

“But I’m Also from There”: Transnational Adoption, Belonging and Cultural Identity in Susi Gonzalvo’s *Zhao*

Este artículo analiza la película Zhao (2008) de Susi Gonzalvo dentro del contexto del aumento en la adopción internacional durante finales del siglo XX y principios del siglo XIX, específicamente en España. Con un enfoque en el uso de una narrativa no-lineal, medios de comunicación textuales y secuencias de flashback, este artículo arguye que la película representa la lucha que experimentan los adoptados transnacionales para resolver sus sentimientos de pertenencia y no pertenencia mientras navegan un terreno cultural complejo. El artículo también contrasta la representación de la protagonista en la película de Gonzalvo con la representación de las jóvenes chinas adoptadas en el documental Generación Mei Min (2014) de David Gózman Rollán.

Palabras clave: cine español, Asia, adopción transnacional, género

This paper examines Susi Gonzalvo’s Zhao (2008) within the context of increasing international adoption during the 1990s and the start of the new millennium, specifically in Spain. Taking into account the film’s use of a non-linear narrative, flashback sequences and textual media, this article argues that the film represents the struggle experienced by transnational adoptees to resolve their feelings of belonging and non-belonging as they navigate a complex cultural terrain. The article also contrasts the representation of the protagonist in Gonzalvo’s film with the representation of young Chinese adopted girls in David Gózman Rollán’s documentary Generación Mei Ming (2014).

Keywords: Spanish cinema, Asia, transnational adoption, gender

Between 1998 and 2004 Spain held a leading position in international adoption in the European Union and globally.¹ In 2004, Spain was second only to Norway among major receiving nations and was one of the countries receiving the most children when taking into account its population size and

number of live births (Selman 35). The largest group of internationally adopted children in Spain during this period came from China, accounting for forty-three percent of all adoptions in 2004 (37). This rapid increase in intercountry adoption is a reality reflected in Spanish cinema since the start of the new millennium. Films such as David Planell's *La vergüenza* (2009), Daniela Fejerman's *La adopción* (2015), and the Spanish comedy *Thi mai* (2017), starring Carmen Machi, portray the arduous and complicated process facing families who decide to adopt transnationally from Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Asia. In particular, these films emphasize the bureaucratic process involved in international adoption and its impact on both adoptees and adopting families. Jessaca Leinaweaver explains what she terms the "unsustainability" of transnational adoption seen in *La vergüenza* by exposing the tensions the process of international adoption may entail as children are expected to assimilate while at the same time being viewed as "others" by adopting families (30). Fejerman has explained in interviews that her film is inspired by her own experience adopting her son from Ukraine, which she describes as traumatic and which exposed her to an extremely corrupt system in which individuals profit from these children (Martínez). As Diana Marre has indicated, corruption in countries of origin is a frequent topic of conversation among families looking to adopt from Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Africa, but much less so in relation to Asia and, in particular, China, which would explain why it is the international country of origin chosen by the largest number of adopting families in Spain (232). These films point to a clear increase in interest surrounding the process and impact of international adoption on Spain with regards to the country's increasing cultural and ethnic diversity. In the following pages I examine the representation of adopted Chinese girls growing up in Spanish families, with a particular focus on Susi Gonzalvo's *Zhao* (2008), to address the depiction of the experience of adopted children as they navigate a complex cultural terrain.

While most of the previously mentioned films are framed from the perspective of future adoptive parents and the struggles they encounter as they go through the adoption process, Gonzalvo's film distinguishes itself through its focus on the psychological and cultural impact of international adoption from the perspective of a young adopted girl, Zhao. *Zhao* examines the impact of the adoption of thousands of Chinese girls in Spain since the 1990s. Through the use of a non-linear narrative, flashback sequences and textual media, the film portrays the character's struggle to resolve her feelings of belonging and non-belonging after being adopted by a Spanish family. *Zhao* showcases the protagonist's problematic relationship to her country of origin, China, as she attempts to understand her Chinese identity in relation to a place and culture about which she has no first-hand

knowledge. Throughout the film Zhao is portrayed in a constant process of negotiation and struggle with her identity as she wrestles with her feelings for her Spanish boyfriend, Martín, as well as her memories growing up in Spain, including her time at school learning aspects of Chinese culture, the death of her adoptive parents, and her upbringing by her Spanish sister and grandmother. The film's representation of Zhao existing in a process of ongoing negotiation over what is "home" and where she belongs invites the spectator to explore what it means to be Spanish in the context of contemporary international adoption, diasporic movements, migration, and globalization. Additionally, by representing Zhao as simultaneously belonging and marginalized from both cultures (Chinese and Spanish), *Zhao* adds to broader questions of how cultural identity is formed and articulated and, in particular, demonstrates the long-lasting effects of international adoption on children who are never free of the anxieties surrounding their origins.

In her analysis of adopted persons' feelings of belonging, Barbara Yngvesson has noted that "adoption is a process that can never be complete" ("Going" 36). Yngvesson's observation is made within the context of observing "root trips" made by adopted children and their families to Chile from Sweden. Through interviews with the families and with the adoptees about their experience returning to Chile, Yngvesson details the way in which narratives of belonging and lost belongings "shake up identity in the very moment of grounding it by revealing the interruptions, contradictions, and breaks through which the process we know as "identity" takes shape" (32). My intention in this article is similar. Like Yngvesson, I want to call attention to the process surrounding how cultural identities take shape, specifically within the context of international transracial adoption as represented in *Zhao*. International adoption research contributes to the theorizing of social and cultural belonging as it demonstrates the anxieties and transformations at the center of adoptive persons' lives that reveal notions of "home," "belonging" and "nation" as never fixed, unchanging or resolved. Yngvesson's study, for example, exposes the connections between the adoptive parent and the child, the adoptive family and the birth family as well as between the sending and the receiving nations thereby presenting an alternative to a "narrative of exclusive belonging" (27). In her work on international adoption, Ann Anagnost critiques what she calls the "domestication of difference" found in narratives of institutionalized multiculturalism (391). Anagnost has written that "[i]f constructions of race and culture are contingent processes that are historically open-ended, we need to consider how current adoption practices do not merely fit into what is historically given, but in themselves produce race" – and culture – "in a new form" (391). In their observations, Yngvesson and Anagnost

demonstrate how questions of belonging and culture permeate contemporary adoption studies as well as the constant process of negotiating their own identity that adoptees face.

Under this framework, I would like to approach *Zhao* as a move away from what Yngvesson terms representations of “exclusive belonging” to highlight the possibilities with regards to cultural representations resulting from international adoption that instead accentuate a constant process of change and transformation (“Going” 27). In *Zhao*, a central mechanism for demonstrating the process of cultural identity formation is the use of multiple flashback sequences that create a non-linear narrative. Zhao appears torn between two parts of herself as the film fluctuates between her childhood memories and her present budding romantic relationship with Martín, whom she is vacationing with during the film. It is also noteworthy that the flashback sequences not only consist of Zhao’s time with her grandmother and sister in Spain, but also of the strong bond between her and her best friend, Sofia, who is also Chinese and was adopted by Spanish parents. This confluence of memories and experiences joined together throughout the film in a non-linear narrative structure calls attention to Zhao’s attempt to reconcile the multiple cultural terrains in which her memories collide. Rather than simply representing a form of nostalgia for lost cultural roots, Zhao’s jumbled search to identify herself throughout the film emphasizes her in a constant state of positioning. Additionally, these ideas resonate with what Avtar Brah calls the “homing desire” expressed by diasporic subjects. The homing desire, as articulated by Brah, is not the same as the desire for a “homeland”; rather it expresses the “multi-placedness of home” and emphasizes the ways in which “[p]rocesses of diasporic identity formation are exemplars *par excellence* of the claim that identity is always plural, and in process” (197). While it is not my intention to overlook the significant differences between transnationally adopted persons and diasporic subjects – for example, transnationally adopted children do not necessarily share a common language and, as a community, have a much more complicated relationship to their country of origin as they may feel abandoned or rejected – these groups do share a common experience of displacement. In Gonzalvo’s film, we see this overlap in the way Zhao grapples with her family and relationship in Spain and her effort to rebuild her past and her connection with China.

Zhao stars Spanish actors Menh-Wai Trinh and Miguel Ángel Silvestre and was presented at the Festival de Cine de Málaga in 2008. Developing around China’s population crisis, the film specifically highlights the negative effects of the introduction of the country’s One-Child Policy in 1978 that was still in place in 2008 at the time of the film’s release. The policy, intended to alleviate social, economic and environmental problems, also led to the mass

abandonment of infant girls and widespread female infanticide. In 2001, the BBC reported that for every 100 girls at birth, there were 117 boys, which implies that nearly one-seventh of Chinese baby girls had gone missing ("China's Population" 2001). The policy led to a large gender imbalance throughout China, as men greatly outnumbered women, and in 2007 the *New York Times* reported that "the demand for adoptions far exceed[ed] the number of babies [the Chinese government] deem[ed] 'available'" (Russell). In 2008, the *New York Times* indicated that the Vice Minister of the Family Planning Commission, Zhao Baige, was looking to move away from the One-Child Policy, and in 2016 it was replaced by the country's "two child policy" (Yardley). Gonzalvo's film explores the international implications of China's One-Child Policy, as many abandoned baby girls were put up for adoption and taken in by foreign families. In interviews Gonzalvo has explained that the film is inspired by her own journey to China to adopt her daughter, Zhao, and that many of the flashback sequences portraying Zhao as a child with her adopted parents are home videos of Gonzalvo's own daughter. Gonzalvo was among a large number of Spaniards who adopted baby girls from China. The interest in international adoption from China to Spain was in large part due to the airing of the British documentary *The Dying Rooms* in 1995 (Ye). The reporters entered China separately on tourist visas and sought to investigate the effects of the country's One-Child Policy, discovering that millions of newborn Chinese girls had been abandoned in orphanages in appalling conditions (Ye). The documentary won a Peabody Award and an Emmy Award and also generated international concern for the situation created by China's birth planning program. Spain, in particular, gained a reputation as one of the countries adopting the most Chinese babies, taking second place in global rankings for the number of Chinese adoptions between 1992 and 2009 with 13,495 babies (Kim and Davis 203).

In *Zhao*, one of the key elements to the film's artistic success, according to Gonzalvo, is the representation of its protagonist as both Spanish and Chinese. As mentioned, the film centers on Zhao's efforts to negotiate her position in the world as she digs through her memories and life experiences. It is also relevant that in the film Zhao has a European style and speaks Spanish with a Castilian accent. In a 2008 interview with the Spanish newspaper *Luces de Málaga*, Susi Gonzalvo described her difficulty finding an actress with "rasgos orientales y con una dicción perfecta en castellano" (Herrera). After many auditions, the director specifically chose Menh-Wai Trinh for the role of Zhao for both being "española y tener acento español" (Herrera). In a 2004 interview with *El Mundo*, Menh-Wai explains that she was born in Cataluña, Spain, and is of both Catalan and Vietnamese decent (Calleja). The film thus relies on and draws from the racial and ethnic

hybridity of the actress to invoke multiple cultural signifiers and to disorient the viewer attempting to locate the subjectivity of the protagonist under essentializing notions of European and Asian identity. It is, however, also important to note that the racial hybridity embodied by Menh-Wai undermines the very struggles that adopted children experience due to the disparity between their ethnic identity and race and between their cultural heritage and birthplace. In this sense, while the casting of Menh-Wai highlights Zhao's hybridity as she moves between two cultural identities, the director's decision to cast a bi-racial actress born in Spain in the role of Zhao may not effectively represent the embodied experience of many adoptees' bi-cultural identity. While this actress may embody a form of cultural and racial hybridity, the sense of dislocation and uncertainty embodied by transnational adoptees as they struggle to reconcile their outer appearance with their inner sense of self and the ambiguities that arise from this experience is distinct.

Mary Kate Donovan has analyzed David Gózman Rollán's documentary *Generación Mei Ming* (2014) as a demonstration of how adoption has a different impact on the construction of selfhood than being bi-racial or growing up in a family that has immigrated to another country. The documentary interviews six young Chinese girls who were adopted by Spanish parents and arrived in Spain in the mid-1990s. *Generación Mei Ming* centers on exploring how the girls identify and their experiences growing up in Spain as well as expresses the diversity surrounding their individual relationship with China and Chinese culture. While one of the girls, Marina, studies Chinese and has travelled to China, another, Estela, conveys a great deal of pain in relation to China as well as feelings of abandonment. Donovan has pointed out in her analysis:

For the most part the girls describe having an ambiguous relationship with China – or the idea of China, as most have not returned since being adopted by Spanish families. Each of the girls is asked how they might feel to meet their biological parents and if they have would have interest in doing so. Most answer that they have no interest in meeting their biological families, with one girl adding the caveat that she would like to have a biological sibling. (203)

Donovan also notes that despite the challenges faced by these girls, *Generación Mei Ming* communicates a deep sense of connection to their families and that they identify as Spanish despite the prejudices they may experience in Spanish society (207). She explains: "The individual interviews are edited in such a way that the girls repeatedly reinforce their sense of a Spanish identity directly to the camera, and by extension to the audience. Their parents, siblings, and friends reaffirm their Spanishness as

well" (207). This cinematic emphasis on a connection to Spanish culture and Spanishness is also conveyed in Gonzalvo's fictional portrayal of Zhao, particularly in a flashback sequence that focuses on a five-year old Zhao at her birthday party. At the party, all the children wear costumes, and the scene opens closing in on Zhao in a bright, yellow flamenco dress, her hair tied in a large bun to the side, accessorized with two large yellow flowers. Zhao's lips are painted red, she has on yellow earrings, and a Spanish style shawl hangs from her shoulders. Drawing on the ability of clothing to produce cultural meanings and positions, the flamenco costume on Zhao is not innocent or neutral but rather inscribes "official" cultural forms onto to her body through one of the most well-known cultural symbols recognized as being quintessentially Spanish all over the world. In this sense, while Zhao wears the flamenco dress as a costume in this scene, it does not necessarily function as a facade but rather can be viewed as an embodied expression of cultural belonging.

While like Gózman Rollán's documentary, Gonzalvo's film portrays the feelings of belonging and non-belonging experienced by international adoptees, *Generación Mei Ming* also specifically addresses the racism and bullying that many of the girls have encountered. Some of the girls describe being excluded and being made fun of at school because they are seen as different as well as the depression that arises from these experiences. In Gonzalvo's film, while we see Zhao at school learning Chinese with classmates and friends (who are presumably also adopted), the film does not address the racism these girls may experience as well as having to navigate growing up in nearly all-white communities, with parents who have themselves not been faced with racism. This is perhaps because, while *Generación Mei Ming* presents a series of interviews with young adopted Chinese girls, in *Zhao*, even though centering the story on a young adopted Chinese girl as a protagonist, the film is a fictional imagining from Gonzalvo's perspective, who drew on her own experience adopting her daughter from China, of what the future of a young girl like her daughter would be.

These differences between Gózman Rollán and Gonzalvo's films are evident from the opening scene of *Zhao*. The film begins with a sequence of tracking shots which feature a medium close-up shot of Zhao walking through the streets captured by a documentary-like mobility that roves the filmic *mise-en-scène* of the Spanish market behind her. As she moves, the viewer may notice the people in the market looking at her as she passes by. This aspect of the opening of the film parallels comments by some of the girls interviewed in *Generación Mei Ming* regarding their experience walking through the streets of their cities, for example describing being looked at while they walk with their family because people don't

understand that they are with their family. However, in *Zhao*, while the bold composition and movement of this shot generates an enigmatic persona around her character, her racial difference is given less emphasis since her features are concealed under a large pair of sunglasses that covers most of her face, and consequently, the epicanthic fold that would call attention to her Asian heritage. This slowly shifts to a shallow depth of field tracking shot that blurs the background of the market and isolates the viewer's focus on a close-up shot of Zhao's face as she continues walking. The sequence lasts nearly two minutes, during which time the viewer is completely focused on Zhao as her presence dominates the screen and emphasizes her protagonism in the eponymous film. The opening shot seems to push society to the background, an aspect also emphasized in later scenes as she describes wanting a "desconexión total" during her getaway with Martín, in order to fully focus on herself and ultimately highlight her own internal process as she strives to culturally locate herself. In doing so, Gonzalvo's film approaches the contradictions of belonging that encompass the life experiences of transnational adoptees through the inward journey of the protagonist as she grapples with the paradoxes surrounding her self-image and self-identification.

It is noteworthy that from these first scenes, the construction of Zhao's character emphasizes her constant movement to match the multiple points of identity exhibited by her throughout the film. After the close of the opening shot, Zhao finally arrives at Martín's apartment, and the screen fades into a dark background from which the film's title emerges and then shifts into a voice-over sequence which tells the story of Zhao's adoption in China by Spanish parents. Together the scenes construct a non-linear narrative that continues throughout the film and resonates with Zhao's exploration of her cultural identity, one that weaves together multiple threads as it moves between Zhao's past and present as well as her connections to both China and Spain. In her analysis of the impact of transnational adoption on identity formation among children Barbara Yngvesson notes that: "As the locus of ambiguity, of a likeness ... that is simultaneously a not-likeness ... the adoptee evokes discomfort, curiosity, and a pull to self-definition in selves – both adoptive and native-born" (*Belonging* 36). Similar to the "tug of war" between varying parts of the self that Yngvesson describes, it is my intention to call attention to the non-linear narrative structure of the film as a means to avoid compromising the representation of Zhao's identity as existing on a binary plain since this element in the film makes it difficult to chart her life as a progression from one definitive point to another. Rather, the use of a non-linear narrative structure illustrates her life story as one of constant, varying forms of movement. Additionally, drawing attention to the ways her life has been

defined by movement reveals Zhao's difficulty as an adopted child to feel wholly integrated into a particular society or culture.

The subsequent scenes depicting the reasoning behind Zhao's parents' decision to adopt another child and their journey to China are interlaced with her and Martín's present drive to a vacation home they have rented. The film continues to add levels of complexity to Zhao's character by fusing her and Martín's getaway with a series of memories – in the form of flashback sequences – that offer a symbolic framework through which the viewer may closely understand how Zhao perceives herself, the world around her and her position within it. In the film's first flashback sequence, Zhao is shown as a young girl with her Spanish sister and her grandmother who took them in after their parents' death. Her grandmother tells her sister that she must teach Zhao “lo que sus padres querían que supiese” (*Zhao* 00:14:30). Following her grandmother's instructions, her sister is shown teaching Zhao how to smoke while Zhao imitates her gestures, pursing her lips to copy her sister's facial expression and attitude while holding the imaginary cigarette. As her teacher, her sister – a white, Spanish girl – instructs Zhao in Western behaviors and attitudes. She also shows Zhao on a globe where she is originally from, China. This is the start of her sister's attempt to provide Zhao with a cultural education, or what Heather Jacobson has termed “culture keeping,” a way to facilitate “a solid ethnic identity and sense of self-worth in children who may experience difficulties because of racial, ethnic, and adoptive statuses” (2). This aspect is further emphasized in the subsequent scene which focuses on the education Zhao receives at school. She is shown in a classroom full of Asian children, who are being taught in Spanish to speak Chinese. The teacher repeats Chinese letters so that the students can learn the sound of the language. As Jacobson describes, culture keeping “is meant to replicate partially the cultural education internationally adopted children would receive if they were being raised within a family of their own ethnic heritage. It is meant to help mitigate some of the challenges of living in an interracial and ethnically diverse family formed across national borders” (2). The representation of Zhao's cultural education in the film is additionally in keeping with the conclusions expressed at the 1993 Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption, which recognized the importance of preserving information about adopted children's origins and was ratified by Spain in 1995. These principles are also reinforced by Spain's Ley de Adopción passed in 2007 (*Ley 54/2007*), which references these proceedings as well as reaffirms the significance of the principles provided in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989. The Convention endorses “the right of the child to preserve his

or her identity, including nationality, name and family relations as recognized by law" (United Nations *Convention*, Article 8).

Apart from scenes of a young Zhao learning to speak Chinese and about Chinese culture at school, Zhao's connection to China is portrayed through her contact with Grupo Zero, a Canadian group committed to Chinese culture and present in several countries. Ultimately, Zhao's contact with the group not only serves as a source of cultural education, but – as revealed at the end of the film – integrates her into an international effort by members of Grupo Zero to call attention to the negative effects of China's One-Child Policy. Specifically, Zhao intends to return to China in an effort to call attention to the many abductions of women, particularly women with Asian traits, by gangs who intend to marry them off. These abductions occur in the country as a result of the gender imbalance caused by the One-Child Policy. In a flashback sequence, we see Zhao shown at school sitting in a line of girls as they receive instructions on Chinese etiquette from one of the Grupo Zero members. In this scene, Zhao's body also serves as a site of contradicting symbols and signifiers that elicit a sense of belonging to multiple cultural institutions. The group of young girls are told how they will need to act and, more importantly, look to pass as Chinese. Moving down the line of girls, the instructor tells them not to wear perfume or jewelry and to dress conservatively. Looking at Zhao, she leans down and turns her head to reveal the tattoo hidden under her hair behind her left ear, stating: "Este tatuaje nunca" (*Zhao* 00:31:22). Zhao lifts her hand to cover the tattoo while the instructor continues directing the students in proper Chinese attire, concluding: "Méteros en la piel de estas mujeres" (*Zhao* 00:31:24). Her remarks reveal that, in spite of being born in China, the girls are located outside of appropriate notions of Chinese "skin" due to the Westernization of their bodies through the previously mentioned perfume, jewelry, and, in the case of Zhao, tattoos.

The tattoos on Zhao's body are symbolic of the ambivalence experienced by adoptees as they simultaneously embody a likeness and not-likeness in both adoptive and native-born cultures. They also, I would argue, open a space in which a more complex understanding of self-identification can materialize. Zhao's physical expression of herself – in this case expressed through her decision to tattoo her body – demonstrates her position between two cultural narratives, but also the agency she finds and exhibits from this position. Her ability to perform and embody her own identity in a way that disturbs exclusive projections of cultural belonging is further illustrated in a subsequent scene in which Martín is shown touching up the tattoo on Zhao's neck and she asks him to tattoo his name on her chest. Although Martín marks Zhao's body, it is only at her request. This is particularly important when considering the final scenes of the film, when

Zhao is seen on a balcony before leaving Spain for China caressing the tattoo of Martín's name on her chest (*Zhao* 01:18:51). By tattooing her body, Zhao establishes a permanent visual representation of herself that reflects her own life experience across multiple countries and cultures that she will carry with her to China. With each tattoo, Zhao's body changes to outwardly reflect her internal process of self-identification as she discovers her own expression of cultural belonging.

Zhao's attempt to culturally locate herself is further constructed through flashback sequences showing her engaging with the memory of her two mothers, biological and adoptive. Since the mother-daughter relationship serves as a means for communicating origins, in *Zhao*, this relationship, as seen constructed through memory and objects from the past, is related to Zhao's exploration of her own cultural and racial identity. The memory of her biological mother is constructed around a piece of paper left with her as an infant. The film uses a voice-over sequence in which Zhao explains her birth and abandonment, which parallels the experience of hundreds of other Chinese girls (*Zhao* 00:32:16). The sequence shifts to a teenage Zhao watching home videos of her adoptive mother and father in her grandmother's house while holding the small piece of paper left with her by her biological mother before abandoning her as a baby. The camera zooms in on Zhao as she reads the piece of paper, smells it and pulls it in close to her face, displaying a sense of closeness, connection and even comfort from her biological mother while holding it. At the same time Zhao presses the paper against her cheek, she caresses the screen of the television while watching a home video of her adoptive mother holding her as a baby on her lap, singing a song. If the mother-daughter relationship is seen as not only a familial, but also a cultural bond, the emotional reaction of Zhao as she simultaneously clings to the piece of paper and watches videos of her and her adoptive mother, accentuates her mixed cultural origins.

Throughout the film Zhao's memories of her adoptive and biological families are intertwined with textual media in the form of news reports about China. Zhao's enthrallment with many forms of textual media throughout the film is akin to Arjun Appadurai's observations concerning the cultural consequences of globalization, connecting the flow of digital media with what he terms the "social imagination" (30). Appadurai argues that migration and electronic media are creating new forms of social imagination in a deterritorialized world where people and things are less tied to a particular place – or nation-state. Rather, through the space of the social imagination an individual or group is able to imagine their own identity as well as act on it. Appadurai explains these new forms of social imagination are produced in the world by global flows, which he terms "scapes" (33). In the context of my analysis of *Zhao*, the author's definition of

“mediascapes” as the “distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information” highlights the ways in which Zhao is able to connect both with representations of Chinese culture as well as stories concerning the international impact of China’s gender imbalance (Appadurai 35). For example, shortly after arriving at the beach house, Zhao is shown watching a news report in Chinese about a group of European women that have travelled to a village in China that is populated by men. The story explains that, due to the gender imbalance in the country, they are seen as potential wives. They will stay for four weeks, participating in various social functions, and that those who find “el hombre de su vida” will marry and stay in China. In the film, the story of the women traveling to China connects with several other media accounts of European women who have been reported abducted while visiting the county. Zhao follows the stories closely and is shown watching various media clips as intently as she watches home video clips of her own family. The media stories interlaced with the frequent video clips of Chinese culture she is shown viewing throughout the film display the influence and importance of technology in her own process of self-identification.

It is important to emphasize that Zhao’s engagement with textual media throughout the film does not merely serve as a means for her to passively connect with China and Chinese culture. These scenes also exhibit the agency Zhao achieves while engaging in the space of the social imagination via the various mediascapes she enters into throughout the film. As Appadurai explains, the imagination directly related to processes of cultural identification is “[n]o longer mere fantasy ... The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order” (31). Understood through Appadurai’s observations, Zhao’s interaction with different forms of textual media throughout the film illustrates her ability to imagine her life and her cultural bonds beyond the boundaries of the Spanish nation-state where she has come of age. In other words, it is through textual media that Zhao has access to materials that enable her to assemble her Chinese cultural heritage as well as follow the global consequences of China’s One-Child Policy. Consequently, these mediascapes enable Zhao to forge her identity in a modern globalized world through a multiplicity of materials that come together within her and underscore the differences and contrasts that closely align with her everyday experience as an adult transnational adoptee.

The images of her past with her family and friends as well as viewing current events in China are mixed with the memories Zhao presently creates with Martín. As a photographer, Martín is shown throughout the film taking various pictures, particularly of different types of insects as he studies their habits and documents their behaviors. It is not surprising that

Zhao's love interest in the film is a photographer. Through his photographs Martín serves as a constructor of memory, and his desire to understand and document various insects parallels Zhao's interest in documenting and exploring herself. Martín is, however, frustrated by Zhao's obsession with memory and constantly urges her to allow herself to live in the present without being haunted by her past. Walking in on Zhao watching her family's home videos on her computer, Martín asks if she has ever read a series of stories by Julio Cortázar titled *Historias de cronopios y famas* (1962). As Martín explains to Zhao, the story is about two different types of beings, the famas and the cronopios. In the story, the cronopios are chaotic, disorganized and unsystematic while the famas are extremely precise, anxious and exceedingly careful in their plans. The story uses various examples to contrast the cronopios and the famas such as their different approaches to travel, time, and eating habits. Of particular interest to Martín in reference to Zhao is their approach to saving and organizing memories. Martín explains to Zhao that the famas feel the need to carefully label each of their memories and compile them into categories. As he describes the famas' careful organizational system, Zhao visualizes her own memories stacked neatly in boxes with specific labels on the adjacent shelf. She then walks over to the imaginary boxes and carefully secures them on the shelf while Martín continues explaining the story. Martín's description quickly turns into harsh criticism of Zhao's constant clinging to her past, as he stands and opens the door, asking her: "¿Por qué no dejas de ser la reina de los famas y dejas que tus recuerdos salgan a dar una vuelta?" (*Zhao* 01:11:03). Zhao immediately stands and runs to shut the door in a panic. She breathes heavily, her face is frightened and unnerved as she turns around to see the boxes of her memories on the floor, edging towards the door, but now safely contained.

For Martín, the past and his memories form part of the present, but they exist among many other elements that construct his identity. Martín also lost his parents when he was young, as he explains in an earlier scene; yet, he differs from Zhao in that he does not feel confused or anxious about his past. It is Martín's position within his country of origin that demonstrates the most obvious difference between himself and Zhao. Martín indicates that he has also been haunted to a certain degree by the memory of his father stating: "Me he enterado de que he vivido toda la vida intentando ser como él" (*Zhao* 01:08:52). But, as a native Spaniard in Spain, Martín has not felt constantly pressured to identify his cultural origins and ethnicity. It is Zhao's position as a transnational adoptee, that explains her preoccupation with and concern for her memories. Sara K. Dorow notes the following in her analysis of the ways in which meaning, identity and value are constructed by and around transnational adoptees:

The individual adopted child's history recalls the multiple histories around her, from the gendered disciplinary circumstances of her abandonment, to the transnational movement of resources that help prepare her for adoption, to the racial and national discourses that both invite and potentially compromise her citizenship. In other words, the "identity issues" of post-adoption are not just the result of leftover feelings of loss and rejection or individual experiences with racial prejudice; rather, they surface because the historical raced, gendered, and classed conditions of abandonment and adoption are *still present*. (25)

The experience outlined by Dorow is the reason memory (in the form of home videos, her own recollection of her childhood and the small piece of paper from her biological mother) is significantly more important to Zhao than to Martín, since it is through her memories that she is able to sort through her own identity and in this way arrive at conclusions about how she identifies herself. Zhao's memories in the film are the manifestation of an unsettled past that she attempts to organize and control.

The end of the film reveals Zhao's conclusions with regards to her journey through her past and present. Zhao plans to return to China in an effort to draw international attention to the abduction and disappearance of various women as a result of the country's large gender imbalance. Although Martín begs Zhao to stay, arguing that she is from Spain, Zhao responds: "Pero también soy de ahí" (*Zhao* 01:15:44). The film ends with her departure and transitions into a series of international news reports from various countries (Spain, United States, Italy), all reporting the disappearance of various women in China. Zhao and her faceless compatriots' cultural identity is portrayed by the media as Chinese-Italian and Spanish-Chinese girls, among other nationalities. The film's conclusion is the culmination of the Zhao's negotiation of her own identity and corresponds with the many memories shared with viewers throughout the film. The final scenes demonstrate that Zhao never fully identified as belonging to either Spanish or Chinese culture, but rather as being part of a community that exists outside of the definitions and traditional notions of statehood and citizenship. The community she identifies with is one that straddles cultural lines and raises questions concerning definitive notions of ethnic and national identity.

The telling of Zhao's life story in Gonzalvo's film invites the spectator to explore the importance and impact of transnational movements and, in particular, the effects of the significant increase in international adoption in the world. In *Zhao*, this focus is centered on the adopted person's self-constructed identity. Gonzalvo's film serves as a lens for examining the internal process of transnational adoptees by emphasizing the anxieties,

multiple bonds and ambiguities developed throughout Zhao's movement from orphanage to adoptive family as well as from China to the European neighborhoods of Spain. The non-linear narrative in the film underscores Zhao's movement among different cultures and demonstrates her struggle to reconcile her own sense of belonging and non-belonging within both Chinese and Spanish culture. When compared to *Generación Mei Ming*, Gonzalvo's film demonstrates limited attention to the racial prejudices that transnational Chinese adopted girls face, and the director's choice of a bi-racial actress impairs the film's depiction of the struggles faced by transnational adoptees. Gonzalvo's film does, however, shift the focus found in other fictional portrayals of transnational adoption that center on sites and actors surrounding the difficult process of adoption to one that centers on the adopted person's self-constructed identity and the impact such experiences have on their development. In this way, the representation of a transnational adoptee in *Zhao* functions as a tool for discussing changing notions of citizenship, ethnicity and belonging.

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NOTES

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