

Comrades Almost A Love Story (1996) 甜蜜蜜

diaspora as long march and transnational identity

- The year 1996 in Hong Kong as a British colony is a landmark in history when the colonial rule was coming to an end. This film by Peter Chan (陳可辛, 1962–), born and raised in Hong Kong, capitalizes on the anxiety of this historical moment. Chan shares his insights into the changes in cultural identity as effected by HK reversion to the Mainland and by migrancy of the Chinese.
- The title of the film is the name of a song often sung by the famous Taiwanese singer Teresa Deng (鄧麗君, 1953-95), “so sweet” (甜蜜蜜). The lyrics captures the mood of those who were to witness HK’s reunification with the motherland: “*Where have I seen you before, your smiles so familiar? I cannot recall now. Ah, it's in my dream that I saw your smile so sweet; It's you that I saw in my dreams*”. The song neither confirms nor denies that a “you” has existed in the fond dreams of the past. As the two comrades emigrate from China into HK and then to the US, they morph into strangers to their own original selves. Only by the end do they realize that they have more in common as Chinese than they care to admit.
- The twists and turns of the romance between the two youths are analogous to China’s ambivalence about the West in the post-Mao era. The two youths are the products of this historical moment, no matter how they reinvent themselves otherwise, or where their diaspora takes them as Chinese expats. Nothing can erase their experiences as shaped by the historical circumstances in which they become who they are. Their experience conditions everything as if in a *déjà vu*.
- “Comrades” is part of the language of international Bolshevism, a term so out of place and out of date in HK as a British colony. The only sense of camaraderie that they share is the fact that they are fellow travelers of the Chinese diaspora in Western territories.
- There is also an inward journey not any easier than the outward diaspora. There is a quest for freedom and happiness that the Chinese dreamed about. “This is Hong Kong; everything is possible here!” says Li Qiao to Li Xiaojun to remind him that this is the place for individual success not possible in socialist China. A Chinese dream begins in HK when they hate to be associated with Mainland China as a stigma. Li Qiao views her past on the Mainland as a hurdle to her success and speaks mostly English and Cantonese, trying to pass herself off as a native of HK. Xiaojun on the other hand is unable to hide his old identity as he speaks only Mandarin and cannot mimic the way colonial subjects talk. This process of self-reinvention is common to tens of thousands from the mainland who took advantage of Deng’s open-door policy and emigrated to HK and the US in the 1980s. The word “comrades” is only meaningful for “...nearly 215 million persons now live in a country where they were not born, so immigrants account for about 3% of the world population”, 20% of which “443 million people, have migrated to the United States”.
- The film pathologizes the Chinese expats who go through phases of disclaiming and reclaiming their cultural roots. Li Qiao tries to bury her past in China when making the best of her time in the free world. This type of double identity is also found in the works of Lu Xun and Bo Yang (*Ugly Chinese*, 醜陋的中國人) whose under-assessments of

Chinese traditions tend to over-estimate the culture as described in various white mythologies.

- The two are each other's alter-ego: one modern and the other primitive. They must suppress their Chinese-ness if they want to succeed in a Western society, embarrassed about their "national characteristics" (Arthur Smith) of a "less" evolved people. As a Quixotic buffoon, Xiaojun's sojourn in Hong Kong seems an anachronism; he represents outdated ideas the way Servantes' protagonist represents the archaic chivalric values. Yet, however remote and obsolete the Chinese values may seem in HK and US, or how culturally distant China might appear to Li Qiao, she is unable to resist Xiaojun. When she spots Xiaojun in NYC, she runs after him because he is the only sign that is meaningful to her, in a sea of foreign faces and meaningless English billboards. He signifies everything she is: her home country, her cultural roots, her music and language, as well as their shared experience as Chinese expats.
- As lovers, the two must synchronize their moments in which they can accept and love themselves. The detours they take complicate their love and trans-nationalize their Chinese-ness, primitive and modern at once. Their choices in life also make them. By the time Li Qiao and Xiaojun bump into each other in NYC, they are no longer who they were when they arrive in HK from China. But Chinese diaspora does not eradicate their shared past.
- Chan's film documents the Chinese diasporic experiences overseas, filled with joy and sorrow "...as the mobility of laborers makes these people culturally lost, socially uprooted, and politically impotent in the public life of their destination societies. ... While the problem of identity arises everywhere with globalization; international immigrants are doubtless among those who meet the most serious challenges in this regard, as they must abandon their own language, culture and religion in settling into new destinations".⁷ The romance of the two immigrants expands the Chinese self-definition. The story extends the Chinese vision from the mainland where the two lovers begin their odyssey all the way to the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor where they are nothing like who they were years ago. The long march taken by Xiaojun and Li Qiao from China to America allows a new transnational identity to emerge, but only as variations of what they have experienced in the past, as if in a *déjà vu*.