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Expression and Prohibition of Desire: Cinematic Representation of Dreams as Alternative Aesthetics in Modern Chinese Film*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines dreams in an array of Chinese films, ranging from popular to modernist, that emerged in several transformative historical moments from the post-May Fourth period of the 1920s through the Reform Era of the 1980s. Through the contextualisation of film dreams, this article explores how oneiric representation waxed and waned in relation to the changing status of realism as aesthetic orthodoxy in the Chinese context. During the journey of emergence, deprivation, and return on the Chinese screen, film dreams become socialised and allegorised in a particular period as a symptom or index of a broader historical reality to which they respond or that they reflect. This article therefore argues that film dreams touched upon the kernel of historic situations and ideology in a way that had not yet reached a universal moment in realist representation.

Keywords: film dreams, realism, alternative aesthetics, individual, collective allegory

Introduction

Dream narratives were abundant in various genres of premodern Chinese literature, including the earliest anthology of Chinese poetry, the *Book of Odes* (*Shi jing* 詩經), pre-Qin philosophical essays like the *Zhuangzi* (*Zhuangzi* 莊子), Song Yu's (宋玉, fl. 298–263 BC) *Rhapsody on the Goddess* (*Shennü fu* 神女賦), Shen Jiji's (沈既濟, 777–800 CE) *chuanqi* story *The World inside A Pillow* (*Zhen zhong ji* 枕中記), the most famous dreams of Tang Xianzu's (湯顯祖, 1550–1616 CE) play *Peony Pavilion* (*Mudan ting* 牡丹亭), and Cao Xueqin's (曹雪芹, 1715–1763) *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglou meng* 紅樓夢). Dreams in Chinese literature were used to indicate different, sometimes contradictory, meanings: a supernatural realm where one might encounter ghosts, ancestors or gods; an autonomous zone where one could break away from the constraints of social morality; the transiency of life; the instability of waking reality; and even existential doubt about consciousness, self, and world. As diverse as these dream narratives were, they were never integrated into a unified theory of dreams. “Dreams were seen as both a confirmation of and a threat to the sense of order in waking life, as factual and as fabricated, as meaningful and as delusional,” concluded Richard Strassberg (2008, 2). Although dreams, as significant psychological phenomena, were re-discovered from the

perspective of science in the beginning of the early twentieth century, various premodern portrayals and understandings of dreams have left an indelible imprint on modern films. For example, Fei Mu's 1937 short film *Broken Dreams in the Women's Chamber* (*Chungui duanmeng* 春閨斷夢) depicts women simultaneously experiencing identical dreams, a phenomenon also described in Bai Xingjian's (白行簡, 776–826 CE) *chuanqi* tale "A Record of Three Dreams" (*Sanmeng ji* 三夢記). While the abundant rhetoric of dreams in modern Chinese literature has drawn critical attention (Chan 2017), the cinematic representation of dreams has been largely overlooked in the scholarship. The dearth of studies on Chinese film dreams may be partly because films with dream sequences are not very common in the entire extant corpus of Chinese film, and they are especially rare in the socialist era.

This article will examine dreams in an array of Chinese films that emerged in several transformative historical moments, from the post-May Fourth period of the 1920s to the Reform Era of the 1980s. These films, most of which have escaped adequate critical attention, mainly have dreams that occur in deep or light sleep: *The Romance of the Western Chamber* (*Xixiang ji* 西廂記), *Broken Dreams in the Women's Chamber* (*Chungui duanmeng*), *Crossroads* (*Shizi jietou* 十字街頭), *Troubled Laughter* (*Kunaoren de xiao* 苦惱人的笑), *Dislocation* (*Cuowei* 錯位), and *Spring Dream by the Lake* (*Hubian chunmeng* 湖邊春夢). An exception is the film *The Life of Wu Xun* (*Wuxun zhuan* 武訓傳), where the dreams are brought on by a fever. Although daydreams that appear rather fleetingly in films such as *A Sparking Red Star* (*Shanshan de hongxing* 閃閃的紅星; Li Jun and Li Ang, 1974) and *The Winter of Three Hairs* (*Sanmao liulang ji* 三毛流浪記; Zhao Ming and Yan Gong, 1949) do not receive detailed analysis, they do constitute complementary examples for discussion. The silent film *The Romance of the Western Chamber* (Hou Yao, 1927) and *Broken Dreams in the Women's Chamber* (Fei Mu, 1937) are the first two films on which I focus. Hou Yao's bold use of cinematic techniques and Fei Mu's skillful experimentation with film language make dreams a site where Chinese filmmakers explore the novelty of the visual medium and avant-garde means of artistic expression. The next film with dream sequences examined in this article is *The Life of Wu Xun* (Sun Yu, 1950), which has the unique status of being the target of the first nationwide campaign of criticism in literature and art after the establishment of the PRC. The serious censure of the dream sequence in the film served as a harbinger of the near extinction of oneiric representation on socialist Chinese screens. It was not until the emergence of *Troubled Laughter* (Yang Yanjin and Deng Yimin, 1979) soon after the end of the Cultural Revolution that Chinese filmmakers began to touch upon dreams again. In the post-socialist era, oneiric representation found its full expression in films such as Huang Jianxin's *Dislocation*. Nightmares in both *Troubled Laughter* and *Dislocation* are scrutinised in the final part of this article.

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Realism and Dreams

Dream representation, which often exceeds the bounds of realism's mimesis, is usually bracketed by and thus set apart from the central narrative and is seen as being inferior to the realist style. The investigation of film dreams thus necessarily prompts a re-consideration of the apparatus of realist aesthetics and the tension between dreams as the locus for exploring alternative aesthetics and realism as the aesthetic ideology throughout the revolutionary century in the Chinese context. Through the prism of the aforementioned film dreams, this article seeks to excavate the alternative aesthetics beneath the surface of the dominance of realism in the history of Chinese cinema.

Therefore, before delving into specific film dreams, we must assess the dynamic between dreams and realism as a representational mode and as an aesthetic ideology. Realism (*xianshizhuyi* 現實主義; *xieshizhuyi* 寫實主義¹) has been the most predominant aesthetic concept in modern Chinese discourse on literature and art. However, in Chinese traditional culture and aesthetics, there is no notion that corresponds to the concept of realism in western aesthetics.² As Christoph Harbsmeier (1998, 207) contends, “Whereas Greek philosophers were very often preoccupied with the notions of factual and evaluative truth for its own sake, their Chinese counterparts looked upon language and thought as much more pragmatically embedded in social life. Their key concept was that of the Way (*Dao* 道) of conducting human affairs, not of objective factual or doctrinal truth.” Correspondingly, the Chinese literati developed and endorsed pragmatic literary theory—literature as a vehicle for conveying the *Dao* (*wenyizaidao* 文以載道)—ever since the eleventh-century. *Wenyizaidao* became the orthodox doctrine upheld by the imperial dynasties until the early twentieth century when the western concept of realism was introduced through Japan to China during the New Culture Movement (*Xinwenhua yundong* 新文化運動). However, as Yang Xiaobin's (2002, 7) reading of Marston Anderson suggests, the May Fourth intellectuals, “strengthened, rather than weakened, the Chinese literary convention that requires literature to convey principles. While only the content of principle (*dao*) was changed, the presumption that the literary text is subjugated to the truth (subjective or objective) remained intact.” Furthermore, among the new concepts and literary ideas imported from the West, realism was paramount to all others, including romanticism and modernism. Prominent intellectuals such as Hu Shi (胡適, 1891–1962) (1935 [1917], 34–43) and Chen Duxiu (陳獨秀, 1897–1942; 1935 [1917], 44–47) saw realism as an advanced literary technique and the right path

¹ In many discussions on the literature of the early twentieth century, *xieshizhuyi* was considered interchangeable with *xianshizhuyi*. However, it must be noted that, in the Chinese context, *xieshizhuyi* is the prelude to the use of *xianshizhuyi*. The term *xieshi* first appeared in Liang Qichao's 1902 essay “On the Relationship between Fiction and the Government of the People” (*Lun xiaoshuo yu qunzhi zhi guanxi*) (Anderson 1990, 28).

² “*Zhen*” (真, literally translated as “truth”), a Chinese concept that has existed since the pre-Han period, is usually compared to western realism. However, there are fundamental differences between *zhen* and realism. Chinese traditional culture did not develop the abstract and scientific notion of truth as Western culture did; instead, it is more concerned with the ethical, moral, and emotional aspects of truth.

for Chinese literature to follow to break from its ossified classical tradition and achieve literary modernisation. These intellectuals also believed that realism had played a key role in nineteenth-century European social reform and was therefore essential to accomplish the goal of China's social transformation (Chen 1999 [1915], 124–126). This initial emphasis on the role of realism in moulding a new society has continued to be reinforced. Realism was advocated ideologically in the revolutionary era, which ultimately gave rise to its orthodox status as the aesthetic counterpart of the nation's modernisation. Meanwhile, the discourse of realism, from the 1930s to 1976, had been constantly politicised, ultimately leading to its effective over-politicisation in the Cultural Revolution. The reverse trend in which realist discourse has sought to rid itself of its overload of ideology and to restore realism's status as artistic aesthetics has lasted from the late 1970s to the present. Underlying the historical process of politicisation and depoliticisation is the essential contest between political heteronomy and artistic autonomy.

With regard to the film medium, the most conventional definition of cinematic realism derives from the medium's photographic ontology—the correspondence of photographic image to pro-filmic reality. According to some early Chinese film theories, such as that of Gu Kenfu (顧肯夫, 189?–1932), the verisimilitude (*bizhen* 逼真) of cinema, based on its “scientific” reproduction of the real world through photography, endows cinema with a superiority over other forms of drama (as quoted in McGrath 2016, 20). The supreme faith in the powers of realist representation as a pragmatic social force along with the scientific method of cinema rooted in the nature of the mechanical reproduction of photography form a hidden utopian impulse within realism itself. This impulse or desire, as Roy Chan (2017, 30) suggests, “lurks within reason's very structure, a volatile potential that cannot be completely contained by the reality principle or by realist convention.”

Dreams make that desire explicit. To maintain and realise, to use Bazin's (2005 [1967], 20) expression, the cinematic vision of “a total and complete representation of reality,” realism attempts to present a multi-layered reality, including physical and psychic, conscious and unconscious, and visible and invisible dimensions. Dreams escape realism to probe its deep, opaque territory. Once the realist mode engages, a tension arises because the dream's fragmentary, discontinuous, and irrational ontology may differ essentially from the rational nature of empiric mimesis. Particularly in the case of cinema, dreams fundamentally destabilise the basis of (photographic) realism due to the lack of a material pre-existence of dream objects in the world. Without the constraint of the mimetic need to represent the physical world, the dream image, as Foucault (1984, 74) asserts, “appears as a modality of expression, and achieves its meaning in a ‘style.’” Realist representation with dreams thus becomes a hybrid of two different ontologies, with one attempting to disguise itself as a transparent immediacy in its representation of the world and the other drawing attention to its own expression as the presence of film language.

While the formal analysis of dreams is my main approach, Deleuzian schizoanalysis, which challenges the symbolic standpoint of psychoanalysis, sheds light on this topic. Instead of elucidating representational equations and symbolic

significances, Deleuze's non-representational thinking on film dreams leads us to recognise the affective force of the dream-image that engages the spectator in perceptual disturbances. Deleuze's point of view, as Anna Powell (2007, 19) states, "means a shift away from symbolic meaning to the singularities of style and expression." Dreams' stylistic presence constitutes the impulse of affect that differs fundamentally from the narrative impulse of realist representation. This ontological distinction renews our understanding of film dreams and of the tension between film dreams as the locus for exploring alternative aesthetics and realism as aesthetic orthodoxy in the Chinese context. In addition to the formal analysis of dreams, the approach of historical contextualisation is also applied to investigate the ideological and critical discourses on (the politics of) aesthetics that construct the larger cultural landscape in which the "mechanism of repression" (to loosely borrow the concept from Freud) operates in the production of film dreams.

The Romance of the Western Chamber: Novel Cinematic Devices, Modern Individual Desires

In his *A Brief History of Modern Chinese Cinema*, filmmaker and critic Zheng Junli (1996 [1936], 1393) observes that certain Chinese farcical and slapstick comedies of the period from 1909 to 1921, as in some of Charlie Chaplin's early films, used dreams to construct a fantasy world. Meanwhile, multiple novel camera tricks were applied to create oneiric representation as a way of reinforcing a film's commercial appeal. Unfortunately, the survival rate for early Chinese films is so disastrous that one of the earliest extant films with dream sequences is the relatively late Hou Yao 1927 cinematic adaption of the dramatic classical *The Romance of the Western Chamber*. Nevertheless, the film exemplifies the characteristics of the early cinematic representation of dreams in Zheng's account.

As one of the most popular traditional love comedies, *The Romance of the Western Chamber* features the narrative formula of a scholar-meets-beauty romance. A young scholar, Zhang Sheng, meets and falls in love with Cui Yingying, the daughter of an official of a Tang court at the Pujiu Temple. A local bandit, Sun Feihu, hears about Yingying's beauty and tries to capture her by besieging the temple. Zhang writes to his old friend General Du asking him to subdue the bandits. The crisis is finally resolved after a fight. Zhang Sheng and Cui Yingying are helped by the maid Hong Niang to secure a secret union. To meet the requirements of Yingying's mother, Zhang Sheng attends the imperial examination and wins an official position. The tale ends happily with the couple's reunion.

The story of *The Romance of the Western Chamber* was not new to Chinese audiences at the time; however, what Hou endeavoured to make was very much a "modern," popular cultural commodity. With a classical subject, Hou sought to convey an anti-feudal, anti-Confucian ritual (*fan fengjian, fan lijiao* 反封建, 反禮教) spirit that advocated the freedom of love and individualism and, more importantly, demonstrated the visual novelty of a fantastic world and optical play made possible by his sophisticated use of film technologies and tricks to obtain commercial success. Multiple techniques, such as rapid editing, superimposed overhead shots, and stop-motion photography, are incorporated in the dream sequence, as well as

in the sword-fighting sequence in the extant five-reel film.

In a sequence lasting nearly four minutes in the middle of the film, the tired Zhang Sheng falls asleep in his room, and then an iris shot of Yingying walking in a cloud signals that he is dreaming. When a normal shot shows Yingying entering Zhang's room, the film appears to return to the waking state. The two lovers are talking to each other ardently when the bandit Sun Feihu suddenly intrudes and abducts Yingying. The despairing Zhang grabs a brush pen, and the pen magically grows to the size of a spear. More than a weapon, the brush pen becomes a vehicle of flight, which Zhang mounts and rides against the backdrop of a superimposed image of mountains in pursuit of Sun. After undertaking an intense fight, Sun finally lies defeated on the ground, his face covered with the ink from Zhang's brush pen. The couple embraces. After a fade-out and fade-in transition, we find Zhang embracing his servant boy, and we realise that what we have seen was simply Zhang's dream.

According to scriptwriter and director Hou Yao (1927), the dream plot (as well as Yingying's hallucination of her internal debate over love versus conventional mores that appears elsewhere in the complete ten-reel film) is not from the original work but is Hou Yao's cinematic invention.³ The fantasy world of the characters' psychology serves as an arena in which the filmmaker experiments with and fully develops technical expertise based on his own understanding of the new visual medium. The magical tricks in the dream sequences are of great importance as sheer technical achievement in this silent film, which is reminiscent of the early film "magician" Georges Méliès' innovation. In his early filmmaking days, Méliès was fascinated by creating various cinematic versions of dreams such as *A Drunkard's Dream* (1897), *The Artist's Dream* (1898), *Dream of the Ballet Master* (1903), and *Dream of an Opium Fiend* (1908). Similarly, Hou Yao's cinematic realisation of special effects, trick photography, and superimposition makes the dream sequence (as well as the sword-fighting sequence) a type of "cinema of attraction" (Gunning 1986, 63–70)—a "spectacle" that engages in the dynamic process of interacting with the story-telling cinema of narrative (Gunning, 1994). *The Romance of the Western Chamber* also bears considerable resemblance to many of Chaplin's films that feature a transition from a romantic and heroic dream into gritty reality, as Zheng Junli (1996 [1936], 1385–1432) remarks in his observation of Chinese films of the 1910s. The scholar Zhang's dream and awakening as a comic incongruity in the classical-subject film may remind us, for example, of Chaplin's *The Bank* (1915), in which he saves the secretary Edna from robbers and turns to kiss her but then wakes up to find himself kissing a mop. Given that Chaplin's comedies were released in China in the mid-1910s (Bo 1979, 11), it may not be arbitrary to say that *The Romance of the Western Chamber* was influenced by early American comedies

³ In his essay on directing *The Romance of the Western Chamber*, Hou Yao states that what he seeks is to present "the true feeling that is in accordance with the spirit of the classical drama of *The Romance of the Western Chamber*, regardless of whether the plots are from the original work or not." He admits that the two plots—Zhang Sheng's dream and Yingying's fantasy—which do not exist in the literary version, were added to the filmic version to convey the spirit of the original work. See Hou Yao, "Yandi de Xi Xiang" (The visual version of *The Romance of the Western Chamber*).

represented by the works of Chaplin and others.

Not only does the elaborate visual representation of dreams present audiences with a distinctively modern experience, but the dreams' symbolic signification is also much like the functional fulfilment of a modern individual's repressed desire, as elucidated in Freud's dream theory. In Kristine Harris' (1999) meticulous reading of the dream sequence in *The Romance of the Western Chamber*, the imagery and usage of Zhang's brush pen as well as the poured ink from the pen are convincingly interpreted as a phallus, related to the male libido and sexual potency, and they convey "sexual tension and anxiety" (69). It is not clear whether Hou Yao's cinematic adaption of *The Romance of the Western Chamber* was influenced by knowledge of Freudian theories of dreams and sexualised unconscious or not. However, dream theory, as a key part of Freud's ideas, entered China in the May Fourth period and became well known among Chinese intellectuals in the early 1920s (Zhang 1992, 34–35). It should not be seen as a coincidence that in the same year of 1927, another film, *Spring Dream by the Lake* (*Hubian chunmeng*; Bu Wancang), which is not extant, also featured a significant dream framework. If the dream world in *The Romance of the Western Chamber* is the combined projection of archaic, indigenous imagination, and modern desire, then the daydream in *Spring Dream by the Lake* seems to be an outright Westernised, modernist reverie. Scripted by the renowned writer Tian Han 田漢 (1898–1968), who was influenced by Sigmund Freud and, more explicitly, by Tanizaki Jun'ichirō 谷崎潤一郎 (1886–1965), a Japanese writer focusing on the theme of sexuality and erotic obsession, *Spring Dream by the Lake* depicts a sadomasochist relationship between a playwright and a femme fatale. When it was released, *Spring Dream by the Lake* was publicised as an art film aimed at raising the level of audience tastes (as quoted in Huang 2014, 121). According to Zhang Zhen's (2005, 256) speculation based on the film's synopsis and reviews, the psychological drama in which mirrors frequently "function as devices of metamorphosis of different states of mind" is "a cinematic fairy tale about the painful transformation of modern male and female identity." Thus, despite the apparent difference between *The Romance of the Western Chamber* as an entertainment film and *Spring Dream by the Lake* as an "art film," dreams, when rendered cinematic, were embedded in the rather modern sense of unconscious sexual desire and anxiety.

In early Chinese film, dreams offered the pioneer filmmakers an ideal site for experimenting with novel cinematic tricks and special effects, as well as innovative aesthetics. Ma (1990, 6–21) fairly points out that although in early Chinese film history there was no parallel to the avant-garde movements in the 1910s–1920s European and American cinema, the two commercial genres—farical and slapstick comedy and the subsequently emerging fantasy-martial arts film—substituted for the experimental film and played the role of vanguard in exploring film language and technical expertise. Zhang Zhen (2005, 205) thus designates the early films that bridged the gap between the popular and the avant-garde as "avant-pop." Dreams in avant-pop films were commonly the confluence of the dual function of cinematic experiment and commercial entertainment, as exemplified in the dream sequence of martial arts fighting in *The Romance of the Western*

Chamber whose camera tricks and special effects were employed and amplified as a pyrotechnic display of technical and physical spectacle in the later hit *Burning of the Red Lotus Temple* (*Huoshao hongliansi* 火燒紅蓮寺; Zhang Shichuan, 1928). In the 1920s, when film was perceived as low-level, popular consumer entertainment, dreams played a dual role, creating entertainment appeal and enabling filmmakers to experiment with cutting edge cinematic techniques. The two roles of cinematic dreamscape still blended into one another during this period, while a more conscious attempt to make cinematic dreams an arena for exploring an alternative aesthetic did not arise until the late 1930s.

Broken Dreams in the Women's Chamber: Women's Noir Dreamscape and the Nation's Symbolic Salvation

Ten years after *The Romance of the Western Chamber*, the dream in the 1937 film *Crossroads* (*Shizi jietou*; Shen Xiling) continues the conventions of the 1920s popular film *The Romance of the Western Chamber* in depicting libidinal psychology. In the dream sequence of this light-hearted comedy, the female protagonist Yang Zhiying dreams about the romantic fulfilment of sexual desire with the male protagonist Lao Zhao. The dream sequence serves as an entertaining element interwoven with the film's otherwise social realist representation. Nevertheless, at a time when Japan increased its aggression against China, the foremost oneiric representation was from another 1937 film, *Broken Dreams in the Women's Chamber*. Dreams in this short film go beyond the private unconscious and personal desire and represent a symbolic dimension connected to the entire culture and society of the period.

Scripted and directed by Fei Mu, *Broken Dreams in the Women's Chamber* is one of eight episodes that make up the omnibus work *The Symphony of Lianhua* (*Lianhua jiaoxiangqu* 聯華交響曲; 1937). This collection of films was made by filmmakers from the Lianhua Film Company towards the end of 1936. *Broken Dreams in the Women's Chamber* is an eighteen-minute short film portraying three dreams of two women in a bed. The first dream shows a Chinese soldier on a battlefield taking from his pocket a begonia leaf, which was a symbol of China's territory at the time. In the second, a nightmare, a devil-like man frantically rotates a globe, as Hitler does in *The Great Dictator* (Charlie Chaplin 1940). He throws the begonia leaf into a fire with a shrieking laugh. In the third dream, the two women are assaulted by the devil-like man; however, they rise up in resistance and ultimately kill him. Meanwhile, soldiers win a victory on the battlefield.

In an explicit way, *Broken Dreams in the Women's Chamber* conveys an overt symbolic dimension of nationalist concerns, alluding to the resistance against Japan's invasion at a time when the Chinese film industry was still not allowed to produce openly anti-Japanese content.⁴ There is a long tradition of telling male or collective stories through women's experience in Chinese literature and culture. In 1930s leftist films, women in particular carry the burden of representation and are depicted as both victims and heroes. Women's sufferings on screen are evidence of national catastrophe and social injustice, while their independence and struggle are symbols of China's future destiny. In this light, in contrast to the individual

desire voiced by the dreams of *The Romance of the Western Chamber* and of *Spring Dream by the Lake*, the two women's nightmares in *Broken Dreams in the Women's Chamber* are the bearers of collective anxiety and longings rather than personal desire. Moreover, the collectivity of the dreams is heightened, consciously or unconsciously, by the intersubjective state of the two women's dreams—they share the same dream, which is hardly possible in reality. By fusing their subconsciouses into one, the dreams erase the distance between different subjectivities and convey a radical sense of collectivity that was strongly desired in a time of national calamity. Moreover, by creating a world fundamentally different from the “real” mimetic one, the dream sphere provides an ambiguous zone where the filmmaker could circumvent the KMT's film censorship and present a patriotic theme, although at the expense of having the dialogue completely removed by censors.⁵ A clear line is drawn between the dream world and the real one in the film: Fei Mu consciously demarcates the two worlds by showing the two sleeping women tossing and turning in bed to suggest that subsequent events are experienced only in the protagonists' dreams. The sensitive content of resistance is confined to the women's oneiric experience, while the reality looks peaceful and seems to have no link to the violent dream world.

More than simply a tactic to circumvent censorship, Fei Mu also used the dream framework as an ideal locus within which he could continue his formalist experimentation, which was already evident in his 1936 film *Blood on Wolf Mountain* (*Langshan diexue ji* 狼山喋血記), a rather symbolic work combining allegory and realism. *Broken Dreams in the Women's Chamber* is highly aestheticised or even avant-garde and stands out strikingly from its contemporaries in the 1930s. The technical and visual coding of the oneiric representation—the highly symbolic imagery, distorted set design, unusual composition, chiaroscuro lighting, and active camera movement—distinguishes the film significantly from realist aesthetics. In terms of sound, the jarring symphony is interspersed with the characters' recurrent, hyperbolic laughs and screams, heightening the uncanny atmosphere of the dream world. Through this experimentation with visual and sound sensations, *Broken Dreams in the Women's Chamber* is preoccupied with rendering the gestures, shivers and struggles of female bodies, placing the emotional and affective experience of women's horror at the heart of filmic sensory effects. Dreams thus become a filmic arena that privileges showing over telling, and bodily contagion over narrative plotting. It is difficult not to relate Fei's short work to the influence of the epitome of German expressionist cinema, Robert Wiene's silent horror film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), which is said to have been released in China in the 1920s.

⁴ In May 1932, after the Battle of Shanghai (known also as the January 28 Incident), the KMT government signed the Songhu Cease-fire Agreement (*Songhu tingzhan xieding* 淞滬停戰協定) with the Japanese. From June 1932, bound by the armistice agreement, the Propaganda Department of the KMT government issued an order to prohibit Shanghai film companies from making films about war or that contained revolutionary content. Films with such “provocative content” were considered to “impede the progress of peace,” which “severely deviates from the original intention of the government.” See Cheng, Li and Xing, *Zhongguo dianying fazhan shi* (History of the Development of Chinese Cinema), 292–293.

⁵ *Broken Dreams in the Women's Chamber* originally had dialogue; however, the dialogue was censored by KMT authorities. See Cheng, Li and Xing, *History of the Development of Chinese Cinema*, 475.

In fact, Fei Mu's unique combination of oneiric aesthetics and a patriotic theme should be considered in the specific historical context of the growing ideological divergence between the leftists' political pragmatism and the modernists' aesthetic proclivities in 1930s Chinese cinema. Leftist film critics supported the ideologically coded realist films that exposed social conflict and oppression, thereby mobilising the population to carry out social revolution. The critics' standpoint was soon criticised in film journals by certain modernists who were mostly writers of the "New Sensationism" (*xin ganjue pai* 新感覺派). This criticism triggered a famous debate between 1932 and 1935—"Soft Film versus Hard Film" (*ruanxing dianying yu yingxing dianying zhi zheng* 軟性電影與硬性電影之爭). For example, the modernist Liu Na'ou 劉吶鷗 (1905–1940) criticised leftist films for their over-politicised content and the supremacy of content over cinematic form and declared the artistic autonomy of film art. The statements of both sides indicate that the focal point of the debate lay in the relationships between art and politics, aesthetics and ideology, and film form and content. In 1936, in the wake of further Japanese aggression and with the public paying increasing attention to national salvation, film critics and filmmakers had a variety of discussions on the concept of the "national defence film" (*guofang dianying* 國防電影). The issues discussed included whether a national defence film should be a realist film. Although most film critics suggested that a national defence film should not reject artistic techniques, such as symbolism and romanticism, they still believed that "realism is the most advanced technique" (as quoted in Li 2001). While most national films did apply a realist or even a propagandist style, Fei Mu painstakingly sought to integrate ideological messages into his innovative experimentation with an alternative aesthetics in *Broken Dreams in the Women's Chamber*.

Broken Dreams in the Women's Chamber represented an implicit aesthetic challenge to the prevalent notions of how a national defence film should look. Nevertheless, as China was increasingly cast in the shadow of war, the discourse of realism was constantly ideologised and closely associated with the political discourse of social transformation and national salvation. It is worth noting that one of the dominant discourses of the time was the metaphor of "awakening" (Pang 2000, 23–25). The harsh reality of national survival being at stake made "dreams" seem untimely. For example, in 1927, Tian Han 田漢 (1898–1968), the scriptwriter of *Spring Dream by the Lake*, wrote a renowned serialised essay "Silver Dream" (2000 [1927], 8–61), in which he advocated for aesthetic modernism and asserted that film, in its essence, is a daydream. However, in 1930, Tian wrote another essay entitled "Awaking from the Silver Dream" (2000 [1930], 66–70), rejecting his earlier aestheticised notion of film and underscoring an ideological approach to understanding the medium. Marston Anderson (1990, 27–60) observes that, at the time, any formal attempt that deviated from realism could be readily labelled "self-indulgent" or "romantic." Cinematic dreamscapes that had once encapsulated commercial entertainment or an alternative aesthetic and that had once implied hidden libidinal or utopian desires, were intensely penetrated by the strong light of the realist impulse. Under the grim circumstances of internal disturbance and external aggression, realism did not mean only aesthetics or style, but rather

represented a value orientation in Chinese cinema.

The Life of Wu Xun Campaign: The Depravity of “Problematic” Dreams

Made at the dawn of the new era following the CCP’s victory in the civil war, *The Life of Wu Xun* was written and directed by Sun Yu 孫瑜 (1900–1990), who studied film in the United States in the 1920s and established his reputation with a number of socially concerned melodramas in 1930s Shanghai cinema. This film traces the life of a real historical figure from the late Qing dynasty, Wu Xun 武訓 (1838–1896), who was devoted to raising money by begging to found schools for the poor. In *The Life of Wu Xun*, the eight-minute dream sequence in the middle of the movie diverges from the otherwise realist narrative. In Sun Yu’s screenplay, the oneiric part is titled “Trilogy of Fantasies” (*Kuangxiang sanbuqu* 狂想三部曲). The sequence depicts Wu Xun’s subjective experiences over three days and nights when he has fallen ill, interweaving reality, memories, and dreams. Wu Xun’s dreams begin with a montage sequence depicting the hard life of the repressed peasants: thousands of peasants turn grindstones in heavy yokes and iron chains, while the ruling class, represented by the Promoted Scholar (*juren* 舉人) Zhang, easily exploits them by monopolising access to education. Then, in a supernatural scene, the villain Zhang and his henchmen, all looking like devils, raise a giant brush and inkstone to force the peasants, including Wu Xun, to jump into the “Sea of Bitterness” and hell, where poor people suffer desperately. When Wu Xun suddenly realises that the only way to change everything is through education, he becomes a leader who ignites the revolt of the poor. The last dreaming scene switches to Heaven, where the children of the poor receive education and Zhang is overthrown. The spectacle and characterisation of the three-part dream sequences are largely derived from indigenous sources of folktales and myths, while the fantastic and mythical dream world is produced through a dazzling display of superimposition, dissolves, and distorted images. Christian Metz (1977, 670) designates this type of cinematic trick as a type of “trucage,” an “avowed machination” that declared itself through its formal presentation, leading the viewer to enjoy the technological artifice while still losing him- or herself in the illusion. The dream sequences of *The Life of Wu Xun* are redolent of both *The Romance of the Western Chamber*, with respect to its use of traditional resources and cinematic “tricks,” and *Broken Dreams in the Women’s Chamber*, in terms of its national consciousness, which, to a large extent, indicates the lineage of the Shanghai film tradition in Sun Yu’s work.

Different from individual perception, Wu Xun’s dreams compress the temporality of the course of history—the miserable past, the revolutionary present, and the fantastic future—to imagine a utopia. Later, in the campaign of criticism against the film, this utopia was deemed to challenge the historical viewpoint of the struggle of the proletariat and the officially sanctioned utopia. Sun Yu (1950) himself attached considerable weight to the dream sequence. He wrote a special essay after the completion of the film to explain why and how he used more than a thousand feet of film to portray Wu Xun’s dreams. This essay implies that the dreams become a crucial trigger, if not the central impetus, for Wu Xun’s efforts to found schools for the poor.

The Life of Wu Xun was initially praised after its release in 1950. However, in 1951, an unsigned editorial (widely known to have been written by Mao Zedong) in the *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao*) harshly criticised the film's historical viewpoint and political stance. This criticism was the start of the first nationwide campaign of criticism in literature and art after the establishment of the PRC. In the large-scale criticism of *The Life of Wu Xun*, some detractors censured the dream sequence for two main reasons. First, the dream sequence reflects a false historical view, idealism, seen as opposite to the materialist orientation of Marxism-Leninism and Maoist philosophy. From the standpoint of historical materialism, the development of both individuals and society is determined not by man's subjectivity but by material conditions. Sun Yu's filmic emphasis on Wu Xun's dreams, which play a pivotal role in forming his resolve to beg for money for education, apparently could not meet the Party's demand that literature and art must show the new regime's legitimacy as an irresistible historical trend beyond anyone's subjective will. Sun Yu (1952) himself later "accepted" such censure in his self-criticism article by accepting his portrayal of Wu Xun's dreams as "idealistic, fantastic, mysterious—showing the pernicious influence of Freudian theories." It is worth noting that Freudian theories were increasingly criticised in China from the 1930s and, together with other Western schools of psychology, were repudiated as idealist, subjective, and bourgeois after the establishment of socialist China.

Second, the non-realist techniques used in the dream sequence were denounced as the decadent techniques of the Western bourgeoisie (*xifang moluo de zichanjieji chuanguozuo fangfa* 西方沒落的資產階級創作方法) and as contravening the spirit of Mao's *Yan'an Talks* in 1942, which advocated "proletarian realism" as the principle of literary and artistic practice. In the 1930s, filmmakers such as Fei Mu could still experiment with and develop their own artistic style as an alternative to realism. The context was completely different in the 1950s, when socialist realism was promoted by the CCP as the official aesthetic criterion for guiding literary and artistic creation. The oneiric aesthetic is clearly linked to "the dross of Western art, foreign dogmatism, and the notion of art's supremacy," as Sun Yu (1952) acknowledged in his self-criticism. After the campaign, filmmakers also became very cautious about the exploration of film style and aesthetics, which were attempted only discreetly on the premise that they were ideologically acceptable. An excessive emphasis on film form or aesthetics was very likely to be condemned as "formalism" (*xingshi zhuyi* 形式主義), a "dangerous tendency" that was believed to divorce filmmakers from the broad masses of the people and to violate the principle of "literature and art serving workers, peasants, and soldiers" established in Mao's *Yan'an Talks*.

The Socialist Monopoly of Cinematic Subjective Devices

The campaign of criticism of *The Life of Wu Xun* serves as a watershed in the transition of Chinese cinema from the film tradition of Shanghai to the socialist film culture and industry. Soon after the campaign, at the Second National Conference of the Representatives of Literary and Art Workers in 1953, socialist realism was officially endorsed as the sole criterion in literary and artistic creation

and criticism. Borrowing the label from Soviet terminology, the new revolutionary aesthetics is the continuation of the Maoist theory of the relationship between politics and art, which had already been clearly elaborated in Mao's Yan'an *Talks*. Inherent in the logic of socialist realism, truth (*zhenshi* 真實) means an underlying ideological truth, which is seen as being even more truthful than reality itself.

The campaign was also a turning point in oneiric representation; the cinematic depiction of dreams all but disappeared from the screen in Mao's era.⁶ The near extinction of dream representation may be partly attributed to the aftermath of the political criticism campaign. More essentially, the shift was due to the fundamental contradiction between dreams as a private form of meaning production and the Marxist-Leninist state's socialist epistemology that aimed to take full control of individuals' cognition and desires. As Wendy Larson (2009, 6) so aptly puts it, Chinese socialist psychology demanded "consciousness as opposed to the unconscious, social contextualisation as opposed to the isolated interior mind, and *jingshen* ('spirit') as opposed to the sexual." The centralised socialist state negated the existence of private consciousness or unconsciousness as embodied in individuals' dreams. The socialist individual is closely tied to the collective network, and individualisation is justified only if it is subordinated to national and collective ends. Furthermore, not only did the cinematic representation of dreams scarcely figure on screen, but other subjective devices associated with individual psychology, such as flashbacks, were also very rare, as Chris Berry's (2004) discussion of Chinese socialist cinema demonstrates. Even in the very rare cases of cinematic subjective devices used in films of the socialist era, they are rarely private or libidinal psychological patterns beyond characters' social identities, but are "part of a collective process of learning from experience" (Berry 2004, 41). Subjective devices become socialised, and collective discourse operates at the levels of the individual's perception, feeling, and mind. Chinese screens were almost devoid of oneiric representation for nearly three decades until the emergence of Yang Yanjin and Deng Yimin's directing debut with *Troubled Laughter* in 1979.

Troubled Laughter: The Return of Dreams, the Return of the Human

Troubled Laughter, with its intensive representation of psychological suffering, echoed the genre of "scar literature" of the late 1970s and early 1980s in depicting intellectuals' highly personalised subjective experiences of trauma during the ten-year turmoil of the Cultural Revolution. Made in the immediate wake of the state's nightmare, *Troubled Laughter* is interspersed with dream and fantasy sequences, and its dreams are predestined to be nightmares in which individual sufferings symbolise national political trauma. The film centres on a Cultural Revolution journalist, Fu Bin, who is asked by the local Party leader Secretary Song to write a report to criticise a rightist medical professor. Faced with the dilemma of whether to obey the evil cadre, Fu suffers from anxiety and experiences nightmares. Refusing to write an untrue report, Fu is put in jail. After the fall of the Gang of

⁶ The 1974 children's film *A Sparking Red Star* (*Shanshan de hongxing* 閃閃的紅星) was one among a very few films that briefly portrayed characters' subjective fantasies.

Four, Fu is released and reunited with his family.

In Fu Bin's first dream-like hallucination, he is falling from a tightrope high in the sky while watching an acrobatic performance. Later, he has a second hallucination of climbing countless steps into the clouds to visit Secretary Song when he is in front of Song's house. While these first two hallucinations are simply a reflection of Fu Bin's anxiety, Fu's third dream, in a somewhat absurdist style, is the climax of the film and has abundant cultural implications. Fu is led into a modern, palace-like building with interior decorations that combine ancient and modern Chinese styles. In an unstable shot, a huge curtain rises and Fu witnesses a terrible scene: at a traditional Chinese birthday feast, the villainous Secretary Song wears a luxurious Ming dynasty costume and arrogantly asks the guests to comment on his newborn baby. Secretary Song's three followers assert that the child will be rich and powerful in the future. The three receive official promotions, and their clothes are changed to either Qing dynasty robes or Nazi military uniforms. The other two, who honestly say the child might die, are beaten to death. At the following banquet, the villains and a dog eat human beings together. Fu Bin is shocked by what he sees. Then the editor-in-chief, as leader of the propagandistic media, tortures Fu in an effort to force him to lie. However, Fu still refuses to tell lies and attempts to escape from the maze-like palace. Fu's dream ends with a shot in which, as the "claw" of a giant hand reaches out towards him, he is unable to escape the palace. In the midst of the chase, Fu Bin is awakened by a bus conductor. The interrupted dream implies a pessimistic attitude towards the predicament of Chinese history and culture, echoing the ambiguous ending of the film.

In fact, Chinese people in the socialist era led somewhat circumscribed private lives due to the pervasive collective movements and penetrating collectivist ideology. The ideal situation that the Party demanded was that an individual keep no secrets from the collective; all private and personal problems were to be solved by "opening one's heart to the Party" (*xiang dang jiaoxin* 向党交心). Dreams, which fell at the rightist end of the public-private spectrum, inherently contradicted the socialist state's requirement to make all social meaning accessible. In the initial moment of the post-Cultural Revolution era, the resurgence of dream representation in *Troubled Laughter* indicates the resurfacing awareness of the existence of a private realm that belongs only to oneself and is detached from the collective life and from the Party's monopoly over meaning production. In the film, Fu dreams only when he is in public spaces—a theatre, a residential area, and a bus—but never when he is at home. Fu's dreams can thus be interpreted as an individual's auto-immune mechanism under rigorous social control and political oppression. There is also the tension raised by Fu's occupational identity as a journalist aiming for public outreach and his subconscious retreat into his inner world. In contrast, the local Party leader Secretary Song is a villain who associates himself closely with official media by posing as a manual labourer to promote his image. In this sense, the film, as Ma (1987, 64–72) notes, links the public sphere and official media to deception while connecting the private sphere, rendered in the dream sequences, with truthfulness.

In *Troubled Laughter*, the three nightmares are signalled by unusual

film language—shaky shots, uncanny soundtrack, and distorted images—as if highlighting the heterogeneity within the narrative as well as underscoring the disparity between the dream realm and the physical world. Underlying the distinction between dream and reality are not only the dichotomies between the collective and the private but also the divergence between the official discourse in the Cultural Revolution and individuals,' in particular, intellectuals' understanding and perception of the upheaval. Fu's third dream is a version of two May Fourth literary classics—Lu Xun's 魯迅 (1881–1936) short stories *Establishing an Argument* (*Li lun* 立論) and *A Madman's Dairy* (*Kuangren riji* 狂人日記), whereby the film reconnects with the tradition of enlightenment of May Fourth that is interrupted by the socialist revolution. Through these allusions, *Troubled Laughter* suggests that the period of the Cultural Revolution in which Fu lives is a “dark age” of “eating people” when “man is forced to be a dog,” as the dream sequence shows. The exterior of the building is modern, while the inside is mostly ancient: the villains' outfits (only villainous characters wear special costumes), the ancient Chinese interior decoration and furniture, and traditional food. There are also a number of modern appliances, such as electric fans, TV sets, and radio-cassette recorders, which in late-1970s China were symbols of material progress and modernisation. Socialist China in Fu Bin's grotesque dream is represented as an odd hybrid of imperial culture and material modernisation, an upgraded premodern society. Like Wu Xun's dreams in *The Life of Wu Xun*, Fu Bin's third nightmare clearly carries a collective dimension. *Troubled Laughter* sees the Cultural Revolution as dragging up the dregs of Chinese feudal culture. This standpoint deviates from the official evaluation of the Cultural Revolution as an accidental political disaster and internal disorder, which was the ideological strategy adopted by the Party in the 3rd Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the CCP held in late 1978.

Moreover, the re-emergence of subjective devices, particularly dream representation, implicitly indicates that revolutionary heroes and heroic narratives are on the wane while ordinary people with complexity and individual subjectivity are returning to Chinese screens. In socialist literature and art, the revolutionary hero is fabricated and moulded emblematically as the virtuous image of political men and the perfect incarnation of revolutionary values. This characterisation has come to be “one of the principal means of indoctrination and exhortation throughout the society, and one of the most important propaganda instruments of Party and government” (Mathewson 2000, 2). Revolutionary aesthetics of the sublime and the worship of the flawless revolutionary hero reached their peak in the Cultural Revolution, while the post-Cultural Revolution film *Troubled Laughter* initiated the cinematic journey of desublimation and of farewell to heroes. Departing from the characterisation of the heroes of socialist films, especially of the “Model Revolutionary Operas” (*yangban xi* 樣板戲) of the Cultural Revolution, the film unfolds with the statement, “What this story describes is neither gods nor ghosts but ordinary people like us” and portrays the non-heroic protagonist Fu Bin, who often has nightmares or hallucinations. Fu's nightmares mark him as human, with fallibility, doubts and compromise, as opposed to heroes who act wholly and exemplarily “within the confines of an infallible doctrine promising certain success

in the public domain, whatever the private cost” (Mathewson 2000, xvi). The dream world functions as a locus of resistance to the rigid code of political ideology and of reconstructing individual subjectivity. The cinematic rendition of dreams easily evokes and promotes a sense of affect in *Troubled Laughter*—specifically, a sense of terror and tension. By giving the spectator access to the protagonist’s subjective perception, the film establishes a strong bond with spectators who had recently experienced the traumatic catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution as victims, and it simultaneously establishes an emotional community for a new intersubjectivity that is based on individual affect instead of political indoctrination.

The Revival of Alternative Aesthetics to (Socialist) Realism

Troubled Laughter marks not only the return of dream representation to Chinese film but also the revival of an alternative aesthetics that is beyond the realist sensibility. It represents the delayed germination of an older seed planted by filmmakers such as Hou Yao in the 1920s and Fei Mu in the 1930s. Various formalist techniques, such as the use of monochrome, split screens, and freeze-frame, which were considered novel in Chinese film in the late 1970s, are applied in this film to portray the complexity of the character’s inner world. The three dream sequences are deemed the most innovative part of the film. After the film’s initial release, some Chinese critics, such as Zhang Zhongnian (1980, 10–12) asserted that *Troubled Laughter* departs even further from the realist aesthetics than contemporary works, such as *Little Flower* (*Xiao hua* 小花; Huang Jianzhong, 1979) and *Reverberations of Life* (*Shenghuo de chanyin* 生活的颤音; Teng Wenji, 1979), which are considered to integrate the technique of “stream of consciousness” (*yishiliu* 意識流) into realist style: “It [*Troubled Laughter*] focuses on expressionism (*xieyi* 寫意) . . . which is closer to modernism.” In fact, in addition to *Troubled Laughter*, an array of films from the late 1970s and the early 1980s focus on the exploration of psychological characterisation and subjectivity through the formalist rendition of dreams, fantasy, and hallucination. *Troubled Laughter* and other films constitute an aesthetic tendency that contrasted with the prevalent tendency of *jishizhuyi* (紀實主義 actualism). In a recent discussion of filmmaking in the early 1980s, some Chinese critics and filmmakers’ claims, such as those of Zheng Dongtian (鄭洞天) (Xie et al. 2008, 9), attest to such an observation: “At that time we actually pursued two tendencies; one is documentary (*jishi* 紀實) style: lighting, cinematography, acting, and so on must be realistic. On the other hand, we hoped to represent subjective psychology at the same time. . . . We were under these two aesthetic tendencies and all the directors took what they needed.”

Jishizhuyi has attained considerable attention and discussion in previous scholarship. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, with the adoption of the ideological principle of “seeking truth from facts” at the Third Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Party in 1978, the emphasis on truth-seeking spread throughout various aspects of social and cultural life, including filmmaking. In the field of film criticism, “seeking truth” was manifested in the advocacy of the new realism. This was evident in Zhang Nuanxin and Li Tuo’s influential manifesto-like article (1979, 40–52) “The Modernization of Film Language.” Zhang

and Li praised Italian Neo-Realism and the French New Wave for their realistic style that presented viewers with a “not faked, but a truthful record” and for their “attempt to redeem physical reality.” This article not only evoked heated discussion on innovation in Chinese film, but also led to the wide circulation of Bazin’s and Siegfried Kracauer’s realist theories in Chinese film circles in the early 1980s. When Chinese scholars translated Bazin’s realist theory at that time, they seemed to intentionally avoid using *xianshizhuyi*, a term considered to carry strong political implications due to its appearance in the official-advocated term *shehuizhuyi xianshizhuyi* (社會主義現實主義 socialist realism). Instead, Chinese scholars use *jishizhuyi* (actualism), *jishi lilun* (紀實理論 documentary theory) and *jilupai lilun* (紀錄派理論 the theory of recording-reality school) to differentiate Bazin’s theory of realism from socialist realism and revolutionary realism used in the Chinese socialist period. This effort was intended to distinguish the new realism from Chinese socialist realism and revolutionary realism and to distance the new realism from any political connotations.

However, comparing the two filmmaking aesthetic tendencies, *jishizhuyi* is relatively “safer” because of its seeming affinity to socialist realism, which had been officially advocated in China. By interpreting (or misreading, whether consciously or not) the realist theories of two prominent Western critics, André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer, the new generation of critics and filmmakers in the 1980s used *jishizhuyi* as “real” realism to replace the “fake” realism of the revolutionary aesthetics. A range of *jishizhuyi* techniques—long takes, natural lighting, location shooting, and non-dramatised narrative—are practiced in films such as *The Drive to Win* (*Sha’ou* 沙鷗; Zhang Nuanxin, 1981), *Neighbours* (*Linju* 鄰居; Zheng Dongtian and Xu Guming, 1981), *Sunset Street* (*Xizhaojie* 夕照街; Wang Haowei, 1983) and *Yamaha Fish Stall* (*Yamaha yudang* 雅馬哈魚檔; Zhang Liang, 1984). Different from socialist films that portray revolutionary heroes in dramatic conflicts of life and death struggle, these films pay attention to the particular social issues of contemporary China and vividly present the trivialities of ordinary people’s daily lives. The rejection of “fake realism” (in the films of the Cultural Revolution) was in accordance with the new ideological orientation of Deng Xiaoping’s reform era, a strategic stance that drew a distinction between the Deng era and the Cultural Revolution. In contrast to *jishizhuyi*, non-realist aesthetics not only rebelled against Mao’s revolutionary aesthetics, but also turned further away from realism, which was still the aesthetic orthodoxy in literature and art in China.

In 1979, Deng revived Mao’s 1956 cultural principle, “Let a hundred flowers bloom, a hundred schools contend” (*Baihua qifang, baijia zhengming* 百花齊放, 百家爭鳴), as the Party’s policy on the development of literature and art. This policy seemed to signal that the Party had relaxed its control over literary and artistic activities. However, in late 1981, Deng’s Hundred Flowers Movement ended with the official critique of the film *Unrequited Love* (*Kulian* 苦戀; Peng Ning, 1980) and its eponymous source novel *Unrequited Love* (its author Bai Hua 白樺 also scripted the film). In the early 1980s, despite the officials’ loosening control over subject matter and themes, the propagandistic function of films was still strongly endorsed by the Party under its new slogan of the Four Cardinal Principles (*sixiang*

jiben yuanze 四項基本原則). Given the hegemony of realism in literature and art of the PRC, alternative aesthetics were intrinsically a heterodoxy not favoured by Chinese authorities. The new stylistic devices in some films were bound to “Western modern art,” which was often condemned as bourgeois and decadent. The discourse on Huang Jianxin’s *Dislocation* during the period of the Anti-Bourgeois Liberalisation campaign refracts the politics of alternative aesthetics in such historical circumstances.

Dislocation: The Living Nightmares of the Socialist Split Subject

Dislocation is regarded as a sequel to *The Black Cannon Incident* (*Heipao shijian Dislocation*, 1985) in the unique Fifth-Generation filmmaker Huang Jianxin’s urban trilogy of the 1980s because of the shared protagonist, Zhao Shuxin, and a similar critique of socialist bureaucratism. The film represents a post-socialist individual subject’s nightmares as a stage upon which unresolved conflicts stemming from the relentless intrusion of the socialist bureaucratic system are reenacted.

With an obvious science-fiction look, *Dislocation* is set in an unspecified time and place in a future China. The protagonist Zhao Shuxin has just been promoted to section chief in a high-tech industrial department. Exhausted by attending endless rounds of meaningless meetings, Zhao invents a robot that looks exactly like him to act as his substitute while Zhao devotes himself to technical research. However, Zhao’s stand-in is corrupted by bureaucratic life and is addicted to participating in meetings, smoking, drinking, and dating women. Finally, the robot is unhappy with Zhao’s control and attempts to rebel against him. At the very moment of a violent confrontation between the flesh-and-blood Zhao and his robotic double, Zhao awakes in a sweat, indicating that everything that happened was a long nightmare. The film ends with a confused Zhao standing in his laboratory.

Dislocation includes three dreams. The first two consecutive nightmares are represented in an apparently surreal way—the eerie atmosphere, shrill soundtrack, and irrational activity suggesting that the scenes of Zhao giving a lecture and undergoing an operation occurred only in his dreams. Later this speculation is confirmed by an abrupt cut to Zhao’s sudden awakening. Unlike the first two dreams, the narrative shifts to Zhao’s last dream in an imperceptible way, without using any special film language or effects, such as unusual camera angles or odd sounds, which might signal to audiences that the ensuing events were not happening in the real world. While the boundary between the dream sphere and the objective world is still distinctive in *Troubled Laughter*, dreams as a subjective experience in *Dislocation* begin to challenge the superiority of the objective world, and the two spheres become seamlessly integrated into each other.

The effect of seamlessness or exchangeability between the oneiric and the “real” world is reinforced in the “waking” scenes. The final waking scene in the film is, intriguingly, the cinematic duplication of Zhao’s first awakening. Zhao wakes with a start and turns to gaze into a mirror in which his own image appears in blue. The third, or waking dream in *Dislocation* falls directly onto one pole of Deleuze’s (2013, 59) designation of dream-image based on technical

means—“the restrained”—in contrast to rich and overloaded means, such as the use of dissolves, slow-motion, superimpositions, and other techniques to signify the status of dreaming as is typical in the cases of *The Life of Wu Xun* and *Troubled Laughter*. The restrained type uses non-continuity editing to imply that the dream may appear no different from the real world. Thus, as David Deamer (2014, 202) remarks, “Signs of the rich present the dream or hallucination without ambiguity, while signs of the restrained engender a question: is this or is this not a dream, a hallucination, a nightmare?” Huang Jianxin deliberately bewilders audiences by re-using the sequence that had previously misled viewers to believe it was the end of a nightmare. No one can really tell if this ending was another new dream. Furthermore, the shot of a lightning flash at the moment of Zhao’s awakening in *Dislocation* is the same shot that appeared in the opening sequence of *The Black Cannon Incident*. The re-used shot suggests a possibility that Zhao’s “waking” experience is perhaps a re-enactment of *The Black Cannon Incident*. History is caught in a closed loop as the nightmares continue within the diegetic world of *Dislocation* and *The Black Cannon Incident*. The inability to relieve the trauma and anxiety by awakening from nightmares and the suffocating, listless atmosphere pervading the entire film give the spectator an overwhelmingly grim mood, resembling the ambiguous finale and the overall tone of *Troubled Laughter*.

The absence of the waking world in *Dislocation* does not mean that Zhao’s dreams are an escape from the historical context; quite the contrary, Zhao’s nightmares gesture to the friction within the troubled reality, to the larger sociopolitical forces of the time. As an artistic response to the official discourse of the “Four Modernizations” (*sige xiandaihua* 四個現代化)—the modernisation of agriculture, industry, national defence, and science and technology—that underscore Deng Xiaoping’s early regime, *Dislocation* reveals the dislocation or clashes between material modernisation and the premodern political system, between the Party’s developmentalist agenda and the repressive socialist bureaucracy. This response is essentially a continuation of Fu Bin’s third nightmare in *Troubled Laughter*. Huang’s *Dislocation*, like *Troubled Laughter*, revives the intellectual discourse of the May Fourth Movement, which suggested that Chinese modernisation could be achieved only jointly with both Mr. Democracy (*De xiansheng* 德先生) and Mr. Science (*Sai xiansheng* 賽先生). Neither was dispensable. In many ways, the 1985 film demands an allegorical reading. In his dream, Zhao “tests” socialist theory and its promise of a utopian society in the future. The test seems to imply that without the modernisation of the socialist system, China’s modernisation is unbalanced. Zhao’s tentative rebellion against the monotonous and rigid socialist system, although in an unaggressive way, may eventually lead to a personality split (symbolised by the white statue of two boxers fighting) and even self-destruction (Zhao’s robotic twin tries violently to replace Zhao) without any decrease or change to the hegemony and stability of the repressive system.

Alternative Aesthetics in Question

The cinematic representation of nightmares in *Dislocation* not only reflects a post-socialist perception, but also, in terms of aesthetics, challenges the orthodox

aesthetics of socialist realism. In a 1988 essay, Chris Berry claimed to have identified two opposite aesthetic tendencies, hyper-realism and absurdism, in Chinese urban cinema in the 1980s. Taking Huang Jianxin's films as a typical example of absurdism, Berry argued that both cinematic tendencies break from socialist realism. *Dislocation* indeed features a significant expressionist *mise-en-scène* in which most scenes of the film are shot indoors and Zhao's surroundings are dominated by a limited palette of black, white, and red, and by exaggerated geometric shapes, such as circles and squares. Various cinematic devices and effects highlight the overpowering, suffocating quality of everyday bureaucratic life. Zhao usually goes outside at night, and the environment is generally empty. In such an environment, the feeling of lifelessness and of being bored and smothered engulfs everything, with no signs of possible improvement. It is fair to say that the cinematic design and stylised elements of both *Dislocation* and its prequel *The Black Cannon Incident* bear a clear aesthetic connection to Western modernist art, characterised by alienation, absurdity, and distanciation (Berry and Farquhar 1994, 100). For example, in the scene of the "desert dream" that Zhao has within his larger waking dreams, a perplexed Zhao wanders in an unspecific barren desert. The setting, the ambience, and the soundscape seem to be inspired by Western modernist masterpiece *Red Desert* (*Il deserto rosso*, Michelangelo Antonioni, 1964) rather than, as Nick Kaldis (1999) argues, by classical Chinese scroll painting.

Huang Jianxin's *Dislocation* was later followed by an array of films, such as *Visions from a Jail Cell* (*Moku zhong de huanxiang* 魔窟中的幻想; Wang Jixing, 1986), *Death Visits the Living* (*Yige sizhe dui shengzhe de fangwen* 一個死者對生者的訪問; Huang Jianzhong, 1987), *Red, White and Black Rooms* (*Hong fangjian, baifangjian, heifangjian* 紅房間, 白房間, 黑房間; Song Jiangbo, 1988) and *Filmmakers* (*Dianyingren* 電影人; Ding Yinnan, 1988), which shift their representational emphasis to the characters' subjective experience and use dreams, fantasy, and hallucinations as loci for exploring non-realist aesthetics. Moreover, the emergence of alternative aesthetics in 1980s Chinese film was not a single case, but echoed a wider intellectual engagement that was influenced by Western modernism. From early 1985 there was an upsurge of avant-garde trends in Chinese literature and art. During the peak of the avant-garde trend in the period from 1985 to 1989, numerous works of foreign history, philosophy, psychology, and aesthetics (psychoanalysis, structuralism, existentialism, for example) were published in translation, and surrealism, absurdism, and expressionism were favoured by young artists in China. It is intriguing to note that a Freud fever broke out again in China in the 1980s after its first arrival in the 1920s. Nonetheless, the introduction of modern Western culture into mainland China might be seen as merely a by-product of Deng's economic policy of openness. The influence of Western culture soon went beyond what was acceptable to the Party. Several social campaigns, from the "Anti-Spiritual Pollution" (*qingchu jingshen wuran* 清除精神污染) campaign of 1983 to "Anti-Bourgeois Liberalization" (*fandui zichanjieji ziyouhua* 反對資產階級自由化) of 1985–1987 to the Tiananmen Incident of 1989, all show that the Party was fundamentally opposed to Western values and political systems. Ideas associated with Western culture, including modernism and postmodernism,

were treated in a derogatory way in official discourse.

Because of these political pressures, commentators in the 1980s avoided referring to the experimental tendency of alternative aesthetics derived from Western modernism and, consciously or unconsciously, used more conventional or “safer” terms to describe alternative aesthetics. For example, the film critic Ma Debo (1987, 172–177) classified *Troubled Laughter* and some other films under the category of “romanticism.” In the second half of the 1980s, there was still a possibility that a film could be denounced by the CCP film authorities as contradictory to the propagandist and pedagogical purposes of socialist film. As Pickowicz (1994, 72) observes,

During the discussions on *The Black Cannon Incident*, many commentators . . . had agreed that it was appropriate to use a term like “absurdity” to characterise Chinese social life. . . . However, suddenly, in January 1987, it was dangerous to suggest that Chinese society was absurd or that a cinematic theatre of the absurd was an appropriate way to approach the problems of socialist society.

In the post-Cultural Revolution era, the Party’s totalitarian ideology and control still casts a shadow over artistic alternatives to the orthodox representational mode of socialist realism.

Conclusion

By tracing the vicissitudes of film dreams ranging from popular films of the 1920s to films of the modernist movement of the 1980s, this article shows that film dreams have undergone a course of emergence, deprivation, and return on the Chinese screen. Furthermore, this study explores how the cinematic production of dreams waxes and wanes in relation to the changing status of realism as the mainstream aesthetic ideology. Film dreams are a crucial component of realist representation in realising realism’s commitment to achieve “total reality”; however, at the same time, they are desires—potentially subversive elements that speak to sociopolitical and historical situations that are not accommodated in the rational, empirical, and “awakened” world of realist narrative. In his psychoanalytic film criticism, D. N. Rodowick (2014, 96) insightfully notes that “the ‘narrative’ structure of phantasy is fundamentally paradoxical—simultaneous expression and prohibition of desire.” The “prohibition of desire” as a mechanism of dream formation implicitly gestures to the pressures and constraints stemming from the historic circumstances under which the film dreams are produced, as indicated in the contextualisation of *Broken Dreams in the Women’s Chamber*, *The Life of Wu Xun*, *Troubled Laughter*, and *Dislocation*.

As in most cases of films discussed in this article, dreams replete with somatic occasions provide immediate, sensuous audiovisual experiences that readily engender affective resonance and bodily immersion. The image of dreams, generated through rich, even overloaded techniques, such as superimposition, strange colours and sounds, skewed angles, and spatial-temporal discontinuities, highlights the intensity of cinema’s singularity even in the most classical film

dreams. Film dreams thus constitute conditions of alterity that break the bounds of a standard representational mode and of the logic of mimesis, displaying their own stylistic innovation and affective contagion. This mechanics of oneiric representation is implicitly at odds with realism's pragmatic social program, which is ruled by the principles of reason and science. As a result, dream representation, as the embodiment of latent alternative aesthetics, has been disciplined by periodically resurfacing political orthodoxy in the context of Chinese cinema.

This article has also examined how private dreams in films become socialised and allegorised as a symptom or index of a broader historical reality to which they respond or reflect. Departing from the initial fascination with the visualisation of individual sexual desire and anxiety made possible by the new media, dreams in most films of the 1930s to the mid-1980s performed the task of associating the individual's private realm closely with public discourse and historic totality. In *Broken Dreams in the Women's Chamber*, *The Life of Wu Xun*, *Troubled Laughter*, and *Dislocation*, the inner sphere of the individual's experience—dreams, in particular—are the arena where ideas related to the state are made operative. Although the dreams of both *Troubled Laughter* and *Dislocation* reflect an individual's suffering from oppression by the bureaucratic system, they are still metaphors that point to national and political trauma or socialist systemic conflicts left unresolved. It was not until the latter half of the 1980s that dreams in Chinese films once again turned to addressing the anxieties, desires, and longings of the individual. These films include not only the aforementioned art films *Death Visits the Living*, *Filmmakers*, and others, but also some “entertainment films” (*yule pian* 娛樂片), such as *The Daydream* (*Yixiang tiankai* 異想天開; Wang Weiyi, 1986). In films like *The Daydream*, the dream or fantasy framework was no longer associated only with alternative aesthetics but was employed to accommodate different genres including science fiction, slapstick comedy, and horror films, which readily reminds us of the early comedy and fantasy-martial arts genre of 1910s and 1920s Chinese film as examined above. By this point, cinematic dreams had realised their role of touching upon the very kernel of the historic situation and ideology in a way that had not yet fully reached its universal moment in realist representation in the transformative moments of Chinese cinema history.

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