Midi Z, network aesthetics from below, and the cultural politics of Taiwanese subimperialism

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Midi Z, Network Aesthetics from Below, and the Cultural Politics of Taiwanese

Subimperialism

On September 9, 2014, Taiwan’s Ministry of Culture (MoC) announced its entry for Best Foreign Language Film at the 2015 Academy Awards. The government’s choice was Bingda/Ice Poison (2014), directed by the Myanmar-born but Taiwan-based filmmaker Zhao Deyin, better known as Midi Z. Described by the MoC’s press release as “a brutally honest take on the day-to-day reality in his homeland Myanmar”, Ice Poison beat out features by more high profile directors. These included Tsai Ming-liang’s jiao you/Stray Dogs (2013), and Kano/Kano (2014), Umin Boya’s feel-good sports film about a 1930s Taiwanese high school baseball team, which was produced by the current doyenne of popular genre cinema in Taiwan, Wei Te-sheng. According to the government publication Taiwan Today, Zhao’s film stood out due to the power of its documentary realism in conveying the life of a poor farmer who turns to selling crystal meth for cash. Not unconnectedly, it was also reported that Ang Lee, having seen the film at the Tribeca Film Festival, commented that Ice Poison had “inherited the aesthetic style of Taiwan’s New Wave school of film yet uses the linear narrative structure of the world’s mainstream film”.

This announcement, and the accompanying press coverage, raises many questions about Midi Z’s relationship to the contemporary Taiwanese film scene. How did a Burmese director of ethnically Chinese origin, who only became a Taiwanese citizen in 2011, come so rapidly to represent a “national” film culture? Similar questions could be asked of Ice Poison. The third of three low budget features shot on digital video, predominantly set in Myanmar, and barely featuring anyone recognisably Taiwanese, the film was originally commissioned as a short called Anlaoyi/Burial Clothes, by China’s Phoenix TV in Hong Kong, and then released as part of the
omnibus feature Nanfang lai xin/Letters from the South (2013), by Malaysia’s Da Huang Pictures. Zhao decided to expand the short to a full-length feature only after shooting had actually started, staying on to record extra material for what would become Ice Poison. Given the film’s loose connections to the island, what was the attraction of submitting it to the Oscars as an example of Taiwanese cinema? Finally, turning to the comment attributed to Ang Lee, there is the question of Midi Z’s style. What does it mean for Taiwan’s most famous twentieth-century cinematic export to be reconstituted, in Southeast Asia, in the twenty-first century? And why raise the ghost of that cinema in the first place, whether it was invoked by Ang Lee, or by the journalists reporting on him?

This article cannot answer all these questions, but it does use them as a point of departure. I am especially interested in Midi Z’s relationship to the Taiwan New Wave, or Taiwan New Cinema. A film movement that emerged in the early 1980s, continued and diversified in the 1990s, and largely petered out in the 2000s, the Taiwan New Cinema is strongly associated with a modernist, art cinema aesthetic. As Ang Lee’s apparent comment suggests, Midi Z’s cinema is both a manifestation of and a significant departure from this style. How and why this metamorphosis has occurred in Zhao’s cinema—specifically, in the so-called Homecoming Trilogy, of which Ice Poison is the final film—is part of what I want to address here. In particular, I want to situate it in relation to broader industrial and geopolitical dynamics that are also part and parcel of Ice Poison’s Oscar submission.

I will start, therefore, by looking in some detail at the style of the Homecoming Trilogy. I argue that while the trilogy does retain elements of Taiwan New Cinema style—particularly those associated with what has come to be called “slow cinema”—it also demonstrates significant cinematographic departures. In particular, it incorporates sequences of rapid
movement and angled camerawork not usually associated with the New Cinema. I suggest that this hybridization reflects Zhao’s interest in mapping globalization from below: a bottom-up perspective on the consequences for Myanmar’s citizens of their incorporation into contemporary capitalism following the country’s gradual transition to democracy. In shifting between moments of stasis and movement, Midi Z captures both how Burmese workers seek to enter transnational labour networks, and the limits to their circulation through them. The trilogy is thus formed of a series of commodity narratives, focused on Burmese migrants, and framed through what I term “network aesthetics from below”. The digital camera is a critical tool here: it allows for low cost production, while also enabling Midi Z to translate into formal terms the problems faced by Burmese workers as they seek to enter these networks of illicit trade and labour. But digital technology is not enough to explain this dialectic alone. While the new wave aesthetic of the Taiwan New Cinema reflected Taiwan’s entrance into global capitalism in the 1980s, its hybridization in the Homecoming Trilogy presages Myanmar’s entry into regional markets in the 2010s. In these markets, East Asian countries, including Taiwan, are dominant, not peripheral, players, drawing on Southeast Asian labour in an attempt to sustain their industrial strategies and standards of living. Thus, I suggest that Midi Z’s reconstitution of New Cinema aesthetics in his first three features is a marker of this transition in the relationship of Myanmar and Taiwan to each other, and to capitalism in East and Southeast Asia more broadly.

Finally, I extend this analysis to the film industry itself. The legacy both of government policy, and of the New Cinema, means that Taiwan is a key regional node through which minor cinemas may access the global festival circuit. However, the transition towards a more neoliberal film policy and production environment has left the island both without globally recognisable art cinema directors, and with an unwillingness to invest in developing them. This
helps explain Zhao’s outsider/insider status in relation to the film industry, as well as his comparatively recent and rapid adoption by the Taiwanese state in its ongoing efforts to raise the island’s profile internationally. But it also suggests how the style and content of the trilogy can be read as symptomatic of these contemporary neoliberal production dynamics, which differ somewhat from those of the 1980s and 1990s. Whereas the political economy of the early Taiwan New Cinema was predicated on continued state support for filmmaking, if in conjunction with the private sector, this responsibility has now been largely transferred to the individual, facilitated by an emerging digital production ecology. The afterlife of the Taiwan New Cinema in Midi Z’s filmmaking thus alerts us to the complex interplay of geopolitical transitions and industrial transformations, mediated through emerging digital technology.

To begin, though, we must return to the director himself. Midi Z (variously transliterated as Kyawk Dad-Yin, Zhao Deyin, or Chao Te-Yin) is a Burmese director of Chinese ethnicity. Born in northeast Myanmar, in the city of Lashio, on the border with the People’s Republic of China (PRC), he moved to Taiwan to study on a government scholarship at the age of sixteen; as of 2011, he holds Republic of China nationality. Initially training as a designer, he began to make short films while still a university student, starting with his 2006 graduation short, Bai ge/Paloma Blanca. At time of writing, he has shot four features—Guilai de ren/Return to Burma (2011), Qiongren: liulian: mayao: touduke/Poor Folk (2012), Bingdu/Ice Poison (2014), and Zaijian Wacheng/The Road to Mandalay (2016)—two feature-length documentaries—Wa yushi de ren/Jade Miners (2015) and Feicui zhi cheng/City of Jade (2016)—and several more short films, including the recent installation piece Haishang huanggong/Palace on the Sea (2014).
The Homecoming Trilogy is the name sometimes given to Zhao’s first three feature films. Although the director suggests that this packaging was partly a post-facto marketing ploy by his producers, the description also reflects what critics recognise as their common characteristics. As Hong Kong critic Chang Wai-Hung notes, the three films use similar locations, similar characters, and address similar issues. All were shot using a digital SLR camera, and a barebones crew, in the wake of the former Burmese junta’s abrupt decision to hold countrywide elections in 2010. They are largely set in and around the Burmese border towns where Midi Z grew up, with excursions to larger cities, including Bangkok and (briefly) Taipei. The films usually feature Zhao’s childhood friend Wang Shin-hong as one of the male actors, assorted extras played by amateurs, and Taiwanese actress Wu Ke-hsi, the only professional performer, as the female lead. Linguistically, they shift between Mandarin, Burmese, Thai, and Yunnan Chinese. Thematically, the issue of labour dominates; most characters are either working abroad, have just finished, or are looking to do so. The films therefore explore the workings of the grey economy, touching on the drugs trade, sex work, and people smuggling.

Finally, all three films are stylistically consistent. Amateur actors and location shooting are supplemented with natural sound and lighting, although there is some extra-diegetic music; minimal use is made of post-production effects; scripting and directing are approached in an improvisatory manner, rather than carefully pre-planned; and, in the manner of much contemporary art cinema, the cinematography is based upon a long take-long shot aesthetic, often executed with little or no camera movement.

Given these qualities, it would seem obvious to describe the Homecoming Trilogy as an example of slow cinema. Slow cinema is the form of art cinema largely understood as characterised by (excessively) long takes, long shots, minimal camera movement, and a thematic focus on everyday existence and waiting. While the precise origin and scope of the

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term is unclear, it is a style associated with the Taiwanese New Cinema. Indeed, two of the primary New Cinema “auteurs”—Hou Hsiao-hsien and Tsai Ming-liang—are frequently classed as proponents. 10 Unsurprisingly, connections can be traced between Zhao, Hou, and Tsai. In the latter’s case, the parallels are biographical as well as aesthetic: like Zhao, Tsai is Southeast Asian Chinese (from Malaysia, rather than Burma), was educated in Taiwan, has worked consistently with particular non-professional male and professional female leads, and is famous for his highly stylised use of the long take. 11 The relationship with Hou is also more concrete. Midi Z trained with the director at his Golden Horse Film Academy workshop in Taipei, where they worked together on the production of Zhao’s short film Huaxin jie jishi/ Hua shin Incident (2009). 12 The latter acknowledges the influence of the former on the development of his working practices, in particular the aesthetic that I outlined above. Commenting on Hou’s impact on his own style, Midi Z states that

What I have learned from Hou is how to use the minimalist aesthetics to disguise the awkwardness of non-actor’s performance and allow them to improvise naturally. We did invent our own aesthetic style due to the limitations, but some of the skills are not original in my film. Long shots … [are] not a new aesthetic style, but … a good fit for the kind of realistic storytelling and narrative with a strong sense of real time passing. Even with a higher budget and a larger crew, for this story and the tone of film, I would still have chosen to shoot the film the same way. So the aesthetic style was a conscious choice as well as the result of limitations. 11

Here we have Zhao both acknowledging a debt to Hou, positioning his films in a manner that fits with the slow cinema paradigm, and acknowledging that his use of this aesthetic was not simply a question of limited resources, but also a self-conscious decision reflecting the kind of story he wanted to tell.
If Midi Z’s films display the influence of Hou and Tsai, however, they also exceed it. First, as Chang Wai-Hung notes, in certain ways Zhao’s cinematography is quite distinct. Interspersed between the classic slow cinema moments are hand-held tracking shots and angled close-ups, sequences during which both the camera and its subjects are frequently in motion, and which break with the more measured style of the Taiwan New Cinema directors.\textsuperscript{14} We can see this in \textit{Ice Poison}, in the sequence where the primary female character, Sanmei, first couriers drugs for her dealer. The camera, angled upwards beneath her face, tracks her closely through the market where the exchange of goods is to take place, brilliantly capturing a sense both of claustrophobia and of paranoia. We can also see it in the scene in \textit{Poor Folk} where Tingting, the younger sister of the male protagonist, tries to escape being sold across the Thai border. The camera runs after her and her traffickers as they pursue her, the handheld, jerky movement and poor focus conveying the atmosphere of the moment. These scenes suggest that Midi Z’s cinema is not simply one of slowness, but also one of movement.\textsuperscript{15} Second, while Hou and Tsai have sometimes been chary of articulating the meaning of their films, Zhao is quite open about the significance of his. Discussing \textit{Ice Poison}, for example, he explicitly rejects readings of the film as a critique of drug use. Instead, he says that it speaks to “the ideologies and symptoms of globalization … the film is actually an allegory of globalization”.\textsuperscript{16} It is this relationship between slowness, movement, and the issue of globalization that I now want to explore in some detail.

If each film in the Homecoming Trilogy is an allegory of globalization, questions arise as to what type of and whose globalization we are talking about, and how this allegory is constructed. Again, Zhao himself is quite clear: his films allegorize Burma’s experience of globalization, and, by extension, the poor and dispossessed everywhere—those losing out from a process that benefits only people at the top.\textsuperscript{17} He is also quite explicit about how his films can be read for this process. The final scene in \textit{Ice Poison}, for example, is a single long take, in
medium shot, of a cow being slaughtered. It takes place in the dark interior of what appears to be a butcher’s shop, clearly run by South Asians (possibly Rohingya or Burmese Indians), but this is neither a space nor characters that we have seen before. Although there is an oblique narrative logic to a scene that, on first viewing, is difficult to understand or place—the cows are apparently being slaughtered to pay off the debt incurred to provide Wang Shin-hong’s character with the motorbike that originally serves as his taxi, and then as the vehicle on which he delivers the “ice poison” of the film’s title—Zhao also positions it as a symbol of ordinary Burmese and their relationship to globalization: they are like lambs to the slaughter. But I would suggest that Midi Z’s films do more than just allegorize global processes. As has been suggested already, all his major male characters have sold their labour overseas—in Taipei, Kuala Lumpur, or Bangkok—or are looking to do so. All his female characters have themselves been trafficked overseas, usually to China, into marriage, or to Thailand, as sex workers. Alternatively, they are involved in this trafficking, such as Sanmei in Poor Folk, who ironically is also desperate to smuggle herself into Taiwan. Finally, most people are implicated in the drug trade, often selling crystal meth as a way to pay for their own border crossings, or those of others. Through these storylines Zhao’s films do not merely allegorize globalization. They also map the structure and dynamics of contemporary capitalism at a variety of different scales, through attention to the movement of people and commodities—often people as commodities—and the networks that they form.

I would therefore argue that Zhao’s films can be seen as variants of what Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle call contemporary “it narrative” cinema. Borrowing the term from the nineteenth-century literary form that follows a single object passed among multiple owners, Toscano and Kinkle update the concept for twenty first-century screen culture. They describe this cinema as one that “track[s] the production and distribution of particular commodities and the societies
they traverse”. While the it narrative can manifest in moving image work from art cinema to installation pieces, its most famous manifestation is in big budget Hollywood productions, such as Edward Zwick’s *Blood Diamond* (2006), Stephen Gaghan’s *Syriana* (2005) or Stephen Soderbergh’s *Traffic* (2000), which seek to map the their main characters’ relationships to their commodity of choice, be that guns, cocaine, or oil. In order to do so, these films deploy what Patrick Jagoda terms “network aesthetics”. These aesthetics are formal and narrative techniques used to visualize globally interconnected systems of all varieties. Consequently, they usually involve forms of complex, multilinear storytelling that bring geographically dispersed narratives together in time and space at the critical climax. Though not specifically connected to digital culture, one of the names originally coined for these films—“hyperlink cinema”—gestures clearly to the ways in which complex storytelling in video games, for example, is perceived to have impacted on them.

That Midi Z’s cinema looks little like Soderbergh’s *Traffic* should hardly be surprising. First, they rarely provide a complete perspective on the movements of the commodities they track. Instead, the picture we receive is at best partial, limited by the perspectives of his characters as they navigate these networks in person. Second, if big budget it narratives track global commodities through network aesthetics, they are also very much the product of similarly complex transnational networks of money, technology, and labour. In many ways their style reflects this. Toscano and Kinkle argue that such films focus on speed, often accelerating the representation of commodity production for dramatic effect. Similarly, Jagoda suggests they are stylistically characterised by rapid cutting as a way to link their multi-site storylines. Zhao’s cinema may be no less the product of networks, but as I have already implied, they are of a decidedly more low tech, low cost variety. Zhao estimates that the total cost of his first two films came in at around 30,000 US dollars. *Return to Burma* and *Poor Folk* were made
on a crew of three and four respectively;\textsuperscript{27} Ice Poison expanded this to seven;\textsuperscript{28} all of them, as already noted, rely overwhelmingly on amateur performers, most of whom were Midi Z’s friends, neighbours, and relatives when growing up. This was partly a result of circumstance: since Zhao worked without government approval, all the films were shot guerrilla-style, and were difficult to finance.\textsuperscript{29} Return to Burma was originally intended to be a much more ambitious feature, but no Taiwanese investor would touch it. Even the talent agency that initially supported the film pulled its key actor out at the last minute because they were worried about shooting on location in Lashio. Eventually a newly formed Burmese production company paid for the three-man crew’s airfare, but that was all the direct investment they got; Zhao made up the difference himself.\textsuperscript{10} It is partly for these reasons that Song Hwee Lim argues the films are an example of poor cinema.\textsuperscript{31} But what is also critical here is the availability of cheap, commercial quality, lightweight digital video technology. If we understand the Homecoming Trilogy as the product of low costs networks linking people, money, and places, then the DSL camera is a critical node in this assemblage. Without it, it would have been very hard, if not impossible, to make these films—certainly in the form that they now appear for us. So if digital culture shapes the form of the contemporary Hollywood it narrative, the possibilities and limitations of mass digital camera technology play a key role in Midi Z’s variant on this genre.

What I am proposing is that we can usefully understand the Homecoming Trilogy as part of an ongoing attempt to configure a digital cinema of globalization from below. Here, I am using the term globalization from below to suggest a quotidian, bottom-up perspective on the global economy as experienced by the majority of the world’s population, particularly those outside the so-called developed world. While the first scholars to coin this term associated it primarily with grassroots social movements formed to resist multinational organizations such as the WTO, more recently the phrase has also come to encompass what Gordon Mathews calls “low-
end globalization”: the movement of people and goods through informal networks that connect places, usually outside Europe and North America, that are often understood as peripheral to globalization proper. At the same time, the emphasis on bottom-up experience is not lost, for, as T. Thu Huynh notes, “this ‘from below’ view is a productive analytical framework that … shifts the focus of globalization towards ordinary citizens, away from corporations and multilateral institutions”. A digital cinema of globalization from below is therefore one that seeks to capture this perspective and experience cinematically, through mass-market digital technology.

Such filmmaking is hardly unique to East or Southeast Asia: arguably the trilogy is a classic example of what Vincente Rodríguez Ortega terms the “digital fictoreal”, a form of low budget, digi-tech, neorealist filmmaking that blurs the boundary between documentary and fiction, and which is a phenomenon with a global reach. Yet so capacious a term leaves room for a more focused analysis that reflects on both the immediate material conditions from which particular films emerge, and the specific uses to which they put the digital. As such, I think it worth considering these films more closely, and in relation to their reworking of the it narrative’s network aesthetics to reflect working class migrant experience. As I have hinted, this adaptation partly involves developing stories that gesture to wider networks while deliberately limiting our ability to visualise them. But it is also about working through the possibilities and limitations of digital technology using film form—in other words, how one can convey a network aesthetic through cinematography and editing, not just through story. I think this latter point illuminates why Midi Z’s style both draws on, and departs from, that of the Taiwan New Cinema. I want to suggest that, whether narratively or audio-visually, the moments when the films depart from the long take, long shot style are intimately connected to Zhao’s exploration of the “disjunctures” of global flows, and their limits for the Burmese migrants who are the
director’s protagonists. They are, in effect, how Midi Z renders complex networks of goods and people, and the boundaries of such networks, audible and visible to the cinema audience—as I would now like to consider directly.

Narratively, network aesthetics can be understood as an attempt to map the totality of a complex social field. Even if networks themselves are ultimately impossible to totally visualise in their entirety, a networked narrative will usually try and do just that. This is partly because they assume a complex causality in which any element, at any scale, may contribute to a narrative outcome. William Brown points out that this is the logic of much contemporary, commercial digital cinema. But it is not the logic of the Homecoming Trilogy. Here, although various characters speak of their experiences working overseas in Taiwan; of their family member’s experiences of the same; or, in the case of young people, of their desire to work in Taipei or Kuala Lumpur; we actually only see Taipei once in any of the films, very briefly, at the very beginning of Return to Burma. In practice, the films are primarily situated in the porous area between Shan state, northern Thailand, and the Yunnan border. Bangkok and Mandalay also appear, momentarily. This is clearly a response to the limitations of guerrilla filmmaking, both in relation to budget and to visibility. But, structurally, it also indicates the material limits of this global network for Zhao’s characters, the ways in which they are largely unable to access this wider social field, despite being distantly connected to it. Taiwan in particular may occupy a privileged position in the ideoscape of the film’s protagonists, but for most, these desires will remain limited to what Midi Z calls their “Taiwan dream” (Taiwan meng): a desire to achieve the good life through overseas labour that can never practically be realised.
Zhao makes this clearest in a scene from *Return to Burma* in which the main character’s younger brother, played by Wang Shin-hong’s actual younger brother, sit around with his friends, smoking and playing the guitar. The scene is shot very simply in a single three-and-a-half minute take, with a static camera positioned in medium shot. The boys sit indoors, arranged in a semi-circle on the floor of someone’s house. Initially, they listen while Shin-hong’s brother plays a Taiwanese pop song on his guitar; one hums along, another smokes. The brother stops singing, but continues to play, and a conversation ensues. One friend complements him on his singing, and says they should all go to Malaysia to be singers. It emerges that Shin-hong’s brother is waiting for his passport. They discuss the fact that Shin-hong has just returned from Taipei, but are unclear where that is, and whether it is the same as Taiwan (“Taipei is close to China, Taiwan is close to Japan”, says Shin-hong’s brother, who maintains they are completely different). Conversation then turns to a mutual friend who paid to go to America and work in McDonald’s. Shin-hong’s brother says if he had the money he would rather go to Europe, to France or Germany. Here, we cut to the beginning of the next scene, with the guitar music acting as a sound bridge.

This sequence scales Kuala Lumpur and Taipei as sites of regional opportunity in relation to the US and Europe. At the same time, it suggests how ephemeral this dream is practically, given that the boys do not even know the difference between Taipei and Taiwan. Indeed, this is probably part of the attraction: characters in the films who have been to Taipei, or have family members employed there, describe the work as hard and dangerous, suggesting that no-one would be doing it if there were opportunities available in Burma. Second, the sequence articulates the conditions under which these boys can enter such networks, at whatever scale. It is not as musicians; it is as unskilled labourers, either on building sites (like Shin-hong himself) or in fast food outlets. Critically, though, the scene also underlines the barriers to their legal
entry. The main character’s brother is waiting for his passport, a document that may or may never come—we do not know. This sense of delay is in direct contrast to the speed which Toscano and Kinkle associate with mainstream it narratives. The sensation of waiting is further conveyed by the use of the long take, combined with minimal movement, in classic slow cinema or Taiwan New Cinema style. Neither the boys or the camera move for the entirety of the sequence. Here, structural limits to the boys’ ambitions emerge naturally through dialogue, while Midi Z captures those limits stylishly. Aesthetically, the long take therefore becomes a way to represent disjunctures in global labour networks: logistical and infrastructural blockages that are legally insuperable for most of the characters in Zhao’s films.

Logically, I want to then suggest that it is through moving takes that these films show what networks their characters traverse, and how they do so. In terms of film technique, these moments demonstrate effective manipulation of the mass-market digital camera. Through utilizing extreme close-ups, odd angles, and handheld tracking shots—precisely those techniques that Chang Wai-Hung argues distinguish Midi Z’s style from that of Hou Hsiao-hsien—these sequences exploit the manoeuvrability of lightweight DV technology, or what Paola Voci has termed digital’s “lightness”. Take the scene in Poor Folk that I raised earlier, part of the journey in which the girl Tingting, who turns out to be the youngest sister of the main characters, crosses the border from Burma into Thailand, there to be sold on into domestic servitude. This sequence starts with a long take, in medium shot, of a small group of men and women, avoiding the sun under a makeshift shelter, while another of Tingting’s brothers talks to her about the importance of behaving appropriately in Bangkok. The camera moves slightly, but remains at a distance, allowing us a better view of Tingting climbing on the back of a motorbike, sandwiched between Sanmei and her friend, and being driven off into the distance. Then it cuts: we have a close-up of the motorbike as it drives past, crossing left to
right, as the camera moves slightly to accommodate it in frame. We hear Tingting insist that she needs the toilet. Then we cut to a medium shot, with the bike driving slowly towards the camera, stopping outside a small outhouse. The camera settles on a slightly unsteady medium shot of the motorbike as Tingting climbs off and disappears, presumably to the toilet. The women wait. Suddenly one calls out “Tingting”. The camera pans rapidly to the left, and we see the girl running along the hilly ground behind the hut: “She ran away”, says one of the women. And then they are both off in pursuit, followed by the camera, which tracks them jerkily as Midi Z in his role as cinematographer runs with them. Oddly angled and difficult to follow, with the handheld camerawork disorientating the viewer in relation to the image, this single two-minute take is, nonetheless, powerfully kinetic, most effectively capturing the panic felt by Tingting at the thought of being transported across the border, and by her minders at the thought of losing her.

This sequence, and others in the trilogy like it, can be seen as part of a network aesthetic because they actually connect different narrative locations. Rather than simply cutting between Bangkok and northern Thailand, or Mandalay, Lashio, and the countryside, Zhao follows his characters as they travel between these spaces. In doing so, he maps their journeys between different nodes on a network that is local, national, and sometimes even transnational in reach. The latter is at least true of the border between Thailand, Burma, and Yunnan, where state lines are represented as comparatively easy to cross. This is partly why bus stations recur as locations within the trilogy. But, equally importantly, most of these journeys also trace the routes that various commodities travel through these networks. Such merchandise might be crystal meth, couriered from Bangkok by Shin-hong and his brother in Poor Folk; they might be people, as with Tingting trafficked across the Thai-Burmese border in the sequence outlined above; or they might be both, as with Shin-Hong’s transition from motorcycle taxi driver to
drugs courier in *Ice Poison*. But in either case, the aim of both activities is often to further expedite the illegal circulation of those doing the dealing. In *Poor Folk*, for example, Sanmei smuggles girls because she wants fake papers to enter Taiwan to work. Denied legal access to these regional networks, Zhao’s characters have no choices but to deal in illegal commodities in order, in turn, to commodify themselves.

Given this is the case, I would suggest that close-ups, angled shots, and tracking shots of characters might formally hint at this process of commodification, whether of self or other, articulating film form to content. These techniques often occur at key narrative moments involving the circulation or consumption of drugs or children; as such they help intensify the drama of the moment. In the process, however, they often focus on one or two characters. One could argue that this is an aid to empathetic identification, the humanization of these stories. But at the same time, visually, such techniques temporarily isolate these individuals from their context. Unlike in a static long shot, a moving shot gives us less chance to position characters in relation to the rest of the mise-en-scène; the same is true of the sound in some of these sequences. In consequence, just as the films’ protagonists are forcefully dislocated from their family and friends when crossing borders illegally, or as they are absorbed into the drugs trade, so they are removed from their immediate context within the cinematic frame while facilitating this process, narratively, whether in a direct or indirect fashion.

While Tingting’s crossing provides one example of this technique, I would like to discuss two more to underscore my point. Both are from *Ice Poison*. The first I have previously alluded to: it is the sequence in which Sanmei conducts her first drugs drop, carrying the product from motorcycle to client through a crowded market in Lashio. As established earlier in the film, Wu Ke-hsi’s character has been sold into marriage across the Chinese border, against her own will.
Allowed to return to her hometown only because her grandfather is dying, her husband and his family have insisted she leave her child behind as collateral. Her decision to join her cousin in the drugs business is thus driven by a desire to make money quickly, so that she can find a way to reunite with her son, and escape her husband. The marketplace scene is the first in which we see her direct involvement in the drugs trade. Shot in a single take that is almost one and a half minutes long, the sequence starts with the camera focused on a roadside scene, with Wu Ke-hsi and Wang Shin-hong then drawing up to the curb on their motorcycle. Wu dismounts, removing her backpack and taking out a much smaller bag in which the drugs have been concealed. The camera moves to focus on her hands as she fumbles with the bag, and then tracks up and back slightly, so that we are focused on her face in close up, but from below. From this angle, Wu’s head and shoulders fill the screen. As she begins to move through the market, the camera tracks her from this position, always staying slightly ahead. In consequence, although the sounds of human activity fill the soundtrack, the combination of angle and tracking shot crops out everything but the sky, the glare of the sun, and the tops of market stalls. As Wu approaches the drop point, the camera falls back slightly, pivoting to track her from behind as she hands the drugs over to her customer.

The second sequence occurs almost at the end of the film. Wu and Wang have driven out to the edge of the city to smoke crystal meth. A long take, in medium shot, captures them sitting at the top of a small hill, facing the camera, while each takes turns at cooking and inhaling the drug. First one, then the other, lies down. After she has done so, Wu starts to wordlessly hum a Taiwanese pop song. Suddenly the camera cuts; clearly now attached to the front of a small vehicle, is moving down one of the empty back roads that we have seen on many occasions in the film. Sanmei’s singing continues, however, acting as a vocal bridge, but also overwhelming the sound of the vehicle’s motor, which can only be heard faintly. Once more, the camera cuts.
This time, the camera is once again angled upwards, from the front of what is clearly a motorbike. In close up, we see Wang and Wu travelling at speed, him driving, her on pillion; again, the background is largely obscured by their heads and shoulders, and by the movement of the camera, both along the road with the motorbike, and up and down, responding to the uneven surface of the highway. Sanemi’s voice continues on the soundtrack, humming the song on repeat, but slower and slower, as if she is gradually falling asleep—or unconscious.

Both sequences exploit sound and image in ways that intertwine form, narrative, and questions of circulation and commodification. In the first example, the effective cropping of the background not only conveys a strong feeling of isolation and fear—clearly, Sanmei is wary of being caught, and Wu’s facial expressions convey this most effectively—but also emphasizes the movement of both character and camera. While this combination of angle and movement suggests the illicit nature of guerrilla filmmaking as a practice, it also highlights Sanmei’s role in the circulation of drugs through the Burmese grey economy. In addition, it hints at her own commodity status in that same economy—a purchased bride, sold illicitly across borders—as well as her desire, through dealing “ice poison”, to re-enter that transnational flow of bodies in order to recue her son and bring him home—or to have someone do this for her. The camera thus captures the character’s contradictory status as both a victim of trafficking, and, at this very moment, its agent. In the second sequence, sound builds on image to emphasize how Wang and Wu are literally enveloped in their own world, disconnected from their surroundings both visually and aurally. As both consumers and dealers of the drug, they have become even more closely integrated into the circulation of “ice poison”, even as the consequence of this integration into the commodity chain is extremely socially disruptive. This is made clear by the film’s ending, which follows on immediately after this scene. Wu is captured by the police, and will clearly be separated from her family both in Lashio and in
China; Wang in turn pushes his family further into economic precarity, burning their fields in a moment drug-induced paranoia, thus forcing the slaughter of their cattle to pay off the debt owed on his motorcycle. The use of cinematography and sound in the motorcycle sequence both projects us forward to what happens next, even as the apparently innocent happiness that it captures “in the moment” contrasts very directly with what comes after. Again, form and narrative intertwine, with the moving close-up “translating” audio-visually these moments of commodification, circulation, and social dislocation.

To sum up thus far, I am suggesting that we can see the Homecoming Trilogy as a variant of the commodity narrative: one that seeks to map globalization from below, rather than above, and with a focus on regional connections inside Asia, rather than inter-continental networks. Midi Z is able to do this partly, though not exclusively, because of the emergence of particular forms of digital hardware. Both ideological and practical factors thus shape the way in which the trilogy mediates this narrative through a form of network aesthetics. Narratively, the emphasis is on partiality rather than totality. Cinematographically, we see a shift between movement and stasis. The former maps the network through which commodities move; the latter pinpoints places where such circulation fails. Ultimately, this may help clarify why Zhao’s three films both borrow and depart from slow cinema, a style associated with key Taiwan New Cinema auteurs such as Hou Hsiao-hsien, his mentor, and with Tsai Ming-Liang, another point of critical reference.

What is the significance of these claims? Clearly, the global rise of a low budget digital production culture is not explanation enough. Although the digital camera has facilitated the exchange of images, “enabling transnational filmmaking to take place at an unprecedented level”, the question remains as to which specific border crossings are taking place in such
filmmaking, and why. While the flexibility of such cameras may explain certain elements of Midi Z’s style, the spread of digital technology alone cannot explain his deterritorialization of a Taiwan New Cinema aesthetic, and his subsequent reterritorialization of this adapted form in Myanmar specifically. What is the relationship between this spatial shift and what I am identifying as Zhao’s reconstitution of New Cinema aesthetics in the service of mapping globalization from below? To answer this question, I think we must consider the cinematic politics of new waves, the geopolitical and geocultural status of post-dictatorship Myanmar, and the relationship of Taiwan to Southeast Asia more broadly.

Although Midi Z’s genealogy of formal influence can be partly traced through his contact with Taiwan New Cinema, and Hou Hsiao-hsien in particular, it is important to note that the New Cinema style is not exclusive to Taiwanese art film. As James Tweedie argues in *The Age of New Waves*, what he understands as new wave aesthetics—a combination of location shooting and an emphasis on mise-en-scène, “a phenomenon of bodies, objects, and space recorded with the incomparable precision of the camera”—emerges first in France, in the wake of the Marshall Plan, before expanding outwards on the back of Euro-American capital, industrialization, and the growth of youth-oriented consumer societies round the world. The almost simultaneous appearance of new waves in Taiwan and the PRC is therefore both a result of, and a response to, “Taiwan’s incorporation into a global market in the 1980 and China’s attempts to ‘link tracks’ (*jiegui*) with the world during its era of Reform and Opening.” This is why Tweedie terms the logic of new wave cinemas “the representation of globalization from the frontiers of an emerging world market in images”, a description that nicely captures Zhao’s preoccupation with depicting the underside of globalization.
The re-articulation of a hybrid new wave aesthetic in Midi Z’s early films arguably signals a similar dynamic occurring in Myanmar post-democratization. Certainly, the country’s situation has become something of a geopolitical battleground between China and the United States since 2011. But the Homecoming Trilogy itself alerts us to the particular ways in which such processes of integration play out on the ground. In the case of Myanmar, the films seem to suggest the emergence of regional rather than global markets as the primary vehicle through which the country is reintegrated into the contemporary capitalist system. For the protagonists of the trilogy, Bangkok may present the most likely possibility for a job overseas, with Kuala Lumpur as the next step up, but it is Taipei that seems to occupy the privileged position in their ideoscape—hence the “Taiwan dream”. Zhao’s use of mostly amateur actors further underlines the reality of these labour relationships for Burmese, since all three films include characters who have worked, or work, in Taiwan—or who have close family members working there—and who discuss their experiences on screen, as previously noted. Tweedie makes the point that location shooting and the long take allow for the capture of ways of life threatened by modernization and urbanization. In this instance, non-professional casting enables a similar collapse of the documentary-fictional divide, bringing to the fore other consequences for the Burmese of the post-dictatorship transition. The initial step of the country’s assimilation into world markets is actually integration into a regional market where it provides labour for its more immediately developed neighbours, and where Southeast Asia as a whole provides labour for East Asian markets, Taiwan included. In turn, Myanmar provides potential outlets for East Asian capital.

This dynamic speaks directly to the broadly unequal relationship of East and Southeast Asia since the late twentieth century, and the manner in which this inequality is built into the regional economy. Of course, trade connections between East and Southeast Asia have a long
history. However, the roots of this contemporary relationship lie in East Asia’s rapid industrialization during the Cold War, and the challenge of the post-1989 transition. While North America and Western Europe were key destinations for the goods produced by the export-driven development of Japan and the four so-called Asian Tigers (Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea)—the engine driving East Asia’s incorporation into Tweedie’s global market—Southeast Asian labour was increasingly central to this process. Initially, such centrality manifested in the outsourcing of manufacturing. In the 1970s, Japan had already begun to shift the assembly of electronics made for the North American market to Malaysia and Singapore. This accelerated following the 1985 Plaza Accord, which resulted in a sharp depreciation of the dollar against the yen, the won, and the New Taiwanese dollar. In this context, outsourcing to Southeast Asia, where low-wage labour was plentiful and government policies amenable, was a way of ensuring the Asian Tigers could maintain international competitiveness, and their companies’ profit margins. Vietnam in particular has proven a popular destination for Japanese, South Korean, and Taiwanese firms, which from the 1990s onwards began using the country as a manufacturing to assemble goods for export within regional networks, and then, increasingly, through global production chains. But, alongside this movement of capital, we can also trace a reverse movement of people. Facing the multiple challenges of aging societies, falling birth rates, and a white-collar population reluctant to take on blue collar and agricultural work, from the 1990s onwards governments across East Asia gradually liberalized their labour regimes. This allowed them to turn to immigrant workers to fill these labour shortages. In Japan, the number of foreign residents doubled between the early 1990s and 2008, to 1.6% of the total population. Taiwan, which adopted a formal policy of labour importation in the early 1990s, also saw increases over the same period to 1.6%. Even in South Korea, which resisted such a policy turn the longest, this figure stood at 1.4% by the late 2000s. While the composition of these migrant communities varied from country to
country, a significant proportion of those in temporary labour, care work, and manual work of all kinds were from Southeast Asia.\(^{52}\)

In Taiwan, this economic imperative melded with the island’s complex political relationship with China to produce what is known as the “Go South Policy”. First initiated in 1994 by then-President Lee Teng-hui, the policy aimed to balance Taiwan’s increasing economic entanglement with the PRC by encouraging local companies to invest in Southeast Asia. In fact, as Chen Kuan-hsing notes, capital on the island had already begun to anticipate this strategy in the late 1980s, attracted by the low cost of labour in the region, and facilitated by the emergence of Taiwanese industrial development zones in Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines.\(^{53}\) While the policy has waxed and waned over the years, shaped not least by shifts in the relationship between Taiwan and the mainland, it has remained a staple in times of diplomatic adversity.\(^{54}\) In September 2016, for example, the recently-elected DPP government of Tsai Ing-wen, anticipating increased hostility from across the strait, announced a “New Southbound Policy”, intended once again to direct business away from the PRC and towards Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the South Pacific.\(^{55}\) This included the establishment for the first time of a Taiwan business desk in Yangon’s Taipei Representative Office, with the specific aim of supporting Taiwanese firms investing in and trading with Myanmar.\(^{56}\) But a critical corollary to the encouragement of investment overseas has been the opening up of the Taiwanese labour market to migrant labourers. Although in practice the private sector had been employing undocumented low-skill labour from Southeast Asia since the mid-1980s, the 1992 Employment Service Act legalized the hiring of foreign blue-collar workers.\(^{57}\) In consequence, according to government statistics, between 1995 and 2015, the number of legal migrant workers in Taiwan tripled.\(^{58}\) The vast majority of these were from Southeast Asia, primarily Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Thailand; all were employed in agricultural work,
manufacturing, social care, and the fishing industry. Increasingly, Taiwanese society has become dependent on Southeast Asian labour to do the kinds of low income, hard labour jobs that Taiwanese themselves would rather avoid.

If we are to map the geopolitics of the Homecoming Trilogy—to try and interpret the significance both of its form and content—it needs to be against this backdrop. No longer is Taiwan a periphery from which globalization can be watched, or a frontier where its local impact can be traced. Instead, it is a key agent in the regionalization of these developments. Its relationship with Southeast Asia is thus unequal: Chen describes it forcefully as one of “subempire”, or neo-colonial exploitation. Myanmar, isolated for many years, now appears to be being drawn into its orbit. This is precisely the dynamic that the trilogy captures. Zhao’s characters and their stories lay out this relationship narratively, outlining, if indirectly, the effect of Taiwanese capital and policymaking on Burmese economy and society. At the same time, the trilogy’s adaptation of new wave cinematographic practices is a formal symptom of this dependence: a marker both of the similar historical relationship between 1980s Taiwan, twenty-first century Myanmar, and global capital, and of their significant contemporary differences. Zhao’s films are thus commentaries on a rapidly intensifying economic and political dynamic, the effects of which manifest formally and thematically. But I would argue that his films are also the product of this dynamic as it plays out across the Taiwanese film industry. This is the final issue that I want to consider.

For Tweedie, the politics of new waves is not just about the globalization of capital, but also the globalization of cinema. In particular, it is about the growth of art film as an international phenomenon. New wave cinemas may start as local responses to globalization, but as the films “enter the global network of art cinema”, so they move from being a local product to speaking
to a global audience.\textsuperscript{61} This is partly enabled by their style and subject matter: a realism that captures local experience, even as it also speaks to audiences beyond that locality.\textsuperscript{62} But, it is also about the entrance of these films into the international film festival network that consolidated itself after World War Two as an alternative to Hollywood’s dominance of overseas film markets. These festivals are what made art cinema a recognisably phenomenon worldwide; they were, in effect, the global network of art cinema.\textsuperscript{61} The rise of new waves cannot therefore just be a question of film style; it is also one concerning the mechanisms through which these films, and the people associated with them, become global commodities.

I would argue that, just as the style and content of the Homecoming Trilogy point to the development of regional labour and capital markets centred round East Asia and Taiwan, so does the history of the trilogy’s production and circulation speak to the position of Taiwan as a particular node in the production network of art cinema across East and Southeast Asia. Indeed, it highlights the island’s role as a conduit through which certain “minor” regional cinemas can access global cinema circuits. Structurally, this centring of Taiwan as a node in a regional network is hardly accidental. Zhao came to Taiwan as a university student, a beneficiary of longstanding government policies encouraging overseas ethnic Chinese to study on the island.\textsuperscript{64} Since this effectively kick-started his filmmaking career, facilitating his entrance to the Golden Horse Film Academy workshops, and establishing his connections with Hou Hsiao-hsien, we can see how these policies help generate a network of Sinophone artists across the region that is focused on Taipei, while also allowing for the intergenerational transmission, in this example, of Taiwan New Cinema practices.\textsuperscript{64} In turn, Taiwan has remained Zhao’s primary base, but also his point of global departure. This is most obviously demonstrated by the MoC’s decision to select \textit{Ice Poison} as Taiwan’s Oscar submission, but also by the increasingly international trajectory of Zhao’s career since. \textit{The Road to Mandalay}, his fourth feature, was selected for
the Cannes co-production platform, L’Atelier; made through a French, German, Taiwanese, and Burmese co-production structure; features a soundtrack by Hou collaborator Lim Giong, and editing by Matthieu Laclau, Jia Zhangke’s editor; and premiered at Venice. It is clearly the product of the kind of global art cinema culture Tweedie associates with cinema’s various new waves.

But if Zhao’s early and more recent trajectory are characterised by various forms of state assistance, the actual production of the Homecoming Trilogy was not. The extremely low budget production, as discussed earlier, reflects this lack of support. No Taiwanese government money was invested; despite some private third party backing, Midi Z shouldered much of the financial risk himself, just as he shouldered the political risk of shooting them illicitly, without permission, in Myanmar. It was Zhao who had to hurriedly raise additional funds from Taiwan when he decided to extend Ice Poison from a short to a feature while shooting on location; it was also Zhao who bribed officials and soldiers in Myanmar to allow him to continue filming without a permit. This individual responsibility for structural risk arguably defines the trilogy’s production process. Such neoliberal personalization contrasts with the emergence of the Taiwan New Cinema, which resulted from conscious initiatives—the “Newcomer Policy” (xinren zhengce) and the “Low Capital, High Production (xiao chengben, jing zhizuo) Policy”—both to diversify production and to spread its risk between the state and the private sector. Consequently, the early stages of the new wave in particular involved considerable government intervention. In contrast, it was only really after Midi Z’s films gained traction at international film festivals that the Taiwanese government stepped in to alleviate these hazards, at least financially. The selection of Ice Poison as the island’s Oscar nomination brought with it NTD 1.5 million (USD 50,000) in government funds to promote the film, the first direct state support for the trilogy that I have been able to identify; this came in the wake of the film’s
premiere in Berlin, and its winning best feature at the Edinburgh International Film Festival. If the age of new waves is “a period when cultural and economic innovation is relocated from nation to the market and the world at large”, it seems fair to note that, with the Homecoming Trilogy, the risks of production were initially relocated from nation and market to individual, before a modicum of world support persuaded the former in particular that said risks were worth the return. In this sense, the Taiwanese state’s somewhat belated support for Midi Z mirrors its delayed adoption of “Go South” as an official policy, in that it is following in the wake of an already identifiable trend that has clearly come to serve a particular purpose.

The particular purpose here, I would suggest, is to try and raise the profile of Taiwanese cinema overseas through a revitalised association with art film. The late 1980s and the 1990s were the heyday of Taiwanese film internationally. This was not entirely coincidental. One of the external triggers to the “Newcomer Policy” was Taiwan’s failure to win any awards at the 1982 Asia-Pacific Film Festival, held in Kuala Lumpur. From the mid-1980s onwards, the government therefore began targeting the emerging New Cinema films at what James Udden calls “upper mid-rank festivals”. In 1987, *Kongbu fenzi/Terrorizers* (dir. Edward Yang, 1986) won the Silver Leopard at Locarno, while *Tongnian wangshi/A Time to Live and A Time to Die* (dir. Hou Hsiao-hsien, 1985) won a prize at Rotterdam. But, in 1989, Hou Hsiao-hsien’s Golden Lion for *Beiqing chengshi/City of Sadness* (1989) at Venice, the first time a Taiwanese film had won a major award at one of the key three European film festivals. Further works by Hou, Ang Lee, Edward Yang, and Tsai Ming-liang were awarded major prizes at Venice, Berlin, and Cannes across the following decade. This was the peak of Taiwan’s association with art cinema globally.
While Tsai and Hou continued to win awards more sporadically in the 2000s and beyond, however, Taiwanese cinema’s visibility in general suffered internationally during this period. This reflected competition from Hong Kong and PRC filmmakers on the festival circuit, the collapse of the local market following the reduction of quotas for foreign film imports across the 1990s, and the gradual falling away of established names—although Hou is still working, Yang is dead, Tsai has now moved to the gallery, and Lee is more strongly associated with Hollywood. It also reflected changing government priorities. In 2003, in an attempt to counter Hollywood’s almost complete domination of the local box office, the Government Information Office (GIO) announced it would be changing its film funding policies to focus not just on art film, but also on commercial genre productions and overseas co-productions.\textsuperscript{74} While the late 2000s saw a consequent revival in local productions in local cinemas—the unexpected success of Wei Te-sheng’s \textit{Haijiao qi hao/Cape No. 7} (2008) is usually seen as a watershed—these works were largely popular genre films that sought to re-engage questions of local history, language, and identity.\textsuperscript{75} As such, they had much more limited overseas appeal, both to audiences and to festival programmers, than had the films of Hou, Yang, and Tsai.\textsuperscript{76} Against a background of such uncertainty, capitalising on an unexpected festival success fulfils both a desire to promote Taiwanese soft power overseas through an internationally legible form of cinema long associated with the island, and an unwillingness to take investment risks on unproven art house talent at the expense of locally popular genre film.\textsuperscript{77} Yet, such a reterritorialization of Zhao’s cinema also suggests an effort to extract maximum cultural capital from minimum capital investment in a climate slightly different from the late twentieth century, when Taiwan’s cinematic reputation on the global stage peaked.

This story is hardly new: in many ways it is the standard narrative of low-budget digital filmmaking, though with a transnational twist. While the low cost of digital production
technically lowers the bar for entry into the industry, it also allows the professions to transfer the risks for entry onto individuals, before moving in and picking the winners—a dynamic that is arguably one of the defining features of film production in the era of neoliberal capital. But, as a result, it is hard not to see parallels between Zhao’s early relationship with the Taiwanese film industry, and the position of his characters vis-à-vis the Taiwanese economy. In both cases, labour risks—the financial and political costs of film production, the risks of manual and blue-collar work—are forced onto the immigrant. In both instances, the Taiwanese state then steps in to reap some reward, though thankfully at less cost to the real-life individual here than in the films themselves. Midi Z has frequently compared himself to his characters, primarily based on shared local histories and immigrant trajectories. In particular, he has talked of his initial reasons for moving to Taiwan as being financially, rather than educationally, motivated, and how as soon as he arrived he started working on a construction site, in order to send money home.78 Perhaps, however, there are other less obvious forms of labour that such comparisons unconsciously mirror, and which allow us to read the poverty of Zhao’s production methods, the Homecoming Trilogy’s narrative, and its formal characteristics, as products both of the pressures of guerrilla filmmaking in Myanmar, and of neoliberal filmmaking in contemporary Taiwan.

In conclusion: if Midi Z’s borrowing of, and departure from, Taiwan New Cinema aesthetics in the Homecoming Trilogy speaks to Myanmar’s entry into global capital via regional markets dominated by East Asia, one can make a case that these aesthetics reflect a similar dynamic in the networks underpinning the production art cinema. At the same time, the adaptation of this style also reflects the ways in which film production has changed since the 1980s and 1990s, in ways increasingly in line with neoliberal governance more broadly. The modified Taiwan New Cinema aesthetic of the Homecoming Trilogy, enabled by digital hardware, is clearly Midi Z’s
response to his subjects’ struggles with border crossing and labour networks between Southeast and East Asia. But it is also the product of state-sponsored networks and organizations that serve, in part, to consolidate Taiwan’s cultural and political capital across the Sinophone world through training and education. The deterritorialization, and consequent hybridization of, this aesthetic in turn reflects the state’s withdrawal from art film production, and its transfer of the hazards of film production to the private individual; this is both underpinned by the logic of contemporary neoliberalism, but also facilitated by the emergence of low-cost digital production technologies. Only when the rewards from such risks seemed apparent did the government then step in, attempting to reclaim Zhao’s cinema as the first step in a plan, it would seem, to raise the profile of both Midi Z and Taiwanese art film abroad. That this comes at a time when there is no obvious heir to Hou Hsiao-hsien or Tsai Ming-liang on the horizon should come as no surprise.

What this case study suggests, I hope, is how the study of particular media forms across and between different zones of Asia can help us understand the dynamics and frictions of regional integration. My point of departure for this article was the movement of the Taiwan New Cinema aesthetic across borders, and its hybridization in Midi Z’s early digital cinema. The afterlife of this style opens up further questions about markets and industry connections between Taiwan and Myanmar, connections that complicate discrete understandings of regional distinctions within the Asia Pacific. However, as I have also tried to indicate, the emergence of these intra-regional networks should not distract from internal inequalities and power imbalances between different nodes or actors in such networks, nor, indeed, from the relationship between these networks and processes occurring at a global scale. Instead, the Homecoming Trilogy provides a window onto how these disparities are being constantly made,
remade, and negotiated, by those who are an intimate part of these processes, and how, in turn, this manifests on screen.


5 The term “Taiwan New Cinema” is a direct translation of the Chinese term for this group of films and filmmakers (Taiwan xin dianying), but western critics initially described it as the Taiwan New Wave. As Chris Berry and Feii Lu note, critics in Taiwan treat the New Cinema as a phenomenon strictly limited to the period 1982 to 1987. However, since the most established of the New Cinema filmmakers were still making films during the 1990s and 2000s, western critics have continued to label these works somewhat loosely as Taiwan New Wave films. See Chris Berry and Feii Lu, “Introduction”, in (eds.), Island on the Edge: Taiwan New Cinema and After (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), p,7. Following Berry and Lu, I will use “Taiwan New Cinema” to refer to films made by these directors across this entire period. However, the question of new waves, and new wave aesthetics, is also central to my argument, and so these terms will also appear at various points in this article.


7 Chang, Bryan Wai-Hung, “Huilai, xian likai” [Home coming is made possible first by departure], Hong Kong Indie Film Festival Catalogue 2015 (Hong Kong: Ying Yi Chi, 2015), p.3.

8 Return to Burma was made immediately following the election announcement, with Zhao flying from Taipei to Lashio accompanied only by his line-producer cum leading actor and a sound engineer. Poor Folk and Ice Poison were made on subsequent trips to the region, with Ice Poison based around a short film called Anlaoyi/Burial Clothes. The latter was originally commissioned for a programme called Yuanxiang yu lisan/Homeland and Diaspora (2013) by Phoenix TV in Hong Kong, and then released as part of the omnibus feature Nanfang lai xin/Letters from the South (2013), by Malaysia’s Da Huang Pictures. Zhao decided to expand the short to a full-length feature only after the shoot had actually started, staying on to shoot extra material for what would become Ice Poison. See Zhao, Ju. lisan. Bingdu, p.34.

9 Song Hwec Lim, Tsai Ming-liang and a Cinema of Slowness (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2014), pp.2-3.

10 In their introduction to their collection on slow cinema, for example, Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge emphasize the broad capacity of the term, arguing that “slow cinema can
be seen as an unstructured film movement made up of disparate films and practices that are conceptualised as a grouping thanks to their comparable style”. In this sense, “slow cinema” is a capacious term that incorporates a variety of different filmmakers from around the world. See Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge, “Introduction”, in (eds.), Slow Cinema (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p.4. Lim, reviewing those filmmakers most frequently cited by critics as examples of slow cinema auteurs, notes Tsai and Hou alongside other art house favourites such as Béla Tarr, Pedro Costa, and Carlos Reygadas. See Lim, Tsai Ming-liang, p.14. At the same time, it should be noted that not all Taiwan New Cinema filmmakers are framed in this manner. For example, though Emilie Yue-yu Yeh and Darrell William Davis describe Edward Yang as a filmmaker “of the interval, or waiting”, he is rarely labelled a director of slow cinema, despite the fact that he shares a long take-long shot aesthetic with both Hou and Tsai. See Emilie Yue-yu Yeh and Darrell William Davis, Taiwan Film Directors: A Treasure Island (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p.101. 

In addition, there are certain professional connections: Tsai contributed a segment to Letters from the South, for example, as did Zhao (see fn 8 above). Style aside, however, there are differences between the two filmmakers’ work. Tsai is famous for his focus on the urban environment and contemporary metropolitan living; furthermore, despite his recent reorientation towards Malaysia, his feature films have been shot largely in Taipei. Zhao’s films, with their focus on migration, small towns, and the tension between the rural and the urban in the midst of social and economic transformation, are arguably more reminiscent of early Hou Hsiao-hsien films such as Fengui lai de ren/The Boys from Fengkui (1983). The workshops, established by Hou under the aegis of the Golden Horse Film Festival, allow select Mandarin-speaking filmmakers from the region to work with Hou for a month on the production of a collaborative film, to be screened at the festival. Midi Z attended the workshop in 2009, working not just with Hou but also Ang Lee.


Qin, “Point of interest”.

He has reiterated this in interviews, making the point both that the narratives and characters in the films are not unique to Burma, but can be found everywhere—a consequence of globalization—and that the country’s recent liberalization has not largely benefitted its poor, but rather its “one percent”. See, for example, Dave Mondo, “Globalized Addictions: A Talk with Midi Z, Director of ‘Ice Poison’ (Bing Dui)”, June 6 2014, UnseenFilms.com, http://unseenfilms.blogspot.co.uk/2014/06/interview--midi-z-ice-poison-bing-du.html, accessed May 15, 2018; Qin, “Point of interest”.


While many terms are applied to such aesthetics, including “complex narrative”, the “mosaic film”, and the “multiprotagonist film”, in this instance I believe “it narrative” and “network
“aesthetics” are more apposite. This is precisely because of the importance of capital, labour, and commodity networks in these films, rather than simply questions of complex causality or multiple narrative strands. Indeed, neither of the two latter issues are necessarily prominent in Midi Z’s oeuvre. For further discussion, see Peter F. Parshall, *Altman and After: Multiple Narratives in Film* (Plymouth: Scarecrow, 2012) on complex narrative; Patricia Pisters, ‘The Mosaic Film: Nomadic Style and Politics in Transnational Media Culture’, in Mieke Bal and Miguel Á. Hernández-Navarro (eds), *Art and Visibility in Migratory Culture: Conflict, Resistance and Agency* (New York, NY: Rodopi, 2011), pp. 175–90 on the mosaic film; and Maria del Mar Azcona, *The Multi-Protagonist Film* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010) on the issue of multi-protagonist cinema.

24 Toscano and Kinkle, *Cartographies*, p.142
25 Jagoda, “Terror Networks”, p.76
27 Ibid., *Ju. lisan. Bingdu*, pp.22-3
28 Ibid., p.43
29 Ibid., p.24
31 Lim, “Poor Cinema”, p.5.
34 This is perhaps where I would depart slightly from Mathews’ definition, particularly his insistence that those who practice globalization from below seek to benefit from capitalism, rather than oppose it (Mathews, Rebeiro, and Vega, “Introduction”, p.8). I believe that a cinema of globalization from below need not necessarily endorse capitalism. It could be critical, celebratory, simply aspire to “objectivity” in its approach to the phenomenon, or, indeed, be a complex combination of any or all of these positions. This is not least because, as I hope to show in relation to Midi Z, it may well also be material product of such dynamics.
37 As Jagoda says in his analysis of *Syriana*, the film assumes that “quotidian and world-historical events are necessarily interdependent”. See Jagoda, “Terror Networks”, p.77.


In *Poor Folk*, one woman who has worked there informs Sanmei and her friend, “It’s not worth working as a foreign labourer there. Don’t go. The pay is horrible and you’re mistreated”.

In reality Shin-Hong’s younger brother was actually waiting for a work visa to Malaysia at the time of shooting. It never came; he was cheated by the agent responsible for organizing the paperwork. See Midi Z, interview with Hui, 7 March 2015.

In this sense, Midi Z’s films bear some similarity to the fine art screen works that Toscano and Kinkle also identify as examples of the it narrative, such as Steve McQueen’s *Gravesend* (2007) and Lucy Raven’s *China Town* (2009). In these works, they argue, the emphasis is not on speed but on forcing the viewer to experience the full weight of the temporality in the labour and travel intensive commodity chains both pieces depict. See Toscano and Kinkle, *Cartographies*, pp.143-4.

Zhao has also discussed how he constructed a car rig for some of these scenes by taping his camera tripod to a small box truck, leveraging the size of this equipment to overcome some of the restrictions of guerrilla filmmaking. See Zhao, *Ju. lisan. Bingdu*, p.112. For more on lightness, see Paola Voci, *China on Video: Smaller Screen Realities* (Routledge: London and New York, 2012).

Lim, “Poor Cinema”, p.2.


Ibid., p.5

Ibid.

Following the military government’s crackdown on democracy protestors and invalidation of national elections in 1990, Myanmar was the focus of western sanctions. During this period, the PRC provided both diplomatic cover and economic support for the junta, becoming the country’s top direct investor. Following the 2010 elections and subsequent political reforms, however, sanctions were gradually lifted. The Burmese government then began to re-engage with the United States, and, to a lesser extent, the European Union. In consequence, diplomatic competition between China and the United States for access to Myanmar’s markets—and, in the PRC’s case, the country’s Indian Ocean ports, which are a key element of the current “Belt and Road” initiative—has intensified. For an historical overview of this dynamic, see Enze Han, “Under the Shadow of China-US Competition: Myanmar and Thailand’s Alignment Choices”, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol.11, no.1 (2018), pp.81–104.


In 2010-2011, for example, the largest group of overseas labourers in both Japan and Korea came from China. However, in Korea, the next largest groups were from Vietnam, Indonesia, Philippines, and Thailand respectively; in Japan, the next largest groups were Koreans and
ethnic returnees (\textit{nikkeijins}) from Brazil and Peru, but Filipinos still constituted the fifth largest population of migrant workers. In Taiwan, the majority of overseas labourers are also from Vietnam, Indonesia, Philippines, and Thailand, while in Hong Kong, the large community of overseas domestic helpers is overwhelmingly constituted of Filipino and Indonesia nationals. See Graziano Battistella, “Labour Migration in Asia and the Role of Bilateral Migration Agreements”, in Marion Panizzon, Gottfried Zürcher, and Elisa Fornalé (eds.), \textit{The Palgrave Handbook of International Labour Migration} (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 303.


54 For a full assessment, see Ngeow Chow Bing, “Taiwan’s Go South Policy: Déjà vu All Over Again?”, \textit{Contemporary Southeast Asia}, vol. 39, no. 1 (2017), pp. 96-126.


58 Ibid.

59 Ibid., pp. 68-9.

60 Chen, \textit{Asia as Method}, p. 18.

61 Tweedie, \textit{New Waves}, p. 20.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid, p. 23-4. A more comprehensive overview of this phenomenon can be found in Marijke de Valck, \textit{Film Festivals: from European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia} (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007).

64 Lim, “Poor Cinema”, p. 3. These policies are part of Taiwan’s attempt at consolidating its political position within ethnic Chinese communities overseas, and include both encouraging such students to study in Taiwan via scholarships and work opportunities, and sponsoring Chinese-language schools abroad. See James Jiann Hua To, \textit{Qiaowu: Extra-Territorial Policies for the Overseas Chinese} (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 133-6.

65 Tsai Ming-liang is another obvious beneficiary of these policies, and another who remained in Taipei after graduation.


67 Lim, “Poor Cinema”, p. 5.

68 Both policies were initiated by the Central Motion Picture Corporation (CMPC), Taiwan’s primary government-run film studio, around 1982. They aimed to encourage new blood into the local film industry, and revitalise it in the face of competition from Hong Kong commercial films in particular. But they were also an attempt at spreading risk, not least because they encouraged co-productions with independent and overseas producers, allowing CMPC to save money that could then be spent on more traditional genre films. See Yeh and Davis, \textit{Taiwan Film Directors}, pp. 57-9. This form of state-private enterprise risk sharing still demonstrates the far greater degree of government involvement in film production compared with the case of Midi Z. Despite the fractious relationship of many New Cinema filmmakers with the authorities, government support for art film continued in various form across the 1990s: Tsai


Tweedie, New Waves, p.20.

Yeh and Davis, Taiwan Film Directors, p.58.


See, for example, Elena Pollacchi’s discussion of the reception of Wei’s Saideke Balai/Seediq Bale (2011) when it screened at Venice in 2011, and the problems the film’s form and editing presented for western critics, in “Taiwan Cinema at the Venice Film Festival: From Cultural Discovery to Cultural Diplomacy”, in Kuei-fen Chiu, Ming-yeh Rawnsley, and Gary Rawnsley (eds.), Taiwan Cinema: International Reception and Social Change (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), pp.42-6.

In certain instances, local agencies seem to have taken up this latter challenge. Pollacchi notes the centrality of the Taipei Film Commission, the quasi-government office reporting to the city mayor and various industry commissioners, in funding Taipei Factory I (2013) and Taipei Factory II (2014), two omnibus collections intended to raise the profile of Taiwan cinema. These premiered at Cannes and Venice respectively, with Midi Z co-directing a short film, Silent Asylum, for the first collection. However, as Pollacchi points out, the expense of these showcases was supposed to be offset by the direct investment they would elicit; furthermore, both were conceived as joint projects with different festivals, in itself a cost-sharing exercise. See Pollacchi, “Taiwan Cinema”, pp.46-8.