of the god Vishnu, is sent into exile, and only through his wanderings with his beloved Sita and brother Lakshman, is he able to confront and defeat the demon Ravana. The epic, and vast Mahabharata also describe exilic wandering as a spiritual means, even a necessity.

¹²² There are many examples, from the sublime to the ridiculous, from the minor to the iconic, some of which I will be addressing in this chapter. Diverse hit films such as *Guru*, *Swades*, *Housefull*, and *Dostana* all contain diaspora characters or are set, at least partly, abroad.

¹²³ Accents influenced by Western languages, particularly English, poor Hindi, flashy clothing, and Western names are a feature of many villains in 70s popular cinema especially, where we see such enduring villains as Robert, the villain of *Amar Akbar Anthony*. These villains, unlike the small-minded patriarchs of such diverse classic films such as *Mughal-e-Azam* and *Bobby*, are incomprehensibly evil, sadistic for reasons unrevealed or petty in the extreme. Pure greed, rather than unbreakable pride, or blinkered adherence to tradition, is their hallmark, putting them at odds with the "family romance" that defines both the positive and negative cores of many, if not most, popular Hindi films.

¹²⁴ Iris Vandervelde's recent essay "Revisiting the NRI 'genre': Indian diasporic engagements with NRI and multiplex films" describes this movement, and the relation between the portrayal on screen and real NRI populations.

that I described in Chapter One. We can characterise this as the second stream that influences the current portrayal of diaspora.



Fig. 43: ‘Robert’ (Jeevan), the villain of Hindi film classic *Amar, Akbar, Anthony*, a study in the Westernised villain of pre-reform Bollywood.

We can observe that the rise of the *Desi*-as-phenomenon in *India*¹²⁵ has occurred in parallel with the love affair with the NRI-as-fantasy-figure. That “family romance” reached its breathy zenith in the period from the mid-1990s to mid-2000s, largely under Karan Johor and Yash Chopra (Dwyer 2002). Diversification of film styles has occurred

¹²⁵ As I discuss in chapter 1, *Desi*-ness has had a different meaning in India up until recently, indicating a rustic, naive quality, or something authentically Indian. Today, the influence of global *Desi* culture sees the use of the word proliferating in the domestic context to indicate a transnational Indian identity of culturally inflected modernity nevertheless rooted in the “motherland”. *Desi* is, for example, attached to fashionable brands and pop music, for the consumption of domestic audiences and markets as well as continued use abroad.

within the Hindi language industry over the past 7 or 8 years up until the end of this study in 2014, with the development of the so-called “multiplex film”, which as a consequence of the increasing availability of multi-screened venues relieved pressure to attempt an ‘All India’ hit (Mehta 2005). I consider this “multiplex” category not entirely satisfactory, since it creates a distinction between films that do not conform completely to the model of the “*masala* film”¹²⁶, and Bollywood as a whole, ignoring the continuity between them, from an aesthetic, character, star and distribution/production perspective. But despite new(er) styles, from *Delhi 6* to *3 Idiots*¹²⁷, the endurance of the NRI, and “Person of Indian Origin”¹²⁸ (PIO) as character, and “Abroad” (*Pardes*) as place, endures as a concept in the popular imagination, and cannot be ignored.

In this chapter I argue that the reasons for the persistence of the diaspora figure, in both Hindi and Mandarin language popular culture, particularly as lieu for continuous reworking of identity, blends philosophical, economic and aesthetic factors that inform the ongoing intertextual “conversation” referred to above. This conversation comprises facts, including the changing balance of global power and perceived rise of India and China, with the experiences of diaspora, such as increased stigma since 9/11, and fictional depictions of the diaspora world. All of these combine to create a matrix for the

¹²⁶ *Masala* or “spice” film refers to a film that contains multiple genres in one long film, i.e. moments of comedy, tragedy, action and romance all come about, usually with music and dance. They tend to have a somewhat melodramatic acting style as well.

¹²⁷ Touted as very innovative, I believe it is easy to draw a relationship between the style of this film and comedies such as *Munna Bhai MBBS* on the one hand, and student resistance films such as *Rang de Basanti* on the other.

¹²⁸ An official term used for the provision of visas and in political discourse, the PIO is designated, according to the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “a foreign citizen (except a national of Pakistan, Afghanistan Bangladesh, China, Iran, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Nepal) who at any time held an Indian passport or who either of their parents/ grandparents/ great grandparents was born and permanently resident in India as defined in Government of India Act, 1935 and other territories that became part of India thereafter provided neither was at any time a citizen of any of the aforesaid countries (as referred above); or who is a spouse of a citizen of India or a PIO.”
(http://mea.gov.in/Portal/CountryQuickLink/703_PIO-OCI.pdf)

production of diaspora characters on screen which feeds back into the Social Representation (Moscovici) of the two countries. It is no coincidence that this phenomenon of emergent diaspora on screen has occurred in parallel with the changes wrought by economic liberalisation and globalisation (Mehta 2005). They reflect and inform what diaspora lives, and being diasporic *mean*, and *do* in China and India today. Below I will attempt to briefly highlight some of these factors, philosophical and economic/political.

2.2 Diaspora in the Symbolic and Real Economies of India and China

Culture and Hard Economics

When Narendra Modi addressed an audience of NRIs and PIOs in New York's Madison Square Garden in the autumn of 2014, his speech (and its context) was rich with cultural meaning. However, it did not just pull at the heart strings of *Desis* abroad, interpolating them into the cultural nationalist fold of "Greater India". It also included practical measures and policies designed to strengthen the relationship between the Indian State and its contemporary diaspora, its current situation, and its future direction. It constituted, therefore, an example of the confluence of hard policy and the often blurry rhetoric of the 'Cultural Nation', or 'Civilisation State'.



Fig. 44: *Publicity photo of Narendra Modi's address to 20,000 people in Madison Square Garden, NY, which was particularly focused on the needs of NRIs and the Indian Community in the USA more generally, as well as highlighting key features of domestic policy. Similar events have been held at major diaspora centres around the globe. Photo Source: NDTV*

The key development of the speech was the relaxation of visa policies for PIOs, allowing visa on arrival, and an increased length of stay (Desai 2014). These, along with new measures to ease business in India, and investment opportunities in state flagship projects such as “Make in India” were outlined as a *Navratri*¹²⁹ gift of sorts, all presented in the charismatic, off-the-cuff manner for which Modi is famous. Emphasis on Hindu holidays as a cultural tie that binds is notable from Modi as a leader of the Bharatya Janata Party, and remains a distinctive feature of Indian popular culture¹³⁰,

¹²⁹ Navratri is one of the holiest holidays in the Hindu religious calendar and celebrates the incarnations of the Goddess Durga over nine nights.

¹³⁰ It can be argued that the popularity of some festivals has actually increased as a consequence of their appearance in popular cultural products. The fast day of *Karva Chauth* for example, was not widely

increasingly commercialised¹³¹. The long, rambling collection of events that proceeded the PM's arrival on stage, hosted by noted American of Indian descent¹³², included dance and the very conspicuous use of live and recorded Bollywood music. Indeed, *Modi in America* highlights the relationship between globalisation and cultural nation as enacted through film, and the increased official intervention in it, that at once seeks to harness its global economic potential, and also to make “good cinema” that re-creates *Desi*-ness, the “Indian state and family” (Mehta 2005). Also screened was a three-minute film by Prashant Bhargava entitled *The Anthem of Us* (2014), commissioned for the event. Following on from this cultural showcase, the PM's arrival, and the momentous news that both travel and financial relationships would become more possible (Chaudhury 2015) in “My India”¹³³, was jubilantly welcomed by the audience. Madison Square Garden is normally understood as an entertainment venue, and the magic of Modi did not disappoint the audience present, or watching via NDTV¹³⁴ and domestic Indian outlets. Indeed, for Modi, it has become increasingly apparent both at home and abroad, that bringing the NRI rabbit out of the hat, both economically and politically, has become no laughing matter (Sharma 2015). For although many popular analyses of India's Foreign Direct Investment show poor performance trailing China's, scratching a

observed among India's middle and upper classes, but gained increased popularity, after its appearance in *Hum Apne Hain Kaun!?* and *DDLJ* and *K3G*.

¹³¹ I examine the impact of increasing cultural emphasis on holidays as consumer events and the relationship between these and comedies in Chapter 3. This is another conduit for diaspora to participate in the domestic cultural and financial economy through ordering holiday gifts, or even temple visits, online.

¹³² The full program is available online. The programme was MC'd by Miss America 2014, Nina Devuluri, the first American of Indian descent to earn the crown. It was co-MC'd by successful PBS broadcaster Hari Sreenivasan.

¹³³ The name of the famous central anthem from the 1997 NRI-genre film *Pardes* (Subhash Ghai dir.). The original song was performed for the film by Kavita Krishnamurthy (vocal) and her husband, legendary violinist Dr. L. Subramaniam. The couple appeared live to perform music, including this hit, at the preamble to Modi's address at Madison Square Garden.

¹³⁴ NDTV is internationally available by satellite and web.

little below the surface we find that the imbalance is actually more a matter of categorisation than of volume. And in the at once threatening and exciting place of a globalised world, the implications and possibilities for domestic screen media of all kinds of increasing economic fluidity, are profound.

As Alan Smart and Jinn-Yuh Hsu's article (2014) points out, the Chinese state has also made specific overtures, offering incentives to expand entrepreneurial projects in China by growing and converting the traditional *guanxi* (or "relationship") network into a dynamic professional interflow. Notably this includes Western hubs, China and other Sinosphere powers, such as Taiwan. This is one example among many of policies specifically designed to increase the hard reach of the PRC in the diasporic world. And as *Zhongguo Hehuoren* points out, despite environmental crises, the increasing price of property, and many other less than attractive factors, Chinese business people and students in the diaspora are increasingly returning to China (Wu 2013) and investing in the country as well. Although there is still a great deal of ground to gain, this is likely a direct result of educational efforts, cultural hold, and the attractions of state incentives.

Surprisingly, India has, up until recently (Sharma 2015), not made the kind of formal efforts one might expect in enticing its first and second generation diaspora to invest through return. Brain-drain in diverse areas from medicine to business, as well as general movement of labour, is evident in net emigration figures, and the break down on education and occupation provided by organisations like the World Bank. Perceived difficulty of doing business¹³⁵ has kept many away. In recent years, especially since the

¹³⁵ Ranking of ease of doing business is published each year, results showing that India and China have different strengths in this regard, but that both struggle to attain a high ranking.

debacle of the Commonwealth Games¹³⁶, media and state have begun to tackle the reality and perception of inefficiency, corruption and sloth head on, famously characterising the approach as a battle between “New India” and “Old India” (Sanghvi 2010). As aspirational visions, diaspora films show what *could be*.

Looking at the figures from the World Bank’s most recent available *Factbook on Migration and Remittances* (2011), we can see that India is the top receiver of remittances at time of writing, followed by China, and from the graph and table below, it is clear that remittances have been more robust as vehicles of economic flow than other sources during the financial crisis and its aftermath. Sharma’s analysis reveals, in alignment with policy strategies encouraging entrepreneurial return to China, that much of what is called “Foreign” Inward investment can actually be defined as taking place within and/or through the diaspora, and therefore can be placed on a continuum with remittances, which are “sent by the cumulated flow of migrants over the years, not only by the new migrants of the past year or two” (World Bank *ibid.* 17). In sum, it is hard to say whether India or China is gaining the upper hand in the amount it receives from such external sources, but for our purposes, firstly, the amounts themselves are significant, and secondly, the role of the diaspora in instigating them in both cases, is equally so¹³⁷.

¹³⁶ The widespread corruption and continued humiliation on the global stage that attended the run-up to the games had a huge political effect, proving to be a tipping point that arguable gave rise to Anna Hazare’s demands being taken more seriously and the development of the Aam Admi Party from out of the India Against Corruption movement. The set of events was particularly damaging as it contrasted starkly with the extraordinary Beijing Olympics of 2008.

¹³⁷ It remains to be seen whether the balance of skill and experience types leaving and returning from India and China with their emigrant/returnee populations will affect the balance of FDI, remittances and other informal means, such as the Hawala System¹³⁷, used.

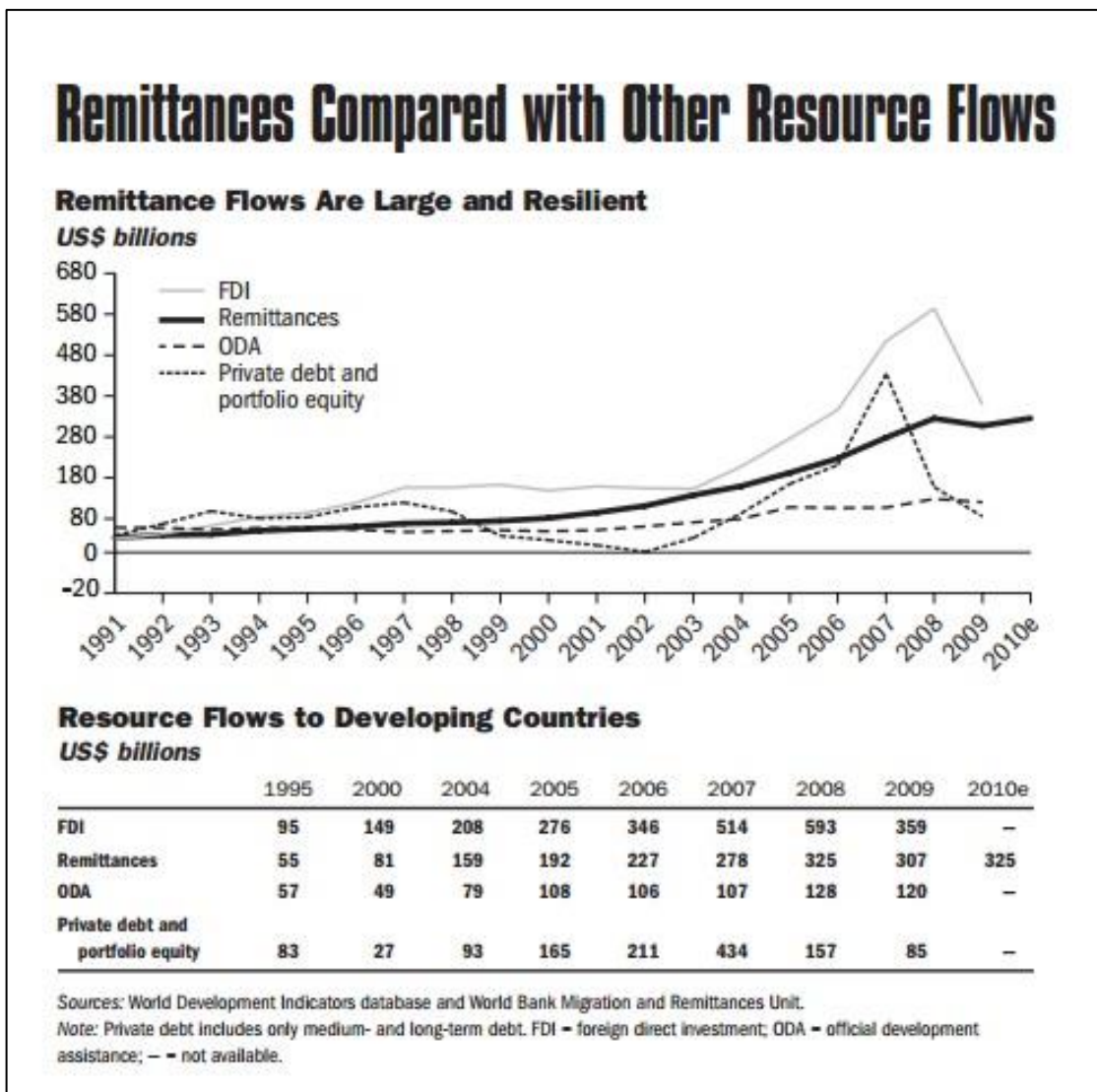


Fig 45: World Bank Handbook *Graph and Data* showing the stability and importance of Remittances as a resource flow. India and China are the two countries that receive most remittances in the world.

Diaspora, Markets, Media

In addition to the many forms of investment flowing from diaspora into the domestic economy, diaspora communities have also provided means to grow the success of all manner of products emanating from the ‘home country’, including media. The growth of cable and satellite television both within the domestic markets of India and China and to the diaspora through targeted culturally and linguistically marked media products has been one of the success stories of the years since 1990. Networks like Phoenix, Star and

Zee¹³⁸, and the international ventures of CCTV have expanded reach and profitability. The internet has only multiplied this solubility, while nevertheless profitability is threatened through it. For although ‘film is perhaps the single strongest agency for the creation of a national mythology of heroism, consumerism, leisure, and sociality’ (Appadurai & Breckenridge (1996) 8), the means by which it is viewed, its audience and venue are changing, influenced by the global reach of the cultural nation, and therefore the diaspora. If cultural nations are in many respects dependent on the existence of diaspora far afield for their reach, for their very transnational nature, and facilitated by the liberalisation and globalisation of their economies, diaspora consumption of media is one way of displaying belonging in the cultural nation. By supporting the growth of Zee, Star and Phoenix, by watching *Eros Online* or *Youku*, diaspora has participated in the globalising, mediatizing and monetizing of the *Hua* and *Desi* identities, but has also helped to build the very media network through which they can be drawn in an interpolated by their presumptive “homelands”, something not only evident in Narendra Modi’s address, but in the State’s somewhat unexpected and problematic embrace of popular Chinese cinema and pop as part of the cultural offering¹³⁹. And we can see that using the media to this end, especially in the face of perceived Orientalism, and globalisation is an idea with currency, “a deliberate stride towards the conscious construction of culturally valuable mainstream blockbusters...” that can “make significant gains in diaspora ticket sales within the mainstream global

¹³⁸ Star is an Asian television network that covers both China and India (and others), owned by 21st Century Fox, however it does positively affect both domestic economies through the sale of programmes, jobs and tax/licensing.

¹³⁹ Chinese and English language versions of the general government website give, for example, Feng Xiaogang as a leading director, under the section on cinema.

film market.” (Jin (2009) 81-2). In other words, the relationships between diaspora and media under modernity, and globalization, as sketched in Arjun Appadurai’s *Modernity at Large* (1996), have advanced, but the development of the connections between his five “Scapes”¹⁴⁰, and their overall purposes, has been somewhat rewired.

2.3 No more American (or British) Dreams? Disillusionment, Confrontation and Claim-Staking as building blocks of new-future fantasies.

At the beginning of every episode of influential TV series *Beijingren zai Niuyue* (*Beijingers in New York*¹⁴¹), the Chinese version of the poem below, is displayed in white on a black screen. Meanwhile, Jiang Wen, who plays lead character Wang Qiming, reads the English translation as given below.¹⁴²

“ 如果你爱他	‘If you love him
就把他送到纽约去	Bring him to New York
因为那里是天堂	For it’s Heaven
如果你恨他	If you hate him
就把他送到纽约去	Bring him to New York
因为那里是地狱”	For it’s Hell.’

-Cao Guilin

¹⁴⁰ The players: between the diaspora (ethnoscape), the technology it may employ for communication (techscape), and the Financial system implicated (financescape), as one group, and the media and ideology (mediascape and ideoscape) that, produced at a national level, change in resonance from place to place.

¹⁴¹ The title of the series is normally given this way now, although when it was released the English title shown on screen was the rather more wordy “A Native of Beijing in New York”.

¹⁴² I have written the English version just as Jiang Wen reads it, not necessarily as I would translate it.

The knowledge of heaven and hell that his voice conveys, is powerful enough to invest the basic writing with an epic quality. Throughout this chapter I contend that a cinematic imaginary informs, even constructs, the diaspora environment abroad, as well as the understanding of the diaspora experience domestically. Further, though differences are apparent, this effect echoes across the filmic landscapes of Hindi and Mandarin cinematic contexts. Such depictions serve as a theatre to confront and resolve the Social Representation of the relationships between these countries and the international community, especially the Western powers (Lu (2014) 10). These have been in flux in new ways since the 1990s, and affect the nations' views of themselves. I follow three filmic phenomena to explore the ways in which the diaspora experience is portrayed in popular film of India and China in Hindi and Mandarin, and to track changes in this portrayal. These are: Disillusionment, Confrontation and Claim-staking. Since the opening up of their economies, these phenomena, whether manifested in plot, mis-en-scene, sonic elements or dialogue, have displayed the increased importance of diaspora as border guards of the transnational cultural nation, and the growth of their "home countries'" global cultural and economic clout. This is put forward through a convergence of agendas occurring between State, Market, Filmmakers and Audience¹⁴³. This does not reflect a reverse trajectory from modern nation state to "culture-bound empire"(s) (Lu (2014) 3) but rather a syncretic reimagining under present global conditions. We will see considerable similarities that occur in these cinematic theatres

¹⁴³ This is a more subtle reworking of Benedict Anderson's disputed line in the first edition of *Imagined Communities* "so often in the 'nation building' policies of the new states one sees both a genuine, popular nationalist enthusiasm, and a systematic, even Machiavellian, instilling of nationalist ideology through the mass media, the educational system, administrative regulations, and so forth' ([1983] 113-14), that reflects the globalised capitalist market economy, commodification and consumerism, integration of media and development of communications in the past 25 years. In the second edition of the book, Anderson critiques this assessment as "hasty" and "short-sighted" ([1991]163), and in many respects, perhaps it was, however, the usefulness of his insights as fuel to analysis of the present situation is clear.

of knowledge and power, but also the differences brought about through their individual histories and aesthetics. Particularly, we will note the geographical and conceptual arenas of judgement within the diegesis in which disillusionment and confrontation occur - courtrooms, workplaces, airports, schools, and parties - and how depictions of claim-staking move beyond this confinement and out into the wider urban space. Aerial shots are an analogous exemplar to consider the close relationship between power and alienation described by these three phenomena.

Like the poem above, the ubiquitous aerial shots that characterise the portrayal of the “fantastic” foreign city, be it New York, London or San Francisco, provide the audience the exhilaration of being *above*, inhabiting a powerful “heavenly” vantage point. We are able to view the (Western) urban experience¹⁴⁴ in a superficial simulacrum of omniscience, exhibiting “objects on display” (Mitchell (1989) 220)¹⁴⁵. Much as aerial photography of exotic locations in Western cinema has made them domestic consumables, the end-product is aimed not only at the diaspora, but perhaps even more for the domestic audience, as reception study by Iris Vandeveldde (2013), industry perspectives in India, and theoretical works on China suggest (Jin 2009).

Yet these aerial shots of the Western city also present a fearful spectacle of enormity, a “hellish” hiddenness even in their seeming clarity; The windows and buildings can be seen, but the people within are, at best, atomistic fleeting entities. We can contrast this with the fact that even when Chinese and Indian cities do appear in

¹⁴⁴ As the global economic landscape has changed since 1990, cities like Sydney and even Dubai are appearing more in this coveted position of desired city.

¹⁴⁵ Mitchell does an excellent job of exploring the relationship between the display and its viewer in his study of early exhibitions and cross-cultural exchange. In his analysis, he examines the position of Western viewers vis a vis “spectacles” such as the World’s Fair, but also the Panoramas, Dioramas etc. I find it interesting to think about the changes in power play that have occurred between these two instances of cross-cultural “viewing” (the French spectacle viewer, and his Egyptian chronicler, and the *Hua* or *Desi* film audience), and the ways in which the power dynamic of gaze operates here.

diaspora films, they are rarely, if ever, portrayed with these heady aerial shots, and indeed, such shots are rare in the portrayal of the domestic urban environment in general.

The *spectacle* of the Western city, laid out before us, has a dual nature, not reflective of the true range of diasporic destinations, but coloured by the diasporic experience, providing a base diegetic environment for these theatres of power to develop. This central dichotomy is a cinematic one, and its symbolic value, created, transmitted, and understood through the conventions of cinema, underpins everything that follows.

Being abroad, being in diaspora, is a complex state of inbetween-ness, experienced differently dependent on destination, age, circumstances, gender, wealth and other factors. Nevertheless, the contemporary portrayal of diaspora distils certain elements of real diaspora lives, fantasises them, blends them with anxieties over change, and the international power dynamics, or perceived power dynamics, that affect national identity. This produces a fictional diasporic experience that is reflective but not accurate, both aspirational and cathartic. The drama, it promises, will reveal these joys and sorrows, and it is through them that we will understand what it is to be that exotic creature, a Beijinger in New York.

Below, I explore Disillusionment, and Claim-staking, and the significant, revealing process of Confrontation that links them together. I ground these in the overall idea of diaspora as both *dreamer*, and *dreamed*, within the context of new, cultural nationalist “*dreams*”. I will do this by considering the relationship between these phenomena as scenes of embodiment of national cultural identity, adoption of a cultural-nationalist “voice”, and as experiences located in geographical and social milieus of judgement.

What are the Phenomena?

“Disillusionment” refers to a character’s own abrupt realisation of his/her strangeness in the eyes of those around them, and perhaps even their social undesirability -- a crashing fall to earth for the *diaspora-as-dreamer*. Disillusionment can spur protagonists to victory, or crush them where they stand, and will always be the shadow of the hopes that precipitate its blow.

“Claim-staking”, refers to an overt, and self-conscious act of “empowerment” set in the diaspora context. Literally, it is the assertion of perceived ownership, often in a fantastical mode: *the diaspora-as-dreaming the culturally inflected dream*. In film, we can identify cinematic choices: location, point of view, editing or symbols in mise-en-scene, or a change in the sonic landscape, for example the use of national anthems, or ethnicised instrumental versions of known Western/“host country” tunes. We can also see evidence in dialogue, in protagonists verbally claiming a place of belonging, often times the USA or UK¹⁴⁶, or in atypical examples like *Delhi-6*, stamping out their own piece of the “motherland”. Claim-staking is an important theme in both contemporary Hindi and Mandarin cinema, and one that I believe will only grow. However, I suggest, it will change to reflect the shifting power relations between “abroad” and “home”¹⁴⁷, and the different meanings these words conjure up for citizens of these two nations-beyond-borders.

The phenomenon that bridges the gap between Disillusionment and Claim-staking is Confrontation. In Indian and Chinese cinema’s portrayal of confrontation

¹⁴⁶ Of course, the USA and UK have been seen in recent history as the destinations of choice for those going abroad, but this is changing, not least as the dynamics of South-South migration develop, as shown in the World Bank’s handbook (2011).

¹⁴⁷ This includes the increase in influence by Chinese production companies globally.

between diaspora and “host” reveals stark changes between 1990 and 2014.

“Confrontation”, whether direct, or genteel, offers a way of connecting the themes of “disillusionment” and “claim-staking” in a single gesture. It represents the *diaspora-as-hero*, the *diaspora-as-dreamed*.

I will show that intertextual “conversations” occur between each industry’s films as they develop these themes of disillusionment, confrontation and claim-staking, often quoting each other obviously, as if to signpost change. Participating films are not merely brought together based on their success, but also by direct relationships in the filmmaking industry. For example, in China, a real relationship exists between the 21 episode television series *Beijingren Zai Niuyue* (1992/3), 1997 film *Wangluo Shidai de Aiqing* (Chen Jin dir.), diaspora comedy *Bu Jian Bu San* (Feng dir.1998), *Guasha* (2001), and the 2013 film *Zhongguo Hehuoren*. Stock characters emerge, situations repeat, and intertextual jokes and references are made. We see the influence of directors, actors and producers who have been responsible for much of the aesthetic invention of diaspora in film, including Feng Xiaogang¹⁴⁸, and Zheng Xiaolong.

Discourse is lively in India as well. From the 1990s the visual representation of India’s relationship with its diaspora changed. The developments between *Dilwale Dulhania Lejayenge* (Henceforth *DDLJ*), *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (*Sometimes Joy, Sometimes Sorrow*, 2001. Henceforth *K3G*), *My Name is Khan* (Johar dir. 2011) *Namastey London* (2007), *Desi Boyz* and *Ra.One* (2013) highlight shifts in the cultural world, and status particularly of first and second generation diaspora, both within and without India.

¹⁴⁸ Feng Xiaogang’s comedies will be addressed in more detail in Chapter 3.

As if haunted by a compulsion, diaspora characters on the popular screen frequently find themselves inhabiting the role of spokesperson for their entire nation and culture, particularly in Western locations. This tendency echoes across Hindi and Mandarin visual entertainment. Indeed, this growing use of the diaspora-as-spokesperson is not only evident, but developing in similar ways. Taking on such a role can be a conscious decision of an individual in the diegesis, or it can be imposed by their surroundings, and can precipitate humiliation or glory. Below, I examine some ways in which this on-screen “role-playing” has occurred. This process, on the part of filmmakers¹⁴⁹ of implanting within the diaspora character the voice of the nation, through disillusionment, claim-staking, and confrontation, can be traced through experiences as a dynamic. I begin with disillusionment, an impetus against which the changes in society and fortune in both India and China since 1990 have become particularly culturally important.

Diaspora Disillusionment: Shattered Dreams and Cognitive Dissonance in Representing the Cultural Nation.

Disillusionment, in the face of the realities of a cinematically constructed city, is bound to be the shadow of even the rosier depiction of diaspora life. This is a defence in the face of disillusionment, not so much marking the Western space, place and culture as *Desi*, as Claim-staking does.

The diaspora victims of humiliation, maltreatment at the hands of the “host” country, particularly those based on presumptive racial/cultural identity (i.e. *Hua-ness*

¹⁴⁹ As usual, I hold “filmmakers” as a category to include persons who influence the character of a film as it is being created. This includes not only directors, producers, cinematographers, but also any person involved in the score, or visual content of the film, including actors, and sometimes even financial sponsors who enable films to be made while affecting their identity and the censors that control, curb, encourage or pass them.

and *Desi*-ness) are taken *pars pro toto*, meaning that prejudice displayed towards them can transcend the individual, to attack the entire cultural nation. At times, attacks can even be performed by other, established members of the diaspora community usually marked as distanced from their “native culture”. Although there are numerous different arenas in which the Disillusionment of the *diaspora-as-dreamer*, and Confrontation for the *diaspora-as-dreamed* can take place, for the purposes of this chapter I am going to draw particular attention to places where judgements, places of assessment by the “host” country in its official capacity, occur. These -- airports (increasingly), parties, schools, courtrooms, and the workplace – are where disillusionment is most clear. All of these can actually be understood as courtrooms of one kind or another, and the process of entering them begins at the airport, where *Desi* and *Hua* are open to interpretation.

Arrivals and Disillusionment

The differences in depiction of diasporic characters’ entering and initially settling in a foreign country as shown in popular film of India and China is revealing. Hindi films since 1990 rarely tell this side of the story, marking the trials of acquiring diaspora status as a sort of transparent norm. Chinese films, on the other hand, revel in the painful alienation of foreign-ness and the *baudad* status of its innocents abroad in a manner¹⁵⁰ continuous with the preoccupations of modern Chinese literature.

¹⁵⁰ The usual interpretation of the appearance of such scenes of unpleasant arrivals is that the cinema of China, even in its popular form, is inherently built upon a “realist” tradition. It is one of the points of my thesis that this is a politically constructed, simplistic, and actually factually erroneous assessment of the very rich and complex history of cinema, particularly popular cinema in China. This cinema is very much marked by melodrama at its root, just as Hindi popular cinema is, and has social, reformist notions in its DNA. Its “socialist realist” phase, culminating in the political spectacular of the Cultural Revolution films, can hardly be considered continuous with Third Cinema. Further, as critics *and* fans have noted, contemporary cinema is blending in motifs from other media including television drama, and moving away from what may be called the realist style, towards, in some cases surrealist, comic-book stylings, particularly notable in comedies like *Rang Zidan Fei* (*Let the Bullets Fly*, Jiang Wen dir. [2010] or the

As today's most common point of official entry, the airport has become a field of layered hopes and anxieties, where one can be recognised or refused - the most basic problem for "Others" entering a new environment. Cut off from the rest of society-at-large in the chronotope of "airport time", and at the whim of officials with seemingly godlike powers, a diaspora protagonist can go from urbane traveller to suspect undesirable in a matter of moments, as Meng Xiaojun relates in his description of an unsuccessful business trip to the USA in *Zhongguo Hehuoren* (fig.46). In these scenes, the gray-blue, fluorescent light associated with airports is utilised cinematically to impart an exaggerated cadaverous pallor, and the suspension of time that a windowless environment implies: the airport becomes a kind of purgatory, or indeed, one of the courts of hell¹⁵¹. The gray paleness of the airport appears in office rejection, recalling those moments of sterile discrimination. Certainly the distorted blueness of the airport sequence in *My Name is Khan*, which resonates between the blue gloved and uniformed security officer and back again (fig. 47) is an effective visual element in making the examination undergone by the innocent quixotic traveller with Asperger's Syndrome, Rizwan Khan, seem particularly unbearable, and un-ending. *My Name is Khan* tells the story of Khan's move under duress from a Muslim section of Mumbai to San Francisco, and how he falls in love and marries Mandira, a Hindu, single mother and proud San Franciscan, even adopting her son, Sameer before the 9/11 attacks. Following these tragic events, the lives of Khan and his family are turned upside down by the vitriol

Lost in... series (Yip dir. *Ren zai Jiong Tu*. [2010] ; Xu dir. *Ren zai Jiong Tu zhi Taijiong*. [2010]), or the influence of advertising and internet media cross-pollination, as in the *Tiny Times* series. *EntGroup's* recent (2015) analysis of the Chinese government report on internet and film gives some sense of this relationship (See bibliography).

¹⁵¹ In common Chinese folk belief the dead pass through a series of courts to atone for sins committed in life or by birth. Living kin burn paper representations of objects and money to ensure comfort for their ancestors, and in some beliefs, the ability to bribe court officials to speed up snags preventing their ascension into a heavenly realm.

poured upon his identifiably Muslim-sounding name. His adopted son is even killed. In the mourning aftermath, Khan argues with Mandira, defending his name and religion, and expressing confusion as to why they should be negatively perceived. Mandira bitterly quips that for all their sakes he should quickly find the President and tell him “Mr. President, My name is Khan, and I am NOT a terrorist.” Rizwan takes the challenge seriously and sets off on a circuitous, picaresque journey across the country. On this first leg of the journey, the moment when he enters the airport as a member of a *Desi* continuum to embark upon a true journey to the heart of America, the blue paleness of the airport contrasts sharply with the bright, colourful idealistic beauty of Rizwan and Mandira’s life in San Fransisco before the attack, which characterised the initial diasporic visual environment of the film. This pale colour, is almost a blending of the white-ness of the self-consciously Caucasian America that Rizwan has unexpectedly come to inhabit, and the blueness of the uniforms of officialdom. This colour reappears in the film when Rizwan is fiercely questioned and brutally, strangely unproblematically, tortured by officers from Homeland Security¹⁵². However, the initial shock of disillusionment does not end at the airport door.

¹⁵² The film is not clear about the names of the bodies employed at various stages of the plot, nevertheless it is strange that in the diegetical world of the film, torture is a matter of course, rather than an unexpected, aberrant or isolated event, reflecting perhaps the common beliefs of the audience, which from a US perspective would be controversial at best.



Fig. 46 & 47: Scenes of race and nation-based humiliation in the transit experiences of diaspora characters; *Zhongguo Hehuoren* and *My Name is Khan*.

Disillusionment in the Workplace

For diaspora characters, especially those that lack English-language skills, this is only the beginning. Workplaces, and first homes from which opportunities are sought, provide the next layer of places of judgement.

In *Zhongguo Hehuoren* (Fig. 48), for example, shots of Meng Xiaojun and his wife Liang Qin in a dilapidated apartment, similar to those in *BzN*, appear as they face the reality of life in New York. Later on, Qin questions the purpose of their move to

America after they both lose jobs that had signified the first rung on a ladder to success. Li Qing, female lead of Feng Xiaogang's *Bu Jian Bu San*, also encounters a gulf between her ambitions of a career in international trade based in LA and her domestic cleaning job. Unlike the protagonists of *BzN*, however, who despite many setbacks including periods doing low status, low paying jobs throughout the film, eventually succeed, Li Qing, Meng and Liang return to China. In a move that exemplifies the direction of contemporary cultural rhetoric around diaspora *Hua*-ness, they *do not* become New Yorkers in the sense that Wang Qiming does, and also that they do not simply retreat in the manner of Maomao. Rather, they force America in line with their desires, while retaining, even emphasising, their very status as *Hua*, as ethnically, culturally Chinese. Li Qing (Xu Fan) even ends up starting a Chinese language school for children where she seeks to inculcate *Hua* values. Despite having made herself a success, she finally returns to China when, called back by filial morality upon the illness of her mother¹⁵³. It is noteworthy that the impetus for these moves are at least partially due to interactions with the workplace.



Fig. 48: Meng Xiaojun and bride in *Zhongguo Hehuoren*. Like Qiming and Guo Yan, they feel the need to hide the miserableness of their situation from their friends and

¹⁵³ I am discussing “traditional values” in the sense that they are communicated in the contemporary, especially by hegemonic forces such as the State, or educational bodies.

loved ones in their phone conversations and correspondence, saying that their new home “although a bit noisy, has wonderful light.” This duplicity can be read as an effort to stave off the worry of family members far away, and also as a face-saving measure. Similar behaviours can be seen in Hindi language films where the well-being of “elders” is put above all else. Disillusionment thus becomes a secret bitterness that perpetuates itself.



Fig. 49: Meng’s wife questions the whole purpose of their move to America after they come clean to each other that they have lost their jobs.

The workplace is a powerful scene of acceptance, value, and control; as a key to social status, particularly in ostensible meritocracies like the UK and USA, it has a greater potential to disappoint. *Bu Jian Bu San* is a dysfunctional love story, like many in Feng Xiaogang’s repertoire, taking place within the diaspora context of Los Angeles and environs. It similarly shows the “reality” of menial work for new arrival Li Qing, but while working as a maid in the imposing home of wealthy, absent Chinese diaspora, she is held at gunpoint, and robbed. The film makes particular reference to *Beijing Ren Zai Niuyue*- in fact director Feng, despite his own involvement in the series, pokes fun at it: Li Qing says she didn’t “think much of it”.¹⁵⁴ Qing ends up in a succession of low status jobs, washing dishes, washing windows. In an example from the *Desi context*, it

¹⁵⁴ As Liu Yuan (Ge You) tries to persuade Li Qing to let his film crew use the house she is looking after for absent diaspora as a shooting location, he tries to impress her by saying that the crew is the same one that filmed *Beijingren zai Niuyue*. Her response: “Kan de shihou wo ye mei jue de zenmeyang.” (“When I saw it, I didn’t think much of it.”)

is in Zakir's *office* that he tells his brother, Rizwan Khan the story of his own successful business ventures, and how anyone who was willing to could do likewise "Because this is America." However, it is Rizwan's wife's hairdressing salon that shows the effects most painfully when 9/11 undercuts their social status; having just opened her own shop, Mandira suddenly loses her clients. Zakir's wife is assaulted, her headscarf removed in the university where she works, and she thereafter abandons it until the end of the film. Another, more recent example in the *Hua* realm: despite the characters of *Zhongguo Hehuoren*, especially Meng Xiaojun, having worked in many a hybrid location, from disused warehouse to Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet, it is when they enter workplaces in the USA become representatives of a culture and country precipitating disappointment. In the more recent of these films workplace disillusionments also exhibit, or at least give rise to an increasingly confrontational cast.



Figs. 50 & 51: Workplace humiliations at the hands of the native population are a common theme in Mandarin language popular films depicting diaspora. These moments as shown in the film *Zhongguo Hehuoren*, above, represent a kind of suppressed confrontation, and Lacanian “lack” that characterises disillusionment.

Parties, Disillusionment, and Loss of Social Status



Fig 52. K3G Anjali Raichand (Kajol) complains of the contempt with which she feels she is treated on a social level on account of her race and culture.

In the scene above, we have a good example of the kind of disillusionment most commonly shown in popular Hindi cinema portraying diaspora: racism encountered in a formal social interaction, another place of judgement. Loveably, comically straightforward Anjali makes similar comments as above throughout her exile in London. However, in keeping with her characterisation she continually uses the inability of her host society to understand her own Hindi language as a means of subversion. She resists, even mocks, what she finds an oppressive culture. In this respect she continues her habit earlier in the film of commenting sardonically on the habits of the wealthy in Delhi, redirecting her disdain to fall on the host society, the power before her. These gestures of resistance, both in the form of commentary and the seriousness with which she seeks to maintain Indian culture in her home, recall the action of Singh, the father in *DDLJ*, but in a new manner that incorporates power and development. They exist in a state of aesthetic perfection, where Anjali, her home and her family are always utterly in keeping with the mores of contemporary Indian aesthetics, the exception being the figure of comic and sexual excess, her younger sister

Pooja (Karina Kapoor). Anjali (Kajol), like many women portrayed in the diaspora, is invested throughout the film with the role of repository for authentic *Desi* culture. As a result, Anjali is triply burdened by the role; in addition to the expectations of her gender and motherhood, she must provide a kind of Indian-ness that cannot be accessed by her international, global¹⁵⁵ *Desi* husband through her background as a member of the Chandni Chowk district of old Delhi. She must also try to fill in the gaps left by the absence of “elders”, with her parents both deceased and Roshan’s seemingly permanently estranged. In many respects, Anjali’s conservative attitudes and sense of loss are contrasted further against the many scenes of claim-staking in the film. Indeed, the scene above illustrates the gulf between the two. Following her dissatisfied complaints about the “Shining White-Army” she is shocked by the improbable, surreal, fantasy scene of Indian reverse-colonialist claim-staking; the schoolchildren, led by her son, sing the Indian National Anthem, as the predominantly Caucasian audience rise to their feet in dewy-eyed respect. Her suppressed, one-sided confrontation, born from disillusionment in her new environment, is sublimated. Other confrontations, however, are more overt.

¹⁵⁵ Although SRK’s character Roshan does return to India before the beginning of the film’s main events, he not only has studied abroad in the UK (which makes his ease of transition a bit more plausible), but has travelled extensively with his father throughout his formative years in the process of helping him with his work. This is referred to several times in the beginning of the film, but particularly in a scene where Roshan’s father Yash (Amitabh Bachchan) prepares Roshan to take over the helm of his company(ies).



Fig. 53: An elderly, decorated gentleman (his medals are obscured by his hand in this still), and the one non-white audience member other than the Raichands, rise for the Indian National Anthem (Jana Gana Mana) performed by children from Nikki Raichand's school, in a pastoral English setting.

Confrontation: Establishment Antagonists, Schools, Workplaces and Courtrooms

As demonstrated by Anjali, probably the key problem for diaspora characters is their burden as spokespeople for their cultures and ethnicities in these films. This in large part causes the disillusionment, confrontation and claim-staking that appear in judged environments. Surprisingly consistent across contemporary Chinese and Indian cinema, the most obvious situations in which “role-playing” takes place, is during confrontation between the *Hua* or *Desi* individual and a representative of the ‘host’ country, or culture. Furthermore, an additional, notable aspect is the tendency for that representative of the “host” country to embody the “establishment” or orthodoxy of the society in a way obvious to a domestic audience: he is almost always male, and almost always white. Further, the males that challenge, or orchestrate challenge, are flat, nearly interchangeable, from prosecutor Benton Davis in *Gua Sha* to the prosecuting US lawyer in *Zhongguo Hehuoren*, or John Pringle, the racist party guest in *Namastey London*.

The stock Caucasian male antagonists in films such as *Gua Sha*, *Zhongguo Hehuoren*, *Desi Boyz* and *Namastey London* are in no way physically threatening, but can be menacing, bearing signs of status and power. His presence itself is a trope, designed to provoke both the diaspora protagonist and the assumed audience, without being fleshed out enough to really qualify as a villain. In many respects, in the Hindi film context, one can draw a straight line between this white male in the contemporary, and the depiction of British/Caucasian officers in history films, like *Lagaan* (Gowariker, Ashutosh dir. 2004), or, as they aggressively, smugly, often brutally challenge Indians until faced down by a revolutionary hero. The similarities brought about through an ongoing intertextual conversation, create a subtext that links the excesses of colonisation and its legacy, with contemporary power struggles, and casual racism.

In the Chinese context, it would be tempting to imagine an influence of these scenes upon Mandarin film directors, such is the similarity between them, but this is unlikely. Instead we may point to the legacy of, if not outright colonisation, “National Humiliation”. We can, in this case, draw a line between the confrontational Caucasian currently on screen and the Western shadow cast upon diaspora literary figures of the late Imperial and Republican periods¹⁵⁶; we can see him in the anxiety around perceived decay, or weakness, the “Sick man of East Asia” syndrome, a phrase inscribed on a tablet famously shattered by Bruce Lee in the popular film *Fist of Fury* (Lo Wei dir. 1972), *Dongya Bingfu*¹⁵⁷. He is also linked with the oppressive racist task master of the American Railroad. Nationalism, and popular culture are linked in the subtext here, and the role of Western patriarchy, and masculinity in this mix is an essential part of the

¹⁵⁶ Yu Dafu’s famous story “Sinking” is one such. Lu’s study (2014) of physical culture and nationalism, makes reference to a wide array of participants to this discourse.

¹⁵⁷ Although this is a Hong Kong film, containing Cantonese and English, its influence is absolutely global, and Bruce Lee himself was part of the diaspora continuum.

conversation taking place between and through all the diaspora films in this chapter, creating a short-hand for the audience.

The arguments and confrontations in which the diaspora characters find themselves on screen as spokespeople for their cultural nation, are racist in nature, undermining or belittling the culture, or innate abilities of *Hua* and *Desi* people. The Caucasian male antagonist of *Gua Sha*, prosecutor, Benton Davis (Joe Erker), for example, constructs his entire case against successful, American-Dreamer couple Xu Datong (Tony Leung Ka-Fai) and his wife Wang Jianning (Jiang Wenli) as an opportunity to take “traditional” Chinese culture to court, from medicine, to literature, to family structure. By creating this opportunity in the diegetical world of *Gua Sha*, director Zheng Xiaolong creates a theatre for “Constructing Chineseness as a territorially dispersed, yet ethnically integrated imagined community.” (Esperjesi (2004) 28).

***Gua Sha*: Failed Confrontation in the Courtroom**

Confrontation in the workplace, or school, challenges the image of Western meritocracy. Confrontation in social settings confronts the ideal of societal equality. And confrontation through court, or trial represents an opportunity to revel in, reveal, mock, or admire, (or some combination of these), the judicial system in Western countries, often touted as the freest and fairest in the world. This venue also allows more easily for a natural shift to the preferred cadence of on screen diaspora becoming spokespeople for their nations: suddenly we are in the realm of the stirring monologue.

In *Gua Sha*, Datong and Jianning are accused of abusing their son Dennis upon the discovery of marks caused by the traditional Chinese medical practice of *gua sha*, which rubs or scrapes the skin, stimulating the circulation to alleviate common

illnesses¹⁵⁸. A small, *in camera* meeting with a family court judge becomes a more official trial, after images of Dennis's reddened back are circulated among shocked legal teams; even Quinlan, Datong's friend and acting counsel deserts him. Jianning and Datong prepare for the court hearing that will follow, questioning themselves, practising statements, pacing in their urban apartment to find the magical combination of words that will convince the judge, *that will convince America*, that they do love their son, and would never harm him. In the "informal hearing" scene that follows, an echoing, neoclassical municipal courtroom in drab browns, forces attention onto the dialogue and actions of the protagonists. Few shots reveal more than the torso, so that the full intensity of expression is available to the viewer. This is used to particularly powerful effect during the opening speech of the trial, in which Datong expresses his love for his son. This moving statement begins in the diegesis as he faces himself in the mirror the night before, aesthetically suggesting true introspection through light and *mis-en-scene*. The statement segues into the courtroom, and precipitates violent interaction between Datong and Davis.

¹⁵⁸ The *gua sha* itsle, to add an additional layer to the drama, was performed by Datong's elderly father, played by veteran Chinese actor Zhu Xu, who is visiting from Beijing. From the very first sign of trouble, Datong insists on keeping this fact from any of the authority figures who he encounters, and equally, he and his wife endeavour to keep the heartrending ordeal of having their son taken from them, into care, from his father.



Fig. 54: *Xu Datong tells himself the story of how he felt upon the birth of his son.*

These two moments, introspection and violence, bookend the action within the court in a meaningful way, going some way to explaining the more surreal aspects of this film. In the scene above, a tired Datong digs deep to try to find overt ways to explain his parental love, a contrast to the less often expressed “traditional” modes of love within the Chinese family. In the dark, intimate space of the bathroom, the blue-black background dramatically contrasts with the bright light, and orange-gold cast to his skin. Speaking little above a whisper, we are party to a very tender secret: “Dennis was a premature birth...only 4 pounds. So small and fragile...like a little monkey.” As Datong speaks, the camera, which begins poised over his right shoulder slowly zooms in tightly to his eyes, until they dominate the frame. He imagines Dennis’ future, with perspiration, tears, or just water, clinging to his eyes: “He is my son. I am his father. He’s going to grow up into a man. To get married...”. Having been brought into such an emotional intimacy, the sincerity, although with changed tone, that Datong displays is reassuring when we then cut to Datong in the courtroom mid-sentence (below)



Fig 55: Xu Datong holds back tears as he gives his statement about his relationship with his son, and his disillusionment as to his status in the USA. He feels that his, and his son's future options have been narrowed: having in the past hoped that Dennis would become "A great scientist, an artist, even a President..." he states, "I don't think that way anymore...All that matters is that we have peace, good happiness and good health." This loss of status, from the beginning of the film, where he felt that he had achieved the American Dream, is profoundly sad. His embodiment of Chinese culture loses against the challenge posed, only underscoring this disillusionment. It is caused, above all, by the gap between his perceived status at the start, and what turns out to be his real position in society: totally beholden to the good will of his "hosts".

The Monkey King, as a character in literature, in the video game for which Datong has been feted, and as Dennis' cherished toy, is a major symbol of the film. Dennis' toy is made by his father, and lost as he is taken from his parents into child services' custody; it suddenly takes on a new meaning. The Monkey King in all these contexts does represent Chinese "culture, values and ethics", but he is also deeply linked with Dennis, the "little monkey". Giving Sun Wukong to Dennis as a toy becomes a cultural gesture: Sun Wukong himself represents Chinese culture, and indeed in the events that unfold in the court room, Datong takes on a patriarchal interpretation of the *Hua* cultural nation, defending this symbol of cultural China. After court proceedings that include the testimony of a nurse, Consuelo Rico (unlisted actress), who calls the Xu's "barbaric Orientals", and the blind-siding of Datong's ambivalent friend

Quinlan, events in the courtroom take a turn for the worse. Prosecuting attorney Benton Davis begins to attack Chinese culture, particularly through slanted analysis of the beloved Ming Dynasty novel *Xi You Ji (Journey to the West)*. He attacks Sun Wukong, as a “murderous, vulgar, devious Chinese monkey”; this becomes the final straw for Xu Datong. Having, at the beginning of the film, said how he wished to become like other Americans, he now finds himself on his feet, grabbing Benton Davis by the collar on account of a fictional monkey because he represents “our” values, “our” ethics, our 5000-year-old culture, and what passing that culture on to his son means to him. More than at any time during court proceedings, his emotions get the better of him, and he has to be pulled away by security officers.



Fig. 56: Benton Davis improbably uses *Journey to the West* as evidence of the perfidious nature of Chinese culture.

Datong’s world is, as he says, “turned upside down” because of a misunderstanding stemming from a fundamental difference in world-view exemplified by TCM¹⁵⁹. What Datong and his family are experiencing is a traumatic kind of

¹⁵⁹ This is the commonly used abbreviation for Traditional Chinese Medicine.

cognitive dissonance, which makes it impossible for him to form an argument that is successful.

In the end, ironically, the only hero of *Gua Sha* is TCM, a prime example of “Chinese culture”. Its innate goodness and efficacy enables Quinlan to see Datong’s innocence in another surreal spectacle. The camera adopts Quinlan’s viewpoint as he seeks out a practitioner in Chinatown, and is led through a maze of ornaments to the back of a shop. Despite the Orientalist flavour of the ornate colours, incense smoke, and Chinese musical motifs that proceed the action, a clinical, white-coated, erudite TCM doctor performs the treatment in a darkened room, explaining the principles behind it clearly and professionally. Of course, Quinlan feels no pain, and when his reddened back, quite literally *marked* by an expression of Chinese culture, is revealed to him in a mirror, he sighs, a little surprised, and in a measured voice pronounces, “I understand now.” He has been enlightened, and in a move typical of this film, which blends a thematic and strategic emphasis on Chinese culture and symbols, with a taste for nostalgic Hollywood family movies of the 1980s and 1990s¹⁶⁰, he and a representative from children’s services rouse the judge on Christmas Eve to rescind the restraining order against Datong. They discover him shimmying up the drain pipe of a multi-story apartment building in a Santa suit to (illegally) be with his family and give a new Sun Wukong toy to his son. The family can be together, and some much-needed glamor is injected into the visual schema. *Gua Sha* represents unexpected helplessness in the face of the Western establishment. Yet through the turn to Chinese language at the very end

¹⁶⁰ At times the film recalls the genre of “family” holiday films, such as *Home Alone*, and *Uncle Buck*, through its use of the excess of the US holiday period with its unparalleled nostalgia and unapologetic *schmaltz*, littering the screen with Christmas sweaters and happy Caucasian families. It musically invoking such film classics as *Meet Me in St. Louis* through the Christmas song of the film, “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” sung by Judy Garland, and follows the tradition of the holiday-time happy ending found in these 90s films, and in the iconic *It’s a Wonderful Life*, which is echoed in its final scenes of patriarchal, family redemption.

of the film, we are given a clue to the trajectory of future confrontations, where the Western Establishment is suggested to be veering towards obsolescence.

Confident Confrontations: New Reflections of Growing Global Power

Scenes of out-and-out racism, like that of Benton Davis, or the nurse witness of *Gua Sha* had been typically reserved in Bollywood for historical dramas, as mentioned. The appearance of direct confrontation, often enacted by characters played by Akshay Kumar, in films such as *Namastey London* and *Desi Boyz* challenges this. If SRK is the face of the romanticised *Desi* as imagined in the 1990s by Karan Johar, and others inspired by Johar's style, Akshay Kumar has become that of the *Desi* patriot for the new millennium.

Akshay Kumar has become a niche favourite for his comic roles, and his ability to portray down to earth, tough characters in films like *Khakhee* (Santoshi dir. 2004) and *Dabangg* (Kahyap dir. 2010). And he, perhaps more than any other actor, has become the face of the *Desi* tackling racism abroad. The film *Namastey London*, is an excellent example, where his character, Arjun Singh, though comic, turns out to have hidden depths, especially when faced with any kind of crisis. The motto of *Namastey London* is "Be flexible, never give up, and have a true heart, and everything you desire will be yours". Arjun Singh personally embodies this motto, which bears many of the hallmarks of *DDLJ*, the first blockbuster "diaspora film", with which, through gestural borrowing, musical motifs and direct, intra-diegetical references, *Namastey London* is having a deep conversation on the nature of *Desi*-ness and love in "Cultural India". In many respects, *Namastey London* is a contemporary, somewhat less fantastical, re-imagining of *DDLJ*. In 1995 *DDLJ* shows Raj, its hero, as played by SRK, proclaiming

himself *Hindustani*¹⁶¹. He enrobed himself not only in the trappings of a *Desi* identity, but also in its constructed moral and ideological components, including romanticism, persistence, and adherence to a patriarchal code of honour. He does not take “advantage” of heroine Simran, when she becomes intoxicated, for example, below.

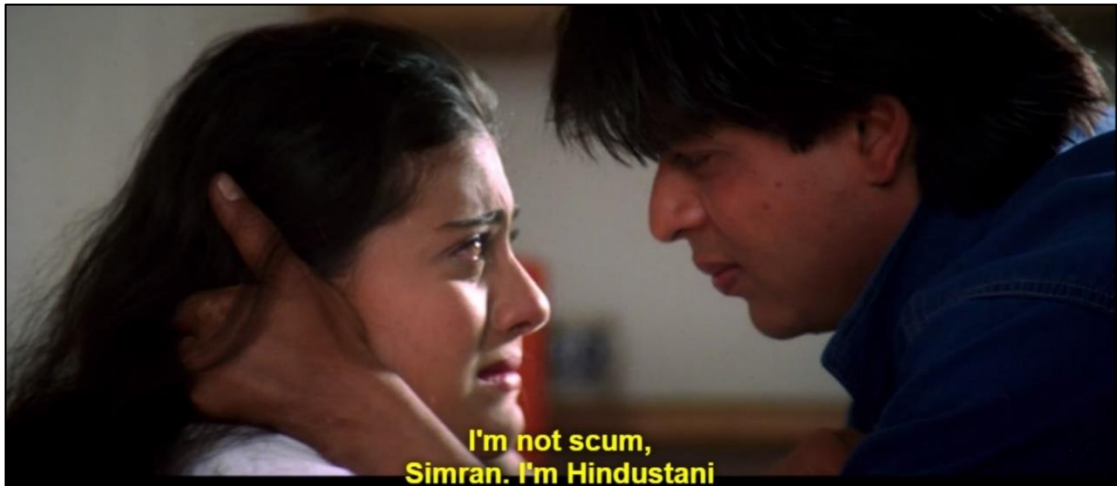


Fig. 57: *DDLJ*: Reclaiming, retreating or refilling Indian moral values.

All of these are present, reimagined, in *Namastey London*. *DDLJ*, however, only reflects an early stage of *Desis*' growing global power. *Namastey London*, 12 years later, shows the new status of India through direct confrontation with Caucasians of a “host country”.

Crashing the Party: Confrontation in *Namastey London*

Namastey London tells the story of second generation Londoner Jasmeet aka Jazz (Katrina Kaif) who is determined to make herself utterly unacceptable to any *Desi* beau that her father, Manmohan Malhotra (Rishi Kapoor) attempts to arrange. Jazz seems completely uninterested in “her” *Desi* culture, considering herself completely “British”, despite saying so, and speaking to her office friends, in Hindi, or American-accented

¹⁶¹ At the time of the making of *DDLJ* “Desi” as a global identity had not been absorbed into popular culture in the way that it now has. Indeed, the point of the film in many senses was to begin the process of *re-anchoring* the diaspora population abroad into Indian, *Hindustani* sensibilities and identities.

English. Much as in *DDLJ*, fearing for Jazz's moral wellbeing, Jazz's father takes her on a "holiday", sightseeing and meeting potential grooms. Meanwhile, Jazz considers how to proceed with her own wedding plans, as she is now engaged to her boss, thrice divorced wealthy Englishman, Charlie Brown. Her family eventually engages her to Arjun Singh, the son of his best friend. Despite her disgust, Jazz allows her parents to perform a Hindu wedding to him right away, on advice of her good friend and fellow Londoner, Imran Khan (Upen Patel). He assures her that a purely religious ceremony, un-registered, would not be recognised in the UK: she would not have to observe its validity once home. Consequently, having put off her "first night", on the morning after arrival, Jazz announces that as far as she is concerned, she is a free agent. Her marriage to Charlie Brown is on. And so, for the remainder of the film we are presented with the bizarre spectacle of Arjun, Jazz's *husband*, being present as a guest at wedding-related functions and events. Introduced as a relation, he is a tragicomic ghost of *Desi*-ness, consistently reminding her that he will never hurt her, or be angry, but wish her well, because he loves her, in a show of self-sacrifice that itself embodies *Desi* values on screen, and once again, recalls *DDLJ*.

Arjun Singh prides himself on his flexibility, which he associates with all *Desis* and he reveals knowledge and worldliness which was not so apparent when he was presented comically, spraying milk into his mouth from a cow's udder in Panjab. He even conceals his unexpectedly cosmopolitan ability to speak fluent English.



Fig. 58: Arjun Singh critiques the hypocrisy of the previous generation of Desis and their attitudes towards their home country. Jazz's father (right), is surprised not only at his perspicacity but also at the ease with which he has "adjusted" (the most commonly used adjective to describe one who has successfully undergone the process of getting to know and become accustomed to one's partner's foibles in an arranged Indian marriage, both on and off screen) not only to the family, but to the UK. As usual, this is typically shown in the film in terms of the urban modernity of London, and the pastel rural idyll of grand houses and parks, which we may recall from previous films, including DDLJ.

Arjun steps up as a spokesperson for "India" and "Indians" in his interactions with his father-in-law Manmohan (above). He highlights the hypocrisy of a nostalgic, emotional attachment to India, while being unwilling to go back and help develop it, or to recognise its growth and advancement, rather, just treating it as an inferior option to the "English lifestyle". Indeed, this call to the NRI/PIO to return "home" is in keeping with the real-world political zeitgeist (Chadhury 2015, Sharma 2015). But Arjun later becomes the spokesperson for his cultural nation even more spectacularly, on Jazz's behalf as racist comments drive a wedge between her and what she had clearly assumed was her transparent Britishness. Arjun, at this turning point, claims her as *Desi* and speaks for *Desis* everywhere. At first excited by her engagement party, Jazz's disillusionment takes place in claustrophobic scenes against the background of seemingly refined wealthy gentility of a boat on the Thames. Her humiliation is made complete by the comments of her fiancé, who instead of backing her up when she says

that India is “not just a nation of snake charmers”, as John Pringle suggests, joins in with racist “humour”, adding that it is also “a land of chicken tandoori and call centres”.



Fig. 59 & 60: *Namaste London*: Jazz's identity as a British woman is not only called into question, but completely dismissed by the stock middle-aged male Caucasian.



The middle-aged Caucasian, asks whether “they still do the Indian rope trick” in India, to which Arjun replies in Hindi, like a polished orator. Translated by Jazz, Arjun points out the cultural and religious diversity of India, that has seen Catholic, Sikh and Muslim individuals “lead a country that is 80% Hindu” but, that, in a kind of veiled threat, is the country with “the third largest army in the world”, “not yours”. As in the Chinese commercial film context, Arjun Singh refers to India as a “5000-year-old *civilisation*”, a maxim derived from the rhetoric of Hindu nationalism (emphasis

added)¹⁶² and echoing the discourse of the “Civilization State” (Kumar 2002, Ghosh 2012). Although perhaps an ahistorical or lazy term, this has entered the popular and political imagination in full force, and, as such, cannot be ignored. In the tradition of diaspora films like *DDLJ* and *K3G*, humiliations take place in a sterile, pastel landscape, visually contrasted with idealised colourful India. This idealised *pastoral* England is a wealthy land of manor houses. In contrast with the upper-class Caucasian establishment however, diaspora live in urban or suburban, *modern*, homes, be they small or large. Stereotypes about India are now *confronted*, bridging the gap between disillusionment and claim-staking. Arjun Singh points out the change in Indian society, contrasting this with outdated stereotypes that have disillusioned and hemmed-in his *Desi* compatriots in the past: “We have reached the moon...but you still feel stuck at the Indian rope trick”. In opposition with the stereotype of a “backward”, *unmodern* India, Arjun suggests here, that it is the British/English “host” establishment who are behind the times, retrograde, unable to cope with changes that the global balance of power has undergone, and is undergoing. This is mirrored in the manner in which Meng Xiaojun confronts the US lawyer prosecuting his company in *Zhongguo Hehuoren*, by saying that his compatriot students *now* wish to return to China after completion of their American education¹⁶³, rather than “cheating” to stay; the prosecution is “still focused on cheating”, a legacy stereotype.

¹⁶² The full speech is provided both in the original Hindi and in translation in the addendum to this chapter.

¹⁶³ Although the numbers of Chinese students returning to China is on the rise, the substantial percentage that do stay abroad remains a source of anxiety domestically, see Jiang (2013).

Confrontation in Layered Theatres of Judgment

In *Zhongguo Hehuoren* the trial, workplace, school and society are blended as influences to judgment and confrontation, but with complex, differing results. As we have seen in the case of *Namastey London*, these are reflective of the changing political, cultural and economic climate at the time of production and release. Meng Xiaojun and his bride in New York, and Su, the long-distance love of Cheng, in Boston, experience diasporic workplaces including a science lab, restaurant, hair dresser, and dry cleaner. In most of these workplace environments, confrontation unfolds, and includes the layered influence of court, and social milieus.



Fig. 61: *The legal challenge to a Chinese educational business.*

Above we see a crucial moment in the most important arena for the diaspora embodiment of *Hua-ness* in this film, the attempted prosecution of *New Dream Enterprises*. The legal challenge takes place in a corporate office-type environment, in a luxurious high rise: far from being intimidating, we may note, this space is continuous with the glass-and-steel contemporary style of *New Dream's* own corporate building, and the homes of its founders. This as a potent blend of workplace and trial environments, with the addition of a scholastic context, given the nature of the business that *New Dream* engages in. Indeed, at this moment, the lawyer for the complainants

(Daniel Martin Berkey) says that he has “found out some interesting facts about Chinese culture”, proceeding to describe the imperial examination system as innately corrupt. He implies that this sets precedent for cheating of which New Dream is accused, and that Chinese culture itself, *Hua* culture, is untrustworthy. This easily reminds us of the use of *Journey to the West* in the court case of *Gua Sha*, where again, a perhaps deliberate misinterpretation is plastered upon the accused. They are suddenly required to not only defend their own actions, but those of all *Hua* people, and at the same time to explain a complex set of facts in minimum time to an accuser representing the establishment. This legal case frames the narrative of *Zhongguo Hehuoren* and serves as the crux around which the group’s anxieties and ultimate triumph are played out. The opening salvo of a defence from the *New Dream* team is indicative of what is to follow: a gift of mooncakes in a decorative box, slid casually across the table as a gift to their opponents, not as an attempt at (very cheap) bribery, but rather an immediate connection to their *Hua*-ness. The counsel expands, tenuously, the argument that cheating is endemic to *Hua* culture and among Chinese students coming abroad. Firstly, they reiterate the case against *New Dream* of unfair practises, and secondly by “revealing” school head Cheng’s “mediocre” personal academic record – he had failed to get a place at university twice, for example. To counter this argument, the founders of *New Dream*, Wang, Meng and Cheng, again change the parameters of the discussion, to encompass *Hua* values, while at the same time demonstrating their comfort level and ability in a system that is different: Cheng quotes passage after passage of a book of US copyright law, memorised on the flight over from China.¹⁶⁴ As for Cheng, if he does not “know

¹⁶⁴ One might pause to wonder how much better Xu Datong would have fared if he had been able to prepare himself with knowledge of family law in such a way, and one need only look to established *Hua* diaspora character Ah Chun, with whom *BzN*’s Wang Qiming has a relationship, to understand how he avoids being on the wrong side of the law.

the ropes” one could say that he is able to learn them, extremely quickly, and is aware that he must. The accusation of cheating is evidenced in the prosecution’s argument by the excellent results achieved by Chinese students entering US Universities: such results are suspect. Cheng’s partners defend him through his demonstration of ability, stating that indeed he has superior intellect, but given the inherent skills and the unparalleled willingness to engage in hard work and sacrifice that his school mates had, only compared with them, could he be viewed as mediocre.¹⁶⁵ Chinese students excel, it is explained, because of their intelligence, but also because of their willingness to go to any lengths to achieve. This is a cultural factor, and something that the *New Dream* team tells their opposition that they “will never understand”. Echoing the trend that we have observed above, a logical argument emerges that the ways of understanding on the part of the Western establishment figures are not only logically at odds with a *Hua* perspective but are quite simply *behind the times*. Moreover, in contrast to the behind-the-scenes admiration that Benton Davis showed for symbols of *Hua* culture such as *Journey to the West* (he admits to a co-worker that he “couldn’t put that book down for three days and two nights”), the facial expression of the counsel in *Zhongguo Hehuoren* is shown to soften in response to these assertions, into one of quiet admiration at the meeting itself. The confrontation has been well and truly won. Nevertheless, the emphasis on the power and knowledge of diaspora students, and diaspora people in the film, reveals a paradigm shift in the kinds of images of diaspora that popular culture films project, and that domestic audiences, and indeed diaspora audiences, wish to

¹⁶⁵ Indeed the film itself, which has given us the story of the New Dream team’s education and development, including the many sacrifices they have made up until this point provides a defence, a kind of entrepreneurial, diasporic *bildungsroman*.

consume. These are those that echo the narrative and evidence of China as a rising power, and the relationship between diaspora, domestic public, and state in its rise.

Desi Boyz: Confrontational, Desirable, Academically Superior Desis

Despite the many differences between the films, *Desi Boyz*, *Zhongguo Hehuoren* and *Namastey London*, all display diaspora protagonists with cultural fluency and comfort level abroad, and an invocation of transnational *Hua* and *Desi* identities. *Desi Boyz* reveals two global *Desis*, Jignesh and Nikhil (aka Jerry and Nick) flexibly responding to crisis, through a very positive understanding of *Desi* culture, and indeed masculinity. Having lost their jobs in the financial crisis, they join an escort service called *Desi Boyz*, which portrays the *Desi* male's identity and physique as globally desirable¹⁶⁶. In this, and other ways, this film continues the trend for diaspora movies to characterise the Western establishment view as itself *backward*. In the best example, the film's characters, and aesthetics completely undermine the assumptions of an establishment figure, a stock Caucasian male professor, when he claims that Indians are incapable as students¹⁶⁷. This professor, ostensibly at a fictional University of Oxford, where the "college" scenes were filmed, accuses Indians both of illiteracy, and of having such poor available education that they must leave the country to gain a decent degree, should they be one of the few literates. The Indians in his class are "nincompoops", a

¹⁶⁶ The two protagonists join a stripping and escort service after having lost their jobs in the economic crash. The entire company, called *Desi Boyz*, as in the title, is composed of escorts and strippers who utilise their *desi-ness* as the key point of their desirability. They point to gentlemanliness, and macho sexuality as key attributes of the transnational *desi* culture. This is more than surprising, given the current status of Indian males in the media both in India and globally, especially following recent high profile and brutal rape cases.

¹⁶⁷ This was particularly topical content for some diaspora and would-be diaspora after the closure of many "colleges" in the United Kingdom, where the film is set.

wonderfully old-fashioned word. But Jignesh (Akshay Kumar) has the knowledge and power to challenge this professor. Highlighting major academic achievements of Indian and *Desi* people in modern times and throughout history, including the invention of the zero by Aryabhata¹⁶⁸, and the success founder of Hotmail, Sabeer Bhatia, states: “Sir, it is not easy for ‘nincompoops’ like us. Only brilliant minds get accepted to our colleges in India. Who knows, sir, if you applied even you might get rejected.” As in the case of *Zhongguo Hehuoren*, Jignesh highlights “mediocrity” as relative, reflecting on the hard work of his compatriots as a cultural and national characteristic. Aesthetically, the environment in which all of this occurs is marked by claim-staking that gives a different context to the confrontation, just as the assumptions of a globally desirable *Desi* change the context of the romance. On a meta level, the fact of the extra-diegetical power of the Hindi film industry to *take over* an Oxford College, forms an overarching sign of geographical, landmark-based claim-staking for the film’s intended audience. Moreover, the Oxford “college” environment has, in its interior shots, been transformed into the kind of colourful, varsity, idealised college seen in classic Bollywood “college” movies of the 90’s and early 2000s such as *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (Johar dir. 1998).

In “diaspora films” of India and China, confrontation with a stock male establishment figure increasingly does not result in failure, instead forcing the “host” to realise that he may well be beholden to the “guest” for the future. And, as alluded to above, growing power is signposted with claim-staking both within and without them.

¹⁶⁸ The invention of 0/zero by Aryabhata is very much a disputed fact, as it the concept is thought to have been arrived at by several different civilisations independently. However, like the “5000 years of history” narrative that reflects a newly re-formed cultural nationalism in dialogue with that of China, the *fact* of Aryabhata’s discovery is one that has been placed in the category of an indisputable reality by much of the education system, and within the Indian popular consciousness.

Diasporic Claim-Staking as a Visual, Sonic and Textual Endeavour

Since the 1990s, disillusionment itself has become not simply a scene of humiliation but an opportunity for power struggle, through the tool of confrontation. Meanwhile, claim-staking pure and simple, or the portrayal of protagonists claiming a place, geographical and/or conceptual, of belonging in countries in which they reside, has remained an important theme in films depicting diaspora. In Mandarin media, we can almost trace this trend to the last frame of the last episode of the TV serial *Beijingren Zai Niuyue* where Wang Qiming, “flips the bird” at a van of complaining passengers as he drives aggressively in New York, his adopted home.



Fig. 62: *A claim that resonates through Chinese cinematic depictions of the diaspora: Wang Qiming’s middle finger raised through the window of his smug white Cadillac at a bus of demanding Americans at a NY traffic light.*

However, in the case of Qiming, we see the seeds of a problem that more contemporary claim-staking seeks to resolve: the absorption of the character into local culture, or, to use an ironically apt turn of phrase, diaspora characters “going native”,

becoming continuous with the Western culture they inhabit. Qiming has lost his idealistic culture. Arriving as an ambitious classical musician, a trained cellist, he has taken on the habits of hardscrabble diaspora. But upon success, his relationships with both his wife and daughter have broken down. He, in many senses loses the symbols of his cultural origin, including the Ai Weiwei painting that he points out to his newly arrived daughter on the wall of his idyllic suburban home in episode 13 of the series. Qiming's *Hua*-ness transforms into his *New York*-ness, but there is bitterness and loss with the triumph in that simple obscene gesture, with his attempts to dominate a prostitute earlier in the series, or with his comfort with dropping an unsuspecting new immigrant to sink or swim unaided in a disused flat, as was done to him. For a *Hua* or a *Desi* audience, whether domestic, or within the cultural "catchment" area of the cultural nation now engaging as part of what Prof. Kanti Bajpai refers to as "Geo-culture", this understanding of a diaspora reality has now changed. A new, aspirational aesthetic language which autonomously takes space in the "host" environment while retaining cultural identity, is a key factor in the shaping of a *desirable diaspora*¹⁶⁹ as alluded to in our exploration of confrontation. The space will be filled with cultural nationalist *dreams*.

Behind Claim-Staking: Growing Dreams and Dreamers

The ways in which contemporary diaspora characters on screen are portrayed, especially their relationship with geography and landmarks, and their understanding of local cultural context, reveal a complex network of relationships between individuals and

¹⁶⁹ Bajpai's recent work analysing Modi's cultural and International Relations strategy as a global phenomenon in historical context, including a forthcoming paper, currently titled "Modi's Foreign Policy in Greater Asia: Geo-Strategy Geo-Economics, and Geo-culture" presented at a conference, *India under Narendra Modi: Reconsidering Indian Foreign Policy* held on May 4th 2015 at St. Antony's College, University of Oxford.

their “host” country. Further, it shows how the representation of these relationships is predominantly dictated by the needs of the “home” audience. We can see throughout the phenomena of disillusionment, confrontation, and claim-staking that the portrayal of diaspora reflects, that the manner of “speaking” to power has changed. Knowledge and power conjured on screen as innate evident facets of the *Hua* and *Desi* story, if not identity, are bolstered by real-life changes in global status, and cultural nationalist projects governments and culture industries have been engaged in during the period of reform. These are now blossoming into an era of national “dreams” which, though earnestly critiqued both within and without the domestic structure from which they arise, are nevertheless accruing ideological and cultural currency around the globe. And despite their wry sense of humour, as I will expand in greater detail in Chapter Three, even the visual language of films like Feng Xiaogang’s *Fei Cheng Wu Rao I (If You are the One)* (2008) and *II* (2010) replete as they are with modern, glamorous takes on Chinese “traditional” aesthetics, are testament to this, and indeed the ambivalent nature of the relationship between such “dreams” and the public. The context for statements of claim-staking, also, of course, includes the cultural and economic importance of diaspora to this cultural nationalist project, which is overtly invoked through overtures to *Hua* and *Desi* communities on both political and cultural fronts¹⁷⁰, the diaspora that

¹⁷⁰ As I have discussed in the previous sections, the role of *Hua* networks, including both Chinese and Taiwanese businesspeople in establishing new opportunities within China through government incentives, or new incentives aimed at NRIs to “Make in India” under Modi, would constitute economic signs of the importance of diaspora, and cultural propaganda that aims at a wide “catchment area”, including satellite TV, films, and larger scale events. Chinese and Indian television, in addition to be replete with reality fare, and popular films, contain a surprising number of programmes effectively designed to teach (cultural) citizens (presumed audience is both within and without China/India), about their culture and history, including arts, philosophy, and in India’s case, religion. The existence of numerous programmes such as *Weming zhi Lü* (Tour of the Civilisation) or the enduring popularity of numerous iterations in various forms of mythic stories in China and India, such as *Journey to the West*, or the *Mahabharata* is

includes *huaqiao*, *huayi*, *luxuosheng*, *PIOs*, *NRI*s and more¹⁷¹. I wish to briefly highlight three ways in which claim-staking, the more overt, and often times more *cinematic* form of expressing power¹⁷² is manifested: through overt, voluntary assumption of the role of spokesperson for the cultural nation, in an extension of the kind of *pars pro toto* positioning we saw in the disillusionment *and* confrontation formation; and second and third through visual and sonic elements, including colour, mis-en-scene, and the careful use of background music, and/or musical sequences. These various elements will naturally occur together at times.

very instructive in showing the extent to which the mainstream of these cultures is geared towards creating and recreating an understanding of a 5000 year-old civilisation, in both cases.

¹⁷¹ As I have mentioned elsewhere, the diaspora in real terms certainly does not constitute a unified whole, but rather a wide range of individuals with different links to local domestic cultures of their “origin” country, different linguistic and folkways, and indeed different levels of reaction to their nation of “origin” and their “new” home. Diaspora in reality can include *huaqiao* (Chinese abroad), *huayi* (roughly synonymous with PIO but in the Chinese case), *luxuosheng*, *PIOs* (Person of Indian Origin: an individual who does not hold an Indian passport but who has ancestors born in India. Within 4 generations this can be used to obtain a special visa, *NRI*s (Indian national abroad, usually it is expected that an NRI will hold an Indian passport, unlike PIO, but with first generation immigrants, and to some degree second generation immigrants this issue can become complicated as well.). And although there are Chinese entrepreneurs in rising numbers in parts of Africa, for example, and a huge immigrant population of Indians to the Middle East, both low-skilled and skilled, the focus of the filmic portrayal, even the popular portrayal of diaspora, remains squarely on those individuals moving to what could be identified as recent centres of Occidental power, and centres of so-called “Western Values”, such as the UK, the USA, and even Australia. I suggest that we could link this with the overall effect of a post-colonial modernity, while the changing nature of the interactions between “host” and “guest” in these films, is, I suggest, a product of changes to the global power landscape, both real and perceived.

¹⁷² Being, as I show, frequently reliant upon visual and sonic elements to produce the experience of claim-staking in the diegesis.

Claim-Staking Disturbed: The Antecedent, *DDLJ*



Figs. 63 & 64: *DDLJ*. The lights of Leicester Square serve as landmark for those “in the know” and generic Western city scene full of international and local brands for those unfamiliar.

In the scene above, we see a typical expression of the cultural fluency which marks *DDLJ*'s claim-staking, a fluidity in space, rather than the cultural nationalist flamboyance which comes in later films. The hero and heroine, Raj and Simran, negotiate the urban space of London's Leicester Square with ease; this landmark, with its neon signs, can also symbolise Western entertainment and nightlife. In the diegetical reality of the film, we can compare these moments to the opening scenes of Simran's father, Baldev Singh (Amrish Puri) feeding pigeons in Trafalgar square, another landmark. The two squares are contrasted for their visual power, justifying the

geographic errors of Singh's route (Dwyer 2014) from the Square to work. In opposition to the natural ease of his daughter, the loss and emptiness that Singh feels in London is explicitly derived from a lack of social warmth that he sees in his surroundings, visually coded in the contrast between grey, drab colours that encompass him in shots of his adopted home, and the bright fantasy fields of mustard in director Aditya Chopra's romanticised Panjab. But this feeling of *loss* is itself born out of a *lack*¹⁷³: an expected fulfilment that has not materialised. Baldev Singh's response, is not to confront the "host" culture directly, but create a circle of salt against it, attempting to fill that space with an unalloyed culture, a project haunted by futility. The difficulty that Singh and his ilk on screen have in performing the feat of preserving India *London sheher men*¹⁷⁴ is their inability to come to terms with, and lay claim to the cities that "do not know them" and where they "know no one" as he says in the monologue in Trafalgar Square that opens the film. Neither can they utilise disillusionment as a kind of cultural weapon.

As the scene above develops, the camera cuts between two conversations as Simran and Raj discuss their plans to take a Eurorail trip through an exoticized Switzerland (Kaur 2002): Simran explains to her friend that her father objects to the trip, while in Raj's case, he pleads with his pal to accompany him. Still strangers, they pass each other. The problematic relationship between claim-staking and loss in the film can be noticed in the typical Occidental view of Western fashion (Kaur 2002): Simran's friend is unproblematically wearing a piece of fetish wear, that looks as if it might have been purchased in nearby Old Compton Street, as if it were normal clothing.

¹⁷³ I am consciously referring to *lack* here in both the normal sense, and in the Lacanian sense.

¹⁷⁴ This translates to "in the city of London".

Little wonder then, that Baldev Singh is concerned for his daughter's absorption of British ways.

The use of famous places, from Trafalgar Square in the opening scenes of *DDLJ* to Buckingham Palace in the closing scenes of the 2007 Bollywood comedy *Housefull* (Nadiadwala dir. 2010),) – a film that I will discuss more in the next chapter – is not confined to Hindi film by any means. It is a feature that in its visual immediacy is powerfully cinematic in its ability to communicate with an audience. In every one of these films, and in the television phenomenon that is *Beijingren zai Niuyue* as well, aerial shots of the Western urban environment¹⁷⁵, are combined with visual markers of geographical space, famous landmarks that define cultural being, in what for domestic audiences may well be an imagined Western world.

Cosmopolitan Consumerism and Claim-Staking: *K3G*

K3G is brimming with overt claim-staking: the colonisation of the colonisers' space by "new India". Its protagonists come out on top due to their own *global Desi* status (and substantial wealth) unlike the case in *Gua Sha*, released the same year. Claim-staking here comes in the form of the surreal outcome of deliberate embodiment of Indian values, as demonstrated by the actions of heroine Anjali, described previously. It also comes in the form of actor Hrithik Roshan marching down the Embankment to a modern arrangement of the empowering national song *Vande Mataram*¹⁷⁶ with a bevy of women in Indian national colours, or taking over Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire and

¹⁷⁵ Which were discussed in more detail at the beginning of this chapter.

¹⁷⁶ A Bengali song/anthem originally penned as part of a novel, *Anandamath*, by Chandra Chatterjee, and brought to a nationalist context by iconic poet and pan-Asianist Rabindranath Tagore.

transforming it into a fantasy “college” for its protagonists in a meta-gesture of power, similar to that of the later *Desi Boyz*. As in *DDLJ* the “Violence done to geography” as Dwyer puts it (2014¹⁷⁷) is notable: Oxford and London are blended, and European homes are grafted onto Indian locations. The less savoury aspects of Delhi’s Chandni Chowk are erased by use of a glamorous and colourful set romanticising *Desi-ness*¹⁷⁸, ostensibly for the consumption of a diaspora audience, if we follow the classic interpretation. This also feeds into a pursuit like that of Baldev Singh, to construct a perfect *India*. And yet it also projects an ideal, a dream of Indian culture that chimed with the domestic, through the romantic plot and colourful atmosphere: otherwise it would be hard to explain its enduring appeal. This highlights one of the particularly important *visual* aspects of claim-staking that links it to the domestic audience, whether or not they have been abroad: the conspicuous and copious use of landmarks and national symbols. The K3G *Vande Mataram* sequence, however is further notable for its overt use of international consumer brands as a sign of development, and “*world class*” status as it is often described in Indian popular media. The camera’s fast cutting between brand signs in London’s West End, from designer clothing such as Gucci to more middle-class luxury outlets such as Haagen-Dazs and Roshan’s bounding jog between London locations create an exciting, fast-paced montage, full of visual sweeps between shots created by a spinning camera, only adding to this giddy sensation. We

¹⁷⁷ Kindle edition location 941.

¹⁷⁸ To a certain extent this romanticised quality, a watchword of the colourful and lush so-called “NRI films” made by Karan Johor during the late 90s and early-to-mid 2000s, is challenged by films such as the noteworthy *Delhi-6* which I make special study of below, and even Ashutosh Gowariker’s films, such as the cultural nationalist plea *Swades: We the People*. Oddly enough, however, both these films, while ostensibly revealing a “grittier”, less “smoothed-over” vision of Indian urban and/or urban life, in fact romanticise the grittiness, the “chaos” as Roshan describes it in *Delhi-6* and innocent, though perhaps “ignorant” culture and populace. In other ways, an exoticised Other to the clean cosmopolitanism of Western-style urban life is revealed, but now as a desirable, if challenging, cultural “home”, even for second generation diaspora like Roshan. I will discuss this in greater detail below.

might view this as a visual expression of the sensation of *jouissance* and disorientation arising from expansion of consumer culture, which was joyfully, innocently, and critically explored in much earlier films, such as Aziz Mirza's 1992 film *Raju Bangaya Gentleman*. Here, the international *Desi* is launched into the excess of contemporary global consumerism, colouring brands saffron, white and green, just as the Bluewater shopping centre is marked with *Desi* melodrama, and a return to *Desi* "family values" at the end of the film.



Fig. 65: Part of the remarkable *Vande Mataram* musical sequence that dramatizes Roshan's (Hrithik Roshan) arrival in the UK, where he has tasked himself to find and retrieve his estranged brother Rahul.

Claim-staking 2.0: *Zhongguo Hehuoren* in Context

Despite their different aesthetic environments, *Zhongguo Hehuoren* provides an excellent comparison with contemporaneous Hindi films such as *Namastey London* and *Desi Boyz*. Their preoccupations, and their blending of visual and cultural claim-staking with the flavour of confidence provided by global economic and relational change (Narlikar 2015) make them in some respects similar. This autonomy and victory in screen confrontation with the West in the Chinese popular context is rapidly developing. The scenes shown in the stills below serve as testament to this. During a lunch break in their legal case, Meng, Cheng and Wang return to the diner where Meng worked in a

menial capacity during his time in NY, having been dismissed from his lab technician position. From a young age, Meng had been a firm believer in the American Dream, and in the USA as a dynamic place of change, and justice; consequently, his disillusionment is all the more painful. Over lunch at the diner, Meng finally confesses to his partners the full extent of the indignities he has been forced to suffer in the USA. There they sit easily around a table and order the quintessential New York dish, entirely unaided or advised: Pastrami on Rye. Having finished their heart-to-heart, and a lunch that demonstrates an ease with, and knowledge of day-to-day culture of the West, Cheng declares, as shown above, “Let’s go storm America.” Thus fortified, they go on to victory.



Fig. 66: Zhongguo Hehuoren. *The legal case to which the three partners have been called in New York has stopped for lunch and the partners discuss their next move and the diasporic experiential context for it.*

During the first episode of *BzN*, in the first scenes of Wang Qiming and his bride Guo Yan’s entry into New York, Qiming sees the lights of Manhattan from the car of the “Aunt” who is ostensibly to drop them at their new home. He cries out “New York!

Manhattan! I'm coming!"¹⁷⁹, immediately upon which, the soundtrack is overtaken by a marching band medley of American tunes: Wang Qiming, a musician, conducts this imaginary symphony with gusto. He is overtaken already by the romance of the American dream, the disillusioning reality of which he spends a good deal of the rest of the series coming to terms with, before finding his feet. *Zhongguo Hehuoren* is in dialogue with these moments in two ways. Firstly, on the level of the basic plot and outcome: as we have seen, the partners make use of their *Hua*-ness rather than quashing it. They inhabit iconic Manhattan vistas, highlighting the excitement of the city, but *on their own terms*, just as they belligerently claim their place in the US Stock Market, the ultimate statement of power.



Fig. 67: *Zhongguo Hehuoren*: The trio josh joyfully as they drive down Park Avenue after Wang says, in Hollywood-hero style, “We’ve got ‘em by the balls.” – they are going to be triumphant in their case.

Furthermore, the sonic landscape of the film is central in underscoring its claim-staking, both diegetical and extra-diegetical. The score cleverly uses a wide range of music from popular trends in China contemporary to the periods shown during the

¹⁷⁹ The original Chinese is: “*Niuyue! Manhadun! Wo laile!*”. I have translated it as “I’m coming!” rather than “I have arrived!” because the flavour of the sentence implies that Qiming is directly addressing the city, rather than making a simple statement.

bildungsroman-style section of the film, from rocker Cui Jian, synonymous with the 80s, to Cantonese pop, and Taiwanese singer Chyi Chin (Qi Qin), as well as resonant covers of Western songs, such as John Denver's *Leaving on a Jet Plane*. This creates a romantic, nostalgic atmosphere that is part of a general trend towards a romantic view of the 80s in China, although the events of 1989 are obviously absent¹⁸⁰. But perhaps most importantly, and part of a trend seen in other media in both India and China: there is a trend for transformation of Western songs into versions flavoured by cultural musical motifs. An excellent example is the cover of *Oh Susanna!*, played complete with Pipa, and other traditional instruments, to accompany the initial use of a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant in Beijing as a quasi- classroom for Cheng's growing number of English Language students after his dismissal from his university post. Far from being overcome by a Western tune, it is domesticated, and the situation itself made comical.

The two most poignant moments of claim-staking in the film are spatial/geographical, portrayed in a melodramatic style, and occur towards the end of the film, and specifically revolve around the diaspora experience, represented by the experiences of Meng Xiaojun. In the first, it is revealed that although they were not told, Meng's partners found out about his dismissal from the Columbia University Lab at which he had been a technician, never telling him that they knew of his pain, but instead, making a donation to the university to refurbish the lab, with a plaque on the door reading "Donated by Meng Xiaojun". Walking to the location to reveal this surprise, the three men are met by a lab worker filled with respect and gratitude.

¹⁸⁰ One can read the dissolution of Wang's relationship with Western sojourner in Beijing, Lucy, and his subsequent act of cutting his long, romantically youthful hair as a kind of coded reference to the loss of innocence and romance that the Tian'anmen Massacre represents, but in overt terms the plot skips over this year entirely.

Redemption, catharsis, and a small piece of New York that belongs to Meng have been assured, and in the background score, a Chinese-style piece of light emotive music plays. The second scene is precipitated by the first, which seems to exorcise the ghost of disillusionment. Indeed, afterwards, in a dream-like sequence Cheng imagines Meng confidently walking through Times Square, as shown below: his disillusionment has been banished, his dreams restored, in new ways. These adventures seem to focus primarily on taking back something that should have been: claiming a stake to correct the imbalances of an unfair past, a fantastical redressing of *lack*. Below, we shall see that in the Hindi film sphere, the blockbuster *Ra.One*, typifies both the geographical and sonic claim-staking trends taken much further, to their (il)logical conclusions.



Fig. 68: *Zhongguo Hehuoren*. As the partners triumph in their law suit, victorious in the iconic heart of modern Western commerce, Cheng imagines the long-suffering Meng Xiaojun, as he had been in their early days together at university in the early 80s. Then so enamoured of both the English language and the USA, instead of being crushed by disappointment, Cheng imagines the young Xiaojun walking confidently through the chronotope of Times Square.

***Ra.One*: Global, Modernised Claim-staking as Excess?**

Fig. 69: *Ra.One*. The use of the iconic Tower Bridge as a backdrop to a football game allows a layering of cultural referents, and adds to the tally of geographic claims in the film.

Claim-staking as described above, involved the Hindi or Mandarin language film protagonist taking a confident bite out of the Western urban environment. However, Hindi films perform their claim-staking diversely. At times, we even see, an incipient trend towards eye-watering cultural appropriation, particularly of African American culture, which nevertheless maintaining a grip on the values of *Desi*-ness, and its brand of modernity. Yet, no gesture of claim-staking can be bigger than a transnational hit, bolstered more often than not by a diaspora audience.

SRK's vehicle for entering the overseas, particularly Middle Eastern market, *Ra.One*, is an excellent example of all these trends. The film, a Diwali holiday hit (Subramanian 2011), is easily one of the most bloated examples of excess in contemporary Hindi cinema. In addition to plenty of place-based, landmark-based claim-staking, as seen in the still above, and the City of London location for the office of the central protagonist, Shekhar Subramaniam, this film performs claim-staking on a *meta* level. It does this by taking on the superhero genre, with a blue-eyed, muscular, hyper-masculinised SRK adorning the film's collaterals, and stylistically aspiring to

Hollywood special-effects blockbusters. This is nothing if not the “big picture consciousness” (*dapian yishi*) to which both PRC and Hindi language popular film industries aspire, and which has led to significant collaboration, and power brokering by major Chinese companies, and some Indian companies at the heart of Hollywood production¹⁸¹.

Ra.One engages in meta-claim-staking through its deliberate attempt to become an international hit, including by laying claim to an every larger circle of *Desis* abroad. The film is testament to the economic appeal of the Middle East¹⁸², where investment is available and the market is diversified and enlarged significantly by the presence of a large Indian diaspora population. The majority of this diaspora does not belong to what had traditionally been understood as a *Desi* population, i.e. they are typically not North Indian. However, both the audience and the industry have been challenging this image of Indian-ness, of *Desi*-ness as simply North Indian, each for their own reasons. This South Indian diaspora is part of the global *Desi* phenomenon, consuming both native local language films in Tamil or Malayalam, for example, and Hindi offerings, as is often the case back home, and engaging with the changing image of India. At the same time, the ethnically mixed composition of the diaspora *Desi* population, is being increasingly tapped by the Hindi film industry, where more and more blockbuster films, including *Ra.One*, *Rowdy Rathore* (directed by South Indian cinema great Prabhu Deva 2012), *The Dirty Picture* (Luthria, Milan dir. At the same time, the ethnically mixed composition of the diaspora *Desi* population, is being increasingly tapped by the Hindi

¹⁸¹. The market for Hollywood film diversifying globally and becoming more lucrative in foreign markets has also had a significant effect on production, and is continuing to do so. This increase in the power of the Chinese producers and audience has given rise, for example, to two versions of the recent *Transformers* film. Indian company Reliance, for example, has invested heavily in DreamWorks

¹⁸² This power is perhaps somewhat affected by the new development of fuel sources in the USA,

film industry, where more and more blockbuster films, including *Ra.One*, *Rowdy Rathore* (directed by South Indian cinema great Prabhu Deva, and released in 2012), *The Dirty Picture* (Luthria, Milan dir. 2011), and *Chennai Express* (Shetty, Rohit dir. 2013), feature southern Indian characters, film aesthetics and/or locations such as the states of Kerala or Tamil Nadu. This takes advantage of the lucrative South Indian audience(s), at home and abroad, who normally tend to be loyal to southern Indian stars, even elevating them to high political office and semi-divine status (Romig 2015). *Ra.One* is a film that reflects these changes.



Fig. 70: *Ra.One*. The opening scenes of the film are a painfully over-baked semi-reverential send-up of action films and gaming, with a hero “Lucifer”, who in the end turns out to be being dreamed by Shekhar’s son. These scenes, like the actual game that Shekhar goes on to build, are, like the games of Xu Datong in *Guasha*, scattered with cultural references both modern and classical, that belong to the diaspora’s “home” culture.

Ra.One’s lack of finesse enables a useful analysis of the politics of return in the diasporic context. Shekhar, the afore-mentioned unassuming NRI, settled well in the London suburbs and enjoying a demanding and successful career in technology and games design, is challenged by his British-born son to create a more morally challenging game. The game he creates is overtly marked as culturally *Desi* using the monikers *Ra.One*, a play on Ravan, the demon villain of the *Ramayana*, and *G.One*, a

play on the word *Jeevan* meaning “life” to name the villain and hero of the game, respectively. With such powerful forces invoked, the game itself becomes haunted and murderous, eventually precipitating Shekhar’s death. Reborn as a robotic avatar, he and his family return to India to discover the answers to their problems, and effectively save themselves, and the world, from evil that has developed in the technology. In many respects then, the plot has similarities to that of *Guasha*, but whereas the person of Xu Datong is deliberately conflated with Chinese culture within the diegetical space, Shekhar Subramaniam, and his incarnation as G.One consciously represent *Desi* spirit on a supernatural scale, ridding technology of evil that can only be invoked through employment of Hindu motifs, and returning to a wholesome environment. *Ra.One* leaves attempts at realism behind, and consequently, within the diegesis, the invocation of culture is not, like the Monkey King of *Gua Sha* symbolic. It is real. Even Shekhar Subramaniam, conspicuously identified as a member of the Tamil diaspora, is rendered *Desi*, aesthetically more North Indian¹⁸³, through his rebirth as G.One

The cultural politics of *Ra.One*, and its ways of staking a claim in the diasporic realm become complicated through its relationship with African American/Black culture. This film is by no means the only recent Bollywood film to stumble into this territory: Bollywood music has always incorporated sounds from whatever popular styles are gaining ground, the more exotic, the better. This can be read simply as fashion, but also, increasingly, as a form of claim-staking, representing a sonic dimension to the appetite of *Desi*-ness as a global force. Therefore, we see Calypso in *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, and salsa or techno elements elsewhere, such as the soundtrack to

¹⁸³ This highlights one of the ironies of Hindi film’s attempts to absorb some of the attention of the south Indian film audiences: they cannot seem to help mocking South Indian cultural habits (e.g. modes of eating), and they cannot seem to help painting heroes with features traditionally associated with North Indians.

Dil Chatha Hai, but increasingly, a trend for R&B and/or Hip hop elements in film songs prevails. The death of Michael Jackson, who struck a chord with a popular culture enamoured of dance, has also been a significant factor in the rise of black culture as a factor to be absorbed and culturally marked with *Desi*-ness: dance motifs that recall his style, and the use of his iconic hat and glove are clear symbols, blended with the moves of home grown talent Prabhu Deva. Recently, R&B artists have contributed to Hindi film soundtracks, notably Snoop Dogg (aka Snoop Lion) for *Singh is Kinning* (sic), and Akon for the soundtrack of *Ra.One*. But participation from the hip-hop industry of the US does not make this relationship an unproblematic one, particularly in the case of *Ra.One* below. In the US, Miley Cyrus, Iggy Azalea and others have in recent days caused an uproar through their use of dance moves like twerking or styles seen to be quintessentially of the African American community, featured previously prominently in R&B music videos; the fact that twerking, and the combination of twerk-like-dance, black culture, black bodies, and criminality (“just like a criminal”) are put together in one song from *Ra.One*, for example, as shown below, is problematic, if not simply offensive. The immediate questions this dance sequence and those like it raise: is this a case of Hindi films claiming an element of popular culture of the West, is it cultural appropriation, or indeed exoticised racism, a kind of orientalism, pure and simple? Or is it foregrounded against a legacy of minority relations in the West? Either way, the presence of artists like Snoop Dogg in the soundtracks of Bollywood films will certainly prove lucrative for all parties.



Figs. 71 & 72: Ra.One. Shah Rukh Khan dancing and “singing” in scenes from the song Just like a Criminal, with Kareena Kapoor, below. Is this a case of claiming a stake in the West, or a noxious blend of racism and cultural appropriation?



Ultimately, we can see that, in the cinematic construct of the *Hua* and *Desi* diasporic realms, there are many ways of claiming a stake. Each of these in turn can be linked to the *disillusionment* that provides soil for confidence, to the history of diaspora on film played out intertextually, and to the aspirations of the public, and political sphere of the day.

Conclusion



Fig. 73: Zhongguo Hehuoren. *One half of The Diaspora Creed?*

Without diaspora, the trans-national cultural nation is not possible; as real populations, and as characters on screen, they are absolutely crucial elements in the creation of cultural, transnational identities such as *Hua* and *Desi*.

Perhaps, when considering the dynamic relationship between countervailing forces of disillusionment and claim-staking, and the confrontation that enables them to develop, it is worth considering the motto of *New Dream* founder, Cheng, (above), itself a contracted paraphrasing of Nelson Mandela¹⁸⁴. He says, “Seek victory in failure; Seed hope in despair”. The popular Chinese media’s depiction of diaspora realities, certainly emphasises this “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger” mentality, that at the same time, positions the diaspora protagonist as a *method* by which to overcome a state of victimhood, in echo of the narrative of modern Chinese history often put forward by the State (Callahan). But if this is the distilled spirit of Disillusionment and Confrontation, a *Desi* diaspora context provides the confident, claim-staking gesture. *The Anthem of Us*

¹⁸⁴ Nelson Mandela’s famous remark was “I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.”

(Bhargava dir. 2014), is a short film made for Narendra Modi's address at Madison Square Garden in October 2014, where it was screened. Using intimate narration style and still montage of old family photographs, the film was explicitly designed¹⁸⁵ to speak of the Indian experience in a way that "worked" for both diaspora and domestic audiences, highlighting the daily sacrifices of ordinary Indians in the service of the future, describing in a narrated, English-language poem, a representation of the experiences and aspirations of *Desis* everywhere: "We turn tragedies to triumph/We are the rock stars of humanity." Diaspora characters' claim-staking in both Hindi and Mandarin film, has something of this swagger, and something of this goal of an ever more aspirational future.

¹⁸⁵ Bhargava describes his aims in making the film and the difficulties faced in doing so in his article "Crafting 'The Anthem of Us'" (2014).

Chapter 3. The Privileges of Laughter: Comedy, Critique and the Consumer

Grotesque.

As I have shown in the previous two chapters, the growth of the middle class consumer economy within both India and China since economic liberalisation has been accompanied by, and given rise to, the growth of the popular cinema¹⁸⁶. And among those films produced, many of the most influential, from Feng Xiaogang's "*hesui pian*" ("New Year Comedies"), to regional successes such as Hirani's *3 Idiots* (2009) and *PK* (2014), have been comedies. Why has comedy been such a central genre to the development of *Hua* and *Desi* films, and indeed identities? What *is* comedy for these two nations-beyond-borders, and what functions do such films serve in contemporary society?

In this chapter I make special study of a range of popular comedy films in order to begin to answer these questions. I suggest that these movies, among the most commercially successful, are actually in many cases the most critical *of* society, and *to* society. This is the first step in my process to expand analysis on certain particularly interesting facets of genres that give rise to *Desi* and *Hua* -ness on screen. Having, in the first half of my thesis, explored trends emerging within identity politics in light of the tensions currently spurring cultural nationalism and its visions of modernity, in this

¹⁸⁶ Clearly other factors are also at play, both in the growth of the middle classes themselves and also in the success of popular cinema, including the participation of working classes, (especially in India), in the continuing expansion of popular cinema culture through the realms of popular culture. Nevertheless, as key drivers of i) higher revenue from ticket sales, ii) the growth of the diaspora market, iii) the expansion of the multiplex, uptake of film to satellite tv and streaming media, and iv) the changing aesthetics of popular film, the contribution of the middle classes cannot be denied.

half of my thesis, chapters three and four, I focus on two genres, and *genre films*¹⁸⁷ as forms in which these tensions are played out¹⁸⁸. Continuing to utilise analytical tools established earlier, and developing additional concepts, I will show that, as objects of taste, and normative enterprise, comedies *are* engaged with a discourse of cultural values pertinent to the formation of *Hua* and *Desi* identity, in spite of the ease with which they may be dismissed as inconsequential. Indeed, notwithstanding the genre's status as a considered "safe" choice for state and industry players, sure bets at holiday time, comedy films and the laughter that produces them, and which they produce¹⁸⁹, is highly ambivalent in nature. If we scratch the surface, we find much more. For example, discomfort has the tendency to breed laughter; this is a fact of human nature of which we are all aware. Laughter can be sinister, or even, like the forced laughter of the ever more contorted Medical School Dean Dr. Asthana (Boman Irani) in *Munna Bhai MBBS* (Hirani dir. 2003), comically hideous. Parody points out the laughable in society, often associated with power. Happy endings, and indeed slapstick, reassure us in different ways as to the order of things¹⁹⁰. Further, in a rapidly changing society, modes or admixtures of comedy that are thought to be in some sense unique, indigenous, culturally embedded, and opaque to outsiders (it is often said that the hardest thing to engage in in a learned language is humour), form a base of intimacy with their

¹⁸⁷ An interesting meditation on the use of the word *genre*, its fixedness or lack of same, and its relationship to the *generic* can be found in Altman (1999) 113-5.

¹⁸⁸ Chapter four will concern mythic and modern history films.

¹⁸⁹ For without the ability to produce laughter, or at the very least "levity" as described by Noel Carroll (2014), something cannot be considered to be humorous; thus humour and its object are in a state of interdependence.

¹⁹⁰ Slapstick, as discussed by Bevis, allows us to laugh at the otherwise painful, to suspend belief in physics, and see a reality in which cleverness is rewarded. We can be comforted (sometimes disturbed) by the indestructible nature of the clown, while allowing ourselves to feel superior to him/her.

audiences, from which all that is troubling, all that needs to be released, can be explored, and, ostensibly, let go of. At the same time, it subtly unites cultural citizens. In contemporary India and China, I argue, the principle sources of anxiety, and therefore of comedy, are clustered around the subjects of identity, consumption and class¹⁹¹. Comedy allows the network of those producing it, be they filmmaker, state, audience or market, the privilege of domesticating these anxieties into figures of fun, while knowing that they can still bite back.

In fact, comedy film is suited to these tasks in multiple ways. For, comedy, more than any other mainstream genre, works seamlessly within the logic of global capital and within the economy of cultural value – i.e., the kind of comedy one chooses to consume, to acquire and attach to oneself, does, like any other status symbol, confer cache and belonging within social strata¹⁹². Thus it is itself a *good* and a *value* related to “symbolic boundaries” of “legitimate cultural taste” (Friedman and Kuipers (2013) 181), even within the popular field. Comedy itself may, given its participation in consumer logic, be considered middle class, but even more than action or history films, which are widely enjoyed as lavish, big budget blockbusters, comedy’s flirtation with the “vulgar” (a term I explore in more detail later), can confirm or undermine social status. Nevertheless, in the field of cultural production this taste hierarchy, and its

¹⁹¹ As I will show here, and as I have shown throughout this thesis, these anxieties are particularly focused on the young. This, however, is not merely a question of juvenoia, but a pertinent gathering of fears while facing a future that is described with a mixture of uncertainty and pride.

¹⁹² Although one can argue that all film does this, social reaction to comedy is often more visceral, as indicated in Friedman and Kuipers (2013), and in fact, as can be understood from the mixture of fear and distaste held for it in not only the seminal works of Plato and Aristotle, but in Confucian philosophy. In Indian tradition, humour is at once imbricated in tradition by virtue of religious dramas forming an important part of the annual cycle of worship, where humour is not excluded from the formula (e.g. Ram Leela), and also given the status of a symptom.

values, are always in the process of reorganisation, particularly in recent years by, and for, the youth market. Comedy retains its seed of danger. Whether viewed on a pirate copy in a crowded room for a pittance, streamed on one of billions of mobile phones, or enjoyed in the reclining armchairs of the new and glamorous picture palaces that adorn urban and suburban shopping malls¹⁹³, the films themselves, and the extent and type of enjoyment experienced by the audience has socio-cultural meaning, and economic consequences.

¹⁹³ The multiplex, as a physical and conceptual space, has had profound consequences for popular film, its types, roles, and profitability in recent years in both India and China. In India, it has eroded the need for an “All India” hit, or even exclusive focus on the family diaspora films, such as *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (Johar dir. 2001) that served as the cornerstone to contemporary *Desi* film as we know it. Within the dominant forms of popular cinema, the multiplex provides space for an increasing variation of style, accommodating films that are *zara hatke* (“somewhat different”) as Rachel Dwyer puts it in her contribution to Donner (2011). Different age groups, social and educational levels are catered, for example, in a kind of physical manifestation of market segmentation whose simultaneous exhibition contrasts with the mode of older movie houses, both urban and rural. In China, as in India, the development of such multiplexes into a lifestyle “experience”, complete with “value-added” measures designed to attract audiences away from satellite tv and streaming has further highlighted the composition of the ticket-paying audiences that consume not only the film itself in a manner lucrative to production houses, but also the trans-media products increasingly available connected with such films. That India’s Hindi, Bollywood, now *Desi* cinema has an enviable penetration into nearly every facet of popular culture, from music to fashion, to sports, is well understood, but the partial integration of Hong Kong and Mainland cinemas, has resulted in shared fan cultures, recirculation of pop music and culture icons from diaspora territories like Singapore and Malaysia, but also influence of Taiwan and the powerhouse of East Asian pop culture that is South Korea. Mainland fans now have, in popular film, an integrated experience, incorporating musicians and models, and participating in transmedia at full tilt. Furthermore, Chinese companies in particular have spread this luxury cinema-going phenomenon to Western countries, with restaurants and bars elegantly integrated into cinemas themselves and even in-theatre dining. Tiered classes of seating, massage chairs, and recliners have also begun to make an appearance beyond Asia.



Fig. 74: Still from opening section of *Dawan (Big Shot's Funeral)* Feng Xiaogang dir. [2002]. A send up of the “exotic” films of famous directors such as Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou, who are both specifically invoked in the film. The presence of the principal character, a Caucasian director named John Tyler (Donald Sutherland), who is attempting to make a movie of which this little boy should be star, also overtly recalls Bertolucci’s award-winning film, *The Last Emperor* (1987). The addition of the Coca-Cola-like bottle, the colour of which fits harmoniously with the gold and red of the imperial aesthetic gives an absurd dimension to this low angle shot, making the brand, and the bored child oddly superior. The effect further critiques the pampered “little emperors” born of China’s “One Child Policy” into a growing landscape of brands and product placement which the film as a whole parodies and blends into an almighty, grotesque carnival, as I discuss in my analysis below. Does the laughter produced here arise from discomfort at the world-turned-upside-down of this carnival space, or is it dismissive in its parody? Does it allow audiences to “let off steam”, or stoke them to moral judgement?

The phenomena around economic liberalisation, have led to a wide range of effects during my period of study, one of which is a substantial growth in the middle class in both India and China (Barton et al. 2013, Mustafi 2013), and comedy, especially with a happy ending intact, is often critiqued as a bourgeois, or “vulgar”, genre. The middle classes now have greater disposable income, and willingness to spend into the expanding consumer, market economy while continuing to occupy a problematic role

with regard to moral and cultural hegemony, and the (re)crafting of (traditional) values and culture¹⁹⁴.



Fig. 75: A scene from *Raju Ban Gaya Gentleman* (Mirza dir. 1992). The normally sensible and thrifty heroine Renu (Juhi Chawla) presses her nose against the glass, window shopping as she admires an example of the new goods of a growing consumer economy. This film is a particularly valuable cinematic touchstone with regard to its portrayal, both accidental and deliberate, of the relationship between Indian society and the influx of consumer goods in the early 90's. Renu, and romantic lead Raju (Shahrukh Khan) can be seen as two conflicting, yet related, responses to this new era, that are to be resolved through the romantic comedy logic of the film. Renu's grounded, feisty adherence to "traditional"¹⁹⁵ values and thrift, is contrasted with (or enlivened by) Raju's ambitious, at times profligate, embrace of all things new. He, as a newcomer to Mumbai from far away Assam, and moreover, is portrayed as somewhat naive. However, in addition to the advent of consumer temptation in the form of Raju's co-

¹⁹⁴ Part of the problem of the middle-class' role in this burgeoning market and moral/culture or indeed *hual/desi* identity is the status of domestic goods in the domestic market, a problem that both countries face, where imported or import-grade is considered superior to domestic-made in many cases. This problem is evident in cinema also, especially in popular cinema, which in this thesis I also consider as a consumable good. To underscore the status of popular film as a cultural product *and* market product, we need only look at the considerable effort that is made in both India and China to shore up protection of indigenous film production against foreign imports, and indeed, in the case of China in particular, to grow this segment significantly. Several strategies can be employed to this end: for example, one is the philosophy of "big picture consciousness" which I described in the previous chapter, another is legislating the market for imported media. A third is to retell "foreign" stories with a local "accent" or normative framework. All of these, it is plain, feed into and speak to the growth of cultural nationalism beyond borders, whereby it takes up the conceptual aspects of the "Hindu Goddess, Mother India" (Uberoi (2011) 327).

¹⁹⁵ In that Renu is portrayed as feisty, and a single woman working outside the home, we may speculate on this, but in the polarity of the film, she is definitely the anchor to home, and family values.

worker, Sapna (Amrita Singh), the wealthy daughter of his boss, whose name literally means “dream”, who showers him with gifts and attempts to incorporate him into a Westernised, elite lifestyle, the film is backgrounded with an unusual level of satire. This is provided by Jai (Nana Patekar) a street philosopher, and the anchor to the film, with near supernatural charisma and abilities of prognostication. Here, in this scene, though, we as an audience in fact take the position of a consumable. However as is actually the case, we, through the *mis-en-scene* are able to gaze at Renu in a voyeuristic manner from behind the mannequins’ elbows. We enjoy her childlike excitement, at the same time that she is viewing a coveted good, which is to say that in this shot, she has become a kind of consumable good as well. In this new age of the global market then, we are all goods among ourselves.

I argue that popular comedies in India and China, much like the middle classes themselves, are being pulled between a cultural nationalist vision of “moral order”, and a universe of consumption. This is a general tension, if not the central tension within *Hua* and *Desi* films that gives rise to new visions of the nation, and new dreams, as I have described in chapters one and two, but that, on its way to some sort of resolved plenitude, some sort of culturally inflected modernity¹⁹⁶ that we can take to be the happy ending *par excellence*, can be allowed to erupt into an ugly, and/or humorous spectacle through the genre of comedy. How, and to what extent, the oppositional forces between norm challenge and reinforcement that describe the journey to this plenitude are resolved is largely dependent on what itself is defined as comedy.

Thus, in order to examine the genre as it stands from 1990-2014, in this chapter I firstly situate the popular comedy within understandings of humour, and the history of comedy cinema in the Chinese and Indian contexts. Defining what comedy *is*, even for the limited purposes of this chapter, is a complex task, but the parameters of the filmic

¹⁹⁶ This culturally inflected vision of modernity, of the type I described as one of the chief aims of popular film in India and China in Chapter 1 is related to the Chinese or Indian dream as defined as a transnational ambition in Chapter 2, and here, in chapter 3, I describe comedy cinema as one of two crucial structural sites for the actual casting of these dreams on screen.

genres in contemporary *Desi* and *Hua* film are special to their circumstances, and must be reasonably understood. In addition to some historical background, in order to contextualise the *contemporary* content somewhat, I touch upon the influence of popular authors Wang Shuo and Chetan Bhagat in the creation of (ironically) idealistic films, such as *Dawan*, and *3 Idiots*.

Finally, to round out my thoughts on what comedy is here, and what purposes it serves within the logic it inhabits, I introduce Foucault's "Heterotopia". I suggest it as a useful, concept that allows us to think about flexible, reflexive readings of the role of comedies for societies in flux, especially when considered alongside the structured reality that PRC thinker Wang Hui describes in his sophisticated historiography surrounding globalism in post-Modern China. Through these, I consider whether subversion, critique, and release work against, or with hegemony, and particularly the confluence of factors producing cultural values and the cultural nation in India and China today. This is particularly important to consider with regard to the film analysis in question, as so often directors are defined simply as brave breakers of convention or traditionalists who hold up norms of society and family – which, under the conditions of present day India and China, is not only simplistic and West-modelled, but thus simply not in keeping with the reality on the ground, where certain formations of family, for example, may push at the borders of convention.

In the second section of this chapter, I build upon these ideas, using visual and aesthetic examples to link comedy, critique and heterotopia with what I call a "*Consumer Grotesque*". Grotesque in general terms occurs in both *Hua* and *Desi* comedy cinema, but its combination with considerations of wealth, class and consumer products on screen produces, I suggest, unique forms of grotesque, that have grown up in the present economic and cultural climate. It therefore has strong connections with

the tensions of *Hua* and *Desi* as global consumer and cultural repository. In order to make this argument, and bring out the significant differences between comedy in the two industries I follow a series of works from comedy trailblazers that have influenced my entire period of study: on the *Hua* side, Feng Xiaogang, and on the *Desi* side, David Dhawan.

I combine a general knowledge of Feng Xiaogang's oeuvre, with deeper analysis of his films *Jia Fang Yi Fang* (*Dream Factory* 1997), *Da Wanr* (*Big Shot's Funeral* 2001), and *Siren Dingzhi* (*Personal Tailor* 2013), with some reference to *Shouji* (*Cellphone* 2003). I argue that Feng, especially through his relationship with oft-cast actor Ge You as a protagonist, and afore-mentioned novelist Wang Shuo as a collaborator, has a predominant vein in his work critiquing excess. This encompasses the world of consumer goods, and the perverse desires of those who have been made grotesque by them, while ambiguously being attracted to these, and being held within the complex irony of product placement and endorsement. The chief determinant for *consumer grotesque* in his case is "vulgarity" (*su*). In the *Desi* context, David Dhawan's partnership with the comic Govinda has led to incredible success for both in an industry that garlands successful directors with ever more "partner"¹⁹⁷ companies displaying their logos before the film even begins, in cinema or home. I look at the blockbusters *Raja Babu* (1994), *Jodi No.1* (2001) part of the "No. 1" series that ruled the box office upon the release of each installment), and *Partner* (2007) linking them with what the very important commentary on development that is Aziz Mirza's 1992 film *Raju Ban Gaya Gentleman* (still shown above). I argue that, although the flavour is different, in

¹⁹⁷ One could almost suggest an echo of this "partner" status in Dhawan's film *Partner*, which sees the interdependence of the suave romantic lead, and the comic romantic. Just as Govinda's character needs a 'love guru' to help him communicate, so Dhawan needs a fleet of media partners to make his film a true success with all the interpenetration of popular media that that entails for a *Desi* film.

particularly defining *grotesque* against “simplicity” (*Sidhi-sada*), the critique of a certain contemporary globalised version of wealth and consumerism can be seen to be developing in these films as well.

I move on from Feng and Dhawan, these two “auteurs of the vulgar” to take a broad survey of comedies in the 2000 and 2010s, a new crop of ideas and aesthetics that overlap with the works of these two iconic directors. I generally argue that, as consumer culture and its consequences become ever clearer, the state and society interact with ever greater admixtures of repulsion and attraction, and ever more extreme grotesques, which I show often revolve around the commodification of the body, its products and even human emotion. From *Dhamaal* (Kumar dir. 2007), to the so-called ‘multiplex film’ *Delhi Belly* (Deo dir. 2011) *Desi* film’s humour is very often driven by the grotesque wealthy, or the grotesque desire for wealth, even with the changes in the way youth are portrayed in comedy, and how their relationship with the establishment has changed. My survey of the new era Mandarin language field highlights the emerging “Bromance” and road movie trends through examples such as *Xin Hua Lu Fang* (*Break Up Buddies*) (Ning dir. 2014) and the *Jiong* series (*Ren zai Jiong Tu* (*Lost on Journey*), *Ren Zai Jiong Tu zhi Taijiong* (*Lost in Thailand*)), where the sense of perverse wealth is continued in more extreme, grosser ways. I make reference to Ning Hao’s break out hit film *Fengkuang de Shitou* (*Crazy Stone*), and its pecuniary scatology as well.

Looking at all these films in both cinematic and socio-economic context, I argue that they are often at cross purposes: on the one hand, perhaps against the intentions of the film makers, their exploration of wealth, class and consumption serve an explicitly “social” function, particularly with regard to consumerism, providing a normative, post-socialist critique of soaring wealth against the “purity” of the *aam admi* or *lao baixing*. Nevertheless, this perhaps naive heart occurs alongside the presence of overt, unabashed

product placement - a *meta-grotesque*. And all the while, progressive social issues such as divorce (*Ren zai Jiongtu*, *Ren zai Jiongtu zhi Tai Jiong* and *Xin Hua Lu Fang*), gay culture (*Dostana*, a comedy referred to in previous chapters, and to a degree *Partner*¹⁹⁸), and single motherhood (*Partner*) appear. Comedy, perhaps surprisingly, is a battleground.

For India and China, poised on the edge of increasing economic uncertainty, the essential nature of cultural and moral values, becomes ever more important to social cohesion, to attracting the diaspora, and wider investment. In these countries that can be seen as sharing, at least to a degree, a post-socialist mentality, regarding the “first world” with suspicion, as discussed in the previous chapter, the consumer identity being revelled in by a swathe of society is still a problematic one. A distrust of domestically produced goods inspires foreign brands to proliferate, and the middle class comedy to question allegiances, reflecting broader anxiety on the part of the public in this regard. Dislocation from the “authentic” experience of the “common man” *laobaixing* or *aam admi* who forms the nostalgic core of the social experiments that constitute the Indian and Chinese states, from their earliest days, gives rise to the oddly contagious ‘everyman glamour’ of cult comics such as Ge You and Govinda who are successful precisely because of their combination of the everyday and the extraordinary.

As Chinese and Indian identities are recast, a process of smelting, of combination is occurring in order to create what we have referred to in previous

¹⁹⁸ There are quite a few references to gayness in *Partner*, but these are quite parodic, over-the-top images, from *ladyboys* in Phuket (‘Ladyboys’ also hold a fascination for Bao Bao in *Ren Zai Jiong Tu de Tai Jiong*.) to the wedding planner(s) with their flamboyant suits. Nevertheless, even if Priya’s best friend Kiran does have a whiff of innuendo-laden British 70s television series *Are you Being Served?* about him, he is still portrayed as her best friend. Much as the case in the examples of Hindi films where gayness is portrayed and/or discussed,

chapters: new “dreams”. The unique historical roots, and contemporary manifestations of both Hindi and Mandarin language comedy cinema then, are the crucibles in the *Dream Factories* that produce such dreams.

3.1 Comedy, Dramedy, *Hasyam*, *Youmo*

Whether slapstick or witty banter, comedy-as-humour is an “*object of comic amusement*”¹⁹⁹ (Carroll (2014) 7). It shapes the art of laughing *with*, or laughing *at*, or both; it can be seen both as a steam valve, a heterotopia to allow the smooth function of hegemony, and as a means of resistance, a “pleasing, but risky, behaviour” (Davis and Chey [2013] 20) as I discuss below. It has the potential to be both anarchic, and hegemonic. As a *genre*, and now a *genre cinema*, comedy operates within a structure from which it gives rise to creativity; this structure, its place in society, and its origins, are important. In this section, I attempt to fill in some information about the content of “comedy”, or “humour” for the Indian and Chinese, and more importantly, for the creation of such globalised but culturally inflected visions of modernity, the *Desi* and *Hua* worlds of cinema, including historical background, and media formations.

The superficial, stock viewpoint may be that *Hua* and *Desi* comedy cinema today is no different from any other genre²⁰⁰: Westernised, and modernised. But keeping in mind the complexity of humour as both “social lubricant” and a kind of ethnicized epistemological glue this simply does not ring true, even as Hollywood does make its impression. Hollywood film, and its roots in Western drama, have influenced *Desi* and *Hua* popular comedy, but this influence has echoed and combined with indigenous

¹⁹⁹ “Amusement”, as Carroll, among others discuss, is in itself a problematic term, since in this context it can cover everything from a gentle levity, to the cackle of sadistic excess. Emphasis given is mine.

²⁰⁰ This viewpoint on other popular genres is also, in my opinion, insufficiently sensitive, or reflective of reality.

factors to create understandings of cinematic comedy. For example, the traditional definition of comedy in the West encompasses not only that which makes us laugh or amuses us, but dramatic works with a happy ending. In fact, due to genre stylings, the relationship between these two understandings of the word - the happy ending, and the laugh-inducing - is complex in the context of *Desi* and *Hua* film, where black humour, action, melodrama and romantic comedy interact in ways substantially outside of the typical Hollywood formula. However, the happy ending and the comic do live together harmoniously, in their own way, within the *Hua* and *Desi* context. The happy ending is also a good starting point to considering the relationship between comedy and norms. It reinforces norms in a fairly obvious way: obstacles, the promontories that give rise to both fear and laughter, are overcome, and the status quo absorbs their very existence. Would that an overall definition for comedy in the Indian and Chinese contexts²⁰¹ were so easy to come by.

Comedy, as a filmic genre, and as a general concept is quite slippery in both the Indian and Chinese contexts at present, and was also problematic at the time of the development of a modern popular cinema in both countries. Indeed, the words for comedy, and humour themselves within Mandarin and Hindi languages have revealed this complexity. As pointed out in *Humour in Chinese Life and Culture* (Davis and Chey [2013]) and in the work of pop psychologist and humour researcher Yue

²⁰¹ I use “Chinese” and “Indian” in this context quite deliberately as I will be exploring not only the role of comedy within the contemporary transnational cultural nationalist constructs that are *Hua* and *Desi*, but the underpinning understandings of comedy within a moral or philosophical framework that pre-date cinema by a wide margin, as well as a consideration of Hindi and Mandarin cinema up until the 1990s, i.e. before *Desi* and *Hua* came into their current incarnations.

Xiaodong²⁰², a wide range of specified modes of comedy or humour existed in China prior to the establishment of what we may call the modern nation state²⁰³. Despite comedy existing under the suspicion of the Confucian tradition, where an understanding of the “seeming”, or “slippery” facets of humour²⁰⁴, and the humourist, came into conflict with the desire for reliable regulatory clarity of meaning (Xu 2004) defined in Confucius’ analects and in the works of later scholars, it has retained its plethora of forms. And though the forms and subjects of humour continued under scrutiny during Maoism, and continue to be monitored, many types are not taken seriously, and continue to persist sometimes within, and sometimes spilling out from the umbrella category of *youmo*, a term in common contemporary usage²⁰⁵ derived from a transliteration of the English “Humour” itself. These include verbal play, especially punning, and skit comedy, irony and physical comedy, which all exist in the literature. Some of these live on in various forms from the official state-sponsored *Chun Wan* annual Spring Festival variety show²⁰⁶, for example, to the (*Jing wei*) Beijing-style

²⁰² Prof. Yue is an academic who has most famously performed qualitative and quantitative studies on the lifestyle, habits and stress levels of students and young people within the PRC, Hong Kong and in the elite diaspora community of foreign students at Harvard. He has produced several best-selling books on these subjects and “self-help” areas, as well as academic papers, from which my use of his work is drawn. He is thus something of a public intellectual.

²⁰³ Although there are many different ways of defining this, let us, for our purposes place this point as being the establishment of the Republic of China in 1911, as this was a period in which Western influences of literary and scientific thought came to be more keenly felt.

²⁰⁴ In fact, starting with the “earliest form of humour” (Yue [2010] 403) *Huaji*, a strain of humour “types” as given by both Davis and Chey (2005) and Yue includes the word *hua* (slippery), which Yue highlights as having a flavour of the obsequious, or of a trick, about it. Over 12 *main* types of humour, with countless variations, from 2 person skits (*canjun xi*) to “jerk humour” (*pizi youmo*) are defined as existing in the history of humour in China between Davis and Chey and Yue’s work.

²⁰⁵²⁰⁵ The term *youmo* is originally thought to have been popularised in China by modern writer and scholar Lin Yutang.

²⁰⁶ Feng Xiaogang, and other cultural figures who have a complex, heterotopic relationship with authorities, have actually participated in hosting this festival of official culture, and increasingly, what is again a place for rhetoric to be imparted.

black comedy so pervasive in literature and popular film²⁰⁷. In this area, the influence of author Wang Shuo must be fully acknowledged: his sometimes painfully visceral, irreverent black humour has, since the late 80s and early 90s, spilled out from his novels and stories to screenplays and collaborations driving some of the most popular and game-changing television series and films in recent times, including *Beijingren zai Niuyue* (*Beijingers in New York*) and *Bianjibu de Gushi* (*Stories of an Editorial Board*). In Wang's social, political satire, a chauffeur will dream of being a politician just to prove how incorruptible he can be, in comparison with his employer²⁰⁸, or a person will be pushed into a sex change in order to succeed in a sport competition to save the honour of the nation²⁰⁹. This type of cynical, yet intimate humour has even given rise to movements in visual art, of which Yue Minjun's work is a good example. But as the new century has gone on, contemporary comedy has also embraced visual *bricolage* and visual and verbal spoof (*e'gao*) (Rea in Davis and Chey (2013) 149-72), often of a subversive or semi-subversive nature, on the internet²¹⁰. This makes use of the richness of puns available in Mandarin due to its many homophones, to veil itself and challenge censors, while operating in the space between illegal and legal, between politics, satire and bad taste (Rea *ibid.* 170). Taking the effect of all this background together, we can see that mainland comedy on the cinema screen has arisen in its current forms from a

²⁰⁷ One of the key features of this type of black comedy is that it often does not give rise to overt laughter, and frequently leaves non-Chinese audiences somewhat confused as to the ways in which the film can be considered a comedy. Feng Xiaogang's films often fit into this category, where absurdism, black comedy and uncomfortable romance vie for the lead. *Tian Xia Wu Zei* (*A World without Thieves*) and *Fei Cheng Wu Rao* (*If you are the One*) are good examples of this.

²⁰⁸ As in the screenplay for recent Feng Xiaogang film *Personal Tailor*.

²⁰⁹ This plot, with many far more gruesome, Kafka-esque twists, appears in the seminal novel *Qianwan bu dang Wo wei ren* (*Please don't call me Human*), 1989.

²¹⁰ Take, for example, the *Grass-mud Horse* (*Caoni Ma*) incidents wherein the nature of the Chinese language, especially conducive to punning due to its many homophones, was used to veil political critique and obscenity in (satirical) poetry that could be read in multiple ways. (Davis in Davis and Chey ed. (2013) 15)

landscape of both more traditional types, and contemporary influences in literature and other media. Yet there is also a strong legacy of Chinese comedy cinema alive in *Hua* humour on screen.

After liberalisation, the 80s saw cultural influences from the diaspora, particularly from Hong Kong and Taiwan, began to blend into PRC culture – one of the sources for the development of *Hua* film aesthetics. The comedy genre, in its myriad variations, has been a favourite form in popular Hong Kong cinema, often including a heavy dose of slapstick. However, Hong Kong’s cinema history also helps to uncover what became of popular comedy cinema in Mandarin as it had begun to develop in earnest during the 30s and 40s²¹¹. Produced in the mainland, unrest, followed by the Communist take-over in 1949 meant that this burgeoning genre went along with fleeing filmmakers to be produced in Hong Kong, then the third largest film industry in the world²¹². There it continued its success, particularly with Chinese diaspora audiences in Singapore and Taiwan (Fu 2008), becoming associated with the Nationalist Kuomintang movement. Its scope was quite wide-ranging, but these productions were probably best known for their musicals, which in many respects bear significant similarities to comedies produced in Hindi around the same time, leading us perhaps to wonder what the shape of Chinese popular cinema would have been like had they continued to grow

²¹¹ The first Chinese films that could properly be called comedies were adapted from traditional operas and produced during the late 1920s, however the genre lagged well behind drama, action and crime/suspense in popularity and sheer numbers of films produced.

²¹² Mandarin language film continued to flourish in Hong Kong until the 70s, alongside Cantonese and Teochew language productions, especially under the auspices of pan-regional production houses such as Shaw Bros and Cathay.

in the Mainland. The history of these films, and stars like Ge Lan²¹³ was in many respects lost or divorced from the current comedy forms of Mainland China. Films such as *Mambo Girl* exemplified a Mandarin language comedy industry that was built on cross-pollination, and patronage across the diaspora. Now, this cross-pollination is being repeated in the contemporary realm²¹⁴ both among Chinese diaspora industries, and regionally, but we must nevertheless remain aware that the nature of the “comedy” represented by the mainland take-over of the Hong Kong event that is the *Hesui Pian* or New Year’s Film arises from cultural nationalism beyond national borders emanating from the mainland, its culture, politics and markets.

In India too, Hindi language comedy is affected by the fact that “comedy” and “humour” in the contemporary are historically embedded concepts, though naturally overlain with a globalised sense of the Hollywood comedy genre film, in their cinematic form. As in China, the comic form in Hindi is often thought of as being derived from a classical source, in fact the same ancient Sanskrit guide to the performing arts which I referred in chapter one, the *Natya Shastra*²¹⁵. There, *Hasyam*, which we may take as more-or-less equivalent to “comedy”, is defined as one of the eight original *rasas*²¹⁶ or “essences”²¹⁷ of the dramatic arts. Interestingly, *Hasyam* itself, although defined independently as an essence from which emotional exchange could occur between

²¹³ Real name: Grace Chang, Ge Lan was born in Shanghai in 1933 and was the star par excellence of the Mandarin musical comedy scene of the 1950s.

²¹⁴ The influence of Taiwanese culture, the legacy of Hong Kong cinema, and the significant impact of the Korean-wave exemplify additional inputs to the current range of comedic cinema emanating from the PRC, apart from the contemporary literary, pop culture and commercial drivers.

²¹⁵ The work is attributed to Bharata Muni, and thought to have been written between 200BCE and 200CE.

²¹⁶ A ninth *rasa* was later added which distinctly defined familial love as opposed to other kinds of love.

²¹⁷ *Hasyam* is, however thought to be a *rasa* subordinate to the *rasa* of romantic love, an interesting point in light of the nature of Bollywood forms of comedy, as I have elaborated.

performer and audience, is described as arising from *Shringara*, the *rasa* of romantic love, a fact that we may find relevant to the nature of comedy in Hindi cinema of today. As Sanjit Narwekar points out (2005), Hindi cinema, from its earliest days has a special relationship with comedy, wherein, despite the presence of comedy heavy-weights from Shammi Kapoor to Johnny Lever, movies *devoted* to comedy are exceptionally rare, and even the most light-hearted films find comedy encased in an overarching story of romance, and drama. This includes most of the films that I have selected for special study below. We could call these *dramadies*, at their excessive edges we call them *Masala* (spice) *films*, we characterise them as containing the full range of life: in Mandarin *Tian Suan Ku La* (Sweet, Sour, Bitter and Spicy), and in Hindi, *Khatta Meeta* (Sweet and Sour). We have moments of levity here, but even a film such as Dhawan's *Raja Babu* which is filled with ridiculous and comically grotesque moments during its first half, suddenly becomes a dramatic action film for most of the portion that remains after the intermission. And in further considering the genre we might note that, in addition to enabling the considerable length that characterises many, if not most *Desi* films, the intermission does allow for these films to switch gears, to provide a "game of two halves". The form of Hindi films, even contemporary *Desi* films, which, in the main, includes dance and song sequences, also links well into the very premise of the *Natya Shastra*, and the interpretations it has undergone over the years: the actor is an "actor/dancer". In other words, dramaturgical work without dance is simply inconceivable, since movement is necessary for the communication of the plot and its emotions, as is the case in traditional narrative dances such as *Kathak*, and *Bharatnatyam*. Obviously, in some senses, these traditions are still supported in the

form of *Desi* film today²¹⁸. Perhaps it is little wonder then, that the doyen of 90s comedy cinema, Govinda, is equally famous for his (humorous, but admired) dancing, as for his comic acting, even becoming a judge on dancing talent shows such as *Dance India Dance*.

Further to these observations, and somewhat in contrast to the conclusions we have drawn about the relationship between humour and morality *as-a-whole* under Confucianism, the status of humour and laughter in Indian tradition in the form of texts and as experienced in today's ritual life appears somewhat different. Humour in India, as we have it now, and its effect on the *Desi* identity, is at once imbricated in tradition by virtue of religious dramas, which form an important part of the annual cycle of worship, where humour is not excluded from the formula (e.g. Ram Leela), and also given the status of a symptom. In the first of these roles, the information gleaned from the *Natya Shastra* again still applies well, where we must view worship, dance and drama as inter-related, if not facets of the same performative/spatial chronotope. In the second, we can draw parallels between the status of laughter as symptomatic of the relative health of bodily systems within *Ayurveda*, India's traditional medicine, and emotions as manifestations of health or illness in both the Chinese tradition of meridians, and the legacy of the Western "humours", which brings us nicely back to laughter itself.

²¹⁸This is quite apart from the considerable influence of traditional music and dance forms on what are now independent genres: "Bollywood dance" and "Bollywood music", or indeed the concomitant genre of "*Desi* Beats".

Putting contemporary *Desi* comedies in context however, requires more than a link to *Hasyam*, *Ayurveda* or even the growing trend for “Laughter Yoga”²¹⁹. Modern India has a rich history of popular humour and satirical literature; this is perhaps best exemplified by the beloved humourist and cartoonist R K Laxman²²⁰. He began his long running Times of India cartoon strip in 1951, not long after the country had gained Independence, and sadly died in 2015 at the age of 93. Blending a satirical look at society, cynicism regarding the political system, and warm-hearted affection for the “Common Man” (*aam admi* - a concept which I revisit later), Laxman’s viewpoint looks not unlike that of many of the comedy filmmakers that I discuss below, including Feng Xiaogang.

²¹⁹ Laughter Yoga, or Laughter Therapy, is a practice that seeks to utilise the endorphins produced by laughter to increase a person’s wellbeing and reduce stress through teaching the individual to laugh as a regular daily practice, and indeed, as shown in Hirani’s film *Munna Bhai MBBS* to do so at times of stress and tension.

²²⁰ Laxman was the brother of famed novelist R K Narayan, and drew illustrations based on Narayan’s seminal series of stories of Indian rural life, *Malgudi Days*, which were used to develop a television series.



Fig. 76: In this example of Laxman's regular comic strip in Times of India, *You Said It*, we see a critique of growing consumer and celebrity culture that while reflecting the reality of the increasingly close relationship between different components of the Transmedia nexus, including celebrity endorsement, also brings to mind the satire on consumer branding and its relationship with the value of human nature that is Feng Xiaogang's film *Dawan*.

Although Laxman himself did not write screenplays, he influenced a generation of comics and writers that did. And while Chetan Bhagat is considerably more right wing in his politics than the late Laxman, in the sense that his writing combines cynicism and hope, and extends into the popular forum, including newspaper columns, he is a natural descendent of the man. If Wang Shuo's work can be said to be a very evident exemplar of the directions that humour within a mainstream (but not *official* or overly-sanitized) environment has gone, then this too is so for Chetan Bhagat. Bhagat's novels with their focus on the plight of the middle classes, and especially middle class youth. Whether or not he has been a trailblazer in the sense that Wang Shuo has been,

Bhagat has explicitly involved himself in political activism within and without his writings, which have influenced discourse, and film, where he, like Wang, has become a sometime screenwriter. *3 Idiots* (Hirani dir. 2009) based on Bhagat's *Five Point Someone* (2004), *Hello* (Agnihotri dir. 2008) based on the novel *One Night at the Call Center*, 2005, and *Two States* (Verman dir. 2014) based on Bhagat's 2009 novel of the same name, all owe their existence to his very successful English language novels²²¹. Although Bhagat does write a regular column in Hindi newspaper *Dainik Bhaskar*, it is worth remembering that both he and R K Laxman in the main communicate with the public via the medium of the English language, or at the very least *Hinglish* the language of the urban middle and upper-middle classes, highly influential on popular culture in today's India.

That Bhagat, author of the non-fiction collection *What Young India Wants*, has become such a successful contributor to Hindi popular cinema is down to one additional factor that sets him apart from more biting satirists, Laxman included: Hindi comedy, and *Desi*-value comedy, unlike *Hua*-value comedy normally enacts its critique through *embodiment* rather than comment or verbal play. An observer, making satirical comment in the course of a comedy plot, is unlikely. A good example of the relationship between the two is contained in Rajkumar Hirani's aforementioned classic, *Munna Bhai MBBS*. Murli Prasad (Sanjay Dutt), otherwise known by his Mumbai Mafia title Munna Bhai, has for years been pretending to be a doctor for the sake of his parents' pride and status in their home village. Every visit that they make is accompanied by the scurrying of Munna's underlings to transform their lavish hideout in Mumbai's laundry district,

²²¹ Bhagat's net worth is thought to be in the region of \$50 million USD, derived from book sales, columns, speaking engagements and endorsements of organizations like *Huawei* and *Shaadi.com* is thought.

Dhoby Ghat into an ersatz clinic. On an unexpected visit, however, Munna's proud father comes to be shamed with the knowledge of his son's true occupation by an old colleague, the Dean of the top local hospital and medical college who had been interested in setting up his doctor daughter with his friend's "doctor" son. In revenge and a fit of pique, Munna decides to attend medical school "for real", and cheats his way in. On his way to his first lecture, however he witnesses a dramatic scene, as a mother is forced to stand in line and submit forms in order for her son to be admitted to hospital, as he writhes, foaming at the mouth after a potentially lethal overdose in attempted suicide. Munna takes up the patient's cause, asking again and again how a dying man can be expected to fill in a form, and if he dies in the lobby under these circumstances, "whose fault will it be?". Nevertheless, the *true* satire of the film, with all its simultaneous tenderness, is not to be found in incidents like these, but rather it is *embodied* in the *person of Munna himself* – that is, it is not just an ordinary man who becomes the people's champion, but rather a threat made safe through laughter: a criminal. Comparisons have often been made between *Munna Bhai MBBS* and the Hollywood film *Patch Adams*, but in truth, the two are quite different. While personal interaction is prized as a healing tool in both films, *Munna Bhai's* use of a potentially harmful subject as hero, functions almost as an inoculation.

3.2 The Contemporary *Hua* and *Desi* laugh: Heterotopia or Hegemonic Spectacle?

If at this point we know something about what comedy *is* at the present moment in the popular cinemas of India and China, and its history, we still have some questions about what it does, and how. This section will attempt to give some ideas about the *what*, before deeper visual analysis shows the *how*. Given that above we have established that, as a consequence of historical and modern influences, the crux of much contemporary comedy in both India and China is the tension between affection for and *cynicism about*

mankind, there are questions to be asked about its status vis a vis the society it critiques. In particular, at the heart of all modern popular cinema in India and China, especially the new forms of *Hua* and *Desi* cinema that reach out to the modern nation-beyond-borders, is the question of the extent to what we are viewing is a kind of cultural propaganda. I have argued elsewhere in this thesis that a confluence of actors and their interests have shaped the form and content of popular cinema in India and China in Hindi and Mandarin, since 1990: *State, Market, Audience and Filmmakers*. Nevertheless, especially in light of both specific censorship drives²²², and the promotion of films redolent of “soft power”, the question of whether entertainment, and especially comedy, with its special subconscious, physical and unifying powers, are utilised by hegemonic forces as a kind of pressure valve for society under strain, a way to “forget their ‘little troubles’” (Wang, Rachel 2013), must persist. But how can we accept that this may be a prime motivation, while *at the same time* accepting comedy as a *critical* force?

Just as popular cinema in general emerges out of a confluence, being neither entirely one thing, nor another, while never able to completely break free of the hegemony that both encourages and curtails it, so too it would be a mistake to imagine a clean break, a convenient dichotomy between these two roles of comedy. Resistance,

²²² During the period of this study there have been many of these, but in recent years, the significant crackdown on detective programmes and talent shows on television has had a knock-on effect in the popular film industry in China. Meanwhile, through the process of creating an Indian “dream” the debate surrounding moral values in society in India has heated up: on the one hand, crimes like the brutal torture and rape of Jyoti Singh in Delhi (2012) are being increasingly reported and putting much-needed pressure on lawmakers and society alike to make changes. On the other hand, the rise of “citizen censorship” for want of a better phrase, means that films deemed to veer from “traditional” morality of one type or another, mainly on religious grounds, can be so affected by particularly “communal” violence that they are forced to cease exhibition. Thus, in the coincidental contract between interests acting in the production of popular film, censorship can come from all sides. Companies, of course, also have a certain amount of control: as parodied in *Dawan* they can put limitations on those they finance, with distinct consequences in a product-placement-heavy genre.

critique, sentimentality, and even ‘collusion’ with market or state actors characterise not merely the construction and content of popular cinema but the nature of the imbricated nexus of culture and power at play in India and China that dominates contemporary life, as Wang Hui points out ((2003) 44). To understand this, it may be useful to bring in Foucault’s concept of Heteroropia.

In Foucault’s essay, “Des Espaces Autres” (1984) a new preoccupation upsetting the legacy of the nineteenth century ‘obsession with history’ is revealed: space. Foucault’s interest concerns designated space, but even more so liminal and contested spaces that do not conform to single purposes or designations as would a bed, or a house²²³; these are utopias and what he terms *heterotopias*. For Foucault, utopias are “fundamentally unreal places” as they simply confirm to logical extreme the state of things as they are, or run in blank opposition to them. Heterotopia, by contrast, reflect the new developments in conceptual cartography, where they serve as “counter-sites” that deviate “from the norm” but are nevertheless interconnected with it, and with other sites. The heterotopia, Foucault writes,

“is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible. Thus it is that the theater brings onto the rectangle of the stage, one after the other, a whole series of places that are foreign to one another; thus it is that the cinema is a very odd rectangular room, at the end of which, on a two-dimensional screen, one sees the projection of a three-dimensional space.”

²²³ These are the examples that Foucault uses. Personally, I am not sure whether I find them to be as clear as he seems to.

So, rather than viewing the forces of critique and hegemonic power as oppositional, it would be more accurate in the current context to think of them as Wang Hui's discussion of an interlinked world of political forces or as Foucault's heterotopia suggest, which is as a network of "skeins" intersecting to create a pattern of interaction through time. In other words, our assessment cannot be 2D or 3D but must be 4D to think about the relationship between compliance and humour.



Fig. 77: One of a series of oddly serious moments in the final section of Feng Xiaogang's 2012 film *Siren Dingzhi*, as the team seeks forgiveness from the environment of a China from which they have been largely immune.

In the above scene, we see one episode of a change of pace towards the film's end. The *Personal Tailor* team disperses throughout China at Spring Festival holiday time, from their fantastically beautiful, indeed utopian, base on the island of Hainan, to "celebrate" international apology day. They take the opportunity to go to different scenes of environmental degradation and disaster in China and apologise to the earth, the water. The scale of destruction is emphasised by a combination of aerial, middle distance and other shots which allow us to view the horizontal axis. By this means, Feng pares down what has been a colourful, almost cartoonish palette to a greener, browner filter: this scene thus highlights the artificiality of blues and reds in the scrabs of rubbish that surround Ge You. There is no hint of humour here, as the extra-diegetical music

and sincere, hushed tones of Ge You's voice convey. But if this is a moment in which the heterotopia of Feng's film contains its sincere opposite, is it a consequence of a message for a cause dear to Feng's heart, or that of Wang Shuo, who wrote the script? Is it a critique of government policy on the environment, and the social acceptance of pollution in an expanding economy? Or is its critique of waste culture a facet of campaigns of the state which align environment and morality? Or perhaps, in keeping with Wang Hui, and Michel Foucault, is it both?

3.3 Fear, Loathing, Laughter, and Aspiration: Consumer Grotesque and its Meta

In the section below, I conduct juxtapositional analysis of two directors of *Hua* and *Desi* films whose work during my period of study has been highly influential, and both of whom have created strong relationships with stars with whom they have worked consistently, bringing ever better results for both actor and director. The two directors are Feng Xiaogang and David Dhawan, and their actors, perhaps even their collaborators or muses, are Ge You, and Govinda. My analysis covers three films from each director to trace themes that elucidate the ongoing relationship between critique and norm in their works, and the ways in which these help build two impressions of a new form of grotesque on screen that both amuses and repulses, born of economic liberalisation. I refer to this as the *consumer grotesque*. This, I reveal to be both a critical tool, and a meta-level dilemma within the logic of commercial film. I also show how it is defined differently on screen for Dhawan and Feng with regard to their relationships with *vulgarity* (*su*) and innocence (*sidhi-sada*).

In the second part of this section I go on to examine the ways in which this *grotesque* has developed within a more recent crop of films, including “alternative” or “multiplex” success such as *Fengkuang de Shitou* (*Crazy Stone*), and *Delhi Belly*,

particularly highlighting the ongoing, and indeed spreading, fascination with thieves as repositories of the *grotesque*, as figures of deviance to moral value.

Feng Xiaogang and David Dhawan: *Su* 俗²²⁴, *Sidha-sada* सीधा-सादा and the Advent of the *Consumer Grotesque*

Whether their subjects are thieves, actors or self-help gurus, and for all their differences of style, Feng Xiaogang and David Dhawan can be said to share some common interests, including performance, dreams, and excess. Each has exerted a great deal of influence on his respective country's comedy cinema, each has been accused of being crude or unrefined, and each has been lauded for his love of the simple "common man", *laobaixing*, *aam admi*, the *xiao renwu* (small characters²²⁵), even the innocent abroad. When pitted against the forces of a changing society and economy, against growing consumer culture and alienation, I suggest that these directors show sympathy for their everyman characters, and reveal crippling lack and/or a *grotesque* excess in that consumer culture, and those who become lost in it.

I call this the *consumer grotesque*, where *the grotesque* in general is defined by its deviancy from a norm, and therefore shores up the norm, and is both repellent and attractive at the same time, is characterised by excesses of scale, and/or *lack* of one kind

²²⁴ *Su* 俗, is one component of many words for "vulgar" or "coarse" in Chinese, for example 粗俗, and in the course of Feng Xiaogang's films, is often used on its own to denote these. *Sidha-sada* सीधा-सादा is a term that is very important to morality in *Desi* films, and very useful to both comedy and tragedy. It refers to someone who is naive, innocent, simple-hearted, and unsophisticated in the sense of being guileless. It is often translated as "simple", which can cause confusion for a non-*Desi* audience.

²²⁵ This is a term important to Chinese literature and performing arts as it refers to moving away from the stories of heroes, even communist ones, towards every day, often middle, or lower-middle class characters, with no particular magical powers, even if they do end up as the unlikely hero of the day.

or another²²⁶. The *consumer grotesque* allows the excess of scale, the lack and so forth to appear not only in a physical sense but in conjunction with the consumer economy, with the question of *value*. For example, in their definition of *the grotesque* which I have referred to above, Edwards and Graulund give the example of Baron Vladimir Harkonnen (69-70), in the Herbert's science fiction classic *Dune* (1965). Harkonnen is defined by the excesses of his form, the grossness of his un-restrained desires as expressed through his physical presence. I suggest that a character like the wealthy You of *Jia Fang Yi Fang*, or the lecherous, wealthy Neil in *Partner* engage in *grotesque* identities by precisely the means of their access to the globalised consumer market and its culture. Where in other genres of film, we might have found them contemptible and ready to be simply be taken down a peg through the process of confrontation I described in the previous chapter, within the logic of comedy, we find them, a situation, or a behaviour both threatening and *ridiculous*. Boss You may not have a gross physical appearance, although, as I show below, aesthetically he is marked, but his *desire* for *hardship* and his lack of empathy to his common man in the context of late 1990s China, or India for that matter, are certainly in a realm that inspires both envy, and disgust. The key is *an excess of consumption* against the moral norms within films that define it, and a *lack* with regard to emotion: the confusion of monetary and human value, which can be comic, or disturbing. As such, the *consumer grotesque* need not

²²⁶ In their examination of the history of the grotesque (as it exists in the West), Edwards and Graulund elucidate a simple architecture of possible sources of grotesque in its contemporary meaning: Grotesque variance of scale is one of these. The use of such grotesque contrast of scale, and grotesquerie in general is something that we can easily link to the work of VF Perkins' in *Film as Film*, which as I have mentioned in earlier chapters, highlights the often neglected relationship between film and carnival, sideshows, and other entertainments that were contemporaneous with its advent into the popular sphere. The work of Rabinovitz on the relationship between early *comedy* in particular with Vaudeville and the sideshow in *Electric Dreamland* further links the spectacular grotesquerie of the sideshow, with its giants, dwarves, and other "freaks" displaying both absences and excesses from the norm, to laughter of the contemporary audience. Certainly, with the influence of Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton on cinema in India and China, blended with the pre-existing native grotesque and influencing theatre, this is not a point to be lost.

apply to a person, although in the work of these two filmmakers it often does, but can also apply to a place or another entity. In the case of Feng Xiaogang's *Dawan*, a company or companies – perhaps a whole system. Perhaps in the case of David Dhawan, the it is a contemporary system in its totality that prizes appearance and money over “simplicity”, that by virtue of the contemporary, loses understanding of *value*.

But, if we take Dhawan and Feng to be influential auteurs of *Desi* and *Hua* popular film, we must at the outset ask one question: could one argue, that these matters concern domestic social and economic issues, and contradict the extensive nature of *Desi-ness* or *Hua-ness*? I would say precisely *not*; if we accept that the nation states of India and China are, through their various actors, attempting to take ownership of the central space of the transnational *Hua* and *Desi* identities, we can see that this type of humour and the *consumer grotesque* itself, serves multiple purposes in the endeavour. Firstly, comedy, as we have discussed above, automatically creates a cultural and linguistic intimacy. Secondly, within that intimacy, taking control of the moral high ground and norm creation, even if these are not simple or unidirectional, is an important position of power. Thirdly, for Chinese and Indian diaspora, the *Hua* and *Desi* abroad, certain kinds of consumption viewed *outside* of the cultural nation can themselves be rendered grotesque, even the culture of countries: the everyman, and his virtues which at some level challenge the excesses of consumer culture, lie within the *Hua* and *Desi* cultural formations.

Needless to say, the grotesque as a general rule is defined against the norm, where it offers radical external possibilities at the same time as it defines the acceptable; the *consumer grotesque* is no different. Further, the norm, as the totality of my analysis shows, does vary, and has developed in ways that react to the notion of a greater, cosmopolitan, culturally inflected modernity over time. As some of the most successful

directors of popular comedies, how do Feng and Dhawan each display their love, their scepticism, their anxiety? And how do they play all these for laughs with the help of Ge You and Govinda?



Fig 78: Above, Siren Dingzhi (*Personal Tailor*), which I propose is Feng Xiaogang's 2013 reimagining of his 1998 film *Jia Fang Yi Fang* (*Dream Factory*), contains not only critique of society in general, but a good helping of self-mockery. In this scene, discussed below, a director of popular films has called the *Personal Tailor* team to his mansion to ask for their help to make him into a serious director, with good taste, even if this means that, as it turns out, he struggles to make ends meet as a consequence.

The director Feng Xiaogang has become a symbol of *Hua* popular comedy, if not popular cinema as a whole. Born, and brought up within a military compound, Feng did not take the normal route to film making, via the Beijing Film School, but entered into entertainment through army troupes. Nevertheless, he had a string of box office successes, which defined him as the most consistently successful director in commercial cinema from the late 1990s through the first decade of the 2000s, consistently breaking his own records on ticket takings. Feng had worked in television, but began his cinematic achievements through the medium of comedy, according to his own account, by being encouraged by powerful producer and distributor Han Sanping (Feng

Xiaogang in interview in Jin (2005) 96)²²⁷. Han suggested that Feng reinvent what had become a Hong Kong institution, the *Hesui Pian* (“New Year’s Comedy”) film from a mainland perspective, and with a social message. Thus, despite scepticism on the part of Feng and his collaborator Wang Shuo that such a project would be welcomed by the public, the first of Feng’s new year comedies, *Jia Fang Yi Fang* (*The Dream Factory*) was born. In this section, I will look at the visual and textual aspects of three of Feng Xiaogang’s films, and then consider them alongside three works by David Dhawan. The three films: *Jia Fang Yi Fang*, *Da Wan* (Big Shot’s Funeral), and *Siren Dingzhi* (Personal Tailor) were all very successful in the box office, and the first two in particular are considered cornerstones of Feng’s oeuvre. They all deal with dreams, with performance, and all of them feature “plays within plays”, whether these are the acting out of fantasies (*Jia Fang Yi Fang*), or film-making and production being shown on screen (*Da Wan*). I would argue strongly that *Siren Dingzhi* is a kind of remaking of *Jia Fang Yi Fang* for a later era, but even apart from this, I will look at both these films, and the films of David Dhawan chronologically below, to show the changes in the norms and grotesques as they are conveyed in these films, and how they are inter-related. We begin by examining what happened to that first new-style *Hesui Pian* – *Jia Fang Yi Fang* a.k.a. *The Dream Factory*.

Backgrounded by a Beijing that blends courtyard living and party member visits, with air conditioned luxury shops with greeters, *Jia Fang Yi Fang* is contextualised by

²²⁷ As head of the China Film Group, a company with close ties to the government, Han has had a leading role in recent “patriotic”, state-backed films such as *The Founding of the Republic* and *The Founding of a Party*. He is actively involved in a great many of the most successful comedy films in the domestic market, most often credited as producer.

the issue of unemployment, as Han Sanping had suggested. The film concerns a group of out-of-work actors who decide to form their own company, *Haomeng Yi Ri You*, roughly translating as *Day Trip to Your Dreams*. That the company's name recalls that of the *Haomeng Gongsi* (Good Dream Company) a production company set up by Feng Xiaogang and author Wang Shuo should probably come as no surprise. Yao Yuan (Ge You), Zhou Beiyang (Liu Pei), Qian Kang (Feng Xiaogang) and Liaozi (He Bing) have the chief purpose of bringing their clients' dreams to life, if only for a short time, through acting out scenes, even placing their clients in a degree of real danger: a bookstore worker wants to be the American General George S. Patton, a chef dreams of proving strength of body and mind by keeping a secret intrigue while under the thumb of a parody Qing dynasty style aristocratic couple. The structure of the film, which occurs in episodes or stories has two main effects: firstly, at times what is real and what is acted within the many "plays within plays" becomes confused, and secondly, the diversity of economic condition and lifestyle, the contrasts in the changing moment in Chinese society, make one a bit dizzy, and also serve to construct a new *consumer grotesque*. The *Hao Meng* team, composed of Yao Yuan (Ge You), work out of their *danwei*, or (Communist) work unit, where they also slept and eat, along the traditional Communist model. This is no accident, as the film, while critiquing the liberalising policies of the government, also has a strong socialist heart, against which the perverse dreams of a society in flux, and particularly of the nouveau riche, are contrasted. The *danwei* as the heart of the company also contributes strongly to the aesthetic feel of the film, which largely occurs in indoor space, with certainly all initial contract discussions made within, suggesting perhaps the inner chambers of the mind, where dreams are enacted, or at least, from which they arise.

Simply in creating a film that concerns desires, more often than not secret desires, Feng has opened up a Pandora's Box, and one that goes directly to the consumer consciousness of the era, by virtue of highlighting the private and/or individual (*si*) in this manner – in itself a somewhat controversial act. Acting in direct contrast to the basic principles of collective “revolutionary” populism of the Communist era, *si*, which has been in the past considered a way of thinking antithetical to the advancement of society, has been used to convey Reform-era ideas concerning individuality and subjectivity. Here, keeping in mind the constraints of this chapter, I wish to draw out two sets of comparison based on the visual environment of the film. Firstly, we can compare the scenes below to give us a sense of the balance between social consciousness and humour achieved in the film, and the ways in which this is achieved aesthetically.



Fig. 79: Jia Fang Yi Fang (*The Dream Factory*; *literally Party A, Party B*), an old acquaintance of Yao Yuan (*Ge You*) comes to the dream fulfilling organisation *Haomeng Yi Ri You*. Sick of his luxurious life, has seeks to satisfy the perverse dream of the nouveau riche: “bitter days, weeds and plain gruel.” – in other words, he dreams of poverty.

Above, Yao Yuan's old friend and new client You, explains that "eating lobster and drinking birds' nest every day²²⁸" has made him "nauseous", and that he wishes to experience not just normalcy, but poverty. Our viewpoint is that of Yao Yuan, who sits in the opposite chair as light streams in the window of the company's small premises. The client and his surroundings merge into a continuous blend of gold, brown and green, where the neutral palette is reflected in the man's tie, creating a harmonious line up the centre of his body. At the same time, this same palette dulls the colour of the man's face, blending it into furnishings as a disembodied object above the uncomfortable looking angular dark box of his suit, which lays, at this low angle, out like a coffin. He is both insipid, even sickly, and sinister. In the end, this man gets his wish, sent to a small village under the auspices of Yao Yuan's aunt and uncle, he is put to work, with no special treatment. When picked up by the *Hao Meng* team, he is a skinnier, hairier and more grateful, and wants "To spend (my) whole life sleeping with lobsters". If he is perhaps more generous, this generosity does not quite stretch to sharing the chicken that Yao Yuan brought him when collecting him in a luxury car. Contrasting with this *Shouku Meng* ("Dream of Hardship"), we have the "client" below, and his "Dream of Reuniting" (*Tuanyuan Meng*) with his terminally ill wife. Yao Yuan and his new wife, Zhou Beiyan, who also works for *Haomeng*, meet him in a hospital where he has just received the news of his wife's terminal cancer. Yuan and Beiyan listen to the man's story which highlights another major social issue just beginning to come into the fore in late 1990s China: split families due to economic migration. This husband, having moved to Beijing in order to earn higher wages, has lived away from

²²⁸ Natural, edible swiftlets' birds' nests (yanwo), are consumed as a medicinal delicacy, according to Traditional Chinese Medicine. They command a very high price, so eating them daily would be considered a sign of ostentatious wealth.

his wife for the majority of their married life, always promising himself that they would be together one day, and assuring her that he lived pleasantly in Beijing, concealing the reality of his tough life to avoid distressing her. Yuan and Beiyan consider the situation, and while laying in the bed of their new flat, decide that the place, which represents their new life together in a freer and growing economy, should serve as a theatre for this Dream of Reuniting. They instruct him to take their keys and let his wife spend her last days there, in the dream that it is their own home, while they return to their accommodations in the *danwei*. Afterwards, they begin to wonder if they will ever get the flat back, as they hear nothing for weeks. Leading up to the shot below, the members of *Haomeng* eat dinner together in the *danwei*, drinking to celebrate their many successes, as Yuan and Beiyan contemplate the situation. Warm under the single lamp and red glow of the lanterns outside, the team melds their enterprising spirit into their socialist upbringing, concluding that their company's success, its purpose, is to "serve the people". They conclude that even if they lose their material possessions, the satisfaction that they derive from their work is worth it, moreover, they would even be happy to do what they do in a charity, not for profit. Their independent business has returned not only to the *danwei* but also to the heart of the People. Immediately following these conclusions and toasts to their good works, the labourer below appears, in the glow of the red light, as a sort of spirit of socialism, rewarding the young couple with their keys after they have relinquished their more private desires. Moreover, his virtue brings them new spiritual rewards: he admits that he could not continue to lie to his wife, and told her that the flat was not his, but that regardless, she was grateful "in her last days to have a warm home". The camera puts us face to face with him, as the red light causes everything to glow, awash with a colour of warmth, health and socialist values, even as he looks clearly into Yuan and Beiyan's faces, open and brave despite

his sad ordeal. You's *Hardship Dream* ends with the comic flourish of his volte-face vis a vis lobsters, while the *Reunion Dream* is completed in a moment of personal warmth, and heartfelt sincerity. The contrast between the selflessness of the *Reunion Dream* and the perverse *Hardship Dream* is complete.



Fig. 80: Jia Fang Yi Fang. *A genuine dream, as opposed to that produced by moneyed classes as shown.*

You, the dreamer of the *Hardship Dream* is one of only two character within the film who are *actually* wealthy within the diegesis – all other “wealthy” characters are roles taken on by the actors of the company: corrupted aristocrats, orientalist visions of middle eastern (Tufan) royalty. And yet, as ridiculous and corrupt as those characters are, the two that are meant to reflect reality in the context of the film, seem no less strange, no less perverse. The third of the *dreams* in *Dream Factory* that I would like to consider is the Putong Ren de Meng (Dream of an Ordinary Person, or Dream of being an ordinary person²²⁹) of famous actress Tang Lijun (Xu Fan). The encounter between Tang Lijun and the Haomeng team occurs due to her precious, tiny dog, from whom she

²²⁹ This ambiguity in the Chinese is likely to be deliberate, emphasising both the aspiration to ordinariness, and the fact of true ordinariness.

has become separated in a scrum of fans spotting her while out shopping. A parody of a diva, Tang swears not to eat or drink until her baby is returned to her. Finding the name and address of the owner on the dog's tag, curiosity leads Yuan and Beiyun to the star's door. The self-absorbed Tang sits with them in her drawing room and laments her fate as a star unable to take a moment's pause as her agent comes and goes with invitations to various functions or to perform here or there²³⁰. She dramatically confesses that her one wish is to be an ordinary person again, and upon hearing that the team can make it a reality, readily agrees. After calling a press conference, which in its monochrome hues anticipates the press conferences and televised auctions of *Dawan*, Yuan announces on Lijun's behalf that she will no longer be performing, but that her desire is now to live the life of an ordinary person. Unlike the other 'dreams' in this film, the consequences of this action are neither mediated by the acting team of *Hao Meng*, nor are they fleeting, the 'one day' referred to in the name of the company. In fact, the results, to Lijun's horror, seem final. The bright, elegant rooms of Lijun's home, bathed in white, filled with bustle, are suddenly made grey as her staff leaves, one by one, despite desperate attempts of her agent to get a part for the former star, now thirsting for her former fame. They even try to shop a one woman show, or return to the coveted, establishment Chunwan. In the shot below, the final shot of the story of this Dream of an Ordinary Person, we see Tang as if down a tunnel, her once spacious rooms suddenly seeming small around her, while she herself, in the distance looks like nothing so much as a sad doll, herself small, but crushed by the diminishing size of her world. The blues and grey tones used, and her resigned body language only emphasize this. As her staff

²³⁰ Interestingly, at this point, Tang Lijun firmly tells her agent that the only party she will attend (meaning televised party, will be the CCTV Spring Festival extravaganza, Chunwan. The importance of, but also the absurdity of the event is made a point of by Feng Xiaogang.

leave, including her manager, the camera takes their line of sight to look back at her, not filming her from a low angle shot or close up to emphasise her larger than life nature, and give us the view of her exquisitely made up, luxurious face, but emphasises her doll-like smallness. We are leaving her, and in fact, we, as an audience are ruthlessly saying goodbye. She calls out to her staff, “I will give you an autograph as a parting gift”, below her staff reply, *we* reply, “You have already given us your autograph.” But Tang responds, “Well let me sign another one...my hands have nothing to do.



Fig 81. Jia Fang Yi Fang: An actress stands bereft after seeking escape from the excesses of celebrity culture of 90s China.

In Tang Lijun, we have a petulant, uncaring diva, who does not know her own needs, takes flattery for love, and does not know the value of human relationships *or* of money, it seems. She is crippled by her own lack of awareness, and as Edwards and Graulund describe, she is made grotesque in this scene by extreme of scale which suddenly echoes her own lack. She is to be pitied, and yet, she is so comical.



Fig 82: Dawan (*Big Shot's Funeral*). *The soul of American director John Tyler (Donald Sutherland) floats past Chinese cabaret girls to stirring music in an animation initially put together for his desired comedy funeral. In fact, the absurd grand finale of the animation, after much portrayal of Tyler in China, speaking Chinese, and as a son of the nation is his rebirth, it is decided, should be as an "African", black baby, for political reasons. After many a grand plan has been laid, it emerges that despite his fame, Tyler has little money to his name: he is, and is not, a big shot.*

Feng's *Dawan* is perhaps the most perfect example of *consumer grotesquerie*, which perceptively anticipates changes in the Chinese economy and society. Its English title, *Big Shot's Funeral*, is (for once) absolutely accurate to the content. It was released one year after China entered the WTO, which had far reaching consequences for China's domestic economy, as well as its economic, political and social standing in the international community. The film is a hilarious meditation on the value of human life in a society overtaken by consumer culture, and corporate values. In it, Rob Tyler (Donald Sutherland), an aging and famous American director working in Beijing suffers a stroke while losing a battle with creative self-doubt. His Chinese-American assistant Lucy (Rosamund Kwan, and his new friend, You You, a cameraman (Ge You) working with him on location at the Forbidden City, are left with the instruction, arising from a discussion with You You about attitudes to age and death in China, that he would like to

have a “Comedy Funeral”. This concept, which was meant to convey the Chinese belief that the death of an elderly person who had lived a long and full life should be regarded as a blessing, and a time of happiness for their good fortune, had arisen from a poor translation, but in the hands of Feng Xiaogang, and by extension, in the hands of You You, the black humour that the phrase implies is brought to its (il)logical conclusion. Firstly, it is thought by You You and his partner, Wang (Ying Da), that Tyler’s estate would have ample money to stage a vast spectacle, taking over the Forbidden City itself, and employing the talents of Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, even a staging of the Puccini opera *Turandot* (which actually had occurred in like manner by this time in China), as well as comic animation, and a general sense of the grand absurd. They discover that Tyler’s pockets are in fact empty (Tyler is thought to be in a coma in hospital following his stroke. In fact, he recovers, but does not let his friend know, instead observing the unfolding comedy) Meanwhile, after discovering the pecuniary limitations, You You racks his brain to think of ways to remain true to Tyler’s wishes, and hits upon the idea of selling advertising rights to corporate sponsors in order to pay for the event. In itself, this is such an absurd, grotesque concept that it cannot help but lift the rest of the film into ever greater levels of levity, confusion and grotesquerie. Getting over her initial reticence, Lucy, who has lost her accommodation and is being put up by You You, allows Ge You, who is always cast as a somewhat ordinary character, neither superficially heroic or attractive, to be revealed to the audience as a good hearted soul trying to honour the wishes of a friend. In this film it is the market and its culture, it is the society that is grotesque. You You and Wang eventually sell off every bit of the funeral from the entertainment, so to speak, to the hearse, to the garments on the corpse, different brands on each side of the body: even Tyler’s hair, it is planned, will be strewn with cigarette ash to simulate dandruff for the benefit of a brand

of dandruff shampoo. Tyler himself, in the logic of consumerism, has, without money to his name, only branding, only the value of his *brand*, to which other brands which to attach themselves. And in a post-WTO, dotcom bubble China, You You is able to sell that brand, even auctioning it off on live TV.



Fig. 83: *The eventual outcome: a corporate spectacle in the Forbidden City, and an expression of the meta grotesque. We should note that, as the subtitle displays, Youyou is quoting Confucius.*

Nevertheless, the two particularly interesting things about *Dawan* for our purposes are the meta-grotesque, and the device of the film-within-a-film, which is used explicitly twice.

Firstly, the meta-grotesque. In the scene above, we see a large stage placed in the middle of the Forbidden City, the historic site and tourist attraction at the heart of Beijing. The balloons are in corporate colours, the furniture, which, You You argues, suggests an elegant lifestyle, is a demonstration suite from a luxury retailer, and the enormous moving billboard that grabs our attention alternates between portraits of Tyler and advertising for various brands, in this case, we can see the ad for Outback Steakhouse. And here is the crux of the matter: Outback is a real company, really

advertising through product placement in the film. They are attaching themselves, perhaps, to the cool cache of Feng Xiaogang, but, as with *You You*, they are also serving as backers, to help finance the production. In fact, the brands in the film are a mixture of real and fictional, of foreign and domestic, of name brands and knock-offs. We must also consider that this scene, with its balanced mis-en-scene, and its almost romantic use of light, actually shows us this scene of product placement or advertising *in the place which seemed to be absurdly grand* i.e. the Forbidden City. Feng Xiaogang is in fact making his film according to the absurdity, the lack of understanding with regard to value that he is exposing within the film. Does this make him hypocritical, or merely cynical about self, film, and society? The effect is repeated in the later film *Shouji (Cellphone)* [2003] which has been criticized as one long advertisement for China Telecom and Motorola. However, I believe that the truth of the matter, as with the spectacle of *Dawan* is significantly more complicated, deliberately causing uneasiness in the laughter of the audience, while highlighting Feng's own ambivalence. In the end of *Shouji* such technology and the combination of consumerism and surveillance that it entails are *feared*. In the end of *Dawan* the market, the society driven by schemes of wealth, is portrayed as *insane*.

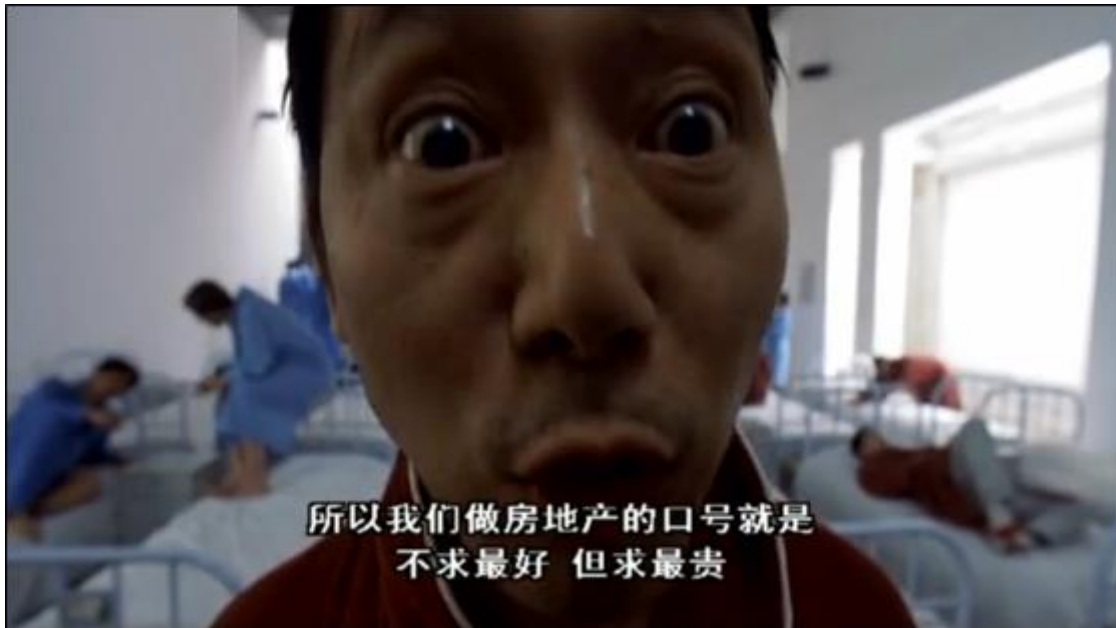


Fig. 84: ‘So, the motto of our real estate company will be: ‘we don’t look for quality, we look for the most expensive.’. Breaking the fourth wall during the long take inside an asylum where You You had been pretending to go mad in order to avoid his obligations, as the inmates plot their fortunes.

This portrayal of insanity is made even more comical, even starker, by the fact that our perspective, literally (as above) and figuratively, is manipulated in it. There are two occasions where Feng uses the film-within-a-film device in *Dawan*. The first is during his attempt to make a success of Tyler’s movie at the beginning of the film, recalling all the excesses of Bertolucci, Chen Kaige, and Zhang Yimou, as I have mentioned above. The second is during the final, long take of the film. Immediately following You You’s confession to Lucy that he has been faking his mental illness, which had “manifested” itself in his ongoing obsession with finding more sponsors for an event that was no longer to happen. The camera pans backwards on a dolly through a room full of patients walking to and fro in what appears to be a stark looking hospital ward. The inmates are, in one way or another, wrapped up in plans to make money in the new consumer marketplace, from recording technologies, to the internet, to real estate, and we are party to one animated conversation after another as we pan backwards as if backing away from the scene. The desire for money is rendering these

people *literally grotesque*, literally insane. Finally, the inmate above breaks off from his discussion with one of his comrades to directly address the camera, which has been fitted to create distortion of scale that render the eyes of the patient even larger, even more wild, under the grey, sickly light. He is right next to our faces when he says that high cost is more important to the wealthy than quality, which matters little. In fact, after this, we are suddenly made aware of the fact that what we have actually been panning through is a film set in the diegesis, as well as in reality: a play within a play, a film within a film. Tyler is using the story of his “comedy funeral” to make a film. But we as an audience are rendered unstable, since we do not know whose narrative to trust anymore. Just as the inmates, we are caught in a mixture of fact and fiction, one where it seems strangely logical for a thing to be prized because of its cost, rather than its quality.

Evidently, this thought had not left Feng Xiaogang, or Wang Shuo’s mind by the time that work began on *Personal Tailor*, about ten years later.



Fig 85: The sentiment of Dawan’s madman has moved into the performance of wealth by the *Personal Tailor* team in the final dream/episode of the film, “You Qian” (“Rich”). Mrs Dan (right) is being taken through a fantasy of wealth by leader of *Personal Tailor* team, Yang, as they pretend to spend the interest of Mrs. Dan’s imaginary fortune in one day. Here, they are buying property, an area that has continued to see such growth in value in China’s cities that it can be considered a

bubble. They demand the most expensive property, preferably in a poor location, and then try to persuade the seller to double the price.

Siren Dingzhi presents the spectacle of *Jia Fang Yi Fang* being reimaged from within what, by 2013, has become a much more globalised industry and society. Instead of the small, simple *danwei* occupied by the wish-granting actors in 1997, the Personal Tailor Team occupy an idyllic paradise compound in China's Hainan Island, a popular tourist destination. They are professionalised, smartly dressed, and young, most likely portrayed as born between 1985 and 1990²³¹ within the diegesis, which gives them a totally different viewpoint on economic liberalisation and *Hua-ness* at least, in theory. Professional and beautiful, the new team is composed of leader Yang Zheng (Ge You), Bai (Bai Baihe), Lu (Lu Xiaolu) and Ma Qing (Zheng Kai). The film, like *Jia Fang Yi Fang*, follows individual dreams to weave its plot, but this is taken to a further extent in *Siren Dingzhi*, where each of the five new episodes or clients is given an inter-title, with the exception of the unknown client whose fantasy of escaping the Nazis in war, opens the film in monochrome, and with quite a lot of confusion. Two things are noteworthy: firstly, each of these episodes, as well as the environmentalist finale, deals with a specific critique of contemporary society that finds its echo in real government campaign and policy. Secondly, all the episodes within the film concern, to a lesser or greater degree, consumer culture, and the effects of money²³². The first client of the film proper is a man who is chauffeur to political leaders; having seen three of his employers be arrested for corruption, he comes to the conclusion that he could do a better job, and

²³¹ These would be considered part of the so called *baling hou* (*post-80's*) generation, which, it is implied, arrive into a reforming China and are fundamentally disconnected to the realities of pre-Reform China, and of the cultural changes that occurred during the 1980s. They are the first generation to represent the result of the One Child Policy.

²³² In fact, the whole film can be read as an allegory with regard to the excesses of the Chinese state, but that is an interpretation that would be best placed in a different study.

enlists the *Personal Tailor* team to help him prove it by letting him play the part of a low level official while they come upon various ways to tempt him to corruption. They succeed, in the end, but only by seduction, rather than material offerings.



Fig. 86: *The Personal Tailor Team in their reimagined Danwei?* One of the most notable changes since both *Jia Fang Yi Fang* and *Dawan* is the change in aspect ratio that Feng employs, from a more television or monitor shape, to a more modern, wide-screen style. In addition, of course, improvements in overall quality of colour etc bestowed by developments in technology have also reached the popular Chinese screen.

The second item of note is the story of a popular director who dreams of developing “good taste”, so that he may run away from his *su* vulgar success, and his own coarseness. Rather like the situation of Tang in *Jia Fang Yi Fang*, this episode concerning the life of someone who works in entertainment, whose work is naturally one of acting and seeming, or creating drama, is the one with the most actual, long term, irreversible effects. Having established that no one in the *Siren Dingzhi* team has any taste whatsoever, they seek to do the opposite of their natural inclination. Nevertheless, they find him a large raw space to live, work, and think in when approaching a new, “high culture” film project. Not long afterwards, the Director is rushed to hospital with circular lesions all over his body. The team are told that he is suffering from “high culture shock”, caused by an inability to digest complex ideas, an illness that, according to the doctors, is quite common among members of the Chinese entertainment industry.

When the doctors raise up their hands as to their helplessness in the matter, the team concludes that if “high culture” made him ill, “low culture”, the *su* or vulgar, should prove to be the antidote. Accordingly, they bring the director, by ambulance, to a KTV club, where he is surrounded by cheesy music and scantily clad women. Naturally, under these circumstances he makes a recovery, but he has again sunk back into the mire of his own success. A drastic measure is required to realise his dream. Very much in keeping with the style of Wang Shuo, the team, dressed theatrically in classical Chinese official costumes, recommend a blood transfusion from a person with the “DNA” of good taste, to counteract the *su* DNA of the director. The result is that in the end, the director of popular film becomes an artist who swears by his own incomprehensibility, and a former country bumpkin is handed awards for most vulgar picture by Jackie Chan.



Fig 87 & 88. Siren Dingzhi. Above: the director takes his “medicine” in the form of a garish room echoing with the sound of karaoke, and glowing with the colours traditionally associated with prostitution: red and green.

Below: Having become even more desperate, the Director undergoes a blood transfusion with the scion of a line linked to classical musicians, a cotton beater played by “innocent” character-actor, Wang Baoqiang.



Which is to say, that, almost as if trying to reach a height of *grotesquerie*, Feng is showing the wealthy *using*, literally vampirically taking the *blood* of the poor²³³. Yet in the end, the less well-off are able to have the last laugh, in this film, at least. The high level of red and green contrast that characterised the interior of the KTV lounge with its bevy of “medicinal” women, is repeated in the scene above, as the transfusion is carried out. Perhaps there is a suggestion that both sets of people, the KTV girls and the cotton beater of classical extraction, are being used, or at the very least, bought. It is the *lack of shock*, that is in itself grotesque, and shocking. We can speculate as to whether this episode too is a comment on Feng’s career as a whole, and particularly his movement away from comedy and to more “serious” subject matter in recent years. Now that he has become a “serious artist” does the Chinese film industry, as the official presiding over the agreement stated, need “new blood”?

I wish to consider one more episode from *Personal Tailor* before moving on to David Dhawan’s work: Mrs. Dan’s “Rich” dream. The episode begins with Ma and Bai

²³³ It is worth considering this in the context of recent history where entire villages had famously been infected with AIDS and other blood-borne diseases due to the activities of so-called *Xuetou* or *Blood Head*. These criminals, illegally operated by taking advantage of poor villagers and economic migrants to collect blood products for money, particularly in the late 90s and early 2000s (Beach 2001, and *Renmin Wang* 2003)

seeking out Mrs. Dan where she works on her small boat. The reason they are so keen to meet her is that she had, one year before, saved Ma's life. It is her birthday, and Bai has her imagine her deepest desire...Mrs Dan, after concentrating spiritually, opens her eyes and says "Money." And so, the *Personal Tailor* team get to work to give her a day with the impression of being very wealthy indeed.



Fig. 89: Siren Dingzhi: *Mrs. Dan initially keeps her feet on the ground while she is made up for her day of wealth fantasy.*

The process of teaching Mrs. Dan to “be” wealthy, as captured in this film, is enlightening. She is made up garishly, awarded expensive clothes, uncomfortable shoes, and given Yang to act as her dogsbody cum secretary, and, he implies, “boy toy” as well. She is taught what to like and dislike (mainly the latter), and told, in this realm of fantasy, that most of the real estate in Beijing belongs to her. To illustrate, as the finale to the day, Yang brings her up to the top of a temple to survey Beijing, thereupon getting the rest of the team to (mysteriously) turn off the power to parts of the city that Dan “owns”.

Fig .90 & 91: Siren Dingzhi: *The cinematic spectacle of Dan's fantasy.*



In contrast to the smoggy, polluted, dangerous Beijing that will be discussed by the team in the final episode, here Beijing is cinematic, jewel-like, just for a few moments. Dan enjoys it, and later says that even though she was able to remember that this was all a fantasy throughout the day, seeing the buildings go dark made her think for just a moment that the fantasy might be real. She might be a billionaire. If we were in the world of the Hindi film, she might be, but this would present a problem for a logic under which being ordinary, *laobaixing*, *aam admi* is dependent upon a certain relationship with money. Yang reveals to her the truth that the deeds to most of the buildings in Beijing were held by banks in any case because of the many, many

mortgages attached to them. He assures her that wealthy people wake up with anxiety about how much they owe, and that she is better off, and happier, without wealth. This seems like the edge of a norm, and as she is driven back to an intra-diegetical soundtrack of sad, romantic music about time passing away, she seems unsure. And, we have to wonder, are the *Personal Tailor* team not wealthy themselves? We are then distracted from these thoughts by the environmental apology sequence. But, how did Yang, played by Ge You, manage to sound so reassuring when he was telling Dan that she was better off poor?

Ge You can be a constant because he is both ordinary and likeable. His manner and accent are absolutely the height of *Jingwei* and therefore are of a piece with the work of Feng Xiaogang and Wang Shuo, but it is not simply a matter of fitting one certain type, for Ge You has played criminal, love and rogue under Feng's direction. Instead, I suggest, Feng Xiaogang continues to favour working with him, not only because of their long-standing partnership, but rather because of his special combination of being recognisable, and in that sense remarkable, while at the same time, having an air of ordinariness about him that renders even villains that he plays likeable, which can be quite a strange effect.

Further, keeping in mind these changes in Feng's oeuvre, it remains pertinent to speculate as to whether what we see throughout Feng's career is a movement away from the more pointed aspects of his criticism is illustrative of what may be called a domestication of the "cynical" aspect of the "*liumang*" or "hooligan" person and culture, as Zhu Dake describes it in chapter three of his book on the subject (2006). Certainly, Wang Shuo, who has been associated with this *liumang* culture from the start, reveals in his script for *Siren Dingzhi*, quite a lot of development in his thinking, while retaining the mix of romance and cynicism which characterises both *Hua* and *Desi*

comedies in the contemporary, to a lesser or greater extent. In a reality that accommodates luxurious homes in Hainan along with environmental degradation, that the inmates have taken over the asylum is clear to see, and this incongruity is not lost on Feng, even as his filmmaking digs the hole even deeper.

David Dhawan stands out among comic directors of the 90s and 2000s as, like Feng Xiaogang, having a distinct *oeuvre*. Stylistically, Dhawan has come to be associated with the family, but also with vulgarity (Gopal and Moorti [2008] 113). In fact, his oeuvre, almost entirely composed of comedy films especially marked by the presence of comic actor Govinda, and other actors who excel in comedies such as Sanjay Dutt, (they are a common duo in Dhawan's films), does not however simply constitute a list of B Movies. This is worth noting since often those films that raise their heads above the parapet and refer to themselves as, or appear to be, true comedies, do end up as second class citizens of the *Desi* cinematic universe. By this I mean specifically that, with few exceptions they are far less likely to have A-list stars, or to feature special effects or locations that would be glamorous or expensive²³⁴. Even their theatrical runs tend to be shorter. However, the partnership between Dhawan and Govinda has led to Govinda's entering an A list status, as both comic and star. Like Feng Xiaogang, David Dhawan's film has become associated with holiday productions, particularly the lucrative Diwali blockbuster. That Dhawan's work contains plenty of family relational problems, love trouble, disapproved-of relationships, and double roles, is nothing new in the context of Hindi film as a whole. However, the types of problems encountered and how they are handled, contains a *logic of seeming* that is quite different

²³⁴ It is often remarked on that the Hindi film industry produces an enormous number of movies every year, over 1500 in 2012 alone, according to Forbes (McCarthy 2014). Clearly, a large number of these are "second rung" or "B" movies. The percentage of comedy films at this quality level is far higher than their relative proportion in the A, or main feature films.

from other films with similar content, with a hyper-awareness of the nature of the film itself, the characters and actors as “products” both within the logic of the film, but also within the burgeoning consumer economy. One may speculate as to whether part of Dhawan’s viewpoint stems from his non-theatrical family (his father was a banker), or his experiences first as a failed actor, and then emergence as a natural director while at FTI (Film and Television Institute), Pune. Moreover, Dhawan has a special feature in the person of Govinda, who, as mentioned, has star status, and very high levels of recognisability among the public, but who retains, much like Ge You, a sense of being the ‘*aam admi*’, the common man²³⁵.

Raja Babu is the first of Dhawan’s films that I wish to examine; it is his fifth film with Govinda²³⁶, but one of his first big successes as a director after the breakthrough film *Aankhen* (*Eyes*) the previous year, which also starred Govinda. The film was released in 1994, not long after the beginning of economic liberalisation, and we can think of the film as transitional, particularly because unlike Mirza’s *Raju Ban Gaya Gentleman* *Raja Babu* takes place in a village/town context, where, unlike bustling Mumbai, with its exploding consumer scene, a photographer’s shop is the primary lieu for consumer citizenship and *seeming*, and the location from which the romance itself unfolds.

²³⁵ Ironically, Govinda has it both ways in his portrayal in films like *Raja Babu*. As a somewhat chubby young man in possession of a bright smile and devotion to his mother, aesthetically he fits into an Indian type, of ‘chikku’ cuteness, sweet and adorable, recalling perhaps the stories of the Gods Krishna and Ganesha when they were naughty, plump boys, devoted to *their* mothers.

²³⁶ This may seem like a lot already, but when compared to the scale of Dhawan and Govinda’s work together, and the length of their relationship, this is still at the beginning of their cooperation.

Raja Babu tells the story of a spoiled young man, a profligate princeling of wealthy parents, tied to his mother's apron strings. Though uneducated, and perhaps a bit weak, he does appear kind-hearted, when able to think beyond himself, which appears more likely when faced with the plight of someone resembling his mother; he helps an older woman who is being evicted from her home, for example. Raja's constant companion, servant and friend, the underwear clad²³⁷ Nandu (which he almost invariably follows with "Sab ka bandu!" – Everyone's pal! –when introducing or announcing himself), is charged with maintaining him when he is out of mother's sight. He genuinely seems both to like Raja, and to enjoy the power that being with him confers, especially as his low status is very evident: he does not even dare to sit on the seat of Raja's motorcycle, but rather perches absurdly above, because of caste considerations, it is implied.



Fig. 92: *The well-dressed Raja sets off from his home for a joy ride, his pockets full of cash. His mother (Aruna Irani, right) instructs Nandu (Shakti Kapoor), and confers upon him the responsibility of effectively looking after a baby, as his father (Kader Khan) is despairing and angry in turn.*

²³⁷ Nandu's state of undress was one point of criticism of the film, where the long strings that swing at the front of his boxers were considered particularly suggestive and crude, although nothing compared to the lyrics and choreography of the song *Sarkaye lo Khatia Jaada Lage* – "Bring the Cots closer – I'm cold"



Fig. 93: Raja Babu. A dream sequence in a film critiqued for vulgar spectacle, full of double entendre, is not only an over-the-top pastiche, a riot of colour, but filled with layers of golden phallic imagery, in keeping with the notorious ‘bumping and grinding’ choreography found in several other songs in the film, especially Sarkaye lo Khatia Jaada Lage, (Pull the Cots Closer, for I am Cold) which has been censored from some current versions of the movie.

In the course of this long, circuitous, but by all accounts, enormously successful film, Raja falls in love with Madhu (Karisma Kapoor) an educated woman who, upon learning of his inability to even read fluently, calls off the wedding she had wholeheartedly agreed to, and heaps shame upon Raja’s father. Raja’s fathers *izzat* his “face”, and loss of same, then becomes the key plot-driver for the remainder of the film. Raja’s love interest had fallen for him first when he is in a sort of Robin Hood disguise, rescuing her from the violent intentions of goons sent by his own nefarious uncle; despite her scepticism, he and his companion are invited to stay at the family home until they have recovered from their ordeal. After returning home, Raja, who had first begun to fall in love with Madhu upon seeing her picture in the photographer’s shop where he poses for his many different interpretative portraits regularly, is utterly smitten. Having made off with Madhu’s picture, as if she were herself an item to be bought, he proceeds to wage a war of attrition, taking any opportunity and employing disguise, including

cross-dressing as a widow seeking alms for her widows' home²³⁸. Madhu later on sees the photograph of him as a barrister, and assumes that he is one, leading to the shocking revelation of his intellectual inability. Which brings me to the first of two observations I would like to make about this film, especially with regard to the *consumer grotesque*.

Firstly, in this hit film, why is there so much dressing up, so much *seeming*? Raja himself only late in the film discovers that he is adopted, so in that sense that he has always been in a state of being someone he was not²³⁹. Raja himself struggles with the reality of his filial emotions towards his parents, and the reality of not only not knowing his origins, but having the fact of his lack of blood relation be exploited by his those who would wish to hurt him, including his scheming, money-grubbing Uncle. However, the theatricality of Raja's costume changes cannot be ignored, especially when the value of the "performance" is not clearly understood. The shot below, which shows four of the costumed photos of Raja as (from left to right, an MP, a policeman, a doctor, a barrister) is the way in which Madhu's mistake is revealed to her, but it also gives the impression of a menu, or set of flavours, even advertising. But, as Madhu's cold shoulder makes clear, the inherent value of those things, those "Rajas", is dependent upon perception, upon marketing, in the diegetical reality of the film, not upon the all-important *sidhi-sada* innocent simplicity that at once inspired this child-like fantasy, and was violated by its commerciality. The photos can smile down at us from

²³⁸ Widows, particularly young ones, have traditionally been forced to continuously struggle for any kind of status in Indian society, being thought of as cursed, or at least inauspicious. The practice of widow-burning or *Sati* was one, particularly unpleasant response to this. Up until time of writing, widows' ashrams exist throughout India to provide a safe haven for them, when so often they have been dependent on their husbands for status and money, and after the loss of their partners, they may often be rejected by their in-laws. The injunction against widows wearing coloured clothes remains strong, so strong that the decision by a group of widows to celebrate the Holi holiday with the traditional throwing of *rang* or colourful powder, was a cause of remark in India and throughout the *Desi* community.

²³⁹ Although we may think differently, this is the diegetical understanding of this reality.

high on the wall, but their jovial appearance does not change the manner in which Raja appears to have become an object by their means.

Fig. 94: *Raja in various costumes and poses takes on the identity of professionals he cannot hope to be. Are these different models of the same item? Are they a kind of fetish?*



Secondly, we can say that in this film wealth is a fool, and wealth is a killer. In the first instance, it is Raja himself who is the fool, if not his mother and father as well. Raja obviously is the butt of some good natured jokes in the film, but his parents are each foolish enough to try to keep his past from him, and foolish enough to make a show of emotions that they expect to be revealed by their other half, in a way that presciently leads the way for films such as *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (2001).

That wealth is a killer can be seen from the actions of Raja's uncle, Lakhan, whose constant plotting against his brother in favour of his own children, ending in him attempting murder of his own brother, Raja's father.

Fig. 95: Nandu engages in more vulgarity: empowered by his Boss's pilfering one of the photos of a local beauty (Madhu) off the wall in order to find the woman in question, he suggests that he too could choose a bride from among the cosmopolitan selection displayed as objects to be purchased on the wall of the photography studio.



In the end, after a failed scheme, and then a failed murder attempt, thwarted by the conscience of his maltreated, least-favoured son, Lakhan and his son are apprehended. The family that remains, having realised the true value of each other beyond logics of seeming, are reunited, including now Madhu, of course.

Dhawan's *Jodi No. 1*, his 14th film with Govinda, continues to explore the notion of value in a money-fixated society, that cannot see sincere simplicity for what it is. The film concerns the friendship between two thieves, who have modelled their names, and their friendship after Jai (Amitabh Bachchan) and Veeru (Dharmendra), iconic characters in one of India's most beloved films, *Sholay* 240 (Sippy, Ramesh dir. 1975). As is the case with Feng's films, here there are many plays within plays as the characters act out skits of various kinds, except that in the case of *Jodhi No.1* they are

²⁴⁰ *Sholay* is a milestone in Hindi cinema, and remained the highest grossing Hindi film of all time for many years, until recent times. The key relationship in the film is the iconic friendship between Jai and Veeru, which as in *Jodi No.1* is the key to the thieves' success, and which is intended to be placed above any other relationship, giving rise to the famous song, "Yeh Dosti, Hum Nahin Thorenge" ("We will not break this friendship.")

doing the acting purely for their own benefit, at least, to begin with. Having begun a successful campaign of robberies in Mumbai where they are able to overcome all opposition with their charm and confidence, Jai and Veeru are forced to escape to Goa after accidentally causing the death of the son of a dangerous gangster. They end up taking the identity of a conceited NRI who was also on the train who is accompanied by his “secretary and friend”, and go to stay with the family that should have been hosting their victim. One could easily say that the whole film is about deceit and money, and yet, it is not the thieves whose money lust is shown to have made them into villainous grotesques: much as in *Raja Babu*, it is *family* that is most dangerous and grotesque if their innocence is robbed of them (for want of a better phrase) by money-lust and consumer culture.



Fig. 96: Jodi No.1. *Thieves Jai (Sanjay Dutt) and Veeru (Govinda) at large in Mumbai at the beginning of the Film. Here, the pair act in a film within a film conceit that enables them to take riches out from under the nose of the real jewellery shop owner (right) during shooting; he looks on, confused.*



Fig. 97: Jodi No. 1. Ironically, it is not the thieves hiding under his roof that head of the household Rai Bahadur should fear, but rather his own extended family, who seek to gain a share in his fortune. They do not support him when his factory goes through hard times, and are so hard hearted against him that they do not respond when calls for help are made during his heart attack.

As in *Jia Fang Yi Fang*, and *Siren Dingzhi*, the third of Dhawan's films I wish to examine, *Partner* (2007) is about someone *providing a service* that, despite itself, commoditizes a non-physical, non-finite thing, be that a dream, or love. We can see, just by this example that the gesture towards intangible value that these represent is forever drawn into the logic of consumerism in the contemporary. In *Partner* the service provided is of a "love guru", who dispenses advice. Prem (Salmaan Khan), the "cupid" in question, whose very name means "love", is devoted to helping people to meet and marry their soulmates.

The film follows the quest of Bhaskar Chowdhury (Govinda), a mid-level financial advisor who has sought out Prem's help after falling madly in love with the owner of his company, Priya Jaisingh (Katrina Kaif). Once Prem has understood who Bhaskar has in his sights, he does everything he can to convince him that such a relationship would not be possible, even that attempting it would not work, based on

Bhaskar’s “status” and “style”, or lack thereof. Eventually, however, and after Bhaskar has doggedly, and slightly disturbingly followed him on his family holiday with niece, nephew and sister to Phuket, Prem decides to at least try to help him, since he is so sincere. In my analysis here it is this sincerity, this simple *sidhi-sada* nature that I want to investigate the aesthetics of as part of the humour, as it is against this that I argue Dhawan makes his grotesques. This, in fact, gets us also very close to the question of why Govinda is the success that he is, as well.



Fig. 98: Partner. *Bhaskar (Govinda) ‘rocks’ the board meeting with an assertive display of his Sidhi-sada, his innocence.*

In the above scene, after being advised to get himself noticed by Priya by “rocking” the boardroom, Govinda climbs animatedly up onto the table. He calls out the failings of all the rich seniors at the table: who is unfaithful, who cannot tie their shoes etc. Further, he explains that people such as he “wait for the 30th” – they live month to month, and cannot simply make decisions regarding hundreds of thousands of rupees for her, when these decisions are so alien to them. Sitting in this informal, intimate manner, he scolds Priya Jaisingh, telling her that she must learn to make her own decisions, and that, some of these must be taken with the heart, rather than the head.

This heart over head argument is irresistible to Priya, and adds a soft undertone to an hilarious scene. Govinda's radical, physical *wrong-ness* in this scene, sitting up on top of the boardroom table on his crossed legs with his nose near Priya's is an example of his *Sidhi-Sada*.

While Bhaskar is working through his love story, Prem has also fallen in love with Naina (Lara Dutta) a beautiful investigative journalist, who turns out to be a single mother. He is thus engaged with persuading her son of his sincerity, and that he should be a likable, good match, and is entrusted with his care while Naina travels for work one weekend. As it happens they end up running into each other since Prem, Bhaskar and Roshan (Naina's son) make the trip with Bhaskar to Jodhpur to stop Priya's father from marrying someone else against her will, based on considerations of wealth and power.



Figs. 99-101: Partner. *In the above scene, Bhaskar points out that the bride herself is not happy, and that this is not of the “good daughter of a good Father”. However, appealing to Priya’s father’s better angels does not work. He points to Bhaskar’s salary, not his upbringing, his caste etc. In fact, we know virtually nothing about Bhaskar’s upbringing, except that he was close to his mother.*

That the potential groom is also Caucasian and British, as shown in the stills above, makes him even less palatable for Prem, and with the help of all three males, Priya's father agrees to Bhaskar as groom. In the still from the scene below, one can also see the delightfully glittery clothing that both Prem and Bhaskar are wearing, which brings us to the situation of having Bhaskar profess his own lack of wealth while wearing something extremely expensive looking. However, in the logic of Dhawan and Govinda, this is acceptable, as Bhaskar's innocence makes it impossible for him to fall prey to the lack of human relations that give rise to the understanding of the consumer grotesque that Dhawan put into play.

In this, as in virtually all *Desi* films, the content, and the people, since the turn of the century just seems to get wealthier and wealthier, without any consideration of how much money anything would cost, or whether the lifestyle that these people appear to have makes any logical sense. And in that sense the fantasy world of *Partner* is not unlike that of *Siren Dingzhi*. This could be a recipe for grotesque to take over, and the common man to be lost. The answer that we see time and time again, that allows wealth, and aspiration to circulate in a way that can be viewed as positive, is to ground morality in the characters. This is a symptom of the culturally inflected modern that I had talked about in chapter 1, but brought to a height in the smelt of popular comedy. Bhaskar in *Partner* is explicitly middle class, not "in the same league" as Priya Jaisingh. Yet, it is his "simplicity", kindness and virtue, that endear him to her, and mean that in the end, he wins. So naive and sweet is he, something like Wang Baoqiang, that he needs to consult Prem on sex on his wedding night, repeatedly, while Prem is also trying to enjoy his honeymoon next door. If anything were to illustrate the extent to which his manner is the opposite of the *su* tendency in Feng Xiaogang's work, or even some of Dhawan's earlier films, the fact of his virginity and shyness over it could.



Fig. 102. Partner: Govinda, a schlub on the beach.

Although often portrayed as a lover, Govinda is rarely filmed as a Casanova. Normally paired against a comedy partner who is much taller and more muscular than he, such as Sanjay Dutt or as is the case in *Partner*, Salman Khan, Govinda, is positioned, like Ge You, as the common man's hero, by explicitly not being one, but by making us like him, and laugh. Indeed, Ge You and Govinda both appear to cut through the *Consumer Grotesque's* misunderstanding of value, but as with the meta-grotesque of these films themselves, we must, as an active audience, be aware of their very status as products, marketable in all their roles, filmic and otherwise within *Hua* and *Desi* popular culture more generally, on the basis of these properties.

Objects among themselves? *Apna Sapna Money Money*²⁴¹ down the drain.

What happens to these critiques of consumer culture as the 21st century moves on and we move further away from the beginning of economic liberalisation? Do these moral

²⁴¹ Translated as *Money, Money, is our Dream*, this is the name of a film (Sivan dir. [2006]) which concerns the frantic and absurd hunt for a bag of diamonds misplaced between police, thieves and

questions about the nature of value remain both anxious and humorous, and does the *consumer grotesque* persist in repelling and attracting? In this section, I take a short survey to examine some films that represent a variety of different styles now: *Dhamaal*, *Vicky Donor*, and *Delhi Belly*, the break out film *Fengkuang de Shitou*, and two films in the *Jiong series*. I will show, that perhaps as a consequence of the comedy audience splitting into different (inter-related sections) what we find is a *Consumer Grotesque* that is both more fantastical, ever more aspirational, and envy-inducing, and at the same time, viscerally disgusting, surrounded by scheming, lying and the physical grotesque. We find a broadening and deepening of a fascination with thieves, but also with the perils of being too career focused as the increased competition for career opportunities in India and China comes against a pervasive fear of social disintegration. These films present different facets of disgust and consumerism, where sometimes the disgust is sublimated, and sometimes not. Films like *Dhamaal* which follow the antics of several teams of thieves²⁴² competing to get their hands on a fortune buried in a Goa graveyard form a basic type circulating through both *Hua* and *Desi* cinema in various iterations: people made grotesque as they pursue money, to a point where it becomes the sole content of their dreams – *apna sapna* – to be given up in favour of the social good represented by a charity for orphans, as in *Dhamaal*, or a marriage, in the cases of *Ren zai Jiong Tu*, and *Vicky Donor* among others.

ordinary members of the public who are all made fools in its name, including some very interesting cross-dressing. It is also the name of a very popular song from the film that expresses the desire for cash that characterises much of the dissatisfied discourse of those feeling left behind by India's economic growth. In this respect, the source of money-fever, of focus on the getting of money and on consumer culture arises from a *lack* of financial success, rather than the goods themselves and the potentials of them.

²⁴² If not already noted, it is fascinating that thieves make such a strong showing in Hindi and Mandarin comedy film today, particularly in the Hindi film context. I suggest that this is linked to an overall complex relationship with consumerism, objects, transgression and law, which builds upon existing cultural background but is brought into new focus by the advent of the *consumer grotesque*.



Fig. 103: *The Swiss-Army-Knife-of-Belts*, a vulgar expression of the utility of money, and a useful plot saver in *Dhamaal*.

Feng Xiaogang and David Dhawan, aged 58 and 60 respectively at time of writing, are of the same generation. Naturally, the experience of being 58, or 60, in India and in China brings with it two distinct sets of generational experience, and yet there are certain aspects to this generation's relationship with economic change and the growth of consumption, as well as the popular, that seem to be shared. They both have an explicitly stated, although at times fraught, dedication to making popular films, operating outside the main hall of Cinema (sic), as Feng describes it (Jin (2005) 112), which is something that, on one hand we may see as simply logical (if they didn't like to make such films, why would they do so?). But on the other hand, it represents a position vis-a-vis the popular, the bourgeois, the "vulgar", and the *comic* that encompasses them all. Further, although Feng's spate of more dramatic films (*Tang Shan Da Di Zhen* (*Aftershock*), for example), represent perhaps an attempt to enter a more "serious" space, much as the director in *Siren Dingzhi* sought to do, that very film in itself represents an at least partial return to comedy. Feng and Dhawan have a generational viewpoint on the economic change that they have witnessed in their lifetime, but were not born into, that reflects this. The tradition of black comedy, of absurdity, of love-

gone-wrong still continues. However, three significant inter-related phenomena have arisen in the ensuing years between the rise of Feng and Dhawan, and the present that indicate where new generations of filmmakers are taking these concerns, and these aesthetics, in comedy cinema.

Firstly, in China, the rise of the romantic comedy, which, although very much linked to the cultural phenomenon known as the Korean Wave, is a function of a larger linking up of disparate regional aesthetic aspects in pop culture. Along with this comes an attempt at knitting together of some segments of the markets of Hong Kong, China, Japan and Korea to create a domestic, Mainland-based culture of pop-romance aesthetics. In fact, this process has the effect of re-embodiment of the ghost of Chinese romance and melodrama cinema of the past, now upgraded and decked out with transmedia tie-ups, product placement and celebrity endorsement. The other aspect of this ghost though, is the Romantic Comedy, re-calling the Hong Kong-based Mandarin film industry that I referred to earlier in this chapter. For our purposes, this turn also just happens to further expand the common ground with the preoccupations of Indian popular film. In order to do a proper study of this phenomenon and its roots, more time, research, and space would be required. What we can say, is that, in keeping with their status as enfants terrible heirs to the commercial comedy tradition, directors like Xu Zheng and Ning Hao both inhabit a popular culture space alongside new *Hua Rom Coms*, and consciously make films that *react* to their light, airbrushed atmosphere – such a contrast to the rough and ready *jingwei*, even if the surroundings of new *Jingwei* films are beautiful, even idyllic places like Thailand, or indeed Hainan island.

Leading to a similar diversity in aesthetics in *Desi* films, and particularly a divergence between “clean” and “dirty” is a factor working in the opposite direction to that in China. This is the development of the so-called *multiplex film*. As I have stated

elsewhere, this category is very problematic. However, in that it indicates the development of diverse approaches, experimenting with aesthetics, lifestyle, modes of comedy (including black comedy, such as in *Delhi Belly*) and so forth that parody, or diverge from, the standard *masala* film, it is at least somewhat useful as terminology. What it chiefly allows us to do, is to talk about films that are a bit “different” (“zara haatke”, as Dwyer has it), that might have an “Indie” feel to them, but, crucially *are not within the category of “Parallel Cinema”* or Art Film. Interestingly here too, the resulting effect is yet more increased ground for shared appreciation by East and South Asian audiences: the fact that Hindi films released in China have begun to make it to the top of the box office²⁴³ is testament to this.

Thirdly, both *Hua* and *Desi* above are driven by the development of a modern youth-oriented cinema growing up around the status of the young as consumers with access to resources. However, regardless of the diversity that these developments represent, the preoccupations of class, wealth and consumerism, whether portrayed in a light romantic comedy such as *Du Lala de Shengzhi Ji (Go Lala, Go!)* or in a film that meditates on the nature of commodification and disgust, such as *Vicky Donor*, have in no way been erased, or even diminished as sources of anxiety and humour. Further, it is apparent that this is still true for many among the younger generations of filmmakers²⁴⁴.

In fact, the pursuit of money has continued to be a plot driver, but also a force for personal corruption, making individuals into half-people, hobbling examples of the

²⁴³ After the critical and market success of *3 Idiots*, in 2015, for example, the social commentary comedy *PK*, which was both loved and hated in India, rose to the top 3 in the Chinese box office.

²⁴⁴ In my conclusion I will consider the role of work that attempts to deliberately empty itself of any kind of social content, such as Guo Jingming’s *Tiny Times* series.

lack and *excess* that define the *consumer grotesque*. In fact, perhaps as a consequence of loosening cultural mores, or perhaps as a reflection of the input of younger people, the grotesque has become nothing if not grotesque-er, pushing at the censors with bodily fluids, even while wasting no opportunity for a panning shot of a luxurious mansion²⁴⁵. A case in point for this argument is the film *Delhi Belly* (2010). The film revolves around the exploits of three young men that share a filthy flat in Delhi. All three work in media: Tashi (Imran Khan), a reporter, Nitin (Kunaal Roy Kapur), a photographer, and Arup (Vir Das), a cartoonist, and none of them make much money. When Tashi's flight attendant girlfriend asks Nitin to deliver a package on her behalf, that unbeknownst to her, contains diamonds, things begin to go wrong. Whether due to his own lack of personal hygiene or the vermin infested food that is strewn around the flat, Nitin develops "Delhi Belly" – food poisoning with diarrhoea. He delivers his stool sample to the drug lord for whom the diamonds are payment, and the diamonds to the doctor, who, inexplicably doesn't touch them, but simply returns the nesting Russian dolls they have been delivered in. As may be expected, the film runs from this premise through many dangerous situations, near misses, and attempts to gain control over the diamonds, and/or the money that becomes the proceeds of them.

²⁴⁵ In *Dhamaal*, *Delhi Belly*, *Siren Dingzhi* for example, much is made of the beautiful homes of the wealthy protagonists, not to mention the attention to detailed discussion of individual fittings in *Raju Ban Gaya Gentleman*.



Fig. 104: Delhi Belly. Tashi (centre) with Sonia and their families. After a dinner spent having his future arranged by others in Sonia's lavish family home, Tashi is given a present: a new Maruti car. Here, in an example of the careful mis-en-scene employed by director Abhinay Deo, everyone puts the weight of expectation on him as he stands looking at the motor, and the mediocrity it represents. The pinkish brown tones of the scene highlight the bright yellow of his bag strap: standing thus, at the centre of the shot, he looks as if he has been crossed off, held back, or marked for demolition, or execution.

And money, it turns out, is what all of them need, at least to begin with: while Tashi has been becoming more interested in another, more mature woman, Menaka (Poorna Jagannathan), his girlfriend Sonia (Shenaz Treasurywala) becomes his fiancée and both families are pushing him inexorably towards the altar, paving the way with gifts and money that are part of the reason that the proposition is hard to give up. Nitin tires of paying for their crumbling hole of a residence, and early on in the film manages to take photos of their landlord with a prostitute with which he is planning to blackmail him so they never pay rent again. Arup's case is saddest of all in many respects: working in a job he dislikes, where he is constantly being given contradictory orders from his manager, he is also not earning enough to be taken seriously by his girlfriend's

family. Without informing him, she is engaged to an Indian-American²⁴⁶ who, stereotypically awed by “exotic” India, and seemingly not very intelligent, swoops in with a preppy sweater tied around his neck to “steal” Arup’s would-be bride, who does not seem all that upset about the arrangement. Arup is so distraught that he shaves his head. The money, then, is the answer to everyone’s prayers, and they drive across town, put themselves in terrible danger, lie, cheat and dress up in burqas to hold on to it, without causing anyone to be killed in the process.



Fig. 105: *Delhi Belly*. A clueless, preppy PIO takes a *Desi* bride, robbing cartoonist Arup, her long-time boyfriend, of his plans for the future.

The film is generally awash in warm, brownish tones, only broken up by the blue of a lavish pool party, and the black of a velvet cloth for glittering diamonds. This suggests to the viewer that the state of things is warm, hot, dirty -- loving, but uncomfortable. In the end, however, in order to preserve the life of Sonia, the group give up their grotesque; the consumer grotesquerie of families, and particularly of money being so present in considerations of romance, had become something that they

²⁴⁶ I hesitate to call the hapless PIO depicted *Desi* in the context of this current discussion, because although he does fall into the category of *Desi-ness* in theory, I do not wish to single him out as *Desi* as opposed to the other characters in the film, when my principle argument is that there is a culture continuum of *Desi-ness* of cultural nation-beyond-borders. It is important that the PIO is Indian-American because aesthetically this is played for laughs.

themselves, in their desire to gain riches, had begun to blunder. When, at the end of the film, Tashi kisses Menaka, sealing the fate of his broken relationship with Sonia, things broken have created value: Tashi's Maruti is totalled, after many a car chase, and fighting off Menaka's violently jealous ex-husband, and the ceiling of the three boys' flat has fallen in, allowing the world of the classical dance instructor who lives above them to finally mingle with the contemporary youth living below. Even Nitin, the source of the "Delhi Belly" itself, gives up his plan to blackmail their landlord, sending all the photos and negatives to him in a fit of humanity. Nitin's mistake caused the action, and in him there is a link between money and illness: he is the one to hit upon blackmail, the most enthusiastic about taking the diamonds, and/or keeping the money, the most willing to sacrifice scruples for wealth. He is injured several times, and he is the hapless member of the group who needs to periodically run off to relieve himself, even painfully washing himself with orange juice when the water was turned off in the flat. The Consumer Grotesque, its roles in parent-child relationships and in young people's realities, are laid bare here, and for an audience that is composed mainly of young people, the film is at once liberating and oddly reflexive: Am I putting money before my authentic dreams? If I do, will I come up smelling of roses, or of shit? The fact that the language of the film is English or at maximum Hinglish, reveals that the target audience is likely middle to upper-middle class, and educated, with a particular emphasis perhaps on those educated abroad, as much as Indian-Americans like Arup's rival are mocked.



Fig. 106: *Delhi Belly*: Having sold the diamonds, Nitin sits in the car with his flatmates counting money, and breathing in its scent. Perhaps this is the antidote to the pervasive waft of the toilet that fills this film, or perhaps it is the true source.

In the *Desi* film world, English is being used as an alternative to Hindi or Hinglish to find audience niches, but also invest popular film with new energy in keeping with the possibilities of the “multiplex film”. *Delhi Belly* starred Bollywood superstar Aamir Khan’s nephew, Imran Khan, and was produced through Aamir’s company, so it would be a mistake to think of *Delhi Belly* as an outsider project, despite the fact that it challenges some assumptions. In China, new(er) popular talents such as Xu Zheng are becoming more and more familiar, and every now and then, something pushes the envelope. The film *Fengkuang de Shitou* (*Crazy Stone*) is just such a film; it helped to launch Xu, and actor Huang Bo, among others, to national stardom. Like *Delhi Belly*, it is not in the most common language of its cinematic context: in fact, *Fengkuang de Shitou* is in a mishmash of dialects, principally the Sichuan-dialect, and not readily intelligible by speakers of standard Mandarin. In fact, the film was immensely and unexpectedly successful, and brought popular director Ning Hao to the fore, serving as a platform for many talents now appearing in the varying landscape of contemporary *Hua* comedies. The film concerns an ancient jade stone discovered on the grounds of an old toilet block, and the scramble of many different parties to obtain it.

Lao Xie (Chen Zhenghua) the elderly owner of the toilet block and nearby buildings, an actor and owner of a handicrafts operation, suddenly has a piece of leverage against a developer (Xu Zheng) to whom he had been at the point of succumbing. To further increase revenue, the owner decides to display the stone, with plans to auction it afterwards, and puts the responsibility for its safe keeping onto his chief of security. But allowing the stone out on display only strengthens the alluring possibility of stealing the object for a group of local thieves, and for a professional cat-burglar hired from Hong Kong by the property developer, who now seeks to have both the property, and the stone found on it. Again, we find ourselves on the hunt for a treasure, and again, everyone is made to look ugly and funny, while in the game. The desire for wealth and the society that breeds it, with its BMWs and high rises, are all derided. As with *Delhi Belly*, in the second decade of the 21st century it seems that wealth and scatology go hand in hand, with money and effluvia sitting together throughout the film. In the first place, the basic premise is that the “crazy” stone, or rather *the stone that makes people crazy*²⁴⁷, is found on the grounds of a toilet block. Secondly, the film opens with the security head, Bao Shixiong (Guo Tao), being unable to urinate due to an infection – this problem persists throughout most of the film, causing him great pain and frustration. Moreover, throughout the film, one of the rather odd crew of local thieves, led by local don Dao Ge (Liu Hua), is frequently to be found in one or another filthy toilet because of *Delhi-Belly*-style stomach complaints. And as if the symbolism were not already entrenched enough, members of that crew that have used a sewer to try to pass undetected, end up trapped within overnight and into the next day. The cinematic style employed by director Ning Hao makes the most of this relationship between

²⁴⁷ The Chinese language title *Fengkuang de Shitou*, can be read as Crazy Stone, or The Stone of Crazyness.

wealth and excrement in the film in split-screens such as the one below. In it, a member of Dao Ge's band is stuck labouring on the toilet while talking to a representative of the property developer who would like to obtain the stone. At this point, both the real stone and a fake one are in play, but neither of the characters below know this. In a choked voice the thief bears down, and at the same time says "The goods you want are in our hands." The contrast between the filthy, cramped, dark interior of the hostel toilet and the rather dated-looking office, with its bottles of well-known liquor brands, and small objets d'art is substantial. However, the play of power – who has the goods? – and the similarity of gesture as both men use silver mobile phones that look alike, mean that this split screen, and others like it, represent more of a rebellious gesture on the part of Ning Hao to make sure that anyone following too closely after money in the film ends up smelling like excrement. In this respect the gesture refashions the consumer grotesque, taking it to its symbolic heights, and using it to erupt into the world of aspiration in its maximal ugliness, in its maximum absurdity, bringing fear and laughter. Scenes like this one also completely undermine the "private", in both senses, rendering both companies and individuals laughable.



Fig. 107: Fengkuang de Shitou. *More bowel movements and valuables, juxtaposed in a split screen.*

We are party to everyone's bowel complaints and urinary infections, blackmail plans, pipe dreams, and money-grubbing schemes. But this brings up an interesting point about these two films, and others: why is everyone so unwell? Health, anxiety over it, and the problematic relationship between health and money, are embedded in both *Delhi Belly*, and *Fengkuang de Shitou* as contextual sources of laughter.

Having healthy children in healthy, loving nuclear families is the ideal of both societies, though the upbringing they receive may be different. And yet, the reality is that the health of the middle class to upper middle class families is highly variable, and possibly deteriorating, for all the economic growth that has occurred in both countries. These groups that are the vanguard of values production, the shapers of contemporary iterations of "tradition", are now beset, in both India and China, with diseases such as diabetes, weight, heart and other problems related to a changed diet, a deteriorating, polluted environment, and to stress. This stress, caused by the strains of a competitive society in the thrall of global capital and consumer culture, is particularly important, both as a social factor and a factor in disease, both physical and psychological. All of these factors can cause relationship problems, as well as affecting general health, including fertility (Lin 2013; Ganguly and Unisa 2010; Baria 2013). Enter *Vicky Donor* (Sircar dir. 2012).

Vicky Donor tells the story of Vicky (Ayushmann Khurrana) an arrogant young lay-about in urban Delhi, and his surprising alliance with Dr Baldev Chaddha (Annu Kapoor). Vicky lives with his mother and grandmother in Lajpatt Nagar, and is close to his Sikh grandmother, who indulges him, while his mother pushes him to get a job and contribute to the family income. But Vicky is vain, full of himself, and unwilling to stoop to getting just any job going, instead holding out for the unlikely event of his getting a position with a high-profile company. He looks down upon his modest

environment, and wants all things luxurious and modern. Meanwhile, Dr. Chaddha, an obsessively dedicated fertility doctor, is hitting a wall: he is unable to find good quality sperm to meet the needs of his clients. Calling his ideal donor, a modern Alexander the Great, with the immense spread of Alexander's genes in mind, Dr. Chaddha search also has a racial edge to it. He is looking particularly for a young, healthy man with genes related to the Aryan²⁴⁸ bloodline, which he connects with Alexander, and believes will provide especially fertile sperm. Seeing Vicky one day, he become convinced that he is the man for the job, and begins a sort of almost romantic campaign to win Vicky over to the idea of donating his sperm, which, as it turns out, can be very lucrative. Vicky at first rejects the idea: sexuality in general being taboo in many circles of Indian society, the implications of donating sperm run particularly counter to most logics of cultural purity, and moral norms, at least superficially. However, under pressure to find a source of income, Vicky decides to give it a go, and the results are excellent, so despite his misgivings, he continues with the job. Dr. Chaddha tries to convince him that donating sperm is a noble deed, and a great boon to those for whom all other treatments have failed. Vicky tries to tell people his occupation but is met with disgust, whereupon he continues in secret, using his substantial earnings to improve his home, and refurbish his

²⁴⁸ This is *not* to be taken with the racial meaning attached to it by the rhetoric of the German Nazi party. Unfortunately "Aryan" is a problematic category whose content has been refilled to suit the politics of the time leading to most egregious consequences. The term properly refers to an Indo-Iranian culture and people, but also later to refer to nobility, as well as places associated with the Indo-Iranian people afore mentioned. The term, as we know was entirely re-invented by the Nazi party, but it has, unfortunately, also been loaded with racial content by ethnographers in India, where, borrowing from the legacy of studies under British colonialism, the Indian subcontinent is divided into two broad swathes of people: the Aryans and the Dravidians. In this discredited understanding the Dravidian peoples are those of the Southern cultures of India whereas the Aryans, who are often figured as superior, are from the North, lighter skinned, and related to the Iranians and Greeks. Thus, when Dr. Chaddha, in *Vicky Donor* especially prizes an Aryan bloodline, he is unfortunately, and explicitly referring to *this* set of racial prejudice and inaccuracy, but *not* the vision of Aryanism as blond and blue-eyed, as put forward by the Nazis in the 30s and 40s. That this particular understanding also has fed into the idea of the centre of *Desi*-ness and even modern Indian-ness being in the Hindi-speaking north, with racial aspects also included, should not be overlooked.

mother's beauty parlour. Nevertheless he goes through several periods where his doubts and social pressure get the better of him. But it is when he falls in love with a Bengali bank clerk, Ashima (Yami Gautam) that Dr. Chaddha despairs that his donor, who is helping so many couples (although the ethics of one "father" being responsible for that many different children is a bit shaky), will soon be lost: he is actually jealous of the loss of sperm represented by Vicky's romantic relationship. It is when Vicky and Ashima marry that things become even more complicated and the secret emerges; upon marrying, Ashima admits that she was briefly married before to someone who left her immediately after their marriage. Vicky, however, does not reciprocate by admitting his source of income. When, after being married for a time, they find that they cannot conceive, Vicky, already the "father" of many children, automatically knows that the fertility problems do not lie with him. Ashima discovers that not only is she unable to bear children, but that Vicky has lied to her, and is distraught. All that Vicky's work has brought to his family is destroyed as friends and neighbours shun him. He is even accused of handling "black money" – specifically the proceeds of sex work – and arrested. Eventually, Dr. Chaddha convinces Vicky to do his best to bring his estranged wife back to Delhi from her parents' home in Kolkata, promising that he will do his best to fix their marriage. Vicky complies, and with the help of Ashima's progressive father, who reminds her of the service he has done for so many unhappy couples, he brings her back. Dr. Chaddha invites them both to a party to celebrate the 25th anniversary of his clinic, and shows them both the many, many happy families that he is responsible for. Finally, he introduces them to a child "fathered" by Vicky whose parents have died in an accident, leaving her orphaned. Vicky and Ashima adopt her, and the film ends with their happy family, and the epilogue that Vicky continued to donate on occasion with Ashima's approval.



Fig. 108: Vicky Donor. A modern “*awaara*” finds an occupation suitable for his lack of commitment, and Raja Babu-like vanity, without initially fully understanding the consequences.

Going into detail with this plot is important for several reasons. Firstly, it touches one of the chief preoccupations of society today in both India and China, and among both *Desi* and *Hua* populations, which is the issue of family, what it means, what it should mean, what values it should instil and which it should omit. As I discuss in more detail in the next section, there are distinct contextual reasons that this focus has become so acute, tied up in the changes wrought by economic growth, urbanisation and economic migration, as well as ongoing social and economic problems related to gender roles, and the gender ratio. So, in societies where there is a great deal of strain put onto the point at which health and family meet, then, it becomes particularly interesting to trace, in a detailed way, how the viewpoints of the individual characters involved in such an emotionally charged subject are portrayed. Particularly, looking at the way their feelings regarding the relationship between money and biology, specifically sperm, changes over time. Dr. Chaddha, who had been almost completely absorbed in the health, and character of the *sperm*, with little regard for the donor other

than as a vessel, becomes more socially invested in Vicky as an individual. Vicky, who had perhaps committed himself to the ultimate in *Consumer Grotesque* by giving up his bodily fluids for money, specifically for a global consumer lifestyle, becomes less selfish, at first broadening his focus to think of his mother's needs, and then his wife's and the population as-a-whole. His sperm donation becomes a social service and not an exchange of money for the body, where it can be likened to sex work, which it is, several times in the film. In other words, what had been a "disgusting", and "selfish" act is sublimated into a social one in a film that, like *Delhi Belly*, did roaring trade at the box office and achieved notoriety, while adopting non-traditional aesthetics: no dance numbers here, although both films produced popular songs²⁴⁹.

So far, this survey of films by younger directors has looked at situations in which characters became absorbed in getting money, were made stunted by it, until such time as an event or the film itself could sublimate or resolve this problem. *Xinhua Lufang (Breakup Buddies)*, also directed by Ning Hao, is quite different, since it starts with the dissolution of a marriage, where a relationship is usually a prime mover to move beyond the material, and the rest of the film is basically about how Geng Hao (Huang Bo), the jilted protagonist, can reassess value in his life, and therefore, love and money. The film is obviously related to Ning Hao's breakout film, *Fengkuang de Shitou*, but is more romantic in flavour, and in style – with a soundtrack including songs by the popular *jingwei* folk/rock artist Hao Yun, and picturesque locations. A Beijing urbanite, and former musician, the heartbroken Geng Hao attempts his journey of discovery via a long road trip from Beijing to Dali with his friend, Hao Yi (Xu Zheng),

²⁴⁹ Actually, the most popular of the songs from *Delhi Belly* was *Bhaag D.K. Bose, (Run, D.K. Bose)*, was very controversial as it is punning on a swear word 'BhosDi Ke' ('fuckers'). The most popular film from *Vicky Donor* was *Pani da Rang (The Colour of Water)*.

a smooth-talking womaniser, with the view to exorcise Geng's marriage from his soul, by means of sinking deeper into a commodification of love, sex and the body: Hao Yi's prescription for a broken heart is to find some "fun". As for Geng Hao, his engagement with this project is highly ambivalent. The film begins as he attacks possessions with a chainsaw to divide them in half: he is distraught by his divorce, and rendering worthless anything that was purchased or owned as part of that life. From there, each of Hao Yi's plans to loosen Geng Hao up, a pretty girl, or even a karaoke club and prostitutes, ends in disaster, because of the reality of a mismatch between emotion and the superficial "good times" Hao Yi's version of the *consumer grotesque* presents. For example, in his first attempt at getting his friend some no-strings-attached fun, they stop and meet with a hairdresser that Hao Yi has been corresponding with online. Given her young age, one could even say he was grooming her, giving her the impression that he was younger than he actually is. In any event, the plan fails as Geng Hao becomes embroiled in the girl's emotional life, and entangled in the vicissitudes of her on-again-off-again relationship. He finds himself in an unplanned and unwanted "love" triangle, being used by the girl as a pawn to get what she wants from her erstwhile lover, while being threatened with violence by the clueless swain. Later, in an episode in which the scene below occurs, Geng Hao tries to use commodification of affection to obtain emotional satisfaction: which is to say, in a knowing re-staging of the famous scene in seminal television series *Beijingren zai Niuyue*, he attempts to pay a prostitute to tell him that she loves him, and make him believe it, if only for a moment²⁵⁰. Drunkenly he draws out more and more money, throwing every bill into the pit of his own pain, as he tries to

²⁵⁰ The scene from *Beijingren zai Niu Yue* has now become a touchstone that has been reference and re-staged multiple times. This rethinking is particularly painful and poignant, with none of the bitter-sweet power play of the original.

convince the prostitute he is with to comply, and to make it real, but money will not buy love. The strong red/blue contrast employed below highlights the redness of the 100 Yuan bills and the red of Geng Hao's face, linking his desperation directly to the money itself. The mise-en-scene makes the most of the money, showing it spread out, fan-like, to exaggerate the huge quantity of bills even more simply by having them take up more space in the shot, and also by suggesting that in some way this fan can soothe Geng's sweaty desperation.



Fig. 109: Xinhua Lushang (2014). *Excess has become more excessive, as lack has become more keenly felt in a society running against pressing dilemmas.*

In the end, it is not through emptying out the meaning of love that Geng Hao's ghosts are exorcised, but, through the deepening of his friendship with Hao Yi, and through his return to meet himself, to revisit his old memories in Dali, the ghost of his ex-wife and his past self can be accepted. This is made explicit by Ning Hao in the fact that the story line of how Geng Hao met his ex-wife Kang Xiaoyu (Yuan Quan) in Dali. Her journey to that place, is played out for the audience as if it were happening in the present, rather than the past, where we are not party to the fact that the woman whose story we have been following is, in fact the ex-wife of Geng at all. Geng manages to salvage his good memories and at the same time, trick his friend into kissing him as his

“last wish”, and Xu Zheng’s ability to play the moment for laughs only confirms his place in the new *Hua* comedy pantheon.

The fact that Xu Zheng has emerged as one of the most recognisable and prevalent figures in contemporary comedy is obviously dependent on his considerable abilities as actor and director, but also on the type of character he tends to play. Ge You has been the face of the common man in *Hua* cinema for many years, basically a good guy, imperfect but usually well-intentioned, or playing against type as a villain, usually of a scheming or weak variety, as in *Tianxia Wu Zei* (*A World without Thieves* Feng dir. 2004) and *Rang Zidan Fei* (*Let the Bullets Fly* Jiang dir. 2010). But Xu is the face of the contemporary middle-class man, usually the contemporary middle-class man gone wrong. Xu Zheng, in *Fengkuang de Shitou*, *Xinhua Lufang*, the *Jiong* films, and others, such as *Aiqing Hujiao Zhuanyi* (*Call for Love* Zhang dir. 2007), plays men whose relationships have gone awry, normally divorced, or nearing divorce, mostly due to overwork and/or womanising. He is consistently portrayed as morally ambivalent, deeply embedded in the lack of understanding of human value that typifies the *consumer grotesque*, instead concerning himself with superficial pleasures and the money that can buy them. Thus it follows that in this new landscape of comedy, such a character, will often be teamed up with a *sidhi-sada*-style, sincere innocent, the most extreme version of which contrast is to be found in the *Jiong* films, where he appears opposite Wang Baoqiang, who specialises in this type of role.



Fig. 110: *Ren zai Jiong Tu zhi Tai Jiong* (Lost in Thailand). *Sincerity Sidhi-sada* has gone up a notch, and become even funnier as a consequence. Bao Bao's (Wang Baoqiang) dedication to both religion and his mother seems both admirable and absurd, as Xu Lang (Xu Zheng) braces himself for a long wait while Bao approaches each Buddha for blessings.

Ren zai Jiong Tu (Lost on Journey) and *Ren Zai Jiong Tu zhi Tai Jiong* (Lost in Thailand) are part of a crop of *bromances* and road movies²⁵¹. In considering the developing landscape of *Hua* and *Desi* comedies, I wish to suggest that, in general terms, as consumer culture has become more developed and entrenched in both societies, so the characterisations of grotesquerie and sincerity have only become more extreme. Whether this is a reaction to the growth of other mainstream trends or not, we can see that religion, and family have become more important, and the “gross-out” factor of excess has grown in a commensurate way as well. I suggest that this reflects growing fear, and growing absurdity, where comedy provides a good way to sublimate these, even if it cannot dispel them. The blend of themes emerging: family, bromance, youth, and the styles that are in evidence, from gross-out humour, to the road movie,

²⁵¹ Looking at the plots of *Break up Buddies* and the *Jiong* series it already begins to be apparent that we are looking at a trend.

resonate across the *Hua* and *Desi* comedy landscapes, where they reflect similar clusters of problems. Racist and sexist jokes and portrayals persist in both industries.



Fig. 111: Ren zai Jiong Tu. *In this famous scene, wronged dairy farmer seeking money owed him is told that he cannot bring the large quantity of milk he has come with onto the plane he wishes to board. Not wishing to waste what for him is the equivalent of money, he proceeds to drink it all, then struggling to keep it all in once on the flight. On the side of good or bad, we have entered the age of the “ick” factor.*

As I have described above, the growth of the middle classes, and a consumer economy, of which popular cinema is itself a part, has given rise to a distinct set of phenomena in both *Hua* and *Desi* comedy films since the 1990s, where both humour and social commentary are derived from the lack, and excess of the “vulgar” *Consumer Grotesque*, as I have termed it. Sincerity, or innocence, have become its foil. The full range of spectacle described by different manifestations of this within the comedy genres of both Hindi and Mandarin language film industries, which encompass both laugh-out-loud amusements, and comedies of the happy ending, serve to critique wealth, those who have it, and those who pursue it, while at the same time aspiring to it and goading the very consumption it disavows. Moreover, they settle the dramatic field into a normative whole. In contrasting the pure desires of the poor with the perverse aims of

the wealthy, as in the films of Feng Xiaogang, highlighting the greed of the rich establishment that stands in the way of love between classes, as in so many Hindi films of this era, or laughing at the grotesques people make of themselves when pursuing riches, even to the point of commodifying themselves, these films further explore the problems of the gulf between rich and poor within these developing economies. This gap is no secret, and a problem that the governments of India and China are attempting to face through economic and social policies, while trying to soothe the anxieties of the middle classes that are key to domestic consumption, and thus have a strong influence.

Each of these specific themes relates, in fact, to a distinct social problem-set present in both India and China, and so it should not be too much a surprise that they appear in both *Hua* and *Desi* films. Romance across the tracks relates to the consumer grotesque in that it unsettles class hierarchies, which, despite past political movements designed to erase them, persist in both India and China, through political dynasties, wealth dichotomies, lack of opportunity and social mobility and in the case of India, caste. In a middle class genre, the smelting of such hierarchy can be met with both humour and fear. The urgent and problematic issue of so-called “left-behind children” (Waldmeir 2015) which has arisen in different ways as a consequence of the drive to take advantage of economic growth on the part of rural people has presented a need to shore up family structure²⁵². This has consistently been a preoccupation of both political

²⁵² In China, the population of children left behind when their parents migrate to cities to seek work is thought to be roughly equivalent to the population of the United Kingdom. The Indian situation is somewhat different, largely because of the level of freedom of movement, but the rural to urban migration for economic purposes is very obviously a significant phenomenon and one that is continuing grow. Despite periodic unrest, which can often amount to violent clashes, the large contingent of economic immigrants to Mumbai from Uttar Pradesh for example, has given rise to a significant Bhojpuri pop culture in the city, and also a large number of children who grow up without at least one parent.

and middle classes as shown in policy (Uberoi 1996) and culture. As we have seen above, the threat of divorce as a consequence over under-commitment to the emotional needs of the maily, particularly on the part of career-focused middle and upper-class men has become a theme in *Hua* film in particular. Returning to a *Hua*-culture specific form of family values²⁵³ has therefore become an urgent project in film, exemplified by the plots of the *Jiong* series, where the family is brought back together, often through the device of holidays. The development of so-called “Bromance” as a theme in both *Hua* and *Desi* film, and also the road movie as a comedy genre type for exploring that theme can be linked to the serious problem of “surplus males”, a consequence of gender selection in both India and China. The male-focused high school and college film also point to this and the development of consumer youth culture. Further, in the manner in which these issues are handled, we can see the growth of consumer culture, and globalisation, with ambivalent results. Indeed, on a *meta* level, as is the case for Feng Xiaogang and others, including David Dhawan, popular filmmaking has gone hand in hand with a career in television and advertising.

The preoccupation with youth films is worth another mention before moving on. It resonates in both countries: youth films and romantic comedies aimed at the young are growing areas, backed up by young adults’ increased consumer power, and, in India, a youthful population (Krishna 2015). That the leaders of both countries are significantly older, representing systems authority that are problematic at best only underlines this. These are themes that I have mentioned in my analysis above, but below I will show

Moreover, movement of families, or the very young, has a knock on effect on education of the migrant population and those they leave behind.

²⁵³ *Hua*-culture specific, and therefore in keeping with contemporary visions of both tradition and modernity that inform identity today

how these particularly resonate with the dramatic divide between the wealthy and the poor where partners taken from.

Youth, College, and Romance “Across-the-Tracks”

The development of youth culture into an aesthetic phenomenon that can be given serious and sustained attention on screen is one of the key developments over the period of my study. After years of unrest, war, and “emergency”, although times are uncertain, it can be safe to say that school has become an increasingly unifying locus of nostalgia, and thus the uncanny, and the humorous. Yet on film at least, *Hua* and *Desi* works tend to find themselves focusing less on antics in High School, as seen in the USA of the 1980s, for example, and more on “College” as a time of freedom and experimentation²⁵⁴. There are many possible reasons for this.

Firstly, one could point to the intense competition at the High School/*Gao Zhong/Secondary* (to *Tenth Standard*) level in both countries given the relative paucity of good university places and the necessity of education to find decent paying jobs that will satisfactorily cover cost of living, with rising prices, attendant payments for health services and to ensure smooth relations, plus even having some sort of hope at owning a home of any kind. To be sure, nostalgia about these earlier teenage years exists, but the emotions expressed in these experiences, whether in film, television, popular novels or comic books, tends to be one of pining for lost innocence. Less, houseparties, alcohol and sex, and more cycle rides and holding hands, although some films have begun to challenge this. The popular view, despite a reality that is far less homogeneous on the matter, is that Indian and Chinese households, indeed *Desi* and *Hua* households as a

²⁵⁴ It is notable, for example, that popular novels or graphic novel series for the youth market often revolve around secondary school.

whole, are too strict and family-oriented to allow this “free” behaviour while young people are living at home, and that such high school students are in any case too busy with work to have time for this kind of experimentation.

College then, the time of leaving home that is the last available period with potential for freedom of expression before continuing on the expected and “traditional” cultural trajectory of career, marriage and children, of the taxpaying *householder* stage of life, where, in both societies, preparing to support, or actually supporting elder members of the household in addition to building a new generation, becomes imperative. The fact of the presence of college in comedy films, or even as a place of comedy, as well as self discovery in more serious films, from *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (*Something Happens* Johar dir. 1998), to *3 Idiots*, from *Zhongguo Hehuoren* to *Wanwu Shengzhang* (*Ever Since We Love*. Li, Yu dir. 2015)²⁵⁵. Scenes of hazing, as below, are good examples of the combinations of subversive carnival, and the need to create or replicate normative structure. We can derive a great deal of pleasure from the fear of anarchy and the maintenance of a kind of order, order that has a particularly dominant place in the psychological lives of *Hua* and *Desi* young people, I would argue²⁵⁶.

Another pertinent reason that college is the primary place explored in these films rather than high school is the demographic profile of their primary audiences: the middle classes, as we have discussed. College is by no means a universal collective

²⁵⁵ *Wanwu Shengzhang* represents a new wave of adaptations of contemporary literature. If Wang Shuo was a driving force to the comedy of Feng Xiaogang, and has had a strong influence on comedy and culture, author Feng Tang, also arguably a new layer in the history of *Jingwei*, is making his new brand of “vulgarity” felt. Meanwhile, popular but deeply polarised authors/public figures Han Han and Guo Jingming, are also pushing the boundaries of popular literature, popular cinema, and popular comedy, in different directions.

²⁵⁶ This is not to say that young people of *Hua* and *Desi* communities, whether in China or India or the diaspora, adhere to social order uncritically, or at all, but rather, that because of the importance placed on social order (albeit differently expressed) there is a greater need to address it, whether to follow or to critique.

experience in either India or in China. The specific use of this kind of nostalgia is that it creates a unifying experience for a group of people who have to be given one to galvanize around. For non-college-attendees, it gives an amusing spectacle, and an opportunity to laugh at the moneyed. It gives creative students an injustice to challenge: yet another instance where comedy serves as both a place of push against norms and to reinforce them. Let us consider *Munna Bhai MBBS* in this connection. The film concerns a family-oriented gangster thrusting himself into an intellectual environment in order to prove a point, and giving an alternative viewpoint that challenges the status quo along the way. There is a romantic ending, and some norms remain intact (the structure of the medical school that munna attends, for example), while others are challenged forever, with the establishment of an *alternative therapy clinic* focused on personalised care and physical contact. Further, a character whose very presence, his language and style rubs contrary to the establishment, and even creates a source of both amusement and fear, turns out to be a kind of unlikely hero, the overall effect is comic, but heart-warming, and thought provoking. Nevertheless, Munna participates in rituals like “ragging” or hazing, making it difficult to say whether he is truly disrupting them or not.



Fig. 112-13 Munna Bhai MBBS: *The high angle shot allows us to look down upon the spectacle of the all-male hazing victims, making them smaller, and even more pathetic in stature.*

Below: Munna disrupts this ritual, as much as he wishes to be included, by threatening the general principle of embarrassing the students due to his mature and strong body. His performance calls a halt to proceedings, even as he asks about what is next on the agenda.



One fact worth keeping in mind is that disruptors like Munna also operate as outsiders with regard to class. Thus the comedy and nostalgia combination provided by the relative freedom of the secondary or tertiary educational context has allowed a mixture of classes and background that opens up space for resistance and relationships, both of a platonic and a romantic nature.

As I have mentioned, love across the tracks is nothing new in Hindi and Mandarin film either, especially in the *Desi* film context, but the nature of these prohibitive divides, what they are composed of, is a key question. Related to this is what can be thought of as a step too far, a divide that cannot be surmounted. In all the films of director David Dhawan that I have discussed above there is a story of lovers divided.

For example, in *Raja Babu*, the principal wedge between Raja and Madhubala was his lack of education, as compared with her higher level of schooling. The film then layered this with more traditional issues of pride as Madhu *herself* refused the match quite rudely, shaming Raja's father before the community. In *Jodi No.1*, although Jai and Veeru are really the "Jodi No.1" (No. 1 Pair) of the title, they do end up carrying out their desire to have relationships with the daughters of their well to do host, who they are all the while conning. The relationships were not possible before because of their devotion to money, but once they have reconciled their true, (good) natures with their criminal (bad) identities they are naturally rewarded with the erasure of the divide between themselves and the objects of their affections. Finally, *Partner*, the most recent of Dhawan's films included in this study, shows two pairs: two men, trying to win over two women. Bhaskar (Govinda) is in love with the wealthy and beautiful Priya, and wins her over, but in the classic Bollywood style finds himself running against the obstacle of her father and her father's wishes.

Love beyond a divide in the *Hua* film context is somewhat different: class and family divisions exist strongly in society in China, but how to address these issues in an environment that is pinched between tradition and policy (Qi et al. 2014) is a complex task. With regard to family or background influence on relationships, therefore, the focus is much more squarely placed on the problems of divorce, and family dissolution, or lack of moral centre. The most common barrier that young men in particular face on the *Hua* screen is difference in perceived attractiveness between themselves and the objects of their desires, and this itself is played for laughs. At times, we can read this in a similar way to the argument given by Prem in *Partner* that is his job to help the lovesick innocents of the world to overcome the fact that in a society that values money and looks their brand of endearing "siddha-sada" simplicity just goes unnoticed,

neglected. On the other hand, in an age where love across classes can be a bit difficult to work out, this attractiveness-level differentiation can also serve as a code for class. For example, in Feng Xiaogang's famous 2008 *hesui pian Fei Cheng Wu Rao (If You are the One)*, Qin Fen (Ge You), who refers to himself as unaccomplished, enters the ranks of the nouveau riche by means of a tongue-in-cheek invention and an angel investor, as I have described in previous chapters. He then falls in love with considerably younger flight attendant Xiao Xiao (Shu Qi) and while there is no specific discussion of her family background, or any money that she may have had, her educational level, and so forth, despite his ealth, Qin Fen seems to feel awed, even out-classed. His classic, rough Beijing accent contrasts with her smooth, cool-toned Taiwanese Mandarin. And as much as we obviously know that this was not a college romance, the general point of an outsider being the agent of normative upset holds in this case as well, it is Qin Fen, someone who has radically changed his status in a short period of time, who tries, however cautiously, to change his options.

Road Movies and Bromances

I have particularly highlighted above the issues of youth, college and romance across-the-tracks in the *Desi* case as there are many ready examples in a *comedy* context, while those issues are more likely to be explored chiefly from within a dramatic framework in a *Hua* film context, although the same issues do arise. Below, I want to primarily focus on the Mandarin-language, *Hua* context with regard to themes of Road Movies and “Bromance” because this is where we have seen more change in recents years, with this genre emerging as a force.

As I have mentioned, many *Hua* comedies can now be considered Bromance films and/or road movies, where the road as a process and a metaphor allows time for a

relationship to deepen, for self-realisation to occur, and for men who might not have been so forthcoming to open up about their fears and dreams. Feng Xiaogang has never made a comedy bromance²⁵⁷ or road movie, unless one can count the relationship between You You and the moribund director in *Dwan* to be one. This investment in male/male friendship then, is a new response to changes in society, in the problems that the audience, state and market want to see exorcised on screen. Current gender imbalances, the misogyny of the society created confusion, along with the face of an increasing rate of divorce have led to a need for male friendships to be prized as a source of solace, and a place to work things out, in addition to simply being a backdrop to locker-room chatter. Little wonder then, that *Ren zai Jiong Tu* a re-thinking, if not a remake, of John Hughes' 1987 film *Planes, Trains and Automobiles*, in which Neal Page (Steve Martin) and Del Griffith (John Candy) get stuck again and again on their way from New York to Chicago. In *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* as in *Ren zai Jiong Tu*, the impetus of the two men in their goal is different: the executive (Neal Page and Li Chengong both play this type of role), is trying to reach his family in time for an important holiday of reunion (in *PTA*, this is Thanksgiving, the ultimate American holiday. In *RzJT* it is Chinese New Year, again a strongly *cultural* holiday); meanwhile the blue collar partner (Del/Niu Geng) is, at least ostensibly, on an ongoing quest after money, albeit not a very serious quest, as money is not a value or end in itself for these characters. Their investments into their family and friends seem to be higher priorities. Their personal style reflects this well: Del, in Hughes' film, is ready to tell Neal what he thinks of him, if pushed, a quality different from that displayed by Niu Geng, whose sunny outlook rarely falters. It is worth remembering the extent to which contemporary

²⁵⁷ The only bromance one could suggest in his work is *Jijie Hao (Assembly)*, a dramatic war film, which of course is the other main backdrop for male-male relationships in cinema, besides the trope of the road.

Hua and *Desi* films are increasingly becoming driven by the schedule of holidays, and their expanding commercialisation. From the timed releases at Diwali and Chinese New Year, the financial implications of a holiday release are clear, but the increasing presence/reinvention of Chinese New Year, Mid-Autumn Festival, Diwali and other traditional holidays, such as Raksha Bandhan, Eid, Karva Chauth, family rituals, and religious beliefs on the commercial screen in India and China at present should also be noted as a very much related phenomenon. This commercialisation of holidays affects domestic and diaspora populations, and brings the *Consumer Grotesque*, and the “traditional” closer together, perhaps, than ever before. For example, internet services to send sweets for Diwali to family homes in India from abroad, as well as many such domestic services, or even the ability to participate in religious activities remotely. The emphasis on holidays as a point of family togetherness in an increasingly atomised society, or in any case, a society that fears increased atomisation and individualism, is a phenomenon that shows quite clearly the tensions of building a new set of cultural nationalist values within a contemporary context, and certainly this is an area that could lead to fruitful future study.

Conclusion

Comedy within the *Desi* and *Hua* contexts, is central to defining the boundaries of social inclusion, and moral norms, especially as these norms change, and especially for a cultural nation beyond borders that uses media to communicate its contours. Comedy, as the ultimate expression of the film-as-consumable, forces us to think about value, and re-assess values consistently, in a sort of exchange rate with all other values, such as progress. The history of humour in India and China informs what kind of humour is employed and the socio-cultural reaction to it, and the history of comedy cinema helps determine the form in which the humour is deployed. In heterotopias that allow space

for intersection between compliance and resistance, where multiple directions can be taken simultaneously, the romantic and the cynical about society and the common man are being continuously smelted down to create new forms of comedy, and of norm in an era of economic liberalisation.



Fig. 114: *Ren zai Jiong Tu zhi Tai Jiong*. A car chase begins as *Baobao* (Wang Baoqiang) and *Xu Lang* (Xu Zheng) embark upon another leg of their journey through the hazards of contemporary society to the fullness of family values.

Grotesque is ironically a feature present in both forms that at once challenges and exposes the conditions and culture of economic growth. Its laughter ridicules norms while holding them together, and making them more attractive, through the growth of attention to holidays (also seen in the history films in chapter four) and “social” or “family” values, the wealthy are brought to earth, redeemed, reunited, relieved of the grotesque. The middle-class, consumerist audience is given a cathartic experience, after being allowed a heterotopic space *and* being roped in as cultural/moral police defining proper limits/modern manifestations of *Hua* and *Desi*. The petit bourgeois nature of this form and this cinema is undeniable, where it continues to opine the loss of proper values while displaying the very consumption on screen, whether in the form of beautiful Hainanese villas or rhinestone encrusted *sherwani*, that is being critiqued. From this association it can be called an urban form, viewing the pastoral/rural, or the lower socio-

economic groups²⁵⁸ as exotic, pure. Even in the trends that currently exist to deliberately make a point of lacking any such moral core, in for example, the films by Guo Jingming that are based on his *Xiao Shidai (Tiny Times)* series of books, the pastoral/rural exists in its very erasure. Our understanding of the realm of the *aam admi* or *lao baixing* has become almost touristic. And in history films, mythic history is similarly a *place* that we can tour.

²⁵⁸ Because of the rural/urban divide in economic progress in both India and China this often amounts to the same thing.

Chapter 4. History, War and Competition: Making a Nation, Making a Myth

Contemporary India and China share a distinction from other countries in that the burgeoning sense of their contemporary cultural identity is rooted in present-day understandings of *both* the “*ethnic*” - a construct that seeks to reach back into mythic history²⁵⁹- and the *conceptual*, which forges a nation against its philosophical and physical environment, or onslaught²⁶⁰. This can be thought of as the bringing together of two modern facets of a modern idea: the nation state. However, in the case of India and China today, with their respective related transnational *Hua* and *Desi* “nations”, this combination of ethnic and conceptual becomes particularly potent, and transmissible. Films that tackle a speculative “national” history, which is to say “history films”, combine these two elements, providing opportunities for identification that are pertinent to multiple populations under the signs of *Hua* and *Desi*, whether they be diasporic or domestic in the strictest sense. Thus, perhaps more than any of the other genres or film types examined in this thesis, this one is directly geared towards the production of cultural nationalism. Further, as a fairly loose genre, with “something for everyone” (Hughes-Warrington (2007) 38) whether based on factual events or fictions taking place

²⁵⁹ It is arguable that ethnicity is constructed, and itself serves as a pathway.

²⁶⁰ When we speak of the “ethnic” here we should be aware that it itself is a time-contextual concept, that nevertheless frequently seeks to link together the present and past along cultural and racial lines. We may compare this state of affairs with that of the USA, for example, can, as it has been established partially through the erasure of indigenous peoples, be thought of as effectively a concept, giving rise to a contested blend of ethnicities, having no resource to reach into the mythic past of embodied indigeneity except via hyphenated identities. The UK, by contrast, has a complex relationship with what its philosophy constitutes, although many suggestions exist, mostly, again rooted in war, particularly WW2 and the idea of the so-called “stiff upper-lip”. Its ethnicity is problematized as well, partially on grounds of proximity and remembrance of the nationalism it opposed during WW2, and a collective memory of Empire that is at once embarrassing and exciting, not to mention the reality of its fragmented and often invaded landmass. France’s “Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité”, is consciously, and conspicuously conceptual, being at odds with its own existence prior to the Revolution, the glamour of which consistently provides an ongoing term of reference in the construction of ideas about modern French culture from “laïcité” to “chic”.

in a notionally factual past, history films contain an added layer of potency by virtue of an implicit kind of truth claim²⁶¹. Below, I consider what types of history films are in current circulation in Hindi and Mandarin popular cinema, what they do, and how they do it. Moreover, I consider what the film types I identify do and do not have in common, both within the broad genre²⁶², and between similar films in the two markets inter-operate to produce the cultural nationalist backbone of *Hua* and *Desi*.

National history, mythic and martial, distant and recent, provides the bread and butter of identity politics on film in India and China. For although the range of what constitutes a history film, even whether history film exists as a genre at all, is disputed (Hughes-Warrington (2007) 36; Altman (1999)), for our purposes we can tie together films based in the past that relate to these themes which inform the principal content of contemporary cultural nationalism as described above: the *ethnic* and the *conceptual*. There has been a broad range of popular history films produced since 1990. Some seem to challenge official history, such as *The Legend of Bhagat Singh*²⁶³ (Santoshi,

²⁶¹ The fact that something is in the past, that it contains a completed action that takes place in a specific time and space, imply at the very least a not-knowing status, a possibility of truth. Even if the events themselves are fictional, when placed in the context of facts and real events in a manner that effectively puts both fact and fiction on an even footing, the line is blurred, and at least an authentic experience is implied. This is all the more true of events taking place in times and spaces where the means of producing the Imagined Community, of recording events as they occurred were limited or non-existent. For although we know that even if we were to film our surroundings 24 hours a day we would still be in the process of curating a kind of lie, the temptation is to view any gaps between as replete with possibility. One good example of the will to smooth over the differences between fact and fiction is the use of labels of name and rank in the two propagandistic history films *Jian Guo Da Ye* and *Jian Dang Wei Ye*, which I will discuss below. At the same time, in many academic contexts, as Hughes Warrington describes, the category of “historical film” may perhaps be used “pejoratively, as with ‘chick-flick’ or ‘women’s weepie’” (37).

²⁶² Ironically, as Hughes-Warrington points out, despite the evidence that a wide array of popular “historical” films is produced in India and China, non-Western historical cinematic output is even less respected than that of Hollywood (42).

²⁶³ As I explain below, the *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* is one of a spate of films that may be seen as rebelling against the received understanding of the role of violence in the emancipation of India from

Rajkumar dir. 2002), to those that cleave to it closely, such as *Jian Guo Da Ye (The Founding of a Republic)*. Han, Sanping and Jianxin Huang dirs. 2009), from the mythic *Chibi (Red Cliff)*. Woo, John dir. 2009/10²⁶⁴) and *Jodhaa Akbar* (Gowariker, Ashutosh dir. 2008) to stylised realism in the modern war movie *Jijie Hao (Assembly)*. Feng Xiaogang dir. 2007) all, by and large, nevertheless present in stark terms, binary “us” versus “them” mentalities²⁶⁵. This is to say that in this wide ranging genre of “history film”, there is no dearth of facility for *Othering*²⁶⁶, which is nothing less than efficient opportunity for national self-definition against a construction of enmity. As used all over the world, here history films convey constructs of self-as-group and vice versa. This is both described by the positive content of the nation-on-screen²⁶⁷, and through

British rule. We may perceive this shift as contrary to the received, yet also in harmony with current political trends.

²⁶⁴*Chi Bi* can be considered one long film of more than 4 hours, but was released in two portions in Asian markets, with the first film being released in 2009, and the second half following the next year, after what one may think of as a year-long intermission. In the USA and certain other markets however, the film was released in a highly redacted form that collapsed both films into one movie of just over 2 hours. For the purposes of this chapter I treat *Chi Bi Shang* and *Chibi Xia (Red Cliff 1 and Red Cliff 2)* as one film, but note the fact of the film’s split. After all, was the division into two sections purely to make sure that the audience’s attention did not wander, or was it to build interest? Was it for economic or artistic reasons, or perhaps both?

²⁶⁵ Probably the most complex of the films in this chapter’s analysis in this regard is Feng Xiaogang’s *Jijie Hao*, which ironically has been criticised as propaganda mainly, in my view, for the reason that it was awarded a film prize by the North Korean regime.

²⁶⁶ I want to make very clear the distinction that I make when utilising Said’s often misused term. As I outlined in the introduction to this thesis, I am putting forward an argument that the process of creating a *Hua* or *Desi* identity is the process of creating a global, modern, *Subject*, a central reference point from which additional groups can be *Othered*. The model wherein peoples of the “non-West” were precisely constructed as a consistent *Other*, *subaltern* group that challenges power from that position. While Western hegemony is, no doubt, still a substantial force to contend with, my central position is that due to economic changes, socio-economic transformation has occurred in confluence with changes to the global balance of power. This has affected the public, State, market, and filmmakers, and has influenced the nature of the production of subjectivity in the two countries in various ways, some similar and some different. Nevertheless, the central change has been the refocusing of perceived subjectivity and power within a widening global field that further allows *Othering* to occur, even of one Asian country by another for example, and this is no less true of India and China.

²⁶⁷ Whether that nation is politically or ethnically related to the current regime in real terms.

contrast: everything that the nation, and its heroes are *not* also serves as a reference point. At times, these two methods can even merge²⁶⁸ allowing enemies, both external and internal, to be faced with group dynamics, quashing impulses that are at odds with the cultural nation, aligning *ethnicity* and *concept* to purge any ambiguity about them. This process need not be transparently proscriptive, and these films are often identified with uplift; the aim, I argue, is in fact to define a group by engendering *pride*²⁶⁹ a basic unit of currency in the economy of cultural nationalism. For this, these films are sometimes hated, and for this they are often loved.



Fig. 115: Scene from song sequence in *The Legend of Bhagat Singh*. The film emphasizes patriotism at the service of a larger Socialist, but nation-focused cause, for which everything can be sacrificed from family, to religion, to life itself, and is modelled as being given up with joy and pride. The hero, Bhagat Singh (Ajay Devgan, foreground) leads the way.

Indeed, these films are not only loved, but lauded. They are often prize material, chalking up one *Golden Horse* after another; in fact, prizes specifically created to

²⁶⁸ One need only think of the US/Russian confrontation of Rocky for an obvious example in cinema, or the plot of Wang Shuo's 1989 novel *Please Don't Call me Human* for an uncomfortably humorous portrayal of a declaration of war being placed upon the ignominy of defeat itself in *pessoptimist* nations.

²⁶⁹ It is easily argued that other films, such as the diaspora films I analysed in chapter 2, are geared to do this through the process of confrontation, however since the role of popular history films in India and China is, I argue, specifically to elucidate an ethnic and/or conceptual identity they have the

honour films that “unify” the nation, or reinforce national “spirit” seem to have such films in mind. One such is the prize for films of “National Integration”, India’s Nargis Dutt Award, which emanates from the Directorate of Film Festivals (DFF). Yet, as much as both the public and awards committees seem to have an understanding of what constitutes a “history” film, and as much as we know that in keeping with the overall thrust of contemporary cultural identity they pursue both the *ethnic* and *conceptual*, the genre itself is loose, and gives rise to many questions. How do different kinds of exploration of the past express these different pillars of contemporary identity value? What do the broad range of “history films” have in common, apart from taking place at some point in the past? Why would one type be more successful in a given market than another? And how is identity not only represented, but brought to inspire *affect* in the audience by them?

In this chapter I survey two main types in the portrayal of history in *Hua* and *Desi* cinemas identified through my research as being relevant to both markets; I examine what their effects are, and what relationships exist between them while also noting where they diverge, where questions for further study arise. These categories are: mythic history, modern history films, predominantly of war. Both of these can be said to feed into the cultural nationalist element that combines, in tension, with modernity, development and globalisation to give rise to the cultural nations of *Hua* and *Desi*.

Mythic history films, I argue, for the most part represent an attempt to build a connection to *ethnicity* in a fantastical past. These films link both to earlier literary forms that predate the invention of the modern nations of India and China, and to an actual recorded history of peoples, and thereby are key in illustrating the desired cultural and ethnic foundation whose truth claims are difficult to unpick with certainty, and

whose mythology is of extreme importance in the growth of contemporary *Hua* and *Desi*.

Modern history films, where, in the main, I identify war films of the modern nation often concerning its founding, frequently by means of violent struggle, or protection of its borders. These by contrast with films of *mythic* history represent and make legendary the real physical pains taken to create and maintain the modern *conceptual* nation states of India and China. These films add a modern sediment to the construction of cultural nationalism, and tie the ethnic nations to the places, India and China, that as I have argued before, would seek to be viewed as their originating centres.

The sweep of all these films under the umbrella of *history* tends to be dramatic, even melodramatic, with a surfeit of evocative visual language to digest, including abundant CGI and dramatic camera techniques. There is a great deal to examine in this richness of visual language as well as the plot and context of the films. Therefore, I will attempt to concentrate my efforts in the analysis of this chapter, looking at 5 pairs of films below in detail, each of which exemplifies certain aspects of the will to mythologize, to crystalize, which I believe is an underpinning desire in both (sub)genres. The first pair, two mythical histories: *Jodhaa-Akbar* (Gowariker, Ashutosh) and *Chibi (Red Cliff)*. John Woo dir. 2007 and 2008), I will also make reference to other Mythic Histories such as *Asoka* (Sivan, Santosh dir. [2001]) and *Kongzi (Confucius)*. Hu, Mei dir. 2010), and comment on the relationship between *Wuxia* or martial arts films and *mythic history* in the Chinese context. In the second section I will take a wider survey, looking at three pairs of films as I feel that they exemplify splits and developments within “official history” of the nation state in the contemporary era and the portrayal of protagonists as successes and failures. These

films are: *1942: A Love Story*, *Mangal Pandey* and *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* on the *Desi* side, and *Jian Dang Wei Ye (The Beginning of the Great Revival)*, *Jian Guo Da Ye (The Founding of a Republic)* and *Jijie Hao (Assembly)* on the *Hua*; I also make some reference to the films *1942 (Back to 1942)* Feng, Xiaogang dir. 2012), *Border* (Dutta, J.P. dir. [1997]), *Mission Kashmir* (Chopra, Vidhu Vinod dir. 2000), and even *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* (Hirani, Rajkumar dir. 2006) here.

Among these different history films there may be elements of critical dialogue with the prevailing invention of history, yet nevertheless, the challenge itself is frequently subsumed into the overall narrative of hegemony, as with comedy. However, as I argue this is particularly evident in modern histories, where new interpretations of histories *within living memory* that in both countries have already been sculpted and split.²⁷⁰ How the contemporary should be understood, connected to the past, and invoked, are very noticeable, particularly in the portrayal, or lack thereof, of Mao Zedong and Mahatma Mohandas Gandhi. Here, in the age of media, positioned on the edge of uncertainty, but in the light of growing global-facing confidence, *Hua*-ness and *Desi*-ness are essential tools. However, in such a context, that *Hua* and *Desi*-ness should, it seems, be composed of heroes²⁷¹ on whose shoulders to stand, and whose clothes we may inhabit. History films are a significant space where these heroes can take on the illusion of flesh and blood as figured in light and shadow.

Ethnicity, in the form that we see it imagined on the screen today, can be said to be closely related to *myths of origin*. Which myth of origin a society chooses to believe

²⁷⁰ Here, I am particularly thinking not only of the many violent re-interpretations of events under China's communist leadership, but also the controversial and divisive figures of Indira Gandhi and indeed "father of the nation" Mohandas Gandhi.

²⁷¹ Again, the subjects of mythologization of this type are generally male, with a few notable exceptions, which I will mention, such as Indian Olympic boxer, Mary Kom, whose biopic was met with praise.

- how “we” got here, where “we” come from, and how “our” distinctive culture was born – clearly has a great deal to its vision of self, but it also varies significantly according to context and the aims of those promulgating such a myth, even whether a society chooses to view it as a “myth” or not. The claim of 5000 years of continuous history, frequently made in Chinese and *Hua* discourse around the world is an example of this. The fact that critically it is more than a little hard to prove such a continuity, and that such a history is, at the very least, full of multivalences, admixtures, influences and cosmopolitanisms, indicated by religious variance, cultural change, and simultaneous dynastic claims, can be actively edited in the process of myth-making. They can also be fully absorbed, or indeed erased. Indeed, focus on origins of this type is common to India and the *Desi* discourse as well, connecting the “Aryans” with Sikander, the Sanskrit name for Alexander the Great for example, or the legend of Asoka, made into a movie of the same name starring Shahrukh Khan as the eponymous Maurya Emperor (b. 304 BCE - d. 232 BCE), and Kareena Kapoor as his love interest whose influence brings him from his status as a violent and ruthless ruler to a Buddhist monarch. This status is portrayed as one feared by members of the royal family as effectively enforcing the erasure of the royal bloodline²⁷². Which origin then should be turned to? That of a conquering hero, or that of a pacifist ruler who learned the error of conquest? Choices made today about which stories are embraced, and how they are portrayed are central to understanding the nature of the ineffable *Desi* with “Indian Values” or *Hua* person within the Chinese moral system, that would be even more elusive without them. Popular cinema is one of the most effective conduits for communicating such choices.

²⁷² The argument as portrayed in the film is that the Buddhist doctrinal imperative to restrain desire in order to reach enlightenment results in the end of the family if adhered to strongly, which is basically the case.

Modern history films bear these questions forward, transforming the contemporary flavour of the *myth of origin* into what we may describe as a question of “national character”, a term and quantity that especially in the case of India and China has been a direct concern of modern society. This in itself has been transmuted into the process of defining the contemporary *Hua* and *Desi* subject on a global and globalised stage.

Up until this point, what has emerged in this thesis through examination of *Hua* and *Desi* on screen is a remarkable series of attempts at formulating new culturally inflected *modernities* that work to redefine the national subject of India and China in terms of *themselves-as-subject* and not the Other, as more traditional constructions²⁷³ would have it. History film transmutes the question of modernity into a query as to how the modern *Hua* or *Desi* audience sees itself, or is expected to see itself as related to the cultural and national *past* interpreted through a contemporary context. At the cinematic apex between “Cultural Nationalism”, “Postcolonial Nationalism” and “Romantic Nationalism”, this project of redefinition borders the sublime, and possibly the farcical, through the various forms of the popular “historical” feature film. The paradigmatic example of this intoxicating phenomenon is the *mythic history* film, the place of ethnic legends.

²⁷³ Self-definition as subaltern is important to note here: it is not merely the case that the Western academy has been negligent in assigning proper agency and subjecthood to Indian and Chinese subjects among others. This is not to suggest that this continuing myopia is not extraordinary, but that status as Other has also been put to strategic use in the discourse of both India and China.

4.1 “Where history meets proud folklore, there legends begin”²⁷⁴

The quote above appears as an epigram before the opening shot of the Ketan Mehta film *Mangal Pandey: The Rising*, starring Aamir Khan as Pandey (b.1827-d.1857), a sepoy turned insurgent revolutionary in a loose interpretation of real 19th Century events in Barrackpore that gave rise to the Indian Rebellion of 1857. The epigram itself is attributed to no one in particular but rather, therefore, to anyone and everyone: as a general truth. It begins to reveal a link created in film and culture between more modern history films of the nation and films of mythic history that pre-date nation states of India and China. It seems that there is a kind of desirability of aligning more modern stories with the mythic history of “legend”. But what is it about being “legendary”, about aligning the modern with the pre-modern past that *makes* it desirable? Is it simply a link to an “ethnic” past, or is it more? Of what does this “legendariness” consist?



Fig. 116: *Mangal Pandey: The Rising*. *Having been captured and convicted of leading the unsuccessful first sepoy uprising of soldiers serving in the British Raj army, the beaten Mangal Pandey (Aamir Khan) is lead in chains to the gallows, viewed from a low angle shot that shows him larger than life. His set face with eyes fearlessly focused on the middle distance - the future of India- only adds to the impression of him as a*

²⁷⁴ Before the opening shot of the film *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* this epigram appears on screen, unattributed.

hero of mythical proportions, not lead by the soldiers that guard him but bravely leading the way to his own waiting death, and his martyrdom, of his own volition.

In this first section then, I wish to start at the beginning, with films that deliberately illustrate the manner in which contemporary politics enact themselves upon imaginings of the past: the creation of “legendariness” through *mythic history* on screen. Within this category of mythic history²⁷⁵, I intend to explore three principal themes that serve as analytical tools and that are expressed both in terms of visual language and in terms of plot. First, the multivalent idea of *fabrication* which can lead us to a larger meditation on the role of the conceptual quantities of myth, legend and history as expressed in *Hua* and *Desi* cultures, while keeping hold of the material culture of the *mythic history* screen. Secondly, I will show the importance of gender in mythic history films, particularly the role of women as they act in their own right, but also as facilitators of the male hero tale. Thirdly, I wish to explore the theme of fate, or *karma* as expressed through the visual technique of *patterning*, largely shown by means of a preponderance of aerial shots used within this sub-genre across both *Hua* and *Desi* film products in the popular realm. First, though, as part of a category of history film that is consistently critiqued as fuzzy at best, let us be clear over terms: what exactly is the “Myth” in “*mythic history*”?

²⁷⁵ In the Chinese case the distinction between *mythic history* and the *Wuxia* or martial arts (in the sense of mythic context, rather than that of the 1970s) is sometimes somewhat fuzzy. For the purposes of this thesis I am locating the category of mythic history as being based in an actual historical event, or at least related to that event, allowing the quite conscious grafting of fiction and history in a way that moves beyond even the “based on real events” hedge often seen in things like biographical films.

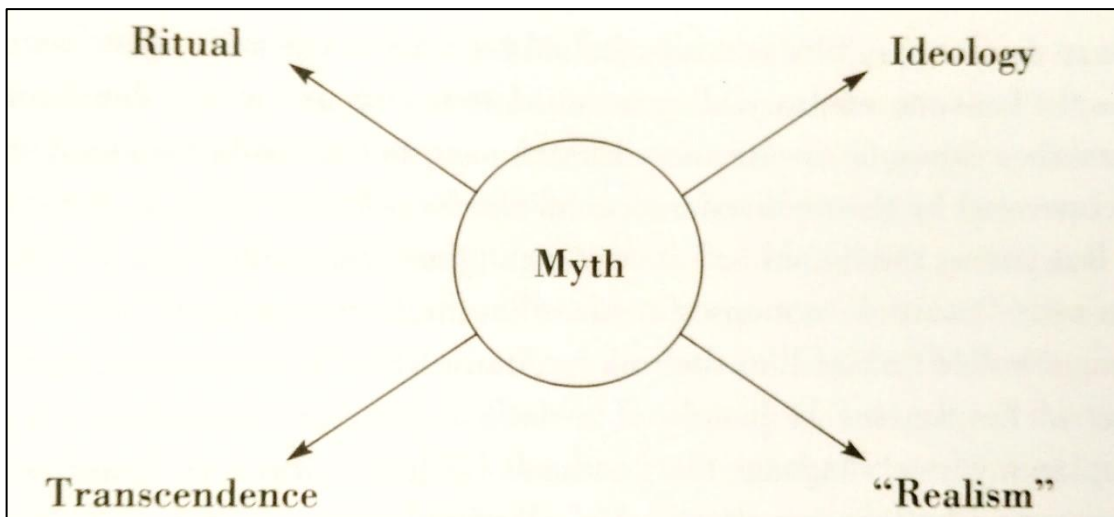


Fig. 117: A very useful way of thinking about the cinematic structure of Myth. This diagram appears on page 122 of Sumita Chakravarty's 1993 volume *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema: 1947-1987*.

For the purposes of this analysis *mythic history* is a deliberate term with a defined meaning: it inherently includes, in and of itself, both the fictive, the *myth*, and the *historical*, which is the ostensibly, or superficially factual²⁷⁶. Chakravarty's diagram, suggests through the direction of arrows within it that Myth produces Ritual, Ideology, and so forth. I would posit a relationship between these and Myth that rather runs in both directions – Myth produces Ritual, for example, but Ritual also produces Myth. I include the totality of this myth production, an adaptation of Chakravarty's construction, as placed in tension with the history from which it is ostensibly derived, or to which it is related for its "authenticity" – from which its ticket to "realism" as an object is obtained. In addition, following Chakravarty's analysis above, ritual and transcendence must take their place as part of the mix from which *mythic history* emerges. I locate these two factors within the gender dynamics of the two films of the

²⁷⁶ Of course it has been acknowledged for quite a while in academia that history itself is subjective, suspect, and must be rigorously interrogated based on its context and point of origin. Nevertheless, the term *mythic history* is useful, since it makes not only the suspicious nature of fact-claims explicit, but also because the nature of *myth* itself, of *legend*, as supra-factual, and as a vehicle for defining some manner of cultural truth or nature, highlights the *kind* of pressure under which the history on display has been formed.

pre-modern under analysis here, *Chi Bi* and *Jodhaa Akbar*, and within their use of patterning as well. So, let us consider these films and their production.

Chi Bi (Red Cliff), is a film directed by John Woo, for which Han Sanping is one of the producers, and cinematography duties are shared by Zhang Li and Lü Yue. This rostrum of participants is significant; as previously mentioned, Han Sanping, is an extremely powerful force within the Chinese popular film industry as a whole, due to his role at China Film Group and Beijing Film Studio among numerous other entities. Meanwhile, Lü Yue has contributed stylistically to popular cinema's vision of China, and *Hua* aesthetics, through an oeuvre that frequently puts him behind the camera of such stories. He is cinematographer in two films in this chapter: *Chi Bi* and *Jijie Hao*, as well as a further film important to this thesis: *Fei Cheng Wu Rao (If you are the One)* – we can note then, that despite the variance of style between these three films, they share a common thread, which I would describe as motif, and scope²⁷⁷. Clearly, the director is ultimately responsible for the movement of the film, but Lü, as cinematographer displays mastery over many styles and methods, from sweeping aerial shots, to intimate interiors, to point-of-view action shots with hand held camera. As to *Chi Bi*, although created as one long extravaganza, it was released as two separate halves with what constitutes a six-month “intermission” between them, part one (or *shang*) in 2008, and two (or *xia*) in 2009. The denouement of the film occurs, fittingly, at Chinese New Year, around the time of its 2009 release, which may have been one of the driving forces for the selection of this release date. The film broke many box office records, and having received critical acclaim and winning at least nine prizes across a broad range of

²⁷⁷ By this I mean that he picks up small details, and places them into quite sweeping and large landscapes. Tracing this tendency in his work would definitely be the purview of another paper, although very interesting.

Asian film festivals, has since enjoyed status for its drama as well as its action sequences and visual effects.

The plot of the film is based upon the classic Ming Dynasty novel *Sanguo Yanyi* (generally translated as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*). This book of the *Yanyi* literary type depicts happenings of the second and third centuries AD. *Yanyi* is often translated to English as “romance” but it is hard to ascertain in what sense this wide-scope assemblage attributed to Luo Guanzhong conforms to this category as understood in European literature or life. Indeed, the word in English may be a mistranslation that has stuck. At a push, it may bear similarities to the moralistic courtly romances of medieval Europe which define proper behaviour through relationships between nobles, although in such romances these are inevitably wrapped around the enigmatic presence of a beloved woman for whom such norms are bent. “*Yanyi*” can also be literally translated as *perform righteousness*, possibly implying a morality play, although this is not a common way of breaking down the term. Based on official histories and oral tales (much as the epigram from *Mangal Pandey* suggested), the much-loved novel concerns the last days of the Han dynasty, and the subsequent jostling for power to fill the vacuum that remained in ruling the Chinese empire on the part of warlords and nobles. The battle of Red Cliff, which includes the eponymous villain of Chinese literature, drama, and culture, Cao Cao (In *Chi Bi* played by Zhang Fengyi), who was an historical person, constitutes one episode in the enormous book. In John Woo’s hands, the episode takes on more of the flavour of its translation, i.e. romance, than is present in the original text, allowing a modern cinematic sensibility and a strongly ethnicized and gendered exploration of righteousness, loyalty, and sensuality to emerge within the retelling on screen. This is achieved in the film through two principle focal

points by which the tale of the battle between warlord²⁷⁸ Zhou Yu (Tony Leung Chiu-wai) and power-hungry villain Prime Minister Cao Cao unfolds. Firstly, the brotherly relationships between Zhou Yu, genius strategist Zhuge Liang, and prince Sun Quan (Zhang Zhen), a kind of bromance, and secondly, the loving and passionate relationship between Zhou Yu and his wife Xiao Qiao. All of these are expressed through a combination of values expounded within Confucian texts, for example the importance of music, which in the Confucian *Analects* is considered a means of ritual, of expression, and restrained arts, through which the governance of a kingdom can be ascertained. Like calligraphy, as practised by Xiao Qiao, with its cultured *wen* nature, achieves a balanced co-existence with the *Wu* or *martial* arts, as described in Sunzi's *Bing Fa (Art of War)*, which is directly quoted in the film. This perhaps provides us with a link between mythic history films such as this and *wuxia* or martial arts films set in the past, another good example of which is *Kongzi (Confucius)*, which stars Chow Yun Fat as the great philosopher. This series of arts, recorded in a state of perfection that communicates the ideal qualities of passion and restraint, represent an ethnic nostalgia, while at the same time being blended with a contemporary cinematic sensual sensibility including close shots of the bodies of Xiao Qiao and Shun Shangxiang (Zhao Wei), and erotic sex scenes, as well as CGI. Contemporary cinematic techniques also

²⁷⁸ “Warlord” or *wangba* is a very complex term in the course of the film and in the context of Chinese literature and history. Most often in present interpretations or usage it is used pejoratively: it is only the Emperor or *huangdi*, who can be thought of as having the divine right to rule, the “mandate of heaven” *tianming* and those who in any sense attempt to dissipate this power are ultimately not allowing the natural course determined by the “rites” *li* to take place. However, in this film, who is a “warlord” and who is a rightful heir to a throne, even an Imperial throne, is somewhat fuzzy. Cao Cao, who is generally understood to have usurped a great deal of power within the court, channeling the energy to himself such that he can take the role of Emperor in all but name, is nevertheless seen as a kind of “warlord”, grasping for control with a Legalist philosophy, that may call to mind Machiavelli. Nevertheless, Cao Cao himself refers to Zhou Yu and others within the context of the film as “warlords” as well, which although it may be an unflattering perspective, does seem to reflect their status as rulers of men outside of the normal Imperial framework. This jostling can actually occur by virtue of the fact that the actions of Cao Cao and others have hollowed out the authority of the Imperial court that would wish to rule, and retain the mantle of the *tianming*.

allow for us as audience members to see military formations, the consequences of brotherhood and strategy, as well as other patterns, from above, with aesthetic and affective consequences as I will show below. Let us first compare the above context with that of *Jodhaa Akbar*.

Jodhaa Akbar also blends romance and the building of a moral order with a lush and ethnicised aesthetic. The film, is notably directed by Ashutosh Gowariker, who in a similar manner to those behind *Chi Bi* has a hand seen in other films explicitly meditating on the underpinnings of Indian society and *Desi* ethnicity such as *Lagaan* (2001), and *Swades* (2004), which I discussed in the first chapter. The film's cinematographer is Kiran Deohans, who also worked on touchstone of *Desi* aesthetics, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*. The film adapts a popular story derived from the official history of the period known as the *Akbarnama*. This tale concerns third Mughal Emperor Jalal ud-din Mohammad Akbar (b.1542-d.1605) and his marriage to Jodhaa, believed to be the historical Rajkumari Heer Kunwari, (b.1542-d.1623) also known as Mariam-uz-Zamani, a Hindu Rajput princess²⁷⁹. The relationship between the two, as they learn to accept each other's cultures, religions and power then becomes the focal point with which all other plot dynamics intersect. Other wives, which Akbar surely did have in reality, are erased in the film, so as not to detract from the purity of the romance. Jodhaa and Akbar's marriage, and the acceptance of this mixture of religions by the court, or lack thereof, is a motivating factor for much of the jostling for power that then occurs. Within the court, Akbar's severe former wet-nurse and personal advisor Maham Anga seeks to undermine Jodhaa, who she views as a foreign woman

²⁷⁹ It is known that Akbar had many other wives, from a variety of backgrounds, but Heer Kunwari was natural mother to the next emperor Jahangir, and grandmother to the fifth Mughal emperor. She is understood through historical record to have been very influential at court.

taking Akbar's attentions, even attempting to break the two up by planting rumours and deliberately misconstruing objects in Jodhaa's possession. Eventually Akbar's natural mother reveals the truth and encourages him to the difficult task of appeasing Jodhaa and returning to court with her from her ancestral home. Clerics cast aspersions on Akbar's devotion to Islam because of his alliance with her, and plot with Sharifuddin Hussain, a defiant, *wangba* (warlord)-like governor married to Akbar's sister, to seize power. Defeated in battle, killed, or sent on Hajj, indeed, relations between Akbar and the men who should be closest to him disappear in this film, often in a violently abrupt manner, contrasting with the lush surroundings. The plots are fascinating, and well known. But why are these films of the distant past particularly important to examine in understanding the role of the historical genre in the present day?

Fabrication

Contemporary portrayals of a pre-modern, particularly one that pre-dates photography and modern print media that precipitates changes in self-conception by producing Imagined Communities are important because of the possibilities produced by the properties of the time period they describe. Films such as *Red Cliff*, and *Jodhaa Akbar* provide an opportunity to overcome the barrier to Imagined Community in the pre-modern, by representing in a closer way a past with which we may have only a distant familiarity, made more intimate by popular media – fiction, soap operas, games and the like. They also create an Imagined Community of a past through the process of *fabricating* and *incarnating* the contours of official histories that may not be accessible²⁸⁰ to the wider public, and the legends and fictions that have grown up around them. As Alison Landsberg argues in her 2015 book *Engaging the Past*, the

²⁸⁰ In a semantic or literary sense or with regard to expertise rather than a physical barrier, necessarily.

history film, and particularly one that reaches back before living memory, gives rise to a “desire to come to understand something foreign and fundamentally ungraspable, to care about and be interested in the past...” (35), which is to say, *fabricating* what she calls, “prosthetic memories” (32).

The danger here is that its “virtuosic capacity” to “lure the viewer into a deep identification with the characters and events of the past, will foster an illusory sense that the viewer truly understands another person’s position, or how the past *felt to those who lived there*”²⁸¹, which brings us back to the notion of a creative kind of deception. I believe the word *fabrication* is particularly important as a content rich tool for unpacking this, and particularly pertinent to these rather spectacular, melodramatic films of *mythic history*. I suggest that in this case, we must consider the term-as-tool in several senses useful to this analysis: it represents materialising or producing texture and fabric; in another sense it implies creating, on an industrial scale perhaps: *fabrication*. Finally, it also has the connotation of invention with intent to deceive.

²⁸¹ My emphasis here.



Fig. 118 & 119: *Texture and colour used to invoke a fantastical past in Chibi above, and Jodhaa Akbar below. The styles and aesthetics are, of course, very different, depicting as they do periods of time far apart from one another, and in places defined by different histories of aesthetics, but the effect of texture, whether it be the combination of a draped robe and leaves swept in by a swirling wind backgrounded by intricate carving and a painting-like scene²⁸² of the art of tea, or the sensual pouring of milk, liquid and white against the intricate coloured clothing of gathered women in a ceremony of pre-wedding preparation, is designed to overwhelm with aesthetic and ritual perfection, creating an affective link of nostalgia, pride and awe.*



Jodhaa Akbar and *Chi Bi* were both released in 2008, a significant year, where the stakes of cultural nationalism were suddenly running higher than they had been.

²⁸² In fact, as I mention later, there is an explicit link made between painting and the image of lead female Xiao Qiao, the wife of military hero Zhou Yu.

They both boast multi-star casts, and cannot be said to lack “big picture consciousness”. Both were directed and produced by well-known people and were well marketed across many platforms, where the *fabricated*-ness of such mythic history films was a lever for attracting attention: the attention to detail in producing the many lavish sets of jewellery in *Jodhaa Akbar*, the technology used to craft the intense battle scenes of *Chi Bi*, were reported in fashion magazines, news outlets and industry papers, much as described in Landsberg’s study of *Titanic* in her 2015 book *Engaging the Past*.

For dramas where props, scenes and costumes are essential components producing a past that is reinforced visually as mythic, *fabrication* represents exactly the combination of tactile and industrial qualities that can produce the right meaning. It also implies a fiction, even a lie, and compels us to think about the origins of the words pertaining to *myth* and *legend* in both Hindi and Mandarin. Do they contain the blend of fiction and history (itself a problematic category), as the epigram suggests, as implied by the category of *mythic history*, and the cinematic experience of “prosthetic memory” and if so how? Are there distinctions that we must note between *Hua* and *Desi* formulations in order to consider how *mythic history* is manifested on screen, and how it is consumed by its audience(s)? In combination with our first term of *fabrication*, a brief meditation is in order before as we consider what *kinds* of myths and legends they seek to communicate and how.

The etymology surrounding words meaning “myth”, “legend” and “history” in Hindi and Mandarin languages is enlightening. In Mandarin, legend, *chuanshuo* means literally “transmitted speech” – something which is passed down *liuchuan*, spread, almost as if it were a contagion *chuanran*. Yet, it also links with the oral tradition, a general movement beyond the confines of an individual incident or utterance, a flow. Myth, *shenhua* speech of, or story of a spirit, god or deity, the hero of these stories are

xugouren “made-up people” according to both dictionary and etymological definitions as found in standard Chinese reference books such as the *Ciyuan*. History, *lishi* is, by contrast with both of these dependent upon measurement, etymologically: *li* as in a calendar, *shi* as a purer representation of history.

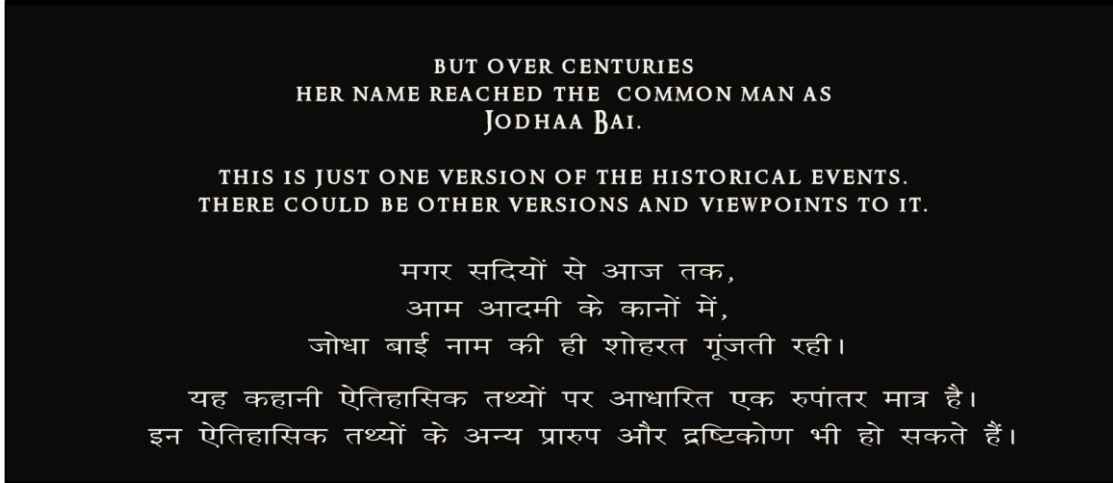


Fig. 120: The “disclaimer” that precedes the beginning of Jodhaa Akbar. The claims which emphasise the admixture of fiction and history to create a contemporary social and cultural truth are present here, as they were highlighted in the opening of *Mangal Pandey*, which I referred to earlier. This disclaimer has a social context, where several members of families whose bloodline ostensibly linked them to the previous princely kingdom of Ajmer, from which Jodhaa is said to have come, objected to the portrayals made on screen despite the welcoming response from the public. However, this disclaimer also makes a kind of truth claim, wherein the story, and its meaning have become the truth of the “aam admi”, the common man, directly invoked above.

Hindi, by virtue of its background operates differently, interwoven with Sanskritic and Persian influences, and thus implies and includes many possible interpretations even without the layer of exegesis. “Myth”, frequently translated as *kalpit katha*, combines two linguistic elements *kalpana* and *katha*, which can be interpreted in several ways. *Kalpana* is fantastic, imaginary, idealistic, and a frequently used word with both positive and negative connotations. It includes the process of mental construction essential to creativity through its relationship with Sanskrit *krati*, but can also imply the fantasy or unreality of our daily existence, as opposed to spiritual

reality of true self, as used in the *Ratha Kalpana*²⁸³. Unlike the Chinese, unreality, mainly recognised in today's understanding as a *lack* of the firm, graspable texture of reality, is not posited as necessarily negative, but neither is it simply "made-up". Indeed, it has deeper philosophical connotations, nevertheless pertaining to fantasy, but also to *kama* desire. *Katha* is a word for story or storytelling that ranges back in classical history, in, according to most analysis, for example the story element in *Kathak* classical dance of North India which tells a narrative story in movement, in keeping with the *Natyashastra*, mentioned before in this thesis. Words that can be translated readily into English as *legend* are many, and varied: However, the concepts of "legend" and "history" can be said to share one term which is in common current usage, usually to mean the latter: *itihaas*. *Itihaas* like many Hindi words, is derived from Sanskrit, where the root word has influenced a large number of major Indian languages both Northern and Southern, including Bengali, Kannada, Telegu and Urdu. The Sanskrit includes the concept of "saga", thus a transmitted, somewhat fictionalised history, perhaps embellished in the process of *spreading*. In this respect it displays similarities to the Chinese *chuanshuo*.

As described in our exploration of *fabrication*, films like *Red Cliff & Jodhaa Akbar*, *Asoka*, *Yingxiong* (*Hero*. Zhang Yimou dir. 2002), *Kongzi* (*Confucius*. Hu Mei dir. 2010) and *Zhan Guo* (*Warring States*), are visually replete, even at times overflowing with colour, texture, effects, and in general a sense of *spectacle*. Indeed,

²⁸³ *Ratha Kalpana* or "chariot of the imagination" is a metaphor of a person as a chariot with the horses, reins and charioteer all representing different parts of the person's mind. It is believed to be first found in the ancient *Katha Upanishad*, but thought to be influential in a great many works describing the control of the intellect for spiritual purposes. The *Katha* of *Kathat Upanishads* is different from *Katha* storytelling.

they can be accused of displaying the so-called “ermine cape effect”²⁸⁴ – in applying one authentic detail in a manner that makes it inauthentic for symbolic purposes - neither Jodhaa nor Akbar are ever seen to sleep in anything but jewelled attire, for example. But as seen, this forms a complimentary mis-en-scene of excess to the moral drama created by the gendered presence of heroes and heroines on screen, and their relationship with the audience.

Gender and the Transmission of Mythic History on Screen

The archetypal mythic history hero in both Hindi and Mandarin language film displays control of passions, while surrounded by a rich visual world; Akbar chastely woos his bride throughout the majority of *Jodhaa Akbar* restraining the passion she inspires, thereby gaining the sublime, the love of the people, and crucially for his character and the aims of this *Desi* film, recognition as an *Indian* monarch rather than a member of a foreign conquering power. Indeed, consummation, discreetly but erotically portrayed through music and sensual choreography, is put off until the final third of the film, and significantly, in only possible because Akbar had won Jodhaa’s love²⁸⁵ by creating a magnanimous, religiously tolerant new law to exclude both Muslim *and* Hindu pilgrimages from taxation. Meanwhile *Chi Bi*’s Zhou Yu allows his passion only to be released at an appropriate time, and in the appropriate ways: through music,

²⁸⁴ The “Ermine Cape Effect” is a term more commonly used in relation to television period dramas and the ways in which they use items or props as short hand to clearly mark out characters for an audience in an efficient if hackneyed way, even if the props themselves are absolutely authentic to the period being portrayed.

²⁸⁵ As in *Chi Bi* this desire for love and consent plays into the modernity of the plot and aesthetics of a film that at the same time aims for authenticity. Very often the stated aim of such a film is to imagine the reality of past events, most often through projecting many of our current social mores and behaviours into the past.

through martial arts, through marital relations. In contrast to their enemies, both Akbar and Zhou Yu do their best to keep their emotions in check, while as I will show, female characters are connected to appropriate conduct through ritual, and the good of the people. The criteria for appropriateness of time and type of course differ very significantly between the two cinematic traditions, but in fact, *Hua* and *Desi* mythic history films have an historical tendency toward melodrama²⁸⁶. Reconciling the tension between lavish display and emotional control, as an audience whose relationship with the film produces the overall experience, is our enjoyment of this released energy in some way linked to the control of the hero and heroine? In our involvement with the world on screen, is the audience expected to join in the cultural project, providing a repository, an overflow valve for the hero's passions that enable him to retain his equanimity and poise? Do the actions of female characters enable the victory of the male, and the entrance to the sublime? The latter is a particularly important point to explore in these two films anchored by central couples.

²⁸⁶ Further, it may well be argued that, starting with the Fifth Generation's films which of course were originally not aimed at a commercial audience, a lush aesthetic *fabrication* also entered the modern cinematic sensibility in China, in films such as *Wangba Bie Ji (Farewell My Concubine)*. Chen Kaige dir. 1993). This lushness has not only followed individual directors as they have ventured into the commercial arena, as in for example, Zhang Yimou's transformation from independent, and at times troublesome director of *Da Hong Denglong Gaogao Gua (Raise the Red Lantern)* 1991) into semi-official and only rarely troublesome director of *Man Cheng Jindai Huangjin Jia (Curse of the Golden Flower)* 2006), and the 2008 Olympics' opening ceremony, but also influence the commercial cinema in general terms.



Fig. 121: Chi Bi. *In this final sequence of the second chapter, a female foal raised by Zhou Yu and Xiao Qiao is given to wunderkind strategist Zhuge Liang (Takeshi Kaneshiro) as a gift as they part following their victory over Cao Cao. The foal Meng Meng was delivered by Zhuge Liang early on in the film in a scene that demonstrated his knowledge of animal husbandry and the natural world, as well as his trustworthiness. It serves as a parallel new life with the child that Xiao Qiao is carrying, whose name is Ping'an meaning "peace". In this idyllic, fantastical setting, replete with romantic imagery of an ideal pastoral China, complete with double rainbow, the young and the female represent new hope, and a return to ordered harmony in the aftermath of the villain's defeat.*

Mythic history, as we can see from the above explorations, is in a sense *designed* by fantasy, transmission and history to *fabricate*. By blending these: “the effects are simultaneously part of the diegesis, and a cinematic spectacle” (Allen (1995) 181). One trend that emerges as a kind of consequence, is the growth of the role of female characters, in presence and significance, which is often noticeably more prominent than that which falls to them in narratives of the modern nation. Why should this be the case? The female presence on screen in depictions relating to the *ethnic* past, a pre-modern space being therefore a space of birth, of bloodline, is certainly one possibility. Perhaps it is that the lush realm of *reproduction* and *fabrication*, provides a space that is not so neatly measured, consciously and subconsciously associated with the feminine within a

binary cultural logic²⁸⁷ of contemporary patriarchy in India and China. Or perhaps it is the nature of a past predicated on *desire* that gives rise to the presence of a female character as focal point in these films. Then again, the presence of more women on screen here may merely be a method of focusing the human element of sprawling histories, with many actors, giving the relational, or “people” element that spoken of by DeMille (Landsberg 26) in discussing the methods of making engaging history film²⁸⁸. Nevertheless, here in the realm of *Mythic History*, the prominent presence of women characters such as Jodhaa (Aishwarya Rai) and Xiao Qiao (Lin Chi-ling) of *Jodhaa Akbar* and *Chi Bi* who play pivotal roles in the plot of these dramas concerning the very content of the ethnic nation do mark the absence of female principal characters in certain other areas of entertainment film, such as comedy, in sudden starkness.

²⁸⁷ This logic, which we can identify with the help of the feminist criticism of Helene Cixous (Moi (1985) 102-6) and others, as belonging to a substantial corpus of Western philosophy can be said to resonate with some aspects of “traditional” oppositional thinking in, for example Chinese medicine. Crucially however, when we think of the ways in which theories of this nature do and do not apply to the *Hua* and *Desi* contexts we must desist from the tendency to, in a rather Orientalist manner, wish the influence of the West away from the modern nation state, particularly when it is an explicitly employed establishing component, developed, changed and transformed since.

²⁸⁸ We may even link it to the occasional, but important use of women characters as signs of modernity in contemporary films of competition, such as *Chak de India!* Discussed briefly later in this chapter



Figs. 122 - 23: *These two scenes mirror each other; as their husbands fight in momentous battles, both Jodhaa and Xiao Qiao make independent plans to come to their aid, setting off without the approval of anyone else.*



Above are two scenes of principal women characters acting as moral centres in their own right, but with a view to enabling the heroism of men in the film. In the topmost image, clad in red that amplifies the red of the emblematic fort behind her, drawing the eye to her as she moves from the centre of the screen, Jodhaa departs the palace to go to the aid of her husband Akbar, and cousin-brother²⁸⁹ Sujjamal (Sonu Sood) at the war camp where the forces of rebel Hussain are squared off against the

²⁸⁹ The “cousin-brother” relationship is a specifically defined one in Hinglish; it fairly clearly refers to a male cousin who is close enough to be like a brother, usually to a female. In Hindi itself, within the context of *Desi* film, this relationship is usually defined as such once, and thereafter the characters will quite naturally refer to each other as brother and sister, which is a common enough practice among friends as well in any case.

Emperor's forces. The jewellery at her hair-parting causes her form to echo harmoniously the arched architecture: she is strongly identified with the building and the righteous rule of the Mughals which she has helped to establish through her instruction to Akbar that the way to win her heart, and the hearts of the people, is to know their "small joys" and sorrows. It is by this and other means that Jodhaa consistently highlights faith, and religious tolerance as a balm to soothe the populace, and it is by this means that she influences Akbar sufficiently that their rule becomes harmonious, until threatened by external forces. Behind Jodhaa, Akbar's sister Bakshi Banu Begum (Abir Abrar)²⁹⁰, who is also the wife of the treacherous Hussain, follows along to try to make peace between the men and avoid bloodshed. Using a low angle shot, we look up at the noble figure of Jodhaa as she rides fearlessly into the desert, larger than life. She is literally and figuratively at the centre.

Like Xiao Qiao, Jodhaa is, in many respects designed to inspire us with awe as a perfect balance of noble womanhood. Like Xiao Qiao, she has knowledge of arts and ritual, a reciprocal component in our adaptative understanding of Chakravarty's Myth diagram. For example, she brings all her knowledge to bear on completing the full compliment of Hindu marriage rites even within the Islamic imperial fort at Agra, and breaks with tradition to perform a wifely duty of preparing a Hindu vegetarian meal on a significant holiday. She does this on a grand scale, facing the wrath of Maham Anga in order to complete this sign of womanhood, much to the pleasure of Akbar and his guests. She also possesses great knowledge on matters of faith, which further amplifies the notion of her moral authority. Her nobility is displayed in her knowledge of the martial arts as well, as shown below, and in this, we see the chief difference in the way

²⁹⁰ The historical Bakshi Banu Begum was born in 1540 and died in 1596.

that ideal femininity is portrayed in these films; Although both women are brave, beyond doubt, Xiao Qiao's defensive and offensive abilities come through her ritual and arts knowledge: in fact, she attempts to draw a sword to kill or harm Caocao but fails. Meanwhile, Jodhaa's ability with a sword provides her with power, but is also portrayed as attractive, and the sequence of which the still below is a part, is highly eroticised: Akbar uses his sword to reveal her concealed face and hair, and they breathe heavily together with the camera trained in to a close shot of their excited faces mere inches from each other. Nevertheless, as shown below, Jodhaa is formidable. A final element to her gendered knowledge of ritual and arts comes in her learning to write Akbar's name in Urdu calligraphy; she at first strongly resists reading his name aloud as it is taboo to speak a husband's name in Indian cultural tradition, particularly Hindu practise. When she does so, it again inspires great passion in the illiterate Akbar²⁹¹, and precipitates the romantic consummation of their marriage. Thus, it is the balance of forces within Jodhaa's gendered character that allow her to embody the mythic, and facilitate the mythic in Akbar.

²⁹¹ It is widely believed that Akbar lacked basic literacy skills, due to his life being consistently engaged in battle, and focused on the martial arts. In this film, therefore, he is portrayed as, at once a soldier, an expert at the martial, but also a great *appreciator* of the aesthetic, of beauty, and of the poetic, able to quote Persian poetry.



Fig. 124: *Although Jodhaa and Akbar come to be the ultimate power-couple of Indian religious tolerance, their relationship has its ups and downs throughout the film. Far from expressing cultural power through stillness and a restrained, quiet femininity a la Xiao Qiao, Jodhaa combines her devotion to Hinduism, particularly to Krishna, with fierceness and her own knowledge of the martial arts which she does not restrain when Akbar comes to her family's estate to woo her back to the imperial palace after groundlessly accusing her of being unfaithful.*

If we look back to Fig. 123, we see the image of Xiao Qiao, who leaves her home to enter the enemy camp in secret, realising that by doing so, she will be able to divert the attention of Caocao and enable her husband's forces to prevail against the much larger opposing army. As in much of the film, the screen is lit with the glow of torches or candlelight, a device that, while on one level answering the desire for "authenticity" creates further possibilities. Such lighting, along with a simple colour palette which emphasises black, white and red gives rise to deep chiaroscuro, in which concealment can take place within a dreamlike world: Xiao Qiao is at once vulnerable in this shot, seemingly alone amid the enemy, yet armed with her soft but determined expression and the ritual and propriety for which she is conduit. Like Jodhaa, she is motivated by love for the common people, the *laobaixing* we discussed in chapter three,

or the *dong wu de haizi* which we may translate as “sons of the southlands”²⁹² that she refers to in the letter she leaves for her husband to find after departing on her mission. In this missive she also reveals that she is three months pregnant, which has further added to her sense that stakes are high, and peace must be achieved.

We have spoken of excess as an aesthetic context for the morally appropriate centre constituted by the principal hero (and heroine). However, as mentioned, excess can be expressed in different ways in the forms of the oppositional or enemy force – where *extremes* also appear as excess and not merely visual luxuriance. For example, in action, as in the case of villainous Adham Khan, whose practises of rape and embezzlement force Akbar’s one episode of personal excess in violence²⁹³. Plot antagonists Sharifuddin Hussain and Maham Anga display not only un-checked, destructive emotions that run contrary to the celestially sanctioned rule of Akbar. They are both depicted surrounded by high contrast, principally monochrome, in contrast with Akbar’s colourful court. Their lack of colour, deliberately stern aspect and hunger for power, whether they believe it to be motivated by good intention (as in the case of Maham Anga) taken to deceitful extreme, or purely by egotism (as in Hussain’s power challenge) become their own kind of excess against the glittering imperial court in *Jodhaa Akbar*. Caocao in *Chi Bi* is overcome with unfettered desire for power, and for Xiao Qiao another man’s dedicated wife, to such a point that he attempts to create replicas of her among his concubines. Indeed, when Xiao Qiao enters the enemy camp, she does so in order to use her practised, perfect femininity, to distract him. She uses her

²⁹² Xiao Qiao says in her letter: “我想，我们不能只顾着自己的孩子，而忽略了东吴的孩子” (“I believe that we cannot sacrifice the children of the Southlands for the sake of our own child.”)

²⁹³ The film brings to life a famous episode in the *Akbarnama* wherein Akbar kills Adham, upon learning of his brutal behavior, despite the fact that Adham is Maham Anga’s natural son, and thus Akbar’s sworn brother.

mastery of cultivated *wen* arts, exemplified by the tea ceremony, to defeat him, or to allow her husband's tempered *wu* or martial skills to defeat him. This we may understand as an example of the influence of present incarnations of Confucianism, in what is no doubt a modern understanding of romance, but also an instance of the "ritual" component of our understanding of Chakravarty's conception of myth.



Fig. 125: *Xiao Qiao* distracts *Caocao* from battle with a cup of tea, as he attempts to enter the ritual world that she embodies, despite the fact that as *Zhou Yu* had earlier surmised, such aesthetic refinement is unfamiliar to him. The martial warrior is made vulnerable and childlike, more so than *Xiao Qiao* is ever shown to be during her mission, by his desire for her, and his unbalanced knowledge as a leader.

Chakravarty's vision of myth also indicated "transcendence" as a component furnishing legendary or mythic status. I agree with this, but believe that especially in the contemporary *Hua* and *Desi* mythic history sub-genre, which focuses increasingly on relationships as central, this transcendence is frequently arrived at through the interaction of gendered subjects. These two films are good examples in this regard, but *Yingxiong* (*Hero*. 2001) by Zhang Yimou, or even *Wo Hu Cang Long* (Ang Lee dir. *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* 2000), not to mention *Asoka*, in which the eponymous Emperor actually undergoes a religious experience and *conversion*, also relate to it.

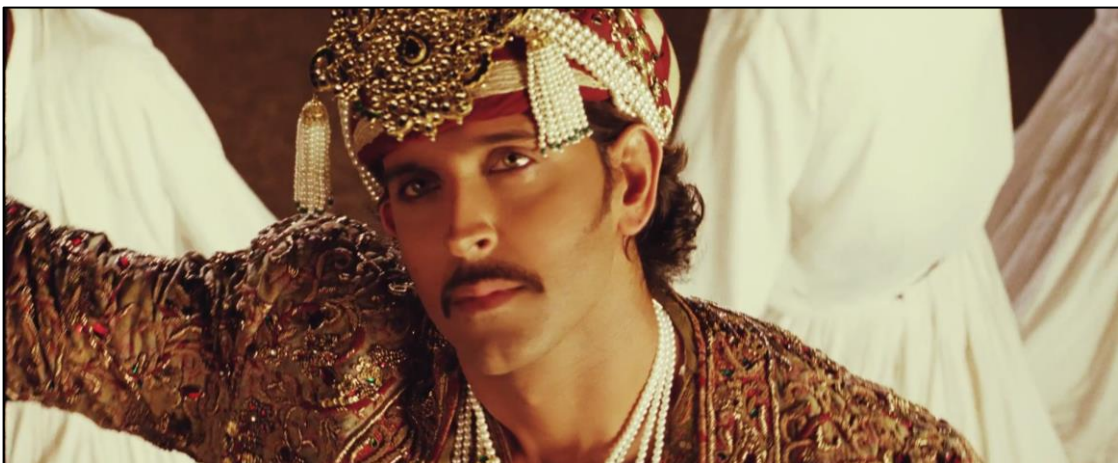
Jodhaa Akbar specifically deals with the subject of religion through the primary pair; indeed, faith, as in both *religion* and *trust*, are the major forces underpinning a

sensuous romance. Consequently, throughout the film, events in the lives of the two chief protagonists allow them to access experiences of the sublime, even the divine. In Jodhaa's case, this takes the form of her devoted prayer to Krishna through her personal temple idol at various moments throughout the narrative. When Akbar is injured by a poisoned arrow in an assassination attempt, Jodhaa prays solidly from dawn to dusk, to dawn again for his recovery, whereupon the glowing light of the rising sun behind the form of her dancing Gopala Krishna statue reveals the truth: the Emperor has regained consciousness.

As to Akbar himself, he reaches into both a divine mission for himself and for the state through his alliance with and love for Jodhaa, as is made very explicit throughout the film. The two shots below are from a song sequence that takes place on the night of Akbar's marriage to Jodhaa which is carried out in both Hindu *and* Muslim ceremonies. Akbar and his retinue are entertained by the music of a group of Sufi mystics as a gesture of gratitude for Akbar's protection as they go to the shrine of Moinuddin Chishti²⁹⁴. Akbar had made pilgrimage there himself to seek guidance as to whether to go ahead with the proposed marriage alliance between himself and Hindu Princess Jodhaa of Ajmer, and upon finding that it was forces from Ajmer that were preventing the Sufis from their pilgrimage, he took this as a divine sign to go ahead with the union.

²⁹⁴ Moinuddin Chishti was an Islamic scholar, poet, philosopher and imam who began the Chishti school of Sufi thought. Living between the 12th and 13th centuries AD, his shrine was established upon his death and remains an important site of pilgrimage for Muslims, especially practitioners of Sufism. Emperor Akbar is known to have been a visitor to the shrine of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, and later Mughal Emperors remained benefactors of the shrine and its complex (Khan, Motiur Rahman [2011] 226).

Figs 126 & 127: Jodhaa Akbar. Akbar becomes entranced by a mystical experience that reinforces his belief that his “mixed marriage” has created a bond that will help his people recognize him as Indian, and unite the Empire beneath him as he endeavours to create just and benevolent rule. Blessed with a vision of divine light while listening to the *Qawwali* song *Khwaja Mere Khwaja* which speaks of the attributes of the saint whose shrine he had visited earlier; Akbar is inspired to join the Sufis’ whirling dance.



In addition to the rather unambiguous divine glow that bathes Akbar in the top-most image here, his form in the dance that immediately follows is interesting amid the simply clad Sufi devotees. He is a point of splendid colour in his wedding attire, gazing distractedly into the middle distance at the grace of God. The torch light here illuminates his skin which is made to look unearthly, uncannily perfect, almost reminiscent of the shining finish of Jodhaa’s idol.

The modelling of both appropriate male and female behaviour produces the mythic components of ritual and transcendence, while acting within the *Hua* and *Desi*

cultural realm where prosthetic memories are being produced in a globalised, transnational context. This is to say that they operate within an aesthetically ethnicised space that nonetheless displays contemporary sensibilities in order to fabricate an Imagined Community based on *ethnicity* where one is *not truly possible*: the “dangerous” strong identification we have already discussed. However, when prosthetic memories are created, when we enter into this presumed understanding that we know what it is to live in a past that we cannot experience, it remains predicated on one thing: the *past-ness* of the past, which is to say, the fact of its completion in a given way that we have received, transmitted through history, and its records, for all the alteration possible. I would like to suggest, that in films of the distant past, where information is relatively limited, the inevitability of the past becomes perceived as an even stronger force, and it is one that is expressed on screen in a way that simultaneously amplifies the sense of splendour, and of organising principal, much as we witnessed in the 2008 Olympics’ Opening Ceremony: through the power of patterning.

Patterns of the Past

It may seem redundant to say so, but mythic history, like all history, concerns what has happened in the past. The conceit of this is that what happens cannot be changed. Events that have occurred follow their own path, with a sense of inevitability, *karma* or *yuanfen* (Fate/karma) that cannot be disturbed, but only allowed to play out, no matter how artfully suspense is produced in the audience. The broader perspective on events as in some respects pre-ordained, is common to both Indian and Chinese “traditional” world-views. In *Jodhaa Akbar* and *Chi Bi* visual motifs appear repeatedly that suggest this state of mind: patterning, especially when viewed by means of an aerial or very

high angle shot. It is surprising how many of this type of shot really *are* utilised in both films, especially *Jodhaa Akbar*²⁹⁵.



Figs. 128 & 129: Above is an aerial shot from a scene of battle formations in the opening sequence of *Jodhaa Akbar*, depicting the Second Battle of Panipat (1556). Below we see the same in a battle sequence in *Chi Bi*. In both cases we can see the use of spectacle and patterning to allow us a distant view in which all is laid out in a manner that breaks the conceit of living in the past.



These aerial shots, do not constitute the traditional “establishing shot”, nor do they move independently through the upper space – thus the long computer-facilitated

²⁹⁵ Arguably this is not just a notion of style, but rather a visual device in this case that is ideologically motivated: *Jodhaa Akbar* is the ultimate ethnic dream of a future religious harmony. It exemplifies a possibility that brings hope to the present and future.

shot taking the carrier pigeon's eye view to survey the forces of Cao Cao in *Chi Bi*, would not be included in this category as I have defined it. With very few exceptions, these shots are rather the perfect demonstration of the relationship between cinematic language of mis-en-scene and the audience as they create an idea of the past that could not be, while simultaneously attempting a kind of ersatz realism or fabricated authenticity. In a sense, they *break* the authenticity of a lived experience of the past, while *making* it, on a cinematic level. These shots balance the aesthetic and symbolic of armed combat taking place in the distant past in a demonstration of a kind of dramatic irony: they foreshadow outcomes that we know.



Fig. 130: *Chi Bi*. Aerial shot/CGI of the more complex “turtle formation”

However, it is a crucial point that these films of mythic history set a precedent for this kind of patterning, aerial shot as a general motif, in a variety of situations, that deepens the aesthetic field, despite its status as anathema to the constraints of the diegetic world. They furthermore utilise the “authenticity” of the appearance of natural and candle light to establish a variety of colour and shadow patterns that enrich the close ups and middle distance shots from less extreme angles. In the case of *Jodhaa Akbar*, I would argue that the frequent use of aerial shots or high angles directly down from above to circular patterns also reinforces the theme of unity, between different

faiths and peoples into one union. They also recalls the wheel of *Asoka Chakra*, the 24-spoked wheel that appears on the Indian flag and symbolically recalls the powers of Hindu mantra, but also the Buddhist wheel of *dharma*.



Fig. 131: *The Hindu wedding of Jodhaa and Akbar from above shows clearly the pattern of the lanv or rounds that are performed as part of marriage, where the seven lanv symbolise the seven lifetimes for which the couple is thought to be conjoined. The circularity can also be said to symbolise the wheel of dharma, and of reincarnation itself.*



Fig. 132: *A high angle shot shows us the entwined bodies of Zhou Yu and Xiao Qiao from above in Chi Bi. The sex scene between them, a married couple, as shown by John Woo is shown in painterly chiaroscuro, with a simplified colour palette which emphasises the golden tone of their skin against the white and black. The couple themselves seem to glow, a quality that is also picked up in Jodhaa Akbar to lend a romantic and mythic quality.*



Fig. 133, above: *The resplendent spectacle of Jodhaa Akbar makes full use of the repetitive motifs to establish a world of ethnicised aesthetics, which recalls and reiterates the court which is rich in decoration, as well as the sense of karmic order, and inevitability. In the shot above, the food prepared by Jodhaa herself is served to Akbar's assembled guests after Maham Anga has forced Jodhaa to taste the dishes herself to prove that no poison is present. After the slow, tense tasting scene, the camera flies up joyfully to harmonic music. These aerial shots show the perfect presentation of round, flower-like thali trays, and the completeness of the meal in a shot with echoing circles. The aesthetics serve, along with an at times whirling camera, to convey a sense of vindication, elation, and order.*

Fig. 134, below: *aerial shots again reveal round flower-like forms displaying the unity of many different elements, including in this case people, brought into a graceful, joyous, circular whole.*



The production of “prosthetic memory” through strong identification and the fabrication of Imagined Communities with an ethnically inflected mythic past is one

part of an intoxicating blend of elements contributing to the overall appeal of cultural nationalism in *history films*. *History films* in general blend ritual and history together to produce a contemporary interpretation of past events that can be neatly linked with current ideology, like that of the Indian *Hindutva* movement, or the re-invigoration of an appropriated, perhaps re-mixed version of Confucianism in the post-reform era (Solé-Farras, Jesús (2014) 22). Modern histories pick up the threads of myth and bring them into the philosophical realm of national character.

4.2 Modern History: A Politics of Affect

If the filmic fabrication of “ethnic” histories serve to rally the past into the contemporary project of creating *Hua* and *Desi* identities fit for a globalised world²⁹⁶, myths of *modern* history of the Indian and Chinese nations states, their creation and the threats they have combatted, provide another level of discourse among state, citizens and diaspora. Which is to say, that while the production of an imagined nation around a previously un-“imaginable” past is designed to operate as a means of ethno-cultural linkage across boundaries intended to instil pride in domestic citizens and *Hua* and *Desi* people at large, the affective filling-in of the history of the modern nation state, ostensibly supported by the materials and media, draws those *Hua* and *Desi* identities in to not just an ethnic place, but rather an identity and world-view that is specifically *political*. And yet, some of the methods used cinematically to communicate these elements are perhaps surprisingly similar. In this, we can see a manner in which the two sub-genres *mythic* and *modern* are linked in overall aims emanating from multiple converging quarters within Indian and Chinese society. Consensus, sometimes

²⁹⁶ Which is to say, I reiterate, a culturally inflected modern citizen fit to operate in multiple spheres of influence.

undirected, sometimes engineered, produces the desire for a story of political and ethnic identity as overlapping parts of the package that is *Hua* and *Desi* identity. The establishment of a nation, as a parallel myth of origin, *must* be romantic, must inspire affect if it is to stand as a form of soft power along with mythic history, if it is to inspire any form of patriotism. In fact, the “social” nature of the history of popular film in both countries, carried through until today, would seem to underscore this. If a moral lesson or a social problem can be put into a popular film to integrate it into the consciousness of the people, to answer a need in society, or to promote an identity, it follows that films that are *about* the moral lesson, or the social problem, can be made more palatable or enjoyable if they are given a healthy dose of affect, *and* in today’s cinematic environment, *effect* as well. This, in itself echoes the application of the sugar coat of entertainment as a general rule.

In this section, I would like to look at three qualities particularly manifested through the visual and sonic worlds of these films of modern national history, that I believe are particularly important in inspiring affective response in the viewer. Firstly, the continuing use of aerial or high angle shots to show patterning, and the truth claims of which these are part, secondly, the related use of colour and filmic techniques, and thirdly, romantic forms mapped upon the hero, both as a lover and as a martyr. Further, it is essential to think about the ways in which current portrayals of modern history do and do not challenge the received narrative through displays of violence, which I suggest have become a particularly important point within the soft power of both nations as they participate in globalism in new ways. How does the image of a national hero relate, or break from present defense policy, or economic policy for example? How can a national hero participate in the circulation of soft power and popular culture as an icon in a global consumer economy? The six films that I will be examining in detail to

instantiate these themes are *Jian Guo Da Ye (The Founding of a Republic)*, *Jian Dang Wei Ye (The Beginning of the Great Revival or The Founding of a Party)*, *Jijie Hao (Assembly)*, *Mangal Pandey: The Rising, 1942: A Love Story*, and *The Legend of Bhagat Singh*. I also make reference to other films including *Asoka*, *Hey Ram!* and *Lage Raho Munna Bhai*.

The Patterns of Politics: Inevitability, Truth Claims and Purpose

As I have discussed with regard to mythic history, aerial shots are powerful tools to communicate a mapped schema, a perceived inevitable truth of history. If we consider the contemporary socio-political environments of both India and China, and the related transnational forms represented by *Hua* and *Desi*, it becomes clear that in order for the logic of strength or success of the so-called “Civilisation State” to be self-evident, indeed a kind of birth-right, the establishment of that modern nation state must also seem inevitable. This must seem so, moreover, despite the magical thinking that inevitably ensues when we engage in the dramatic identification that causes us, at least partially, to suspend disbelief. This is, I might add, an essential component of “reflexive spectatorship” (Staiger, Janet 2005). In that connection, it is indeed what Slavoj Žižek points to as the conceit “I know very well that, but...”²⁹⁷. Affect, the emotional draw of pattern, colour and romance in creating a story of inevitability and a story of love that we can key into, and in effect that we demand to fill the vacuum of national purpose as a member of an increasingly commodified global capitalist logic, is thus needed.

Looking at the images below we can see ways in which there is an aesthetic relationship

²⁹⁷ Žižek uses this construction frequently, to speak of culture and life in general (e.g. what he calls The “Starbucks Effect”, and also in film, as in his film *A Pervert’s Guide to Cinema*.

fabricated cinematically between the mythic and ethnic history of the pre-modern, and the recorded history of the modern nation state.

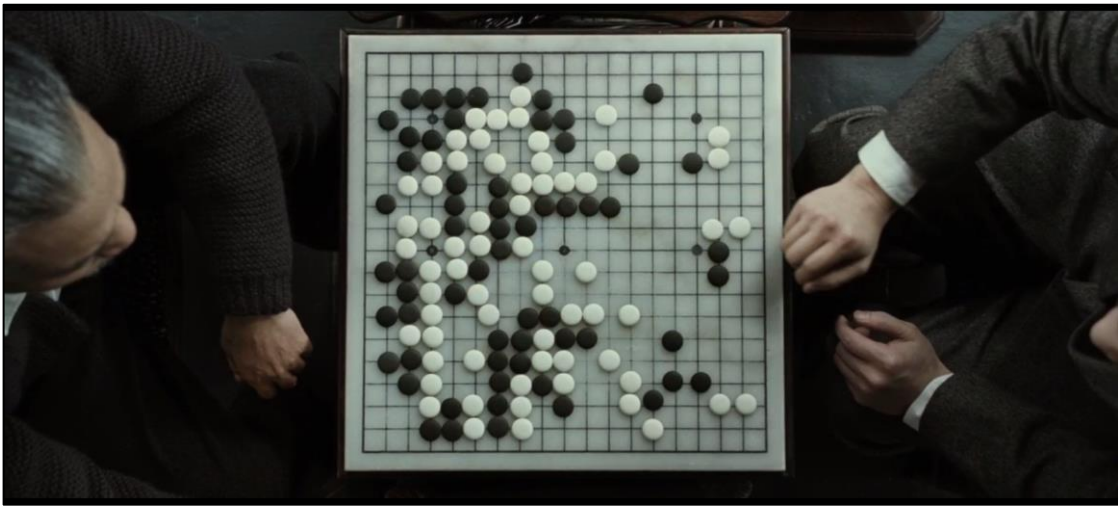


Fig. 135: A Game of Chess/Go takes place between Cai Tingkai (Leon Lai) and Li Jishen (Jin Xin) in Li Jishen's Hong Kong home in the film *Jian Guo Da Ye*.

Jian Guo Da Ye and *Jian Dang Wei Ye* are two important cases in point where the aesthetics of inevitability are cleverly employed to reinforce an officially constructed truth claim that permeates the very bones of the films while entertainment aesthetics bring them to the possibility of a wider audience. We must keep at the forefront of our minds the premise central to this thesis: that these films sit in a space between entertainment films *yule pian*, and *zhuxuanlu pian* “main melody” or official film, meaning a type emanating more or less exclusively from State aims. *Jian Guo Da Ye*, tells the story of the battle between the forces of the Nationalist *Guomin Dang* (usually abbreviated to KMT), who later fled to Taiwan after being defeated, and those of the victorious *Gongchan Dang* or Communist Party of China (CPC) It was released to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the establishment of the People's Republic of China under the leadership of the Communist Party (rather than the preceding Republic of China) after nine years of civil war, and a philosophical battle to engage and persuade the many smaller factions that remained in play on the political stage at that time. Thus

the film has both combat and strategic, ideological elements in it, while also hinting at the emotional lives of key players, for example showing Mao Zedong (Tang Guoqiang) playing with his daughter, and the daughter of his friend and ally Zhou Enlai (Liu Jin) in an idyllic grove of flowers. The film contains an enormous cast of characters, and employs many interesting aesthetic devices as I discuss below.

Jian Dang Wei Ye, is the companion film which followed two years later; it is in essence a kind of prequel, outlining how the Communist Party of China was established in the first place. The film, released in 2011, again commemorated an important anniversary: the 90th of the creation of the CPC by a group of intellectuals and revolutionaries following the intellectual foment of the 5/4 or May Fourth Movement which sounded the death-knell for any form of imperial structure within the new Republic of China which had officially come to power ten years earlier in 1911/12. A smaller cast of characters and a somewhat different aesthetic sensibility was employed as the focus was very firmly placed on the character of Mao Zedong (Liu Ye)²⁹⁸, his influences, his youthful romances, and his role in the creation of the CPC. Clearly this film was intended to be at least seventy percent “historical” biopic of the period, “based-on-a-true-story”.

Firstly, in considering how these and other films in this section create both appeal and affect in their audiences, let us think about the entertainment elements employed. *Jian Guo Da Ye* and *Jian Dang Wei Ye* gathered together a substantial majority of industry stars, recognisable faces from Chinese entertainment film, including Zhao Wei, Jackie Chan, Andy Lau, Jiang Wen, Fan Bingbing, and many, many more through both of these films, especially the first, *Jian Guo Da Ye*. This

²⁹⁸ This is interesting since, in fact, in many respects his role was much less significant in these events.

allowed the audience to play a sort of celebrity cameo bingo, a draw to filmgoers, although at times dizzying. Both films were co-directed by Han Sanping, a name ever-present in the production of popular films understood to be capable of bridging the gap between state driven sentiment and slick commercial visuality.

Nevertheless, the reality for these two films, which saw a much closer relationship between State dogma and (entertainment) film than the restructured film industry that came into full existence with horizontal and vertical integration in the “year of cinema”, 1995 had allowed, was that State support was, in the end, also needed to artificially boost box office sales, so as not to lose face. To that end, free tickets were distributed through schools and government departments, especially for *Jian Dang Wei Ye*. For a public that, as I have argued, *does* embrace social messages geared at the fears of society and policies that address them, a move towards a more official style of plot and language could at first be countered with the draw of a star-cast or good effects, especially in a film that detailed the struggle of the Chinese Civil War as a whole. But a supposedly “better produced”, slicker and far more romantic vision of the establishment of the Communist Party specifically recalled perhaps too much the propaganda of the pre-reform era for an audience with a complex relationship to local cadres. Judging on the reaction to news and literature pertaining to the establishment of Congress and the BJP²⁹⁹ as post-independence political entities in India, it is probable that a similarly glowing film, attempted in an entertainment arena, might also be met with a lukewarm response at best, while films of the establishment of the *nation* itself, including the struggle against colonial oppressors, are many, and more than welcome, as we shall see.

²⁹⁹ Present day government and its officials are basically portrayed as corrupt, but especially as part of the unpicking of received history of the *Swaraj* movement, selfish and political motives have also been ascribed to the major players there, including Gandhi and Nehru.

Apart from the overt attempts at commercial packaging for these movies, as history films they utilise a wide range of visual elements. In particular, especially because of their motivations, perhaps, they make a truth claim through their aesthetic worlds. In these films these devices *rely* upon the existence of a set of information that constitutes some of the content of an Imagined Community, rather than the fecund absence of one, in which one can be fabricated as in the case of *mythic* history films. I suggest three ways in which this manner of truth claim is achieved.

Firsly, *Jian Guo Da Ye* in particular makes liberal use of stills, some of them taken from real, extant photos of the period in question, many modern recreations of such photos shown in sepia or black and white tones, and many more showing still and short pieces of video of situations described in historical documents (or not), again filmed in black or sepia tones. The change from a colour film that nevertheless employs a subdued palette, to a monochromatic or sepia-toned scene, complete with visual noise to add a feeling of age, allows bookmarks of seeming authenticity throughout the film, where the drama in colour, it is suggested, fills in the gaps between. *1942: A Love Story* and *Hey Ram!* Employ similar methods, either by using recreations of actual stills (as in the latter), or recreating in film known, described scenes, (as in the former), such as the massacre in Jallianwala Bagh, Amritsar in April 1919 when a group of non-violent protestors, including many women and children were fired upon as they aired their grievances at the Sikh holiday of Vaisakhi. This scene was filmed on location. These are not just the enaction of recorded episodes as was the case in the mythic history films, but rather an attempt to directly reproduce a situation in a place that may have been photographed, allowing a foothold into the authenticity of events that took place in living memory. We haunt what haunts us.

A second truth-claim device is captioning or comparison. In *Jian Guo Da Ye* for example, more so than *Jian Dang Wei Ye* uses what we could call “labels” beside or below each of the characters as they appear on screen, from tiny cameos to leads. Each of these gives name, rank and role of the character, somewhat in the manner of a documentary, despite the fact that a decent portion of the characters are entirely fictitious. On one hand, the labels by themselves lend an official air to the portrayals by actors, as if they are in fact the people they represent. On the other hand, they lend legitimacy, and a sense of realism to functional characters as well, as a whole being another good example of “prosthetic memory”, where happenings are grafted on to actual events. They also link the film to the classical style employed in pre-modern written histories and fictions to help keep track of the many characters in most Chinese stories. By contrast *Jian Dang Wei Ye* predominantly concerns a smaller number of characters, giving rise to a more romantic air – these characters, even in the 30% of the film that we would not consider a biopic, such as intellectual and Marxist Li Dazhao (Zhang Jiaye) and the anti-heroic Yuan Shikai (Chow Yun-fat) are central to the story of the Communist Party of China and the modernisation of China. Therefore, I suggest, it is assumed by the filmmakers that they will be familiar to the audience, and although names may appear, titles are rarely mentioned. The status of photography at the portrayed period also enables transformation in personal appearance – mimicry on the part of the actors. Thus see ghosts on screen, whose value as embodiment, their closeness to a truth claim, is judged in some senses when we compare them to photos at the end of the *Legend of Bhagat Singh* for example.

Thirdly, as is the case with the examples in mythic history above, the use of aerial shots combine two elements of truth-claim here: firstly, and importantly they repeat the sense of inevitability, removing the possibility of the action of any individual

person to break the pattern seen from above, they reinforce a sense of fate. Secondly, they recall more modern uses of aerial photography in newsreels, and documentaries: they are different in character to the mythic history shots in one important respect: they are mainly urban, and involve more modern buildings, naturally. In this sense they are more familiar to us, and more in keeping with a certain cinematic language of the documentary.

Below, sweeping aerial shots of unclear provenance are shown at the end of *Jian Dang Wei Ye*, with a very clear didactic message concerning the role of the Communist government in China's development. We can see ways that the new footage from *Jian Guo Da Ye* not only of course recreates the formations of a political event, the presentation of the armed forces to the victorious leaders of the Communist Party, particularly Mao Zedong who rides a tank down the centre of the route, but that the colour of earlier footage, which emphasises the red/green contrast of the military colours, is utilised. In addition, the perspective, and shot types recall propaganda films of public events and gatherings staged by the party³⁰⁰.

³⁰⁰ The visual language of multitudinous people, forming a whole in which individuals are subsumed is one that we can also recognise in other soft power products with which the State has close ties, such as the 2008 Olympics opening ceremony, although the red/green contrast of the Communist Party's visual language is deliberately absent. It can be recalled that in several of the films of Feng Xiaogang he employs heightened red/green contrast, both in films that do depict the Communist Party and the People's Liberation Army directly, such as *Jijie Hao (Assembly)* which I discuss in this chapter, and others, such as *Tianxia Wu Zei (A World Without Thieves)*. There are several possible reasons for this. Firstly, Feng's background, being raised within a military compound in Beijing, and his relationship with the military as a whole, which is where he got his first break, has had an influence on him aesthetically, one that he at times revels in, and at other times works actively against. Another possibility and/or effect of this use of red/green contrast is that neutral tones tend to become browner, lending a vintage, nostalgic effect of pre-reform aesthetics, not dissimilar to that employed by proponents of *Ostalgie* (Nostalgia for the East) in Germany. This, in itself, is a particularly important point when taken in the context of the increasing attention that the current regime is placing on aesthetics and entertainment over the last few years, as displayed by the growing presence of the military in the *Chunwan* Spring Festival extravaganza, for example, a resurgence that leaves many concerned.



Figs. 136 & 137: *The final scenes of Jian Dang Wei Ye (The Founding of a Party/Beginning of the Great Revival). Use of this footage, which it is not clear what the provenance but appears very similar if it is not actually from, propaganda films of the 70s and 80s.*

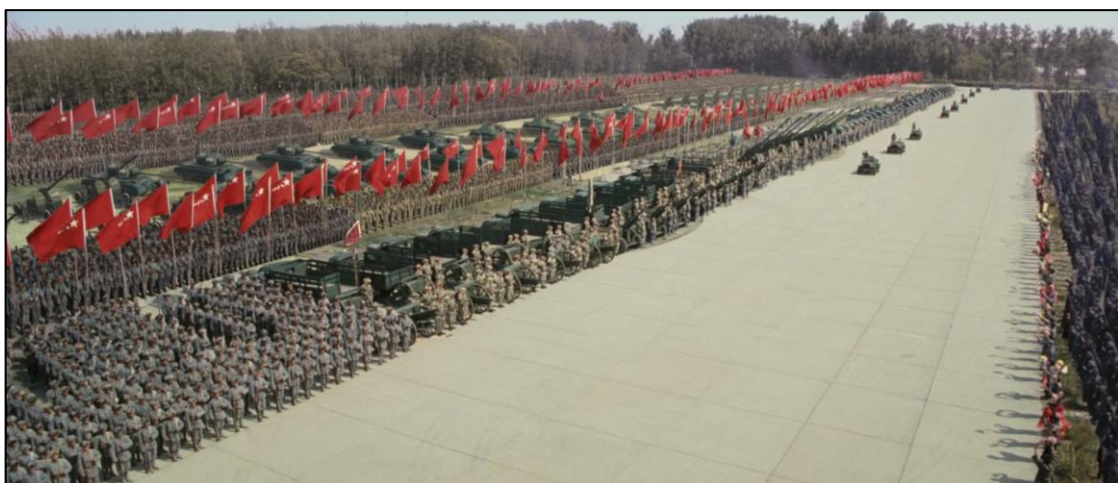


Fig. 138: *Scene of victorious parade following success of the CPC. Jian Guo Da Ye.*

The visual language of the *group*, in which an individual is not easily distinguished, is an essential component of Communist aesthetics in China, and demonstrative of the basic philosophy employed of solidarity and/or subsumption, depending on one's perspective. The aerial shot allows this to be fully exploited. Below is another example of this, applied to the demonstrations of students in the May Fourth actions dramatized in *Jian Dang Wei Ye*. An essential plot point in the film, these real, historical demonstrations, an outgrowth of the intellectual environment in which the New Culture Movement (1915-21) was being developed, are portrayed in an interesting way. Factually, the May Fourth movement was instigated on May Fourth 1919 by the outcome of the Treaty of Versailles which saw the occupied "concessions" of Shandong, under the power of the Germans prior to World War 1, not being returned to China, which had been an ally of the victors, but being put in the hands of the Japanese. Although there was resistance to this ignominious decision by the Chinese representative at Versailles, Wellington Koo, the decision was based upon the previous agreement to the *Ershi'yi Tiao* or Twenty-One Demands. Largely the film follows these events, from the perspective of a passionate throng of students. In addition to the scenes occurring within the Beijing University campus where Mao himself (according to the film) worked in the library, the film accompanies mass demonstrations in the streets as shown below. The shots and colours are reminiscent of aerial photographs of the democracy demonstrations in Tian'anmen Square in 1989, a visual echo that connects the May Fourth demonstrators forward to a progressive student movement. However, the film also dramatizes the actions of some students in breaking into the home of the official thought to have actually signed the *Ershi'yi Tiao* on behalf of the weak Early Republican government lead by Yuan Shikai. When they have reached the home, they terrorize the inhabitants, burning documents and furniture while seeking out any

officials they can find. The connection with the actions of the Red Guards of the Cultural Revolution is clear, and the colour and style of the shots themselves recall the actions of “revolutionary students” in Tian Zhuangzhuang’s Fifth Generation Masterpiece *Lan Fengzheng* (*The Blue Kite* 1993). Thus, the May Fourth Student movement is arguably given ambivalent treatment, or, one can argue that the legacy of the Cultural Revolution, one that is still a complex one in Chinese society and politics, is to a certain extent “whitewashed”, put into a context that links it with previous student movements, making it seem considerably less anomalous in its extent and brutality. The real place that the May Fourth movement has in history may be up for debate, but it is certainly true that this narrative serves a purpose for the State that was integral to the making of the film, and by sandwiching the plot between recorded, photographed events, and images that are reminiscent of some, a truth claim is put forward as well.



Fig. 139: *Demonstrations of the students involved in the May Fourth Movement.* Jian Dang Wei Ye.



Fig. 140: *Scholar, revolutionary, and founding member of the Communist Party of China (CPC), Chen Duxiu (Feng Yuanzheng) emerges from jail where the ruling government has kept him imprisoned for one hundred days to find representatives of the 5/4 or May Fourth new culture movement and socialist supporters waiting for him.*

Above we see another example of a combination of both truth-claim and affect lent by colour and perspective in *Jian Dang Wei Ye*, which has a strong pink/brown-blue/grey contrast that lends a romantic, vintage feel to the film. The bright red banners that stream across the screen in what is an extremely carefully crafted shot, stand out vibrantly against such a muted colour palette, and the large black rectangle of the open jail door dwarfs the tiny figure of Chen Duxiu. In fact, I argue that in *Jian Guo Da Ye*, *Jian Dang Wei Ye* and *1942: A Love Story*, the colour revolves around the iconic colours of the iconic national flags: the red *guoqi* flag, and the *tiranga*. The objects themselves and the colours of them are lifted to the emotional heights of a fetish, designed to create affect in the audience, as the final scenes of incredible violence and nationalistic love in *1942: A Love Story* illustrate. In this film, after violent attacks upon many of the most vicious officers of the British Army present, where the camera all the while uses quick edits to follow a trail of blood down the white marble stairs of the now

doubly red-carpeted municipal building in perhaps a gesture to Eisenstein³⁰¹, the noose that was to hang romantic lead Naren is used to kill evil General Douglas (Brian Glover) while the building is bombed, as Vijay Mishra puts it, “Under the sign of ‘Jai Hind’ (‘Hail India’ or ‘Victory to India’) a mother willingly sacrifices a son, a sister her brother, and a son his father”. As a large assembled crowd with torches revels in the violent overthrow with shouts of *Jai Hind*, the Indian flag is raised, and the audience, itself brought into a romance of national pride that transmutes the bloodshed, is interpellated by the film itself. A shot of the fluttering flag is accompanied by the subtitle *in Hindi* “*Kripya Rangrgeet ke Samman men khaRe rhiye*” ‘Please be upstanding in respect for the National Anthem³⁰²’” Suddenly, as Mishra himself argues, we are part of the film, part of the crowd, and further, I would argue, also implicated in the violence and its sublimation.



Fig. 141: 1942: *A Love Story*. *Colour is an extremely important element in this film, and we may say that its focal points radiate from the love objects in it from which passion and affect emanate: the female lead, Rajjo and the nascent independent India*

³⁰¹ The films may be very different from one another, but the violent revolution shown in *1942: A Love Story* becomes surprisingly serious especially towards the end of the film, so that an echo of Eisenstein’s landmark *Battleship Potemkin* is not as absurd as it might appear.

³⁰² *Kripya Rangrgeet ke Samman men khaRe Rhiye*”

itself, as symbolically represented by its old form Tirang (tri-colour) flag, as shown above.

Thus intoxicating, romantic affect washes over us, but the focal point by which we experience it is through the hero who lives it in echo of, or in place of an actual romantic relationship, giving rise to the mirroring and intersecting images of the martyr and the lover, as I will show below.

Whose Love, Whose Violence?: Modernity, Martyrdom and Romance

The modern nation states of India and China were established with great loss of life, a fact well known. The establishment of China as a republic, and the subsequent civil war between the nationalist KMT and Communist CPC forces is said to have cost the lives of perhaps six million people, and untold millions were killed in the struggle for India's independence and the bloody partition that followed. Films such as *Pinjar* (*Skeleton*. Dwidevi dir. 2003³⁰³), *1942* (*Back to 1942*. Feng Xiaogang dir. 2012) and *Hey Ram!* among many others remind us of this. Despite the peaceful protest strategy employed by Gandhi in attempting to carve out *Swaraj* or self-rule, away from British control, the struggle against the *Raj*, and later the carnage of the partition of India and Pakistan, mapped the borders of contemporary India in blood. However, the extent to which the countries of India and China wish now to be associated with bloodshed, or how this bloodshed and violence is *figured* in the popular imagination as part of their national stories is not simple. Contemporary India and China tend to project themselves as peaceful when interacting on the world stage, despite both having nuclear arms, and engaging in border disputes with each other and other states. Rhetorically, one manner of ennobling a violent past is through the person of the martyr (*shaheed* in Hindi, *lieshi*

³⁰³ This film is based upon the Punjabi novel by Amrita Pritam written in 1950 when the trauma of partition was very fresh indeed.

in Mandarin). The martyr is a complex figure, however, who one can argue is emasculated by the nation for its purposes. On the other hand, one might say that he takes ownership of his own death, and thereby gains cultural power, depending on the way in which the subject is approached. One thing that does characterize martyrs, as opposed to victims is *love*. It is through love that a martyr is supposed to have sacrificed himself, *and* in the cases we will look at below, committed violence against those he considers enemies of the nation with which he is enamoured. It is through this relationship between love, nation and death, that violence can be married to romance in the service of the nation, and in a person or people, as is graphically illustrated in the films *The Legend of Bhagat Singh*, *Mangal Pandey: The Rising*, *1942: A Love Story*, and *Jijie Hao (Assembly)*, below. Indeed, the first words of *1942: A Love Story*, spoken by a black silhouette of a raspy-voiced man figured ominously in front of a Union Flag, are “Hang them!”. Ironically, it is by blood and by the Indian flag that he and his troops end up being defeated in this tale of martyrdom and passion.

Two more heroes, two more nooses. In the stills below, we see those who commit violence and are violently treated, but whose violence is sublimated by the cause as constructed: love of the nation, construed as mother, God, and lover, in the logic of *Desi* film. The paradoxes of *Desi* history films of the modern Indian nation are many, yet we see trends emerge that cannot be denied and that are intrinsically linked with the changing political status of the country since 1990. Bhagat Singh and Mangal Pandey stare out through nooses that frame their emotional faces, focusing our attention, and in some sense elevating them to an iconic status almost as a true picture frame, or kind of halo: they are set apart from other people, by their deaths. The manner in which they are portrayed as staring into the future for which they are willing to sacrifice themselves, includes us, the audience, but also something beyond, through their focus

on the middle distance. Below is the final shot from *The Legend of Bhagat Singh*, whose title really tells us how this Socialist revolutionary is going to be portrayed at the outset. The film tells a story based on the real life of Bhagat Singh, a man engaged in the struggle for Independence from British rule at the same time as Gandhi was nudging steadily forward. As a witness to the afore-mentioned Jallianwala Bagh massacre in Amritsar, Singh, the son in a local Sikh family, is traumatised and angered, supporting Gandhi's efforts from a very early age. He is disappointed with the slow progress and compromises that Gandhi's peaceful protests voluntarily make. He and student friends distinguish themselves from the anglicised upper levels of Indian society at the time, and start their own socialist independence group, tutored in Marxism and building up a small network. Eventually persuading a chemistry teacher to instruct them in bomb-making. The group make grenades that they set off in the newly formed, weak parliament, however the film dis-associates the group from modern terrorism by making it explicit that they were setting the explosives in areas where they would do no actual harm to people but instead were intended to shock and frighten³⁰⁴. The group also attempt to assassinate a powerful and vicious British officer. Thereafter, key members of the group, including the leader, Bhagat Singh, allow themselves to be arrested and undergo trial, which they soon put to their rhetorical advantage, using the stage they are provided to protest imperialism, and demand revolution. Indeed, I would argue that the key point in this film, the reason that Bhagat Singh himself has re-emerged as a hero despite his violent actions, condemned by many in the past, is the message of emancipation that is communicated through him: Bhagat Singh does not see self-rule as the ultimate aim, but rather, a socialist revolution that will destroy other systems of

³⁰⁴ Naturally, it is doubtful whether such a logic would be acceptable viz those who consider themselves contemporary freedom fighters.

oppression within the Indian state, such as caste and class. Inspired by socialism, Singh becomes an atheist since religion is also a dividing factor that his philosophy would seek to sweep away, in dramatic foreshadowing of the violence of partition, which speaks to filmgoers and their experiences of the “communalism” of contemporary India at the same time.



Fig. 142 & 143: *Bhagat Singh faces execution for revolutionary activities, his face full of emotion, after he and his allies walk to the gallows with a joyful song, demonstrating their love of country and belief in future victory. Below, a very similar shot from Mangal Pandey: The Rising as Mangal looks to the future.*



The distinctions between class, caste and religion which ultimately are still seen by the Indian public and state as fractures that undermine the strength of the nation post-Independence are also a key point in *Mangal Pandey: The Rising*, a film produced three

years later, but depicting an earlier incident in the struggle for *Swaraj*. As Mangal Pandey, the loyal sepoy to the British turned revolutionary himself says:

“Ham sab achchoot hain, apni des men.

(*We have all become untouchables in our own country.*)”

Mangal Pandey is based around the notion of ritual purity, which links it well with the ritual aspect of the *mythic* as I discussed with regard to mythic history. The film concerns a soldier who leads resistance to the British he had served, starting what in India is called the First War of Independence³⁰⁵. The enmity begins in full force when, in addition to a general environment of disrespect, racism and violence towards Indian troops by their British superiors, a new cartridge is introduced to the soldiers, for use in the latest rifles, with which they have been supplied. In order to operate the guns, the soldiers are required to tear the cartridge open with their teeth, holding them in their mouths, in order that the shot may then be poured into the muzzle of the rifle and tamped down. It is soon rumoured that the cartridges are greased with the tallow of cows and pigs, making them unclean for both Hindus and Muslims to handle in such a manner. Mangal Pandey, is portrayed as a particularly loyal soldier who is a sworn brother to Captain William Gordon (Toby Stephens), a Scottish officer. But all around both of them, the British are engaged in double dealing: unlike the upstanding Mangal, who believes the word of his British superiors far longer than his fellow soldiers, the powers that be are portrayed as dishonest and disloyal: *Namak Haram*. Mangal, whose name means Blessing, is an example of *Namak Halal*: being worth one’s salt, which is to say, truly loyal. When, in the film, the rumours are actually confirmed, Mangal, who had even gone so far as risking his Brahmin status in the community by helping his

³⁰⁵ In the West it is still often referred to by the name given by the British: The Sepoy Uprising.

friend Gordon kidnap a woman from a Sati ritual funeral pyre, faces an existential crisis. The violence that had been in the service of the ruling British is now turned upon them, and an independent future is glimpsed, while at the same time, there is attempt made to jettison religious and caste-based divisions existing between the Indian populace before a common enemy. By the end of the film, the female lead, Heera (Rani Mukherjee), a woman sold into prostitution during the course of the film, is a revolutionary bandit, burning churches on horseback, portrayed as a heroine. Violence that would be unacceptable in other circumstances is made pristine through cultural nationalist *love*.

Love of country is frequently manifested in *Hua* and *Desi* films in one or both of two ways, either of which can lead to tragedy or violence: love of culture, or love of comrades. Feng Xiaogang's film *Jijie Hao* also speaks well of the *lieshi* or martyr, indeed trying to lay claim to the name for both emotional and practical reasons. Commencing its saga during the Chinese civil war, Feng Xiaogang's war film provides a stark contrast with official *Jian Guo Da Ye*, with its overt truth claims and photograph-like qualities despite the use of realist war-film techniques such as hand-held camera. So it has a kind of aesthetic truth-claim as well, that differs, but nevertheless fits, at least at first glance, into the official narrative of the period. The film follows Captain Gu Zidi's quest to find proof of his troops' valour as well as their physical bodies after they were all killed in a mission during the Chinese civil war where they were abandoned to their fates in a situation in which they could not but die. As the only survivor, Gu Zidi is lost when, having put on enemy clothing in order to pass by their lines, and to get food, he is intercepted and treated by his own forces as a POW, lost in a radically changing military and political system that simply does not recognise him.

The award-winning *Jijie Hao*³⁰⁶ underlines the meaning of *lieshi* status both to social capital and real economics. The range of characters with different abilities and different backgrounds, from the bookish political officer Wang Jincun (Yuan Wenkang) to big-hearted sniper Jiang Maocai (Wang Baoqiang), come together in the context of a hopeless and gruesome cause that forces them to subsume their individual lives for a greater aim, while the fear grows by the hour that their mission is nothing less than suicide. Like many history films, *Jijie Hao* has its fair share of historical inaccuracies and anachronisms, and picking apart each in each of these would hardly be an endeavour that could fit within the constraints of this chapter, however one inaccuracy is of interest to the plot and interpersonal dynamics of the film: the ranks of the men. *Jijie Hao* resurrects rank divisions that would not have historically existed at the time of the initial operation, the tail end of the Chinese civil war³⁰⁷. The use of rank however, usefully helps us to label and to understand the responsibility felt between the various members of the unit, while also making the particular job of the *zhidaoyuan*, the “political officer”³⁰⁸ particularly important. Indeed, the political officer is the centre of the film, philosophically. Cinematically, *Jijie Hao* exists in the bleach process,

³⁰⁶ The film was the recipient of both the Hundred Flowers and Golden Rooster awards.

³⁰⁷ In fact, the PLA did not use ranks or insignia until 1955 and then ceased to use them for a period during the Cultural Revolution as well.

³⁰⁸ *Zhidaoyuan* literally means “Person who points out the direction”, and since very early on in the history of the proto-PLA, this officer, a party member, was considered essential to morale. In *Jijie Hao* Gu Zidi seems to feel that his men, who are almost entirely illiterate, have need not only of someone with political direction to keep them on the straight and narrow, but perhaps more importantly someone to help them to write letters home etc. At the beginning of the film Gu is witness to his political officer being gruesomely blown up, dying in a pool of blood. He ends up in the brig for taking items of clothing and other supplies from the opposing forces once his platoon have conquered, and there meets Wang Jincun, who is being punished for cowardice. It is unclear whether the status of *Zhidaoyuan* would have been marked out even if other ranks were not recognized, or whether simply the status of party member would have been sufficient as a definition.

handheld-camera realism of *Saving Private Ryan*, which records gruesome acts of war. In fact, the desire to sacrifice oneself for a cause, to melt into a team, becomes a problem in the film, one which the battle-scarred leader, Gu Zidi, spends the remainder of the film trying to resolve as he searches for the remains of each man³⁰⁹. In this film, we can see a continued use of aerial shots defining inevitability, but the overall effect is more one of melancholy than of confidence in victory.

This effect is achieved through the loneliness of the figure of Gu Zidi as he is without his men. His smallness against the vastness of his task, and the State bureaucratic machinery he must confront is depicted repeatedly in the film through mis-en-scene and aerial shots, below are two examples. In one, Gu is filmed from above as he walks across the vast swathe of coal on one of the hills that is part of the old mine. In fact, the camera pans up and out, revealing the vastness of the landscape around him, where he is the only light-coloured thing amid lifeless funereal blue-black. In the image below this, Gu's tiny foothold into the landscape is positioned within a wide shot that again makes him and the widow of his dead political officer seem tiny. The news she brings is good, and the light on the snow is a more hopeful pink, but the two of them are no less tiny for all that, against the giant system which has only just ratified the facts that they knew to be true.

³⁰⁹ Ironically, this film has received praise and awards from North Korea, and has been accused of being a propaganda film in its retelling of history. Although the history of the film is both biased and at times inaccurate, critics often fail to appreciate the ultimately quite anti-communist-establishment message within the plot.

Figs. 144 and 145. Jijie Hao. *Gu Zidi* moves on in his *Quixotic* attempt to find the bodies of his platoon.



These scenes of the underdog, fighting against gigantic odds lead to some interesting questions about the role of this film in the official narrative. After all the odds that are against Gu are largely placed there by the CPC bureaucracy. Gu Zidi had asked, “They were laid out right here one by one. How can you not find them?”³¹⁰. His quest to find his comrades is to find their *bodies*, their individualities, their selves. Thus, despite initial appearances, the push is *against* total loss of person-hood in this example of contemporary war/history film in the popular sphere. Just moving their names from one list to another is not sufficient for Gu, who is at once haunted by the memories of

³¹⁰ “一个一个都好好的摊在里边，你们怎么就看不见？”

the fallen, and stubbornly *haunting* the place of the mine, and the machine of the party and PLA. One of his eyes is totally blind and the other is losing its sight due to shrapnel that he took in his head when saving his superior officer, now friend Zhao Erduo (Deng Chao) from a landmine during the Korean war. It is thus that at the same time as he is doggedly refusing to disappear, he is halfway out of the world around him. Indeed, in digging for his fallen men, in a kind of romantic gesture, he is digging his own grave. A dead man, whose very being is trauma, haunting the present.



Fig. 146: *One of many shots that show directly the visceral horror of the battlefield of civil war in Jijie Hao. Graphic gruesomeness is a hallmark of the “authentic” style of this film which won awards both in the PRC and North Korea.*

As in this example, many contemporary films of modern history pose some challenge to received discourse up to a point, while still very much remaining within it. This can be achieved in the manner of *Jijie Hao*, where ultimately the Party is magnanimous, which is to say that challenging discourse is absorbed within a wider, normative narrative, much the same way as we have seen with comedy films. Another important way in which plot points and styles that would at first seem challenging actually fit smoothly into public and state discourse is by the fact that in the contemporary, the goal posts may have moved: the norms will shift in order to fit the functional political needs of the time. For example, one would think at first glance that

films like *Mangal Pandey* and *The Legend of Bhagat Singh*, or *1942 a Love Story*, would be consistent with official history. This is both true and untrue. These films exemplify quite clearly a development in Indian discourse with regard to passivism, and with the legacy of Gandhi. Gandhi, the father the nation, is an international icon of passive resistance, inspiring countless people all over the world; his image adorns innumerable official buildings in India and every banknote. Yet his message is increasingly chipped away by new historical investigations into him personally, into his political thought, and into his political effectiveness. In the atmosphere that has given rise to nuclear power and Hindutva, Gandhi is very selectively invoked, while heroes like Bhagat Singh (who is specifically told that he is “not Gandhi”, and no one will care if he starves or not when he is on hunger strike.) and Mangal Pandey who *fought* tooth and nail are increasingly present. Below, in another scene from *1942: A Love Story*, we have an example *par excellence* of cultural nationalist violence on screen: an officer of the Raj finally becomes enraged as the brutality of the British behaviour towards an assembled crowd of protestors becomes apparent. He seizes the Indian Tiranga flag, and uses it to impale a British officer.



Fig. 147: *Violent phallicism as Major Bisht (Danny Dzongpa) uses the symbol of the nation as a weapon. He is attempting to impale the General, whose actions further add to the power of the metaphor as he uses the person of one of his Indian lackeys, Naren’s father, to take the blow in his stead.*

While *1942: A Love Story* contains within it many references to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, which is being rehearsed for a production in a play within a play, the lovers across social classes, Naren (Anil Kapoor) and Rajjo (Manisha Koirala), "become revolutionaries" (Mishra, Vijay (2001) 230). Indeed the story of love between the two seems fairly incidental to the many self-immolations and incidences of revolutionary violence that occur, even though technically it is the driving force to the drama: privileged boy Naren's love for rural girl Rajjo introduces him to a fight for liberation of India, perhaps representing the necessity of the love of the educated classes for the rural heart of India to achieve patriotic victory. Naren also befriends her father, a patriot who ends up blowing himself and his home up, and making himself *shaheed*. Rajjo herself, a Hindu is saved by one of her father's protégés, an expert in violent revolution. The film itself follows a circular, noose-like arc, beginning with Naren going up to the gallows, with his family blessing him through their tears. In the end, though, it is not Naren who ends up within the noose, but the British to cries of *Jai Hind!* and extra-diegetical soundtrack of Muhammad Iqbal's ubiquitous *Sare Jahaan Se Accha*³¹¹

At the same time, this approach, which does place violent resistance at the centre of India's struggles for modern selfhood, allows violence at her borders to be incorporated into the overall history of modern India's defense, rather than anomalous or anathema to the core values of the country. The struggle for Independence can be linked thus through violent heroes to the violence of *Border* or *Mission Kashmir* even as those films ultimately do try very hard to put forward an argument for peace and coexistence.

³¹¹ The song's most iconic lyrics are, translated, "Of all that there is, our India is greatest."

Fig. 148: *More violent action is described as sepoys break into the arsenal in their attempts to overthrow the Raj.*



In the face of an Indian nation that is configured on the *Desi* screen as a martial power, the invocation of “Bapu”³¹² and his goals as a power in society is left to popular comedy. While few like to acknowledge the break in the vision of the nation state, when Gandhism does make the odd successful appearance, anxiety over lack of adherence to the teachings of the Mahatma is revealed, and films such as *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* (*Keep on, Munna Bhai*) safely reintroduce these belief systems, but not into the defense of the nation, or to its establishment: rather, Gandhi’s *Satyagraha* is given to the public as a tool for daily life, for social cohesion, perhaps even social control.

³¹² “Bapu”, meaning father, is a commonly used expression of respect and intimacy for Gandhi in the *Desi* world.



Fig. 149: *Where are the peace-makers? In Laage-Raho Munna Bhai, Gandhi dismisses his omnipresent image as useless if his philosophy is not kept in the hearts of the people, while espousing a kind of thought that reinforces order.*

Nothing Behind the Curtain: The Romantic Hero in Three Dimensions

One of the chief motivations for literary, filmic and academic work that delves more deeply into the life and times of Gandhi, is precisely the point that he be made a living entity in the mind, a flesh and blood person, which can both challenge to his status (as in the case of much academic work, and some films), and reinforce the power of his image, as discussed above. In some senses, the films *Jian Guo Da Ye* and *Jian Dang Wei Ye* also have this mission, and are exercises in official patriotism. We have already discussed the role of truth claims, both explicit and aesthetic in these two films. Now I would like to take a more detailed look particularly at *Jian Dang Wei Ye*, and how its aesthetics and mis-en-scene techniques both flesh out and romanticize the person of Mao Zedong in a way that grows out of traditional propaganda images of him combined with contemporary pop culture. This is a prime example of a particularly contemporary attempt to craft *Hua*.

“‘Propaganda’ is a pejorative term; applying it to a history film implies disapproval, and we do not expect those who have their works so labelled to respond

positively. Changes of propaganda are likely to be met with denial.” (Hughes-Warrington *ibid.* 144)



Fig. 150: “*Shenme shi Bo-she-wei-ke?*” (“What is ‘Bolshevik?’”) *Useful little propaganda opportunities are much more noticeable in Jian Dang Wei Ye’s more tightly focused drama, imbued with romance in colour and mis-en-scene. A few scenes like this that crop up in the film feel oddly anachronistic, showing a film that in its attempts to straddle the worlds of official history and entertainment sometimes fights with itself.*

As Hughes-Warrington rightly points out above, propaganda, in the mind of those intended to receive it, is often fixed. Change to official history is viewed with scepticism in China as elsewhere. *Jian Dang Wei Ye* attempts to bring a new kind of life to images and histories that would easily be thought of as propagandistic. As in the case of Gandhi, the film makes the project of fleshing out characters that are traditionally flattened, while maintaining an ever-positive viewpoint. This is achieved through visual devices that make revolutionary heroes, and particularly Mao appear less iconographic and controlled, and more romantic, a flesh and blood object of desire, rather than a sterile image. The techniques I wish to explore here are camera edits that surround the protagonist, split screens, and use of colour.

Firstly, circulating shots. These are effective ways of showing that there is “nothing behind the curtain”, and one way of attempting a more immersive experience where we, the audience, flash between the viewpoint of the individual character of Chen Duxiu, for example, as in the still below, and the crowd assembling to hear him. This, I suggest, is designed to even more deeply give us a sense of “being there”, despite the fact that it provides us with an impossible memory. The technique is also employed during encounters between Mao and groups, both in meetings and in speeches.



Fig. 151: *Chen Duxiu leads students and workers. In this shot we are behind Chen looking down at the crowd, but in previous shots of the same speech we join the crowd, looking up at him.*

While *Jian Guo Da Ye* almost literally serves as a series of stills, tableau, seemingly based on existing photographs or fabricated photographs, with action between them, the aim of *Jian Dang Wei Ye* is basically to undermine this “still-ness”. Another example of how this is achieved is through the split-screen. The last usage we saw of the split-screen in this thesis was in a very different context, the comedy *Fengkuang de Shitou*, where juxtaposition allowed for absurd comic effect. The split screen here is quite different and as the shot below displays, it allows for a shorthand version of the “surrounding-edit-shot” technique I have described. It creates more complex impossible tableaux and drama.



Figs. 152 & 153: *Use of split screen in Jian Dang Wei Ye*



Above, Chen Duxiu is affected by the speeches in the Beijing University Library as the New Culture movement begins to expand. The split screen here, although somewhat confusing at first in that it seems to present *two* Chen Duxiu's, allows us to see his historically momentous company (Hu Shi to his right and Li Dazhao to his left³¹³), as well as the emotion in his face. He is not simply a static image viewed in an official gathering, but rather a person *as well*, affected by the stirring words he hears.

³¹³ Hu Shi (1891-1962) was among the most important literati and thinkers of his age. He was a principal architect of the New Culture movement, and an insistent advocate of the *baihua* or vernacular movement, which sought to simplify written Chinese of all types to make it more accessible and reflective of the modern populace. In this scene he is challenged to show that vernacular can be as pithy as Classical

As for Mao himself, while he is subject to all of these devices within the film, he is also the centre of one more, which surrounds him like a cloud or halo, intensifying the pink/brown vs. blue/grey “vintage” looking feel of the film: a warm pinkish tone. His enthusiastic, innocent reactions, sincerity and dedication are displayed fully in the images below. In them, his love interest, Kaihui and he have been working in the Beijing University library on Chinese New Year’s Eve, not heeding the normal cultural conventions to join with family and friends on this holiday. Nevertheless, as fireworks begin, at the midnight hour the amorous revolutionary couple run outside to see them. Surrounded by the romance of falling snowflakes, Mao lifts the petite Kaihui, enabling her to see the spectacle properly. Golden red fireworks suffuse their faces with a rosy glow reminiscent of the “healthy” pinkness of images of Mao on propaganda images of the pre-reform era, particularly the Cultural Revolution, which also sought to reflect the redness of the Red Flag. However, the image, which displays a cinematic sensibility, and mis-en-scene more redolent of other forms of pop culture, including television and popular romance movies.

Chinese, the efficiency of which is often presented as one of its most positive features. He accomplishes the task with humble aplomb.

Li Dazhao (1888-1927), along with Chen Duxiu, was one of the earliest advocates of Marxism, and its application in China. He was one of the founding members of the Communist Party of China, as the film shows, and was librarian at Beijing University.



Figs. 154 & 155: *Romantic Scenes that combine propaganda images of Mao, and mis-en-scene reminiscent of a dianshi ju soap opera or melodic pop video in Jian Dang Wei Ye.*



In *Jian Dang Wei Ye*, our modern hero, Mao Zedong, is made to fit into the more contemporary mode of the history film in the popular consciousness today. Instead of remaining pure, and two-dimensional, he is made into a hero, driven by love of country *and* romantic love, although this love does not give him access to a divine or directly political aim, but rather, the other way around: it is revealed through his political relationships with his mentor, Kaihui's father. Much as in *1942: A Love Story*, the couple are revolutionaries together, and their love for each other is absolutely blended into a love for the nation. In this film, then, the combination of affect and

history which seeks to inspire pride in both a domestic and a larger *Hua*-invoked audience is apparent, even if a bit ham-fisted.

4.4 Conclusion

“Cinema itself, becomes the eternal present.” (Mishra [2001] 231)

The quote above gives pithy insight into the analysis in this chapter: the purpose, ironically in some respects, of history film is to transform the past precisely into that “eternal present”, a past which can be watched and experienced *at this time*, and *through* the lens of this time, *for* this time, for access within a cultural nationalist framework of *Hua* and *Desi*. In this chapter, I have shown two principle types of *history film*, which I believe speak to the two main overlapping areas of concern that interact with forces such as globalism, consumerism, and modernity as a whole to form the *Hua* and *Desi* identities that are the main concern of this thesis. There are certainly many more facets to be explored. However, these types show ways in which ethnic and national identity are being constructed in the contemporary by sources of centralised cultural power, and how the combination of affect and effect, of myth and history are induced to create desirable pride in the audience.

Some of this is achieved simply through plot device – the focus on tight groups of people that is often shown. Intoxicating truth claims only amplify the ability of these films to produce prosthetic memories, and spectacular colour and texture help to *fabricate* the category of mythic history, and *embellish* the more modern past, making them more attractive and culturally soluble, not least through transmedia links. The *romance* of modern history films manifests itself in ways that retell founding myths of the nation state, emphasising areas corresponding with the current view of these nations of themselves as project internally and internationally on the global stage, whether

shown through martyrdom or more transparent romance. China figures itself as peaceful and non-interventionist, yet brave, resolute and genuine, and constructs new Mao's and other heroes that echo these, in films replete with truth claims. India, meanwhile seeks to project a stronger, more confident image, and we can see a distinct move away from strict adherence to peaceful-as-good, while sacrifice remains a strong theme. While we thus project present sensibilities into the past on screen, patterning helps us to visually map the *past-ness* of the past, and underline a truth claim visually. In short, these films of history show, therefore, the product of various actors, audience, filmmakers, market and State as they imagine the *past that fits best* into the aims of the present. This present, with its rapid change, owns, and is owned by *Hua* and *Desi*.

5. Thesis Conclusion

“Bailon men Beejon men, Eidon men Teejon men

Reton ke daanon men, filmon ke gaanon men...

Chak de India!”

“In the oxen and the seeds, in Eid and all Festivals,

In each grain of sand, in the songs of films...

Go India!” – song from Chak de India! (2007)

“Yiyingjun Jinxingqu? Weishenme yao yong nei yang lao dianying ge?”

“March of the Volunteers? Why use that old film song?”

Jian Guo Da Ye (2009)

Without popular cinema, China would have a different national anthem. In fact, the Chinese national anthem, *March of the Volunteers*, was first featured in the 1935 film *Fengyun Ernü*, (Xu Xingzhi dir.). It captured the patriotic feeling of a burgeoning, modern China, faced with obstacles on every side, both within the country itself and against the Japanese. In *Jian Guo Da Ye*, the moments wherein the national anthem was chosen during the People’s Consultative Conference of 1949 is depicted, and the question above is asked. Why choose an old film song? The answer given is that, although the lyrics are a bit gloomy, the fighting spirit is important, and the reminder of tough times for the nation is important, echoing the underdog flavour of the French national anthem. But I would suggest a different reason: currency in the popular consciousness. While it is true that the importance of the song soon dwarfed that of the

film, the song itself, with its *baihua*³¹⁴ lyrics, had been made transmissible in the first place through the popular medium of cinema, which by means of the music, and through the film, communicated a patriotic, socialist message. In simple, common language, embedded in a popular film, the public *learned the song* with ease. They already knew it. They did not have to be taught another way to understand their own patriotism.

The lyrics of the song from *Chak De India!* above may not seem so momentous. There is no connection with the national anthem, for example. However, the song does give us a clue into a reality which I have discussed elsewhere: the centrality of popular cinema to *Desi* identity and consciousness. In the song in question the “songs of films” are used to exemplify Indian-ness in no less a way than the buffalo and agriculture, or religious holidays. We may also note that the song of course also happens to itself *be* a “film song”, thus displaying the acute sense of self-referentiality that exists in Hindi popular cinema. But lest we take the statement to thus not be a reliable one with regard to the primacy of Hindi films, and the songs from them in *Desi* culture, there are numerous examples to back this up. Not least of these is the role of the “Social film” in nation making, as we traced in the introduction and in Chapter One: films like *Mother India* have *created* many of the commonly used tropes in both government and popular language about patriotism. And, of course, Hindi film songs have been used in both the opening ceremonies of the Delhi Asian Games, and Narendra Modi’s speeches when abroad, notably in Madison Square Garden, as I highlighted in Chapter Two.

³¹⁴ *Baihua*, “white” or “clear” language, refers to the modern standardised vernacular that came into usage in as a standard expression in outlets other than common speech, including literature and song, at the turn of the 20th Century.

As a document, as a set of phenomena that moves across media, from cinema to web streaming, to cable television, the popular film is malleable, and message-able. Treaties and co-productions, regulations and censorship can make it deeply political, even when it is not in the direct sway of a State's propaganda aims. At this point in time, it is a vehicle for branding and product placement, both of objects and people. And it displays the signs of what the State and society need to see and hear in an era of change, from the highs and lows of our heroes standing up to power abroad, humour that provides a release folded into a normative message, or the spectacle of a history that never was. From all of these, filmmakers are able to eke out a space that is profitable, which speaks of, and expands the economy. These films, moreover, affect the soft power of the countries in question, even if only in that they do perhaps their most important job of helping to build a cultural nation essential to their own success, that of *Hua* and *Desi*.

In the still below from *Chak De India!* we see the Indian National Women's Hockey Team, who, having fought not only to achieve excellence in their sport but also simply to gain funding from misogynist officials, have reached the World Finals in Australia. They are shown in a series of different settings during a song sequence. The song's lyrics, sung to a jaunty pop tune, emphasise the fantastic nature of their journey "Are my feet on the clouds? Is this a land of make-believe?", while embedding the experience in their travel, their reaching a destination. This scene shows the women's team emerging from below the line of the hill by which they are initially hidden from the audience, revealing in the end many shopping bags in their hands. Ultimately this shows their status as global *Desis* displaying their participation in a globalised economy, and their power to do so, and in fact they return to India wiser and more cosmopolitan. We may compare this to the proliferation of consumer labels and the

power that they imply in *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*, analysed earlier in this thesis, where global labels were a sign of *Desi* modernity, but can reasonably be critiqued as a sign of success where only the upper echelons of society may truthfully be asked to participate. However, six years later, Hindi film has not only undergone aesthetic change, but has come to further deepen and develop the image of the *Desi*. The team includes a range of classes from all over India, and this is an important feature of the portrayal of the formation of a unified team, the primary aim of the film. It also uses female emancipation as a sign of modernity, and especially the ability of a female team to represent the nation, to aggressively defend themselves as a means of showing competition, even conflict, in peacetime. Ultimately it is only a team of modern Indian women, modern *Desi* women, who can take on all manner of Western teams, especially the British, and also East Asian adversaries South Korea, and win in a way that symbolises modern *Desi* identity. They even wear saris (no matter how uncomfortable some of them are in them) to the dinner held before the final. Thus a simple shopping trip can be made epic, with the right music, camera angle, and context: the symbolic significance of their consumer power is no joke, especially when the shot immediately following this is that of a fluttering Indian Tiranga flag, which takes up the entire space of the camera's view.



Fig. 156: Chak De India! *The Indian National Women's Hockey Team, having entered the World Women's Hockey Championship in Melbourne, Australia, is shown exploring their new surroundings.*

Throughout this thesis, we have been working with this basic premise of *Hua*-ness and *Desi*-ness, which is to say, modern transnational cultural-nationalist identities that are related to the countries of China and India, and constitute the project of creating new culturally inflected forms of subject-hood that interact with all major forms of global power, economic, cultural and political. *Hua* and *Desi*, as I have shown, combine cultural, racial and moral values in a manner that is transparent to those who feel themselves to belong within the categories, but which can be hard to pin down semantically, or by outside parties. They can refer to populations within and without the countries which lay claim to them, and owe much to the economic, cultural and philosophical contribution of diaspora both new and old. In the spirit of aforementioned academic and author Tu Weiming's analysis, the "periphery" of these transnational identities of *Hua* and *Desi* has influenced the centre. But Tu himself, who was born in China, but grew up almost entirely in Taiwan, and had his adult success in US Universities, has now become the head of humanities at Beijing University, where his status is a point of pride to the State and the university. And similarly, the centre is laying claim to the ideas of the diaspora, and interpolating all populations that can be

brought under the cultural umbrella. But having made strides towards strengthening a modern transnational cultural nationalist, culturally inflected identity, we must wonder what further progress will look like, and indeed, what it might be contingent upon given the potential for global instability, and domestic reactions to the same. Will it be a reactionary (and ultimately futile) attempt to empty out all content of a “social” nature, as in the case of cultural phenomena such as *Xiao Shidai (Tiny Times)*³¹⁵? Or will it be a further investment in “civilizational” values to pervasively craft the contents of global *Hua* and *Desi*?



Fig. 157. *The final shot of Jian Dang Wei Ye.*

Significantly the final shot of *Jian Dang Wei Ye*, above shows the flowing Communist Party flag, rather than the Chinese flag, as had appeared in the preceding film in the Han Sanping produced official history series *Jian Guo Da Ye (The Founding of a Republic)*. *Jian Dang Wei Ye* is squarely focused on Mao Zedong, his life and love, as described above, and its purpose, made especially obvious in its rather jarring final section, is to link the success of the party with the success of the country, the “Great

³¹⁵ *Xiao Shidai* is a series of best-selling Young Adult books by Guo Jingming, later made into a series of films by him. The works, and Guo himself as a celebrity, are very controversial, inspiring extreme reactions of love and hate.

Revival” of one of the English translations of the film’s title. However, we see a link with the power of the present as well: the immediate words preceding those above concern the prosperity and “independence” that China is “beginning to enjoy”. Current clout, visions of centrality and culturally inflected modernity are linked consciously with the contemporary cultural formation of both political and an ethnic nation. The creation of a culturally inflected identity, in this case *Hua*, the subject central to this thesis, is defined.

Although long term political machinations may take time to become fully apparent, and trend lines looking towards the future, whether produced abroad or domestically remain peppered with crisis points, popular culture propels forward fast-paced cultural nations of *Hua-ness*, *Desi-ness*, struggling with values and identities claim-staking, confrontation and disillusionment, the *Consumer Grotesque*, myth, legend, fabrication and the patriotic romance. These continue to evolve in ways that reciprocally react with the four coalescing realms I referred to in Chapter one: Market, State, Filmmakers and Audience – “the combined consideration of material, commercial and cultural practices” (Hughes-Warrington (2007) 166). In a transnational age, this process cannot be halted, and it is not desirable for the interaction of these realms itself that it should be. For India and China, *Hua* and *Desi*, in the popular cultures of an age of transformation there is no reason to expect stillness.

**Addendum: Translation of Speech by Arjun Singh (Akshay Kumar) from
*Namastey London***



नमस्ते. Sir, मेरा नाम है अर्जुन सिंह. ५००० साल पुराणी सभ्यता की वजह से हम हिंदुस्तानी सबको ऐसे ही झुकके प्रणाम करते है. ऐसी सभ्यता जिसमे एक कैथोलिक औरत प्रधान मंत्री की कुर्सी, एक सिख के लिए छोड़ देती है और, एक सिख, प्रधान मंत्री पद की शपथ, एक मुस्लिम राष्ट्रपति से लेता है , उस देश ही भाग दौड़ संभल ने के लिए जिस्मी ८० प्रतिशत लोग हिन्दू हैं.

आपकी मात्रा भाषी अंग्रेजी पूरी दुनिया में सबसे ज्यादा हमारे ही देश में घासी जाती है. और आपको शायद ये भी नहीं पर होगा की अंग्रेजी की ज्यादातर शब्द, संस्कृत से लिए गए है . संस्कृत का शब्द "मात्र", अंग्रेजी में "Mother" बना, " भ्रातृ" बना "Brother", " गामिति" बनी "Geometry", और "त्रिकोणमिति" बानी "Trigonometry".

आपको शायद ये बात दिलचस्प लगे की हमारे यहां २१भशोन में, ५६०० अखबार और ३५०० मैगजीन्स छपती है, जिनको पढ़ने वाक्यों की संख्या १२ करोड़ है . आप के देश के मुक्काबले में कई ज्यादा है.

चाँद तक पहुँच गए हम. लेकिन अब भी आप लोगों को हम हिंदुस्तान यों के हाथ में साँप की बीन ही नज़र आती है. डॉक्टर्स, ईनजीनयॉर्स और साइंटिस्ट्स की गिनती में, जनाब हम सिर्फ दो मुल्को से पीछे.

है ये थी दिमाग की बात, अब करते है ताकत की. दुनिया में सबसे बड़ी तीसरी फ़ौज हमारा यहां है, आपके यहां नहीं. फिर भी आपके सामने झुकके आपको प्रणाम करता हूँ, क्योंकि हम किसी को अपने आप से छोटा या कमजोर नहीं समझते. नमस्ते!

“Namaste. Sir, my name is Arjun Singh. Based upon our 5000-year-old civilisation we Indians have the custom to greet all people in this way: with our hands

folded together. It is this same civilisation that allows a Catholic woman to be Prime Minister, relinquishing the post to a Sikh to be sworn in by a Muslim President governing a nation in which 80% of the population is Hindu.

The greatest number of speakers in the whole world of your mother-tongue, English, are to be found in our country. And perhaps you would never have thought, that a great many English words are derived from Sanskrit. The Sanskrit word “Maatra”, becomes the English word “Mother”; “Bhratra” becomes “Brother”. “Gaamiti” becomes “Geometry”, and “Trikonmiti” becomes “Trigonometry”. It might also interest you to know that in the 21 different languages of my country 5,600 newspapers and 3,500 magazines are published with a combined readership of 120 million people - more than a match for your country.

We have reached the moon, while you all have your eyes still fixated on a rope trick. Only two countries produce more Doctors, Engineers and Scientists than we do.

These are matters of the mind, but let us talk about matters of might. It is we who have the third largest army in the world, not you. And even so, I fold my hands before you in greeting because we do not understand anyone to be weaker or smaller than anyone else. Namaste!”

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