

Bad Images as Diasporic Homes: Exploring Media Obsolescence in Chinese Diasporic Filmmaking

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Abstract

This paper examines how bad images – characterised by poor quality and often produced by obsolete media, low-tech equipment, or machinery malfunction – serve as critical aesthetic devices in Chinese diasporic films and videos. Moving beyond discourses on media obsolescence as a systemic condition of technological capitalism, this paper reveals how substandard images and obsolete media are reclaimed as diasporic visual practices shaped by the political economy of images within specific sociopolitical conditions. Bridging cinema and media studies with art history, this paper focuses on two experimental films by women filmmakers originally from mainland China and now residing in the U.S.: Yin Chi-Jang's 殷子静 *Another Clapping* (2001) and Ouyang Peixuan's 欧阳霏萱 *The ____ World* (2021). While they each address their diasporic realities at distinct historical junctures, with Yin making films in the post-Cultural Revolution era and Ouyang during the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper demonstrates that they both mobilise bad images to disrupt notions of 'origin' and 'authenticity', which are ideologically and affectively coded in diasporic discourses and entangled with the vexed concepts of 'China' and 'Chineseness'. The blurry, glitchy, and faulty images in their works do not signify a lack in diasporic displacement from an authentic origin. Instead, they re-enchant the digital surface, transforming it into a critical space where diasporic women interrogate these notions in their ideological, racialised, and gendered framings. Ultimately, this paper argues that the creative reclamation of bad images cultivates emergent modes of diasporic belonging and intimacy, rooted in a radical rejection of the prescribed terms of authenticity and Chineseness.

Keywords: Chinese diasporic filmmaking, Experimental Film, Glitch, Media Obsolescence, Feminist, Chinese American

Introduction

Trembling violently, the grainy footage of a 16mm Bolex captures a sentimental view of a distant cityscape. An error message flashes on a computer interface, followed by an Asian woman's portrait plagued by flickering glitches. A childhood family photograph dissolves into large patches of pixels as it endlessly buffers. These images – shaky, glitched, pixelated, deteriorated, at times chemically damaged or digitally distorted – form a recurring visual trope in Chinese diasporic filmmaking, appearing in works from the 1980s to the present across Hong Kong, Taiwan, the U.S., and beyond. Produced by independent filmmakers and artists – many of them women or queer – working across experimental cinema, video art, and museum installation, these films share a deliberate engagement with obsolete media and degraded image quality. Some, like U.S.-based filmmakers Simon Liu 廖沛毅 and Yin Chi-Jang and Taiwanese artist Lin Yi-Chi 林羿绮, experiment with darkroom processes, old film cameras, and analog family photographs found in personal archives or military village ruins. Others, such as Hong Kong video artist Ellen Pau 鲍蔼伦, U.S.-based filmmaker Ouyang Peixuan, and Taiwanese media artist Betty Apple 郑宜苹, embrace digital noise and glitches as the raw material of their moving images.

This paper examines the persistent infatuation with what I term ‘bad images’ in Chinese diasporic filmmaking, which are images marked by poor quality and degradation, often produced by obsolete media, low-tech equipment, or malfunctioning devices. These suboptimal images stand in stark contrast to the contemporary visual economy, where clarity, resolution, and seamlessness are valued as markers of authenticity, technological progress, and commercial value. Yet, over the past four decades, amid the rise of China as a global power, the China-US trade war, the COVID-19 pandemic, and political upheavals and escalating tensions in Hong Kong and Taiwan, Chinese diasporic artists and filmmakers have continually turned to low-quality images to address their diasporic reality. This paper focuses on two such filmmakers, Yin Chi-Jang and Ouyang Peixuan, both originally from mainland China and now residing in the United States. Each of them employs pixelation and glitches at distinct historical moments – Yin in the post-Cultural Revolution era while Ouyang during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through an analysis of Yin’s *Another Clapping* (2001) and Ouyang’s *The ____ World* (2021), this paper investigates why bad images have become critical aesthetic devices for Chinese diasporic filmmakers, particularly in an era when poor-quality images are often dismissed as unfavorable and worthless.

The hierarchy of resolution could not be more evident in our time: high-resolution images are consistently commodified and stratified, from tiered streaming subscriptions to high-end camera technologies. They are aestheticised, through the metallic sheen of 4K K-pop music videos, the sleeky design of Apple products, the dictate of Dolby Vision in theatres, and the ultra-HD, hyperreal, futuristic visuals of television shows like *Black Mirror*. Together, good images reinforce a future-oriented visual economy that equates hyper-visibility with authenticity. In contrast, poor-quality images, typified by pirated films and deep-fried memes, often indicate reproduction, deterioration, and obsolescence – in Hito Steyerl’s descriptions, the ‘illicit fifth-generation bastard of an original image’, ‘the debris of audiovisual production’, and ‘the trash that washes up on the digital economies’ shores’ (2009, p. 1). At times, they signify low bandwidth, outmoded devices, and malfunction due to lack of maintenance. They suggest memory loss, dystopic chaos, and nuclear fallouts. They constitute the subgenre of analog horror, channeling the media of VHS, camcorders, and deteriorated files with an ominous sense of obscurity, haunting, and death. Unlike the smooth, effortless consumption of high-res images, bad images demand laborious engagement from their viewers to wait, squint, scrutinise, and reconstruct. They therefore represent the opposite of the visual economy’s ideal – the masked, the distorted, the ghostly, the outdated, and hence, the inauthentic.

This ‘class society of images’ (Steyerl 2009, p. 2) both emerges from and sustains the ideological framework of media obsolescence. While the discourse on media obsolescence offers insights into how obsolete media reinforce or disrupt the teleological narratives of technological progress and the capitalist condition of media infrastructure, it often centers on the technological, material, and economic dimension without fully accounting for the complex sociopolitical conditions behind the rendering of obsolescence and suboptimal images. Moreover, they overlook the bad images’ function as diasporic visual strategies, in their negotiations with ‘origin’ and ‘authenticity’ as terms also coded in discourses on immigration and diaspora. Thus, this paper intends to shift the conversation towards diasporic filmmaking. Treating bad images as an analytical lens for understanding diasporic subjectivities, I ask: How do we understand the ideology of authenticity in diasporic contexts? How does the repurposing of bad images cultivate an alternative, affective understanding of authenticity? In what ways can bad images and obsolete media mediate dislocation and historical trauma, challenging dominant narratives that frame diaspora as a departure from home and an imperative to return?

By thinking through these questions, this paper also reframes the history of Chinese independent filmmaking through the lens of bad images. Unlike their predecessors who were trained in state film schools, the Chinese diasporic filmmakers that I am interested in are often educated in art schools, navigating video art, experimental film, photography, and performance, among other practices alongside traditional filmmaking. They are also imbricated in a shifting media economy shaped by digital technology, internet culture, and neoliberal media economies defined by rapid obsolescence and technological replacement. To fully grasp this history, it is therefore essential to bring in an art historical perspective – a context not foregrounded enough in studies of Chinese independent filmmaking – and to consider how media obsolescence influences diasporic filmmaking. What obsolete media offers, I suggest, is not simply a degraded aesthetic but a heightened sensitivity to temporality, memory, and the unstable notion of origin and authenticity. Ultimately, this paper argues that bad images in the works of Chinese diasporic filmmakers, as exemplified by Yin and Ouyang, enable emergent modes of diasporic belongings, intimacies, and subjectivities.

Media obsolescence in grains, pixels, and glitches

The concept of media obsolescence has garnered significant traction within cinema and media studies over the past decade, particularly within the framework of media archaeology. Resummoned and advanced by scholars such as Thomas Elsaesser and Jussi Parikka, media archaeology as a historiographical method interrogates the ideological forces that have shaped media history and challenges the dominant technological teleology (Elsaesser 2016; Parikka 2012). For media archaeologists, media obsolescence is not a natural progression of technology but a structural condition of technological capitalism. Parikka, in particular, theorises planned media obsolescence as a mechanism through which capitalist infrastructures dictate the lifespan of media technologies, via cycles of forced upgrading, replacement, and disposal (Hertz and Parikka 2012, pp. 425-426).

Under this framework, the competition of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ images emerges as both a symptom and complicit rhetoric of planned obsolescence. Bad images, as the substandard evil twin, hold a flattering mirror to their counterpart. They gain their rhetorical power by existing as the inferior, the left-behind, while reflecting what good images uphold – the future, the authentic, with the illusion of total mastery of space and time. At times, in grainy film stocks and VHS interface, they harbor a paradoxical temporality, in which ‘present and past are both integral and palpable’ (Elsaesser 2014, p. 95). Other times, in forms of bootleg films, bad signals, low bandwidth, and unofficial film exhibition on small screens, bad images obscure the racialised and gendered labour exploitation in media infrastructure and the uneven cultural hierarchy that stipulates the value of images (Larkin 2008; Lobato 2012; Parks and Starosielski 2015; Neves 2020).

But what happens when bad images are claimed, repurposed, and aestheticised? Film Scholars such as Elsaesser and Erica Balsom, among others, observe that the term ‘obsolescence’ has recently reappeared as a practice in experimental cinema and the art world (Balsom 2009; Nardelli 2009; Knowles 2011; Elsaesser 2016). Elsaesser aptly points out a positive shift in the cultural meaning of obsolescence, describing it as ‘heroic resistance to relentless acceleration’ and even as a ‘badge of honor of the no longer useful’. He suggests that obsolescence might become the ‘new gold standard of authenticity or even... as our own fidelity to the event’ (2016, p. 335). This alternative notion of authenticity can be further understood as giving rise to new affects and subjectivities. In her influential essay on the ‘poor image’, Steyerl argues that as the poor image moves away from the ‘origin’ and hence becomes the inauthentic copy, it cultivates a new ‘visual bond’,

connecting alternative communities through shared affects toward degraded images (Steyerl 2009, pp. 5-6). More recently, art historian Shane Denson also theorises what he calls ‘disrelated images’, which destabilise the conventional relation between the image and reality, thereby representing ‘a transitional reconfiguration of affective embodiment itself’ and giving rise to new subjectivities (Denson 2020, p. 23). Taken together, these scholars demonstrate how bad images can move beyond their initial status as outdated, degraded, or signs of malfunction and become generative and critical vehicles for new affects and subjectivities, with an underlying concern about authenticity and the increasingly tenuous link between image and reality.

While discussions on media obsolescence and its creative reclaim in the past decade provided valuable frameworks for understanding bad images as a systemic capitalist condition, they often remain centered on technological teleology, digital capitalism, media history, and cinematic ontology (Balsom 2009; Elsaesser 2016; Betancourt 2016). What these discussions tend to overlook are the broader sociopolitical structures of visibility and exclusion that shape the political economy of images and neglect the following questions: Whose images are deemed worthy of preservation and aesthetic value, while whose images have been historically considered ‘bad’ or ‘obsolete’? What conditions allow some degraded images to be reframed as vintage, chic, aesthetic, or ‘too bad to be good,’ while others are dismissed as pirated, inauthentic, ethnographic, or irrelevant to history? Who needs bad images to re-narrate memories, navigate displacement, and shake assumptions of notions like ‘authenticity’ and ‘origin’? Who claims bad images to reject legibility? I argue that we need to go beyond the current discourse to understand the hierarchy of good/bad images as shaped by racialised, gendered, colonial, and political regimes that inscribe value onto images, which map onto structures of cultural legitimacy and erasure.

Furthermore, I intervene by expanding the discussion of the bad image into the realm of diasporic film and art practices, where notions like ‘origin’ and ‘authenticity’ carry heavy affective and ideological weight that were previously seldom foregrounded. The materiality of bad images naturally lends itself to a diasporic metaphor: Fragmentation, blur, and deterioration mirror the conditions of estrangement, dislocation, and loss. From fading family photographs to glitchy video chat calls, bad images index the frictions of transnational movement and the departure from the original home. They evoke temporal dissonance (jet lag, sleep-deprivation, time-zone confusion, and the sleepy traveler), linguistic fragmentation (the gradual invasion of a foreign language as a testament to ‘inauthenticity’), and epistemic disorientation.¹ As such, we need to understand bad images as affective carriers of diasporic time, space, and sensation. They are also strategies to resist linear narratives of displacement, which posits the diasporic subject as inauthentic, amnesiac, and strange while calling for a return to ‘home’.

This paper thus argues for a dual intervention in the discourse on media obsolescence: first, by foregrounding the sociopolitical conditions in which the logic of obsolescence and bad images operate, and second, by highlighting how bad images are mobilised as diasporic visual practices. I will demonstrate that through home archives, domestic objects, pirated media, found footage, and simulated landscapes, Chinese diasporic filmmakers and artists forge alternative diasporic visualities that resist the dominant visual economy. These filmmakers have demonstrated a sensitivity to the politics of visibility and obscurity, and how different obsolete media may variously afford resistance to what is stipulated as ‘good’, ‘authentic’, ‘original’, ‘legible’, and ‘real’. Through their negotiation with these terms, their practices extend the discourse of media obsolescence into the realm of affect, imagination, and new ways of relating to space, memory, and history.

With this framework in mind, the following section turns to the specific context of Chinese diasporic films and videos and considers what image economy these filmmakers respond to.

Contextualising Chinese diasporic films and videos

The 1990s marked a pivotal shift in the landscape of Chinese contemporary art and cinema, coinciding with China's post-socialist reforms, rapid urbanisation, and increased global visibility. During this period, the term 'The New Documentary Film Movement 新纪录片运动' gained traction, marking a move away from state-sanctioned filmmaking toward independent modes of production. Dominant narratives on Chinese independent filmmaking in this period highlight the pervasive use of home digital video cameras in the late 1990s, the common style of *xianchang* (or 'on the spot') that emphasises documentary authenticity, and shared focuses on subjects of socially marginalised communities (Pickowicz and Zhang 2006; Berry et al. 2025). These discussions often emphasise films' role in capturing social change and shifting political landscapes. Concurrently, Chinese video art also emerged, which is often construed as a documenting tool of performance or critique of mass media (Minsheng Xiandai Meishuguan 2011). As a result, within both film studies and art history, the focus on video cameras as tools for direct documentation and social commentary has overshadowed the aesthetic and experimental dimensions of these moving images, which are more commonly associated with European and American avant-garde practices from the early to late 20th century.

At the same time, the category of Chinese contemporary art was gaining visibility overseas, particularly through exhibitions in the USA such as *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* (1998, curated by Gao Minglu 高名潞) and *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (1999, curated by Wu Hung 巫鸿). These exhibitions primarily foregrounded painting, installation, and material-based art with some legibility as 'Chinese'. Within the narrative of this part of art history, the marginalisation of Chinese diasporic experimental filmmakers and video artists in the USA can be attributed to two factors. First, the field of art history has maintained an object-oriented focus in the past decade, prioritising material objects while falsely relegating films and videos to the realm of the immaterial. Second, more importantly, it is because the Western discourse on Chinese contemporary art has remained rooted in a multiculturalist framework since the 1990s. This framework privileges artists whose works stage a dynamics between legible Chineseness and avant-garde aesthetics, often through the trope of 'cultural synthesis' of 'Eastern' and 'Western' symbolism, synthesizing cultural, post-socialist, and contemporary experimental elements (Davidson 2020). Such a trope is exemplified in works such as Xu Bing's 徐冰 *Book from the Sky* 天书 (1987-91) and Wenda Gu's 谷文达 *United Nations Series: Temple of Heaven (China Monument)* (1997).

In contrast, the diasporic filmmakers that I am interested – both are women filmmakers in the case studies discussed here – engage in more complex relations with China, Chineseness, and the notion of homeland. As I will demonstrate below, their works do not readily conform to the dominant narratives of Chinese diasporic identity, nor do they fit neatly within the Western impression of Chinese contemporary art. Instead, the works of Yin Chi-Jang and Ouyang Peixuan illustrate how bad images may serve as a critical aesthetic device in diasporic filmmaking, which allows the filmmakers to negotiate with vexed notions of authenticity, home, and intimacy.

Another Clapping: the wound of the photograph

Born in 1973 in mainland China, Yin Chi-Jang moved to Canada with her mother at a young age and later

received training in both art and film production in the USA. Shot with a hand-held DV, *Another Clapping* (00:24:00) is an experimental documentary in which Yin explores the ambivalent relationship between herself and her mother, and the entangled trauma of domestic and state histories as a haunting presence in the diasporic lives. The film tells the story of a mother who fled China, her home country, after 1976 when the Cultural Revolution ended and immigrated to Canada with her five-year-old daughter. This escape is simultaneously an escape from her abusive husband, whom she divorced before leaving the country, and from a patriarchal state plagued with violence.

The film opens with a departure scene that immediately reveals Yin's fascination with the gritty texture of digital image surfaces. The plane takes off when the camera guides our gaze beyond the window from the interior of a plane, and as the aircraft plunges into the clouds, the moving images begin to morph into frozen stills. As the stills alternate and increasingly fixate upon the clouds, their outline gradually fades, ultimately yielding to an indistinct grey haze on the screen, compelling us to scrutinise the shifting pixels and the varying shades of grey that blend into a textured mosaic (Figure 1). Setting the stage with an allegory of the displacement of reality into the digital surface, the story then unfolds in a solemn tone, as the daughter faces the camera mouthing words that confess her inability to recall her mother's experience of violence in the past, and that any recollection of hers is shaped through her mother's storytelling:

'Mom, I really don't remember, what had happened to you that night.
You said my father beat you, you said I was four and we lived in China at that time.
You said it was the first time he beat you.
You said that night he suddenly woke you up, when we were going to sleep, he beat you without warning.
You said since that night he started to beat you occasionally at night.
You said every time when I saw my father beat you, I cried so hard.
I screamed, you said, but there was one night, I stopped crying.
You said you still didn't understand why I wouldn't cry.
You said I might have felt unafraid, after I saw him beat you so many nights.
Mom, since you told me this story so many times, I have started to remember it clearly now.'



Figure 1 Still from *Another Clapping* (00:01:14)

As the film unfolds, this forgetting and recollecting through mediation becomes a thread, weaving its way through the intersection of domestic violence and political trauma. The daughter's inability to remember becomes a new form of violence, deepening the mother's sense of alienation. The second half of the film then witnesses the mother's struggle to reconnect with her daughter, who runs away from home. Through voice-

mails, the mother's distant voice repeatedly pleads, 'How can I find you? You've changed so much that I feel so far from you.' The film culminates as we follow the daughter's melancholic fixation on her mother, who is immersed in singing an old familiar tune—an echo of a past both shared and lost.

For the interest of this paper, I draw attention to the part (0:08:44) where the daughter recalls seeing her mother cutting out her father's image from their family photographs. In contrast to her amnesia at the beginning of the film, she remembers the photo memorabilia and the meticulous manipulation performed upon them. The recount of her memory unfolds with Yin's performance – shooting from below, the camera captures Yin pressing her face against a glass surface with a tissue paper. Tearing up a rectangular window into the tissue paper, she peeps through the paper window as if casting a gaze into a distant past (Figure 2). In the next scene, against a black background, we are shown the cut photographs exhibited as palpable reminders of intentional erasure. The figure is strangely positioned at the border of the photograph, accentuating the conspicuous absence of the excised segment. The child tilts her head in a whimsical smile, with the border of the photograph abruptly forming a tangent line, silently denying the intimate existence of another individual (Figure 3). As the camera zooms in, we are invited to scrutinise the texture of the cut borders and the surface of the image (Figure 4). At times manifested as a deliberate curve and at others a sharp incision, the edge of the cut photograph bears a resemblance to a scabbed wound, testifying to a past trauma while simultaneously preventing those memories from seeping through. The zoomed-in photograph and its poor quality thus confirm a sense of impenetrability, as the enlarged pixels dissolve into a grey blob, announcing its incapability of holding the details of the past. The gaze of the young girl in the photographs (Figure 5) meets ours, yet the blurred details of her eyes convey detachment rather than offering a window into the past. The camera methodically surveys the details of her eyes, then her hand, her shoe, before drifting to the surface of the image, where insignificant pixels dominate, obscuring any meaningful content.

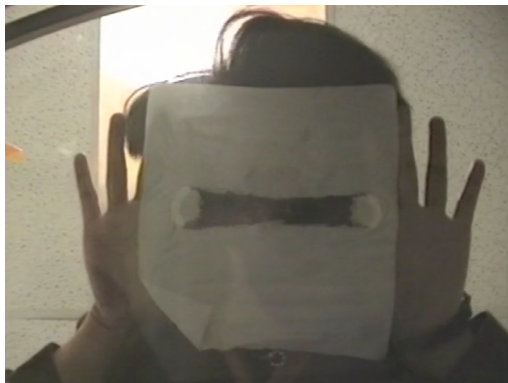


Figure 2 Still from *Another Clapping* (00:09:38)



Figure 3 Still from *Another Clapping* (00:09:51)



Figure 4 Still from *Another Clapping* (00:09:53)

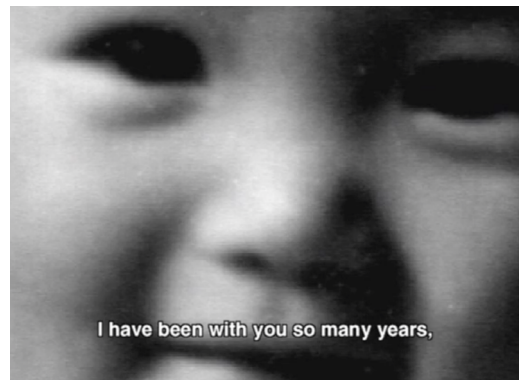


Figure 5 Still from *Another Clapping* (00:12:45)

The bad image here, which manifests as opaque pixels, rejects the photograph's presumed indexicality and transforms it into an ethical practice of forgetting and remembering. The flatness of the photographs and the intimate proximity between the surface of the photograph and the beholder evokes a paradoxical distance, in which the cut-out photograph fails miserably at its promise to faithfully provide a return to its indexical past, to a moment when the daughter can testify to the mother's pain. Instead, the obscurity of the image fabricates the photograph to be the new object of aura, re-enchanted through aesthetic de-familiarisation and deliberate revelation of its imperfection. It evokes what Laura Marks would call the haptic visuality, turning the eye into a 'touching organ' that seeks to extend its touch to the decontextualised image (Marks 1999, p. 128). As the camera glances over the surface, what seems more interesting to Yin is the cut and the pixels as well as the toggling between different resolution levels, rather than the photograph as a memory signifier.

In this maneuver of the digital gaze through remediation of the screen and scrutiny of the wound of the cut-out, Yin prompts a question about what it means to forget and to remember as she navigates her mother's traumatic past as a diasporic foreigner. The answer for her is to turn the screen into a performative field, which allows her to playfully assemble, transform, and extend the cut-out (Figure 6). As she narrates her memory of standing on her father's hand, she fills in a line drawing of a man's arm supporting the little girl in a cut-out photograph. Similarly, she depicts a pair of hands holding her arms as she spins in circles. This process transforms the screen into a virtual realm where she invites the affective gaze at the wounded photograph while establishing a tangible connection with the violent past in her creative re-telling of the past. Far from seeking a mere 'recovery' of the 'real' past, Yin's practice challenges the imperative of authentic representations of the 'historical truth.' The pixelated, decontextualised photographs disrupt the illusion of a faithful return promised by clear, stable historical photographs, which are images that claim to offer an unmediated connection to the past. Instead, these blurry, fragmented images question the value placed on legibility and fidelity. Through her performative engagement with these photo objects, Yin does not attempt to reconstruct a coherent past for her audience, but rather positions herself within the fractured, reimagined narratives of the past.

It is crucial to put Yin's work into the larger art historical context in the late 1990s in order to understand the way she addresses the trauma of the Cultural Revolution as a Chinese woman in diaspora. As previously noted, the 1990s witnessed the emergence of Chinese contemporary art. As curator Gao Minglu points out, finding themselves within a new cultural and postcolonial context, the emerging Chinese artists who participated in the international art scene had to operate in what Homi Bhabha calls the third space, and were compelled to 'rethink their origin and how on the one hand it can function in such ex-

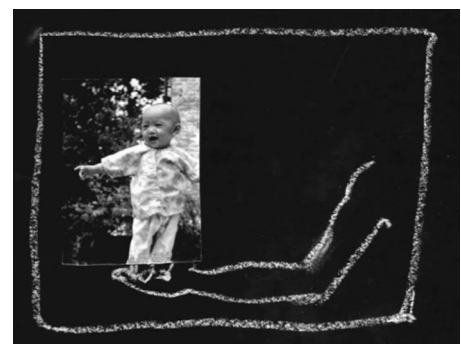


Figure 6 Still from *Another Clapping* (00:02:50)

changes as well as function in the "mainstream culture" as a way of representing their origin performatively' (Bhabha 1990; Gao 1998, p. 33). In other words, these artists in the late 80s and early 90s had to incorporate Chineseness as part of their branding while making it legible and interesting for international attention. Aside from referencing traditional Chinese visual forms like calligraphy and fireworks, one of the major tropes in this period tied post-socialist Chineseness with a retrospective critique of the Cultural Revolution. Typified by Zhang Xiaogang's 张晓刚 *Bloodline: The Big Family No.2* 血缘—大家庭：全家福 2 号 (1995) and

Fang Lijun's 方力钧 *Series 2: No.2* 系列二 (之二) (1992), these works are often portraits characterised by uniform clothing and expressionless or exaggerated, distorted faces, reflecting how the oppressive collectivism of that period subsumes the individual identity. However, these works also inadvertently transform the trauma of the Cultural Revolution into a consumable aesthetic spectacle, perpetuating an uncritical binary opposition between the collective and the individual in Western expectations.

By comparison, Chinese and Chinese American women artists in the same period, while each working separately, took up a different route to address their relation to the haunting history of the Cultural Revolution as well as Chineseness, which is a notion that either excluded or exploited them.² Through an engagement with family photographs, self-portraits, performances, and found home objects, artists such as Yin Xiuzhen 尹秀珍, Hung Liu 劉虹, and Patty Chang 張怡, who are contemporaries or predecessors to Yin Chi-Jang, explored their Chinese/Chinese American identity by looking at personal histories, immigrant policies, state biopolitical control, and the racialisation and sexualisation of Asian women (Gouma-Peterson, Liu, Zurko, & Bryson 1998; Davidson 2020, pp. 53-88). Rather than exploiting Chinese political symbolism as a form of branding, these women artists critically engaged with the ideological, racialised, and gendered framing of their intersectional identity as Chinese immigrant women, thereby giving rise to distinct artistic approaches with focuses on domesticity, familial tension, and political memories.

Coming back to *Another Clapping*, it is within this historical context that Yin made the video work. I suggest that it is Yin's positionality as a Chinese woman in diaspora that attunes her to the aesthetic valence of bad images. By fabricating the cut family photograph into a re-enchanted low-quality image, Yin intentionally obscures the shape of the traumatic history of the Cultural Revolution that constitutes the major trope in the genre of Chinese contemporary art of her time. Instead, the pixelated surface allows her to direct attention to the opacity of state violence - no matter domestic or political - inflicted on the female body, and to its haunting and unspeakable presence in the diasporan lives. It reminds one of Saidiya Hartman's notion of 'critical fabulation', in terms of the practice of refusing the totalising historical visibility (Hartman 2019). Rather than reproducing trauma in a way that renders it consumable, Yin's bad images call into question what counts as a 'correct' representation of history and interrogate the relationship between visibility and truthfulness. Or else, who owns the visibility to represent history, while who doesn't, or chooses not to? In embracing the obscurity of bad images, Yin therefore shifts the terms of representation altogether. Rather than seeking resolution, her images pose some poignant questions: how should Chinese women keep on living in another world with the inscribed violent history within the body? How does historical trauma constitute a diasporic subject?

The ____ World (2021): faulty images and simulated realities

While the generation of Chinese diasporic women filmmakers active in the 1990s was haunted by Chineseness as an ideological, exoticised, racialised, and gendered category in the post-Cold War context, the generation that Ouyang belongs to experienced Chineseness in diaspora in a drastically different manner. Born in the 80s and 90s, this generation of filmmakers and artists witnessed the rapid development of China's market economy as it rose to be the epicenter of globalisation. Different from Yin's generation, scholars note that this younger generation tends to 'display a sense of cosmopolitan "worldliness"' (Pollack 2018, p. 5). They do not necessarily respond to the question of Chineseness as an ethnic or ideological category per se, but are more interested in the question of how to situate themselves in a global, diasporic context, against the backdrop of China's rising power, the growing nationalism, and exacerbated Sinophobia abroad (Bao 2022,

p. 10). As we shall see in this section, *The ____ World* deploys bad images to demonstrate how contemporary diasporic subjects and feelings of belonging are embedded in a media infrastructure that bears utopic and yet ultimately failed promises of neoliberal globalism; instead, it proposes an alternative, digitally mediated form of intimacy.

Composed during the COVID-19 pandemic, *The ____ World* (0:17:53) is an essay film about disconnection in a world under the promise of globalisation. The film transports us between the replica model of New York City in Window of the World in Shenzhen, China, and the simulation of New York City on Google Earth, and is woven together through Ouyang's monologue about dreams, childhood memories, and text conversations with her mother. The film begins with Ouyang telling the audience in English about a bizarre dream of her mother, in which she spent the entire night wandering in foreign streets looking for her daughter, who, having turned into an alien that shapeshifted, hid in a lamp, and didn't recognise her mother. A text message appears on the screen with a buzz, lamenting the impossibility of bridging two realities ('I don't know if there's even a way to show you what I saw here. All I have is this deceptive medium.'). Then, narrated in Chinese, she sketches out a nostalgic story of her childhood visit to Window of the World and an imagined road trip with her parents in a second dream, in which she saw a huge statue of liberty made of plastic with blurry contours.

As Ouyang narrates in a sentimental tone, the film invites us into a world of images riddled with pixels, glitches, and obsolescence. The camera lingers on the worn-down surface of the miniaturised New York City replica in Window of the World (Figure 7), suggesting its status as an outdated simulation – a once-utopian fantasy of global connectivity. This footage is followed by the photographs of Ouyang's family trip to Window of the World in the early 2000s, which are rendered as large patches of pixels squeezed through slow buffering, never reaching its end (Figure 8). The film then transitions to Google Earth's simulation images, where flaws and glitches persist. As the camera navigates a glitch-ridden, low-resolution Manhattan in drone view, it penetrates the pixelated facades of buildings, revealing the fragmented and unstable nature of this virtual geography (Figure 9).



Figure 7 Still from *The ____ World* (00:01:37)

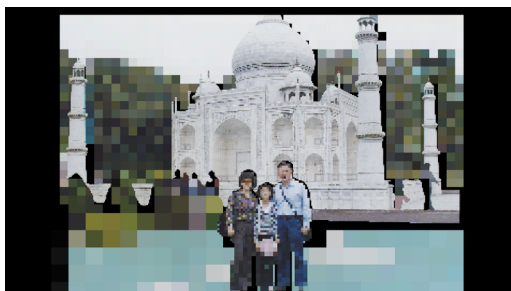


Figure 8 Still from *The ____ World* (00:10:38)

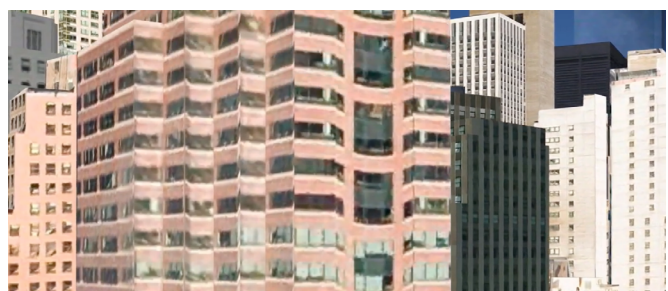


Figure 9 Still from *The ____ World* (00:14:05)

Like *Another Clapping*, Ouyang's *The ____ World*, made two decades later, shares a fascination with the creative productivity of bad images and the digital surface. The unencumbered traversal across virtual realms, through pixels and errors, dreams and invented memories, must be understood in the claustrophobic context of the pandemic, which imposed new and precarious meanings onto Chineseness and home for Chinese women in diaspora. Made during Ouyang's residency in Chicago, the film reflects a time when Chinese dias-

porans in the USA were cast as pathological threats – targets of xenophobia, gendered violence, and Trump-era deportation threats – amid rising racial tensions and the George Floyd protests.³ The domestic sphere thus was a home space that one was forced to stay within and at peril of eviction with the revoked visa documents. Meanwhile, in China, the zero-COVID campaign framed the virus as foreign, justifying extreme surveillance and restricted resources on targeted populations including overseas Chinese, women in the country, and ethnic minorities, which are proved expendable in the name of national security (Hou 2020; Yeung, Xiong, & Gan, 2022; Chan and Lee 2024).

While diasporic Chinese faced forced immobility, the pandemic-born *The ____ World* translates such immobility into a curious form of adventure – across a Chinese simulation theme park, childhood photographs, and a glitch-ridden Google Earth rendering of New York City. Yet, this mobility does not grant the freedom of a *flâneur*, who, as Charles Baudelaire describes, is ‘away from home and yet to feel everywhere at home’ (Baudelaire 1995, p. 9). Instead, *The ____ World* presents a subject never fully ‘at home’, traversing surfaces that expose the instability of its realities. Both the obsolete replica and the glitchy simulation function as a virtual construction that once sustained a 1990s fantasy of a globalised, accessible, homogeneous world through images; their surface, nevertheless, marks the failure of such a dream. Opened in 1994 in Shenzhen – the hub of electronics manufacturing and counterfeiting – Window of the World was a place-making project that not only fostered its visitors’ imagination of the world but also reimagined China’s position within the world (Braun 2022). Now on the verge of obsolescence, the surface of the replica has been worn, crooked, and faded in color. The interstices between the skyscrapers are re-occupied by lush weeds. Reminiscent of the unsettling paper constructions built and photographed by German photographer Thomas Demand, a close-up of the paper model renders it at once convincingly real and uncannily artificial, encapsulating a world teetering on collapse. In a similar vein, once used as a popular tool for vicarious exploration of the world, Google Earth in Ouyang’s work now reveals its own instability as a digital space. As the camera navigates the glitching surface of the Statue of Liberty in Google Earth, it exposes how the surface of the simulated model is stitched together by geometric shapes and disconnected lines with occasional failure when it is not entirely loaded (Figure 10). In this glitchy, fragmented world made up of flimsy dioramas and wonky digital simulation, Ouyang stages her family photographs in pixelation, with the ceaseless loading of the blurry pictures testifying to the fuzziness of her home memory.

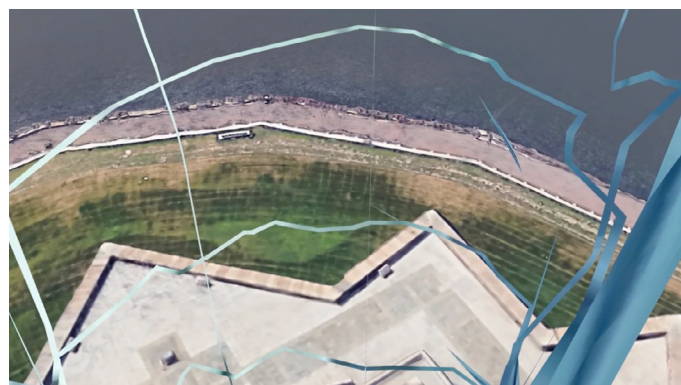


Figure 10 Still from *The ____ World* (00:15:31)

Evoking what Denson calls ‘disrelated images’, these faulty images therefore serve as poignant reminders of simulacra’s unfulfilled promise to replicate reality, revealing a fundamental shift of the relationship between the subjects and the objects of perception in the algorithmic age (Denson 2020, p. 1). ‘How can I

ever show you what I see here? How can I ever reach you on the other side of the screen?' The flimsy tie between the faulty images and reality resonates with the disconnection and estrangement evident in Ouyang's mother's dream and their text conversation. Yet, it is precisely this shakiness that grants Ouyang the ability to traverse binaries – past and present, dream and reality, virtuality and actuality, moment and eternity – through the digital screen. Rather than reinforcing fixed hierarchies, these faulty images become pathways between these realms. Fixating on digital flaws and imperfections, Ouyang transforms them into an experimental space where she negotiates these boundaries and reimagines intimacy – not dependent on proximity, clarity, or seamless presence, but on opacity, failures, and digital mediation. Bad images, then, are no longer merely a symptom of media obsolescence; instead, they become a method of survival and an affective strategy for navigating displacement and distance.

Conclusion

This digitally mediated intimacy in Ouyang's *The _____ World* evokes Russian-American cultural theorist Svetlana Boym's notion of diasporic intimacy, which suggests an alternative understanding of intimacy that is not defined by proximity or unmediation to an essential, unchanging 'innermost nature' or 'home' but takes mediation as an integral part, and thus is 'not opposed to uprootedness and defamiliarization but constituted by it' (Boym 1998, p. 499). As she states, '[i]n contrast to the utopian images of intimacy as transparency, authenticity, and ultimate belonging, diasporic intimacy is...rooted in the suspicion of a single home' (pp. 499-500). It does not promise a comforting recovery of identity and postulates a necessary distance from 'home'. In other words, diasporic intimacy deconstructs the notion of home as the one and single place of origin that demands a return in order to achieve intimacy, and allows 'home' to grow in multiplicities, be produced through the immigrant's creative processes, and rest in the 'fragile coziness of a foreign home' (p. 501). Just like bad images that are always subject to collapse but also find themselves in incessant production and affectionate practices by immigrants, the diasporic 'home' is similarly tenuous and contingent and calls upon immigrants to constantly negotiate with that transience. Boym therefore argues for the unapologetic nature of diaspora, which entails departure from the homeland and a leap into the unknown and the 'furtive pleasures of exile', which precisely derives from the failed promise of returning home (p. 502).

For Chinese women filmmakers and artists in diaspora, bad images become the site of diasporic intimacy. Instead of fulfilling the promise to seamlessly bridge the 'authentic' home that one longs to return to, poor-quality images, with their glitches, blurriness, and fragmentation, compel the immigrant to learn to reconcile with foreignness, trauma, and estrangement while caressing and inhabiting the surface of images. Just like how Yin's fixation on the indistinguishable patches of grey in the wounded family photographs and Ouyang's obsession with the glitches in Google Earth simulation, bad images harbor the diasporic longing and memories and reenchant itself into a haptic, performative, and affective field. They therefore develop an ethics of intimacy and of home as a critical praxis of relating the Chinese diasporic women to the past, to others, and to reality, that rejects a utopic image of the 'origin', the 'authenticity', and 'Chineseness' in ethnic oneness and national solidarity, opening them up into multiplicities of home that exist beyond nationalist, racial, and gendered narratives. The surface of bad images thus becomes a diasporic home for Chinese women to dwell in.

What emerges from a bad image thus is an unruly diasporic existence and subjectivity always in fluctuation. It demonstrates that diaspora is a dynamic process. It is a matter of nomadic mobility and deterritorialisation,

in which one is uprooted and learns to negotiate with distances. It is a distinct mode of epistemology that is always caught in the flux of collapse and rebuild. It is lived through in moving images and on screen, in reminiscence, imagination, and simulation. It is performed through storytelling when the narrator redefines the past and the listener learns an ethics of remembering and forgetting. It is always accompanied by a sentimental sense of lack and yet also summons an exilic pleasure. It therefore opens up a larger project that calls for an examination of the larger body of work made by Chinese diasporic filmmakers through the lens of bad images and asks the question: what diasporic becoming are they calling for?

Notes

- 1 Hence, it is no coincidence that bad images are also employed in films and videos made by émigrés and immigrants beyond the Sinophone world. Notable examples include Shigeko Kubota's Self-Portrait (1970-1971), Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's Mouth to Mouth (1975), Mona Hatoum's Measures of Distance (1988), Rea Tajiri's History and Memory: For Akiko and Takashige (1991), and Tran T. Kim-Trang, Ekleipsis (1998). The connection between blurry images and diasporic cinema has been partially addressed by Laura Marks in her discussion of intercultural cinema. Her interest lies in the physical, bodily engagement in viewing intercultural cinema as a way to convey cultural experience and memories (Marks 2000).
- 2 'Chineseness' as a racialised and ethnic category was discussed by Rey Chow very early on (Chow 1998). More recently, Sasha Su-Ling Welland discusses the intersection of Chineseness, feminism, and Chinese women artists in the context of late 1990s to early 2000s Beijing (Welland 2018).
- 3 See post-screening Q&A: http://ff1895.com/post.show?post_id=2399

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