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Precarious Nostalgia in *Youth* [芳华] (2017): Cinematic Memory Before and After Revolution

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Abstract

This essay investigates how nostalgia, as a mode of engaging with the past, changes in post-socialist Chinese cinema, with a particular focus on the film *Youth* [芳华] (Feng Xiaogang, 2017). Although once used as an ideological tool by the Chinese Communist Party, nostalgia's status becomes more contested under neoliberal economic conditions. Rather than offering a unified representation of the past, nostalgia begins to serve multiple objectives: political, personal, commercial and subversive. Revolutionary symbols and historical events, such as model dramas and the Sino-Vietnamese War, are not only commodified but also stripped of their historical context, imbued with a more generic emotional appeal, and deployed to tacitly resist dominant political narratives. Nostalgia has become a way of navigating state authority, market interests, and individual memory, but it also works to subtly reshape the narratives on which traditional Chinese cinema once depended.

Keywords: nostalgia, Chinese youth cinema, Cultural Revolution, neo-liberalism, post-socialism

Introduction

Although Chinese youth in the late nineteenth century had strong desires to directly participate in revolutionary movements, as the political and economic environments changed, so did their national memory. The tradition of youth-led revolutions in China dates back to 1894, with the outbreak of the First Sino-Japanese War. This tradition was reinforced in 1919 by the subsequent emergence of the May Fourth Movement, which set the foundation for China's modernization program.[1] Since then, the youth-led revolutionary tradition, and its accompanying imagery, have undergone several significant changes mediated by different forms of nostalgia. Although the close relationship between the youth and revolution was largely preserved with the establishment of the Communist regime, the economic deregulation reforms of 1978 loosened the link.[2] They were, finally, violently decoupled in 1989 in Tiananmen Square. By 1992, with Deng Xiaoping's "Southern Talk," what was mere economic reform soon became the "market economy." Post-socialist China, defined by the overlap of socialist-statehood and capitalism, would leave the idea of a revolutionary youth as, at best, a mere memory and, at worst, an unacknowledged legacy.[3] Cinematic representations of Chinese youth followed suit. Such representations were depoliticized and decontextualized even, or especially, when situated within the context of the Cultural Revolution. The idea of direct, radical action was transformed into a sentimental nostalgia, and politics became a matter of passive consumption.

Although more recent Chinese cinema makes frequent use of nostalgia, this becomes even more prevalent after 2010, evidenced primarily by contemporary cinema's increasing reliance on *Bildungsroman* plots and retrospective storytelling to chart the psychological and physical developments of its protagonists.[4] Representative of this tendency—especially in their retellings of the Cultural Revolution—include *Under the Hawthorn Tree* [山楂树之恋] (Zhang Yimou, 2010), *Youth* [芳华] (Feng Xiaogang, 2017), and *Forever Young* [无问西东] (Li Fangfang, 2018). Although these films often laud adolescence rather than the violence it was often subject to, they

nonetheless introduce new and important images to contemporary Chinese cinema: the heroes of the past are presented, for instance, as figures of complex nostalgia or as subtly ironic cultural icons. As the national memory of the Cultural Revolution began to fragment, largely owing to the standardization of historical narratives and state censorship, these two cinematic constructions became increasingly significant.

Nostalgia is not only a longing for the past but also an index between that past and the present. The term itself was coined in 1688, when Swiss physician Johannes Hofer identified a common medical disorder affecting displaced soldiers, and described it as a melancholic condition marked by acute longing for home.[5] Centuries after Hofer, Fred Davis has argued that nostalgia is less influenced by the temporal distance of past events than by their contrast—or more precisely, how individuals construct these contrasts—with current events, moods, and contexts.[6] What is important, in other words, is the *discontinuity* between past and present. While Stuart Tannock also highlights this discontinuity, he places more emphasis on how the past is constructed or imagined as a prelapsarian world. We might say that for Tannock, nostalgia establishes both continuities *and* discontinuities between this prelapsarian past and postlapsarian present.[7] His proposition concerning the three stages of nostalgia may help us understand China's own modernization process: the socialist period represents the prelapsarian past; the Cultural Revolution and Tiananmen Square constitute the lapse; and the contemporary, post-socialist era characterizes the postlapsarian phase.

Within the context of more recent neoliberal developments, this process has nonetheless become more contradictory, multifaceted and discontinuous. On the one hand, nostalgia serves as an important instrument of political and social control for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). On the other hand, nostalgia has already been used by film directors to question and resist state narratives and policies surrounding the Cultural Revolution and political conversations more generally. Disguised by emotional solace, directors use nostalgia to prompt audiences to reflect on the past, and may even suggest

discontent with the present.

A consideration of *Youth* can illuminate these developments. In contrast to many other films about the Cultural Revolution, which tend to accentuate the traumatic experiences of ordinary young people, *Youth* romanticizes these events in a largely commercial way. Additionally, the film portrays the experiences of young performers in a military art troupe through the 1970s, early 1980s, early 1990s, and late 2010s. This temporal span—from the Cultural Revolution to the contemporary era—illustrates how the relationship between Chinese youth and revolution has transitioned from intimacy to detachment. Furthermore, invoking the model dramas and cultural icons of the Mao era, *Youth* not only reflects on China's changing social and cultural traditions since the 1970s but also reveals how the discontinuities between those traditions, along with the revolutions, have been memorialized. On the one hand, through his depiction of the tragic life stories of underprivileged youths, Liu Feng and He Xiaoping, director Feng Xiaogang depicts a growing disillusionment with socialism. On the other hand, and perhaps more importantly, *Youth* demonstrates how nostalgia—those shifting and discontinuous dialogues between past and present—has shaped post-socialist, neo-liberal, contemporary China. Before examining *Youth* in greater detail, it is important to first (1) contextualize its place in the evolution of cinematic representations of Chinese youth, (2) understand Feng's own position in the traditions of commercial, comic, and art cinema, and (3) examine the broader, historical relations among post-socialist nostalgia, neoliberalism, and precarity.

Nostalgic Youth

Youth revolutionaries frequently appear in Communist-era films: *Letter with Feather* [鸡毛信] (Shi Hui, 1954), *Song of Youth* [青春之歌] (Cui Wei & Chen Huaikai, 1959), and *Red Detachment of Women* [红色娘子军] (Xie Jin, 1961), for instance, all depict young revolutionaries sacrificing themselves for the good of the nation.[8] Such films, which idealized these "heroic agents" of revolution, were primarily used for

propaganda purposes. After the Cultural Revolution, and the profound sociopolitical changes that followed it, the idealized representation of youth began to include more critical perspectives that sought, under the guise of realism, to depict the "actual" experiences of young people during social upheavals. Early works, such as *Hibiscus Town* [芙蓉镇] (Xie Jin, 1986), *The Maple* [枫] (Zhang Yi, 1980), and *The Blue Kite* [蓝风筝] (Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1993), portray the tragic aspects of the Cultural Revolution through melodrama.[9] These films help us see the historical transformations in everyday life at a time when the traditions of socialist-era China, which had once sought to narrativize that life, were becoming undone. The young people depicted are no longer mere representatives of collective identities or revolutionary ideals, for instance, but boast complex inner and individualized struggles too.

After 1984, the authorities carried out a "total negation" of the Cultural Revolution, which was believed to legitimize Deng Xiaoping's regime and its policy of economic liberalization.[10] However, the authorities were also concerned that further exploration of the Cultural Revolution, especially its atrocities, might undermine the CCP's governance, and thus adopted a repressive stance on the issue.[11] Hence, since the growth of the market economy in the 1990s, Chinese cinema has adopted a more nostalgic view of the Cultural Revolution—primarily, it seems, to negotiate the censorship system—starting with *In the Heat of the Sun* [阳光灿烂的日子] (Jiang Wen, 1995). This approach, as Jing Meng has argued, became more common after China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001, which inaugurated the privatization of the Chinese film industry. According to Meng, if contemporary portrayals of the Cultural Revolution tend to rely on fragmented memories and personal nostalgia, this is because such a tone is "safer."[12] Zhun Gu, however, is less sympathetic to the post-socialist nostalgia of, for instance, *In the Heat of the Sun*. Gu suggests that the Cultural Revolution, and China's socialist past more generally, have been reimagined for purely ideological reasons: largely to legitimize economic reform and CCP power.[13] Nostalgia in post-socialist Chinese cinema is thus not merely a sentimental recollection for Gu; it is also complicit with the mechanisms of political control,

social mobilization, and historical revision.

Although *Youth* is adapted from Yan Geling's semi-autobiographical novel *You Touched Me* [芳华] (2017), it is also informed by the director's personal memories.[14] It opens with a lively depiction of young performers in a military art troupe who, because of their experiences of the political, social, and cultural changes around the period of economic reform, become disillusioned with the socialist ethos. Narrated by the performer Xiao Suizi, the film mainly focuses on the life stories of the talented dancers, He Xiaoping and Liu Feng, among others. He Xiaoping believes that she will be able to escape her disadvantaged background by joining the troupe, while Liu Feng is what some might call a pure altruist in the Maoist sense. Despite He Xiaoping's talent, other performers from more affluent family backgrounds continue to bully her, and she becomes a nurse in the Sino-Vietnamese War. Meanwhile, Liu Feng falls in love with Lin Dingding, another member of the troupe. After being falsely accused of sexually harassing her and subsequently dismissed, he is deemed to have a "corroded" mind, and later becomes a soldier in the war—during which time He Xiaoping is driven to madness and Liu Feng loses an arm. Even though both continue to be ostracized, even after the Reform and Opening-up period, the film's conclusion sees Liu Feng and He Xiaoping reunited, living ordinary yet contented lives.

The ambiguity of *Youth*'s representation of socialism has prompted numerous public and academic debates. When the film was released in 2017, it triggered a particularly heated discussion about its depiction of the Sino-Vietnamese War, for instance. The war was a short but bloody border conflict lasting from mid-February to mid-March 1979. Authorities in China officially claimed to "teach Vietnam a lesson" for invading Cambodia and overthrowing China-backed Khmer Rouge, mistreating ethnic Chinese in Vietnam, and asserting dominance in the region. The war ended with China's withdrawal, claiming its objectives were met. Traditionally whitewashed as an out-and-out victory to distract from the heavy casualties sustained, the war remains a sensitive topic for the Chinese government.[15] Other critics argue that the director packaged the political traumas of the Sino-

Vietnamese War and Cultural Revolution into a commercial product, which undermined the work of genuine critical reflection on that past. Other academics draw attention to the uniqueness of Feng Xiaogang's cinematic style. Meng, for instance, suggests that Feng's own cinematic trajectory is largely the reverse of many Fifth-Generation directors such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, who shifted from art-house cinema to commercial blockbusters. However, continuities remain throughout his oeuvre. His early urban comedy films, for example, employ satire and social commentary to appeal to large audiences while remaining ideologically and politically ambivalent. Feng's recent films, such as *Aftershock* [唐山大地震] (2010), *Back to 1942* [一九四二] (2012) and *Youth*, all of which touch on national traumas in China (i.e., the Tangshan earthquake, the Sino-Japanese War, and the Cultural Revolution), in fact exhibit a similar ideological and political ambivalence.[16] It is precisely Feng's career trajectory from commercial to art-house, alongside his long-standing political ambiguity, that helps to explain the idiosyncrasies of nostalgia's function in *Youth*. The following section gives a brief account of Feng's "reverse" trajectory.

The In-Betweenness of Feng Xiaogang

That Feng belongs, properly speaking, neither to the Fifth Generation of Chinese directors (e.g. Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou) nor to the Sixth Generation (e.g. Jia Zhangke), is not only a result of having abandoned his studies at the Beijing Film Academy owing to financial constraints. It is also, perhaps more fundamentally, because of his commitment to what he calls a "common people-focused" cinematic style. Such a style differs from the Fifth Generation's emphasis on grand narratives and trauma aesthetics, but it is also distinct from the Sixth Generation's underground or "realist" filmmaking. However, Feng's "common-people-focused" style has drawn the ire of some critics too: "Feng's films seem shallow and playful when compared to the astonishingly exquisite visuality, exotic autoethnography, relentless criticism of the dark side of Chinese history, society and politics in films by Fifth and Sixth Generation filmmakers."[17] Academic

discussions of Feng's style have mainly centered on his "New Year Films" [贺岁片]: *Party A, Party B* [甲方乙方] (1997), *Be There or Be Square* [不见不散] (1998), *Sorry Baby!* [没完没了] (1999), *Sigh* [一声叹息] (2000), *Big Shot's Funeral* [大腕] (2002), *Cell Phone* [手机] (2003), and *A World Without Thieves* [天下无贼] (2004). With reference to Stuart Hall's seminal paper *Deconstructing the Popular* (1981), Rui Zhang understands Feng's cinematic style in terms of a "doubleness"—a simultaneous containment and resistance, where the latter alludes to Feng's tendency to express social concerns and the former to his market success.[18] The implication is that Feng endorses the status quo by offering critiques for which the solutions are contained within the system, amounting to something like conservative reformism. Such a critique may well extend to *Youth* too, since Liu Feng and He Xiaoping seem to achieve a relatively happy ending despite earlier hardships. Haomin Gong argues, in a similar fashion, that Feng, careful not to upset his commercial interests, employs a "cultural intervention[ist]" approach, where solutions rely on merely intervening in the cultural—rather than in the economic or political—plane.[19]

Youth is not Feng's first film to employ nostalgic techniques. In fact, his use of nostalgia can be traced back to *Cell Phone.* The latter offers a nostalgic portrayal of pre-modern Chinese society in juxtaposition with modernity, and, broadly speaking, became the basis for current scholarship's two interpretations of how nostalgia works in Feng's films. The first interpretation sees nostalgia as a form of contemporary social critique. In *Cell Phone* and *A World Without Thieves,* Feng contrasts a pure, traditional past with a corrupted modern present by tracing the structural transformations of China's evolving social spaces, eventually ending in post-socialist China.[20] Similarly, James Keogh and Brian Yecies identify nostalgia—and fantasy too—as cultural critique in the satire, *Personal Tailor* [私人订制] (2013). They argue that nostalgia functions not merely to promote optimism, or to smooth out China's turbulent history, but also indirectly challenges the national discourse on the "Chinese Dream"—primarily through satirical depictions of failed personal aspirations and dystopian narratives.[21] The second interpretation focuses on Feng's incorporation of commercial elements

within the context of his nostalgic narratives. *Cell Phone* and *A World Without Thieves* heavily feature brand integrations, including Motorola and Nokia mobile phones, China Mobile and China Unicom telecommunications services, HP laptops, and Canon cameras. Indeed, Wing-Fai Leung contends that Feng may represent one of the most successful examples of advertising integration in Chinese commercial cinema, even if the status of this integration remains contested. Leung also suggests that these products may be working indirectly to critique consumerism and commercialization. For both interpretations, however, Feng's films present "contested social realities," and endeavor to balance profit, censorship, and Feng's own cinematic voice.[22]

Although Feng's films have addressed various aspects of Chinese national trauma since at least 2010, *Youth,* as already mentioned, marks his first attempt to explore historical events that potentially challenge the legitimacy of the CCP. Initially scheduled for release on 1 October 2017 (China's National Day), the film was abruptly rescheduled by authorities just days before its premiere. Some journalists speculated that scenes depicting the politically sensitive Sino-Vietnamese War caused discomfort among regulatory bodies as it could lead to veterans gathering to demand their rights, including increases in pensions and improvements in welfare.[23] However, no official explanation was provided. Others conjectured that censors felt uneasy about releasing a film that did not positively portray the CCP before the crucial National Party Congress. When it was eventually released in China, portions of the film were censored: the version eventually screened in cinemas was twelve minutes shorter than the version that screened at the Toronto Film Festival on 28 September 2017.[24] Despite these interventions, the film's eventual approval for theatrical release nonetheless suggests that the CCP perhaps still values certain nostalgic representations of the Mao era, and maintains an interest in promoting the revolutionary youth image, insofar as it aligns with national ideology.

There may be biographic reasons for Feng's vision of this period of Chinese history too. Unlike other Fifth-Generation directors, Feng grew up in a Beijing "grand courtyard" [大院]. After having his application to the Beijing Film Academy declined, Feng joined

a Military Art Ensemble as a set designer. From the vantage of his childhood, the Cultural Revolution represented a period of relative peace and tranquility.[25] In *Cinema of Feng Xiogang*, Zhang shows that Feng's early films portray the Maoist era with intense nostalgia and sentimentality rather than critique and disillusionment.[26] However, *Youth*'s disillusionment with socialism marks a decisive shift in his biographic and theoretical relation to Chinese history, seen above all in the character of Liu Feng, whose image as a paragon of collective morality (i.e., a socialist hero) is gradually stripped away to reveal personal desires and vulnerability.

Precarious Nostalgia

It is worth turning to current academic debates surrounding *Youth,* as well as other revolutionary narratives, to see how they make sense of nostalgia's different and changing forms: emotional, aesthetic, ideological, industrial and commercial. Qijun Han, drawing on Svetlana Boym's theory of reflective nostalgia, interprets *Youth* as a contemplative response to a traumatic past. Boym suggests that nostalgia can be both retrospective and prospective, and Han argues that its deployment in *Youth* serves as a response to the traumatic past while simultaneously conjuring a more promising future. The film's use of melodrama, revolutionary music from the socialist era, and symbolic artefacts (such as clothing) establishes a sense of nostalgia that, while emotionally resonant, is still politically acceptable.[27] Ying Zhu also discusses the film in terms of "reflective nostalgia," but refunctions the term into what she calls "nostophobia," or the fear of "coming home"; this not only connotes the fear of coming to terms with the historical reality of the Cultural Revolution, but may also suggest an ambiguity in the object of desire—a past that we both fear and covet. Nostalgia and nostophobia "are [thus] modes of memory that are closely connected with but also different from each other," for while the film tends to aestheticize traumatic memory through representations of an idealized youth, nostalgia is not quite the same as the romanticization of a brutal past.[28] For Meng, nostalgia in *Youth*

is primarily a strategy used to bypass censorship. This is why the national traumatic history, and people in the socialist era who may have been fanatical about that history, are deliberately downplayed as mere footnotes to the protagonists' coming-of-age stories.[29] Previous scholarly discussions tend to see nostalgia as a deliberately diluted representation of national trauma that allows for all the emotional pull of its affect while depoliticizing its more subversive implications.

Few have addressed the inner instability of nostalgia itself as a discursive or economic practice, especially in the context of neoliberalism and post-socialist China. By post-socialism, some scholars are thinking along the lines of Sheldon Lu: the term denotes a "cultural logic" that tries to "negotiate the residual socialist past, and the emergent capitalist present to concoct new imaginaries of a transitional society."[30] Xudong Zhang moves beyond the mere "cultural" sphere and defines post-socialism as a historical and contemporary condition wherein socialist states and capitalist economic systems overlap with one another.[31] Often omitted from these discussions, as Gu has noted, however, is a consideration of neoliberalism, with its emphasis on free market policies, which have played a crucial role in shaping the political economy of post-socialist China.[32] I argue that nostalgia can be understood in this broader context, as a far more radical mechanism for negotiating these more material realities, a sort of "back and forth" between entertainment, politics, and the director's own voice. To see how, we must first consider the notion of "precarity," however.

Precarity has become a critical term in these discussions. Guy Standing famously characterizes the new era of insecure employability in terms of the "precariat" (combining "precarious" and "proletariat"). The precariat are themselves figures of in-betweenness, belonging neither to the old working class, who possess long-term, stable employment with fixed working hours, nor to the middle class. They constitute "a class in the making," even if not yet "a class for itself."[33] Judith Butler extends precarity in their definition of "precariousness" beyond labor. They see it as an ontological condition of interdependence and vulnerability shared by all, and uses it to

critique the neoliberal fantasy of the autonomous, self-sufficient individual, where the latter obscures real-world inequalities and structural violence.[34] Precarity has become a theoretical framework that attempts to reveal the often hidden ways people are marginalized within the specific context of neoliberalism. It is with this in mind that Sanfor F. Schram, in his analysis of Occupy Wall Street, suggests that "precarity" is not just a static, philosophical abstraction but a discursive practice operative in political movements in recent years.[35] The age of precarity marks an age of changing relationships to nostalgia. Nostalgia, especially as it relates to the Cultural Revolution in post-socialist China, has shown itself to be unstable, continuously negotiating among audience, market needs, and censorship. *Youth* and other films' retrospective approaches to revolution also show a precarious discursive practice, an instability or "discontinuity" between past and present—as Davis and Tannock have argued—that desires the stability of some stable, prelapsarian world. Keeping in mind Gu's idea that "nostalgia is constructed by the post-socialist human condition (normally seen as a sense of discontinuity) to engage with the influence of capitalism through imagining a past time or place set in the period of socialism," we might appreciate that just such a discontinuity exemplifies the nostalgic practices of *Youth* in its attempt to represent and reinterpret memories of Chinese revolutionary history.[36] This also helps us see how socialist ideals become disenchanted and deconstructed, creating an unstable relation between official portrayals of socialism and the material and political ironies of the present situation.

Commodifying Revolution

Youth does not simply revive or vaunt "red" memories; it rather demonstrates the symbolic and visual rupture among socialist ideology, present-day neoliberal precarity, and the director's implicit interrogation and critique of the status quo. Through the performative duplication of revolutionary imagery, the film detaches itself from the original political context and thereby unsettles the coherence

of official historical narratives. If we call such a mode of nostalgia "decontextualized" or "de-historicized," it is only in the sense that it unsettles or disturbs the official version of history. In any case, such a logic not only shapes the film's re-enactment of revolutionary symbols but also extends to its depiction of historical events, such as the Sino-Vietnamese War, which is similarly displaced.

Figure 1. Original performance of *Women Soldiers*.

Figure 2. *Youth's* re-enactment explicitly shows the female body.

Vanessa Agnew uses the term "re-enactment" in the context of an "affective turn" in historical narratives.[37] It is in this sense that *Youth* "re-enacts" a scene from the "model opera" [样板戏], *Women Soldiers of the Grasslands* [草原女民兵] (Fu Jie, 1976). The sequence occurs at the beginning of the film, when He Xiaoping joins the military art troupe and watches them perform a four-minute rehearsal. In the original, the dance sequence depicts how female soldiers fight an undefined enemy and worship Mao. However, the *Youth* re-enactment presents only the dance and dispenses with the war scenes. The leader of the rehearsal frequently instructs the dancers to be more focused, more energetic and softer in their movements by extending their bodies in a sexualized manner. While the dancers in the original opera wear long skirts that cover their bodies (Figure 1), the dancers in *Youth* wear modern t-shirts and shorts, supposedly to reveal "more of their attractive bodies for the eroticized gaze" (Figure 2).[38]

In her analysis of this re-enactment, Meng argues that Feng transforms the model opera into a spectacle, deliberately removing the political elements while preserving its formal structure and cultural symbolism. The women become an image of a nostalgic visual pleasure subject to the male gaze.[39] But this transformation also draws attention to how the revolutionary imagery of *Women Soldiers*, in which femininity is used to serve a political objective, is itself rendered ideological. Although female characters were often central to model operas and films of the socialist period, their feelings, desires, and bodies tended to be eclipsed. They become mere metaphors, "daughter[s] of the party," at worst subject to torture or rescued by CCP men, at best merely fighting as automata on behalf of the party.[40] Moreover, although there is no clearly defined enemy in *Women Soldiers*, the narrative still reflects the militarism of revolutionary ideology, the need for unconditional obedience to the party and its directives. Although *Youth* also boasts an indeterminate enemy, it extends this indeterminacy to the idea of "revolution" itself, which is aestheticized through a precariously commercialized mode of nostalgia. It asks us to consider how nostalgia may already have been "commercialized," even as early as the Mao era, as Jinhua

Figure 3. Liu Feng sees the unspecified enemy from a distance.

Dai has argued. Nostalgia during this time, according to Dai, signals a shift toward the domestication and commodification of ideology, and culminates in the dissolution of political taboos and the sacred.[41] I argue that the transformation of cultural memory in *Youth*—from politicization to commodification—represents a similar, but perhaps this time explicit, semiotic rupture, and exposes how revolutionary memory, in the intertwined context of post-socialism and neoliberalism, becomes a means for navigating precarity.

Another significant narrative discontinuity in *Youth* is its decontextualized portrayal of the Sino-Vietnamese War. In contrast to the film's otherwise gentle, nostalgic style, the depiction of the war is reminiscent of Hollywood blockbusters. The sequence lasts for only 13 minutes, and the context of the war is not clearly stated. We are given only a subtitle reading "1979, China South-West Border," followed by a sequence in which we find He Xiaoping providing medical aid to wounded soldiers in a field hospital after she had been expelled from the military art troupe. The next seven minutes show the Vietnamese army (although their nationality is not clearly indicated), ambushing Liu Feng's unit. After several explosions, in which indeterminate bodies are blown apart, we see Liu Feng fighting back against unspecified enemies (Figure 3), as if we have the form of a historical

situation but not its content, or the desire for a past but not that past itself.

Youth is not the first film to touch on the Sino-Vietnamese War. During the 1980s and 1990s, films and musicals about the war typically served political purposes, and focused on glorifying acts of heroism and patriotism. *Wreaths at the Foot of the Mountain* [高山下的花环] (Xie Jin, 1984), for example, follows the commander Guo Zhenhua and his soldiers during the Sino-Vietnamese War. The narrative shifts between the front lines and the home front, detailing the emotional burdens faced by the soldiers and their families, such as the personal cost of war and the enduring strength of those left behind. *Wreaths,* unlike *Youth,* received recognition from both the film industry and the Chinese government, and was awarded the First Prize for Outstanding Film of 1984 by the Ministry of Culture. It also received accolades, such as the Best Feature Film at the Hundred Flowers Awards and Best Screenplay at the Golden Rooster Awards.[42]

Beyond the difference in censorship and the authority's attitude toward the Sino-Vietnamese War between the two films, *Youth*'s disjunction between historical form and absent content parallels what Philip Drake terms "an engrossing but ultimately fabricated approximation of the past."[43] For Drake, nostalgia can be conceptualised as "a knowing and reflexive relationship with the past."[44] In this engagement, narratives are deliberately selected to create a sense of stability. Yet as I previously mentioned, this apparent stability emerges from ongoing negotiation among political ideologies, commercial needs, and the director's voice. Behind this sense of stability is the discursive discontinuity at the heart of post-socialist nostalgia: *Youth* reveals how nostalgia itself is constructed around fragmentation, displacement, and ideological ambivalence. Hence, nostalgia is not about what happened in the past, but how we construct a sense of "pastness" today.

As I have been arguing, cinematic representations of youth after 2010—regardless of their relation to the socialist period itself—are almost uniformly decoupled from revolutionary ideology. Historical events are, at most, backdrops that have little bearing on the

development of young characters. While both Gu and Meng introduce the idea of "fragmentation" to describe a simplified version of the past designed to attract greater commercial consumption, I contend that this term fails to appreciate how representations of nostalgia are mediated by the political circumstances, not to mention the legitimacy of the CCP. [45] This is evident above all in the characterizations of Liu Feng and He Xiaoping, characters who deconstruct the idea of a socialist moral exemplar and represent a broader disillusionment with socialist ideals. Given that the development of these characters is itself discontinuous, a closer look at these two protagonists' trajectories in the film is necessary.

Youth's Protagonists

Although He Xiaoping and Liu Feng initially believe that they will be able to integrate themselves into a network of politically privileged youth, their efforts to do so have unforeseen results. The two characters, who have relatively comparable experiences, serve a similar thematic purpose—that is, decentering revolutionary heroism within a post-revolutionary context. On the one hand, the military art troupe portrays an idyllic socialist utopia, which may reflect Feng's personal memory and perhaps even his own nostalgia; on the other hand, Liu Feng and He Xiaoping, as outsiders within the troupe who try but fail to fit in, experience the emptiness of this utopia. Their stories reveal the political hierarchies and class-based exclusions implied in the supposedly egalitarian collective. This, in turn, exposes nostalgia not only as a sentimental longing for something past, but also as a fractured and ambivalent memory—one that may, in fact, construct the very object of desire, and thus become vulnerable to disillusionment.

Throughout He Xiaoping's story, Feng shows how idyllic collectives often belie hierarchies and power imbalances. Jie Wang and Yanshan He have argued that the troupe is in fact a youthful memory of an actual socialist utopia; although set during the tumultuous periods of the Cultural Revolution and the aftermath of the Sino-Vietnamese War, the young performers still manage to indulge in a

Figure 4. A torn photo of He Xiaoping is put back together.

carefree existence, as the gate of the troupe supposedly demarcates the threshold of a serene world beyond strife, bloodshed, and war.[46] Their discussions of nostalgia suggest that the present is emotionally and ideologically entangled with the past—not merely as its product, but as part of an ongoing tension. They define this as a "double helix" of red and nostalgic utopias: the former refers to an idealized vision of socialist collectivism rooted in revolutionary ideology, while the latter reflects a sentimental longing for a lost past tied to personal memory and the process of Chinese modernization.[47] Although the paper interprets the expulsion of Liu Feng and He Xiaoping as a reflection of the tragic nature of China's modernization and the conflict between collective ideals and individual desires, the art troupe is still believed to be an idealized utopia. However, because the act of expulsion is carried out by members of the troupe itself, I believe it is necessary to uncover the inequalities embedded within this seemingly egalitarian collective. Beneath the art troupe's harmonious facade, it is structured in accordance with a very specific class hierarchy (largely) based on political ancestry: Shuwen is a general's daughter, Chen Can's father is a deputy regional commander of Kunming, and Lin Dingding stands out because of her beauty and sweet voice. On the contrary, the parentage of He Xiaoping is blemished because her father was

jailed in a re-education camp, and this is why she becomes a target of denunciation. Other members suggest that she smells bad, perhaps alluding to her family background. When she joins the troupe, she steals Lin Dingding's uniform because so strong was her desire to have a photograph of herself wearing it, so strong was her adulation of the politically privileged. After she is caught in the act, she is bullied and eventually expelled. He Xiaoping subsequently tears up the photo and, even though Liu Feng later finds it and pastes it back together (Figure 4), the photo remains fragmented—much like her irrecoverable faith in revolutionary ideals and her nostalgia for a time that may have been precariously imagined in the first place. Despite its superficial appearance as a nostalgic paradise, the troupe ultimately becomes a metaphor for what Michel Berry describes as the "cannibalistic attributes" of Chinese society during the Cultural Revolution.[48]

Liu Feng's story, perhaps even more than that of He Xiaoping, directly questions the heroism of the socialist period. Although it is unclear whether Liu Feng's family background is as distinguished as that of other troupe members, he remains in the troupe thanks to his reputation as "Living Lei Feng"—a moral role model and figure of altruism. Even so, he cannot help but express his love for Lin Dingding—a personal desire that goes against collectivist ones—which subsequently leads Lin Dingding to falsely accuse him of sexual harassment, and thus precipitates his fall from grace. Liu Feng's life subsequently becomes miserable: he is sent to fight in the Sino-Vietnamese War, where he loses his right arm, a sort of synecdoche for the fractured narrative of "Living Lei Feng" itself. Before his happy ending, Liu Feng is also targeted by the government and lives in poverty during the period of economic reform, while the other troupe members continue to enjoy comfortable lives and privileges, perhaps hinting at the red origins of the market economy and the persisting unequal distribution of power.

The process of the two protagonists' disillusionment is also expressed through the motif of the color red, which has a revolutionary legacy that is present from the very beginning of the film. Indeed, before the narrative even starts, the production credits appear on a red

Figure 5. Mao's portrait following the production credits.

background—the same color as the Chinese national flag, signifying the CCP's connection to its revolutionary past—before a giant wall showing a portrait of Mao standing before the CCP flag fades in (Figure 5). Following this sequence, Liu Feng brings He Xiaoping into the art troupe. This moment symbolizes the ideological apex of the Mao era: Liu Feng is still portrayed as "Living Lei Feng," steadfast in his beliefs, while He Xiaoping longs to integrate into the collective and transcend the stigma of her flawed family background.

Following this scene, this giant wall of red appears two additional times: first, a quarter of the way through the film, a shot from a very low angle renders Mao's portrait grotesque. After this, a huge black cloth falls to the sound of an echoing drumbeat, with a green subtitle reading "1976" (the year Mao died). After this scene, a rupture begins to emerge in Maoist ideology, symbolized by the appearance of personal desires in the form of "Hong Kong goods," such as jeans and Teresa Teng's pop songs. This also marks a narrative turning point in Liu Feng and He Xiaoping's story, in which they are expelled from the art troupe. Finally, when Liu Feng walks through the giant wall 20 years later, Mao's portrait has been replaced by an advertisement for Coca-Cola (Figure 6), an explicit marker of the cultural changes resulting from the economic reforms. At this point, the art troupe

is dismissed, Liu Feng begins to live in poverty, and He Xiaoping, suddenly hailed as a "hero" during the Sino-Vietnamese War, loses her sanity. This signals the protagonists' gradual marginalization under the collapsing illusion of collectivism. Although Feng uses the giant red wall to demarcate the two periods in the film, these three sequences are also linked symbolically, as the changing red color reflects and moves in tandem with their process of disillusionment. The same color connects the ideological chaos of Mao's socialism with modern neoliberalism, acting as the passage for the transition from socialism to "socialism with Chinese characteristics" [中国特色社会主义]. By using the giant wall to reveal the ideological discontinuities—and, indeed, continuities—before and after the Cultural Revolution, *Youth* brings the precarity of nostalgia into relief, encouraging spectators to consider the links between the revolutionary past and the reformed present.

As Liu Feng and He Xiaoping reunite at a station in the film's closing scene, we hear the voice of Xiao Suizi describing how every character has grown disillusioned with collectivism. Bringing the characters back together for her son's wedding, Xiao Suizi demonstrates that even the red youths (i.e., those from politically

Figure 6. Liu Feng passes a commercial Coca-Cola billboard.

privileged backgrounds) have not been immune to disaster—and that what they all share is not the idealized utopia of collectivism but tragedy. Against this voiceover, which assures us that their older faces will not be shown, we see images of the youths in their prime. Xiao Suizi's narration moves us into the contemporary period—a time, it is implied, that no longer requires cinematic representation. The supposed "happy ending" of the film is complicated by these tragic undertones: the dissolution of the socialist legacy, the fragmentation of political unity, and the resulting precarious state that contemporary Chinese youths find themselves in today.

Conclusion

Youth helps us to appreciate the precarious and discontinuous practice of nostalgia—how it can both endorse and resist the status quo—within contemporary Chinese cinema. This discontinuity is apparent, above all, in the film's re-contextualization of revolutionary icons, symbols, and historical events into de-historicized, commodified spectacles that not only serve to evade censorship and offer emotional resonance but also subtly critique the dominant political ideology. The tragic stories of Liu Feng and He Xiaoping demonstrate how nostalgia functions today as a complex discursive practice that negotiates state censorship, neoliberal market demands, and the director's own voice.

Eight years after the release of *Youth,* the cinematic representation of youth and revolution has gradually been incorporated into state discourse, once more transformed into symbols in service of mainstream ideology, even when such representations have mainly focused on campus romances or urban narratives. By examining *Youth,* I aim to offer a more critical and historical interpretation of nostalgia, one in which nostalgia itself may be historicized as a particular mode of relating to the past. For it is precisely the discontinuous form of nostalgia prevalent today that allows us to glimpse how fragmented histories are being reconstructed, commodified, and subtly rewritten within the post-socialist Chinese context.

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