Communists Have More Fun! The Dialectics of Fulfillment in Cinema of the People’s Republic of China

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Within the first third of Xie Jin’s 1961 revolutionary classic Red Detachment of Women (Hongse niangzi jun; later adapted as both a model ballet and a model Peking opera during the Cultural Revolution), a definite pattern in the lighting scheme emerges. Every sequence set in the area of Hainan Island controlled by the Nationalist or Guomindang (KMT) government is dark and gloomy, with glowering, underlit villains and deep architectural shadows appropriate to the landlord Nan Batian’s dungeons, in which proletarian slaves like the film’s heroine, Wu Qionghua, are tortured (fig. 1). In contrast, the areas of Hainan controlled by the insurgent Communists (the year is 1930), including the Red women’s detachment that Qionghua joins after an undercover Communist agent facilitates her escape, seem always to be bathed in bright sunlight (fig. 2).

In keeping with the lighting scheme and even more striking is the radical lack of anything resembling joy in depictions of the KMT-held areas on the one hand, and the abundance of everyday happiness represented in the Communist strongholds on the other. The people and soldiers of the liberated areas laugh, dance, and playfully splash water on each other, while those suffering under the old society live in darkness, misery, and mutual estrangement. It is not just that the ordinary people are happier under communism; even Nan Batian himself, the richest and most powerful landlord in the region, can never seem to muster more than a lingering smirk or at best a false smile.

This is just one example of a central message of mass cinema of the Mao era: Communists have more fun! In fact, Mao-era cinema itself was much more fun than its reputation as mere propaganda would have us believe. Not only does a film like Red Detachment of Women stand up well against the slickest and most emotionally involving classical Hollywood films of heroism on the battlefield, but there was a diversity of filmmaking in China during the “seventeen years” (as mainland Chinese refer to the period from the establishment of the People’s Republic of
China [PRC] in 1949 to the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966) that is forgotten by most except for a smattering of film scholars and an older generation of Chinese. Popular genres of the period included traditional opera films, comedies, ethnic minority romances, children’s films, and spy thrillers in addition to the more well-known revolutionary bildungsromane and patriotic war epics (depicting resistance to the Japanese during the occupation and to the Americans during the Korean War as well as the civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists).

Nevertheless, it is fair to state as a generalization that the idea of happiness conveyed by all of these genres revolved around the cultivation of an ever more public self, a forward-looking subject whose libidinal organization and object choices were intimately linked to the total project of revolution. Whether this type of fulfillment is conceived in terms of the sublimation of private desires or in terms of a “new human” (xin renlei) with entirely different psychological wiring, the extreme of this mode of cinema and of the accompanying social experiment no doubt came during the Cultural Revolution, when every detail of daily life was supposed to be imbued with the type of revolutionary heroism embodied by the main protagonists of the “model drama” (yangbanxi) films such as Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy (Zhiqu Weihushan, 1970) and The Red Lantern (Hongdengji, 1970) in addition to the later film versions of Red Detachment of Women itself (ballet, 1971; opera, 1972).

If the pursuit of happiness is a modern right bequeathed to the world, however unintentionally, through the universalist agenda of Western colonialism, it is interesting to reflect on the model of personal fulfillment offered by the alternative modernity of Maoism—not just as an exercise in cultural history, but more importantly as a backdrop to what often appears as an almost diametrical reversal in post-revolutionary China. Whereas the Maoist subject was not to divorce the personal from the political, for the postsocialist subject (in keeping with the global trend since 1968), the political itself becomes impossible, and happiness can be pursued only along the most private trajectories of desire. In either case, a certain pathology emerges that effectively makes some form of self-destruction a condition of personal fulfillment. What is interesting in the case of cinema is that, in both instances, the repressed returns in the form of residual generic conventions—silent visual reminders of what has been sacrificed.

**Love and Revolution**

Long dismissed by Western Sinologists as mere propaganda and mostly ignored by film historians and theorists, the cinema of Mao-era China has recently begun to attract new interest. It is true that the 1950s saw a rise in Soviet influence and the loss of the particularly productive narrative and stylistic heterogeneity of the “golden age” of Shanghai cinema in the 1930s and late 1940s. The new ideological formula for cultural production was variously called proletarian realism (in Chinese Communist writings during the civil war), socialist realism (for a few years in the 1950s before the Sino-Soviet split), and finally a combination of revolutionary realism plus revolutionary romanticism (the formula promulgated by Mao beginning in 1958). In practice the films mostly followed the rules of Eastern bloc socialist realism—that is, classical Hollywood narration, but with occasional rhetorical flourishes reminiscent of early Soviet montage, all in support of a didactic revolutionary message. A key difference from classical Hollywood, however, is the suppression of romantic love as a central plot element in most revolutionary films. Indeed, the replacement of private libidinal desire with the appeal of a
revolutionary sublime Other, to which Communist protagonists directed their longing, has led to a conception of revolutionary narration as a process of sublimation.

The sublimation thesis was first advanced by Chris Berry in his study of the Republican-era classic *Big Road* (*Da lu*; dir. Sun Yu, 1934), which, in Berry’s reading, “attempts to arouse revolutionary ardor by the arousal of libidinal drives and their redirection towards the object of revolution.”¹ Later, in one of the finest attempts in Anglophone scholarship to reach a deeper understanding of films of the Mao era, Ban Wang developed the sublimation thesis with a view to explaining how revolutionary films provided pleasure for spectators:

 Far from repressing the individual’s psychic and emotional energy in a puritanical fashion, Communism is quite inclined to display it—with a political sleight of hand. It recycles the energy, as if it were waste products or superfluous material lying outside the purposive march of history by rechanneling it into transforming the old and making the new individual. This method launches individuals on the way to a more passionate and often ecstatic state of mind and experience.²

Consequently, argues Wang, “an intense emotional exuberance marks Communist culture,” and instead of seeing the sublimation process as “the dreaded ‘collectivization of the self’” of Cold War caricature, we should acknowledge that in revolutionary films of the Mao era (as was likely the case for many in the revolution itself), it is precisely through collective action that the individual finds the greatest meaning and fulfillment.³

One example given by Wang is the blockbuster film *Song of Youth* (*Qingchun zhi ge*; dir. Cui Wei and Chen Huai’ai, 1959), in which the heroine, Lin Daojing, begins the film as an utterly alone and suicidal young woman who has run away from an arranged marriage (fig. 3), and ends it as a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) member fully and exuberantly engaged in the mass opposition to Japanese imperialism (fig. 4).⁴ In the film’s finale Daojing helps to lead an anti-Japanese protest march in 1935, bravely persevering in the face of police swords and water hoses. The exciting sequence conveys not just the revolutionary potential of the masses but, just as importantly, the deep personal fulfillment that Daojing has gained by joining the collective struggle; communism has brought her happiness as well as purpose.

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Fig. 3 Suicidal Daojing prepares to throw herself into the ocean in the first scene

Fig. 4 Happy Daojing helps to lead a protest march in the film’s final shot
The libidinal sublimation that, according to Wang, facilitates both aesthetic pleasure and ideological interpellation in these films often plays out by way of an implied romance between the protagonist and an attractive Communist who acts as mentor. Both Red Detachment of Women and Song of Youth follow this pattern: in the former, the slave-girl-turned-revolutionary Qionghua is romantically linked, albeit only implicitly, with the handsome young cadre who saves her and later teaches her about Communism; in the latter, Daojing develops emotional attachments to a series of Communist Party members, two of whom become martyrs in the course of the film. The shift in the object of cathexis suggested by the sublimation thesis—from another person as sexual/romantic object to the Party as sublime Other—is facilitated by the depiction of Party members as robustly attractive, physically and socially, and the eroticization of the Party by means of these characters is often surprisingly direct.

An example of this dynamic in Song of Youth comes when Daojing’s husband mistakenly accuses her of adultery. The husband, Yu Yongze, depicted as a student of the reform-minded scholar Hu Shi (who would be villanized under Communism), had seduced her with his liberal, romantic outlook after saving her from a suicide attempt in the film’s opening sequence. However, during their marriage in Beijing, she becomes increasingly disenchanted by his lack of revolutionary consciousness while meanwhile being drawn to Lu Jiachuan, the handsome cadre who first teaches her about Marxism-Leninism. One night Daojing daringly stays out all night posting Communist agitprop fliers while disguised as a bourgeois “new woman” of the jazz age out for a night on the town—dressed in a fashionable cheongsam and accessorized with jewelry and high heels. When she returns home in the morning thus attired—and with an unmistakable glow about her as well (fig. 5)—her husband flies into a jealous rage and accuses her of having an affair. On the denotative level, of course, his accusation is false and only serves to increase the distance between them and accentuate his own lack of understanding of the revolutionary cause to which she has committed herself. The real problem with his accusation, however, is of course not that it is false, but rather that it is absolutely true at a deeper level: Daojing has been swept away by the Party, which, by way of its attractive representative Jiachuan, has completely replaced Yongze as the object of Daojing’s desire.
Films such as these—in which the message *Communists have more fun!* is just as central as that of any blatant ideological indoctrination—helped to form a distinctive discourse of happiness in the Mao era. The official dogma on happiness became especially self-conscious as the revolution reached the age at which the transmission of its legacy to the young became an issue. During the “Socialist Education of the People” campaign of 1963-1964, the newspaper *Chinese Youth* ran a series of articles that discussed the correct understanding of “happiness,” emphasizing that happiness in fact comes from the elevation of the collective over the self, the proletariat over the bourgeoisie, asceticism over hedonism, and revolutionary zeal over material satisfaction. The main idea of the campaign, argues Xiaobing Tang, was that “You are actually happy.” For example, the paper advised, “Young comrades, we live in a happy country. We must not live in happiness without knowing what it is.”

As Tang shows, a play first performed in 1963 and adapted into a 1965 film, *The Young Generation* (Nianqing de yidai; dir. Zhao Ming) explicitly addressed the problem of how youth should realize happiness, and in particular the need for them to understand the profound debt owed to the revolutionary elders who made possible their current happiness (however unconscious the callous young may have been of the latter). Needless to say, here we see a creeping anxiety on the part of the Party that self-fulfillment by means of identification with the revolutionary collective might not be enough to convince the people of their own happiness indefinitely—an anxiety that the post-Mao reform era launched by Deng Xiaoping would more than justify.

**Reverse Sublimation**

If revolutionary films of the Mao era often enacted the sublimation of sexual love to politics, a striking feature of the current “reform-era” stage of development of the People’s Republic (a condition officially called “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” but known more widely as “capitalism”) is the extent to which the dynamic has been nearly reversed. Indeed, beginning
around the turn of the twenty-first century, a number of films from China depicted heteronormative romantic love as the singular true value in life, sometimes even represented as explicitly trumping any sort of political commitment. Whereas Mao-era cinema enacted the sublimation of love and sexuality to politics, in these recent films the political becomes at best an ornament for tales of sexual passion, at worst a completely repressed aspect of social life. From the perspective of Western liberalism, this shift represents the newfound freedom of the individual in China to pursue personal desires during the reform era. In fact, such films actively propagate a neoliberal model of an entirely apolitical existence and the type of subjectivity most suited to global capitalism: the desiring individual “as a bundle of needs waiting to be met,” for example. As such, their significance goes beyond China as they are of a piece with the global trend of post-1968 depoliticization.

One example of the new relation of love to politics in Chinese cinema is Lou Ye’s 2006 film *Summer Palace*. The film never received distribution in China, and in fact was banned, its director forbidden from making films for five years, ostensibly for illegally entering the film in international festival competitions without obtaining the necessary permission in advance. Despite this bureaucratic rationale, the ban was widely interpreted as the result of the film’s controversial content. *Summer Palace* featured a number of explicit sex scenes, but it also contained potentially explosive political content, being the first mainland Chinese feature film to directly depict the student protests of 1989 that led to the violence in Tiananmen Square on June Fourth. However, the most revealing aspect of the film may be neither the sexual content nor the representation of political dissent but rather the odd manner in which the two subjects were articulated together in the filmic text—or, more precisely, the way the political failed to find any meaningful expression beyond the personalized libidinal narrative.

*Summer Palace* is narrated from the point of view of Yu Hong, who enters college at the fictional BeiQing University (an obvious stand-in for Beijing University) in the fall of 1988. Just before leaving for college, she loses her virginity to her high school boyfriend, and upon arriving in Beijing she joins a student scene of bohemian pleasures: drinking and dancing in bars frequented by foreigners, listening to rock music, engaging in casual sex with classmates, and the like. Soon Yu Hong meets the love of her life, Zhou Wei, with whom she has a torrid, tumultuous love affair during her freshman year. At the end of that year, in spring 1989, the Tiananmen protests erupt, and Yu Hong, Zhou Wei, and their various friends are swept up in the student activism of the time. In an extended sequence, we see Yu Hong, Zhou Wei, and other students boarding trucks in droves to go to central Beijing, all the while laughing, chanting, singing, and screaming in excitement. In the end, of course, the protests are crushed, and the students’ screams of joy turn to cries of agony as they throw rocks at a burning truck, run from police, and lose track of each other. Eventually Yu Hong and Zhou Wei part ways, and the film quickly skips ahead through the years, depicting Yu Hong having a series of sordid sexual relations (an affair with a married man, sex with another man in a squalid public bathroom, and so on) as she moves first back to her hometown, then to Shenzhen, then Wuhan, and then Chongqing. Meanwhile, Zhou Wei and several of her other friends move to Germany, with one eventually committing suicide.

Throughout *Summer Palace* the point of view is closely tied to Yu Hong, in part through a confessional voiceover narration in the form of her diary entries. Despite her occasional attendance at college classes and her involvement in the student protests, her consciousness and the very structure of her subjectivity seem to be tied entirely to her turbulent romantic life,
and in particular her obsessive and often self-destructive love for Zhou Wei. The film features ten scenes of sex or post-coital partial nudity, taking up a full nineteen minutes of the film’s running time. The sex scenes quickly become almost relentlessly monotonous—featuring passionate kissing, panting missionary-style intercourse, partial to full nudity, male (but never female) orgasm, and post-coital kissing, crying, and cigarette smoking. Most of these scenes involve Yu Hong and Zhou Wei, but some depict Zhou Wei and a later girlfriend or Yu Hong and her later lovers. In the latter case, Yu Hong’s voiceover narration makes clear that her predilection for casual sex is a way of working out her lingering obsession with Zhou Wei. As the camera shows explicit views of Yu Hong having sex with her married lover in Wuhan, for instance, her voiceover relates the following:

Looking through my photo album, I came across a picture of Zhou Wei. My heart raced wildly. One look, and the joy and pain flooded back. Staring at his image, I asked myself how it was that on this serene face—open, frank, and resolute—I saw no trace, no shadow that could make me doubt? Why could nothing he’d said to me or done to me prevent my heart from going out to him? . . . The memories brought tears, and the resolve to endure.

The later scene of sex with another man in a public bathroom has this accompanying diary entry:

Zhou Wei, why am I always so anxious to make love with the men in my life? Because it’s only when we make love that you understand that I’m good. I’ve tried countless ways. In the end, I’ve chosen this very special, very direct path.

Thus Yu Hong appears to indulge in a pleasurable suffering centered on self-destructive obsession with a love object. The sex scenes, which were clearly deemed excessive by the Chinese authorities, dramatize both the intensity of the lead female character’s passion as well as the masochistic nature of her love (Yu Hong is repeatedly slapped, at her own request, by Zhou Wei in one scene, for example).

Since the Chinese authorities gave just a bureaucratic explanation for the banning of Summer Palace, we can only speculate as to whether it caused greater offense with its explicit sex scenes or its political content. To my mind, however, the great irony of the film is that, in one sense at least, it in fact fully supports the official government narrative of the 1989 protests, and indeed if the Communist Party cultural mandarins had had any sense of subtlety they might have promoted the film as an instructional illustration of their version of history, sex scenes notwithstanding. The reason for this is the bizarrely complete disconnection between the political events of 1989 depicted in the film on the one hand and its overall mode of narration and characterization on the other. In not a single scene do we see Yu Hong, Zhou Wei, or any other student utter so much as a solitary sentence providing social context or political motivation for the Tiananmen Square protests. On the contrary, the students are depicted as entirely narcissistic and hedonistic, and their joining in the protests appears to be no more profoundly motivated than their decisions to go to rock-and-roll bars or to have sex with each other. In short, if the Chinese government account of the students in Tiananmen Square is that they were impulsive, unreasonable, lacking in understanding of their own goals, and spiritually polluted by Western influences, then it could hardly find a better illustration than in this film. As a result, while the film depicts the political through its unprecedented use even of documentary images from the
actual Tiananmen protests (a point I will return to later), the political is nonetheless never meaningfully integrated with the characterizations and the narrative as a whole, which instead hews closely to Yu Hong’s private, self-indulgent libidinal trajectory.

Thus, while Mao-era classics such as *Red Detachment of Women* and *Song of Youth* encourage an actual libidinized politics, *Summer Palace* reveals a symptomatic underlying rupture between the political and the libidinal in the post-Mao era, its ostensible social message of solidarity with the 1989 student protesters in Tiananmen Square undermined by its myopic tale of an individual’s psychosexual cul-de-sac.

In fact, this film is merely the most politically sensitive instance of the thoroughgoing depoliticization of the public sphere and redirection of subjectivity into the realm of individual desire rather than social commitment in the postsocialist age. A more typical and non-controversial example of this trend is Xu Jinglei’s 2004 film *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (*Yige mosheng nüren de laixin*), a remake of the 1948 Max Ophüls film of the same English title, which was in turn an adaptation of Stefan Zweig’s Austrian novella of 1922.

By the time she directed and starred in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, Xu Jinglei was already a cultural phenomenon in her own right. She had studied acting at the Beijing Film Academy, starred in several films by hip young directors, begun directing her own films, and launched what became the most popular blog in China by 2006. For the lead male role in her adaptation of *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, Xu recruited Jiang Wen, one of China’s top actors and a director himself, to play a man who comes home one night to find a letter from a woman whose name he does not recognize. Just as in the precedents by Zweig and Ophüls, the letter reveals that the writer has always been in love with the recipient, having obsessed about him since they were neighbors during her childhood, and that they have in fact had sexual liaisons and even conceived a child together, all without his explicitly recognizing her as anything more than a fleeting romantic conquest whom he soon forgot. Xu’s adaptation begins in China in the 1930s and continues to 1948, when the woman makes a final sacrifice of her life and writes the letter explaining all that has transpired. The film thus encompasses the period of the War of Resistance against Japan, but for the most part it only deals with the tumultuous political events of the time obliquely, keeping the focus almost entirely on the obsessive, romantic love of the “unknown” woman for the man.

When asked why the war itself is never shown in the film, Xu Jinglei answered as follows:

> What I wanted to say in this movie was about love. I made a period movie and described the love story. I wanted to portray a simple love affair between two persons, to focus on the emotional relationship between the man and the woman and what happened between them. Everything else is just background.

The one moment when the divorce of personal relations from wider politics breaks down is when, in the period leading up to all-out war with Japan, the young woman, in keeping with the spirit of the age, is marching in an anti-Japanese protest rally with a large group of other students. She suddenly sees Mr. Xu, the neighbor with whom she had fallen hopelessly in love while still a pubescent girl, taking photos of the crowd. When the protesters are violently dispersed, Xu pulls the woman into a doorway and keeps her safe from the public struggle by taking her up some stairs and quietly hiding with her inside a building (fig. 6). Any investment
she had in the political demonstration is soon forgotten amidst the pleasure of the chance encounter with the man she loves (fig. 7), and indeed she quickly realizes her longtime dream by belonging to him for a night.

In an analysis of the Ophüls film version of *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, Gaylyn Studlar notes the extent to which it fits the “repetition of scenarios of masochism” characteristic of the “women’s film,” in which “apparent capitulation to ‘romantic love’ demands to be read as a masquerade for a perverse sexual scenario that freezes ‘love’ into a single, compulsively repeated pattern unconsciously replaying a past object relationship.”¹⁰ The “unknown woman” in this remake thus anticipates the masochistic performance of Yu Hong in *Summer Palace*, in that she seems to be locked in a perpetual repetition of a primordial scene of self-negation with regard to a primary love object, on whom she has willfully set her libidinal coordinates for the rest of her life.

When she began adapting the script for *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, Xu Jinglei originally planned to set the film in the contemporary era, from the late 1970s to the 1990s. It was precisely politics—or rather the desire to completely avoid politics—that caused her to change the setting to the Republican era during the writing of the script:

> When I was one-third through, it became difficult to continue because I discovered the script encroached on issues like unmarried mothers and high-class prostitution. If I were to portray these in this period, it would involve social issues and this I didn’t want. I did not want to discuss social issues. I felt they would detract from my original intention and the Chinese censors would intervene. So I decided on the 1930s and 40s.¹¹

In other words, *Letter from an Unknown Woman* not only depicts, particularly in the anti-Japanese protest scene and its aftermath, the rejection of any political significance in favor of obsessive romantic love, but it also was itself calculated to avoid any semblance of political relevance.

**Pathologies of Fulfillment and Generic Residua**

Obviously the version of romantic love presented in films such as *Summer Palace* and *Letter from an Unknown Woman* is a fundamentally pathological one. Such depictions of obsessive sexual attachment suggest that when the individual is so completely cathexed in a single, highly
private object that it becomes the only conceivable source of happiness, happiness paradoxically becomes impossible. The relative lack of any broader symbolic social order anchoring personal identity in favor of an exclusive imaginary relation with a singular love object inexorably leads, in the case of both films, to self-destruction, or at least the self-inflicted perpetual misery of *amour fou*. The complete identification of the self with an individual other at the expense of any wider social Other makes the self impossible to sustain, and the self-negating excesses of such a masochistic object relation are on full display in the films themselves.

Of course, the sublimation of the self to the sublime Other of revolution carries with it its own potential pathology, which in China the excesses of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) made abundantly clear. This pathology has perhaps been most clearly delineated by Slavoj Žižek in his discussion of “the fetish of the Party.” The fundamental ideological dynamic of totalitarian parties, argues Žižek, is to replace the private object of desire with the “social phantasm,” so that for ultimate personal fulfillment subjects look not to private objects but rather to the “social body,” or “society as a body.” The problem with this structure, according to Žižek's take on Lacan, is that usually the phantasm of desire is intrinsically nonuniversalizable—its object basically personal—as opposed to the “big” Other of symbolic Law, which is “universal in its very nature.” This paradoxical dynamic, however, is the defining trait of the “totalitarian” social link,” which Žižek says “is precisely the loss of distance between the phantasm that gives the indicators of the enjoyment of the subject and the formal-universal Law that rules the social exchange”: “The phantasm is ‘socialized’ in an immediate manner as the social law coincides with the injunction ‘Enjoy!’ It starts to function as a superego imperative.”

Indeed, despite the obvious mechanisms of sublimation of libidinal desires found in revolutionary films—such as the implied romances with Communist cadres that are not consummated but instead redirected into cathexis in the Party/state itself—we could even say that the *ideal* of Maoist revolutionary aesthetics would be something like that of Deleuze and Guattari, which refuses the necessity of repression or sublimation altogether. Instead, Deleuze and Guattari insist “that the social field is immediately invested by desire, that it is the historically determined product of desire, and that libido has no need of any mediation or sublimation, any psychic operation, any transformation, in order to invade and invest the productive forces and the relations of production. *There is desire and the social, and nothing else.*” Consequently, “fantasy is never individual: it is *group fantasy*.”

By the early 1960s, as we have seen, the CCP was becoming increasingly explicit in the superego injunction “Enjoy!” as it launched coordinated campaigns to convince youth in particular that they were already happy. Such a message was only an extension of the dictum *Communists have more fun!* that I have identified as a central tenet of revolutionary films throughout the Mao era. By the Cultural Revolution, represented most memorably by the films of the *yangbanxi* or model plays, an extreme was reached in which every phrase, gesture, and act of everyday life was supposed to be directly imbued with the libidinal fervor of revolutionary commitment.

The result, however, seems to confirm Žižek’s assertion that a political order built on the social phantasm is “necessarily self-destructive; it cannot be stabilized; it cannot arrive at a minimum of homeostasis that would allow it to reproduce in a circuit of equilibrium. It is constantly shaken by convulsions.” During the Cultural Revolution, the impossible ideal of direct, unmediated libidinal investment in the social field of revolution arguably led to, on the one
hand, gang fights among Red Guards and a witch-hunt mentality of seeking out and exposing imagined enemies of the revolution and, on the other, quite possibly a crippling cynicism when the quotidian routines of daily survival failed to live up to the impossibly heroic ideals espoused in official discourse.

If such a direct and intense libidinal investment in the political proves to be both pathological and ultimately impossible, the extreme privatization of desire seen in many post-Mao films of the PRC raises, as we have seen, a different but equally troubling set of issues. In *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, *Summer Palace*, and countless other films of millennial China, we have to trace a new model of the relationship between love and politics, the private object of desire and the realm of collective ideology, the imaginary and the symbolic, the *objet petit a* and the “Big Other.” These films might of course be read in terms of a *desublimation* that happens in the postsocialist period, in which the private realm reasserts itself and is represented as outstripping the public and the political in the construction of human subjectivity and desire. But we could also read the films as on the contrary a sublimation of *politics itself*, in that the political somehow becomes inarticulable as any kind of coherent, sustained collective commitment, and any urges in that direction are rechanneled into purely personal obsessions.

Whether sex is sublimated by politics or politics by sex, an interesting question that arises is how the repressed might return. In both cases in the history of PRC cinema, it appears to return in the form of narrative conventions or genre citations that ultimately are subverted or belied by the overall narrative system of the film. At issue in this kind of sublimation is not necessarily or primarily the sublimation of drives or desires within the libidinal economy of the films’ fictional protagonists, nor the sublimation of similar desires in the viewing audience, for whom the film functions as dream work or as fantasy to structure desire through a narrative vector. Instead, what is more interesting in the present context is a process of *trans-narrational sublimation*, in which narrative elements from previous modes of filmmaking—elements that formerly had served as textual dominants—appear in the new context only to be overwhelmed or suppressed within a new narrative system.

In the case of revolutionary films of the Mao era, the conventions in question are those of classical Hollywood romance. Both of the main examples we have considered from that era—*Song of Youth* and *Red Detachment of Women*—have clear instances in the form of scenes that—in the script—seem to be all about the growing bond between the female protagonist and the Communist cause, but in the visual elements of the mise-en-scène and editing pattern unmistakably deploy the genre conventions of classical Hollywood heteronormative romance. Thus, in *Red Detachment*, when Qionghua reunites with Changqing, the handsome cadre who had saved her, after a period of separation while she recovered from a gunshot wound, the scene may read verbally as the growing comradeship between an aspiring Communist Party member and her mentor, but the use of shot/reverse-shot editing, close-ups, and non-verbal performance cues (figs. 8–11) all lead us to a much more personal conclusion: this is a woman in love (and a man inclined to reciprocate).
Even more such examples can be found in *Song of Youth*. Most notable is a scene late in the film in which Daojing, the protagonist, meets with Jiang Hua, the last in the series of Party members/mentors in her story and someone who appears to be a potential romantic partner (and in fact *is* in the popular novel on which the film is based). They row in a boat on Beijing’s famous Beihai Lake in a quintessentially romantic setting (whether the precedent is Hollywood or traditional Chinese drama and fiction). Again the editing pattern (shot/reverse shot), framing (ever closer as the scene progresses), and performances closely follow the conventions of Hollywood romance. In fact, reading the scene only visually, one might guess that the gentle yet confident man is proposing to the shy yet overjoyed woman, the scene ending with a close-up of her happy smile and a tear of pleasure in her eye (figs. 12-15).
The impression would seem to be borne out by the cut to the following scene, in which Daojing stands with Jiang Hua raising her hand in a solemn ceremony. Of course, this visual reading is belied by the actual film script: what really has played out on the lake was that Jiang Hua informed her that she was at long last being admitted to the Communist Party, the following scene being her induction ceremony. Similarly, the potential romance of the scene in *Red Detachment* described above is quickly followed by a discussion of military strategy between Qionghua and Changqing, who in fact goes on to lecture her about the need to sublimate her personal desires to the collective struggle of the masses throughout China.

In both cases, then, the genre conventions of Hollywood romance are deployed in a way that would seem to facilitate sublimation. The spectatorial desire to see the potential romance consummated is redirected to the didactic function of a cinema explicitly aimed at serving the Communist revolution. That is, given the fact that the implied romances never actually occur in these films, the conventions of classical Hollywood romance appear here as generic residua—leftovers from an earlier mode of narration that survive because Chinese cinematic “revolutionary realism plus revolutionary romanticism,” like the broader category of transnational socialist realism of which it is a variety, is in fact highly dependent on classical Hollywood narration in its stylistic details. At the same time, it is precisely through these generic residua, though apparently now deprived of their original signifieds (those of heteronormative romantic love) that sublimation is carried out on the textual level, with the residual generic signifiers now given the new signifieds of the Communist cause (thus
constituting a specific example of the “political sleight of hand” described by Ban Wang in the passage quoted earlier). Spectators cued to invest their desire in romantic love through identification with characters have their cathexis gingerly shifted from the sexual bond to the political, in theory losing little of its libidinal intensity.

Yet, if this is how the sublimation process plays out through the details of film narrative technique, we may speculate whether contemporary audiences necessarily experienced the films this way. We have anecdotal accounts, for example, of men who vividly recall being sexually aroused by the Cultural Revolution ballet version of *Red Detachment of Women*.18 In the case of the scenes described above, we can also question whether the political meanings inscribed in the film scripts necessarily trumped in the end the romantic signifieds of the Hollywood visual conventions deployed. Might audiences not have consciously and fully enjoyed the alternative narrative provided by the visual text, without necessarily having that pleasure rechanneled into the political cathexis? In fact, it is just such an over-privileging of the written over the visual text that would create an opening for filmmakers of the early reform era—particularly “Fifth Generation” innovators such as Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou in films like *Yellow Earth* (*Huang tudi*, 1985) and *The Big Parade* (*Da yuebing*, 1986)—to surreptitiously subvert revolutionary film conventions just by virtue of tweaking the imagery in various subtle ways while using scripts that were relatively uncontroversial.19 In the case of the revolutionary films examined here, we can and should analyze the textual practices through which the sublimation process was mapped out, but we also should recognize the possibility that audiences may have enjoyed (mis)reading the visual cues of Hollywood romance according to their “original,” unsublimated meanings and taken pleasure in the implied love stories featuring attractive actors whether or not the political meanings had much effect on their consciousness. Indeed, in the form of visual conventions and genre cues, the “repressed” libidinal content turns out not so much to return as to have remained there on the surface all along.

Can we find a similarly ambiguous process of repression, sublimation, and yet ongoing presence in the form of generic residua in the post-Mao era, when the sexual and the political seem to have switched dialectical positions? In *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, as we have seen, the tale of obsessive romantic longing is at one point ruptured by a throwback to the genre of Mao-era revolutionary cinema. To an audience familiar with precedents such as *Song of Youth*, the shots of the protagonist marching in protest against Japanese aggression would be an immediately identifiable convention from the earlier genre of the revolutionary *bildungsroman*. (See figs. 16 & 17.) Just when this generic residuum threatens to sweep the lead young woman into a social movement and a political praxis, her fetishized private love object almost magically appears to pull her out of the public space of the street into a private space where her attention can be refocused on his apparently irresistible attraction.
If there is any kind of trans-narrational sublimation happening here, it would indeed have to be a reverse sublimation in which the public and political passions of the prior narrative mode are quickly channeled into the private, masochistic libidinal trajectory of the “unknown woman” in the post-revolutionary film. However, just as was the case with the Mao-era films’ use of classical Hollywood conventions for romance, we may well ask whether the substitution in question—here the replacement of a political cathexis with a romantic, sexual one—is likely to be so seamless. Alternatively, we may view the surprising, solitary irruption of the revolution into the tale of obsessive love as a generic residuum that in fact calls into question everything else in the text. Here the repressed returns as a potentially damning judgment: why, in an era of anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist revolution, is this heroine consuming herself with love for a Westernized intellectual/artist rather than casting her lot with the Chinese masses? (In earlier segments we have seen that Xu is a musician who plays Western classical music, dresses in Western leisure outfits, and adorns his home with Western-style furniture and decorations.) The generic residuum quickly passes and is integrated, if not sublimated, into the narrative of privatized narcissistic desire, but the potential for critique by means of its suggestion of revolution and public action remains.

In *Summer Palace*, the mismatch between the libidinal and the political plays out in the extreme rupture the filmic text displays between the overall narrative of love and sex on the one hand and the irruption of the Tiananmen political protests into the narration midway through the film on the other. Here the documentary images taken from Western news coverage of the actual protests in 1989—inserted into the fictional scenes shot more than fifteen years later—stand out from the rest of the film as an undisguised shard of history within a fictional fantasy. The grainy televised images contrast with the 35 millimeter high resolution of the rest of the film, while the physical appearance—hairstyles, dress, and so on—of the people in the actual 1989 protests cannot help but call attention to how much the fictional students in the film look suspiciously like they are from 2006 rather than 1989 in terms of their sense of fashion. (In one sex scene Yu Hong and Zhou Wei even share earbud-style headphones, which would hardly have been widespread in Beijing in 1989.) In short, the generic residuum interrupting the fictional narrative in this film, the moment at which the repressed political returns, is precisely the documentary footage awkwardly inserted into the stylishly shot fiction film.
Here again, we may question whether the political signifieds of the documentary images, and the fictional students’ participation in the protests, are really suppressed by the text as a whole or not. As I have noted already, the script itself gives absolutely no context or rationale for the students’ political convictions, and indeed the film may be read as supporting the official government account of the Tiananmen events insofar as the protests seem consistent with an overall lifestyle of hedonism, irrationality, and irresponsibility on the part of the students. At the same time, however, the visual documentary images themselves are quite powerful, and spectators could well have been spurred to provide their own context and rationale for the protests despite the lack of representation of them in the film. Thus while the film as a whole appears to suggest obsessive romantic love as the ultimate fulfillment available in life, the out-of-place documentary footage potentially remains a fundamentally unassimilated textual remainder, a splinter of social reality that disrupts audience absorption in the private fantasy.

Impossibilities of Happiness

In these four select but in some ways representative films of the revolutionary and post-revolutionary eras of the PRC, we have a reversed pair of images of the aporias of happiness under extremes of communism and capitalism. The former presents a model of fulfillment in which the individual subject ideally achieves something like direct libidinal investment in the revolutionary collective so as to merge with the sublime subject of History, with all secondary libidinal attachments (of heroines to handsome Party cadres, for example, or of spectators to the attractive heroines themselves) serving ultimately as mere means to this end. The latter suggests on the contrary a model of subjectivity in which the social/political becomes bracketed entirely, while the individual seeks fulfillment purely by means of private(ized) libidinal obsessions.

In both cases, as we have seen, the dynamic appears to lead to some form of self-negation. Insofar as the revolutionary subject loses all capacity for the private fantasy and invests desire completely into the public sphere of revolutionary action, the public sphere itself becomes a dangerous space of “fanatics” who end up obsessively seeking and persecuting the corrupting counterrevolutionary “other” in their midst. In the postsocialist case, in contrast, the privatization of desire to the point that no fulfillment at all can be found in collective political identity or social action leads to an ironically self-negating narcissism—a subject so consumed with a private object of desire that the ultimate impossibility of merging with or being consumed by it results in compulsive self-destruction.

Of course, both of these are fantasized, fictional outcomes that may only occasionally find approximations in real people’s lives. More often, the revolutionary subject will continually fail to reach the ideal of complete identification with the social phantasm, while the postsocialist/capitalist subject will be haunted by at least the possibility of social(ist) values and action on behalf of the collective rather than just individual obsessions. The implication here is thus not that the Chinese (or anyone else) ought to find a golden mean between the two, but rather that, while the medium of cinema is likely to express through its narratives whatever ideals of fulfillment hold current dominance in the culture, it may well also find means, such as countervailing generic residua, to represent what is necessarily repressed by those very ideals.
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Notes

3 Ibid., 124, 127.
4 The contrast between Daojing’s desolate individualism at the beginning of the film and her fulfillment through collective belonging at the end was first analyzed by Dai Jinhua and discussed further by Ban Wang. See Dai Jinhua, Dianying lilun yu piping shouce (A manual of film theory and criticism) (Beijing: Kexue jishu chubanshe, 1993), 175-76; and Wang, 136.
6 I first discussed this phenomenon in Jason McGrath, “The New Formalism: Mainland Chinese Cinema at the Turn of the Century,” in China’s Literary and Cultural Scenes at the Turn of the 21st Century, edited by Jie Lu (London: Routledge, 2008), 217. Other films in this category include Spring Subway (Kaiwang chuntian de ditie; dir. Zhang Yibai, 2002), Dazzling (Huayan; dir. Li Xin, 2002), Where Have All the Flowers Gone (Na shi hua kai; dir. Gao Xiaosong, 2002), Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress (Xiao caifeng; dir. Dai Sijie, 2002), and Baobei in Love (Lian'aizhong de Baobei; dir. Li Shaohong, 2004), just to name a few.
7 Laura Kipnis, Against Love: A Polemic (New York: Vintage, 2003), 71. In this book-length essay, Kipnis relates the ideology of romantic love to capitalism, finding that “in commodity culture [love] conforms to the role of a cheap commodity, spit out at the end of the assembly line in cookie-cutter forms, marketed to bored and alienated producer-consumers as an all-purpose salve to emptiness.” Ibid., 195.
8 For an extensive discussion of the ideological and cultural implications of the postsocialist condition in China, see my Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).
9 “Xu Jinglei: In Front of and Behind the Camera” (interview), Kinema (spring 2006), http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/jingl061.htm.
11 “Xu Jinglei: In Front of and Behind the Camera.”
13 Ibid., 26.
Ibid., 27.
16 Žižek, 28.
17 Though the terms have important distinctions in psychoanalytic theory, generally speaking from Freud’s *Civilization and its Discontents* to Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization*, sublimation is closely linked to repression, which would be the dynamic that occurs before the libido is rechanneled into social labor of some kind. Here, of course, we are using psychoanalytic terms not in any clinical sense but as metaphors for textual operations in the field of culture and thus ideology.
18 In the documentary *Yang Ban Xi: the 8 Model Works* (dir. Yan Ting Yuen, 2005), a 39-year-old artist recalls that his first sexual feelings were aroused by the revolutionary ballet *Red Detachment of Women* because the dancing women wore relatively revealing military uniforms: “At last we’d discovered something real in the Revolution.” Similarly, actor/director Jiang Wen (who plays Xu in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*) has claimed that a viewing of *Red Detachment of Women* “was the first time I ever experienced sexual feelings.” Quoted in Jerome Silbergeld, *Body in Question: Image and Illusion in Two Chinese Films by Director Jiang Wen* (Princeton, N.J.: P.Y. and Kinmay W. Tang Center for East Asian Art, 2008), 33.
19 See, for example, Stephanie Hemelryk Donald’s perceptive analysis of the way *Yellow Earth* subverts the “socialist realist gaze,” in her *Public Secrets, Public Spaces: Cinema and Civility in China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 57-83.