

The Search for Family in Post-Socialist China: A Study of The Orphan of Anyang (2001)

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Abstract:

This paper looks at the film *The Orphan of Anyang* for examples on how the modern Chinese family is constructed in post-socialist China. From this film, viewers can see how the characters in the film who represent individuals in the underbelly of Chinese society struggle to construct families based on traditional Chinese cultural influences as well as western influences. This return to tradition as well as the move towards westernization of the Chinese family is the result of the fall of communism, where individuals were supported by the state. Without the state providing for them, individuals had to enter the new global capitalist society and find support in other areas, one of the areas being the concept of the traditional Chinese family. Yet this attempted return to tradition is met with the new challenges of a post-socialist realities which demands adaptations to new marketable professions as well as changes in gender roles and hierarchies within the family. Throughout the film, the characters struggle with these conceptions of family in a new post-socialist China.

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The 2001 film, *The Orphan of Anyang* was directed by Sixth Generation filmmaker Wang Chao. The *Sixth Generation* is a common term used to refer to directors who began making films in China during the 1990s and whose films often reflect a Post-Maoist social realism. Their films directly contrast with their predecessors in several ways. For example, *Sixth Generation* filmmakers were not funded by the state. In addition as film critic Stephen Teo points out “Unlike the *Fifth Generation*, the *Sixth Generation* brings a more individualistic, anti-romantic life-view and pays far closer attention to contemporary urban life, especially those affected by disorientation, rebellion and dissatisfaction with China's contemporary social tensions.”(2003) Stylistically, the *Sixth Generation* filmmakers often utilize documentary style filming including long takes, derelict urban settings and amateur actors in order to create films that reclaim reality. The subject matter in these films are rarely epic, and are more likely to represent ordinary people or even individuals in the underbelly of Chinese society such as migrant workers, prostitutes or petty thieves. Therefore, the realism of the film techniques used by these directors aims at reinforcing the realism of the subject matter they portray. *The Orphan of Anyang* is a typical example of a *Sixth Generation* director's artistic style and choice of characters.

1. PORTRAYAL OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE URBAN LIFE

The film begins with the protagonist, Dagang. The audience meets Dagang after he has been laid off from his factory job where he has worked most of his life. We see him aimlessly roaming the depressing streets of the city of Anyang. The setting of the film is a typical *Sixth Generation* pursuit; it is urban, and it is filmed on scene, giving a realist representation of Anyang as a modern Chinese city. The character is also typical of other *Sixth Generation* films in that Dagang is hardly a hero but, instead a common lower-class individual struggling with real life problems such as being laid off from work. Left with no job and no money, we see how Dagang struggles to find a new way to survive in this post-socialist society. All he has ever known is life and work within the factory, itself a remnant of communist China.

The plot moves forward as that evening, Dagang goes to a noodle shop for dinner, but finds that all he has in his pocket are vouchers for the factory cafeteria. These vouchers were distributed to factory workers and were used as a substitute for money within the Chinese communist factory system. Outside the factory system, where Dagang finds himself after being laid off, the vouchers are useless.

Embarrassed, he returns to his apartment and attempts to trade these vouchers for cash with his neighbors who are still employed at the factory. When he finally finds a neighbor willing to trade he returns to the noodle shop to eat. The cook asks him to hold a baby while he makes Dagang's meal. Dagang discovers that the baby is an orphan and that the mother will pay whoever cares for the baby 200rmb a month. Jobless, and almost penniless, Dagang asks to take the baby from the cook and adopt it.

This is when the audience meets Feng Yanli, a prostitute and also the mother of the baby that DaGang has adopted. We find out throughout the movie that Yanli is actually not from the city

but came there to work and earn money to send back home to her father. This at the time was a common phenomenon, with Yanli just one of many men and women who migrated to the city in post-socialist China in search for jobs that paid in this new market economy.

Unable to find other work, Yanli turns to prostitution, a marketable service that provides for her as well as allows her to send money home to her family. As a result of this lifestyle, she becomes pregnant with her boss's baby. Her boss, whose name is Sade is a not only a pimp, but he also appears to be the leader of some type of gang. He does not help Yanli support the baby nor does he claim the child until the end of the movie after he discovers he is dying and that the child may be his only heir.

As the plot unfolds, and Yanli and Dagang meet, they arrange to move in together in Dagang's factory provided apartment. She continues to work as a prostitute, bringing clients to their home while Dagang opens up his own small street business fixing bikes. The film seems to suggest that the two will eventually get married, Yanli will quit her profession and they will raise the child together. However, tragedy strikes when Yanli's boss comes to claim the baby as his and take it away. Dagang ends up killing Sade in defense, the result of which is that Dagang is sentenced to death, and Yanli must continue to work as a prostitute supporting and caring for the baby alone.

The movie ends with Yanli's prostitute gang being broken up by police. As she runs away she hands the baby over to a stranger. This act reminds the viewer of how the movie began when she first handed her child over to the care of a stranger. When she returns to retrieve the baby, the stranger is gone and she is caught by a policeman. She, along with other women who were working as prostitutes, are herded into a large truck and sent back to the country side. Presumably, Yanli will never see the baby again.

From this film we can see the main characters struggling to construct a conventional family under less than perfect conditions. As the post-socialist Chinese society around them changes, and moves towards a harsher market economy, the characters find themselves in new situations that require adaptation. An example of this can be the professions that the characters choose. Neither prostitution nor the bike repair businesses are ideal, yet in order to survive in the new market economy, the characters adapt.

Similarly, the new societal conditions prevalent in post-socialist China make the construction of the traditional Chinese family archetype or even the newer westernized "nuclear family" nearly impossible. Yet the characters adapt to these conditions and nonetheless try to construct a family as best they can. They pull elements from Chinese traditions, as well as newer westernized ideas of family in an attempt to create a support system in the aggressively consumerist Chinese society.

2. EVOLUTION OF THE CHINESE FAMILY

Throughout China's long imperial period, the model of the ideal Chinese family was prescribed by Confucian beliefs. These beliefs, as social anthropologist Francesca Bray points out in her study, *Technology and Gender; Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China*, "were structured on hierarchies of generation, age, and gender," and that "differentiation in rank was fundamental to the Chinese sense of social order." (1997; 123) In fact, it was also believed that the morality of the society as a whole was dependent on these hierarchies. Men would lead women, women would follow men, parents would lead children, and children would follow parents, the state would lead its citizens and the citizens would follow the state. Thus, the hierarchies were coded in patriarchal terms and were meant to order the population as well as control the morality of individuals.

The focus on the traditional family unit changed drastically during the Mao Era starting as early as 1949 when the political ideology tried to move away from traditional thinking. As C.K Chang and Talcott Parsons argue in their book *The Chinese family and the Cultural Revolution*, "The reform of the Chinese family, along with the remaking of other major social institutions, became a part of an over-all drastic social change." (1959; 17) During this time the focus shifted from the family towards the community and Confucian ethics were rejected. In the country-side families were moved into collectivized communes and in urban settings families were moved into factory provided apartments complexes. The factory system in which Dagang spent most of his life was structured around socialist concepts of communal living prevalent in socialist Mao ruled China.

Aside from being the location of work for laborers, the factory also provided and, in some ways controlled other aspects of the Chinese worker's life. For example, the factory provided communal housing. We see that the building in which Dagang lives in is a communal compound where other workers also live, side by side in one room apartments. There is also the example of the meal vouchers that were distributed to the factory workers, dictating and controlling where and what the workers ate.

Xiaoping Lin points out in his article, *Behind Chinese Walls; the Uncanny Power of Matriarchy in Wang Chao's The Orphan of Anyang*, that the state ended up replacing the traditional family unit during the Cultural Revolution. The state in the form of the factory system provided for its employees in the same way a mother would provide for her children. She fed them in the form of food vouchers and housed them in the factory apartment compounds. This is the system in which the protagonist Dagang grew up in, lived and worked in until the closing of the factory. Xiaoping Lin points out that "As a devoted employee at his factory, Dagang had always trusted in the system like a child who relied on his parents." (2009; 199) Therefore, the state became the primary provider for individuals, during the Maoist era.

However, with the fall of Communism and the opening up of China to domestic and international markets many individuals, the character Dagang included, found themselves abandoned by their work units. Left without the motherly support of the state, many turned to the traditional family unit as a new system of support. Yet, because of the modernization of

Chinese society in the global market economy, and the remains of the communist system lingering, this return to the traditional family unit as prescribed by Confucian ideology became impossible. Instead, individuals such as the characters in *The Orphan of Anyang* had to adapt their families to modern realities.

3. ADAPTATION OF THE FAMILY UNIT

The characters in *The Orphan of Anyang* are very much motivated by traditional Confucian values as well as the western concepts of a “nuclear” family. However, they are affected by the consequences of the fall of the socialism and the prevalence of the market economy, which make it difficult for them to obtain these ideals

During the Cultural Revolution period in China, there was a reorganization of the family structure that reflected the communist ideals of Mao's politics. One such example of this was the move from private family-controlled households to the larger state-controlled communes. At this time emphasis was placed on the community versus the family. Thus, it could be said that along side the Cultural Revolution also existed a “family revolution.” In this family revolution we see that the traditional Confucian ideas of family were rejected. One such tradition that underwent serious renovation during Mao's cultural revolution was the role of women both in society as well as in the family. The “family revolution” demanded

“ a new role for women in the family as well as in society in general terms of sex equality; it advocated freedom of social association between opposite sexes; it demanded marriage by free choice and love, not by parental arrangement; it called for greater freedom for the young; it vaguely urged a new family institution similar to the Western pattern.” (Chang and Parsons 1959; 13)

Yet with the breakdown of socialist ideals in post cultural revolution China, there is a return to traditional Chinese culture as well as incorporation of western culture with the advent of globalization. We can see several instances where the characters of *The Orphan of Anyang* attempt to enact these transformations of the traditional family unit as well as incorporate westernized family ideals in their own lives.

One such instance is when Dagang and Yanli go to the Buddhist temple to ask for purification for their tainted lives and presumably make arrangements for a future marriage. It seems that from this act, they both hope to eventually obtain the socially acceptable and traditional ideal of a family sanctioned by marriage.

Afterward, they go to take a family portrait. From the portrait it appears that they are in fact a complete nuclear family with traditional values. Dagang appears serious and stoic, the patriarchal head of the family. Yanli looks conservative and modest; the symbol of the ideal Chinese wife and the baby boy sits happily between them, the complete family unit. This photo symbolizes aspirations for the westernized nuclear family as well as the characters desiring to fulfill family roles prescribed by traditional Chinese culture.

However, as the viewer is aware: this is not the case at all. The family is in fact very unconventional and goes against the grains of the traditional patriarchal Confucian family structure. It also does not represent the conventional western model of the wholesome nuclear family, because the baby is not Dagang and Yanli's but is in fact Yanli and another man's, Yanli's boss, Sade. The family is not the simplistic nuclear family ideal but is much more layered and complex.

Also, Dagang and Yanli's family is actually matriarchal because Yanli is the primary bread winner of the family. This could be viewed as both a result of the changing roles of women during the Cultural Revolution, but is more likely a result of the harsh realities of the market economy where Yanli provides a service that is desired by the market. Although Dagang does provide the housing for the family in the form of the small one room apartment he rents from the factory, it is Yanli who ultimately bears the financial responsibilities of the family.

Xiaoping Lin also argues that this is a result of the invasion of the market economy and the failure of the state to provide for its workers after the fall of socialist China. His argument is especially evident in the case of Dagang's and Yanli's relationship. Because Dagang has no skills that are marketable in the post socialist market system, and Yanli does, Dagang is forced to rely on Yanli's monetary contributions to their unconventional family. As a result, the gender expectations and hierarchies of the traditional Confucian family are reversed in order to adapt to the post socialist Chinese society.

Then there is the issue of the biological father of Yanli's son, Sade. In Confucian values, a male heir is very important. Therefore, when Sade realizes he is about to die and will not have a chance to produce another heir, he clings to Yanli's son as the last hope. Yet, the social role of the father has already been designated to Dagang. The conflict between the biological father and the adoptive father creates a rupture in the nuclear family fantasy that Dagang and Yanli have constructed for themselves. The result is the ultimate breakdown of their family structure and the revelation of its foundational weakness.

4. CONCLUSION

From the film *The Orphan of Anyang*, we can see the effects of the evolution of the Chinese family from its traditional Confucian roots, towards a shift which prioritizes community over individual families during the Cultural Revolution. Further, with the fall of Communism and the advent of global capitalism in Chinese society the Chinese family structure continues to evolve and adapt. As Junhua Yang points out in her study on the changing trends of the Chinese family

“China has witnessed an extraordinary transformation over the past three decades: from centrally-planned and self-sufficient economy to market-based and global economy; from closed-door policy to opening to the outside world; from authoritarian governments to more democratic governments and peaceful political transitions; from

rural-based populations to urban majorities, and from high fertility to low fertility.”
(2;2013)

In the film the *Orphan of Anyang* we see the results of these transformations as manifested in the main characters and their story. We see that Dagang struggles with the loss of support from the “motherly” institution of the factory system which is a result of the fall of communism and the advent of the global market economy in China. Because of this failure of the state to provide for its workers as represented in the character, Dagang, many attempted to return to traditional family units in search for support.

Yet this attempted return to tradition is met with the new challenges of a post-socialist realities which demands adaptations to new marketable professions as well as changes in gender roles and hierarchies within the family. We also see from these characters that there is a trend towards the westernized concept of the “nuclear family” headed by a two-parent household, hence Dagang and Yanli’s move towards a more committed relationship to one another. Nonetheless, even this aspiration is unattainable as Dagang is not actually the babies biological father resulting in a love triangle conflict that eventually leads to tragedy.

Throughout the film, the characters are struggling to find support in one another and create a family that is socially acceptable within a rapidly changing post-socialist and aggressively modern Chinese society. This search of support in the family could be viewed as a result of the lost support from the state that occurred in the post socialist era. In creating a family structure and identity, they face the many conflicting forms of family that have manifested throughout modern Chinese history. In the end, however their efforts prove futile as they are left to face the harshness of the social realities of their time and their social positions make it impossible to fulfill fantasies of both the westernized nuclear family and the traditional Confucian family.

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