In her new volume, Rey Chow claims that contemporary Chinese films inspire an “intellectual renewal and regeneration” through an “affective mode” she terms the “sentimental” (14). Historicizing the idea in relation to Friedrich Schiller, she claims that sentimentality allows us to glimpse diasporic Chinese communities’ ideals and interiorities. Chow also proposes that the idea can tell us something about cinema itself. She asks: “is there something about film as a medium—with its mechanisms of fetishistic imaging and magnification, its capacities for experimenting with narrative temporalities, and its methods of conjuring interiorities beyond verbal language—that makes it well-suited for the elaboration of sentimentalism in the late twentieth century?” (24).

The book consists of three sections. The first deals with films “in which the past is imaginatively invoked and idealized” (23): Temptress Moon (Chen Kaige, 1996), Happy Together (Wong Kar-wai, 1997), The Road Home (Zhang Yimou, 1999), In the Mood for Love (Wong, 2000). The second covers films that pit “the experience of migrancy . . . against the demands of the traditional kinship family”: Song of the Exile (Ann Hui, 1990), Comrades, Almost a Love Story (Peter Ho-sun Chan, 1996), Eat a Bowl of Tea (Wayne Wang, 1988), The Wedding Banquet (Ang Lee, 1993). The third is concerned with films that produce “unconventional affective connections . . . as innovative epistemic possibilities” for otherwise “disenfranchised populations”: Happy Times (Zhang, 2000), Not One Less (Zhang, 1999), Blind Shaft (Li Yang, 2003), The River (Tsai Ming-liang, 1997).

Drawing from Deleuze, Lacan, Derrida, Pasolini, Bing Xin, Freud, Foucault, and Heidegger, Chow’s multidisciplinary method provides an eclectic foundation for her film analyses. For example, her chapter on Happy Times and Not One Less first combines critiques of orientalism, “initiated theoretically in the West,” with Zhang’s complex relation to national interests and cultural stereotypes (147). Chow describes China’s “rapid transition to market capitalism” as “a vastly duplicative operation, in which those who perform physical labor will increasingly be consigned to the margins” (157). She finds an equivalent spectacle in the plot of Happy Times, in which “well-meaning, kindhearted people . . . are collectively putting on a show to appease the downtrodden and powerless” (157). Here, Chow’s analysis gains breath-taking momentum; her urgent interpretation of cinematic and cultural production exemplifies the ease with which, throughout the book, she grasps and explains the intersection of politics and aesthetics.

She also emphasizes the significance of stylistic patterns. Chow describes the paradox of In the Mood for Love and Happy Together’s “visually extravagant” images that become “more colorful and beautiful” in proportion to their revelation of the “capricious . . . human universe that revolves around/behind them” (77). In her analysis of the documentary style and lush visuals of Happy Together, Chow equates the former with the “promiscuous lover . . . who pick[s] up things and people ubiquitously and indiscriminately” (61). She contrasts this “casual, flirtatious liaison” with “images that, like the faithful partner, simply keep being there because they are deeply ingrained in memory—and in fantasy” (61). These stylized images (e.g. a lampshade, a waterfall, a tango) “intimate that in the midst of a messy, degenerate relationship . . . some tender moments” gain permanence because “they have not been casually dropped for something more novel or glamorous.” Moving from style to ontology, Chow beautifully correlates “sensuous plentitude and spiritual longing” (77).

As is evident in her previous work Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema (Columbia University Press, 1995), Chow combines vast resources of literary, psychoanalytic, cultural, gender, and film theory. Perhaps as a consequence of this breadth, chapters unevenly privilege the sentimental, cultural, and cinema. Analyses of Zhang and Wong shine, respectively, in their incisive cultural critique and stylistic exegesis; Chow’s study of Song of the Exile connects cinematic form, “feminine psychic interiority,” and temporality (89); through Eat a Bowl of Tea and The Wedding Banquet, she explores home and homecoming relative to “geographical relocation,” the “biopolitical imperative to reproduce” (127), and “alternative reproductive arrangements” (142) of family and history. These arguments are often captivating; yet the discussion of Zhang, for example, would benefit from a focused stylistic analysis such as is devoted to Wong’s films.

Instead of a comprehensive conclusion, Chow offers a postscript that positions Lee’s Brokeback Mountain (2005) as exemplary in elevating compromise and relationality to a level of historical and narrative significance. Despite a disappointing final sentence (“‘Sentimental Fabulations’: clearly a theme to be continued”), she impressively observes an affective shift from themes of “defiance, rebellion, flight, or absolute departure” to “accommodation, compromise and settlement” (199). Films such as Love Eterne (Li Hanxiang,
provide doomed lovers the chance for romantic and rebellious self-assertion, through the “shining path of escape” (198) they discover at the film’s end. In contrast to this “courageous folk resistance against an oppressive regime of power,” Chow argues that Brokeback Mountain—like the other films she studies—“succeeds” because it emphasizes “compromise as an important emotional event” (199).

Though she does not satisfyingly fulfill her introductory promise to map out the significance of the sentimental to film theory, her analyses demonstrate the relevance of the “logic and effects” (200) of the sentimental mode to cinema studies. One of the benefits of this book is to expand on questions of the impact cinema has on identity politics and cultural relations. How, for example, can national and ideological concerns combine with aesthetic production/consumption and sentimental yearnings? Chow’s reading of Heidegger’s writings on “homelessness,” for example, establishes a frame through which film-inspired thinking might overtly affect ideas of political empathy that are crucial in contemporary debates over immigration reform and refugee aid.

Sentimental Fabulations convincingly analyzes a national cinema by studying film and culture in relation to themes of finding, creating, returning, and leaving home. Here, Chow presents the sentimental as a lens through which to see what a culture misses and idealizes. Moreover, the sentimental honors the interior (home, family, community) and exterior (world, history—time and place writ large) of both cultural and film worlds.

Through Chow’s perspective, the sentimental thus becomes a productive and promising concept for understanding national cinema. © 2008 Kristi McKim

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