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SOCIETY AND SUBJECTIVITY

ON THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF
CHINESE MELODRAMA

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A study of filmmaking in the People's Republic of China will, almost inevitably, take as its starting point the relation of the character ("the self") to the social space in which it moves. The assumption that this dramatic relation is also, at bottom, ideological is evident in contemporary Chinese cinema through the continuity with and conflict between the pre-Liberation traditions of Confucianism and the post-Liberation ideologies of socialism, a continuity and conflict that turn on the relation among the self, the family, the workplace, and the state, the fundamental terms of any image of the social totality. Starting from these premises, this essay argues that the most complex and compelling popular film form that embodies the negotiation between the traditional ethical system and the new state ideology, one that articulates the range and force of the emotional contradictions between them, is what is known in the West as "melodrama." Because this category is not part of the Chinese genre system, its use entails a shift of cultural perspective.¹

The legacy of Western criticism of melodrama in literature and film is complex and contradictory in its theoretical formulation of the affective foundations of subjectivity. For Elsaesser, melodrama is the representation of the subjectivity of the European bourgeoisie in its struggle against the authority of a declining feudal system.² That is, melodrama is a passionate meditation on the historical experience of bourgeois subjection to the economic authority of the ancien régime, an account of action and subjectivity in the social formation from the standpoint of loss and from the point of view of its victims. This representation of historical victimization as a social catastrophe is registered by narrativizing the subjective and ethical aspect of the drama within an economic interpretation of class relations and by viewing the story's individual protagonist as an overdeter-

mined ideological figure. The shape of the story underscores a fate of suffering and of eventual social insistence on reconciliation through conformity that locates this sentimental drama and its protagonist within an ultimately oppressive social order.

The main alternative to Elsaesser's understanding of melodrama emerges from Peter Brooks's psychoanalytic account of the melodramatic imagination.³ On this account, "melodrama" is founded on the (French) postrevolutionary attempt to institute in the Republic a morality founded on an ethical imperative centered around a new and troubled figuration of the self in its relation to the unconscious. Melodrama is a theater of social misfortune in which personal virtue is contested, hidden, misrecognized, or subverted, a form of theater that seeks within the confining and largely recalcitrant parameters of the old society to restore and recenter the ethical imperatives required of the bourgeois age. The personification of innocence and villainy constitutes the dramatization of the democratic reverberations of a newly emergent, post-traditional mode of romantic individuality. In this, melodrama is a *mise-en-scène* whose system of figuration is caught between restoration and reform. For Wylie Sypher, melodrama, seen from a political point of view, is the characteristic form of nineteenth-century bourgeois aesthetic thought that marks out the impasses and the paralysis of Western revolutionary programs and aspirations, informing even the theatrical metaphors and schemes of Marx's *Kapital*.⁴

For contemporary film studies, melodrama indicates a site of ideological critique centered on the representation of sexual difference.⁵ Its logic as an aesthetic ideology is founded on the contradiction between a potentially transgressive feminine sexuality and a social system that seeks to delimit and contain it. As a transcription of the tragic into the domestic order, melodrama exemplifies the instability of the ideology of private life under capitalism and, from women's perspective, the domains of affect and action within the nuclear family. The dominant explication of the conflict of law and desire is founded on the psychoanalytic paradigm of the (white) bourgeois patriarchal family. The "social" itself – the workplace, politics – enters the familial configurations of subjectivity through the mediation of the father. The specifically aesthetic impasse of melodrama, and to a certain extent the limitation of its critique, consists of the form's failure to constitute the family in a clear or comprehensive relation to the larger social formation.

From a feminist perspective, melodrama is a dominant mode of mass culture and the site of the central contradictions of patriarchy. Owing to the centrality of its figuration of women's experience, it has been the chosen ground for the delineation of the affective stakes of social constraint and transgression. Hollywood melodrama's aesthetic ideology, in distinction to the strongly marked class oppositions characteristic of its European prototypes, reflects the democratizing of its cultural scope and generic meaning.

Even with certain ambiguous precedents, the translocation of the criti-

cal/aesthetic category of "melodrama" from its Western inscription to a contemporary Chinese context is hardly unproblematic. On what basis can an aesthetic ideology so embedded in the popular entertainment forms of Western culture – Christian and capitalist – be treated as significant, culturally speaking, to the form and meaning of contemporary Chinese film? Strictly speaking, the Chinese system of genre classification and its categories are incommensurable with the Western system. The comparability of critical terms like "genre" is not simply a question of formal similarity, but one related to recognizing both significant similarities and differences in literary and cultural contexts.⁶ It is true that important conventions of both Chinese *spoken drama* and *butterfly fiction*, instances of popular, vernacular entertainment that influenced Chinese filmmaking in the early decades of the century, are arguably Western influenced.⁷ Though the terms "melodrama" and "family melodrama" have been used rather widely in the 1980s in discussions of films from Hong Kong (to emphasize sacrifice for family order),⁸ I am unaware of a general account of the cultural or critical genealogy of the term in relation to Chinese aesthetics.

Ma Ning's analysis of contemporary cinema of the People's Republic shows how what he calls melodrama renegotiates the relation between tradition and modernization in a narrative that introduces a justification for a new economic order, represents a transformation of power relations within the family order, and shows this change from the vantage point of an established power structure. This social order, he argues, is ultimately subordinated to the system of hierarchy and patronage that supports the political power of patriarchal socialism and its new, ideological imperatives.⁹ The constitution of the family drama calls on a system of family ethics that serves in turn the project of ideological legitimation. But a depiction of the designated conflicts within the family does not, it seems to me, constitute in a sufficiently clear way the melodramatic problematic as it has been enacted in Western cultures. The "other" can be reduced to the "same" only at a price. That is, though important elements associated with Western melodrama are present in films in the People's Republic, these films do not exemplify its distinctive, constitutive features – the form's schematization of good and evil, its emotional effects, its mode of theatricality and spectacle, its mode of characterizing the individual as victim, and its mode of understanding the relation of the individual to the social as a matter of justice. At best, the term "melodrama" indicates a rough critical analogy.

I express this reservation about the relevance of Western melodrama to an accounting of Chinese film forms for several reasons: in order to motivate a move toward a more specific account of the constitution, function, and interpretation of these forms as works functioning within the culture in which they originate; to qualify the colonizing power and domination of Western critical theory for an accounting of the specificity of Chinese film and culture; and within the discipline of film studies, to work toward a new model of figuring melodramatic structure and affect in the Western context, through an alternative to its familial

focus, namely through the juridical. To the extent that Western theory of melodrama has privileged the nuclear family and its psychoanalytic account of the private sphere of "sexual difference" and "subjectivity," it has lost sight of the broader social conditions of the meaning of the form. I want to proceed, in other words, on the premise that what has been called the genre of Chinese "family melodrama" is neither a true analogy nor the exclusive site for the expression of what we might call the "melodramatic mode." Cross-cultural exchange/interpretation of what is meant by "melodrama" can be elaborated by considering the form of what I will call "political melodrama" as it is dramatized in the work of the Chinese film director Xie Jin. In this way, we might treat "melodrama" as an expression of a mode of injustice whose *mise-en-scène* is precisely the nexus between public and private life, a mode in which gender as a mark of difference is a limited, mobile term activated by distinctive social powers and historical circumstances.

The political melodrama that I want to consider is best exemplified in Xie Jin's films focused on the figure of the rightist, the nature of his crime, punishment, and process of political rehabilitation. In the 1980s, this thematic is an authorial preoccupation in *The Herdsman* [Mumaren, 1982], *The Legend of Tianyun Mountain* [Tianyunshan chuanqi, 1980], and *Hibiscus Town* [Furongzhen, 1986]. Indeed, *Hibiscus Town* addresses the emotional complexity of the central ideological question of the post-Cultural Revolution era – the place accorded to individual entrepreneurship within the socialist order.

Hibiscus Town tells how a young woman laboriously and diligently builds up a small business (a bean curd restaurant), then is denounced by the local Party leader, who is jealous of her large income. She loses her business, her house, and her husband (who is persecuted to death), suffers years of ostracism, becomes sick and slides into despair, falls in love with a fellow street cleaner (an old rightist who cares for her), becomes pregnant, is illegally married, is judged and condemned again by the Party (it isolates her and imprisons her new husband), and bears the illegitimate child. At the end of the Cultural Revolution, she has her second husband, home, and business restored to her. The "text" of *Hibiscus Town* narrativizes these events through a sexual, economic, and political description of the organization of the society of a small Chinese rural town from 1963 to 1979. The film centrally dramatizes the relation between "subjectivity" (self) and society as it is organized and mediated by the Communist Party.

At the very outset of the film, the population of Hibiscus Town consists of three groups: the "people," the "bad elements," and the Party. The action proper begins with the arrival of local Party Secretary Li, a woman, under the banner of "class struggle," and the initiation of her investigation of Hu, the small restaurateur. The latter is building a new house with her business profits on land bought from a local Party official, Wang, a land-reform activist who lives elsewhere in a dilapidated section at the edge of town. Li's investigation moves forward with a public accusation of Hu's "illegal" self-enrichment (realized, it is alleged,



4. New Rich Peasant Hu and her husband. Xie Jin, *Hibiscus Town* (1986). CHINA FILM IMPORT AND EXPORT CORPORATION, LOS ANGELES

through favorable terms she had negotiated with the local manager of the state's granary stores). The state confiscates Hu's property, condemns her as a "bad element," "a newly rich peasant," and sets her to work cleaning the town streets. Three years later with the onset of the Cultural Revolution, Secretary Li is herself stigmatized – as a slut (she protests saying she is a leftist) – and is publicly humiliated. In 1979, with the close of the Cultural Revolution, Li returns to the town to carry on Communist politics.

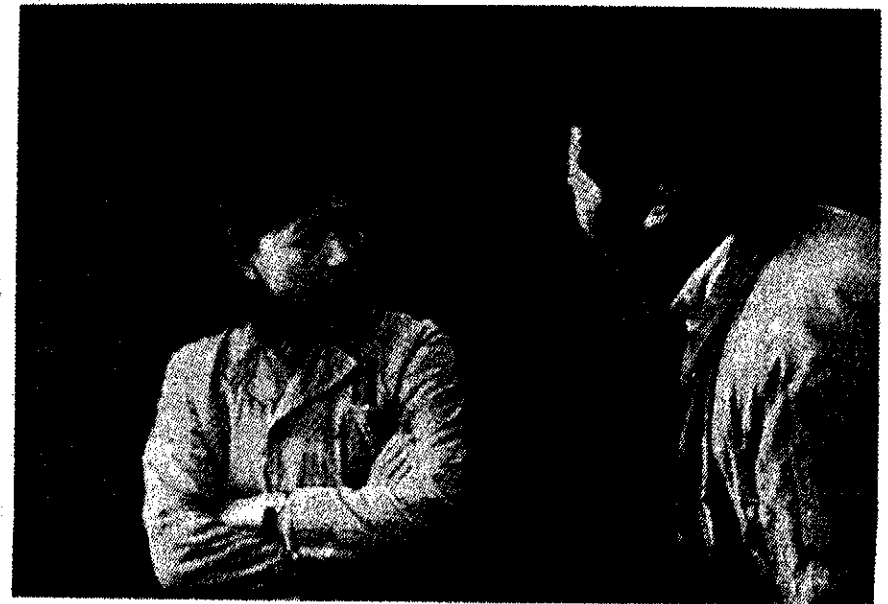
In posing the question of how, fifteen years after the founding of the socialist state, hard work leading to the purchase of a house can be regarded as a crime, the film points directly to the contradictory ideology and practices of socialism in the reform years. Indeed, the film's complexity consists of the fact that the sexual, economic, and political systems that comprise this social network are almost completely imbricated and intermixed. Notwithstanding this, the film is organized around distinctive binarisms, identified and labeled as "rightist" and "leftist."

Most important, these political categories (which are also economic categories) intersect with moral categories. That is, in the film's principal reversal, the oral perspective contradicts the long-standing correspondence of "Left" with "good" and "Right" with "bad." Indeed, the film inverts the dogmatic formula of the 1950s in which the Party leaders come to the small village and liberate the

people from an oppressive feudalism by dissolving the forced marriage contracts that serve as the quintessential emblem of feudal patriarchy. *Hibiscus Town* inverts this formula by showing that the Party system of social control through classification by type leads to persecution and criminalization of a marriage between two persons freely choosing each other outside the authority of the Party. In *Hibiscus Town* the agents of the Party are designated as oppressors.

The personification of the moral and sexual conflict between Right and Left is realized in a dramatic comparison between two women – New Rich Peasant Hu and Secretary Li (Figures 4 and 5). Each woman is authoritative in her own sphere of work. Hu, the younger, is married both at the beginning of the film and at the end; Li is older, more severe, and unmarried throughout. Li's political comrade and lover Wang is a boastful, self-important toady, imperious in his own sphere but wholly subordinated to her power. The film's evident inversions of traditionally subordinated power relations between women and men underscore and thematize male masochism.

In conjunction with the moral evaluation of political positions is a moral evaluation of sexual relations. In this way, the personal and sexual characteristics of the two leading women contribute to an understanding of the legitimacy – and even the rectitude – of their political status. In one central difference – not of gender but of politics – the film points up the superiority of Confucian morality



5. Party Secretary Li (left) and former Secretary Gu (right). Xie Jin, *Hibiscus Town* (1986). CHINA FILM IMPORT AND EXPORT CORPORATION, LOS ANGELES

over socialist pragmatism. That is, the ethical perspective at work in the film contends with the political system.

The narrative of *Hibiscus Town* is organized around three major clusters of events that can be summarized as crime, punishment, and restitution. Hu's trajectory through the film marks them out: the allegation of criminal self-enrichment through the sale of state property; her punishment and suffering through the loss of business, house, and husband; and the restitution and restoration of her home, a new husband, and the birth of a boy child. The film supplies a detailed and comprehensive literal accounting of the economic foundations of Hu's bean curd business that includes the cost of raw materials, gross sales, and so forth. Indeed, her product is explicitly analyzed as a commodity. The fact that the business is part of the food cycle puts the enterprise in close proximity to a biological understanding of the requirements of maintaining life. Indeed, attention to food – both its lack and its abundance, its necessity and its symbolism (as in the wedding feast) – grounds this film, linking it to one of the dominant preoccupations of the Chinese cinema and underlining its foundations in the representation of scarcity. This sequence of narrative events, then, is the figuration of a political interpretation of economic events: acquisition, loss, and return of objects of value (literal and symbolic).

Hibiscus Town shows a fundamental and strict understanding of the political economy of the social order – its modes and relations of production organizing goods, social relations, and indeed “subjectivity” within the framework of the same system. The narrative intelligibility of this Chinese text as a system of signs is predicated not only on a series of motivated consequences, but also on a system that correlates its objects with modes of subjectivity. In this sense, the political classification scheme is coextensive with the order and hierarchy of the social body, and is a means of deciding individual obligations and privileges. Social positions and subjectivity are named and determined by the political system; the Party's political criteria provide a legal justification for the assignment of persons to social ranks. The film shows in methodical, narrative detail the deprivation of life and goods by a political machine that serves at the same time as a judicial apparatus.

In the Chinese political melodrama, the political process is narrativized as a trial that occupies the thematic center in the way that the family conflict does in the family melodrama. Here the drama arises from the Chinese institution of crime and punishment worked out through socialist culture. The film represents the Party's action on the social body. But in the contemporary period, a political perspective vies with and is contested by the ethical one. In this sense Xie Jin's narration and point of view include a perspective on the world of the characters that includes a historical critique. At stake in this form of melodrama is a definition of the self and of the relation of the individual to the social as a fully public matter. Melodrama is the mode of representation of a historical experience that inscribes “subjectivity” in a position between the expectations of an ethical

system (Confucianism) and the demands of a political system (socialism), a condition that typifies the Chinese dilemma of modernization.¹⁰ The form's principal significance lies in the affective dimension of the self's relation to the social order, catalyzing two affective regimes that are acted out in the narrative as intensified performances of betrayal, disappointment, or defeat. Chinese melodrama's mode of arbitrating the relation of subjectivity/society is, in other words, a specific cultural formation.

Confucianism's traditional ethical doctrine linked the social body at all levels, modeling the responsibilities and duties of self, family, and state on an analogical “great chain of being.” Socialism has undertaken to remodel these relations without abandoning them, recruiting film as a state ideological apparatus for the representation of this new, ethical system and its corresponding prescriptions on subjectivity. In this sense, Xie Jin's films work explicitly to monitor and readjust these new ideological premises to old ethical standards and – through a cultural critique of ongoing antirightist violence – to explore the limits of the political administration of socialist justice. *Hibiscus Town* lays out the political process of justice – crime and punishment – but it also subjects that process to a critique that puts politicization itself on trial from an ethical standpoint. For its audience, the film is a kind of judicial hearing with its own rules of evidence and argument. The film, both as a narrative institution and as a legal institution, mediates the relation of the audience to the abuses, disturbances, and injustices of the real, ongoing events of the Cultural Revolution.

In what way, we must ask, can the representation of the experience of Western capitalism viewed from a Christian perspective be analogous to the representation of the experience of contemporary Chinese socialism viewed from a Confucian perspective? The cultural specification of “subjectivity” and of victimization in melodrama implies, from the first, the concept of the “person.” In the ethical and political writings of these two traditions, the treatment of this concept is traceable to the difference between Western “subjectivity” as the private, personal, and perspectival representation of a single mind and the Chinese definition of the person as a set of conventions, social relations, and transactions within the group (mind serving as the ground of social relatedness).¹¹ The Kantian foundation of ethics in individual responsibility defines the moral autonomy of the self as a matter of choice based in a universal faculty of reason beyond or above social convention. What grounds this personal ethical autonomy, legally speaking, is an acknowledgment of rights. Western individuality is treated as a freedom from social and governmental control, surveillance, and the like, and hence individual autonomy is closely associated with the sphere of privacy. In its ideal form, the law guarantees and institutionalizes these freedoms and rights.

In Chinese culture, traditional writings on Confucian individuality underscore the transitive obligations between subjective terms within a hierarchy that regards the person as a social function, a position placed within the five cardinal relations of domination and subordination that draws its meaning and its codes

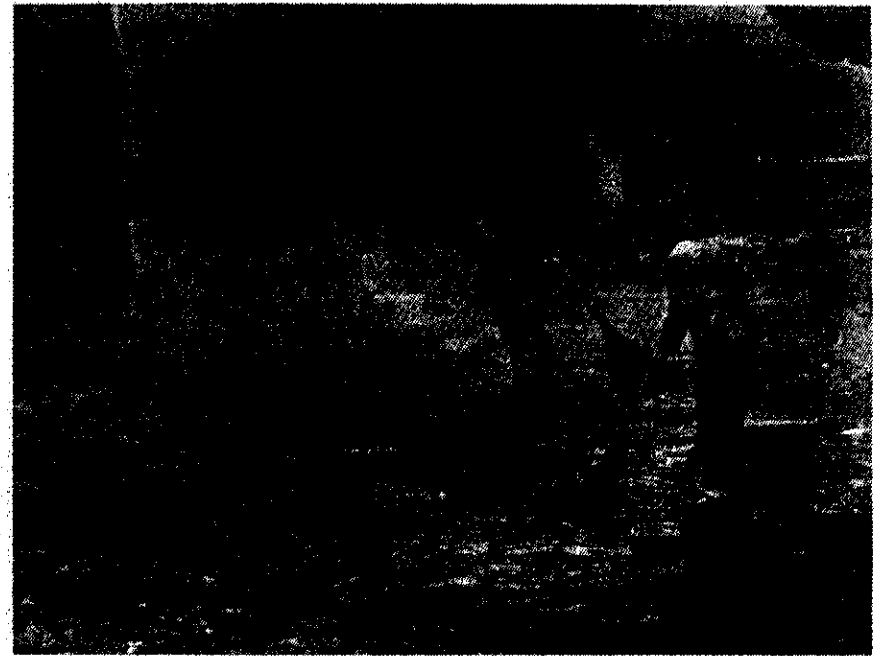
from hierarchically organized social practice, and not from the status of the person as an agent of free choice. This tradition of ethics based on the cooperation of person and group and institutionalized by social practice is the basis of Confucian legal and administrative theory, a theory that posits human improvement through the exemplification of virtue and correction through education. Confucian legal doctrine¹² was elaborated over several centuries in conflict with an alternative, secular "legalist" theory that called for equal treatment of all before a uniform law and an ethical system backed up by rewards and punishments. Confucian ethics, in contrast, was constituted almost entirely as a code regulating *hierarchical* social relations within and beyond the family. It was the basis of the legal theory in one fashion or another that was inherited by the Communist social administration. Legalist theory, however, with its democratic instincts and its doctrine of reform through punishment, provided in some measure one of the intellectual resources for Communist administrative reform of Confucian feudalism.

We might ask, then, about the form of individualism implied in Xie Jin's political melodrama and how it stands in relation to Chinese models of justice. Who are Xie Jin's characters? What is his mode of characterization? First, people's social and political positions are designated by titles: Secretary Li, Director Gu, etc. The society understands the importance but also the superficiality of identity through this kind of symbolic positioning – and the problem of personal identity is articulated in the film around a cinematic topos constructed by distinguishing between the space of the house and that of the street. The spatial coordinates of personal identity are "inside" and "outside," "home" and "workplace." Xie Jin's revisionist mode of socialist spatialization – of construction of the lived relation between person and environment – both deconstructs and institutes the frontier between private and public spaces and the equivalent distinction within the *mentalité* of the social subject. In this sense, the project of revising established conventions of socialist spatialization (i.e., there is *only* public space) seeks to locate the self in the spaces of both the house and the street. In *Hibiscus Town* cinematic *découpage* articulates the revision of the political valence of space.

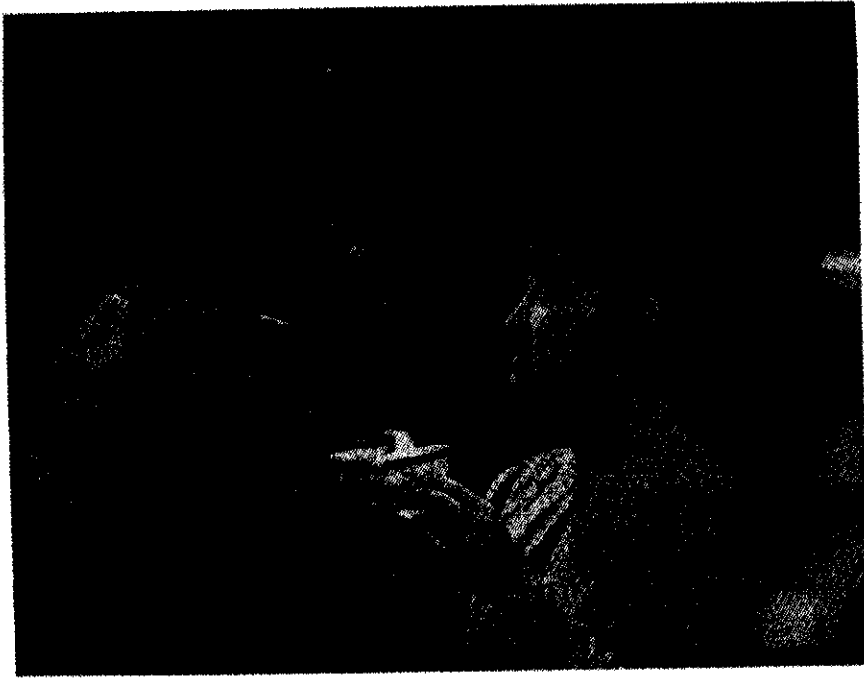
The main interest of the film, then, lies in the problematic of the marginal characters, the social and political outsiders. What is the form of their social nonbeing? *Hibiscus Town* provides significant representations of the life of these outsiders. For a long time, one feels, they have lived in the streets. Indeed, in the long midsection of the film that traces the development of Hu and Qin's relationship, exterior social space and its representation are transformed lyrically. The bodily movement of the work of sweeping becomes the dance of the courtship ritual (Figure 6). This part of the film opens onto a strangely isolated cultural space that is roughly divided in equal parts between the street and Hu's room, between long shots of alleyways receding into the depth (largely bluish gray), which serve as the narrowed space of romantic choreography, and the smallish,

rose-tinted scenes of the interior, nondescript private space in which the bed and the hearth are the most evident furnishings, the site of passion and its consummation. Outside this room, on both sides of the door, are posters announcing the place to the public as the residence of a "black couple." That is, the place of the outsiders explicitly signed as a space apart is the space of a criminalized marriage. Thus, the space of the social outsider is, in a way, indifferent to the discrimination between house and street. At the same time, there is a single space of romance, of song, and of sexual pleasure. This middle section of the film is composed through what we might think of as a romantic comedy centered around the formation of the transgressive couple (see Figure 7).

Politically speaking, however, the spatialization of this interlude is contradictory and paradoxical and stands as the film's central instance of a mode of subjectivity at the margin of official discourse. It is the space of unauthorized and indeed transgressive assertion of individual choice. It, alone, is the space abandoned to the private and is explicitly, I think, the "space of human rights" as it might be understood in the West.



6. Rightist Qin and New Rich Peasant Hu cast out during the Cultural Revolution. Xie Jin, *Hibiscus Town* (1986). CHINA FILM IMPORT AND EXPORT CORPORATION, LOS ANGELES



7. Formation of the transgressive couple, Qin and Hu. Xie Jin, *Hibiscus Town* (1986). CHINA FILM IMPORT AND EXPORT CORPORATION, LOS ANGELES

The theme of the rights of political outcasts to marry is repeated and underlined in Xie Jin's work in the 1980s. In *Hibiscus Town*, with Hu's announcement to Qin that she is pregnant, the couple seek permission from Party authorities to marry. The request is received by Wang with astonishment at "class enemies screwing on the sly!" – and is refused. Qin protests that even members of the "five bad elements" have the right to marry and have children. Qin's assertion of this right is assigned special status – differentiating the human as such. Marriage, however, requires legitimation by civil authority. Old Gu, former Party secretary, observing that no one else would dare to attend the wedding of a "black couple," performs this office. Subsequently, the couple is condemned by the Military Commission for "threatening the dictatorship of the proletariat" and the man is sent to jail. The space of romantic privatization is illusory and short-lived, and is soon rearticulated with the larger public space of the *mise-en-scène* of trial and punishment. The dark result, announced on the steps of a municipal building in the rain to the assembled community, underlies the Party's real power – if not over biology itself, then over the definition of the social status of human

relations. It is part of Xie Jin's humanism to depict the injustice of this eclipse of the space of the human.

Two scenes underline the authority of the Party to decide the propriety of individual action: the early night scene of Secretary Li's public denunciation of New Rich Peasant Hu and the late scene pronouncing the verdict on the couple. Both have a similar formal design traceable to the explicit theatricalization of juridical politics – the official speaker is center stage and points out the accused both to incriminate and to condemn. The scene of judicial decision is presented theatrically to an assembled audience as a public lesson for didactic purposes. The *mise-en-scène* of human rights exists in the relation between the empty streets of political nonbeing and the private room, and the administrative display of public and formalized deprivation and castigation. The two spaces – of being and administration – are dialectically related.

The subjective state of the victims that corresponds to these public sanctions is ambiguous. Generally, Confucian punishment rests on the premise of corrective reeducation through shame rather than guilt as a *social* means for the production of conformity. Guilt, a private emotion, seems more consistent with the punitive theories of Western individualism. The film depicts the couple's refusal to accede to either punitive state. Rightist Qin, the town's artist *manqué* and poster maker, having had more experience at being an outcast, teaches Hu the way to bear this public sanction when he writes and then posts outside their own door the signs announcing the residence of a "black couple" to the assembled public. Qin's comic resilience, bemused distance, and elevated indifference to these self-authored critiques (an attitude carried, as well, in the movement, gesture, and carriage of his body) give form to a personal style of Chinese autonomy. It is a style of resistance to public sanction. He must bear the injustice, but it does not touch him or alter his fundamentally comic and ironic outlook on life.

This is a form of melodrama founded on the concept of the "person" apart from gender *per se*. The chief antagonists are both women, though one is "masculinized." In both Xie Jin's *The Legend of Tianyun Mountain* and *The Herdsman*, the political victims are men, although the women are the active figures and the ones who sacrifice themselves to maintain the men. The evident victim in *Hibiscus Town*, the one whose misfortunes are recounted, is the woman Hu, while it is the man, already stigmatized, who supports her. The dynamics of Xie Jin's victimized couples, between male and female, passive and active, are not irrevocably fixed. The woman suffers, as does the man, but neither sacrifices him- or herself for the other. Both characters adopt an ethic of survival, living when necessary like animals. Although in *Hibiscus Town* the woman is victimized, the man, the rightist, is the reference point for Xie Jin's humanist critique. The two figures are in a sense condensed in an emblem of social injustice. The Party's amnesty returns Hu's confiscated property and provides her with a legitimate husband. With his return, the family as a social unit is re-

formed and the bean curd business resumed. The formation of the family, with child, however, stands outside the strict terms of literal accountability. No price can be put on their suffering. In Xie Jin's hands the political melodrama concludes with the restoration of the family, embedded in a profitable, small entrepreneurial business.

The humanist ideology of the film is simultaneously transparent and complex in its relation to the processes of both socialist revolution and modernization in China in the 1980s. Contemporary Western film criticism since 1968, heavily invested in ideological critique, has not generally confronted the problem of the critique of socialist representation. Following Althusser, Western Marxism in its cultural criticism has treated ideology as a discourse of mystification justifying the capitalist order by naturalization. The spectator, on this account, is forced into an implicit agreement with the terms of the text's construction, one that precludes a critical reading. This process of ideological interpellation is literalized by an account of the functioning of cinematographic apparatus.¹³ This paradigm has become an article of critical faith across a range of "progressive" perspectives. Yet what can the Western critique of bourgeois ideology and its associated critical technology achieve in application to Chinese film? And more to the point, what from a Western point of view constitutes an adequate critical model of the relation of film and ideology in the People's Republic? Socialist "ideology," it would seem, is hardly in need of demystification – it is explicit and taught as such. This fundamental difference of perspective indicates that a political reading of *Hibiscus Town* as a melodrama and as ideology should proceed in close relation to the political time and culture in which it is embedded and not simply as the transcription of a Western critical problematic.

Soviet analysts of China in the 1920s and 1930s were undecided about the terms of analyzing the potential for Marxist revolution in China because of its complicated and entrenched mix of feudalism and capitalism.¹⁴ *Hibiscus Town*, however, appears in a postrevolutionary culture, after the Liberation. It is a given that the feudal order so evident in many mainland films (especially those in the leftist tradition of the 1930s and 1940s) has been dismantled. Indeed, in this earlier period there was another version of Chinese political melodrama in which the central antagonist that victimizes the main characters is the feudal order itself. But in the film under discussion, "class struggle" is waged by the socialist victors against the defeated remnants, practices, and personnel of the prerevolutionary period.

Melodrama centered around such persons as Hu and Qin as victims seems possible only retrospectively – after the socialist revolution and after the shift of policy that permitted in the 1980s what was prohibited in the 1960s. "Modernization" as it is understood in China in the 1980s necessitated a change of ideology and, in particular, the process of de-Maoification. The new socialism borrows a moral perspective from Confucianism in order to criticize the old ways and to justify a new concept of the self appropriate to the new economic order. How-

ever, the film argues that this mode of subjectivity is *not* new, but is found in the villages of the past. What is new is the ideological task of introducing the legitimacy of individual entrepreneurship.

The Cultural Revolution in the film is a negative political reference mobilized as a framework in which to present the case for a more local and particular change – the process of modernization. The relationship of the form of political melodrama to the process of modernization is as complex as its relation to revolution. This fact puts the form of Chinese socialist melodrama, and *Hibiscus Town* in particular, in relation to a certain historiography. The fictional form of the film is articulated around the contrast between past and present, by the process, told in multiple interrupting flashbacks, of Hu remembering scenes from an earlier and happier life. The narrative itself is marked out by a series of dates – 1963, 1965, 1979 – that organize the entire film and put this melodramatic form in relation to the audience's popular memory of contemporary history. The film restates the problems of the Civil War and Liberation through its figuration of the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath. In this, socialist historiography confronts the ambiguities of the post-Liberation period. Assistant Party Secretary Wang, driven crazy by events, is left wandering the streets, banging a gong and shouting his prophetic announcement of the return of another "movement." History, as seen by the film, threatens social dismemberment by repetition of the struggles that led to Liberation.

It is difficult to consider the film as fully a part of the new ideological campaigns of the 1980s. It looks backward – and in Xie Jin's account, the Party is assigned responsibility for the strife and suffering of the past. Yet the film stages an alteration of the social category of the "individual" that answers to the needs of both the past and the present. It is precisely the redefinition of human rights of citizens, that is, civil rights, that Xie Jin formulates in the film.

We have detailed the system for figuring the emotional content of the characters' experience in terms of the relation of personal subjectivity to social structure, and treated it as a matter of victimization. The film explores the scope and content of the "space" of human rights through an analysis of complicating relations between the two large systems of ethical/political thought, Confucianism and socialism, that operate in some composite form in contemporary Chinese society. In this, the film indicates the affective basis of Chinese political melodrama. Suffering is linked ultimately to the injustices of the political administration of social power. In this sense, subjectivity is part of a new political language of the post-Cultural Revolution period. It indicates an aspect of the person beyond that of the citizen. From this perspective we can see the justice of designating Xie Jin's project, as Esther Yau has aptly suggested, "rehumanization." Economic modernization, to the extent that it includes a cultural redefinition of the sphere of the personal or the private, indicates a future, yet to be realized, of both rights and desires.

The film's fundamental choice to proceed by dramatizing the central conflicts

of a certain historical moment through the representation of women indicates the contradictory cultural symbolism of the figure of Chinese woman.¹⁵ Secretary Li is a personification, no doubt, of the detested figure of Jiang Qing, Mao's wife, the leader of the Gang of Four, and the film puts the blame on her for the persecution of the couple. In this regard, the film depicts the disfiguration of the social caused by the "phallic woman." By contrast, Peasant Hu, the entrepreneur, carries the extraordinary virtues of her type. In depicting cultural and economic change through the tropological opposition of two women, Xie Jin extends the Chinese practice of representing socialist ideological change by a reduction of sexual difference to an epiphenomenon of the social formation. "Woman" is an ambiguous figure of the Chinese cinema: liberated by the Party, she has been a traditional justification for Chinese socialist domination. Xie Jin's critique of social deformation in the past neither excuses the Party nor supports a call for dismantling it. The film is situated on the cultural horizon of the 1980s in quite a different way than many of the radically conceived films of the Fifth Generation in their refiguration of the role of the political. Xie Jin remains squarely within the recognizable terrain of Han culture, and the familiar contours and problematics of a socialist vision of life, while succeeding in formulating an ethical discourse that works closely in the space between popular sentiments of disappointment or cynicism and the regime of the politically possible. For some Chinese critics and filmmakers, this form of socialist humanism and the Hollywood mode that supports it constitute a cultural monument to the past and designate the limits of sustainable cultural critique.

NOTES

1. For important contemporary statements on the question of cross-cultural method, see Esther Yau, "Yellow Earth: Western Analysis and a Non-Western Text," *Film Quarterly*, 41, no. 2 (1987-8), pp. 22-33, and Fredric Jameson, "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text*, no. 15 (Fall 1986), pp. 65-88, and the response, Rey Chow, "Rereading Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies: A Response to the 'Post-Modern' Condition," *Cultural Critique*, no. 5 (Winter 1986-7), pp. 69-93.
2. Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," in Bill Nichols, ed., *Movies and Methods*, vol. 2 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 166-89.
3. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).
4. Wylie Sypher, "Aesthetic of Revolution: The Marxist Melodrama," in Robert Corrigan, ed., *Tragedy: Vision and Form* (Scranton, Pa.: Chandler, 1965), pp. 258-67.
5. A thorough orientation and survey of the field from this point of view is Christine Gledhill, *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1987).

6. Andrew H. Plaks, "Towards a Critical Theory of Chinese Narrative," in Andrew H. Plaks, ed., *Chinese Narrative: Critical and Theoretical Essays* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 309-52. For a justification of the use of the term "melodrama" in relation to Chinese fiction, see C. T. Hsia, "Hsu Chen-ya's Yü-li hun: An Essay in Literary History and Criticism," in Liu Ts'un-yan, ed., *Chinese Middlebrow Fiction from the Ch'ing and Early Republican Eras* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1984), pp. 199-240. On the relation of literature to film more generally, see Leo Ou-fan Lee, "The Tradition of Modern Chinese Cinema: Some Preliminary Exploration and Hypotheses," in Chris Berry, ed., *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1991), pp. 6-20. For a general study of the performing arts, see Bonnie S. McDougall, ed., *Popular Chinese Literature and Performing Arts in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984).
7. See Perry Link, *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies: Popular Fiction in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Cities* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981).
8. See the remarkable documentation in Li Cheuk-to, ed., *Cantonese Melodrama: 1950-1969*, 10th Hong Kong International Film Festival (Hong Kong: The Urban Council, 1986).
9. Ma Ning, "Symbolic Representation and Symbolic Violence: Chinese Family Melodrama of the Early 80's," *East-West Film Journal*, 4, no. 1 (1989), pp. 79-112. In his Ph.D. dissertation, "Culture and Politics in Chinese Film Melodrama: Traditional Sacred, Moral Economy and the Xie Jin Mode," Monash University, 1992, Ma Ning argues that, "although Chinese film melodrama in its development in this century was subject to Western influences, it also embodies a culturally specific mode of imagination related to Chinese metaphysical, ethical, aesthetic and political traditions." It is the site in which the moral economy of traditional Chinese culture (an economy rooted in traditional Chinese cosmology and ethics) asserts itself in the area of mass cultural production. Ma argues for the specifically Chinese way of ideological domination.
10. The interaction between these two ideologies is the main theme of Judith Stacey's *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983).
11. The traditions are discussed at length in Donald Munro, *Individualism and Holism: Studies in Confucian and Taoist Values* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Center for Chinese Studies, 1985).
12. The classic study is T'ung-tsu Ch'ü, *Law and Society in Traditional China* (Paris: Mouton, 1961). See also M. H. Van Der Valk, *Conservatism in Modern Chinese Family Law* (Leiden: Brill, 1956). For a penetrating account of the status of rights within the liberal framework, see Mark Kelman, *A Guide to Critical Legal Studies* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987).
13. Jean Louis Baudry, "The Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," in Bill Nichols, ed., *Movies and Methods*, vol. 2 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 531-42.
14. Arif Dirlik, *Revolution and History: Origins of Marxist Historiography in China, 1919-1937* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978).
15. For recent analyses of Chinese women by women, see Esther Yau, "Cultural and Economic Dislocations: Filmic Phantasies of Chinese Women in the 1980's," *Wide An-*

gle, 11, no. 2 (Spring 1989), pp. 6–21; idem, "Is China the End of Hermeneutics? Or, Political and Cultural Usage of Non-Han Women in Mainland Chinese films," *Discourse*, 11, no. 2 (Spring–Summer, 1989), pp. 115–36; and E. Ann Kaplan, "Problematizing Cross-Cultural Analysis: The Case of Women in Recent Chinese Cinema," *Wide Angle*, 2, no. 2 (1989), pp. 40–50. On nonwhite women more generally, see Teresa de Lauretis, "Displacing Hegemonic Discourses: Reflections on Feminist Theory in the 1980's," *Inscriptions* (Santa Cruz, Calif.), no. 3–4 (1988), pp. 127–44.

3

HUANG JIANXIN AND THE NOTION OF POSTSOCIALISM

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It is easy merely to assert that Huang Jianxin was perhaps the most politically daring young director to appear in China in the troubled 1980s. The difficulty in assessing his work arises when one tries to locate Huang's highly innovative trilogy of films, *The Black Cannon Incident* [*Heipao shijian*, 1986], *Dislocation* [*Cuowei*, 1987; also known as *The Stand-in*], and *Transmigration* [*Lunhui*, 1989; also known as *Samsara*], in any conventional conceptual framework. In a general sense, Huang's work belongs to the vaguely defined category of Fifth Generation films made between 1983 and 1989. However, he was really the only important director in the elite group consisting of Chen Kaige, Tian Zhuangzhuang, Zhang Yimou, Wu Ziniu, and a few others who dealt exclusively and explicitly with the profound problems of the contemporary socialist city. One hardly needs to be reminded that it was precisely in this sector of Chinese society that the massive popular protests of the spring and summer of 1989 originated. Thus, more than the works of any other Chinese filmmaker, Huang Jianxin's anticipated that extraordinary turmoil.

In December 1988, a time of considerable cultural openness in socialist China, I attended a prerelease screening of a rough cut of *Transmigration* at the Film Archive of China. This screening was attended primarily by film specialists and critics in Beijing such as Li Tuo and Zheng Dongtian, who were eager to get their first look at a work that was rumored to be highly controversial. Huang Jianxin flew in from his base at the pace-setting Xian Film Studio to take part in the lively discussion that followed the screening. A sense of excitement pervaded the room because *Guangming ribao*, an official news daily aimed at intellectuals, had just reported that censors in the Ministry of Radio, Film, and Television had discussed *Transmigration* in a two-hour session that, for the first time since the