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Chinese Broken Homes Melodrama in the Era of Globalization

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Abstract

This essay studies a contemporary Chinese filmic genre "broken home melodrama," which has emerged at the turn of the millennium. In order to regain the shrinking domestic film market, a younger generation of filmmakers has tried to address the needs of Chinese audiences by focusing on their everyday life. Inadvertently, these melodramas capture the essence of ideological contradictions in contemporary Chinese society by portraying home, the ultimate private space, as irreversibly broken in the era of massive privatization and marketization. As a result, happy ending required by the melodramatic convention can no longer function in this otherwise typically commercial genre, as it distances itself from Chinese cinematic tradition emphasizing political engagement since 1930s.

Keywords: broken home melodrama, neoliberalism, privatization, internal orientation, happy ending

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The entrance of China into the WTO at the turn of the millennium intensified local filmmakers' fear of Hollywood domination in their domestic market because the state had to loosen its restrictions on film importation (Zheng Dongtien, 2000: 4-8). But long before this pivotal point, the Chinese film market had shrunk considerably. For the first half of 1999 alone, for example, box office decreased 50% (Yu and Hao 21). Several factors have contributed to the shrinking domestic film market. First, home entertainment centers are increasingly popular among urban middle-class households. DVDs (especially pirated ones) have given Chinese audiences easy access to the most updated versions of global films. Second, television dramas dominate the local market for popular culture; spectators less interested in foreign movies can enjoy their free familiar shows in front of TV screen instead of buying expensive tickets to a movie theatre.[1] Third, the limit on imported films before 2000 was ten per year. These films, mostly Hollywood block-busters, had already contributed to reducing the local production to one third of the annual box office value (Zheng 5).[2] One can imagine to what extent the increase of the importation coda would bring more competition to the limited film market in China.

Facing the challenge of Hollywood blockbusters, only intensified by the WTO regulations, Chinese filmmakers and critics thought about different strategies to survive in a dismal domestic market. One of the strategies is "internal orientation" (*neixiang hua*)—as described by Zhang Yiwu, well-known mainland Chinese cultural critic (Zhang Yiwu 16)—namely, to address the needs of local audiences by reflecting on their everyday life problems. According to Zhang, during the 1990s, most well-known Fifth Generation directors, with few exceptions, focused on exotic features of (often reinvented) Chinese culture to appeal to the international market following the success of what I called the Zhang Yimou model. (Lu 157-72). Zhang Yiwu argues that these directors, pressured by the need of box office success, chose an "external orientation" (*waixiang hua*), to meet general expectations of their international investors. But the international market has become less and less interested in this self-orientation, after China has become more and more familiar to global audiences through its ubiquitous consumer goods. Further, the young generation of filmmakers usually cannot rely on the same kind of reputation to attract sufficient global investments as their Fifth Generation predecessors. Consequently, the choice of "internal orientation" reflects young filmmakers' desire to open up the domestic market. Yu Zhu and Hao Jian, two other mainland Chinese film critics, also point out four years later: "the only possibility for Chinese filmmakers to re-conquer part of the territory lost to Hollywood is to take advantage of their unique weapon: their true understanding of Chinese society" (Yu and Hao 23).

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[1] See a detailed study of such a popular primetime TV drama (Zhu 3-17).

[2] Zhu Ying summarizes this situation in her introduction to her book (Zhu 1-37).

Zhang defines the internal orientation as a return to the melodramatic tradition of Chinese commercial cinema, traced back to the first commercial wave, such as *Orphan Saves His Grandpa* (*Guer jiu zu ji*, 1923), a tradition "centered on everyday life of small potatoes while emphasizing sentimentality and morality" (Zhang Yiwu 19). In the 1920s, Chinese filmmakers tried to gain shares of the domestic market from its powerful Hollywood rival in semi-colonial Shanghai by focusing on entertainment values. In fact, few Chinese pioneer filmmakers were interested in any heavy-handed collective ideology, because they urgently needed to make their ends meet in their fragile emerging cultural industry. As a result, Chinese cinema of 1920s, unabashedly devoted to entertainment values, can arguably be considered the only important commercial wave in the history of mainland Chinese cinema until the late part of the twentieth century.

During the 1930s, Chinese cinema went through a process of politicization largely because of the Sino-Japanese War, as filmmakers started National Defence Cinema (*guofang dianying*) to meet the Chinese audiences' heightened sense of patriotism. Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar write: "Left-wing thinkers reformulated 'passive' romanticism into a collective, nationalist, and active aesthetics" (Berry and Farquhar 80). In fact, the Communist Party contributed to this "collective, nationalist, and active aesthetics" in the 1930s since a number of influential left-wing filmmakers and critics, such as Tian Han and Xia Yan, were clandestine members of the Communist Party. Since then, although Chinese cinema has gone through various stages of transformations, collective, nationalist, and active aesthetics dominated the filmic world throughout the twentieth century. In the late 1940s, Chinese cinema attained its apogee after relatively quiet eight years of the Sino-Japanese War. Best and brightest film-makers of the postwar period often engaged in social criticism, facing a society ravaged by the recent Japanese invasion and the ongoing civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists. After the Communist victory in 1949, socialist realism turned mainland cinema into party's propaganda machine for decades, as communist ideology dominated the scene. In post-Cultural Revolution cinema collective aesthetics still prevailed. Even the Fifth Generation directors at the beginning of their careers in the 1980s were bound by their concerns for cultural reflection and criticism.

Due to the tightening censorship after the crackdown of the student demonstration in 1989 and the commercialization of state-owned studio system in the 1990s, Fifth Generation filmmakers started aiming at box office success in order to guarantee the financial support of their potential global investors. Instead of addressing the needs of their domestic audiences, they tried to reinforce their international recognition through self-orientalization, which Zhang Yiwu considers as "external orientation." In other words, although they became less politically engaged and much more commercialized, well-known Fifth Generation directors, such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, targeted global audiences instead of the domestic market, partly because they can easily raise money from multinational corporations thanks t their international reputation.[3]

This external orientation, however, has become less and less attractive outside China, because the saturation of Chinese-made consumer goods in the global market made exotic images of China increasingly out of sync with daily experiences of global spectators. In the meantime, the domestic market, as imperfect as it is, shows more and more potentials because of the sheer size of the Chinese population and of its recent economic prosperity. Without international reputation of their Fifth Generation predecessors, some young filmmakers chose to return to the first commercial wave in the 1920s, moving away from the tradition of social engagement and from the external orientation of the well-known Fifth Generation. By returning to the "passive romanticism" (Berry and Farquhar 80) of the first commercial wave, a large number of contemporary melodramas implicitly reject the Chinese melodramatic tradition of social engagement, represented by the left-wing cinema during the 1930s and 1940s,[4] the socialist realist film during the Mao period,[5] and "Wound Cinema"[6] in the post-Cultural Revolution era, exemplified by Xie Jin's works in the early 1980s.

Commercialism vs. Social Engagement

Contemporary Chinese melodrama has broken away from this tradition of politicization by focusing on home as a private space apparently separated from macroscopic politics. The move toward commercialism is not surprising, taking into account of privatization on various levels as China has integrated itself in the global market. On the surface, this return to the early commercial tradition is conspicuously apolitical in comparison with previous Chinese cinematic tradition. In reality, after decades of dominations of various overbearing political discourses in mainstream Chinese cinema, the focus on private space in contemporary melodrama subverts the dominant ideology by questioning the alleged solution to Chinese problems: namely, privatisation, marketization, and consumerism. Instead of taking an overt political stance, through the portrayal of irreversibly broken home space, this genre visualizes not only the failure of politicization in the bygone Mao Era, but more importantly, the negative consequences of massive privatization or neoliberalization considered as the only solution to China's current social problems.

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[3] Even few of their domestically oriented film are often either politicized (for example: critique of the Cultural Revolution in Tian Zhuangzhuang's *Blue Kite*) or endowed with a conventional happy ending (as in Zhang Yimou's *Not One Less*).

[4] Pang Laikwan provides an thorough study of this period in her *Building a New China in Cinema: The Chinese Left-Wing Cinema Movement, 1932-1937*.

[5] Concerning this politically engaged melodramatic tradition, see Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar, Chapter 4: "Realist Modes: Melodram, Modernity, and Home" (75-107).

[6] I use this term by imitating the expression of "Wound Literature." In the late 1970's and the early 1980's, both Chinese literature and film devote their creative energies on descriptions of trauma caused by a decade of the Cultural Revolution.

In the post-Mao era, the government has gradually but deftly shifted the economic focus from heavy industry to consumer goods. Meanwhile, a great number of state-owned enterprises, the major force in its previous economic infrastructure, went through bankruptcy and privatization. On the one hand, this transformation has fuelled the current economic prosperity. On the other hand, it has taken the state off the hook from its financial responsibilities implied in the socialist contract between Mao's party and its privileged backbone supporters, state workers. Massive layoffs force many former state workers to join migrants from countryside to form the cheap labour market in the city. Ironically, cheap labour force is the backbone of China's rapid economic development. In many ways, the trend of Broken Melodrama is about the tribulation of urban residents caught in this economic transition, fighting for their economic survival in a fast-changing society where the intensity of money-worship only equals that of Mao's personal cult in the height of the Cultural Revolution.

In the post-Mao era, the Communist Party has taken recourse to the circulation of global capital for its political survival through the post-socialist period of ideological vacuum, while global capitalism needs the power of the Communist state to sustain its profitability by means of a cheap labour market. Since the late 1970s, China has gone through a radical "neoliberalization"—to borrow David Harvey's expression–despite its residual socialist discourse, indispensable to justify one party rule. In his book, Harvey uses China's accumulation of wealth by deprivation as one of the most important examples of neoliberalization in the world: the state deprived their workers of lifelong contracts through bankruptcies of numerous state-owned enterprises. Ironically, the dominant neoliberal ideology has converted the Chinese Communist Party leaders into believers of the magic function of free market (Harvey 120).

China has become a mixture of the two apparently opposite ideologies: both are situated in a grey zone, neither can function effectively as a critical discourse. By focusing homes of cheap labour providers, backbones for Chinese economy success, contemporary melodramas gain a critical edge by showing to what extent the marketization is not a panacea for traumatic Communist past. By contrast, this apparent solution has become part of current social problems. To this extent, "privacy" has inadvertently become "political" in these apparently apolitical films, if we paraphrase the well-known feminist slogan: "Personal is political." As a private expression, broken home melodrama problematizes the impact of massive privatization.

How does contemporary Chinese melodrama try to capture the collective imaginary of ordinary Chinese in our time? To what extent does this melodramatic imagination distinguish itself in its particular historical and cultural context? In what way does their portrayal of contemporary life connect China to global capitalism? I will address these questions through the analysis of contemporary melodrama centered on the broken home, a topic commonly shared by a great number of contemporary Chinese melodramas. The broken home (or home as the point of no-return) dominates these melodramas despite their different subject matters. Zhang Yimou's *The Road Home* (*Wode fuqin mouqin*, 1999) presents a son's journey to his parents' house at his father's funeral; his childhood home has been buried with the memory of his parents' painful past. *My Father and I* (*Wo he baba*, Xu Jinglei, 2003) is mostly situated in a shabby apartment, which witnessed the dissolutions of the marriages of two generations and the ambiguous but passionate relationship between the divorced father and the divorced daughter. *Far From Home* (*Wo de meili xiangchou*, 2002) describes a group of migrant workers whose homes are not only geographically inaccessible but also chronologically located in an irreversible past, which exists only abstractly in an elliptic form of memory.

Broken Home Melodrama: A Genre of Contradictions

At the historical juncture of conflicting value systems: the hollow official socialist discourse deprived of its economic basis and a ghostly but ubiquitous presence of capitalistic economy deprived of a consistent discursive support, broken home melodrama has become a genre representing unsolved and unsolvable conflicts in China. Novell-Smith considers melodrama "as a contradictory nexus." He writes:

> Melodrama can thus be seen as a contradictory nexus, in which certain determinations (social, psychical, artistic) are brought together but in which the problem of the articulation of these determinations is not successfully resolved. The importance of melodrama... lies precisely in its ideological failure. Because it cannot accommodate its problems, either in a real present or in an ideal future, but lays them open in their shameless contradictoriness, it opens a space which most Hollywood forms have studiously closed off. (Novell-Smith 74)

In other words, melodrama is an open form, as its flexibility allows it to mix with different genres, and to adapt to various historical and social contexts. This form functions dualistically. This duality fits well into contemporary Chinese society, as the Communist Party has embraced "neoliberalism with Chinese characteristic" (Harvey 151), while sticking to the political system of socialism "really existent," namely, one party rule. This system is a contradiction in terms. On the one hand, its political agenda is supposed to protect the working class. On the other hand, its economic prosperity is based on cheap labour. As a result, the supposedly socialist regime often implicitly sides with global capitalism to maintain China's competitive edge: low wages. Broken home melodrama exposes numerous contradictions existing in contemporary China, while localizing symptoms on the surface without analysing the sources of social conflicts. On the one hand, melodrama rejects "intellectualization," as it insists on understanding social changes only "in private contexts and emotional terms." As a result, it stays close to the empirical reality of the repressed while tending to "encourage escapist forms of mass entertainment" (Elessaess 47). Because of its emphasis on the experience (especially the suffering) of ordinary people, melodrama has thus the potential to attract a broad audience. At the same time, since it "touches the socio-political only at that point where it triggers the psychic" (Gledhill 37) and "it operates within the frameworks of the present social order" (Gledhill 21), its exposure of social conflicts mainly from the victims' perspective can easily pass the party's censorship, since this exposure remains *prima facie* apolitical and confined in the private domain.

I will categorise a large number of contemporary Chinese family melodramas as part of the "broken home" genre, to distinguish them from their Hollywood counterparts. Although family melodrama is a popular Hollywood genre, these Chinese movies distinguish themselves by portraying home as an irreversibly broken space, instead of offering an emotionally and economically stable oasis "where the heart is" in Hollywood melodrama–at least in its conventional happy ending—as Gledhill's book title suggests. The broken home has become a space of threatening violence (in *Parking Attendant in July*), a space of solitude (in *Life Show*), a point of no return (*Far From Home*), or a space threatened by an incestuous relationship (*My Father and I*).

Naturally, in any family melodrama, home is problematized as a fragmented space; Hollywood and the first commercial wave in China are not exceptions. Most commercially oriented melodramas, however, tries to appease the spectators' frustration vis-à-vis the misadventures of their unjustly treated heroes with poetic justice, expressed in the form of conventional happy ending. Douglas Sirk, considered the father of American melodrama, provides excellent examples of this inherently contradictory convention. Although his films often show a broken world, they briefly end in a setting of a cosy home artificially pieced together. Artificial as it is, this convention nevertheless creates an illusion of home as an oasis where the oppressed characters escape from constant social pressure even if this were only in a fantasy space. *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) ends in the intensively emotional scene in which Ron (Rock Hudson) awakes from his coma to pronounce the concluding words to his beloved Cary (Jane Wyman), "You've come home." In the beautiful country house Ron renovated and decorated with love for his fiancée, the camera shows several deer from Cary's perspective through the large glace doors, creating a kind of fairy tale atmosphere. Although *Imitation of Life* ends in Annie Johnson's funerals, the black mother's death provides a good excuse for a new family reunion: the two daughters, Susie and Sarah Jane, who both went astray, have returned on this occasion to join their spiritual parents, Lora and Steve. In the concluding scene, the limousine has become a metaphorical home space protecting the hearts of the characters from the ruthless world. Despite the tendency to politicize Sirk in western academy, his works cannot be separated from their socio-historical context of postwar America of the 1950s as the products of popular culture during a period of intensified consumerism and political repression.[7]

Concerning the family melodrama of the 1920s, the first commercial wave in the history of Chinese cinema, the happy ending fits well into the Chinese dramatic tradition; "the broken mirror has been pieced together" (*pojing chongyuan*). In *Last Moment of Conscience* (*Zuihou zhi liangxi*, Mingxing Studio, Zhang Shichuang, 1925), right before his death and after having consistently and ruthlessly mistreated his son-in-law and daughter-in-law, who were forced to marry his useless offspring to pay back their parents' debts, the parvenu unexpectedly decides to donate all his property to these two youngsters, now single, to allow them to organize a happy family in the concluding scene. In *Orphane Saves His Grandpa and Blind Orphan*, the family spaces are repaired through filial piety, the most important Confucian virtue. In contrast to most commercially oriented melodramas, even the conventional happy ending, artificial as it may be, has become impossible in a large number of contemporary melodramas despite their dissociation from various forms of activist melodramatic tradition in Chinese cinema after the 1930s.

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[7] As Barbara Klinger points out, "After the early 1980s, Sirk criticism entered its most recent phrase under the auspices of the feminist continuing inquiries into this genre, the impact of cultural studies, and interest in the representation of the racial issues in melodrama. This period has both enshrined Sirk melodramas and partially displaced them from the center of melodrama discussion" (Klinger 28).

The representation of unstable home space reveals a deep crisis in contemporary Chinese society. In Confucian tradition, home is considered a microscopic world of the state. Confucius states: "For governing the state one must manage the household" (*zhiguo zaiyu qijia*). Home is not only a private space, but also a microscopic model of the state. The collapse of the family space has thus broad implications for the political system. During the Mao era, as the ultimate shelter for privacy (privacy equalled bourgeois and feudal values), home was constantly intruded on, if not destroyed, through endless political movements in China, as Tian Zhuangzhuang demonstrated in *Blue Kite*, the 1993 film.[8] The rapid transition from the Maoist confined economy to the open global market further destabilizes traditional home space, albeit from a different angle and apparently without coercive measure. David Harvey rightly points out: "Even when privatization appears to be beneficial to the lower classes, the long-term effect can be negative" (Harvey 163-64). If the political movement in the Mao Era tended to chase ordinary urban residents away from home, China's "neoliberalization" pushes them to work frantically to cope with the growing financial pressure as the socialist big pot had disintegrated, instead of giving them time to settle down in stable homes. As a result, broken home melodrama has become symptomatic of the social instability witnessed by contemporary Chinese society. Ironically, radical privatization has contributed to further disintegration of the ultimate private space, home, for a large percentage of Chinese population.

Deprived of the comfort of a bourgeois home or the moral certainty of a community defined by Confucianism, broken home in these contemporary Chinese films can no longer be restored for the reunion of the family members. Therefore, this genre fails to create an artificial happy ending within the home space. Broken home melodrama often end in ambiguous scenes shot outside home: prison (*Parking Attendant in July*), marketplace (*Life Show*), cemetery (*My Father and I*), and a street full of homeless migrant workers (*Far From Home*).

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[8] For a study of this melodrama, see the section 3 in Chapter 2 of *Confronting Modernity in the Cinemas of Taiwan and Mainland China*.

Because of limited space, I will focus on two films as test-cases for the broken home melodrama: *Parking Attendant in July* (*Kanche ren de qiyue*, An Zhanjun, 2003)[9] and *Life Show* (*Shenghuo xiu*, 2002).[10]

Violence and Perversion of the Legal System

> Almost throughout the picture I used deep-focus lenses which have the effect of giving a harshness to the objects and a kind of enamelled, hard surface to the colour. I wanted this to bring out the inner violence, the energy of the characters which is all inside them and can't break through.
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> — Douglas Sirk, *Written on the Wind*

In *Parking Attendant in July*, Du Hongjun, an unemployed worker, has just found a job as a parking attendant in front of a hotel. At the same time, Du falls in love with Song, a florist. Both have failed in their previous marriages. Du's former wife left him and his teenage son Xiaoyu. Song's husband Liu Saner, a prisoner on parole, tears up the divorce paper that he signed in prison as soon as he learns that his wife wants to remarry. Since then, Liu takes every opportunity to torture his wife, Du, her fiancé, and Xiaoyu, Du's son. After Liu beats Song, his lover; Xiaoyu, his son; and Du, takes away all Du's furniture which he had just bought for his wedding, and makes him lose his job through vandalism, Du, the usually humble parking attendant, takes the law in his hands by mutilating his torturer, a crime that leads him to prison.

In *Parking Attendant*, highway, street, lanes, school corridor, parking lots are constantly shot in deep focus, plunging the Chinese capital into a harsh impersonal light. The closed, long, and narrow spatial configurations not only provide "a kind of enamelled, hard surface to the colour,"[11] but also create an impression of predestination for each character. As almost all the public spaces are presented in the same light, the characters in this Chinese melodrama seem unable to break the claustrophobic "inner violence" (Elsaesser 62), despite their frantic efforts to escape unbreakable social bonds.

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[9] *Parking Attendant* won the first jury award at the 2004 Montreal International Festival.

[10] *Life Show*, an adaptation of the popular novel by Chi Li with the same title, won best actrice and best screenwriter awards in Shanghai International Festival.

[11] Douglas Sirk, quoted by Thomas Elsaesser, in "Tales of Sound and Fury" (43).

At the outset, however, the camera deceptively presents two spaces in a different light: the big single room of Du's traditional-style apartment and Song's flower shop, which serves as a façade to her living space. They seemingly offer hope for a potential happy romance, as both spaces contrast with the network of impersonal, distant, and closed public spaces with their lively style often portrayed in bright daylight. As the film progresses and it presents these spaces in more details, the initial hope evaporates. Du's apartment has no depth, since it constantly exposes the activities of its residents to the public. He and his son Xiaoyu eat, drink, and sleep in the same shallow apartment. As the windows are large and the door appears forever unlocked, his neighbour, his lover, or his enemy can visit this space without knocking at his door, even in his absence. Liu Saner and his followers are able to move all his new furniture away in broad daylight. Du would not have been aware of it if he had not returned home by chance when they had almost finished their job. Further, he dare not claim his ownership while he helplessly watches them take away his only valuable possessions. By contrast, Song's living space always remains invisible. Even Du has never entered into that space. Just as the façade of beautiful flower shop hides her miserable marriage with a violent gambler, the beautiful florist never discloses to her fiancé her unglamorous past: that of a lonely woman who tried every means (possibly including prostitution) to pay back the debts left by her imprisoned husband. Du was not even informed that her divorce is not finalized until Liu Saner unexpectedly shows up at his door and demands that Song return to his home, as he is her legitimate husband.

Despite their hope for a happy family, the unfortunate couple can settle down in neither of their living corners; one is too shallow; and the other, too deep. In Du's apartment, for example, they cannot even make love, because Du's old bed is too noisy and his neighbours would listen in; while Song's apartment remains inaccessible to Du, just like her shameful past.

A cross-cutting sequence of these two spaces reveals the impossibility of constructing their dreamed home. The first scene gives the illusion of their future happiness: Du's neighbours help him move new furniture (which will soon be taken away by force by Liu Saner), including his expensive new bed, to his apartment. With a cheerful smile, Du murmurs to Song's ear, while sitting on this bed: "Our neighbours will not be able to hear us this time." The camera cuts short the close-up of Song's shy and happy smile by the shot of the angry intruder at her flower shop (which the couple considers the financial source of their future life: Du would garden, while Song would sell flowers). This apparent stranger breaks the large glass window with an expensive lotus plant. As he continues to vandalize the shop, the camera crosscuts to Du's home again, where Song's employee, a scared young woman, rushes to report to her boss the damage caused by this stranger. The alleged stranger follows the helper, and Song recognizes him; he is her (not yet divorced) husband Liu Saner, just released from the prison on parole. Liu forces his wife to return to their home after having humiliated Du in the midst of his newly acquired furniture. The following shot shows how Liu Saner beats Song while throwing the torn-up divorce agreement in her face. Her dream of a happy home is smashed into pieces just as her pretty (and expensive) lotus plant is dashed through the shop window. Song then returns to her space of hidden violence and misery. As a result, neither of the potential home spaces can shelter the couple from violence and the criminal behaviour of her villain husband. Instead, the dreamed spaces for potential happy marriage become the very locus of violence, violence repeatedly committed by Liu Saner, and finally, of Du's own violent revenge.

Throughout the film, Du's problematic relationship with his lover has always been closely watched, either by the pitilessly objectifying gaze of the camera or by the critically subjective eyes of his teenage son, Xiaoyu. The former constantly frames him as a loser, and the latter ceaselessly challenges his fatherly authority. From the outset, the engagement of Du and Song is framed as a mismatch. In the prologue, the photographer taking their wedding pictures constantly criticises Du's looks, while forcing him to stand on a bench to compensate for his height. During this long sequence, Xiaoyu gazes at his father critically in the shadows, without pronouncing a single word. Later, we learn that this apparent mismatch results from the unstable family situations of both the man and the woman. On the one hand, Du is a divorced single father. Although the film has never explicitly explained the reason for his divorce, it has suggested that his ex-wife left him partly because of his unemployment. On the other hand, Song has already gotten the signature of her violent husband during a visit in prison, although as soon as he is on parole and has found out Song's engagement with Du, the husband tears up their divorce agreement.

In other words, the match of Du and Song is made possible by two major unstable factors in contemporary China: the high rate of unemployment and the high rate of crimes (the second factor is closely related to the first). Because of these factors, both Du and Song have failed in their personal lives. Aware of their own vulnerability, both seek emotional shelter in each other's arms and consider this relationship an oasis in a cold and impersonal world. What prevents the two individuals from creating a dreamed-of home is precisely what makes their union possible in the first place: the high rate of unemployment and high rate of crime. Toward the end of the film, Du loses his parking attendance job because of Liu Saner's revenge. The diligent worker is punished harshly for

Liu's vandalism, while the criminal remains at large despite his repeated offences against his innocent victims. Often shot from Du's point of view, these events reinforce the protagonist's pathetic sense of helplessness. Faced with the violent criminal Liu Saner, the gentle and submissive Du Hongjun does not seem to have any other choice but to suffer from one blow of injustice after another. As the camera conspicuously displays the suffering of Du and his family, the spectators are forced to watch them in the most humiliating detail–anxiously and helplessly. At the same time, the legal system in the film remains blind to their victimizations.

Both Song and Du are afraid that the legal system will fail to protect them, and will even help the violent husband oppress them. Song dares not even report her husband's abuse even at the insistent request of his parole officer, right after his violent outbust against her. Du explains to his son Xiaoyu: "As long as they remain married, I'm an adulterer, and I can say nothing against Liu. I'm not like you, because I understand the law." In other words, if their victimization is unnoticeable, their transgression is flagrant. The legal system, designed for socialist big pot, stays inadequate to respond to instability caused by China's rapidly changing and globalizing economy while preserving its utter indifference of the bygone era toward individual desire, such as choosing a suitable partner in life. As his son rejects his father's conformism, Du's humble behaviour is often filtered through Xiaoyu's critical eyes. Thus the son's observation further diminishes the father's authority. As a result, the father's impotence and the perversion of the legal system mirror each other to form a topsy-turvy image of contemporary Chinese society.

From the outset the film emphasizes Du's resignation and humility. This emphasis makes his final crime even more shocking to us, because the change in his personality looks particularly radical. At the same time, all the injustice Du suffered also prepares us for his final desperate gesture, because the law that fails to protect him and his family has forced him to imitate his persecutor. If Du did not take the recourse of violence against Liu Saner's persistent harassment, Liu would have continued to torture Du and his family with impunity. In this sense, Du's violence against his violent persecutor has become a perversion of the law, as this act plays the role of protecting victims against violent crimes in the place of the inefficient legal system.

China's integration into the global market has brought a sea change, which has destabilized lives of many ordinary Chinese, while the legal system, designed for the bygone socialist big pot, remains relatively unchanged, if not more corrupted. Cornered by the instability provoked by economic changes reinforced by the inadequate responses of the inefficient legal system, small potatoes like Du and Song can no longer find any safe space to project their dream of a stable home, not even in the world of fantasy. Fantasy has become part of reality; because most people fantasize about becoming rich, while enduring mounting economic pressure. Pressured by an inescapable violence that follows the logic of fantasy in its excessiveness and uncontrollability, Du could break away from the circle of his own victimization only by taking recourse to violence as a gesture of self-destruction. The hero's individual perversion substitutes for the conventional happy ending. Harmony re-established by this melodramatic convention is irreversibly disrupted by the desperate act of one single individual, spatially and emotionally isolated from his family and friends.

Mise en Scène of the (Absence of) Home

Life Show (Huo Jianqi, *Shenghuo xiu*, 2002) focuses on the story of Lai Shuangyang, a divorced woman in her thirties, who sells grilled duck necks in Jixing Street, a food fair. Shuangyang tries hard to create a new family for herself and to climb the social ladder in the changing Chinese economy through her work, her ingenuity, her toughness, while often relying on her seductive power as a pretty woman. In the end, she cannot reorganize her relationship with her relatives, and most of them stay away from her. Her carefully staged show in the market does not effectively change her life, and her relationship with her suitor does not work out. She remains as lonely as before. Further, the former suitor, the real estate developer Mr Zhou, bought Jixing Street in order to develop it into a modern commercial district. As a result, Shuangyang and other traditional merchants of this region will soon lose their livelihood, because the new location will be too expensive for most of these shop owners.

Since melodrama usually evolves around the family, its spaces remain generically limited. One of the melodramatic devices is precisely dramatizing the limited spaces through a "formal language (lighting, staging décor, acting, close-up, montage and camera movement)" in order "to compensate for the expressiveness." As Thomas Elsaesser explains, "Considered as an expressive code, melodrama might therefore be described as a particular form of dramatic *mise en scène*, characterised by a dynamic use of spatial and musical categories, as opposed to intellectual or literary ones. Dramatic situations are given an orchestration which will allow for complex aesthetic pattern . . ." (Elsaesser 51).

In the absence of a stable home, the camera dramatizes the protagonist's restaurant, the most important space in her life. In fact, we can even say that the film is structured around the "dynamization" of this space—if we borrow

Panofsky's expression (Elsaesser 51)—for good reasons. Shuangyang's shop is her only exit that offers possible opening toward the world outside her lonely and desolate apartment, which she mostly uses to sleep, as a cheap motel. If the protagonist leaves this space for a moment, either to rest in her lonely apartment or to face the often ultramodern urban spaces, she always returns to the shop in the following scene. The film presents the shop not as her home but as a reminder of the absence of a home for her. This space requires her either to work or to perform her life show ceaselessly. It is a space where she can never take a good rest. At the end of this film, this only relatively stable location in her life is on the verge of disappearing.

The camera constantly contrasts the obscurity and solitude of her house with the glittering lights and bustling activities of the food fair. At the same time, its lights appear artificial or "vulgar" (*su*)—as Mr Zhou metonymically describes Shuangyang in a moment of rage; and the camera presents the crowd mostly in soft-focus, as if they were only part of the background decorations, but not part of her human connections.

This shop seemingly offers her possibilities to reorganize a new family, but each of these possibilities turns out to be illusory. As a young girl, Shuangyang raised her baby brother after their mother had died in child-birth. From her shop, she takes the ferry to visit her beloved younger brother confined in his prison-like drug treatment clinic, but his brother returns her plea for love with contempt. As the stillbirth of her baby, she served as a wet-nurse to her nephew because her sister-in-law had no milk. Near her shop, she meets her older brother and sister-in-law, with her surrogate son, her nephew. But out of jealousy her sister-in-law insults her in public. Left alone amid the broken bottles and china of her shop, Shuangyang watches her rival walking away from the food fair, followed by her family members: her brother and her nephew—their choice is obvious.

If her motherly instinct has been frustrated as a childless divorcee, she is even more unlucky in her sexual adventures. All her failed dramas with her relatives serve as a prelude to her most important attempt to organise a new family through her potential marriage to Mr Zhou, thanks to her *life show*. At the beginning, her show seems promising, because the rich and powerful Mr Zhou insistently watches her for over a year. His passionate gaze and persistent courtship raise her hopes, while eliciting jealousy from her sister-in-law and her neighbours.

From the beginning to the end, the film never conceals the mercantile nature of this relationship. Mr Zhou looks at the pretty shop owner with the same expression as he would have if he were looking at a delicious dish. Later, he succinctly describes her performance in the shop: "as if you were not to sell duck, but to show yourself exclusively to me." In other words, she is marketing her food as well as her body. For Zhou, the food is only the by-product; her sexual appeal is the major commodity in his eyes (following the same logic, his infatuation with the pretty restaurant owner is only a by-product of his attraction to the real estate value of the food fair). Shuangyang does not disguise the mercantile nature of their relationship either. The first time she speaks to him, she immediately asks him about his Lexus, the symbol of his wealth. Ironically, Mr Zhou drives her home for the first time on the back of a tricycle, a vehicle normally used to carry duck meat to her store. This unglamorous vehicle indicates Shuangyang's status in her buyer's mind: not so much higher than the delicious food that will satisfy his appetite. By contrast, Shuangyang invites him to a weekend outing in a luxurious villa, vicariously inviting herself to the world that she considers his—according to her imagination and at her own expense. Despite her effort to move up, she has become part of the food shop at the corner of the city. Her attempt at upward movement only brings her frustration. If she is the showpiece in the food fair, her aerial perspective only provides her with a glance of another spectacle, the lifestyle of the rich and powerful. On this occasion, she transforms herself from an actress to a spectator, an outsider who bought her exclusive view of a different *life show* at an outrageously high price.

No longer a showpiece in this setting, Shuangyang is reduced to a pure and simple sexual object—like the duck meat in her shop. The rainstorm that accompanies the pair seems to season their otherwise monotonous sexual act. The spectators can watch this scene either through the windowpanes obscured by the rain or through a hole in the decoration–which makes viewers peeping toms, as if the lovemaking itself were too plain and too mercantile to be staged alone as the object of visual pleasure. This act is so banal that it is only interesting or titillating if it is partially concealed. After they made love, Shuangyang asked Zhou about their future. Instead of offering her the possibility of a stable family, he wants only a casual relationship. Her dream of her new family falls through–just like all her efforts to reorganize other alternative families with her relatives.

Shuangyang had firmly believed in the possibility of such an alternative family with Zhou through marriage because she trusts the strength of his passion, sustained by his daily visits to her duck shop for more than a year. But his visits are also a life show, because his original intention is to buy the food fair property in order to transform this traditional corner into a modernized and much more profitable commercial center, while potentially eliminating jobs for all the members of this community. Therefore, his passion for Shuangyang disguises his intention of making profit to the detriment of local people, including the apparent object of his passion, the owner of the duck shop herself. In this sense, his apparent passion for her is also an investment in a profitable business, just like her effort to attract his gaze.

When Shuangyang realizes his true intention, she is disappointed on two counts: first, the subject of his passionate gaze is not simply her beauty, but more importantly the profitability of her location; second, he is responsible for her and her neighbours' loss of their territory, thus their potential livelihood. Angered by this discovery, she rushes from his car, while Zhou follows her and tries to drive her back. They push each other back and forth, until her purse falls on the ground and all kinds of make-up containers roll onto the muddy road. Shuangyang stands pathetically in front of her pitiful stage props, behind his car where we see the Lexus insignia, the symbol of his wealth. She stands just as she stood in front of the broken glasses and dishes in her shop after her fight with her sister-in-law. In both cases the *mise en scène* underlines her desperation; another of her family dreams falls into pieces. Shuangyang urges Zhou to leave her alone, and walks away from him in the pouring rain on the deserted mountain road, while his gaze follows her receding into darkness.

Life Show dramatizes broken spaces in each of Shuangyang's attempt at reorganizing a family either with her relatives or with her lover. The dramatized spaces show to what extent it is difficult, if not impossible, for a divorced woman like her to rebuild a family. As a working-class woman who wants single-mindedly to establish a family for herself, she is marginalized in the coexisting and conflicting patriarchal orders. According to socialist ideology of the bygone Mao era, her desire for a family is too individualistic; and in the rapidly developing capitalistic economy, she remains at the bottom of the social hierarchy as a single woman without powerful connection or financial basis. Caught in between a bygone and a partially formed conflicting value systems, the family space that her heart desires cannot be pieced together even in a fantasy space–as showed in her unglamorous love-making scene in a supposedly dreamed-of environment.

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Broken home genre represented by these two movies shows to what extent melodrama as a form is malleable in view of changing local and historical conditions. This genre stays away from the conventional happy ending prevailing in most commercially oriented melodramas, while remaining faithful to certain core conventions: duality, excessiveness, contradiction, dramatization, and focus on private spaces. At the end of these films, irreversibly broken home space replaces the relatively cosy bourgeois family as a fantasized solution of irreconcilable social conflicts in American family melodrama[12] or the moral certainty preserved by an imaginary transindividual community during the first commercial wave in China of the 1920s. Further, the sad ending does not serve any explicit ideological purpose, since broken home melodramas consciously distance themselves from "activist romanticism" inherent in various forms of Chinese cinematic tradition since 1930s (Berry and Farquhar 80).

In the post-Mao era, the Communist party has seemingly used privatisation as a solution to negative consequences caused by socialist collectivism in order to enter the global market. This policy has brought a sea change to China's social structure through neoliberalization on two fronts: rapid publicized economic reform and gradual latent ideological transformation. Deprived of its economic foundation because of the massive bankruptcies of state-owned enterprises, the ideology of "socialism really existent" still functions as the dominant discourse in China as the current regime tries to establish "the socialism with Chinese characteristics" or "neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics"—to borrow Harvey's expression.[13] In absence of a positive official discourse, global capitalism has invaded every aspect of Chinese social life with its ghostly but powerful value system of money-worship. Maoist ideology used to present home as the ultimate private space, thus hostile to socialist collectivism. China's integration into the global market has not reversed this trend. By contrast, its radical changes associated with the disappearance of social safety net have further destabilized already broken home spaces for numerous ordinary Chinese, backbones for China's economic prosperity. The excess of competing value systems (bygone socialist ideology and incomplete capitalist market economy) has paradoxically intensified the post-Mao ideological vacuum. The worship of money has occupied the collective fantasy in absence of official discursive justification; while socialist ideology of equality functions as a discursive fantasy for most workers who have lost their safety net after life-long devotions to bankrupted state-owned enterprises. Caught in between fantasy and reality, home, the conventional melodramatic center, has difficulty to regain its position as a privileged space of fantasy in its traditional form. As a result, "Broken home" melodrama is symptomatic of China's difficult transition from the "real" socialist state to global capitalism. Neoliberalization of Chinese economy has been mainly associated with cheap labour market while encouraging excessive consumerism and unevenly distributed wealth. Because this process cannot be carried out with out migrations, unemployment, and increasing financial pressure for a great number of Chinese as backbones for the cheap labour market, massive privatization paradoxically makes it even more difficult for them to reconstruct stable and secured private spaces. This radical transition pushes the logic of shelterlessness expressed in Hollywood melodrama to extreme, to the extent that home, the center of the melodramatic world, is radically disrupted even in its fantasy space despite the alluring promise of China's integration into the global market.

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[12] Richard De Cordova states: "The bourgeois family is finally separated from this conflict and presented as a private alternative to the more public spectacle of class difference. This work of privatisation as a form of resolution is astonishingly clear in the last shots of all of these films. In all, the heroes walk or drive away from the public scenes of the spectacle and disappear from the fiction into their own little worlds, as if escaping from the worst of dreams" (267).

[13] Harvey uses China's accumulation by deprivation through bankruptcies of numerous state-owned enterprises as one of the most important examples of neoliberalization following the ideology of free market (Harvey 120). In other words, the wealth of the elite class largely comes from proletarization of a large number of population.

At the same time, although contemporary Chinese melodrama marks a return to the first wave of commercial films in the 1920's by breaking away from "active romanticism" in Chinese cinematic tradition since 1930s and by addressing the needs of local audiences, current audiences' needs have little to do with those of the Chinese audiences at the beginning of the last century. The traditional community based on transindividual values, be they Confucian or communist, no longer exists, even in the collective imaginary of 21st century China.

As a result, neither fantasy space nor traditional ethics will help contemporary melodrama patch up its broken home even in the brief moment of an artificial conclusion. Ironically, this radical failure to escape from the gloomy reality of everyday life also prevents the genre from reaching its goal: competing in the domestic film market with Hollywood blockbusters, which exemplify escapism *par excellence* for Chinese audiences thanks to their geographical distances. American dream imported through the Hollywood film industry seemingly provides an opening to the claustrophobic reality for a great number of Chinese viewers, while often reinforcing the fantasized credibility of neoliberalization. Escapism can function effectively if it is located outside the deadlock of its social reality either spatially or temporarily, as contemporary China represents a contradictory mixture: economic reality (global capitalism) and ideological fantasy (socialist ideology). Both are located only in-between social reality and collective fantasy to the extent that reality and fantasy are no longer distinguishable. "Reality is more exceptional than fiction,"[14] if we quote Jia Zhangke, the leading filmmaker of the post-Fifth Generation.

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[14] www.wuhua xingqiwu_zhongguowang.htm

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全球化時代的中國破碎家庭通俗劇

摘　要

本文主要分析中國大陸最近出現的一種電影類型，作者稱這種類型爲「破碎家庭通俗劇」。這一新類型可以說是打破了中國電影多少年來干預政治與社會現實的傳統。從三十年代左翼電影以來，中國電影（至少在大陸）一直以不同形式集體主義意識形態爲宗旨。只有在二十年代電影萌芽階段中國電影的創業者們曾經以商業性娛樂性爲主要目的，被批評界稱爲第一次商業浪潮。破碎家庭空間的情節劇這種對票房價值的重新重視是與當代中國電影市場的不景氣分不開的。多數拍這類情節劇的導演沒有第五代前輩的國際知名度，不可能像他們那樣不斷得到跨國公司的財政支援，也沒有像他們那樣打國際市場的願望。他們選擇表現當代城市小人物的題材，也是爲了通過對本土生活的關注在國内找到自己的觀眾，開發國内市場。另一方面這種對小人物生活的關切，又使這類電影無意中反映了中國今天意識形態矛盾重重的現實。在這種現實的壓力下，家庭無可挽回地成爲了支離破碎的空間。

關鍵字：破碎家庭通俗劇，新自由主義，私有化，内向化，外向化，大團圓結局