Some Contemporary Chinese Films

and with the cosmos, in a way that—thanks to the imaginary possibilities of cinema—transcends the constraint of the specific here and now. This transcendence is fantastical and antisocial. Romantic love becomes the signifier of emptiness—the emptiness and emptying of the social.

After this death, society goes on. The fantasy of romantic love is from now on remembered with nostalgia, as what happened at a different time in a different place. Importantly, it is the woman, Qiao Ying, who carries death with her. She eventually leaves the community and donates her dowry to the cause of continual well digging. Wangguan, who found himself a mistress in the depths of his failed social labor, reemerges as a cultural hero who is aided not only by his mistress but also by his wife, who calls upon the entire village to give what they can to help his cause. While one woman gets nothing and the other retains her husband, Wangguan keeps his family, the memory of love,  and leaves himself a name.

The futility of the nation is thus signified by the barrenness of romantic love, the consummation of which takes place in the depths of a dry well at the moment of a collapsed effort at drilling. Romantic love is barren not because it is impoverished but because it is surplus: its excessiveness threatens economic productiveness because it prevents that productiveness from being stabilized. Another way of putting this is to say that the sacrifice of romantic love is pure: unlike the attempt to drill a well, it cannot be rewarded or “completed” in the way that the “In Memoriam” plaque, as I will go on to argue, completes and rewards the sacrifices of men’s lives down the centuries. If well digging generates the “value” that compensates for the loss of lives, the barrenness of romantic love lures modernity against itself and back toward the long-disputed family.

The Labor of Social Fantasy

Ethnicity can mobilize the vast majority of its community—provided its appeal remains sufficiently vague or irrelevant.

E. J. Hobsbawm, Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality

Digging an Old Well

How is one to interpret the fact that large numbers of people collectively hold beliefs that are false?

Partha Chatterjee, Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse

If one “foreign enemy” to the community is the romantic woman, who must be cut off, the other “foreign enemy” is the lack that is inside Old Well village—the dry wells themselves. This lack awaits being filled and, once filled, will give meaning to the community.

The theme of dry wells repeats the obsession that has characterized “Chinese modernity” since the nineteenth century: the power of technology. Although we are familiar with the many technological inventions that owe their origins to the Chinese—the compass, paper, printing, fireworks, gunpowder, deep drilling,  to name just a few—in the modern period, notably after Western imperialism became unavoidable, one might argue that “technology” situates the Chinese culture vis-à-vis the West in the form of a lack. Political trends in the twentieth century oscillate between the desire to fill this lack and the pretense that China needs nothing. In the post—Cultural Revolution period, following Deng Xiaoping’s modernization campaigns, we see once again the openness to technology, from the most mundane items for household use to computers. Contemporary Chinese films necessarily reflect these developments. One of the narratives that have sustained China’s relationship with Western modernity can thus be described as a quest for technology—a quest for that “power” without which China cannot become strong.

At the same time, in this film, the quest for technology is legitimated not so much in terms of the elusive “nation” as in terms of a post—Cultural Revolution humanism that tries to preserve the traditional in modernization. As such, the film also repeats one of the basic fantasies that have run throughout the course of Chinese modernization since the nineteenth century, which is expressed in the aforementioned phrase “Chinese learning for fundamental structure, Western learning for practical use.” The fantasy is that the Chinese can have part of the West—technology—without changing its own social structure. Today, this fantasy continues in the evident split between official Chinese rhetoric, which still remains loyal to the classical themes of Marxism, Leninism, and Maoism, and Chinese social practice, which now includes
all kinds of Western and capitalistic ventures and enterprises. Such fantasy is crucial to the narcissistic value-writing that I suggest as the alternative way of understanding “third world” cultures.

This narcissistic value-writing is, moreover, masculinist. *Old Well* begins with shots of part of a naked male body against a dark background hammering away in sweat. We read “determination” into these signifiers. The ending of the film completes these opening signifiers with an “In Memoriam” plaque indicating the lives (presumably all male) that have been lost in the centuries of failed attempts at well digging. The completion is the completion of the sacrificial process: finally, the film seems to say, the sacrifices pay off.

From the perspective of Wangquan, technology is strictly a means to an end. Technology is instrumental in fulfilling the mandate that is loaded on him and that he cannot resist. He cannot protest against that mandate because in it lies a communal meaning of responsibility; he cannot decline it because in it lies the very personal identity he receives from society as a reward. The mandate not only takes from him his life energy; it also gives him his life and his immortality.

What is interesting is not the simple affirmation of humanistic values and a process of identity production through stamina, effort, and willingness to self-sacrifice but how such an affirmation is at the same time part of that cultural narcissism that exotizes its own alterity, its own otherness. The fact that the affirmation of humanistic values takes place not in metropolitan centers such as Shanghai and Beijing but in backward villages in remote mountains suggests that the reinvestment in humanism in contemporary Chinese cultural production is at the same time an uncanny ethnographic attempt to narrate a “noble savagery” that is believed to have preserved the older and more authentic treasures of the culture, in ways as yet uncorrupted by modernity.

At the center of the treasures to be preserved is a system of production in which the will to work will be duly rewarded—if not in the form of an immediate gratification to the individual, then definitely in the form of the reproduction and continuance of the life of a community. The fascination not only with technological production or genealogical reproduction alone but with the welding of the two in the successful perpetuation of a culture is probably the most important fascination of the post–Cultural Revolution period, in which the diversion from the mindless destructiveness of the previous two decades needs to graft itself onto something substantial and concrete. These two kinds of production together make up the economy of the third kind—the production of value/ideology, a production that is at the same time a series of translations, decodings, and readings between “contemporary” and “rural” China, between communism (with its emphasis on loyalty to the party) and humanism (with its emphasis on loyalty to the clan and the family, and on individual effort), between China’s status as other to the West and the status of the “other” cultures of China’s past and unknown places to China’s “present self.” In *Old Well*, the “lack” of China (in terms of technology) is projected onto the “lack” of China’s rural area, which is further projected onto an actual lack, the lack of water. In this series of projections and substitutions, the “lack,” always at once frustrating and empowering, finally gives way to a filling that stabilizes significations for survival.

At this point, we need to say, But wait, it’s not only the “filling” and the production of water that enable the survival of the community. The failure to produce water is what has already sustained the culture of Old Well village for generations!

What indeed is the old well?

In terms of narrative structure, the old well is, of course, nothing: it is the lack that makes narrative possible. The old well is the obsession that, precisely because it remains unfulfilled, perpetuates itself in the village as a kind of collective memory, collective responsibility, and collective desire. Do the men in Old Well village know what they really want? Or do they continue digging simply because their ancestors have formed that habit—simply because it has become a *tribal ritual*? The sense of absurdity that figures in what looks like a revered tradition is clearest in the scene where villagers from a neighboring village attempt to close up a well that the Old Well villagers claim to be theirs. This competition over the rights to the well leads to the question as to the whereabouts of the plaque indicating the well’s “ownership.” Finally, it is the women who produce the “original” plaque, which has, it turns out, long become a latrine stone.

But the absurdity of this discovery does not change the powerful impact that the obsession has on the village. And such is the power of social fantasy: even when the “original” plaque has been turned into a latrine stone and is thus shown to be, after all, *no more than a (shitty) stone*, the belief that it is *more* persists. In a discussion of Eastern Europe
after the collapse of communism, Slavoj Žižek writes about the fantastical nature of what he calls the “nation-Thing” in a way that is equally applicable to the old well:

The Thing is not directly a collection of these features [composing a specific way of life]; there is “something more” in it, something that is present in these features, that appears through them. Members of a community who partake in a given “way of life” believe in their Thing, where this belief has a reflexive structure proper to the intersubjective space: “I believe in the (national) Thing” is equal to “I believe that others (members of my community) believe in the Thing.” The tautological character of the Thing—its semantic void, the fact that all we can say about it is that it is “the real Thing”—is founded precisely in this paradoxical reflexive structure. 30

This fantasy turns all accidents—events that are real but somehow cannot be accounted for coherently—into mere accidents, mere errors, which have no place in the actual functioning or labor of the fantasy. Similarly, all the lives that have been sacrificed in the course of searching for water are simply meaningless until the first well is successfully dug. Until then, we can say that the lost lives do not matter: they remain chance components waiting to be materialized into the full-blown fantasy populated with real bodies. Instead of describing the history of Old Well village as one in which the villagers are united by a hope for the future (when water will be found), therefore, we should describe it this way: the discovery of water validates the sacrifices retroactively as parts of a concerted communal effort at well digging. This is the paradox of the ending, at which we are shown a close-up of the plaque “In Memoriam” of all the well-digging martyrs with the dates of their failed efforts and their deaths. Superimposed upon the rolling image of this plaque is the author’s/director’s inscription documenting Sun Wangquan’s accomplishment: “January 9, 1983: Water was found, and fifty tons of water were produced every hour from the first mechanized deep well.” The current “success” proves by its chance occurrence that “it” is what all the previous generations have been slaying for and that, moreover, their deaths were finally worthwhile. 31

The act of discovering water, in other words, is like a signifier that enigmatically constitutes the identity of the past by its very contingent presence or randomness. If, because of its success, this act becomes endowed with the value of a “primary” act, then “primary” value itself must be described not as an absolute origin but instead as a supplementary relation: like all previous attempts of well digging, the latest attempt is a random event; at the same time, this latest attempt is marked by an additional randomness—the discovery of water, the accident of “success.” This additional randomness, this accident that is more accidental than all the other accidents, marks the latest attempt of well digging apart from the others, thereby constituting in the same moment the “necessary” structure that coheres the entire series of events in a meaningful signifying chain, a signifying chain that I have been referring to as social fantasy. The labor of social fantasy, then, comprises not only the random physical efforts at well digging and their failures but also the process of retroactive, supplementary transformation in which the random and physical becomes the primary, the necessary, and the virtuous, and henceforth functions and reproduces itself ideologically as such.

Crucial to this social fantasy is the danger represented by the romantic woman and the recurrent dry well, both of which are “taken care of” at the end. The fantasy is that the village can have the technology of the running well without the technology of the new (running) woman, that the village can turn into a self-sufficient community with only as much outside help as it wants—precisely at a time when Chinese countryside self-sufficiency, like that of other “third world” rural areas, has been irredeemably eroded by modernized production and distribution, and the permeation of global capitalist economics.

A film such as this, which demonstrates the fundamental nothingness of the labor of social fantasy, inevitably lends itself to a reading that is exactly the opposite. Attesting to that is Old Well’s warm reception by Chinese audiences at home and overseas, and its success at the Second Tokyo International Film Festival of 1987, 32 in contrast to the regular official censorship of films by the Fifth Generation directors that are consciously critical of Chinese culture. The intense appeal of a film that celebrates the rewarding of a communal, collective effort makes little sense unless we understand the magnitude of the fantasy of collectivity on the largest scale—the Cultural Revolution—and its collapse. The emotional vacuum left behind by the latter awaits the legitimating work
of some other thing. This other thing is increasingly being sought in China’s old and remote areas, where social fantasy, whose creation of a present identity is always through a nostalgic imagining of a permanent other time and other place, can flourish most uninhibitedly. And so, beyond the futility of the nation and the barrenness of love, the labor of social fantasy, like the muscular, masculine arms at the film’s beginning, hammers on.

Silent Is the Ancient Plain: Music,
Filmmaking, and the Concept of Social Change
in the New Chinese Cinema

During a talk he gave at the University of Minnesota in the summer of 1989, the Chinese director Chen Kaige described his interest in filmmaking as that of “reform.” These words, spoken during the immediate aftermath of the Tiananmen massacre, when Chinese intellectuals could not safely return to China, were deeply resonant with the hopes and despair that the Chinese have been feeling toward their culture since the mid–nineteenth century. Merely a year before, during an interview with the Chinese edition of Playboy, Chen had said this in response to questions about his work: “As someone who thinks, as someone who has emerged from a 5000-year old culture, you are bound to feel that you should do something, and bound to hope that your people do not have to go through yet another, greater tragedy.”

The films Chen had directed up to 1989—Huang tudi (Yellow Earth, 1984), Da yue bing (The Big Parade, 1985), and Haizi wangle (King of the Children, 1987)—were produced in the midst of the “Modernization” campaign that was launched by Deng Xiaoping after he returned to power in the late 1970s. The emergence of a remarkable group of directors known as the Fifth Generation, who include Chen, Zhang Yimou,
who've spent time in the country, while we're urbanites. . . . [Tian] Zhuangzhuang and his peers all went through the Cultural Revolution, and they remained kind of romantic. We didn't. . . . I don't like being subjective, and I want my films to be objective. It's objectivity that'll empower me." Quoted from Yingxiang (Imagekeeper Monthly) 32 (September 1992), in program notes on Mama, Seventeenth Hong Kong International Film Festival (1993).

100. Xie Fei's Xiang huan ni (Oilmakers' Family, 1992) is an exception to this. It is a film about how women in rural areas, regardless of generational difference, are still bound by oppressive feudal practices.

101. See Zhang Yimou's remarks in Mayfair Yang, "Of Gender, State Censorship, and Overseas Capital: An Interview with Director Zhang Yimou," Public Culture 5, no. 2 (Winter 1993): 306–7. See also Ma Qiang, "The Chinese Film in the 1980s," for a summary of the conditions under which Chinese films are usually made and moved through the various levels of bureaucracy.

102. Much like Bazin's discussion of the Stalin films in the Soviet Union of the 1940s, films about the foreign invasion of China in the nineteenth century, about the revolutionary history and military achievements of the communist government, and about monumental figures such as Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai are used, in the 1990s, in an attempt to erase the crimes committed by the Chinese government with carefully (re)constructed stories and images. See the section "More Mao than Ever" in Chris Berry, "A Nation T(w/o) a: Chinese Cinem(a) and Nationhood(s)," East-West Film Journal 7, no. 1 (January 1993): 24–51.


105. Zhang, interview with Liu Xiaobo, Lianhe bao (Hong Kong), May 1, 1993.


107. Ibid., pp. 62–63. For a companion piece of criticism of contemporary Chinese culture, see also Barmé's "The Greying of Chinese Culture": "What does it mean to be grey in China these days? . . . It is a syndrome, rather, combining hopelessness, uncertainty and ennui with irony, sarcasm and a large dose of fatalism. It is a mood that both envelopes the individual and an ambience suffusing the society; it is a Zeitgeist that is particularly prevalent in youth culture. It is the temper, in particular, of the capital Beijing" (sec. 13, p. 2).


9. Ibid.


12. Teshome H. Gabriel, “Towards a Critical Theory of Third World Films,” in Questions of Third Cinema, pp. 48–49. For a discussion of why pictorial aesthetics and “third world” ethnic identity/agency cannot be mapped onto each other in this manner, see the following chapter.


14. Judou, for instance, was nominated for “best foreign language film” at the Oscars in 1991 while being banned in China until the spring of 1992. Since June 1989, the Chinese authorities have been tightening control over “culture” by a conscious return to leftist educational strategies. The “nationalistic” view of Ai Zhisheng, the minister for radio, film, and television, that only Chinese people are eligible to praise Chinese films, is an example of this ridiculously reactionary turn in mainstream Chinese cultural politics. For a relevant discussion, see Tony Rayns, “The Tunnel Vision of Minister Ai.” This essay appears as “L’étroitesse d’esprit du ministre Ai,” trans. Corinne Durin, in the program notes, Festival international du cinéma chinois, 4e édition, du 23 mai au 2 juin 1991 (Montréal), pp. 65–67.

15. Baudrillard, For a Critique, p. 94; emphasis in the original.

16. The recent films by Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou obtained financial support from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, England, Germany, and Holland. As Jean-Paul Aubert writes about Chen’s 1991 film Life on a String (a philosophical treatment of contemporary Chinese culture): “Le plus étonnant sera d’apprendre que ce film si profondément chinois est en fait une production anglo-allemande . . . le gouvernement chinois n’a pas mis un seul yuan dans la production. C’est peut-être même la première fois qu’un film chinois . . . est entièrement financé par des producteurs occidentaux.” See “Le retour des enfants prodiges,” Cahiers du cinéma, no. 442 (1991): 85. Zhang Yimou, for his part, apparently had no problem accepting exclusively Japanese financial backing (from a company called the Tokuma Group) for Judou even though in Red Sorghum he expressed “nationalistic” sentiments by portraying Japanese violence against Chinese villagers during the period around the Second World War.

17. In an interview with Chinese and non-Chinese reporters in early 1991, the Chinese premier Li Peng responded to questions about the Tiananmen massacre with the following kind of “rationality”: “It has already been two years since the June Fourth incident; there is no need to discuss it any more . . . . Under the urgent circumstances of the time, had the Chinese government not acted decisively, we would not be able to have the stability and economic prosperity we see in China today.” “Zhong wai jizhe zhaozhai shang Li Peng huida went” [Li Peng’s responses to questions at the press conference for Chinese and foreign reporters], Ming Pao Daily News (Vancouver ed.), April 11, 1991; my translation.

18. I am grateful to Teresa de Lauretis for telling me that I needed to clarify my point about “coloniality.”


22. Such a reading informs, for instance, the discussions collected in Lao jing (Dianying/Zhongguo mingzu xuan, no. 1), ed. Jiao Xiongqing (Taipei: Wuxiang tushu gufen youxian gongsi, 1990).
23. “Hence, as we can now see in melancholy retrospect, it was the great achievement of the communist regimes in multinational countries to limit the disastrous effects of nationalism within them. . . . Indeed, it may be argued that the current wave of ethnic or mini-ethnic agitations is a response to the overwhelmingly non-national and non-nationalist principles of state formation in the greater part of the twentieth-century world.” E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, p. 173.


25. The common view among some feminist China scholars is that issues of female sexuality have been subsumed under either the traditional kinship family or the modernist discourse of the nation. In the early twentieth century, when nationalism was replacing familial pieties as the valid self-strengthening discourse in the “third world,” the family and the nation could indeed be looked upon as equally “major” historical forces that dwarf and erase women in different but comparable ways. However, the major shortcoming of this view lies in that, after pointing out the masculinism of nationalism, it cannot explain why nationalism has such a great appeal to women as well as men. The analysis of the relation between “woman” and “the nation” I offer here is quite different from this common view.

26. The story ends with these lines: “Below, on the flowery banks of the Qinglong River, in the little village half hidden by the morning smoke, lie his dry land, his small son, his virtuous wife, his dearest elders and brothers, and memories of the love that he will never forget.” Zheng, *Lao Jing*, p. 224; my translation.

27. For a recent discussion of how the Chinese extracted brine for making salt by drilling the deepest well (one kilometer) in the world over a century and a half ago, see Hans Ulrich Vogel, “The Great Well of China,” *Scientific American*, June 1993, pp. 116–21. According to Vogel, the Xinbai well, which is located in Sichuan Province, “was the culmination of an 800-year-old technology.” The epigraphs by Hobsbawm and Chatterjee at the beginning of the present section are taken respectively from *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, p. 169 (emphasis in the original), and from *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World—A Derivative Discourse* (United Nations University, Tokyo: Zed Books, 1986), p. 11.

28. The “technological” interest is evident even in films that are not explicitly about technology. For instance, in Zheng Dongtian’s *Yuanyang lou (Young Couples*, 1987), we find the stories of six couples living in the same apartment complex that are cinematically narrated against a background of new common household objects, from the vacuum cleaner to the cassette tape player. Even as mere silent background, technology in the home effectively demonstrates the changes in cultural value.

29. The films that are set in big cities are, by contrast, always about the loss of such humanistic values. Recent examples include Zhou Xiaowen’s *Fengkaogan de daijia* (Obsession, 1989), and Xie Fei’s *Ben ming nian* (Black Snow, 1990).


31. If we substitute the word *communal* for *national*, the following quotation would apply well to our present discussion: “Where national memories are concerned, griefs are of more value than triumphs, for they impose duties, and require a common effort.” Ernst Renan, “What Is a Nation?” trans. and annotated by Martin Thom, in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 19.

32. *Old Well* won four of the thirteen awards given by the festival, including the “special affirmation award by international film critics.”

2. Silent Is the Ancient Plain: Music, Filmmaking, and the Concept of Social Change in the New Chinese Cinema

1. *Playboy* (Chinese ed.), no. 22 (May 1988): 44. Hereafter page references are given in the text. All translations are mine.


5. Ibid., p. 45.

6. Mitsuhiko Yoshimoto has criticized the notion of “cross-cultural” exchange/analysis adopted by many Western critics in the following manner: “By designating only one direction of subject-object relation, this popular notion elides the issue of power/knowledge. While Western critics as subject can analyze a non-
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Visuality, Sexuality,
Ethnography,
and Contemporary
Chinese Cinema

Rey Chow

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To my father, Chow Chak-hung, and to the memory of my mother, Tuet Wai-ching