

Shannon May , “Power and Trauma in Chinese Film: Experiences of Zhang Yuan and the Sixth Generation,” *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 156-160.

Soon after Zhang Yuan’s first film, Mama, was released in 1990 the State-owned Film Distribution Corporation pulled all prints without explanation. After independently financing, filming and exhibiting Beijing Bastards, Zhang was officially banned from feature production in 1994 by the Chinese government. Other artists were directed not to work with him; companies were ordered not to rent equipment to him. Zhang was branded a disseminator of “spiritual pollution.”<sup>vi</sup>

As the first film made entirely outside the State system since the 1951 nationalization of the industry, Zhang’s Beijing Bastards marks a new movement in Chinese film. Even before the first shot, the audience is warned that this is a new form of filmmaking. Since 1951, all films commence with two standard frames appearing in sequence: the government-issued license number and the name of the State studio responsible for the project. Beijing Bastards has no distribution license number and displays the name “Beijing Bastards Raw Shot Production Group” instead of one the State studios. By taking the name Beijing Bastards for both the film and the production group, Zhang implicates himself and his filmic practice as an illegitimate but unwilling-to-be-denied offspring of Beijing. The double metonymic practice that uses “Beijing” to simultaneously refer to China as a whole and to the CCP’s seat of power serves to complicate the title. Zhang and the narrative encapsulated in his film are situated as the bastard sons of the Party and Chinese nation. Moreover, the Chinese characters translated as “raw shot,” *shelie*, convey multiple meanings: while foreshadowing the unfinished quality of the film, the phrase also carries the double image of film as a raw, tearing edge and a festering wound. Zhang and

his peers—the filmmakers of the new Sixth Generation<sup>ii</sup>—announce themselves and their films as a fissure in the Chinese cultural and political landscape.

In his first post-1994 project, Zhang not only flouted the ban against his work, but the taboo against homosexuality as well. East Palace West Palace encodes an analogous relationship between Zhang's own forbidden position as independent filmmaker and that of the homosexual protagonist of his film. After reading an article in Beijing's *Life News* about an AIDS research institute that used police to force gay men to fill out surveys, Zhang focused on the oppression and discrimination that gay men face:

When I first began the script, there were a lot of characters: policemen, sociologists, gay men. As I wrote, I found the key to all this was power, and the connection between sex and power. Why did the police have the power to make these people talk about their lives? Why would the gay men reveal their private lives to the police? (Interview)

In Zhang's final script there are only two characters: A Lan, the homosexual, and Shi Xiaohua, the policeman. Zhang made it clear during our interview that while the film's surface reflects sexually charged interactions between a gay man and a police officer, the significations of the film go far deeper. He confides "I love my country and I love the Party just as A Lan loves the policeman" (Interview).

A Lan's love of the policeman, Shi, is repeatedly expressed through sadomasochistic fantasies of being dominated. Zhang's own statement parallels the dialectical phrasing of A Lan's avowal of devotion to the policeman, Shi: "The convict loves the executioner. The thief loves the jail keeper. We [homosexuals] love you [policeman]. There is no other choice." The mixed compulsion and desire felt by A Lan—and Zhang—for the human incarnation of the power that labels him "social refuse" resembles that of long-term psychological trauma victims. According to Judith Herman, systematic, repetitive, psychological trauma induces the victim to

identify with the perpetrator. Such “methods are designed to instill terror and helplessness, to destroy the victim’s sense of self in relation to others, and to foster a pathologic attachment to the perpetrator . . .” (88). A Lan revels in memories of his mother's admonitions: “When I was bad, she always used the same threat: ‘be good or the policeman will come to get you.’ I loved that sentence. The policeman was coming to get me! I waited.” It is not the threat of punishment, but rather that the threat was never fulfilled that disturbs him. Just as A Lan is compelled to seduce the policeman, Zhang is drawn toward the Party/State. Despite “treatment” for his homosexual “illness” through emetic therapy, A Lan continues to frequent the park, knowing the police will question, and possibly arrest, him. Rather than avoiding mental and physical punishment, A Lan actively pursues it.

Despite explicit state prohibitions, Zhang, like others of the Sixth Generation, continued to make independent films throughout the 1990s. Set against the silence and repression of post-Tiananmen China, Beijing Bastard’s focus on *liumang* culture,<sup>iii</sup> and in particular, rock star Cui Jian, who provided the “soundtrack” for the demonstrations in Tiananmen, begs for the State to punish Zhang’s impudence. Zhang refused to bow to state censure, making a clandestine short on the Tiananmen Incident as well as a life-based feature on family madness and dysfunction. Even after being banned, Zhang continued to challenge the PRC’s system of control.

The very title of East Palace West Palace marks the symbolic realm of the film as the discourse between the center and the margin, the official and the banned. The title refers to the slang term used by gay men for the bathrooms on either side of the Forbidden Palace, the mythic seat of State power in the center of Beijing. The choice of this location flouts the CCP’s taboo against homosexuality by placing the proscribed Other at the heart of the PRC’s Self.

Zhang explores the need of the disavowed to return and the fragmented to seek wholeness through A Lan's attempt to seduce Shi. Inversion of the victim-abuser-rescuer dialectic<sup>iv</sup> begins from the outset when A Lan gives the policeman who will become both his captor and prey an off-balance kiss. In the darkness of the garden-park, the shot holds A Lan as he turns to face the blinding flashlight in Shi's hands. While the focus of the shot is on A Lan, Shi's profile remains in view. A Lan's lips give a glimmer of a smile as Shi's arm reaches to his shoulder and he is chastised for his homosexual pursuits. The over-the-shoulder shot changes abruptly as Shi pushes A Lan out of the frame. The next cut interjects another officer berating other gay men as "social refuse." The scene cuts to a silhouetted A Lan and Shi stumbling along the walkway. The shot pulls back. A Lan and Shi turn toward the camera. Shi's arm holds A Lan gruffly about the shoulder. As A Lan jerkily turns against Shi's body, managing to steal a kiss, the shot collapses into a close-up of the two men's faces. The camera cuts to Shi's shocked face. He is silent. Even as focus is turned to Shi and a confrontation is depicted in the narrative, A Lan remains in view. Shi walks forward, edging A Lan off-screen. The camera jumps to a close-up of A Lan's face: his eyes glisten, his mouth smiles. Backing away, he nibble-licks his finger. Simultaneously, Shi is pulled back on-screen, his back to the camera. The camera cuts to a close-up of Shi's face. Silent and still, eyes wide and glazed he appears as in a trance.

Not only has the camera united the two men in film, but in Shi's silence in the scene also reveals his own desire—and impotence. As the PRC's frontline against homosexuality, Shi should have immediately arrested A Lan. Not only is he a homosexual, but he is also predatory—worst of all, his prey is a representative of the CCP's power. Shi's frozen silence reveals a confused pleasure rather than the rage the film leads us to expect from the policeman. While the camera first creates the classic subjective view of Shi gazing at A Lan after the kiss,

the next cut takes a close-up of Shi's face. The camera does not, however, complete the second subjective cycle; it does not return to the object—to A Lan. Shi's ability to possess his desired object is undermined.

Although A Lan is diegetically framed as the enunciator of the narrative due to extensive use of flashback, he is also depicted as impotent. Each of his flashbacks relates attempted sexual experiences. In each he is silent. He cannot speak to his only female crush in middle school; he does not respond to the male factory worker who encourages the other workers to beat him after sex; he undresses silently and then lies on his stomach awaiting his male teacher. However, he is only playing a role in these flashbacks; they draw out the latent sadistic desire A Lan reads in Shi's eyes. Despite his self-described passivity in social and sexual roles, A Lan is the instigator of social and physical contact with Shi. If A Lan did not act out in full-view of Shi, the policeman would not come.

Despite construction of mutual desire, discrepancies between the men's fantasies are evinced when Shi berates A Lan into dressing as a woman. Although A Lan faces Shi, he orders A Lan to "put on these [women's] clothes so that I can see your real face." Notably, A Lan's back is to the spectator. Even as Self and Other unite in subject-object desire, the nature of desire is split off and repressed. Shi cannot see A Lan as a man. By enforcing the pretense of sexual difference, Shi refuses to see A Lan as a reflection of himself. To accept A Lan as a man while succumbing to his own desire would force Shi to admit that in a profound, primal sense he and A Lan are the same: the Other is the Self. To see A Lan as a man is to be unable to hold on to a definitive delineation between oppressor and oppressed. Such bivalent vision would force Shi to consciously relinquish his (assumed) sole possession of the phallus. He cannot accept such a castration. On the contrary, A Lan's love is based on a reflexive recognition of himself in Shi.

He identifies as both seduced and seducer, tormented and tormenter. Shi's need to maintain a sexual power differential disrupts A Lan's identification, however. When Shi keeps demanding A Lan put on the women's clothes confiscated from a local transvestite, A Lan cries "This is not what I want."

Shi's inability to see A Lan as a reflexive image of himself parallels the CCP's inability to recognize Zhang as an integral part of the Chinese self. If the State were reflexively to share in Zhang's cinematic fantasy by endorsing the vision in his films, the State would be unable to cling to its dominant position. It would no longer be able to perceive itself as both the enunciator and executor of China's moral and political imperatives. Zhang must necessarily be repudiated. Just a few days before the 1996 Ministry of Radio, Film and Television regulations<sup>v</sup> explicitly prohibiting film production not in cooperation with the studio system came into effect Zhang smuggled the negatives of East Palace West Palace to France for post-production. Humiliated by Zhang's continued defiance and success, including the selection of East Palace West Palace as an official entry in the Un Certain Regard division of the 1997 Cannes Film Festival, the Chinese State confiscated Zhang's passport upon his return to China from Hong Kong on April 10, 1997.

Even Zhang's second official banishment from the film industry could not silence him. Zhang's continued seduction and torment of the State culminated in his cooperation with the State-owned Xian Film Studio to release his first domestically distributed film in a decade. Seventeen Years, focused on the return of an estranged daughter to her parents after seventeen years in prison, opened to sold-out, teary-eyed audiences in December 1999.

From the marginalized periphery, Zhang returns. And awaits the policeman.

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<sup>i</sup> Deng Xiaoping defined spiritual pollution at the Second Plenum of the Twelfth Central Committee in October 1983 as "all varieties of corrupt and decadent ideologies of the bourgeoisie and other exploiting classes . . . distrust of the socialist and communist cause and the Communist Party leadership," qtd. in Oksenberg, Sullivan and Lambert, 401.

<sup>ii</sup> The term "generation" has been used by Chinese film historians to catalogue film directors into periods, taking into account both the time when a director first began making films as well as directorial style and production methods. A new generation is marked by an abrupt stylistic change that tends to coincide with the graduation of a new class of directors from the Beijing Film Academy. The previous five periods are generally accepted as: 1905-1932, 1932-1949, 1950-1960, 1960-1980, and 1980-1992. Once labeled as a member of a particular generation, a director is known as being of that generation regardless of the length of his career.

<sup>iii</sup> Traditionally, liumang is a pejorative term denoting immoral and offensive behavior, conjuring images of gangsters and hooligans. After Tiananmen, China's disillusioned youth appropriated liumang as the code word for the alienated urban rebel who seeks to distance himself from State culture and its official definition of terms. Liumang's previous negative associations with dishonesty and criminality have been superseded by attributes such as individualism, defiance, and independence.

<sup>iv</sup> See Layton 130 for discussion of the vectors along which victims of prolonged trauma tend to construct relationships, in particular the triangulation of victim, abuser, and rescuer.

<sup>v</sup> On July 1, 1996 the Ministry of Radio, Film and Television, the regulatory agency that then oversaw the activities of the Film Bureau and the Film Distribution Corporation, issued a new 64-article system of regulations. In order to explicitly prohibit work outside of the official studio system, the regulations required that no film could be produced, distributed, exhibited locally or abroad, or imported without prior approval at all censorship levels. While vague, the 1996 regulations do outline seven content areas that would be forbidden: anything that endangers the

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Chinese State, discloses state secrets, libels or slanders others, or promotes pornography, feudal superstition or excessive violence. A if the vagueness of the first six prohibitions were not enough to give the censors free reign, the seventh taboo was listed simply as “other content forbidden by state regulations.” Punishment for those filmmakers who violate the regulations include fines ranging between five to ten times any profits gained from illicit productions and the possibility of criminal prosecution.