



BRILL

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF TAIWAN STUDIES

4 (2021) 143-162



brill.com/ijts

Research Article



The Returnee as an Outsider: Reunion and Division in Wang Quan'an's *Apart Together* (團圓, *tuan yuan*)

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Abstract

Mainland Chinese director Wang Quan'an's *Apart Together*, which won the Silver Bear Award for Best Screenplay in 2010, tackles the issue of cross-Strait relations by telling the story of Kuomintang veteran Liu Yansheng's return to mainland China after nearly 40 years of separation from his wife and son. Shanghainese is the main language of the film, a dialect that is used to suggest a local attitude towards the national issue. While earlier Chinese films on similar themes often emphasise the cultural and emotional ties between Taiwan and China, in Wang's film Liu is characterised as an unwelcome Taiwanese guest, an intruder in his wife's Chinese family. This essay argues that Wang's *Apart Together* contests the People's Republic of China's official discourse of cross-Strait reunification by demonstrating the cultural and identity divisions between the Taiwanese character and his Chinese family. Wang provides an alternative perspective on the 'Taiwan issue', showing that ordinary people's experience of cross-Strait reunion might be painful and problematic.

Keywords

cross-Strait relations – mainlander – reunification – Wang Quan'an – *Apart Together*

The sixth-generation mainland Chinese director Wang Quan'an's *Apart Together* (團圓, *tuan yuan*) won the Silver Bear Award for Best Screenplay in 2010, with the script written by Wang Quan'an and Jin Na. The film tackles the issue of cross-Strait relations by telling the story of KMT (國民黨, Kuomintang, i.e. Nationalist Party) veteran Liu Yansheng's 'return' to mainland China (from Taiwan) after nearly 40 years of separation from his wife Yu-e and son Jianguo. The theme of family reunion after the Cold War successfully drew the attention of international audiences. Derek Elley of *Variety* describes it as 'a well-played, light family drama that references major historical and political issues beneath a low-key front' (2010: 8). The film's Chinese title *tuan yuan* (團圓), a traditional Chinese expression, suggests a 'happy reunion', but the movie presents a far more complicated and ambivalent view of the relationships between the returnee and his family by portraying Liu as a 'Taiwanese' outsider, or even intruder, in Yu-e's 'Chinese' family. The plot is simple, but the emotions revealed are complex and powerful. After Liu's Taiwanese wife dies, he decides to visit his Chinese wife, Yu-e, from whom he has long been separated, in Shanghai. The aim of Liu's return is to take his wife back to Taiwan with him, regardless of the objections of her new family. Due to the turmoil that Liu's return causes, Yu-e's easy-going and devoted husband Lu Shanmin has a stroke and the 'Chinese' family is almost torn apart. Yu-e, who initially seems willing to follow Liu to Taiwan, changes her mind and decides to stay with Lu. Liu finally returns to Taiwan alone.

Tackling the theme of reunion, the film reveals Wang's deep thinking about the inherent complexity in the separation of Taiwan and China. He states in an interview that '*Apart Together* is in fact about gulf: not only the geographical distance of twenty kilometers across the Taiwan Strait, but also the sixty years of temporal separation' (Y. Chen, 2013: para. 22). Wang explains his idea of reunion by pointing out that '*tuan yuan* represents the spirit of the Chinese people, but the real reunion does not exist, because people always come and go. Therefore, *tuan yuan* does not refer to the act of being together but suggests the ideal we pursue' (Li, 2013: para. 7). In *Apart Together* Wang presents his audience with a highly allegorical story of how social and cultural discrepancies across the Strait make the ideal of *tuan yuan* an unfulfillable dream. The fact that release of the film was blocked in the People's Republic of China (PRC) until September 2013 suggests that the message *Apart Together* conveys touched a nerve, as the PRC government regularly asserts that the reunification of Taiwan and China will bring prosperity and happiness to both sides of the Strait.¹

1 After three years, the film was released in September 2013 in mainland China without any cuts or revisions. It is no coincidence that the film debuted during the Mid-Autumn Festival, an important Chinese holiday for family reunions.

The reunification of Taiwan and China is a problem that the PRC has claimed to have solved. In 1979 Deng Xiaoping, in his 'Message to Compatriots in Taiwan' (告台灣同胞書, *gao Taiwan tongbao shu*), proposed the policy of 'one country, two systems' (一國兩制, *yi guo liang zhi*) as a solution to the 'Taiwan issue' (China Centre, 2019). Thereafter, the PRC government has followed Deng's 'One China' discourse by emphasising the 'inseverable' ethnic, linguistic, and cultural ties between Taiwan and China. The PRC's attitude towards Taiwan has remained unchanged; the anti-secession law that is meant to bolster China's claim to sovereignty over the island was passed in 2005 during the presidency of Hu Jintao. In December 2008, on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of Deng's 'Message to Compatriots in Taiwan', Hu further emphasised that the harmonious relationship across the Strait would help promote the great rejuvenation of the Chinese people (Hsiao, 2009; Hu, 2008). However, the official discourse of the PRC understates the respective cultural changes and identity transformation that have occurred during the decades of political separation. Wang Quan'an's *Apart Together*, which was made in 2009 shortly after Hu's speech, contests this official discourse by foregrounding the ambivalence, conflict, and division between the Taiwanese character and the 'Chinese' family. The film envisions a cross-Strait reunion without a traditional happy ending in which the separated family members finally come together with tears of joy; instead the reunion leads to the estranged couple's recognition of their wide cultural and emotional discrepancies, and results in their decision to part yet again. Closely analysing the director's choice of Shanghainese as the major language, the characterisation of the Taiwanese and Chinese characters, as well as the songs sung by the characters, this paper examines the cinematic strategies through which Wang both distances *Apart Together* from China's political films and articulates the cross-Strait family reunion as not only problematical but ultimately unachievable.

1 'Mainlander' as 'Taiwanese'

In *Apart Together*, the 'Taiwanese' character Liu Yansheng is characterised as a KMT veteran who followed the Nationalist government to Taiwan in 1949. This group of military migrants, along with other civilian Chinese Civil War migrants and their descendants, are called mainlanders or *waishengren* (外省人) in Taiwan. During the martial law period from 1949 to 1987, mainlanders dominated Taiwan's politics and culture. Since most mainlanders enjoyed political and cultural privileges under the KMT's party-state rule, they developed a complex inter-beneficial relationship with the political party. Traditionally,

this group has been notable for its support of the KMT's Chinese nationalism and its goal of eventual reunification across the Strait (Yang & Chang, 2010).² Indeed, compared with other ethnic groups (族群, *zu qūn*) in Taiwan, including indigenous people, the Hoklo and the Hakka, whose families have lived on the island for centuries, mainlanders are the most recent migrants to Taiwan and have the strongest historical, genealogical, and emotional connections with China.³

The term 'mainlander' is applied not only because of these individuals' family background but also due to their cultural identity. During the martial law period in Taiwan, mainlanders often saw themselves as 'Chinese' instead of 'Taiwanese'. After the lifting of martial law in 1987, with the rapid development of the discourse of Taiwanisation, as well as the local-centric 'Taiwanese identity', mainlanders have often been regarded by the general public and media in Taiwan as controversial and ambiguous in terms of identity (Yang & Chang, 2010). As is evident in National Chengchi University's yearly identity surveys from 1992 to 2019, an increasing number of Taiwanese residents identify themselves as Taiwanese instead of Chinese. Taiwanese residents who identified as Chinese hit a new low of 3.5 percent in 2019 (H. Chen, 2020). With the democratisation in Taiwan, mainlanders no longer determine Taiwan's cultural and political directions but instead have become an ethnic and cultural minority, accounting for only around 7 percent of the population (Hakka Affairs Council, 2011). Mainlanders' ambiguous position in contemporary Taiwanese society (and in China as well) has been articulated by mainlanders themselves, such as in the literary work of Tien-hsin Chu, who in 1992 wrote: 'It was only when we returned to the mainland to visit relatives did we realise that in the eyes of our remaining relatives, we were Taiwanese compatriots or Taiwanese. Once returning to the island where we have lived for forty years, we are often called "you mainlanders"' (2003: 78–79). Since the lifting of martial law, mainlanders' self-identity

2 Martial law was lifted in 1987 in Taiwan, and mainlanders were eventually allowed to visit China. Individual mainlanders' attitudes towards China started to change and became diverse based on personal experiences of visiting their homeland in China and interacting with their Chinese relatives. However, a large proportion of mainlanders' narratives of their 'homecoming' trips have been negative, particularly in those published during the 1990s.

3 The classification of ethnicity began in the early 1990s in Taiwan, which categorises Taiwan residents into four groups: indigenous people; the Hoklo; the Hakka; and mainlanders. The Hoklo, whose ancestors came from Fujian Province from the seventeenth century onwards, account for around 70 percent of the population. It is the majority of Taiwanese society, while mainlanders account for only around 10 percent. Nonetheless, during the martial law period from 1949 to 1987, mainlanders occupied the major official jobs in both central and local governments in Taiwan.

has kept transforming in response to the discourse of Taiwanisation. Yet, the extent to which mainlanders' cultural identity can be regarded as representative 'Taiwanese' has been much debated. Without noting the diversity of Taiwanese culture and identity, it is highly problematic that Wang's *Apart Together* chooses a mainlander as the representative figure of 'the Taiwanese', and uses it to elaborate on the cultural and social discrepancies between Taiwan and China.

Although Wang Quan'an has stated that the idea of the film was inspired by a real story he saw in a TV news report about a KMT veteran's 'homecoming' trip to Shanghai (Li, 2013), delving into the highly sensitive issue of Taiwan and cross-Strait reunions, the film presents much more than two ordinary people's story. Given that the film's portrayals of Taiwan and the Taiwanese are often stereotypical, as is evident in the characterisation of Liu Yansheng (which I will address later in the article), it could be argued that Wang's *Apart Together* does not attempt to explore the complex question of 'what Taiwanese people are', but instead, by delving into the subject of a mainlander's 'homecoming', it instead considers a rather sociopolitical question, regarding the possibility of a return (or a *tuan yuan*) after the long separation across the Taiwan Strait.

China has been cautious and conservative about cinematic representations of Taiwan, particularly after the resumption of communications across the Strait in 1987. Despite the increasing economic and cultural exchange, there had been no Chinese films addressing the 'Taiwan issue' until 2004, when the first Taiwan-related main melody film (主旋律電影, *zhu xuan li dianying*) *My Bittersweet Taiwan* (台灣往事, *Taiwan wangshi*, dir. Zheng Dongtian) was released, followed by another commercialised film of the same genre *The Knot* (雲水謠, *yun shui yao*, dir. Yin Li) in 2006. The former tells the story of a Taiwanese man's close relationship with his mother, and the latter addresses a leftist Taiwanese exile's romance in Taiwan and China. Main melody films, a genre that emerged after the Tian'anmen Square Protest in the PRC in 1989, heavily rely on Chinese government subsidies and are meant to constitute a positive image of China for international audiences and evoke the domestic audience's patriotic sentiments. Both *My Bittersweet Taiwan* and *The Knot* faithfully mouth ideologies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), advocating cross-Strait reunification by emphasising the strong love between Taiwan and China. Cultural differences between the two lands are eliminated from the films, as *My Bittersweet Taiwan*, which is set during the Japanese colonial period in Taiwan, focuses on the protagonist and his mother's anti-Japanese sentiment and their affection for their motherland, China. *The Knot* even portrays the Taiwanese protagonist as a socialist hero, who fled Taiwan for China

in 1947 during the February 28 Incident, and devoted himself to the CCP and its people. These two films have set the tone for Chinese cinema's general attitude towards the cross-Strait issue, interpreting Taiwanese culture as rooted in Chinese culture and portraying Taiwanese characters as remaining loyal to China.

Apart Together was released less than four years after *The Knot*. Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that Wang Quan'an employed this film to challenge the state-defined, harmonious cross-Strait relationship. Wang is a well-known Chinese filmmaker who produces non-mainstream, non-commercial movies, which have often been supported by international awards and festival attendance. His films often tackle lower-class female protagonists' inner struggles, a theme that has been seen by the Chinese authorities as controversial. *Apart Together* is Wang Quan'an's only work that situates his female characters in the background of cross-Strait separation. Based on Wendy Su's categorisation, *Apart Together* can be regarded as part of 'artistic and critical cinema', which 'foregrounds the plight and misery of underprivileged people and paints a gloomy picture of China that is fundamentally different from that shown in main-melody movies' (Su, 2016: 213).

China-based critic Hongfeng Tang's research echoes Su's idea. Tang examined six films released in the PRC from the 1950s to the 2000s and argues that most of the earlier films on the topic of cross-Strait relations, including the two mentioned above, incorporate the characters' feeling of homesickness and nostalgia into the ideological framework of patriotism (2011: 82). Personal experiences are used to serve China's national goal of propagating the desire for political reunification. Nonetheless, Tang notes that Wang's *Apart Together* shows a considerable difference in its stance by disconnecting personal emotions from nationalism: 'the idea of homesickness totally loses its hint of nationalism, but instead it is presented as the nostalgia for a specific location: Shanghai. At a certain level, it is a story of two cities: Shanghai and Taiwan' (2011: 82). Tang's analysis is valid in the sense that in *Apart Together* Wang experiments with the seemingly contradictory and conflicting ideas of unification/separation and union/division by blending them together in many scenes. The film shows a strong sense of affection and love for China by presenting Shanghai's everyday practices involving language, food, and songs, through which the cultural distinctions between China and Taiwan are made explicit. *Apart Together* presents Wang's humanistic concern with ordinary mainland Chinese people's traumatic experience during the Chinese Civil War and the political turmoil afterwards, without expressing much love towards Taiwan and 'the Taiwanese'.

2 Language as a Presentation of Distinction

Wang Quan'an's decision to use Shanghainese as the main language of the film is significant, especially as he grew up in Shaanxi (陝西) and does not himself speak Shanghainese. Unlike *The Knot*, in which all the Taiwanese characters are presented as speaking Mandarin so as to emphasise cultural unity across the Strait, the language Shanghainese is employed in *Apart Together* to represent a local and bottom-up voice, in contrast to the top-down view projected through the official language of Mandarin. Pierre Bourdieu's ideas regarding the imposition of an official language remind us that 'the official language is bound up with the state, both in its genesis and in its social use' (1992: 45). Therefore, the use of an official language often suggests the acceptance of a set of unified values constructed by the authorities, along with the language's 'political vocabulary, its terms of address and reference, its metaphors, its euphemisms and the representation of the social world which it conveys' (48). Whereas Bourdieu highlights how one's proficiency in the official language determines one's position in the social space, in *Apart Together* Wang uses Shanghainese to contest the ideology and values concomitant with Mandarin's use as the official language.

Shanghainese occupies a peculiar position as a dialect in China because of Shanghai's special status. Shanghai is China's largest city and economic centre, boasting both modernity and cultural complexity. Thus, it is often shown in the mass media as China's symbol of prosperity. Critic Puzhong Hu (2011) argues that Shanghai is critical to the unfolding of the story, asserting that Liu Yansheng sees himself as a saviour from Taiwan, who attempts to rescue his erstwhile wife from the poverty and deprivations of Chinese life. However, after he actually visits Shanghai and witnesses its modernity, he realises that he has no chance of convincing Yu-e to abandon her life. Hu's analysis is problematic in that, while he insightfully points out Shanghai's importance as the setting of the story, he takes Shanghai's outstanding financial performance as the main reason for Yu-e's decision to stay in China, without considering the complex web of relations and personal emotions presented in the film. Nonetheless, it is because of the special economic and cultural status of Shanghai that Shanghainese is not presented in *Apart Together* as inferior to the official language of Mandarin. Instead this dialect is treated as representing the more realistic voice of ordinary people, at odds with that of state authorities. In addition, Shanghainese is employed in the film to represent a unique Chinese feature: a language that only belongs to China, in distinction to Liu Yansheng's use of Mandarin, as Taiwan and China share the same official language.

The scene in which a community leader, representing the government, joins the Lu family's meal in order to welcome the 'Taiwanese returnee', demonstrates how Wang regards the official ideology of cross-Strait reunification as inapplicable to this local and private field. To expand upon Bourdieu's theory, this community leader functions as an 'intermediary' of not only language but also social doctrines (1992: 47). Even if she speaks to the Lu family in Shanghainese, she is still monitoring the highly sensitive 'family reunion' and propagating official state ideology. She turns the family meal into a political battleground by using the well-worn political slogan adopted by the PRC government—'for compatriots across the Strait, blood is thicker than water'—when talking about Liu's 'return'. The contrast between the official stance and the Lu family's complicated feelings is made explicit when the community leader proposes a toast 'wishing all people in love [become a family]' (祝天下有情人終成眷屬), an expression that is most often used at weddings. The atmosphere of the meal turns tense and awkward as she realises her sentiments are painfully inappropriate to an occasion where Yu-e and her two husbands, Liu and Lu, sit side by side at the table. This brief scene demonstrates Wang's doubts concerning how much state ideology reflects ordinary people's life experience, especially in the case of a bitter 'family reunion', since political issues are the cause of their separation and the subsequently entangled relationships.

Language in the film is also used to distinguish the mainland Chinese people from the Taiwanese characters. Throughout *Apart Together*, with the exception of Liu Yansheng, all of the major characters speak Shanghainese in their daily conversations. The very first scene, which starts with a letter written by Liu Yansheng to Yu-e, exemplifies this distinction of the Chinese 'self' and the Taiwanese 'other'. The touching contents that explain Liu's emotions for his wife and his longing for a reunion are read aloud by Yu-e's granddaughter Nana during the mealtime in emotionless Mandarin, while the whole family sits together to listen. The personal issue of a reunion, intended only for Liu, Yu-e, and their son, turns into a family issue due to the inclusion of Yu-e's current husband Lu Shanmin, their two daughters, and grandchildren. Following Nana's reading of the letter, the family debates and discusses—in Shanghainese—his upcoming visit. Shanghainese is presented as the language that this family feels most comfortable with, while Mandarin is shown as the language that belongs to Liu, whom Yu-e's family refers to as 'that Taiwanese man', suggesting their hostility towards him as well as his awkward role in relation to this family. This scene sets the tone for the rest of the film by showing that the mainlander-Taiwanese's 'return' is unwanted by this 'Chinese' family. And the two languages highlight their distinction.

As the story unfolds, linguistic difference becomes a symbol of the cultural and emotional gulf between Liu and Yu-e as a result of their identity changes during the decades of separation. In the first night Liu stays at Yu-e's home, the couple finally manages to sit together alone. The first question Yu-e asks him is if he still remembers Shanghainese, suggesting the importance of the language to her. Liu uses inadequate Shanghainese to tell her that he can still understand Shanghainese but can no longer speak it well. This is the only time Liu speaks in Shanghainese. Except for this scene, neither of them tries to speak the other's language, even though Yu-e apparently can speak Mandarin (as she sings Mandarin songs well).

Critic Mo Chen criticises Wang's lack of precision in dealing with the long-separated couple's complicated emotions, particularly regarding the two's feelings about each other (2010: 26). He takes this as a flaw of the screenplay, arguing that although Yu-e tells her family that she is still in love with Liu, and that the two look forward to living together again, neither of them shows interest in the other's life (2010: 26). Indeed, while the film does use several scenes to display how the two try to work through the huge gap in their lives together to resume intimacy, their cultural and emotional gulf is foregrounded, which seems to have been an intentional move on Wang's part to demonstrate that not all relations can be resumed and not all harm can be undone, particularly for victims of historical events such as those affecting this couple.

A scene in which Yu-e takes Liu to the construction site of her new apartment clearly demonstrates the difficulty in bridging the considerable emotional and cultural distance. Wang presents us an image in which the two walk hand in hand while using two different languages to talk about their respective plans for the future. Yu-e tells Liu how she and her new husband struggled financially to buy the new apartment and complains about the fast-emerging high-density buildings in Shanghai, whereas Liu tells her about his own three-bedroom apartment in Taiwan and his plan to move to Hualien with her. Although they seem to be talking about the same topic, they are shown as having no shared present or compatible vision of their future. They seem to be delivering two soliloquys rather than having one conversation, since neither of them expresses care, interest, or concern about what the other says. As Mo Chen points out, when Liu tells Yu-e that they will move to Hualien together, 'the female protagonist does not even bother to ask for more detail about the place' (2010: 26). The resulting effect of the scene is to show that the respective post-1949 experiences in Shanghai and Taiwan have changed their self-identification into that of a Shanghainese and a Taiwanese. All they have in common are memories of the 'old Shanghai' before 1949, suggesting the love that they claim to have will be, at best, difficult to sustain,

especially when Yu-e's husband, Lu Shanmin, is characterised as a much more responsible and reliable Shanghainese man than the Taiwanese Liu.

3 The Chinese Good Man versus the Taiwanese Visitor

As the plot develops, the theme of family reunion turns into an awkward situation of a one-wife-and-two-husband threesome with the female protagonist struggling between obligation and love, a subject that Wang previously dealt with in his *Tuya's Marriage* (圖雅的婚事, *tuya de hunshi*) (2007). Whereas *Tuya's Marriage* emphasises how the female character is stuck in the difficult situation between her past (her first husband) and the future, and thus is unable to move forward, in *Apart Together* Wang provides a solution, showing that Liu's visit gives Yu-e a chance to re-contemplate her feelings towards Liu and Lu. Wang lets the audience see that rather than an act towards fulfilling her obligation, Yu-e's decision to stay with Lu is primarily due to her recognition of the kind of love he offers, which is blended with affection, mutual understanding, collective memory, devotion, and responsibility.

Wang Quan'an's characterisation of Liu and Lu is highly allegorical, since the two are veterans of the KMT and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) respectively. Liu's return is even compared to the opening of a new negotiation between the two sides, with Liu telling Yu-e that his plan to take her away is more difficult than the KMT and CCP negotiations during the Chinese Civil War. To a certain extent, the two characters Liu and Lu project the general images of the Taiwanese and the Chinese from a mainland Chinese perspective, seen even in Lu's name. Lu Shanmin (陸善民) in Chinese can be literally translated as 'the Chinese good man' (M. Chen, 2010: 28). Liu's name, on the other hand, has a much more ambiguous meaning. However, to understand it using a similar approach, 'Yansheng' (燕生) literally means 'born in Yan'. 'Yan' is the abbreviation of the ancient Beijing. Liu's name may hint that he was born in China but has become what the other Chinese characters see him, 'a Taiwanese man'.

Wang draws a neat contrast between the Taiwanese Liu Yansheng and Chinese Lu Shanmin, while showing a preference for the tender-hearted Chinese husband. This contrast exposes Wang's effort to make Liu Yansheng a less likable character, if not an actual antagonist. While Lu is portrayed as gentle, tolerant, and extremely considerate, Liu is portrayed as passionate yet selfish. While Lu has raised Liu's son lovingly as his own, Liu does not seem to care much for him. Although Liu proposes to give his son Jianguo money (and he uses the same strategy to 'compensate' Lu for taking his wife away),

he does not mention his son in his future plans and never tries to spend time with him. While Lu sheltered Yu-e, the abandoned wife of a KMT soldier, and her son during a period of social upheaval, and sacrificed his career for her, the audience learns that Liu remarried without contacting Yu-e for decades (although he claims he tried to). Liu is shown negatively even in the very first scene, through his letter to Yu-e, before the audience meets him. In the letter he states that he got married in Taiwan but three years earlier his wife Suqin died and he started to think more about Yu-e, hoping to visit her and 'compensate' her. Yu-e's daughter questions his motivation for 'returning' to China, stating, 'I cannot understand. He thinks about you and wants to meet you only after his wife died? If his wife didn't die, would he still think of coming back?'. With an unconvincing reason for his return and his plan to take Yu-e to Taiwan, Liu is seen by Chinese critics as a problematic character. As Puzhong Hu (2011: 18) argues, Liu represents the mainland Chinese people's general impression that the returned KMT veterans of the late 1980s and early 1990s tended to be rich and arrogant. Indeed, rather than presenting Liu as an individual, Wang portrays Liu more as a Taiwanese stereotype.

Wang's different treatment of the two characters, Lu and Liu, is also presented in the narration techniques: while he carefully unfolds Lu's inner struggles and personality to the audience through his daily interactions with Yu-e, his family, and neighbours, Liu is a much less rounded character. We only see him as a would-be husband, and other aspects of this character are never fully addressed. Liu is primarily characterised through fragmented cultural elements of Taiwan, such as the Taiwanese dish Buddha's Temptation (佛跳牆, *fo tiao qiang*) and early 1970s Taiwan pop songs such as 'Nostalgia in Drizzle' (濛濛細雨憶當年, *mengmeng xiyü yi dangnian*),⁴ which tell little of him as an individual (and paint an obscure picture of Taiwan). As such, Liu's persona remains ambiguous and perplexing throughout the film. Derek Elley observes the contrasting presentations of the two characters when he states, 'Yansheng remain[s] pretty much an enigma until the very end', while Lu 'mirrors the movie's essential soul of tolerance and practicality in a performance that turns into the pic's one likable, showpiece role' (2010: 32). Although Elley's comment refers mostly to the actors' performance, the plot and the way Wang presents the characters contribute to such an effect. Whereas this movie appears to delve into a mainlander-Taiwanese's life story, Wang's different treatment of

4 When Liu Yansheng sings the song, he introduces the song as 'Drizzling' (毛毛雨). However, the information he gives is incorrect. The song is called 'Nostalgia in Drizzle' (濛濛細雨憶當年) sung by Tsai Mi-mi. This mistake reveals Wang Quan'an's lack of knowledge about Taiwan.

Liu and Lu turns the Taiwanese returnee into a supporting character, shifting the central focus of the film to the relationship between Yu-e and the more sympathetic Lu.

Love is the subject Wang employs to untangle the difficult question of this cross-Strait family reunion. In the complicated relations of the threesome, *Apart Together* invites the audience to sympathise with Lu. In the film, the love that Wang addresses is not only the personal emotion that entangles the three but also a more general affection for Shanghai itself. Yet, Liu is presented as failing in constancy to both. The movie reaches its climax when Lu appears so easy-going as to promise to give up Yu-e in order to let her seek her own happiness. Yet the two find that they cannot get a divorce since they only have a common law marriage, not recognised by the officials. Wang arranges an ironic episode in which Lu and Yu-e have to prepare a wedding photo in order to get a marriage certificate before using it for a divorce. However, they ultimately choose to remain married as they find that they share not only memories and family but also property, which cannot be easily divided. This is an important scene since it reveals how the two met during Shanghai's turbulent past and helped each other survive. At the evening meal, Lu finally expresses his deep love for Yu-e by telling the story of the difficult days they shared. However, he suffers a stroke immediately after his touching narration. This scene successfully makes him a character whom audiences can empathise and sympathise with more easily.

Lu's account of his love and devotion to Yu-e to a certain extent reflects a higher and broader national level of love for Shanghai, and by extension China, signifying how after the KMT (Liu) left China, the CCP (Lu) stayed to share the pain and sorrow of the land through the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), his hard work and loyalty helping his homeland achieve its present-day prosperity. Although the political concept of nation-state is deliberately understated in the film, Shanghai is presented as the locale that accommodates the dark history as well as the modern glory, with scenes of old Shanghai communities appearing alongside the modern new Shanghai cityscape throughout the movie. The KMT veteran Liu, however, is absent from the post-1949 experience that Yu-e and Lu share. Therefore, aside from presenting the emotional, cultural, and identity distance between Yu-e and Liu, as discussed above, Wang also shows us that Liu is already a stranger to the land he calls 'homeland' (家鄉).

The cultural distance between the Taiwanese and the Shanghainese is brought to the fore in a scene in which Yu-e and Nana join Liu's veteran group on a city tour. When the tour guide introduces (in Mandarin) the Trade Centre, Lujiazui Financial District, and Lupu Bridge, which epitomise the advances of the Chinese economy, the Taiwanese visitors are shown as exaggeratedly

standing up on the bus, peering out, and even comedically exclaiming in awe. Nana, who represents the younger Chinese generation growing up in Shanghai after China's economic reform, is listening to music and appears amused by the Taiwanese visitors' actions. This scene reveals a sense of pride at being both Chinese and Shanghainese. However, it also demonstrates that this pride does not belong to the Taiwanese visitors, as the tour guide often makes comparisons between Taiwan and China, and states that the infrastructure in Shanghai is better than Taiwan's, and is one of the world's best, unsobly suggesting China's superiority to Taiwan.

The way in which *Apart Together* presents the relation between Taiwan and China as a rivalry instead of a family can be understood through Shu-mei Shih's idea of the Sinophone, in which she sees Taiwan as an offshore Chinese-speaking community, or, to use her term, a Sinophone community, whose culture is distinct from that of mainland China. Shih's idea of 'the Sinophone' was first proposed in her *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific* (2007), and was later modified in the collective edited work *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader* (Shih, Tsai & Bernards, 2013), which includes other scholars' writings that generally support Shih's argument. While the theory has yet reached its maturity, and questions, such as how to make meaningful comparisons among various Sinophone communities and interpret their relations to China, are still under debate, Shih's argument contributes to contesting the concept of a unified and univocal Chinese culture (or 'Chineseness') that ties all Chinese (including diasporic Chinese communities) together. She proposes multiple and flexible Chinese identities and Chinese cultures in overseas Chinese communities, stating, 'the Sinophone is a place-based, everyday practice and experience, and thus it is a historical formation that constantly undergoes transformation that reflects local needs and conditions' (Shih, 2013: 33). Such differences in everyday practice between Taiwan and China are presented in *Apart Together* particularly through the use of different languages and foods. For example, even though Liu is a returned Shanghainese, at his first meal with the Lu family Lu's son-in-law still feels it is necessary to introduce 'the authentic Shanghai dishes' to him. And after Lu has a stroke, Liu cooks Lu Buddha's Temptation for him, a dish that his Taiwanese wife had taught him to make.

Shih argues that as a result of cultural discrepancies there may be various relationships between the various Sinophone communities and China, a thought that challenges the hierarchical thinking that imagines China as the 'motherland' or 'cultural centre' for overseas Chinese migrants (2013: 33). Shih's analysis focuses on the ways in which the Sinophone communities have developed into autonomous cultural entities out of their continuous day-to-day

interactions with their local environments, and thus her discussions often exclude the cultural productions in China, as she tends to see them as conforming with China's state ideology. Yet, Wang's *Apart Together* presents a unique view that, on the one hand, recognises Taiwan's and China's respective social and cultural changes after 1949, and on the other, takes pride in the achievements of the PRC, or at least, the PRC citizens. That is, while the film echoes Shih's Sinophone ideas by questioning 'the motherland myth', it reveals a patriotic attitude towards China, which contrasts with Shih's stance of anti-Sinocentrism. Celebrating the glory and modernity of the 'Chinese' family (or China), *Apart Together* depreciates Taiwan and excludes the Taiwanese returnee (or Taiwanese) from the 'Chinese' family. This message of Liu as an outsider, and thus 'the other', is best represented in Liu's farewell party, in which Liu decides to sing an old pop song from Taiwan, 'Nostalgia in Drizzle', to express his gratitude to the Lu family. However, as he begins to sing, it starts to rain, and everyone rushes for shelter. Liu stands alone outside the door while the whole Lu family has squeezed into a doorway, a vivid depiction of Liu's 'un-belonging' to the family and the place. Liu's return is presented as a process through which he grows to understand that his much-missed homeland is no longer a 'home'.

4 The Hope for Reconciliation

Mainland Chinese critics, including Hongfeng Tang and Puzhong Hu, interpret the scene in which Lu, Liu, and Yu-e sit together to drink and sing 1930s pop songs in Shanghai as a significant moment that Wang has inserted into the film to represent their eventual reconciliation before Liu's return to Taiwan. The scene strongly hints at the three characters' shared nostalgia for 'the old Shanghai', suggesting that the period was their golden age, in contrast to the pain and sorrow the post-1949 period brought to them. Both Tang and Hu argue that this nostalgic scene does not effectively solve the problem of cultural discrepancies between Taiwan and China. As Tang states, such an arrangement can only be seen as 'a temporary strategy that reveals Wang's attempt to avoid the difficult but important issues: the thirty years of the Republican age before the establishment of the PRC and the Taiwanese residents' colonial experience before 1945' (Tang, 2011: 84). Indeed, Wang does not seem to use the film to address how the historical, emotional, and cultural gap between China and Taiwan can be bridged in order to achieve mutual understanding. On the contrary, it highlights the conflicts and explores the possibility that the three characters might be able to get along despite their differences. Their emotional gulf

is in fact emphasised in this scene when the three chat about the day the KMT retreated to Taiwan and the PLA entered Shanghai. While the KMT veteran Liu insists that it rained, the PLA veteran Lu remembers it as a bright, clear day, and Yu-e says that there was a thunderstorm. No agreement is reached but this scene functions to show that their memories simply reflect their diverse feelings at that historical moment. The message expressed here is that even if their disagreement is not settled, and perhaps is even resolvable, they still can find a way to get along, which may implicitly reflect Wang's view of cross-Strait relations.

If, as Tang and Hu have stated, the film conveys a message of reconciliation, it could be argued that the film engages more with the three major characters' respective reconciliations with themselves. An ideal grand reconciliation among the three does not appear in the film. Instead, we are shown that Liu Yansheng's 'return' allows the three to revisit the trauma and harm that they experienced, helping them to work through their own sorrow, regret, or discontent in order to come to terms and make peace with these experiences. As is shown, through meeting Yu-e again, Liu's guilt at leaving her behind in China is assuaged. Due to Liu's return, Lu finally has a chance to express his love for Yu-e, which he had previously been unable to show her. And Yu-e finally gets the answer to the question she has always had: why did Liu not come to meet her at the harbour on the day he retreated to Taiwan. With this knowledge, she is able to clarify her feelings for Liu and Lu and move forward into the future.

Yu-e's reconciliation with her past is particularly noteworthy since her character changes significantly throughout the course of the film. Her choice between Lu and Liu, to a certain extent, reflects Wang Quan'an's view of the Republic of China (ROC), a period that has been seen as a thorny issue to deal with in the PRC's historical discourse. In *Apart Together*, it is narrated as an age that already ended in China but continues to exist in Taiwan. Known for tackling the issues of female characters' inner struggles, Wang uses Yu-e to represent the Chinese women who grew up during the Republican age, supported the liberal position of the May Fourth Movement, but were victimised by the history of the Chinese Civil War and the sociopolitical turbulence in the PRC afterwards. When Yu-e is first introduced to the audience, she is a quiet and attentive woman who seldom expresses her opinions and hardly smiles or laughs. However, as the story unfolds, Wang shows us a totally different image of her: a brave and independent woman. By revealing that when she was young, she eloped with Liu and enjoyed singing popular songs, she is portrayed as a modern and fashionable new woman of Republican China. Sarah E. Stevens describes the New Women of the 1920s and 1930s China as such: 'Her [a New Woman's] pursuit of "new love" emphasises the relationship between freely chosen marriage and social improvement, rather than dwelling on issues of

personal fulfillment or sexuality' (Stevens, 2003: 88). Yu-e's view of marriage, as is shown through her love story with Liu, reveals her as a 'New Woman'. Yet, this independent Republican New Woman suffers badly after the establishment of the PRC. She has no choice but to marry a PLA soldier, whom she thinks she will never love. Therefore, Yu-e says that after Liu left, 'she has only managed to live'. Yet, Wang skilfully distinguishes the nuances between Yu-e's nostalgia for the Republican age and her feelings for Liu. The film shows that what Yu-e really loves and misses is her young days during the Republican age, which have become conflated with her memories of the romance with Liu Yansheng. This is evident in her indifference to Liu's experience in Taiwan as well as his plans for their future, but she shows great happiness whenever the days of the Republican age are mentioned.

The scene in which Yu-e, Liu, and Lu sit together and sing the 1930s Mandarin pop songs is remarkable in that it shows Yu-e (and the audience) that Lu Shanmin, who also grew up in the Republican age, has the Republican memories similar to hers, but they had always been suppressed and perhaps hidden because of his identity as a PLA soldier. In this scene, Yu-e is presented as having made her choice between Liu and Lu: she chooses Lu because of her new understanding of him and her love for him. When Liu tells Lu his decision to not take Yu-e away, he says 'I couldn't get her to leave with me', suggesting his recognition of his marginal position in the threesome. Liu's request to sing a song with Yu-e, the two's 'love song', 'Champagne Everywhere' (香檳酒滿場飛), a pop song from 1938, develops into a trio started by Lu. Critic Hongfeng Tang argues that it is unconvincing and illogical that a PLA soldier can sing a song that promotes 'the capitalist way of sinful enjoyment' (2011: 84). Yet, it could be argued that what Wang presents through this song is a historical perspective that recognises the continuity from the ROC to the PRC, in contrast to the PRC government's historical view, which often imposes an absolute negative image of the Republican age (Zhou, 2008: 66). Therefore, in the film the PLA veteran Lu is presented as open to the culture and history of both the Republican and PRC eras. It is also in this scene that Yu-e realises that she has never tried to understand Lu. She is surprised that Lu knows the song 'Champagne Everywhere', and Lu replies, 'you never talk about songs to me'. The song that should have belonged to Yu-e and Liu turns out to serve as a new starting point for Yu-e and Lu to understand each other.

In the film Liu takes a ship (instead of a flight) back to Taiwan, which would be extremely rare for a returning mainlander. In the early days after the Taiwanese government relaxed the rules on tourism to China, all mainlanders were requested to travel to China through Hong Kong. There were no passenger ships between Taiwan and Shanghai in the 1990s. Yet, for the sake of

satisfying narrative closure, Wang gives us a scene in which Yu-e can finally bid a proper farewell to Liu, a chance she did not have 40 years earlier when Liu fled to Taiwan with the KMT. The farewell signifies Liu Yansheng's real 'return' to the place where he belongs and symbolically represents Yu-e's acknowledgement that *her* Republican age already ended in China 40 years before, and Liu Yansheng's Republic of China is now located in Taiwan, a distant and alien land she does not know much about and has no interest in. In this scene Yu-e cries loudly like a young girl, finally enacting the departure which should have occurred between Liu and her decades earlier. This scene also hints at the destined separation of this couple: while they were separated by the war 40 years previously, this time they *choose* to say goodbye to each other freely. The reunion that Liu and Yu-e had looked forward to for many years turns out to bring about their recognition of the inevitability and necessity of their being apart because they have both changed.

Wang does not end the story at the moment of Liu and Yu-e's separation at the harbour, but instead he shifts the focus from Liu and Yu-e's reunion to the Lu family's reunion by providing an epilogue in which Lu, Yu-e, and Nana have already moved into their new apartment. They are waiting for their family to have a reunion meal on Chinese New Year's Eve. However, none of Yu-e and Lu's daughters and sons come back, which strongly signifies the sense of alienation and distance owing to modernisation and urbanisation in China. Yu-e complains that since moving into their new place, their children hardly visit them. Again, Wang emphasises the improbability of *tuan yuan*, both psychologically and physically. Yet, in this scene what is presented tells as much as what is omitted: Liu is not mentioned. While Yu-e is presented as making several phone calls to ask her children to visit, no call is made to Liu to wish him a happy new year, suggesting that at the most important time of family togetherness, Liu has no place. The grand reconciliation or the message of people across the Strait as one family does not appear anywhere in the film, even at the very end.

5 Conclusion

Akin to Wang's earlier films, national and international awards⁵ did not make *Apart Together* a box office success in China. It earned only 180,000 RMB (c. US\$25,394), making it one of the worst in 2013 in terms of box office performance (Feng, 2014). Critics Hong Yin and Yingfei He (2014) argue that 'light

5 *Apart Together* also won the Golden Rooster Award for the Best Supporting Actor in 2011, as well as the Best Director and Best Actress in China Image Film Festival in 2011 (London).

movies' (輕電影, *qing dianying*), referring to those which focus on 'pleasant and relaxed experience' and emphasise 'positive individual values as well as self-fulfilment', performed best in 2013 (Yin & He, 2014: 6). Obviously, Wang's heavy-hearted historical theme did not pique the interest of the 90s Generation, who comprise the main audience. Yet Wang's *Apart Together* represents a significant and rare voice in Chinese cinema, which has lacked variety in terms of perspectives towards the Taiwan issue. With the title of *tuan yuan*, the film *Apart Together* demonstrates Wang's concern with the overly positive political vision which the state promotes in regard to cross-strait reunification, but it understates the harm, conflict, and sorrow that the reunification may bring to those who are involved. While the film seems to deal with the cross-strait topic of a mainland-Taiwanese's trip back to China, it turns out to reveal Wang's sympathy and concern with the families left behind by the KMT soldiers in China. The poor box office performance may indicate that while the PRC government repeatedly emphasises the importance of Taiwan to the revival of China's 'Chinese dream', Taiwan, in fact, is a subject that is alien and distant from the life of the younger generation, and this feeling of emotional and cultural distance resonates perfectly with the message that Wang conveys through the film.

Since *Apart Together*, no other films about cross-strait relations have been successfully released in China. The exiled Chinese independent director Ying Liang's *A Family Tour* (自由行, *ziyouxing*) (2018), which tells the director's autobiographical story, was banned in China, and Qin Hailu's *The Return* (拂鄉心, *fu xiang xin*) (2019), which tells a KMT veteran's life story in Taiwan and won Best Actor Award in the 22nd Shanghai International Film Festival, was supposed to be released during the Mid-Autumn Festival in 2019 but ended up being indefinitely postponed. From the earlier main melody films to the more recent movies like *Apart Together* and the two mentioned above, there has been a tendency for more filmmakers to try to interpret cross-strait relations from various perspectives. These films may not represent mainstream voices, and may not be seen by mainland Chinese audiences, but they contribute to presenting the increasingly diverse viewpoints regarding the Taiwan issue in Chinese cinemas in opposition to the CCP's hegemonic discourse. The influence and development of these movies are thus worthy of more academic attention.

Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this paper was a joint winner of the European Association of Taiwan Studies (EATS) Young Scholar Award in 2020. I would like to express my sincere appreciation of EATS.

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