

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Intellect in *Asian Cinema* on 01 Oct 2018,
available online:

<https://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/intellect/ac/2018/00000029/00000002/art00006>

Asian Cinema

Volume 29 Number 2

© 2018 Intellect Ltd Article. English language. doi: 10.1386/ac.29.2.243_1

HING TSANG

University of Suffolk

The poetics of (social) *mise-en-scène* and transcendence in Li Shaohong's *Stolen Life*

ABSTRACT

1. This article is a formal analysis of the poetics of Li Shaohong's *Stolen Life* (2005).
2. It analyses issues of *mise en scène* from the perspective of composition, camera move-
3. ment and choreography of characters within the frame. Taking in equal measure
4. from David Bordwell's classic work on *mise-en-scène* and Adrian Martin's recent
5. espousal of social *mise en scène*, I shall be arguing that Li's work presents both a
6. rich social description but also provides an account of agency and transcendence. My
7. analysis of *Stolen Life* acknowledges Li Shaohong's deployment of familiar tropes
8. from popular storytelling, while giving as much emphasis to the distinct variations
9. that she provides throughout the film.

INTRODUCTION

10. A sullen young Chinese woman places two large shiny knives on a freshly
11. made bed. Harsh industrial pounding and electronic percussion accompany
12. the arrival of a surly working-class man, who enters the corridors of a lugubri-
13. ous building. He is warned by a colleague that his ex-girlfriend has returned
14. and is looking 'hateful'. Inside the dimly lit room, the couple exchange glances
- 15.
- 16.
- 17.
- 18.

KEYWORDS

mise-en-scène
 aperture framing
 composition in depth
 human agency
 deliberative agency
 social *mise-en-scène*
 transcendence

1. Although the purpose of this article is not philosophical, my observations are nonetheless shaped by Colapietro's work on the semiotic self. Taking from Peirce's work on self-control, Colapietro reminds us that 'it is precisely because we possess the capacity to stop ourselves from acting [...] that we can think in a distinctly human manner' (1989: 115). Colapietro's philosophical work is also highly influential throughout Tsang's semiotic account of documentary practice (2013).
2. It should be noted that Li Shaohong is credited as overall producer while other episodes are directed by different directors.
3. In one of the few articles that have engaged with this film, Lin Xiaoping has spoken about 'postsocialist trauma', which is endured by China's working class to 'survive new Chinese capitalism' (2009: 131). Nevertheless, Lin's work is less concerned with Li's *mise-en-scène*. Comparisons are made with D. W. Griffith's *Way Down East* (1920) in thematic rather than formal terms.

that express pity, hatred and rage. The woman is told to 'put the knife down'. However, we also hear the following:

That was a very special moment. I stood before him just like that and for the first time in my life I felt my strength and power. He'd taken away many important things in my life but he couldn't take away my life. I still have my future. He's not worth it.

A slow-motion close-up of a knife dropping to the floor is repeated five times.

This encounter is a turning point towards the end of Li Shaohong's *Stolen Life* (2005). The presence of vengeance and desire may immediately seem reminiscent of countless similar genre vehicles across Asian and western cinema. But something is different. A personalized voice-over, combined with the repetition of an image of a falling knife, does not privilege violent action, but points to something unexpected – a human capacity to desist from immediate instrumental action.¹ Arguably, this constitutes an ability to stand away from contingency, which involves self-observation and is also an integral part of human agency.

This is a major claim for a single film, but it should be noted that Li Shaohong is one of China's most important film and television directors. Li originally emerged alongside filmmakers of the Fifth Generation before directing a range of extremely diverse feature films, ranging from realist family dramas *Family Portrait* (1992) to more surreal experiments using much CGI such as *Baober in Love* (2004). Most recently, she is known for her direction of the television series *The Dream of the Red Mansions* (2010). *Stolen Life* is a feature film that was originally produced as part of a television series and was then released as a stand-alone feature in American and European film festivals. The television series was based on a controversial but widely read book of interviews by the Chinese journalist An Dun, which was rather aptly entitled 'Absolute Privacy'. Both book and television series² constitute an attempt to look at the emotional lives of ordinary Chinese citizens in a way that was intimate, open and non-judgemental. Of these stories, *Stolen Life* deals directly with the highly controversial subject of a university student becoming pregnant and attempting to take control of her circumstances amidst a time of massive social and economic transformation.³

Li's director's statement is highly revealing. She speaks about the female protagonist being 'in no position to make a judgement on her upbringing and the decisions she made... My best choice is to walk with her, into the city's underworld, into the fringe; to follow her into the depths of her soul' (Li 2006). I shall be arguing that this is achieved through Li's sophisticated use of *mise-en-scène*, whereby composition, camera movement, placement and choreography of characters, combined with a changing soundscape, contributes to the viewers' emotional and intellectual engagement with the work.

It is here that recent work on *mise-en-scène* is highly pertinent. In particular, David Bordwell espouses a 'bottom up' approach. This approach views filmmaking as a form of 'problem solving' (Bordwell 2005: 41–42). It emphasizes the agency of the filmmaker, working within largely shared (transcultural) norms, but nevertheless finding individual solutions to perennial issues of framing, staging and pacing. Distinctive solutions to the creation of spatial and temporal depth serve to 'guide our attention across a complex visual field, play hide-and-seek with our expectations, summon up expressive qualities like delicacy or dynamism, and participate in a broader narrative patterning' (Bordwell 2005: 16).

An attention towards form and style should not, however, be viewed as a narrow form of formalism. Bettinson has recently reminded us that 'culturalism and poetics are not mutually exclusive paradigms' (2016: 2). But could it then be proposed that a fine-grained emphasis on film poetics might lead to a much richer cultural and social description than what is produced through recourse to aprioristic notions? The recent work of Adrian Martin is particularly pertinent here. The Australian film scholar argues for a renewed engagement with a notion of social *mise en scène*. Martin's observations are worth repeating in full:

With social *mise en scène*, rather than going directly or primarily to the unique, idiosyncratic sensibility or world-view of the maker, we attend to the newly grasped raw material of social codes, their constant exposure and deformation in the work of how a film articulates itself. In particular, it allows us to zero in on something specific: known rituals that are recreated, marked, inscribed in the flow of the film, usually in order to be transformed.

(2014: 134)

This extremely rich passage invokes a critical engagement with the flux of everyday life and its habits. Martin's use of the first-person plural and his emphasis on what is 'newly grasped' hints that the filmmaker as much as the (profilmic) subject and audience, are implicated within a continuous and above all shared world. 'Deformation' and 'transformation' of the habitual also serve to remind us that, under such conditions, what was previously 'known' and taken as a 'given' is constantly revised in the face of new experience.

Improvisation in the face of unpredictable societal change is equally evident in the bare bones of *Stolen Life's* story line. Yanni is an adolescent girl, who was born in wedlock during the Cultural Revolution. Because of lingering social taboos, it is the aunt and grandmother who bring her up in Beijing. Yanni's mother passes through Beijing on a rare fleeting visit. The aunt brings Yanni aboard the train in which the mother is travelling, but Yanni refuses to recognize or greet her. It is not until Yanni is a teenager that her parents visit Beijing for a slightly longer period. Somewhat hesitantly, they offer to pay for their daughter's university education. Upon receiving a letter of acceptance from the university, Yanni leaves home for the university. A chance encounter with Muyu, a delivery man from a humble peasant background, changes her life dramatically. He buys presents and meals for Yanni. On her birthday, he accompanies her to watch a movie in a drive-in cinema and declares his unconditional love. Yanni believes this and subsequently falls pregnant. Expelled from the university, she and Muyu move into a grim cramped apartment that is located amongst the workshops and factories of Beijing's informal economy. While working in a small stall serving fried snails, she is confronted by her aunt. Yanni's mother and Muyu collude to make Yanni give up the baby for adoption. However, Yanni also discovers more about other children that Muyu has fathered and given away for adoption and financial gain. This leads to a desire for vengeance, which is nevertheless transformed during a moment of self-transcendence.

It is also worth noting that much of the story of *Stolen Life* is told through a first-person voice-over. Yanni's observations of past events and relationships weave an intimate thread across different geographical and temporal spaces. Her commentary also serves to remind us that personal development is often

4. In the context of an analysis of Mizoguchi's use of 'aperture framing', Bordwell draws our attention to 'denotative' and 'expressive' functions (2005: 104–06), highlighting the constant interplay between description and aesthetic patterning.

a fraught process, characterized by moments of hesitation, doubt and rage. It is a process that is never complete – even when a past self is constituted as an object of a later slightly more knowledgeable but nevertheless emergent self. The dramatic nature of this process is also articulated by the use of formal tropes, which are then repeated and varied in the main body of the film. Li's variations on motifs shared with other movies and internal motifs exclusive to the film contribute towards our engagement with the film's narrative. The interplay between different patterns of staging can be seen in the first section of the film that describes Yanni's unhappy childhood and her rocky relationships with her immediate family.

CROWDED TRAINS, INDIGESTIBLE MEALS AND UNHAPPY FAMILIES

A train has stopped at the platform of a Beijing train station. A subjective shot, taken from the perspective of the mother inside the train, glides past different windows, allowing us to see a young Yanni and her aunt running along the platform. The presence of frames within frames, separating background and foreground, is the first of many examples of 'aperture framing' that occur throughout the film (Bordwell 2005: 102–06, 206–10).⁴ Within the opening moments of the film, Li and her cinematographer Gao Hu use short focal lengths that exaggerate the space between passengers inside the train, who are almost silhouetted, and others running along the platform, whose faces are fully visible. Also present here is Li's careful staging, whereby Yanni and her aunt run in the opposite direction of figures who are either waving or crossing in front of them, thus motivating a cut to the interior of the train.

Once the aunt and Yanni get on the train, the camera tracks backwards as they walk through the aisle. The use of a short focal length draws our attention to the sharp perspectival lines within the train. This is augmented by the choreography of background actors, who cross the frame laterally and pack away their luggage in the background once Yanni and her aunt move forward to meet the mother. An animated conversation takes place between the two adult women. However, instead of a series of reverse shots between the two speaking subjects, the camera focuses on the impassive expression of the 7-year-old Yanni. It is here that we see a device that is repeated throughout the film. Li's juxtaposes Yanni's voice-over with extended close-ups of Yanni. The pacing and intonation of the voice of the actress Zhou Xun gives us access to the character's emotionality. Just as importantly, we also learn about wider social relationships and historical events that provide a context for what is directly visually presented on the screen. Yanni tells us how her birth was an accidental result of her mother's relationship with a man from a peasant background during the time when educated youth (*ZhiQing*) were sent down to the countryside. She also comments on her lack of affection for her mother: 'That day I never said a word to that woman. I just felt that I could not be related to this woman'.

Yanni's alienation, which is manifested both through facial expression and retrospective reflection, shapes how we engage with sequences set in the grandmother's house. Significantly, Li shoots during family mealtimes. In reference to the work of Hou Hsiao-hsien but with great relevance to Chinese and Asian cinema in general, Bordwell speaks about the presence of 'dramatic turning points' associated with mealtimes that are also rooted in 'a deeply meaningful ritual of community in Chinese culture' (Bordwell 2005: 229).

Li is part of this tradition, but she also adds something very distinctive. She transforms these rituals so that displeasure, passivity and antagonism are brought to the fore. The young Yanni refuses to share food with her grandmother, aunt and younger sister. Domestic antagonism is matched by Li's use of *découpage*. Li alternates between a medium close-up of Yanni standing in a doorway and a wider shot of the living room that accommodates the movement of full-bodied adult figures in the cramped space. In contrast to countless films from filmmakers as diverse as Ozu, Hou Hsiao-hsien or Wong Kar-wai, where mealtime scenes often incorporate a central view of food, Li places the family's bowls of rice and dishes on the extreme right-hand side of the frame. By doing so, our attention is drawn initially to the grandmother counting money at the far end of the table in the middle ground of the frame. This is followed by diagonal movement of characters that traverse the entire frame, serving to accentuate domestic discord. Yanni moves across the room to stand in the courtyard by her grandmother, at the same time as her younger sister enters the room from the courtyard to eat the food refused by the sibling.

Thus, Li has used movement of characters to transition from one aperture framing to another. A despondent Yanni now stands outside in the yard, looking slightly downwards in the opposite direction of the three women who can be seen eating through a window pane. Using a short lens that is held extremely close to Yanni's face, the front, middle and back planes are sharply separated from one another through recessive perspective and different degrees of illumination. Yanni's pale face is lit directly by exterior daylight in contrast to the more diffused light that illuminates her aunt and sister inside the room.

In these initial sequences, Li has shot seemingly simple set ups within the limits of cramped enclosed locations. Her integration of short focal lengths, aperture framing, camera movement and choreography already suggests an aesthetic style that is distinct from what Bordwell has described as a 'stand and deliver approach' (2005: 22). The latter is associated with much of the 'intensified continuity' characteristic of Hollywood cinema since the 1980s, where actors, once fixed in a position, are filmed with a master shot, which is then accompanied by a succession of shot/reverse shots and singles on the same axis. Li's approach is already more fluid, and further differences can be seen in sequences that immerse us in the minutiae of everyday life.

Once Yanni is a teenager, her father and mother visit the house in Beijing to discuss their daughter's education. The transition from Yanni's childhood to her encounter with her estranged parents occurs without recourse to an establishing shot. Instead, a tight hand-held tracking shot follows the twisted path of a wire connected to a small socket before ascending to reveal the teenage Yanni washing her clothes. What Martin describes as 'micro-gestures' (2014: 138) that draw our attention to parts of the body other than the face are also associated with acute social observation. Close-ups of a clothesline on the stone flooring of the courtyard and Yanni's hands washing clothes emphasize the frugality of the family's working-class Beijing lifestyle. When her parents arrive, the placement of the camera emphasizes the diagonal lines of the humble courtyard's architecture, but we also see a close-up of the father's hand grabbing a crudely sewn pocket of his jacket. Yanni's voice-over expresses dismay at seeing her father 'dressed like a peasant', so that alienation within the context of face-to-face interaction among family members also serves as an analogy for wider disparity between city and countryside.

Further irreconcilable differences between generations, gender and class emerge in a discussion at mealtime. The grandmother, aunt and mother reproach Yanni for not speaking, responding or eating. Yanni's mother expresses a long-standing and tacit acceptance of patriarchal values, reminding the family that since she never finished university she does not believe that getting an education is something that runs in the family. An acceptance of present class status and centuries-old gender roles belies her statement that 'chickens don't breed phoenixes'. This informs her further comments about the cost of education for Chinese working-class families, even urging Yanni to find a job and marry early (Gettings 2005). As in the previous meal sequence, a central view of food or a wide shot that would provide spatial unity or even suggest family harmony is conspicuously absent. It is replaced by the exaggerated sounds of crunching, produced mainly by Yanni's peasant father. In a rare moment of humour, the aunt blames Yanni's younger sister for the noise. Li's modification of a commonplace dinner table set-up verges towards the comical and grotesque. Unflattering close-ups of adults, who munch on unidentifiable food and speak aggressively, accompany the silent expressions of the main character, who refuses to interact. This is further problematized in existential terms by what is stated in her voice-over: 'I've never been master of my fate. It's like you can't decide where to be born and what kind of parents [you have]'.

Nevertheless, Yanni is offered a place at a university a few years later. Here, Li combines *découpage* with aperture framing to convey Yanni's optimism, while also reminding us of the continued estrangement between her and different members of the family. A shaft of bright light shining through the dark walls around a doorway is used to frame a postman parking his bike and delivering a letter from the university offering her a place. Yanni runs past her aunt and grandmother, who are seen through the translucent panes of a window, which divides the fore-ground into separate vertical rectangles. It is not Yanni who informs them of the news, but her sister who runs into the frame and shows them the letter. Furthermore, Li chooses not to include a shot of Yanni saying goodbye to the three women, favouring instead a nonchalant acknowledgement from the grandmother when Yanni departs. Harsh daylight shining through a doorway in which Yanni is dragging a suitcase reminds us of her estrangement from her immediate family while hinting at her initial hopes for a bright future.

Further combinations of aperture framing and staging across different planes of the composition are deployed to depict Yanni's disastrous sentimental life during her short-lived university career. This is further augmented by strong contrasts in lightness and darkness that mark separate sequences. Yanni's arrival at the university takes place in bright sunlight. Li provides us with some rare wide shots of urban Beijing that are nevertheless point-of-view shots taken from Yanni's perspective within a taxi. Yanni asserts, 'I thought that there'd be earth-changing changes in my life. I'd have my own values and my own world'. After her taxi almost crashes into a van driven by Muyu, a delivery boy working at the university, a friendship rapidly emerges between the pair, beginning with shared meals and small presents. It is from this moment on that the bright surfaces of the university classrooms give way to sequences shot either at night or in subterranean interiors far from natural daylight. Li's variations of aperture framing also serve to comment on changes in Yanni's immediate and more distant social relationships.

ONE CAR, TWO LOVERS AND THREE VARIATIONS

The interplay between changing interpersonal relationships and different staging patterns can be seen in the variations that Li brings to a motif that is commonly deployed in numerous popular movies about young people. Li shoots several sequences that depict young lovers talking in a car at night time. This spatially restrictive set-up might seem to offer few possibilities for variation. However, Li alters her set-ups on each occasion to reflect the dramatic changes in Yanni's life – her initial infatuation, accidental pregnancy and eventual disillusionment with Muyu.

In the first of these sequences, the camera is placed on an almost parallel axis to the front window of the car (Figure 1), so that each character is given spatial parity to create symmetry. Muyu offers a bicycle as a birthday present and declares his love for Yanni, while apologizing for his working-class background. Both faces and parked cars in the background are illuminated, making the sequence more evenly lit than subsequent variations of the same set-up. It is at this point that Muyu boasts that he has made the stars look brighter to celebrate Yanni's birthday. The camera cuts to a shot that includes the wing mirror and the window frame, producing a split frame in which we see the reflection of Yanni and Muyu in the wing mirror on the right and side of the frame and a reflection of the movie being played on front window of the car on the left-hand side – suggesting harmony and balance between the individuals themselves and between the couple and their immediate surroundings. The same can be observed when Li cuts to a series of singles inside the car that incorporate the frame of the window while adhering to conventions of analytical continuity. Muyu is given slightly more prominence in the frame but the single on Yanni emphasizes balance and harmony. Out of focus coloured lights in the background and reflections on Yanni's face complement one another.

Frames within frames are thus produced by the effect of light on different surfaces. This includes not only reflected light on windows and mirrors but also an image of a projected film image that is placed in a central position amongst the many cars in the car park in a final wide shot. Significantly, the image itself consists of another frame within a frame. We see a wall covered with



Figure 1: Yanni shares her birthday with Muyu.

5. I use this term extremely cautiously, largely agreeing with Bordwell's critique of film studies' far too frequent recourse to an all-encompassing notion of 'reflexivity' (1991: 112). This view is complemented from an anthropological angle by MacDougall's critique of 'external' reflexivity (1998: 88–89).

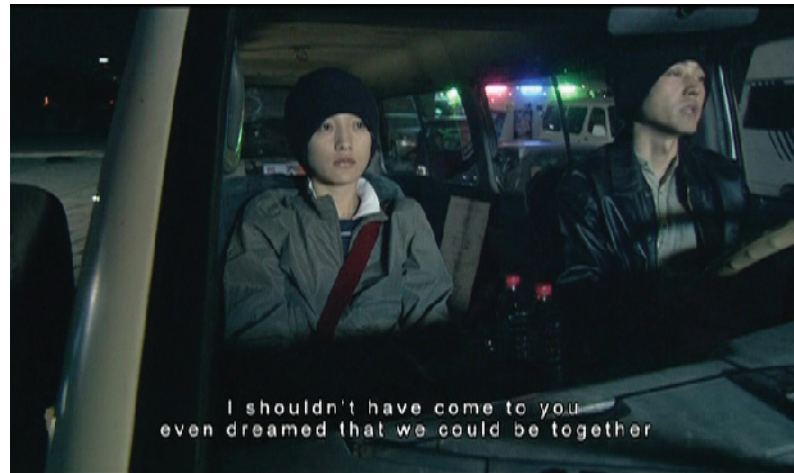


Figure 2: Yanni has discovered that Muyu is a father.

photographs upon which a hand holds another photograph. This is a highly self-referential motif,⁵ but also one that suggests the process of connecting different spaces and temporal episodes that informs general human agency. At this early stage in Yanni and Muyu's relationship, the action of adding an image hints much more at Yanni's initial hopes and sense of intimacy than her eventual alienation.

In a second variation of the car set-up (Figure 2), Li provides us with a slightly harsher composition that mirrors the vicissitudes of the couple's interpersonal drama. This occurs after Yanni has discovered that Muyu is already a father and is possibly still in a relationship with a woman from Sichuan. Nevertheless, Muyu insists that Yanni has misinterpreted the situation and he denies that he is the father of the child. The problem of trust and truth is highlighted by Yanni's voice-over: 'anyone could tell that's a story except me'. Disparity and discrepancy are also evinced in Li's adjustment of aperture framing. Li chooses not to film frontally in this instance, placing the camera at a slight angle favouring Yanni and drawing her nearer to the foreground of the frame. The overall composition is thrown further out of kilter by a harsh lopsided vertical line created by the edge of the window on the left of Yanni's face. Light on both faces is notably more diffuse and dimmer than in the first set-up.

Disparity is also manifested in the composition and pacing of close-ups that are deployed inside the car. In contrast to the earlier set-up, Li's singles do not deploy the matching over-the-shoulder shots. Instead, separate close-ups are used, providing a little more space around Yanni's face in comparison to the tight close-up on Muyu, thereby hinting at her initial attempts to distance herself from her lover. The camera stays on Yanni's face for much of the first part of Muyu's attempt to justify himself. Once the camera cuts to Muyu, it is Yanni's voice-over that is initially dominant in the mix rather than the diegetic speaking voice of her boyfriend. Yanni reminds the audience of her emotional dependence on Muyu despite her growing suspicions.

A final, third variation of the car set-up occurs after Yanni has discovered that she is pregnant (Figure 3). The camera is positioned more centrally,



Figure 3: Muyu declares his undying love.

6. Also see Kuoshu (2012: 125). He speaks of a 'predatory economy' as the context for expansion within the higher education system.

giving us a frontal composition that is similar to the first variation, except for a slightly wider angle revealing the car bonnet and giving greater emphasis to the foreground space that frames the two characters. More importantly, Li creates distance through the use of heavy rain, which obscures our view of the couple, even more so through the movement of the windscreen wiper in the foreground. This is also a moment when Muyu attempts to persuade Yanni to give up the baby for adoption while reassuring her of his undying love. Fewer close-ups are used inside the car, and only on Yanni, who receives a ring from Muyu before embracing him. Nevertheless, Li's *mise-en-scène* brings some irony to the couple's embarrassing exchange. A wide contextual shot that re-locates projected images in the cinema screen within the rain-swept car park is used to end the sequence. On-screen images mirror the previous foreground action in Muyu's car. A fragment of an unidentified foreign film shows a woman on a beach leaving a car only to enter the enclosed space of another car, thus hinting at the increasing isolation and claustrophobia that dominates the second half of the film.

These three distinct variations of the same set-up have been used to accent Yanni's personal decline leading to her pregnancy and expulsion from the university. They are also accompanied by an exploration of social spaces that are very different from either the grandmother's house at the beginning of the film or the shiny surfaces found in the new university's lecture halls and laboratories. Li's sharp delineation between different spaces highlights what the Chinese film critic and cultural commentator Dai Jinhua has described as the 'social division between the rich and poor' (2002: 225),⁶ which is concealed through the seemingly innocuous transformation of public space (*guangchang*) into a notion of the shopping mall (*shangchang*) during China's move towards commercialism in the 1990s. *Stolen Life* follows a parallel trajectory, in that we literally descend into an underground world of sweatshops and factories populated by emigrants from the countryside (Gittings (2005: 274–75). This colours how we engage with later sequences set in shopping malls that bear some superficial albeit ironic resemblance to what Dai elsewhere describes as 'glamorous commercial prosperity' (2002: 233).



Figure 4: A couple make love.

UNDERGROUND LOVE AND CLANDESTINE COMMERCE

Through a dimly lit stairwell, Muyu leads Yanni down into an underground world in which he has rented a makeshift flat. It is a tiny cramped space in which the couple make love. A commonplace scenario is strongly modified through Li's distinctive use of *mise-en-scène*. This is characterized by the use of sharp diagonals that divide the frame and point outwards beyond the frame (Figure 4), creating oblong and triangular sections within the image rather than the rectangles and squares that are evident elsewhere in Li's use of aperture framing. The camera initially shoots from a fixed position looking down through an open window into the room, so that a window pane, which has been left open at a perpendicular angle, forms an oblong shape above the couple making love. Once inside the room, Li shoots from directly above. The angle of the camera creates a diagonal line with the edge of the bed that effectively splits the composition and places the heads of the lovers on the extreme left-hand side of the frame. Similarly, a point-of-view shot looking upwards from the bed is twisted in a way that the corner of the room and the window in the wall are transformed into triangles and oblong shapes. The last shot of the sequence, taken from almost directly above the headboard of the bed, splits the screen at a roughly 45 degree angle, creating a triangle around the two lovers, which is accentuated by lighting that imitates a harsh single light source. Sound is also used in a way that is simultaneously descriptive and expressive. In addition to diegetic sound that reproduces the noises of the copulating couple, Li also adds the sounds of shouting and working from the surrounding workshops. It is the dominant sound in a sequence that might otherwise become visually and sonically generic.

This scene provides the most extreme and expressive use of diagonals lines in Li's film. It contrasts strongly with Li's shooting stratagem amongst the winding tunnels of the workshops and factories of the new underground world that Yanni is introduced to. Li and her cinematographer shoot in a seemingly mobile documentary style that is nevertheless highly choreographed. Shots in which Yanni and Muyu enter the frame from the front, back or side are interspersed with fluid point-of-view shots that show people

working with machines or packaging. The movement of Yanni and Muyu is off-set by either prominent work activity in the foreground or the presence of physical objects such as a safety sign or a television screen on the extreme edges of the frame. In effect, this makes the walking shots another variation of aperture framing, whereby primary and secondary figures are made to move across different planes in different directions. This contributes to the energy of the sequence, which is reinforced by Yanni's comment that 'people above didn't understand their lifestyle but they were an essential part of the city' and, perhaps even more importantly, a layered soundtrack that incorporates the bangs and thuds of urban construction. The latter is integrated with the film's subtle musical score, which is more ambient than melody driven. Industrial noise combines with shimmering electronic chords and percussion with various degrees of intensity during the film's dramatic moments. This serves the film's internal storytelling but also points towards the wider narrative of urban migration and development (Gittings 2005: 274–76).

Nevertheless, it is moments of solitude and isolation from public spaces that dominate the film once Yanni's is expelled from the university and her pregnancy has become visible (Figure 5). I have alluded earlier to Li's use of texture in the frontal planes of her images, brought on by reflective surfaces or augmented by wind and rain that potentially obscure our access to the subject and the subject's access to the world. This is now taken a stage further once Yanni locks herself away in Muyu's room and hides under a mosquito net. Yanni becomes a dark translucent figure, her head and fingers only emerging from the netting to write a message to Muyu. The mosquito net is also placed in front of the black-and-white television set that Yanni attempts to switch on, so that her access to the world around her is literally opaque and blocked. The potential monotony of these set-ups is partially offset by the primary colours of fruit and vegetables, which sit horizontally on a table in the foreground and serve as Yanni's principal food during a period of isolation in which her sole distraction is daytime television.

Furthermore, Li also establishes connections between the use of screens within open public spaces and enclosed private rooms in a way that draws our attention to Yanni's increasing isolation. Yanni's written message to Muyu



Figure 5: Yanni finds herself isolated from the world.

requesting that he should take her to the drive-in cinema because she 'cannot see enough movies' reminds us of earlier sequences, where Li's use of a projected image upon the cinema screen hints ever so slightly at imaginative interaction between audiences and stories in the public realm. However, this has been replaced by grainy static noise on a small television set. The latter is also placed prominently in the foreground of the frame once Yanni is given a small job packaging pirated DVDs at home. The camera tracks out from the flickering black-and-white images of a family drama to reveal a pile of DVD covers and discs strewn on a table that are being sorted by a heavily pregnant Yanni. Her isolation from her immediate surroundings is highlighted, but the presence of transmitted imagery and pirating of films in the public realm also hints at a wider sociocultural phenomenon. A potentially public culture that is self-aware and (self)-critical has been reduced to a highly dispersed network of anonymous consumerism. This is the context in which highly antagonistic encounters between Yanni and other women are presented.

SNAILS, SHOPPING MALLS AND THE 'OTHER WOMAN'

Nevertheless, survival in the informal economy is extremely precarious. Once it becomes evident that packaging pirated DVDs will not resolve their financial problems, Yanni and Muyu open a small food stall selling fried snails. Rapid shots of snails being washed and cooked precede a confrontation between Yanni and her aunt. The latter insults Yanni and pours the hot snails onto the ground. She also throws paper bills towards Yanni's face when asked for compensation. The confrontation ends with a point-of-view shot that shows Yanni standing defiantly amongst other stalls. The positioning of the camera emphasizes the diagonals formed by the intersection of the street corner with a busy wide avenue, so that high melodrama is intertwined with a description of social contexts and economic activity. This is also augmented by another instance of Li's layering in the soundtrack. Ambient sounds of traffic and distant police sirens are blended with industrial thumps and bangs, both of which overlap into the following sequence where Yanni is confronted by her mother.

A second confrontation occurs immediately afterwards in the underground world where Yanni works and lives. Li's *mise-en-scène* is notable here for not making the mother's arrival appear too sudden or contrived. Li chooses not to use an establishing shot or transition shots. Instead, she uses aperture framing in a single hand-held tracking shot that makes the mother's entrance discreet and arguably all the more surprising. Our attention is initially drawn to brightly coloured basins that are being washed under a flowing tap. Through a doorway in a dimly illuminated background, we catch sight of Muyu, who is followed by a woman whose features are initially hidden by shadows and then blocked by the presence of the cistern in the foreground. It is only once the hand-held camera ascends slightly that we become aware that the person washing the snails is none other than Yanni. Her three-quarter back profile now frames both Muyu and her mother who have walked into a slightly more illuminated area in the background. Our attention has been shifted. A descriptive shot has become a dramatic shot that serves as a prelude to a series of awkward glances.

A heart-breaking exchange between mother and daughter occurs within the confines of Yanni's bedroom (Figure 6). Camera positioning and the use of short focal lenses emphasize the emotional distance between the two



Figure 6: Mother and daughter do not see eye-to-eye.

women. Through *découpage*, Li alternates between a single of Yanni, shot from a slightly low angle, and a highly unusual two shot, whose height and composition emphasize the physical and emotional distance between mother and daughter. In the latter shot, the camera is held extremely close on Yanni's face, which is seen in profile looking straight ahead rather than at her mother. An untidy pile of DVDs strewn on a table serves to split the composition vertically, drawing our attention to the chasm between two unhappy faces. Limited depth of field is also used to produce a further visual clash between the sharply focused mother in the rear of the frame and a slightly out-of-focus profile of Yanni in the foreground. The former is illuminated, while the latter is positioned away from the main source of light.

It is through Yanni's voice-over that we learn that daughter and mother have repeated the same mistakes. Like her daughter, the mother eloped with a man from a different social background. In the face of societal prejudice, the mother rushed into a marriage with a man of limited economic means. For this reason, the mother insists that Yanni give up the child for adoption and keep silent about the pregnancy. The exchange ends acrimoniously with the mother storming out of the room, which is heightened by Li's integration of camera movement and carefully timed staging. The camera tracks rapidly forward as Yanni's mother heads towards the door, stopping barely inches from Yanni's face. An extreme close-up of Yanni contrasts sharply with the dark full figure of the mother, who takes one step past the doorway and pauses for a beat. She looks back at Yanni, warning her: 'One of these days you'll regret it'.

The acrimony between the two characters also mirrors long-standing class and gender issues that are also a prelude to a set of harrowing events in which Yanni gives birth to a son that she must give up to a state agency after 28 days. During this period Yanni breastfeeds and clothes the child, developing a strong maternal bond. Nevertheless, any trace of sentimentality is played down once Yanni and Muyu are visited by the baby's adoptive parents. Li employs a long lens to film a listless Yanni. The long focal length brings the adoptive parents closer to Yanni's mournful face because size differences between figures on different planes have been minimalized. However, shallow depth of field also

7. Berry (2016) defines the film in terms of 'inward subjectivity'. This can also be seen alongside Colapietro's emphasis on 'inward autonomy', which is derived from Peirce's account of the self that privileges 'interpenetrability' over 'insularity' (1989: 104).

blurs their contours, privileging contrast and difference over visual affinity. Li's simple but effective *mise-en-scène* turns the adoptive parents into anonymous consumers; their faces are never revealed, but their manners, clothing and speech patterns embody a new professional comprador class. Once papers are exchanged with Muyu and the baby is taken away, Yanni chases after her child and is restrained by Muyu in one of the most disturbing moments in the film that is further punctuated by the prominence of industrial bangs and thuds on the sound track.

Furthermore, Yanni's victimhood is heightened once she becomes the object of disdain for a woman called Fangfang, who believes that she alone has exclusive possession of Muyu. In this sense, Yanni has thus become 'the other woman'. This can be seen visually in the way in which Li sets up the confrontation between the two characters. Yanni has now become a sales assistant in a shopping mall. The location is presented through subjective shots taken from the perspective of someone walking along the corridors and escalators of 'a happy shoppers' heaven' (Dai 2002: 220). The camera is held at a slightly high angle that emphasizes the angularity of the location's architecture and the presence of local Chinese copycat brands rather than international labels. Yanni is the subject of a gaze that is only identifiable once we see Fangfang entering the frame.

A terse conversation ensues between the two woman in which Yanni is given a limited time to remove her possessions from Muyu's flat. The exchange is one of the few occasions in which Li deploys a shot/reverse shot stratagem, alternating between over-the-shoulder singles. But there are differences. In contrast to standard textbook practice that would encourage the use of matching focal lengths, Li uses very different focal lengths to create disharmony and distance. She alternates between a short focal length on Fangfang and a longer lens for a slightly tighter shot on Yanni showing her face and upper torso. The contrast is further marked by Li's choreography of passers-by who are made to cross the frame laterally, both in the background behind Fangfang and in front of Yanni in the foreground. The distances between primary and secondary figures on different planes are exaggerated in the single on Fangfang and are diminished in the single on Yanni, where the passers-by are almost the same size and appear as virtually abstract smudges due to the reduced depth of field. Furthermore, the latter do not always exit fully from the frame before Li cuts back to Fangfang, making the cuts appear discontinuous and abrupt.

This acerbic exchange also serves as a trigger for Yanni's attempt to find out more about Muyu's dark secrets. Taking advantage of the fact that Muyu is away for a few days, Yanni returns to the flat and searches through his possessions. She discovers multiple receipts paid out to Muyu for the different children that he has fathered with various women. On his return to the flat, the couple have a fight, at the end of which Yanni is compared unfavourably to the 'younger' Fangfang. The latter brings a black bag containing Yanni's old possessions to Yanni's workplace, provoking Yanni's desire for revenge in the encounter that I described in the introduction to this article. I also emphasized Yanni's abstaining from instrumental action as part of her emerging agency. Furthermore, what Yanni describes as 'strength and power' should not be conflated with a narrow sense of individualism.⁷ Instead, a greater sense of interconnection between individual agency and wider communal concerns is strongly hinted at in a last exchange between Fangfang and Yanni, and it is brought to the fore in a final direct address to the audience that brings the film to a conclusion.



Figure 7: The 'other woman' has been abandoned by Muyu.

8. See Daniel (1996) and Wiley (1994) for ethnographical and sociological work that links individual subjectivity with wider communal concerns.

COMMUNITY AND THE TRANSCENDENT INDIVIDUAL

After Yanni desists from personal vengeance, Fangfang makes a last visit to Yanni (Figure 7). With tears in her eyes, she asks for the whereabouts of Muyu, who has predictably deserted her. Yanni's dry reply – 'Who is Muyu?' – nevertheless serves to remind us of parity and equivalence between the two women's situations. This is also mirrored in visual stratagems that provide a subtle but nonetheless distinct variation on the use of focal lengths and reflections in the first hostile encounter between the two women. Fangfang is initially seen as an object of Yanni's gaze. She is veiled by the reflections of women passers-by on a glass panel, which splits the frame vertically, creating visual tension in the composition, but this also locates the encounter between the two women in the context of the reflections of many other women. The same glass reflections also form a background for the singles on Yanni. Differing focal lengths further alter the proximity of secondary women figures within the frame. The latter are brought closer to Yanni because of Li's deployment of a long lens, while a short lens and the positioning of the camera on a diagonal axis exaggerate the distance between Fangfang and background women figures. An emphasis on difference and disparity would seem to formally mirror the earlier encounter.

Nevertheless, there is also a further shift in perspectives and proximities (Figure 8). After it would appear that Yanni has turned her back to Fangfang, she comes out of her shop looking for the other person. She is positioned almost centrally, giving us a near-frontal view. As the camera tracks forward, Yanni comments on how Fangfang's refusal to face truth is similar to her own previous predicament. This is thus a projection into the experience of another woman that transcends their earlier hostility. The final image, which is now a close-up surrounded by glass reflections of many other women, also hints at a sense of the collective that transcends the vicissitudes of individual experience.⁸ This is directly expressed by Yanni, when she declares 'I am a new person'.

Yanni's capacity for projection into the lives of others is brought further to the fore when she catches sight of a pregnant Fangfang a few months later outside a block of flats. Yanni's voice-over states: 'At that moment I saw myself

9. In this sense, Li's work shares some of the same thematic concerns as Wu Yonggang's *The Goddess* (1934), in which a young mother longs for the child that had been taken away from her. Both films, separated by a period of 70 years, engage with the theme of agency and social prejudice even if very different formal techniques are deployed.



Figure 8: Yanni reflects on her recent experience.

and remembered all the things that had happened to me'. This anticipates a highly striking direct-to-camera address that ends the film. In a tour de force performance, in which hesitations, tears and hushed tones suggest both intimacy and the desire to communicate in the public sphere, Yanni asks the off-screen interviewer how she might help the helpless Fangfang. She also expresses her love for her son and her desire to know how he is.⁹ Directly facing us, we are implicated in Yanni's subjectivity through the frontality of the camera and the raw authenticity of Zhou Xun's performance. Li's use of composition further highlights the interrelationship between inner and outer space, reminding us that the issues of the film are ongoing and continue to affect wide sectors of society. Yanni is framed by the contours of a brightly lit children's nursery. A plastic toy house dominates the background and a window looks out onto a playground. Its sterile emptiness is contrasted with the sounds of children playing and shouting from an indeterminate source. A tearful Zhou Xun looks down and the film fades to black.

It has been my intention to show the interrelationship between Li Shaohong's sophisticated use of *mise-en-scène* and a nuanced engagement with contemporary Chinese social issues, which is undertaken from the perspective of individual lives and does not resort to simplistic pamphleteering. In the light of this, Dai Jin hua's earlier critique of academic silence and the need for 'a public critical conscience' (2002: 233) and Martin's more recent admonition that we 'short-change ourselves by censoring out, so completely, the social dimension of the profilmic' (2014: 142) might no longer be viewed as culturally disparate observations. Instead, nuanced sensitivity towards changing social conditions offers possibilities for modes of film criticism that would pay attention to film craft as a form of problem solving (Bordwell 2005: 249–54) as much as it would to the 'micro-gestures' of everyday human interaction (Martin 2014: 138). A synthesis along these lines would offer a point of departure for more general social critique. This is what is offered through a close analysis of this particular film by Li Shaohong, and it is my hope that my modest efforts will contribute towards further critical engagement with one of China's major filmmakers.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

- Tsang, H. (2018), 'The poetics of (social) *mise-en-scène* and transcendence in Li Shaohong's *Stolen Life*', *Asian Cinema*, 29:2, pp. 243–60, doi: 10.1386/ac.29.2.243_1

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Hing Tsang is a filmmaker and teacher at the University of Suffolk. He is the author of *Semiotics and Documentary: The Living Sign in the Cinema* (Mouton

de Gruyter, 2013). This book applies Peircean sign theory to the work of Jon Jost, van der Keuken and Rithy Panh. He has previously published in journals and books on the work of van der Keuken and Jon Jost. His research interests include American pragmatism, sign theory, bio-semiotics, visual anthropology and Asian film. He is also active as a practitioner and his work has been shown in film festivals across Europe and the Americas.

Contact: Long Street, Ipswich, Suffolk, IP3 8AH, UK.

E-mail: h.tsang@uos.ac.uk

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0658-9595>

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