

'Nomadland': An American or Chinese Story? Review of 'Nomadland' (Chloe Zhao, 2020)

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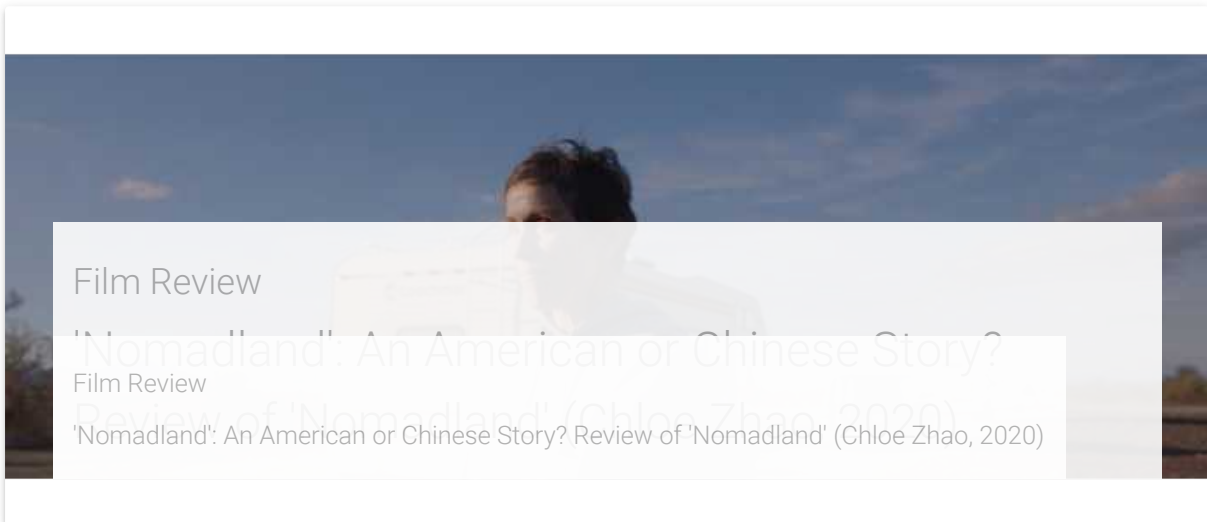
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The Hollywood novice and outsider Chloe Zhao wrote, directed, and edited *Nomadland* (2021), the Oscar-crowned best picture that has generated far more international attention than all the rest of its fellow academy Best Picture nominees for 2021, including the much talked about (at least among seasoned Hollywood watchers and practitioners) *Mank*, a meta cinematic tale about the birth of Hollywood's legendary film *Citizen Kane*, from the quintessential US film industry insider David Fincher. *Nomadland*, a film set in the American hinterland, has somehow outshined *Mank* among the chattering classes—not necessarily for its cinematic feats but for the director's Chinese origin. It is China—not the Academy Award nor *Nomadland* as an artistic text—that has become the focus of most of the media coverage about the film.

The China-born but UK- and US-educated Chloe Zhao won the Best Director award at the Golden Globes on February 28, 2021, in an early harbinger of the film's later award season success. The Chinese Internet lit up in response to Zhao's Golden Globe, proudly claiming the otherwise little-known filmmaker as China's native daughter. But the initial euphoria in China quickly turned sour when old interviews surfaced that Zhao had been critical of China on a couple of occasions, including an interview she gave that revealed she was drawn to stories about the American heartland as a result of her upbringing in China, "a place where there are lies everywhere," to use her own words.¹ Zhao's subsequent Oscar win received scant official coverage in China but provided fodder for ample coverage in the West of censorship, making *Nomadland* an obligatory story about China. In an era when China has become the single most dominant topic, the story of *Nomadland* inevitably falls into the normative China discourse. Is *Nomadland* an American or Chinese story?

***Nomadland* as an American Myth**

A story about mostly elderly van dwellers set in modern-day United States, *Nomadland* is an adaptation of Jessica Bruder's 2017 nonfiction book *Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century*, which follows a group of itinerant workers—predominantly white and in the Trump world literally and metaphorically—as they travel the path of seasonal jobs to eke out a meagre living. If there is a strong political and moral condemnation of a system that has failed to protect the dispossessed and the elderly in Bruder's original text, the film has mostly transformed such a repudiation into a celebration of resilience, self-reliance, and the rugged individualism and freedom engendered by the open road. The film casts a utopian light on the roaming workcampers, projecting them as individuals who willingly combine work with travel by swapping brick and mortar real estate for the liberating vans, RVs, and other forms of "wheel estate." Instead of seeing the work

campers as the casualties of the 2008 economic downturn, Zhao's cinematic rendition amplifies the liberating power of their journey toward self-discovery and self-fulfillment as it spotlights the gumption and work ethic of the wanderers. Muted is the critique of the systematic letdown of the elderly and the working class. Unlike the desperate white Okies in *The Grapes of Wrath* (John Ford, 1940) who are forced to travel to escape poverty, the characters in *Nomadland* are the brave and the bold who embrace the life of an open road, with no desire to settle and no need for a home to return to. "I'm not homeless," as Fern, the main character in *Nomadland*, declares, "I'm just houseless."²

The people living on the edge of society wander as a choice rather than a condition in the film. The transformation of *Nomadland* from an expose about American poverty to a film about individual resilience is unmistakably Zhao's touch. Such an attitudinal orientation is reflected in her two previous films, *Songs My Brothers Taught Me* (2015), which explores the bond between two Lakota Sioux siblings set in the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, and *The Rider* (2017), which features a young cowboy in South Dakota fighting to regain his footing in the world after suffering a life-threatening injury. Both films celebrate the triumph of people on the margins who overcome hardship and inner demons, and in the process learn to connect and make peace with the land and the natural environment. There is almost a sacred deference to the landscape in all its natural glory throughout all three films that Zhao has made so far, which inadvertently resurrects the myth of the American West.



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Figure 1:

Frances McDormand as Fern in Nomadland. This shot is one of the most popular from the film. Source: © Searchlight Pictures.

Debunking or Celebrating the Myth of the American West

Emily VanDerWerff, a critic at large for Vox who herself grew up in the American hinterland is critical of Zhao's perpetuation of such a myth: "She [Zhao] is superb at capturing how that part of the country feels about itself—a rugged, romantic individualism full of cowboy myth and rough- and-ready ideals. But I think she is sometimes too unwilling to puncture that myth, for whatever reason."³ The "whatever reason" might have to do with Zhao's position as a cultural outsider with no historical memory and political urgency nor certain ideological predispositions to unpack the myth of the frontier that has advanced the most ruthless version of US capitalism.

But the "whatever reason" might also be that Zhao has her own unique take on the American West, which genuinely embraces a more celebratory view of US individualism and averts films that take a critical stand on political issues. Consistent throughout Zhao's short oeuvre is her insistence on a nonjudgmental approach that lets the characters define their own stories. Both *The Rider* and *Nomadland* feature real-life characters with voices of their own that set the tone on how they wish to be perceived by the world—not as problems but as individuals who control their own destiny. In a live interview conducted at the University of Oregon in May 2018, after she made *The Rider*, Zhao told eager film students that "I was much more interested in portraying them [the characters in *The Rider*] as human beings rather than issues."⁴ "I know they don't want to be remembered as an issue, as victims. They want to be remembered with dignity," reiterated Zhao in a later interview with the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in February 2021, this time about *Nomadland* after the film brought her the Best Director award at the Golden Globe.⁵ "Issues" in Zhao's usage can perhaps be more accurately interpreted as staking a political and ideological positioning.

The Aversion to Politics and Zhao's China Link

The "not a film about issues" claim is not surprising, given Zhao's personal background as the daughter of a ranking Chinese Communist Party (CCP) family with a front-row seat on the viciousness of frequent "issues" masking party politics. Zhao's maternal great-grandfather was Huang Huoging, the procurator-general of the Supreme People's Procuratorate of China from 1978 to 1983 who presided over the persecution of the notorious Gang of Four.⁶ Huang Yichen, Huang Huoqing's son, and Zhao's grandfather, was the People's Republic of China's minister of energy from

1988 to 1993. The hushed official Chinese coverage of Zhao upon her Oscar nod likely followed the party's as well as the family's wish to remain under the radar so as to avoid a potential political fallout by incurring the wrath of the new party elite or the patriotic Chinese netizens who questioned Zhao's political allegiances. Though her particular family background puts her in a tenuous position, Zhao is not unique in wanting to steer clear of politics and ideology. The urge to avoid engaging politics is symptomatic of the deep-rooted suspicion and apprehension among generations of Chinese living under the CCP's incessant and invasive political campaigns, which have politicized all aspects of people's lives. Seen in this light, the aversion to political engagement is not a simple matter of lack of critical awareness.

Interesting to note that, in making her films, Zhao has in mind audiences back in China: "I keep thinking about my family back in China—how would they feel about a cowboy in South Dakota, or a woman in her 60s living in America?" she said: "If I make it too specific to any issues, I know it's going to create a barrier. They'd go, 'That's their problem.'"⁷ Elsewhere, Zhao said that "I always think when I make a film, I want my family back in China, who don't speak English and don't care much what is happening here, to be able to watch this movie and relate. To do that, I have to focus on human stories."⁸ But watch they cannot, back in China—at least, not officially, though I ironically watched it, before the film was officially distributed in Hong Kong on an illegal Chinese streaming site with Chinese subtitles supplied by a film buff in China.



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Figure 2:

Frances McDormand and director Chloe Zhao share a moment in the set of *Nomadland*. Source: © Searchlight Pictures via France24

(<https://www.france24.com/en/culture/20210411-gig-economy-film-nomadland-wins-four-bafta-awards-including-best-picture>).

Zhao's nonissue posturing notwithstanding, American critics do "take issues" with *Nomadland* for its airbrushing of the exploitations of Amazon, for its lack of racial diversity by featuring mostly white characters and for its thematic neutrality. Where the original book calls our attention to the shady practices of Amazon for offering free painkillers that makes it possible for the elderly employees to bend and lift for ten hours at a stretch, Zhao's film shows the company giving jobs to people in need. At a group discussion about the film, Emily VanDerWerff expressed her frustration over the film's lack of a clear message: "I wouldn't need it to be more direct about capitalism if it was less evasive with Fern, and vice versa. As it stands, it's a movie about something failing somebody, and then it all ends with a vague justification of, 'Well, we're all sad.'" ⁹

As for the charge of whiteness, one critic wonders how the film might look and feel if, say, a black or brown actor instead of Frances McDormand were to be cast as Fern. ¹⁰ Would the film elicit different reactions were it to feature an Asian in the lead? Zhao's racial insensitivity or "color-blindness" might have been the result of her lack of exposure and deep understanding of the history of racial tension in the United States. But accentuating race would have turned the picture into an "issue film," something Zhao has insisted on avoiding.

As if to ward off any potential political traps, Zhao has been persistently adamant about the nonissue nature of her work. In an interview with *Indiewire* in September 2020, Zhao let it be known that she made a deliberate effort to depoliticize the story: "I tried to focus on the human experience and things that I feel go beyond political statements to be more universal—the loss of a loved one, searching for home." ¹¹ In December 2020, during an interview with the *Sunday Morning Herald*, Zhao said, "My instinct is to talk more about the things that relate us than the things that can potentially divide us." ¹² In February 2021, to the same *Indiewire*, Zhao again reiterated, "I want to make films that last, that have a timeless feel to them, that aren't just a flash in the pan with whatever topic is trending on Twitter right now. I'm not interested in that stuff." ¹³

In the end, *Nomadland*'s "whiteness" both in culture and in characters it features is very much a given, as the story takes place in white Trump country, the place its leading lady, Frances McDormand, was born into.

***Nomadland* and Frances McDormand**

Though the film is directed by Zhao, it is Frances McDormand—an actress who has called her own upbringing "white trash" ¹⁴—who lends the weight to, and whose very presence makes the film. *Nomadland* singles out the story of Fern, a newly widowed woman and novice van dweller who joins others to spend their golden years working

odd jobs across the American West. The silhouette of a solitary Fern/McDormand with her impenetrable yet soft gaze into the distance against the vast landscape embodies *Nomadland*. In what Justin Chang describes as “the innate kinship between character and actor,” McDormand’s serenely wistful face embodies Fern, whose character remains an enigma to us with her guarded smile and watchful gaze and the skeletal personal history that the film cares to reveal to us.¹⁵ There is pain but also beauty in Fern’s loneliness.

Despite the stillness of her weathered face and her easygoing smiles for new friends, there is a restlessness in Fern that pushes against societal norms.¹⁶ A reluctant work camper initially, Fern must overcome trepidations. “I couldn’t pack up and move on,” Fern says in the film: “I couldn’t leave [Beau] ... we didn’t have kids ... if I left, it would be like he never existed, so I stayed as long as I could.” Fern finally hits the road, taking her uncalled-for freedom for the ride. On the road alone, with the vast unknown, must be unsettling, but the hauntingly beautiful wildness is equally alluring. Traversed by the real-life nomads, the landscape of the American West adds new meanings to the old iconographies of Hollywood’s westerns. McDormand transforms Zhao’s at-times romanticized version of the Western frontier into a meditation on loss and the struggle to simultaneously hold onto and let go of the past.



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Figure 3:

Frances McDormand as Fern in *Nomadland*. Source: © Searchlight Pictures.

As one blogger put it while commenting on *Nomadland*, “Loss can feel like a nowhere land of moving aimlessly from feeling to feeling, place to place, inside your mind. You’ve lost the home you know, with a person that you love. There’s sadness, anger, memories—as you grapple with the challenges of an uprooted life. Chloé Zhao’s Best Picture nominee, *Nomadland*, takes us there, with Frances McDormand’s Fern leading the way through the open expanses of loss. Loss is a journey, not unlike the one Fern takes in her trusty van, Vanguard.”¹⁷ And there is so much Fern holds in that we are left with the overwhelming sensation of loss and longing, all kept behind

McDormand's eyes. While uniquely American set against the North America landscape and personal to Fern, the theme of loss and grief is universal.¹⁸

In an interview with the *Sunday Morning Herald* in December 2020, McDormand quoted an observation made by a journalist about her performance in *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*: "They said, you know, that 'a close-up of Frances McDormand's face is like visiting a national park.'"¹⁹ McDormand loves the quote "because it is about an unaltered, ageing face that gives you perspective, like a natural landscape."²⁰ Indeed, McDormand's face is the embodiment of the weathered yet resilient America that refuses to be beaten down, which is the motif of *Nomadland* under Zhao. The tough-as-nails spirit in Fern fits into Zhao's cinematic universe.²¹

Interestingly, it takes a sojourner from across the ocean to discover anew, and shine the light on, the enigmatically weathered face of McDormand. Hollywood worships the young and eschews the wrinkled when it comes to featuring female leads. Now a sexagenarian and never a conventional beauty, McDormand is finding it challenge to secure good roles. Hollywood "is such an ageist industry," Zhao told a *New York Times* reporter: "Someone like Frances McDormand who is just so authentically herself, who has not tried to erase those lines on her face or cover that up to fit into the industry—to me, she'll be relevant forever."²² It takes an outsider to appreciate and preserve the face of McDormand and, in turn, America. The result is a performance that simply lets the aged actor be.



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Figure 4:

Zhao and McDormand in the set of *Nomadland*. Source: © Searchlight Pictures via *India Times*.

Last but not the least, there is "a spiritual presence" hovering over the film, notes Justin Chang, who uses the term *grace* to capture the aura of this sparingly plotted

yet emotionally rich movie. The grace is what transcends a potentially “issue film” into a film about humanity.²³ The grace is delivered by “plaintive musical score”²⁴ of Ludovico Einaudi and the meditative landscape captured by the cinematographer, who happens to be Zhao’s beau. The film is a profound meditation on the impermanence of life and on our simultaneous yearning for solitude and for the company of others. The film in the end is about an attitude and a world view.

“I’ll see you down the road,” calls out Bob Wells, one of the real-life characters, which encapsulates the film’s almost Zen-like acceptance of one’s inner peace and solitude as we embark on our journey, crisscross each other, and be at each other’s side when chance encounters allow. For the duration of the film, we as viewers are offered the privilege of traveling alongside Fern and her fellow nomads. Watching the film is akin to embarking on an adventure with random encounters, some long-lasting, some transitory, but always thrilling. In the end, *Nomadland* is a universal story located in the American hinterland and seen through the eyes of a Chinese sojourner.

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