

What the Mountain Silently Speaks to Us: The Perspective of/from the Mountain in Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *A City of Sadness*

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Abstract: As a protagonist's hearing disability shows, the theme of silence is important in many ways in Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *A City of Sadness*. Interestingly, the mountain that is a natural backdrop of story seems to be connected with it. This article delineates the silent mountain as a symbolic presence beyond "cultural relativism" with regard to Global South, postcolonialism, Environmentalism, and contemporary ecocriticism.

Key words: ecocriticism, postcolonialism, eastern-Asian cinema

In Hou Hsiao-hsien's outstanding film, *A City of Sadness* (悲情城市) (1989), silence plays a significant role for describing the regional history in Taiwan. The film's multiculturalism, as prominently exemplified by its discordant uses of Taiwanese, Chinese, and Japanese songs [1], reflects Taiwan's turbulent years from 1945 to 1949. The hearing disability of Wen-ching, one of the main protagonists, however, effectively helps make the songs "floating signifiers" [2], which expresses nothing but the difficulty to represent the complex past. Moreover, with regard to the political oppression as silencing, Wen-ching, as a silent witness, "enacts the very problem of communication which February 28th creates" [3].

Here, we can also ask what the silent mountain embodies, for the shots from/of the mountain that is looking down on the small mining town impressively appear on the historic turns. We should not regard its beautiful presence as the unchanging Nature outside the cultures or the history because the mountain is

"unnaturally" changing due to the gold mine. What Rob Nixon calls "slow violence" takes place beyond the film's short period. The perspectives from/of the mountain have potentiality for undermining Nature as the fixed referential point of cultural relativism.

According to Bruno Latour, cultural relativism always secretly uses particular universalism, in which the one dominant society, namely the Western, has a privileged access to Nature [4]. Yet, as Wen-heung's vehement words, "First the Japanese, then the Chinese" show, no Western society directly exercises its power in the film. These non-Western characteristics seem to tempt us to think of the film's relationship to Latour's alternative notion of "natures-cultures", partly because Latour regards the year 1989 — when the Berlin Wall fell — as a certain turning point of Western ecological values. In this light, I would like to consider nature in the postcolonial context.

1. Introduction

There are plural functions in silence in *A City of Sadness*. Silence, in the first place, is symbolically

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indicative of the political silencing after the February 28th Incident. Depriving the Hong Kong actor of any languages, either Beijing, Taiwanese, or Cantonese [5], Hou Hsiao-Hsien makes the hearing-impaired protagonist, Wen-ching, act in utter silence. The prison scene in which Wen-ching desperately leans on the lattice, most strikingly, shows us the difficulty to represent the political oppression, because the hearing disability of Wen-ching makes the gun shots that kill his fellow prisoners inaudible on the level of representation. We hear the fellow prisoners shot to death, but we cannot fully imagine how the shots sounded on the spot. Thus, Wen-ching, as a silent and silenced witness, “enacts the very problem of communication which February 28th creates” [3].

Secondary, silence operates to foreground the film's cultural diversity. The film's multiculturalism, as prominently exemplified by its discordant uses of Taiwanese, Chinese, and Japanese songs [1], reflects Taiwan's turbulent years from 1945 to 1949. The film never admires Japanese colonialism, but Japanese songs are included in the life of the Taiwanese. The film neither praises the mainlander's settlement to Taiwan nor clings to the indigenous Taiwanese culture, but both Chinese and Taiwanese songs are included in the life. In such a multicultural dimension, Wen-ching's hearing disability effectively helps make the songs “floating signifiers” [2], all of which lack the substantial signified cultures that are solidly rooted in the local life. It is very suggestive that Wen-ching, playing the record of German music, tells his loss of hearing sense to Hinomi, the female protagonist. The scene, in which the music of Lorelei floats, subsequently changes into the flashback in which 8-year-old Wen-ching mimics the actor in a traditional musical drama of Taiwan. Wen-ching's silence does not put diverse cultures within hierarchical order, as can be seen in the fact that culturally unfamiliar German music evokes his local memory of his lost hearing sense. That is, any cultures, as far as they are concerned with silent Wen-ching, do not occupy either

superior positions or subordinated positions. For the time being, we may call this characteristic of multiculturalism “cultural relativism” without any dominant cultures.

Importantly, the theme of silence can be found in the shots of/from the mountain that is looking down on the small mining town. Just after the beginning of the film, Hinoe says, “It was cool in the mountains and the view was lovely. From now on, I will see it every day. I feel so happy.” Near the ending, she says to her nephew-in-law in the letter that is telling Wen-ching's arrest, “Please, come and see us soon. It's fresh in Chiu-fen. The autumn flowers are in bloom. The mountains are all white, like snow.” Such lyrical mountains, although they indisputably heighten the epic aspects of the film, should be put into the contrast with the uncannily silent mountains that appear as the backdrops of historic turns: Japanese emperor's announcement of unconditional surrender (1945) and the announcement of martial law after the February 28 Incident (1947). On each turn, the mountains appear as if to reinforce the difficulty to witness the complex past. Then, we can also ask what the nature, epitomized by the mountain in this film, silently tells us within the relationship between cultures and nature. In the rest of this paper, I would like to find in this film one of the ways the contemporary ecocriticism acquires its validity, by taking into consideration the year when this film was made — 1989, the year of the fall of Berlin Wall, the year of the end of the Cold War — because this film has something widely open to the future despite its focus on the regional past.

2. Cultural Relativism and Beyond—“Slow Violence” and the Mining Town

If we find “cultural relativism” in the associations among the diverse cultures, the nature in the film has to be the unchanging Nature that lies outside the cultures. According to Bruno Latour, cultural relativism has nature as referential point outside

cultures [4], for as long as cultures can exist without their interactions, we should find the very basis of independent cultures not in their mutual relationships but in each culture's relationship with non-culture, that is, Nature. In cultural relativism, Nature, with its unchangeability, holds up each culture's independent stability and/or mutability without putting cultures within their interdependence.

This view of Nature as the referential point can be applied to the mountains in *A City of Sadness*. Surely, the mountains appear to be unaffected by any historic turns; Japan's unconditional surrender (1945), the February 28 Incident (1947), and the Nationalist Government's movement to Taiwan (1949). The mountains, with their beauty and picturesqueness, appear to transcend any cultures.

Yet, we have to notice that the picturesqueness of the mountains derives from an artificial factor, that is, the mining industry. The rugged mountains are both natural and artificial, as can be seen in the background against which Hinoe works in Kinguishi Miner Hospital as a nurse. The mining industry, although I do not know its actual origin, is supposed to originate in Japanese colonialism. When we observe the fact that the town would become gradually desolate after 1949, we can see the mutual relationship between the town and the mountains beyond the narrow time span of the film. The mountains are changing and affecting the town slowly, but constantly. We should notice that even during the era from 1945 to 1949, the mountains are also changing very slowly. Furthermore, the impressive presence of the changing mountains leads us to think of the relationship between cultures and nature beyond "cultural relativism."

Rob Nixon calls a specific type of industrial destruction of nature "slow violence." "Slow violence" toward nature is defined by its invisibility of the destruction and its slowness compared with the fastness of capitalism [6]. Nixon also specifies "slow violence," by pointing out the global-wide mutability of its subjects (global capitalism corporations aligned

with neo-liberalism) and the unmovable locality of the objects including the inhabitants [6]. Then, we can see that "slow violence" takes place in the mining town in *A City of Sadness*, because even after Japanese colonialists, who are aligned with colonial capitalism, leave the town, the declining mining industry keeps on affecting the nature and the inhabitants. The silent mountains put into question the mutual dynamism between the diverse cultures and the nature. Not only the humans working towards nature but also the nature's influence on humans is sharply questioned.

Latour makes a remark that cultural relativism always secretly uses particular universalism in which the one dominant society, namely the West, has a privileged access to Nature [4]. All over the world, the Western colonialism and capitalism, insisting on the only master of nature, had or has the privilege to exploit Nature. What the "cultural relativism" of this film conceals, surely, could be equated with the Westernized industrious cultures, although the dominant authority changes from Japanese colonialists to the Nationalist Government. Interestingly enough, however, there are no Western dominant cultures in this film, even though the diverse cultures are, to various extents, Westernized. There appears no dominant Westerner in this film, as the vehement words of Wen-heung, who is Wen-ching's older brother, clearly shows, "First the Japanese, then the Chinese." In order to think of the nature in this film beyond "cultural relativism", we should think about these peculiar non-Western traits.

3. Strange Non-Western Nostalgia for Socialist Dream, but without Lamenting

As for the mountains in this film, the audience should not forget the scene in which Hinomi, Hinoe's brother, runs away from the political oppression into the mountains. In the mountains, Hinomi, who espouses socialist idealism, tries to make a subsistence community based on farming with his comrades. Their somewhat pastoral idealism and refusal of

capitalism might be regarded as the other course towards Westernization, but the film's perspective does not simply admire the universal socialist ideal for the other Westernization in the year 1989, when everyone in the world witnessed the result of the socialist's corruption. In his other films such as *Three Times* (最好的時光), Hou Hsiao-Hsien nostalgically and earnestly celebrates the 60's youthful dream for freedom, influenced by American culture. Therefore, we should not find the simple nostalgia for socialist dream or the attempt to retrieve socialist idealism in this film. We should think of why Hou Hsiao-Hsien intentionally inserts the strange nostalgia for socialist dream in the story.

The nature for the socialists, which is nothing but the mountains, embodies the basis of socialist "progression" which is attained from humans workings towards nature without capitalistic intermediation. Yet, the uncannily ragged mountains on the way to their subsistence community show us not only the "slow violence" of capitalism but also the premonition of the collapse of socialism, partly due to its ignorance of environmental issues, prominently exemplified by the Chernobyl incident. Then, we have to ask again why the director inserts the strange nostalgia.

One effect of this strange nostalgia is that the socialist idealism as a counterpoint against the political oppression operates to seek Taiwanese identity, as can be seen in the pastoral landscape of rice field in the mountains. In spite of their official belief in "progressive" socialism, they seem to try to establish their local "non-Western" identity in the harmonious relationship between the culture and the nature. Although this search for identity looks quite dubious because of the film's affirmative attitude toward the multiculturalism, this de-Westernized and localized socialist idealism helps locate the globally expanding capitalism in the relationship between the cultures and the nature. We cannot assert their idealism neither as universal socialism nor as

rebellious regionalism. Yet, the film's perspective from 1989, through the collapse of socialism, turns to present what these local idealists actually fight against not only as human's exploitation of human but also as human's exploitation of nature, because the socialist's critique of the capitalistic exploitation of humans, at least in 1989, completely turns out to conceal the global exploitation of nature. The idealists in the mountains are not aware of this concealment. Their de-Westernized and localized status, however, reveals to us the global exploitation of nature as the bases of both capitalism and socialism.

The problem is the exploitation of human and/or exploitation of nature. If this problem is presented by the old-fashioned conflict between capitalism and socialism, the perspective from 1989, when Latour calls "the year of miracles" [4], newly maps out the world between locality and global power. The "strange" "non-Western" nostalgia for socialist's dream in this film, at the expense of its "invalid" insistence on the "genuine" cultural identity, helps locate capitalism within the tension between its global influence and the deserted locality. Latour describes what the year 1989 evokes as the returns of repressed, as follows:

"While seeking to abolish man's exploitation of man, socialism had magnified that exploitation immeasurably. It is a strange dialectic that brings the exploiter back to life and buries the gravedigger, having given the world lessons in large-scale civil war. The repressed returns, and with a vengeance: the exploited people, in whose name the avant-garde of the proletariat had reigned, becomes a people once again; the voracious elites that were to have been dispensed with return at full strength to take up their old work of exploitation in banks, business and factories. . . . By seeking to reorient man's exploitation of man toward an exploitation of nature by man, capitalism magnified both beyond measure. The repressed returns, and with a vengeance: the multitudes that were supposed to be saved from death

fall back into poverty by the hundreds of millions; nature, over which we were supposed to gain absolute mastery, dominates us in an equally global fashion, and threatens us all. It is a strange dialectic that turns the slave into man's owner and master, and that suddenly informs us that we have invented ecocides as well as large-scale famine" [4].

Socialism, with its death, turns out to be based on the exploitation of human. Capitalism, with the death of its opponent, turns out to be threatened by nature. According to this brilliant schema, we can draw the view for ideology in this film: Hou Hsiao-Hsien's "strange" "non-Western" nostalgia for socialist dream, with its de-universalized strains, paradoxically suggests that the subject that forms *direct connection* with nature is not the dead socialism but the alive capitalism. In one sense, the damaged mountains in *A City of Sadness* are willing to choose capitalism as their *direct* (and opponent) interlocutor without the intermediation of humans, although we, humans, are also spoken to by the bizarre mountains under the shadow of capitalism. It is particularly notable that the de-Westernization and localization of universal socialism enables such a rendering of nature as the alternative subject in this film.

4. The Embedded Global South and Environmentalism

My discussion so far might have emphasized too much on locality. Yet, simply, I like also the multicultural aspect of this film very much. I like that various songs and music are most indicative of the global multiculturalism in Hou Hsiao-Hsien's world. For instance, just like the internationally popular American music in *Three Times*, the opening song of *Good Men, Good Women* (好男好女) has socialist cosmopolitan resonance, as the lyric reads idealistically, "When yesterday's sadness is about to die/ When tomorrow's good cheer is marching toward us/ Then people say 'Don't cry'/ So why don't we sing?" Yet, simultaneously, we should observe that

this cosmopolitan song is sung against the backdrop of local nature. As we have already seen, this natural landscape is not the unchanging referential point of "cultural relativism". We have to categorize each culture's *connection* with nature as what Latour defines as "nature-culture" [4]: "All natures-cultures are similar in that they simultaneously construct humans, divinities and nonhumans. None of them inhabits a world of signs or symbols arbitrarily imposed on an external Nature known to us [the Westerners] alone" [4]. In this light, multiculturalism should be renamed as "multi-natures-cultures." From such a point of view, we can hear what nature speaks to us, by recognizing their own subjectivity.

In *A City of Sadness*, we cannot hear what the mountains silently speak to us except the furious lightning from the mountains which forebodes certain historic turn. Yet, in *Dust in the Wind* (恋恋風塵), there is one scene in which the presumably identical mountains seem to respond to capitalism and us as if to tell their rage directly. The story is set in the 1960's. On watching the TV show on the mining industry, Ah-yuan, the protagonist, traumatically remembers his father's injury in the mining shaft. The subsequent shot shows us the urgent way the miners, including his father, try to escape. Importantly, this shot, in our context, could be interpreted as the mountains' subjective act of pouring the miners out. The mountains respond to both the local working-class inhabitants and the globally expanding capitalism. It is in this tension between locality and globalization that the film presents the *direct connections* between the cultures under capitalism and the nature as the crucial component of the contemporary world, because we know already both neo-liberal globalization as the reinforcement of growing wealth gaps and cultural globalization as an effective counterpoint against cultural essentialism. Such a contradiction of globalization validates the contemporary ecocriticism dealing with "natures-cultures" under the global capitalism.

When we pay attention to the global capitalism's exploitation of local nature, it is possible for us to equate the boundary between global power and locality with the distinction between the Global North and the Global South. The gap between the two is not only economical but also environmental. I am not sure that eastern Asian countries, including Taiwan, could be regarded as the Global South. Rather, due to their Westernization or highly-capitalization, eastern Asian countries usually seem not to be categorized as the Global South. What is significant in our context is, however, that *A City of Sadness* embeds the issue of Global South in *our* landscapes with regard to ecological problems. In this case, what "we" means is, unlike Latour, not only the Westerners but also the non-Western citizens living in the Global North.

What the mountains speak to us should be sought in such a geographical ambivalence, because the mountains cannot determine to whom they attribute the damage. Abstract capitalism or the concrete workers? The Global North or the Global South? At the same time, the mountains are forced to face a temporal ambivalence, because they cannot distinguish between colonial capitalism and global capitalism, or among pre-modernity, modernity, and post-modernity. Mining is mining. This justifiable tautology makes us newly think of the necessity to visualize somewhat "invisible" (Nixon) continuity, this time concerning "multi-natures-cultures". We

may call this continuity historicity, whether local or global. But, in order to hear the mountains, we have to include the symmetrical perspectives of "natures-cultures" into historicity. The embedded Global South, with its heterogeneous presence, makes us keep on thinking of this lesson. I would like to highly evaluate that this monumental film made in 1989, as if to predict the future, includes the contemporary environmentalism just in-between the Global North and the Global South.

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