Digging an Old Well:
The Labor of Social Fantasy

Allegorizing The “Third World”:
Opposition or Narcissism?

All third-world texts are necessarily . . . to be read as what
I will call national allegories.

Allegory . . . means precisely the non-existence of
what it presents.
Walter Benjamin, The Origin of German Tragic Drama

Perhaps the nearest thing to thought about nationalism
inspired by the Third World—outside the revolutionary left—was
a general scepticism about the universal applicability
of the “national” concept.
E. J. Hobsbawm, Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality
What does the term third world\(^1\) conjure up these days? In the academic circles of North America, it often becomes a signifier for opposition, resistance, anti-imperialism, anticolonialism, struggles for national and cultural autonomy, and so on. When we examine “third world” cinema, our expectations also tend to follow these major notions, which operate by identifying Western imperialism of the past few hundred years as the chief enemy. As Ashish Rajadhyaksha writes, “The identification of the enemy, across all historical differences, as something static in space and time, has often been seen as one of the purposes of the Third Cinema, the first step towards liberation.”\(^2\)

It follows that arguments for “third world” cinema are always such that the “third world” becomes an extension of the European Marxist avant-garde tradition and that its cultures are loaded, by way of interpretation, with residues of European Enlightenment with an emphasis on cognitive lucidity, on production, on experiment, and on emancipation.\(^3\) What dominates the understanding of the “third world” is thus a masculinist leftism for which “nationalism” becomes the “third world” revenge on “first world” imperialism.\(^4\) The “third world” is attributed an “outside” position from which criticism can be made about the “first world.” This outside position is part and parcel of what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls “the continuing subalternation of Third World material”\(^5\) by “first world” critics, who condemn “third world” cultural production in the age of postmodernism to a kind of realism with functions of authenticity, didacticism, and deep meaning.

One question that the inscription of “third world” cultures in opposition does not seem to be able to deal with is what else there is in such cultures besides the struggle against the West.\(^6\) What if the primary interest of a “third world” culture is not that of resistance against Western domination? How are we to read the processes of signification that actually fall outside the currently hegemonic reading of third world cultures, the reading that insists on their oppositional alterity to the West only?

The currency of Jameson’s notion of “national allegories” is evident in its application by scholars who are otherwise different in their political, national, and gender interests.\(^7\) Instead of simply agreeing or disagreeing with Jameson and his followers, let us first reconsider what Jameson means by “allegory”: “The allegorical spirit is profoundly discontinuous, a matter of breaks and heterogeneities, of the multiple pol- ysemia of the dream rather than the homogeneous representation of the symbol.”\(^8\)

Although he defines “the allegorical spirit” with care, however, Jameson does not apply it to the word “nation.” Using his own definition of allegory, we may ask: why has the notion of “nation” and “the third world nation” not been allegorized and made “discontinuous”? For whom is the nationness of “third world” nations unquestionable in its collectivity? For whom does “third world” collectivity equal the “nation”? Even though “national allegories” might have currently locked the West’s others into a particular kind of reading, the notion as such cannot sufficiently account for the “breaks and heterogeneities” and “multiple polysemia” of “third world” texts. Jameson’s description of “first world” readers confronted by a “third world” text is actually a good way of describing the feelings of “third world” readers confronted with “first world” readings of “third world” texts, readings that, by their emphases on what appeals to “first world” readers, render even familiar “third world” texts “alien”: “We sense, between ourselves and this alien text, the presence of another reader, of the Other reader, for whom a narrative, which strikes us as conventional or naïve, has a freshness of information and a social interest that we cannot share.”\(^9\)

Contemporary Chinese cinema is fascinating because it problematizes the facile notions of oppositional alterity that have for so long dominated our thinking about the “third world.” Those readers who have seen something of this cinema would know that the Chinese films that manage to make their way to audiences in the West are usually characterized, first of all, by visual beauty. From Chen Kaige’s Yellow Earth (1984) to Tian Zhuangzhuang’s Horse Thief (1986), to Zhang Yimou’s Red Sorghum (1988), Judo (1990), and Raise the Red Lantern (1991), we see that contemporary Chinese directors are themselves so fascinated by the possibilities of cinematic experimentation that even when their subject matter is—and it usually is—oppression, contamination, rural backwardness, and the persistence of feudal values, such subject matter is presented with stunning sensuous qualities. One would need to ask whether some of these films are not compelling because of their aesthetic purity and beauty rather than simply because of their content of the “lack of enlightenment.” If so, what kinds of issues do they engender for cross-cultural inquiry?

The sharp distinction between the often grave subject matter and the
sensuously pleasing "enunciation" of contemporary Chinese film—a
distinction we can describe in terms of a conjoined subalternization and
commodification, as a subalternized commodification and/or a com-
modified subalternization—points to the economics that enable the dis-
tribution and circulation of these films in the West.

Some may therefore say that contemporary Chinese directors know
how to "package" their stories of oppression with fashionable techniques
and that were it not for such packaging the films would not sell. The
presumption of this kind of argument is that "packaging" is superfluous—
something that the films can or should do without. What contemporary
Chinese films demonstrate, however, is that packaging is now an inher-
ent part of cultural production. Even the most gruesome story needs to
be shot exquisitely, so that it can contend for attention in metropolitan
markets. If we follow this understanding of "packaging"—that is, pack-
aging as a kind of production, the production not of deep meanings but
of exotic surfaces—we would need to redefine cultural labor and value
production as these appear in contemporary "third world" cinema.

To illustrate this point, let us consider briefly a film that attracted
quite a bit of attention a few years ago: Zhang Yimou's Judo. (I will dis-
cuss Zhang's films in greater detail in part 2, chapter 4.) Based on the
story "Fuxi Fuxi" by Liu Heng, the film is about the secret relationship
between Yang Tianqing, the nephew of Yang Jinshan, and Wang Judou,
Yang Jinshan's wife and Yang Tianqing's aunt. In the film, incest and adul-
tery lead to the birth of a son, Tianbai, who officially remains Tianqing's
"younger brother" because he is thought to be the offspring of Jinshan
and Judou. Tianbai eventually kills both his father-by-name and his bi-
ological father.

Rather than simply focus on the sexual content, which caused the
film to be banned in China when it was first completed and constituted
its main interest for audiences overseas, I want to argue how this film
transforms our notions of "third world" cultural production. This can be
seen in the changes Zhang Yimou made in the story. Among these
changes, the most interesting one is the background of a dye mill, which
is not in the original story by Liu Heng.

With the dye mill come the possibilities of experimenting with col-
ors as part of the visual language of the film. However, my reading of
the visual here is different from that usually offered by critics who see it in
terms of a return to ethnic traditions and a constitution of ethnic iden-
tity. Chinese pictorial aesthetics, as is well known, is the favorite choice
for such critics in their attempts to establish the "third world differ-
ence." An example of this kind of reading goes as follows: "A general
criticism leveled at Third World films is that they are too graphic. This
spatial factor is part of a general rhythm of pictorial representation in
most Third World societies. It is, therefore, precisely because graphic art
creates symbols in space that it enables Third World viewers to relate
more easily to their films. In the Chinese case, for example . . . "

Here, the "third world" is given an identity as a pure other space with
a distinctive "otherworldly" aesthetics. The logic implied in this kind of
reading is that graphicness and symbols, even though they may not be an
accepted part of Western film, are an intrinsic part of "third world" audi-
ences' reception. Instead of establishing the "third world difference" this
way, however, I would argue that it is indeed in the graphic aspects of
Judo that the historical conditions of "third world" cultural production
are most pronouncedly truthful, but the graphic is truthful not because
it represents "China" as such but because it signifies that which is not
purely "Chinese." Another way of defining this impurity is to say that the
"ethnicity" of contemporary Chinese cinema—"Chineseness"—is already
the sign of a cross-cultural commodity fetishism.

Jean Baudrillard defines the semiological relation between commod-
ity fetishism and ideology in these terms:

The fetishization of the commodity is the fetishization of a prod-
uct emptied of its concrete substance of labor and subjected to
another type of labor, a labor of signification, that is, of coded
abstraction (the production of differences and of sign values). It is
an active, collective process of production and reproduction of a
code, a system, invested with all the diverted, unbound desire
separated out from the process of real labor and transferred onto
precisely that which denies the process of real labor.

For those intent on looking for the "third world difference," the dye mill
would be one of those sites of "third world" labor that can be used to
contrast with "first world" metropolitan centers. A predictable set of
dichotomies would thus follow to oppose the "third" and "first" worlds
in terms of rural versus urban life, manual versus mental labor, simplic-
Some Contemporary Chinese Films

...ivity and innocence versus complexity and experience, and so forth. And yet, in *Judou*, the setting of the dye mill does not so much enable us to understand the labor of dyeing cloths in the Chinese countryside in the 1920s as it provides the metaphoric and cinematic staging for the romance, the physical violence, and the human tragedy that unfold in the course of the story. The dyed cloths that are hoisted to the roof of the village house, the visual effects of layeredness as pieces of brightly dyed cloths fall and fold upon each other at crucial moments (such as the lovers’ first episode of lovemaking), the disturbed colors in the dye basin in which the two men die—all these are part of a kind of production that is other than the “realistic” portrayal of the labor of Chinese peasants living in the feudal countryside. Instead, an age-old labor activity is now given a second-order signification, that of cinema, in order to project a very different concept of labor altogether. This is the cultural labor of the “third world” in the 1990s, in which the “third world” can no longer simply manufacture mechanical body parts to be assembled and sold in the “first world.” What the “third world” has been enlisted to do also is the manufacture of a reflection, an alterity that gives (back) to the “first world” a sense of “its” freedom and democracy while it generously allows the “third world” film to be shown against the authoritarian policies of “third world” governments. But an “alterity” produced this way is a code and an abstraction whose fascination lies precisely in the fact that it is artificial and superficial, as Baudrillard says, “it is the artifact that is the object of desire.”

Once we shift our thinking of production to that of image production, we can no longer theorize “labor” as purely physical or manual, that is, emanating from the human body and therefore more genuine and unalienated. The production of images is the production not of things but of relations, not of one culture but of value between cultures: even as we see “Chinese” stories on the screen, therefore, we are still confronted with an exchange between “China” and the West in which these stories seek their market. In the case of films from the People’s Republic, this is especially evident when excellent films receiving applause outside China are banned at home. What this means is that the labor of Chinese filmmakers is, to use the language of classical Marxism, literally alienated from its home use. Contemporary Chinese film production serves in this instance to redefine “third world” cultural production as first and foremost alienated. Alienation is the very form of cultural production, which “third world” cultures, precisely because of their histories, make manifest. And the first symptom of such alienation is usually the emotional insistence on a “national” essence such as the “Chinese.” It is as if the more indisputable the interference and intervention of the “foreign” have become, the stronger the insistence on cultural self-containment must be.

The simultaneous fascination with traditional activities of physical labor and the abstraction of such labor in the form of beautiful images (as is the case with wine making in *Red Sorghum* and the nomadic livelihood of Tibetan people in *Horse Thief*) means that questions of “third world” cinema cannot be posed simply in terms of a uniform nationalistic opposition to the “first world.” Instead, the production of images foregrounds the much more difficult issue of value, which, precisely because it is intangible, can be distributed, absorbed, and reproduced far more easily than actual objects. But in posing the question of “third world” cultural production in terms of images, I am not, I want to emphasize, making an argument for criticizing the “incorrect” images and finding the “correct” images of the West’s others, since I would, in order to do that, need to presume the existence of an unalienated labor that can be matched onto a correct image. The much more disturbing issues of cultural exchange—the exchange of ideologies, values, and images—mean that what need to be fundamentally revamped are not so much positivistic representations as the critical bases on which “third world” cultures are currently being examined.

Here, the history of China vis-à-vis the West can be instructive in a number of ways. Unlike India or countries in Africa and America, most parts of China were, in the course of modern European imperialism, never territorially under the sovereignty of any foreign power, although China was invaded and had to grant many concessions throughout the nineteenth century to England, France, Germany, Russia, Japan, and the United States. Major political movements in China, be they for the restoration of older forms of government (1898) or for the overthrow of the dynastic system (1911), led by the religious (1850–64), by the well-educated (1919), by the antiforeign (1900, 1937–1945), or by the communists (1949), were always conducted in terms of China’s relations with foreign powers, usually the West. However, my suggestion is that the ability to preserve more or less territorial integrity (whereas other ancient civilizations, such as the Inca, the Aztec, India, Vietnam
and Indochina, Algeria, and others, were territorially captured) as well as linguistic integrity (Chinese remains the official language) means that as a “third world” country, the Chinese relation to the imperialist West, until the communists officially propagated “anti-imperialism,” is seldom purely “oppositional” ideologically; on the contrary, the point has always been for China to become as strong as the West, to become the West’s “equal.” And even though the Chinese communists once served as the anti-imperialist inspiration for other “third world” cultures and progressive Western intellectuals, that dream of a successful and consistent opposition to the West on ideological grounds has been dealt the death blow by more recent events such as the Tiananmen massacre of 1989, in which the Chinese government itself acted as viciously as if it were one of its capitalistic enemies. As the champion of the unprivileged classes and nations of the world, communist China has shown itself to be a failure, a failure that is now hanging on by empty official rhetoric while its people choose to live in ways that have obviously departed from the communist ideal.

The point of summarizing modern Chinese history in such a schematic fashion is to underscore how the notion of “coloniality” (together with the culture criticisms that follow from it), when construed strictly in terms of the foreignness (that is, exteriority) of race, land, and language, can blind us to political exploitation as easily as it can alert us to it. In the history of modern Western imperialism, the Chinese were never completely dominated by a foreign colonial power, but the apparent absence of the “enemy” as such does not make the Chinese case any less “third world” (in the sense of being colonized) in terms of the exploitation suffered by the people, whose most important colonizers remains their own government. China, perhaps because it is the exception to the rule of imperialist domination by race, land, and language involving a foreign (external) power, in fact highlights the effects of the imperialistic transformation of value and value production more sharply than in other “third world” cultures.

Karl Marx, we remember, defines value in relation to labor. What exactly is this relation? In her illuminating readings of Marx through Jacques Derrida, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak criticizes the view, assumed by many to be unproblematic, that value is labor’s “representation.” Taking from Derrida’s notion of writing as différence, Spivak redefines value not as the representation (i.e., completed symbolic replication) of labor but as difference: “The basic premise of the recent critique of the labor theory of value is predicated on the assumption that, according to Marx, Value represents Labor. Yet the definition of Value in Marx establishes itself not only as a representation but also as a differential. What is represented or represents itself in the commodity-differential is Value.”

Value, in other words, functions in the same enigmatic manner (in Marx) as “writing” (in Derrida). Although value is supposed to be secondary and derivative (because it occurs as the result of labor, as writing is thought to occur after “natural” language—speech), it seems shamelessly usurping: It acts as a primary determinant, an agent that creates and stabilizes value/worth. Like writing, value poses the question about origins: does the value/worth of value come from what “precedes” it, namely, labor, or does it come from itself? Is it not scandalous to assume that value is self-originating when, supposedly, labor is? And yet we cannot think (labor) without thinking in value. Reading Marx after reading Derrida, Spivak is thus able to force the paradoxical heterogeneity of value—what she calls the “economic text”—to emerge: like writing, value is both inside and outside; its “being” comes from its being in circulation, but in order to “own” or “have” it one must take it outside circulation, outside the process in which it becomes value/valuable. Value functions both as “culture” (the agent of capitalism, the general equivalent overriding all others) and as “nature” (the mysterious contentless thing that seems “originally” there, before cultural exchange begins), but this functioning, while dependent on the clean conceptual boundary between culture and nature, also violates that boundary.

Spivak’s reading is especially useful for the production of value that is “national culture.” The predicament faced by many “third world” nations becomes lucid once we see national culture as a kind of economic text—a kind of value-writing. While the history of Western imperialism relegates all non-Western cultures to the place of the other, whose value is “secondary” in relation to the West, the task of nationalism in the “third world” is that of (re)inventing the “secondary” cultures themselves as primary, as the uncorrupted origins of “third world” nations’ histories and “worth.” In the case of China, for instance, the state authorities insist to this day on the separation of China from the West as summarized in the nineteenth-century dictum zhong xue wei ti, xi xue wei yong—“Chinese learning for fundamental structure, Western
learning for practical use.” This dictum, often interpreted as a sign of the conservative nature of China’s attitude toward the West, actually signifies in an elegant manner the difficulty inherent in the labor process/value-writing that is otherwise known as the construction of national culture among “third world” intellectuals. According to this dictum, “China” is the foundation of cultural value, a foundation that determines other cultures’ relation or relevance to itself rather than the other way around. “China” was there “before” the West, which might be added on for practical purposes but cannot usurp China’s place as the origin of value. And yet, the predicament of China in modern times is, of course, precisely that inscribed in the paradox of Marx’s economic text: the notion that “China” is first and original is already a response to the exchange with the West, a claim that is made after the onslaught of the West has become irreversible. If an original “Chineseness” somehow persists and thrives as collective belief, it is only because “China” continues to be circulated among entities that are not Chinese. To prove the “Chineseness” of the Chinese culture, the only way is through difference, which means inserting “China” among others in processes of cross-cultural production—processes that render the fantasy of an original “Chinese” value untenable.

Precisely because the processes of labor’s alienation—exchange, commodification, circulation—are inevitable and indispensable to the definition of value, the insistence on an original “Chinese” culture is the insistence on a kind of value that is outside alienation, outside the process of value-making. The wish to return a culture to an original (native) value is thus the wish to remove that culture from the process in which it appears “original” in the first place. In modern Chinese texts, filmic or literary, this kind of predicament and paradox of the production-of-national-culture-as-original-value repeatedly occur. Unlike, say, modern India, where the British left behind insurmountable poverty, a cumbersome bureaucracy, and a language in which to function as a “nation,” but where therefore the sentiment of opposition can remain legitimately alive because there is historically a clearly identifiable foreign (external) colonizer, the Chinese continue to have “their own” system, “their own” language, and “their own” problems. Chinese intellectuals’ obsession remains “China” rather than the mere opposition to the West. The cultural production that results is therefore narcissistic and self-conscious, rather than purely oppositional, in structure. Whatever oppositional sentiment there exists is an oppositional sentiment directed internally toward the center that is itself—“China,” the “Chinese heritage,” the “Chinese tradition,” the “Chinese government,” and variants of these.

This structure of narcissistic value-writing explains the current interest on the part of Chinese filmmakers to search for China’s own others. The films about the remote areas of China such as Tibet, about emperors, empresses, and eunuchs, and about the agrarian lives of the nameless and voiceless peasants in the past, as well as about the lingering forces of feudalist oppression that persist in spite of the revolutions—all such films partake of what we may call a poststructuralist fascination with the constructedness of one’s “self”—in this case, with China’s “self,” with China’s origins, with China’s own alterity. In the wish to go back to “China” as origin—to revive “China” as the source of original value—the “inward turn” of the nationalist narrative precisely reveals “China” as other-than-itself. This narcissistic structure then (mis)translates into the more familiar paradigm of “China as oppositional alterity to the West” through the international cinematic apparatus and the not so innocent apparatuses of cross-cultural interpretation.

In the following sections, I examine the problems that surface in such a narcissistic exploration of a “native” culture. Foremost among my questions is how narcissism informs the reconstruction of origins, the truncating of libidinal economies, and the imaginary reinvestments that make up the “labor” moving within a “third world” culture as well as between the “first” and “third” worlds.

The Futurity . . . the Futility of the Nation

The film I will discuss now is Lao jing, or Old Well, directed by Wu Tianming and produced in 1987. Like many contemporary Chinese films, Old Well is based on a novel by the same name.21 The author of the novel, Zheng Yi, also wrote the film script.

Old Well is a village located far into the Taiheng Mountains. There are endless stony mountains, but no water. Over the generations, the Old Well villagers have dug 127 wells, but they have all been dry. The deepest was over fifty meters. The greatest hope of all the villagers is that
they will find water on their own land. The protagonist is an educated youth called Sun Wangquan ("Sun," his family name, also means "grandson," and "Wangquan" means "auspicious for flowing stream"). When the film begins, Wangquan has returned to his village and is determined to use his knowledge to find water. His own family is very poor. To reach his goal and to help his brothers get married, he marries Duan Xifeng, a young widow with a daughter, and gives up his love relationship with another woman, Zhao Qiaoying. After many failed attempts, including one in which Wangquan and Qiaoying are trapped at the bottom of a well, where Wangcai, Wangquan’s younger brother, is killed, Wangquan finally succeeds in digging a well by applying his newly acquired hydraulic knowledge. For the first time in many generations, Old Well village has water.

*Old Well* can, of course, be read as a “national allegory.” According to this type of reading, everything in the film would be assigned a national—that is, Chinese—significance. The struggle of the protagonist and the village would then be microscopic versions of the “nation” and its people struggling to consolidate their identity. It would be a story with a positive ending. But what if the supposedly “national” sign “Chinese” itself is more than the “third world nation” that is conferred upon it by modernity? Once we stop using the “nation” to unify the elements of the film text, other questions begin to surface. A careful *allegorical* reading of *Old Well* would demonstrate that the allegory of the “nation” is, paradoxically, the nation’s otherness and nonpresence.

The “nation” reading is impossible because a national enemy is absent. Instead, the space of an enemy, which is crucial for the unification of a community, is occupied by two “others”—the dry well and the romantic woman. Why would a “Chinese” film of the 1980s concentrate on enemies other than “national” enemies?

In the readings of recent world events, it is commonly recognized that the breakdown of communism in Eastern Europe since 1989 has not led to democratic prosperity in accordance with anticommunist beliefs but has instead caused the resurgence of old ethnic conflicts that were neutralized and covered up under communism. The prominence of nationalist sentiments in the states previously dominated by the USSR indicates that nationalism was actually the repressed side of communism, a repressed side that boils over once the lid of communism is removed.

In China, where ethnic differences are relatively undisruptive (except in Tibet) and where the centrality of the Han culture remains relatively uncontested by other ethnic groups, many of whom have been assimilated for generations, nationalism functions in the past forty years to fuel communism rather than as communism’s repressed side. As communism gradually loses its hold on the populace (even though it is still the official policy), what surface as the “social disorders” that are repressed under communism?—Two related things: sexual difference, which communism neutralizes, and “the West,” which is communism’s adversary but also its founding source. The surfacing of these disorders means the relative indifference not only to communism but also to communism’s ally in China—nationalism itself.

**Female Sexuality and the Nation**

The eruption of romantic love in contemporary Chinese cinema continues the modernist interest in the controversies of love and sexuality among Chinese intellectuals since the beginning of the twentieth century. Why is romantic love such an issue? In the early twentieth century, the interest in love among popular literature writers (those of the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly School) was partly a result of the *ideological* rather than actual disintegration of the Chinese kinship family. The ongoing protest against the oppression of women and junior members of *jia*, the traditional family, meant that alternative spaces for human relationships had to be sought. During that period, when China’s participation in anti-imperialism meant that resistance against Western and Japanese aggression had to be conceived in the form of nationalism, the “internal” battle against the family became allied with the promotion of Chinese culture as the “nation,” which was literally conceived of as the state-family, *guojia*, the large organizational unit that would give China a place among the nations of the world.

If the conception of “woman” was in the past mediated by women’s well-defined roles within the Chinese family, the modern promotion of the nation throws into instability all those traditional roles. How are women’s sexuality, social function, economic function, contribution to cultural production, and biological reproduction to be conceived of...
outside the family and in terms of the nation. This is the historical juncture when, in what appeared to be a sudden “liberation” of the traditional constraints on Chinese women’s identity, romantic love became a leading social issue. For what is “romantic” about romantic love is not sex but the apparent freedom in which men and women could choose their sexual partners, in a way that differed from arranged marriage. And since the traditional family system was paternalistic—that is, resting on the sexual stability, chastity, and fidelity of women while men were openly promiscuous or polygamous—the new freedom meant first and foremost the production of a new female sexuality. In other words, because the conception of the nation sought to unify the culture regardless of sexual and class difference, it left open many questions as to how women’s sexual identities, which were carefully differentiated and monitored within the kinship system, should be reformulated. This is why, one could say, in the discourse of modernity, the Chinese woman suddenly became a newly discovered “primitive”—a body adrift between the stagnant waters of the family, whose oppressiveness it seeks to escape, and the open sea of the nation, whose attention to “woman” is only such that her sexual difference and history become primarily its support (i.e., become erased).

The emotional as well as economic forms of the family, on the other hand, die a slow and drawn-out death. Especially because the modern discourse of the nation has not really provided real alternatives other than an apparently emancipated “body” with no constraints, the tenacious bonds of the family live on. And this is ironically even more so under the communist revolution. When Mao Zedong upheld women as “equal” to men in the public spheres of work and economic production for the nation, and when Western feminists were delighted to see Chinese women being honored without discrimination with the same tasks as men, the family continued to thrive in the ideological vacuum left by the creation of the communist nation, simply because women’s labor in the home, unlike their kinship roles and positions, which could be taxonomically classified, remained real and material but traditionally unclassified and unpaid, and hence much more difficult to reclassify in the new system. The consequence is that the oppressiveness resulting from such labor is left intact to this day, leaving their imprints on cultural productions even when such productions are not overtly about gender, sexuality, or women.

In Old Well, the kinship-bound and modernized female sexualities are represented by Wangquan’s different relationships with Xifeng and Qiaoying. From the beginning, the two women are portrayed stereotypically, in accordance with the literary and historiographic conventions of understanding Chinese modernity. While Qiaoying is, like Wangquan, coming back to the village after having been in the outside world, Xifeng is the woman who remains at home. Qiaoying’s attractiveness is associated with her “novelty”: she brings back with her such modern items as a television set. Xifeng, although widowed, is clearly more “stable”: her stability is represented by the support she has from the multiple roles she plays within the kinship system, in which the women are as strongly functional as the men.

Xifeng has a mother, who supervises her sexual life, and is herself a mother. All she needs is a husband who would make her female social identity complete. Qiaoying, on the other hand, is an unknown entity: one of the reasons Wangquan’s grandfather disapproves of her is that he thinks she would not stay put in the village. Even though, in terms of social progress, Qiaoying is much closer to man himself than to the woman at home, in the rural village her avant-garde ontological proximity to masculinity is eyed with suspicion and distrust. The modernized, educated woman signifies romantic freedom—that is, “choice” over her own body—and thus social instability. Qiaoying is represented as without family relations. Like a mysterious signifier unleashed from centuries of anchorage to kinship, she does not know where she is heading.

What is most remarkable, however, is the way this convention of understanding modernity—the convention of exorcizing the romantic woman and romantic love from traditional society—surfaces in post—Cultural Revolution cultural production. What does this convention do here?

First, it helps consolidate the traditional female sexuality represented by Xifeng and her relation to Wangquan, whose genealogical as well as career stability is guaranteed through marriage. In Chinese, “digging an old well” conjures up idioms and expressions that carry sexual connotations. Gujing qingbo (the stirring of ripples in an old well) and tao gujing (dredging an old well), for instance, are expressions that allude to the renewed sexual activities in a woman who has been without them for a long time. The man who has sex with such a woman is then an old-
well-digger, which is the role played by Wangquan, who “receives” not only food, cigarettes, and money from Xifeng but finally, though reluctantly, her body. Toward the end of the film, Xifeng is pregnant. By contrast, the romantic woman is turned into an outcast. Qiaoying is the “enemy” to the economic basis of the village community, who must be exiled.

Second, in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, the affirmation of traditional family values comes as an attempt to mask the lack created by the bankruptcy of communism and nationalism, even though nationalism may persist by reinscribing itself in traditional forms. The main point is that the central roles played by the family and village community are here signs of the dismantling of the modernist revolution from “family” to “nation.” “Woman” is now caught between the bankruptcy of nationalism and communism, in which the sexes are “equal and women’s problems do not exist, and the resurgence of older patriarchal forms of community, in which female sexuality is strictly managed for purposes of kinship reproduction.

A film such as Old Well demonstrates that the “Chinese nation” itself does not have to exist in order for the social and sexual issues to be circulated and negotiated. Like the female body emancipated from traditional kinship bonds, the “nation”—that imaginary anchorage for primitive passions—is nowhere except in the politics that uses it to fight the past (be that past primitive, ethnic, feudalist, or colonized). Like the female body thrown into “romantic love,” the nation is theoretically capable of all kinds of dangerous libidinal possibilities. Because it is fundamentally empty, the “nation” must be controlled by a more locally grounded production and reproduction. In their relative silence on the subject of the nation, contemporary Chinese films seem to say: “It is the ‘nation’ with all its extravagant promises that has led to the internal catastrophes in modern China. But—still, we must continue to seek such extravagant promises elsewhere!”

The Barrenness of Romantic Love

If the decline of the “nation” is as elusive as its rise, this elusiveness finds a convention of staging itself in the romantic woman.

In spite of Wangquan’s marriage to another woman, Qiaoying loves him, and we feel, through his silence and guilty expressions, that he still loves her. After Wangquan is married, Qiaoying has been going out with Wangcai, who earlier had a quarrel with Wangquan about his own lack of everything, in particular his lack of experience with women. Qiaoing’s association with Wangcai is clearly presented as futile and futureless: Wangcai is an example of the “decadent” younger generation of contemporary China, who, unlike his brother, has neither the stamina nor the altruism to persist in a quest for the communal good. Instead of digging for water, he is more interested in stealing women’s underwear and ridiculing women performers in ways that are clearly sadistic and misogynistic. A hilarious scene shows Wangcai leading a group of young people dancing wildly to the noisy tunes of Western rock and roll music played over a transistor radio at the site of an attempted well drill. In Wangcai, the “dangers” of Westernization threaten to become destructive. Here is a youth with no long-term plan and no concern for society’s future. During a well-digging accident, Wangcai is killed by rubble falling into the well.

Because of the accident, however, Qiaoying is finally able to “consume” her love for Wangquan. In this love scene, we have perhaps one of the most romantic portrayals of romantic love in contemporary Chinese cinema. Its romanticism lies in an excessiveness that can only belong to film.

From under the well, the image of the two lovers kissing in passion is superimposed with the cosmic landscape—the sky, the mountains, the trees—in a series of shots that are, like the accompanying music, in motion rather than still. The lovers’ entrapment inside the well thus becomes, in a dreamlike fashion, the freedom one can find in “nature” outside the confines of human wants and desires. If this moment captures romantic fulfillment, it is also, I suggest, a capturing of the uncatchable through the juxtaposition of what is temporally and geographically specific—romantic love—with what is timeless and placeless—the cosmos. As that which is here and now, love does not and cannot reproduce itself outside the circuit of the two lovers. The sacrifice it requires, as well as the meaning of its intense presence, is that of an unrecuperable death. Romantic love is thus literally experienced as death, at a moment when the lovers have lost hope of getting out alive. It is in death that they can dream of being at one with each other.