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摘要

楊德昌的電影《牯嶺街少年殺人事件》(1991)，作為一部黑色往事追憶錄，很好展示了「國家」的命題如何介入黑色電影這個電影類型，相關情形並未見於西方。該影片印證了佛洛伊德「原始聚社」的理論：只要族中長老一死，族裡男丁皆須朝拜，作其陽物崇拜。電影中這個主題發生在兩個層次上：一是小混混們的行事邏輯，一是黨國的治國邏輯，兩者之間相互呼應。一股黑色電影常見的被迫害妄想狂於焉誕生，並由影片中一個致命的女人推上高潮。然而她的面貌模糊神秘，以致父權犬儒的權力結構隱而不顯。

關鍵詞：楊德昌；致命女人；黑色電影；國家；佛洛伊德；政治

Abstract

Edward Yang's *A Brighter Summer Day* (dir. Edward Yang, 1991), a film noir *de temps perdu*, serves as a good example as to how nation has a role to play in this film genre—a role not found in its counterpart in the West. The film plays out Freud's primal horde theory, according to which as soon as the Father is dead, all the sons of the land have to gather around his house to re-confirm their collective identity that lies in the ontology of their penises. The film plays out this motif so impressively as it occurs on the level of the juvenile gang members and that of the political power structure alike, echoing each other. The paranoid mood lends its power to the mental chiaroscuro that a film noir needs, when this mood gets a further push by the femme fatale in the film. So long as she remains a mystery, the cynical power structure of the primal horde remains unearthed.

Keywords: Edward Yang, femme fatale, film noir, nation, Sigmund Freud, politics

Nation as Noir

Kien Ket Lim

Of all the genres Chinese cinema has adopted from the West, *film noir* happens to be the most enigmatic one. It rarely makes an appearance in Chinese, but when it does, the genre breathes life into the theme of national allegory, very much at odds with the state of *noir* in the West. This study aims at tracing such an intriguing reception by the Chinese filmmakers and the impact *film noir* has on them, and more importantly, establishing a sustainable theory for this newly acquired dialectic of thriller and national allegory.

The specimen to be dissected in this study is Edward Yang's *A Brighter Summer Day* (1991). Yang's noir *de temps perdu* is set in the heyday of the Cold War when Taiwan was under the right-wing autocratic rule. In an uncanny manner, the juvenile delinquents controlled their clan members (and women) in the way their pretentious elders governed the island. Somehow the juniors' herd instinct is driven by a *femme fatale*, ironically also their captive, whose murder deconstructs the glossy surface of their male bonding. The protagonist, alienated first by his unfriendly primal horde (read, Freudian), ends up killing this (wrong) woman he falls for, to desperately recuperate the ethical faith he has in it.¹ The state steps in, not so much to redress the wrongful death of the innocent, but to incriminate him, to unwittingly swallow the cynical ethics by which the horde abides. When a woman must die (all the more so in an abject manner), the nation, playing the horde's superego, becomes itself an impossible project of ethics—unless it is downright *noir*.

What is ironic in all this is the fact that woman has been taken as a symbol of national fate in Chinese cinemas for decades (Lu, "Chinese Cinemas" 20; Reynaud 546). Such is a recurrent pattern in Chinese cinemas to which we the regular viewers of Chinese films have grown too insensitive to note, a pattern in which the national plight is invariably represented by women's suffering. To just see any woman and her life being trampled on the screen is to directly or

¹ Compare this interesting note by Freud in *Totem and Taboo*: "Sexual desires do not unite men but divide them. Though brothers had banded together in order to overcome their father, they were all one another's rivals in regard to women. . . . The new organization would have collapsed in a struggle of all against all Thus the brothers had no alternative, if they were to live together, but . . . to institute the law against incest, by which they all alike renounced the women whom they desired and who had been their chief motive for dispatching their father" (144).

indirectly see a nation in peril, afflicted by either the imminent threat of Japanese imperialism in the thirties, the wear and tear of civil war in the late forties, or the pre-Tiananmen disillusionment, or the subsequent post-Tiananmen shell shock. Recognizing such a pattern enables us to trace out the secret bonding among the male directors like FEI Mu (*Spring of a Small Town* [*Xiaochengzhichun*], 1948), CHEN Kaige (*Yellow Earth* [*Huang tudi*], 1984), and ZHANG Yimou (*Raise the Red Lantern* [*Dahong denglong gaogaogua*], 1991), even though their films have been produced decades apart. To this list of films we can certainly add more to include Evans CHAN's (CHEN Yaocheng) *To Liv(e)* (*Fushi lianqu*, 1991), which is on Tiananmen and Hong Kong's coloniality; CHANG Yi's (ZHANG Yi) *Kuei Mei, A Woman* (*Wo zheyang guole yisheng*, 1985) on Taiwan's neo-colonialist predicament; HOU Hsiao-hsien's (HOU Xiaoxian) *Good Men, Good Women* (*Haonan haonü*, 1995) on the island's post-coloniality, and *ad nauseam*. However rich and complex they may be as films, each of them is thematically straightforward when a female character is called upon to bear the brunt of a faltering nationhood, identity, or mirror image.² A narcissistic inspection of the shaky nationalism in question, be it postsocialist or republican, nativist or colonial, soon fills the ideological undercurrent of those films.

This identity crisis in Chinese cinemas reveals the disturbing sexual anxiety of quite a few male directors. It is as if the Father is now dead, and all the sons of the Chinese land have to gather around his house to re-confirm their collective identity that lies in the ontology of their penises. Perhaps, they reflect, the threat of castration is now gone with the Father, who according to their phantasy, imposed the threat, but then that would mean that castration has been executed, leaving no threat but guilt, which is equally unbearable to the sons.³ Perhaps, they reflect again, to compensate for the loss of the Father, each of them should in turn own a piece of him in the totem meal, re-attaching their missing members to their castrated sites, so to guard their newly recuperated supreme identity in one form of Chinese nationalism or another against all else. But soon the women that the dead Father left behind complicate the matter, when they

² See also Chen Xiaomei's chapter in her book *Occidentalism* on the playwrights of May-Fourth period explains how the woman motif works as a "national allegory" (she does not use this phrase).

³ A certain logical necessity is pre-supposed here. Kristeva: "the castration fantasy and its correlative (penis envy) are hypotheses, a priori suppositions intrinsic to the theory itself, in the sense that these are not the ideological fantasies of their inventor [Freud] but, rather, logical necessities to be placed at the 'origin' in order to explain what unceasingly functions in neurotic discourse." (197)

are to be wrested by the sons, the savage horde over whom harsh prohibition of incest does not always work as planned. The sons are now wondering if they should love his women and therefore hate him, or revere him but still love them. In any case, the sons have come to realize that they must be cautious with women, or they may lose their filial faith in their Daddy and lose their identity altogether; or worse still, overpowered by their desire for his women, the sons may end up butchering each other, as they once probably did to their Father.

This is only the beginning story of what I would in a moment call the “exchange of women” in Chinese cinemas. Such an Oedipal scenario in modern Chinese cultural production has been acknowledged in one way or another, unfortunately for the wrong reasons. For instance, one might want to call the *quest* for a national identity we lay out above as “national allegory” after Fredric Jameson, who believes that “all third-world texts” are fundamentally such a breed (69). But unless Oedipalization is nothing but an allegory, his concept of “national allegory” will remain as a repression (forgetting) of the sexual dynamic that contributes to what has been conveniently termed “national.” If we should otherwise push Jameson’s allegorical reading of modern Chinese literature further, we would be lured into a hermeneutic vicious circle by thinking that women’s suffering as national suffering, a thematic pattern widely adopted by the male writers as it is in cinema, indeed serves to consolidate Jameson’s claim. The misconception here is mainly resulted by the word *all* in his phrase “all third-world texts,” a word being *allegorical* in purpose, with the effect of suppressing any difference among *all* third-world texts, let alone sexual difference. Not surprisingly, all the sexual dynamics involved in the making of the so-called “national allegory” simply fall out of Jameson’s allegorical horizon.

With the rise of the Fifth-generation filmmakers, the sexual charge as tightened up within the Oedipalization of Chinese cinema becomes even more pronounced in their aggressive filmic quest for a collective identity. The women’s fate that runs into the Oedipal rivalry they depict is soon portrayed in the most visually stunning manner ever. Women are first of all, as in the case of Zhang Yimou according to Rey Chow, “the bearers of the *barbaric* nature of a patriarchal system that has outlived its time and place; their abuse is a sign of China’s *backwardness*; through them we come to understand the *fundamental* horrors about a culture” (146). Such horrors, adds Chow, are elaborately melodramatized by Zhang as Oedipal rivalries between two male generations, taking women’s bodies and sexuality as the locale of those fights (147). After the patricide, the necessary Oedipal aftermath, Chow concludes, “we are made to feel that, being

fatherless, China is deprived of power; China is subaltern in the world of modern nations. At the same time, this self-subalternization is unmistakably accompanied by the fetishization of women . . .” (148). What I would add is that the swing from killing the Father, to mourning him, and eventually to fetishizing women, presents the sons’ unbearable yearning for the phallus, which only the Father can give but can take away as well. Their yearning is unbearable because they cannot hold up any further the threat of castration, nor could they live with the foreseeable guilt of being castrated, the projection of which leads them to fetishize women before they can practically “enjoy” them. In the final analysis, what matters is the right of those sons to own the phallus, and in our case, of the male directors to claim their national identity. There is therefore no surprise for Rey Chow to note that “Zhang’s interest is not inherently in women’s problems themselves” at all (147). His filmic depiction of women’s suffering is instead a matter of therapeutic exchange.

Zhang’s Oedipalization may be different in outline from the one other male directors picture, but his is nevertheless the most readily discernible one, given the melodramatic superficiality that has enhanced its glare. Perhaps Zhang’s case can serve as a textbook example to show how we can bring into rigorous analysis the even subtler, and more twisted, Oedipalization in other male filmmakers. Yet it is meanwhile essential to stress that the filmic Oedipalization we have singled out is nevertheless culturally and historically specific, strongly overdetermined by the intricate political scenario across today’s Chinese territories (the mainland, Hong Kong, and Taiwan). It must also be noted that the same historical condition has poured out more films which cannot be strictly considered as Oedipalized, even though they also address the hardship in women’s lives. One example is the films by the women filmmakers like HU Mei (*Army Nurse* [*Nüer lou*], 1986) of Beijing, Ann HUI (XU Anhua; *Song of the Exile* [*Ketu qiuhén*], 1987) and Clara LAW (LUO Zhuoyao; *Autumn Moon* [*Qiuyue*], 1992) of Hong Kong, and Sylvia CHANG (ZHANG Aijia; *Siao Yu* [*Shaonü Xiaoyu*], 1995) of Taiwan. Terms such as “women’s cinema” and “feminist film” may be helpful but do not seem to adequately describe the complexity of their works, which go beyond the gender dialectic in their own unique ways. In general, their films are more personal, at times detached from the political high talk of their immediate historical contexts, in a way making the films themselves even more perceptive in their political critiques. However, the heterogeneity of contemporary Chinese cinemas does not stop there. If we should limit our scope to films about, or related to, sexuality, gender, and women’s lives, we shall also

include films by some other male auteurs, such as XIE Fei's *Women from the Lake of Scented Souls* (*Xianghunnü*, 1992), which is a realist-humanist critique of the class difference among women in the postsocialist China; TSAI Ming-liang's (CAI Mingliang) *Vive l'amour!* (*Aiqing wansui*, 1994), an Antonionian vivisection of the late-capitalist exploitation of Taiwan's male and female working class; and WONG Kar-wai's (WANG Jiawei) *Chungking Express* (*Chongqing senlin*, 1994), a witty depiction of the extreme fluidity of gender roles, the fluidity as over-determined by the crooked colonial space in Hong Kong.

All these films have eluded the grasp of Jamesonian "national allegory," however. Or if they should be allegorized in that manner at all, any such effort will end up explaining what that manner is, but not what those films actually are. By contrast, Jameson's model seems to work better in approaching the Chinese films that adopt the theme of Oedipalization, even though the sexual dynamic therein has been repressed by that approach. But since repression is also conservation in the manner of forgetting, the sexual dynamic in fact remains functioning underneath, despite being contained at a constant level by repression. In this light "*national allegory, being a repression, is sexual in nature*"; in more practical terms, it lays out the synopsis of filmic Oedipalization we find in Chinese cinemas.

This is how we can conceptually single out the thematic pattern of "women's suffering as national suffering" recurring there by taking the sexual dynamic into account. In so doing, we do not mean to categorize into a genre or sub-genre the films that employ this thematic pattern, or we may explain away their richness and specific complexity, as Jameson's concept of "national allegory" tends to do to virtually "*all third-world texts*." Instead, what we want to establish is that this filmic pattern, while echoing and shaping the so-called "national allegory," is essentially Oedipal in nature. But soon we see the darker side of this Oedipalization, when the filmic pattern in question is self-consciously pushed to the limit by Edward Yang and Stanley Kwan, two prolific auteurs from Taiwan and Hong Kong, in their effort to literally sexualize the Jamesonian "national allegory" as upheld by that pattern. To recapitulate: now a woman is depicted in their films as facing hardship in her life; she symbolically stands for what guarantees the authenticity of China as a nation or Chinese as a race; she is surrounded by the males on some transcendental cause, such as their "collective identity." In no time the national allegory turns awry in the hands of Yang and Kwan, when she ends up being killed by the males, in murder or suicide. Dramatized as such, the murder of women turns out to be the hidden agenda of

Oedipalization, and takes place at the moment when they are most passionately loved by the savage horde.

It is love that has led the way to the downward spiral of violence in the world of Edward Yang's *A Brighter Summer Day* (*Gulingjie shaonian sharen shijian*). A translation of the Chinese title is: "A juvenile homicide on the Guling Street". The story begins in the summer of 1960, at the height of the Cold War and the internal oppression by the Kuomintang's police state in Taiwan, when the fourteen-year-old evening school student Xiao Si ("Little Fourth"--the fourth sibling in his family) falls in love with another student of his age, Xiao Ming. She is Honey's girlfriend, Honey also a teenager, being the charismatic leader of the Little Park Gang, who has killed the head of Village 217 Gang because of her. As Honey now goes into hiding, Xiao Ming is left alone wandering, surrounded by all other gang members, friends and foes alike, who not only want to "protect" her, but also own her. A delicate balance of power among them gets reshuffled when Sly, who has been a subordinate to Honey, secretly dates Xiao Ming and openly organizes a concert with the rival gang of Village 217 to make money. Xiao Ming, meanwhile, has fallen for Xiao Si, who is not a gang member himself. As he is suspected of dating her, he is repeatedly hassled by Sly and Gang 217. Two persons come to Xiao Si's rescue: first is Honey, who suddenly shows up to settle his account with Gang 217. Shortly before he is plotted against and slain by them, he gives his tacit consent to Xiao Si to "own" Xiao Ming. But eventually she falls into the hand of another teenager, Xiao Ma, who is the other person to help Xiao Si out of all the gang troubles. Feeling betrayed and feeling that he is the rightful heir of Honey, his surrogate father, Xiao Si carries a short knife with him looking for the chance to hassle Xiao Ma. Instead, Xiao Si confronts Xiao Ming by chance, broken-heartedly begging her to come back to him. He says, "Only I can help you out--I being your only hope, for like Honey before me, . . . I'm now your Honey." She finds him ridiculous, and he stabs her.⁴

Edward Yang has painstakingly painted the destitute situation Xiao Ming is in: fleeing to Taiwan because of the civil war, she has only her mother with her there, a mother who is jobless and plagued by asthma. Honey's death is a serious blow to Xiao Ming, but with or without Honey, she feels equally helpless and withdrawn, desperately seeking the "sense of security" (as in her own words) from just any man she finds in her way. Eventually she sticks to Xiao Ma,

⁴ For a full discussion of the film in Chinese by critics in Taiwan, see the cinedossier prepared by Lao Jiahua.

whose father is the highest in military rank among the fathers of those other kids in the gangs. Representing the ultimate violence that is backed by the state apparatus, Xiao Ma is literally untouchable before them. In a larger scope, the rivalry among the juvenile gang members for the “ownership” of Xiao Ming is their struggle for the control of the whole savage horde.⁵ Yet in that process, every surrogate son that makes it to owning Xiao Ming always ends up being disgraced or even slaughtered by his upcoming successors. She is the object of their incestuous desire, a *femme fatale* who costs any suitor his life, but also an empty signifier that guarantees the collective identity of the savage horde and their ultimate power to control. She is their supreme phallus ever in exchange in a libidinal economy triggered off by the sexually overcharged savage horde. In their infantilism, they adore her as their phallic mother who in their collective phantasy owns the phallus they are wishing for. In their disavowal of her not having it, they fetishize her in order to eschew the horror of their own imminent castration. Xiao Si is no exception. But he naively thinks that he can bypass that horror as prohibition by regaining his pre-Oedipal innocence to love her incestuously. Xiao Ming, undermining his wishful thinking, chooses to tell him the truth: “I am just like this world, and this world will not be changed.” Failing to follow this message from the Real, Xiao Si withdraws into his Imaginary world and uses his very last resort: death through murder, which he unconsciously believes will guarantee just any everlasting love.

Distressed by the after-effect of Chinese civil war in the forties, the film presents a national allegory in which the members of a savage horde are having a civil war, slaughtering each other in their collective Oedipalization. Made in early nineties, this film also forewarns the recent state terrorism launched by the People’s Republic against the Chinese people on Taiwan. Being one of the largest war games ever mobilized since the civil war, the saber rattling becomes an ironic answer to Jameson’s national allegory. Few have made it to see that this state terrorism of PRC is an ultimate love affair, for to make war is to make love. The infantilism underlying such a love affair sadly reveals that the oldest of all males, Chinese or not, are barely five years old, who are still struggling with their Oedipal anxiety. When women’s suffering is portrayed by them as national suffering, the real women’s suffering begins: they are put into exchange, loved,

⁵ Huang Yuxiu’s harsh critique on *A Brighter Summer Day* condemning Edward Yang, though mentioning Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* (1913), has nevertheless missed the significance of Freud’s theory of the primal horde (318).

desired, despised, perhaps even murdered and mutilated, in the name of national allegory. They could perhaps do nothing to stop that male infantile gang violence overshadowing them, the violence that proposes ruthless murder in love, but passionate love in death.

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