

Internal Order: Resort to Violence by Members of Vulnerable Groups in Chinese Independent Films

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Abstract

Resort to violence by members of vulnerable groups depicted in Chinese independent films in the last fifteen years is analyzed. The characters' violent action, usually coming near end of the movies, is shown sympathetically in the films, reflecting the directors' motivation of setting up or maintaining "internal order" in the segment of individuals they care and belong to, in contrast to the "external order" of the society that is beyond their control. The internal order the directors trying to set up depends on the period of societal development that is depicted in the film and is very current. Four independent films, Yu Dagang's The Orphan of Anyang (2001), Li Yang's Blind Shaft (2003), Zhang Lv's Grain in Ear (2005) and Li Yang's Blind Mountain (2007), are discussed as illustrative examples. Comparisons with the situation in developed countries are also given.

Keywords: Independent film, China, Violence, Internal order, Vulnerable group

1. Introduction

Independent films refer to those films made by the directors who basically have full control of its making, including, in particular, the filming and cutting. The control may not be 100% in practice, due to insurmountable constraints. The basic distinction between an independent film and a mainstream film is: The former aims at a minority and the latter, the masses (even though it is just part of the masses).¹

There are independent films in every country. But because the minority group of viewers the directors aim at varies from country to country and from period to period in time according to the cultural and societal developments in each country, there are differences between independent films from different countries, not just in East and West. For example, the independent films in America [Winter, 2006] and in contemporary China [Pickowicz & Zhang, 2006] are not the same.

In this paper, we analyze one important aspect of the independent films coming out of China in the last fifteen years: the resort to violence by members of vulnerable groups. To the best of our knowledge, this topic has not been discussed by anyone before. This topic is interesting because violence is a common theme in films, independent or mainstream, especially in the West [Dudley, 1999; McCaughey & King, 2001; Lichtenfeld, 2004; Grimes et al, 2008; Berlatsky, 2012]. But violence by vulnerable groups in China, as depicted by Chinese independent film directors, is quite different. We will point out the cultural and historical background against which the films are made, and show how and why they are different.

2. Internal Order

In 1953, four years after the new China was established, all movie companies were nationalized. In the few decades after, making a movie privately in China was illegal. Then in the 1990s, a few young directors challenged the system by raising funds privately or from abroad and made movies. Without surprise, they were severely punished by the authority.² Those got sanctioned included Tian Zhuangzhuang,³ Zhang Yuan and Wang Xiaoshuai.

¹ In very rare cases, an independent film could (unexpectedly) become a mainstream film. An example is Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000).

² According to Dai Jinhua [1999, p. 28] the relationship between the "government line" and the "civilian line" is very complex, which involves "cooperation" apart from "struggle."

³ With the exception of the author's, in this paper, the Chinese names have the family name listed first; e.g., the family name of Tian Zhuangzhuang is Tian.

However, as China's economy became more open under globalization the government's policy on film making became more relaxed, to a certain degree. After 2000, officially produced films and independent films from China were allowed by the government to appear in the same international film festival, while before that the official films would be withdrawn if the festival chose to keep the independent films.

A breakthrough came in 2002 when the government allowed privately-owned film companies to exist. At the same time, 30 theater franchises in 23 provinces were open for business. What resulted was that some "underground" movie directors could become and indeed went "above ground," accompanied by a name change: their underground movies were now called independent movies. But they were handicapped by the fact that their movies were still not being shown in the theaters, partly for marketing reasons. Yet independent movies moved on.

Starting with Jia Zhangke's *Xiaowu* (1998) a new generation of independent film directors emerged. They go beyond the "sixth generation" with the motto: focus on reality; record reality; show reality; intervene in reality [Ouyang, 2007, pp. viii-ix]. They and their movie practices are constructing the *subjectivity* of independent movies in China today. To face the new market reality and the lost of the 1980s' "internal order" after the 1989 event,⁴ a new internal order has to be constructed. The internal order advocated by the independent film directors is shared by their intended viewers—the middle-class intellectuals (many are white-collar workers), a minority in the Chinese society.

In general, "liberal intellectual" is an identity shared by China's independent film directors. For them, the contemporary Chinese society is short of order and thus needs order. Of course, the order they aspire to is that of the modern Western societies such as justice, fairness and individual dignity. In their films, the directors' inclination is reflected through the vulnerable individuals' trying their best to establish and keep an internal order in a society short of order. In this sense, establishing internal order is what the directors have in mind. Undoubtedly, the character's internal order is approved by the independent directors. When the society lacking of orders does not allow the characters to keep their internal order, they will have no choice but to resort to violence.

Here, four independent films are used as examples to show the independent directors' attitude towards violence and their demand for a more orderly society. The four films are *The Orphan of Anyang* (directed by Wang Chao, 2001), *Blind Shaft* (Li Yang, 2003), *Grain in Ear* (Zhang Lv, 2005) and *Blind Mountain* (Li Yang, 2007). All of these movies were highly praised at international film festivals.⁵

3. *Their Desires and Wishes*

*In the four independent films, the vulnerable keepers of orders are not perfect but are common individuals with different desires and wishes.*⁶

In *The Orphan of Anyang*, the reason why Yu Dagang, a laid-off worker, at first decides to take care of the infant abandoned by Feng Yanli, the mother and a prostitute, at his doorstep is not his sense of morality, but his wish for the monthly payment of 200 yuan for looking after the infant which he learned from a note left with the baby. After he accepted the offer, he is arranged to meet the mother. The scene at which he meets Feng for the first time includes two long-take shots. The first shot is a mid shot. Yu and Feng are sitting opposite at the table and eating noodle in a dirty, small restaurant. Feng asks Yu a couple of questions, gives him 200 yuan and pays for the lunch. The second shot is a full shot. At the door of the restaurant, Feng hugs the infant and gives the baby to Yu. And they part each other by walking away in opposite directions. The two shots express that Feng and Yu are equal as the hirer and the hiree.

⁴ As remarked by director Lou Ye, "After 1989, it took China only one year to solve the problem and returned to order. Surface [external] disorder is easy to return to order; internal, inward things are hard to return to. And this means the personal viewpoint"; see Cui Weiping and Lou Ye, "Interview of Lou Ye: Following art's self-restraint," in [Ouyang, 2007, p. 121]. For Lou Ye and intellectuals like him, the internal order of the 1980s is the values, social integrity concepts and cultural ideals possessed by the individuals.

⁵ *The Orphan of Anyang* was nominated to Directors' Fortnight, Cannes Film Festival; *Blind Shaft* received Silver Bear Award for Outstanding Artistic Achievement, Berlin Film Festival; *Grain in Ear* received New Currents Award, Pusan International Film Festival; *Blind Mountain* was nominated to Un Certain Regard, Cannes Film Festival.

⁶ Here and in the following, the sections' major conclusion is given in italics at the beginning of the section.

Yu is not superior to Feng, a prostitute, in both economical and moral levels. After meeting Feng, Yu has sexual fantasy on her. Same as in their first meeting, their second meeting is in a dirty, small restaurant and they sit opposite at the table. It is a long take and mid shot, too. Yu hands the infant to Feng, and the baby cries. Feng opens her clothes and guides the baby's mouth to her breast. The next shot is a close shot of Yu's face. His look at Feng is full of desire. A close-up of Feng's breast the baby nursing at is the next shot. The point of view of the shot is Yu's, and his desire is expressed directly and unambiguously.

Similar to Yu and Feng, Tang Chaoyang and Song Jinming, the two murderers in *Blind Shaft*, live outside of the Chinese Dream. They introduce peasant-workers to work in small coal mines, murder them in the underground shaft secretly and call it a mine accident. They made money by claiming to be a relative of the victim and collect the accident compensation from the mine owner. They then send the money back as living expenses to their own wives who remain behind in the countryside raising children. Song once gives his wife a call after sending money to her and asks her about their son's studies in school. This time, before trapping the 16-year old Fengming to follow them to a coal mine for a job, Song and Tang have a lunch in a small restaurant. The TV just broadcasts a piece of news on an official on trial for embezzlement of millions of yuan. Song remarks that he does not need millions of yuan but only a few hundreds of thousands of yuan which will be sufficient to send his son to a university when he grows up. However, Tang says that if he has millions of yuan he will buy and run a coal mine himself, since his son's school grade is not high enough to go for higher education. By such details, the director shows an important difference between Tang and Song. The sole purpose of Tang is to get rich and he does not care whether he makes his money legally or not. Different from Tang, Song wishes that education and knowledge will change his son's fate and enable him to live a better life than his own. For Song, despite a murderer himself, a university education means a bright future of becoming a middle-class citizen and living a Chinese Dream; to him, it is dark, dirty and sinful to own a small mine and exploit the workers.

In *Grain in Ear*, as a Korean-Chinese single mother who makes a living by selling Korean pickles, Cui Shunji's desires, such as sex and alcohol, are not entirely "rational." The camera is always placed at a lower height when shooting in her home because everyone sits on the floor in the traditional Korean-style room. It emphasizes her identity as a Korean-Chinese and hints at the oppression she receives being a single mom—the lack of a sex life. Cui falls in love with another Korean-Chinese, a married man. Soon they make love in Cui's home. It is the only scene in which the camera is not placed low in her room. The placement of camera at a normal height highlights a woman's sexual desire. Cui loves drinking. After drinking together, Cui and her lover make love. In addition, she drinks with her neighbors, a couple of prostitutes. When the policewoman taking Korean dance lessons from Cui complains to her that Korean dance is difficult to learn, she answers that it becomes easier to learn if the learner drinks. Sex and alcohol symbolize the irrational ego of Cui for whom the male-centered and Chinese-centered society is the "other." She does her best to prevent her ego from being the other in the alien society.

Bai Xuemei, the female university graduate in *Blind Mountain*, wishes to find a good job, earn more money and pay off her parents' debt. She is so anxious to make money and is thus an easy prey for human traffickers. Interestingly, Bai's expectation is the same as Song's; her is a brighter future for her parents (and herself) and Song's is that for his son. In this sense, the fate of Bai is the fate of Song's son. Although to live a Chinese Dream is the general dream of vulnerable group's members, it is very difficult for them to realize their dreams.

4. Their Internal Orders

In spite of their various strong desires and wishes, there are limits to the things the vulnerable group members are willing to do to realize their aspirations. There is a bottom line that they will not cross: They are not inclined to violate their internal principles.

Yu and Feng make love after their second meeting. Feng then moves to live with Yu. However, in the daytime she continues to prostitute herself in Yu's apartment while Yu runs a stand for repairing bicycles and keeps the infant with him at the housing complex's gate. Every night Yu makes love with Feng and pays her for sex. In that sense they establish a john and prostitute relationship. Yet, day by day, a family is being built. Every evening, Feng cooks supper and goes out to call Yu back home, then the three of them have dinner together. At those times, Feng and Yu look like a husband and a wife. In the daytime Feng heavily powders herself and seductively dresses herself as a prostitute, but in the evening she wears no make-up and dresses in a white sweater looking just like a common housewife. In addition, they carry the baby with them and do some shopping at weekends. At those moments, they look like a nuclear family. Finally on a certain day, Feng decides to be a prostitute no more.

They go to a studio to take a family photo, which means a family is really born. In other words, although Yu is merely attracted by Feng's body at the beginning, he finally succeeds in establishing a family relationship between Feng and himself. Family redeems Feng by changing her identity from a prostitute to a housewife and the infant by giving the baby a father. So a conclusion can be drawn that *family is the internal order of Yu* and he builds interpersonal relations according to the order. In fact, Yu's initial sexual desire for Feng includes the order of family. There is a scene that on a certain midnight, he sexually imagines Feng for the first time with the infant sleeping at his side. In other words, who he fantasizes is more a mother than a prostitute. As noted above, the shot in which Yu sees Feng feeding the baby at her breast shows his sexual desire. However, in the shot, a breast being sucked by a baby symbolizes more a mother than a prostitute.

Family is also a component in Song's internal order. However, Yu's order of family is more bound up with the husband-wife relationship while Song's the father-son relationship. The basic reason why he disagrees with Tang's intention of trapping Fengming is that he thinks Fengming is just a teenager. Song's opinion that it is absolutely pitiful for Fengming to die still being a virgin comes out of a father's sympathy for a son. It is in a father's stance that Song argues that Fengming's father will have no offspring with Fengming being killed. Additionally, like Song's own son Fengming is a very good student in school, and he often reads his textbooks at rest time. Song is deeply moved by Fengming's love for study and associates it to his own son's. For these reasons Song makes up his mind to help Fengming. As a result, he finally succeeds in building up the father-son relationship between him and Fengming. On the other hand, despite being a father too, Tang shows no sympathy for Fengming. For just the reward of money, he is determined to kill Fengming. So a violent conflict is generated between the two partners, Song and Tang. In order to protect Fengming from being killed, Song has to argue and negotiate with Tang again and again.

Cui's internal order is to protect her identity as a Korean-Chinese woman from being changed by the alien society. The director often emphasizes Cui's identity. The words "Korean Pickles" are written on the three-wheel cart that she uses to carry the pickles for sale. In her Korean-style room, she talks with her son in Korean. She would rather choose a Korean-Chinese (married) man than a Chinese as her lover. One of her prostitute neighbors tells her that her lover who visits prostitute is not a good man at all. She answers: "I am not a good woman, too." Here, the binary opposition between good and bad suggests the binary opposition between Korean and Chinese. Cui chooses to identify herself with "bad" Korean. A manager of a driving school's canteen is willing to buy Cui's pickles to help her in expense for sex with her. She gives him an absolute refusal. As a woman, Cui cannot accept selling her own body.

Bai is sold by a pair of human trafficker to Huang Dewei, a peasant living a very poor life in a remote village. She becomes Huang's "wife" who is obliged to have sex with him and make babies for him. However, Bai identifies herself with an educated modern woman and an expectant white-collar worker. She has to protect her identity from being changed. As a modern woman, Bai uses law—the order of modern society—to get out of her dilemma situation at the beginning. She says to Huang who locks her up: "Mercenary marriage is illegal." Huang neglects her. Then she falls back on the village head, the official responsible for keeping order of a society. The village head does not help her either. Huang rapes Bai with the help of his parents, and she tries to kill herself in despair. However, her life is saved. She is aware that suicide is weak and cowardly and she should be strong and solid. So she decides to escape from the village. Apart from Bai, there are several bought "wives" in the village.

They all try to escaping at first but fail. But after the birth of their babies they give up the escape idea completely and decide to stay. Accordingly, the villagers all consider that it is impossible for a mother to leave without her babies. It means baby can change a woman's identity. Nevertheless, Bai still runs away after she becomes a mother. At the end of the film, her father and two policemen reach Huang's home to rescue her. She tries to take her baby with her, but the policeman points out that she will have trouble in departing from the village with her baby. She finally decides not to take her baby along. Throughout, Bai is not changed by her baby from a modern woman to a mother. Bai refuses to be a member of Huang's family all the time. She does not allow Huang Decheng, the cousin of her "husband," to call her "sister-in-law" and Li Qingshan, a child in the village, to call her "aunt." When Chen, another bought "wife" in the village, says to Bai that Huang's mother is "your mother-in-law," she immediately retorts: "She is not my mother-in-law!" When Huang Decheng says to "her: "You are married to my cousin," she at once shoots back: "I am not married to him."

5. A Society Short of Order

The society short of order does not allow the vulnerable individuals to keep their internal orders.

The real father of Feng's infant, a gang chief, finds her and tries to take the baby from her because being diagnosed with cancer he now needs an offspring. If Feng and Yu do not give him the baby, he will wrest it from them. The film shows policemen in two scenes. In one scene, a policeman introduces a girlfriend to Yu. In the other scene, a couple of policemen are arresting prostitutes. Symbolizing law and order in a society, the policemen do all things except to protect vulnerable groups. In the face of a strong intruder and a society that fails to provide security, Yu cannot defend his "wife" and "son."

The policemen in *The Orphan of Anyang* show the lack of law and external order in a society while Tang in *Blind Shaft* shows the common lack of internal order. He minds nothing except money. After several negotiations and arguments, when Tang is no longer willing to wait, Song has no idea how to save Fengming.

Both Cui and her lover are Korean-Chinese. Cui's internal order treats this common identity as the basis behind her relationship with her lover. However, the identity of Korean-Chinese, as Cui's internal order, is not her lover's internal order. Her Korean-Chinese lover betrays her and falsely accuses her of prostitution. She is arrested and sent to a police station. While there, Officer Wang releases her after having sex with her in exchange.

Despite several attempts to escape from the village, Bai does not succeed. On one occasion, she succeeds to arrive at the town and gets on a bus. Huang and a couple of villagers violently take her away from the bus. On the way home, they meet a policeman, and Huang tells him Bai is his mentally-ill wife. The policeman believes Huang and allows him to kidnap Bai in effect. When superior leaders inspect the village, the village head sends several villagers to hide all bought "wives" in the hill. In the end, when the policemen try to take Bai away from the village, a lot of villagers stop the police car and the village head helps the villagers in private. In Chinese independent films, law enforcers (such as village heads and policemen) usually do not uphold the law.

6. Violence Is to Keep Order in a Society Short of Order

When the vulnerable men and women feel hopeless in the society short of order, they adopt violence to keep their internal order. Yu beats to death the gang chief to protect Feng's baby; Song kills Tang to save Fengming; Cui puts the rat poison into the pickles which she prepares for Officer Wang's wedding feast; Bai cuts down Huang when he is wrestling with her father.

The independent directors show the violence as a virtue; the reasons are as follows. At the end of *The Orphan of Anyang*, while escaping from the police Feng hands swiftly the baby to a passerby who happens to be Yu. It is not important whether the passerby is really Yu or Yu's soul or just a symbol. It is important that the director approves of Yu's rescuing of Feng through violence (he kills the gang chief) in the persona of a father. Wang, the director of the film, claims that his films are about the suffering of people, hope and redemption [Dai & Wang, 2007, p. 21]. In the film, Yu symbolizes hope and redemption. "At the Cannes Film Festival, the audience called the hands receiving the baby at the end the 'hands of God'," says Wang [Cheng & Huang, 2010, p. 140].

To prevent Tang from killing Fengming, Song kills Tang in the shaft instead, with Fengming watching from the side. And then a coal mine collapse starts, trapping Song on the ground. Fengming does not help Song but escapes to the ground above. (He then collects the accident compensation as the "relative" of Song. He does not send it to Song's family but keeps the money himself.) The glaring sunlight outside of the shaft prevents him from opening his eyes. Here, the darkness inside the shaft contrasts to the sunlight outside. In the tradition of films, darkness means sin, danger and sadness while light means goodness, happiness and safety. The glaring sunlight symbols Song's virtue which is scolding Fengming's conscience of abandoning Song to die.

Before poisoning the officer, Cui always wears trousers and moves very slowly. However, after that, she wears a skirt for the first time. Additionally, she suddenly runs at full speed, and the camera follows her closely. The film's greatly increased speed implies a vital force. The fact is that the camera is no longer staring at Cui but that the woman full of vigor is leading the camera.

After Bai cuts down Huang, the last shot of the film is a low-angle close-up of her face which shows the director's respect and admiration for the woman.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

The kind of violence carried out by members of vulnerable groups is depicted in contemporary Chinese independent films but not elsewhere. There are several reasons. First, since China's reform-opening up policy started in 1978, the country's economic system became partly market oriented. The economic development picked up speed in the 1990s. It went so fast that the society's "external order" with characteristics left over from the planned economy of the first 40 years became out of sync with the "internal order" which the vulnerable groups try to keep. This dislocation of internal and external orders does not exist in developed countries. Or, more precisely, the process of synchronization of these two kinds of orders has been basically completed in the last few hundred years in the West.

Second, all films openly screened in theaters in China have to be approved by the authority and China has not yet adopted any rating systems for films, meaning that all films have to be suitable to be seen by children as well as by adults.⁷ It is then not surprising that violent acts could be found only in independent films, most of which were never shown openly.⁸ On the contrary, no such restrictions apply in developing countries, and so violence can be found in both mainstream and independent films there.

Third, independent film directors in China are intellectuals with a social consciousness. No one ever puts violence in a film for violence's sake; there are more pressing social issues that they want to examine in their works with a limited budget. Maybe it is not yet time for anyone of them to treat violence as an art form; there are no Sam Peckinpah and Quentin Tarantino in mainland China.⁹ (This is not the case with movies from Hong Kong.)

In short, for China's independent directors, members of vulnerable groups who commit violence are constructing order out of a "disordered" society. By maintaining their own internal orders, they establish interpersonal relationships that are humanistic and full of humanity. Moreover, violence itself is a kind of order.

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⁷ This could reflect either the authority's failure to recognize (art) films as an art form or the judgment that art films are not suitable for public screening in China.

⁸ A rare exception is that *Blind Mountain* was allowed to be screened briefly, but only after the single violent scene of Bai Xuimei cutting down Huang Dewei at the end of movie is removed and replaced by Bai being taken away safely from the village by the policemen—a happy ending.

⁹ Ironically, it is the government-owned stations that showed TV series which use extreme violence (often in "fighting Japanese" stories) as a means of attracting more viewers.