

The Construction of the Post-socialist Urban Identity: China's Reform and Drifting Urban Population

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Abstract

In the transition from the socialist system to the postsocialist system since 1978, thousands of Chinese urban-to-rural migrant workers and students of socialist movements and urban laid-off workers of socialist state-owned enterprises were no longer safeguarded by Chinese government in terms of political status, job opportunities, welfare, and living standard. Struggling for returning to cities and integrating into the competitive market economy become the living dilemma of the two urban groups respectively. This paper explores the images of those troubled urban figures within both the Chinese Sixth Generation cinema and the Chinese independent documentary. It aims at exposing Chinese urban people's drifting experience within the postsocialist social context in relation to Chinese modern cinema. The spatial and ideological drifting of troubled urban people in postsocialist China, it shall argue, derives from the transition from the socialist class struggle to the postsocialist economy-oriented reform and from the socialist planned economy to the postsocialist market economy.

Keywords: urban drifters; socialist movements; social reform; ideological transformation; spatial movement.

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1 Introduction

By 2018, China's opening-up and reform policy has operated for nearly forty years, helping China to become the world's second largest economy. It is worth noting that China's reform was a painful process, especially for the urban-to-rural migrant socialist activists (e.g. workers and students) of socialist movements and the laid-off workers of Chinese state-owned enterprises. However, it is not until the turn of the 21st century that the sufferings of these people were represented on the screen. In this paper, I explore how the two newly-emerged film genres of the 1990s, Chinese Sixth Generation cinema and independent documentary, deal with the influences of China's post-socialist reform on the send-down political activists and industrial workers of the socialist system. I argue that "drifting" becomes a shared theme for the Chinese Sixth Generation cinema and the Chinese independent documentary to expose the urban socialist workers' and political activists' living dilemma in the post-socialist system. The send-down urban people recognized the absurdity of socialist movements, and subsequently struggled for returning from remote inland countryside to cities to recover the urban family social ties and to pursue better living standards. On the contrary, the laid-off workers wanted to remain at the socialist planned economy system but were deprived of the lifelong livelihood as well as the higher social status in the reform of state-owned enterprises. They were thrown into the market economy system with little compensation and had to wander in the market-oriented context for livelihood.

From 1964 onwards, the Communist government initiated the "Third Line construction" [*sanxian jianshe*] (Naughton 1988: 351) to move China's heavy industry from coastal cities to remote inland countryside. By doing so, the government hoped to protect China's industrial system from foreign attacks, due to the Cold War tension between China, the USA and the Soviet Union. It is in this background that thousands of urban workers were removed from advanced coastal cities to remote inland areas. In the socialist system, similar send-down movements involved not only industrial workers but also urban students. In 1968, Chairman Mao gave the famous speech: "It's necessary for educated young people to go to the countryside to be reeducated by the poor and lower middle-class peasants", which marked the beginning of the "join the commune for life movement" [*chadui luohu*] (McLaren 1979: 1). During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), millions of urban youngsters who had finished junior or senior high school, college, or university were sent down to the countryside to live and work with peasants in poverty and under harsh political and mobility control (Wang and Zhou 2016: 345). In 1976, the Cultural Revolution came to the end, and in 1978, Chinese government decided to operate the opening-up and reform policy. These two political resolutions were aimed at prompting China to start moving from class struggle to economic development. Against this backdrop, thousands of send-down urban migrants chose to cut off their social ties of remote countryside and returned to their urban hometown (Gold 1980). However, the continuity of the socialist policies (e.g. the Chinese registration system) prevented those migrants from free mobility. They had to clandestinely move to cities without official permission, and subsequently, they became marginal population without legal registered residency.

Since 1978, China gradually carried out joint stock reform within state-owned enterprises and encouraged both state-owned enterprises and workers to participate in market competition. From 1992 onwards, state-owned enterprises were further encouraged to adopt privatization in order to adapt to the market economy, meaning that the state would not protect state-owned companies from bankruptcy. Consequently, workers' lifelong job opportunities as well as welfare were no longer guaranteed by the state. The bankruptcy and privatization of state-owned enterprises and the unemployment of unnecessary urban workers then became significant social issues in the post-socialist China (Lu 2005, Zhang 2007, and Ramos-Martinez 2015). Urban workers' lifelong job and welfare used to be guaranteed by the government in the socialist system. However, after they have been discarded by the socialist planned economy system, the laid-off workers had to struggle for livelihood in the market-oriented economy system.

Drifters refer to those living on the margins of society and shuttling between spaces in an existence lacking stability (Cuir 2012: 412–413). The sense of homelessness and separation is one of the most significant features of drifters (Cuir 2012, Gooch and Watts 2013). In this paper, the drifting urban population would be divided into two groups — spatial movement and value transformation, both of which stem from urban people's being discarded by the government in China's reform. The send-down urban population of socialist political movements try to return to urban areas in post-socialist China. However, they become drifters when the rural-to-urban migration cannot be justified by the government. The laid-off workers of state-owned en-

terprises, instead, lose stable life-long jobs and become the victims of socioeconomic reform. They are, to some extent, exiled to the market-oriented economic context, which results in the drifting from the value of the planned economy to that of the market economy. With the collapse of socialist ideals, in ideological and economic aspects, the lack of stability and safety becomes the kernel feature of drifting Chinese urban people.

In this circumstance, I will consider two feature films of the Chinese Sixth Generation cinema: Jia Zhangke's *Platform* (2000) and Wang Xiaoshuai's *Shanghai Dreams* (2005). Further, I will compare these films with two Chinese independent documentaries: Wang Bing's *West of the Tracks* (2003) and Tian Wei's *Strange Land, Hometown* (2000). *Shanghai Dreams* and *Strange Land, Hometown* describe the difficulty in returning to cities for the send-down urban workers of the "Third Line construction" and students of the "join the commune for life movement". *Platform* and *West of the Tracks*, instead, explore the struggles of the laid-off workers of Chinese state-owned companies in the market reform.

Despite their generic differences, in this paper I will analyse both drama and documentary films, focusing on the expression of the social issues within some of the cinematic network produced by the Chinese Sixth Generation cinema and the Chinese independent cinema. By this analysis, Chinese workers and political activists of the socialist system are understood within the context of both China's socioeconomic reform and modern Chinese cinema. This paper contains two parts: the first part introduces *Shanghai Dreams* and *Strange Land, Hometown* to explore the rural-to-urban spatial drifting of socialist workers and political activists in the post-socialist China, whilst the second part adopts *Platform* and *West of the Tracks* to deal with urban drifting workers who were thrown into the market-oriented social context in the transformation from the planned economy to the market economy.

2 Political movements, social reform, and urban drifters

In the socialist China, the Communist Party has initiated a series of social movements to carry out economic development, class struggle, and national defence construction. The "Third Line construction" and the "join the commune for life movement" are significant components of China's top-down social movements in the socialist system. In the two socialist movements, thousands of urban workers and students were dispatched to remote and barren villages by the government. However, returning to urban areas became a communal issue for these urban-rural migrants in the post-socialist China. The director of *Shanghai Dreams* (2005) Wang Xiaoshuai and his parents are parts of the migration population. In 1966, when he still was a new-born baby, the director Wang Xiaoshuai migrated with his parents from Shanghai to the remote Guizhou Province for the "Third Line construction". In order to commemorate the urban-to-rural migrants' sufferings in moving back to Shanghai, Wang made *Shanghai Dreams*, which turns out to be the first Chinese film that puts the "Third Line construction" on the screen. This film describes a group of urban workers who volunteered to migrate from Shanghai to Guizhou to participate in the so-called "Third Line construction" in the 1960s but struggled to return to their urban hometown in the early 1980s. A worker Lao Wu's daughter Qinghong is studying in a local high school. She regards Guizhou as her real hometown and falls in love with another worker's son, Xiaogen. However, Lao Wu cannot accept her wishes because he wants Qinghong to enter a university and go back to Shanghai legally.¹

The relationship between Qinghong and Xiaogen could potentially lead to Qinghong's failure in the college entrance exam. Thus, Lao Wu forbids Qinghong to meet Xiaogen. After that, Lao Wu decides to move with his family from Guizhou back to Shanghai without official permission before Qinghong takes the college entrance exam. Qinghong finally refuses Xiaogen's love and prepares to leave for Shanghai with her parents, and consequently, Xiaogen turns violent and rapes her. In the end, Qinghong and her family stealthily leave Guizhou in a morning, with Xiaogen being accused of committing rape and subsequently being executed. In his article on

1. Within the Chinese registration system, the rural-to-urban migration is strictly limited. However, college students could transform their rural registered residence to urban registered residence after they find a stable job in cities. The workers of workplace organizations [*danwei*] (e.g. state-owned enterprises or departments of the government) could also change their registered residence with the permission of local government and work units. In *Shanghai Dreams* (Wang Xiaoshuai, 2005), Laowu and other workers cannot get the permission from the leaders of local factories due to the conservative reform policy. They thus cannot return to Shanghai City legally.

Shanghai Dreams (2010), Richard Letteri emphasizes that the images of urban workers drifting between their workplace Guizhou and their hometown Shanghai signify the impossibility of home in the rapid transformation of Chinese society in the 1980s. However, it is worth noting that Letteri (2010: 9) highlights more the lack of a sense of security for the next generation of the migrant urban workers (e.g. Qinghong) than the condition of their parents (e.g. Lao Wu). The original participants, who responded to the call of the government and moved to the rural areas in the socialist era, have been ignored.

Migrating from urban areas to rural areas, urban residents are placed in a stranded contradictory situation. In rural areas, they are the “others” who come from urban areas and work in state-owned companies with stable working environment and welfare. In *Shanghai Dreams*, Lao Gu’s wife has a big quarrel with Lao Lü after her daughter Zhenzhen elopes with his son Lü Jun. In the beginning, Lao Gu’s wife speaks in colloquial Chinese language. However, when the quarrel becomes increasingly fierce, she suddenly reverts back to her native Shanghai language. Her identity as Shanghai native resident seems to be unable to be modified although she has been working in Guizhou for over a decade with other migrants. At the same time, the Chinese household registration system [*hukou*]² divides Chinese citizens into two parts: respectively, urban residents and rural residents. Farmers can only do agricultural production while urban residents carry out non-agricultural production in the workplace organizations [*danwei*] (Wu and Treiman 2004: 364–365). As a result, the rural-to-urban migration is firmly restricted by the government, so much that urban residents cannot take rural partners to urban areas even if they get married. Thereby, the intermarriage between a farmer and a worker seems to be ridiculous from the perspective of urban residents because it would strip the worker of a chance to go back to Shanghai.

Lao Gu’s daughter, Zhenzhen, is very confident in persuading Lao Lü’s son Lü Jun to marry her, even though he has already made a rural girl pregnant. Zhenzhen cannot imagine that an urban man would want to marry a rural woman, becoming a permanent rural resident himself. The urban *hukou* is directly bound to the chance to go back to Shanghai, which strictly separates urban workers from local farmers. However, the inevitable integration of urban workers into local society has already begun. Lü Jun finally marries the rural girl under the pressure of morality and thus faces the fact that he must stay at Guizhou forever. Besides, Lao Wu and his wife cannot stop Qinghong from regarding Guizhou as her sole hometown, although they clearly tell her that it is Shanghai rather than Guizhou that is their real hometown. In urban areas, these workers become the “others” as well. Lao Wu’s son has no idea why his grandma does not like them. His mother tells him that his grandma is angry with her and Lao Wu.

In the socialist era, Lao Wu and his wife were revolutionary activists and volunteered to come to the remote Guizhou regardless of their parents’ protest. Their migration had lacerated their relationship between their relatives, which further led to the sense of alienation when they wanted to reintegrate into the original urban family system. Apart from this, the migration to rural areas makes urban residents in remote areas the victims of the uneven development between urban areas and rural areas in the reform era (Letteri 2010: 9). The opening-up and reform policy starts in a few coastal cities of southern China, resulting in the uneven economic development between southern China and northern China and between coastal urban areas and inland remote rural areas (Lu and Zhang 2010: 2). Urban residents, especially those who enjoy the bonus of marketization, can get higher income than those who work in rural factories. The different living standards further worsen the economic discrimination between urban residents in urban space and those in rural space. As a worker in *Shanghai Dreams* complains, no one thinks highly of the poor workers from rural areas although they used to dwell in Shanghai.

The introduction of a market economy in the post-socialist China contributes to the construction of a capitalist wealth-oriented class hierarchy, degrading Chinese workers’ socioeconomic status from the leading class of the socialist system to the lower class of the post-socialist system. The new class division deepens the contradiction between those migrant workers and their urban rivals. Migrating from Shanghai to Guizhou, the social role of the urban workers becomes complicated. They are either urban residents or rural residents, and at the same time, they are neither urban residents nor rural residents, which results in a schizophrenic

2. In China, the household registration system [*hukou zhidu*] divides urban residents and rural residents into different social groups with different rights and possibilities, and migrating between rural and urban areas requires an official permit from the authorities (Thelle 2010: 1043).

social identity. Homelessness, or drifting, has become a living dilemma of the urban-to-rural migrants in the post-socialist China due to the contradictory identity.

In remote inland countryside, the elder urban workers get stuck in the rural working areas because their social relationship has become localized, especially when their kids accept local social identity. Therefore, older generation's dream of Shanghai and the next generation's local rural identity become conflictive. In *Shanghai Dreams*, the opposing social identities are expressed in the familial conflict between Lao Wu and his daughter Qinghong. This conflict could be clarified by the scene (see Figure 1) in which Lao Wu is scolding Qinghong for wearing the red high-heeled shoes which Xiaogen buys for her. Qinghong takes off her red shoes and sits on the bed in her bedroom, remaining silent and keeping her head down.



Figure 1: *Shanghai Dreams* (2005) – Lao Wu criticizes Qinghong for accepting Xiaogen's red leather shoes.

At the same time, Lao Wu stands outside the bedroom with an angry expression on his face, holding the red shoes, pointing them to Qinghong and warning her not to meet Xiaogen again. In the end, Lao Wu throws the shoes out of the room. The door separates Qinghong's private space from Lao Wu, making Lao Wu a jailer and Qinghong a prisoner. The gift from Qinghong's suitor, the red shoes, seems to be the mere bright attire in the grey-dominated scene. It stands for the illusion of love for a young girl but is finally destroyed by her father. Such a scene represents that Lao Wu spares no efforts to prevent his family members, especially his daughter, from rooting in the local society. Although Qinghong regards herself as a local resident of Guizhou, her identity has been violently twisted by the socialist and Confucian patriarchy in the name of Lao Wu's Shanghai dream. As Letteri has stated,

Lao Wu is like Chinese top leader Deng Xiaoping, whose policy of economic modernization sought to reverse the fortunes of the Chinese people after the disastrous policies of the centralized state economy. Thus, he says to colleagues that "to cultivate me, the Party sent me to the third line. To cultivate my children, I will be bound to send them back to Shanghai" ...his belief that Shanghai and economic modernization will solve his family's problems is quixotic, and borders on the schizophrenic particularly for his daughter. (2010: 9)

As a result, the "Third Line construction" has led to the dual avulsion of its participants' family relationship. The send-down movement has dissevered the original urban family by separating the urban-to-rural migrants from their urban family in the socialist China, while the ambition of returning to cities breaks the current family by forcing the localized second-generation migrants to leave the rural family in the post-socialist China. Lao Wu's Shanghai dream finally ruins the balance of his rural family as his daughter tries to commit suicide and

his wife wants a divorce after his daughter is raped by Xiaogen. Qinghong cannot struggle against her father for her love and individual identity in the Chinese moral system. She has to follow her parents' will, although she is not willing to pursue the Shanghai dream; this eventually results in her being not only physically raped by Xiaogen but also psychologically invaded by her parents. At the same time, this is also a tragedy deriving from the conflict between the socialist collectivism and the post-socialist individualism.

The continuity of the socialist policy requires urban workers to remain in local factories. Hence, passing the college entrance exam becomes the mere way for these workers' next generation to break the limitation of Chinese registration system and go back to cities legally. Hence, the college entrance exam is of the utmost importance because it is bound to the Shanghai dream, which further results in the love tragedy of Qinghong and Xiaogen. As a result, not only Lao Wu and his wife but also their children are forced to drift from rural to urban space. Although Lao Wu and his family finally leave Guizhou for Shanghai, the lost dreams of a young girl and the breakdown of the social relationship in Guizhou result in the collective homelessness of Lao Wu's family (Letteri 2010: 16).

Tian Wei's independent documentary *Strange Land, Hometown* (2000), however, pays attention to another migrant group of the socialist system: the send-down students of the "join the commune for life movement". Tian's documentary work depicts the story of a send-down student, Luo Xinwei, from 1967 to 2001. In 1967, Luo Xinwei was allocated to rural areas to do farming in Jiangxi Province where she stayed until 1975. She then moved to Anhui Province with her rural husband Zhang Changyou and, after the end of the Cultural Revolution, she tried to go back to Shanghai. However, she gave up this dream after she was told that her rural husband was not allowed to go back with her. As a result, she taught primary school students in Anhui Province until her retirement. In the early 2000s, Luo Xinwei eventually got the chance to move back to Shanghai with her husband but lived away from her urban family.

About her decision to migrate to the countryside, Luo Xinwei mentions that the slogan proposed by Chairman Mao in the 1960s — "rural areas are a wide space where people could make much progress" [*noncun shi yige guangkuode tiandi, zai nali shi keyi da you zuowei de*] (*Hennan Daily*, June 27th, 1968) — played an important role in encouraging urban junior and high school students to volunteer to go to rural areas. However, in telling her own memory, Luo Xinwei shows the same attitude of the urban workers in *Shanghai Dreams* towards the past socialist memory; in other words, she is not nostalgic any more about her passionate time as an activist. Instead, she pays more attention to the painful suffering experienced during this period of political transformation. When Luo Xinwei tells about the experience of leaving her urban family for rural areas, she refuses to look at the camera, with the tears leaking from her eyes (see Figure 2). In this scene, the documentary cross-cuts the disappointed Luo Xinwei with the historical images of send-down students of the socialist system, who either held the slogans advocated by the socialist propaganda or waited to leave for rural areas in railway stations. The cross-cutting generates a communication between the historical moments of socialist movements and the current condition of the participants of those movements.

While in the socialist era youngsters went to rural areas to achieve their socialist ideals with passion, contemporary Chinese migrant generations reflect on their family's wounds emerged after prolonged stays in remote areas of rural China. This scene illustrates the send-down migrants' oppositional ideological identities of the socialist system and of the post-socialist system. The painful sufferings in the socialist system lead urban migrants to reevaluate their collectivism ideology and, subsequently, to pay more attention to personal wounds as well as individual wellbeing.

In the post-socialist China, the relationship between send-down students and their family was not recovered but further disrupted. Apart from the hardship of being separated from her urban families due to the "join the commune for life movement", Luo Xinwei's relationship with her urban family was further broken after her relatives knew that she had married a farmer. In China's registration system, urban registered residence and rural registered residence represent different living standards. "Those with urban *hukou* received cradle-to-grave welfare benefits while those with rural *hukou*...received almost nothing, with some minor exceptions" (Guo and Liang 2017: 774). Urban areas are characterized by labels such as "rich", "advanced", and "prior", while rural areas are described as "poor", "underdeveloped", and "inferior". As a result, Luo Xinwei's extended family completely dissociated from her, which resulted in the fact that she could not contact her urban family for over twenty years. The discrimination of rural residents keeps Luo Xinwei and her rural families away from



Figure 2: *Strange Land, Hometown* (2000) – Luo Xinwei cries when she says that she gets no chance to stay with her urban families.

the urban family system because, as Luo Xinwei's peasant husband comments, urban residents look down upon rural relatives. Although Luo and her husband eventually return to Shanghai, they are both separated from the rural family and excluded by the urban family. The rural-to-urban migration has not recovered the urban family but further tears the rural family, which leads to the homelessness of those returning send-down urban population.

As argued by several critics, social movements could lead to participants' ideological transformation (Fendrich 1977, Morris 1984, Mueller 1987, and Yang 2000). In particular, Guobin Yang (2000: 382–383) has argued that the influence of social movements on the reconstruction of ideology could be divided into three stages. In the first stage, the participants are separated from the previous structural conditions. After that, they go into a liminal unfamiliar social context, and the transgression of ideological conventions begins. In the end, the participants set back to the new social structure and the new ideology draws to an end. Building on this theoretical framework, it is possible to interpret the ideological changes of Chinese send-down urban population. In the socialist era, the send-down urban workers were dislocated to rural areas in the name of the socialist revolution and development; by that, these workers were separated from the urban context, and then, their urban social ties were disrupted.

Considering the socialist living experience in rural areas, urban residents, including Lao Wu and Luo Xinwei, had to face the pressure of the transformation of the urban family relationship and the harsh rural living conditions. In this process, the passion for socialist movements started withering away; at the same time, personal interests, such as the recovery of family relationship, the pursuit of higher living standard, and the demand of higher education, were gradually emphasized. Finally, the socialist collectivist identity was questioned by the participants of socialist movements, so that urban residents spared no efforts to recover the urban identity. Therefore, there is an ideological transition in the transformation from the socialist urban-to-rural migration to the post-socialist rural-to-urban migration. It is not necessarily caused by the competition of the introduced capitalism with local socialism but determined by the ideology-transforming experience in social movements (Yang 2000: 382–383). The socialist urban-to-rural migration and the post-socialist rural-to-urban migration tear send-down population's connection respectively with the urban and the rural families. Consequently, the collective drifting between urban space and rural space becomes an inevitable fate for the send-down urban workers and students in the process of China's reform.

3 Market-economy reform and drifting industrial workers

In the socialist China, state-owned enterprises were oversized and overmanned with unnecessary labour to deal with China's industrialization as well as the issues of unemployment within urban space (Fung 2001: 259–262). However, the excessive burden became one of the most significant factors in reducing the competitiveness of state-owned companies after the introduction of the market economy. The dismissal of workers became a remarkable social problem in the reform of Chinese state-owned enterprises.

Jia Zhangke's feature film *Platform* (2000) focuses on the reform of state-owned enterprises to explore the drifting experiences of urban workers in the social upheaval of China's reform age. The title "Platform" derives from a mid-1980s rock song that describes someone waiting for his loved one on the platform of a train station. Jia Zhangke (2015: 43), however, regards the title as a tribute to people's naïve expectation of the future. He further points out that "platform" represents a drifting condition that "we are always expecting and seeking something, always on the road to somewhere" (Jia 2015: 43). In *Platform*, Cui Mingliang, an accordion player, and his girlfriend Yin Ruijuan, a dancer, used to work for Fenyang County Cultural Troupe, a local state-owned cultural institution. Cui wants to marry Yin. However, the privatization of the troupe disrupts his plan. Cui stays at the privatized troupe and works for the new boss, while Yin finds another job in a state-owned post office and continues to serve the government. After leaving Fenyang to carry out commercial duties for a long period of time, Cui returns home and eventually marries Yin.

By pivoting the two figures' living experience before and after the state-owned troupe transition to the private troupe, *Platform* exposes Chinese workers' transformation from "worker-in-state" to "worker-in-enterprise" in the reform of China's state-owned enterprises (Fung 2001: 264). In the socialist system, working in an official company meant that workers would get the so-called "iron rice bowl" (Berkowitz et al. 2017: 735), that is, a life-long job as a civil servant from the cradle to the grave. As Ho-lup Fung (2001: 259) has indicated, when the planned economy model dominated Chinese society, the government maintained tight controls over production and factor allocations: most jobs were assigned to individuals by the government; people were provided with stable and lifelong jobs as well as welfare (e.g. cheap housing, education, health care, and retirement benefits). As Cui has told his mother, "if you do not feed me, the Party will". In terms of the goals of working, serving the country plays an important role in the motivation of urban residents because workers get the "iron rice bowl" in state-owned companies, on the only condition that they are selected to serve the modernization of the PRC (Fung 2001: 264).

In the first scene of the film (Figure 3), actors perform the revolutionary programme *The Train to Shaoshan*³ [*huoche xiangzhe shaoshan pao*], a musical drama which describes peasants and workers pilgrimaging to Chairman Mao's hometown Shaoshan. The camera is placed in a fixed position, facing toward the middle of the stage and taking a full shot of the performance. The absence of close-up and middle shots results in the fact that performers' faces cannot be seen clearly. Only their social roles and action can be recognized. Therefore, this wide shot, to quote Jia Zhangke (2015: 44), pays less attention to personal and individual performances than a collective mental status, that is, the loyalty to Chairman Mao as well as to the Communist Party. The stable and dull frame, to some extent, responds to the solemnity and authority of official cultural activity of the socialist system, which contrasts with the dynamic and active camera movement of popular entertainment programmes (e.g. Spanish bullfight dance and heavy metal rock music), performed by the same actors in the latter film. The leading figures on the stage are workers and peasants, who are stylistic leading protagonists in the socialist system (Zhou 2007: 1).

They wear blue and grey clothes, sing revolutionary slogans, and express their loyalty to the Party, advertising how happy the socialist life style is, as required by the socialist propaganda. This scene refers to the situation in which the art workers of state-owned companies in the socialist system serve as the spokesmen for the government. As Cui Mingliang says to his father with pride in *Platform*: "I am an art worker (of the Communist Party) who doesn't have to do manual work".

3. *The Train to Shaoshan* (1968) used to be a children's song which has been adapted to the music drama in *Platform* (2000). The lyrics of the song is to advertise the authority of chairman Mao and the unity of different ethnic groups.



Figure 3: *Platform* (2000) – Workers of the state-owned troupe are performing *The Train to Shaoshan*.

When it comes to the 1980s, China has started to introduce capitalism to develop domestic economy. Jia's *Platform* does not directly pivot the transformation of the state-owned troupe but concentrates on the influence the reform of a state-owned enterprise had on the workers' life styles. If the introduction of marketed popular culture (e.g. rock music, new hair styles, and flared trousers) has enriched people's daily lives, the expansion of market economy destroys the living foundation of workers of state-owned enterprises. As mentioned above, the official troupe used to carry out socialist propaganda, advertising socialist ideology and revolutionary history. After the privatization of the troupe, it replaces revolutionary programs with popular programs (e.g. rock 'n' roll and pop music) and starts to carry out touring performance to chase the market. Cui Mingliang chooses to stay at the privatized troupe. He transforms from the "worker-in-state" to the "worker-in-enterprise". On the contrary, Cui's lover Yin Ruijuan remains in the internal system of the government by finding a job in a local post office. Cui serves as a sort of busker and is required to wander around with his colleagues to do touring performances. They provide a variety of programs, mainly characterized by the latest popular songs and dance styles, for colliers, other urban dwellers, and pedestrians in order to make profits, and at the same time, they live in cheap hostels, tatty collective tents, and even the carriage of the truck to minimize the cost. The truck of the troupe, which carries Cui and his colleagues from a stage to another, becomes the epitome of those art workers' drifting lifestyle in the market-economy context.

Platform crosscuts Cui's touring performance on the commercial stage with Yin Ruijuan's peaceful dance in her office (Figures 4–5), which rises the debate on the so called "iron rice bowl" — the lifelong job as well as welfare guaranteed by the state. The contrast between the quiet, private, and closed office and the loud, colorful, and open commercial stage could not be sharper. These cinematic settings clearly claim the different life styles of the worker of the stable "internal system" [*tizhi nei*] and the worker of the anchorless "external system" [*tizhi wai*].⁴

The transformation from the planned economy to the market economy does not only change people's life styles but also result in a sense of homelessness and separation. The planned economy is built on the authority of the state because both cultural and economic activities are designed by the government. Workers of state-owned enterprises are sponsored and protected by the state power. At the same time, China's Household Registration System [*hukou*] further legalizes nonagricultural workers' superior socioeconomic status over peasants by distinguishing "the nonagricultural" and "the agricultural".

People with nonagricultural *hukou* are mainly urban workers of state-owned enterprises, whilst those with agricultural *hukou* are farmers. Non-agricultural residents could enjoy better education, medical treatment,

4. The term "internal system" [*tizhi nei*] refers to institutions sponsored by the government, such as state-owned enterprises, departments of the government, and institutions of Chinese Communist Party. "External system" [*tizhi wai*], however, refers to private institutions which operate independently from the government.



Figures 4–5: *Platform* (2000) – Yin Ruijuan (above) and Cui Mingliang (below) are dancing in a private office and on a commercial state.

pensions, working opportunities, and public welfare more than farmers do (Guo & Liang, 2017, p. 778). Therefore, the workers of socialist China should be interpreted differently from Western societies' traditional class division: in the socialist class system, workers are part of the leading class, while in a traditional capitalist class system, they tend to belong to lower classes. In this circumstance, the collapse of state-owned enterprises does not only mean the loss of life-long jobs but also refer to the decline of the superior social status. At a moment of *Platform*, the privatized troupe is going to leave Fenyang to carry out a touring performance. Performers sit together in the carriage of a tractor and sing the Chinese version of the Italian song *Bella Ciao*. However, Cui keeps looking back with a depressed face (Figure 6). In the next shot, the camera seems to be put on the tractor and points back at the county town of Fenyang, where the performers used to live, from the perspective of Cui.



Figure 6: *Platform* (2000) – Cui Mingliang (on the right) keeps looking back before the privatized troupe is going to carry out a tour for the first time.

The song *Bella Ciao* goes throughout the scene until the tractor goes out of the gate of the town. The modern concept of home is not merely a physical place but a sense of security in the process of interacting with the world (Young 2000: 189). After the market reform of the troupe, the cultural workers' livelihood is no longer protected by the government. On the contrary, they have to depend on themselves to earn money. Cui's depressed face, together with the song *Bella Ciao* and the camera angle which keeps looking back, generates an impression that the past is leaving behind at a rapid pace, whilst the future is unseen. In this sense, this scene refers to both a sense of homelessness and an anxiety of the uncertain future. As Jia Zhangke (2015: 46) has stated, "after we completed this exit shot, I suddenly realized I had found the whole film's composition: 'Enter the city, exit the city — departure, return'". Obviously, *Platform* does not only imply the spatial drifting of such a troupe but also explore the mental drifting of Chinese workers after they have been discarded by the planned economy system and subsequently exiled to the self-dependent market-economy context.

The reform of state-owned enterprises and the transformation of workers' social roles have been also introduced by documentary works. The first episode of Wang Bing's documentary *West of the Tracks* (2003), "Rust", explores how the crisis of state-owned factories leads to the workers' painful drifting experiences in the post-socialist China. Three state-owned companies in Shenyang's industrial Tiexi district (a smelting plant, an electric cable factory, and a sheet metal factory) are about to go bankrupt and be demolished. A few workers continue to work in the factories. However, they clearly know that these factories make little profits and would inevitably be closed in the short term. Finally, the three factories are either privatized or demolished, and subsequently, the workers lose both their lifelong jobs and welfare. Some of the workers are sent to a hospital for medical examination; here, they sing songs, watch TV, catch fish, and watch porn videos. At the same time, they worry about the uncertainty of their future.

The initial three-minute long take is extremely impressive. The camera is put in front of a small goods train,

going through the factories of Tiexi district on a snowy day. The train passes by abandoned and snow-muffled factory buildings, machines, telegraph pole, and dwelling houses beside the railway, together with the sound of the creak of wheels. The long take, to a certain degree, presents the down-turn of the socialist industrial civilization (Lu and Zhang 2010: 1). The factory buildings have witnessed the resplendence of the state-owned factories in Shenyang in the history, however, the empty and deserted factory buildings imply the death of these factories, after the market economy has been introduced to China to challenge the dominance of state-owned enterprises for no more than twenty years. Workers of the three state-owned factories work with sub-standard equipment and low salary. What is worse is that some of them have to bear the harsh working conditions, such as unsafe precautions, poisonous heavy metal, and bug dust of raw materials. At the same time, they are at the risk of losing their job opportunities as well as pensions if the three state-owned factories suddenly go bankrupt. Obviously, such a long-take describes the last days of the state-owned factories which have lost competitiveness in the market economy. As the director Wang Bing has stated, “we want to create a world, but this world collapsed” (Lu and Zhang 2010: 1).

West of the Tracks records the ruins of the socialist industrialization, the dusk of the socialist world, and the disillusion of the socialist ideals (Lu 2005). The down-turn of state-owned companies is accompanied by the disillusion of the socialist planned-economy ideals. In the socialist system, the working class gets a higher political and economic status because workers are provided with lifelong jobs, pensions, health care systems, and a general safety net — they are considered as the glorious builders of socialist China’s modernization (Lu and Zhang 2010: 3). However, the prosperity is broken after the factories cannot make profits and maintain the fixed salary, pension, and even job opportunities. Workers in *West of the Tracks* compare the Chinese Communist Party to the American Republican Party to complain that the capitalist market reform of state-owned enterprises, initiated by the communist government, has ruined their life. These complaints represent both their nostalgia of the past socialist era when workers’ livelihood was guaranteed by the government and the protest of globalization which deprives of their lifelong job and welfare. The radical market reform has caused social problems at least in the following regards. On the one hand, thousands of urban workers were dismissed with little compensation.

At the same time, it is hard for the urban labour market to provide enough new job opportunities for those laid-off workers, especially those who are classified as “low-skilled” and “old”. The dismissed workers are thus degraded from the leading class to the lower class, without hope and future. On the other hand, the corruption of the governors of state-owned enterprises further aggravates the crisis of confidence. The potentates of the Communist party accumulate wealth by turning state-owned enterprises into their private property in the process of privatization, whilst the laid-off workers have to confront poverty due to their unemployment. The expanding socioeconomic gap between the rich and the poor lays the foundation of the collapse of the socialist ideals.

Before the demolition of the factories, workers go to local hospital for health care. There are two impressive shots of the break room in the hospital (Figure 7): the former shot takes advantage of a full shot to show that a group of middle-aged workers watch porn videos on the sole TV in the break room, while the following shot adopts a close-up of the workers’ indifferent and phlegmatic facial expression, with the noise of the porn video on the background. The two shots, to some extent, make a reverse shot, emphasizing the indifferent attitudes of the laid-off workers to the porn video. According to the Freudian theory, touching and seeing sexual objects are the preliminary sexual aims in relation to the normal copulation; however, they can take the place of copulation when the attainment of the normal sexual aim is hindered (Freud 1905 [1977]: 68–69). For example, the sexual object is very expensive and even the sexual act is very dangerous. In this sense, watching porn videos is a substitute of normal sexual activities, which could help to release the sexual tension and to extinguish sexual instinct. The workers’ collective silence and indifferent facial expression, instead, represent the depression of sexual pleasure, which should be explored in terms of their harsh living pressure in the background of the bankruptcy of state-owned companies. The workers in *West of the Tracks* are the last group of people who leave the state-owned companies in Tiexi district. Workers who are able to run private business have integrated into the market economy early, leaving the weak workers being the refugees of the socialist planned economy. After the bankruptcy of the last state-owned factories of Tiexi district, these middle-aged workers are at risk of losing their salary, pension, and welfare — the livelihood for the rest of their life.



Figure 7: *West of the Tracks* (2003) – workers in Shenyang Smelting Factory are watching porn videos.

As Jaeyoun Won (2004: 72) has argued, most laid-off workers are left with little help from either the government or local factories. They either remain unemployed at home for years or feed their families by serving as janitors, beauticians, restaurant workers, or peddlers in street market. These workers used to rely on the job provided by the government, but they have to rely on themselves to compete for job opportunities in the labour market. For the workers without high educational qualification and professional skills, it is hard for them to compete in the market-oriented labour market in terms of either working ability or age. Workers' indifferent faces in front of the sexual desires, to some extent, imply the hopelessness of the unstable future after they are thrown into the market-economy context (Lu and Zhang 2010: 5). Without the stable livelihood within Chinese state-owned economy, the laid-off workers are forced to drift from the state-owned economy to the market-oriented private economy. Finally, they get stuck in a collective homelessness caused by the disillusion of the socialist planned economy. In 2005, the local government of Shenyang forbade the DVDs of *West of the Tracks* (2003) to be released to the public because this documentary is "hindering the harmonious socialist society and defaming the reputation of Shenyang."⁵ The drifting fate of laid-off workers of state-owned companies becomes not only a collective trauma of Chinese urban workers but also a sensitive sociopolitical issue which cannot be exposed to the public.

4 Conclusion

Although China's socioeconomic reform already begun in 1978, it is not until the early 2000s that the urban victims of the reform came to be represented on the screen, especially with the rise of the Chinese Sixth Generation cinema and the Chinese independent documentary. On the one hand, the send-down urban workers and activists living in remote inland areas start to critically reflect on the social movements ordered by the socialist system; subsequently, they hope to return to cities to have better life opportunities offered by the market economy. However, the continuity of the socialist policies (e.g. Chinese registration system) prevents them from returning to their urban hometown, which drives these people to become exiles or drifters between coastal urban areas and remote inland areas. On the other hand, the top-down reform of Chinese state-owned enterprises forces urban workers, who used to rely on the state-owned economy, to face the marketized and globalized social environment. The transformation of social roles from the leading class of the socialist system to the lower class of the post-socialist system leads urban workers to wander between the socialist planned economy system and the post-socialist market economy system. Thus, drifting becomes a significant feature

5. <http://movie.mtime.com/16944/reviews/1664321.html>

of the urban subjects within the Chinese urban cinema and the Chinese independent documentary. As this article argued, this theme serves as a social critique which exposes the weakness of individuals in the face of the rapid and compulsory top-down social reform in modern China.

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