Cinergie – Il cinema e le altre arti. N.16 (2019)
ISSN 2280-9481

Epitome, Legitimation, and Reproduction: Nostalgia and Grand History in Two Chinese Melodramatic Films

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Submitted: September 7, 2018 – Accepted: November 25, 2019 – Published: December 23, 2019

Abstract

The short essay examines two recently-released melodramatic works, Zhang Yimou's *Under the Hawthorn Tree* (*Shanzhashu zhi Lian*, 2010) and Peter Chan's *American Dreams in China* (*Zhongguo Hehuoren*, 2013), based on a revisit of nostalgia's conceptualisation and melodrama's history in China. I argue that the melodramatic works spell a distinctive interlacing narrative of personal nostalgia and grand history. The study aims to enrich our understanding of nostalgia in global cinema and the socio-political transformations that all of us are now experiencing as participants.

Keywords: Nostalgia; Melodrama; China; History; Cinema.

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1 Introduction

One set in the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and the other set in the Reform Era (since 1978), one implicating countryside and the other featuring the metropolitan Beijing and New York, one rather theatrical and the other realistic, and one made by an established Fifth Generation director and the other by a filmmaker whose career starts in Hong Kong and Hollywood: *Under the Hawthorn Tree* (*Shanzhashu zhi Lian*, Zhang Yimou, 2010) and *American Dreams in China* (*Zhongguo Hehuoren*, Peter Chan, 2013) are so different two works that a comparison would seem impractical and infertile. However, the distinction may not be that unbridgeable. A nostalgia that harks back to the past is shared despite their different historical backdrops. Countryside as it envisions picturesquely, the former's central narrative takes place in a city, a small one notwithstanding, as well as the latter does. Whereas the former presents a melodrama with its dramatised moral dilemmas and sensational characterisation, the latter could also be construed as melodramatic in that the protagonists are designed to ensure victory over repressions through many hackneyed scenarios such as farewell and reunion, falling in love and breaking up, and receiving contempt as wretched losers and earning respect as shrewd businesspeople.[1] A strong connection with current Chinese film industry is also shared between the two: Zhang Yimou has been evolving with China's film industry and managed to hit the box office with the former; an eight-year filmmaking experience in mainland China makes it possible for Peter Chan to cooperate well with Chinese film companies, Chinese crews, Chinese stars, Chinese stories, and Chinese market.

Nostalgia, historical urban landscapes, melodramatic forms, and contemporary Chinese cinema: all the common elements invite a close attention to the recent release of nostalgic and melodramatic films in mainland China and raise a question as follows: to what extent is nostalgia and history relevant to the Chinese melodramatic works now? Two box-office hits, Zhang's and Chan's works have simultaneously so many differences and common features that are noteworthy. Revisiting their melodramatic images, I will argue that China's current melodramatic films produce a narrative where personal nostalgia epitomises, legitimates, and replicates grand history. Prior to any detailed analysis, at stake are the questions as follows: what is nostalgia? Is there any critical apparatus to approach it? Has nostalgia ever been relevant to China's melodramatic films? If so, in what specific manners?

2 Nostalgia as a Critical Concept

An ordinary sentiment that harks to the past, nostalgia is a rhetoric trope that dates to Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in the West and Confucius' recollections of the great examples of good virtue in the golden age of the past. Miscellaneous references to and studies on specific cultural phenomena of nostalgia notwithstanding, nostalgia as a concept — its ontology, typology, and critical agency for example — has nevertheless been investigated, introduced, and critically deployed in a strikingly unequal proportion. This section will offer a brief account of nostalgia's conceptualisation both in the West and in China and several relevant concepts that my further analysis of nostalgia ought to highlight.

Nostalgia has been critically conceptualised and studied in the West for no more than five centuries.[2] Coined as a pathological term in the late seventeenth century, nostalgia develops in a de-medicalising course toward the vocabulary of poetics and philosophy[3] until many social and cultural critics[4] relate it to modernity in the

1. I will discuss the melodramaticality of *American Dreams in China* later.

2. For a detailed survey of nostalgia in Homer's epics, see Svetlana Boym (2001), *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York: Basic Books, p. 1-6.

3. For nostalgia's early history, see Roderick Peters (1985), "Reflections on the Origin and Aim of Nostalgia," *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 30, 135-148; Michael S. Roth (1991), "Dying of the Past: Medical Studies of Nostalgia in Nineteenth-Century France," *History and* Memory, 3, 5-29; Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*; Alastair Bonnett (2010), *Left in the Past: Radicalism and the Politics of Nostalgia*, New York: Continuum; and Alex David (2016), "Coming Home Again: Johannes Hofer, Edmund Spenser, and Premodern Nostalgia," *Parergon*, 33.2, 17-38.

4. The ambivalent relation between nostalgia and modernity has inspired many social critics, who partake in the critique of nostalgia by putting more weight on its ontology. Reading nostalgia as politically tainted, Walter Benjamin suggests that the past in one's nostalgia would always already exist as a fantasy. The subject would revise the past for the sake of an imagined future. To articulate the past historically is, therefore, none other than a desperate attempt to wrest the tradition from the conformism that endeavours to overpower it. Kathleen Stewart investigates the forms, meanings, and effects of nostalgia, thereby charting the concept as hinging on

last century. Amongst all the stimulating scholarships, Svetlana Boym's theoretical exploration, despite her focus on East European post-communist society, clarifies systematically nostalgia's genesis and typology and encourages various studies on regional nostalgic cultures.[5] Boym defines nostalgia as a reflection of modernity, one that signifies a loss of an enchanted world — which ought to have clear temporal borders — and a mourning for the impossibility of any mythical return.[6] A bifurcated typology of nostalgia — a restorative one and a reflective one — is specified. Restorative nostalgia accentuates the motif of homecoming, confirms the authenticity of memories, and attempts to rebuild the lost paradise.[7] Reflective nostalgia is, in contrast, more concerned with the sense of loss and longing and more cynical about any memorial stasis, thus "wistfully, ironically, [and] desperately" (Boym 2001: xiii) deferring the act of homecoming. Restorative nostalgia employs two consistent narrative plots — a re-imagination of personal or national origins and a conspiratorial narrative that pervades in political writings such as national anthems — to conceal the trauma that modernity leaves behind, whereas reflective nostalgia underscores instead the shattered memories that are registered collectively as fertile footnotes of modern experience. References to nostalgia's theorisation as such allows me, in further textual analysis, to accentuate the filmed nostalgia's relations to the paradise lost and its features — such as the causes, effects, and relevance to history — that could be restorative or reflective.

In contrast, the study of nostalgia in China starts earlier and nonetheless thrives only within the literary theories. Identified as an expression of missing or reminiscing the past, ***huáijiù*** is virtually the most conventional Chinese translation of nostalgia in both the public sphere and the academia.[8] Classical Chinese literary criticism approximates huáijiù as a literary concept, a theme or a genre with its own aesthetics

its specific context and the political stance of the nostalgic. Further to these studies, Fredric Jameson explores the extent to which capitalism kidnapps the images of the past by means of nostalgia films, which were destined to fall into enumeration of "stereotypes, of ideas of facts and historical realities" (Jameson 1991: 279). Based on these incisive critiques, nostalgia has eventually been conceptualised as a medium of and a victim to modernity. For nostalgia's relation to the discussion of modernity, see Walter Benjamin (1968), *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, edited and introduced by Hannah Arendt, prefaced by Leon Wieseltier. New York: Schocken Books, p. 255; Kathleen Stewart (1988), "Nostalgia: A Polemic," *Cultural Anthropology*, 3.3, 227-241; and Fredric Jameson (1991), *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

5. For Boym-ushered critiques of nostalgia in cultural productions, see, for example, Tammy Clewell, ed. (2013), *Modernism and Nostalgia: Bodies, Locations, Aesthetics*, New York: Palgrae Macmillan, on creative writings; Andreea Deciu Ritivoi (2002), *Nostalgia and the Immigrant Identity*, New York: Roman & Little Field Publishers, INC., on exilic nostalgia and identity epitomised by discursive cultural forms; Maria Todorova, and Zsuzsa Gille, eds. (2010), *Post-Communist Nostalgia*, New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books, on East European nostalgic words, sounds, and screens; Russell J. A. Kilbourn (2010), *Cinema, Memory, Modernity: the Representation of Memory from the Art Film to Transnational Cinema*, London and New York: Routledge, on nostalgic films; and Gary Cross (2015), *Consumed Nostalgia: Memory in the Age of Fast Capitalism*, New York: Columbia University Press, on the commodities for nostalgics.

6. See Boym (2001), p. 8.

7. For an example of the restorative nostalgia, see André Bazin (Fall, 1978), "The Stalin Myth in Soviet Cinema," translated by Georgia Gurrieri, introduced by Dudley Andrew, *Film Criticism*, 3.1, 17-26.

8. Creative writings, such as *Hong Kong Sketchbook: Nostalgia* and *Republican Beijing: History and Nostalgia*, are prone to adopt huáijiù as a Chinese rendition for their nostalgic references in the titles. Proportionally extensive are the academic translations of English nostalgia into Chinese huáijiù and vice versa. Translating English academic works that implicate the concept nostalgia, Chinese-speaking scholars would by and large take the word huáijiù insomuch that Svetlana Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia* acquires a Chinese title *Huáijiù de Wèilái* (literally, *Huáijiù's Future*) and Fredric Jameson's polemical chapter on postmodern nostalgic films is named as "Duìyú Xiànzài de Huáijiù" (literally, "Huáijiù for the Present"). English-speaking or bilingual scholars are also tentative to correlate their own polemical concept of nostalgia with the Chinese huáijiù, and examples can be found in David J. Davis's "Old Zhiqing Photos: Nostalgia and the 'Spirit' of the Cultural Revolution" and Sheldon Lu's "History, Memory, Nostalgia: Rewriting Socialism in Chinese Cinema and Television Drama." For those who translate Chinese huáijiù into English academic scholarships, nostalgia is likewise their ultimate option: Dai Jinhua's "Xiǎngxiàng de Huáijiù" (literally "Imagined Huáijiù"), for example, is translated by an English-speaking scholar Judy T. H. Chen as "Imagined Nostalgia." See Jin Yi and Ouyang Naizhan (1999), *Hong Kong Sketchbook: Nostalgia (Xiānggǎng Sùmiáo: Huáijiù* 香港素描：怀旧*)*. Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Company; Dong Yue (2014), *Minguo Beijing Cheng: Lishi yu Huaijiu* 民国北京城：历史与怀旧 *(Republican Beijing: History and Nostalgia)*. Beijing: Joint Publishing Company; Svetlana Boym (2010), *Huaijiu de Weilai* 怀旧的未来, translated by Yang Deyou. Nanjing: Yilin Press; Fredric Jameson (1998), "Duiyu Xianzai de Huaijiu" 对于现在的怀旧, in *Hou Xiandai Zhuyi Huo Wanqi Ziben Zhuyi de Wenhua Luoji* 后现代主义或晚期资本主义的文化逻辑, translated by Wu Meizhen. Taipei: China Times Publishing Co., pp. 335–354; David J. Davies (Fall 2005), "Old Zhiqing Photos: Nostalgia and the 'Spirit' of the Cultural Revolution," *China Review*, 5.2, 97–123: p. 100; Dai Jinhua (1999), "*Xiangxiang de Huaijiu*" 想象的怀旧, in *Yinxing Shuxie: 90 niandai Zhongguo wenhua yanjiu* 隐形写作：*90* 年代中国文化研究. Nanjing: Jinagsu Renmin Chubanshe, pp. 106-128.

   Rey Chow (Fall 1993), "A Souvenir of Love," *Modern Chinese Literature*, 7.2, 59-78: p. 60.

and techniques.[9] Awareness of huáijiù's critical agency can be traced back to one of the earliest anthologies of Chinese literature, *Wen Xuan* (the six century AD),[10] in which huáijiù appears as a thematic topic that conforms to the genetic conventions of sorrowful rhapsody. Such a conceptualisation of huáijiù shapes many critical writings insomuch that scholars such as Chen Xun, in their reassessment of classical Chinese literary in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, still gauge the concept literarily as "fǔyǎng chénjì, wúxiàn dīhuái; zhìshēn kōngjì, dàqǐ dàluò, dúwǎng dúlái"[11] (literally, "looking at something old and wandering relentlessly; staying in an empty space, with the emotion as wildly fluctuating as the self solitarily walking around") (Chen 2005: 4861).

Conceptual approximation is always difficult, either from the West to China or from the classic Chinese literary theories to contemporary Chinese films. At a similar critical intersection, Rey Chow suggests a much more rigorous approach to Chinese cinematic nostalgia than some foregoing scholars have adopted.[12] In some of her early works, Chow sympathises with her cohorts in cultural studies and recalibrates Western nostalgia onto the culture of huáijiù in the Chinese idiom, "táohuā yījiù, rénmiàn quánfēi" (literally, "the peach blossoms are there as always, whereas the human faces have completely changed") (Chow 1993: 60), thus interpreting Chinese nostalgia as a lack or loss projected onto physical space: "while the seasons, scenery, architecture, and household objects remained unchanged, the loved ones who once shared this space with them were no longer around" (Chow 1993: 60). A much more profound understanding of Chinese nostalgia and an insightful strategy of approach are propounded in her belated re-examination of Chinese cinemas. With an increasing vigilance against the danger that might be incurred by either Eurocentrism or Sinocentrism, Chow endeavours to seek a balance between the Western theories and native context in the process of reading, suggesting to survey on the one hand the critical agency of cinematic nostalgia as conceptualised in the West, and bear in mind on the other hand the literary tradition of Chinese ***huáijiù*** culture. In its detailed analysis of films, this article will follow her step to highlight both the Boym-inspired restorative and reflective agencies of nostalgia and the literary elements — captions, featured Chinese characters, and literary frameworks of stories among many — that contribute to the sentiment of a cinematic nostalgia.

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9. Ann M. Shields has once sought the native signification of huáijiù from classical Chinese literary theories and criticism. As she suggests, huáijiù is a nostalgic reflection on one's old friends and personal recent past, which constitutes an explicit contrast with the collective distant past that another subgenre, "huáigǔ," underscores. For more details, see Anna M. Shields (December 2006), "Remembering When: The Uses of Nostalgia in the Poetry of Bai Juyi and Yuan Zhen," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 66.2, 321-361.

10. *Wen Xuan* collected by generic order the assumed best verses and proses from Late Zhou to the Liang Dynasty when it was compiled. Commissioning huáijiù as a sub-generic thematic topic, Xiao Tong aligned Pan Anren's "Huáijiù Fù" (or "Rhapsody on Recalling Old Friends and Kin" as Knechtges translated) under the category "āishāng" ("Sorrowful Laments" as Knechtges annotated), which covered in parallel rhapsodies on resentment, separation, et cetera. For an introduction and translation of *Wen Xuan*, see David R. Knechtges and Xiao Tong (2014), *Wen Xuan, or Selections of Refined Literature*, Volume 1, 2, and 3. Princeton: Princeton University Press. For a copy of the Chinese version with annotations from six scholars in the Tang Dynasty, see Xiao Tong, ed. (1987), *Liu Chen Zhu Wen Xuan* 六臣注文選, annotated by Li Shan, Lü Yanji, Liu Liang, Zhang Xian, Lü Xiang, and Li Zhouhan. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.

11. "俯仰陳跡，無限低徊。置身空際，大起大落，獨往獨來." See Chen Xun (2005), "Haishao Shuo Ci" 海綃說詞, in *Cihua Congbian* 詞話叢編, edited by Tang Guizhang. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, pp. 4861.

12. Many foregoing scholarships on Chinese nostalgic culture transplant foreign theories of nostalgia directly onto the interpretation of Chinese texts. They are unquestionably not to blame, as they on no account propose to represent any autonomous Chinese way of uttering nostalgia. Arguably, their principal achievements consist in the painstaking research on the miscellaneous embodiments of foreign nostalgia in Chinese cultural productions. Wang Ban is one of the leading scholars that engage with the momentous acts of appropriating Western nostalgia in modern Chinese history. Revisiting the ideological discourse in the 1980s allows him to come to terms with the contingent dialogue between Boym's nostalgia and Chinese history, id est, the dynamism in which the historical course of the early reform era stimulates an outbreak of nostalgia, and in which the nostalgic stasis reversely alters – restores and reflects on, as he cited Boym – the writing of political history. Other than their insightful critique of diverse cultural phenomena, studies as such are proportionally informative as they unveil the complexity and subtlety of modern Chinese nostalgia, of which some facets are, as occasioned by modern China's overt resistance against and virtual appreciation of foreign impacts, less subject to the residual local discourse than the contingent Western force. For details, see Wang Ban (2004), *Illuminations from the Past: Trauma, Memory, and History in Modern China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. There are also many other scholars, apart from Chow, who recognise the discrepancy between Chinese and Western nostalgia and attempt to seek an equilibrium in cultural studies. See, for example, Margaret Hillenbrand (2010), "Nostalgia, Place, and Making Peace with Modernity in East Asia," *Postcolonial Studies* 13 (4), 383-401; Anna M. Shields (December 2006); and Sheldon H. Lu (2007), "History, Memory, Nostalgia: Rewriting Socialism in Chinese Cinema and Television Drama," in *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics: studies in literature and visual culture*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, pp. 130-149.

3 Melodramas in Mainland China

Following a brief account of the conceptualisation and critical agency of nostalgia, I will now begin to introduce another quintessential concept in my argument: melodrama, particularly melodrama as a genetic concept in cinema, the history of Chinese melodramas, and their representations of nostalgia and history.

Originally denoting a romantic and sentimental play where accompanied music enhanced the situations on-stage, melodrama has, since the music ceased to be its integral part, been identified as a form of drama that features "sensationalism, emotional intensity, hyperbole, strong action, violence, rhetorical excesses, moral polarities, brutal villainy and its ultimate elimination, and the triumph of good" (Dissanayake 1993: 1). Pejorative inferences developed recently in literary fields[13] notwithstanding, "melodrama" and "melodramatic" have in film studies been rehabilitated in relation to representational concerns such as the role of ideology and female subjectivity. "Strong action, emotional intensities, [...] rhetorical excesses" (Dissanayake 1993: 2), "allegorical or stereotypical good versus evil forces, [and] the individual shown as at the mercy of forces beyond his or her control" (Kaplan 1993: 10) all define the melodramatic and contribute to its antirealistic orientation, which nevertheless signifies the characters' alienation and opens to the film's deeper structure. In this sense, what melodramatises the films in focus here, the sensational conflict between the good people and the evil society in *Under the Hawthorn Tree* and the allegorical one between the resilient Beijing and the repressive New York in *American Dreams in China*,[14] would disclose in further analysis the profound relations between nostalgia and history. However, such relations are, as many scholars warn,[15] always culturally and historically conditioned: "melodramas exemplify in concrete ways the diverse casts of mind, shapes of emotion, vocabularies of expression, imaginative logics, and priorities of valuation of different cultures" (Dissanayake 1993: 2). Hence an essential introduction to the China's melodramatic works, their historical trajectory, cultural concerns, and shifting perceptions of nostalgia and history.

Seen as "a new commercial medium that placed little value on complexity and subtlety" (Pickwicz 1993: 299), cinema in the pre-socialist Republican China (the 1910s and 1920s) features almost no May Fourth iconoclasm that literature spearheads, and instead, merely some popularised political tendencies, such as anticapitalism, antiwarlordism, and anti-imperialism, in the melodramatic genre that Chinese filmmakers have learned from Hollywood to "infuse the banal and the ordinary with the excitement of grandiose conflict" (Brooks 1995: 20). Addressing the crisis of the early twentieth-century Chinese culture and society in a polarising and appealing way, classic leftist melodramas (the thirties and forties[16]) such as Sun Yu's *Dawn* (*Tianming*, 1933) and Wu Yonggang's *Goddess* (*Shennü*, 1934) inherit the mode of excess[17] that renounces the original May Fourth respect for diversity and subtlety and achieve a heroic legend that would be tailored in Maoist era (1949–1978) to legitimate the socialist state. Popular memories are thus expropriated and manipulated, whereby the good people (peasants and women amongst many) are filmed as being tortured by the sadistic evil (Kuomintang, landlords, or Japanese for example) until their emancipation by the Communist Party. The past is the old days that never appear good. Hence scarce presentations of nostalgia in melodramas and a history that has always

13. Peter Brooks (1985), *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*. New York: Columbia University Press.

14. See further analysis in a later section on *American Dreams in China*.

15. See, for example, Wimal Dissanayake (1993), "Introduction," in *Melodrama and Asian Cinema*, edited by Wimal Dissanayake. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1-8; E. Ann Kaplan (1993), "Melodrama / Subjectivity / Ideology: Western melodrama theories and their relevance to recent Chinese cinema," in *Melodrama and Asian Cinema*, edited by Wimal Dissanayake. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 9-29; Yuejin Wang (1993), "Melodrama as historical understanding: The making and unmaking of communist history," in *Melodrama and Asian Cinema*, edited by Wimal Dissanayake. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 73-100.

16. "The films of the late forties, complete with detailed sound dialogues, are more interesting and complex than the mostly silent 'May Fourth' films of the thirties and probably did more to subvert the legitimacy and authority of the Nationalist state" (Pickwicz 1993: 308). For more details about the Republican melodramas, see Paul G Pickowicz (1993), "Melodramatic Representation and the 'May Fourth' Tradition of Chinese Cinema," in *From May Fourth to June Fourth*, edited by Ellen Widmer and David Der-Wei Wang. Harvard: Harvard University Press, pp. 295-326.

17. Or more precisely, the "rhetorical excess, grossly exaggerated representations, and extreme moral bipolarity that one finds in Chinese film melodramas of the twenties" (Pickwicz 1993: 305).

already been written up by revolutionary needs.[18]

After the Maoist socialist realist exemplars, melodrama in the 1980s evolves into many novel forms. Xie Jin is undeniably one of the leading figures in melodramatic cinema,[19] reconfiguring the evil from the agents of "feudalism, capitalism, and imperialism" (Pickwicz 1993: 321) in the Maoist era to those of the Communist Party and their running dogs. However, it is not until the emergence of the Fifth Generation that the landscape of melodrama has changed radically and that nostalgia and further reflections become possible beyond the sheer contradiction between good and evil. Overtly disavowing the melodramatic image and "the stereotyping of characters, the stylistic and emotional exaggeration, and the rigidity of propagandist content" (Silbergeld 1999: 235), the young filmmakers nevertheless mutate their cultural parentage of melodrama into "the children of melodrama"[20] — including, in Jerome Silbergeld's typology, no-drama, pseudo-drama, melodramatic masquerade, and deconstruction drama — a series of theatrical incarnations which mark their failure to outgrow Chinese cinema's tradition of melodramas, of what might be construed more safely as "the melodramatic" or a refined and self-reflexive stage of the melodramatic genre. Amidst a widespread dismay in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, many melodramas by the Fifth Generation, *Yellow Earth* (*Huang Tu Di*, Chen Kaige, 1984) and *Red Sorghum* (*Hong Gao Liang*, Zhang Yimou, 1987) amongst many, "reinvent realism and melodrama as a form of nostalgia" (Berry and Farquhar 2006: p. 12)[21] for some moments bygone in the twentieth century and some primitive places where communist gaze is not ubiquitous and everything has a black-or-white simple answer.[22] Whereas history still plays a quintessential role in these melodramas, nostalgia steals in this time and seeks, based on its dynamic restorative agency, to penetrate China's memory of the past and provide Chinese people with a much more profound understanding of history per se.[23]

Nostalgia and the reflections over history have changed their course in the 1990s when a rapid urbanisation, under the aegis of China' "reform and opening-up" policy, compels many residents of the primitive countryside to migrate to China's proliferating cities and many urban dwellers to witness the spatial reorganisation of specific urban sites.[24] Loss of home in the countryside, lack of certainty in anonymous cities, and disjuncture from the "revolutionary past" (Lu 2007: 138) amongst many "post-socialist" problems in Chinese society[25]

18. Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar identify in Chinese cinema a strand of "melodramatic realism": "realism and romanticism came hand in hand and were not disassociated until later in the twentieth century" (Berry and Farquhar 2006: 77), and thus pervading most of Chinese melodramatic expressions in cinema before the 1980s is a "presentism" where "nostalgia for the past was repressed or severely criticized in mainland critical realist and socialist realist cinema" (Berry and Farquhar 2006: 78-79). However, "scarce" does not mean "no." In what Berry and Farquhar defines as the "poetic realist" works, such as *Spring in a Small Town* (*Xiaocheng zhi Chun*, Fei Mu, 1948), nostalgia does appear. For more details, see Berry and Farquhar (2006), *China on Screen: cinema and nation*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 76-79. For further discuss of the relations between the popular memories and the leftist melodramas, see Pickwicz (1993); and William Rothman (1993) "The *Goddess*: Reflections on melodrama East and West," in *Melodrama and Asian Cinema*, edited by Wimal Dissanayake. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 59-72; and Jerome Silbergeld (1999), "The Children of Melodrama: no-drama, pseudo-drama, melodramatic masquerade, and deconstruction drama," in *China into Film: frames of reference in contemporary Chinese cinema*, London: Reaktion Books, pp. 234-303.

19. For melodramas by some other filmmakers in the early 1980s, such as Zhao Huanzhang's *The In-Laws (Xiyingmen*, 1982) and Hu Bingliu's *Country Couple (Xiangyin,* Pearl River Studio, 1984), see, for example, Ma Ning (1993), "Symbolic Representation and Symbolic Violence: Chinese family melodrama of the early 1980s," in *Melodrama and Asian Cinema*, edited by Wimal Dissanayake. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 29-58.

20. For all the "children of melodramas," see Silbergeld (1999), p. 234-304. Berry and Farquhar defines some of the innovative films in the 1980s as works of "melodramatic realism." For details, see Berry and Farquhar (2006), p. 75-107.

21. For the interpretation of *Yellow Earth* as a melodramatic and nostalgic work, see Berry and Farquhar (2006), p. 75-107; for *Red Sorghum*, see Silbergeld (1999), p. 234-236.

22. For more details, see Pickowicz (1993); and Tonglin Lu (2002), *Confronting Modernity in the Cinemas of Taiwan and Mainland China*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

23. For the Fifth Generation melodramatists' contribution to the reflection of history, its production and ideology for example, see Silbergeld, p. 234-303; Rey Chow (1995), *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 142-172.

24. For the rural migration to China's proliferating cities, see Dai (1997); for the urban landscapes in demolition and development, see Yomi Braester (2010), *Painting the City Red: Chinese Cinema and the Urban Contract*. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 1-24, 95-150, 224-280; for both and an investigation into the intricate relations between China's urban generation of filmmakers and the consistently changing urban landscape, see Zhang Zhen (2007), "Introduction," in *The Urban Generation: Chinese cinema and society at the turn of the twenty-first century*, edited by Zhang Zhen. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 1-45.

25. For a detailed analysis of China and its "postsocialist" problems, see Sheldon Lu (2007).

invite many filmmakers to "assuage the present" (Dai 1997: 145). Hence the appearance of melodramatic works, such as *Blush* (*Hong Fen*, Li Shaohong, 1995) and *Shanghai Triad* (*Yao A Yao, Yao Dao Waipo Qiao*, Zhang Yimou, 1995), through which nostalgia, as Dai Jinhua argues, traces some sexualised or individuated stories,[26] offers a spiritual space for imagining and consolation, substitutes history and the consciousness of it with marketable cultural commodities, and contends that modernisation is not "the miracle of the 1979 reform of an old China in decline but an always integral part of the history of China" (Dai 1997: 160). Nostalgia on the one hand constitutes a complicit force with official ideologies to sustain the historical illusion and beckon a further modernisation, and on the other hand, wields its reflective power and affords China a feeling of pause and solace, and a temporary asylum where personal expressions were possible and apolitical.

The 2000s saw a continuation of such a reflective nostalgia and an eventual decline of filmgoers along with the development of television and internet industry. Since 2008, the moribund condition of cinema has been reversed insomuch that the market have grossed soon into the second largest one over the world. A new cycle of melodrama emerges with a nostalgic flavour that befits the taste of China's urban / urbane citizens and no longer ponders on the countryside. Many melodramas of this recent cycle set their stories primarily in urban landscape, with countryside visualised as a minor setting. Filmmakers learn from American youth films and film noirs, adopting sex, school bullying, and stress caused by examinations as their major concerns and employing flashback, first-person voice-over, and low-key lighting as distinctive styles. Themes such as growing-up experience and youth going overseas to study are recurrently expanded on, whereas personal nostalgic visions are increasingly overshadowed, or even eroded, by an already melodramatised and replicated version of History. However, in what specific manner has history been represented in these melodramatic works that seem to have departed afar from those of the 1980s and 1990s? How is nostalgia relevant to the represented history here? The regretful length of this short article disallows any inclusive analysis of the melodramatic works now and nevertheless encourages a single perspective of approaching, one that starts from the historical frames in the nostalgic visions of two films and their filmed melodramatic conflicts.

4 *Under the Hawthorn Tree*

Similar to many of its precursors in the 1980s, the principal conflict in *Under the Hawthorn Tree* lies between ordinary people as incarnations of good and the Maoist society as an invisible yet ubiquitous evil Other. Set in the Cultural Revolution, *Under the Hawthorn Tree* presents a failed love story that sustains reminiscent of those in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, *Sacrificed Youth* (*Qingchun Ji*, Zhang Nuanxin, 1985) for example: a rusticated youth[27] during the Cultural Revolution, the female protagonist, Jingqiu, comes across her would-be lover, Laosan, in the countryside, falls in love with him, and ends up woefully. A nostalgic vision of the far bygone Maoist age has been restored since the film's beginning by an old-fashioned bus, a greyish yellow filter, and several static shots that captures the characters and the picturesque nature in an extremely long distance. However, unlike many melodramas in the 1980s, *Under the Hawthorn Tree* does not linger in the countryside forever but return to the city – yet nonetheless without any rapid urbanisation presented as in many melodramas in the 1990s – where the film is primarily set, until Laosan's death of leukemia toward the end of the film. As if mirroring the social reality in China today, urban schools, hospitals, and households invade the screen and become the primary sites of characters' actions, with the countryside rendered more likely to be an exotic other that feeds on and satisfies the young characters' imagination. Hence a fresh restoration of the urban life in the Cultural Revolution. However, another difference seems to be more suggestive: *Under the Hawthorn Tree* seems to hark back to a conflict in the Cultural Revolution not for a deeper understanding of history – which many of its precursors in the 1980s strive for in contrast – as its affirmation of the grand history complicates and puzzles any attempts for sober understandings.

26. For further elaboration of the "sexualised and individuated stories" and the several statements within the sentence, see Dai (1997).

27. Rusticated youth, also known as sent-down educated youth or zhiqing, were urban young people who left – willingly or under coerce – for rural areas from 1962 to the end of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s, as a part of the "Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement" (shàngshān xiàxiāng yùndòng). This generation was supposed to settle down in the countryside and receive re-education from the peasants until they were well-prepared to inherit the socialist undertakings. For more details, see Thomas P. Bernstein (1977), *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages: the transfer of youth from urban to rural China*, New Haven: Yale University Press; and Wu Weiyi (2016), *The Identity of Zhiqing*, London: Routledge.

The film begins with a caption as follows:

> "this is based on a true story that took place during the Cultural Revolution. In the early 1970s, Chairman Mao called on the people to 'build classroom in the field.' In response, schools sent teachers and students to the countryside." (opening credit of *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, 2010)

It is unquestionably not uncommon that melodramas, in either the 1980s or the 1990s, refers as the backdrop of stories to some historic events such as the Japanese invasion or the Cultural Revolution. Epically severing and suturing the 20th century as comprising discursive events as such, Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* (*Bawang Bie Ji*, 1993) forms even an extreme. A similar historical approach notwithstanding, *Under the Hawthorn Tree* seems to have rendered it too conspicuous and deliberate by instilling, in forms of captions and other literary ways, too many historically relevant and diegetically unnecessary elements into, for example, the supposedly intimate dialogues between lovers or among mother and children. Following a speech to advocate Chairman Mao's doctrines at a public square where glossy images of Mao are lavishly visualised, a friend of Jingqiu's, Wei Hong, is about to be sent down to the countryside, answering the "Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement" and receiving re-education from the peasants until further notice in the unknown future. Wei's mother comes to the square to see her daughter off. However, what is supposed to be a sensational farewell, with moving and comforting languages, transpires as a reiteration of the speech on the soapbox. "Be earnest and at ease, and receive the re-education from the poor peasants: do you know these?" Concluding with the mother's tears notwithstanding, the sequence delivers that historical discourses have deeply affected the life of ordinary people, and constitutes less a reflection – which many of their precursors in the 1980s are likely to do as suggested previously – over the production and hypocrisy of history than a reproduction of the historical images and nostalgic sentiment. History is thus epitomised and reproduced by a nostalgia that appeals to as many spectators as the film's box-office achievement might disclose.

Here we might as well revisit the effects of those Maoist doctrines in the film's nostalgic visions. Wei's mother appropriates the slogans in Cultural Revolution to bid a farewell to her daughter, Laosan deploys "Chairman Mao's instructions" to befriend and entertain Jingqiu: every character seems to know exactly what others mean beneath the political jargons and wallow in the pleasure or displeasure that has been engendered by the word games, and so does the audience who might be curious about at first and amused then by those remote political references and the act of enveloping one's exact intention within there in the process of utterance. Arising here is an interesting parallel between the structure of the entire film and these characters' beguiling way of signification and communication. Informing the spectators of the story's progression, the process of a nostalgic restoration and a personal narrative, the all but informative captions begin, end, and permeate the entire film with as many political jargons, of which the signification and significance has long gone afar from the audience's reality, as the character's delicately constructed sentences. Aware of the melodramatic nature of the film, the audience always knows exactly where the narrative would lead and still wallow in the pleasure, or displeasure, that has been engendered by the captions, the historical flavour, and the action and effects of the politically coded communications. An understanding of the film's nostalgic representations of history as such invites a further speculation that what holds for the captions and the personal conversations exemplifies the iamges of the grand History: all are nothing enigmatic at present but a cloak, an envelope or a coding surface, that vocalises no essential concerns of the past and confers fulfilment on the current audience. History is thus melodramatised and replicated in the shape as it is believed or favoured to be in public.

Toward the end of the film, Jingqiu, aware of her inexorable exile from her romantic utopia, hides her sorrow beneath a melodramatic farewell to her lover, raising arms to pretend a hug, turning around, and never looking back. The spectators would know exactly how woeful she feels at that moment and delight nevertheless in the melodramatic forms that visualise the sorrow and entertain them with a highly nostalgic flavour. Anything else, apart from Jingqiu's sadness, lurks under the forms seem no longer important for the nostalgic producers and consumers, at least not so crucial as the melodramatic forms, particularly the historical and the nostalgic ones, that have been redeemed and might hence be re-construed as the essential significations of the stage. Whereas entertaining the audience with a melodramatised history might partially explain the commercial success of *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, the recently released melodramatic works might present something more with its nostalgic sentiment, as another film, *American Dreams in China*, provide another perspective of the relation between nostalgia and grand history.

5 *American Dreams in China*

Should "melodramatic" be construed as strong action, emotional intensities, [...] rhetorical excesses" (Dissanayake 1993: 2) and a good-versus-evil conflict between two – or even two groups of – characters, *American Dreams in China* is arguably not a typical example of melodramatic works. It basis on real stories seems to have ousted at first the possibility of any larger-than-life story, and hence excesses and extravagances. Whereas some old-fashioned bureaucrats and cunning businesspeople might be considered as the possible incarnation of the evil in melodrama's polarised conflict, there is apparently no explicit embodiment of the good, as the three protagonists possess different personalities, pursue distinct life trajectories prior to their compromise to get together again, and become businesspeople as shrewd as their American counterparts are. However, it would turn out to be more melodramatic once the defining feature of melodrama – the "allegorical or stereotypical good versus evil forces, [and] the individual shown as at the mercy of forces beyond his or her control" (Kaplan 1993: 10) for example – be understood in a broader sense. What if the conflict between the good and the evil is epitomised not by characters but other cinematic elements that structures the narrative. For example, if Beijing and New York, the two primary settings throughout the film, be construed as two oppositional forces – and there would be sufficient reason to do so, as Beijing symbolises the good old days of the characters' college life, the energetic and innovative power to struggle against any difficulties, and the one side of the negotiation table between the protagonists and their accusers, whereas New York represents the unfriendly people and institutes, unchangeable landscapes, and the malicious opponents on the other side of the negotiation table – the film would be too melodramatic to re-watch. However, what does such a melodramatic work tell about nostalgia and history? Anything close to what *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, a film that is so different from it, suggests about the matter? To pursue these enquiries, the following passages will return, as in the case of Zhang's feature, to the representations of history in the nostalgic visions.

Unlike Zhang's retrospection into the Cultural Revolution, *American Dreams in China* is nostalgic for Beijing's post-1978 urban landscapes that have sustained ever changing and changed in a rapid process of urbanisation. Hence a "spatial disappearance"[28] that accelerates and intensifies the feeling of nostalgia in the eyes of those urbanites born and bred in cities. The protagonists' nostalgia is nonetheless also different from what Ackbar Abbas might name as "déjà disparu,"[29] as personal nostalgia is restored here with a mainland version of the grand narrative of history. Starting from a critique of the conservative 1980s when party cadres are pejoratively melodramatised as senior men trying young rebels in a stagnant, gloomy, and stifling interior, the nostalgic vision recalibrates personal growing-up experience according to (in a quite ameliorative manner) the rapid development of China's urban landscape, economic boom, and international influence. What marks the aging of the characters is not any personal affairs such as love, marriage, or career establishment but historical events that echo the official narrative in the post-Mao era. The opening of the first KFC in Beijing and a deserted state-owned factory read that China has avowedly begun to implement its market economy with "Chinese

28. Ackbar Abbas (1997), *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*. Minneapolis and London: Univeristy of Minnesota Press.

29. In his discussion of Hong Kong, Ackbar Abbas bases the cinematic "déjà disparu" on a local "culture of disappearance," one that has been incurred by both Hong Kong's "changing nature of coloniality" (Abbas 1997: 29) and its, as he highlights particularly in his "Building on Disappearance" chapter, rapidly changing and changed landscape: "The combination of rising land prices, property speculation, and the presence of large corporations vying for prime space results in a constant rebuilding that makes the city subtly unrecognizable" (Abbas 1997: 63). It is the latter, a phenomenon shared by Hong Kong and the mainland China now, that provides the possibility of appropriating Abbas' term in the context here. In Hong Kong, the fear of the city's disappearance in the rapid rebuilding continues in its post-1997 era. In a similar vein to Abbas' "culture of dis-appearance," Esther M. K. Cheung correlates the nostalgic sentiments in Hong Kong's post-Handover cinema with the filmmakers' topophilia and woeful feelings for the city's crisis, whereas another scholar, Sun Shaoyi, remaps the city's displacement, dis-appearance, and re-identification onto its cinematic nostalgia for an old Shanghai. In the realm of mainland China, Meng Yue has borrowed Abbas' "culture of disappearance" to describe the contemporary Shanghai in its rapid renovation and emerging nostalgia and encouraged my appropriation here, and Yomi Braester focuses on the demolition in Beijing since the 1980s, arguing that cinema presents the trauma of rapid urbanisation and preserves the image of the vanishing cityscape. For more details, see Ackbar Abbas (1997), *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, Minneapolis and London: Univeristy of Minnesota Press; Esther M. K. Cheung (2015), "The Urban Maze: crisis and topography in Hong Kong cinema," in *A Companion to Hong Kong Cinema*, edited by Esther M. K. Cheung, Gina Marchetti, and Esther C. M. Yau. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 51-70; Sun Shaoyi (2007), "'Wu Diyu Kongjian' yu Huaijiu Zhengzhi: 'hou jiuqi' Xianggang dianying de Shanghai xiangxiang" ("'Non-Locality' and Nostalgic Politics: imagining Shanghai in 'post-1997' Hong Kong cinema"), *Literature and Art Studies* 11, 32-38 and 182; Meng Yue (2006), *Shanghai and the Edges of Empires*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press; and Yomi Braester (2010), p. 224-280.

characteristics," whereas the bombing of Chinese Embassy in Yugoslavia becomes a quintessential landmark that speaks for China's rival with the United States and portends a long-lasting competition thereafter. At the end of the film, a collage of some Chinese tycoons' old and recent photos bespeaks their poverty, struggle, and success under a Sinicised American dream on the one hand, and invites on the other hand a reconsideration of whether such a collage mirrors the historical development of China as the entire film has already restored, and if so, whether this film draws up an image of China as developing from a primitive territory via its own decades-long striving to an international superpower. Unlike many of the 1980s melodramas that seek to penetrate the production of history and many in the 1990s that renounce the grand narratives, melodramas now proactively revisit the grand history, legitimate it as a part of personal memories, and replicate it to the audience who might thereby be trapped in a political/historical nostalgia and an unescapable consumer culture.

It is noteworthy that some restored nostalgic elements in literary forms – such as the striking slogan on a wall of the deserted factory, "Dōngfēng Yādǎo Xīfēng" ("East Wind Defeats the West Wind" – betrays the protagonists' and China's confident, if not complacent, stance against the States or even the entire Western world. However, A dream place for one of the protagonists at the beginning of the film and a symbol of China's state power,[30] Tiananmen Square remains visually absent amidst the film's avowed opposition to the United States, whereas paradoxically in its stead, New York's Time Square, its glass-wrapped high-rises, and the chain restaurant KFC become exposed for many times. A reconsideration of the characters' career development might render the paradox here more explicit. The three protagonists do succeed in their business at the end, yet their method to achieve such a success, in the film's nostalgic vision, is making money by helping Chinese pass the ETS examinations and learn something in the United States, or shrewdly negotiating with American companies, benefiting self-interest as cunning capitalists, and making more money at the end: thereby they become at the end Americanised – should we return to the melodramatic conflict between Beijing and New York – and the film concludes with the evil's defeat of the good. It even follows that the photo collage of Chinese businesspeople at the end of the film might be construed anew as a commercial display that justifies the capitalist colonisation of the bygone socialist realms and redeems capitalist modernity as China's current way to rule the world. When the young protagonists gather in the film and discuss the Zeitgeist, one says "to change," whereas another one protests that "we cannot change the world; it is the world that changes us." Presuming the capitalist characteristics are imposed by an exotic other, China is finally able to rewrite its history of "victimisation" and "marginalisation,"[31] and complacently continue its capitalist reproductions: in the same way, Chinese people might do better than the Americans. Hence the film here that commemorates China's proud development and caters with an imagined duet between China and America to a nationalistic pride. Amidst nostalgia's restoration of the past, personal memories are expropriated, quite like many of their precursors in the Republican time, and grand history is not reflected as the 1990s melodramas might do but legitimated and reproduced for a popular imagination.

6 Conclusion

The 2008 Beijing Olympic Games orients the nation towards an unfolding future, and the following years have seen the release of many melodramatic works that, as many of their precursors in the last century did, associate personal nostalgia with grand history. However, the cinematic nostalgia in *Under the Hawthorn Tree* and *American Dreams in China* amongst many is on the one hand no longer as reflective as some in the 1990s

30. Tiananmen Square has played a quintessential role in China's melodramas and other film genres in the 1980s and the 1990s, serving as a symbol of China's state power and reflecting filmmakers' either commemorating or sarcastic politics. For a detailed analysis of Tiananmen's symbolic significance and some relevant films, see Braester (2010), p. 151-186. It might be argued that the visual absence of Tiananmen, or particularly the June Fourth Tiananmen Incident in 1989, might be of profound significance and signification for a film dealing with students in Peking University and spanning from 1980 to now in China. However, the absence of the Tiananmen Incident might be due to multiple reasons beyond the scope of this article, such as 1) the fact that the protagonists study in Peking University from 1980 to 1984, after which one of them stays in the University not as a student but as a lecturer, a tedious and unpopular as the film shows; 2) the state censorship; 3) the market's preference; et cetera. Thus risky is any suggestion that the absence have profound significance and signification within the text.

31. Chow argues that China became in the Republican China, by neurotically indulging in a quasi-modernity, or a perspective of beholding China as both victim and empire entailed by primitivism, obsessed with China's " 'victimisation' and 'marginalisation' vis-a-vis the West." It seems that a re-writing of China's ethnography starts anew. See Rey Chow (1995), *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*, New York: Columbia University Press, p. 1-52.

would be — substituting individuated stories for grand history and offering a temporary asylum where personal expressions were possible and apolitical; on the other hand, despite their nostalgic restorations as delicately designed as many melodramas in the 1980s, the cinematic nostalgia now would no longer painstakingly seek to ponder over the production and meaning of history. Instead, the images of the bygone days epitomise, legitimate, and reproduce grand historical narratives either to meet the recreational imagination of history or to justify China's soaring economic, political, and cultural ambition. Hence a sheer nostalgic sentiment that might superficially or ideologically please the spectators. Undeniably, it is still too soon to chart all the germane attributes or presage any out-comings of the current cinematic phenomenon of melodramatic works in China. What we can and shall do now is to wait and see the unforeseeable complex that China's melodramas work towards, investigate into the forms and roles of nostalgia along the genealogy of melodramas (and the ecology of the entire film industry) in China, and delight in the pleasant or bitter taste that nostalgia, in melodramatic works that may seem strikingly different and be nevertheless closely related, affords us.

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