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Storytelling in the Age of Post-socialism: Wang Xiaoshuai's "Third Front Trilogy"

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Storytelling in the Age of Post-socialism: Wang Xiaoshuai's "Third Front Trilogy"

A Thesis Presented

by

XUESONG SHAO

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DEDICATION

To my family.

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As I am approaching the closure to this thesis and my two years' study at UMass Amherst, I feel an elusive touch of nostalgia and a deep sense of gratitude for many individuals. First and foremost, my heartfelt thanks go to my advisor, Professor Enhua Zhang, who has guided me not only through every stage of this project, but in each step of my intellectual development as a newcomer to the field. I am very grateful to my two committee members for their guidance and support. Professor Anne Ciecko has introduced me to the field of film studies and inspired me to engage with theoretical issues in my analyses. She always has confidence in me whenever I doubt about my academic potential, and provides the most encouraging and insightful feedback on my writings. Professor David K. Schneider shows an unwavering interest in my research. I benefit tremendously from talking with him about history, memory, and contemporary China.

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ABSTRACT

STORYTELLING IN THE AGE OF POST-SOCIALISM: WANG XIAOSHUAI'S

“THIRD FRONT TRILOGY”

MAY 2017

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China, for the past six decades, has witnessed two massive population movements in reversed directions: the government-imposed relocation to rustic hinterlands during the Mao era, and the market-driven rural-to-urban migration in the post-socialist age. Revolving around a group of socialist workers' relocation and homecoming, Wang Xiaoshuai's 王小帅 trilogy, comprising *Shanghai Dreams* (*Qinghong* 青红, 2005), *Eleven Flowers* (*Wo shiyi* 我 11, 2012), and *Red Amnesia* (*Chuangruzhe* 闯入者, 2014), connects the two movements through its visual representations. By examining the embedded dichotomies, namely the inland area against coastal cities, socialist remnants against post-socialist prosperity, and personal recollections against collective amnesia, I

explore the geographical, historical, and historiographical Other implemented in the trilogy's visual narratives. This elusive yet omnipresent discourse of otherness replaces the impression of documentary realism, the hallmark of Wang's cinematic style as exemplified in previous works, with a sense of Benjaminian storytelling. Additionally, in his tales of two cities, the director grapples with aporias of a post-socialist China through the discourse of woman. In this regard, I investigate how the female body, once the recipient of male gaze and the object of desire, has become the masculine other's outlet of revenge, thereby providing narrative closure to the tension-ridden tales.

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INTRODUCTION

At the outset of Wang Xiaoshuai's semi-autobiographical work *Eleven Flowers* (2012), a voice-over reveals a shared motif in three of Wang's most recent feature films, *Shanghai Dreams* (2005), *Eleven Flowers*, and *Red Amnesia* (2014), aka the "Third Front Trilogy".¹ In the black-and-white sequence before the credits, the eleven-year-old Wang Han watches his father arranging flowers for the boy to paint a still life. With neither of them uttering a word, this sequence is accompanied by a voice-over, supposedly the grown-up Han recounts in retrospective:

You spend your life observing others. You imagine being born elsewhere. You dream of another life. But one day, you realize that it is impossible. You are just you, born into this family, at this time. Your dreams won't change your life's path. Your life, you have to accept it and respect it.

Dreaming of living elsewhere functions as the trilogy's thematic focus. Borrowing from his childhood and adolescent experiences, Wang addresses the massive relocations over half a century ago and the repercussions in the years that followed. The measured tone in this voice-over also suggests the director's attempts to grapple with personal as well as collective past.

The three films form a trilogy in light of their shared spatial-historical reference and semi-autobiographical style. The Third Front Movement (*sanxian jianshe* 三线建设), the

¹ In other discussions, these three films are also referred to as "life trilogy" or "autobiographical trilogy". Here I adopt the director's own nomenclature. See Wang Xiaoshuai, *Baobao de guxiang*, 164.

historical setting of the trilogy, is a military-industrial campaign instigated by Mao in 1964, and carried on all the way through the Cultural Revolution. This campaign solicited thousands of intellectuals and skilled workers from cities such as Beijing and Shanghai to move inland (specifically to Guiyang in the films) to cope with perceived external threats to the nation's security.² Either telling old stories of the Third Front residents or telling a contemporary story of former Third Front workers, the three films delve into this lesser-known massive relocation of populations in the Mao era.³ Many of the characters and plots correspond to Wang Xiaoshuai's Third Front upbringing. He had lived his carefree childhood and teenage years in Guiyang, where his family was relocated from Shanghai just four months after his birth. The director reaffirms his attachment to what essentially is his hometown in his constant re-visitation of the site of memory through the ten year's filmic trajectory. This retrospective and introspective viewpoint not only is in line with the "author function" Foucault suggests,⁴ but also invites a thematic study of trilogy *auteurs*, such as Francois Truffaut, Yasujiro Ozu, Hou Hsiao-hsien, and Jia Zhangke. Such comparison brings to light the indexical specificity as well as the universality of

² Oakes, *Translocal China*, 6.

³ The better-known relocation campaign during the same period would be "up to the mountains and down to the villages" (*shangshan xiexiang*). I will juxtapose the two for a close discussion in the next section.

⁴ See Foucault, "What is an Author?"

autobiographical or biographical trilogies. In this light, Wang's visual narrative can be viewed through the lens of Benjamin's remarks on the artistry of storytelling.

Before going into detail on this Benjaminian storytelling, I start with a brief review of the director's works and scholarships in the English-speaking world.⁵ As of 2017, Wang's oeuvre includes eleven films: *The Days* (*dongchun de rizi* 冬春的日子, 1992), *Frozen* (*jidu hanleng* 极度寒冷, 1994), *So Close to Paradise* (*Biandan guniang* 扁担姑娘, 1999), *The Dream House* (*Menghuan tianyuan* 梦幻田园, 1999), *Beijing Bicycles* (*Shiqisui de danche* 十七岁的单车, 2000), *Drifters* (*Erdi* 二弟, 2003), *Shanghai Dreams* (2005), *In Love We Trust* (*Zuoyou* 左右, 2008), *Chongqing Blues* (*Rizhao chongqing* 日照重庆, 2010), *Eleven Flowers* (2012), and *Red Amnesia* (2014). While the first two are distinctive for their avant-garde and experimental style, the rest bear continuities in film language as well as subject matter. Scholarship on Wang Xiaoshuai in turn has been inspired by two interrelated filmic genealogies: Chinese underground filmmaking and postsocialist urban narratives. Among these writings, *Beijing Bicycle* has arguably received the most scholarly attention.⁶ For academic works that deal with more than one

⁵ I focus solely on English scholarships that directly address those films. Almost half of Wang's films are banned or denied public screening (five out of eleven) in PRC, and responses are few from other Chinese-speaking areas.

⁶ For scholarly writings about *Beijing Bicycle*, see, for instance, Xu, *Sinascape*, chapter 3; Jinhua Li, "Beijing Bicycle: Desire, Identity, and the Wheels."

of Wang's films, Haomin Gong has a chapter in his monograph devoted to Wang Xiaoshuai's films, particularly *Beijing Bicycle* and *So Close to Paradise*, highlighting their sentimental and the universal significance as well as that of social criticism.⁷ Xiaoping Lin's monograph also examines in detail *Beijing Bicycle* and *Shanghai Dreams* in different chapters, analyzing respectively the narratives of youth postsocialist trauma.⁸ As to other scholarships on the trilogy discussed in my thesis, Letteri investigates the psychological state of the protagonist in *Shanghai Dreams* in a Rey Chow-informed theoretical framework.⁹ Scruggs looks at the narratives of rusticated youth (aka *Zhiqing*, or the sent-down youth) in *Eleven Flowers* through the lens of memory and trauma studies.¹⁰

In general, current scholarship on Wang divides between two topical matters: urban narratives and memory studies. I bring in the perspective of gender in addition to (trans)locality and historical memory in viewing the trilogy. While delving in-depth how the narratives unfold on the three levels, I analyze Wang's mastery of the art of storytelling. According to Benjamin, a story distinguishes itself from news and

⁷ Gong, *Uneven Modernity*, chapter 5.

⁸ Xiaoping Lin, *Children of Marx and Coca-Cola*, chapter 4 and 6.

⁹ Letteri, "History, Silence and Homelessness in Contemporary Chinese Cinema."

¹⁰ Scruggs, "Landscapes and Sublime Memories."

information in that it does not entail immediate explanation. Therefore, “it preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time.”¹¹

Compared with his contemporaries, Wang’s oeuvre lacks the experimentalism in Lou Ye’s film, nor is it as lyrical as that of Jia Zhangke; his trademark is the complete, capturing, and sometimes melodramatic stories.¹² As for this trilogy, its autobiographical nature that works for pathos is even reminiscent of the Benjaminian storytelling, in that “the storyteller takes what he tells from experience-his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale.”¹³ Equally important is how the storyteller tells the story, since “it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it.”¹⁴ By way of storytelling, Wang avoids any didactic lectures to be imposed upon the viewers in his visual narratives.

The three films speak to the dialectic between Guiyang and Shanghai or Beijing, thus carrying a poignant reference to China’s spatial unevenness in the national agenda of modernization. Seen through this lens, the “other’s life” that Wang’s characters yearn for embodies an urban dream. A wide spectrum of post-fifth generation cinematic works

¹¹ Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” 90.

¹² While Wang’s early works, namely *The Days* and *Frozen*, are distinct in style among his oeuvre, both stick with the general pattern of storytelling in terms of narrative.

¹³ Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” 87.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 89.

have articulated the experience of urbanization and the formation of new urban identities,¹⁵ including Wang Xiaoshuai's earlier films such as *So Close to Paradise* and *Beijing Bicycles*. What complicates and distinguishes the trilogy's urban narratives, however, is a mixture of spatio-temporal mobility and historical contingency. Wang's camera pans between the major cities and the Third Front, from contemporary life to the era of high socialism, with an equal urgency of documenting the *zeitgeist* as well as recollecting memories from the ashes of history.

Telling the tales of two cities in both past and present tenses, Wang's trilogy addresses the "connections between cultural production and its referents."¹⁶ His works, meanwhile, expand the geographical scope of post-fifth urban narratives and evoke a strong sense of socialist nostalgia as the camera captures the forlorn Third Front places that used to be populated. Whereas "the ubiquity of the bulldozer, the building crane, and the debris of urban ruins" are perceived as a trademark of the urban generation, what Wang brings onto the screen in *Red Amnesia* is the desolate landscape of a depopulated industrial city.¹⁷ With the ruins resultant from natural erosion—not demolition, Wang's on-location shooting provides an alternative illustrative example of the changing urban

¹⁵ Zhen Zhang, *The Urban Generation*, 33.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

space inasmuch as the surroundings evoke a recently lost past, of which the heyday is not far back yet. As Wu Hung observes, the images of industrial ruins “embody a strong historical perspective as the artists’ retrospective reflection on the country’s socialist past.”¹⁸ By the same token, a contemporary Chinese viewer would inevitably reflect on questions concerning the legacy of the Chinese revolution.¹⁹ In this sense, Wang’s films are in dialogue with feature films such as *24 City* (*Er shi si cheng ji* 二十四城记, 2008, dir. Jia Zhangke) and *Piano in a Factory* (*Gang de qin* 钢的琴, 2011, dir. Zhang Meng), as well as documentaries, including *West of The Tracks* (*Tie xi qu* 铁西区, 2002, dir. Wang Bing) and *Manufactured Landscapes* (2006, dir. Jennifer Baichwal). Each manages to transfigure and reconstruct ruins of the deserted state-owned factory.²⁰

The three films allow for a historical viewing on account of their shared subject matter and linear temporality from the final years of the Cultural Revolution to the present, thereby emplotting historical events in the past decades.²¹ Set months before the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1975, *Eleven Flowers* showcases the shock-effects of

¹⁸ Wu, *A Story of Ruins*, 241.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 241.

²⁰ For a detailed study of *West of the Tracks* and the temporality and materiality of industrial ruins, see Ling Zhang, “Collecting the Ashes of Time.”

²¹ For a discussion on historical emplotment, see White, *Metahistory*.

witnessing violence through the boy protagonist's encounter with a fugitive. *Shanghai Dreams* recounts the aftermath of "the decade of chaos" and people's bewilderment in the wake of China's marketization in the early 1980s.²² The main plot of this film revolves around the conflict between Qinghong, a 17-year-old schoolgirl who wishes to remain in her birthplace Guiyang, and her father, Old Wu, who yearns for his hometown Shanghai and the prospect of a better life there envisaged by Deng Xiaoping's policy of economic modernization. Set in present-day China, *Red Amnesia*, on the other hand, deals with the post-traumatic nightmare of Old Deng, a former Third Front worker who now lives in Beijing. This semi-noir unravels with the entanglement of the busy yet disorientated Old Deng and her mysterious stalker, who eventually turns out to be the grandson of Old Deng's late colleague from the Third Front. In this trilogy, Wang chronicles the everyday life of certain historical moments. Intriguingly, his stories are set in "years of no significance," i.e. 1975, 1983, and 2014, rather than the historically significant years such as 1976, 1978, and 2008.²³ By portraying the quotidian practices intertwined with personal memories, the director manifests a historical vision akin to the

²² The director does not spell out the exact year *Shanghai Dreams* is set. The severe crackdown on crime (*yanda*) in the ending sequence hints at 1983, when the first round of *yanda* took place in China.

²³ For the origin of the famous saying "a year of no significance," see Ray Huang, *1587 A Year of No Significance*.

involuntary memory of the *madeleine* in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, wherein the flow of everyday life outweighs momentous historical junctures.

By the same token, this linear temporality by no means encourages a progressivism vision of the historical time.²⁴ As noted by Ban Wang, when representing the catastrophe and trauma, it does not help with the understanding of the past to adhere to a preconceived outline of history.²⁵ In spite of the abrupt endings with a seemingly moral imperative to reiterate lawfulness, Wang eschews the Enlightenment narratives as he denies the presumed salvative function of the omnipresent other. In the trilogy, an array of characters observe others and dream of life other than their own: relocated workers yearn for the better life back in their hometown, the local youth desire urban lifestyles, and descendants of relocated workers daydream about their ancestral places, or the imaginary El Dorado. However, the films evoke a sense of disillusionment instead of acclaiming such utopian outlooks. An attentive spectator may soon grasp the fatalistic message upon hearing the grown-up narrator's voice-over at the start of *Eleven Flowers*, as quoted earlier in this writing. In all three stories, disillusion of dreams has been insinuated at least on the narrative level. It might be the bad luck of historical

²⁴ The concept of historical time is put forth by the German historian Reinhart Koselleck. Koselleck's theory mainly focuses on the linear sensibility of time.

²⁵ Ban Wang, *Illuminations from the Past*, 142.

contingency who dresses up as the “mischievous hunchback” that pops up at deciding moments and shatters life’s possibilities.²⁶

Besides the proximity in subject matter, geographical setting and historical background, the cinematography of the trilogy also calls for a holistic analysis. Specifically, the window imagery serves as the convergent point of the three. In film language pertaining to realist theory, window is also an established metaphor of how the world is framed. As Bazin claims, “the problem then that faces the filmmaker is to give his décor a dramatic opaqueness while at the same time reflecting its natural realism.”²⁷ Window is certainly one of the artifices to represent this opaqueness of cinematic realism. The image of window thus invites the dialectics between reality and memory. From a structural point of view, the oft-mentioned opening sequence of *Eleven Flowers* forms a narrative loop together with the closing scenes in *Red Amnesia*, where the similar window image relays the feeling of uncanniness. Both beginning and ending scenes underscore the thematic gesture of observing the Other. Centering on the window frame, *Eleven Flowers* begins with black-and-white images accompanied with voice-over in

²⁶ The hunchback in Hannah Arendt’s introduction to the selected works of Walter Benjamin refers to the element of bad luck in one’s life. See Hannah Arendt, Introduction to *Illuminations*, 6.

²⁷ Bazin, *What is Cinema?* 111.

slow tempo and music that is non-diegetic, which resembles unfolding an old photo album. The scenes retrieved from memory are standstill slices in the form of photograph. The melancholic ambience of this very first scene to some degree redirects the hopefulness observation to a desperate reconciliation with the self. The fatalistic message is more salient in the ending of *Red Amnesia*. As the boy falls off the window with half of the windowpane, the moving picture freeze-frames with the remaining window, and the narrative comes to a standstill. For this, the protagonist neither resolves the family feud nor redeems herself. The windows that occupy the frame in both films leave the imagined salvation through the Other in suspension. Other scenes in *Red Amnesia* can be viewed as intertext to the graphical memory at the start of *Eleven Flowers* as well. When the boy follows Old Deng home, he studies closely at Old Deng's photo frame. Apparently, this collection of old photos speaks of the crystallization of memory. As the boy violently smashes the frame and tears into pieces the pictures, it visually links photograph with symbolic death. As Roland Barthes suggests, "every photograph is this catastrophe," regardless of the life or death of the subject.²⁸ Therefore, the death-alluded photographic scenes appearing in Wang's moving pictures reiterate the feeling of inescapable despair.

²⁸ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 96.

The window not only separates inside from outside and metaphorically distinguishes the present time-space from memory and the past, but also underscores the gaze as it reduplicates the frame within the framed screen. In the ground-breaking essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Mulvey addresses the active/male, passive/female split in terms of pleasure in looking. While the determining male gaze renders woman’s presence as “an indispensable element of spectacle,” the woman displayed becomes the erotic object for both the characters within the screen story and the spectator within the auditorium.²⁹ The way that the girls in *Shanghai Dreams* and *Eleven Flowers* are presented is certainly in line with such symbolic order and sexual objectification. The window, or the duplicated frame, further underscores the safety distance on the part of the camera and the spectator, who, occupying the position of privileged viewer, would say, in Sontag’s words, that “this is not happening to *me*.”³⁰ By distancing the spectator from the site of pain, the proliferate windows resituate the female body under the scopophilic gaze as well as dissolving the films’ historical exigency.

The insulted and the injured women as a filmic trope can be traced back to the incipience of Chinese cinema, as exemplified through Ruan Lingyu’s characters in leftist films such as *New Women* (*xin nüxing* 新女性, 1934, dir. Cai Chusheng) and *The*

²⁹ Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 19.

³⁰ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 99.

Goddess (*shennü* 神女, 1934, dir. Wu Yonggang). As Dai Jinhua notes, such cinematic narratives do not work on providing salvation for the female protagonists; instead, they use the humiliated women as a metonymy for historical atrocity and social malaise.³¹ This tradition has been embellished by (male) directors of later generations. In the hands of Fourth Generation filmmakers, women are presented as the object of desire, who simultaneously imply the to-be-looked-at China.³² For the Fifth Generation, the position of women in the Orient/Occident dynamics becomes more intricate.³³ One generic female image during that time period is the “women in the iron house” trope established by Zhang Yimou in films like *Judou* (1990) *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991). As Dai points out, on the part of Chinese filmmakers, such narrative resumes the historical reflective work intercepted by June Fourth; on the other hand, the image of imprisoned and repressed women essentially caters to the gaze from a western audience.³⁴ In the years to come, the Chinese female body gains due amount of exposure on the global screen as the narrative site of collective memory and trauma. Two cases in point are Joan Chen’s *Xiu Xiu: The Sent-down Girl* (*tianyu* 天浴, 1998) and Dai Sijie’s *Balzac and the Little*

³¹ Dai, *Xingbie zhongguo*, 45.

³² *Ibid.*, 106.

³³ For the Occidentalism/Orientalism framework that is developed out of the Chinese context, see Chen, *Occidentalism*.

³⁴ Dai, *Xingbie zhongguo*, 120-23.

Chinese Seamstress (*Baerzhake yu xiaocai Feng* 巴尔扎克与小裁缝, 2005), both made by Chinese diaspora and explicitly addressing the traumatic experiences during the Cultural Revolution. The excessive and even unnecessary nudity and sexuality therein further problematizes the power structure in term of gender and ethnicity.³⁵ While the female characters in *Shanghai Dreams* and *Eleven Flowers* are along this “the insulted and the injured” vein, Wang’s portrayal of female resistance in *Red Amnesia* presents an alternative of the stereotyped feminine victims. I will expand on this point in the final chapter.

³⁵ For discussion of the two films, see Li, *Memory, Fluid Identity, and the Politics of Remembering*, ch.3.



Image 1, 2. Window images in the establishing shot of *Eleven Flowers* (left) and the ending shot of *Red Amnesia* (right).



Image 3-5. *Shanghai Dreams*: Qinghong in various double-frames.

CHAPTER 1

SPATIAL TALES: MOVEMENT, DISPLACEMENT, TRANSLOCALITY

The Third Front “Movement”

The feeling of disillusionment is first and foremost exhibited through the old-time tales about the Third Front workers’ displacement. By translating the Chinese term *saxian jianshe* into the Third Front Movement, it gains two layers of meaning with the polysemy of the English term “movement,” combining the process of physical relocation with the political campaign. As a result of the national agenda of socialism, China in the mid-twentieth century witnessed enormous movements in both senses. To analyze the Third Front Movement in its socio-historical context while acknowledging the immediacy of locales, I bring the geographical term translocality into discussion.³⁶ While a variety of definitions have been suggested based on different geographical scales, this paper is in line with Oakes and Schein, who see translocality as “being identified with more than one location,” focusing simultaneously on mobility and locality within the

³⁶ The concept of translocality has different meanings in transnational contexts. Here the term is appropriated to apply to a more limited scope of mainland China. For a summary of theories that help with understanding translocality, see Yingjin Zhang, *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China*, introduction.

scope of mainland China.³⁷ The discourse of translocality with its ensuing subjectivity issues has emerged as a trope since the early 1980s, epitomized by narratives of the sent-down youth (*zhiqing* 知青).³⁸ Having millions of urban students relocated to the countryside, the “up to the mountains and down to the rivers” (*shangshan xiaxiang* 上山下乡) campaign is analogous to the Third Front Movement in terms of location (backward inland area) and temporality (during the Cultural Revolution).³⁹ Hence the Third Front Movement is often considered as a constituent of the *shangshan xiaxiang* campaign. In spite of many shared features, several differentiating characteristics of the Third Front Movement call critical attention to the historiography of socialist China, and to Wang’s visual storytelling as well. The distinctions as typified through the films are two-fold, one being the migrant workers’ social status and the other the connotations of the nuclear family.

First, unlike the sent-down youth who were deprived of the right to education during the semi-exile, those relocated to the Third Front were intellectuals and skilled workers

³⁷ Oakes, *Translocal China*, xiii.

³⁸ For a survey of *zhiqing* narratives, see Michael Berry, *A History of Pain*, ch. 4. For a discussion on “scar” films made from 1976-1981, see Chris Berry, *Post-Socialist Cinema in Post-Mao China*.

³⁹ Narratives of the two relocated groups, the sent-down educated youth (*zhiqing*) and the Third Front workers, are often examined along the same line. For comparative studies of the films in question with *zhiqing* narratives, see Scruggs, “Landscapes and Sublime Memories,” and Lee, *The Stranger and the Chinese Moral Imagination*, ch. 4.

committed to the military-industrial missions of the party-state. The films' sound, such as bugle calls in *Eleven Flowers*, indicates the military nature of the Third Front residence. During the revolutionary years, the national defense sector was among the few that saw substantial development despite political upheavals. Therefore, the relocation to the Third Front should not be taken for granted as political persecution, which arguably is the case for the sent-down youth. Although the living condition in Guiyang was not comparable to that in major cities, the relocated workers still lived a life that was both separate from and above local economic life, as opposed to the sent-down youth who had to immerse themselves in the lifestyle of local peasants.⁴⁰ The clearly delineated and self-sustaining factory complex is an enclave, where the residents physically live at Guiyang but keep psychological distances from the local culture. The relocated workers' superior social status is straightforwardly articulated in *Shanghai Dreams* by Old Wu, when he says disparagingly to the face of Xiaogen, a local boy in love with Qinghong, of the disparity in Xiaogen's family status with his daughter's. These economic and psychological privileges enjoyed by socialist workers in turn foreshadow their disorientation and nostalgia after the break-down of centrally planned economies and state-owned enterprises.

⁴⁰ Oakes, *Translocal China*, 6.

Second, in an era when the socialist campaigns celebrate the communal life and strive to diminish familial attachments, people are relocated to the Third Front still with family as the basic unit. While *zhiqing* narratives mostly shun marriage and family, instead featuring teenage romance or sexual awakening in the vast countryside,⁴¹ Wang's trilogy unravels in the mode of family melodrama. The problem of translocal subjectivity becomes even more complicated with the second generation's coming-of-age at the Third Front. Unlike their parents who yearn for homecoming, the locally born teenagers identify more with their birth place than the faraway ancestral cities. This disagreement takes the form of father-daughter conflicts in *Shanghai Dreams*, which, as Letteri observes, signify "a much larger set of conflicts between ethics, politics and economics that emerged at this time."⁴² Through all the family melodramas, the films indicate that one's sense of hometownness is constructed, of which the fluidity and ambiguity problematize Chinese people's obsession with homecoming.

⁴¹ Such films include Zhang Nuanxi's *Sacrificed Youth* (1985), Dai Sijie's *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* (2002), Jean-Jacques Annaud's *Wolf Totem* (2015), to name but a few.

⁴² Letteri, "Wang Xiaoshuai's *Shanghai Dreams*," 8.

The State and (Im)mobility

Through the above differentiation, it clarifies the uniqueness of the translocal experience concerning the Third Front Movement. There is an obvious yet calamitous feature shared by most socialist movements left undiscussed, that this kind of translocality is coercive and can hardly be reversed. China's household registration (*hukou*) system strictly limits social mobility in the years prior to Deng Xiaoping's economic reform. The *hukou* system, since its implementation in the 1950s, has restricted individual movement from one place to another and institutionalized the unevenness in welfare between the city and the country with its two-tiered structure.⁴³ All three films feature episodes of relocated workers' gathering, in which they complain about limited mobility and scheme to bypass the *hukou* restriction to get back to their native cities. However, during the high socialist years, *hukou* is constitutive of one's identity; unapproved migration would result in losing one's legal citizenship. As long as their *hukou* remain in Guiyang, the returnees cannot find jobs or enjoy the welfare back in Shanghai or Beijing. That is why in the gathering scenes, people always argue over the possible means for them to obtain the proper paperwork and resident permits to return. Old Wu, the patriarchal father who desperately wants his family to return, is the only one

⁴³ For a detailed account of the *hukou* system, see Solinger, *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China*, ch. 2.

who dears to think about making a living in Shanghai without the paperwork.

Unfortunately, it is the fatal rape of his beloved daughter that finally precipitates their surreptitious leaving.

In the final piece of the trilogy, Wang addresses China's mobility in the post-*hukou* era. From the early 1980s to the present, hundreds of millions of rural workers swarm to big cities in search of economic opportunities. These laborers struggling to eke out a living in the city are known as the "floating population," who, by official definition, are "engaged in partial temporary relocation."⁴⁴ The broadly circulated stories about social mobility and economic success in newspapers and popular magazines have sparked spatial imagination among the urban sojourners, albeit their mobility is based on the reality of displacement. Wang's earlier films, such as *So Close to Paradise* and *Beijing Bicycles*, have examined the plight of urban outsiders in the wake of a polyglossic urban kaleidoscope. As Xu explains, "The rural-to-urban migrants are an embodiment of the historical juncture at which the vision of a socialist utopia and the value of national authenticity invested in the rural space are replaced by the primacy of individual desire and rights and the logic of global modernity invested in the metropolis."⁴⁵ The sojourners need to traverse the cultural-ideological distance as much as the geographical

⁴⁴ Solinger, *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China*, 15.

⁴⁵ Xu, "Representing Rural Migrants in the City," 435.

one while encountering opportunities, conundrums and dilemmas along the urbanizing pilgrimage. The boy in *Red Amnesia* is a poignant cultural reference to the sojourners, who shoulder the historical burden of a deep-rooted urban-rural rift. The film's back story happens during the Cultural Revolution: Old Deng manages to get the only returning quota that has been assigned to Old Zhao. Hence her family return to Beijing while the Zhaos remain in Guiyang until the film starts. Upon Old Zhao's sudden death, his grandson learns about the family feud and goes to Beijing to seek revenge on Old Deng. In contrast to the protagonists in *So Close to Paradise* and *Beijing Bicycles*, who struggle to urbanize themselves, this boy commits avenging crimes as he journeys in the city without any real effort to blend in. The film's noir style indicates the hybridity of sojourners under the skyline of the urban labyrinth, as a side note to how translocality works on the present-day level.

The Cinematic Space

Wang's films speak to translocality both thematically and cinematically. Whereas the Bazinian mise-en-scene and cinematography in both *Shanghai Dreams* and *Eleven Flowers* emphasizes the geographical particularity of the Third Front region, people's voices on the soundtrack are reminiscent of their urban background. Both films are shot at an industrial complex in Chongqing, a place that parallels Guiyang geographically and

demographically. Wang appropriates the landscape of Chongqing to sketch the mundane and oppressive ambience of the old-time Guiyang as he remembers. Interestingly though, he barely includes any landscape shot to confirm the spatial specificity in another film shot at Chongqing, the 2010 *Chongqing Blues*, despite its titular information. The copious long shots in *Shanghai Dreams* and *Eleven Flowers* capture the hilly and misty surroundings, accompanied by diegetic sound only. In contrast to the disproportionate long shots of the vast yellow earth in Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* (*Huangtudi* 黄土地, 1984), in which the image of the land dominates most outdoor scenes and creates an overwhelming air, the landscape in Wang's films is relatively tranquil and nostalgic.⁴⁶ The high-angle long shots dwell on the vastness of the landscapes, capturing expressionistic profiles of people walking up and down the hills with low-key lighting. With most of the conflict scenes kept indoor, the rather silent soundtrack with landscape shots further lays focus on the surroundings.

This visually harmonious relationship between characters and the locale, however, is interrupted by their conversations. The parents would speak Shanghai dialect with their fellow relocated colleagues as an articulation of identification with Shanghai rather than Guiyang. Living separately from the locals, the workers maintain the dialect in the

⁴⁶ For discussion on the landscape in *Yellow Earth*, see, for example, Donald, "Landscape and Agency," and Ban Wang, *Illuminations from the Past*, 99.

Shanghai clique while critiquing the government vehemently or sharing latest news from Shanghai. Most scenes of people's gathering are set indoors, which, at the level of the graphic space of the screen, contrast the outer space with such demarcation lines as doorway and window frame. These cinematic features separate the inside from the outside, thereby underscoring the films' dual spatial references, i.e., to the Third Front and the absent-yet-omnipresent Shanghai.

However, the wedding sequence in *Shanghai Dreams* challenges this well-established outside-inside, real-imagery, Guiyang-Shanghai dichotomy. Jun, the offspring of migrant workers, has no choice but to marry a local girl because he has impregnated her. During the outdoor wedding, migrant workers on the groom's side and local peasants on the bride's side appear in one shot for the first time. They raise toasts, jokingly to their soon-to-come third generation, the grandchild. Shortly thereafter, the otherwise reserved middle-aged workers start to sing revolutionary songs accompanied by an accordion until dawn, while all other guests have left. This singing scene intercuts with scenes of Jun staring into the darkness and his lover Xiaozhen crying at home. The festive atmosphere comes to a climax as the workers repeat the line, "now if someone were to ask me what sort of place this is, proudly I would tell him this is my hometown." They stop here, and the soundtrack is brought to a standstill. The uplifting mood of the song nonetheless contrasts with the bewilderment of relocated workers. Now that the revolutionary

discourse as well as its artistic articulation fails to gain an audience, the migrant workers, relocated for the noble mission of socialist revolution, can neither “proudly” claim anywhere as home. The revelry-turned-silence suggests the migrant workers’ psychological displacement that has been intensified twenty years or so after their physical displacement.

Before discussing the historical tales of two cities, I will return to the issue of dialect. Wang Xiaoshuai is not the only director among his contemporaries to use dialects. Jia Zhangke, arguably the most renowned post-fifth generation director, has developed “a dialectal film aesthetics based on the Shanxi dialects of Fenyang and Datong”.⁴⁷ Dialects for the two directors have different connotations. As Michael Berry observes, by setting his films in Fenyang, Jia attempts to “remap small town China as the true heart of the country,” and thus creates a new vision of “hometown” that not only is home to his protagonists, but “serves as the ontological hometown of all of China.”⁴⁸ What makes the dialects in Jia’s films more symbolic is the ethnographical implication of Shanxi, a place considered as the cradle of early Chinese civilization. In spite of this, the dialect in Jia’s films is also a metaphor of rhizome in lieu of roots, celebrating movement

⁴⁷ Lu, *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics*, 150.

⁴⁸ Michael Berry, *Jia Zhangke’s “Hometown Trilogy,”* 16-17.

and unpredictability.⁴⁹ Jia's ambitious appropriation of Shanxi dialect as a metaphor of transnationalism is notably unequivocal in his latest multilingual work *Mountains May Depart* (*Shanhe guren* 山河故人, 2015). In this film, the ocean-crossing Shanxi dialect invokes the dialectic of root and route, to borrow James Clifford's concepts, in that the dialect's intrinsic local attachment is challenged by the ongoing global diaspora.⁵⁰

As opposed to Jia's connection of the local "directly to the transnational,"⁵¹ Wang asserts dialects punctiliously with their temporal and spatial referents, or to borrow Bakhtin's concept, the *choronotopes*. Bakhtin coined this term to analyze the aesthetic visualization of human life as "materially and simultaneously present within a physical-geographical space and specific point of historical time."⁵² For people with translocal experiences, Shanghai dialect is associated with the chronotope of Shanghai before the Third Front Movement, while Guizhou dialect designates the chronotope of the Third Front city Guiyang during the movement. Counterintuitively, the cinematic narrative does not follow this preconceived coordination. While physically at Guiyang, the relocated workers communicate in Shanghai dialect. Moreover, Guizhou dialect has only been

⁴⁹ Yingjin Zhang, *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China*, 101.

⁵⁰ See Clifford, *Routes*.

⁵¹ Yingjin Zhang, *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China*, 91.

⁵² Bakhtin, *The Bakhtin Reader*, 180.

heard once throughout the trilogy. It is a scene towards the end of *Red Amnesia*, where Old Deng bargains with a local fruit vendor during her first re-visit to Guiyang in the past forty-some years. The “out-of-place” dialect acts as an affectionate agent that helps evoke memories associated with certain chronotopes. Unlike Jia Zhangke, who boldly transforms the unknown Fenyang county into a site “emblematic of all of China” that occasions the (re)imagination of the Chinese “everyman” with the help of local dialect,⁵³ Wang Xiaoshuai uses the dialect as a translocal device while grappling with the vestige of personal and collective memories.⁵⁴

⁵³ Michael Berry, *Jia Zhangke's "Hometown Trilogy,"* 17.

⁵⁴ A similar translocal device in Jia Zhangke's films is the use of popular songs. See Yingjin Zhang, *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China*, 98, 201.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL TALES: TRAUMA, NOSTALGIA, EVOCATION

In this section, I explore Wang's representation and (re)imagination of history through the trilogy's visual texts and acoustic intertexts. As discussed in the previous chapter, the three films suggest dialectics between those discarded factories and China's metropolitans, and could thus be approached from the vantage point of the urban generation cinemas. However, in underscoring translocality, Wang has created a chronotope that is both synchronic and diachronic, which distinguishes his works from such urban films as *Shower* (*xizao* 洗澡, 1999, dir. Zhang Yang) and *A Beautiful New World* (*meili xinshijie* 美丽新世界, 1998, dir. Shi Runjiu). For the exilic workers, the city as the Other not only is nostalgic on the personal part, but speaks of collective traumatic memories. They are in an endless search of a tangible as well as a spiritual hometown, the latter of which has to do with socialist nostalgia as a structure of feeling in today's post-socialist China.⁵⁵ Instead of exalting the past, the discourse of nostalgia expresses “a vital vision against a reigning historical narrative in the present.”⁵⁶

⁵⁵ The notion of nostalgia has in recent years comes into prominence in both academic and popular discourse. Yet it has different cultural referents in various contexts such as nostalgia for the Republican era, for socialist China, for the eighties, etc.

⁵⁶ Ban Wang, *Illuminations from the Past*, 5.

In *Shanghai Dreams* and *Eleven Flowers*, a premise for the sense of displacement is the apparent visual absence of the geographical other (Shanghai in this case). The narrative of *Shanghai Dreams* is brought to an end shortly after Qinghong's family board the jeep returning to Shanghai, thus canceling the prospect of Shanghai's cityscape on the screen. In *Red Amnesia*, however, the camera oscillates between the visible banalities of contemporary life and the invisible specters of a recently lost past. Its first half presents the everyday trivialities of an extended family and provides a glimpse into China's contemporary urban life, whereas the second half focuses exclusively on the mother and serves to reflect upon history. It speaks to the nostalgia sentiment that is prevalent in present-day China, as the protagonist physically revisits Guiyang, a site reminiscent of China's socialist past. Wang generates with his mnemonic camera the impression of virtual historicity by showing not only the geographical other, but also the ideological other in the Derridaian sense of a specter of history.

Socialist Nostalgia: Sight and Sound

Boym defines nostalgia as “a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed,” “a sentiment of loss and displacement,” and “a romance with one's own fantasy.”⁵⁷ Nostalgia in the form of cinematic image “is a double exposure, or a

⁵⁷ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xiii.

superimposition of two images –of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life. The moment we try to force it into a single image, it breaks the frame or burns the surface.”⁵⁸ Such double exposure can be found in the mnemonic narrative of *Eleven Flowers* as the narrator’s voice-over and illustrative captions imposing on the silent motion picture.

The twenty-first-century films use myriad cultural artifacts culled from the socialist era to create a nostalgic ambience. There are close-ups of the featured architectures in all three films, such as the large tablet with Mao’s picture on it in *Eleven Flowers*, and the weathered walls still showing slogans from the Cultural Revolution in *Red Amnesia*. After the credit sequence, the actual story of *Eleven Flowers* starts with an often-cited scene featuring Han leading the daily morning exercise routine in white shirt and red scarf. A set of *Eleven Flowers* posters also center around items like the red scarf, white shirt, the Lei Feng bag and paper planes, all cultural icons reminiscent of childhood experiences of generations of the Chinese. As noted by Ban Wang, “memory represents a residual, enchanted form of communal life and structure of feeling.”⁵⁹ These metonymic icons would affectively recall the shared memories as structures of feeling among those who lived that high socialist era, including the director himself. These icons, on the other

⁵⁸ Ibid., xiii-xiv.

⁵⁹ Ban Wang, *Illuminations from the Past*, 4.

hand, bring “new representations of history” in that film posters, as a means of publicity, blatantly speak to commercial profits.⁶⁰ As Dai points out, the wave of nostalgia in fin-de-siecle China renders history “the ‘presence in absentia’ that emits a ray of hope on the Chinese people’s confused and frenzied reality.”⁶¹



Image 6, 7. *Eleven Flowers*: Han leading morning exercise routine (left); A set of *Eleven Flower* posters (right).

Besides these graphical features, the films’ sound also creates an acoustical ambience of nostalgia; it at once reproduces the socialist auditory space and critiques its total soundscape.⁶² I will elaborate first with the loudspeakers, and then revisit the

⁶⁰ Dai, “Imagined Nostalgia,” 160.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁶² Nicole Huang proposes the idea of “total soundscape,” which removes the ecological term soundscape from its pastoral origin and “resituates it in a highly politicized society where every corner of social life was thoroughly saturated with centrally ordained and politically charged sound bytes.” See Huang, “Listening to Films,” 190-191.

revolutionary songs on the soundtrack. The inconsequential sound of everyday life such as the centralized news from wired loudspeakers exemplifies the total soundscape of socialist China. The wired loudspeaker is iconic of the socialist auditory culture. As Huang observes, revolutionary messages were first propagated by radio waves and wired loudspeakers placed everywhere.⁶³ Close-up shots of the loudspeaker appear in both *Shanghai Dreams* and *Red Amnesia*, whereas contradictory messages have been conveyed. In the establishing shot of *Shanghai Dreams*, we see a loudspeaker installed by a second-storey window, broadcasting radio music for gymnastic exercises. This radio sound typifies the soundscape of a totalitarian regime inasmuch as it requires everyone's participation in the same set of routine. Although this total soundscape maintains its hold "despite the regime shift in 1976" and makes its way into the *Shanghai Dreams* story set in the early 1980s, its "longevity and pervasiveness" is at once at stake.⁶⁴

The film also features Old Wu secretly listening to "Voice of America" via a privately-owned radio at home. This politically-sensitive scene unexpectedly bypasses censorship and appears in the publicly-released version in mainland China. Borrowed from Wang Xiaoshuai's memory of his own father, this particular scene speaks of the

⁶³ Ibid., 190.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 190.

family as a sanctuary against totalitarianism.⁶⁵ Interestingly, Wang uses the still of Old Wu fiddling with the radio from *Shanghai Dreams* as an illustration when writing about his father. In the same collection, Wang maintains that his intension of making the trio is to restore the collective memories of a generation. However, his contextualizing this particular shot as his own father image calls into question the collectiveness of his works. The director inevitably encounters what Caruth refers to as “the difficulties of writing history from within it,” as he negotiates between the authenticity on the personal level and that on the historical level.⁶⁶



Image 8. *Shanghai Dreams*: The loudspeaker and the window image in the establishing shot.

Compared with that omnipresent and empowered loudspeaker during the high socialist era, the image of this device in *Red Amnesia*, however, becomes a forsaken

⁶⁵ For the directorial account of this episode, see Wang Xiaoshuai, *Baobao de guxiang*, 202-203.

⁶⁶ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 12.

residue from the past. There is a close-up shot of a weatherworn loudspeaker in the ending sequence, when Old Deng revisits the now desolate factory complex she used to dwell in. The slowed-down speed and tempo as such forms a stark contrast with the film's otherwise hectic pace.⁶⁷ Accompanied by an off-screen melody, the classic Soviet music *The Hawthorn Tree*, this sequence distinguishes itself in the trilogy insofar as the director eschews extra-diegetic music elsewhere. On the site of the Third Front, Old Deng murmurs that she has a *deja vu*, which explains the previous intercuts between the abstracted Old Deng and this lonesome landscape. The drawn-out landscape shots spell out the nostalgic sentiment, with the melancholic music further distinguishing this episode as a directorial gesture to highlight the godforsaken Third Front landscape even at the cost of narrative continuity.

This scene, on the other hand, invites a close examination of revolutionary music. *Red Amnesia* features a "Red Song" chorus made up of the elderly. Wrote and sung in homage of the communist revolution, these Red Songs in the 21st century speak of a revived revolutionary heritage. This state-sponsored cultural practice gains momentum in the nationwide Red Song Campaign in celebration of the ninetieth anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party in the year of 2011. One classic piece, *The Hawthorn Tree*, has

⁶⁷ According to Wang Xiaoshuai, the original title of the film was *Running Old Deng* (*benpao de laodeng*), which stresses the hectic life pace of the protagonist.

been played on the soundtrack unremittingly since the preceding scene, in which Old Deng stands by the door of the community center, staring at people singing this song. The camera work in this scene is nuanced; it zooms out from the chorus to a long shot, showing the entire picture of the building and Old Deng right in the middle of the double frames (the door frame and the camera's frame). This frame-within-frame composition creates a moment of *mise-en-abyme*, in which the character's forlorn profile forms a ghostly contrast with the cavernous hall. The Red Song in a sense evokes the historical specters that have been haunting Old Deng throughout the course of the film.

In an earlier sequence replete with textual and contextual tensions, Old Deng is portrayed lingering around the community center as well. As she approaches the building, her walk takes on a goose-step manner with the beats of *The Road to Revival*.⁶⁸ The goose-step, according to George Orwell, is "one of the most horrible sights in the world," simply affirming "naked power."⁶⁹ Probably out of regret for her wrongdoings to Old Zhao's family during the Cultural Revolution, Old Deng mindfully resists the Red Songs as she hesitates about joining the chorus. However, the unintentionally goose step in her body language betrays what the revolutionary era and the culture of dictatorship have bequeathed to her.

⁶⁸ *The Road to Revival* is a 2009 performance which is adapted from the 1963 revolutionary music, *We Walk on the Great Road*.

⁶⁹ Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 21.

In addition, the messages conveyed by *The Road to Revival* is essentially problematic. With the melody reminiscent of that in the heyday of communist revolution, the lines of *The Road to Revival*, however, situate “between the red (socialist) and black (capitalist) approaches.”⁷⁰ For instance, the first few lines as played in the film reads “we walk on a brand-new road facing the rising sun.” With China’s breakneck changes and economic prosperity alongside the recently acknowledged collective amnesia of past misfortunes, it could well be the case that this “brand-new world” would eventually become the “brave new world” as Huxley depicts in the dystopian novel under the same name.⁷¹ As noted by Chen, by using and manipulating the historical narrative, political orientations, popular stars and cultures, and national sentiment, it forms a new red legend for contemporary China that remains “red” only in name.⁷² The Red Songs’ legitimacy as ideological symbols being challenged, the sentiment of nostalgia is even more questionable, perhaps a floating signifier embellished with spectacular representations.

Revolutionary songs have been woven into the trilogy’s auditory narratives that play key roles in conveying the director’s political attitude. In lieu of acclaiming the CCP, they strategically critique the revolutionary grand narratives. In the previous section, I

⁷⁰ Chen, “Performing the ‘Red Classics,’” 153.

⁷¹ Several recent fictions, especially science fictions, have addressed the issue of collective amnesia. See, for example, Chan Koonchung’s *The Fat Years*.

⁷² Chen, “Performing the ‘Red Classics,’” 153.

have analyzed the singing scene in *Shanghai Dreams* and its reference to relocated workers' native land sentiments and disappointments with their forsaken situation. A parallel scene in *Eleven Flowers* senses the aura of *deja vu*, in which Han's parents sing the same song and once again stop in the middle. As other people scoff at Han's father for forgetting the next line that reads "Chairman Mao and the Party lead the way," it articulates the message of political resistance, which is veiled by the feeling of nostalgia in *Shanghai Dreams*. The camera immediately segues to Han's first wet dream as he hears his parents having sex that night. By insinuating a connection between the defiance of the Maospeak and Han's sexual awakening, Wang reiterates his stance of political resistance in a cynical manner.



Image 9, 10. *Red Amnesia*: Old Deng stands by the door of the community center (left); Old Deng walks in goose steps with lyrics of the Red Song (right).

Personal Memory, Personalized History

The filmmaker's sophisticated cinematography also contributes to the dialectic between visual texts and historical memories. In *Eleven Flowers*, Wang vastly uses point-of-view shots to defamiliarize and scrutinize everyday practices during the high socialist era. In most scenes, the camera remains at a height of around four feet above the ground, taking the viewpoint of the eleven-year-old protagonist.⁷³ In a gathering scene, the camera follows Han as he hides underneath the table. The sight is circumscribed by furniture and people's legs, with their conversation about the murder sounded nonchalant and faraway. In another scene when Han plays in the bathhouse which is of course vast for him, it features the place as if it is a swimming pool. Likewise, Han happens to eavesdrop another piece of gossip of the murderer from underwater. The director says in an interview that the cinematic technique's capture of memories resembles how he feels about those, which are "close to the heart yet impossible to recreate".⁷⁴ The conversations Han overhears in these scenes serves to integrate the fragmented mnemonic narratives by retelling the murderer's story. However, it is at the same time blurred in nature as it is said to be drawn from a person's elusive memory at the age of eleven. The long take in the final scene further challenges the credibility of memory, in

⁷³ See Wang Xiaoshuai, *Baobao de Guxiang*, 146.

⁷⁴ See Davison, "Wang Xiaoshuai on *11 Flowers*."

which Han runs with his friends towards the site where the murderer is about to be executed. In the end, the camera moves close to Han, who stands still on the hillside, and the voiceover goes “I cannot remember if I heard the shots. Shortly after, China experienced major upheavals. All these memories are fixed in my mind. That year, I was 11.” With individual stories engulfed by the grand narrative of the nation-state, the narrator of *Eleven Flowers*, arguably the director himself, acknowledges the uncertainty of mnemonic narration. We could tell that with this final sequence, the director pays homage to the famous long take in François Truffaut’s *The 400 Blows* (1959) when the boy protagonist runs all the way toward the beach in the end. In retrospective, the running scenes are the epiphanic moments in both boys’ initiation, thus the rite-of-passage symbolism bears more weight than recollecting actual happenings.

One of Wang’s stylistic feature is his preference of initiation stories, which can be found in his other works besides the trio, such as *Beijing Bicycle* and *So Close to Paradise*. The motif of growing up through the entanglement with a criminal can be found in literature as well, such as Lin Hai-yin’s 林海音 autobiographical novel *Memories of Peking: South Side Stories* 城南旧事. The I narrator’s interaction with a thief in the chapter named “Let us go and see the sea” very much resembles the story in *Eleven Flowers*.⁷⁵ This episode is recapitulated in Wu Yigong’s 吴贻弓 screen

⁷⁵ See Lin Hai-yin, *Memories of Peking: South Side Stories*, trans. Nancy C. Ing and Chi

adaptation in 1983.⁷⁶ Such coming-of-age narratives often ensue a moralistic ending with criminals brought to justice and the protagonist's epiphany at the very moment of witnessing. It also echoes what Ban Wang phrases as the "typical responses to historical trauma," which "start at the bloody image for a stunned moment, and then turn away to weave a narrative in a hurry."⁷⁷

While reinforcing the symbolic order and the law, the endings of Wang's films are often found conspicuously weakened in critical energy. The resultant lapse in critical profundity, as Zeng argues, could well be a "strategic ambiguity" in operating against censorship or a result of self-censor.⁷⁸ While the final version of *So Close to Paradise's* positive depiction of the police in maintaining social order serves to qualify the realistic depiction of the harsh lives of the peasant workers, "Wang's use of cinematography and sound undercuts and conflicts with the narrative and thus creates an ambiguous space and evokes irony."⁷⁹ Censorship wise, the moralistic endings of *Shanghai Dreams* and *Red Amnesia* to some degree function in the same vein as in *So Close to Paradise*, whereas

Pang-yuan, 139-196.

⁷⁶ Wu's eponymous film has conventionally been translated as *My Memories of Old Beijing*.

⁷⁷ Ban Wang, *Illuminations from the Past*, 97.

⁷⁸ Zeng, "So Close to Paradise and *The Missing Gun*: Hollywood Models and the Production of Film Noir in Chinese Cinema at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century." 56.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

that in *Eleven Flowers* fits better with its mnemonic narratives, which romanticizes one's childhood at the cost of exposing critical issues. Since the story is told from Han's perspective, it frames Han in the foreground whereas capturing the victim, Juehong, in a distanced view. This scene visualizes how the camera manoeuvres personal memories in a way that overshadows historical violence, thus undermining its realistic flavor.



Image 11. *Eleven Flowers*: Han and his buddy examine Juehong from a distance.

Haunted Realism

Braester analyzes analogous break-downs of cinematic realism in Jiang Wen's *In the Heat of the Sun* (*yangguang canlan de rizi* 阳光灿烂的日子, 1994). He points out that “the sunny days” during the Cultural Revolution as depicted in Jiang’s film “are as much a figment of the narrator’s imagination as they are rooted in reality,” and the narrator’s vision of the past crystallizes into a still image that is “not a vision of reality but a

resplendent cinematic mirage”.⁸⁰ It is at this point “when memory fails to provide a reliable record of events,” that “cinematic vision takes over.”⁸¹ Wang uses similar cinematic mirage in *Red Amnesia* as he frequently intercuts between Old Deng’s viewpoint that shows hallucinatory vision of her late husband and the stalking boy, and the ghostly non-point-of-view shots that pans through desolated factories at Guiyang. This alternation obscures the distinction between fiction and reality to such an extent as to show the camera’s intervention into historical memory. In this “unlikely blends” of horror film, melodrama, and psychological thriller,⁸² the director invites the audience in challenging the credibility of his narratives from time to time. A prominent case in point is the evocation of Old Deng’s late husband, which I will elaborate in the third chapter when it comes to gender structures.

In a likely manner, the boy appears as a specter when Lao Deng tries to find him in the yard. In most of the film’s narratives, the boy is ignored by people around him. In this episode, the *mise-en-scene* conveys the sense of a thriller as the boy disappears even from the footage of surveillance video. The frequent intercuts between reality and illusion add to the mysterious effect. In an interview, Wang acknowledges the symbolic value of

⁸⁰ Braester, “Memory at a Standstill,” 352.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 350.

⁸² The phrase “unlikely blends” is borrowed from Gaudiano’s review.

this character. “While he’s a person in the story, the young boy also signifies a distant past that is haunting the lady’s present.”⁸³ These spectral intruders are “the specters of Marx” in a Derridarian sense, who return occasionally to haunt the present-day people that are much too immersed in contemporary life. As for the mnemonic discourse, Wang’s visual narrative in the first half implies a pathological explanation for Old Deng’s amnesia as her daughter-in-law complains about her aging stupidity. The director combines this natural forgetfulness that “an old person may experience” with what he phrases as “red amnesia,” the collective trauma in the Chinese psyche, so much so that the work “attempts to blur the boundary between reality and fantasy.”⁸⁴ These cinematic spectacles of dream and hallucination also speaks of uncanniness in the Freudian sense, inasmuch as “death and the re-animation of the dead have been represented as most uncanny themes.”⁸⁵

Wang’s trilogy is comparable to *In the Heat of the Sun* in the unambiguous portrayal of violence as well. As Braester has noted, “Chinese revolutionary rhetoric has often used bodily injury to invoke a sense of reality.”⁸⁶ By the same token, violence and crime

⁸³ See Wang’s interview in Lee, “Wang Xiaoshuai’s Cultural Revolution trilogy screens in Hong Kong.”

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Freud, “The ‘Uncanny,’” 948.

⁸⁶ Braester, “Memory at a Standstill,” 353.

constitute the key plot of all three Wang Xiaoshuai films. With the criminal executed (in *Shanghai Dreams*) or self-executed (in *Red Amnesia*) in the end, the stories are brought to a closure, which, by the way, is considered as political correct under the rhetoric of socialist realistic narratives. Given that engaging in violence is tantamount to “make history” at a symbolic level,⁸⁷ the end of *Eleven Flowers*, with the gunshot up in the air, can be viewed as an attempt to “un-make” history, to challenge the historicity in such memory practices that is often overpraised.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 353.

CHAPTER 3

WHOSE TALES? THE OBJECT, AUTHOR, SUBJECTIVITY

In this chapter, it brings the variant of gender into film analysis. It first examines the voyeuristic gaze and fetishized object in *Shanghai Dreams*, *Eleven Flowers*, and some other Wang Xiaoshuai films, considering the problematic subjectivity of these victimized female figures. It then draws a parallel between *Red Amnesia* and Chan Koonchung's 陈冠中 *The Fat Years* 盛世, exploring their alternative configuration of empowered women in resisting collective amnesia.

Lacan, Hitchcock, Wang Xiaoshuai

Several of Wang Xiaoshuai's characters are portrayed as obsessive with certain fetishized objects, which can be interpreted with Lacan's theory of desire. In this light, the pair of red high-heels in *Shanghai Dreams*, the white shirt in *Eleven Flowers*, and the bike in *Beijing Bicycles* all epitomize the Lacanian *objet petit a*, which, according to Slavoj Zizek, symbolizes "the link between the capitalist dynamics of surplus-value and the libidinal dynamics of surplus-enjoyment."⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Slavoj Zizek, "Coke as *objet petit a*," quoted in Xiaoping Lin, *Children of Marx and Coca-Cola*, 98.

With its winning of the Jury Grand Prix of Silver Bear at the 2001 Berlin International Film Festival, *Beijing Bicycle* has been considered as a masterpiece of the Sixth Generation and perhaps the most internationally acclaimed Wang Xiaoshuai film. Following this international debut, *Beijing Bicycle* is often compared to the Italian Neorealism exemplar *The Bicycle Thief* (dir. Vittorio De Sica, 1948) for the shared theme, style, realism, and preoccupation with cityscape.⁸⁹ We may juxtapose this European aesthetics with two other geopolitical foci insinuated in its titles of both languages, namely Beijing in *Beijing Bicycle*, and Hong Kong or Taiwan in *shiqisui de danche* 十七岁的单车,⁹⁰ thus mapping the transnational production and reception trajectory of this award-winning arthouse film.

While the gaining and losing of a bicycle in Wang's *Beijing Bicycle* resembles the meta-plot of *The Bicycle Thief*, the accepted but then returned red high-heels in *Shanghai Dreams* and the grabbed and replaced white shirt in *Eleven Flowers* can be viewed as further derivations of this narrative. Jenkins' review points out this genealogical correlation in *Beijing Bicycle* and *Eleven Flowers*, saying that "both are simple, resonant tales of youths who have something taken from them."⁹¹ Xiaoping Lin's analysis of

⁸⁹ For comparison of the two films, see Gary Xu, *Sinascape*, ch.3.

⁹⁰ In Mandarin, bicycle is *zixingche* 自行车, whereas *danche* 单车 is oft-used outside Mainland China.

⁹¹ Jenkins, "*Eleven Flowers: A Revolutionary Childhood.*"

Beijing Bicycle borrows Žižek’s theorization, contending that the bicycle is a gadget of the “libidinal dynamics” in Chinese capitalism that haunts many a youngster like both boy protagonists of this film.⁹² Such an argument can be appropriated to scrutinize the red high-heels in *Shanghai Dreams*, a fetish object that in a likely manner represents “surplus-enjoyment” in the wake of China’s economic marketization. Yet in the case of *Eleven Flowers*, the white shirt at once speaks of totalitarian conformity as a cultural icon (as discussed in chapter two) and foreshadows capitalist surplus-value for its entertaining brand-newness.



Image 12. *Shanghai Dreams*: The red high-heels and the male gaze.

The objects in Wang’s films can be viewed in the Hitchcockian tradition as well.

The edited book *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan: (but Were Afraid*

⁹² Xiaoping Lin, *Children of Marx and Coca-Cola*, 98.

to Ask Hitchcock) is an attempt to interpret Hitchcock's films through the lens of Lacan's theory. Dolar's article in particular grapples with the problem of object. It differentiates between the two kinds of Hitchcockian objects, namely the McGuffin that is immaterial in itself thus instigating the infinite metonymy (examples include the microfilms in *North by Northwest*, and the plans for aeroplane machines in *The Thirty-Nine Steps*), and the evocation of Lacanian (Following Freud and Heidegger) *das Ding* that possesses a kind of sublime and lethal materiality (such as the ring in *Shadow of a Doubt* and the lighter in *Strangers on a Train*). Dolar proposes a Lacanian distinction that the former is "the object of desire, a vanishing semblance pushing the desire in an infinite metonymy," whereas the latter denotes "the object of the drive, the presence incorporating a blockade around which all the relations circulate."⁹³

Wang's films fit aptly into this Hitchcockian dyad. *Red Amnesia* features immaterial objects that echo the first type, whereas the objects' indexicality in *Shanghai Dreams* and *Eleven Flowers* parallels the second. *Red Amnesia* unfolds with a series of puzzles as Old Deng starts to receive weird phone calls: she cannot get along with her daughter-in-law and her homosexual son; her elder son, Dabing, seems to have a menacing enemy from work; and her own mother has issues with living in the nursing house. In the episode to come, Old Deng's electronic foot-spa basin breaks down, and she

⁹³ Dolar, "Hitchcock's Objects," 44-46.

embarks on a fruitless journey of finding the manufacture factory. In the process, she encounters a boy and gets herself into another pickle. In this case, the mysterious calls and the never reached factory can be likened to the McGuffin, the content of which is never learnt by the audience, nor is it significant at all. The McGuffins Wang has employed in the first half of the film successfully create suspensions on multiple levels. The audiences could have been led astray about the subject matter for its polyphonic narrative, possibilities including family melodrama of trifles between the in-laws, social expose of underpaid migrant workers, or even the aging problems perplexing the Chinese. However, none of these possibilities have been revisited in later episodes, in that the McGuffin signifies “only that they signify” or “the signification as such.”⁹⁴ The conception of McGuffin partly explains the “unfinished stories” that Wang might be accused of, in that the object that evokes the desire discourse is irrelevant by nature. However, it on the other hand accentuates the film’s weakness in managing multiple genres. The prolonged, melancholic shots in the second half that relay a strong sense of personalized nostalgia and the almost didactical political discourses do not necessarily go with the ambience of mysterious thriller created through the first half. Because of this inconsistency, we may say that *Red Amnesia* is a good attempt in combining the arthouse with genre films; yet it needs more sophistication to appeal to both groups of spectators.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 45.

On the contrary, the red high-heels and white shirt in the other two films have strong socio-political connotations, thus are “fascinating, captivating, bewitching, spell-binding” objects that essentially carry with them the kind of lethal materiality.⁹⁵ To single out the defining characteristics of the second kind of object, I draw another parallel between *Beijing Bicycle* and *Eleven Flowers* with the Hitchcockian doubling. In the case of *Shadow of a Doubt*, the axis of duality therein centers around Charlie-Charlie, the uncle and his niece who has been named after him, whose dual relationship is hinged by the circulation of the ring. As Dolar points out, “every duality is based on a third,” the position of which “is occupied both by the fascinating and lethal object (which is also the object of exchange and circulation) and the mother’s desire, Mother as the bearer of the law.”⁹⁶ Wang maneuvers this Hitchcockian archetype of duality in several of his works. Current scholarship has noted the applicability of “the privileged object” to the bicycle in *Beijing Bicycle*, and the dual relationship between the boy protagonists highlights the “fatherlessness” of the two children.⁹⁷ Dual relationship, lethal object, and impotent father are also the structural elements in *Eleven Flowers*. In fact, the age difference between the eleven-year-old Han and the grown-up factory worker Jueqiang very much

⁹⁵ Ibid., 45.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 33, 38.

⁹⁷ Xiaoping Lin, *Children of Marx and Coca-Cola*, 99-100.

resembles the Charlie-Charlie axis. Like *Shadow of a Doubt*, the crimes have taken place before film narrative starts, and Han's white shirt has later been appropriated as the circulating object, "the stand-in" for the absent crimes.⁹⁸ In the only episode that Jueqiang the murderer actually appears on the screen, he acts like a father figure to Han, full of masculinity and exhibiting patriarchy as he makes orders and promises compensation. In contrast, Han's real father, being an intellectual in the revolutionary era, is presented as incompetent in the film. Therefore, the duality in *Eleven Flowers* is two-fold: the white shirt serves as the hinge of the dual relationship between Han and Jueqiang, while Han, objectified through the gaze, is the pivot of duality between a father figure and the real father. This in turn underscores how the revolutions have denied traditional familial order.

Position of the Mother

The discussion above ensues another question: how is the mother presented in Wang's films, if the father has become an empty space? The Chinese title of *Red Amnesia* offers a pretty literal answer to this question: mother is the intruder.⁹⁹ The title, as the director and other critics point out, has two layers of meanings in the film: the

⁹⁸ Dolar, "Hitchcock's Objects," 36.

⁹⁹ Its Chinese title, *chuangruzhe* 闯入者, literally means "intruder."

unexpected specter of history intruding on contemporary life (as discussed in the second chapter), and the mother who constantly intrudes into her children's lives.¹⁰⁰ While the narrative presents the mother, Old Deng, as an obstinate intruder on her children's privacies as well as a helpless victim being haunted by the oppressive past, the visual language nonetheless insinuates that nobody can be excused from this. Unlike the cinematography of *Shanghai Dreams* and *Eleven Flowers* that always captures the landscape from a distance with fixed camera, *Red Amnesia* features close shot and handheld shooting. Instead of telling a past story, it uses present tense so that actively engages with both the contemporary and the unresolved past.

One gathering scene at Jun's house clearly shows that everyone in a sense has intruded into other's territory. As the family are busy preparing for dinner, they frequently pass over the camera and block the views. The cinematography here alludes to the incommensurability between different generations: since there is no way out for communication and mutual-understanding, they have no choice but resorting to verbal or physical violence. This can be viewed as a side note to Sartre's adage in *No Exit*, that "hell is other people."¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ See Rhapsodes, *Chuangrüzhe: Hongse shiyi, yihuo laowusuoyi?* 《闯入者》: 红色失忆, 抑或老无所依? (*Red Amnesia: Red Amnesia or No Place for Old People?*) Mtime, May 1, 2015, <http://movie.mtime.com/203208/reviews/7894784.html>.

¹⁰¹ See Sartre, *No Exit*.



Image 13, 14. *Red Amnesia*: The half-blocked shots in the gathering scene.

The mother comes to the fore to represent the extended family and repay a historical debt in the absence of a father figure. However, the father never actually leaves the household. In the same gathering scene, Old Deng insists on saving a seat and providing a set of dinnerware for her late husband. Her daughter-in-law expresses her impatience about Old Deng's paranoia as she says to her son that "you grandfather always lives with us." When Lao Deng eats in her own apartment, she would talk to the empty seat that once belongs to her husband as if he is still there. This somewhat superstitious invocation ritual works in the visual narrative: the father reincarnates, sitting on his old spot in silence, but in a sense dominating the household. This entanglement between the real and the surreal, or (day) dreams on the one hand embodies the famous or infamous Orwellian adage, that "Big brother is watching you." On the other hand, it underscores the entrenched gender structure of male dominance in this typical socialist Chinese household.



Image 15, 16. *Red Amnesia*: Old Deng's late husband reincarnates in the same sequence.

As an indispensable constituent in the film's narrative arc, the mother's amnesia is subjected to a symptomatic viewing. It brings the perspective of gender into the dynamics of history, memory, and imagination. A film of comparative salience in this sense is the Zhang Yimou's blockbuster film *Coming Home* (guilai 归来, 2014), which was released just a few months before *Red Amnesia*. Its analogous plot revolves around a mother who suffers from amnesia as an after effect of traumatic experiences during the Cultural Revolution. Dai comments that in this story, the father who comes back home after a decade brings a closure to the historical tragedy by restoring the male-dominant familial order.¹⁰² *Red Amnesia* follows the same logic that a woman is not entitled to resolve the history. The latter half of the filmic narrative focuses on the mother's own journey of repaying the whole family's historical debt. In the end, as the boy falls out of the window under the watch of Old Deng, it relays a clear message that Old Deng's attempt to come

¹⁰² See Dai, "Shizong de muqin."

to terms with the history fails. That said, the flipside of this perplexing gender discourse in Wang's film is that it calls upon historical reflection on the part of the audience. This skeptical and humanistic attitude toward the unresolved history differentiates it from Zhang Yimou's melodramatic take that at best stays on the surface.

By Way of Women

As mentioned previously, it has become an infamous filmic convention to project historical atrocity on the insulted and injured female body. The girls in *Shanghai Dreams* and *Eleven Flowers* are depicted along this vein as “the most oppressed,” and thus “stand-ins for China's traumatized self-consciousness.”¹⁰³ *Red Amnesia*, on the other hand, suggests an alternative avenue by presenting its female protagonist as taking the initiative to resist repressive history. Such narrative might seem to be progressive in terms of gender issues at first sight; yet it could still be problematized in both form and content. The cinematography examined in the last section suggests that Old Deng's late husband is omnipresent within the diegesis. “He” disappears from the screen from time to time, but never vanishes from the story. Here I investigate another male figure in absent-presence –the man who hides behind the camera.

¹⁰³ Chow, *Women and Chinese Modernity*, 170.

The question of subjectivity is central to the issue of authorial (directorial) intention. Who speaks on behalf of whom? Regarding this, Wang's rendition can be examined in the genealogy of Chinese (male) intellectuals' political and cultural rhetoric about gender and nation. According to Cui Shuqin, the image of woman "acts as a visual and discursive sign in the creation of the nation-state in twentieth-century China." Yet despite woman's conspicuous visual presence, "the master narratives that describe the evolution of the nation-state are marked by the absence of woman as subject and her voice as discourse."¹⁰⁴ Such gendered exposure and erasure can be found in various literary and artistic genres. Chen Xiaomei explores a group of male May Fourth playwrights devoted to writing about the issue of women's liberation and equality. She contends that these "women's issues" could be seen as "having been utilized in disguise by the May Fourth men-of-letters to speak for men, or the 'new-cultural men,' in their political struggle against the old men, the Confucian men."¹⁰⁵ Such "male-dominated-feminist" narrative, as Chen phrases it, proliferates throughout the twentieth century, reappearing as Maoist state feminism in later years.

The way the female protagonist in *Red Amnesia* is represented resonates with the imagination of woman during the Mao era. In those high socialist days, "female sexuality

¹⁰⁴ Cui, *Women Through the Lens*, xii.

¹⁰⁵ Chen, *Occidentalism*, 155.

or the sensuality of the female body is replaced with a genderless and sexless symbol that signifies the sociopolitical collectivity.”¹⁰⁶ Wang’s narrative features the mother taking up the family burden, participating in communal activities, and returning to former work place all by herself, all characteristic of the socialist woman who could “hold half the sky.” On the part of the male author, such configuration enables him to engage political issues, and the female character’s “naturalized” limited effectiveness in fighting against historical amnesia also provides a convenient retreat. This type of discourse has been critiqued by contemporary feminist scholars for “having subsumed female agency, rendering women mere symbols of male-centered discourses or, at best, passive objects of a bestowed liberation.”¹⁰⁷

Through the above analyses, I tease out the stories told in the trilogy in different contingencies: the geographical, the historical, and the gendered. These narratives can be subsumed under the overarching Benjaminian artistry of storytelling in that they are personal as well as universal, socially engaged in subject matters while morally detached in style. Of course, Wang’s trilogy is far from flawless; for example, the visual narratives

¹⁰⁶ Cui, *Women Through the Lens*, xiii.

¹⁰⁷ Dooling, “Writing Chinese Feminism(s),” 228.

are somewhat self-repetitive and formulaic. My point is that despite this and that imperfections, there is significance in these films on both textual and contextual levels. Embedded in China's social and political conditions during the past half a century, Wang's stories present themselves as artistic interventions into the economically booming yet historically amnesic status quo. I would like to evoke another famous, if not clichéd, historic figure illustrated by Benjamin: The Angel of History, to explain such artistic endeavor. In "Theses on the Philosophy of History," he writes,

A Klee painting named *Angelus Novus* shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

In facing the storm of global capitalism what we call progress, it is exigent as well to making sense of historical legacies. While China's film market is rift with "non-films," as phrased by Dai Jinhua, it is hoped that Chinese directors, including the one discussed here, could demonstrate more "obsession with China" and obsession with filmmaking in addition to the obsession with capital.

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