

Absences and Excesses in Cinematic Representations of Beijing

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“Reality is a mess in China”—Jia Zhangke

Social reality of postsocialist China can only be described in polysemic terms bearing contradictory or at least conflicting connotations. The phantasmagoric nature and the immeasurable dimension of this historical condition make it an infinitely challenging object of study for anyone interested in any aspect of contemporary China.¹⁾ The past three decades or so brought drastic changes to China that have fundamentally altered formations of the social structure and the individual's position and function in this structure, forcing Chinese people to re-orient themselves in the way they experience the world and interact with each other. The triumph of global capitalism at “the end of history” brings China an enormous explosion of energy with which the ordinary Chinese have marched forward toward accumulating greater amount of wealth and experiencing greater satisfactions of pleasure. It has also impacted essential moral, ethical standards and thinking honored by conventional wisdom and habit, ushered in different sets of values, beliefs and practices, many of which are potentially more problematic than beneficial.

In this paper I would like to examine postsocialist China from two important aspects, namely the family in disintegration and the workings of the body politics that exploit the weak and encourage the return of many repressed desires of the previous regime. By using cinematic lens as a tool and Beijing as focus, this paper intends to ask pertinent questions regarding how the human subject struggles to re-define the meaning of moral agency and re-negotiate various power relations in order to make sense of a tumultuous and mundane interiority, and an equally devastating exterior formed in sharp contrast between polished, smooth industrial steel and concrete and pathetic, cast-away grey bricks. It discusses how the new urban Chinese cinematic discourse encompasses contrasting emotional and political strategies, producing a wide range of aesthetic experiences of real or imagined reality of China from gentle nostalgia to critical reflectivity.

Tracing historical changes that have underlain the ideological workings of the Chinese Communist Party since its beginning, a study by Jiwei Ci articulates the philosophical logic with which the Chinese revolution experiences a three-fold movement, proceeding from an idealistic utopianism to a devastating nihilism and then toward a hedonism.²⁾ Along this path that leads from “faith to cynicism” China has gained tremendously in terms of material wealth and yet, as Ci speculates, the

Chinese collective consciousness, germinated from a utopian spirit, a belief in the eventual fulfillment of the communist ideal, remains deeply unsatisfied and is forced to grapple with “an extremely complex mixture of motives and tensions—innocent optimism, exuberant energy, proud nationalism, personal ambition, outright ignorance and irresponsibility.”³⁾

Under these circumstances how do the ordinary Chinese people experience reality is a question that elicits numerous answers, none definite and often ambiguous. After all, when the system from which one derives “shared meanings to interpret and make sense of the world” is undergoing unpredictable changes, conventionally accepted signifiers will also change their signified meanings.⁴⁾ To comprehend this reality is difficult because of the sheer scale of things and the complexities it involves. Any particular outlook will depend on factors such as locality, profession or job categories, educational background, political aspirations, or the influence of *guanxi* (social connections). In terms of cultural representations, any perceived reality could vary from real or authentic, to false or imagined. A good example is Beijing, now recognized as a global megacity on par with Shanghai—the two “dragon-heads” of twenty-first century China. In the past three decades Beijing has undergone changes that literally and metaphorically make the city unrecognizable in many ways. The shift of Beijing’s cityscape and its symbolic meanings is emblematic of changes that have been going on in China since economic reforms began in the late 1970s. Indeed “revolution” would not be an exaggeration to describe China’s recent drive toward modernization and to pursue global capital.⁵⁾

Studies on postsocialist China’s development into socialist capitalism have in general pointed to its most essential feature, i.e. it is a fiercely expanding and erosive process of urbanization. “(Chairman) Mao’s mandate that the countryside encircle the cities has been irrevocably reversed during the past three decades in China,” observes Robin Visser in her study on the meaning and impact of this new communist strategy to modernize a huge nation.⁶⁾ This process of urbanization/modernization generates entire “new ways of seeing and perceiving the world.”⁷⁾ “The world” refers more to cities than the vast countryside that still inhabits the majority of China’s population.⁸⁾ Chinese films produced in the past three decades confirm this trend of gravitating toward urban areas. Films that have defined Chinese cinematic aesthetics by the fifth Generation directors, such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, tend to focus on rural experience. *Red Sorghum*, *The Story of Qiuju*, *Yellow Earth* and *To Live* easily come to mind. It has been assumed the Chinese rural countryside “defined the Chinese way of life,” and “was a metaphor for genuine Chinese society.”⁹⁾ On the contrary, in Chinese cultural imagination, cities are seen as inauthentic, suspicious and even parasitical. However, the younger generation, i.e. the Sixth Generation, filmmakers such as Wang Xiaoshuai, Zhang Yuan, and Jia Zhangke, tend to situate themselves in urban centers of China that have been completely transformed by market economy.¹⁰⁾ *Beijing Bicycle*, *In the Heat of the Sun*, *Beijing Bastards*, *Suzhou River*—the “urban milieu” has captured a generation of filmmakers’ imagination and inspired a new urban film aesthetics that is distinctly individualistic in terms of style and concern, but decidedly postsocialist in their outlook.¹¹⁾

In this paper I use three films by young directors of China to illuminate contrast-

ing postsocialist realities in China, via Beijing.¹²⁾ Zhang Yang's *Sunflower* (2005) is a mainstream popular film follows a family in Beijing from the 1960s to the 1990s. Li Yu's *Lost in Beijing* (2007) has been banned by Chinese authorities for political reasons.¹³⁾ Jia Zhangke's *The World* (2004), has received critical claim for its non-sentimental look into the lives of migrant workers stuck in Beijing World Park, which opened in 1993 and showcases miniature replicas of famous sites in the world. From melodramatic exaggeration, nostalgic sentimentalism to bleak realist documentary style, these films offer more than a glimpse into ways of engagement that contemporary Chinese cinema does with postsocialist reality and its discontents.

Sunflower captures a "visually correct" imagery of Beijing's recent political and cultural affair with the *siheyuan* (courtyard houses), its two thousand year history literally unchanged until China's embrace of marketization.¹⁴⁾ The unassuming and calming grey walls and roof tiles of the *siheyuan* extend and blend into a humbling contrast to the imperial red and yellow at the center of this great city.¹⁵⁾ As a metropolis of enduring imperial and socialist legacies, Beijing has witnessed and experienced numerous historical transformations initiated by each new political regime, and yet it is the "capitalist revolution" in the recent past that proves the most powerful and spectacular. The "socialist market economy" implemented in the late 1970s rejuvenated a collective energy repressed by years of "postponed satisfaction" for material comfort and an asceticism touted as necessary to realize the Chinese Communist Party's idealist, utopian project.¹⁶⁾ This energy finds release through two antithetical and codependent forces: to build and to demolish. The Chinese character *chai* (demolition) has been an inseparable part of Beijing's cityscape for couple decades. Represented in numerous contemporary Chinese art forms, mostly notably by Wang Jinsong and Zhang Dali, *chai* is a powerful postsocialist symbol of the spirit of the time, a social progression and cultural impasse signaling tension and anxiety. The city in ruins has informed an "uncanny ruin aesthetics" that becomes the dominant cultural expression of this particular human condition.¹⁷⁾ What exactly, though, has been demolished and replaced? What is the price paid for that which is built? What has been sacrificed and who gains in this new march toward wealth and pleasure?

Sunflower centers on a *siheyuan* family of three whose *hutong* is located around the *Houhai*, an old neighborhood with strong traditional connotations in Beijing. Spanning more than three decades of time, the film delineates the story of this family with several specific markers of time: 1967, 1976, 1987, and 1999, highlighting for the audience the need for historical awareness. The film is a family drama narrated by the son, who was born in 1967. The central conflict begins with the return of the sent-down painter father shortly before the end of the Cultural Revolution. Jobless, and having lost mobility in his right hand, the father nonetheless forces his son, an only child, to become a painter like himself. The second conflict that shakes the harmony of this family centers on abortion and giving birth. The third revolves the mother's unquenchable desire to "zhu loufang" (live in high-rise apartment buildings).

The first two of these three main conflicts are common, even "trite," motifs in modern Chinese literary and visual representations. In this film they receive a bit of

a twist, with the intention to make the specific timeframe clearly identifiable. The father-son embattlement accelerates to the point of bust when the father physically drags the son off a soon-to-take off train heading to Shenzhen. This is shortly after one of Deng Xiaoping's seminal visits down south: market economy has taken off. Like millions of other Chinese, the son is anxious to join the "xiahai" (quit state guaranteed job and seek business related employment) army to make big bucks. In the son's view, this is a much better choice of life than the one prescribed by his father: art school then artist, i.e. college education and a stable job. At the center of this conflict lie fundamental moral and ethical differences: the father's idealism and asceticism are suspended by the son's practical approach to life. The stacks of money hidden inside the son's pillowcase speak volumes: now monetary gain as a goal of life is not only accepted but also legitimately encouraged.¹⁸⁾

One of the functions of families in conventional China is to ensure the family line continues. The parents in this film are infuriated when told about a decision to abort a fetus: "To give birth to a son for us is Heaven's sanction—perfectly justified!" The children insist that this is a private matter that needs only concern themselves. This kind of individualistic sentiment departs miles away from the conventional dictates of filial obligation that children have toward their parents. Family values in the traditional sense begin to lose its meaning. Virtues such as filial piety and even respect have lost ground to the younger generation's emphasis on how "I" feel and think. It is clear that these fundamental differences are affecting their way of engaging with their world, their view of life and their relationship with their own self. The film, however, chooses the more lighthearted path by never allowing the son to really break free on his own terms. In other words, family here still exists, in a state of disaccord but not yet being displaced.

The mother's hysteric effort to move into a high-rise apartment is time specific of postsocialist China. To be able to "zhu loufang" has been one of the earlier symbols of material comfort and status coveted by the ordinary Chinese and made possible by the new economic policies. In the film, it is this newly found or "rediscovered" pursuit of pleasure that splits this family, first superficially on paper, then in the real sense. After the mother moves into a new apartment, we see the father meandering among the *hutong* ruins in the late 1990s, alone, feeding stray cats and making an effort to regain his lost artistic ability to draw. The father drifts into his own lonely world filled with nostalgic longings for the warmth the family fails to provide. The father's eventual decision to disappear from the now dilapidated *siheyuan* where all other neighbors have moved out is a melodramatic yet weak gesture of meanings that are not entirely transparent.

The father clearly senses discomfort and confusion, if not total loss of meaning, in a new world where belief systems, Confucian or communist (the film never makes it an issue regarding where the father stands in terms of political ideology) can no longer serve as stimuli for living. Is his disappearance protest, escape, acceptance of defeat and failure or recognition that he has not been a "good" father? The film seems reluctant to explain the meaning of the father's final act or what symbolic meaning the father really represents. Ambiguity might be a strategy to "neutralize" a thorny question about who our Father is. Is the father's exit into obscurity a sug-

gestion that those virtues symbolized by the father's goodness, i.e. uprightness, honesty, endurance and incorruptible character, simply can not survive in a material world where success and status (which assumed to contain goodness) are measured only in monetary terms?

Other cultural representations of China in the film also reveal problematics of this neutralizing attempt. "Xiangyang" (meaning sunflower), for example, is the son's name and the title of the film, which carries a very "politically correct" connotation for anyone grew up during Mao years.¹⁹⁾ What is the intention to depoliticize this powerful political icon by deliberately associate it with nature at the end of the film? The son succeeds as an artist in the film which uses the real paintings by Zhang Xiaogang, one of the most successful and highest earning contemporary artists, whose paintings based on old family photos have become one of the most exhibited and visual postmodern icons of China's art scene. The glazed eyes of the subject in each of the paintings are devoid of depth, individual identity or emotion. They look but don't see; they are suspended in a startled state of being, as if not ready to be fully awakened from a reverie for a past that was really an imagined familial sphere of existence. The photos are taken in the Cultural Revolutionary years but are innocuous: it is difficult to associate them with violence, lawlessness, and utter chaos that were characteristics of the era. Watching photos of familiar looking people watching us, a feeling of nostalgia arises, even though there is a strong sense of falseness present. The endless repetitious of the same faces, eyes, uniforms evoke a hollowing space in the human psyche. Nostalgia for an imagined past which is simultaneously denied by collective amnesia testify to the unconscious need to ease the pain by remembering and forgetting at the same time. The film, like Zhang's art, reminiscences about a lost past but refrains from making critical inquiry into deeper range of emotions in regard to the loss of this past, apart from melodramatic sentimentalism.

Studies on China's urbanization have focused on three most shattering effects of this process: family displacement, gentrification and social stratification.²⁰⁾ Li Yu, Chinese CCTV anchor turned independent filmmaker captures the chaotic feelings brought by disparate realities that postsocialist China engenders in her *Lost in Beijing*. The film examines ruthlessly how Chinese people are caught in the new capitalist dream that proves to be more fragile and temporary than envisioned. Here the crowded yet cozy, disorderly yet humane, *hutong* alleyways have become forgotten ghettos of the marginalized urban underbelly, which consists mostly of displaced migrant workers who come from the countryside or small towns less favored by the process of marketization.

The haves, symbolized by The Boss of the Golden Basin Massage Parlor and his leisure—occupied wife, live in a brand new high-rise apartment furnished with glittering luxurious items. The have-nots, a young migrant couple, cramp into a tiny one-room living space, barely equipped with basic facilities, tucked away in a run-down *hutong*. The Boss (which is how he is addressed to in the film) and wife, also not from Beijing, are among the luck few of the floating population who has made it big with a flourishing and ludicrous massage business that employs dozens young and hard-working women who are mostly migrants. One of these is the heroine of

the film, Pingguo. Ankun, Pingguo's husband, is a migrant worker who cleans high-rise building windows, a job that belongs to one of the so-called "Three D Jobs", i.e. dirty, dangerous and demeaning. Knowing the nature of these jobs and the fact that they are disdained by the urban populace does not stop large number of migrant workers compete for a position, after all they get to live and feel like one of the urban crowd, regardless of how superficially or temporarily.²¹⁾

Despite shocking disparity between their status, luxury apartment vs. ghetto, Mercedes-Benz vs. bicycle, dining with wine and dance floor vs. street food from the vendors, the two couples become entangled in an uncanny fashion that is symptomatic of the human condition of postsocialist China, in which messy and arbitrary formations of relationships and conflicts can make pivotal changes. The problem arrives when The Boss rapes Pingguo, taking advantage of her in a vulnerable moment. Drunk, she initially mistakes The Boss for her husband, but soon realizes the mistake. Her protest meets with more force from The Boss. By chance Ankun cleans the very window from outside and witnesses the incident. The furious Ankun makes a big scene but is thrown out of the parlor. He goes home and forces himself on Pingguo—the two painfully twisted bodies speak of a dream suddenly shattered by a cruel reality which consists of pain, anger, regret, confusion, despair, and agony—rarely a sex scene carries so many mixed feelings showing raw energy wasted as a futile performance of protest. Pingguo becomes pregnant and the two men make a deal to do a blood test to determine the identity of the real father. The Boss is happy to pay a large sum of money for the pregnant mother to secure a son: his wife being infertile has been the only defect of this perfectly happy nouveaux riches family. Sex and money, the corrupt version of hedonistic pursuit of wealth and pleasure, become crudely intertwined in a new power structure and receive an honest interrogation in this film.

In fact, the opening shot of the film already presents an unsentimental look at the sex and money game which has become part and parcel of the new postsocialist reality, made possible by marketization of all forms of services, social or corporeal. The camera follows the back of a young woman, cruising through a lively eating place in daytime and ends up in a private room upstairs where The Boss waits with a sexual desire needs to be fulfilled and a wallet full of cash. When Ankun goes to The Boss's wife for blackmail, she informs him in a matter of fact tone: money is not a problem for The Boss, it's all about face. She proceeds to make a business like suggestion: "Why don't you return him what he has given you?" The next shot cuts to the wife riding on top of Ankun. Yet neither is able to enjoy the sex act, both bitter and desperate about the situation. It's a performance of discontent which both know will be meaningless since they are both in the weaker position to negotiate: her being the materially dependent and infertile wife, him being a marginal figure by any measure. Sex and money become distastefully connected and can even be fatal for some. Xiaomei, Pingguo's co-masseur transforms radically from an innocent small town girl who refuses to be touched by her licentious customer to a heavily made-up, wildly partying girl who is more likely making money by prostituting herself and ends up dead after being robbed and attacked.²²⁾ Beijing is seen as a city that corrupts. Loss of innocence is a given in this postsocialist environment where money

alone rules.

The film offers another telling insight into how people negotiate their identities, rights, claims to relationships in a new power structure where blatant consumer morality is able to commodify everything and replace the old morality of socialism as well as Confucianism. People's interaction with others is reorganized in terms of a new relationship determined by capital in a new master-servant order.²³⁾ When the two couples decide to peacefully resolve the issue regarding the unborn baby, they reach a private agreement without seeking any legal interference: a written document is simply signed in red ink by the two parties. The sense of justice maintained informally like this is based on the value of commodity, in this case Pingguo's womb and the baby inside, assessed and agreed upon in the private domain. Such conveniently conceived strategy mocks the legal system and reinforces the hierarchy in this power relationship. It also brings back pre-liberation memories when women's bodies were traded openly as commodities. The return of the repressed takes an uncanny route.

Later in the film when the police comes to give The Boss the DNA test result from the new-born baby, The Boss tears it up while the police timidly murmurs: "This is your own business..."²⁴⁾ In the end this agreement of transaction of money and a baby fails to bring fulfillment on either side. Both couples break up and both men's dreams to be the proud father of a son shatter to pieces. Family can no longer represent a "cultural ideal consisting of a set of norms that motivate the individual in his or social practices."²⁵⁾ Chinese have always viewed the family as an ideal social institution that serves to stabilize society since it nurtures relationships at the fundamental level through tradition honored ethical codes that provide guidance of proper behaviors and attitudes. Now it becomes a temporary formation, at best an illusory oasis where "drifters" seek short-term comfort. Marriage becomes a deal of convenience. The already displaced family is disintegrated, regardless of its social stratum. The English title of the film then refers to a loss of multiple meanings: Pingguo's and the baby's physical disappearance, money and relationships, and something more profound like trust or even love. The irony that the birth of a son breaks up two families is a big contrast to *Sunflower* where the birth of a son first symbolizes happiness in the family sphere, the second time brings back a self-exiled father in spirit—family values are reconfirmed rather than discarded.

In *Lost in Beijing*, not only families the city itself is also displaced. The neatly organized, harmonious structures of *hutong* have given way to building projects that defy the imperial capital's dignified and symbolic existence as political and cultural center of China. The carefully laid out city plan is now dismantled, and the city is up for sale in large chunks. Emboldened by the new economic policy to modernize and catch up with the west, Beijing is at a risk losing its enduring "historic identity."²⁶⁾ The 2008 Summer Olympics serves to justify the Beijing boom, a crazy and endless game of demolition and construction. At the same time high-rise apartments become new living quarters, mega scale projects, shopping malls, finance centers, museums, entertainment facilities have given Beijing a face-lift, a new identity defined by "landmarks by international star architects" and the impulse to change Beijing into a "theme park of world architecture."²⁷⁾

Indeed it is now a “city of performance” driven by a singular desire to show off its global megacity appeal.²⁸⁾ The historic cultural heritage of a certain Beijing flavor or style whose close proximity to Chineseness has been replaced by a cosmopolitan design closely linked to business interests and consumer demands. The “national identity” showcased with such grander and confidence in the 2008 Olympics in a way is a gross exaggeration and gloss over of the realities of Beijing: a hybrid, fragmented and fractured space rather than a culturally integrated place of locality.²⁹⁾ Beijing exists in multiple realities felt and experienced differently by a socially stratified people who no longer share the same political right to claim the meaning of existence. If globalization manifests itself in terms of the changing experience of time and space, Beijing offers a good example of how this experience is felt in an uneven and unfair manner. Cinematic mappings of Beijing also involve shifting spaces and re-engaging with spatial identity.

Jia Zhangke is one of a few contemporary Chinese filmmakers who consistently voices serious concerns of the state of being of China. Jia has produced films documenting forgotten or ignored realities of China’s *xiangzhen* (small towns) in the process of modernization.³⁰⁾ Jia’s films are very much concerned with giving the “right of discourse” to the less privileged.³¹⁾ His films are known for their realist style, which has been referred to as “docu-realism” and share many similarities with mainland China’s independent documentary movement that aims to approach realities of China from close range.³²⁾ *The World* diverges from his usual *xiangzhen* milieu and ventures to Beijing’s popular theme park. Filled with miniatures of world famous structures, the park employs many migrant workers from all over China, even displaced Russian women as dancers. “A migrant laborers’ village”, the park is unlike any other traditional parks associated with Beijing. It’s entirely foreign: from Taj Mahal to the no longer existent World Trade Center, it satisfies an illusion that here one becomes a “world citizen.” “Give us a day and we’ll show you the world”—the parks’ motto shines in neon illumination, a promise to deliver a dream that will remain imagined mobility for the migrant workers stuck here where “boredom and emptiness” have a real social content.³³⁾

Displaced and exploited, the forever-replaceable migrant workers live a life of in-consequence. The capitalist dream of gentrification is a distant echo, beyond grasp. “I don’t know anyone that has been on an airplane,” says the film’s heroine Xiao Tao as a plane flies over an industrial terrain of concrete and steel, abandoned or waiting to be utilized. Immobilized by her lack of choices, Xiao Tao’s dream of freedom is so desperate and remote it can only come in the form of cartoon simulacrum on her cellphone. In comparison, even the displaced Russian Anne is able, at least, to fly to Ulaanbaatar to meet up with her sister. If the migrant couples in *Lost in Beijing* still have a vague attachment to familial values pinned to the birth of a son and a clear sense of a place that is called home, in *The World* human subjectivities assume meaning and identity through constant negotiations of place. Family is a distant memory, exists to fulfill an “imagined nostalgia.”³⁴⁾ Home is a complicated “network of localities,” or simply wherever there is work.³⁵⁾ “Drifting” becomes a reality and serves as a fitting metaphor for a state of being permanently at the mercy of capitalist development. Relationships are barely sustained, even when love involves. “These days

you can't trust anyone, not even me" is the reply of Xiao Tao's boyfriend, both on a hotel bed at a most intimate moment of their love life. Marriage still symbolizes happiness but of a kind suspicious of impulsion for ownership, as another young couple demonstrates.

Beijing in Li Yu's film is a place full of potential to corrupt the innocent, here it is a world where easy ways of making an extra buck seem to have erred the common sense judgment of what is right and wrong. Erxiao casually lifts notes of RMB from each purse left in the backstage as if it is an entitlement that comes along to him as the key-holding security guard. Xiao Tao's boyfriend Taisheng, also a security guard at the park, makes handsome amount of money making fake ID cards for a dubious Song with such ease and even pride—his trendy black leather jacket and smooth waltz steps are markers of someone on the way to success, big city style. There is an ironic moment that brings out Taisheng's internal confusion, or a contradiction emblematic of the postsocialist time of China. Upon learning that Erxiao, a *tongxiang* (coming from the same village), is caught thieving money, Taisheng strikes him in anger, scolding him with a typically old-fashioned remark of reprimand of a father figure: "How shameless! Useless thing!" Taisheng's sense of loss of face on behalf of his native place is genuine, but it comes out as a weak and comic mockery of his own engagement with something much more ludicrous and harmful, not to mention criminal in nature. "The moral state of being of our nation" that Jia intends to reveal is a state of schizophrenia in which human agency to reason is only a contingent effort for moral and emotional integrity.³⁶⁾ Jia is not interested in offer "moral condemnations" on the state of being of the underprivileged people, his "tell-no-lies" camera simply speaks directly to the audience in a honest voice that is calmly effective because of its lack of embellishment.³⁷⁾

Sunflower, *Lost in Beijing* and *The World* have shown cinematic mappings of Beijing in its transformation into a postsocialist global city necessarily confront fundamental losses of many kinds: communities, family relationships and "virtues" cultivated and idealized in Confucian ethic codes such as fatherly love and brotherly affection, trust among friends, as well as loyalty in ideals. Instead, desires for mobility and choice, not to mention wealth and pleasure become the driving life force. In place of the vacuum left by idealism, hedonism emerges, repressed desires return, reified and magnified into numerous forms, many of which relate to the ever more powerful presence of body politics.³⁸⁾ Under the communist regime, body politics has been associated strongly with various forms of state control. Bodies, desires and sexuality are subject to disciplines enforced in top-down policies to ensure social and moral orders are in place, consistent with state ideology. The numerous "re-education" campaigns on the one hand intend to align the thinking mind and consciousness of the populace with state ideology; on the other hand they clearly exercise power over the body to the extent of abuse, let alone exploitation. The politically and sexually neutral Maoist uniforms, for example, only serve to conceal, and simultaneously draw attention to, the problematics of the body, which affects both genders.

In *Sunflower* body politics is played out in all of the main characters' lives. Several scenes in the earlier part of the film show the father's masculine body, clad in tank

top, obvious result from years of manual labor in the countryside. Now working as an earnest carpenter at home, he shows off skills learned in the re-education campaign. He also has lost muscle power in his right hand—his lifeline as a painter. As a victim of ideology gone astray, the father survives and even triumphs, and yet he is a conventional patriarchal father with a strong belief in an ethic code, which grants him absolute power over his son, body and soul. “Just because I am your father,” he tells his son after forcing the son’s girlfriend to abort his fetus. Here body politics works inside the familial framework that has supported the patriarchal authority to exploit the younger generation, and especially women, as legitimate and correct.

In postsocialist China as family units loosen, state ideology shifts and becomes more “tolerant” or eager to overlook areas of dubious nature, human body becomes a highly profitable commodity. The body has acquired an unprecedented presence as a cultural signifier yet whose meanings remain undetermined and ambiguous. Popular or avant-garde cultural productions of the last couple decades from mainland China, whether fiction, performance art, photography, advertising, or films, easily provide a catalog of body-centered imageries and leitmotifs.³⁹⁾ The shockingly honest, intentionally twisted or ugly representations of the body in postsocialist Chinese cultural scene testify to a need to reconsider deeper implications of body politics.

Unlike *Sunflower*, *Lost in Beijing* shows body politics in postsocialist China has become so powerful and prevalent it enables commodification in ways that are dangerously destructive. Sex, the womb, the fetus are all crudely traded for cash and a false sense of meaning, satisfaction and justice.⁴⁰⁾ The numerous explicit and implicit sex scenes, the horrifying abortion episode, the transformation of Xiaomei, all prove the human body is rarely associated with deep passion or warm affection. The only exception is the sex scene of Pingguo and Aukun at the beginning, where there is a feeling of honest spontaneity that speaks of youthful energy. Yet even here there is no escape of the omnipresence of body politics that comes in the form of irony: Aukun confesses that he has learned the standing position from a porn film.⁴¹⁾ In the rest of the film the body struggles in agony, or performs to the value attached.

The film rightly includes both genders in the game of the body but eventually makes a gendered statement through Pingguo and The Boss’s wife, both end up slightly wiser though hardly winners. Pingguo gains moral and emotional agency to become her own person (and her baby’s mother); the wife finds courage to extinguish a relationship sustained by money and comfort. The film, however, refuses to take a radical feminist position or simplify a very complicated matter: both women willingly take a large sum of money from the men. It remains unclear if this money signifies anything more than deserved payment for loss, security or reminder of a narrow escape from total destruction of self when happiness in the form of family ties has disappeared.

The World opens with Xiao Tao, the migrant dancer freshly made-up and costumed to go on the stage in the theme park to perform among several dozen young women (as well as a handful of men) in Las Vegas style spectacles that require not so much dancing skills than beautiful sexy bodies, decorated, scantily clad or fabulously adorned to meet a wide range of whimsical fancies of an anxious and generously

paying audience. The camera shoots onto Xiao Tao's face and upper body, following her through the backstage, screaming: "Who's got some band aid?" As the film proceeds, Xiao Tao's body is put through more severe tests: a chance to exchange her service for glamour and a trip to Hong Kong, a command to give up her body to her boyfriend as proof of her love and devotion. Xiao Tao resists the temptation to compromise. In her there inhabits a certain moral integrity and quiet strength that keeps her from cashing in on her desirable body as some of her fellow dancers have done: Anne gets money and a roommate gets a promotion. The bathroom scene in the gilded karaoke building brilliantly puts Xiao Tao in contrast to the norm: girls obviously serve as more than companions at parties come here to vomit and regain their posture, then to receive swabs of cash. Xiao Tao meets Anne, re-packaged to meet the occasion. The two embrace, wordless, with tears running down Anne's face and inside Xiao Tao. The biggest irony, though, waits for Xiao Tao: right after asking her boyfriend to marry her, she chances upon a text message from Qun, Taisheng's secret and very attractive Wenzhou lover, who has also been displaced and separated from a husband in pursuit of the capitalist dream in France.

Like Li Yu, Jia zhangke also makes it clear that body politics exploit women and men equally if in different manners, all succumb to the new logic of market capitalism. Several bleak documentary-like shots in *The World*, in typical Jia fashion, confront this reality. In one scene, the camera pans over the newly constructed groups of high-rise buildings, while several dozens of men, in uniformed collectivity identifiable only by their helmets and metal lunch boxes, walk in silence past these industrial forests that offer luxuries beyond the means of the likes of them. Human subjectivity is nearly completely erased to the level of irrelevancy. An old man walks in the shadow cast by the fake Eiffel Tower, slowly as if crushed by the weight of the huge pile of garbage on his back that is his lifeline—we never see his face. Erguniang dies in an accident at the construction site and then his taciturn farmer parents come to carefully tuck away two stacks of money—no explanation is ever offered regarding the cause. Jia's camera simply stays on the face of the parents for a long time—it does not moralize nor condemn. Yet it is moments like this that are rare protests of an unfair system, showing the critical potential of filmic discourse.

In this new urban landscape men and man-made objects co-exist in disharmony. It is a new urban aesthetics that has replaced the tradition-honored aesthetics of Chinese art that emphasizes harmony between man and nature.⁴²⁾ Now it is defined by nondescript features and imitation simulacrum: human beings become contingent objects in passing, reduced as source of labor or service, as mere physical being with potential for materialistic value. Man and city become separate entities, forming a mutually replaceable and alienating self/other relationship.

The new Chinese urban cinematic aesthetics can be described as sliding along a pendulum of cultural expressions encompassing absences at one end and excesses at the other, both intricately linked to the postsocialist Chinese condition. Cinematic expressions of absences relate first of all to a strict censorship that forbids contents of issues of political sensitivity. In *Sunflower*, the absences of the two Tiananmen events of 1976 and 1989 may make the film politically correct, but it is hardly authentic for those whose experiences of these critical historic moments play crucial parts in their

life outlook. The otherwise realistic representations of changes to the *siheyuan* in the film therefore become less than genuinely felt.⁴³ The other forms of absences reflect a vast vacuum left by the seemingly sudden and abrupt shift in China's ideology that ruthlessly favors commercialism and marketization. The new economic success is achieved at the expense of dismantling values, beliefs, habits and the ways ordinary Chinese people interact with and experience the world: anything that deems incompatible with the new logic of market economy needs to go. The permissive shift from ascetic self-control and refrain to excessive pursuit of wealth and pleasure encourages an unprecedented release of human energy to chase a new dream of hedonist materialism. This dream, however, has become an addiction for many and remains an imagined freedom for others.

Notes

- 1) Scholars have offered different interpretations regarding what constitutes Chinese postsocialism. For an insightful description refer to Sheldon H. Lu, *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics: Studies in Literature and Visual Culture*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 204–210.
- 2) Refer to Jiwei Ci, *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution: From Utopianism to Hedonism*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).
- 3) *Ibid.*, 209.
- 4) In this paper the term culture is interpreted along the lines examined in Jonathan Xavier Inda and Renato Rosaldo eds., *The Anthology of Globalization: a Reader*, (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 1–34.
- 5) China's economic reforms in the 1970s and 1980s have been described as “revolutionary” by Wang Hui in his analysis of Chinese neoliberalism. See Wang, *China's New Order: Society, Politics, and Economy in Transition*, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003), 45.
- 6) Robin Visser, *Cities Surround the Countryside: Urban Aesthetics in Postsocialist China*, (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2010), 1.
- 7) *Ibid.*, 4.
- 8) According to Visser, 30 percent of China's total population has been registered as urban in 1997. See *ibid.*, 28.
- 9) *Ibid.*, 10–14.
- 10) For one insightful study on differences between these two generations of filmmakers, see Xiaoming Chen, “The Mysterious Other: Postpolitics in Chinese film,” in Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang, eds., *Postmodernism and China*, (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2000), 223–238. Also refer to Yingjin Zhang, *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010), 56–59.
- 11) Yingjin Zhang, 57.
- 12) For a study that analyses a wide range of Chinese urban films, see Harry H. Kuoshu, *Metro Movies: Cinematic Urbanism in Post-Mao China*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2011).
- 13) More details about the banning of *Lost in Beijing* can be found at: www.danwei.org/media_regularion/lost_in_beijing_finally_gets.k.php.
- 14) For some brief explanation of Beijing's *Siheyuan* and *Hutong*, refer to China Culture.org. at <http://www.chinaculture.org/>. This is an official website produced by the Ministry of Culture of P.R.C.
- 15) Informative explanations on how the design for Beijing was conceived and changed during imperial and republican eras can be found in Lillian M. Li, Alison J. Dray-Novoy and Haili Kong, *Beijing: From Imperial Capital to Olympic City*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
- 16) Ci, 14.
- 17) Discussions on how the ruin aesthetics in contemporary Chinese painting, photography and film departs from traditional Chinese art aesthetics and moves toward western style of representation are found in Chu Kiu-wai Chu, “Constructing Ruins: New Urban Aesthetics in Chinese Art and Cinema,” *Modern Art Asia*, Web, Issue two, February 2010. For a comprehensive explanation of

- the contemporary Chinese art scene, including works by Zhang Dali and Zhang Xiaogang, see Saatchi Gallery, *The Revolution Continues*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008).
- 18) Money is also at the center of a father-son conflict in Wang Xiaoshuai's *Beijing Bicycle*, set in similar time frame, in which the son steals money to buy himself a bicycle in order to remain friends with a group of hip and wealthy high school students.
 - 19) It is common knowledge that during the Cultural Revolution, the Red Guards are referred to as sunflowers that bloom toward the red sun that is Chairman Mao. Also, the theme of the obligatory *zhongziwu* (loyalty dance) is about sunflowers turning to the sun, symbolizing the Chinese people's relationship to the Communist Party.
 - 20) This summarization comes from *Urbanisation in East Asian*, the Newsletter published by the International Institute for Asian Scholars, no. 55, Autumn/Winter, 2010.
 - 21) Ingrid Nielsen and Russell Smyth, eds., *Migration and Social Protection in China*, (New Jersey: World Scientific, 2008), 3. This book has much data from case studies and interviews about migrant workers in different cities of China.
 - 22) For one recent study on sex workers, especially female migrants, in China, see Tiantian Zheng, *Red Lights: The Lives of Sex Workers in Postsocialist China*, (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2009).
 - 23) Yan Hairong explains how this new master-servant relationship works in postsocialist China. For theoretical information regarding the background of this trope in industrial societies, see Hairong Yan, *New Masters, New Servants: Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 13–24.
 - 24) The film makes an interesting example of how Chinese people regard what constitutes justice and rule of law. For an insightful analysis on related topics, see Bill Brugger and Stephen Reglar, *Politics, Economy, and Society in Contemporary China*, (London: Macmillan, 1994), 176–224.
 - 25) Ma Ning, "Symbolic Representation and Symbolic Violence: Chinese Family Melodrama of the early 1980s," in Wimal Dissanayake ed., *Melodrama and Asian Cinema*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 29.
 - 26) Lillian M. Li, Alison J. Dray-Novey and Haili Kong, 5.
 - 27) Yomi Braester, *Painting the City Red: Chinese Cinema and the Urban Contract*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 299.
 - 28) For arguments on how Beijing artists play an important role in performing national identity for the world, see Visser, 131–174.
 - 29) Yingjin Zhang's book examines how contemporary Chinese cinema re-conceptualizes space and place in relation to postsocialist transformations of China.
 - 30) Jia Zhangke discusses how *xiangzhen* provide him with an aspect of Chinese society that is "completely real", see Ge Fei, Jia Zhangke, et al., *Yigeren de Dianying*, (Beijing: Citic Press, 2008), 78–118. Xudong Zhang chooses to use *xiangcheng*, to emphasize that these are "county-level cities." See Xudong Zhang, "Market Socialism and Its Discontent: Jia Zhangke's Cinematic Narrative of China's Transition in the Age of Global Capital," in Jyostna Kapur and Keith B. Wagner eds., *Neoliberalism and Global Cinema: Capital, Culture, and Marxist Critique*, (New York: Routledge, 2011), 141.
 - 31) Xudong Zhang, 140.
 - 32) For analysis of docu-realist films in contemporary China, refer to Jiang Dolby Feng, *Docu-realism in Contemporary China*, (Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2010). Xudong Zhang also discusses Jia Zhangke in relation to China's documentary movement. See Zhang, 144–146.
 - 33) Xudong Zhang points out these are the central subject matter in many of Jia's films. See Zhang, 149.
 - 34) For an insightful analysis of the meaning of nostalgia in contemporary Chinese culture, see Dai Jinhua's "Imagined Nostalgia" in Dirlik and Zhang, 205–221.
 - 35) Yingjin Zhang, 8.
 - 36) Xudong Zhang, 153.
 - 37) *Ibid.*, 142.
 - 38) For close examination of relationship of body politics and Chinese modernity, see Lu.

- 39) Studies on the body in contemporary Chinese fiction and art are prevalent. “Body Writing”, for example, has occupied a central position in contemporary Chinese women’s fiction. For one comprehensive analysis that covers a wide range of areas, see Lu, especially 53–92.
- 40) Abortion plays an important part in the lives of modern Chinese women. For a comprehensive study, see Jing-Bao Nie, *Behind the Silence: Chinese Voices on Abortion*, (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005).
- 41) For open and honest discussions on many topics related to sex and youth culture in postsocialist China, see James Farrer, *Opening Up: Youth Sex Culture and Market Reform in Shanghai*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002).
- 42) Refer to Kiu-wai Chu.
- 43) Sixth Generation director Lou Ye’s banned *Summer Palace* (2006) offers a honest look into the generation that maturized during the time of the 1989 Tiananmen movement. In this film, Lou also explores how this social movement is intricately linked with something that was equally important to China’s “opening up” at the time, i.e. explorations of sexuality.