

Transformation and Identification between Two Generations Shanghai Dreams as a Political Melodrama

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Abstract:

Shanghai Dreams (Qinghong 青红), directed by Wang Xiaoshuai (王小帅, 1966-), is the first work created by a famed Chinese sixth-generation auteur to deal with the subject of construction of the “third line of defense” by focusing on the aftermath of this movement. This paper puts the movie vis-a-vis the historical experience of China’s change from Maoist socialism to Dengist pragmatism, and suggests that it is the conflicts between the authoritative Dengism and the residual Maoism that constitute the core of this political melodrama. The choice of the object of love and preference by the three protagonists has its allegorical significance related to the competition for the future and the re-structuration of class hierarchy in the post-revolutionary society. An episode of a failed Bildungsroman or the coming-of-age narrative, the film nevertheless fails to give a poignant political diagnosis of the social-political problems exemplified in the story which appears as a tragedy.

Key Words: Post-revolutionary Society, Political Melodrama, Maoism, Dengism, Class Structure

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the 1960s, under the threat of the Western imperialists and the former Soviet Union, the Chinese government under Mao's leadership relocated its industrial infrastructures to the hinterland to make up a "third line of defense." For this purpose, thousands of intellectual youths were sent down (many of whom voluntarily) to the remote, mountainous southwest rural areas. Filmmakers have rarely taken on this subject. *Shanghai Dreams* (Qinghong), directed by Wang Xiaoshuai (1966-), is the first work created by a famed sixth-generation auteur to deal with this subject by focusing on the aftermath of this movement. Partly autobiographical in nature, the film is a recording of the past from the perspective of the present; as Wang says, "I wanted to talk about these very first people who returned and seized the opportunity to do independent work, when it was just a fragile hope in China."¹ The movie reaped the Jury Prize at the 2005 Cannes Film Festival.

Following a family from Shanghai working in a factory in one of such undeveloped, remote rural areas as the Guizhou province, the movie concentrates on their uprooted lives. An experienced and once faithful sent-down intellectual named Lao Wu has been working there for a decade, and now he is obsessed with the idea of returning to Shanghai for a better life, an urge shared by his colleagues as a result of the information of better economic interests there and new state policies that encouraged this migration. To realize this plan, he ruthlessly attempts to pinch off the sprout of romance between his daughter and a local worker, both of whom in their puberty, which leads to a tragedy. This melodramatic plotline easily invites an allegorical association. And indeed, Richard Letteri takes it as a genre of Chinese "political drama" as defined by Nick Browne.² In his point of view, the movie "employs representation of gender and family to critique the impact of Confucianism, patriarchal socialism and economic modernization on individuals, the family and Chinese society during periods of rapid social change."³ In particular, the film "goes 'back to the future' to investigate the historical origins of those very same socioeconomic problems – such as social alienation, communal breakdown, economic migration, urban development and class differentiation."⁴ How could this political

¹ Joan Dupont, "Uncensored: Wang's 'Shanghai Dreams'," *New York Times*, May 19, 2005.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/18/arts/18iht-wang.html> (Retrieved July 31, 2012). We are informed that "the director, born in Shanghai in 1966, moved with his family to Guiyang when he was a baby. Due to his father's determination, the family left the province and he was able to attend the Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing." Ibid.

² See Nick Browne, "Society and Subjectivity: On the Political Economy of Chinese Melodrama," in Nick Browne, Paul G. Pickowiz, Viviam Sobchack and Esther Yau (eds), *New Chinese Cinema: Forms, Identities, Politics* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 40-56.

³ Richard Letteri, "History, Silence and Homelessness in Contemporary Chinese Cinema: Wang Xiaoshuai's *Shanghai Dreams*," *Asian Studies Review*, March 2010, Vol. 34, 8, also see Ma Ning, "Symbolic Representation and Symbolic Violence: Chinese Family Melodrama o the Early 1980s," in Wimal Dissanayake (ed.), *Melodrama and Asian Cinema* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 32.

⁴ Richard Letteri, "History, Silence and Homelessness in Contemporary Chinese Cinema: Wang Xiaoshuai's *Shanghai Dreams*," 4.

melodrama as a historical fable or allegory be achieved with a personal story? Or how does it organize its narrative to make a judgment on a period of history? What kind of ideological identification does the film subscribe to?

Richard Letteri's reading of the movie anchors it on the Heidegger's interpretation of modernity. In his view, "Wang's representation of Lao Wu's manipulation of his daughter and Qinghong's spiraling descent into her catatonic state reflects many aspects of Heidegger's description of modern technology, homelessness, and the inability to speak in the face of the dread of modernity."⁵ In more details, "Qinghong's vacuous state represents not only the lost dreams of a young girl and the breakdown of a social fabric that once bound a nation, but also the state of homelessness that, for Heidegger, affects everyone whose relationship to their own selves, others and the world is defined by our technological comportment to the modern world."⁶ But I would like to put the movie vis-a-vis the historical experience of China's change from Maoist socialism to Dengist pragmatism, and suggest that it is the conflicts between the authoritative Dengism typified by the Father figure and the residual Maoism implicitly harbored in the still immature Qinghong that constitute the core of the political melodrama, which relentlessly lead to a tragedy. The choice of the object of love and preference by the three protagonists has its allegorical significance related to the competition for the future and the re-structuration of class hierarchy. An episode of a failed Bildungsroman or the coming-of-age narrative, the film nevertheless fails to give a poignant political diagnosis of the social-political problems witnessed in the tragedy.

2. THE SEDUCTION OF HIGH-HEELS V.S. THE GOSPEL OF MONEY ECONOMY?

The central storyline can be roughly taken as a delineation of the father-daughter relations. A tyrannical man, the father Lao Wu always appears high-handed and irritable, typifying a patriarchal figure with Chinese characteristics – a rigorous father demanding upright behaviors and every behavior following his instructions from his children in the Confucian tradition. In addition to supervising her daughter Qinghong's study and extracurricular activities,⁷ he regularly meets other Third Line volunteers to discuss how to return to Shanghai. When discovering that Qinghong has sneaked out to attend an underground dance party organized by the restless younglings, he confines her to the house, the move of which leads to the latter's hunger strike. In the end, although he successfully brings the whole family out of town driving towards his dreamland in a secret manner, Qinghong has already been raped by her angry boyfriend and becomes catatonic while the latter is executed.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁷ The discipline reaches to such a degree that he follows her home from school, discourages her from spending time with her girlfriend, and forbids her seeing her boyfriend in order to ensure a restricted social life.

When evaluating this storyline, firstly we need to bear in mind some intertextual facts. Ostensibly, this story is reminiscent of the “Literature of Trauma” popular in the early 1980s, which exposed the cruelty of the social-political circumstance during the Cultural Revolution and shows the suffering of the people being persecuted. The difference lies in the subtext of the movie in terms of the particular moment. The movement of “going to any place the motherland urgently needs in order to support the third-line construction (or in general for the socialist construction)” was undertaken mostly voluntarily by the people at the time in the spirit of patriotism, collectivism and socialist altruism; and most of those who went to the remote area made up their minds to stay there for the rest of their lives. This is the pre-history of the story not represented here.

Yet this political fever was dissipated in the late 1970s, when the new regime under Deng’s Leadership proposed economic initiative with a new propagandistic slogan: “To get rich is glorious!” in replace of the stringent Maoist tent, “To Take class struggle as the guiding principle!” Consequently, the project of nation-building shifted its focus. This means that we need to note the subtext of the movie is the dramatic ideological shift with the alteration of differing regimes. Believing now that any impending war imposed by the imperialists (either from the Western capitalist imperialist countries or from the “social imperialism” of the former Soviets) could be avoided with the change of international political situation (in particular its actual alliance with the States), the new government wanted to develop its economy faster rather than enhancing its capability of national defense. Economic reform brought new prosperity to Shanghai, which was always the advanced industrial base in modern China. (In Mao’s China, it still offered the most needed daily sustenance for the Chinese people). By contrast, the life in the third-line country was still hard and difficult, for constructions of civil facilities were delayed in the past decades for the stake of wartime exigency. Economic development needed more knowledgeable intellectuals; and the new policy of calling back the sent-down youths was put to the government’s agenda, though not yet formally announced. This new initiative greatly attracted the attention of those persons involved. Thus we see the secrete meetings the father’s generation hold throughout the movies, in which the new political-economic changes are intensely discussed and the influences of the changes towards their future lives as well as their reactive responses heatedly debated.

Although the movie does not provide any scenes directly related to the flowery new life in the dream world of Shanghai, it portrays the stifling circumstance of the local society with details. The small community depicted in the film is self-enclosed: To begin with, a long shot of a narrow corridor in the start of the film ends in a door with a window on it; along with the shot, two super-sonic tweeters are broadcasting the music of radio gymnastic exercises. The next shot shows that Qinghong is doing the exercise with other classmates in the playground following the order of the soundtrack. A typical scene at the time, it leaves the audience the impression that this is a community in a collective way of life, which demands standard and uniform dress and practice. Living with her overly repressive father, weak and meek mother

and naïve younger brother in a typical small house with various red posters on her bedroom wall championing production quotas, Qinghong is a somewhat introvert girl studying in a technical school. For this school, the audience witnesses a chalk-drawing highlighting technical advancement covering her classroom's blackboard; and the four walls of the classroom display banners inculcating students with the goals of economic modernization. All these details with rich epochal information indicate that this is a country still in its way to industrialization; and in particular, at that moment the urge to get modernized is much more prominent than ever.

On the surface, what all these scenes portray is the collectivist leftovers of the Maoist era, yet there is a subtle yet decisive difference. The Maoist era, in particular in its later period of the middle of 1970s, the state-party stressed that the objective was two-fold: One is to make revolution, another is to promote production. A policy implicitly aimed to redress the "ultra-leftism" of the early Cultural Revolution which to a certain extent neglected the enhancement of the level of productive forces, these two emphases now were simultaneously calling upon. Yet after the end of Cultural Revolution, though still paying lip service of the Marxist principle of class struggle, Deng's regime to a large extent concentrated on the development of economy. What is more, it resorted to economic interests to boost the initiative of the people, rather than galvanizing their revolutionary passion, the practice of which had been criticized in the Cultural Revolution by Mao himself as a road inevitably leading to capitalism. To serve the purpose, the government in the mean time prohibited the people's rights to demonstrate protests and the rights of staging "freely airing of views, great debates and big-character posters" against the bureaucratism and corruption.⁸ Instead, the authority applied high-handed measures to crack down any moves of the society it deemed "violating the stability," the gestures of which is best represented by Lao Wu. In this way, Lao Wu's "autocratic persona" is indeed "emblematic of the overbearing control of the Chinese state, at least in the political sphere."⁹

The implication is crucial because it is the stake for us to judge Lao Wu's manner is symbolic of Maoism or Dengism. It is not to deny that Mao many times also took arbitrary and coercive measures to suppress his enemies and dissidents, but he also encouraged people's active participation in political movements and airing diversified view, especially during the Cultural Revolution, when he felt that the Liu-Deng alliance high-handedly put down the differing views of the people against the official abuses of power, which would inevitably developed to be a capitalist regime. After Deng came back to the political arena and essentially ascended to be the highest authority of the country, he disavowed the rights of the popular protests in the name of stability and against "bourgeois liberty." In this light, although to certain extent Lao Wu "represents the bridge between the family and the state, Confucianism and Communism,"

⁸ It was believed that "if people are busy staging demonstrations today and airing their views or writing big-character posters tomorrow, they cannot concentrate on economic construction." The view was articulated by Deng Xiaoping himself, see his *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping* (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1989), Vol.3., p.332.

⁹ See Richard Letteri, "History, Silence and Homelessness in Contemporary Chinese Cinema," 9. But Letteri only pays attention to his dress and behavior to derive the argument.

to say that he “characterized China’s patriarchal socialism” is only partially justified but somewhat misleading.¹⁰ In short, under the façade of his priggish demeanor and dogmatic articulation of Maoist revolutionary phrases, there lies the ideological core of Dengism – individualistic economic stakes or the principle of “economic in command” (*jingji guashuai*), scientism which promotes the paramount value of techniques and empiricism,¹¹ and arbitrary, high-handed authoritarianism which is again prone to be mistaken to be an inheritance of Confucianism.¹²

It has been noted that “Capitalist modernity brings about massive dislocation and the collapse of many previous social ties and cultural codes as relations and values are increasingly reduced to abstract market functions.”¹³ In view of this apt observation, we might suggest that the political re-orientation of Deng’s project of modernization was pro-capitalist in its very start. Meanwhile, in the recent studies of sociology, economic modernization has already been regarded as not a value-neutral project; what oftentimes accompanies it is developmentalism and consumerism, which seemingly compose a sharp contrast with the revolutionary asceticism which is generally taken to be the ethos of the Maoist era. Thus we witness that working hand in hand with the economic interests as stimulation (consciously taken to be a “better life” envisioned than the hardscrabble living conditions they now drag on) by the elder generation is the new fashion of looking for physical stimulation by the youths: In conjunction with the desire of the middle-aged father’s generation to return to the metropolitan city to enjoy material convenience, the youths are looking for a free life with carnal bliss, a trend prominent in the

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9. Therefore, Letteri’s judgment of Lao Wu’s representative value of Maoism is questionable, as he suggests, “Although the Zhongshan jacket he wears (though mostly unbuttoned and a bit dishevelled) throughout the film has its own history – symbolic of Republicanism, modernism and nationalism – after the Communist Revolution it becomes the uniform of Maoism.” 9. Because, Although he has a “continual habit of reproaching Qinghong and, at one point, Xiaogen, to ‘declare your attitude’ and ‘inspect yourself’ as the Red Book and the Revolutionary neighbourhood councils had recently demanded of everyone,” he is merely applying the Maoist revolutionary rhetoric for the service of his individualist economism, which is typical of Dengism.

¹¹ In the movie, we witness that “Throughout her daily life, Qinghong must engage the technological. Her morning exercise routine begins her day at the technical school with the technical control of her body, while a technical drawing covers her classroom’s blackboard and its walls display banners inculcating students with the four goals of economic modernisation. Sadly, even one of the posters on her bedroom wall champions production quotas.” But this does not merely mean that “their material subsistence, everyday activities and identities are all integrally tied to the technical rationalism inherent in modern production systems,” but it means that this technical rationalism has already superseded revolutionary idealism which, in its combination of technical rationality and socialist ethics and morality, meant to explore an alternative road to modernity different from the one that had been taken by the West. *Ibid.*, 13.

¹² Confucianism was severely criticized during the Cultural Revolution as “feudalistic” and “reactionary” for its intrinsic system of class hierarchy and culture of obedience, especially after the “September 13th Incident” when Lin Biao (1907-1971), once regarded the successor of Mao himself, was taken to be essentially the inheritor of Confucian ethics and morality. Instead, Mao promotes egalitarianism and encourages the rebellious spirit of the people against their elders and the political authorities, which again was discredited after Deng came to power. In the movie, Lao Wu’s strict insistence on family protocol, demanding the family’s postponing of taking supper before Qinghong returns home, is a sign of this feudalistic order.

¹³ Jason McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 8.

society as a result of the relaxation of revolutionary ethics and the influence from the overseas capitalist culture. The ladies and girls wear bell-bottomed pants, get their hair ironed, and listen to soft-core music from Hong Kong and Taiwan, which were taken by the dogmatic official ideological machine at the time to be phenomena of “bourgeois liberalization.” Stirred by this new climate, they are against the asceticism of the collective era: Although Qinghong’s feeling towards the young worker Xiaogen is merely an innocent affection of a girl in her pubescent age, her girlfriend Xiaozhen has more physical urges towards boys. So when the latter invites Qinghong to attend a dancing party,¹⁴ aesthetically more “conservative” Qinghong (who apparently is more prone to socialist aesthetics) shows apathy and even antipathy towards the sexual seduction as exemplified by the gestures of the dancing boys,¹⁵ whereas Xiaozhen is greatly enchanted by the flirtation of a flamboyant boy with a Western-styled hairdo. It is not surprised for us to see that Xiaozhen is courted by this “bad boy”, gets pregnant, and is scolded by her parents and becomes the target of the public opinion in general. Xiaozhen’s experience shows the initial symptom of a society undergoing its dramatic yet gradual shift from a collective-oriented, political community to an individualist, consumerist-oriented entity; or from a “political society” to a post-revolutionary one.¹⁶

The behaviors and psychological impulses of the younger generation are despised and reproached by their father’s generation. Yet we need to note that this antipathy is merely the other side of the latter’s desire. This dialectical understanding could be witnessed in Lao Wu’s reaction towards a pair of red-color, high-heeled shoes that Xiao Gen buys and gives Qinghong as a gift or token of love. The red shoes symbolize the enchantment and even seduction from the materially affluent Shanghai, with the high-heels further foregrounding its sexual implication. Qinghong who has not experienced her “sexual enlightenment” has no particular feelings for the shoes; yet her father sees it as a taboo, a dangerous entity that threatens the virginity of his daughter, and thus he must eradicate it in toto. The shoes, as the primal form of commodity fetishism that began to popularize at the society at the time, signify a transmutation of aesthetic taste out of the subtle yet decisive ideological alteration. Lao Wu an experienced man fully knows the seduction of the commodity fetishism (typified and represented by the sexual connotation of the shoes), as what his Shanghai dream yearns for is this economy. But before the dream comes true, he would make sure that immature Qinghong would not be succumb to its attraction to be its prey. Therefore, the object of his antipathy is merely the other side of his own desire, or the desire after the present desire.

¹⁴ Dancing parties were quite popular at the time. Here we see the girls are lined up looking on the boys, while the latter are dancing in awkward couples. The music suddenly starts rocking, and a boy grabs a girl out of the ranks.

¹⁵ It is observed that she is “too virtuous to sneak off willingly to an underground dance,” and has no much interests of “listening to the sentimental and, according to the Communist Party at the time, “mind-weakening” music of Teresa” like her friend Xiaozhen. See Letteri, “History, Silence and Homelessness in Contemporary Chinese Cinema,” 6.

¹⁶ Rey Chow has pointed out that Teresa Teng is “a type of sign that is characteristic of the modes of social relations based on consumerist desires and habits,” Rey Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 112.

3. SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE DISCOURSE OF LOVE

This desire has a strong will to preserve itself irrespective of the interests of the others, which can be glimpsed in Lao Wu's treatment with his family members (in particular Qinghong) and Xiaogen. In the bathroom, he finds Xiaogen and gives him a lecture. The two are both naked, which signifies the conflicts of two naked truths. Whereas Xiaogen stresses his authentic affection to Qinghong, Lao Wu talks about the disparity of social status, which shows the implicit degradation of the working class in the new era – from a leading class with full social privileges and benefits to something insignificant incomparable to the new rising elite class.¹⁷ When he learns the rape case, he runs to the factory trying to beat Xiao Gen, his attire (with his raincoat on, his totally black dress makes him look like a ghost) implying that his mind is engulfed by a vicious, demon-like idea. Incapable to resist his anger, he furthermore reports to the authority, which directly leads to Xiaogen's arrest and execution, as well as Qinghong's catatonic schizophrenia. It is impossible that he does not know that his report would lead to a serious consequence given the stern policies of the time; yet his deliberate doing not only tests his strong will to destroy anything that would obstruct the fulfillment of his desire, but is also a way to establish his patriarchal power with the cooperation of the regime. In other words, his action is not a desire to let justice to be done (since he intimately supervises his daughter, he surely knows the genuine feelings between the two youths), but is out of his regret for his carelessness which causes unexpected outcome. Thus his reaction is a fierce revenge against the worker who usurps his preemptive possession. The authority's cooperation is also expected in his prevision.

The father's generation's determination to get out the mountainous area where they had made the decision to devote all they own is a betrayal to the promise of the past; yet this is glossed over with the pretext of taking good care of the next generation. This crux can be glimpsed from a scene which lasts for several minutes; in which the fathers secretly discuss their strategy of moving out of the third line. A man looking like Lao Wu says to all, "I believe now it is really going to change. Lao Bao sent a letter from Shanghai telling me that the outside world has already begun to change. In particular, Guangzhou's change is faster than you could imagine because it is close to Hong Kong." The turning of the state to a commodity economy¹⁸ makes them feel a gigantic shift of the party's political line, now the key word of their discussion is money. The man continues, "When we came here, the superior informed us that we would get our pay increased for three levels in a certain period of time, yet until now our

¹⁷ However, given the political lipserve still paid to the working class by the regime as well as the material privilege it still to a large extent enjoyed at the time, this probably is a projection of an opinion derived in the later period; what the "disparity" exists is not social status yet but the economic stake envisioned.

¹⁸ Guangzhou is the capital of Guangdong province, which is one of the few "free enterprise zones" along China's southeastern seaboard opened to free trade and foreign investment. At the time, the "dramatic ideological shift from patriarchal state Communism to free market capitalism" (Letteri, 1010:3) was not yet envisioned, which was in effect put to agenda in the late 1990s. Instead, reform and opening-up was taken to be a necessary redressal of the ultra-leftism of the former era and benefit to the socialist construction. In short, the socialist ideal was not totally shelved or disposed of.

wages have not been raised.” By contrast, in Shanghai “just in one month the people could get more than three hundred yuan out of responsibility system.” Although in Shanghai the job security is not guaranteed (unlike state-owned enterprise, the workers there in private owned business could be fired at anytime), the men in discussion still derive the conclusion, “who would be lazy if he could make more money?” This rhetorical question is the rationale of the Deng’s pragmatism, which takes economic stake as the die-hard principle that all people adhere to regardless what their political belief is. But it only indicates that these elder intellectual-workers have unconsciously given up their socialist ideal: Their devotion to the socialist state in the past was not premised on any promise of rewards.

In the next, their topics move from money to the issue of migration. Lao Wu says, “I think money is not the most important, the most significant thing now is to leave here. Even you can make more money here, where you stay is this poor mountain region.....” On the surface, the words signifies that since possession of personal fortune still could not be equated with enjoying civil facilities, returning back to the metropolitan city would be the only choice; what is really at stake is the individualist opportunities. These intellectuals had believed in Chairman Mao’s teaching that “the rural areas are a vast world where much can be accomplished,” yet now in this gigantic political shift, only the sense of disillusion exists in their minds. Lao Wu then remarks that “(the future of) the children is the crux, it does not matter what our lives would be.” He makes an apt judgment of the nature of the coming society, “Don’t you see that in Shenzhen and Guangdong, among the private-owned business, the ten-thousand-yuan income families are numerous. I believe the society to come is one that counts only on money!”

This naked confession needs its retorts to accomplish its self-validation. Someone poses his misgivings to this bare money worship, “When the party asked us to come here to build the third-line, it declared clearly its policy. Would it not care for us any longer?” After this unanswerable question which is in effect a historical interrogation, the harsh reality pushes them soon to reach a consensus: the party could not be relied upon anymore. Since nothing could be counted on anymore, they can only rely on themselves to accommodate the change: “Revolution always demands bloodshed and sacrifice. If you do not make adventure, how could you change your fate?” They understand that what is taking place is a revolution that changes the state from collectivism to individualism, or from the socialist commitments to a pro-capitalist economy. The purpose of their adventure is also revealed, “Lao Bao is a good case. He only leaves for a while, yet you can see how much he now earns each month!” Finally, Lao Wu concludes the discussion by making a resolute statement, “To cultivate me, the Party sent me to the third line. To foster my children, I will be bound to send them back to Shanghai.” There are differing cultivations here: The party cultivated his patriotism and socialist altruism; whereas he wants to cultivate a selfish egotism of his children. He now takes his experience in the locale as a waste of his youth. Yet it is the transformation of the party’s policy and its ideological re-orientation that makes him change his ideas.

This key scene in which Lao Wu plays a significant part essentially establishes his political contour. One critic observes that he “always keep his consciousness that he is a Shanghainese; all his daily life surrounds the subject of returning to Shanghai ... This return does not simply signify a change of life standard, but it also implies a re-acquisition of a cultural identity.”¹⁹ This is not merely a cultural identity, to be sure, but it means a new class status if not yet a class identity. Although the true color of this new class was not clear at the moment, at least he knows that this new social role will differentiate him from the persons living a tough life in the mountainous area. Out of this motivation, he enforces a violent control over the social life of his daughter, and tries to instill in her mind the knowledge of class distinction. This extreme discipline comes from his anxiety and sense of insecurity, which is a sort of nervousness before a fundamental transformation and betrayal taking place.²⁰

The intellectuals like Lao Wu had thrown them into the construction of a strong nation-state under the spell of socialist agenda, and tried to change them to be a member of the working class by serving the proletarian workers, peasants, and soldiers with their knowledge. Now, with the political revisionism which completely negated the Maoist era and followed the practice of commodity economy in the West (which led to the advancement of urban economy and the further division of urban and rural areas), they began to doubt the values and the meanings of their erstwhile devotion in the Maoist era. Material interests call upon them to withdraw from the third-line area to the metropolitan cities, so getting away from the backward districts become their new desire in life. This dramatic reversal shows the fact that the efforts of reforming the intellectuals to let them become part of the working class was never accomplished, and their integration with the latter could easily be severed apart by the political reorientation of the party.

To satisfy this individualist desire and to accomplish his goal, Lao Wu arbitrarily applies his patriarchal power to manipulate Qinghong (as well as her mother). The latter have to resign their feelings to follow his merciless order and will. Yet this selfish move brandishes itself as a love of the next generation. The Father figure with the capital F signifies both the biological father and the Party itself:²¹ Stubborn and aggressive Lao Wu follows the call of the Party, and is simultaneously its incarnation or embodiment.²² The change of the ideas and ideals of the

¹⁹ See Hao Yanbin, “Qinghong: Pains Originates from Helplessness,” *New Bulletin Daily* (Xin Kuai Bao), June 29, 2005. Also see <http://ent.sina.com.cn/r/m/2005-06-29/1717765991.html>

²⁰ Thus he is “reluctant to admit that he once actively supported the Communist regime and willingly came to Guiyang.” Nevertheless, he decisively “wants to return to Shanghai to reap the benefits of newly open markets and privatised business.” Richard Letteri, “History, Silence and Homelessness in Contemporary Chinese Cinema: Wang Xiaoshuai’s *Shanghai Dreams*,” 9.

²¹ The work unit also plays the patriarchal role by controlling personal documents and rejecting the petition of the staff to leave without formal notice from the Party, which had been portrayed in a movie of the early 1980s called *There is a Storm Tonight*. The latter movie also exposed the stirred materialistic desire of the sent-down intellectual youths.

²² On the other hand, it has been suggested that “Lao Wu himself could be seen as a victim of history, his own identity being written and re-written by the political and economic forces that he once, according to his friends,

father's generation lead to the diversification of the fortunes of the children. Although many intellectuals wished to leave their sent-down areas and return to the urban cities they had come from; historically, still many were "reluctant to leave without the guarantee of a *hukou* or residency permit that allows them to move while guaranteeing house, food rations and government services."²³ In this movie in particular, being a member of the next generation of the third-line volunteers, Qinghong has no knowledge and memory of a "better life" in her father's mind, yet is used to the local way of life and enjoying "the security, friendships and solace it provides,"²⁴ holding deep affections towards the local people. She has no desire to leave but is resistant to the idea, out of her natural antipathy towards an alien life and her attachment to her boyfriend Xiaogen. This choice of the object of love and preference by the three persons is not merely a private decision, but it has its allegorical significance related to the competition for the future and the re-structuration of class hierarchy.

4. COMPETITION FOR THE FUTURE AND INCAPABILITY OF POLITICAL DIAGNOSIS

The name of Qinghong (also the original Chinese title of the movie) is open to many ways of interpretations. It literally means "green and red," two colors usually referring to the immaturity of youthful adolescents. Qinghong the girl surely is an innocent lad yet to experience much of the social affairs. But the word also reminds us the Chinese idiom "make no distinction between black and white;" (*Buguan qinghong zaobai*, in which *qinghong* means "black and white, or right and wrong"), which means indiscriminately, and is reminiscent of Deng Xiaoping's political pragmatism "Never mind if a cat is white or black, as long as it catches mice it's a good cat," the latter of which was taken to be the official line and cleared the way to a pro-capitalist market economy. The latter two associations point to Lao Wu's authoritarian rule. The phrase also recalls a famed short story written by the Chinese avant-garde writer Ge Fei in the 1990s entitled "Qing Huang," which narrates a process of tracing the historical truth about local prostitutes (or the real nature of an alleged historiography of the latter). There, the first-persona narrator could not make his independent judgment among various sources of evidences and finally, the so-called historical record of local prostitutes Qing Huang turns out to be merely a legendary myth. If this story is imbued with the "postmodern" spirit of agnosticism, then the movie here is aimed to show the truth of a transitional era through personal experience. Through this narrative, we witness certain critique of the patriarchal power. Yet this critique has ambiguities, which not only lies in the fact that the "selfish" consideration of the father's generation has its justification: The third-line construction had

believed were best for his nation, and now believes will most benefit his family," Richard Letteri, "History, Silence and Homelessness in Contemporary Chinese Cinema: Wang Xiaoshuai's *Shanghai Dreams*," 8.

²³ Ibid.,9.

²⁴ Letteri thus aptly notes that "to this extent, both Xiaogen and Guiyang act as metonymic substitutes for Qinghong's repressed desire to stay in Guiyang and her resistance to her father's plan to move the family to Shanghai." Ibid., 6.

appeared unnecessary under the fundamental change of international political structure, and thus the relocation of the sent-down intellectuals became indispensable; if the state did not shoulder the corresponding responsibility in time, then the persons involved had to consider of arranging their future by themselves.

However, the ambiguity resides more on the depiction of the worker Xiaogen, who plays only a minor role in the film. A local boy, he never thinks about leaving for an outside world (in this light, he seems to be as “parochial” as Qinghong), but succeeds his father’s job to become a factory worker. He has deep affections over Qinghong, and buys and gives the latter a pair of red shoes. When Qinghong tells him that they cannot be together because her family will soon leave, he loses control of himself and rapes her. Yet this is merely the surface plotline which is worthy of further interrogation. When he is warned by Lao Wu in the bathroom, he is also naked which might imply that his desire (as indicated by the shoes which have sexual implication) is as strong as the father’s. Yet a boy with similar age as Qinghong’s, his feeling towards Qinghong could not be exaggerated to be having any evil or improper intention. Still innocent, his action against his beloved is not probable. Susan Morrison points out that Xiaogen’s actions are out of his character;²⁵ the point of which is echoed by Richard Letteri: “Neither the alcohol he drinks to keep him warm nor the revenge he seeks for Qinghong’s repetition of her father’s rationale for ending their relationship seems enough to drive Xiaogen to rape.”²⁶ At the time, rape was deemed a serious crime and was subject to the death punishment. It is impossible that Xiaogen does not know this fact. Yet what we see is that a young worker he is, he never shows any political awareness. When Lao Wu finds him in work, he is mindlessly cutting and measuring holes in pieces of metal. It seems that he is an untypical worker in this regard. His rape at best can be seen as an act of retaliation against Lao Wu (but not Qinghong whom he deeply loves) – and so we can understand that why Lao Wu hates him so deeply as to alert the police to the disadvantage of Qinghong and costs his life. But this allegorical representation of the historical schism between workers and intellectuals is still not reasonable enough. Thus the plotting of this episode only works to push the narrative development, which nevertheless shows certain political unconsciousness of the director himself in terms of contemporary social circumstance which completely ignores workers’ class consciousness and political identification in any given period.²⁷

This negligence is crucial to the movie, which answers the following observation: Although the director “employs a variety of realist techniques in the film – e.g. on-location shooting, non-continuity editing, and the extreme long shot and the long take – to capture the mundane and

²⁵ Susan Morrison, “Shanghai Dreams,” *Cine Action* 68, 2006, pp.69-70.

²⁶ Richard Letteri, “History, Silence and Homelessness in Contemporary Chinese Cinema: Wang Xiaoshuai’s *Shanghai Dreams*,” 14.

²⁷ We have noted that Qinghong refuses to enjoy the sexually seductive underground party. Given that she is also in her puberty, the reason for her “conservatism” apparently lies in her pro-socialist aesthetic taste. However, the film also does not give us enough message in this respect.

sometimes oppressive nature of the everyday in Guiyang;” nevertheless “the contrast between the real and the allegorical is rendered ineffectual.”²⁸ The ineffectuality is also shown in the portrayal of Qinghong, who is most times reticent and lackluster. This representation of the heroine, to be sure, still meant to be “melodramatic,”²⁹ yet it is not difficult to observe that the film soon “moves beyond the confines of this Western genre to what Nick Browne has defined as the Chinese ‘political melodrama.’”³⁰ Nevertheless, in this regard although “the ‘brute speech’ of the sights and sounds of Guiyang – such as its barren hillsides, a young girl’s bedroom de cor, the clamour of machines, a pair of red shoes, and morning exercise routines performed in the schoolyard – represent the real and everyday, what realism in its various forms has always tried to capture, as ‘image signs’,”³¹ the “truth content” of the era is yet to be revealed. Thus, apart from Lao Wu (and even including him), the full physical and intellectual world of the people in the political society is not sufficiently exemplified – to a certain extent they are all projection of the imagination of the people living in the present post-revolutionary or post-socialist era bereft of salient political consciousness. For instance, how these people feel the epochal change of the ideological shift? Consequently, although the movie does address “issues such as class and geographic differences, the influence of Western popular culture, and changing sexual norms,”³² it fails to give sufficient information not to say a political savvy judgment on the political alteration and the accompanying psychological turmoil of the populace still deeply harbored the revolutionary ideas. In this light, “the political representations underlying Qinghong, her father, and their relationship” could not provide satisfying information for us to show the “historical struggle” not only with the “autocratic rule of the family and state;” but more importantly, with Deng’s political reorientation or diversion from the Maoist socialism.³³

On the superficial level, this is a sort of anachronistic mistake out of historical amnesia, yet in the truth it is a new rendition or a new historiography out of a political unconscious. The disregard of the political consciousness of the working class, being the normal situation in the present post-socialist society, when being projected back to the historical arena, not only would yield to debatable schemes, but also would offer a problematic picture with an allegorical nature which is an idiosyncratic distortion of the class relations in a erstwhile political society with dramatic differing nature from the present one we are familiar with. The rape of a member of the intellectual elite class by the youthful offspring of the working class (we need to note that here Xiaogen appears seemingly an orphan whose parents is nowhere to see, thus he appears an

²⁸ Richard Letteri, “History, Silence and Homelessness in Contemporary Chinese Cinema,” 4.

²⁹ Letteri notes that “as much as the film is shot in a realist style, Qinghong’s narrative arc from a smiling schoolgirl at the film’s beginning to the vacant catatonic stare she wears at its close is steeped in melodrama.” *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

³² *Ibid.*, 5.

³³ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

atomized individual in the state of *tabula rasa*, without any political consciousness typical of the working class at the time³⁴), in this light, is especially a noteworthy arrangement. Out of what political (un-conscious) does this make-up, if not a total fabrication, take place?

The improbability of this scheme is furthermore witnessed in the development after the incident: After the event takes place, Xiaozhen's mother comes to visit Qinghong's mother, and proposes that the best choice now is to take Qinghong off for Shanghai. Again, they enforce their own choice on Qinghong in the name of love; for the "best choice," when thought carefully, is undoubtedly allowing Qinghong to stay in the locale and establish a formal relation with Xiaogen; because in this way, not only could it save both of them, but it is also the choice made by Xiaozhen herself, who had returned from the outside world when she experienced the hopeless conditions of life after she eloped with her lover Lu Jun, the son of another "Third Line" volunteer couple. The two get married and become a formal couple, apparently now living a happy life.

To be sure, this happy ending has much to do with their own personalities: Compared to the shyness and even cowardice of Qinghong and Xiaogen, the two youths are open and fond of free way of life. Wearing a pair of sunglasses and has his hair curled (regarded as a typical gesture of Westernized youth at the time), Lu Jun is wandering around the local society and leading its fashion, reminiscent of the character of Zhang Jun in Jia Zhangke's movie *Platform*. Whereas for Xiaozhen, "with her Teng tape, 'boom box', curled (read Western) hair and pictures of Asian celebrities on her bedroom wall," is fond of imported objects with "commodified values."³⁵ While she seemingly falls short of the bold and vigorous spirit of Zhang Jun's lover Zhong Ping. Still, when Xiaozhen faces the situation demanding her decision, she does not draw back, which exemplifies the ethics of the early reform era). The couple and the group around them are the earliest ones in the Chinese society who feel the epochal tide of social liberalization brought about by economic de-collectivization. When China transformed from a highly collectivized society to a secularized, individualist society, their individuality is stimulated, yet the inertia of social ideology render their parents in particular and the society in general disagree with their behaviors. Being fond of a *laissez-faire* style of life, Zhang Jun nevertheless is not a rogue. He gets a local girl not so pretty pregnant and is forced by his angry father to marry her. Yet soon after the wedding, he runs away with Xiaozhen. When they return to the local community, Qinghong's parents persuade Lu's father to let them get married to

³⁴ It is noted that "at critical junctures, such as when we first meet him and when Lao Wu seeks revenge for his daughter's rape," he is "pictured at his noisy work station mindlessly cutting and measuring holes in pieces of metal that will likely go into some machine, building or manufactured product often symbolized;" in other times, he is also merely "symbolized by either non-diegetic romantic melodies or those he plays on his harmonica." *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

cover up the scandal and avoid more troubles.³⁶ Yet when facing the similar situation of their own daughter, Qinghong's parents make a completely different move.

On the allegorical level, the intricate exchange between Qinghong, Lao Wu and Xiaogen can be seen as a rendition of a new class relation (which has been dealt with by other sixth-generation auteur, such as Zhang Jiarui's *The Road*): Under the new political situation, the competition for the beloved object or the fight to claim the next generation (and thus implicitly also the vying for the future) by the working class and the elite intellectuals. In this struggle for a new identity/identification, the elite class, which once has been bereft of its privilege by the Maoist political policies aiming to transform it to be an organic part of the laboring class, wins the battle with the assistance of the regime;³⁷ and this also signifies their formal break with the working class and the initial forging of a new identity.

However, the movie only shows that this is only a contrast between "Qinghong's dreams of romantic love" and "her father's dreams of the material advantages of Shanghai," a seeming paradox or inexorable dilemma so to speak.³⁸ Their difference is of a gigantic divergence of a serious political nature, yet is at most presented to be Qinghong's "larger need for a sense of security, comfort and acceptance" or "a sense of homeliness,"³⁹ while where is the home is taken to be the physical location of Guiyang, or at most including the people that she is familiar with there; but the alternative vista of a differing life and its implied diversified political route to "modernization" is not expressed and explored; or, they are completely out of the director's intellectual agenda in this deliberately-orchestrated "political melodrama."⁴⁰ This judgment not only shows the general drawbacks of the Chinese genre ever since the 1980s in its representation of the Cultural Revolution,⁴¹ but also points to its cinematic skills. As noted, the movie "continually films her from within the narrow framework of a window or door." In this

³⁶ Apparently, Xiaozhen's parents are gentler and have a more relaxed state of mind towards the wrongdoings of their daughter, which however does not simply mean a loosened enforcement of patriarchal power. Since they do not intend to move to their original place coming from, they can be witnessed as keeping the Maoist idealism; at least they do not yield to the enticement of materialism that Deng's regime brandishes. Therefore, their softer arrangement constitutes a contrast to Lao Wu's high-handed authoritarianism which is the feature of Deng's political rulership..

³⁷ Although Lao Wu leaves the work unit without the permission of the authority, the returning was actually encouraged by the state's policy.

³⁸ Richard Letteri, "History, Silence and Homelessness in Contemporary Chinese Cinema," 7.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁰ This drama itself beguilingly remains restrained; as noted, "one should be cautious about reading too much of the Western-style melodrama or 'women's weepy' into Shanghai Dreams. Critical elements of the genre such as exaggerated expressions of emotion and the rewarding of virtue are not present. Nor can a clear Manichean conflict between good and evil or innocence and villainy be read into the discord between daughter and father." *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴¹ It "employ representations of gender and family to critique the impact of Confucianism, patriarchal socialism and economic modernization on individuals," but fails to go deeper into the contradiction between socialism and Deng's pragmatism. See Letteri, 8. Also read Ma Ning, "Symbolic Representation and Symbolic Violence: Chinese family Melodrama of the Early 1980s," in Wimal Dissanayake (ed.), *Melodrama and Asian Cinema* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 32.

way, although “the classic melodramatic technique of framing the heroine represents how she is limited by the social and familial restraints that confine and define her and prevent her from resolving her own problems and creating her own identity,”⁴² it shows the director here observes from an outsider’s point of view. Likewise, while the director “imbues his shots of desolate hillsides with the distant clamour of these factory machines,” and “most of the dialogue that takes place on the factory floor is dominated by the repetitive clanging of metal,” this technical representation merely makes “the sounds of modern technology overwhelm the social and interpersonal,”⁴³ which means that it is negligent of the political. For instance, in the movie, only “the collapse of human bonds and the feeling of homelessness” are presented from Qinghong’s own point of view, while the response of the local people is silenced, which nevertheless signifies the betrayal of the intellectuals’ promise to the local people in particular and the socialist enterprise in general.

5. CONCLUSION

An episode of a failed Bildungsroman or the coming-of-age narrative, the docile adolescent Qinghong yearns to escape the domestic tyrant and joins her boyfriend. When the sprout of her romantic love is thwarted by her stubborn father who has a dream to resuscitate his metropolitan life, she has retreated to a hunger strike and even attempts suicide. When her love and life force is blighted, she is reduced to be someone without identity and agency. Richard Letteri has aptly pointed out that “Qinghong’s distraught emotional condition” is “a symbol for those Chinese people whose loyalty to the state socialist system, third-line cities, and more generally, the rural provinces from which millions of Chinese have migrated, is being severely tested by the lure of economic modernization...”⁴⁴ It indicates “the fracturing of the social consciousness of the Chinese people caused by the state’s dramatic ideological reversals.”⁴⁵ In other words, when “the market replaces the state, personal gain supersedes community need, and economic opportunity rather than the family or...the work place determines where one calls home,” the people become homeless spiritually in regard to their ideological identification – either with Maoist revolutionary idealism which aims to bridge the gulf between the rural and the metropolitan and build a strong socialist state, or with Deng-ist pragmatism in which “the market replaces the state, personal gain supercedes community need, and economic opportunity

⁴² Letteri, 7. Also see Doane, Mary Anne, “The Woman’s Film: Possession and Address,” in Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Home is Where the Heart is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman’s Film* (London: BFI Publishing 1987), 288.

⁴³ Letteri, “History, Silence and Homelessness in Contemporary Chinese Cinema,” 13.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁵ Richard Letteri, “History, Silence and Homelessness in Contemporary Chinese Cinema: Wang Xiaoshuai’s *Shanghai Dreams*,” 11.

rather than the family or – under the Communist system – the workplace determines where one calls home.”⁴⁶ All of these provide the materials for this not-too-sentimental family story.

In particular, just like the western melodramas, in this movie the “ ‘social’ itself – the workplace, politics – enters the familial configurations ... through the mediation of the father;” but like the former, it also “fails to constitute the family in a clear or comprehensive relation to the larger social formation.”⁴⁷ What leads to this failure is not that the movie does not offer more scenes related to the ongoing political struggle (for the consideration of political censorship, this is surely impossible), but it is because the political significance of this gigantic shift is not yet fully appreciated and thus the destinies of differing classes, though presented to a certain way, is waiting for deeper explication. It is generally held that like other Chinese melodrama of the mid-1980s, the movie represents “a historical experience that inscribes ‘subjectivity’ in a position between the expectations of an ethical system (Confucianism) and the demands of a political system (socialism), a condition that typifies the Chinese dilemma of modernization.”⁴⁸ This observation shows that the movie still falls short of making a breakthrough. As I suggests in this paper, it is the conflicts between the authoritative Dengism typified by the Father figure and the residual Maoism implicitly harbored in the still immature Qinghong that constitutes the core of the political melodrama, which relentlessly lead to a tragedy. The “subjectivity” of the Father has changed its nature, whereas the one of the next generation, torn between the two isms (beguiling shown as one that between asceticism and consumerism, or at most between collectism and individualism), is not yet formed but intellectually falling into a “catatonic” situation.

Where is Qinghong in the present society? If “the catatonic state she is left in” is “a symptom of the unhinging of the individual from the social in postsocialist China,”⁴⁹ has she become “normal” and used to the materialist society? If in the diegetic time “the melancholy she feels over her family’s move to Shanghai imbue(s) her with a feeling of homelessness that transforms youthful happiness into an unwillingness to speak,”⁵⁰ can she speak now? Or she has to be spoken by the others such as the director? We need to note that “her rape destroys her identification of both the city and the boy with her sense of the security and care of home;”⁵¹ what is her (new) identity now? The director says that “I left the province at 13, and I have some good memories, but country life was so different from Shanghai. And my work now is to reduce that difference.” He admits that he has “put certain things that I lived or observed at the

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 11. Consequently, their identities are not just “split between their rural villages or interior hometowns and the urban centres that lure them with the promise of the future.” *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Nick Browne, “Society and Subjectivity: On the Political Economy of Chinese Melodrama,” in Nick Browne, Paul G. Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack and Esther Yau (eds), *New Chinese Cinema: Forms, Identities, Politics* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 41.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

⁴⁹ Letteri, “History, Silence and Homelessness in Contemporary Chinese Cinema,” 16.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

time in the movie."⁵² But apparently, he is not honest enough: It is not merely an issue of "different" life, but the vast disparity of life standard or class differentiation. But to a certain extent, Qinghong can be taken as the alter ego of the director himself (though not in toto). Towards the end of the movie, just before her entrance to the intellectual youth, she loses all her spiritual conviction; and her political awareness, if any, is prone to be manipulated and influenced by the discourse of love articulated by the father's generation which was determined to follow the nation's shifted direction. This phenomenon is also witnessed in other the sixth-generation directors; though, in this movie, the children's generation takes the form of certain reflection through a sort of narrated ethnography.

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⁵² Joan Dupont, "Uncensored: Wang's 'Shanghai Dreams'," *New York Times*, May 19, 2005.