Advances in Humanities Research Vol.13 Issue 12 EWA Publishing
Available Online: 27 November 2026 DOI: 10.54254/2753-7080/2026.39596

The spatial configuration of ethnic difference and the generation of cognitive maps—spatial narrative and identity in the films of the new generation of Asian American directors

Fei Tan

Sun Yat-sen University, Zhuhai, China

15652649132@163.com

Abstract. In the postmodern historical context, the new generation of Asian American film directors confronts the unsustainability of the linear modernization narrative embedded in the traditional "estrangement–identification" model, as well as the identity dilemma of nostalgic loss and historical rupture that arises when they attempt to return to immigrant history through nostalgia. Starting from spatial visual narrative strategies, these directors transform static cultural labels of ethnic difference into dynamic spatial configurations, presenting the power struggles and value negotiations of identity between the ethnic historical context and postmodern society; meanwhile, spatial narrative reconstructs the cognitive map, revealing that identity is essentially an ongoing cognitive mapping and value translation within cross-cultural spatial coordinates.

Keywords: new generation of Asian American directors, spatial language, cognitive mapping, ethnic identity

1. Introduction

With regard to "Asian American cinema", Sylvia Chong offered a detailed and profound discussion of it in the American journal *Cinema Journal* in 2017. The article points out that mainstream cinema generally expresses this ethnic difference merely as a single narrative mode—"the happy, stereotyped minority in pursuit of the flawless American dream". Different from this "being looked at" perspective, the actors and narratives, as well as the directors and screenwriters, in Asian American[1] cinema all reflect the diversity, difference and

[1] The article offers a great many analyses of how such concepts as "Asian American" and "Asian American cinema" should be defined, whether they should be defined at all, and why they are defined in this way. Several articles by Peter Feng— "In Search of Asian American Cinema?", Cineaste 21, nos. 1 and 2 (1995): 32–35, and "The State of Asian American Cinema: In Search of Community", Cineaste 24, no. 4 (1999): 20–24—also examine the connotations and scope of this concept. Sylvia Chong, however, holds that naming, defining and classifying are not in themselves as important as it imagines; what matters more is to respond concretely to the shifts in the connotations of these concepts, and to how they reflect, through cultural symptoms, the cultural ideology of the present. This paper shares that view. It makes no attempt to define categories and scope, and takes as its main object of study the works shot in the United States by directors of Asian descent.

Copyright: © 2026 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

transnationality of Asian Americans, which mainstream cinema lacks. This has, to a certain extent, disrupted the mainstream narrative. At the same time, this more subject-conscious filmmaking indicates a contradiction: "on the one hand, in the safe manner of pursuing 'diversity', it adds a touch of exoticism to the multicultural landscape… on the other hand, the term 'Asian American' has to be used in a context without actual racial difference, otherwise it will recall the history of racial discrimination and exclusion that is incompatible with the post-racial dream" [1]. Sylvia's discussion reveals a profound contradiction, namely how Asian directors use ethnic "difference" to make films, and how such filmmaking responds to the fractured historical context and the current ethnic situation.

The directors of the "new generation"[2] have proposed new explorations in this regard. "New generation" is mainly used to describe influential film works created after 2010; moreover, unlike those mature immigrant directors in Hollywood history who had already established professional reputations in their home countries, these new-generation Asian directors are filmmakers who grew up within the American professional film education system and who, through film, have completed the cognition of a new cultural subject identity [2]. Therefore, "new generation" not only points to a difference in film style from the filmmakers of the preceding generation, but also to a new change brought about by a new identification with the film industry and a new understanding of identity politics. It can be said that building exotic cultural narratives with symbols of ethnic differentiation in order to conform to mainstream values, and interrogating the stable relationship between these symbols and their general signifieds, together constitute the narrative strategy of Asian directors' films. So how to understand this "difference", how to describe the narrative grammar that constructs this "difference", and how does "difference", as a cultural symptom, participate in the construction of ideology, and how does it dismantle the fixed expressive modes of ideology?

Jameson proposes in *The Political Unconscious*: "we cannot enumerate the differences between things unless against the background of some more general identity. The task of mediation is to establish this initial identity, against which—and only against which—local identities and differences can be realized" [3]. It can see here a dialectical way of understanding "difference": it is not the purely inert storage of mutually unrelated heterogeneous elements in a text, but a structural difference, that is, a local difference that acknowledges the identity of the larger background, an expression of difference at the crossroads of the modern and postmodern turn which takes a totality-oriented cognition of the world as its background. Therefore difference refers to a relation, not a set of elements. At the same time, Jameson provides us in *The Political Unconscious* with a useful methodological frame of reference for reading texts: "we must first establish a continuity between these two regions or sectors—the linguistic practice within literary works and the objective world (Umwelt), or the confused experience, standardization and rational secularization of the everyday world—so that the latter is understood as that determinate situation, predicament, antinomy or subtext which the former symbolically determines or resolves" [3]. Thus the above-mentioned "background of identity" may refer to the objective world, or to everyday life manifested as the process of the modern-to-postmodern turn under globalization, and at the same time to the determinate situation symbolically projected into the inner world of literary works.

In a stable, static society, integration between ethnic groups proceeds according to the rhythm of "estrangement–identification": the feeling of estrangement gradually fades with the time of integration, and the

[2] As for the "new generation", Chinese-language scholarship mostly refers at present to Asian American directors working after the turn of the new century. A large proportion of them are independent filmmakers who, as creative subjects, focus on the cultural identity of Asian immigrants and on a critical understanding of American society; and their emergence in America is also due to the Western world's attempt to absorb the distinctive style of Chinese directors in order to renew its creative resources.

mode of identification deepens with the accumulation of experience. In a period of multicultural coexistence, however, the content of "estrangement" increases abruptly, and the crisis of identity becomes complex and diverse because of the presence of multiple identities. The "new generation" of Asian American directors is situated precisely in this historical field of multiple identity crises. The way they imagine texts therefore reflects the internal movements of this historical field. In this sense, re-examining the crisis of minority identity from the perspective of ethnic difference aims not to reproduce the historical process of "estrangement–identification", but to form, against the background of the globalizing process of modernity, an internally relativized vision between ethnic difference and the many different forms of identity politics, and to present the different methods, paths and possibilities interwoven within "identification".

2. Historical rupture and nostalgic loss: the double predicament of identity based on ethnic difference

Western academia has already produced a good number of discussions that place Asian cinema within a cross-cultural perspective, such as the cross-cultural textual strategies of directors including Ang Lee [4], and the growing prominence of the immigrant Chinese family as an element in American cinema [5]. In the history of the modern context, the efforts of the first generation of Asian directors who immigrated to the United States to reshape the Asian image in the late twentieth century became the latent text of Asians' journey to America in pursuit of the "American dream". Here, the first-generation Asian directors follow the process of modernity, positioning the self on the coordinate system of linear time, and holding that the process of pursuing the American dream is the process of accelerating this linear change. The allegory of modernity is converted into an immigration strategy under globalization; the core of ethnic identity is the contest between the backward productive forces located on the coordinate system of the distant motherland and the advanced productive forces represented by the American identity they strive for with all their might. The family narrative that appears so frequently in Ang Lee's films, as a unique ethnic difference, became a typical representative in the transformation of the Chinese image of the past. Against the viewing background of American audiences, the ethnic difference here is one of many ethnic differences, which together constitute overseas audiences' general imagination of the Chinese image.

The situation facing "new generation" directors is more plural and more complex. They were immersed early in the value formation of American elite culture and possess a very firm self-identification with intellectual capacity. At the same time, influenced by the long-standing "political correctness" of the United States, their identification with their own minority traits runs deeper than in the past. In the identity of the new-generation directors, besides their belonging to an ethnic minority, there are also the ascriptions of yellow race, female identity, homosexual groups and other identity positions long situated at the lower end of power. The identity crisis of the new-generation directors has shifted from a single ethnic difference to plural identity-political relations. In the past, the pursuit of advanced productive forces was an effective means of bridging the emotional anxiety of a single ethnic identity crisis. Today, the interrelations among the multiple powers within plural identities have instead brought multiple hesitations and possibilities of reflexivity to what was originally a difficult but clear binary choice. The films of the second generation of Asian American directors after the turn of the new century embody these identity crises in the form of latent texts even more: for instance, the lesbian issue discussed by Alice Wu in *The Half of It* (2020), and the issue of the individual's right to medical informed consent discussed by Lulu Wang in *The Farewell* (2019), both reflect the need of the new generation of Asians to engage in power struggles and value negotiations with the previous generation at the levels of cultural values, family ethics and even individual rights. This is not merely a simple

generational difference within the linear process of modernity, but a profound difference in ethnic value identification between those who have deeply internalized Western values and the previous generation who still retain the cultural concepts of the motherland. The new-generation directors must therefore not only meet the challenge of integrating into American society, but also directly confront and deal with the generational cultural differences between themselves and their fathers' generation.

Behind plural identity identification lies the value orientation of postmodernism. Eagleton points out that "for some postmodern thinkers, the flourishing of cultural diversity is both a fact and a value" [6]. He then raises a critique of the postmodern features behind cultural identifications such as homosexuality and religious belief. Postmodernism is characterized by the stagnation of time and the rupture of history, and nostalgia thus becomes a universal strategy by which people in the postmodern condition seek self-continuity. "A rebellion against the modern concepts of time, history and progress. Nostalgia seeks to erase history, to turn history into a private or collective mythology, to visit time as one visits space, refusing to submit to the irreversibility of time that torments the human condition" [7]. For Asian Americans situated in the postmodern multicultural context, looking back at the past is likewise an important psychological demand. However, against the background of globalized postmodernity tending toward "total identity", and unlike mainstream Americans who retrace their own linear history, Asian Americans naturally project the desire to bridge historical rupture onto the immigration history of their own ethnic group. The postmodern sense of temporal stagnation and the crisis of self-identity are thus concretely transformed, in the Asian context, into the value negotiation and power struggle between the new generation, deeply influenced by Western values, and the older generation of immigrants who uphold the cultural traditions of the motherland. If the identity crisis of the first-generation immigrants is rooted in the tear between motherland culture and Western culture, then the new generation must attempt to construct historical continuity by "returning" to the predecessors and the motherland cultural values they represent. Yet the confirmation of this "continuity" often remains superficial: the predecessors and motherland culture no longer constitute a genuine object of "root-seeking" identification, but are rather an "otherized" identification with history generated out of sympathy for their "other" situation. Therefore, although it can temporarily relieve the sense of loss caused by historical rupture, it does not open up a genuinely new path for identity.

It is worth noting that in recent years Asian directors have reaped abundant awards at major American film festivals: Lulu Wang won the 77th Golden Globe Awards with *The Farewell* (2019); Cathy Yan's *Dead Pigs* (2019) was shortlisted for the 34th Sundance Film Festival; Chloé Zhao won the Golden Lion at the 77th Venice Film Festival with *Nomadland* (2020); Alice Wu's *The Half of It* (2020) received a nomination for the 36th Independent Spirit Awards; and *Past Lives* (2023) directly won the 39th Independent Spirit Awards. On the one hand, this marks the recognition of Asian narratives in the Western mainstream field; on the other hand, it subtly reflects a certain curiosity in the Western world toward the "hesitation" component of ethnic difference. Western audiences tend, in these works, to gaze at the identity contradictions of the Asian "other" in order to set off and reinforce the "unquestionability" of their own American identity, and ultimately to complete the confirmation of self-identity through the characters' choice of the "American dream", even if that choice comes only after struggle.

It can thus be seen that both the retracing of the past and the gazing at the other's hesitation are essentially strategies for coping with self-uncertainty. And Asian Americans, in this process of being looked at, simultaneously display a double distrust of "integrating into America" and "returning to history", which in turn intensifies their sense of bewilderment about their own situation. In *The Half of It*, Ellie seeks recognition through academic success, in contrast to her father, highly educated yet confined at home by language barriers, and laments her perplexity about the future; in *Past Lives*, Nora cuts off her old love because of

career setbacks; in *The Farewell*, Billi, amid reluctance and attachment, finally chooses to return to America in pursuit of her dream—all these are artistic representations of the failure to establish historical continuity firmly.

In this situation, ethnic generational difference is often presented in a "spatialized" manner in films: on the one hand, the question of ethnic identity itself originates from geographical migration and is naturally bound up with space, and in images it is often manifested as the contrast between the utterly different urban landscapes of the motherland and the place of emigration; on the other hand, in the visual expression of film, spatial language (such as positional relations in composition, the symbolic connection between characters and space, and the deliberate division of spatial proportions) is a customary device for handling the relationship between self and other. An in-depth interpretation and dismantling of the expressions of difference in filmic spatial language therefore becomes a key avenue for insight into the social subtext behind ethnic difference. Jameson proposes that the difference between the postmodern and the modern lies in the way repeated experiences of novelty replace, in a stagnant manner, the ascending state of the modern process. "Time stagnates and is replaced by postmodern space" [8]. This spatiotemporal conversion profoundly reveals that the view of temporal progress on which linear modernity relies is no longer able to resolve the identity crisis of the new generation of Asians amid multiple identity predicaments; what replaces it is the "spatialized" state formed by the juxtaposition, conflict and negotiation of various identity demands, which becomes the concrete context of the postmodern sense of temporal stagnation.

Jameson's emphasis on the replacement of time by space has at its core the critique of the unsustainability of the linear modernization narrative, together with the erosion of local cultural traits brought about by the convenience of geographical mobility under globalization, and the consequent predicament of self-confirmation. The linear, future-oriented sense of time is replaced by homogeneous "present" spatial slices one after another, which is not only different from the premodern cyclical view of time, but also dissolves historical depth, flattening "past" and "future" within a constantly shifting "present". By analyzing how films use spatial language to encode ethnic difference and its inherent power relations, it can build an interpretive bridge between the filmic text and the social subtext. This approach not only helps to understand how cultural texts represent complex social reality, but can also provide new methodological inspiration for exploring the possibilities and boundaries of self-cognition from the perspective of identity politics.

3. The dynamic configuration of space: visual presentation of ethnic difference and postmodern identity negotiation

Jameson points out that postmodernity is accompanied by "the disappearance of inner time", and that the confirmation of subjectivity turns instead to external space: "subjectivity is an objective thing; it is enough to change the setting and the background, to rearrange the room, or to destroy them in an air raid, for a new subject, a new identity, to emerge magically on the ruins of the old" [9]. This assertion profoundly reveals the core position of spatial transformation as the mechanism of postmodern subjectivity reconstruction. In the context of globalization, Asian immigration to the United States is often wrapped in the narrative of "enterprise" and "hard work", becoming a symbolic action in the search for recognition from the Western mainstream. As shown in *Past Lives* (2023), the parents of the heroine Nora emigrated to North America for the dream of film, while Nora herself takes the Nobel Prize in Literature as her vocation—this desire to transcend ethnic difference and join the Western mainstream is the common expectation of many Asian immigrants. The transformation of geographical living space thus in essence constitutes the "cognitive mapping" premise of their subjective identity transformation. The "cognitive mapping" [10] proposed by

Jameson refers to the individual's capacity to conceive social totality within the fragmented reality of globalization, and is the dialectic between "the direct perception of here and now" and "the imagined perception of an absent social totality". This capacity for mapping is crucial to immigrants' positioning in urban space: urban landscape is not only the intuitive reference of geographical space, but also carries differentiated geopolitical cultures and the psychological order they shape.

The most intuitive spatialized expression of ethnic difference in film is the juxtaposition of the Asian homeland and the American urban landscape. *Past Lives* (2023), directed by the Korean American director Celine Song, takes precisely this as its core narrative strategy. In the film, the geopolitical duality of Seoul and New York is by no means a simple background, but an active symbolic carrier of differentiated cultural logics and psychological orders. The film traces the life in New York of Nora, a Korean Canadian immigrant; the transoceanic connection she rebuilds with her childhood companion Hae Sung through electronic screens offers a visual imaginative possibility of returning home for her diasporic situation. Song's camerawork is highly and explicitly metaphorical: the rapid switching between Seoul's neon streets and New York's orderly skyline, synchronized with the dialogue in the video call, concretizes the protagonist's fractured sense of belonging. The deliberately prolonged shots of traffic flowing in parallel motion between the two cities suggest an emotional resonance across the geographical divide—Hae Sung's identification with Nora's pursuit of self-worth (that is, the pursuit of the "advancement" of modernity) and Nora's effort to seek historical continuity through nostalgia for her predicament in America are interwoven here. The climax of the film—Nora unilaterally severing the digital bond—condenses the tension between emotional attachment and realistic assimilation. Her declaration, "I immigrated twice to get here, I must accomplish something", presents America not only as a land of opportunity but also as an exclusive field of self-identification; the quest for historical continuity therefore also ends with the disconnection between Nora and Hae Sung.

It is worth noting that the two never share the same frame; their interaction unfolds in split screen, and their faces are often obscured by the urban landscape. When Nora whispers to Hae Sung, "I miss you so much", his camera moves away from his face and turns to the extended city panorama of Seoul—this visual presentation merges personal desire with collective nostalgia. The deliberate blurring of the human subject and the highlighting of urban symbols indicate that the relationship between the characters is in fact a particular representation of a geopolitical allegory. And the way the two communicate at a distance in the story belongs, in film language, to different shots; this feeling of being both familiar and strange, both nostalgic and estranged, brought about by spatial separation, is expressed frequently on several occasions. The obstruction of physical distance (accompanied by network lag, unfamiliar language and awkward emotion) forms a tension with the narrowing of psychological distance, while the two utterly different living spaces (Hae Sung living in his parents' home in Seoul / Nora striking out alone in New York), social venues (gatherings at a Korean restaurant / walking alone on New York streets) and identity statuses (student / independent writer) concretize at the micro level the differences and the gulf between the two cultural logics.

Jameson further explains the essence of postmodern spatial transformation: "then, in the consideration of space, the preeminence of difference is not the difference of any change within a temporal understanding of form, but multiplicity and infinity, metonymy and—to arrive at some more forceful, seemingly explicit and all-encompassing formulation—heterogeneity" [9]. This means that the spatial transformation of the postmodern scene is not the metabolism along a linear course of time, but difference itself. Ethnic difference in the filmic text is therefore necessarily represented fundamentally by spatial difference. Lulu Wang's *The Farewell* (2019) likewise takes spatial movement as its narrative engine: Billi, a Chinese girl, shuttles between New York and her hometown Changchun, and the different urban landscapes directly point to the wavering of her identity. Similar to *Past Lives*, the "homecoming" perspective is deliberately restricted—Billi "peeps" at

the Changchun streetscape through the car window, suggesting a distanced, otherized retrospective gaze at history; in New York, by contrast, she is "placed within" the streetscape. The difference in camerawork precisely maps the difference in modes of identity, and suggests that the descendants of immigrants' identification with ethnic history can often only be estranged and otherized.

The deeper spatial narrative of *The Farewell* lies in the visualization of the power field within the family. Centering on the core conflict of whether to tell the grandmother that she has a terminal illness, the film highly condenses the dramatic tension into the fixed space of the Chinese "round dining table". The round table becomes a symbolic field of fierce collision between collectivist ethics and the American individualist ideal. Billi, American-educated and an "intruder", is often isolated from the family group by medium shots, visualizing the difference in her values; the grandmother, who occupies the center of the frame yet loses the right to her own narrative, represents a symbolic identity defined solely by her kinship relation to the protagonist. Through the camera's cyclical gaze at the various figures at the table, especially Billi and the grandmother, the director turns the table into a visual metaphor for the periodic lie that sustains family harmony. The defenders of the collective ultimately lose their individual rights, and the grandmother in the end never learns of her own illness. "The concept of 'relations', especially when combined with 'social bonds' or 'civic solidarity', is often associated with a highly contested and problematic stereotype of community ideals—that is, these ideals are held to be the cause of the persistence of dominant views and behaviours within society, thereby justifying the asymmetric relations established between individuals or groups. In a similar way, it is often intertwined with liberal anxieties about the pursuit of the collective interest of the political community, a pursuit at the expense of individual rights" [11]. The value opposition between collectivism and individualism becomes the core conflict through which the film attracts its audience.

However, Lulu Wang refuses to reduce the conflict to a binary opposition of Eastern and Western positions. The grandmother's tacit permission for Billi to leave ("go chase your life") and Billi's final compromise with the lie together reveal that identity is not an either-or choice. In Billi's "cognitive mapping", she needs the ethnic history represented by her grandmother to satisfy her nostalgic sentiments, yet Changchun's rapid urbanization has erased her childhood memories, and physical space can no longer sustain the retracing of historical continuity. It is worth noting that the aunt, who questions Billi's family's emigration, nonetheless sends her own son to the United States—which in action acknowledges the value of the immigration narrative. The grandmother's and aunt's defense of collectivism at the discursive level, together with their recognition of emigration at the level of action, thus reveals the complex strategies by which Asian Americans confirm themselves through ethnic identity. By depicting the grandmother and the aunt insisting at the round table on the importance of kinship and the collective, the director essentially constructs a mode of representing difference, aiming to confirm the "actual difference" between ethnic concepts and mainstream American values. But this "returning" understanding of collectivism is already an otherized identification, far removed from the traditional "attachment to the native soil". Billi's orientation toward personal value is destined to break with the traditional family narrative of bringing glory to the ancestors. Whether questioning the deprivation of the grandmother's right to know, or finally becoming an accomplice to the "white lie", both point to Billi's strong demand for returning to history to confirm continuity, and to the inherent temporariness and illusoriness of that demand.

The Farewell, by constructing the round table simultaneously as a place of questioning and a place of belonging, dismantles the simplistic reading of cultural difference and spatializes it into a complex system of "relations" negotiation. Within this system, the value choices internal to the Chinese family display the dynamic fluidity of ethnic difference—it is not a fixed binary opposition, but a process of constant

questioning, revision, reversal and reconstruction within specific situations, a practice of cognitive mapping compatible with both modern and postmodern coordinates.

If *The Farewell* focuses on the spatial narrative of "homecoming", then Alice Wu's *The Half of It* (2020) focuses on the micro-spatial politics of Asian immigrants' integration into the everyday life of Western society. The protagonist Ellie's father, a first-generation immigrant, refuses to integrate on the grounds of poor English and settles in a corner of the small town, forcing his daughter to take on household affairs and paid work. Ellie makes a living by writing assignments for others thanks to her exceptional intellect. When Paul asks her to ghostwrite love letters in pursuit of the school beauty Aster, Ellie's Chinese identity is concealed in the transmission of texts—language here serves as a lubricant that dissolves difference, while space exposes the hidden power structure. The "inside/outside" division of the restaurant scene is highly symptomatic: Ellie manipulates from outside the window the date between Paul and Aster inside, and her physical position metaphorizes the predicament of Asians in cross-cultural communication, who are often marginalized and can only intervene indirectly in the Western discursive field. Even more subversive is the church scene: when Aster's father arranges his daughter's marriage in the church (a Western religious/patriarchal space), Ellie looks down on the whole scene from the second floor, a marginal accompanying position. This posture both reproduces the orientalist "gaze of the other" (though with the position reversed) and, because she finally intrudes into the central space on the ground floor to expose the ghostwriting lie, breaks the established power script. Ellie's normal position in the church, the accompaniment seat on the second floor, symbolizes her situation at the periphery of the center of power. Her rush from the second floor to the first is not only the collapse of the lie, but also the dramatic manifestation of ethnic identity from "invisible" to "unignorable"—Asian Americans yearn to be "seen" and recognized in mainstream space. Ultimately, Ellie ascends the stage of the campus gala and becomes the central performer, overcoming obstacles and gaining recognition amid questioning and embarrassment, which constitutes the ultimate spatial metaphor for Asians' struggle for recognition.

In summary, the new generation of Asian American directors, through pluralistic strategies of spatial construction, profoundly present their efforts to handle the complex relations of identity with ethnic history, previous generations of immigrants and mainstream American society, as well as their demand for the recognition of value. In this process, ethnic difference is manifested in a highly visualized and spatialized manner. Whether attempting to return to history to bridge rupture or striving to integrate into the mainstream for recognition, the postmodern spatial metaphors (juxtaposition, separation, hierarchy, field) have become their indispensable core of signification. As Jameson reveals of the postmodern antinomy: "the fundamental antinomy in the description of the postmodern lies in the fact that this opposition is no longer the former binary opposition together with identity and difference themselves; it never ceases to reveal that it is now consistent with its other pole in a way entirely different from the past" [9]. This inspires us: the presentation of ethnic difference in the postmodern context is no longer the linear path by which the first-generation immigrants sought value identification within a binary opposition, but rather self-confirmation achieved through a double strategy: on the one hand, "confirming" in an otherized manner the apparent continuity and the actual rupture of history, in order ultimately to anchor a fundamental identification with mainstream American values; on the other hand, revealing through narrative the reality that they "should not be in peripheral space", thereby legitimizing their status as an "unignorable link" in the operation of American society. The construction of visual presentation with space as its basic grammar thus becomes an important path for analyzing the complexity of contemporary Asian American identity politics.

4. The generation of the cognitive map: spatial reconstruction of ethnic difference and cross-cultural translation

The spatial expression of ethnic difference in Asian American cinema not only points to the otherized identification with ethnic history and the imaginative identification with mainstream American values, but also develops a unique cinematic grammar aimed at dissolving or reconstructing difference itself. This dissolution is not the erasure of difference, but its nesting within the intersecting network of multiple marginal identities (ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation, etc.), which reduces ethnicity to a partial representation of the fragmentation of postmodern subjectivity and of the identity crisis. Space thereby becomes the key field of difference translation and trauma resonance.

The final scene of *Past Lives* (2023) is highly symbolic: Hae Sung finally arrives in New York and is reunited with Nora, and this moment is detached by the director from the linear immigration narrative and placed at the beginning of the film as a spatial anchoring point. Within the frame where the three are together, Nora is in the center, with the Korean old friend Hae Sung and the white husband seated on either side. Nora keeps conversing with Hae Sung in Korean, while the husband falls into aphasia—the three share a physical space but are in a fractured discursive space. This composition does not foreshadow an either-or choice, but visualizes the plural constitution of Nora's subjectivity: both men have deeply participated in the writing of her immigration history and are inseparable links constituting her identity. The two ends of ethnic difference (the Eastern homeland / the Western present) are internalized and blended into Nora's self-identification through emotional bonds, and difference itself is relativized in the shared space. At the end of the film, Nora bids farewell to Hae Sung and throws herself into her husband's arms; the spatial transformation of her trajectory (from the field of three to the private space of two) confirms her value belonging. Hae Sung's "inability to integrate" and final departure, and the husband's "attempt to understand" and final acceptance, together reveal the dual aspect of Asian identity: on the one hand, a dedicated discursive space is needed to manifest uniqueness; on the other hand, Western society remains their actual belonging. Nora's differentiated attitudes toward the two (intimate communication in Korean / physical dependence on her husband) precisely map, through spatial language, her hybrid identity—this is not a simple either-or, but a network of emotional connections formed in the complex interweaving of self and other: Hae Sung symbolizes "the past / the familiar / attachment", while the husband represents "the present / the future / the confirmation of immigrant value".

The Half of It (2020), by contrast, digs deep into the intersection and mutual permeation of ethnic difference and other identity dimensions (gender, class) through fragmented and fluid micro-spaces. The film deconstructs the small American town into a multidimensional field carrying complex relations, dissolving the symbolism of "America" as a monolithic block of homogeneous values. In the course of ghostwriting love letters, the protagonist Ellie develops a same-sex affection for Aster; their secret communication at the graffiti wall and the imagery of their merged bodies in the lake's reflection (echoing the Platonic myth of soulmates) ingeniously transform ethnic, gender and class differences into transcendent emotional resonance. The reflections in the lake merge into a complete body, metaphorizing that the dissolution of difference is achieved not through homogenization but through acknowledging the complementary potential of differentiated subjects. Paul's small car, as another fluid private space, suspends ethnic boundaries. When Ellie and Paul share their reading of Sartre's *No Exit*, an existentialist community forms inside the car: Paul's predicament over the family recipe (Paul wants to innovate but is blocked by his father's and grandfather's insistence on the traditional secret recipe) and the devaluation of Ellie's father's high education (his doctorate earned in China, his value lost in America for lack of fluent language) are reconstructed at the existential level as universal

predicaments—regardless of ethnic background, individuals must deal with the rupture from their own historical identity. Ethnic difference does not disappear here; it is reduced to a differentiated representation of the trauma of modernity.

This strategy of sublimating a specific ethnic experience into a universal existential predicament finds an even more extreme expression in Chloé Zhao's *Nomadland* (2020). As a Chinese American director, Zhao projects the Asian diasporic experience onto the wandering narrative of the white nomad Fern. The visual dialectic of vast wilderness and abandoned towns thoroughly deconstructs the fixed semantics of "home". The RV in which Fern takes shelter is a mobile "home", while her formerly stable dwelling in the town of Empire has become ruins. The cycle of "entering a house and fleeing it" that recurs throughout the film (her sister's house, Dave's cabin, the ruins of Empire) echoes the ambivalent attitude of Asian immigrants toward "taking root"—the stability of physical space may instead mean spiritual exile. When Fern drives toward the line where sky meets earth, the stark disparity in proportion between the human figure and the landscape not only suggests the insignificance of the modern individual, but further implies the relativization of ethnic difference under the systemic oppression of late capitalism: everyone is a nomad on the ruins of postmodern capitalism. In an interview, the Chinese American director Chloé Zhao admitted frankly that much of the portrayal and understanding of minority groups in the film is closely bound up with her reflections on her own identity as an Asian American. Zhao pointed out that a large part of her reading of American politics during her college years was related to her experience in the United States; she wondered why Chinese people in America always live in groups rather than fully integrating into American society. She noted, "when you live in a house, you can choose the community you live in, and sometimes you are with people who look like you, who are like you, to protect yourself"[3], Zhao's account of her creative work corroborates this universalizing projection of ethnic experience: she admits that her understanding of minority groups is inseparable from her reflections on her Asian identity, and observes that the "defensive clustering" of Asian immigrants is isomorphic with the temporary communities formed by American nomads through their shared experience of wandering—both are spatial strategies formed in response to uncertainty and in the search for belonging.

Homi Bhabha's discussion of the third space inspires the understanding of this phenomenon: "the intervention of the third space of enunciation makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, and thereby breaks the mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integral, open, expanding code. Such an intervention quite properly challenges the sense of the traditional understanding of cultural historical identity—the idea that culture is authenticated by an "originary Past" and continued in "national tradition" as a homogeneous, unifying force. … It is precisely the third space, though it is itself unrepresentable, that constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation, ensuring that the meanings and symbols of culture no longer have an original unity or fixity: even the same symbols can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and given new meaning" [12]. In Asian cinema, the symbols of ethnic difference (such as diaspora, clustering and rootlessness) are appropriated and translated, producing profound resonance with the class divisions internal to capitalism.

In cinematic expressions that attempt to dissolve or transform ethnic difference, film dismantles the inherent imagination of space and restores the many complex factors of America itself as a spatial field, rather than leaving it as merely an abstract aggregate condensing imagined elements. Here, the difference brought by ethnicity itself may be restored to many concrete and subtle issues, so that difference itself acquires more

[3] Eric Kohn, "'Nomadland': How Chloé Zhao Made a Secret Road Movie While Becoming a Marvel Director", IndieWire, 2020, September 8.

dimensions, and sympathy and understanding are generated one after another because of the greater similarity. At the same time, ethnic difference itself may also appear as merely one part of the many identity differences faced by an individual living in postmodernity; although it is manifested more conspicuously to some extent, it can be dismantled into various different ways of understanding. The various expressions of filmic space, in their attempt to downplay ethnic difference and to present the various differences internal to an ethnic group itself, thus expand the multiple possibilities of the meaning of postmodern "space".

In these films, space itself undergoes fission, splitting into countless micro-spaces (the car interior, the graffiti wall, the RV, the lake), each of which becomes a temporary contract of difference negotiation. Ellie's Chinese identity is a tool at the restaurant window, an intrusion in the church, and a mirror of the soul at the lake; Fern's RV is both shelter and cage, both a symbol of freedom and a witness to loneliness. When the single adversariality of space gives way to multiple reflective relations, ethnic difference is no longer an essentialized label but an adjustable node within the network of difference. The construction of this "decentered space" ultimately points to this result— sharing the fate of displacement, yet experience it in differentiated ways.

The dissolution of ethnic difference by space is therefore in fact a precise process of symbolic translation: it extracts difference from the level of cultural representation and reforges it into a methodology for understanding the fragmentation of postmodern subjectivity. When Ellie's reflection merges with Aster, when Fern's RV fades into the dusk of Montana, ethnicity does not disappear but dissolves into a larger web of being. This dissolution is not a compromise, but an ultimate inquiry into the nature of difference—before systemic violence (the operating logic of late capitalism), will all differences ultimately be reduced to different dialects of the same trauma? All these films have written this spatial difference: years later, Nora tearfully bids farewell to Hae Sung and throws herself into her white husband's arms; Billi tearfully parts from her grandmother and boards the plane back to America; Ellie and Aster bid each other a smiling farewell, lamenting the undecided future and the long road ahead: the answer given by the films is ambiguous and profound—although the differences have already been borne by fragmented individual subjectivities, it still need the prism of difference in order to refract the unspeakability of trauma.

5. Conclusion

In the retrospective confirmation of the process of modernity by immigration history, space is the coordinate system of the temporal process, and ethnic difference is anchored in the binary tension of "the backwardness of the motherland / the advancement of America"; the new generation of directors, however, in the fractured context of postmodernity, constructs space as a field of difference negotiation—the juxtaposition of geographical landscapes, the miniature theatre of family power, and the marginalizing hints of everyday space together constitute a spatial field for analyzing the complexity of identity. Ultimately, through the fission and translation of space, film completes the reconstruction of ethnic difference: difference metamorphoses from an essentialized cultural label into a shared "dialect" of personal history and trauma in the postmodern context.

This evolution of spatial narrative not only marks the generational turn of Asian American directors from "integration anxiety" to "difference consciousness", but also exposes the universal predicament of postmodern subjectivity: after the failure of linear progressivism, space becomes the last coordinate system through which it maps ourselves and anchor continuity. Yet the coordinate system itself is full of paradox—it both bears nostalgia and declares its illusoriness; it both produces difference and dissolves it. It is precisely in this dialectic that Asian cinema transcends the simple representation of identity politics and sublimates space into a critical cognitive methodology: it forces the audience to confront the temporariness and plasticity of all spatial

coordinates, and to understand that the so-called "American dream" is in fact a never-closing cognitive map constantly redrawn by different subjects in fluid space.

References

[1] Chong, S. S. H. (2017). What was Asian American cinema? *Cinema Journal, 56*(3), 130–135.

[2] Yu, L. (2020). The recruitment and integration of creative resources in Hollywood: A case study of the new generation of Asian immigrant directors. *Contemporary Cinema*, (7), 119–125.

[3] Jameson, F. (2018). *The political unconscious* (F. Wang, Trans.). China Renmin University Press.

[4] de Kloet, J. Saved by betrayal?: Ang Lee's translations of "Chinese" family ideology.

[5] Han, Q. (2019). Diasporic Chinese family drama through a transnational lens: The Wedding Banquet (1993) and Saving Face (2004). *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics, 15*(3), 323–334.

[6] Eagleton, T. (2018). *Culture* (S. Zhang, Trans.). CITIC Press.

[7] Boym, S. (2010). *The future of nostalgia* (D. Yang, Trans.). Yilin Press.

[8] Jameson, F. (2018). The end of temporality (F. Li, Trans.). *Shanghai Culture*, (6), 59-72.

[9] Jameson, F. (2016). The antinomies of postmodernity (Y. Hu et al., Trans.). In *Cultural turn: Jameson collected works volume 10*. China Renmin University Press.

[10] Jameson, F. (2016). Cognitive mapping (Y. Chen, Y. Hu et al., Trans.). In *Neo-Marxism: Jameson collected works volume 1*. China Renmin University Press.

[11] Kwak, J.-H. (2023). Individuality with relationality: Ahn Changho's modern transvaluation of Confucianism. *Philosophy East and West, 77*(3).

[12] Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.