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On Shattered Ruins: The Cultural Practices and Production of the Great Tanghsna Earthquake in Post-Mao Literature and Film

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**ON SHATTERED RUINS: THE CULTURAL PRACTICES AND PRODUCTION
OF THE GREAT TANGSHAN EARTHQUAKE IN POST-MAO LITERATURE
AND FILM**

A Thesis Presented by

Jinhui Chen

Submitted to the Graduate School of
the University of Massachusetts Amherst
in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of

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Chinese

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ABSTRACT

*ON SHATTERED RUINS: THE CULTURAL PRACTICES AND PRODUCTION OF THE
GREAT TANGSHAN EARTHQUAKE IN POST-MAO LITERATURE AND FILM*

SEPTEMBER 2021

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This thesis explores how traumatic memories of the Tangshan earthquake have been constructed in literature, documentary works, and films. Through analyzing the narrative construction of the Tangshan earthquake in the form of film and literature, this thesis studies the relationship between state power and individual agency in the representation of this natural disaster. It argues that the cultural representation of this natural disaster reflects a subtle shift: one from the dominant nationalistic narrative to the narrative centering on individuals' psychological trauma. It suggests the high degree of state control and politicization is what is similar between a natural disaster such as the Tangshan earthquake and other political events. To some extent, the Tangshan earthquake has become a political event to promote the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) propaganda. Therefore, this thesis engages existing scholarship on political traumas to research the Tangshan earthquake. It is indicating a subtle shift because it is a slow-changing process and there is no mark to signal a radical departure from the earlier nationalism accounts. There also exists more interlaces and interconnections between the state and individual in the range of sources

I have examined. And the overlay of the different narratives reflects the complexity of reality and history.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis deals with issues of historical memory of natural disasters in the contemporary People's Republic of China (PRC) in the case of the Great Tangshan Earthquake. It discusses how the historical memory of the natural disaster is constructed and represented through the cultural practices and productions in post-Mao era in the space of film, fiction, reportage, and documentary novel. In my approach, historical trauma is the key to revealing the construction of historical memory of the Great Tangshan Earthquake in the cultural texts and popular media. This project asks and endeavors to answer the following questions: What do these cultural portrayals of the Great Tangshan Earthquake contribute to our understanding of history, memory, and trauma? How are personal loss and pain intertwined with socialistic discourse, affecting the way we perceive trauma of a natural disaster? What is the relationship between public mourning on a national scale and the pain experienced by the individual survivor? What do these cultural representations of trauma tell us about the intervention of public narrative and its impact on individuals' life? Who is the true keeper of historical memory? At what point can the pain experienced by another person become one's own? And how has this disastrous moment in history been transformed into a national trauma? Those questions lead me to think further about the construction and representation of historical memory in the Tangshan earthquake.

Tangshan is a medium-sized Chinese provincial city of heavy industry and factories, known for its coal mining and ceramics industry. It is located in the north part of China and the vicinity of the capital Beijing. Tangshan was one of the earliest Chinese cities that developed modern

industry. Back at Self-Strengthening Movement¹ in the mid-19th century, the Guangxu Emperor (1875-1908) deployed Grand Council Li Hongzhang (1823-1901) to establish Kailuan Coal Mine at Tangshan, where is the start of modern industrialization in China. Until 1975, Tangshan has become a big city with 5, 570,000 people.² The 1976 Tangshan Earthquake (Tangshan dadizhen), also known as the Great Tangshan Earthquake, was a natural disaster with a magnitude 7.6 earthquake that struck the region around Tangshan, Hebei, at 3: 42am on July 28th, 1976. The inflicted areas included Tianjin and Beijing, two important cities of enormous political functions. The center of the earthquake was in Tangshan, the depth of focus was 11 kilometers, and the seismic intensity was 11 degrees. It caused 242, 400 deaths and 164, 581 people were seriously injured³.

Many scholars have placed trauma as a central theme in modern Chinese literary and cultural studies, such as David Der-wei Wang (2004), Yomi Braester (2003), Ban Wang (2004), and Michael Berry (2011). They examined how historical trauma had been re-created and re-presented through the lens of literature, film, and popular culture. This study will follow this method of investigation. What distinguishes this study from their works is its focus on how historical trauma of a natural disaster (rather than a political event) has been imagined and constructed in contemporary Chinese cultural texts, more specifically, in post-Mao era. Unlike political events such as the Musha Incident, the Rape of Nanjing, the February 28th Incident of 1947, the Cultural

¹ Self-Strengthening Movement (1861-1895) is a modernization movement launched by the Guangxu Emperor of the Qing dynasty (1644-1912). This movement's stated goal is to learn western technology and thoughts and to reinforce the reign of the Qing dynasty.

² Xuejiang Xu, "Tangshan dadizhen siwang renshu shi ruhe pilu de? [How the casualty number of the Great Tangshan Earthquake was revealed?], *Xinhua News Agency*, 2006, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190207015837/http://culture.people.com.cn/GB/40479/40482/4643131.html>.

³ Zhizhong Sun, 1976²*Tangshan dadizhen* 1976² [1976²*The Great Tangshan Earthquake*] (Hebei: Hebei Renmin Press, 1999), 72.

Revolution, 1989 Tiananmen Square Incidents, and the Handover of Hong Kong, few have explored the cultural representations of the Tangshan earthquake and the relationship between trauma and natural disaster. Many of the cultural texts examined here have yet to receive comprehensive critical attention in China and the West. Throughout my study, I attempt to frame the discussions and close readings of cultural and cinematic texts in a historical context. Just as the previous scholars, writers, and filmmakers who are striving to fill in the gaps in our understanding of these historical events, I endeavor to bridge certain gaps in contemporary Chinese cultural history and explore the trauma narratives through a natural disaster in contemporary China.

This thesis is based on the premise that “writing, film, and other popular media play an important and fundamental role in shaping popular conceptions and imaginations of history.”⁴ The pain, suffering, ruins, and ashes of the Great Tangshan Earthquake are re-told through artistic representations, from which arises the new form of a historical narrative of this natural disaster. Throughout my study, the conception of “traumatic narrative” is a series of confluences of event and response, history and representation, violence and trauma. The focus is on the ways traumatic response is registered in literary, cinematic, and other cultural texts. This emphasis on cultural representation is why I treat the depictions of imaginary trauma of which the majority were produced by writers, filmmakers, and artists as important as the firsthand accounts produced by survivors of, participants in, or witnesses to the earthquake. The portrayal of trauma has gone through the process from the collections of firsthand experience accounts to a trauma constructed purely on the textual level without direct experience or observation. Trauma writing not only attempts to memorize the bygone disastrous event, but also highlights the pain, loss, and trauma

⁴ Michael Berry, *A History of Pain: Trauma in Modern Chinese Literature and Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 2-3.

experienced by individuals. The latter “non-witness” strategy of approaching history in the context of popular culture is seen as no “less real,” and no less powerful than the former.

In approaching this specific historical event, this study covers three types of textual and visual portrays of the Great Tangshan Earthquake: fiction (novella, documentary novel), reportage book, and film (feature-length film and documentary film). Fictions include novella *Aftershock* (Yu Zhen , 2010)⁵ by Zhang Ling and documentary novel *The Great Tangshan Earthquake* (*Tangshan dadizhen* , 1986)⁶ by Qian Gang . The reportage books are *Personal Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake* (*Tangshan dadizhen qinliji* , 2006)⁷ co-edited by Feng Jicai and Chen Jiangong and *My Experience of the Great Tangshan Earthquake* (*Qinli Tangshan dadizhen* , 2008)⁸ by Tang Yumin . The former collects more than 60 firsthand accounts from witnesses of the Tangshan earthquake and the latter is written by a photographic reporter as well as a participant in the Tangshan earthquake. The film *Aftershock* (*Tangshan dadizhen* , 2010)⁹ directed by Feng Xiaogang , which is adapted from Zhang Ling’s novella. The documentary films are *Heroes Fight with Disaster* and *Real Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake* (*Yixiong kangzhenzai* and *Tangshan dadizhen jishi* ,

⁵ Ling Zhang , *Yuzhen* [*Aftershock*] (Beijing: Beijing shiyue chubanshe, 2010).

⁶ Gang Qian , *Tangshan dadizhen* [*The Great Tangshan Earthquake*] (Beijing: Zhongguo dangdai chubanshe, 2008).

⁷ Jicai Feng and Jiangong Chen ed, *Tangshan dadizhen qinliji* [*Personal Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake*] (Beijing: Tuanjie chubanshe, 2006).

⁸ Yumin Tang , *Qinli Tangshan dalizhen* [*My Experience of the Great Tangshan Earthquake*] (Beijing: China Photographic Publishing House, 2007).

⁹ Feng Xiaogang dir, *Tangshan dadizhen* [*Aftershock*] (Beijing: Huayi Brothers, 2010).

1976)¹⁰, *A Miracle of Kailuan Mining* (*Kailuan Qiji* , 1978)¹¹, and *A Moment and A Decade* (*Yishun yu shinian* , 1986)¹². All of these documentary films are produced by the state-controlled media Central Studio of News Reels Production¹³. The earliest work, *Heroes Fight with Disaster*—*Real Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake*, was published right after this disaster, and other works spanned over four decades. These cultural representations are the driving forces in the creation of traumatic narratives of this historical event.

All the texts examined appeared decades after the event they attempted to revisit: “This phenomenon of the belated response is as much a symptom of political suppression as of psychological suppression.”¹⁴ As Berry stated, the belated cultural response reflected the political suppression on the scale of the nation and the psychological suppression on the individual level. The political suppression is directly reflected in the news reporting of the Tangshan earthquake. According to the “Guidance that reporting disaster should immediately turn to performance and experience (Guanyu jiu zai ying ji zhuan ru cheng ji yu jing yan fang mian de zhi shi

), ” the reporting of disasters should emphasize on the performance and experiences of the rescue work, not on the losses and destruction of disasters. This guidance was issued by the General Administration of Press and Publication and distributed to the local news agency on April 2nd, 1950, and it became the policy of news reporting of disasters. After the

¹⁰ *Yingxiong zhan zhen zai di Tangshan Dadizhen jishi* — [*Heroes Fight with Disaster*—*Real Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake*] (Beijing: Beijing: Central Studio of News Reels Production, 1976), https://www.bilibili.com/video/av11543929/?p=2&spm_id_from=pageDriver.

¹¹ *Kailuan Qiji* [*A Miracle of Kailuan Mining*] (Beijing: Central Studio of News Reels Production, 1978), <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV17W41177jj?from=search&seid=2650135394063203257>.

¹² Xing Pan dir, *Yishun yu shinian* [*A Moment and A Decade*] (Beijing: Central Studio of News Reels Production, 1986), <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1px411j7cT?from=search&seid=1198622546800397590>.

¹³ Central Studio of News Reels Production () was the state official institute of documentary productions.

¹⁴ Berry, *A History of Pain: Trauma in Modern Chinese Literature and Film*, 10.

Great Tangshan Earthquake took place, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) prohibited the mass media from reporting the actual situation of this disaster. There are two direct causes of the media suppression: on the one hand, it followed the mode of exaggerating the success of the leadership of the CCP and limiting the content of casualty and destruction to control the negative reactions of people in the war time; on the other hand, the ideological opposition in the Cold War made the CCP in the fear of the western world knowing the severity and casualty of the earthquake. The political suppression is also closely relevant to the Cultural Revolution. The Tangshan earthquake happened in 1976 which was in the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, and the Gang of Four was inciting the political campaign of criticizing Deng Xiaoping. They put forward the slogan that “No earthquake is able to disturb criticizing Deng (buguan dongzhen xizhen, buneng ganrao pideng).” This slogan shows the news reporting is only a political propaganda tool and the reporting of the disaster is largely suppressed by the political faction.

The three decades after the earthquake witnessed the rise of reportages and documentary films centering on nationalism and socialism, and the representatives are *Personal Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake* and *A Miracle of Kailuan Mining* respectively. Even in the cultural texts after a decade of this disaster, the psychological loss and pain of individuals have still been largely overlooked and replaced by socialistic narrative. It was not until the early 2000s that the fictional and cinematic works prioritizing individual traumatic experiences over the political propaganda of contribution of the CCP and People’s Liberation Army were created. The novella *Aftershock* and its same-name adapted film stand for the representative works of exploring PTSD experiences of the Tangshan earthquake survivors. Through time and repeated representations of the Tangshan earthquake, the cultural construction of this earthquake has gone through a transition from reportages and documentary works of collecting firsthand experience

accounts to the fictional and imagined form of being constructed purely on the textual level without direct experience or observation. It reflects the fundamental shift in the ways traumatic memory is culturally represented and imagined in the contemporary ages, when the popular forms (fiction, film, television drama) target larger audiences with digital reproduction.

This study applies Michael Berry's "centripetal trauma" and "centrifugal trauma," the two terms he borrows from Bakhtin which originating in a linguistic sense, to analyze the relationship between trauma on a national scale and counter-narratives of the nation on the level of individuals. I argue that there is a shift from traumatic narratives of the Tangshan earthquake centered around the shadow of nationalism to those focusing on individuals haunted by the specters of a disastrous past. Berry utilizes these terms in the context of narratives of trauma and historical violence, writing, "[t]he centripetal force of trauma begins on the outside and converges in the center, resulting in new 'official' or 'national' discourses, whereas the centrifugal force originates from this new 'national center' and extends outward, unleashing a multitude of destabilizing 'unofficial' narratives—a true heteroglossia—that stretch, challenge, and destroy national boundaries."¹⁵ "Centripetal trauma" refers to the force traveling from the outside to the center in the examination of traumatic events, and it establishes and cements national discourse.

Although this study intends to reveal a subtle shift from "centripetal trauma" to "centrifugal trauma," there are also various interconnections and interlaces between these forces. It suggests their relationship is much more complex than binary and opposing counterparts. As stated by Berry and Bakhtin, centripetal and centrifugal forces exist independently and affect each other simultaneously. The complexity is shown in the various counter-nationalistic narratives of the Tangshan earthquake among official political propaganda works. For example, the ways of

¹⁵ Berry, *A History of Pain: Trauma in Modern Chinese Literature and Film*, 272.

collecting and rewriting earthquake memories from individuals not only inspire socialistic discourse but also give rise to dissident voices which allude to the collapse of Mao's regime and the shadow of the Cultural Revolution in the accounts of reportages. The pain and loss of the individual in reportages deconstruct the achievement of the CCP and army. On the other hand, the influence of politics has been repeatedly presented in the cultural texts. Those works centering on individual traumatic memories and disturbing the conceptions of the nation, upon closer scrutiny, are also haunted by the shadow of nationalism. The mixture of different tendencies – or “voices” – illustrates very well the Bakhtian concept of “heteroglossia.” This term means, literally, a plurality of voices. To put it simply, there are a variety of voices in fictive texts that create tensions among themselves. Bakhtin is looking primarily at the novel; but this idea can be applied to non-fictive sources as well. It is because of these many voices that we find fissures and alternative or competing interpretive possibilities in the cultural constructions of the Tangshan earthquake, be it a fictive or non-fictive. Taken as a whole, the fissures and alternative possibilities work together towards a subtle shift.

Chapter one reflects the construction of centripetal trauma and its homogeneous socialistic and nationalistic narrative accounts through the close readings and discussions of cultural texts of the Great Tangshan Earthquake. The two types of cultural texts I cover are reportage books and documentary films. I argue that the cultural construction of the Tangshan earthquake was by and large dominated by nationalistic and socialistic narratives, which represent the trend of cultural representations in the duration of three decades after the earthquake. The documentary films carried the legacy of Maoism and the Cultural Revolution and served as political propaganda tools of the state. In the reportage books, historical trauma is intentionally constructed in homogeneous accounts in terms of socialistic narrative, with the cooperation of authors, narrators, and editors. I

examine the construction of a national hero of a party leader, the apex of socialistic values and morality, and the mourning of personal loss overshadowed by the mourning of leader Chairman Mao. I argue that over time and through the process of repeated representations, the Tangshan earthquake has been transformed from a natural disaster taking place in certain areas of China into a national trauma, national fighting disaster spirit, cultural symbol, national myth, and history legend.

Chapter two probes the deconstruction of centripetal trauma and points out a subtle shift from “centripetal trauma” to “centrifugal trauma” based on a detailed analysis of my sources and an understanding of the complexities of the historical situation. I claim that the focus on the representation of individual traumatic memory that plays a profound role in unleashing a multitude of unofficial discourse and dissolving centripetal force. This chapter deals with the traumatic memory issue in the film *Aftershock* by Feng Xiaogang and the fiction *Aftershock* by Zhang Ling. The film reveals survivors’ aftermath life of the Tangshan earthquake, attempting to find out a solution to reconciling with traumatic memory. The novella emphasizes the “aftershock” of traumatic experiences and the difficulty of reaching a settlement with traumatic memory. In those works, the tendency of “centrifugal trauma” overrides and challenges the tendency of “centripetal trauma.”

Chapter three explores the overlaying and interlacing of centripetal trauma and centrifugal trauma. It demonstrates the relationship between centripetal trauma and centrifugal trauma is more complex than two binary and opposing counterparts, which reflects the complexity and richness of history and the difficulty of interpreting a politicalized natural disaster. It demonstrates a subtle shift not only because present sources do not show a definitive break between the centripetal and centrifugal tendencies; but also because these tendencies are mixed in these sources. There are a

variety of voices – “heteroglossia” – in fictive texts and non-fictive texts that they create tensions among themselves. I select *Personal Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake* and the film *Aftershock* to deal with the overlapping of national trauma and individual trauma. Although the former is dominated by the nationalistic and socialistic narratives, the dissident voices reveal the counter-official discourse from the hidden agents. The latter is the representative of the representation of the individual trauma, nevertheless, the undercurrent nationalistic and socialistic narratives in this film construct the national trauma and undermines the individual trauma.

CHAPTER I

From Eulogy to Hymn: The Construction of National Trauma in the Socialistic and Nationalistic Narratives of the Tangshan Earthquake

Introduction

Through the close reading and discussions of cultural texts of the Great Tangshan Earthquake, this chapter analyzes how the centripetal trauma is constructed in the homogeneous socialistic narrative accounts in these cultural representations. I argue that the traumatic experiences and traumatic memories of the Tangshan earthquake are repressed and appropriated by nationalistic discourse, and to a great degree, the historical memory of the Great Tangshan Earthquake is constructed as a demonstration of the powerful leadership of the CCP and the advantageous socialism system. As a reverse, individuals' pain and loss are purposely repressed and personal mourning is overshadowed by the national mourning towards Chairman Mao.

In my study of the Tangshan earthquake, I find that the cultural representations in the three decades were dominated by nationalistic and socialistic narratives. However, the pain and loss of the individual are politically harnessed by the state propaganda to glorify the leadership of CCP and the army, and beyond that, the representation of individuals' suffering becomes the symbol of a nation's body in pain. As Michael Berry points out, the conception of "trauma" can be applied to the national level. "LaCapra (1996) has suggested that psychoanalytic approaches that have traditionally been applied to the individual may be extended to also consider the presence of similar neuroses in the collective structures of society as well as in texts."¹⁶ Over time and through the process of repeated representation, the Tangshan earthquake has been transformed from a natural

¹⁶ Michael Berry, *A History of Pain: Trauma in Modern Chinese Literature and Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 173-174.

disaster taking place in certain areas of China into a national trauma, cultural symbol, national myth, and history legend. The narrative construction of the Tangshan earthquake has gone the transition from a natural disaster to a national disaster aiming to promote national counter-disaster spirit. This nationalistic strategy is also utilized in later natural disasters, such as the 1998 China Floods¹⁷, 2008 Sichuan Earthquake¹⁸, and 2008 Chinese Winter Storms¹⁹.

This chapter covers three types of literary and visual texts — the documentary reportage, the documentary film, and the documentary novel. The documentary reportages include *Personal Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake*²⁰, *A Hundred of Accounts of Personal Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake*²¹, and *My Experience of the Great Tangshan Earthquake*²². The documentary films are *Heroes Fight with Disaster* — *Real Experiences of the Great Tangshan*

¹⁷ The 1998 China Floods lasted from the middle of June to the beginning of September 1998 in China at the Yangtze River, as well as the Nen River, Songhua River, and the Pearl River. It was considered the worst Northern China flood in 40 years -- 4150 people were dead and 180 million people were affected. Around 100,000 square kilometers (25,000,000 acres) were evacuated, and 13.3 million houses were damaged or destroyed (Spignesi, Stephen J. *Catastrophe!: the 100 greatest disasters of all time*. Citadel Press, 2004).

¹⁸ The 2008 Sichuan Earthquake occurred at 14:28:01 p.m. on May 12, 2008. The earthquake measured at 8.0 magnitude and caused 69,180 known deaths, 18,498 people are listed as missing, and 374,176 injured (Barboza, David. "Aftershock Alert Spreads Panic in Chinese City". *The New York Times*, May 20, 2008). It was the deadliest earthquake in China since the Great Tangshan Earthquake in 1978.

¹⁹ The 2008 Chinese Winter Storms were a series of winter storm events that affected large portions of southern and central China, where it does not usually snow severely or extensively, starting on 25 January 2008 until 6 February 2008. The systems affected most of the area with heavy snows, ice, and cold temperatures causing extensive damage and transportation disruption for several thousand travelers. It became China's worst winter weather in half a century. According to some media sources the storms were directly responsible for at least 129 deaths ("129 People Killed, 4 Missing in Winter Storms", *Xinhua News Agency*, February 23, 2008).

²⁰ Jicai Feng and Jiangong Chen ed, *Tangshan dadizhen qinliji* [Personal Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake] (Beijing: Tuanjie chubanshe, 2006).

²¹ Tangshan Zhengxie wenshiziliao weiyuanhui (CPPCC Historical Archive Committee) ed. *Tangshan dadizhen bairen qinliji* [A Hundred of Accounts of Real Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake] (Beijing: Social Sciences Literature Press, 1995).

²² Yumin Tang, *Qinli Tangshan dalizhen* [My Experience of the Great Tangshan Earthquake] (Beijing: China Photographic Publishing House, 2007).

*Earthquake*²³, *A Miracle of Kailuan Mining*²⁴, and *A Moment and A Decade*²⁵. The documentary novel is *The Great Tangshan Earthquake*²⁶. Those cultural texts created a homogenously socialistic and nationalistic narratives which contributed to the establishment of centripetal trauma in the cultural construction of Tangshan earthquake.

The Political Legacy of the Maoism and the Cultural Revolution in the Documentary Films of the Tangshan Earthquake

The Great Tangshan Earthquake took place at the end of Mao's era, and the influence of far-left politics was omnipresent in the cultural representation of the earthquake. This natural disaster occurred in 1976, and it was the year the end of the Cultural Revolution and the death of Chairman Mao. The Cultural Revolution, also known as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, was a violent communism purge movement from 1966 until 1976 in China. Mao Zedong, the Chairman of CCP, launched this mass socio-political movement to preserve Chinese communism by attacking capitalism and instigating class conflict, and to restore Mao's center position of power by eliminating political opponents and garbing power from central CCP and local government. This political disaster and trauma caused China in a mess for ten years, and the year 1976 marked the end of chaos and China was back to normalcy. However, the legacy of the Cultural Revolution and Maoism had been influential throughout the past until now in China. The year 1976 was also

²³ *Yingxiong zhan zhenzaiô Tangshan dadizhen jishi* — [Heroes Fight with Disasterô Real Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake] (Beijing: Beijing: Central Studio of News Reels Production, 1976), https://www.bilibili.com/video/av11543929/?p=2&spm_id_from=pageDriver.

²⁴ *Kailuan Qiji* [A Miracle of Kailuan Mining] (Beijing: Central Studio of News Reels Production, 1978), <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV17W41177jj?from=search&seid=2650135394063203257>.

²⁵ Xing Pan dir, *Yishun yu shinian* [A Moment and A Decade] (Beijing: Central Studio of News Reels Production, 1986), <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1px411j7cT?from=search&seid=1198622546800397590>.

²⁶ Gang Qian , *Tangshan dadizhen* [The Great Tangshan Earthquake] (Beijing: Contemporary China Publishing House, 2008).

a politically unstable year: the Four of Gang²⁷ seized the power of the central CCP through the Cultural Revolution; Premier Zhou Enlai died; Chairman Mao was severely ill; China faced the threat from the western world in the Cold War. Taken as a whole, the Communist China was on the verge of shattering, and the CCP must strengthen the ideological education of the public to maintain the stability of the state. Therefore, CCP utilized a number of propaganda tools to promote the Cultural Revolution and the cult of Chairman Mao. And the Tangshan earthquake is taken advantage by the CCP to inciting political movements and publicizing its legitimacy of leadership position. Right after the Tangshan earthquake, there were several political propaganda films being produced based on this natural disaster to promote nationalistic and socialistic ideology.

The documentary film *Heroes Fight with Disaster—Real Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake* is a typical political propaganda work, and it is filled with brainwashing idioms and discourses of the Cultural Revolution. It was filmed in 1976, right after the earthquake, by the state-owned media Central Studio of News Reels Production. For the straightforward and rigid ideological education purposes, the film is presented as a visual and audio combination version of political comments. As the title “Jishi (record of actual events)” claims, the film is entitled to a documentary work that is loyal to the historical facts. However, it is actually a pseudo-documentary that is shot based on the political-oriented scripts and pretends to present the real event. The scenes are directed and arranged by the production team and played by the same person in real events with designed lines and plots. The earthquake scenes only take up a few minutes whereas the collective rescue work and heroic stories predominate the entire film: most of the visuals of the earthquake are static, only a few visuals are animated; however, the scenes of

²⁷ The Gang of Four (Sirenbang) was a political faction that consisted of four Chinese Communist Party officials: Jiang Qing (Mao Zedong's last wife), Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, and Wang Hongwen. They controlled the central power of the Communist Party of China through the later stages of the Cultural Revolution and were later charged with a series of treasonous crimes.

collective relief work, individuals' heroic stories, and miracles of survivors are fully portrayed in animated details. The film remakes those scenes and performs nationalistic and socialistic slogans. Those visuals are edited and re-told with a commentary of presupposed political standpoint. The commentary is narrated by a male speaker whose serious and energetic broadcasting style is consistent with the speech style of the China Central Television (CCTV)²⁸.

As the title suggested, the film provokes a heroic spirit to fight the natural disaster, the class enemy, and capitalism to defend the great Chairman Mao and the socialist system. It promotes the cult of Mao, the Cultural Revolution, and the leadership of the CCP. At the beginning of the film, it briefly introduces the Tangshan earthquake and presents The People's Daily's²⁹ headline news "The Great Leader Chairman Mao and the Central CCP is Greatly Concerned about the Disaster and Sent Out Consolation Telegram (Weida lingxiu maozhuxi dangzhongyang jiwei guanhuai; zhonggongzhongyang xiang zaiqu renmin fachu weiwendian

) on July 29th. Following the leadership of the central CCP, the remaining high-rank officials of the Tangshan CCP soon organized a command headquarter to lead rescue work of the entire city. The film portrays the rescue work as a class struggle movement to defend Chairman Mao and dictatorship of the proletariat: the spontaneous rescue work carried out by the common people is distorted as party members save their proletariat brothers; the rescue work must obey the rule of "taking class struggle as the key link (jiejidouzheng weigang)," following Mao's revolutionary path, learning from the invincible Mao's thought, and sticking to socialism road; the anti-disaster spirit should learn from

²⁸ China Central Television () is a Chinese state-controlled television station. It is the mouthpiece to both the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and the State Council.

²⁹ The People's Daily (Renmin ribao) is the largest newspaper group in China. It is an official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party.

Lei Feng³⁰ and quotations of Chairman Mao in his Little Red Book³¹; survivors cry out “long live Chairman Mao, long live people’s Liberation Army, long live the CCP! right after being saved. This documentary film constructs Tangshan Earthquake as a tool of political propaganda, and the pain and loss of the individual are completely repressed by nationalistic and socialistic narratives.

Another political documentary film *A Miracle of Kailuan Mining* features the huge success of the restoration achievement of Kailuan Coal Mine (Kailuan meikuang) which was destroyed in the earthquake. It was produced by Central Studio of News Reels Production in 1978. It promotes the collective achievement of the working class and the leadership of the CCP, and criticizes the anti-revolutionaries Lin Biao ³² and the Gang of Four. It portrays the restoration work as a miracle created by coal miners, their families, and party members. At the opening of the film, it questions the doubt that Kailuan was not able to recover from the earthquake, and further criticizes the evil quotation from the Gang of Four that the disappearance of a trivial Tangshan did not matter at all. Then it promotes the sacrifices of the workers who value the collective assets more than their life: A winch driver died in the coal mine during the earthquake. When people found him, his hand was holding the joystick to stop it from losing control. He is praised as a hero who saved the Kailuan Mine at the cost of his life; a dynamite warehouse keeper refused to leave the Kailuan Mine in the earthquake because the explosion would possibly destroy the mine and harm the interest of the nation. He declared that he would rather sacrifice himself in the mine than damage the public property of the people and the state; a nurse lost her daughter but she had no

³⁰ Lei Feng (1940 - 1962) was a soldier and moral icon of political propaganda campaigns in China. In 1963, the Chinese Communist Party promoted the slogan “Follow the example of Comrade Lei Feng” to let the masses learn his spirit of selflessness, modesty, and devotion to Mao.

³¹ *Little Red Book (Hongbaoshu)* is a book of statements from speeches and writings by Mao Zedong published from 1964 to about 1976 and widely distributed and learned by the masses during the Cultural Revolution.

³² Lin Biao was Chairman Mao’s designated successor as the sole Vice Chairman of the Communist Party of China, from 1966 until his death. Following Lin’s death, he was officially condemned as a traitor by the Communist Party. Since the late 1970s, Lin has been labeled as the major “counter-revolutionary forces” of the Cultural Revolution.

time to mourn, and she soon joined the medical rescue work. Their selfless sacrifices and hard work not only guard the state-owned property but also contribute to the resumed coal production. Merely after ten days of the earthquake, Kailuan Mining yield a new batch of coal, which is described as a miracle of collective efforts of coal miners as well as a gift Kailuan Mining presents to the mother nation.

However, this is only the start of success, and the restoration work is still keeping on to retrieve the loss caused by the earthquake and the Gang of Four. The film promotes the partisan morality of selflessness, loyalty, and infinite love of party members to their people: A party branch secretary is concerned about common people's wellbeing after the earthquake -- she visits an old couple who lose their offspring and brings food to them. She arranges orphans to live in the best shelters but she lives in the worst shelter; an old coal miner resumes his work after losing his children; a doctor cures the injured after losing her daughter. Those party members are the representatives of the CCP, and they symbolize the infinite love of the party to the people. Values of collectivism and communism are highly praised as well: the new orphans after the earthquake are taken care of by the "aunties" in the community; the doctors and nurses in Kailuan hospital daily check those orphans' wellbeing; "aunties" feed the infant who loses her mother and save her father's time to operate the restoration work in the coal mine.

After one year and five months' laborious work, Kailuan Mining resumed its full capacity of production. The film describes it as a success of a new Long March³³. The success is concluded as an achievement of learning from Daqing Petroleum Spirit³⁴, which is promoted by Chairman

³³ The Long March (Changzheng) was a military retreat undertaken by the Red Army of the Communist Party of China, the forerunner of the People's Liberation Army, to evade the pursuit of the Kuomintang (KMT or Chinese Nationalist Party) army from 16 October 1934 to 22 October 1935.

³⁴ Daqing Petroleum Spirit is also known as the Iron Man (Wang Jinxi) Spirit. It consists of patriotism, truth-seeking, entrepreneurial spirit, and dedication and it was promoted by the state during the 1960s. Wang Jinxi, a

Mao in his *How Yugong Moved the Mountains*³⁵. It is also resulted from learning from the May Seventh Road³⁶, which includes self-reliant developing agriculture and industry: the family members of coal miners cultivate foods and fruits to provide supply for the whole community; the model coal miner leads his family to work in the mine in the Spring Festival; a more than sixty-year-old miner insists to work even if he is in a bad health state. Due to the collective efforts of Chinese people with the leadership of CCP and the Chairman Mao, the resumed Kaiping mining produces the coal for the state to construct buildings and contribute to the “Four Modernizations³⁷.” It is depicted as a miracle of defeating the natural disaster and a success of overcoming the chaos of the Gang of four. In the end of the film, it promotes the fighting spirit of the working class and the greatness of CCP which follows the revolutionary tradition and bravely attacks class enemies in the frontline.

After a decade, the documentary film *A Moment and A Decade* (1986) was produced as an international propaganda film. It portrays a new Tangshan that borne out of the ashes of the earthquake ruins, which represents the prosperous future of the economical reform. It sheds the bright light on survivors’ life after a decade of the earthquake, admiring their strong wills and the spirit of never giving up in faced of disaster: a man who lost his leg in the earthquake started up his business with his disabled wife, and they offered job positions to those disabled survivors; a woman who loved dancing lost her legs in the earthquake, and she learned to perform wheelchair

petroleum worker on the Daqing Oilfield, was honored as a national hero due to his contributions to the petroleum industry of China.

³⁵ Together with *Serve the People* and *Memory of Norman Bethune*, it was one of the three most frequently read stories in the *Little Red Book* and was memorized by schoolchildren during the Cultural Revolution.

³⁶ May Seventh Road () is not an official term but according to Mao’s May Seventh Guidance () to Lin Biao and the May Seventh Cadre Schools (), it should refer to Mao’s thought of developing agriculture and industry in all-level state institutions for the preparation of war.

³⁷ The Four Modernizations () are goals set forth by Deng Xiaoping to strengthen the fields of agriculture, industry, defense, and science and technology in China. The Four Modernizations were adopted as a means of rejuvenating China's economy in 1977, following the death of Mao Zedong, and later were among the defining features of Deng Xiaoping's tenure as the paramount leader of China.

dance; five earthquake orphans reunited after a decade and they built a precious friendship. Though the film shows solicitude to the earthquake survivors with a warming coat, the experiences of those survivors are still constructed as part of the restoration work of a new Tangshan. While the film is engaged with the individual agency of those survivors, their loss and pain were repressed by the nationalistic and socialistic narratives.

The above three documentary films are all about miracles — the miracle of fighting with the Tangshan earthquake; the miracle of the restoration of Kaiping Mining; the miracle of a new Tangshan. Heroism, socialism, nationalism, and fighting spirit are the consistent themes of those films. They are the political legacy of the Maoism, reflecting the social and cultural development of Chinese society in a decade after the earthquake. They construct a form of cultural representation of the Tangshan earthquake in the nationalistic narrative, which is produced by the state media and serves as a propaganda tool with visualized political and dogmatic commentary.

Following the death of Mao in 1976, the Gang of Four was dismantled, and China was on a new path of political and economic reforms with the leadership of Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997)³⁸. China has an old proverb that says “Tian beng di lie (heaven cracks and earth breaks),” and it annotates the close relation between mankind and nature. In ancient China, people believe that nature has its consciousness and control human beings with natural laws, and human affairs are awarded or punished by nature accordingly. In his book *Heaven Cracks, Earth Shakes: The Tangshan Earthquake and the Death of Mao's China*³⁹, James Palmer argues the Great Tangshan Earthquake is a natural disaster that has close interaction with political events, and it not only

³⁸ Deng Xiaoping (1904 - 1997) is a Chinese revolutionary and statesman who served as the paramount leader of the People's Republic of China (PRC) from December 1978 to November 1989. After Mao Zedong's death in 1976, Deng gradually rose to supreme power and led China through a series of far-reaching market-economy reforms, earning him the reputation as the “Architect of Modern China”.

³⁹ James Palmer, *Heaven Cracks, Earth Shakes: The Tangshan Earthquake and the Death of Mao's China* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

symbolizes the death of Mao and the end of chaos but also signals a political turning point that had borne a new China. In his opinion, the Tangshan earthquake is a political symbol that represents the end of Mao's era and the beginning of a transition and reform era. This political transition is also reflected in the cultural representation of the Tangshan earthquake. As I have stated above, the political documentary films of the Tangshan earthquake produced right after the disaster are controlled by the Maoism and the revolutionary discourse in Cultural Revolution. After a decade of the earthquake, the documentary film of the Tangshan earthquake shot is presented as a success of the national economic reform.

The Political-Oriented Homogenous Accounts in the Reportages of the Tangshan Earthquake

Through analyzing the documentary reportages of the Tangshan Earthquake, I realize they are largely narrated in a political-oriented homogenous narrative even if those accounts are collected from the individuals. Among those accounts, the worships towards Chairman Mao, People's Liberation Army, and CCP are omnipresent; the natural earthquake is depicted as a test to the people and the party; the anti-disaster fighting spirit is highly promoted; socialistic values and morality of putting the nation above the individual are greatly praised; personal mourning is greatly overshadowed by the public mourning of the Chairman Mao. Those textual accounts reflect the politicalized life of common people, constructing a collective memory of the Tangshan earthquake with nationalistic and socialistic narratives.

The Politicalized Life of Normal People and the Intervention of Public Space

Personal Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake is a reportage book published in 2006, and it collected more than 60 articles written by victims of, participants in, and witnesses to the Tangshan Earthquake. It claims to be loyal to history and constitutes of various firsthand

accounts by different groups of people: they were infants, children, teenagers, and adults in terms of their ages; they were civilians, soldiers, officials, doctors, nurses, peasants, workers, and teachers in terms of their professions; they were Tangshan people and other inflicted areas people in terms of their residency. They were the ordinary people who wrote down their individual memories of first-hand experiences of the Tangshan earthquake. Among their accounts, it reflect a collective politicalized life of normal people which is filled with leader worship and violent revolutionary discourse. The individual's private space is by and large intruded by the public space, and politics dominates their daily life.

Those accounts reflect the worship of the Maoism, army, and CCP among common people. Chairman Mao is portrayed as the savior and god of the Tangshan people. In *Personal Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake*, after the earthquake, the first question Tangshan people asked each other was "Comrade, do you think if Chairman Mao heard the news of the earthquake?"⁴⁰ The most frequent sentence they cried out was "Long live Chairman Mao, long live the People's Liberation Army!"⁴¹ Tangshan People believed it was Mao who sent the army to save them out of the ruins, cure their injuries, give them food and water, and build shelters for them. In the field of the debris, there were many white objects reflecting sunlight on top of ruins. Taking a closer look, they turned out to be the porcelain portrait statue of Chairman Mao. Some were Mao waving his hands as he stood; some were the bust of Mao wearing a service cap and military uniform; some were Mao wearing Chinese tunic suit without a cap⁴². Being called as "the capital of porcelain," Tangshan's porcelain industry was highly advanced, and people had many Mao's porcelain statues in their homes. Following the earthquake, Tangshan survivors unexceptionally

⁴⁰ Feng and Chen ed, *Tangshan dadizhen qinliji*, 2.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 102.

chose to enshrine the remaining intact statues at the highest point they could find — the top of the ruins. Those statues become the politicalized symbol of Chairman Mao, and people have been disciplined to treat them with so much great reverence and awe as the way they treat the real Mao. Even faced with the devastating earthquake, people’s first instinct after the attack of panic was to put those incarnations at the highest point. The spectacle of numerous sparkling statues not only reflect people’s worship and reverence to Mao but also reveal politicalized normal life of the public.

In *My Experience of the Great Tangshan Earthquake*, it recalls the author’s personal memory of the Tangshan earthquake as a photographic reporter and witness. It records the scene that numerous political propaganda flyers flying out from helicopters after the earthquake. Those flyers convey condolence from the central CCP and the belief that people will restore a New Tangshan with collective efforts⁴³. A “battle hymn” is created to eulogize Tangshan people’s fighting spirit against disaster in the leadership of the CCP. The hymn reads, “It comes a condolence telegram from the central CCP, and the party’s sunlight warms people’s hearts...If you ask where the power comes from, then Chairman Mao points the direction for you...The People’s Liberation Army is made up of the sons of our people, and they keep people’s safety in mind. They bring medicine, water, and food; heal the wounded; and rescue the dying ones for the purpose of revolution. People in the earthquake-stricken areas unanimously laud that they are Lei Feng in the army.” This hymn claims the power of the Tangshan people coming from Chairman Mao, and extols the savior role the Mao, CCP, and army played in the rescue work. The army provides physical assistance to the Tangshan people, and Mao and CCP are the source of spiritual power that offer emotional support for people.

⁴³ Tang, *Qinli Tangshan dalizhen*, 47.

Those reportages reflect that normal people's daily language in their life was predominated by the violent revolutionary and political discourse. When the earthquake struck, people instinctively recognized it as a bombing either from America or the Soviet Union, and they cried out the slogan of overthrowing American imperialism and the Soviet Union revisionism⁴⁴. In *Personal Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake*, a peasant family thought the earthquake was the guided-missile from America or the Soviet Union, and they did not associate it with Kuomintang (Nationalist Party of China) because Kuomintang reactionaries' cannon can only reach less than fifty kilometers in the film *Reconnaissance Across the Yangtze*⁴⁵ and *Fighting North and South*⁴⁶; A young man just escaped from the destruction, but he ignored his family and his wounds, taking a stick and crying out "Bad news! the Soviet Union revisionism threw nuclear weapons! Comrades, let us fight and kill!"⁴⁷ A reporter, who took pictures of the destruction and dead bodies, was suspected by the passersby as a class enemy with the job of collecting intelligence.⁴⁸ The *Red Flag* magazine⁴⁹ published an editorial to reject the assistance from America and the Soviet Union, and to appeal to the public to warn the class enemies' conspiracy⁵⁰. Through those accounts, we can see the ideological opposition between communist China and the western world. The normal people's minds are occupied with the violent

⁴⁴ Ibid., 13.

⁴⁵ *Dujiang zhenchaji* (*Reconnaissance Across the Yangtze*) is a film directed by Tang Xiaodan in 1954. It is based on the Yangtze River Crossing campaign and glorifies the Communists' victory in the campaign. It won the Ministry of Culture's Best Film Award in 1957 and was remade in color during the Cultural Revolution.

⁴⁶ *Nanzhengbeizhan* (*Fighting North and South*) is a film directed by Cheng Yin and Tang Xiaodan in 1953. The plot is the Chinese Red Army pretends to retreat and sets a trap for the Nationalist forces in Shandong and Jiangsu provinces.

⁴⁷ Feng and Chen ed, *Tangshan dadizhen qinliji*, 88.

⁴⁸ Tang, *Qinli Tangshan dalizhen*, 45.

⁴⁹ *Red Flag* () is an official, theoretical, and political journal published by the Chinese Communist Party.

⁵⁰ Feng and Chen ed, *Tangshan dadizhen qinliji*, 213.

and revolutionary language. These accounts of individual experiences of the Tangshan earthquake tell us about the intervention of public narrative and its impact on individuals' life.

The Apex of Socialistic Morality and the Repressed Individual Trauma

The socialistic values of unselfishness, putting others before oneself, putting the nation above the individual were highly promoted and internalized by the ordinary people and party members. Especially for the committed party members, they were required to stand a higher moral position than the general public. Their personal pain and loss were largely overlooked and repressed by the partisan.

Ninghe county, a nearby county of Tangshan city, was severely destructed by the shock of the earthquake. In the account “Zainan kaoyan xingling (Disaster tests heart),”⁵¹ the CCP officials and leaders of Ninghe county are described as the models of party members. They put the interest of the people, the party, and the nation before their individual families, rushing to lead the rescue work before saving their family members. Wu Jinghan

, the minister of the organization department of Ninghe county, faced a life and death dilemma between his two daughters and his neighbor. He heard the calls of help from them at the same time, and he proceeded without hesitation to save his neighbor over his daughters. When he returned to rescue his daughters, they had stopped breathes. As a committed and loyal party member, he withheld the sorrow and wiped his tears, hosting the emergency meeting with other leaders to discuss rescue solutions. Those officials and leaders put their wounds and family members' wellbeings away, digging out the generator and broadcasting facilities. Their priority was to restore the broadcasting station because their people cannot wait to hear the voices from the party

⁵¹ Ibid, 67-69.

committee. Until three days after could Ninghe people receive the inspiring news from them, “Ninghe county’s fellow residents and countrymen, the party committee is still here! We will breathe the same air and share a common destiny with you, and we together fight against the earthquake and participate in the relief work.”⁵² As a fast and widespread propaganda tool, broadcasting is used by those party cadres to mobilize the masses and strengthen the leadership of the party committee in the rescue work. The earthquake is depicted not only as a natural disaster but also a challenge, a test, even a virtual enemy that posed an enormous threat both to the public interest of the community and the state. Through broadcasting, the party leaders of Ninghe county arouse the fighting spirit of the people to defeat and conquer the disaster, so as to retrieve the economic damage caused by the earthquake. The disaster is described as an unprecedented arduous test, and the party committee is portrayed as heroes who take the responsibility of organizing the relief work on their shoulders and turn in an unforgettable and successful answer sheet. This account highly promotes the leadership of Ninghe party committee and the partisan of party leaders. The earthquake is constructed as a task to test the partisan of the party leaders, and they turn out to be proved as the ideal personification of the CCP who embody the socialism values of unselfishness, putting others before oneself, and putting the nation above the individual.

The socialistic values prioritize collectivism over individualism, and the individuals’ pain and sorrow are suppressed and individuals’ interests are sacrificed for the sake of establishing socialism. “Beiqing suiyue (The Days of Sadness)”⁵³ is the author Chen Feibi’s diary, where she wrote down her grief of losing her husband in the earthquake. Feibi and her husband were both staffs in the Chinese Seismic Bureau and party members. Her husband was on

⁵² Ibid, 67.

⁵³ Feng and Chen ed, *Tangshan dadizhen qinliji*, 124-130.

a trip to investigate Tangshan's situation while she remained in Beijing. Feibi lost contact with her husband after the earthquake and was inflicted by the pain of worrying him. However, she identified herself as an earthquake fighter who had to keep working hardly and living strongly: when all the people suffered from the disaster, she had no reason to be defeated by individual's pain. Therefore, she buried the pain and kept working in a self-composed manner. As time passing by, she realized the chance of her husband's survival was very small, and she had to face the merciless reality. Hence, she wrote a letter to the bureau party committee to confess her determination, "I am ready to face the challenge, and I will take my courage to march forward regardless of the storm."⁵⁴ After writing this letter, she felt a bit of relieved.

The deliver of the news of Yunnian's death becomes a political work that carried out by the party committee. A party committee representative announced the news of her husband's death to her, "Our good comrade, the earthquake fighter, comrade Jia Yunnian died at his post in Tangshan earthquake." Feibi refrained from tears and replied, "Party organization and comrades please do not worry me, and I must convert sorrows into strengths."⁵⁵ The socialistic morality not only represses her individual feelings but also commands her to transfer the pain to the power source of socialism construction. The party organization decided to inform Feibi's parents of her husband's death and sent some comrades to accompany her to deliver the sad news. She comforted her parents in a collectivistic discourse, "In face of this historical catastrophe, we were not the only family suffered from the loss, and there were thousands of families bearing the same tragedy. Yunnian's death was honorable because he died for the sake of the interest of the people. I would treat the misfortune in a correct way. The party organization and comrades cared about me, so you should

⁵⁴ Ibid, 124.

⁵⁵ Feng and Chen ed, *Tangshan dadizhen qinliji*, 124.

not worry me too much.”⁵⁶ As revolutionary fighters in the arts field who were educated by the party for many years, Feibi’s parents swallowed their sadness and overcame the challenge with a strong will. Feibi’s mother wrote a letter to the representative of the party branch in the theater she worked, “The party leaders are responsible to deal with a lot of extra works related to the inflicted families beyond their own work. Hence, we should not trouble the leaders anymore. As parents, we should treat it correctly so that our daughter was able to fully devote to her work. We must prioritize revolutionary interest, restrain the sorrow as much as possible, and stand the test.”⁵⁷ As party members, Feibi’s parents have the same collectivistic values with their daughter since they had been educated and cultivated by the party for many years. All of them believe they should treat this tragedy in a correct way of controlling their personal feelings for the cause of collectivism and revolutionary interests, which implies there is the wrong way of treating it to express their sadness and sorrow. As party members, their individual personal feelings are greatly repressed by their partisan.

The political task of delivering the news of Yuannian’s death has not been completed yet. Yunnian’s family was in Tianjin and did not receive the news yet. For the wellbeing of Yunnian’s parents, Feibi, Yunnian’s second eldest brother, and comrades of the party organization department decided to hide the truth from them for a while. At the same time, the political work team sent comrades to visit Yunnian’s eldest brother in his workplace. Feibi wanted to visit them but she was not allowed, instead she wrote a letter to let the family members carefully do the work for Yunnian’s parents. Throughout Feibi’s diary, we can find a whole procedure of the party dealing with the loss and pain of an individual family. The party controlled the news of Yuannian’s death and passed on the news to the party members in the first place -- Feibi and then Feibi’s parents.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 125.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 125.

The party did not have to take a lot of time to deal with them since they had voluntarily reported their partisan and loyalty to the party. Afterwards, the party arranged to deal this issue with other non-party member family members and Feibi was not permitted to have a hand in. The individual feelings do not merely belong to their private space where was intruded on by the authority and public space. The individual pain and loss are reduced to fixable political work that has a standard and criterion.

Mourning for Personal Loss Was Overshadowed by the Mourning for Mao

Through reading *The Personal Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake*, I encountered a question in my mind: why those survivors of the Tangshan earthquake feel much more sorrowful toward Mao's death, who dies more than a month after the disaster, than their own loss? Chairman Mao died on September 9, 1976, less than two months after Tangshan earthquake. It was another "earthquake" that hit on Chinese people. This news causes more shocks in Tangshan than in other Chinese cities. The public mourning of Mao greatly overshadows the individual and individual families' mourning. The individual's pain and suffering are not treated equally as the loss of the nation, and people bring their repressed loss to cry over Mao's death. The mourning of Mao is also a public occasion where the individual is not feared of releasing their suppressed emotion. To some extent, the public mourning of Mao also becomes a vehicle for the individual to mourning their personal loss.

After the earthquake, Tangshan people were either crying or talking much, and they asked each other "how many deaths in your family" and talked about the loss in a plain and calm manner. Their numbness was interpreted as they were traumatized by the earthquake and appeared numb. In the account "Han Zheng, Chairman Mao, and Old Sun,"⁵⁸ the author claims that Tangshan

⁵⁸ Feng and Chen ed, *Tangshan dadizhen qinliji*, 2-4.

people were not overwhelmed by sadness even though almost every family suffered losses. He opposes the speculation that Tangshan people were traumatized by the earthquake, instead, he argues that Tangshan people were indeed tremendously shocked by the death of Mao. The author worked at an administration bureau where was near a department store. He bought a high-end portable radio in a quite low price, which was excavated from the ruins but was not damaged, from a staff working at the department. When the radio station broadcasted Mao's death, all the people in the bureau surrounded this portable radio and shed tears. They did not stop weeping until the end of broadcasting. In Mao's public farewell ceremony, Tangshan people gathered at an outdoor theater and heard the broadcasting to mourn the death of Mao. During the silent tribute, people cried like a herd of howling oxen. The author observes that Old Sun cried his eyes out, and his nasal mucus and tears run from his face to his mouth, wetting out the cloth on his chest. Old Sun's wife and daughter died in the earthquake, but he seemed to be unaffected and buoyantly participated in the relief work. Nevertheless, he was one of the most grief-stricken people in Mao's farewell ceremony. As far as the author knew, Old Sun was born in a landlord family and graduated from the university in the reign of the Nationalist Party. According to the class classification system, he was forever stamped with a class brand that not belonged to "people." Therefore, he was feared to express his personal loss and pain in case of suffering from the aftermath of political violence. Since his class origin, Old Sun had to re-mould his ideology and showed his resolution to engage with socialism construction. Hence, he actively joined the relief work and pretended nothing was happening at all. His suppressed individual feelings exploded in Mao's mourning, so he behaved exaggeratedly out of control of his sorrow. In another account written by a sent-down youth⁵⁹, he recounted the reactions of sent-down youths, countrymen, and countrywomen to Mao's

⁵⁹ Feng and Chen ed, *Tangshan dadizhen qinliji*, 44.

death. Upon hearing the news, several youths even did not understand the meaning of “*shishi*

” and their teacher cried to explain to them. Then everyone experienced another wave of shock no less than the earthquake. A countrywoman sat on the earth and cried louder than any crying of Tangshan earthquake in this village in the past two months. She genuinely was overwhelmed by Mao’s death and felt like heaven falling down.

The violence of revolutionary discourse intrudes the public mourning. In Mao’s farewell ceremony in a far-away country, people gathered together to hear the announcement of Mao’s death and the lament music in the broadcasting. No sooner than it ended, a militia company commander strictly sermonized that “five black categories (landlords, rich farmers, counter-revolutionaries, bad-influencers, and rightists) pay attention! Who dares to make a move will be killed on the spot! On the spot! On the spot!”⁶⁰ Then there was no one either daring to cry or speak a word because people got confused whether crying would count as anti-revolutionary action.

Those documentary accounts consist of a dreadful image of “no individual family survived without losing family member,” but we can barely see the personal mourning for their loved ones. Instead, the public mourning for Mao’s death became a more important political event than the personal loss. Therefore, mourning for personal loss was overshadowed by the mourning for the leader in the cultural representation of the Tangshan earthquake. On the other hand, it can be understood as a belated reaction to individual’s personal loss, and a foremost reason behind this is that people subconsciously regarded the public mourning for Mao as a safe space for them to vent their suppressed loss and pain.

⁶⁰ Feng and Chen ed, *Tangshan dadizhen qinliji*, 25.

Individual Claims Possessive Ownership of Tangshan in the Documentary Novel of the Tangshan Earthquake

In his documentary novel *The Great Tangshan Earthquake*, Qian Gang wrote a preface titled “My Tangshan” in its reprint version after two decades of the Tangshan earthquake. Though Qian Gang is not a Tangshan person, he claims Tangshan as himself to possess the ownership of this city and becomes the representative and spokesman of Tangshan survivors. He uses emotional and privatized language to show his sympathy for the Tangshan people and obtain the legitimacy of representing Tangshan. He describes himself as a self-sacrificing hero who overcomes numerous difficulties before eventually reach his destination and achieve pilgrimage. His self-sacrifice entitles his agency of appropriating the concept of Tangshan as his own propriety.

Qian claims the ownership of Tangshan as a witness and an insider. He went to Tangshan after eleven days of the earthquake and joined relief work for three months. He witnessed the destruction of the earthquake and took part in several rescue tasks that included serving as an epidemic prevention worker, taking care of and accompanying the orphans from Tangshan to Shijiazhuang, and writing articles for the magazine he worked for. From then on, he had a feeling that he has built a strong emotional bond with Tangshan and become a member of the Tangshan people, then he had a responsibility and duty to write “his Tangshan.” Hence, he returned to Tangshan eight years later to carry out interviews and collect materials for the preparation of writing this book. Qian uses his personal emotional attachment to Tangshan to identify himself as a Tangshan people, acquiring the agency of representing Tangshan and its survivors.

Qian sets himself as a self-sacrificing hero to acquire the agency of claiming Tangshan as himself. He emphasizes that he is motivated by his instinct to join the relief work and overcome several difficulties on the road. He hurried to Hongqiao Airport in Shanghai after two days of the

earthquake and planned to get on board to get to Tangshan as soon as possible. Unfortunately, he was refused because the flights were busy with relief transportation works. He was also warned that Tangshan was in a extreme danger and the epidemic was on the verge of breaking out. Worse than that, he was not allowed to come to Tangshan by himself. However, Qian was not frightened by dangers and warnings, and he managed to join the Shanghai epidemic prevention team to get access to Tangshan. He spent eleven days taking trains and buses until he finally reached Tangshan. Eight years later, once again he came back to Tangshan to do preparation works for his book, and he was so busy with collecting materials that he could not go home to unite with his family in the spring festival – the most important Chinese festival. He emphasizes his action as a self-sacrifice, and the devotion he commits for the Tangshan people. In this way, his journey to approaching Tangshan two times is presented as making a pilgrimage of a faithful believer.

In *The Great Tangshan Earthquake*, the author Qian Gang calls Tangshan as “my Tangshan (wode Tangshan),” claiming possessive ownership of this city. He obtains legitimacy of representing Tangshan victims and of being the true keeper of historical memory. Hence, the pain experienced by the Tangshan people becomes his own. It is also the common cultural phenomenon nowadays in China that the official media claims nation as one’s own to promote patriotism, like the official documentary film *Amazing My China (lihaile wodeguo* ,).

From Eulogy to Hymn: The Construction of a National Trauma with Fighting Disaster Spirit in Socialistic Narrative

A national hero of passing the earthquake news to the central CCP is constructed as a cultural symbol of a national myth. In one account called “a coal miner and a piece of Chinese history”⁶¹

⁶¹ Feng and Chen ed, *Tangshan dadizhen qinliji*, 134-138.

from *Personal Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake*, I found an interesting story of how the news of the Tangshan earthquake has been reported to the Central CCP. In this story Li Yulin, the vice secretary of the party branch in Kailuan Coal Mine organized other three CCP leaders and coal miners, driving more than two hundred kilometers to send the news of the earthquake to the central CCP at 8: 04 am, July 28th, 1976. From the account, not only Li is described as a hero and a great party leader, but his delivery of message is deemed as the only one and earliest source that the central committee received about the Tangshan earthquake. Without Li as the messenger, the central committee would not have recognized the correct central location of the earthquake, not to mention take immediate relief action.

But is that the truth or is that a story constructed as a national tale and myth? There is another book called *The Great Tangshan Earthquake of China*⁶² by Guo An'ning, which is a historiography that traces the development of the Tangshan earthquake with solid statistics and references. It thoroughly collects the various sources of reporting the location of the earthquake after the catastrophe struck. It appears that there were three reports earlier than Li Yulin: the earliest one is a telegram of calling help sent by a soldier called Wu Dongliang from one radio army branch located in Tangshan at 4: 00 am⁶³; the second one came from Lanzhou Earthquake Administration at 4: 20 am, less than forty minutes of the earthquake, and it reported the central location was around the Tangshan areas and measured a 7.7 on the Richter scale⁶⁴; the third one was a telegram sent by Zhao Junjie at 7: 40 am, who is a member of the Standing Committee of Tangshan Party Committee, which was archived in the State Archives

⁶² An'ning Guo, *Zhongguo Tangshan dadizhen China* [Xi'an: Shanxi Science and Technology Press, 2008].

⁶³ Ibid, 251.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 253.

[*The Great Tangshan Earthquake of*

Administration and reported the immense damage and destruction the earthquake had caused⁶⁵. Then why the account from *Real Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake* constructs the heroic story of Li Yulin in light of he is the only source? It can be easily understood Li's story is made to build a national tale of a great party leader in the Tangshan earthquake. Li is a party leader in the Kailuan Coal Mine, and he represents the salvific role the CCP plays in the earthquake and the beliefs that the CCP puts people's interest in the first place. Li chose not to save his family and neighbors but to drive more than four hours to report to the Central Committee with the belief that more lives could be saved. Li and his companions drove an ambulance all the way, many survivors called for help and tried to let them stop, but Li resisted their appeals and explained that he hurried to send the message to Chairman Mao because he believed only Mao can save the Tangshan people. Li's action of discarding the calls from needed survivors is justified in the account that he is more needed by the Tangshan people and the Central Committee, but in fact, his role as a sole messenger can be deconstructed by historical archives. He is built as a great CCP leader and a hero for the Tangshan people, who turns out to abandon real victims and to believe the abstract concept of "people (renmin)" instead of helping the real people. How can a person who sacrificed his beloved ones and people calling for help be a hero of people? Li is described as a responsible party leader who has a noble morality to save more people at the cost of immediate loss of lives he would have saved. The construction of the heroic tale of Li conveys two layers of meanings: the first is the promotion of collectivistic values that the public interests matter much more than the individual's loss and suffering; the second is the belief in CCP's leadership and the party leaders -- when catastrophe struck, only Li, a party leader in a state-owned coal mine, held the

⁶⁵ Guo, *Zhongguo Tangshan dadizhen*, 254

responsibility to save the Tangshan people and report to the Central Committee and Chairman Mao. It reflects that Li's story is utilized to construct a national tale of a party representative in the socialistic narrative, which transforms the catastrophe into political propaganda of the CCP.

In 1986, the tenth anniversary of the Great Tangshan Earthquake, the Tangshan government enacted a Tangshan earthquake monument in Tangshan center square. It is composed of a main monument and auxiliary monument. The body of the main monument is 30 meters high which constitutes four supporting trapezoidal poles. In the center of the frontispiece hangs the tablet of "Tangshan Earthquake Monument" written by Hu Yaobang (1915-1989)⁶⁶. The top of it looks like four huge hands reaching the sky symbolizing "Man Can Conquer Nature." The four sides of the monument body are composed of eight embossments symbolizing the support from far and near of the nation to the disaster area of Tangshan. The vice monument is 4.3 meters long and 1.6 meters high, and it is engraved with an epitaph. It symbolizes the collapsed architectures in the earthquake and the new reconstructed architectures soaring above the horizon. The inscription inscribed on the monument marks the Great Tangshan Earthquake has been officially represented as a national catastrophe and a testament to the belief "mankind can conquer nature." The epitaph relates the Tangshan earthquake to a national shock "quanguo zhenjing ,", and includes Tangshan as part of the Chinese nation "the spiritual soil of Huaxia ()." The word "beige (epitaph)" links the Tangshan earthquake with a national pain which is set in a tragic backdrop. To promote the leadership of CCP, the Tangshan earthquake is portrayed as a national miracle and a legend of assembling the national resources both in the relief work and in the reconstruction work. The spirit of "mankind can conquer nature," which is part of socialistic

⁶⁶ Hu Yaobang (1915-1989) was a high-ranking official of the Chinese Communist Party from 1981 to 1987, first as Chairman from 1981 to 1982, then as General Secretary from 1982 to 1987

value, further develops into the spirit of “fight the disaster and save the damage” that applies to other natural catastrophes.

The entire inscription has five paragraphs: the first one introduces the earthquake and its destruction; the second paragraph highlights the socialistic values and morality of the Tangshan people in their self-help rescue work; the third paragraph praises the leading role of the central CCP, local government, and army in the relief work; the fourth paragraph presents a new and prosperous re-built Tangshan as a result of the contribution of the state; the last paragraph concludes the aim of erecting this monument is to extol the leadership of CCP, the advanced socialism system, the loyalty of the army, and the tremendous power of people. In here, people only ranks in fourth place after the CCP, the socialism system, and army. The proportion of people mentioned in this inscription is very limited, and there is only less than one line in the second paragraph. Even worse, the action of helping each other of the Tangshan people is used to glorify the CCP and the socialism system. This monument is no doubt a paean committed to eulogize the contribution of the state instead of the individual. Only the first few lines are dedicated to portraying the earthquake as a tragedy, whereas a majority of epitaph is occupied to describing the relief work as a miracle and legend. This epitaph has engraved the official cultural representation of the Tangshan earthquake as a national trauma within the context of socialistic narrative.

The inscription transforms an elegy into a panegyric. The official inscription takes advantage of the Tangshan people’s mutual assistance to promote the socialistic values and to glorify the socialism system. “It composes a piece of communist elegy that features people helping each other in distress, going through thick and thin together, putting other people before oneself, forgetting selfishness for the sake of the public interest (

).” The human agency is by and large overshadowed by the

socialistic narrative, serving as a tool and backdrop for the promotion of socialistic values. In the first two paragraphs, the Tangshan earthquake embodies a national disaster and a national elegy. And the cultural representation of this natural disaster is transformed from an elegy into a hymn in the next three paragraphs. All in all, this disastrous moment in history has been transformed into a national trauma and an elegy of the achievement made by the CCP and the army.

The national fighting disaster spirit was constructed in the Tangshan earthquake and applied to the subsequent natural disasters. Upon the Sichuan Earthquake in 2008, it was fully developed into an official national fighting disaster spirit put forward by Hu Jintao⁶⁷ which was formally archived in *Selected Important Documents Since the 17th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party*. It includes “All the people of one mind; our wills unite like a fortress; be fearless of danger and difficulty; never yield in spite of reverses; put the people first; respect for science .” Following the official statement of the Tangshan earthquake, it still promotes collectivism but emphasizes the central role of people. Hu further promoted the concept of “Disaster regenerates the nation

” that connects the natural disasters with the prosperity of the nation. Beyond that, the human agency reflected in the national fighting disaster spirit is utilized to construct a contemporary Chinese national spirit and a zeitgeist. The development of the fighting disaster spirit from the 1976 Tangshan earthquake to the 2008 Sichuan earthquake reveals the improvement of the political propaganda and the endeavor to construct a concrete national solidarity of the CCP.

⁶⁷ Hu Jintao (1942-now) is a retired Chinese politician, who was President of the People's Republic of China (PRC) from 2003 to 2013 and Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) from 2004 to 2012. Hu is considered to have been the paramount leader of China from 2004 to 2012.

Conclusion

In the wake of the Great Tangshan Earthquake, the cultural representations of reportages and documentary films collectively construct a positive and powerful image of the leadership of CCP in the socialistic narrative. Individuals' sorrow and suffering are repressed and treated as the testimony that the CCP and its representative Chairman Mao are the only saviors of victims in the earthquake. The Great Tangshan Earthquake is a natural disaster, and it can be seen as an act of external and outside violence. In its earliest reports outside of China on 28 July 1976 from the *International Tsunami Information Center*, the earthquake has been described as a "violent" earthquake⁶⁸. It left great loss and casualties not only to Tangshan city but to its vicinity areas including Hebei province and Tianjin city. The cruelty and violence, ashes and ruins, suffering and pain of the earthquake are treated as the backdrop in those reportage and documentary works, which to bring out the heroic savior role the CCP played. This historical trauma is utilized by political propoganda at first in the way of cultural representation to form and cement a façade of a stable socialism state, hiding the dark side of contemporary history that the Mao's government had lost political legitimacy and its following cruel political conflicts in CCP Central Committee. For a very long time, the traumatic experiences and historical memories of the Great Tangshan Earthquake are utilized and dominated by nationalistic discourse, and the cultural representation of the Tangshan earthquake transforms this natural disaster into a national trauma and a hymn of the CCP. In this way, individuals' pain and loss are intentionally marginalized and only serve as the backdrop of natural disaster, and human agency is reduced to become the part of the national fighting disaster spirit.

⁶⁸ See *The Daily Texan*, 28 July 1976, page 3.

CHAPTER II

The Destruction of Centripetal Trauma and Representation of Individual Trauma

Introduction

Chapter two probes the deconstruction of centripetal trauma and points out a subtle shift from “centripetal trauma” to “centrifugal trauma.” I claim that the focus on the representation of individual traumatic memory plays a profound role in unleashing a multitude of unofficial narratives and dissolving centripetal force. I focus on the film *Aftershock* and discuss how this film reflects individuals’ traumatic memory after the Tangshan earthquake. *Aftershock* is a representative work of exploring the social trauma of the Tangshan earthquake from the individual perspective, which is far from the previous nationalistic narrative that was controlled by the state power. *Aftershock* evolves on a family’s separation and conciliation, centering on the individual’s traumatic experiences after the earthquake. I will demonstrate how *Aftershock* applies individual perspectives to deal with the social trauma of the Tangshan earthquake. *Aftershock* explores individual traumatic experiences that once were overshadowed by the party propaganda, uncovering the loss and pain hidden underneath every survivor of the earthquake. I will use haunting troupes to illustrate that those survivors in *Aftershock* have been haunted by the past specters, and how in the end they choose to reconcile with the trauma. Besides, I also take the same name novella *Aftershock* by Zhang Ling that the film is based on into consideration. I suggest the novella pays more attention to the depiction of the psychological ruins of the heroin Fang Deng, and it reveals the difficulty of healing with the past trauma.

The Revisited Trauma and Its New Form of Representation

In terms of the cultural construction of the Tangshan earthquake, the nationalistic and socialistic narratives had been dominating the representation of this natural catastrophe. However,

the social trauma of Tangshan survivors was left untouched, and even worse, the vulnerability and loss of individuals were harnessed by the CCP to glorify the salvific power of the state and to cement a collective solidarity. For three decades, the traumatic experiences and traumatic memories of The Great Tangshan Earthquake were repressed and appropriated by nationalistic discourse and to a great degree, the historical memory of the Great Tangshan Earthquake was constructed as a demonstration of the powerful leadership of CCP and the advantageous socialist system. As a reverse, individuals' pain and loss were purposely repressed and personal mourning was overshadowed by the national mourning towards Chairman Mao.

The first two decades after the earthquake witnessed the rise of reportages and documentary works centering on nationalism and socialism. Even in the cultural texts after a decade of this disaster, the psychological loss and pain of individuals have still been largely overlooked and replaced by socialistic narrative. The representative literature works are *The Great Tangshan Earthquake* (1986)⁶⁹ and *A Hundred of Accounts of Personal Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake* (1995)⁷⁰. They collect accounts from the Tangshan earthquake survivors, centering on the leader worship of Chairman Mao and the salvific role of the People's Liberation Army and CCP played in the rescue work. The representative cinematic work is documentary film *Heroes Fighting with Disaster—Real Experiences of The Great Tangshan Earthquake* (*Yingxiong zhan zhenzai—Tangshan Dadizhen jishi* —) produced by Central Studio of News Reels Production (Zhongyang xinwenjilu dianying zhipainchang

) in 1976. It is a completely ideological education film that serves to strengthen people's

⁶⁹ Gang Qian , *Tangshan dadizhen* [The Great Tangshan Earthquake] (Beijing: Zhongguo dangdai chubanshe, 2008).

⁷⁰ Tangshan CPPCC Historical Archive Committee ed, *Tangshan dadizhen bairen qinliji* [A Hundred of Accounts of Real Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake] (Beijing: Social Sciences Literature Press, 1995).

belief in socialism, Maoism, and the Cultural Revolution. It was not until the early 2000s that the fictional and cinematic works prioritizing individual traumatic experiences over the contribution of CCP and the People’s Liberation Army were created. There are several cinematic and literature works reflecting this transition. The documentary film *The Twentieth Anniversary of the Great Tangshan Earthquake* (*Tangshan Dadizhen Ershinianji*) produced by China Central Television (CCTV) in 1996 combine the visuals of this historical earthquake and the present life of Tangshan survivors and their descendants after two decades. Though it still emphasizes the function of ideological education, there is a tendency of presenting individuals’ suffering and loss of the Tangshan earthquake. The novella *Aftershock* (2010) and its same name film stand for the representative works of exploring PTSD experiences of the Tangshan earthquake survivors. The TV drama *The Great Tangshan Earthquake* (2013)⁷¹ is a family ethics drama that revolves around the aftermath life of the Fang Family of the Tangshan earthquake in thirty-eight episodes. The stage play *House Guest*⁷² (2021) sets the Tangshan earthquake as a turning point in the main characters’ life, and it centers on the different ways those retired intellectuals facing the fast-changing Chinese society. The transition of cultural representations of the earthquake has gone from the reportage of collecting firsthand experiences to the fictional and imagined form of being constructed purely on the textual level without direct experience or observation. As Berry observes, “it reflects the fundamental shift in the ways traumatic memory is culturally represented and imagined in the contemporary ages, when the popular forms (fiction, film, television drama) target larger audiences with digital reproduction.”⁷³

⁷¹ Xiaofeng Yao , *Tangshan dadizhen* [The Great Tangshan Earthquake] (Beijing: Huayi Brothers Media Group, 2013).

⁷² Xiaoqian Zhou , *Jiake* [House Guest] (Shanghai: Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center, 2021).

⁷³ Berry, *A History of Pain: Trauma in Modern Chinese Literature and Film*, 14.

Over time and through mass media productions, the two decades of the twenty-first century saw the opening of a new cultural representation of the Great Tangshan Earthquake. The cultural representations of the earthquake has gone the transition from literature and propaganda films to artistic films, TV dramas, and plays. The media of cultural representations has gone the transformation from being produced by official media to individual media, from the state-owned television station to individual and private enterprise studio. Many Chinese writers, artists, filmmakers, and television producers probed the previously suppressed traumatic memory of the Tangshan earthquake victims. Those cultural representations highlight traumatic experiences and memories of individuals and escape from conceptions of the nation and the state. They depart from the function of the propaganda tool of socialism and Maoism, and they establish a body of destabilizing countercurrent “unofficial” narratives. Many textual and cinematic works investigate the truth of the Tangshan earthquake and claim the CCP and the central and local seismological bureaus should be responsible for the “human disaster” of the earthquake. Many artistic and documentary works pay attention to the traumatic experiences and memories of the Tangshan earthquake survivors. From “official” to “unofficial,” from centralization to decentralization, this process reflects the fundamental shift of reinterpreting and representing the Great Tangshan Earthquake. It suggests the cultural representation of this historical trauma has gone a transformation from being dominated by nationalism to focusing on personal feelings. Through the transmission of new forms of digital media, these “unofficial narratives” have been playing an ever-increasing widespread role in shaping the public imagination and conceptions of this past disaster. It signals a departure from the previous conceptions of the dominant and salvific power of the nation, making the public empathize with the pain and loss suffered by the individuals.

In terms of trauma experienced by the individuals, the film *Aftershock* by Feng Xiaogang is the representative of exploring survivors' traumatic experiences in a family unit which reflects the social trauma of the Tangshan earthquake in an "unofficial" narrative. It departs from the previous dominant national discourse that simply reduced the victims to the casualty number or utilized the vulnerability of the victims to construct a collective solidarity. *Aftershock* is a disaster melodrama film directed by Feng Xiaogang in 2010, which centers on the 1976 Tangshan earthquake that claimed 242,400 lives. It is one of the highest-grossing domestic films in Chinese history with a more than a hundred of million dollars box office⁷⁴, as well as the first Chinese-language film being shown on Imax nationwide. The film displays an artistic representation of the "aftermath" life of survivors and reflects social trauma of the Great Tangshan Earthquake. It encapsulates development of Chinese society in the span of thirty-two years in the story arc of a family burdened with historical trauma. The trauma starts with a forced separation of a family faced with a "Sophie's Choice" after the Tangshan earthquake, goes through the life path of traumatic experiences of mother and daughter as the victims, and ends with the reconciliation of this family and the forgiveness of daughter.

In this chapter, I endeavor to uncover the social traumatic memories of the Tangshan earthquake that has been hidden from the public eyes for a long time through the lens of the film *Aftershock*. This film allows us to situate cinematic representation as responses to the social and historical trauma of the Tangshan earthquake. It symbolizes the social trauma of the Tangshan earthquake in the light of a family's tragedy, bringing this traumatic memory to the attention of the national and younger audiences. It directly deals with the traumatic experiences of the survivors of the Tangshan earthquake, who were also victims suffering the "aftermath" of the Tangshan

⁷⁴ See <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1393746/>.

earthquake – the violence of trauma. They were not only inflicted by the political suppression on a national scale, but also suffered the psychological suppression on the individual level. I will explore the historical trauma and traumatic memory in *Aftershock* to reveal the hidden violence that rooted in survivors' life after the Tangshan earthquake. The psychological trauma and ruins left the victims living in the past and haunted by the specters relentlessly.

The Individual Perspective of Portraying the Suffering and Loss of Tangshan Survivors

Aftershock is a film about disaster, and there is no doubt that the most striking scenes are the split seconds of the earthquake and the ruins. However, the emphasis of the film is not only on the disastrous scenes but also on the aftermath of the violent trauma of the earthquake survivors. The director Feng Xiaogang is not just satisfied with displaying the spectacle of the earthquake, he further explores the psychological ruins that exist a lifetime on the Tangshan survivors. In so doing, he takes the light on a family's separation and reunion to present the individual's traumatic experiences. Family is the smallest unit of a society, and Feng explores the social trauma of the Tangshan earthquake with a family's tragedy and reconciliation. The melodrama taking place in the protagonist's family encapsulates thousands of Tangshan families suffering loss and pain after the earthquake. Feng takes individual narrative to portray a Tangshan family's normal life before the earthquake, highlighting their family bond and love to move the national audiences. This melodrama is told in a realistic way that enables the audiences to empathize with every protagonist in the family. Feng takes a lot of scenes to portray their normal family life in the 70s compromised economic condition, arousing a strong nostalgia from the national audiences. He sets a tone of calmness and warmth with the music and color in the scenes before the earthquake to make a stark contrast with the later devastating scenes. In his rosy imagination, Feng utilizes individual narratives to portray a peaceful and promising life the Tangshan people once owned before the

earthquake. In terms of the devastation scenes, he uses CGI technology to create a violent disastrous image to portray the vulnerability of human beings under the natural disasters. He focuses on presenting the individual tragedy and dilemma in the extreme situation: A “Sophie’s choice” faced by a mother which leads to a Family’s tragedy.

The Ordinary Life of a Normal Family before the Earthquake

The scenes before the earthquake are nostalgic and realistic. In the first 12 minutes of the film, Feng portrays an ordinary Tangshan family that lives a happy and stable life in a hard time. The story sets off on 27 July in 1976, the day before the earthquake, in Tangshan. It evolves on an individual family, the mother Li Yuanni is a factory worker who married the father Fang Daqiang, a truck driver. They have a seven-year-old twin, the daughter Fang Deng and the son Fang Da. In 1976, China was in a planned economy period that people lived in economic hardship. Feng reconstructs the authentic social picture of Tangshan in the 70s with the soviet style buildings of bricks and concrete; the vendors selling watermelons, ice pops, fixing bicycles; state-owned communal stores, and theater. The factories, construction works, and amounts of workers tell us Tangshan is a city with heavy industry. Tangshan people wore plain color T-shirts and pants, there were few vehicles in the streets except buses and trucks, the most common transportation was riding bicycles. Fang Deng was capable to purchase ice pops with seven cents because the average salary was no more than a hundred RMB at that time. Li Yuanni’s family lived in a tiny apartment without many modern facilities just like most of the Chinese families in the seventies. The newly purchased electric fan is one of the few facilities of electricity in their home. In order to re-create the family setting in the seventies, the production design team gathered period paraphernalia from nationwide donations. We can identify many representative living stuff that belonged to the past century in Yuanni’s apartment: the lunar calendar, the certificate of merit, and political propaganda

painting on the wall; the schoolbags that drawn with the picture of The Great Wall and Tian'anmen Square; old-fashioned aluminum kettle and lunch box in the cabinet; the sewing machine on the table.

Even under hard circumstances, Yuanni's family nonetheless had their happiness and hopes. The director Feng sets the scenes in a dark yellow color which is reminiscent of a past story, it also adds a layer of warmth to evoke the audience's rosy imagination towards the past. Feng tends to use dark yellow color in his period drama films to set a nostalgic and melodramatic atmosphere, such as *Assembly*⁷⁵, *Back to 1942*⁷⁶, and *Youth*⁷⁷. He uses few scenes to highlight the happiness and connection of the family – mother and children huddled together to enjoy the luxury of newly purchased electric fan; children draw a fake watch on father's wrist; children's joyfulness when received school bags as gifts; Yuanni hoped to have a third child to accompany twins. These scenes are covered in the yellow filter to emphasize the warmth and coziness in this ordinary Tangshan family. Yuanni's family embodies thousands of Tangshan families that ever truly existed in the world that cannot be simplified to a cold number of casualties. The music at the beginning of the film is slow-moving and melodious, it accompanies Yuanni riding back home and follows Daqiang driving a truck with two children around the city. The whole city was in a prosperous and steady state, harboring the pleasure and well-being of thousands of individual families, which makes a stark contrast with the ruins and wreckage scenes after the earthquake.

Human's Vulnerability under the Violence and the Ruins

As a disaster film, we cannot overlook the scenes and portrayals of catastrophe and the ruins. These portrayals consist of a disaster with historical magnitude and fatal power that individuals

⁷⁵ Feng, Xiaogang , *Jijiehao* [Assembly] (Shenzhen: Huayi Brothers Media Corporation, 2007).
⁷⁶ Feng, Xiaogang , *Yijiusier* [Back to 1942] (Shenzhen: Huayi Brothers Media Corporation, 2012).
⁷⁷ Xiaogang Feng , *Fanghua* [Youth] (Shenzhen: Huayi Brothers Media Corporation, 2017).

cannot fight. Like many disaster films in Hollywood, the director utilizes the omniscient perspective and high-angle camera to present the disaster scenes. It shows the ruthlessness and devastation of the Tangshan earthquake and the vulnerability of humans.

Feng's treatment of the scenes before the earthquake is not only nostalgic and calm but also is apocalyptic. Complimented by ominous scenes of dragonfly gathering, Feng creates a sense of doom that looms incoming catastrophe with the combination of color and music. At beginning of the film, tons of dragonflies flew over the railways and across the street on the day July 27th, 1976. Thousands of buzzing dragonflies fill up with each shot of the opening moments. The color texture is brown and grey, and the sound effect exaggerates dragonfly wings' flapping. The flapping sound of their wings is louder than humans' voices, and it makes audiences very annoyed because they feel like it is unstoppable playing in their minds. The scenes with muddy brown and ashen gray color texture appeared to be nasty and disgusting. Fang Daqiang mumbled to guess if the weather will be raining. The strangeness is generated not only by the abnormal animal mass migration but by the location -- why do so many dragonflies appear in a city of millions of people? In retrospect, the historical archive has recorded many abnormal natural phenomena which included well water level changes and animal behavior anomalies before the Tangshan earthquake. Some seismologists pointed out these anomalies climaxed in the days ahead of the Tangshan Earthquake that could have been used to predict it⁷⁸. Feng follows with a series of panoramic views of the city, managing to build up a sense of apocalyptic that foretells something devastating and frightening to happening.

In less than 20 minutes of *Aftershock*, the earthquake struck Tangshan during the historically 23 seconds. On a hot summer night, Tangshan people fell asleep safe and sound, without any knowledge of the upcoming catastrophe. Yunani and Daqiang enjoyed the pleasure

⁷⁸ Zhizhong Sun , 1976²*The Great Tangshan Earthquake*. Hebei Renmin Press, (1999): 90.

of having sex in the back of Daqiang's truck. Da and Deng slept in their home, and the fishes swam abnormally active in the fish tank. An earthquake light illuminated the night sky with a bright white and red hue in the horizon and the earth ground got started to shake. Complemented by CGI technology and special effects, Feng manages to create a series of blockbuster-epic and spectacular earthquake scenes. When the earthquake started to hit, the sky appeared to be purple, and the electronic out of leakage spark traveling through wires. Water came out of the ground and jetted into the air like a fountain. The earthquake with its full potential cracked the earth ground, ripped through monolithic walls of concrete and brick, tore the structure in half, toppled down the Soviet Stalinist-style architecture, tipped the street with falling structure, and crumbled Tangshan into nothingness. The earthquake scenes are also pretty horrifying. The visuals of alive people who attempted to flee cut off in half by falling ceilings, collapsed by massive walls, devoured by the breaking earth, thoroughly punctured by rebar, hit by tumbling manufacturing crane are too horrified and realistic to moviegoers who are under 18 years old because China has not established a legal film content rating system yet. There is no music but the sound effect of grumbling earth, falling buildings, and humans' desperately calling. Yuanni ventured to run into the building to save her twins, but Daqiang pushed her away to replace her. In his attempt to return to the home, Daqiang was crushed by the falling building and died. Yuanni desperately screamed her husband's name. It is the first time the music appears during the entire earthquake scene. The solemn music glorifies the heroic and sacrificing father figure of Daqiang, underlines the desperation and pain of Yuanni. The earthquake completely destroyed their family and the entire city in only twenty-two seconds, and the camera uses a few full blank shots to end this historical earthquake.

Complemented by a dark and ashen grey filter, the camera traces panoramic and high-angle views to display destroyed city. The earthquake left Tangshan in ruins and Tangshan survivors were suffered from psychological ruins. The ruins were not only the spectacle of destruction with shocking verisimilitude but the humanitarian disaster with thousands of deaths and losses. Those injured survivors wore home clothing, muddy and wet from the earthquake and afterward raining. Some even lost their clothing and nakedness, and dignity became the least valued thing when people were overwhelmed by pain and loss. Some were holding the dead bodies of their family members and wailing, and some were desperately searching and rescuing the people buried underneath the ruins. Dead bodies were laid unattended in the field, and subsequent earthquakes caused more casualties. Yuanni attempted to dig out her husband's body but failed, she desperately yelled out "Lord, you bastard!" In face of a natural catastrophe, she could not have anywhere to vent her anger, either she could not blame anyone but heaven. Feng presents the vulnerability of the individual under a historical earthquake. The violent disaster wiped out the entire city, engendered thousands of losses and pain of the individual. The physical ruins of Tangshan epitomized the individual psychological trauma of survivors after the earthquake.

A Sophie's Choice – Individual's Dilemma under the Violent Disaster

After putting down her husband's body among a field of corpses, Li Yuanni did not have time to mourn because she had to rescue her twins both buried underneath the ruins. Immediately she found out she was faced with a "Sophie's Choice"⁷⁹ style decision – her twins were pinned

⁷⁹ *Sophie's Choice* is a 1982 American drama film directed and written by Alan J. Pakula, adapted from William Styron's 1979 novel of the same name. In the film, the heroine Sophie Zawistowski is a Polish immigrant who was interned in the Auschwitz concentration camp with her two children. She had to make a life and death choice between her children—one would be gassed, and another would be sent to a labor camp. In the end, she favored her son over her daughter, chose her son to live and her daughter to death.

under two opposite sides of a massive concrete, tipping one side to save one child means the collapse of the other side and the death of another child. Yuanni was forced to make a life and death choice between the twins within a limited time. She insisted to save twins and could not give up any of them at first, but the rescue team told her that the situation did not allow her to save two children. To avoid losing her children at once, Yuanni chose her son Da over her daughter Deng. Unknown to Yuanni, Deng heard her choice and cried while mumbling “mum”. The tumbling concrete and bricks collapsed on Deng, blackened her vision, devoured her childhood, and cut off her family connection. Yuanni assumed Deng had died, put her body along with Daqiang. She held Deng’s body and cried her guilty of giving up her daughter. But Da was severely injured and needed medical aid instantly, Yuanni had to let down Deng’s body and took Da to Tangshan airport. Miraculously, Deng regained consciousness and was rescued by the army. She survived the physical damage but did not survive with the traumatic memory of Yuanni giving up on her.

Yuanni’s favoritism to Da was obvious in the scene where she gave the only tomato to Da as the twins both wanted to eat, she told Deng she was the older sister so she should let her brother eat and promised to buy tomatoes for her the next day. In fact, there were two tomatoes and Da had already grabbed one before in Yuanni’s witness, which means Da ate two whereas Deng did not even have one. Deng apparently knew the truth and did not trust Yuanni would buy tomatoes for her, but Yuanni insisted she would keep the promise. After thirty-two years, as Deng back to see Yuanni, tomatoes also became a metaphor that embodies Yuanni’s apology that bridges the reconciliation of them. Although Yuanni favoring Da over Deng, she still loved Deng so much that she punished herself in the rest of her life for her choice. Yuanni’s choice is an individual tragedy in faced of a natural catastrophe, she had to give up Deng’s life for the sake of Da, was forced to become the sinner of killing her daughter. Her inner world was destroyed, reduced to a

field of psychological ruins. She burdened the crime and trauma of killing her daughter, using a self-torture way to punish herself and redeem her sin.

Yuanni's favor to Da is not what determines her choice, there are the social and cultural factors behind her choice. She chose Da because he is the son who can be valued much more than daughter in the patriarchal convention. Yuanni felt guilty of Daqiang's death, so she could not stand the chance of losing their son who can inherit the lineage of the Fang family. In Chinese tradition, the son is seen as the direct descendent of a family while the daughter belongs to her future husband's family. Yuanni is a traditional woman, and she could not even against her mother-in-law's will to take Da away because the Fang family owned the right to claim their grandson. Therefore, the earthquake not only reflects the vulnerability and involuntariness of the individual but also reveals the social and cultural structure of Chinese society.

The Traumatic Memory and the Psychological Ruins of Tangshan Survivors

As the title "Aftershock" suggests, the rest of the film revolves around the aftermath of the earthquake. The aftermath takes the form of traumatic memories that haunted the mother Li Yuanni and the daughter Fang Deng. They lived in the psychological ruins for thirty years until they reached reconciliation at the end of the film. Yuanni's traumatic memory is her guilt of giving up her daughter's life, while Fang Deng's traumatic memory is her resentment towards her mother. Yuanni's life after the earthquake represents lots of Tangshan survivors who lived in past trauma while their pain and loss were hard to be understood by others. Tangshan collapsed and was in ruins in a few seconds. The ruins were transient and disappeared after the reconstruction of the entire city. The new city soon erupted and replaced the old one, which has been beyond recognition for the survivors. The old Tangshan, their previous home, and their lost family members only existed in their memories. Those survivors could not find their homes before the earthquake

because they were buried under the ground of the new city. However, that does not mean they forgot the past and their loved ones, and the memory of the past could also not be easily erased with the falling city. The disappearance of old Tangshan is a double loss for the survivors who were not only suffered from losing their home and family, but also losing the reminder and media of their past. They were trapped in the twilight zone where was disconnected from the past and future, living the rest of their life with traumatic memories of loss and pain. Those survivors, like Yuanni and Deng, were relentlessly haunted by the past specters.

The sentimental melancholy towards the old Tangshan and the past is omniscient throughout the film. Even though the government has established public monuments, every mourning anniversary, Tangshan people had their own ritual to mourn the lost ones. They burned the paper money to their lost family members to let them rest in peace and flourish in their underground life. Chinese people believe in the existence of ghosts so that this traditional way can connect them to the dead ones. In the film, Yunani and Fang Da, along with numerous Tangshan people, burned the paper money and communicated with the dead on the night of the tenth anniversary of the earthquake. Yunani repeated the address of their new home in afraid that Daqiang and Deng would get lost. The location of the old home would build a department store and they have moved to a new place. The camera takes a high angle to show the countless fires lit by the burning paper, which embodies the long-lasting traumatic memory of pain and loss in every Tangshan survivor even after ten years of the earthquake.

The “aftershock” of the earthquake strikes survivors in a sudden and remains a lifetime psychological effect on them. When Deng’s adoptive parents got ready to adopt her, they are told that she was silent because these surviving children got traumatized in the earthquake. Deng avoided eye contact and refused to talk to anyone as if she was a dumb person. She lived in her

own world and pretended she had forgotten the past. She was identified as an orphan because no people were coming to claim her after her photo had been put on Tangshan rescue office for a long time. When Deng came to her new home, she worriedly looked at the ceiling lamp and was comforted by her adoptive mother that earthquakes would not happen here. Deng did not speak quite long until she attended elementary school and was asked about her name. She clarified her name is “Wang Deng” by refusing her past surname and remaining her given name “Deng.” Her refusal of her surname represents the matricide and revenge on her mother, but the keep using of her previous given name shows the connection with her traumatic past.

There are two times that her adoptive father asked her past memory to help her find her original family, one time was when she was young, she pretended to forget everything; the second time was before Deng’s college entrance exam, her adoptive father had a meeting at Tangshan and offered her to take a tour, but Deng excused she did not want to go back. Her adoptive mother also supported her to find the original family at Tangshan before she died. However, at this point, Deng had not forgiven Yuanni yet so she did not come back to Tangshan. She deliberately shuts down the past memory to avoid evoking trauma and pain, this is her protective mechanism as a PTSD survivor. Deng’s psychological trauma caused her insecurity in intimate relationships, she was not close with her adoptive parents even if they treated her very well. Her adoptive mother’s concern that Deng would leave them one day reversely pushed Deng further away. Deng selected to attend a far way medical college even if her adoptive mother wanted her to study in their city; she rarely contacted them so that her adoptive father had to come a long way to see her and let her know her adoptive mother got ill. Nonetheless, she does love them but does not know how to deal with intimate relationships.

If we say Feng Deng's trauma is driven by her resentment of her mother, then Yuanni's trauma is made up by her guilt. When Yuanni's mother-in-law and sister-in-law came to visit her and mourned Daqiang, Yuanni cried that she was guilty of Daqiang, Deng, and Da. Daqiang would not have died if he had not worked at Tangshan--Yuanni's hometown; her daughter died and her son lost an arm, while she was safe and sound. Yuanni internally transferred her guilt to her debt, something she should pay for and suffer. Fang Da refused to take the college entrance exam and tried to persuade Yuanni, but she insisted she would not have paid off the debts to her mother-in-law had Fang Da not become a college student and had a bright future. Yuanni would like to sacrifice her own life to take care of Da until his end of life. Her internal regret and loss trapped her to spend her whole life on atonement and redemption.

Fang Da is the one who refused to shoulder the trauma and jumped out of the cycle of living in the past. While burning the paper money, Yuanni complained that Da did not take the college entrance exam so that he was not only disappointed her but his father and sister. Da countered that she should have saved Deng instead of himself. He did not feel like he should burden the life of Deng because he has his own life. He left Tangshan to pursue his career in Hangzhou, a bigger prosperous city without his traumatic past. He is the opposite of his mother, who chose to stay at Tangshan forever to keep the family from separation.

Haunting Troupes of the Past Specters

Yuanni and Deng were trapped in their traumatic past memory and haunted by past specters. The haunting troupes are the repetitive reminders of their loss and pain, and the representation of their trauma. The trauma is inflicted by the natural and human-made catastrophe—the devastating earthquake and Yuanni's choice, harboring Deng and Yuanni's lives like ghosts. They both chose

to suffer hardship to compromise their remaining pain until they found a way to reach reconciliation.

Yuanni intentionally punished herself by living in an old house that was decorated like a mourning hall. The house was built after the earthquake in which Yuanni lived for more than thirty years. It held Fang Deng and Fang Daqiang's black and white photo on the wall, and the tributes to serve them on the table. Yuanni burned incense sticks to pray for them. Yuanni believed Tangshan is her forever home with Daqiang and Deng, she must stay at Tangshan to accompany them at all costs. After the earthquake, her mother-in-law offered to take her and Da to Jinan, but Yuanni would rather Da was taken away than choose to leave Tangshan; Da wanted her to live with his family at Hangzhou, but Yuanni insisted they must have a home at Tangshan; Da purchased a better apartment for her to live but she refused because she was afraid Deng and Daqiang were unable to find the home she told them in the past death anniversaries. Her only desire is to let Da purchase a burial ground for her to get together with Deng and Daqiang after her death. The mourning hall is the physical reminder of her sin and loss, the ghost of Fang Deng and Daqiang haunts every minute of her rest of life. She used a self-torture way to redeem her sin, through sacrificing her happiness. She rejected the pursue of a good man and Da's suggestion to find a company, choosing to live lonely. Her morality deemed this is the betrayal of Daqiang and Deng if she lived happily. In order to pay off the debts she owed to Daqiang and Deng, she gave up the opportunity of pursuing happiness and refused the comfort of material life. She made herself become a ghost forever mourning her loss and guilty, trapped in the cycle of atonement in her psychological debris. As Fang Deng said in his rescue work at Wenchuan Earthquake, he described Yuanni's traumatic memory as a falling home, "The falling building can be fixed but the falling

home cannot be recovered in her mind.” He claimed that Yuanni had been living in the psychological debris for 32 years.

Deng could not forget the traumatic memory of Yuanni choosing to save Fang Da over herself. She was kept in the nightmare of being abandoned by Yuanni and her family. Her deepest horror was revealed in her nightmare, where a bicycle passing by with Daqiang, Yuanni, and Da who appeared to be around the age before the earthquake in black and white color. It appeared to be Deng’s childhood memory but missing herself in this happy family. Deng, herself was a teenager in colors, watched them pass away and called for their attention, but they did not hear and ignored her as if she did not exist at all. The stark color contrast marks there are two worlds, a past world with the traumatic memory of being abandoned, and the present world with a grown-up Deng who struggled with the trauma. This haunting nightmare reflects her depressed and unresolved fear of being abandoned by her family, meanwhile unwraps her deeper desire and attachment to her original family.

The nightmare represents her haunting troupe of traumatic memory, it cracked the first time when Deng brought her daughter back to see her adoptive father, she revealed the truth of her scar and told him she had tried everything but could not forget it. It is also the first time Deng uncovered her scar and confessed her trauma to anyone else than hidden to herself. Like Yuanni, Deng walked a long way of torturing herself to compromise the sizzling pain of traumatic memory. She was pregnant when she was a college student, and she refused her boyfriend’s suggestion of abortion. She told him that she was one of the Tangshan earthquake survivors, therefore she could not give up her baby. Her boyfriend did not understand why Deng would sacrifice herself than lose the baby, but she countered he even did not understand what is sacrifice. She identifies herself not only as a Tangshan earthquake survivor but also a victim of being sacrificed by her family. She is

traumatized in the individual level and no one else than herself can understand the meaning of pain of loss. Faced with a life and death decision, she refuses to become her mother, who gives up her daughter's life. Being expelled by the college, Deng raised her daughter on her own without seeking her adoptive family's help. After she missing from college, her adoptive father desperately tried to find her. However, she has not contacted her adoptive father for many years since she felt too ashamed to see him.

The haunting traumatic memory builds the psychological barrier between Yuanni and Deng that they cannot easily overcome. It is not the physical block like that concrete slab that fell down and separated the twin, but the mental gap that separated the mother and daughter. Deng accidentally encountered Da at the rescue team in the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake⁸⁰, she found out Yuanni had been living in guilt and decided to see her. Before their meeting, Yuanni heard from her daughter-in-law that Deng had been living in Canada, she realized that Deng's resentment made her hide from her so far away. When Deng came back and stood in the courtyard, Yuanni stood behind a window shield that blurred her appearance. The window shield not only is a physical barrier that blocks Deng off Yuanni, but also stands for a psychological barrier that distances them for thirty-two years.

The Reconciliation with Traumatic Memory: Forgiveness and Self-Completion

The reconciliation between Deng and Yuanni is reached by Yuanni's apology and Fang Deng's forgiveness. The maternal love of Yuanni is the key to healing Deng's traumatic memory of being abandoned. The 2008 Wenchuan earthquake was the turning point of releasing Deng's resentment. Deng watched the news of the Wenchuan earthquake on TV in Canada, the visuals of

⁸⁰ The 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake, also known as The Great Sichuan Earthquake, was an 8.0 magnitude earthquake that took place in Sichuan province on May 12, 2008. It caused 87,587 deaths and became the 18th deadliest earthquake all over the world of all time.

devastating ruins and dead bodies revoked her traumatic memory of the Tangshan earthquake, so she felt physically sick. She came back to China and joined the medical rescue team, where she witnessed a mother made a similar choice with Yuanni. Her daughter's one leg was buried under a concrete slab that connected the pillar holding the entire building, tipped the slab then the building would inevitably collapse, killing the soldiers in the work. The mother was forced to choose between her daughter's leg and the soldiers' life. She sacrificed her daughter's leg to avoid causing more soldiers' death and family tragedies. She knew her daughter would hate her one day when she grows up, but she had no other way to go. She desperately tried to find the cut-off leg left in ruins and apologize to her daughter. Deng held her to stop her from rushing into the endangered ruins, she empathized with this mother's helplessness, guilt, and pain. At this point, her resentment to Yuanni started to meltdown.

At the ruins of the Wenchuan earthquake, Deng overheard Da talked about his and Yuanni's aftermath experiences of the Tangshan earthquake. He pointed out Yuanni's life was completely destroyed by the earthquake, she was broken and lived in the psychological ruins for thirty-two years. Deng decided to return to see Yuanni with Da. The film did not present the scenes of reunion between Deng and Da to delay the dramatic tension of the reunion of Deng and Yuanni. Unknowingly to Deng, this would be a journey of completion of herself as well as healing of her trauma.

Da accompanied Deng to return home, he called Deng "sister" in the vehicle, Deng did not realize it was referring to her until Da called her name. She has lost her identity as a member of the Fang family so long that she had to re-adapt to her newly acquired role. Entering the entrance, Da told Yuanni that "my sister has come back," it felt like the time span of thirty-two years disappeared in an instant, Deng just went home after playing with Da, and everything in their

family did not change at all. Also, Fang Deng shared a mysterious closeness with her original family. When she first looked at Yuanni's house, she felt a sense of Déjà vu that she had come to this house before, but in fact she never did. Deng's child and Da's child shared the same pet name "Diandian." Deng's reunion with Da, her twin, represents the completion of oneness with her other pair. As a twin, Deng and Da grew up together in close relationship and shared similarities in nature. When Da's pop stick was snatched by other children, Deng helped him to take revenge.

Entering the house, Deng observed her black and white photo hanging on the wall. While seeing Deng, Yuanni kneeled down to apologize and asked why she did not contact her for thirty-two years. Deng was moved and kneeled to call Yuanni "mother." As Yuanni asked the reason why Deng did not seek her daughter's biological father, she explained that this is not meaningful after he abandoned her. It also answered Yuanni's previous question that why Deng did not contact her.

The tomatoes in the basin represent Yuanni's maternal love and the completion of Fang Deng's unfulfilled desire. Before the earthquake, Yuanni gave the only tomato to Da and appeased the disappointed Deng by promising to buy tomatoes for her the next day. When Deng came back, there were five tomatoes in the basin, Yuanni said she did not lie about purchasing tomatoes for her. Tomatoes, seemingly irrelevant and insignificant in the film, is the metaphor of healing Deng's trauma. It embodies Yuanni's maternal love that she kept her promise for Deng.

The re-united Fang family came to the burial ground to mourn Fang Daqiang. Yuanni brought the news of Deng's return to him. Da suggested disassembling Deng's tomb but Deng replied she would like to be buried here to accompany her father. Yuanni knew Deng still had resentment towards her and accepted it. When uncovered the tomb plate, Deng found out there were her childhood staff and the textbooks from elementary school to high school. Deng cried to

question Yuanni why she wasted her life to live in the past, Yuanni told her that she would feel more like a sinner if she enjoyed a new life. Deng understood Yuanni's guilt and love for her, realized that she was responsible for Yuanni's self-torture of punishing herself to redemption. Yuanni was also mistreated, she was a victim and sacrifice of the Tangshan earthquake. If Deng had returned earlier, Yuanni would not have lived at traumatic ruins for thirty-two years. Deng released her resentment and apologized to Yuanni repeatedly, they hugged together and cried. At this point, Deng and Yuanni reached their reconciliation.

Fang Deng's healing path of traumatic memory was completed at her original home, with the reconciliation with Yuanni. She returned to her family and forgave Yuanni, which in turn redeemed Yuanni's sin. Deng's forgiveness ended their cycle of living in the psychological ruins. Her decision of being buried with her family after she dies represents an eternal return to her origin and root, a compensation for the missing years, and an eternal reunion with Daqiang, Yuanni, and Da. At the end of the film, a real Tangshan earthquake survivor is standing in front of the memorial wall, who is an old man wearing plain clothes and riding a bicycle. He lost his parents, younger sister, and five-year-old son in the earthquake. He talks to his lost family that he will come to see them a few days later. It is his routine to visit them from time to time, and he keeps life going on with the loss and pain. This old man embodies thousands of Tangshan survivors with the memory of their past in their ordinary life, with the remembrance of their lost family.

In conclusion, the film *Aftershock* is the representation of the social trauma of the Tangshan Earthquake from the perspective of the individual. It focuses on individuals' trauma and presents the healing path of traumatized victims of this catastrophe. It explores the violence and traumatic experiences of the Tangshan earthquake's victims, displaying the reconciliation and settlement with past specters.

Comparison with the Same Name Novella—Different perspectives of Portraying Individual Trauma

The film *Aftershock* was adapted from its same name novella *Aftershock*⁸¹ by Zhang Ling that was published in 2007. This story was inspired by her randomly reading of *Personal Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake*, and she found she was not satisfied that those survived orphans' life was reduced to “becoming an elite worker,” “entering universities with a good grade,” or “building up a happy family.” Hence, she had an impulse to write about their struggling experiences of growing up, involvement with adoptive families, and their deep pain and scars⁸². Zhang Ling claimed she was not a witness with direct experiences so that the novella was made up from her imagination. When the earthquake struck, she was a worker in the far away Wenzhou. After layers of strict surveillance, Zhang could merely reach the earthquake news of propaganda slogans, vague casualty numbers, and the photos of collapsed buildings but without dead bodies via newspaper and broadcasting.

By rejecting the official narrative of *Personal Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake*, Zhang created an imagined story of a traumatized Tangshan earthquake survivor of individual narrative without first-hand experiences. Different from the film, the novella takes a single angle of view on presenting Deng's traumatic experiences and psychological ruins. In a flashback narration, Deng in her late thirties, diagnosed with severe mental issues, was attempting to save herself by seeing a psychologist. She was a PTSD victim of the Tangshan earthquake who cannot survive over the Yuanni's choice of giving up on her life. Her “aftershock” syndromes

⁸¹ Ling Zhang, “Yuzhen [Aftershock],” *R g q r Literature*, no. 1 (January 2007): 29-60.

⁸² Ying Zhang, “Shanghai zuizhong huibei daijin fenmu ma? —Tamen de tangshandadizhen [Will the hurt be brought to burial in the end? —Their Aftershock],” *Southern Weekly*, July 14, 2010, <http://www.infzm.com/content/47595>.

included fierce headaches, anxiety, insomnia, insecure, and suicidal attempts. Her inner world was completely destroyed by trauma, becoming a psychological ruin of pain and loss. Deng lost the ability of crying after the earthquake and had a self-destroy tendency so that she committed suicide several times. She was unable to have a normal job because of her headaches, either can she deal with the relation with her family because of her extreme control and insecure. She suspected her husband had affair with his colleague and student; checked on her daughter's diary; did not allow her daughter to hang out with friends. Her daughter had run away from home since nine-year-old. In her hypnosis treatment, there were many mental windows she can open but she failed the last one no matter what effort she put. This locked window embodies her unsettled trauma that was hard to get healed. Not only the novella pays more attention to the post-traumatic experiences of Deng, but to the sibling connection between Deng and Da. When they were born, Da was so weak that he almost died. Yuanni put Deng along with Da, and Da soon miraculously recovered. After they separated, Deng felt her left arm broken while she was safe, and it was Da lost his arm. Da blamed Yuanni for her giving up on Deng, and Deng cried out Da's name when she awoke from a nightmare. They were the twins and the half part of each other so that the separation with Da means the loss of part of self to Deng.

As Zhang Ling stated, the novella focused on the feeling of pain whereas the film had a warmer coat⁸³. The novella displays Deng's painful experiences in more cruel and detailed descriptions – the violence of headaches; the echoing mental pain of being hit by a falling concrete slab; the struggle and hopelessness of living in the dark. It portrays how a survived Deng was tripped by the leaking intestines, walked through mountains of dead bodies until she got rescued.

⁸³ Dongcheng Yang , “Changtan Dianying: Guanyu Biaoyan, Xufan zai xili baofali henqiang [Talking about film: Xu Fan's acting is very explosive],” *Chinese Business Morning Post*, July 23, 2010.

The film, on the contrary, shows a tender sympathy to Deng and Yuanni with a warming coat. Though it presents the violence of disaster, it uses blurring shots and high-angle views to avoid the shocking scenes of violence. It lacks the part that Deng was sexually assaulted by her adoptive father in the novella. For the ending, the film constructs a traditional happy ending with the reunion of the Fang family, to some extent, it is cliché and caters to the expectation of spectators. The novella leaves imagination space for the ending because we know nothing else more than Deng left a note saying she has opened her mental window.

Paralleling the film with the novella, the film also shows the different gender perspectives of a male director and a female writer. In order to manage Deng had a happy life after, Feng arranges a western white man who is sixteen years older than her to save, marry her and accept her daughter. It undermines the subjectivity of Deng and the feminine power of her independence and self-salvation. Deng had a hard time raising her daughter on her own, she brought her daughter to tutor a student and was shamed by her student's mother. The foreign marriage greatly improved the quality of her life, she lived in a spacious house with luxury vehicles and a beautiful garden in an upper-class community, her daughter had the opportunity to attend university. In contrast to the film, the novella reveals the collapse of Deng's marriage and family as a result of her "aftermath" traumatized life of the earthquake. She was fearful of losing and being abandoned, Yuanni gave up on her, her adoptive mother died of cancer, her adoptive father attempted to rape her in the name of love. She felt was betrayed and hurt because they promised to love her with their life. Since her shortage of love, she desperately grabbed the love from her husband and daughter, but her hysteria and control pushed them further away.

As an overseas writer, Zhang re-constructs the historical trauma of the Tangshan earthquake with an otherness perspective. She portrays Deng, an immigrant living in Canada, as a drifting soul

distant from her homeland and root. The memory of past has blurred with time passing by, sometimes she even suspected it was her illusion and imagination. Deng abandoned her past, disconnected from her original and adoptive family, and lost her identity. She became a drifting soul without either past or future, burdening the trauma of pain and loss in this remote country. In the film, Feng constructs a collective traumatic memory in the subject of Tangshan survivors. If we say that Zhang looks back at this historical trauma from the viewpoint of a marginalized outsider, then Feng feels he is responsible to represent the history of the Tangshan earthquake as an insider of the nation.

Conclusion

All in all, the film *Aftershock* and its same name novella stand for the representatives of cultural representation of exploring individual trauma as well as the social trauma of the Tangshan earthquake. Along with other textual and cinematic works, they reflect a subtle shift from nationalism to individualism, from “centripetal trauma” to “centrifugal trauma,” from the official discourse to the deconstructing unofficial discourse, from the dominant political control to the undermining potency of human agency.

CHAPTER III: The Overlaying and Interlacing of Centripetal Trauma and Centrifugal Trauma in the Cultural Representation of the Tangshan Earthquake

Introduction

The first and second chapters suggest a subtle transition of the cultural representation of the Tangshan earthquake: one shadowed by the dominant nationalistic and socialistic narratives to the narrative centering on the individuals' pain and loss; one from the centripetal trauma to the centrifugal trauma. This chapter continues the efforts of exploring the relationship between centripetal trauma and centrifugal trauma in the construction of the Tangshan earthquake. The model of the centrifugal vs. the centripetal presupposes an antagonistic relationship between the state and the individual, a logic that is frequently adopted when people think about authoritarian states. However, their relationship is more complex than the binary and opposing counterparts. I argue that there exist interconnections and interlaces of the centripetal force and the centrifugal force in the cultural construction of the Tangshan earthquake. They exist independently and affect each other simultaneously, reflecting the complexity of the historical event and the relationship between the state power and the human agency.

This chapter investigates the overlaying and interlacing of centripetal trauma and centrifugal trauma. It pays attention to the nuanced dynamics of power and agency between the state and the individual or the individual's family. I select *Personal Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake* and the film *Aftershock* to deal with the overlapping and interlacing of the state power and the human agency. In *Personal Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake*, the dissident voices from the neglected agency reflect the distrust of the people to the Maoism and the individual

pain and loss of the Tangshan survivors, which counter the mainstream nationalistic and socialistic narratives in the reportage. Although *Aftershock* is centered on individual trauma, it promotes the national fighting disaster spirit and puts the People's Liberty Army and the CCP in a bright light in the Tangshan earthquake as well as the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008 – another great natural disaster that took place in Sichuan province measuring at 8.0 magnitude and causing over 69,000 deaths. Feng endeavors to reinforce national solidarity in his portraits of the concerted efforts from the CCP, the army, and the people in these two earthquakes.

The Dissident Voices in the Reportages Dominated by Nationalistic and Socialistic Narratives

As I have claimed in the first chapter, the official narrative in the documentary reportages of the Tangshan earthquake takes advantage of the human agency to promote the national fighting disaster spirit and to construct a national trauma. As a reverse, the individuals' pain and loss are overshadowed by the nationalistic and socialistic discourses. However, the relationship between the “centripetal trauma” and “centrifugal trauma” is more complex than two opposing counterparts. It exists interconnections and interlaces between the trauma on a national scale and the trauma on the individual level.

In the three decades, the documentary reportages of the Tangshan earthquake were dominated by nationalistic and socialistic narratives, which by and large contributes to the construction of the centripetal trauma in the cultural representation of this natural disaster. Nevertheless, there exist the dissident voices that generate the counter-official narratives of the nation in those reportages. Those dissident voices reveal the dark side of the Cultural Revolution, the ordinary people's concern for the unstable politics, the problem of the army in the relief work, the personal mourning and pain, and the psychological trauma suffered by the Tangshan people.

Beyond that, the investigation of the truth of the miss reported issue deconstructs the salvific role of the CCP in the political propaganda. It turns out that the earthquake is not only merely a natural disaster but also a man-made political disaster.

The Post-Traumatic Experiences of the Individual Survivors and the Humanitarian Sympathy towards the Survivors of the Tangshan Earthquake

In the documentary reportages of the Tangshan earthquake, the human agency is appropriated to promote the national fighting disaster spirit and to construct a national trauma. But at the same time, some accounts portray of the post-traumatic experiences of the Tangshan survivors from the individual perspective. It reveals the traumatic memory of the Tangshan survivors and the humanitarian sympathy towards those survivors, which depart from the political suppression on the national scale and the psychological suppression on the individual level. It can be understood that Tangshan survivors and witnesses seize the chance to vent their individual trauma in the official political propaganda works.

In *Personal Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake*, many accounts wrote down the violent and devastating sights of the earthquake and the suppressed pain and loss of the Tangshan survivors. After the earthquake, Tangshan became a ruin and a hell – the dead bodies lay unattended on the street which covered from head to toe in the plastic, bedsheet, and bamboo summer mat. The Tangshan survivors who were exposed to the trauma appeared to be numb and emotionless. Almost every family suffered the loss but those survivors lost the ability of crying, and they resignedly asked each other “how many people died in your family?”⁸⁴ Their sorrow and pain did not show up until a few days after the earthquake, which was vented in the traditional mourning ritual of burning the paper money for the dead family members. Tangshan was

⁸⁴ Feng and Chen ed. *Personal Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake*, 50.

surrounded by the new burials and the smokes of burning the paper money, people even burned the real clothing for their lost ones. The traumatic experiences of the pain and suffering of the Tangshan people are reflected in this unique mourning ritual and their memory of the burial. On the night of every anniversary of the earthquake, they choose to carry out their personal mourning rituals to lament the lost family members, and they burn the paper money to communicate with the dead ones. Why do they mourn in the streets not in the burial grounds? In fact, many Tangshan people do not have accurate burial grounds of their passing family members. The burial work after the earthquake was carried out by the army, and it assigned some public buried grounds for the people to carry the dead bodies all the way to bury by themselves. Many people were not fortunate enough to reach those places and had to let the dead bodies taken away by trucks to nowhere. For the unattended corpses, they were buried in the pits that dug by the bulldozers or in the discarded mine. Even worse, before the winter, the government demanded people to move the burials from the places in the vicinity of the city to the designated locations, and many remaining burials were leveled as the illegal burials. Therefore, many Tangshan people lost the track of their family members' burial locations. Since China resisted humanitarian assistance from other countries, the Tangshan government put forward the slogan of self-dependence and self-reliance of rebuilding Tangshan. In doing so, the Tangshan people were occupied with the relief and reconstruction work after the earthquake. They rarely have time and venue to vent their personal loss and pain which are suppressed on a national scale.

The individual trauma of Tangshan survivors and witnesses leaves traces in the reportage accounts. In an account called “Xunzhao de tiantang (Finding paradise),”⁸⁵ the author recalls her traumatic memory of losing the track of her mother's burial location. She was a teenager

⁸⁵ Feng and Chen ed. *Personal Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake*, 116-120.

when her mother died in the earthquake, and her mother's burial ground was removed by the local government to nowhere in the winter. After hearing of the news that there was a massive grave ground in the suburb, she and her younger brother decided to search for their mother's body. It turned out to be a huge pit guarded by the militia that buried thousands of corpses. They stepped on the layers of corpses and cried to find their mother's body, but all the corpses were put into bags so they could not make out which one is their mother. After thirty years, the author still suffers from the pain of this traumatic experience, and she confesses that Tangshan survivors live with the trauma so they are reluctant to talk about the Tangshan earthquake anymore. The account *Xingzou zai diyubianyan* (Walking along the edge of the hell)⁸⁶ reveals the psychological trauma of Tangshan survivors. The author Wang Ziping's neighbor was a young girl who worked at Tangshan post office, she participated in the relief work and committed suicide merely three days later. Wang realizes that her death is not only an individual case but also a social and collective trauma of Tangshan survivors, whose mental states are broken and destroyed due to the disaster. Her unfortunate passing triggered Wang's interest so that he started to study the psychological trauma of Tangshan survivors. Wang refers to the social survey to get to learn the psychological status of survivors, and he finds the psychological trauma is reflected in three aspects: firstly, the mental disorders like fearfulness, sadness, anger, anxiety, and depression; secondly, the behavioral disorders of committing crimes such as robbery, theft, beating, smashing and looting. In August, the daily average of crimes of Tangshan was 6.98 cases which were 5.2 times the crime rate before the earthquake; thirdly, the severe mental issues were caused by the earthquake. According to the census of Tangshan mental hospital in August 1978, 108 people were suffering severe mental distress due to the Tangshan earthquake. The main syndromes are

⁸⁶ Feng and Chen ed. *Personal Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake*, 387- 401.

depression and no response to their surroundings and stimuli. They are at a higher risk of suicide and intentional self-harm.

Not only the Tangshan survivors suffered the trauma of the earthquake, but the people who participated in the rescue work stood with the same trauma. In the account “Kejin shijiusui de jinghai 19 (The shock cut into my memory of nineteen years old)”⁸⁷, the author Xiang Nan’s older sister was a nurse in the medical relief team of the Tangshan earthquake and Xiang recalls her experiences in the relief work. She describes the scenes of fields of dead bodies were so horrifying that she cannot forget forever. She saw a soldier was driven crazy by the devastating scenes, and he kept searching on the ground and mumbling “dig another one!”

The traumatic memory haunts the survivors for a lifetime and leaves them live in psychological ruins. In an account called “Moke (A strange guest),”⁸⁸ the author Feng Jicai recalls his encounter with a Tangshan survivor after many years of the earthquake. In a remote and shabby inn, Feng ran into an eccentric, solitary, somewhat cold man in his fifties and a talkative young man. The young man attempted to casually talk with this strange man and asked where he was from. Getting the answer of “Tangshan,” the young man was triggered the interest and inquired about his experiences of the Tangshan earthquake. The middle-aged man appeared very calm and replied that he lost his mother, wife, and daughter in the earthquake. The author internally doubted either he was a cold person in nature or was traumatized by the disaster. When the young man asked about his relationship with his family, the Tangshan man cannot control his personal feelings and poured the tears out. He started a relentless speech without the inquiry from

⁸⁷ Feng and Chen ed. *Personal Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake*, 273-280.

⁸⁸ Feng and Chen ed. *Personal Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake*, 356-364.

others. Though his eyes holding the tears, it still appeared to be void and hollow. He took off his hat as he was excitedly speaking, it turned out his hair was almost white. This Tangshan man did not sleep on that night, he sat on the bedside and smoked cigarettes one by one. He represents the thousands of Tangshan survivors who suffered the loss and pain in the earthquake and lived in the traumatic memory. This account reflects the individual trauma hidden in every Tangshan survivor and the social trauma of the Tangshan people.

The psychology and aftermath life of disadvantaged groups of the Tangshan survivors are taken into account. The account “Tangshan zhenhou chongzu jiating de gushi

(Stories of reconstituted families after the Tangshan earthquake)”⁸⁹ focuses on the private topic of the blended families and the lifetime painful experiences of Tangshan female survivors. It interviews several female survivors who chose to remarry and rebuild families after losing their families in the earthquake. It takes a feminine perspective to reveal the aftermath trauma of the female survivors, who not only suffered the loss and pain of losing families but faced with the social pressure of being a widow. Lu Guihua lost her family in the earthquake and was urged by neighbors to remarry. Unfortunately, the matchmaker introduced a bad man to her so she had an unhappy blended family. Her rest of life is miserable and her frequent phrase is “it had been better to be killed in the earthquake.” After a decade of the earthquake, she felt like it took place yesterday; after two decades, she felt like it happened in the day before yesterday; after three decades, she instead feels like it occurs today. Lu blamed the earthquake as the beginning of her traumatic experiences and the root of her tragic life since she lost the subjectivity of controlling her life from then on.

⁸⁹ Feng and Chen ed. *Personal Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake*, 342-355.

The humanitarian sympathy towards the survivors and victims of the earthquake is evident in some reportage accounts. It shows the real personal feelings that not overshadowed by the nationalistic and socialistic narratives. In the account “Feixu zhong zhankaide hua

(The flower blooms in the ruins),”⁹⁰ the author Yan Yan was a company-grade officer in the army and he recollects his experiences in the relief work. This account tells three short stories about the flower: the first is about saving a white flower in the ruins. When Yan and other soldiers were carrying out relief work, they found a white flower in the ruins. Soldiers were impressed by its beauty and vitality and persuaded Yan to save its life because they thought a flower’s life also mattered. Yan agreed and they transferred this flower into an old flower pot. The prettiness and fragrance of that flower are remembered by Yan from then until now; the second story is about the love of a son to his mother. Yan saw a soldier bringing a flower pot to their workplace – an earthquake shelter and asked his reason. The soldier explained this was his mother’s favorite flower so he dug it out from the ruins even if she was already dead. Hence, this flower became a reminder and the symbol of his passing mother; the third one is a romantic story. A young female worker suggested to put flowers in the factory to refresh workers’ spirits, and a young male worker brought some roses that were planted in his family. It turned out the young man was pursuing this female worker, so his co-workers said he sent the fortunately survived flower to his sweetheart. All the workers were happy that the factory was decorated beautifully with flowers. These flower-related stories reflect the strength of Tangshan survivors who are not overcome by the disaster and the human nature of pursuing beauty even in adversity.

⁹⁰ Feng and Chen ed. *Personal Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake*, 167-173.

Deconstruct the Political Propaganda and Reveal the Problem in the Prediction and the Rescue Work

In the accounts from the witnesses of the Tangshan earthquake, we can find some authors are standing an objective perspective to reflect the reality of the Cultural Revolution, deconstruct the political propaganda of promoting the success of fighting the disaster, and reveal the problem of the prediction and rescue work of the state. These counter-official narratives deconstruct the centripetal force and the salvific role the CCP constructs in the propaganda works of the Tangshan earthquake.

In the account “Nayinian, tangshandizhen (That year, the Tangshan earthquake),”⁹¹ the author Su Shuyang discloses the dark side of the Cultural Revolution and the problems in the relief work. He was a professor and be labeled as a rightist, living in a city near Tangshan. When the earthquake took place, the university he worked at assembled all the staff and faculty to participate in the relief work on the campus. People soon came to the campus and Su explicates that people had a high sense of organization and discipline at that time because they were afraid to be classified as reactionary. Su was assigned to carry the corpse specimen to the safe place and repair the endangered building since he was a rightist, whereas the leftists and the revolutionaries were assigned to do the easy work. He criticizes that the revolutionaries were not revolutionary at all in the aspect that they recognized the relief work as a punishment to the rightist. He further shows contempt to the leaders who assigned him to join the medical rescue team even if he did not receive any professional training before. He described these leaders as “forever correct ones” who assigned the laborious work to the people they deemed as unreliable. After entering Tangshan, Su’s medical team did not receive any task and stayed here to do nothing.

⁹¹ Feng and Chen ed. *Personal Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake*, 174-179.

He found out the issue of disorder and chaos during the relief work carried out by the army because it lacked professional knowledge. The survivors were prone to suffer secondary damage – the person injured in the waist was lifted on the two sides of the head and the leg without holding the waist, which caused the break of his spine and paralysis; the person injured in the leg was cast in the arm, but his leg was left unattended; the wounded were driven to a collective gathering place and waited a few days in the outside until a tractor came to pick up and cure them.

The disorder and chaos problem in the relief work leads to the question: to what extent and in which cases can we hold the state responsible for the damages caused by the earthquake? In another account “Xie baitai xiaoduqi benfu Tangshan (Carrying a hundred of sterilizers to Tangshan),”⁹² the author Zhao Danian reveals the mistake that the army took in the first phase of the relief work. The priority of the relief work in the first few days was put on rescuing the public assets but not on the residents. The army worked on to rescue the government buildings, banks, water and electricity supply companies, and employees’ dormitory of the state-owned industry. Soldiers did not have machines to lift the heavy concrete so they can only use their bare hands, and they got half the result with twice the effort. The wounded people were unable to receive medical treatment and the dead bodies were put in the street because the road was blocked and the vehicles cannot go through. Zhao analyzes that if the army had rescued the residents first, more people would have been saved and the casualty would have been reduced accordingly. The army should have cleared the roads first because it was easy to clean the fragments of bricks and tiles. In doing so, vehicles can get access to the city, the crane can reach the public building, and more soldiers can be freed to rescue the residents. Zhao’s account discloses the mistake that the army took in the relief work and leads to the issue that the responsibility the

⁹² Feng and Chen ed. *Personal Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake*, 180-185.

state should have taken in the disaster caused by the earthquake. His implication that the fault of the army causes more casualties deconstructs the salvific role of the army that the CCP endeavors to construct in the nationalistic and socialistic narratives.

Besides holding the army accountable in the relief work, the reportage accounts reveal the missed prediction report issue of the Tangshan earthquake is also the responsibility the state holds for the disaster. In the account “Nanian, Baijiefu zai beijingshi zhuguan dizhen

(That year, Baijiefu supervised the earthquake work in Beijing),”⁹³ the author Jian Wensheng reveals the miss reported issue of the Tangshan earthquake. Bai was the deputy director of Beijing Revolutionary Committee (Beijingshi geming weiyuanhui

), he received the earthquake prediction from Zhang Guomin who was the leader in Beijing Earthquake Team. Bai realized the importance and urgency of this prediction and reported it to the leader whose last name was Wang in the Chinese Academy of Sciences. Wang is an establishment revolutionary who garbed the power from the past dean of the academy and did not have any professional scientific knowledge. He was busy with the political movement of Criticize Deng, Counterattack the Right-Deviationist Reversal-of-Verdicts Trend⁹⁴, and did not care about this prediction enough to make any movement. Bai criticizes the establishment revolutionary dismissing the prediction of the Tangshan earthquake but focusing on the political movement. This report issue was also reflected in the reportages *The Great Tangshan Earthquake in China* by Guo Anning and *1976 · The Great Tangshan Earthquake* by Sun Zhizhong. Their

⁹³ Feng and Chen ed. *Personal Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake*, 402-409.

⁹⁴ Counterattack the Right-Deviationist Reversal-of-Verdicts Trend (), later known as Criticize Deng, Counterattack the Right-Deviationist Reversal-of-Verdicts Trend (), was a Chinese political campaign launched by Mao Zedong in November 1975 against Deng Xiaoping's Anti-Cultural Revolution program. It was one of the last movements during the Cultural Revolution, and continued briefly under Hua Guofeng after Mao's 1976 death, before it officially ended with Deng's rise to power in July 1977.

efforts of exploring the truth of the reported problem not only reflect the political conflict and factional struggle of CCP in the Cultural Revolution but also deconstruct the concrete national solidarity that the CCP created in the cultural construction of the Tangshan earthquake.

The reportage accounts show the public has a sensitive concern to the unstable politics. In the account “Zhanyou cuiwo qu dizhen bumen (Comrade-in-arms urges me to check in the earthquake department),”⁹⁵ the author Lu Zhen was a soldier in the army. In the afternoon of the day Mao died, all of the soldiers were notified to prepare for the war and ready to hear the news in the evening. As soldiers were gathered to hear the broadcasting of Mao’s death in the evening, they cried but not as grieved as to Premier Zhou’s death. Lu analyzes that on the one hand, the soldiers were nervous about the preparation for the incoming war; on the other hand, they were concerned about the unstable politics so that they did not have time to mourn Mao’s death. Lu’s concludes that his generation’s memory of 1976 is an unstable year that filled with tragedies – Premier Zhou died; the Gang of Four suppressed April 5 Tiananmen Incident⁹⁶; the Tangshan earthquake took place; Chairman Mao died. As a young man, he felt perplexed about his future and the nation’s future. In another account “Tangshan zhenbo manyan de rizi

(The aftermath days of the Tangshan earthquake),”⁹⁷ the author Yi Fu was a Beijing person and he witnessed the aftermath situation of the earthquake in Beijing. The red star on the top of the Beijing Exhibition Center fell down in the earthquake. Beijing Exhibition Center was built in the 1950s and served as a symbol of the friendship between PRC and the Soviet Union,

⁹⁵ Feng and Chen ed. *Personal Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake*, 281-284.

⁹⁶ The Tiananmen Incident () was a mass gathering and protest that took place on 5 April 1976, at Tiananmen Square in Beijing, China. The incident occurred on the traditional day of mourning, the Qingming Festival, and was triggered by the death of Premier Zhou Enlai earlier that year. Some people strongly disapproved of the removal of the displays of mourning, and began gathering in the Square to protest against the central authorities, then largely under the auspices of the Gang of Four, who ordered the Square to be cleared.

⁹⁷ Feng and Chen ed. *Personal Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake*, 208-217.

and it was called Beijing and Soviet Union Exhibition Center at that time. But as the relationship between these two states became tenser in the 1960s, the name of this exhibition center dropped the Soviet Union part and changed into Beijing Exhibition Center. Since the political implication of the Beijing Exhibition Center, the public used a political language in the Sino-Soviet split to describe this falling star in the earthquake as “red star in Moscow collapsed.”

The political propaganda of a prosperous social picture of a new Tangshan after the Tangshan earthquake is destructed by the reveal of the chaos of the society and the absurdity of a stage performance. The CCP utilizes propaganda tools to create an illusionary image of a powerful nation and a peaceful social picture after the Tangshan earthquake. It prevents the media from reporting the news with regards to the earthquake and demands the CCTV circulating the feature films *Nanhai fengyun* (*Battle of the South Sea*) and *Yanning hupan* (*Shore of Yanming Lake*) – the former extols the greatness of Mao’s military thoughts and the latter portrays the class conflict in socialistic medical system, and the performance of poetry reading *Lixiang zhi ge* (*The Song of Aspiration*). Then the media was allowed to report the news to glamorize a prosperous social picture of the nation, which includes the news that the Chinese government made a donation to the Philippines that also suffered an earthquake. Besides the propaganda in the public and national media, the nation initiated the campaign of fighting the earthquake and constructing a socialism state. Every announcement board in the community was filled with the slogan of “xianqi kangzhen jiuzai xingaochao (raising the new climax of fighting disaster).” Nevertheless, the reportage accounts reflect the disorder and chaos after the earthquake. People robbed the expensive commodity and food from the shop, fought each other to get more food, sexually assaulted women.

The CCP organized many condolences performances to encourage the spirit of the Tangshan survivors after the earthquake. The political propaganda of rebuilding a new Tangshan is deconstructed in the reveal of the horrifying truth of a stage performance. In the account “Citong xinmu de Tangshan zhenhou jingxiang (The heart-broken scenes after the Tangshan earthquake),”⁹⁸ the author Hou Haifeng was a screenwriter in Tianjin People's Art Theatre and he joined the condolences performances team at Tangshan Steel Factory in August. When the team arrived at the factory, they were welcomed and told that the fields of dead bodies in the factory were removed yesterday. The performance took place on the ruins on which the falling roof formed a flat surface, and the performers standing on this roof to play new-made fighting earthquake shows and revolutionary songs. Hou was informed that there were less than a hundred dead bodies under the “stage” because the roof was too heavy to lift. He was shocked and felt like he was dancing and stepping down the ghosts of the earthquake victims. He also noticed the reaction of the audience, they were numb and absent-minded to the performance on the stage, who were not as “deeply encouraged” as the news reported, and the only conversation between workers was to ask each other about the losses in their family. The horrifying truth that the so-called condolences performances take place on the body of the victims undoubtedly contradicts its claimed goal of comforting and consoling the Tangshan survivors. The salvific role of the CCP that was constructed in political propaganda is dismantled in the absurdity and violence of this scared performance.

In this part, I collect several accounts in the reportage *The Real Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake* to demonstrate that there exist the counter-official and individual narratives in a typical political propaganda work dominated by nationalistic and socialistic discourses. In

⁹⁸ Feng and Chen ed. *Personal Experiences of the Great Tangshan Earthquake*, 50-61.

other words, the force of centrifugal trauma emerges from the centripetal trauma and poses the threat to the integrity of centripetal trauma. The human agency and the subjectivity of the survivors and witnesses of the Tangshan earthquake are the sources of the centrifugal trauma that can be overshadowed by the political suppression but hard to be completely eliminated.

The Nationalistic and Socialistic Narratives in the Film *Aftershock*

Chapter two has demonstrated that the film *Aftershock* is representative of the representation of individual trauma of the Tangshan earthquake. And the director Feng Xiaogang constructs a collective traumatic memory in the subject of the Tangshan earthquake and the Wenchuan earthquake. Here, I want to point out the film has explicit nationalistic and socialistic narratives which put the state and the army in a bright light. Feng endeavors to portray the social development of Chinese society in thirty years and to fulfill the censorship requirement of the National Radio and Television Administration. He re-constructs a national traumatic history of the Tangshan earthquake, and relates the Tangshan earthquake to Wenchuan earthquake to arise the sympathetic resonance of Chinese people right after the Wenchuan earthquake. In this way, he develops an imagined national solidarity in the collective efforts of fighting natural disasters from the common people, soldiers, and overseas Chinese in the leadership of the CCP. He strengthens the sense of identity of Chinese people which is not only a geographic and political conception that includes people living in China but also a cultural conception that unites the overseas Chinese.

The Maoism and the Cult of Mao in the Film *Aftershock*

The film *Aftershock* put the Maoism and the Cultural Revolution in a bright light, which reveals Feng's melancholy and nostalgia for the Mao era. At the beginning of the film, Yuanni rides a bicycle and leads us to take a tour of a Tangshan city swarmed with the Maoism symbols, slogans, and watchwords which take the form of couplets, flags, bulletin boards, red stars, word

plates on the walls and the top of buildings. The common slogans are “Long live the People’s Republic of China; long live the great leader Chairman Mao; long live the Chinese Communist Party; long live the unity of people all over the world!” The portraits and statues of Mao teem with the public space such as the streets and buildings and the private space of common people’s family such as Fang family and Deng’s adoptive family. Even in the ruins of the earthquake, there still has the remains of the Maoism slogans and the broadcasting that promotes the relief work is the great success of Chairman Mao’s revolutionary road in a high pitch and energetic female voice. These symbols of Maoism and its revolutionary discourses seamlessly intertwine with the normal people’s life, which is covered by a warm coat by the director Feng Xiaogang. It reflects that Feng personally has a sense of belonging and self-identity to the Mao era. Therefore, he chooses to put it in a bright light rather than take a reflective standpoint to criticize it. After the earthquake, the rescue army gathered to watch the revolutionary film *Yingxiong ernv* (*Heroic Sons and Daughters*). The temporary camp is decorated with all kinds of slogans which include “The generosity of Chairman Mao is greater than the heaven.” Mao is promoted as the salvific god of the Tangshan people. As Deng’s adoptive parents talk to a female soldier who is responsible for the adoptive work, a huge portrait of Mao is put in the middle of the background which overshadows the three characters in the foreground.

Feng’s melancholy and nostalgia towards the Mao era reaches the climax in the portray of Mao’s mourning ceremony. He reproduces the stunning mourning ceremony in Tian’anmen Square with huge costs, and he arranges the whole square with people of black clothes, the white wreath, and elegiac couplets. He takes a high camera angle to show the panorama view of the square that is overwhelmed by the black color, and the portrait of Mao is put in the middle of the scene. Feng continues to present another mourning ceremony of Mao in the army camp of Deng’s

adoptive parents. He features people's crying and sadness when they prepare the white paper flower for the ceremony. In the ceremony, the army collectively lower heads to show condolence to Mao. The mourning hall presents the couplets such as "Express profound grief to the great leader and mentor Chairman Mao," "The great Chairman Mao forever lives in our minds," "Inherit the legacy of Chairman Mao and carry out the proletarian revolutionary career to the end," and "Advance courageously and must win the final victory. In the treatment of Mao's death, Feng presents the cult of Mao in a positive light and shows his melancholy and nostalgia towards the Mao era.

Construct the Close Relationship Between the Army and the People

The army is especially portrayed in a bright light and constructed as a salvific role in the Tangshan earthquake as well as the Wenchuan earthquake in the film *Aftershock*. The army is described as the Chinese people's army under the leadership of the CCP and embodies the kindness and generosity of the CCP to the Chinese people. The relationship between the army and the people is established as close as the fish to the water. Feng promotes the close relationship between the army and the people which represents the relationship between the CCP and the people.

In the Tangshan earthquake, the army is constructed as the salvor of the Tangshan people, and in this way, the Tangshan people owes the great debt of gratitude to the army. The army saved the Fang family. After the earthquake, Yuanni was told by her neighbor that the army was in the Tangshan airport to rescue people, so she brought Da to the airport. In the airport, there were already thousands of soldiers carrying out the relief work and sending out food. The soldiers supported Yuanni when she fainted and cured her and Da. Da was grateful to the army in his lifetime -- he offered to ride Deng's adoptive father for free when he knew he was a soldier and joined the rescue work in the Tangshan earthquake, and he confessed his gratitude that the army

was the savior and benefactor of the Tangshan people. Deng was saved by a male soldier who comforted her that he would bring her home where turned out to be the army camp. Afterward, Deng was adopted by soldiers and lived in the military community. Her adoptive mother told her the army is a big revolutionary family and every soldier is her family member.

The army is personified as a selfless hero that sacrifices itself for the people. After the Tangshan earthquake, the military camp presented the film *Heroic Sons and Heroic Daughters*, which feathers the self-sacrifices and heroism of the Chinese army in the Korean War. Feng takes a close-up of the female protagonist singing the song *Yingxiong zange* (A paean of heroes) that portrays the soldiers as heroes and fighters of the people. The spirit of fearfulness and bravery of the army is promoted in the slogan “Didong shanyao hesuoju, taishan yading buyanyao (There is nothing to be afraid of the earthquake, and Mount Tai cannot break the waist)” in the Tangshan earthquake. The heroism of the troops joining in the Tangshan earthquake is publicized in the army. When Deng and her adoptive parents came back to the military community, they were welcomed as the heroes of fighting disasters and the examples should be learned by all of the soldiers. The promotion of the heroism and sacrifices of the army is strengthened in the Wenchuan earthquake, where soldiers sacrifice themselves to save the people.

The relationship between the army and the people is built as dependent as the fish to the water. The army loves, serves, and belongs to the people; in turn, the people are grateful for the dedication of the army. In the Wenchuan earthquake, soldiers attempted to save the daughter of a woman and died, and this woman chose to give up her daughter’s leg to avoid more sacrifices. Through the Tangshan and Wenchuan earthquake, the army is portrayed as the savior and benefactor of the people that rescue their life and rebuild their homes. Feng was a soldier in a

military art troupe for seven years and he is proud of his identity as a soldier. He devotes his personal feeling to producing this film and portrays the army in a bright light.

Reflect the Developments of Tangshan Society in the Post-Mao Era and Serve as A Propaganda Tool of the Tangshan Government

Feng presents the thirty-year social developments of Tangshan society in the post-Mao era in the film *Aftershock*. After the death of Mao, China undergoes a series of economic reforms termed “socialist market economy” that carried out by Deng Xiaoping. Feng uses the arc of the Fang family to show the development of Tangshan that embodies the development of a whole Chinese society in thirty years. The film is also a propaganda tool of the Tangshan government to promote a positive social picture of a new Tangshan that successfully overcomes the Tangshan earthquake.

The arc of the Fang family marks several significant social changes in Chinese society. The economic reform provides the opportunity for the Fang family that greatly improves their life: Da failed the national college entrance examination and chose to make a living in Hangzhou. He started up his business by riding a rickshaw first and then owned his travel agency. Da earned a lot of money and bought a BMW in the 90s, and he purchased an apartment for Yuanni; Yuanni lost her job in the laid-off wave caused by the reform of state-owned enterprise, and she opened a tailor shop in a commodity market. Deng’s adoptive parents invited her to watch a film, which turns out to be *Red Sorghum* by Zhang Yimo in 1988; Deng chose to immigrate to Canada in the 90s where was the period of immigration fever of mainland China. Neither Da or Deng settles in Tangshan in their adulthood, to some extent they become the outsiders of Tangshan. Feng portrays the change of Tangshan in three decades with the eyes of Deng and Da at every time they come

back to Tangshan. In the views of Deng and Da, Feng presents a modern and developed Tangshan that revives from the ruins of the earthquake.

The Tangshan government invests 10 million of dollars to the film *Aftershock* which counts 50 percent of the whole investment. This investment belongs to a significant propaganda program of the Tangshan government since 2007, and it aims to show a new social picture of Tangshan city and Tangshan people in the background of the Tangshan earthquake. The producer of *Aftershock* Yao Guoyong in the Tangshan government claims that this film makes a successful propaganda achievement that covers 50 to 60 percent of Chinese civilians, and the film would change people's impression of Tangshan from a resources abundant inland city to a city has great cultural impact. The Tangshan government controls the film to fit in the "main theme" in an official narrative. It supervises and censors every production stage of the film: the mayor, the party secretary, and the minister of the propaganda department of Tangshan reviews the script; leaders of the Tangshan government provide feedback to add the elements of Tangshan; Feng originally planned to name the film as *Yuzhen* (*Aftershock*) or *Dadizhen* (The Great Earthquake), and the Tangshan government insisted to the name it *Tangshandadizhen* (*The Great Tangshan Earthquake*) in avoid of the confusion with the Wenchuan earthquake. At the end of the film, Feng reveals this film is a gift to the new Tangshan that revives from the ashes of the ruins. He presents a song of hymn to Tangshan and compromises his autonomy to the censorship of the Tangshan government in the nationalistic and socialistic narratives.

Strengthen the National Solidarity in the Portrait of the Tangshan and Wenchuan Earthquakes

Feng promotes the fighting disaster spirit and the support from the nation to strengthen the national solidarity. He produced the film *Aftershock* right after the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008

to provoke the patriotism of the national audiences, which contributed to the success of the box office of this film. He reinforces the political propaganda slogan “yifangyounan, bafangzhiyuan (When disaster struck, help came from all sides)” that goes through from the Tangshan earthquake to the Wenchuan earthquake.

In the Tangshan earthquake, the fighting disaster spirit of “rendingshengtian (Human must win over the heaven)” and the support from the nation “yifangyounan, bafangzhiyuan” are established as the great success of the Chairman Mao’s revolutionary road. In the Wenchuan earthquake, the CCP utilizes the same political slogan and promotes human agency to strengthen national solidarity. In the film *Aftershock*, Feng portrays an epic image of the relief work in the Wenchuan earthquake that collects national support from the army, the medical service, the firefighting, the civic organization, and the normal people. Feng takes a close-up of a huge clock that stops at 14:28 which is the time the earthquake strikes. Banners and red flags of slogans are filled with the screen such as “qixinxieli, gongdu nanguan , (Make concerted efforts to overcome difficulties together),” “xiang zhaiqu renmin shenchi yuanshou, tianzai wuqing ren youqing (Reach out to the people in the disaster area. The disaster is merciless, but the people is full of love,” “junmin yijia qikangzhen, xinlianxin yuxhuiqingshen (The army and the people are a family together against the earthquake, their hearts linked and their relationship is close as fish and water).” Da not only donates a considerate amount of supplies to the disaster area but joins in the rescue work of Tangshan civic rescue team in person. Every province has its rescue team, which makes a stark contrast to Tangshan earthquake that resists the supports from other provinces in the name of “ziligengsheng (self-reliance).” Feng reinforces the national solidarity and patriotism in this portrait of national support and the close relationship between the army and the

people, which caters to the political propaganda of the CCP. Besides, he arranges Deng, an overseas immigrant, to come back China to participate in the relief work which leads Deng to strengthen her identity as a Chinese and choose to be buried in Tangshan after her death.

Feng's emphasis on the political propaganda in his portrait of the Wenchuan earthquake helps his film pass the strict censorship of the National Radio and Television Administration. He builds the earthquake as a demonstration of the national fighting disaster spirit with the concerted support from the nation, which strengthens the centralized state power. His endeavor to construct the collective memory of a national disaster and the development of Tangshan city is reflected in the words at the end of the film – “xiang tangshandadizhen zhong linan de ershisiwan tongbao biaoshi chentong aido, jinyi cipian xiangei yuhuochongsheng de fenghuangcheng Tangshan

(This film expresses deep condolences to the 240,000 dead compatriots in the Great Tangshan Earthquake and is a gift to the ‘Phoenix City’ of Tangshan that revives after the earthquake).” Feng attempts to evoke national sympathy for the Tangshan earthquake after the Wenchuan earthquake and construct a history of national trauma to enhance national solidarity and the concept of a national entity.

Conclusion

The third chapter points out the overlaying and interlacing between the national trauma and the individual trauma in the cultural representation of the Tangshan earthquake. It demonstrates the interconnections and intertwines between the centripetal force and the centrifugal force. It shows the dissident counter-official voices in the reportages that dominated by the mainstream discourse, and reveals the nationalistic and socialistic narratives in the film *Aftershock* that undermine its individualism. Hence, the relationship between the centripetal trauma and the

centrifugal trauma is more complex than two binary counterparts, and it reflects the complexity of the history and the interpretation of a politicalized natural disaster.

CONCLUSION

This thesis explores the issue of the historical trauma in the cultural construction of the Tangshan earthquake. I think the high degree of politicalization is what similar between the Tangshan earthquake and other political events. Therefore, I apply the theory of “centripetal trauma” and “centrifugal trauma” from Michael Berry to study this historical trauma. I find out the cultural representation of this natural disaster undergoes a subtle shift: from one dominated by the nationalistic and socialistic narratives to the narrative centered on the individual trauma. In the first three decades, the cultural representation of the Tangshan earthquake collectively constructs a national trauma which evolves around the nationalistic and socialistic narratives, and the individual trauma is politically suppressed on a national scale and psychologically suppressed on the individual level. With more and more works revealing the problem of the CCP in the prediction and relief work, the centrifugal force destabilizes and challenges the official narrative. The film *Aftershock* and its same-name novel are the representatives of the representation of the individual trauma, which feature on the personal suffering and psychological traumatic experiences rather than on the portray of the CCP and the army. In other words, the centripetal trauma deconstructs the centrifugal trauma in the re-imagined form of the representation of the Tangshan earthquake. Nevertheless, the relationship between the centripetal trauma and the centrifugal trauma is not a presuppose antagonist relationship, and there exist the interconnections and interlaces between them.

I select a range of textual and visual works that include the fiction, the reportage, the documentary film, and the film. From purely based on the first-hand experiences to imaginary reproduce and re-create the disaster, the development of the media of those cultural representation reflects the change of the ways of people perceive, accept, and learn a historical event in the digital age. In this thesis, I endeavor to uncover the historical trauma of the Tangshan earthquake and fill the gap of the understanding of the cultural construction of this natural disaster in post-Mao era.

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