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3B Black as Coal: The Transcultural Travel of the Noir into Chinese Cinema

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In the dark underground of the mine shaft, Tang Chaoyang (Wang Shuangbao) and Song Jinming (Li Yixiang) ask their victim whether he is homesick, to which the answer is yes. They promise to "send you home" (*song ni hui laojia*), which is not a lie, because the phrase can be understood in slang as "to send you to death." In one moment, the home that the migrant worker longs to return becomes his death. Yet this is not all. After the murder, Tang obtains monetary compensation for the death of the victim, for whom they faked the identity card so as to bring him to the mine as Tang's relative. After this murder, Tang and Song leave the illegally operated small coal mine to look for their next victim and next job in another mine. Thus begins Li Yang's (1959-) film *Blind Shaft* (*mang jing*, 2001). Diao Yinan (1969 –) opens up his crime story *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (*Bairi yanhuo*, 2014) with an equally disturbing, coal-related scene: On the black coal shipped by a freight train are some pale-colored, dismembered human body parts. They are being distributed to various production locations in the region.

I select the beginning of these two films to call the reader's attention to the tropes of mobility and anonymity as well as violent crime in them. They are typical of the thematics of the canonized American film noir of the 1940s and 1950s, but now find their Chinese root in the dark coal-related locations: the illegally operated small coal mine notorious for its inhuman working conditions and a factory district in North China. There workers not only deal with coal in the job, but sell themselves cheap, like coal, to fuel the fast economic development. The tropes of mobility and anonymity in these films articulate their senses of dislocation, disfranchisement, and alienation. This paper focuses its analysis on how mobility and anonymity destabilize and dislocate social relations, in particular family and sexual relations. In their exploration of the unseen and unseemly side – for example, poverty and violence – of the economic miracle in postsocialist China, this paper attempts to argue, these two films demonstrate the transcultural travel of the noir into Chinese cinema.

1. The Noir on the Move

The category of "film noir" is notoriously vague. The term originated not from that of a film genre but from that of a critical category. It was first used by French film critic Nino Frank (1904-88) in his review essays in August 1946, where he saw "a new, darker quality" that differentiates some postwar American films from those made by Hollywood major studios.[1] *Panorama of American film noir* (1955) penned by Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, on the other hand, attempted to define film noir as a mood and a zeitgeist as well as a genre – "a group of nationally identifiable films sharing certain common features (style, atmosphere, subject)." They notice its destabilizing effect on the viewer which generates a profound sense of anxiety and alienation.[2] The noir visual motifs are summarized as, for example, low-key lighting to oppose light and darkness, "night-for-night" shooting of exterior scenes to emphasize the darkness of the environment, high-angle long shot to look down on its helpless victim, etc.[3] The issues of gender and sexuality, often embodied in the femme fatale, have been the focus of the noir discourse.[4] In general, the mass media tend to use "film noir" to refer to a genre film featuring violent crime, bleak mood and, more often than not, a femme fatale, while cultural critics have tried to identify and define the noir in films by visual representation, function of social critique, and register of collective anxiety, trauma, fear, etc.

When *Black Coal, Thin Ice* was awarded the Golden Bear in Berlin in 2014, the media was quick to point out the distinct features of (classic American) film noir in this work: violent crimes, the cop with his own psychological issues and dubious moral qualities, the femme fatale, the cinematography playing with darkness and light, etc. Some Chinese critic celebrates this film as the ice-breaker of Chinese film noir.[5] The director Diao Yinan admits his deliberate efforts to make a genre movie – a crime drama with the noir style – as the result of the negotiations between the auteur, the investment, and the market.[6] Diao's conscious choice of using the resources offered by the transnational tradition of film noir, on the one hand, contributes explicitly to the transcultural circulation of noir thematics, aesthetics, and politics, and on the other hand, reminds us of the role of transnational capital flows in shaping his film as a cultural commodity.

Diao Yinan's Chinese noir finds its precedent in Li Yang's *Blind Shaft* in terms of thematic matters, visual and narrative styles. Both films rewrite the noir tropes of mobility and anonymity in the context of postsocialist China with a disturbing crime story and reveal an underworld of poverty and violence behind the dazzling economic miracle. Their cinematography shares the realistic impulse to present the raw and the real, an aesthetic attitude developed in Chinese independent cinema in the 1990s against socialist realism[7]. Both narratives are organized in such a way that, instead of presenting the routine and boredom of everyday life, dramatic tension is built up. The calculated organization of the dramatic narrative and the realistic cinematography combine to create an appearance of a lived, everyday life haunted by its uncanny double.

2. Black as Coal: the Chinese Noir

The beginning of *Blind Shaft* visualizes the descending of the three characters – two criminals and their victim – down into the mine shaft. The deeper the lift goes down, the narrower the light up there seems and the more silent the surroundings

1 William Luhr, "Chapter Three: Critical Overview," *Film Noir* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012) pp. 50-72. The five movies Frank believes to represent the features of film noir are: *The Maltese Falcon, Laura, Murder, My Sweet, and Double Indemnity.* In Luhr's view, Frank's use of film noir "carried with it associations of 'black' French films of the 1930s (such as Marcel Carné's *Hotel du Nord*, 1938, or *Le Jour se lève*, 1939) as well as Marcel Duhamel's Serie Noire books, which were largely translations of British and american crime novels that Gallimard began publishing in 1945." Luhr, 51.

2 Luhr 52-53.

3 J.A. Place and L.S. Peterson, "Some Visual Motifs of Film Noir," Film Comment 10.1 (Jan-Feb, 1974), 30-35.

4 There is a large body of literature on the problem of gender, (female) sexuality, and film noir, see, among others, Linda William, "Feminist Film Theory: Mildred Pierce and the Second World War" in *Female Spectators,* ed. E. Deirdre Prilbram (London: Verso, 1988), Paula Rabinowitz, *Black & White & Noir: America's Pulp Modernism* (New York: Columbia UP, 2002).

5 Zhijian zhi zang, "Zhongguo heise dianying kaishi pobing 中国黑色电影开始破冰," *Dianying shijie* [Cinema World] 3 (2014), 24-25.

6 Diao Yinan, Li Xun, You Fei, Chen Yu, "Bairi yanhuo," *Dangdai dianying* [Contemporary Cinema] 5 (2014), 28-40

7 For what Jason MaGrath calls "postsocialist critical realism," see his "The Independent Cinema of Jia Zhangke: From Postsocialist Realism to a Transnational Aesthetic," *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century* (Durham: Duke UP, 2007) ed. Zhang Zhen, 81-114, esp. 83-85.

appear. The mine shaft is the underworld crime scene, but the story can also be seen as one of the crime on the road, made possible by the mobility and anonymity of the characters. Tang and Song are migrant workers who want to make quick money. They go from one private coal mine to another to sell their labor cheap and look for their victims at the train/bus station, where plenty of new migrant workers are looking for jobs. They fake the identity card for the victim – and possibly for themselves, too – before bringing him to the next coal mine. Their geographical mobility as migrant workers, instead of promising possibility of upward social mobility, rather brings dislocation and alienation. They leave their hometown and family. No one knows and cares who they are. They thus take advantage of their mobility and anonymity to commit crime, turning their equally disfranchised peers into anonymous victims.

Standing in the center of their crime is the dislocated and displaced "family" relationship made up of strangers. Like other migrant workers, Song and Tang maintain the relation to their real families through financial support and long-distance calls. As part of their criminal plan, however, one of them always fakes a family tie with the victim. They also do not have normal husband-wife relation. This relation is dislocated into the sexual service of prostitutes in the town near the mine and their contact with the cooking woman on the mine. When Tang and Song pick up Yuan Fengming (Wang Baoqiang), a sixteen-year-old boy looking for his father and a job, as their victim, the tension in these dislocated relations arises.

The fact that Fengming might be the son of their last victim – a fact never clarified in the film – bothers Song and his disagreement with Tang leads to the major suspense of the film: will Fengming be killed? As the story unfolds, the fake uncle-nephew relation between Song and Fengming reciprocates into a displaced father-son relation. Fengming's interest in reading and pride in his smart younger sister touch Song, whose major concern of his own son is his study at school. Noticing the boy's puberty curiosity of sex, Song brings him to the prostitute in order to make him a "man." The scene that Tang and Song become desperate when Fengming disappears on the market on their pay day is rich of implications: one can read the desperation as both losing the child and losing the prey. The reappearance of Fengming with a chicken in his hand, then, confirms the implication of family, namely, he intends to express his gratitude to the two "uncles." Song goes on playing his fatherly, protective role when Tang attempts to murder Fengming in the mine shaft. This leads to the escape of Fengming and the demise of both criminals, who do not have time to evacuate the shaft when dynamite is detonated. As the result, Fengming receives the compensation for the dead "uncle" whose true identity he will never know. The film ends with Fengxiang looking at the smoke rising from the crematory. Most probably he is grateful to his foster uncle who refuses to "send him home."

The concrete social contextualization of the criminals as disfranchised migrant workers offers a clear social critique of the political economy of postsocialist China, where social and economic inequalities are perpetuated instead of resolved. Li Yang's particularity about "making it real" – using non-professional actors, natural light, real mine shooting locations, eye-level camera, etc.[8] – forces the viewer to confront the unsettling violence and brutality.

Blind Shaft, in a way, is a film focusing on males: the violence takes place among men; the (displaced) family relation is that of father and son. The female characters are given little psychological depth: their existence serves to portray the male

8 Michael Berry, "Li Yang: The Future of Chinese Cinema?" *Speaking in Images: Interviews with Contemporary Chinese Filmmakers* (New York: Columbia UP, 2005) 224.
1) no long shots, 2) constantly moving cameras, and 3) no shots higher than eye level.

characters. *Black Coal, Thin Ice* remedies this lack by centering its dark story around a woman, the laundry worker Wu Zhizhen (Kuei Lun-Mei), whose traits of the femme fatale – sexual mobility and manipulation – are revealed step by step in a subtle, subdued, and sometimes ambiguous way. As the opening scenes suggest: this is a story of dismemberment and disintegration: not only the individuals are dislocated in one way or another, but the relations between man and woman are characterized by deception, betrayal, and death.

The film specifies the time of the story as between 1999 and 2004 and the location as in a factory district in North China. This combination helps the viewer to position Wu Zhizhen's economic and social standings. She married a worker of a large state-owned industrial enterprises in the Northeast, which at the turn of the twenty-first century suffered from their lack of efficiency and massively laid off their workers or reduced hours of production.[9] Wu herself works in a private laundry and has to endure the harassment of her boss from time to time. She damages a leather jacket and the owner demands a large sum for compensation. Unable to pay for it, she is forced into a sexual relation with him. She stabs him to death in the end. Her husband Liang Zhijun (Wang Xuebing) helps her to dispose of the dead body and puts his own identity document there to cover the death. As the result, Liang has to become anonymous.

If the social root of this incident can be well traced to the gaping gap between the rich and the poor, then the violence grows murkier and less fathomable when Wu Zhizhen reveals her desire for more sexual mobility. She finds herself unable to endure the anonymity of her husband – what she calls "to live with a living dead" – and attempts to have other relations. This turns Liang into a murderous stalker, who kills whoever trying to have a relation with his wife. Zhang Zili (Liao Fan), the ex-cop who blames himself for the senseless death of his colleagues in their investigation of the 1999 dismemberment case, tries to develop a relation with Wu with the purpose of investigating all the fatal cases related to her.

Adopting Zhang Zili's perspective, the viewer first comes to know Liang's existence as a pair of footprints on the side of those of his wife on snow, and then as a man out of focus outside the laundry. After Zhang Zili identifies Liang as alive and ready to get him out of anonymity, Wu Zhizhen confesses – not completely honest – that Liang is the murderer of all the cases and helps the police to catch him. In the process Liang is shot dead. The fact that Wu Zhizhen shows up the second day wearing make-up and a bright-color sweater implies her celebration. Yet her relation with Zhang Zili is doomed. The beginning of the film shows Zhang had a problematic marriage. The relation between Zhang and Wu is manipulative calculation fused with growing emotional attachment. Zhang takes advantage of this relation to solve the cases, while Wu uses the trust of Zhang to get rid of her husband's surveillance and domination.

Wu Zhizhen's favorite line "do not follow me" may best suggest her complicated relations with men. The first time Zhang Zili shows up in the laundry, she slips a piece of paper to him, on which the line is written. The viewer may very well understand it as expressing Wu's dislike of Zhang. When they go skating together, Wu skates further and further away from the well-lit center of the ground. The increasing darkness of the night builds up dramatic tension: both Zhang and the viewer wonder where she leads him to. This scene portrays Wu's (sexual) mobility and its

9 See, for example, the documentary *West of the Tracks* (dir. Wang Bing, 2003), discussed as postsocialist dystopia by Li Zhang in "Postsocialist Urban Dystopia?", *Noir Urbanisms: Dystopic Images of the Modern City* (Princeton: Princeton Up, 2010), ed. Gyan Prakash, 127-149.

accompanying danger visually and symbolically. When she says "do not follow me" again, it takes on new meanings: it is a warning for the man of the danger, but not necessarily a rejection; it can even be a flirtation, intending to increase the man's interest in her; and most important of all, her repetition of this line suggests the impatience with her husband's constant surveillance.

The distrust and betrayal between man and woman points to the disintegration of family in the film. The wife of the first dead does not call the police after the disappearance of her husband, because she is convinced that he chooses to leave with a woman. Towards the end of the film, Wu Zhizhen is brought to the apartment, where she used to meet and then stabbed the man, to identify the crime scene. She narrates the extramarital sex and violence and illustrates the different furniture arrangement in the same space. Her description of the crime scene creates an uncanny double of the space at a different temporal point. The violent ghost inhabiting in the double unsettles what appears to be a normal family – a young couple expecting a baby – and their life in the present apartment.

3. Conclusion

In summary, this paper attempted to demonstrate that *Blind Shaft* and *Black Coal, Thin Ice* represent two important moments of the transcultural travel of the noir into Chinese cinema. They bring the Chinese noir into being, which is thematically obsessed with and anxious about violence, which destabilizes family relations and sexual relations. Such violence results from social injustice and economic inequality, geographical and social dislocation and alienation, which are represented in the films in the tropes of mobility and anonymity. This is the noir of postsocialist China, offering critique – but not rejection – of China's relentless pursuit of economic development and warning the possibility of the Chinese Dream turning into nightmare. Outside the diegesis, these films form part of the transcultural communication network of film noir, which boosts their international reception by the market and the critic.

3B Zhang Yimou's Journey Towards the Aesthetic of Failed Mediation

Luying Chen

As diverse as the films directed by Zhang Yimou are in genres, themes and historical contexts, several larger categories are easily recognizable: the earlier films about pre-1949 China which are distinct for what Ying Zha calls selling "oriental exoticism to a Western audience" (Zha 329),[1] the realistic films exposing problems in contemporary Chinese society, and the martial arts films. In this paper, I identify one group of films which leaves traces of an aesthetic journey in search of the meaning of filmmaking, including a self-reflexivity on the effect of various means of communication such as written texts, performance, music, photography, the camera, and television, among others. I argue that as Zhang bids farewell to the modern Chinese intellectual mission to save the nation in "Wo de fuqin muqin" (The Road Home, 1999), he celebrates the camera's power to mediate human connections in "Yi ge dou bu neng shao" (Not One Less, 1999). This modest ideal continues in "Qianli zou dan qi" (Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles, 2005). However, in "Gui lai" (Coming home, 2014), Zhang uses amnesia as a metaphor for media's failure to mediate.

When viewed within the larger context of modern Chinese intellectual's self-identity as the enlightened who are burdened with the mission to save the nation, "The Road Home" and "Not One Less" witness a transition in Zhang's search for the meaning of filmmaking. The mission of the enlightened intellectual is perhaps best articulated by the call of the madman "Save the children!" towards the end of Lu Xun's *A Madman's Diary* (1918) as well as the metaphor of the people sleeping in the iron house, which can hopefully be broken by a few who have waken up, in Lu Xun's "Preface to *Call to Arms.*" "The Road Home" connects with that legacy of saving the children with the main story of the father, a sent-down youth like Zhang Yimou himself, dedicating his life to educating the village children, until he died in the city while fundraising to build a classroom. The story is told by the son, who has left the village to work in the city, returning to his home village after the father's death. Within this black-and-white narrative frame as the son seeks to understand his mother's insistence that the father's coffin be carried home by the villagers' shoulders, a colorful flashback brings back the love story of his father and mother. The burden of the coffin symbolizes the weight of the Chinese intellectual's ideal to enlighten the people. Inviting the viewers to share that burden, the film also uses the black and white to frame the romance of the parents, which literally turns the film into a moving picture of mourning. The ending image of the youthful woman running away from the camera further buries both romance and idealism.

Almost imperceptibly, Zhang modifies that intellectual ideal in "Not One Less" with the potential of the camera to revive and reconnect humanity, thereby reconnecting the city with the countryside and calling for the salvation of the underprivileged rural children. The film begins with a picture of the failed dream of several generations of intellectuals to enlighten the people through education: in the Shuiquan Village

[1] Jane Ying Zha, "Excerpts from 'Lore Segal, Red Lantern, and Exoticism," *Public Culture* 5, no. 2 (1993): 329. Rpt. in Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*, 233.