

# Fragmented Memories and Screening Nostalgia for the Cultural Revolution

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# Contents

List of Illustrations	vi
Acknowledgements	vii
Introduction	1
1. Janus-Faced Nostalgia: Moral Critique, Sentimentalism, and Gender	16
2. Post-revolution Nostalgia: Memory as Performance	47
3. Beyond Nostalgia: Agency and Auteuristic Expressivity in Fragmented Memories	66
4. Post-trauma Narrative: Fragmented Past Flows into the Present	93
5. A Collective 'I' and Its Contending Readings: Personal Memories in <i>Sent-Down Youth</i>	111
6. Conclusion: Contingent Memories, Contested Modernities	139
Filmography	147
Bibliography	149

# Illustrations

Figure 1.1: Poster for <i>Under the Hawthorn Tree</i>	30
Figure 2.1: Still from <i>Youth</i> : The opening dancing rehearsal	51
Figure 2.2: Still from <i>Youth</i> : The shower scene	52
Figure 2.3: Still from <i>Youth</i> : The transitional scene of the year 1976	54
Figure 2.4a: Poster for <i>Youth</i>	57
Figure 2.4b: Poster for <i>In the Heat of the Sun</i>	57
Figure 2.5: Still from <i>Youth</i> : Listening to Teresa Teng	58
Figure 2.6: Still from <i>Youth</i> : Liu's return	63
Figure 3.1: Still from <i>11 Flowers</i> : Han peeping into the office	69
Figure 3.2: Still from <i>11 Flowers</i> : Han peeping into the office	70
Figure 3.3: Still from <i>11 Flowers</i> : The portrait of Chairman Mao on the street	75
Figure 3.4: Stills from <i>11 Flowers</i> : Han and others seeking pleasure on the playground	79
Figure 3.5: Still from <i>11 Flowers</i> : Han and others discussing the fighting	80

# Introduction

Autobiography, then, has the unenviable task of confronting, confounding, and even confirming the assumptions, impressions, and (mis)conceptions about the author's or filmmaker's identificatory positionings.

—Alisa S. Lebow<sup>1</sup>

Born after the Cultural Revolution, I began to know about that historical event from the odd line in a textbook and through occasional films and television dramas set in that period. To a large extent, filmic representations, be they memoirs or fictions, form the way I perceive and make sense of this historical period that I never experienced. The Cultural Revolution, though known to many people as ten years of turmoil and disaster, seems to me a distant, tough, and yet passionate era. My parents recount anecdotes of their schooldays, and they sometimes even express longing for the 'good old days' of innocence and carefreeness. In the 1995 film *In the Heat of the Sun* (*Yangguang canlan de rizi*, dir. Jiang Wen),<sup>2</sup> which I saw many years after its original release, the Cultural Revolution was no longer a gloomy and suffocating period as described in school textbooks and archive newsreels; rather, it was a bright and endlessly carefree summer for teenagers. In the 2000s, as I began to know more about history, the Cultural Revolution and China's socialist past remained an enigma to me. I have watched many television serial dramas, such as *Romantic Life* (*Xuese langman*, dir. Teng Wenji, 2005), and seen many films, such as *The Foliage* (*Meiren cao*, dir. Lü Le, 2003), which depict the past as a time of passion and romance, with a tinge of nostalgia. However, the Cultural Revolution is denounced in public discourse, in order to pave the road for economic reform, but further exploration and revelation of its atrocities are still censored in China for fear of undermining the political regime. Furthermore, in media reports and daily life, I have heard people, including my grandparents, who were factory workers in the Maoist era, express discontent with contemporary materialistic life while remembering the socialist past as a time of spiritual wealth and dignity. My grandfather begins his stories with a typical 'when I was that age'. Others of his generation have their own stories as well—stories that might be, I have noticed, quite different

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1. Alisa S. Lebow, *First Person Jewish* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xviii.

2. In this book, the year of the film is listed according to when it was released in mainland China.

from those told in school textbooks or in films and television dramas. Moreover, each person seems to be confident about the authenticity of his or her own stories, however different they may be from one another. It seems that in these narratives of personal memories, 'I' symbolizes the legitimacy and power of being a witness and a narrator; 'I' implies a kind of alternative narrative that may differ from those grand narratives in school textbooks; in addition, 'I' recalled in the past becomes a parameter to measure against 'I' in contemporary society. The representation of the Cultural Revolution through personal memories and micro-narratives is therefore the topic of this book.

Autobiographical accounts of the Cultural Revolution emerged in literature in the 1980s, such as Liang Heng's *Son of the Revolution* (1983) and Nien Cheng's *Life and Death in Shanghai* (1987), both of which were published outside the People's Republic of China (PRC). Filmic representations of personal memories appeared after the Cultural Revolution, using flashbacks to recall the wounds of the past. Personal memories in those earlier films mark a collective experience and serve as a metaphor for the nation. Since the 1990s, there has been a wave of nostalgic representations of personal memories on screen, such as the film *In the Heat of the Sun*. The personal memories and micro-narratives have thrived and culminated since 2001, when China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the Chinese screen industry has since undergone a wave of structural transformation. For instance, in films such as *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* (*Baierzhahe he xiao caifeng*, dir. Dai Sijie, 2002) and *The Foliage* (2003), micro-narratives now prevail over previous grand historical narratives.

The rising micro-narratives are ramifications of and at the same time constitute the privatization and individualization processes of Chinese society. There are several factors that contribute to the thriving personalized narratives of the Cultural Revolution on screen. Firstly, the breakdown of grand narratives of socialism in the postsocialist society enables the surfacing of varied and often contesting micro-narratives about socialism. Secondly, privatization and marketization under the rubric of neoliberalism have encouraged personal expressions and afforded some space for the utterance of personal voices. Thirdly, the popularity of digital technology has also facilitated and provided expanded channels for ordinary people to speak up, to record and share personal memories. Last but not least, micro-narratives that avoid national allegory and underplay national politics have become 'safer' ways of representation for films that seek public release in mainland China.

This book explores the way personal memories and micro-narratives of the Cultural Revolution are represented in post-2001 films and television dramas in mainland China, unravelling the complex political, social, and cultural forces imbricated within the personalized narrative modes of remembering the past in postsocialist China. Since its entry into the WTO in 2001, China has deepened its economic reform in parallel with its social and cultural rescaling. The Chinese film industry has started a new wave of privatization and marketization, as private

companies are warranted entrance to film production and distribution. Although television stations remain state owned in China, the television industry has gone through rapid commercialization and structural reform. The reforms of the Chinese film and television industries usher in reconfiguration of cultural spaces. While representations of personal stories mushroomed after the Cultural Revolution, the deepened marketization and privatization after 2001 have triggered a new wave of representations of personal memories, which divert from those earlier allegorical narratives and are more sentimental, fragmented, and nostalgic.

Through a comparative study of different representations of personal memories across screens, this book argues that personal memories are far from solid and spontaneous; rather, they are constantly constructed and articulated in relation to social, political, and economic contexts, addressing specific concerns of the filmmakers. The personalized reminiscences of the past suggest an alternative narrative to official history and grand narratives. Moreover, the depoliticization and privatization strategies are at the same time subjected to commodification. Recent personal memories and micro-narratives about the past not only reveal varied experiences during the socialist era but also imply the remembering mechanism in the post-socialist era.

## History and Memory

Many scholars have posited that memory and history are two oppositional concepts. For instance, Maurice Halbwachs contends that history, often unitary, is to restore the ruptured continuity between the past and the present, while collective memory, often multiple and plural, resides in the concrete and does not exceed the boundaries of a particular group.<sup>3</sup> A similar observation is made by Pierre Nora as he argues that memories belong to groups, but history 'belongs to everyone and to no one'; moreover, the true mission of history is to 'suppress and destroy' memory.<sup>4</sup> In a general sense, memory is more subjective and is rooted in the concrete, whereas history often strives for objectivity and binds with continuity. Simply put, 'if the goal of history is that it be written in the third person, memory is always written in the first person.'<sup>5</sup> However, memory is at the same time framed within social and cultural discourses and is inevitably imbricated with historical narratives. Despite the distinctions between memory and history, Pierre Nova acknowledges both of them as being constructed. He contends that there is no spontaneous memory but only secondary and indirect memory that, like history, is also constructed.<sup>6</sup> Memories, being constructed and in plural forms, can be used as strategies to support, comple-

3. Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Francis J. Ditter Jr. and Vida Yazdi Ditter (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1980), 78–79.

4. Pierre Nova, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Representations* 26 (1989): 9.

5. Ross Poole, 'Memory, History and the Claims of the Past', *Memory Studies* 1 (2008): 149–66.

6. Nova, 'Between Memory and History', 7–24.

ment, or challenge the progressive and often singular narrative of history. Historical discourses try to use memory, but at the same time, memories open up diverse scenarios and 'prevent the historical imagination from hardening into some ahistorical one-way Main Street.'<sup>7</sup> The productive tensions between memory and history enable ways of negotiating the past, the present, and the possibilities of the future.

Another pair of terms, personal memory and collective memory, is also crucial for the understanding of how memory works. In fact, the distinction between personal and collective memories is often ambiguous and not self-defined. For instance, immediately after the Cultural Revolution, a body of literary work erupted called 'scar literature', which was often written by sent-down youth to portray their suffering during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>8</sup> This genre of literature is based on sent-down youth's own experiences and is often written in subjective perspective; it can thus be conceived as a form of personal memory. However, this body of work also represents similar and shared personal experiences and follows patterned narrative modes, such as 'story of a disaster' (by emphasizing the Cultural Revolution's disastrous impact) or 'historical reflection' (by focusing on reflection).<sup>9</sup> These personal memories (of hardship) also form the collective memories of the sent-down youth generation. Collective memories draw on personal experiences and memories, and personal memories are framed within collective memories. As Halbwachs puts it: 'There exist a collective memory and social frameworks for memory; it is to the extent that our individual thought places itself in these frameworks that it is capable of the action of recollection.'<sup>10</sup> The blurred boundaries of personal and collective memories have become more evident in contemporary society, where our memories are saturated with media representations. Media, through which memory is represented and preserved, in turn reconstructs our memories, further complicating the relationship between individual and collective memories and between memory and history.

Media has generated a sphere where memory is disseminated and reconstructed. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, a body of cultural work depicted the

7. See Ban Wang, *Illuminations from the Past* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 3.

8. 'Scar Literature' is a term used since the late 1970s to describe works that expose traumatic experiences during the Cultural Revolution. It was borrowed from Lu Xinhua's short novel *Scar*, published in 1978. The 'Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement (*Shangshan xiaxiang*)' started as early as the late 1950s, but the movement became nationwide only after 1968, when the Cultural Revolution suspended college enrolment, resulting in a huge number of unemployed high school students in cities. Since 1968, millions of young students were sent down to rural areas to receive re-education from peasants, and they were later called sent-down youth or *zhiqing*—short for 'educated youth' in Chinese—and were often described as the Cultural Revolution generation (mostly born in the 1950s).

9. Zidong Xu, in his analysis of fifty Cultural Revolution-set fictional works written from the late 1970s to the 1980s, concludes that there are four narrative modes of these fictions: 'story of a disaster' for public demand of catharsis; 'historical reflection' of the intellectuals; 'absurd narratives' of avant-garde literature; and 'memoires' of the Red Guards/sent-down youth generation. See Zidong Xu, *In Order to Forget the Collective Memory: Reading Fifty Cultural Revolution Novels* [*Weile wangque de jiti jiyi: jiedu 50 pian wenge xiaoshuo*] (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2000).

10. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 38.



atrocities, hardship, and suffering of the Cultural Revolution. In *Reread the Cultural Revolution* (revised edition of *In Order to Forget the Collective Memory*), Xu Zidong employs Propp's structuralist literary theory to analyse fifty Cultural Revolution-themed fictional works (mostly published in the 1980s). Xu summarizes several of the most popular narrative modes and elements of these novels: misfortune at first and fortune at the end as a basic plot line; a clear distinction between good and evil; a male intellectual saved by a female character as a common plot; longings for sage governors among the people; and a third-person narrative.<sup>11</sup> During that time, many films about the Cultural Revolution adopted similar narrative modes as delineated above and were made by the Third and Fourth Generation of Chinese directors. These films include Xie Jin's *The Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (*Tianyunshan chuanqi*, 1980), *The Herdsman* (*Mu ma ren*, 1982), and *Hibiscus Town* (*Furong zhen*, 1986), Yang Yanjin's *Troubled Laughter* (*Kunaoren de xiao*, 1979) and *On a Narrow Street* (*Xiao Jie*, 1981), and Wu Yougang and Wu Yigong's *Evening Rain* (*Bashan yeyu*, 1980). The majority of these Cultural Revolution-themed films follow a melodramatic tradition: adhering to the dichotomy between good and evil, the cinematic language of sentimentality, and a cathartic ending.<sup>12</sup>

One characteristic of these post-Cultural Revolution films is that there is rising depiction of personal desires in them. For instance, in two films directed by two female directors, *Sacrificed Youth* (*Qingchun ji*, dir. Zhang Nuanxin, 1985) and *The Army Nurse* (*Nü'erlou*, dir. Hu Mei, 1985), representations of femininity suggest the recovery of personal desire and the liberation of the once politicized body. Chris Berry argues that in the post-Mao cycle of films (from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s) about the Cultural Revolution, characters demonstrate more complexity and there are increased depictions of romantic love as 'the countercultural struggle to carve out a space of autonomous experience distinct from and possibly also in opposition to that of Party'.<sup>13</sup> The changes indicate that these films break free of 'the monolithic and conformist grand narratives of modernist progress to focus on the localized, experience-based narratives of individual characters and the groups they participate in', and thus they mark the 'the beginning of China's postsocialist cinema'.<sup>14</sup> Berry also posits that in these early postsocialist films, however, 'individualism is downplayed in favour of [a] homology with the family' that is refigured as

11. Zidong Xu, *Xu Zidong Speech: Reread the Cultural Revolution* [Xu zidong jianggao: chongdu wenge], vol. 1 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2011).

12. Melodrama became a popular film genre in China in the 1930s. Many melodrama films were leftwing and thus were called 'progressive melodrama' that aimed to mobilize social movement. For discussions about melodrama, see Paul G. Pickowicz, 'Melodramatic Representation and the "May Fourth" Tradition of Chinese Cinema', in *From May Fourth to June Fourth: Fiction and Film in Twentieth-Century China*, ed. Ellen Widmer and David Der-wei Wang (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 295–326; Stephen Teo, 'Chinese Melodrama', in *Traditions in World Cinema*, ed. Linda Badley, R. Barton Palmer, Steven Jay Schneider (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 203–13; Laikwan Pang, *Building a New China in Cinema: The Chinese Left-Wing Cinema Movement, 1932–37* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

13. Chris Berry, *Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China: The Cultural Revolution after the Cultural Revolution* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 132.

14. Berry, *Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China*, 132.

‘a resistant, countercultural peer group where common status is based on having suffered as a result of the policies and programs of the Party-state apparatus.’<sup>15</sup> In other words, the ‘self’ in early post-Cultural Revolution films does not refer to an individualized human subjectivity but represents a peer group that has suffered from the Cultural Revolution. The portrayal of the ‘self’ can be read as a collective effort to criticize and resist the past. The ‘self’ in these films is not ‘a discourse about subjectivity or desire’ but ‘a discourse about history and society.’<sup>16</sup> In other words, films of the late 1970s and 1980s re-humanize the ‘self’; however, the ‘self’ marks a collective experience and serves as a metaphor for the nation. In these films, personal memories and stories bear the weight of historical narratives, and the ‘self’ represents a national allegory more than an individualized subjective voice.

In the first half of the 1990s, a new wave of films, mostly made by the Fifth Generation directors, revisited the Cultural Revolution. These films include *Farewell My Concubine* (*Bawang bieji*, dir. Chen Kaige, 1993), *The Blue Kite* (*Lan fengzheng*, dir. Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1993), and *To Live* (*Huo zhe*, dir. Zhang Yimou, 1994). The three films all adopt an epic scope in depicting the lives of ordinary people in the face of political and social changes. These films have interwoven family stories with national history and thus are regarded as national allegories. The Fifth Generation, including Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou, Tian Zhuangzhuang, and Zhang Junzhao, refers to a cohort of directors who went to university after the Cultural Revolution and who made their debut films in the mid- to late 1980s. The majority of this cohort of directors had experiences in being Red Guards and sent-down youth during the Cultural Revolution, and thus they are known as the Cultural Revolution generation. While the Fourth Generation directors lament their ‘sacrificed youth’, the Fifth Generation further question historical discourses and the circularity of history.

In Chen’s, Zhang’s, and Tian’s films, the interweaving of family stories and national history has produced ‘narratives with double meanings—the specific narrative about a family or individual was often intended to be read as an allegory for the Chinese political scene.’<sup>17</sup> *Farewell My Concubine*, *The Blue Kite*, and *To Live* revisit the past through the sagas of ordinary people. In this sense, these films can be regarded as textbook examples of ‘the Jamesonian notion of national allegory, which swings regularly between traumatic personal experience and memories of national disasters.’<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, in films of the Fifth Generation, the ‘self’ serves as a metaphor for the nation. The expressions of personal desire in these films are often read by many

15. Berry, *Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China*, 132.

16. Jinhua Dai, ‘History and Narrative: Perspectives on Xiejin’s Film Art’ [*Lishi yu xushi: Xie Jin dianying yishu guanjian*], *Film Art 2* (1990): 63, 69.

17. E. Ann Kaplan, ‘Reading Formation and Chen Kaige’s *Farewell My Concubine*’, in *Transnational Chinese Cinema: Identity, Nationhood, Gender*, ed. Yingjin Zhang (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1997), 272.

18. Xudong Zhang, ‘National Trauma, Global Allegory: Reconstruction of Collective Memory in Tian Zhuangzhuang’s *The Blue Kite*’, *Journal of Contemporary China* 12, no. 37 (2003): 634.

scholars as a ritual expression of an ideology. In her reading of Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum*, Dai Jinhua argues thus:

The illicit union of Jiu'er and My Grandpa in the red sorghum field at Qingshakou—a world outside the law—does not represent iconoclastic individualism à la romanticism. Rather, it represents the Chinese Adam and Eve in the act of reconstructing the national myth. If we say that it is a spectacular scene, then it is a spectacle of national culture (Chinese folk rituals and customs). The story it tells is not only about desire or even satisfaction of desire; rather it is a story about the grandeur of heroism and the power of national, primitive life force.<sup>19</sup>

Personal desire in *Red Sorghum* is portrayed as primitive life force, and this primitive passion also marks a form of 'Chineseness', especially when received in a transnational context. While earlier films about the Cultural Revolution can be regarded as allegories of a generation or the nation, films made after the late 1990s have adopted more personalized and nostalgic representations.

### Postsocialism and the Breakdown of Meta-narratives

Different from the 'collective self' in the 1980s, the expression of the 'self' in *In the Heat of the Sun* (1995) marks a significant departure from the earlier narrative modes of trauma and national allegory. The film, adapted from Wang Shuo's novella *Wild Beast* (*Dongwu xiongmeng*), mimics the director Jiang Wen's own experience during the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s. One significant cultural meaning of *In the Heat of the Sun* is its personalized rewriting of the revolutionary history. According to Dai Jinhua, the word 'personalized' here does not refer to an 'auteur film' or 'auteur style' but represents a personal perspective, identity, and position, which is often marginalized and centrifugal.<sup>20</sup>

Representations of personal memories and micro-narratives have mushroomed since the late 1990s, and this may partially be attributed to the fact that privatization and commercialization of the Chinese film industry has afforded certain spaces to the utterance of personal desires, enabling the boom of personal narratives. After Deng Xiaoping's southern tour in 1992,<sup>21</sup> China picked up the pace of its economic reforms in marketization and privatization. In 2001, China joined the WTO, thus initiating a new era fully embracing neoliberal globalization. Privatization and neoliberal globalization have contributed to the rise of the individual and private concerns in postsocialist China, where the focus on self-development has shifted from public life in the Maoist era to private life in the post-Mao reform era. As

19. Jinhua Dai, 'Severed Bridge: The Art of the Son's Generation', trans. Lisa Rofel and Hu Ying, in *Cinema and Desire: Feminist Marxism and Cultural Politics in the Work of Dai Jinhua*, ed. Jing Wang and Tani E. Barlow (London and New York: Verso, 2002), 36.

20. Dai, 'Severed Bridge', 36.

21. In the spring of 1992, Deng made his famous southern tour, visiting Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Zhuhai, and Shanghai—the four major cities that had been at the forefront of pro-market reform.

anthropologist Yan Yunxiang has observed, market reform, the phenomenal growth of private sectors, the retreat of the party-state from its previous control over social life, and the challenges to the dominance of Communist ideology from neoliberalism together have consequently increased mobility for people (to move horizontally, such as in a fluid labour market, or to move vertically in social status), and it is this mobility that 'plays a pivotal role in the Chinese case of individualization.'<sup>22</sup> Apart from the socio-economic turn, personalized narratives become safer ways of representing the past in postsocialist China, where different ideologies are competing and mingling.

Postsocialism has become a pertinent concept for grasping the social and political conditions in China after Mao's reign, as the country undergoes economic and ideological reorientation.<sup>23</sup> According to Arif Dirlik, postsocialism does not simply mark an end to the socialist period after the Cultural Revolution but a reconfiguration of Chinese socialism in the context of global capitalist modernity:

Postsocialism is of necessity also postcapitalist, not in the classical Marxist sense of socialism as a phase in historical development that is anterior to capitalism, but in the sense of a socialism that represents a response to the experience of capitalism and an attempt to overcome the deficiencies of capitalist development. Its own deficiencies and efforts to correct them by resorting to capitalist methods of development are conditioned by this awareness of the deficiencies of capitalism in history. . . . [Postsocialism] strives to keep alive a vague vision of future socialism as the common goal of humankind while denying to it any immanent role in the determination of present social policy.<sup>24</sup>

In a sense, postsocialism can be seen as a strategy that 'uses capitalism to develop socialism', and it has the potentiality to compete with capitalism.<sup>25</sup> However, this definition of postsocialism is perhaps too idealistic in perceiving postsocialism as an attempt to overcome the structural power of neoliberalism. Less optimistic about postsocialism as it was in his earlier definition, more recently Arif Dirlik contends that the aim of 'socialism' in postsocialist China is actually to serve capitalism and not the other way around, as this anti-revolutionary 'socialism' no longer aims at achieving equality and emancipation.<sup>26</sup> While some conceive of postsocialism as

22. Yunxiang Yan, *The Individualization of Chinese Society* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2009), 288.

23. See Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang, 'Introduction', in *Postmodernism and China*, ed. Arif Dirlik and Zhang Xudong (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 1.

24. Arif Dirlik, 'Postsocialism? Reflections on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics', in *Marxism and the Chinese Experience: Issues in Contemporary Chinese Socialism*, ed. Arif Dirlik and Maurice Meisner (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1989), 364.

25. Sheldon H. Lu also argues that the aim of postsocialism is to 'use capitalism to develop socialism' and that the cultural, literary, filmic, and artistic creations of post-socialism 'look in two directions—back to the past and forward to the future: it feels nostalgia for the revolutionary past even as it enters the doors of the supermarket of capitalism'. Sheldon H. Lu, *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics: Studies in Literature and Visual Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 205–10.

26. Arif Dirlik, 'Back to the Future: Contemporary China in the Perspective of Its Past, circa 1980', *Boundary 2*, no. 38 (2011): 7–52.

an alternative to the capitalist modernity, others question the notion of ‘alternative modernity’. In his research on Chinese cinema, literature, and criticism in the market age, Jason McGrath maintains that ‘postsocialist modernity is thus a global condition, and a condition that, with the collapse of the “alternative modernity” of communism, inexorably returns us to the “singular modernity” that is, in the final analysis, synonymous with capitalism.’<sup>27</sup>

Rather than perceiving postsocialism in an either utopian or dystopian way, this book argues that postsocialism is a discursive conflation that harbours both potentialities as well as fallacies. Zhang Xudong summarizes postsocialism as ‘a result of the historical overlap between the socialist state-form and the era of capitalist globalization.’<sup>28</sup> In this sense, postsocialism entails ideological conflation and is characterized by ongoing contestation/collaboration between socialism and global capitalism. In the discursive combination of and conflict between socialism and global capitalism, postsocialism is an encompassing concept to capture the plurality, ambiguity, and flexibility of post-Mao China. Under China’s circumstances, postmodernism is central to the historical experience of Chinese postsocialism, or, as Arif Dirlik and Zhang Xudong put it: ‘the postmodern is also the postrevolutionary and the postsocialist.’<sup>29</sup> Paul Pickowicz uses postsocialism as a framework to understand the post-Mao era of ‘popular cultural diversity, cultural ambiguity, and cultural confusion that became so pronounced in China in the 1980s.’<sup>30</sup> Chris Berry argues that the term postsocialism does not simply mean the end of socialism; rather it ‘has more parallels with Lyotard’s postmodernism, where the forms and structures of the modern (in this case socialism) persist long after faith in the grand narrative that authorizes it has been lost.’<sup>31</sup> It is in this postsocialist context of fragmentation and contestation that the rise of personalized narratives about the past should be situated and studied.

The prefix ‘post-’ in both postsocialism and postmodernism does not refer solely to a chronological order; rather, it implies a differed act that reactivates socialism or modernism.<sup>32</sup> As with postmodernism, which is a critique of monolithic modernity, postsocialism indicates the reconfiguration of the meta-narratives about socialism. Rather than considering postsocialism as a way of periodizing or enwrapping the past, this book asserts that there is more continuity than disruption between socialism and postsocialism. In other words, personal experiences of

27. Jason McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 14–15.

28. Xudong Zhang, *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 16.

29. Dirlik and Zhang, ‘Introduction’, 4.

30. Paul Pickowicz, ‘Huang Jianxin and Postsocialism’, in *New Chinese Cinema*, ed. Nick Browne et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 61.

31. Chris Berry, ‘Getting Real: Chinese Documentary, Chinese Postsocialism’, in *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Zhang Zhen (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 116.

32. Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and ‘The Jews’*, trans. Andreas Michel and Mark S. Roberts (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 15–17.

socialism are in fact diverse, multifaceted, and even contesting. These diversified (and hidden) experiences of socialism find their way into micro-narratives and representations in postsocialist China. By navigating through personal memories and micro-narratives of the Cultural Revolution, this book aims to rediscover the fragmented and contradictory aspects of socialism that have been glossed over by grand narratives. Micro-narratives of the Cultural Revolution unveil the plurality of the socialist past that has enriched the discursive contestations of postsocialism in China.

### Varied Narratives and Memories

The Cultural Revolution, short for the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (*Wuchan jieji Wenhua Dageming*), was officially launched by Mao Zedong in 1966 and ended in 1976. The Cultural Revolution has remained an important topic in official history, academic debates, and popular culture throughout the decades.

Lowell Dittmer delineates the periodic cyclical shifts in interpretations of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s and the 1980s: from tacit discontinuation and overt defence between 1976 and 1978, to explicit discontinuation and implicit critique between 1978 and 1980, and then to explicit repudiation and implicit defence from 1980 to 1983, and finally, after a ‘total negation’ in 1984, a continuing interest in the Cultural Revolution in popular culture is met with official silence in the post-Tiananmen period.<sup>33</sup> Dittmer concludes that these shifting discourses are employed as pragmatic efforts to ‘use the past to serve the present’ and to ‘legitimize specific policy lines.’<sup>34</sup> Although generally condemned in China’s official discourse, the Cultural Revolution remains a sensitive issue: as some scholars have contended, the instant refutation of the movement is to legitimize Deng Xiaoping’s regime and its policy of economic liberalism; however, further exploration of the Cultural Revolution, especially its atrocities, is discouraged by the authorities for fear that it might undermine the communist rule.

Intellectual discourses about the Cultural Revolution have undergone constant shifts in their emphases and perspectives in relation to the broader social and political contexts. In the 1980s, most intellectuals conceived of the Cultural Revolution as a continuance of feudal collectivism—hierarchical, xenophobic, and egalitarian, devoid of individuality.<sup>35</sup> The Cultural Revolution is reproached for derailing China from being modern. Critiques of the Cultural Revolution launched a new search for Chinese modernity, resuming the Enlightenment ideas first introduced in the May Fourth Movement in the early twentieth century. Criticism of Maoism became part

33. Lowell Dittmer, ‘Rethinking China’s Cultural Revolution amid Reform’, in *China’s Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution: Master Narratives and Post-Mao Counternarratives*, ed. Woei Lien Chong (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 3–26.

34. Dittmer, ‘Rethinking China’s Cultural Revolution’, 4.

35. See Zehou Li, *Modern Chinese Thought [Zhongguo xiandai sixiang shilun]* (Beijing: Sanlian Press, 2008).

of the Chinese ‘thought-liberating (*sixiang jiefang*) movement’ then and offered a theoretical basis for Deng’s socialist reform movement.<sup>36</sup> In contrast to the earlier research that mostly denounced the Cultural Revolution or focused on atrocities,<sup>37</sup> an increasing number of scholarly works since the late 1990s and in the 2000s show more diversified and complicated understandings of the Cultural Revolution.

Against the backdrop of accelerated marketization and globalization, the decline of the working class, the widening gap between rich and poor, and between the urban and the rural, together with people’s disillusionment with (capitalist) modernity, have all reignited and intensified the debates about different versions of Chinese modernity. The re-evaluation of the Cultural Revolution gives rise to rectification or endorsement of some socialist themes. China’s New Left scholar Wang Hui contends that the Cultural Revolution itself was a modernization drive, a critique of capitalist modernity based on revolutionary ideology and nationalism, and that a total negation of the Cultural Revolution is partially a tactic to legitimize present economic reform and other policies.<sup>38</sup> Wang Shaoguang believes that some of the constructive achievements, such as expansion of healthcare and education in rural areas, made between 1969 and the early 1970s are now forgotten or obscured.<sup>39</sup> Some scholars perceive the Cultural Revolution as a firm part of China’s modernization process. For instance, Paul Clark claims that opera, dance, and musical model performances during the Cultural Revolution were indeed experimental and innovative, combining the specialist and the amateur, the conventional and the new, the international and the Chinese.<sup>40</sup> Richard Curt Kraus states that the economic policy of the Cultural Revolution ‘shook the economy’ but ‘did not shatter it’, and the economy grew at a respectable rate and ‘laid the foundation for China’s transformation into a manufacturing platform for a neoliberal world economy’.<sup>41</sup>

36. Hui Wang, ‘Humanism as the Theme of Chinese Modernity’, trans. Edward Peng, *Surfaces* v (1995), <http://www.pum.umontreal.ca/revues/surfaces/vol5/hui.html#NOTEA>.

37. For instance, the Cultural Revolution is generally perceived as a trauma or a personal power struggle. See Anne F. Thurston, ‘Victims of China’s Cultural Revolution: The Invisible Wounds: Part I’, *Pacific Affairs* 57 (Winter 1984/85): 599–620; and Hong Yung Lee, ‘Mao’s Strategy for Revolutionary Change: A Case Study of the Cultural Revolution’, *The China Quarterly* 77 (March 1979): 50–73.

38. Hui Wang, ‘An Interview Concerning Modernity: A Conversation with KeKaijun’, in *The End of The Revolution* (London and New York: Verso, 2009), 69–105. Wang, ‘Humanism as the Theme of Chinese Modernity’.

39. Shaoguang Wang, ‘Comments’ at the ‘Is a History of the Cultural Revolution Possible?’ workshop with Professor Alain Badiou, Washington University, Seattle, January 2006. Cited in Mobo Gao, *The Battle for China’s Past: Mao and the Cultural Revolution* (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 5. Similar arguments can be found in Dongping Han, *The Unknown Cultural Revolution: Educational Reforms and Their Impact on China’s Rural Development* (New York: Garland, 2000); and Dongping Han, ‘Impact of the Cultural Revolution on Rural Education and Economic Development: The Case of Jimo County’, *Modern China* 27 (2001): 59–90.

40. Paul Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Barbara Mittler also contends that Cultural Revolution art can be seen as an attempt ‘to create a new but Chinese modern art and culture’. See Barbara Mittler, *A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 10.

41. Richard Curt Kraus, *The Cultural Revolution: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), xiv.



In addition to the above debates, growing attention has been paid to the diversity and complexity of the Cultural Revolution. For instance, Barbara Mittler explores Cultural Revolution art as a live experience and rediscovers its contradictory qualities by juxtaposing a close reading of works of art and performance during the Cultural Revolution era with memories of the producers and recipients. Mittler argues that ‘the Cultural Revolution cannot be adequately discussed in simple terms and categories’, as this intensely complex period encompasses multifaceted and inconsistent experiences.<sup>42</sup> Some scholars assert that the Cultural Revolution harboured both dictatorship and anarchy: the uniformity in political rhetoric created a highly ideological atmosphere that dominated every aspect of public and personal life; yet, ‘since the party organization was paralyzed and the security apparatus overburdened, people were making their own decisions on how they should act within the ideological parameters laid down by the central Cultural Revolution leadership.’<sup>43</sup> As Lucian Pye describes it, the Cultural Revolution Generation is also known as ‘the rebellion cohort’, who were taught to distrust and rebel against the authorities during the Cultural Revolution, and these characteristics triggered anxiety among the leaders out of a fear of anarchy or loss of control.<sup>44</sup> Elizabeth Perry argues that, though being ritualized and mobilized from the top, the political movement inspired the popular democracy and protest techniques that influenced later social movements.<sup>45</sup> In a similar vein, Craig Calhoun and Jeffrey Wasserstrom postulate that the Cultural Revolution, to some extent, facilitated the realization of agency and subjectivity (that is, of ordinary citizens who actively participate in the revolution).<sup>46</sup> The complexity and diversity of the Cultural Revolution ushered in various interpretations of the past, and this circumstance has enabled plural, even contesting, memories and narratives of socialism in postsocialist China.

The past is conjured up in relation to the present. Or, to put it another way, narratives of the past are often framed by our concerns of the present. Therefore, discourses—both official and popular—about the Cultural Revolution are not solid or intact but are always reconfigured within contexts and thus are constantly shifting, fluid, flexible, and even contradictory. Moreover, personal memories, interacting

42. Mittler, *A Continuous Revolution*, 5–6. Mittler explains that Cultural Revolution art has enriched people’s everyday cultural experiences by offering new forms of art and knowledge; moreover, the audience has dealt with Cultural Revolution art in a way that vacillates between a passive reception and a subversive one, both critically and creatively.

43. Joseph W. Esherick, Paul G. Pickowicz, and Andrew G. Walder, ‘The Chinese Cultural Revolution as History: An Introduction’, in *The Chinese Cultural Revolution as History*, ed. Joseph W. Esherick, Paul G. Pickowicz, and Andrew G. Walder (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 27–28.

44. Lucian Pye, ‘Reassessing the Cultural Revolution’, *China Quarterly* 108 (December 1986): 611.

45. Elizabeth Perry, ‘“To Rebel Is Justified”: Cultural Revolution Influences on Contemporary Chinese Protest’, in *The Chinese Cultural Revolution Reconsidered: Beyond Purge and Holocaust*, ed. Law Kam-Yee (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 262–81.

46. Craig Calhoun and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, ‘The Cultural Revolution and the Democracy Movement of 1989: Complexity in Historical Connections’, in *The Chinese Cultural Revolution Reconsidered: Beyond Purge and Holocaust*, ed. Law Kam-Yee (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 241–61.



with official and popular discourses, are often more diversified, providing different perspectives into the past.

Whereas Zhang Yimou's earlier film *To Live* follows the paradigm of trauma narrative and is often regarded as a national allegory, his more recent films about the Cultural Revolution, *Under the Hawthorn Tree* (*Shanzhashu zhi lian*, 2010) and *Coming Home* (*Guilai*, 2014), resort to personal memories and stories, turning away from his earlier grand and allegorical narratives. Diverting from his earlier traumatic narrative, Zhang's recent representations of personal memories reveal more a sense of nostalgia and sentimentalism. The changes in representations and narratives indicate that memories are often contingent, as they not only deal with the past but also speak to the present. Apart from nostalgia, another prominent characteristic of recent personalized representations of the Cultural Revolution is fragmentation. Fragmented memories challenge previous coherent and grand narratives, and these fragmented narratives also imply that the haunted past never fades away but revisits the present intermittently. This form of representation, to recall the past through pieces of evidence rediscovered in the present, becomes what we call post-trauma narrative. In addition to the films and television dramas set in the Cultural Revolution or that are about that period, there are many visual works that do not directly deal with the Cultural Revolution but portray contemporary society with traces of the lingering influences of the political movement. In his study of television dramas such as *The Wages of Sin* (*Nie Zhai*, 1994) and *Midnight Sunlight* (*Wuyue yangguang*, 2005), both about stories of the children of former Yunnan sent-down youth, Michael Berry suggests that these representations exemplify a genre of post-trauma narrative, in which 'the scars of the educated youth from Yunnan not only refuse to heal but also reopen decades later, creating a new series of belated tragedies and projected traumas.'<sup>47</sup> This type of post-Cultural Revolution narrative can also be found in films such as Peng Xiaolian's *Shanghai Story* (*Meili shanghai*, 2004), Wang Xiaoshuai's *Red Amnesia* (*Chuangruzhe*, 2014), and Cui Jian's *Blue Sky Bones* (*Lanse gutou*, 2014). In these films, flashbacks of the Cultural Revolution intermesh with personal experiences of the present post-revolution and postsocialist era.

This book delves into these different features—sentimental, nostalgic, fragmented—of recent personalized representations of the Cultural Revolution across a variety of screen forms and genres. They include: commercial films, *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, *Coming Home*, and *Youth* (*Fanghua*, dir. Feng Xiaogang, 2017); art-house films, *11 Flowers* (*Wo 11*, dir. Wang Xiaoshuai, 2012), *Red Amnesia*, *Shanghai Story*, and *Blue Sky Bones*; and a television serial drama, *Sent-Down Youth* (*Zhiqing*, dir. Zhang Jianxin, 2012). By looking at different films and television dramas, this book does not assume that a particular medium determines a particular representation; rather, the book is interested in discovering the dialectic relationship between media content and media context. Through inspection of film-making practices,

47. Michael Berry, *A History of Pain* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 284.

including production, regulation, and promotion, as well as textual and discourse analyses of these films and television dramas, the book explores how representations of personal memories are conditioned by and interact with contemporary socio-political and cultural discourses.

### Structure of the Book

Chapter 1 examines the films *Under the Hawthorn Tree* and *Coming Home* and their nostalgic and sentimental style. In *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, nostalgia for the past derives from discontent with contemporary materialistic society, and socialism here represents a critique of materialism and consumerism. However, the film commodifies and fetishizes nostalgia in the female body, making the gendered nostalgia a selling point. Presented from a personalized perspective, *Under the Hawthorn Tree* and *Coming Home* embrace market logic and soothe the rupture in official discourses about the Cultural Revolution. In this case, personal memory is used as a selling point for a niche market of family dramas.

Chapter 2 looks into the film *Youth*, which chronicles the lives of several performers in a military art troupe throughout the decades and focuses on coming-of-age romance. Similar to *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, *Youth* also reveals a strong sentiment of nostalgia. Whereas the former longs for the simple and pure life of the past, the latter is obsessed with the aromatic smell of youth. *Youth* reproduces a lot of Mao-era dances and songs, rendering memory as a form of spectacular performance, while history has become merely a footnote to youth and performance.

In Chapter 3, *11 Flowers* represents personal and fragmented memories of the Cultural Revolution from an 11-year-old boy's perspective. These memories challenge the monolithic narrative of history and the Maoist rhetoric of revolution. At the same time, this fragmented narrative mode enables individual agency in narrating and constructing history. In addition, through portrayals of everyday life in the Maoist era, the film reveals how the dominant ideology at that time was strategically misinterpreted by ordinary people and was dispersed in everyday life. Socialism, in this context, becomes a mystery, a joke, and a traumatic awakening. In the film, art possesses enlightening power for the 11-year-old boy, who begins to obtain self-awareness through painting. The film thus conveys the director's authorial enunciation and his belief in art as a form of liberation, not only for a boy in the Cultural Revolution but also for Wang Xiaoshuai as a film-maker. The shifting trajectory of Wang's film-making—from independent to art house—alludes to the shifting relations between film-making, the state, and the market. In *11 Flowers*, personal memories become the hallmark of Wang's auteur expression.

Chapter 4 further explores fragmented memories in post-trauma narratives in *Red Amnesia*, *Shanghai Story*, and *Blue Sky Bones*. In these post-trauma films, the past penetrates the present, constituting a postsocialist reality that accommodates different ideologies and temporalities. There is a tension between amnesia and

remembrance, between the past in demolition and the present in reconstruction in contemporary China. The repression of the past in turn causes the resurfacing of unwelcome memories of past trauma. To many of the Cultural Revolution Generation, the lingering pain of the past still haunts the present and becomes a form of belated, persisting tragedy for their sons and daughters. Different from previous traumatic narratives that conclude the trauma in the past tense, post-trauma narratives unveil the continuity between the past and the present. Just like the prefix 'post-' in postsocialism, post-trauma implies a reconfiguration of trauma rather than a complete break from it.

Chapter 5 investigates the television serial drama *Sent-Down Youth* to discover how personal memories are used to provide pedagogical lessons and to build up a collective imagination of the past. The television drama is presented as a critique of the Cultural Revolution against the backdrop of the rising fever for the 'Red Culture' campaign in Chongqing, but it also exalts the idealism and altruism of the Cultural Revolution generation and criticizes materialism in contemporary society. Socialism here is associated with idealism, collectivism, and passion. However, the audience may also apply their understandings of the political context and personal memories to decode the representation, producing diversified and contested readings of the television drama. Television—being state owned and the mouthpiece of the party-state—both limits and enables the proliferation of multiple personal memories and discourses about the past and the present.

Through a comparative study of representations of the Cultural Revolution in WTO-membership China, this book explores how different personalized narratives about socialism are constructed across different forms of screen and how they engage with various strands of socio-political and economic discourses. The rise of micro-narratives in Chinese society and screen culture entail aspects of both subjectivization and desubjectivization. Some of the micro-narratives allow individuals to reconstruct their subjectivities, but some are somehow desubjectivized in the process of neoliberal politics. Rather than perceiving the rising micro-narratives as either homogeneous or autonomous, this book argues that they often embody disparate qualities and potentials. It may be hoped that this analysis of the various micro-narratives and personal memories at play will facilitate fresh understandings of China's socialist past and postsocialist present: the legacies of socialism continue to influence China, constituting the postsocialist reality that accommodates different ideologies and temporalities.

## Beyond Nostalgia

### Agency and Auteuristic Expressivity in Fragmented Memories

The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.

—Walter Benjamin<sup>1</sup>

Margaret Hillenbrand has argued that the fragmentary, imperfect, and incomplete character of the past can be transferred, through aesthetic works, into preconditions for nostalgia, which will enable a kind of ‘working through’ and ‘a rapprochement with modernity’, by accepting the past and its trauma.<sup>2</sup> In nostalgic representations, the past is often glimpsed in fragments, such as retro dresses, worn drapes, and mottled mirrors. These fragments become a synecdoche of the past. It is through the parts that the whole is conjured up and gains affective power. In Chapters 1 and 2, we saw that in the films *Under the Hawthorn Tree* and *Youth* nostalgia for the socialist past is embodied in the female images and song-and-dance spectacles. This chapter examines *11 Flowers*, a film set in 1975 through to the beginning of 1976, which also reflects a sense of nostalgia for the simple life of the socialist period. In this case, however, the nostalgia is rooted in the fragmented memories of everyday life, such as children playing marbles and buying ice cream after school, or a mother cooking meat and marinating fish before Chinese New Year. The daily routine harbours and materializes the sentimentalism of nostalgia. Further, the fragmented memories of daily life constitute a personalized narrative of the past which differs from monolithic historical narratives, such as the official history found in a textbook.

*11 Flowers*, or *Wo 11*, literally ‘I am 11 years old’ in Chinese, can be seen as a quasi-autobiography of the director, Wang Xiaoshuai, who was born in 1966 and reached age 11 in 1976 (according to the particular way Chinese people count age). Like Han in the film, who has the same family name as the director, Wang moved with his family from Shanghai to a small village in south-west China, because the factory where Wang’s mother worked had to relocate inland for the construction

1. Walter Benjamin, ‘Thesis on the Philosophy of History’, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 255.

2. Margaret Hillenbrand, ‘Nostalgia, Place, and Making Peace with Modernity in East Asia’, *Postcolonial Studies: Culture, Politics, Economy* 13, no. 4 (2010): 392, 398.

of the Third Front.<sup>3</sup> The film is based on Wang's memories of his childhood in a factory village in Guiyang: *11 Flowers* is 'an integration of fragmented memories of my childhood'.<sup>4</sup> *11 Flowers* represents the later years of the Cultural Revolution from an 11-year-old boy's perspective, as Han pieces together overheard information about a murder case in his village in south-west China. This film is not the first to use a young boy's point of view to look back at the Cultural Revolution. Tian Zhuangzhuang's *The Blue Kite* uses a boy's first-person narration though the story is in fact told from an omniscient point of view. Similarly, Zhang Yimou's *Shanghai Triad* (*Yao a yao, yao dao waipo qiao*, 1995) alternates the viewpoints of an omniscient narrator and that of a peeping boy whose voyeuristic yet distant gaze becomes a way of intruding into the private life of the main female character.<sup>5</sup> However, in *11 Flowers*, the child's fragmented and often oblivious viewpoint forms a personalized way of remembering and telling the past, thus challenging grand historical narratives. Similar to Jiang Wen's *In the Heat of the Sun*, which depicts the life of a group of teenagers in Beijing in the 1970s, *11 Flowers* takes a personalized approach to representing the past by focusing on fragmented and often blurred memories of the Cultural Revolution. In this way, autobiographical representations of fragmented memories deviate from earlier films that are often regarded as national allegories.

In *11 Flowers*, the fragmented memories of the Cultural Revolution are rooted in the quotidian. On the one hand, ideologies permeate everyday life and try to discipline individuals; on the other hand, individuals reintroduce desires and agency through diversified or even subversive receptions of imposed ideologies. *11 Flowers* portrays the playfulness of everyday life, through such devices as misinterpretations of revolutionary messages and expressions of sexual desires, which manifest the failure of political ideologies. The playfulness of the everyday unmasks the underlying mechanism that sustains the operation of Maoist ideology: a sense of enjoyment.

Apart from celebrating enjoyment of the everyday, fragmented personal memories in *11 Flowers* mark the director's auteuristic imprint. Wang wants to make auteur films, artworks that are made outside the state-led and market-driven system.<sup>6</sup> To Wang Xiaoshuai, a Chinese independent film-maker belonging to the Sixth Generation group of directors who came to prominence through international film festivals in the 1990s, making auteur films is a way of maintaining independence.<sup>7</sup> Chinese independent film-makers are best known for their personalized way

3. The Third Front refers to a large-scale industrial development programme in the south-west interior of China to establish an industrial base secure from foreign attack. The third-front industries also include military-industrial complexes and are known as the third line of defence (the other two are coastal and central lines).

4. 'Interview with Wang Xiaoshuai: Film Needs Diversity' *Wang Xiaoshuai fangtan: Dianying bijiang duoyuanhua duo cengci*, *Popular Cinema [Dazhong dianying]* 8 (2012): 34–36.

5. Zhu and Robinson, 'The Cinematic Transition', 148.

6. 'Art and Box Office—Interview with Wang Xiaoshuai' [*Yishu yu piaofang de zuoyou rensheng—Wang Xiaoshuai fangtan lu*], *Society and Public Welfare [Shehui yu gongyi]* 3 (2011): 19–21.

7. However, many question the label 'the Sixth Generation', as it implies a linear progress of Chinese cinema and ignores the diversity within this cohort of directors. See Stephen Teo, "'There is No Sixth Generation!'" Director Li Yang on *Blind Shaft* and His Place in Chinese Cinema', *Sense of Cinema* 27 (July 2003), <http://>

of film-making both in terms of themes (marginalized individuals) and their production mode (outside the state film-making system). However, since 2010, there has been an increasing use of the term 'art house' (*yishu pian*) to characterize films and film-makers that were once described as 'independent' or 'underground'. The shifting discourse on 'independence' reflects the changing industrial context within which film-makers have to negotiate their artistic and political independence from the state and the market. For this reason, Wang's positioning as 'independent' and an 'auteur' is always conditioned by the social and economic context.

This chapter explores in detail how fragmented personal memories of the Cultural Revolution in *11 Flowers* are used to provide alternative micro-narratives to grand historical narratives. At the same time, fragmented narrative also becomes a mark of the director's aesthetic style and a means of articulating his auteur position. However, Wang's defence of 'independence' is inevitably constrained by shifting political, social, and economic factors. This chapter's examination of *11 Flowers* will reveal in the following ways that personal memories of the Cultural Revolution on screen are manifestations of contested modernities: (1) by illustrating that fragmented memories indicate a deconstruction of a monolithic and linear development; (2) by demonstrating that memories of everyday life reveal diverging experiences of the Cultural Revolution and differing imaginations of Chinese modernities; (3) by arguing that Wang's belief in art as a liberating power and an autonomous field shows his endorsement of Enlightenment modernity.<sup>8</sup>

## Fragmented Memory and History Writing

### *Piecing together the puzzle*

In *11 Flowers*, 11-year-old Han encounters a murderer, Jueqiang, who kills the depraved leader who has raped Jueqiang's sister, Juehong, a teenage girl in the same school as Han. Han pieces the murder case together from overheard scraps of conversation between the adults. At a party, the neighbours sit around a table and gossip about the case. The man found dead on the riverbank was a despicable leader, to whom Juehong's father, Lao Xie, had turned for help in order to get back to Shanghai. Han is curious about the story and tries to hear the grown-ups' conversation, so he circles around the table and peeks through the arms and elbows blocking his view. Like a detective, but randomly rather than purposefully, Han collects pieces of information to solve the puzzle of the murder case. The most

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sensesofcinema.com/2003/feature-articles/li\_yang/; Dror Kochan Han, 'Wang Xiaoshuai', *Sense of Cinema* 28 (October 2003), <http://sensesofcinema.com/2003/great-directors/wang/>.

8. Kant views art as a disinterested and transcendental experience that bridges reason and subjective feeling. See Immanuel Kant's *The Critique of Judgment*. Kantian transcendental aesthetics can be traced in Bazin and his predecessors' ontology of film and reality, as Bazinian ontology views cinema as a totality and as 'redemptive' art. See Siegfried Kracauer's *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), and Bazin's *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*.

## Conclusion

### Contingent Memories, Contested Modernities

Contending memories and representations of the Cultural Revolution manifest not only on different screens but also within the private sphere. For instance, whenever my grandparents talk about how they worked hard in factories and felt proud of being workers in the 1960s and the 1970s, my parents often stop them and comment in a mocking way: ‘Do not keep talking about those “antiques”. It is out of date. We have to keep up with the times [*yu shi ju jin*]’. My grandparents and parents often argue for their different versions of the past, though most of the time my parents win by concluding that my grandparents’ stories are ‘out of date’. My family members’ memories become the primary sources for me to understand the past decades of the PRC. As my grandparents and parents often compete over their different narratives of the past, I see them not only as contesting personal memories but also as manifesting different imaginations Chinese modernity.

Inspired by my family’s different (often competing) memories of the past, especially of the socialist past, I attempted to explore how these personal memories come into being and what they mean in contemporary China. This book has examined the representations of personal memories of the Cultural Revolution in films and television dramas in mainland China after 2001. It aimed to elucidate that personal memories are far from solid and spontaneous; rather, they are constantly constructed and articulated in relation to social, political, and economic contexts. Moreover, film-makers employ divergent personalized narrative modes and construct various versions of personal memories on screen, to address their particular concerns. These disparate micro-narratives across screens (or even on one screen) reveal the contesting memories of and discourses on socialism in contemporary China. In this sense, personal memories also articulate contending Chinese modernities in the postsocialist era.

#### Contingent Memories

Representations and interpretations of the past are shaped by the present. This is evident in official discourses about the Cultural Revolution. As with historical discourses, memory is also constructed and prone to change. Memory, be it personal



or collective, is always ‘under the influence of the present social milieu’, as ‘the mind reconstructs its memory under the pressure of society’.<sup>1</sup> In an age of mass media, memories are often mediated, and at the same time media have provided spaces for different memories to negotiate with each other. Representations of personal memories on screen are never a solitary pursuit; instead, they are contingent and imbricated with the socio-political, cultural, and economic forces.

While early films about the Cultural Revolution can be read as national allegories, since the mid-1990s an increasing number of personalized representations of the Cultural Revolution have emerged in films and television dramas in China. However, by highlighting the significance of ‘the personal’ in the post-WTO screen representations of the Cultural Revolution, this book is not setting up a dichotomy between the personal and the state/nation. Furthermore, while the market economy is an important force behind the rising of personal memories, it would be misleading to perceive the market in opposition to the state. In China, the state has played a pivotal role in introducing the market economy and the privatization process, and thus the relationships between the state, the market, and the personal are highly complicated, as they often intermesh. Therefore, personal memories are not autonomous but usually constructed and represented within the state and the market. I hope this book has successfully demonstrated this point in the previous chapters through the case studies. One of the salient features of the personalized narratives of the Cultural Revolution on screen in post-2001 China is popular nostalgic sentiment. Borrowing Raymond Williams’ term, the nostalgic turn arises in parallel with the privatization and marketization process of China and has become a prevailing ‘structure of feeling’.<sup>2</sup> In the early 1990s, products pertinent to the socialist past became popular in China. The centennial of Mao’s birth in 1993 further boosted the re-consumption of Mao’s portraits and songs in praise of Mao. For instance, taxi drivers would hang Mao’s portraits in their cars and ‘The Red Sun’ album, a collection of songs in praise of Mao, was released in 1991. This booming ‘red industry’ is also known as the ‘Mao Craze’. At the same time, Cultural Revolution-themed restaurants, decorated in the 1970s style, mushroomed across the country, providing distinctive non-socialist venues for the memorialization of the past socialism.<sup>3</sup> Cultural Revolution art has revived and remained popular. The ‘model theatrical works’ (*yangbanxi*) of the Cultural Revolution,<sup>4</sup> such as the ballets *The White-Haired Girl* (*Baimaonü*) and *The Red Detachment of Women* (*Hongse niangzijing*), appeal to nostalgia shared among an older generation while at the same time they ‘seem

1. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 47–51.

2. Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review* (London: NLB, 1979).

3. For discussion on Cultural Revolution-themed restaurants, see Jennifer Hubbert, ‘Revolution Is a Dinner Party: Cultural Revolution Restaurants in Contemporary China’, *The China Review* 5, no. 2 (2005): 125–50.

4. There were eight model operas produced in the first three years of the Cultural Revolution. These include six modern operas: *The Legend of the Red Lantern* (*Hong deng ji*), *Shajiabang*, *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* (*Zhi qu wei hu shan*), *Raid on the White Tiger Regiment* (*Qi x ibaihu tuan*), *Ode of the Dragon River* (*Long jiang song*), *On the Dock* (*Haigang*); and two ballets: *The Red Detachment of Women* and *The White-Haired Girl*. These model artworks feature revolutionary themes and socialist realism.



quaint, even charming, to those who were born long after the operas and ballets lost their model status and political currency'.<sup>5</sup>

An increasing number of representations of the Cultural Revolution are infused with nostalgia. In *In the Heat of the Sun*, while the Cultural Revolution period is portrayed in bright colours to show that 'the sun was always bright', at the end of the film, the scene of the grown-up Ma and his gang friends sitting in a luxurious limousine in the 1990s is shot in black and white. The use of chromatics here highlights the contrast in that the past is a period of freedom, aspiration, and jubilation, whereas the present is materialized and mundane. In this way, the film conveys a strong tint of nostalgia for the 1970s, when life is remembered as being infused with heroic dreams and pleasures. Other films, such as *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* and *The Foliage*, also reveal nostalgia by sexualizing and romanticizing personal experiences of the Cultural Revolution. This nostalgia fever derives from discontent with economic reform and is conceived as a resistance to consumerism, but it also becomes a marketable cultural commodity.

In *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, nostalgia for the simplicity and innocence of the Cultural Revolution is presented as a moral critique of contemporary materialism. In *Youth*, the socialist past becomes a utopia of solidarity and equality. In *11 Flowers*, the detailed portrayals of everyday life in the late 1970s also reveal a hint of nostalgia. In the television drama *Sent-Down Youth*, the sent-down years of the Cultural Revolution generation are represented in romantic and enthusiastic tones. Apart from being a critique of materialism, nostalgia is packaged as an alluring commodity and a fashionable culture. In *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, the nostalgic sentiment is fetishized in the image of a pure female body and marketized as desirable goods. In *Youth*, the Mao-era dances and songs are reproduced for nostalgic consumption. As with disparate personal memories of the Cultural Revolution, nostalgia for the socialist period refuses a totalizing assumption. There are different longings for the past: some for innocence, some for simple everyday life, and some for enthusiasm and passion. These diverse nostalgias also carry different functions, as some are critiques and some commodities. These different nostalgias embedded in personal memories bespeak divergent imaginations of Chinese modernity.

## Contested Modernities

Dai Jinhua observes that one of the prominent characteristics of history writing in the post-Cold War era is the revision of history in the name of memory: films and literary works often emphasize that they are adapted from memoirs or diaries written by ordinary people and thus are guaranteed as sincere and undisputable truth. Furthermore, this type of historical narrative, presented in the name of

5. Richard King and Jan Walls, 'Introduction,' in *Art in Turmoil: The Chinese Cultural Revolution 1966–76* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 20–21.

'I', becomes a new yet effective way of history writing.<sup>6</sup> To elaborate Dai's point, the rising personalized representations of the past should be perceived not only as counternarratives opposing master discourses but also tactics of a new power mechanism that finds a new way of writing history: to reconstruct history in the name of memory. Grand narratives are regarded as the legacy of the revolutionary traditions of the twentieth century. This traditional way of history writing within the framework of the Cold War has been questioned and discarded along with the collapse of communism. Personalized historical narratives thrive in parallel with the closure of the revolutionary era. This de-revolutionary process—a rejection of radical thought and a negation of revolutionary traditions—becomes what Wang Hui calls 'depoliticised politics.'<sup>7</sup> In this sense, personal memories bear both subversive and submissive potentials: while they may challenge the grand and totalizing historical narratives, they may also serve a new way of history writing that eradicates revolutionary traditions and facilitates a smooth transition between the past and the present. The 'depoliticizing' propensity of personal memories reveals the politics of memory. In an interview about film and popular memory, Foucault considered memory a vital factor in history writing. As he put it: 'if one controls people's memory, one controls their dynamism.'<sup>8</sup> As memory becomes a new way of history writing, personal memories are not merely articulations of personal experiences, feelings, and desires but also manifestations of power relations in the discursive constructions of modernity.

When referring to modernity in this book, I am using the concept to sketch out the different modes or paths for China. However, this approach is not intended to simplify modernity merely as a developing mode, since modernity entails far more complexity in terms of its socio-political structure as well as epistemological understanding of individual and society. What the book has been doing is to use the concept to grasp different thoughts in respect to China's socio-political, cultural and economic development. Through analyzing representations and memories of the Cultural Revolution, it has found three commonly embedded thoughts and imaginations about China's paths to a modern state: capitalist modernity (adopting marketization for economic development), socialist modernity (in socio-political and ideological governance), and Chinese Confucianism (restating commitment to ethics and morality). Listing the three thoughts does not exclude other thoughts and potentialities in China, such as democratic socialism. However, these three strands of thought are perhaps the most prominent ones in contemporary China. In addition, by coming up with these three different modernities, the book is not claiming that they are totally different and exclusive from each other. For instance,

6. Dai Jinhua and Yan Wang, 'Representation: History and Memory—Narrative and Representation of History in Films' [*Zaixian: lishi yu jiyi*], *China Reading Weekly* [*Zhonghua dushi bao*], 8 February (2012).

7. Wang, 'Depoliticized Politics', 29–45.

8. Michel Foucault, 'Film and Popular Memory: An Interview with Michel Foucault', *Radical Philosophy* 11 (1975): 25.