

Chapter 8

Floating Life: a cinematic reprise

8a. Introduction: migrant spaces and transnational film culture

I first saw *Floating Life* when it screened at the Sydney Film Festival in 1996.¹ At the time I was conducting the first interviews of Hong Kong people in Sydney on which chapter 6 is based. I was immediately struck by resonances in the film with interviewees' accounts of experiences of settling in suburban Sydney. It was not so much the literal details of the migration process that struck a chord, but a sense of the relations between subjects and places, of the affective shifts accompanying the dispersal and relocation of a single family. The film complements the material in the two previous chapters on settlement in Sydney. An examination of *Floating Life* will augment some of the points I have been making because it articulates and 'fills in', through cinematic narrative and image, aspects of what we might call a Hong Kong migrant habitus. Film and fictional narratives have the virtue of being able to develop, expand on, magnify and unify what ethnographic interviews only detect as messy, fragmentary or veiled processes and relations. *Floating Life*, like this research, constructs a kind of spatial story' of the most liminal and uncertain stages of migrancy. I was able to benefit from a discussion with director Clara Law both about her experience of migrancy and her conceptions of the film. To what extent can film be related to specific practices and lives? Can we apprehend the overlaps between 'real' migrant experiences and the world of this film about migrancy without collapsing one field into another? There is a need to respect these boundaries since cinema is never an unmediated translation of experience. Cinema constitutes its own space and time through specific techniques. *Floating Life* impresses because its rendition of a particular migrant subjectivity is achieved through a consistent approach to image and narrative structure.

Clara Law's experience of migration to Australia and of a trans-national cultural life was clearly germane to *Floating Life*, even if the film should not be reduced to

¹ *Floating Life* is an Australian film, in fact the first film produced under the Keating Government's 'Creative Nation' scheme, directed by the Hong Kong migrant, Clara Law. The script was a collaboration between Law and husband Eddie Fong.

biography or to directorial intentions. Law is an example of a ‘design professional’ engaged in ‘image-projecting and consciousness-transforming industries’, who increasingly tend to work across national spaces, contributing to cultural articulations at various scales – local, regional, national and global (Fore 1997b: 133). However, the trans-nationality of cultural practices such as film production² does not make the specificities of location of producers irrelevant to their work. On the contrary, film directors are often compelled to stake out a position from which to locate their work from within and across boundaries and cultural markets.

Born in Macao, raised in Hong Kong, trained in film-making in Britain, active within the Hong Kong film industry and now an Australian citizen, Law locates herself within an transnational film culture, while being concerned in her films with aspects of cultural location, dislocation and relocation. Her films refer to the meaning and fate of Chinese identities in a time when migration is a cause of cultural renegotiation. *Farewell China* (1990) traces a poor Chinese family from the PRC and their attempted emigration to New York. The wife goes alone to try and secure citizenship so the family can follow. *Farewell China* turns into a harrowing tale of poverty and predatory relations in diasporic New York that ends luridly with the stabbing of the husband by the wife who has gone mad. *Autumn Moon* (1992) is a more meditatively paced examination of the relations between a schoolgirl and a Japanese tourist visiting Hong Kong for food and sex. The film is located around the contrast between the earnest and innocent girl, Wai, and the bored cosmopolitan Japanese man, Tokio, who cultivates a cool detached, one could say ‘existential’ persona. Their medium for communication is bad English. The film seems to be commenting on urban/national styles. Perhaps Hong Kong is yet to generate the ironic dispositions of Tokyo cosmopolites. Perhaps that is not desirable. The girl tries to undermine the disengagement of the Japanese man (explaining to him the Chinese character for happiness, *hoi sum*, to open the door of the heart.) She is about to migrate with her family to Canada, and is trying to deal with this imminent rupture in her life. The two are strangely alone in a dreamlike Hong Kong. Mirror glass skyscrapers and freeways are shot in slow motion tinged with blue giving the strange impression of a space that is both densely enclosing and on the verge of vanishing. In

² In spite of my scepticism about working with the notion of transnational migration, I think ‘transnational’ is quite apt in describing contemporary film production and markets.

these earlier films there was already a clear preoccupation with constructing narrative spaces of migrancy. *Floating Life* complements these offerings with a narrative which traces the pathways of a of a single Hong Kong family who we see living and moving, at different times together and apart, between different places in Hong Kong, Germany and Australia. However, the bulk of the film concerns the family's encounter with the suburbs of an unnamed Australian city.

Unlike *Farewell China*, *Floating Life* is set in a middle class milieu where there is no economic privation or exposure to the double exploitation of being an 'illegal'. For Clara Law, the removal of the problem of exploitative relations from a film about migration opens up other dimensions of migrant struggle:

Other films that I've mentioned have dealt with economic hardship. I didn't want to make another film about that. For me, the hardest thing is to really deal with the inner world. That is the first thing to fail.

I asked Law about the relation between her experience of being an emigrant and the film's form and style. She explained that the film also draws on a period when she was studying and living in England, her first experience of a 'situation where you don't actually think that you belong anywhere'. The film is not so much a direct projection of autobiographical experience, but 'something that I've experienced at the emotional level.' The film should not be read as a document about migration, as *vérité*. In *Floating Life*, Law is more intent on exploring the affective resonances of migrant subjects whose dispositions are not yet attuned to a cultural space they are not able to comprehend. In cinema affective responses are produced largely by attention to the quality of things and the filmic spaces in which they are placed. The look of the film, its colour and intensity of light, the framing of shots and the camera's engagement with objects and spaces contributes to cinematic 'impact' as much as actors and script.

Film narratives can never be simply equated with the 'real' practices they claim to represent, even in the case of the most explicitly veristic cinema. I am drawn to the film theory of Deleuze because it takes as its starting point the cinematic image and the way in which cinematic practices have historically produced changes in their own

structures of space and time.³ Despite the autonomy and artefactuality of the world of cinematic images, there is never an absolute break between the cinematic and social worlds, because cinema draws on ‘the mental’, in C. S. Peirce’s terms – the ‘feelings of relations’ between things and images. Deleuze (1986: 198) refers to a mental image as ‘an image which takes as its object, relations, symbolic acts, intellectual feelings’ that allows an audience to make connections between elements of a film by drawing upon ‘natural relations’ which a viewer can make. The possibility of viewing a film ethnographically, as an artefact having a degree of correspondence with practices it represents, may depend on knowing something about the ‘mental image’, through which affective and symbolic relations are constructed; and the way the film constructs its spaces and time-frames.

In *Floating Life*, close attention has been paid to the luminous qualities of places. National spaces are sharply differentiated, emphasizing different ‘tonalities’ largely through the qualities of light and colour. Law does filmically what migrants do discursively – she constructs sharply different images of places. Hong Kong locations are all interior spaces suffused by yellow light. The ambience of these spaces is ambiguous – are they warm and yoke-like, or sickly and enclosing? German scenes are bluish – the interiors warmly blue, while external shots are ‘cold’, bleak, and at times menacing, as in the scene where an emblematic skinhead lurks in a deserted car-park. Australian suburban scenes are all hard-edged and marked by a magnification and intensification of space, achieved through lighting and the very high-key shooting of the film. *Floating Life* opens with a short scene of a crowded teahouse in Hong Kong, the soft light and soft focus emphasizing a sense of enclosure. The sudden cut to a glary hard-edged scene of Australian suburban houses and deserted streets dramatises the affective and dispositional break experienced by migrant subjects.

The scheme of different places methodically exaggerates typifications of climate and ‘environment’, of which the migrant subject (or any traveller for that matter) would be acutely aware. External scenes in Australia are bright, glary and dominated by the intense blue of the sky. Interior scenes inside houses are relentlessly white – white walls, white staircases, surfaces presented as pure luminosity. This is not mere

³ Rather than applying philosophical concepts to the cinema, Deleuze’s cinematic philosophy ‘works

backdrop – the optical intensity of the light-image is a means of rendering actual and virtual image indistinguishable. This intense luminosity has the effect of ‘freezing’ the temporal flow of the film. I am reminded of the look of Pasolini's *Accatone*, of which it was said: ‘*Accatone* is not a film of political protest. Rather it is religious and existential. The overexposed whites, the unremitting Roman light – pushed to the limits of the tolerable’ (Siciliano 1987: 228). However, *Floating Life* does not convey Pasolini's concentrated asceticism which attempts to sacrilise the characters by illuminating their poverty with the violence of their exposure to the hardness of the streets which are their milieu. The characters in *Floating Life* emerge more comically into the hard Australian light armed with sunglasses and parasols to combat the UV: they are worried about the ozone layer. They are not presented as organically part of the intensified streets as Pasolini's *ragazzi* are, they are shielding themselves *from* them.

8b. Scattered houses

Floating Life is not reducible to its ‘look’. The film contains considerable ‘empirical’ detail about migration, not conveyed directly through its characters but through the film’s compositional structure. I am thinking of the way *Floating Life* constitutes its spatial and temporal frameworks in accordance with typical strategies of contemporary migration. It is uncommon for Hong Kong emigrant families to be similarly dispersed in a number of countries, while still functioning, in both administrative and economic terms, as a family. Family members are seen in Hong Kong, Australia and Germany, but the referential space of the film also extends to China and Canada, which are referred to at as points in a network of friends, colleagues and relatives. This is an orbit common to many Hong Kong emigrant families, rather than a single ‘host’ country and country of origin. ‘Canada’ appears in references to timing visits to Hong Kong to meet other friends visiting from Canada. ‘China’ functions mainly as a nostalgic reference point for the parents. *Floating Life* is a ‘spatial story’ about an internationally dispersed family, in which changing scale, distance and dimensionality necessitate new ways of maintaining

with the concepts which the cinema itself gives rise to.’ (Tomlinson and Galeta 1989: xv).

connections. The narrative in *Floating Life* is elaborately constructed to produce a plausible time frame for a contemporary family emigrating to Australia, as well as encompassing a larger familial orbit in a simultaneity of places. To plot the Chan family's complicated movements and fortunes in a skeletal form:

The Chan family consists of the elderly Ma and Pa, the eldest daughter Yen and younger daughter, Bing, the elder brother Kar Ming and their two younger, school age brothers, Chau and Yue. The eldest daughter Yen had gone to study in Germany and married a German man. The younger sister (*mui mui*) Bing married a Hong Kong man and emigrated to Australia. In 'astronaut' fashion (but without parachute children)⁴ she had stayed in Australia to 'pave the way' while her husband, Cheung had returned to Hong Kong to work and accumulate more money. Bing set up a house and a career on her own at considerable personal cost, immersing herself in her work to become a disciplined and productive migrant, not allowing any intimacies or relaxation of her struggle. She lived on her own in Australia for three years, until her husband joined her.⁵ After they gained citizenship, the mother, father and the two teenaged brothers join her ('family reunion'), staying at her large suburban house. Only the eldest brother Kar Ming remained in Hong Kong, waiting for his visa. But conflict soon broke out between Bing and the rest of the family as Bing tried to enforce a puritanical disciplinary order ('*You're here as migrants, not to enjoy yourself*'), which entailed abandoning apparently useless Chinese customary practices such as making offerings to the ancestors ('*You're in Australia now*'). The family goes into schism, with the parents buying another house, with an ensuing struggle taking place over the guardianship of the two younger brothers, and over definitions of what is appropriate behaviour for them. Yen visits Australia briefly and tries to intervene, arguing with her sister about filial devotion. Gar Ming finally 'lands' in Australia, mobilising his authority as older brother (*goh goh*) over the younger boys. But things have become too much for Bing who succumbs to an immobilising depression. The film comes to an emotional head in a scene where the mother, who is tending Bing, sets up an altar and prays to her ancestors apologising

⁴ 'Parachute children' refers to children of astronaut families left in one country in the absence of at least one parent. See Pe-Pua *et al* (1996).

⁵ This is a typical astronaut strategy, delaying the movement to Australia until the last possible moment. The new settler is required to accumulate two years out of five in Australia in order to gain citizenship.

for their failure to carry out their duties towards them, begging for their help in making Bing well, and generally lamenting their lack of happiness, even though the family is finally out of hardship and living in this 'land of paradise'. The film ends with the implication that Bing would be nursed back to health by her mother, and that the family would be brought back together and biologically renewed: '*It took mum a month to drag her (Bing) out, and a year to get her pregnant*'.

This linear synopsis does not fully capture the film's elaborate construction of place and time. In *Floating Life*, multiple locales are explicitly marked in terms of 'houses', which are used as structural elements in the development of the plot. Thus sections of the film are titled 'a house in Germany', 'a house in Hong Kong', 'a house in turmoil' 'Mui mui's house', and so on. The film's interest is largely centred on private and domestic space. Law took great pains to have the actors develop a 'familial' closeness. The actors were largely non-professionals – a common *auteur* strategy to bypass actorly conventions.⁶ Law prepared the actors by rehearsing in a house, cooking and sharing meals, to become more family-like.

The houses are points in a geometrical structure from which the voices of all the family members narrate different points of view. There is a fugal play of viewpoints, each voice being understandable only within relation to the whole family in its migrant trajectory. The formalism of this structure contains the whole set of relations within the domestic (albeit cross-nationally dispersed) milieu, to the exclusion of (almost) any engagement with others. The narrative excludes not only Aussie others, but also Chinese or migrant others.⁷ The film brackets both the host society and 'migrant community.' There is no well-founded 'wog' milieu, as in *Head On* (Kokkinos 1997), which portrays a Greek-Australian community and cultural enclave settings that the protagonist reacts against as much as against the 'Australian' city. Rather than being locations for interaction with others, the houses in *Floating Life* serve to isolate and contain their inhabitants. Each house presents an imaginary of national and cultural difference as felt by its migrant subjects. This is

⁶ '(T)he professional actor carries with him the affectations of his training – his expression can be foreseen' (Siciliano 1987: 224).

⁷ *Floating Life* projects a very 'private' account of migration experience, similar to what I found amongst my interviewees. Perhaps this is more characteristic of the more ostensibly 'middle-class'

made particularly clear in a section called ‘house in China’ in which we do not see an actual house, only a photo of an old-style village house made of bricks that a friend of Pa’s shows him. The two friends had been sharing a patrimonial fantasy of the ancestral house with its connotations of male continuity and order. When Pa Chan finally buys a house in Australia it is far too big, dwarfing the humble village house depicted in the photo. We see a magnification of Pa’s fantasy of home to fit Australian scale.

The setting of a film about family in a network of houses cannot be divorced from the engagements of gender and sexuality, and generation. I saw *Floating Lives* as a ‘women’s film’ in its insistence on the centrality of domestic sites. However, when I mentioned the pre-eminence of the female characters, Clara Law insisted on the conception of the whole structure of relations within the family. Nevertheless, women are the key protagonists in the contestations that erupt over control of the family once they begin to become established in Australia. Bing usurps the conventional authority of her parents, her husband as well as the sisterly order by claiming precedence over the older sister, Yen. The father seems to lose his authority at the same time as he loses his taste for fine teas and things Chinese, which had been the basis of his sense of distinction as a Chinese gentleman. It is the mother who will nurture her daughter back to health after her illness. Bing’s collapse restores a certain normative order and cultural continuity.

Bing’s bid for control of the house/domestic order – the law of the father – is made on the basis of ‘first settlement’ in Australia. There is perhaps an ironic narrative of discovery and exploration of Australia by Hong Kong pioneers. *Floating Life* has the feel a parodic western, in which the intrepid Hong Kong settlers land in the wild suburbs, battle to establish their homestead against the harsh environment, which is virtually empty of people. As with many of my interviewees, the characters initially cannot conceive of these suburbs as urban: ‘a concentration camp in the woop woops’, one of the boys calls it. Yet it is the boys who are the first to appreciate the spatial and sensual enjoyments of the suburb.

nature of contemporary professional and business centred emigration, focusing on private and familial trajectories and career achievement.

The family is very much on its own. The natives – the Aussies – are invisible, leaving their traces only in the empty streets and tract housing of a kind of *suburbia nullius*. The houses are fortified enclaves, sheltered from the outside, which threatens to break through. The scenes of Bing's first house where she lived alone show her frantic attempts to keep out insects, rats, and men – a Chinese restaurant worker who shows an interest in her. We see her feverishly sealing up every crevice in the house through which invaders could enter. The suburban space surrounding the house is populated and defined by emblematic Australian objects such as kangaroos and dogs, which provide most of the intercultural action. The fear of dogs is furnished with tales of deadly pit bull terriers, the fear of spiders with rumours of redback spiders that kill hundreds etc. These wild inhabitants are 'metaphorical' according to Law. But they do not operate metonymically to signify Australian-ness to the viewer, as is usual for a symbol like a kangaroo. Rather, they operate as affective symbols *for* the migrant characters – they are objects that stand in for a fear of separation and difference. At the same time, they are grounded in real differences in lived habitats. They are sharp reminders of differences to the hyper-urban social worlds of Hong Kong people.

From interviews and observation I encountered a palpable fear of dogs, spiders, mice, birds and snakes – 'wild' things not familiar to my informants from parts of hyper-urban Hong Kong. These phobic responses are also linked to a loss of familiarity and spatial intimacy. When I spoke to Clara Law about the canine encounters in *Floating Life*, she ventured:

As you know, there are dogs in Hong Kong too. But I think if you're familiar with your surroundings, and you know that, even if some dogs come running up to you, you can always hide somewhere, some place that you know. Here it's just so unfamiliar, and everything happens behind the doors, so there's no one to help you and there's nobody in the street too.

It is not the dogs themselves that are threatening, but the perceived absence of a communal space where you could imagine that someone would come to your assistance. The apparent privatisation of social existence exemplified by the suburb with its individual and separated houses and plots of land is initially uncomfortable

for Hong Kong people. It takes time for this environment to be naturalised and potentially enjoyable. The ‘emptiness’ of this suburban space is projected from an outsider’s perspective. There appears to be no ‘connection’ to others, the terrain is not legible but blank. The high degree of domestic privatism probably only achieved in industrialised settler societies, and suburbia’s uncertain rapprochement with ‘nature’: both of these elements are problematic to the settlers from Hong Kong. It is not only external space that is wild and harsh – even the internal space of the Australian houses cannot be homely. They are also too large and too empty, bare of the comforting clutter of homely spaces.

Bing’s eventual catatonic depression results in a psychic/spatial contraction forcing her to withdraw to the confines of her bedroom, unable to connect to any external reference points.⁸ A contraction into the space of the body, the heightened awareness of one’s body – these are recurring themes in migrant accounts of displacement. Bing is not seen during her illness, she effectively disappears after her attempts to claim leadership of the household in Australia. One can’t help but feel that she is pulled back into the familial order which she has tried to usurp. This was confirmed by Law’s comments on Bing’s transgression:

She’s trying to reject a part of her, she thinks is not going to help her anyway in this society. But by so doing she’s really disconnecting herself from something that is actually very precious to her. What I’m trying to say is that it’s actually a very Chinese thing, you feel that you are not alone, in the sense of posterity, you know, through the ancestors, through the children that come after, the family line thing, that you always take for granted.

The continuities of the family are reasserted, its wholeness restored. This ultimately moral narrative is underpinned by the rigorous perspectival structure of ‘houses’ and voices.

⁸ There are resonances in this scene with the director’s own experiences of migration:

If you ever have some kind of sickness, which happened to me while I was in London, and there was one evening when I was having this really really terribly painful stomach ache. It was so painful that I couldn’t even call my friends. And I thought to myself at the time, if I really died now, nobody would know and maybe a week later, somebody might smell something and might come to find a corpse there, you know. And I think it’s that kind of feeling, that you’re so alone.

8c. The place of migrants in Australian cinema

Floating Life has been seen as a film that offers a new perspective to that of earlier Australian cinematic representations of immigration (Tsiolkas 1997: 131). I want to discuss *Floating Life* in relation to other films about migration in order to see what this might indicate about Australian understandings of migrants and immigration.

Most Australian film narratives about immigration have been premised on an inescapable interaction with the Australian hosts: the pressures of discrimination or assimilation, or an attempt to create a resolution between the host population and the migrant.⁹ Previous Australian migration films have been seen as reflecting almost literally the social reality of the period in which they were produced. They were typically received more like documentaries than works of fiction – the comments about the films at the time possessed the serious tone of social commentary rather than the reflective quality of the film review.¹⁰

The extent to which there are dominant understandings of the ‘place’ of migrants as represented in films can be illustrated by some observations of how *Floating Life* is read. Audience questions to the director at festival screenings in Sydney in 1996 provided me with an opportunity to gauge the film’s reception.¹¹ *Floating Life* was a popular success amongst this audience, no doubt a cultural elite. Yet echoing the reception of earlier films with migrant subjects, questions put to Clara Law showed a desire to interpret the film as ‘real’ experience in a quasi-documentary sense. In particular, the audience seemed reluctant to depart from the narrative of the battling migrant. One questioner wondered why *Floating Life* didn’t focus on migrants with more financial worries, lamenting that the film didn’t show the real hardship of migration. Despite the fact that the emphasis in Australian immigration policy has long shifted to recruiting skilled professionals and entrepreneurs, immigrants are

⁹ The confrontation – assimilation – success or failure scenario is present in films such as *They’re a weird mob* (1966), *Silver City* (1984), *Kostas* (1979), *Aya* (1992). I am grateful to Anita Mack for discussions about Australian films about migrants and migration.

¹⁰ Reviews of *Silver City* subjected the film’s characters to the rigorous examination of a ‘real’ rather than a fictional context. The migrants in the film were described as arrogant and ungrateful and the harshness of the arrival camps for post WW2 migrants were said to be overstated (Caputo 1993: x).

¹¹ Sydney Film Festival premiere and Australian Film Institute screening at Chauvel Cinema 1996.

expected to be comfortingly proletarian. Another questioner asked why the family chose to go ‘to such an alienating place’, a question that reflected a superior and distanced view of ‘the suburbs’. (The assumption that the director would simply speak for the choices of fictional characters indicates how the film was read by some as *vérité*.) Law’s reply that the house was probably a good investment was met by laughter from the audience – immigrants are somehow not meant to be making investments, but struggling against injustices of the host society. Despite acclaim for its acting and direction, it seems that *Floating Life* didn’t fit the mould of the Australian migration story – the migrant character was not of a recognisable (and patronisable) kind. A liberal Aussie viewer could not project their sympathy towards a migrant struggling with discrimination or hardship, there being no ‘bad’ racists to blame. I spoke with Clara Law about this aspect of the film’s reception:

- P: There were questions at the film festival that indicated that people didn’t feel the film was representative of migrant experience because the people weren’t in economic hardship, which is sort of the image associated with migrants, or at least the older migrants who came to Australia after the war. But perhaps this is missing a dimension that hardship isn’t only economic.
- C: That’s right. Other films that I’ve mentioned have dealt with economic hardship. I didn’t want to make another film about that. For me, the hardest thing is to really deal with the inner world. That is the first thing to fail. Even if you are here, and you are not well off economically, you still have to sort your inner world out. It may come later but it will still be there.

We can see that the festival viewers also have a particular perspective on the nature of urban spatiality. The ‘outer’ suburbs of Australian cities are perceived as alienating, isolated, and potential sites of social pathologies – a perspective consistent with a body of filmic representations of Australian cities. Christos Tsiolkas made the point that *Floating Life* is new in its imaging of outer suburbs, which in general appear in Australian films only as signifying a ‘nightmare of alienation’. This perspective associates outer or ‘western’ suburbs with a working class devoid of culture and urbanity. Similarly films featuring migrant subjects have tended to remain stuck in a representational geography which does not reflect the fluidity of migrant settlement. Tsiolkas is pointing to the implicit spatial comparisons

that constantly reproduce hierarchies of representations of urban spaces, as representational products of a class-ifying gaze that constantly reinforces associations of certain areas with classes of people. Such representations make implicit judgements about social groups by naturalising their locations in certain spaces – by ‘putting them in their place’. Tsiolkas cites *Floating Life* as a new and exemplary reading of suburbia ‘capable of reflecting the multiple and fractured communities existent in urban Australia’ (Tsiolkas 1997: 45).

But this is exactly what *Floating Life* does *not* do. The film is not located in any ‘real’ urban space. *Floating Life* does not locate itself in a ‘local’ urban spatial hierarchy because it is not embedded primarily within the narrative of migrant engagement with others. In *Floating Life*, the migrants occupy the centre and are not forced into a battle over sharing space and resources with the host population. The film resolutely centres on the inner world of the migrant family rather than attempting to engage in an evaluation of Australian society and how *it* deals with immigration. The suburban space in *Floating Life* is a space of exposure not to the host culture, but to the existential, emotional and identity dilemmas that emerge with the dispositional rupture of migration.¹²

Floating Life is able to give this centrality to the migrant subjects themselves precisely because the film is disengaged from the ‘national’ problem of migrant incorporation. It may be useful to consider *Floating Life* in terms of the category of transnational cinema as put forward by Hamid Naficy. Naficy makes some assertions about characteristic qualities of the ‘genre’ of diasporic or transnational cinema. He points to the unsettled, transitional nature of the films’ representations of the space of host countries, which often conveys a sense of ‘liminal panic’ and agoraphobia (Naficy 1996: 128-9). Admittedly, Hong Kong directors with international reputations may not make a good fit with Naficy’s examples of exiled, subaltern film-makers from Iran and Turkey. Nevertheless he suggests some

¹² Mark Roxburgh, in a paper entitled “Clara Law’s *Floating Life* and Australian Identity”, attempted to analyse the film in terms of ‘representation of the Chinese identities within the film in relationship to the discourses of Australian identity.’ (Roxburgh 1997: 3). He tries to redeem the ‘other’ in *Floating Life* where the ‘self’ is understood to be the dominant ‘sense of Australian national self’. It is as if the normative self/other dichotomy – Aussies and migrants – virtually absent in *Floating Life*, has to be reinstalled, in order to restore ‘Aussie’ centrality. Roxburgh merely produces another

interesting convergences in cinematic style. Naficy points to the prevalence of ‘phobic spaces’, whose paradigm is the prison cell, in exilic cinema which may reflect the imprint of oppressive conditions such as incarceration, and other forms of disciplinary confinement common to refugees.

A sense of claustrophobia pervades the worldview, mise-en-scène, shot composition, and plot development of many transnational films. These are films of liminal panic, of retrenchment in the face of what is perceived to be a foreign, often hostile, host culture and media representation. This perceived (and at times very real) threat is dealt with by invoking confining but comforting claustrophobic spaces. (Naficy 1996: 131)

Naficy suggests that a dynamic of agoraphobia and claustrophobia operate as analogy to the spatial sense of the exilic subject, defining a sense of exposure and confinement to apparently alien social forces. The agoraphobic sense of excess space and distance is a palpable element of *Floating Life*. We have also encountered it in interview accounts of encountering Sydney. I have suggested that this perception of ‘agoraphobia’ is compounded by the practical contrast with the dense and ‘convenient’ spatiality of Hong Kong.

In Naficy’s terms, Bing’s collapse could also be read as a retreat into a claustrophobic internal space. The detached Australian house is a phobic space that cannot simply be inhabited – at least it must be learned to be inhabited. But in *Floating Life* this same house is also a space of protection and recovery, from which the migrant subjects would eventually emerge to interact with the world around them. The film has been interpreted as being about suburban isolation – as festival audiences understood the suburban tract housing as alienating. Again this is a reading from the perspective of a local (and ‘highbrow’) narrative of the city and its class nature. But suburban environments are not simply alienating in themselves. Their inhabitation can only be achieved through changes in migrant dispositions. For Clara Law:

You can be in suburban Australia or in the centre of a city in Germany and can still feel exactly the same. So it’s really the state of mind. And that’s what the film’s

reading of migrant incorporation into the nation when it is patently not present in the film’s perspective.

trying to say – you have to sort that out first, before you can actually make your first step and make friends with Australians.

8d. Concluding comments

I have been interested in the stage of migrancy in which dispositions are most in flux, where new places and habitats appear as threatening and destabilising. But these places can also open up potential forms of enjoyment and rapprochement. Because *Floating Life* seems to bring these tensions into play I felt justified in including it alongside other ethnographic materials. While the film is avowedly non-naturalistic,¹³ it aspires to another kind of realism in its focus on migrant affects, dispositions and sense of place. Several informants who saw the film commented on its resonances with their feelings on arrival in Sydney.¹⁴ On the other hand, Australian audiences had a problem in placing these middle class migrants – and their ‘suffering in paradise’ – within a familiar narrative of migrant incorporation. A similar kind of problem applies to ethnographic writing about migrant subjects who do not face any major economic hardships or cannot be clearly identified as subaltern. The most fertile ethnographic studies of migration in Australia have dealt with the complex modes of migrant incorporation into Australian society, and the intersecting hierarchies of gender, class and ethnic distinction which make many migrant groups highly vulnerable.¹⁵ However, I found myself unable (or unwilling) to conceive Hong Kong migrants in these terms. (This is not the same as saying that they are untouched by these political and economic dimensions). My approach has some similarities with that of Clara Law’s film, with its bracketing of the natives.

In this chapter I have engaged in the luxury of working with a cinematic narrative and its ‘mental image’ which is in close accord with my research interest in tracing a history of migrant engagements with a network of places. The film's scope is consonant with my research between sites that examines the relations between places as both lived and imagined. *Floating Life* as an organised set of images brings

¹³ See the interview with Law cited in Mitchell 2001: 109.

¹⁴ Another commented that it was ‘exaggerated’ and ‘not realistic’.

¹⁵ For instance see de Lepervanche 1980 and 1984, Jakubowicz, Morrissey and Palser 1984, Bottomley 1979, Bottomley and de Lepervanche (eds.) 1991, Castles, Collins, Gibson, Tait and Alcorso 1991.

together a structure of places brought together through transnational migration from Hong Kong. Law's structure of houses and places crystallises the specific perceptions of difference between lived spaces. These places are presented as clearly demarcated image-worlds reflecting the affective differentiation of a migrant imaginary of different places. At the same time, *Floating Life* as a cinematic narrative unifies and fills in intersubjective connections within the 'inner life' of a family, in a way that my fragmentary 'fast-food' stories could not. In the next chapter I will return to the use of interview material from returnees to Hong Kong. This will explore the experience of return to Hong Kong and the persistence of spatial memories from Sydney as part of a larger sense of place. But first a brief glance at another film from the same period which also amplifies the irreality and distancing of Australia scenes as imagined through a Hong Kong lens.

8e. Coda: Suffering in Paradise II

Floating Life could be read alongside a much lighter film, Stanley Tong's Jackie Chan vehicle *Strike Force* made in the same year, 1996. Jackie Chan plays...Jackie Chan – who no longer needs a persona other than his own. Chan, a filmmaking immigrant to Australia like Clara Law, is at the centre of this film, which could be read as a tale of bad migrant experience in paradise. Australia is also represented in *Strike Force* as both a place of natural danger and a kind of cultural depthlessness – it was largely shot around the Queensland tourist area, the Gold Coast. Jackie is some sort of operative assisting the CIA to chase some Russians.¹⁶ The story hardly matters: what is more of interest is its presentation of Australia as a leisure space, in fact, as a giant tourist site. It may not be a 'serious' representation, but it resonates with a certain imagined geography. One of my informants, Mabel was describing her life in Sydney living with her parents before she returned to Hong Kong. Opposing the leisurely life of Sydney to the rigours of living and working in Hong Kong, she described her life in Sydney's southern suburbs as 'just like living in a resort area'.

¹⁶ Is the plot (a James Bond spoof) intended to be this anachronistic, or did this cold war scenario still carry some weight (however light) in terms of the film's release just prior to 1997?

In one scene of *First Strike*, Jackie Chan is in a hotel room overlooking the beaches and swimming pools of Surfers Paradise. Jackie is on the phone to ‘Uncle Bill’, his mentor in the Hong Kong police:

JC: Uncle Bill, I’m in Australia, having a great time, enjoying my great view. I have a presidential suite, two levels, 8000 square feet¹⁷, with swimming pool, sauna and jacuzzi. There are real koala bears in this room.

Bill: It’s only a soft toy, right?

JC: No. It’s the real thing. (To the koala) Say hello to Uncle Bill.

Australia, where soft toys are real. Nature and spatial abundance is everywhere, even indoors. Much of the action takes place in a theme park, Underwater World, a site of ‘natural’ dangers, sharks and other deadly sea creatures that are both wild and at the same time completely contained within a touristic frame.

Lightweight *First Strike* may be, yet I always feel that Jackie Chan’s comic films contain an edge of desperation. The suffering of the hapless Chan must be shown to be ‘real’ suffering. Hence the stunts that didn’t work are ritually shown at the end of the film with the titles to demonstrate the authenticity that is invested in this ‘primal cinema’.¹⁸ In *First Strike*, Jackie’s suffering is not only restricted to the action scenes. In one scene he is forced to undress by the evil Tsui, revealing koala pattern underpants, which also happen to be disappearing underpants. The always coy Jackie Chan is further subjected to embarrassment as tourists laugh and take pictures of him. He later appears in a seal costume with big fins and a football jumper. Jackie is forced to take on this emblematic Australianness, to become a real soft toy.

I recall another self-deprecating performance of Jackie Chan’s. He appears in an Australian Immigration Department video called *Bridging the Gap*, designed to attract Chinese business migrants to emigrate. (‘The gap’ is understood to be basically economic.) It consists of interviews with prominent Australian Chinese like parliamentarian Helen Sham Ho, Henry Tsang, Deputy Mayor of Sydney, and

¹⁷ Typical of the Hong Kong habit of quantifying living space.

¹⁸ Critics have made comparisons between Chan and the great comic director/actors of the silent era, Chaplin, Keaton and Langdon, all of whom performed dangerous stunts to demonstrate the embodied realism of their action cinema (Teo 1997:127).

numerous successful business operators. By contrast, Jackie Chan rather sheepishly relates a story of an embarrassing interaction with a shopkeeper: ‘I was hungry, but I didn’t know how to say fish and chips. And people kept saying “What? What?” So I ran away’.