

Sentimentalism in *Under the Hawthorn Tree*

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Abstract

In Chinese films, the nostalgic mode has long ago permeated the representations of the Cultural Revolution, a period often associated with trauma and violence. Nostalgia for the socialist past indicates a resistance to and a critique of the materialism and deteriorated morality brought about by the capitalist modernity and globalization, and moreover, this longing for the past also resonates with the re-evaluation of the Cultural Revolution in the intellectual discourse regarding China's modernization drive. However, while nostalgia harbours the potential for being a critique of the modernity, it also bears the inclination to be criticized. On the one hand, nostalgia derives from the fragments and materiality of the past, and functions as a resistance to the singular modernity and contemporary consumer culture. On the other hand, this sentimentalism of nostalgia might also be fetishized and commodified, falling in the same trap from which it tries to escape. This paper will analyse in detail a recent Chinese film, *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, directed by Zhang Yimou and set in the Cultural Revolution, and use it as an example to further illustrate and explore the conundrum of nostalgia as has been delineated above. In the film's representation and its promotion, nostalgia and the sentimental are constructed and positioned as the redemption of contemporary materialism and an alternative to the visual spectacles of the blockbuster films. However, at the same time, the film fetishizes nostalgia, or purity, in the female body and commodifies it as a rare good.

Keywords: Nostalgia, cultural revolution, sentimentalism, fetishism, purity, female body.

Introduction

In parallel with globalization and economic development, there also surfaces the conundrum of nostalgia, an unremitting longing for the past. As Cook (2005, p.4) has observed, the past three decades have witnessed a substantial increase in nostalgic memory films. The nostalgic films are often suffused with a sense of melancholy and iconoclastic cultural references, such as cheongsam in *In the Mood for Love* (*Huayang nianhua*, 2000). In the nostalgic mode, the past is often glimpsed in fragments, such as retro dresses, worn drapes and mottled mirrors, which become a synecdoche of the past. It is through the part that the whole is conjured up and touches the heart; Hillenbrand (2010, p.392, 398) argues that the fragmentary, imperfect and incomplete character of the past can be transferred, through aesthetics works, into pre-conditions for nostalgia, which will enable a kind of “working through” and “a rapprochement with modernity”, by accepting the past and its trauma. While the fragmentation and materiality of nostalgia facilitate imagination and salvation by offering a rapprochement with the traumatic past, they also make nostalgia prone to be reduced to fetishism and an obsessive gaze.

In Chinese films, the nostalgic mode has long ago permeated the representations of the Cultural Revolution, a period often associated with trauma and violence. The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (commonly referred to as the Cultural Revolution), a political movement dated from 1966 to 1976, was initiated to fight against revisionism and bourgeois ideology in the party and the state so as to consolidate a social system, and it had significantly affected the nation and its people. In the late 1970s and the early 1980s, immediately after the Cultural Revolution, there emerged a wave of filmic representations of the traumatic experiences, such as *Troubled Laughter* (*Kunaoren de xiao*, 1979), *The Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (*Tianyunshan chuanqi*, 1980). Later, Chen Kaige's *King of the Children* (*Haizi wang*, 1987), *Farewell My Concubine* (*Bawang bieji*, 1993), Tian Zhangzhang's *The Blue Kite* (*Lan fengzhen*, 1993) and Zhang Yimou's *To live* (*Huo zhe*, 1994) represented the traumatic past as a lasting and circling pain and refused a catharsis ending, which marked a deviance from most of the previous films that adopted a trauma-redemption mode. The 1990s witnessed the rise of nostalgia for the socialist period amidst the deepening marketization in China, as the “Mao fever”, albums of revolutionary songs, and the Cultural Revolution restaurants mushroomed throughout the country. The “Mao fever” reached its peak in 1993, the centennial of Mao's birth, and boosted the re-consumption of products pertinent to Mao. For instance, the portraits of Mao in taxi cars, and “The Red Sun” cassette. Meanwhile, the Cultural Revolution restaurants decorated in a 1970s' style provided distinctive non-socialist venues for the memorialization of the past socialism (Hubbert, 2005; Lei, 2005; Barmé, 1999). The 1995 film *In the Heat of the Sun* provided alternative memories of the Cultural Revolution as a period of freedom and fantasy, and the film became a big hit of that year. Since 2000, a growing number of the Cultural Revolution-set films, such as *Balzac and the little Chinese seamstress* (*Baerzake he xiao caifeng*, 2002), *The Foliage* (*Mei ren cao*, 2004), *Under the Hawthorn Tree* (*Shanzhashu zhi lian*, 2010) have sustained this nostalgic trend in cinematic representations.

As Dai puts, the rising nostalgia in China's popular culture can be conceived as a retreat from a fast-changing, unstable society where people feel insecure, restless and somewhat disoriented and desperate, as “it builds a kind of imagined link between the individual and society, between history and the present reality, in order to provide a rationale for our contemporary struggle and to impart to us some sense of comfort and stability” (1997, p.159). In essence, this nostalgia derives from discontent with the present, and seeks an imagined shelter instead of a return. In China, the sentimentalism of nostalgia often dwells in certain periods of the past, such as the capitalist and semi-colonial Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s or the socialist past, which as Lu (2007) believes to have revealed imaginations about two competing visions of Chinese

modernity. Nostalgia for the socialist past indicates a resistance to and a critique of the booming materialism and deteriorated morality brought about by the capitalist modernity and globalization, and moreover, this longing for the past also resonates with the re-evaluation of the Cultural Revolution in the intellectual discourse regarding China's modernization drive. Discussions about the Cultural Revolution have thrived since the late 1990s, particular among the New Left intellectuals. Meanwhile, this trend is also evident among the overseas academics (Clark, 2008). Lu (2007) also argues, the surging nostalgia criticizes the booming materialism and widening social disparity, and shows rejection of "the homogenization of the world under a single capitalist model—call it globalization, Americanization or McDonaldization" (p.149). In addition, the values of the past—passion, idealism, endurance, self-sacrifice and egalitarianism, which are missing in contemporary society—are promoted as the moral redemption. Apart from being "a protest against the present", and an imagination of "an alternative Chinese modernity", Yang (2005) postulates that the nostalgic collective memories of the Cultural Revolution are resistance to previous mnemonic control (in order to form a historical foil and legitimize the rise of the Dengist new regime) immediately after the Cultural Revolution, and later the profit-driven marketization has liberated some spaces for these nostalgic utterances. However, if nostalgia for the socialist past is a rejection of contemporary materialism and marketization, to what extent, does it challenge the consumerism upon which its emergence and boom depend?

Moreover, being a firm part of the global nostalgia boom, the longings for the socialist past are, in essence, the resonance of rather than a resistance to the globalisation or the singular modernity. As Dai (1997) has observed the nostalgic undercurrent in China at the end of the twentieth century actually echoes the nostalgic vogue in the developed countries, a proof of "cultural integration", rather than challenging. In addition, after the 1981 Resolution that concluded the political movement to have been a mistake and disaster, further discussions about the Cultural Revolution have been shelved away in the official discourse for fear of undermining the present political power mechanism. This silence has in fact facilitated the nostalgia to fill in the vacuum of the political discourse. Hence, the flourishing nostalgic mode in the popular discourse has rescued the official discourse from aphasia, and in this sense, it is more a reconciliation than a resistance.

Therefore, while nostalgia harbours the potential for being a critique of the modernity, it also bears the inclination to be criticized. On the one hand, nostalgia derives from the fragments and materiality of the past, and functions as a resistance to the singular modernity and contemporary consumer culture. On the other hand, this sentimentalism of nostalgia might also be fetishized and commodified, falling in the same trap from which it tries to escape. This paper will analyse in detail a recent Chinese film, *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, directed by Zhang Yimou and set in the Cultural Revolution, and use it as an example to further illustrate and explore the conundrum of nostalgia as has been delineated above. In the film's representation and its promotion, nostalgia and the sentimental are constructed and positioned as the redemption of contemporary materialism and an alternative to the visual spectacles of the blockbuster films. However, at the same time, the film fetishizes nostalgia, or purity, in the female body and commodifies it as a rare good.

Personalised Nostalgia

Nostalgia is often deeply rooted in individual memories and personalised experiences. For instance, *In the Heat of the Sun* is based on personal memories of the director Jiang Wen, and *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* is originally written as a semi-autobiography of the Chinese–French novelist and filmmaker Dai Sijie. The film *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, adapted

from a popular online novel, is based on a true story of a couple. The film depicts the romantic love between Jingqiu, a high school student who is sent down to the village to collect materials for textbooks, and Sun Jianxin (nicknamed Lao San), a geologist working in the village and who dies from leukaemia at the end. The individualised expressions are not only associated with sincerity and honesty, but also offer alternatives to the monolithic grand history. Furthermore, nostalgia begins to sprout right from the fertile soil of personal memories. This personalised history, often being eroticised at the same time, differs from the previous narratives of the past. As Dai (1997) posits, in the 1980s, “I” entails a grand narrative, emblematic of a group of “newborn” and “rising” people. However, in recent personalised history, it is “I” rather than “we” that dominates the narrative. This difference is best illustrated in a comparison of Zhang Yimou’s previous film *To Live* and *Under the Hawthorn Tree*. In *To Live*, the life story of Fugui and his family from the 1940s to the Cultural Revolution period is indeed a national allegory that hints at the circling of social and political traumas for the nation and its people. On the contrary, *Under the Hawthorn Tree* foregrounds personal feelings, while the nation and the grand theme fade in the background, as Zhang explains, “*To Live* confronts the era directly, portraying the tragedies in the grand epochs, whereas *Under the Hawthorn Tree* moves away from the historical background and picks up a secret corner to savour the love” (“Two Zhangs”, 2010). This secret savour of personal life in *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, according to Zhang, ushers a post-2000 narrative of the Cultural Revolution, a perspective that focuses on the individual: “erasing the political and historical background, the purity or innocence of that period [the Cultural Revolution] is something classical, [a theme] totally different from previous genres about the Cultural Revolution” (cited in Xia & Zhang, 2009).

In the film, the triumph of personalised history over grand historical narrative is also figuratively conveyed in the story of the hawthorn tree and its red blossoms. Unlike ordinary hawthorn tree, the legendary hawthorn tree in the village is said to bear red, instead of white, flowers, because it is nurtured by blood of the heroes who scarified their lives for the revolution during the Sino-Japanese War. However, this enigma is resolved at the end of the film when the camera zooms in for a close-up of the white blossoms. The zoom-in from a long take of the landscape to a close-up of the tiny flowers on the tree is a manifestation of the changing angle and narrative strategy from allegorical to personalised mode. Moreover, while red in the context of the Cultural Revolution connotes revolution and political rightness, the colour of white traditionally alludes to purity and innocence. Therefore, the white blossom at the end implies a deviance from the revolution enigma and its grand narrative while highlighting humanity. Just like the hawthorn tree that retrieves its white blossoms, personal life and feelings have retrieved their significance from revolutionary signifiers and national allegories in personalised history, as Zhang states,

In the past decades, films about the Cultural Revolution usually highlighted the iconoclastic symbols of the special era, whereas in *Under the Hawthorn Tree* it provides a novel point of view [deemphasising the historical background], only as a story that cannot afford the narrative of the grand trauma of the Cultural Revolution. (cited in Zhang, 2010)

Whilst these individualised memories in popular culture have diversified the discourses concerning the past, they also bring in the danger of cannibalising history through depoliticization, trivialization and privatization, rendering history “nothing more than a soap opera for evening consumption” (Lu, 2007, p.145). Nevertheless, another important dimension of these personal stories and perspectives is the fact that they have enabled the sprout of nostalgia. Nostalgia does not demand a reproduction of the past, but derives right from the

traces of the past and fragmented memories. Therefore, the quotidian life in which the intimate feelings are bedded becomes the precondition for the sentimentalism of nostalgia.

Nostalgia in Style

Films that dwell in nostalgia are often imbued with a melancholy tone that mourns for the passing of time, and thus the sentimental becomes a key element in the style of those nostalgic films. As Chow (2002) has noted in her analysis of *In the Mood for Love* and Zhang Yimou's *The Road Home* (*Wo de fuqin muqin*, 1999), the sentimentalism of nostalgia is embedded in the depiction of the everyday, albeit different anchors of the two films. *The Road Home* is set in the backdrop of the anti-rightist campaign in the later 1950s, a movement often regarded as a prelude to the Cultural Revolution, and the film is about a love story between a village girl and a sent-down teacher. Through a sentimental portrayal of the everyday, *The Road Home* conveys the redemptive power of everyday life and human endeavour (Chow, 2002). To great extent, *Under the Hawthorn Tree* follows in the tradition of *The Road Home*, highlighting the sentimental and the painstaking portrayal of the everyday. However, unlike *The Road Home*, which is more poetic in cinematography, *Under the Hawthorn Tree* adopts a plain style that reinforces the simplicity, the crux of the nostalgic feeling in the film, as Zhang remarks,

The Road Home has splendid colours: a girl in red running across the field covered with blooming flowers, and these strong visual effects [and movements] convey a poetic and picturesque feeling. *Under the Hawthorn Tree* is different, because it does not entail poetic feelings, but you can feel the purity and simplicity just like plain water. (cited in Dong, 2010)

In other words, *Under the Hawthorn Tree* relies on the plain depiction of the everyday, and reduces cinematic technologies to enhance the sense of unsophisticatedness. Without a dramatized plot or spectacular visual effects, the simple narrative style of the film *Under the Hawthorn Tree* and its representation of simple living during the Cultural Revolution aim to trigger longings for the plain life style. Simplicity and purity have become the core of the nostalgia in *Under the Hawthorn Tree*.

In a time when private affairs are still confined from public presence, Jingqiu and Lao San have to hide their relationship from others, and even in the private sphere, they are also self-restrained. However, the plain living imposed with restrictions has never deprived Jingqiu and Lao San of pleasures in the simplest and purest way. In the film, when Jingqiu and Lao San go on a date, they always keep a distance from each other as if they are strangers, as the director Zhang describes,

When they were acting the parts that take place in the public on the street, I told them that in that era, we had to love secretly and hide it underground.... It is not like the young people nowadays that they would boldly kiss in the public, which we now often see.... When they [Jingqiu and Lao San] walk on the street, they have to keep two to three meters away from each other and constantly look around. I told the actor and actress to look to the left and right while they walk, so on the screen this will show a kind of fear [of being seen by others]. I think this taste of “evasive love” is also very special. (“Interview with the crew”, 2010)

Drawing on his own experience during the Cultural Revolution, Zhang, whose father used to be in the Kuomintang (KMT, Nationalist Party) and thus had a bad family background, believes that since Jingqiu's family background is capitalist-roader, she must have a feeling of fear,

fragile and low self-esteem at the bottom of her heart, so she wants to hide herself (Ibid.). However, Lao San understands the girl and tries not to make her panic too much. In this sense, the evasive love actually shows consideration and caring, and embodies a special charm. In the present society when people have already got used to more extroverted ways of expressing their feelings, the self-restraining and evasive love specific in the Cultural Revolution are conceived as a good illustration of purity and caring. As Zhang has disclosed, the bad family background was a huge shadow for him, but when representing the evasive love, this unpleasant memory of the Cultural Revolution is transferred into a kind of nostalgia for pure love and simplicity, a vivid example to demonstrate how nostalgia is used and has enabled working through the trauma of the past. Barmé (1999) explains, the nostalgia boom in the 1990s China “may well have allowed people a chance to clear the way to the future without the pressures of earlier horrors constantly invading and overwhelming the present” (p.317).

Through the depictions of the delicate and subtle emotions, such as the evasive love, *Under the Hawthorn Tree* highlights the sentimental in its representation. Apart from this, the film is categorised in wenyi genre, or literally means “literary and art” film (*wenyi pian*), an alternative to the blockbusters that dominated the film market in China. As its producer Zhang Weiping says, “[films are] just like one’s diet, if you eat too much stewed pork, it is not healthy and you will miss pak choi and bean curd; and to me, *Under the Hawthorn Tree* is the pak choi and bean curd, healthy and light” (“Interview with the crew”, 2010). Originally, Chinese wenyi films in the 1920s and 1930s were adapted from Hollywood melodramas, but the two genres were brewed and developed in different contexts and with distinctions. In her study of Chinese wenyi films, Yeh (2009) argues that Chinese wenyi films, from the inception, embrace humanity and aesthetic sophistication, and despite the fact that the genre has evolved into varied modes, such as socialist realism, romance and artistic pursuit, its sub-genres all highlight the depiction of the sentimental, which is also a heritage from Chinese novel genre of *Yuanyang hudie pai* (literally means *love birds and butterflies*). In this sense, by highlighting the sentimental and belonging to the wenyi genre, *Under the Hawthorn Tree* stands in contrast to the blockbusters of visual spectacles in the present film market. However, does this light dish really balance the “diet” of the film market by challenging the spectacular visual sensations, or is it just camouflaged to look like that?

In her study on sentimentalism, Chow (2007) believes that the sentimental, as a persistence and predominant affective mode of contemporary Chinese films, could be a more fruitful and productive discursive constellation, instead of just being emotional excess, because it “brings with it fundamental challenges to the cornerstones of Western progressive theoretical thinking”, and differs from the Western approach towards intellectual renewal and regeneration that emphasises on aesthetical and theoretical avant-gardism (p.14). In other words, the rising sentimentalism could be interpreted as an opposition to the institutional rationality, as well as to the flamboyant global visibility in the contemporary global film industry. Chow (2007) defines the sentimental as “the second, epistemic sense of visibility” which features a character of non-contemporaneity,

How do we come to terms with older—or increasingly estranged—forms of interpellations such as self-restraint, frugality, filial piety, compliance with collective obligations, inconspicuous consumption, modesty about exhibiting and thrusting oneself (including one’s body parts and sexual interests) forward as a cause in public, and so forth, wherein the key is not exactly—perhaps exactly not—becoming visible? (p.22)

However, Chow also warns that, the sentimental is materialised and “made palpable by visual objects such as filmic images but cannot in the end be reduced to them” (2007, p.23). Therefore, how will the sentimental, as a “second, epistemic sense of visibility”, challenge the “fetishistic imaging and magnification” of modernity and filmic visibility via the medium of film? Will this sentimentalism be reduced to another spectacle for incessant consumption?

Fetishized and Gendered Nostalgia

Apart from portraits of subtle emotions, the sentimentalism of nostalgia—purity and simplicity in the case of the film *Under the Hawthorn Tree*—is also visualised and fetishized in the image of the female protagonist, and commodified as a rare and desirable good in contemporary society. “The purest love story” is the key word for the promotion of *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, and in addition to the representation of self-restraining and the evasive love, the purity is also embodied in the image. Zhang believes, the two clean and unsophisticated faces, “with plain decoration (*baozhuang*), make the two novel stars attractive”, and “the audience will also see youth and the past time represented by them” (cited in Xie, 2010). The nostalgia for the past is thus objectified in the appearance, particularly, in the female body.

Zhang’s casting audition for his leading actress, commonly known as the “Mou Girl”, for each of his film is often extensively covered in media and has been an important part of the promotion campaign and a selling point, with the anticipation that the selected actress will become a next super star, which has been exemplified by the successes of Gong Li and Zhang Ziyi, two most famous female stars that have received national and global attention after starring in Zhang’s films. Moreover, the actresses also become an incarnation of feminine beauty, yet from a male director’s (audience’s) gaze. In the case of *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, the criterion for selecting the “Mou Girl” is essentially “pureness”, which is a key in the representation of the “purest love” and simpler living. Irritated during the casting audition, Zhang once commented that “there is no girl looks pure and innocent among those born after 1990”, which later triggered public discussions on the topic. In response to his previous remarks, Zhang further expresses his perception of purity and innocence:

I am not saying no, but few and difficult to find. To me, being pure and innocent is restricted within certain age group. Most of the high school students still look pure and innocent, but if a woman over forty claims herself to be pure and innocent, it is a little bit strange. In this information society, children receive more information in a faster way, so the feeling of pureness is easily lost once they get more information. (cited in Zheng, 2010)

In this sense, purity is being young and ignorant, and is objectified particular in the image of the high school student Zhou Dongyu, casting the female protagonist Jingqiu. In the film, one summer day Lao San buys a swimsuit for Jingqiu and invites her to swim in the river, but Jingqiu is too shy to wear the swimsuit. Under the encouragement of Lao San, Jingqiu puts on the swimsuit but wears a white blouse outside it. Jingqiu holds the blouse tightly while playing with water, and purity is conveyed through Jingqiu’s shyness and conservativeness. This image embodies and visualises purity, and it is also used in the film trailer and the poster. The plain style of the film poster—consisting of the two clean faces, the lush background landscape and the words “the purest lover story”—echoes its branding of simplicity. In the poster, Jingqiu looks melancholy in a white shirt with her head slightly bent, a little bit shy and a trace of fear, a state that Zhang calls the “evasive love”. This image—clean, simple, melancholy and fragile—discloses the fantasy of a pure girl, like a white flower bud, fresh and charming. This visualised purity, especially in the representation of the female protagonist, plays an important

role in the construction and promotion of the sentimentalism of nostalgia. In addition to youth, purity is also associated with being shy and introvert. Covered by the white blouse, the shyness and the evasiveness mystify the female body and facilitate imagination. Moreover, this shyness of Jingqiu also indicates her passiveness and “to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey, 1975). In their relationship, Jingqiu is often passive, while Lao San plays the dominant role: he takes care of Jingqiu, sends her family the tight supplies and decides to leave Jingqiu when he knows he has got leukaemia. In addition, he, as a mentor, also enlightens Jingqiu. For instance, when Jingqiu worries about being sent down to work in the rural areas, Lao San tells the ignorant girl not to worry because the policy may change soon as he has sensed the changing political atmosphere (in the waning years of the Cultural Revolution). In this sense, Lao San is the desiring subject while Jingqiu is to be looked at and enlightened. This passiveness and repressed female desire and awareness, however, are branded as purity and innocence.

The producer of the film Zhang Weiping has said that the marketing strategy for *Under the Hawthorn Tree* is “to let the audience directly see the bride without those fancy dowries” (cited in Yang, 2010). By comparing both the actress and the film to a bride, it triggers curiosity and imagination, as in the traditional Chinese wedding a bride is covered by a red veil. The mysteriousness, on the other hand, reinforces an erotic gaze and imagination of the female body. Furthermore, this association with a bride also feminizes the film and its representation of the past: mysterious, melancholy (as the bride often cries with her parents to how her reluctance to leave home), and more importantly charming from a male gaze. Therefore, the sentimentalism of nostalgia is gendered. During the Cultural Revolution, femininity was distorted and women were desexualised as socialist workers (Meng and Dai, 2004; Rofel, 1999). In critique of the masculinisation of women in the socialist period, films in the 1980s try to restore the traditional feminine beauty, such as in *Sacrificed Youth* (*Qingchun ji*, 1985) and *Army Nurse* (*Nuer lou*, 1985). However, the 2006 film *The Road* (*Fangxiang zhilu*) departs from the construction of femininity in earlier Cultural Revolution-themed films, and portrays a woman who sticks to an unfeminine image even in the 1990s, which as Zeng (2009) puts, though ambivalent in the representation of female desire, shows a resistance to “contemporary consumer culture that objectifies and fetishizes women” (p.113).

Under the Hawthorn Tree also entails a similar critique. Nevertheless, despite reduced cinematographic techniques and a plain style, the fascination of gaze never diminishes; rather, it is objectified and magnified purely in the female body. In response to the difference between the images of Jingqiu conjured up in the original novel (both innocent and sexy) and in the film, Zhang expresses his opinion on how to visualise the sentimentalism:

Face is one of the most important parts in the medium of film. The face should look smart and touching, whereas in literatures, you can have a perfect imagination. Therefore I have to make changes, not according to our imagination, but according to the requirements of the big screen. (cited in Xie, 2010)

The faces, the feminine beauty in particular, should accord with the frame of the camera lenses and the gaze of the (male) audience. In this sense, purity and nostalgia is objectified, as Zhang further conveys:

Therefore you have to use the film camera to document it, magnify it, and it will become a feeling permeating throughout the film. I think it is more important than the story.... The most important thing is the disposition (*qizhi*).... I have documented the dispositions, the feeling of cleanness and innocence of these two new stars. We

believe it is not the plot that is touching, but, to most people, it is this kind of disposition that moved them, isn't it? (Ibid.)

If the sentimentalism arises as a critique of the bombast of spectacles and visibility, then in the case of the film *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, how would the nostalgia challenge the spectacular and fetishized imagery via the medium of film that contributes to this fetishism? Or will it just fail to escape the curse of fetishization and objectification? The representation of pureness and innocence in the film and its promotion discloses the mechanism of gendering the sentimentalism of nostalgia. Through visualisation and mystification of Jingqiu's body, nostalgia is invoked by the melancholy appearance, and it is up to people's imagination. In this sense, the female body becomes the object of nostalgia and for longing. This kind of objectification of nostalgia further questions its potential as a resistance to the materialism and as moral redemption.

Nostalgia as Moral Redemption

In the film trailer, the film is branded "the purest love story in history" and "a true story that makes people cry" (*yige zhenshi de gushi, rang qianwan ren gandong luolei*). If these quotes still address the past, then at the end of the trailer, it directly links the past to the present, as the caption reads, "in today's consumer society, to feel the lost innocence again" (*zai shangpin shehui de jintian, ganshou na jiuwei de chunzhen*). This has relocated the film back into the contemporary social context and highlighted the significance of purity for the present, justifying the sentimentalism of nostalgia, with emphasis on purity and simplicity, to be a desirable and rare asset. In a similar vein, the director Zhang Yimou also says, "in today's impetuous society, people need a film that washes to the utmost lead gorgeous (*xijin qianhua*) and is genuine and sincere (*qingzhen yiqie*)" (cited in Yang, 2010). The pure love portrayed in the film *Under the Hawthorn Tree* is perceived as a reflection on the rampant materialism and deteriorating morality of contemporary society.

It is never surprising that this kind of longings for innocence and simple life arise from the backdrop of increasingly blatant money-worship in the contemporary society. The materialism was also manifested in the dating reality TV programmes that mushroomed around 2010. A 22-year old female model and a participant of a popular dating reality TV show "If You are the One (*Feicheng wurao*)", commented that "I'd rather cry in a BMW than laugh on the back seat of a bicycle" in one of the episodes in April 2010, which later caused an uproar among the public. On 9 June 2010, The State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) issued regulations, "The Circular of SARFT for Deepening the Regulation on Reality Dating TV programmes" and "The Circular of SARFT General Office for Strengthening Management of TV Programmes about Emotion Story", criticising and banning any immoral values such as money worship or materialism standards of marriage in these dating reality TV shows. The film *Under the Hawthorn Tree* was released amidst heated discussions on the declining morality and the materialism in love relationship, which facilitated the promotion of the films as a story about the lost pure love and justified it as the redemption of corrupted morality. Cui Yongyuan, a famous Chinese TV host has made similar comments regarding the significance of the pure love story in *Under the Hawthorn Tree* in his post on Weibo, a Chinese Twitter:

Jingqiu lost her lover, and we lost purity. We have discarded our nature while being indulged in industrial civilisation. We might suddenly realise our paleness and poverty when nothing left but being old and wealthy. I have seen Zhang Yimou's reflection and remembrance, which is of great value in an era when output and box office overshadow the ecological and cultural functions of films. (Cui, as cited in "Cui Yongyuan", 2010)

Purity and the longings for the simple love relationship are positioned as a critique of the materialism and degraded morality in present society, as well as a resistance to the consumerism. This has found its resonance in the film's audience, as a plethora of film reviews have shown. As *Under the Hawthorn Tree* solicit for a restoration of purity and simplicity and the anti-materialism and anti-market sentiments, however, to what extent, does the film and its representation impose challenges to the consumer culture? As a matter of fact, from above analysis of its representation and promotion, the sentimentalism of nostalgia in the film is objectified, gendered, and then branded as a rare good in the contemporary so as to boost the box office.

Conclusion

Throughout past decades, the Cultural Revolution has constantly been an important trope as well as a parameter for discussion on Chinese modernity and for addressing present concerns. Since the mid-1990s, there emerged a nostalgic mode in the popular discourses regarding the Cultural Revolution. Through personalised narratives, nostalgia for the socialist past suggests a protest against the contemporary consumerism. In a similar vein, the film *Under the Hawthorn Tree* portrays the purity and simplicity in the past, and highlights the sentimental through plain cinematic language. However, positioned as moral redemption of the materialism and a deviance from the bombast of visual spectacles of the commercial films, the sentimentalism of nostalgia in *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, is inevitably objectified in the female body, and thus becomes a gendered nostalgia and feminizes the past as a passive yet desirable good. Nostalgia is in essence ambivalent as it contains so many slippery inclinations, some "restorative" and some "reflective" (Boy, 2001). The sentimentalism of nostalgia encompasses potential for both imagination and fetishization, both resistance and reconciliation. The personalized and often eroticized narratives of the past, from which nostalgia derives, fill in the fissures of those authorized discourses. While being perceived as alternatives and resistances, the nostalgic narratives require a close scrutiny of their criticality.

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