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# AUTHENTICITY, IDENTIFICATION, AND FEMINIST VALUES IN INTERCULTURAL REALITY: THE REPRESENTATION OF CHINESE COMMUNITIES IN CONTEMPORARY SPANISH FILMS

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# Authenticity, Identification, and Feminist Values in Intercultural Reality: The Representation of Chinese Communities in Contemporary Spanish Films

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**Resumen**

La representación cultural de la migración en España es escasa, a pesar de la presencia de personas de múltiples orígenes. Partiendo de la realidad intercultural española, y en base a varios productos audiovisuales, este artículo analiza cuáles son los elementos principales que definen a las personas de origen chino en la sociedad española. El análisis destaca como principales representaciones el debate sobre la autenticidad, la identificación y los valores feministas.

**Palabras clave**

España, migracion china, interculturalidad, producción audiovisual, representación cultural

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**Abstract**

The cultural representation of migration in Spain is scarce, despite the presence of people of multiple origins. Starting from the Spanish intercultural reality, and based on several audiovisual products, this article analyses what are the main elements that define people of Chinese origin in Spanish society. The analysis highlights the debate on authenticity, identification and feminist values as the main representations.

**Keywords**

Spain, Chinese migration, interculturality, audiovisual production, cultural representation

# AUTHENTICITY, IDENTIFICATION, AND FEMINIST VALUES IN INTERCULTURAL REALITY: THE REPRESENTATION OF CHINESE COMMUNITIES IN CONTEMPORARY SPANISH FILMS

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## Introducción

When I arrived at Barajas airport in Madrid in August, 2008, I was struck by a life-size poster of a courier company plastered on a wall. In it, the members of Spain's national basketball team, playing with the hope of winning the gold medal at the Beijing Olympic Games, were pulling back the skin of the corner of their eyes with their index fingers to mimic one of the most pronounced Asian physical traits – slanted eyes. Could anyone involved in this publicity campaign, whether the photographer, the promotional director, or Pau Gasol who spent years in the US, have thought the image might offend the cultural sensibility of the Chinese and by extension, of all Asian people? More startling was the reaction of the Spanish media and of most of the people I met during my stay in Spain. While I was receiving e-mail messages with a link to the New York Times article on the issue (August, 14th, 2008) from colleagues and friends in the US, the reaction in Spain was characterized by its nonexistence. If it was not "worth discussing," it was "incomprehensible" why the English and American newspapers were criticizing the Spanish use of the image when the Chinese back in China did not feel offended. An even more telling illustration of cultural sensitivity in Spain

came from the team's point guard, José Calderón, who stated: "it [the image] would always be interpreted as an affectionate gesture… Some of my best friends are of Chinese origin."

After overcoming an initial shock at the widespread lack of interest in discussing multiculturalism in Spain, I turned my attention to the academic field, hoping to see a contrasting picture, and began to interrogate how Asians (Far Eastern Asians, to be specific) are represented in contemporary Spanish culture. Are cultural examples of stereotypes being challenged? Is there a genuine search for a more profound understanding of Asian immigrants? How can a study of Asian representation contribute to the current debate on Spain's multicultural reality? My objective here is to bring attention to three recent works that incorporate Asia and Asians into their fictional center stage and, by analyzing them, to give my take on the competing models of interculturality emerging in Spanish society. The reason I usie the term, "interculturality," throughout this article is because I subscribe to the vision, that of Bhikuh Parekh, that the coexistence of multiple cultures is bound to be conflictive and the terms of the relationship between communities should be evaluated and negotiated. While choosing to adopt the terminology of "interculturality" over that of multiculturalism in order to be more specific and to avoid a utopian thinking of social reality, I maintain that Spain's interculturality is yet to be defined in a more explicit way and in social fields other than the educational sector. I hope my ideas may open up the terms of this conversation in some small way.

Compared to other ethnic minorities, the cultural representation of Asians in Spain is scant. Isabel Santaolalla, in her *Los "Otros": Etnicidad y "raza" en el cine español contemporáneo* (2005), quotes only three examples – Vergès's *Souvenir*, Gardela's *Tomándote* (a romantic comedy with an Indian

immigrant) and Santesmases's *La fuente amarilla*. In another scholarly contribution on Asian representation, Eloy Martín Corrales's article, "Sudeste Asiático en el cine español: un siglo para descubrir Asia y a los asiáticos,'' the references used are those produced from the beginning of the century to the 1980s. It is really hard to find cases that center on the story of Asian immigration even in the ever-growing list of films and narratives that offer compassionate renditions of the lives of immigrants. A handful of recent examples treat Asians either tangentially or stereotypically. For instance, in José Luis Borau's film, *Leo* (2000), two Chinese attendants in a general store, acted by Taki Sava and Sayago Ayuso (apparently Japanese names), are seen twice throughout the film. On both occasions, they are dressed in traditional garbs and do not utter a word, conforming to the perception of Asian women as silent, submissive and even mysterious. An idealized silence of the Asian woman is once again reinforced in José Luis Cuerda's *La lengua de las mariposas* (1999). Carmiña, played by Elena Fernández, is the Chinese wolf woman with whom Andrés falls in love. She is deprived of linguistic skills because she did not grow up surrounded by other people. The most positive image of an Asian woman appears, ironically, in Miguel Santesmases's *La fuente amarilla* (1999) where all the negative stereotypes of the Chinese men in Spain such as gangsters and martial artists often involved in human trafficking are played out. In this romantic thriller, the female protagonist, played by Silvia Abascal, is half-Chinese and half-Spanish and provides cultural access to her Spanish love interest. The representation of a Chinese chef (interpreted by a Korean actor based in Barcelona) who practices Adrià-inspired-*nouvelle cuisine* in a neighborhood Tapas bar in José Corbacho and Juan Cruz's film, *Tapas* (2005) reiterates the idea of Asians being hardworking, dedicated and undisturbed by earthly matters.

Asians are reduced to and generalized through certain values. A noteworthy tenet of Asian representation is abstraction through allegorization. Sigfrid Monleón's environmentalist film, *Bicicleta* (2005), takes China as a metaphor of an unexplored terrain seducing the young female protagonist who is in search of her own sense of self. Similarly, Clara Sánchez in her novel, *Ultimas noticias del paraíso* (2008), uses China and the Chinese woman Yu, the narrator Fran's love interest, to represent a paradise where hope for a future with infinite possibilities survives an inhumane and harshly monotonous suburban life. In contrast, in Juan Marsé's novel *El embrujo de Shanghai* (1993), China is the backdrop of tall stories told by a young anarchist living in post-war Spain. It is a fantasy land where a Republican hero meets a beautiful femme fatal with Oriental eyes.

## Cultural Representations of Asians in Spain

Contrary to the cited references, the four texts I will consider here resist a simplistic representation of Asians (Chinese, to be specific) and expose the inevitable incompleteness of representation. They are Basel Ramsis's *El otro lado…*: *un acercamiento a Lavapiés* (2002), Javier San Román's *Proverbio chino* (2006), Rogelio Sastre Rosa's *Chino* (2007), and Susi Gozalvo's *Zhao* (2008).

### *El otro lado…*: *un acercamiento a Lavapiés* (2002)

Basel's *El otro lado…*is a low-budget documentary that aims to represent the plural voices of diverse ethnic and racial communities residing in Lavapiés – a neighborhood densely populated by immigrants in Madrid. The documentary adopts an interview format to create an intercultural dialogue by letting immigrants express their positions on many pertinent issues from whether the ghetto is valuable or detrimental to their communities, what are the varying degrees of racism and

discrimination experienced by immigrants from different races and genders, what are the disparate organizational principles under which immigrant politico-ethnic representations operate, and what are the challenges schools face in carrying out intercultural education? While the film states that its production was not conditioned by anti-Arab sentiments that arose after September 11, and nor was it influenced by the theses of Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*, it unfolds against the repercussive backdrop of the Moroccan-Chinese conflict, described as a "Guerra Racial en Lavapiés" by Chano Montelongo in *El Mundo*. The conflict took place in 2000. According to the *El Mundo*, over two hundred Chinese and Moroccan immigrants had a violent brawl, wounding each other with knifes, stones, baseball bats, nun chucks, and axes over a dispute between a female Moroccan customer and Chinese vendors. But the origin of the problem goes back to 1998 when assaults on Chinese immigrants began to increase.

Despite the film's novel take on immigration, no substantial scholarly attention has been given to it. In part, this is because critical attention has been fixated on the question of whether the film signals the beginning of immigrant cinema as in England, France and Germany where immigrants tell their own stories without any mediation or interlocutor. In my view, the issue at stake is not whether this Egyptian filmmaker residing in Madrid is immigrant enough to stand in for the stories of other immigrants. But rather, the film's value lies in the fact that it addresses a series of questions beyond the study of the formation of power relations between natives and immigrants. For instance, is there a newly emerging hegemonic voice in Spain's intercultural reality? How do different ethnic communities interpret the so-called "racial war"? And what are the competing ideas of interculturality? In raising these questions, the film expands the very theoretical frame of interculturality.

Basel attempts to be as inclusive as the cinematographic situation permits. With the exception of one scene, the filmmaker remains outside the frame, invites the interviewees to speak their minds without his mediation, and shows the modest production conditions of his staff, proving that the views represented in the film are not shaped by commercial interests. The interviews convey interpretations of reality as variegated as the interviewees who are Senegalese, Moroccans, Cubans, Dominicans, Brazilians, Columbians, Ecuadorians, Bangladeshi, Spanish natives from all walks of life and a Chinese. Basel makes an effort to give a fair opportunity to all ethnic groups including the Chinese community. However, the viewer sees only one Chinese interviewee – a representative of the Chinese Merchants Associations – because most of the Chinese refused to be interviewed on screen, as the film communicates in notes when the sole Chinese appears for the first time. Basel fails in his attempt at an egalitarian and objective approach because the musical organization of the film's narrative privileges one vision over others, in particular, the opinion of the Cuban community activist of the Chinese as a self-isolating community from other immigrant groups. As a result, it overlooks the complexity of considering intercultural dialogues.

Music is a crucial narrative instrument both on- and off-screen. The first time the image of immigrants living in Lavapiés is projected, the establishing shot is dubbed with a theme music that inscribes a message via repetition throughout the film. The lyrics read "I am you; you are him. We're all cheap labor". It works as a non-verbal disembodied voice-over that purports solidarity for collective rights that should come before any discussion of different cultural values and varying degrees of cultural loyalty. Furthermore, each ethnic cultural identity is constructed through music. The two Dominican women say that each morning they hear Andalusian residents listening to Radio

Olé, Cubans singing rumba and themselves playing salsa. Another interesting codification of music occurs on-screen when a positive intercultural dialogue is demonstrated in two instances: first, between a Brazilian male interviewee with a guitar and an elderly Spanish woman; second, between the same Brazilian and a Bangladeshi immigrant who play music together while the latter sings a song with the refrain "Bangladesh". Such positive reinforcement of intercultural connections is pitted against the sole Chinese interviewer since the editing frames the argument as following. In the first sequence, there is a sense of the human bond forming across races between the Brazilian who prefers rhythmic music to melody and a white Spanish woman who says "no me gusta Julio Iglesias; no lo trago, pero lo mastico." Later in the film, the viewer sees a collaborative musical performance between the Brazilian and the Bangladeshi which collapses cultural differences. Between the two sequences, the Chinese is interviewed and asked if he likes Julio Iglesias. His answer, "A mí me gusta Julio Iglesias," condemns him as an outsider, an unwilling partner in the construction of solidarity between immigrant groups.

There is another level of discrepancy occurring between the film's methodological orientation and the film as an outcome. The film stages the intercultural dialogues necessary to understand the current problems the Lavapiés neighborhood and by extension, Spanish society as a whole, face. And yet, the initial assumption that once an opportunity is given equally, all cultures communicate their feelings and ideas in a similar way is challenged by the difficulty certain communities have in communicating their messages to each other. In a long-take sequence where a native resident complains about the unruliness of a group of youths called "alternatives," the majority of whose members are Moroccans, the viewer witnesses two Brazilian female passers-by and other Spanish

neighbors joining the public quarrel. Everyone speaks but ends up expressing nothing but their emotional frustrations, signaling the importance of cultural knowledge as a pre-condition for real communication. The black Brazilian woman, fearing that the Spanish resident accuses immigrants of destroying the civil order and sanitation, recounts how unfairly her sister is locked up for the negligence of her own children and reminds the Spaniard bombastically how Spanish imperialism in Latin America exploited the continent's inhabitants. While the Spaniard responds claiming to have no personal link with the Spanish company Telefónica's contemporary imperialist endeavors, another Brazilian female bystander intervenes to say how she was verbally abused by her Spanish husband for being a "sudaca." In turn, her grievance is interrupted by two Spanish long-time residents of Lavapiés who, after a clear statement of "I'm not a racist," grumble about their neighborhood's changes for the worse since the arrival of immigrants. A simple plea for better sanitation turns into an appeal for historical checks-and-balances. What this sequence corroborates is that communication in a multicultural setting implies more than one context.

If the Brazilian immigrants reveal historical and racial disjunctures in their discussion with native residents, the sole Chinese presence implies a cultural disparity. The film respects the Chinese community's decision not to speak in front of the camera and, at the same time, constructs them as unwilling partners, based on the assumption that all cultures express themselves through direct, explicit enunciation. Fred E. Jandt), professor of communication at California State University who has researched the intercultural communication of Asians, claims that people from Western and Asian cultures have the greatest chance of misunderstanding each other because they have two different views of communication: "Western cultures, especially the United States, give higher status to the speaker or

'source' of information than to the 'receiver,' the person who pays attention to the information… Asian cultures view communication as communicators cooperating to make meaning. This communication reflects Confucian collectivist values because respecting the relationship through communication can be more important than the information exchanged" (2009:46); "For example, an Asian who had a Confucian view of communication would think it perfectly acceptable to give gifts to business associates and to hire one's own relatives. Both of these actions help maintain social relationships" (2009:47). In the case of Basel's film, the sole Chinese interviewee seems a little uncomfortable, tense and even formal (except when he is asked about Julio Iglesias, a question of personal preference rather than a cognitive one), which implies no previous relationship established with the interviewer/director. The refusal of other members of the Chinese community to speak can be interpreted in a similar vein. They may not have granted their trust to an intermediary, Arab director, who is making a documentary on Lavapies where they are being constantly targeted for robbery by some young Arabs and where the "racial war" took place not too long ago.

A Cuban community activist alleges that contrary to Latin Americans who get along with different races, Chinese immigrants cherish their cultural cohesion and are reluctant to collaborate with other immigrant communities in the pursuit of justice and equality. It is patent that she envisions a model of interculturality based on a collective class struggle across different races, ethnicities and genders. The closeness of the Chinese community is an irrefutable fact that requires inward reflection. It would be ideal if the Chinese community expressed their openness to positive cultural exchanges besides defending their mercantile interests. However, one should also look at other cultural factors that enter into one's consideration

when communication is established. Referring to Tin-Toomey's analysis of a low-context culture like Chinese, Jandt stresses cultural priorities derived from Confucian values in an interpersonal relationship: "Because social harmony and face maintenance are crucial, communication through intermediaries is especially functional because using intermediaries eliminates face-to-face confrontation and reduces the risk of losing face" (2009:63-4). Jandt's observation explains another model of interculturality sustained by the Chinese community in the film which seeks a gradual equality, recognition and maintenance of their cultural cohesion by fitting into the dominant culture rather than calling attention to their unjust situation. The non-confrontational approach of the Chinese community is welcomed by a Spanish elderly woman: "They might be mafias, but they don't bother anyone." Implicit in her remark is that she prefers a model of assimilation (at least in public spaces) and accepts cultural differences as long as they are practiced in their private cultural realm.

Basel asks the Chinese interviewee if he prefers one ethnic group over others. Knowing that the question comes with a tint of suspicion of the Chinese's potentially racist attitudes, he answers that individuals have their own friends and foes independent of their races. In his case, he happens to get along better with Spanish natives and Senegalese immigrants. Although he may not be a racist, his preference of certain ethnic groups is proven, revealing his racial criteria over a strictly individual one. To the growing list of the competing models of interculturality expressed by the Cuban, the Spanish and the Chinese (social solidarity, two-domain multiculturalism and individual racial preference), I would add the fourth vision theorized by an Ecuadorian construction worker. For him, individuals establish different types of relationships, from romantic and commercial, to professionals with diverse people across races, ethnicities and genders. The implication is that

there are different power-relations forming in each type of relationship even within the confines of the same culture. With these four models, Basel brings forth multiple voices and visions that provoke further discussions. He forcefully convinces the viewer of the need to rethink interculturality as a frame of mind that affects the entire society – not just immigrants or the young Spaniards. Nonetheless, he fails to consider the different cultural and historical factors that condition intercultural dialogues and how cultural differences should be negotiated whether in a small-scale dispute over sanitation, loud music at night, or on a larger scale, in instances of inter-ethnic violence. In a way, the viewer is discouraged from moving in that direction since his support for a particular vision of interculturality comes through clearly via the use of music both on-screen and outside the frame.

## *Authenticity. Proverbio chino* (2006)

Javier San Román's *Proverbio chino* (2006) is another film that casts light on the conflictive relationship between two different ethnic groups living in Madrid – an Afro-Cuban immigrant seeking employment at a Chinese restaurant, a Chinese restaurant owner and a young Chinese woman selling Chinese food on the streets at night. From the outset of the film, interculturality is defined, via non-diegetic music that repeats the lyrics of "Está equivocando para aprender," as an uneasy process wherein all learn by making mistakes. As the nine-minute-long short fictional film progresses, the viewer is reminded of how mutual enlightenment between two cultures as remote as the Cuban and Chinese is possible by portraying Sergio – the Cuban immigrant recently laid-off from a Chinese restaurant – and Yori (Yolanda; note the Chinese phonetic substitution of a "l" with a "r") – the defiant Chinese woman selling rice patties on the streets – finding a common cultural element in the cooking rice as their culinary staple. Although a

large part of the film stresses the hermetic, self-exclusive nature of the Chinese community, San Roman's corky humor paints the issue not as the cause of intercultural conflict but as part of the learning process in the path toward a less problematic co-existence of diverse cultures.

Despite its positive, light-hearted tone, the film offers an analytic view on what causes intercultural clashes and tensions. From the Chinese restaurant owner who reluctantly offers employment to Sergio and ends up laying him off, Yori who considers herself different from her close-minded compatriots to Sergio who takes a Chinese proverb from Confucius contained in a fortune cookie as a truth-revealing phrase, all, whether consciously or unconsciously, essentialize culture as if there is an authentic version of tradition and such authenticity is always privileged by those who are outside the ethnic group. Furthermore, for San Roman, the essentialist vision of culture is not a philosophical perspective that determines one's behavior toward others but an attitude one mistakenly embraces from time to time even in situations that lead to building a positive relationship with others.

When Sergio with Afro-hairstyle seeks employment as a waiter at a Chinese restaurant, the owner bluntly expresses in his grammatically-flawed Spanish that the job is not for him, despite his experience working in the hospitality industry, because he is not Chinese but black. As Sergio accuses him of being a member of the mafia and of a racial discrimination, the owner half-heartedly accepts him. The next sequence shows Sergio's professionalism as a waiter by highlighting his fluent explanation of Chinese dishes to Spanish customers. Despite the Afro-Cuban waiter's more than satisfying job qualifications, the Chinese owner grudgingly looks at him and complains that he cannot pronounce well the names of Chinese dishes since Sergio's Spanish is too fluent to be Chinese. The

problem here is that Sergio does not have a Chinese accent when he speaks to the customers who may expect an authentic experience of dining at a Chinese restaurant. Even when he finally learns to pronounce "rollito de primavera" as "lollido de primavera" as the Chinese would say, the owner terminates his employment with the unsubstantiated reason that his presence is bad for the business. No matter how hard Sergio tries to meet the expectations of the owner, he is bound to be rejected. However, the film never accuses the owner of explicit racism, or discrimination against non-Chinese. Rather, it blames the conventional thinking that privileges a visually and linguistically coherent representation of ethnicity. In other words, the lure of exoticism invites the persistence of a culture' authenticity claim.

A similar attitude is witnessed in Yori who defines herself as different from other Chinese by almost patronizing, through her gesture of pulling her eyes to the sides, the ethnic group's physical trait of having slanted eyes. She prides herself on being more assimilated to Spanish culture by boasting her rather fluent command of street Spanish. Sergio's broken Spanish, after emulating the Chinese way of speaking Spanish for professional reasons, offends her because he comes across as someone making fun of the linguistic incompetence of the Chinese. On one occasion, unlike the restaurant owner who insists on authenticity, she debunks the notion of genuine Chinese dishes like "wanfu" – a piece of veal dipped in sweet-and-sour sauce as Sergio explains to his customers. According to Yori, it is an invention of Chinese merchants for their Spanish customers who eat anything and everything. She adds that if you are Chinese, you can sell anything as Chinese. A few minutes later, however, after showing her skepticism toward cultural authenticity, she gets excited ironically when Sergio tells her he can teach her how to make a Cuban rice dish because it will be authentically Cuban. Her enthusiasm is

accentuated when she lights up pronouncing "a la cubana". Here the implication of Yori's attachment of authenticity to a Cuban dish is not as negative as in the previous episode. Nonetheless, it points to a common mistake one commits when learning about another culture. As demonstrated in Yori, the impulse to exoticize ethnic cultures has gained a cultural valence even among those who claim to maintain an inclusive multiculturalist view.

Sergio, who seems to be more open-minded toward different cultures and races than the two other characters and therefore, who embodies more closely the filmmaker's position, grants a particular philosophical value to the Chinese proverb wrapped in a fortune cookie, reminding the viewer of the common association of Asia as a spiritual, philosophical bastion. Before Yori who does not subscribe to the lessons of Confucius, Sergio interprets the following phrase as if it represents a moral message he takes away from his experience at the restaurant: "Entrístete no porque los hombres no te conozcan sino porque tú no conoces a los hombres." While the proverb stresses one's duty to know others before despairing for not being understood by others, Sergio turns the phrase into the thesis of interculturality the filmmaker inscribes by articulating the need to know better each other in order to overcome mutual fear.

### *Identification. Chino (2007)*

Along with San Román's work, Rogelio Sastre Rosa's short mockumentary, *Chino* (2007), is a film on interculturality that has enjoyed enormous cyber popularity. In it, following an interview format, José Manuel, a thirty-six-year-old Spanish male with untrimmed beard and a fan of Bruce Lee films, confesses why he wants to be Chinese and what qualifies him as Chinese to an invisible interviewer. The apparent contradiction between his Western physiognomy and his self-

identification as Chinese demands a complex negotiation of meanings as the viewer watches the film. Furthermore, depending on the viewer's position – Spanish, Chinese, Western, Asian, multiculturalist or traditionalist – Sastre's witty use of defamiliarization is deemed to spawn a wide range of multi-layered reactions and responses, making the film an infinitely open text.

During the course of nine-minute-performance, the interviewee talks about the difficulty of his intended assimilation to the Chinese community, how the Chinese including himself are, what type of Chinese he is and when he looks most Chinese. Before the monologue begins, the camera pans around the Chinese neighborhood in Usera – a district of Madrid where Chinese immigrants are concentrated – showing a couple of Chinese residents walking around and multiple commercial signs in Chinese decorating the locality shot in fragmentary close-ups. Despite the initial contextualization and José Manuel's desire to show the neighborhood to the interviewer, the film is shot exclusively on a rooftop without the participation of the Chinese residents. As he goes on to repeat the clichés of Chinese being slim, athletic, with healthy teeth, wrinkleless skin and abundant hair, and hard-working people who make no trouble with anyone, the viewer may be led to believe that the film is a simple idealization of the Chinese people or, to the contrary, a nonsensical demonstration of a hackneyed generalization about them without any meaningful social contextualization. Whether the viewer's reaction at this point is positive or negative, whether the mockumentary is agreeable or offensive, it becomes impossible to sustain a clear-cut interpretation as the film progresses.

While José Manuel includes himself in the presentation of Chinese stereotypes by using the first-person plural form of verb, "somos," he reveals that he does not speak the language,

cannot distinguish between Mandarin and Cantonese, is not willing to undergo plastic surgery to acquire an Asian physiognomy or to obtain Chinese nationality. He is willing to get a haircut at a local Chinese hair salon so he can sport a modern Chinese style and marry a Chinese woman to have children like "us." He also reiterates how much he enjoys listening to good conversation in Chinese even if he does not understand a word. His lack of linguistic knowledge of Chinese can be justified, as he argues, since there are young Chinese immigrants growing up in other countries who never learn to speak the language properly. Thus, the type of Chinese he wishes to be is a Chinese immigrant to Spain. What Sastre underlines here with José Manuel's deficiencies in crucial ethnic traits – Chinese language and appearance – is that all essentialist ethnic claims can be defied in our intercultural reality. Furthermore, José Manuel's resolute desire to be taken as Chinese, despite his Western appearance, serves to formulate the question as to whether identity is an innate essence that one possesses biologically or a self-identification through culture. Obviously, the idea that identity is constructed through identification is supported by the film.

Without a clear understanding of the film's thesis that identification is what creates a sense of identity, José Manuel's case may seem an aberrant example of cultural fetishism deprived of the projection of sexual fantasy toward a specific culture. One could argue that it is not a case of cultural fetishism since he believes himself Chinese. Here I would suggest that José Manuel's seeming cultural fetishism is a narrative instrument employed in order to unsettle the binary framework of "us" and "them" in speaking of cultures. He claims, slipping mistakenly back into his Western self, that he loves everything about Chinese people including the way "they" walk, their music, Kung-fu, and their incomprehensible conversations. But he rectifies immediately his identity as

Chinese by criticizing Westerners for not having corporeal flexibility like the Chinese. The stress is put on his self-exclusiveness from Westerners: "they" are rusty. The confusing oscillation of José Manuel's identity becomes more patent when he adds that despite his love of Kung-fu, he does not practice it due to his joint problems, i. e., due to his inflexibility like other Westerners. At this point the viewer realizes José Manuel's Chineseness trapped in a Western body and his syntactic gaffe is a satirical articulation of the very impossibility of essentializing ethnic characterizations.

Sastre's defamiliarized representation of the Chinese does not allow for pointed didacticism. But, although not a central idea of the film, the wish for a rather generous tolerance of difference in the Chinese community is consistent throughout the film. There are brief moments when José Manuel reveals his awareness of being somewhat different from Chinese and expresses his desire to be accepted. He opens the interview by confessing how difficult it is to assimilate to the Chinese community because they are rather self-exclusive. And later in the film, he wishes to marry a Chinese woman and have Chinese children like "us" – the very category disturbed by his own appearance. His willingness to become more Chinese by creating a Chinese family is followed by his low-key remark – "Me gustaría que me aceptasen" – once again exposing his awareness that his acceptance is not easily granted.

The question Sastre raises with regards to recent intercultural reality in Spain is if identity – the very term that constructs and is constructed by difference and boundaries – should concur with identification, which implies inclusiveness and acceptance despite difference. The film's open-endedness creates a lingering effect over the issue. José Manuel claims that he looks most Chinese when he squints to protect his eyes from a strong sunshine and approaches the camera, allowing a fragmentary

vision of his face. The viewer is once again awestruck and intrigued by José Manuel's incomprehensible claim to look Chinese and the impossibility of finding anything remotely Chinese-looking on his face. One cannot but reiterate the question: is identity that with which you identify?

### *Feminist values. Zhao (2008)*

The final example of interculturality regarding the Chinese community in Spain is Susi Gozalvo's independent feature film, *Zhao* (2008). This Valencia filmmaker approaches Spain's intercultural reality from a futuristic standpoint when a Chinese adoptee grapples with her cultural heritage. At issue here is not whether the protagonist Zhao is well accepted by Spanish society but whether she can successfully negotiate between a feeling of abandonment by her own culture and a moral obligation to improve situations for women in China. The film suggests that reconciling with her biological and cultural roots will help her become a full person. From the standpoint of contemporary Spanish reality, in which many descendants of various ethnic minorities are on the rise, Gozalvo's film sheds new light on what it means to have an identity that can be defined only by in-betweeness. Zhao's story of her past, present and future emerges through Gozalvo's crafty mix of home video recordings that trace the process of adopting a baby girl from China and Zhao's potty training with her Spanish mother, computer-generated sequences signaling a bio-technical futurism that will help Zhao and other Chinese women to work more freely in restrictive China, and a fast and poetic rendition of the narrative surrounding Zhao's search for herself and her intended completion of a book on overpopulation.

Played by a half Vietnamese and half Catalan actress, Menh-Wai Trinh, Zhao is a self-confident, outspoken, inquisitive, coquettish and creative woman. Her relationship with her

Spanish boyfriend, Martín, goes well until she can no longer overcome her obsession with the past. Although he has the burden of enduring the sad departure of Zhao, Martín is an instigator of her identity who asks how she is, what her name is, why she is called "Zhao" and what it means. Furthermore, he is the one who helps Zhao make the decision to go to China when he argues that international adoption was one of the most positive things that occurred in twentieth century. This is when she realizes the only way to make peace with her past is by taking on a mission to help stop the abduction and trafficking of women in China. Using her knowledge of Chinese, which she acquired by going to a Chinese school in Valencia along with other Chinese adoptees, and her Asian physiognomy which will allow her to move without raising suspicion within China, she aims to provoke a reaction from the international community against the anti-feminist reality in her biological homeland. While the film does not reveal if she achieves the goal in the end, it leaves room for a possible interpretation of her successful return to Spain as the first sequence reconstructs her visit to Martín's place in a temporally ambiguous way.

The idea of coming to terms with the past by embracing a moral duty is the way the filmmaker conceptualizes identity as something that emerges when working toward a universal cause. In Zhao's case, she turns her memory of having been abandoned for being a baby girl into a political activism that denounces the mafia's treacherous exploitation of women. In so doing, she attempts to rectify the unjust situation women face, a situation similar to what she suffered as an infant. Like Zhao's participation in women's cause in China, her Spanish mother's adoption is a personal as well as political action. By adopting a baby girl from China, she rescues a girl from abandonment and from potential death. Her adoption was not a naïve gesture of her adoptive mother's idealism as becomes patent when the film shows a series of scenes full of affection where her

Western mother potty trains Zhao while reading her children's stories and teaching her songs. Her maternal dedication becomes a way of constructing solidarity between mother and daughter. The film ends with a scene where the Spanish mother dances with joy when Zhao successfully defecates in a toilet as if it marks an explosive, celebratory moment when they both take a step forward together. Despite their physical differences, they are united by a basic, universal human need.

Zhao's struggle with the past and her initial reluctance to join Sofía – the protagonist's best friend who is also a Chinese adoptee – on a mission to go to China takes center stage in the film. However, her unwillingness to go to China is not due to her rejection of her Chinese cultural heritage. She grew up learning Chinese alongside many Chinese adoptees, descendants's Chinese immigrants and children of interracial marriages at a local Chinese school. Besides linguistic training, the school offers a class on etiquettes for women and collaborates with Group Zero in a toy drive for children in North Korea. Despite insisting on traditionally conservative gender roles, the Chinese community in Valencia is represented as a socially conscious and politically active group. In order to accomplish their political agenda of freeing abducted women from human traffickers, they go as far as to implant a microchip device underneath their arms so that the organization can locate them in case they get captured by the mafia. The film consciously and consistently distinguishes the good cultural traditions of China from bad cultural values that led to the abandonment of female infants. With a tender gaze, Zhao watches on video a performance of street musicians wearing masks in Gansu Province and a New Year's celebration in London's Chinatown. When the film deals with the adoption of Chinese babies, it attempts to offer contextualized information regarding why female infants are abandoned and what social consequences China is experiencing due to their privileging of

male children. What the viewer learns is that the one-child policy has strengthen the Chinese traditional preference for boys over girls since the male child would assume the obligation of taking care of elderly parents and would be able to keep any inheritance within family. This practice resulted in an imbalance between the sexes and Chinese men now have to find their mates among Rumanian women willing to move to China.

Gozalvo's representation of China and the Chinese is a well-informed one. There is no simplistic stereotyping or generalizing of cultural traits. The Chinese are seen as diverse in their political stances and preserve a rich artistic tradition. Notwithstanding, their patriarchal attitude does not escape criticism. Through Zhao who upholds Western feminist views as well as a Chinese cultural heritage, the film penetrates the heart of the problem and places the Chinese adoptee in Spain at the center of the changes China must carry out. In so doing her contribution to the intercultural debate is to raise the question if interculturality is compatible with feminist visions.

## Conclusions

Despite a growing number of Asian immigrants in Spain, the representation of Asia and Asians in contemporary Spanish culture is either scarce or clichéd. Notwithstanding, Basel Ramsis, San Román, Sastre, Gozalvo offer some thought-provoking examples of intercultural encounters with Chinese communities in Spain, reminding us that Asians have a stake in the building of an intercultural society. Basel's documentary puts forth several competing models of interculturality. San Román's didactic short film diagnoses the lure of cultural authenticity as the source of intercultural misunderstandings. Sastre takes the issue a step further, in his defamiliarized representation of the Chinese, by asking if a rather inclusive,

open notion of identification should substitute a self-precluding definition of identity as a proper frame of mind for intercultural reality. Gozalvo's quirky feature film moves from the context of immigration to adoption in which the intercultural challenge rests on how a Chinese adoptee in Spain accepts her Chinese cultural heritage without foregoing Western feminist values. If San Román normalizes intercultural conflict, Sastre challenges our notion of identity in the age of interculturality. What still remains, as Basel Ramsis suggests, is the need to examine in future works on interculturality if there are emerging ideological criteria or cultural values that operate in the negotiation of conflicts between different ethnic groups (as in France or Holland) from street cleaning, controlling noise at night to violent ethnic confrontation or if not, in what ways can we arrive at cross-cultural moral principles and their application in a culturally sensible manner.

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