

"A major contribution to contemporary critical thinking  
in literary, postcolonial, and cultural studies."

—Iain Chambers

In **Ethics after Idealism**, Rey Chow explores once again the issue of cultural otherness that has been central to her work. She argues that at a time when cultural identity has become imbricated with the way we read our many "others," what must be examined critically is no longer identity politics per se but the idealism—especially in the sense of idealizing otherness—that lies at the heart of identity politics. Recognizing the necessity for a critique of idealism constitutes for Chow an ethics in the postcolonial, postmodern age. In particular, she uses "ethics" to designate the act of making decisions—in this context, decisions of reading—that may not immediately conform with prevalent social mores of idealizing our others but that, nonetheless, enables such others to emerge in their full complexities.

Chow discusses an array of source materials whose affinities are as surprising as their appearances are heterologous. The readings she offers involve various cultural forms—fiction, film, popular music, poetry, and critical essays—and address a wide range of cultural topics, such as pedagogy, multiculturalism, fascism, sexuality, miscegenation, community, fantasy, governance, nostalgia, and postcoloniality.

Methodologically situated in the contentious spaces between critical theory and cultural studies, and always attending to the implications of ethnicity, this book constitutes a unique intervention in contemporary cultural politics.

**REY CHOW** is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Irvine. Her publications include *Woman and Chinese Modernity*, *Writing Diaspora*, *Xie zai jia guo yi wai*, and *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*, which was awarded the James Russell Lowell Prize by the Modern Language Association.

Theories of Contemporary Culture, volume 20  
Kathleen Woodward, general editor

INDIANA UNIVERSITY  
Bloomington and Indianapolis

gleebooks  
\$ 30.00

ISBN 0-253-21155-7  
9 9000

Rey Chow

Ethics after Idealism

Indiana

# Ethics after Idealism

Theory-Culture-Ethnicity-Read

Made for the University of New South Wales  
under Part VB of the Copyright Act 1968  
in reliance on (circle one of the following):  
s135ZJ (article contained in a periodical)  
s135ZK (work contained in an anthology)  
s135ZL (any other print or graphic copying)  
on (date) 6/13/80

Made for the University of New South Wales  
under Part VB of the Copyright Act 1968  
in reliance on (circle one of the following):  
s135ZJ (article contained in a periodical)  
s135ZK (work contained in an anthology)  
s135ZL (any other print or graphic copying)  
on (date) 9/3/80

Rey Chow

*Ethics after Idealism*  
*Theory—Culture—Ethnicity—Reading*  
is Volume 20 in the series

THEORIES OF CONTEMPORARY CULTURE  
Center for Twentieth Century Studies  
University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee

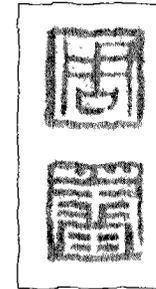
KATHLEEN WOODWARD  
GENERAL EDITOR

# ETHICS AFTER IDEALISM

---

THEORY—CULTURE—ETHNICITY—READING

*Rey Chow*



INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS / BLOOMINGTON AND INDIANAPOLIS

1998

157

## SEVEN

### *We Endure, Therefore We Are: Survival, Governance, and Zhang Yimou's To Live*

---

IF THERE IS A metanarrative that continues to thrive in these times of metanarrative bashing, it is that of "resistance." Seldom do we attend a conference or turn to an article in an academic journal of the humanities or the social sciences without encountering some call for "resistance" to some such metanarrativized power as "global capitalism," "Western imperialism," "patriarchy," "compulsory heterosexuality," and so forth. In many respects, "resistance" has become the rhetorical support of identitarian politics, the conceptualization that underwrites discourses of class, racial, and sexual identity.<sup>1</sup> As an imaginary appealing especially to intellectuals, "resistance" would have to come from somewhere. It follows that resistance is often lodged in something called "the people" or one of its variants, such as "the masses," "the folk," or, at times, "the subalterns." What is implicitly set up, then, is a dichotomy between the pernicious power on top and the innocent, suffering masses at the bottom, whose voices await being heard in what is imagined as a corrective to the abuses of political power.

What is often missing in such an imaginary of popular resistance is the crucial notion of a mediating apparatus, a specifically defined public space, that would serve to regulate the relationship between those who have political power and those who do not. The *absence* of such a mediating apparatus has vast implications for the conceptualization of political governance. In this chapter, I would like to explore some of these implications by discussing aspects of the ideological conditions in contemporary China, particularly as such conditions appear in Zhang

that once inspired political revolution. The continued fascination with “the people” suggests an attempt to cling to the beliefs that lay at the foundation of modern Chinese national identity. Yet precisely because the turn to “the people” is nostalgic as much as utopic—a desire for home as much as for change—it inevitably reencounters all the problems that are fundamental to that turn.

For instance, the invocation of “the people” has often gone hand in hand with another invocation—“the West.” During the Great Leap Forward, the rhetoric of *chao ying gan mei* (literally, overtaking England and catching up with the United States) was used to mobilize the entire country to labor hard for national self-strengthening.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, England and the United States stood for technological advancement, an area in which China needed to improve. Acknowledging the necessity of “Western technology,” however, undermined belief in “the Chinese people” as the ultimate source of national empowerment in a fundamental way. For if China did in fact need *external* input in order to attain the status of a world-class nation, then what did that make “the people,” the supposed mainstay of national identity? To solve the problem raised by this inconsistency, the Chinese Communists resorted—in spite of their claims of overthrowing tradition—to a formulation that has been used by Chinese politicians since the nineteenth century: “Let us adopt science and technology from the West, but let us preserve Chinese culture”; “let us modernize, but let us modernize with Chinese characteristics”; “let us adopt capitalism, but we will call it Chinese socialist capitalism.” Such variations on the nineteenth-century dictum *zhong xue wei ti, xi xue wei yong* (Chinese learning for fundamental principle, Western learning for practical use) point to an ambivalence that structures the conceptualizing of a political culture based on an unmediated notion of popular resistance.

In such conceptualizing, “the people” become a fantastical stand-in for national specificity—in this case, for what is “Chinese.” On the one hand, this thing that is “the Chinese”—their people, their culture, their value—is thought to be unique and self-sufficient; on the other hand, it is in need of preservation and protection from outside forces. “The Chinese”—people/culture/value—is what makes China China—that is, what no one can change or take away; at the same time, “the Chinese” is what “the West” can endanger—that is, what someone *can* change and take away. Caught between cultural pride and cultural necessity, the investment in national and cultural specificity as the basis of political identity is marked by an impossible rift from the beginning. To patch over this rift, a particular kind of essentialism has to be introduced, one which often takes stunningly provocative forms, demonstrating the logic of a well-lived, though tattered, ideology.

Consider the People’s Republic’s notorious manner of handling hu-

man rights. Here, China’s foremost problem of governance, overpopulation, is approached not as a problem that can and should be solved gradually, but rather as an immutable fact—an immutable fact that is, moreover, cast in the form of an *essential lack*, the (potential) lack of food. Such, then, is the attitude of the Chinese authorities: it is inconceivable that the West tell China what to do on the issue of human rights because *human rights in China* simply means having enough to eat. Since the People’s Republic has done more than any previous Chinese government to feed the Chinese people, it is already honoring human rights *in the Chinese way*. Human rights as insisted upon by Westerners—in the form of, say, freedom of speech and trial by law—amount to foreign interference in Chinese *internal* affairs. China—in the position of a victim—must resist such imposition, invasion, and so forth.

Instead of being used as an occasion to rethink the fraught relationship between the governing and the governed, the problem of overpopulation becomes a justification for the abuse of political power, an excuse to stop, rather than to begin, any consideration of alternative forms of governance. What is interesting is that such a justification for the abuse of political power must be aimed at an external target. In the world of postcolonial awareness, the intransigent attitude of the Chinese gerontocracy toward political governance conveniently finds its guise in the form of national self-determination against “the West.”

A number of important implications are revealed in this process, all following from the fantastical construct of a “self-sufficient” China/Chineseness that can and must govern itself. First, this need for self-governance is defined, paradoxically, by way of an essential lack—the lack of food—and thus as a matter of biological survival: the need for self-sustenance. Although China’s long periods of starvation in the past might have had much to do with government policy and with the unequal distribution of food among different classes, history is bypassed in favor of an essentialist survivalism. Second, as the reduction of human rights to a matter of having enough to eat indicates, issues of political representation can be likewise reduced to—and abstracted as—something potentially lacking/missing. Accordingly, while it is this potentially lacking/missing thing that defines China’s uniqueness, that makes China China, “the people” are in effect just a bunch of gaping mouths and, as such, are precluded from having political representation. In the vicious circle of “political rights”-cum-biological-needs, “the people” are literally held hostage by themselves—by their “essential need” to survive. Instead of being recognized as something done to or against “the people,” the denial of political rights will thus always be *condoned* in their best interests. Third, the continual abuse of power, secured as it is by the structure of this vicious circle, can legitimate and perpetuate itself on the grounds of “Chinese” internal affairs.

Cultural and national identity, which is the crux of the relationship between the governing and the governed, is then simply a matter of cumulation, compounded by acts of essentializing, acts of absorbing and assimilating every problem inward—into the entrails of the physical body, into the interior of the nation, into the systemic propriety of the culture—and redefining it as “Chinese.”

### The Story of *To Live*

The people, popular resistance, and the relationship between such resistance and political governance are among the issues Zhang Yimou examines in his film *To Live*. Based loosely on the novella of the same title by the contemporary mainland author Yu Hua, *To Live* is, on first reading and viewing, very much a story of its time.<sup>9</sup> Like many examples of fiction and film produced since the mid-1970s, *To Live* looks back to events of the past through a look at some ordinary people—the Xu family—whose saga runs from the late 1940s to the 1970s (the period after the peak of the Cultural Revolution).

The film begins in a gambling house. Xu Fugui, the only son of a well-off family, is already heavily in debt, as recorded in a log kept by the dealers. Refusing to pay heed to the advice of his parents and his pregnant wife, Fugui squanders the family fortune, including the ancestral home which is sheltering them. Having thus lost his house, his father (who dies after signing the house away), and his wife (Jiazhen, in despair, has left with their daughter and gone to her own family), Fugui is reduced to making ends meet by selling the few possessions he still owns. Many months pass before Jiazhen returns with their daughter, Fengxia, and a newborn son, Youqing. With the help of Long'er, the man who took over his ancestral home, Fugui begins a new career as a singer and player in a shadow-puppet theater, making his living by performing with a troupe. He and Jiazhen go through a series of epochal events—the Civil War between the Nationalists and the Communists, the Communist Liberation of China, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution—and lose both their children in the process. At the end, four members of the family survive—Fugui, Jiazhen, their son-in-law (Wan Erxi), and their grandson (Mantou/Little Bun).<sup>10</sup> By this point, conditions in China are seemingly improving.

At one level, the ability “to live” can undoubtedly be understood as the basic resistance of the common people to the random disasters befalling them under a political system that has failed in its mission. However modest, the plea for the condition of “living” serves in this instance as a metacriticism, a critique of the critical imperatives of the political regime, which was itself founded on the ideas and ideals of

resistance and struggle. Because this political regime has resorted time and again to violence and murder in order to realize its dreams, and has replicated the authoritarianism it once sought to resist, the film’s sympathetic portrayal of “living” is made in the spirit of a resistance to bureaucratized resistance, a struggle against the state-sponsored struggle of official rhetoric. To be able to live through—and *in spite of*—disasters should in this light be seen as a “back to basics” approach in what I have elsewhere called the post-catastrophic discourse of contemporary China.<sup>11</sup> After the grandiose messages of revolution, for which millions of lives have been lost in the name of salvation, it is as if the sheer possibility of simply living has become cause enough for celebration and respect. The commonplace “to live,” then, has the same nostalgic function as the figure of “the people” in that it, too, asserts the value of a return to something fundamental. Having lived through years of war, poverty, separation, illness, fatal accidents, and the loss of loved ones, ordinary people now prefer to occupy themselves with the mundane and the banal—such as eating, for instance. The film concludes with the survivors of the family’s three generations gathering for yet another meal.

### The Food That Does Not Go In

As in Zhang’s other films, the shift in the medium of representation—from literary writing to film—offers a significant clue to his reading of the “original” subject matter. The major change introduced by Zhang is, notably, the elimination of Yu Hua’s first-person narration.<sup>12</sup> Hence, while our understanding of the events in the novella relies on Fugui’s memory and narration, in the film Fugui becomes simply one among many characters. From the perspective of reception, the effect is that of a shift from a single voice which predominates and guides (the reading) to multiple characters, events, and discourses. This shift, though perhaps a technicality, is crucial nonetheless because it introduces a departure from the ideological implications of the novella. Yu Hua’s literary style, which uses simple, matter-of-fact prose, presents the past in the form of what is already past. With Fugui as the only survivor in (and of) his own tale, the feeling of closure, of a story and a history having been completed and come to an end, is put across with the certainty of a retrospective—“it all happened this way.” Zhang’s film, by contrast, forsakes the relative stability of a kind of writing based on the remembrance of things past. By abandoning the nostalgic perspective of a sole surviving narrator, Zhang opens up the narrative in terms of temporality—“it is still going on, it is to be continued.” What is perhaps foreclosed in the retrospective narration of Yu Hua’s novella

is conversely supplemented by the story's unfolding on the screen, the presentness of which transforms the significations of "living," of what it means "to live."

Moreover, by eliminating the story's monological narration, the film enables the interactions among the characters to surface much more readily, and it is through such interactions, which can no longer be attributed or confined to the understanding of a single character, that a very different kind of narrating unravels alongside the realistic one. To be sure, Zhang, like all good popular artists who understand the importance of popular appeal, does make ample use of the current interest in the lives of "common people" to tell a moving and entertaining story on the screen with the full coherence of illusionism.<sup>13</sup> But he has also done something more: by taking seriously the Chinese Communist dictum of paying attention to "the people," Zhang has produced a film which literally takes a long, hard look at "the people," one that reveals them as sentimental, loving, and filial, but also as petty, small-minded, and, above all, *ready to sacrifice others in order to protect themselves*. Unlike the Party officials and the many Chinese intellectuals who continue to idealize "the people" by invoking them poetically as the bearers of revolution, resistance, and hope, Zhang gives us an unglorified portrait of the people—not exactly as the embodiment of evil but, more disturbingly, as a host for the problems that have beset China's construction of its "national" identity through political governance. If Zhang's film is a critique of the ideology of the Chinese regime, as I believe it is, it is a critique that materializes by reinforcing the critical terms legitimized by that regime—"the people" and their "resistance"—to the hilt.

In a cultural context in which food occupies such a central physical and imaginary place, what better way is there to look hard at "the people" than through the event of eating, an event which is fully resonant with the theme "to live"? Zhang's handling of eating is, as I will argue, nothing less than extraordinary. In Yu Hua's novella, food is central to the narrative action in that it serves to propel the plot, deepen characterization, and intensify conflicts. Among the novella's most memorable scenes are those depicting starvation and the search for edible things in the countryside.<sup>14</sup> In Zhang's film, however, food takes on a drastically different set of connotations. While he never neglects the physical appeal of food—as what fills the stomach—Zhang also *desentimentalizes* the representation of food as a fundamental lack. Instead of using food—or its absence—as a means of mobilizing the narrative action, Zhang represents it as an indigestible detail—as what does not quite go "in," what does not get eaten with satisfaction. Remaining thus in a relation of *exteriority* to the human bodies that are supposedly its "end," food is decoupled from the essentialist survivalism to which it has always been attached and becomes an occasion

for the staging of another kind of consumption—the consumption of political oppression. In the following three examples, food assumes not so much the form of a substance to be ingested as the form of the leftover, the absurd, or the weapon.

*Jiaozi* (Meat-Filled Dumplings). One morning, Youqing is abruptly wakened from a deep sleep and forced to go to school—his classmates have come by on their way to remind his parents that all students are expected to show up early to learn about steel-smelting. Having just brought home their family's share of *jiaozi* from the town as a reward for their hard work, Jiazhen proceeds to prepare a lunchbox for her son, making sure that he has plenty of the mouth-watering dumplings. That same day, Youqing is killed in an accident. Still tired, he has fallen asleep against a wall; when a vehicle crashes into the other side of the wall, it collapses on the little boy. Youqing never has a chance to open his lunchbox. When we see the *jiaozi* again, they have been left cold and untouched, their culinary appeal completely superseded by the grief at Youqing's graveside, a place where food is traditionally displayed as a way of paying respects to the dead.

*Mantou* (Steamed Wheat Buns). Fengxia gives birth to her son in a hospital, the management of which has been assumed by the youthful Red Guards, who are as contemptuous of the older and more experienced medical doctors, whom they consider "reactionaries," as they are complacent about their own ability to handle medical emergencies. Such attitudes quickly change when Fengxia begins postpartum hemorrhaging. Earlier, hoping to ensure a safe delivery, the Xu family had gone against hospital rules and brought in a top gynecologist, Professor Wang, pulling him from a procession in which he and other intellectuals were being paraded as symbols of "feudalist corruption." But Professor Wang has not eaten for three days. When he is offered some *mantou*, he gorges himself so hastily that he becomes almost comatose—a condition aggravated by the water he is then given by those who are trying to help. In the absence of any medical intervention, Fengxia bleeds to death.

Already, in these two brief examples, the handling of food suggests that eating is something other than "filling the stomach." What is normally welcome is in both cases associated with the sacrifice of innocent children. Would Youqing have died if his parents had not forced him to go to school early in conformity with others? The meat-filled dumplings, a rare treat during the days of the Great Leap Forward, become in the end *leftovers*—the waste of ideological abuse, undoubtedly prepared with parental love and patriotic loyalty, which find their ultimate victim in the young child. The most familiar and familial items of consumption—*jiaozi* being best when homemade and always served during festivities—here take on a defamiliarized and defamiliarizing

relation to what they normally signify. Rather than being eaten and absorbed, the lumps of dough and meat now stand as reminders of a life that has been irrecoverably wasted.

Similarly, would Fengxia have died if intellectuals and skilled professionals such as Professor Wang had not been mindlessly abused during the madness of the Cultural Revolution? The *mantou*, meant to ease Professor Wang's hunger so that he can assist in the childbirth, rehydrate and expand within his starvation-shrunken stomach. Failing thus to be properly incorporated, the *mantou* indirectly kill Fengxia. However well-intentioned, "filling the stomach" in this case leads to death, with food emphatically marked by the errors and terrors of history. Toward the end of the film, as the Xu family visit the graves of both children, Fugui reflects on the past, lamenting the fact that he had given Professor Wang too many *mantou*—otherwise, he says, the professor could have saved Fengxia's life. Or else, he adds, it was the water that they should not have given him. Fugui even supplies a mathematical elaboration: "People say that once you drink water, one *mantou* in the stomach turns into seven. Professor Wang ate seven *mantou*. Seven times seven is forty-nine. That'd knock anyone out of action!" When they learn that Professor Wang has since then avoided anything made from wheat, eating instead only rice, which is more expensive, Jiazhen exclaims—in what comes across as an utterly bizarre conclusion to this tale of epochal crisis and sorrow—"What a food bill he must have every month!"

Statements such as Fugui's and Jiazhen's seem absurd not because they reduce "great" suffering to mathematics and economics, but because such reductions confront us with a stark discontinuity in emotional experience. From anticipating the birth of a grandchild with both anxiety and hope, to witnessing the death of one's child, then mourning, followed by a return to "normal" life, and finally the ritualized family visit to and conversation at the grave, the changes and reversals of emotional intensity that occur around food play off one another in such a way as to reveal what—for the lack of a better term—must be called a dialectic, whereby moments of poignancy swing between a tone of sentimental vulnerability, on the one hand, and of absurdist irony, on the other. There is no tragic moment, as a result, that does not simultaneously border on the comic and the ridiculous, or vice versa.

*Noodles.* Of all the moments related to eating, the most compelling one is a scene which features Youqing during the Great Leap Forward period. Fengxia, as we learn earlier in the film, became deaf and mute after a childhood fever. She is the object of ridicule among the town schoolboys, who mock her with malicious tricks such as shooting at her behind with a slingshot and then waiting in hiding for her response. Incensed by such abusive behavior, little Youqing has attempted to

protect his older sister. One day when the families in the town gather for a meal in the communal dining hall, Youqing gets himself a big bowl of noodles laced with hot chili sauce and walks up to the boy who leads his gang in abusing Fengxia. Climbing up on a chair behind the boy, who is busily eating, Youqing raises the bowl and, in a gesture that resembles the offering of a sacrament, pours the noodles and sauce over his enemy's head. Outraged, the boy bursts into tears, while his father quickly calls the crowd's attention to the Xu family. Fugui, greatly embarrassed by Youqing's incomprehensible behavior, scolds his son, demanding that he apologize. When Youqing refuses, Fugui grabs him, spanking him until Jiazhen and others separate them. Only later, when they are alone at home and Jiazhen has explained the background to Youqing's act, does Fugui realize that he has wronged his son.

This scene of collective food-sharing comments provocatively on two distinct forms of *political* behavior. What is the difference, it asks, between Youqing's act and Fugui's act? One is an attempt, albeit childish, to demand social justice for a person who cannot speak for herself. The other is a public punishment of a child by an adult who succumbs to crowd pressure. Because solidarity between father and son would threaten the father's status, he must distance himself from his son by punishing him. At the same time, though, this face-saving act of distancing also reestablishes and reaffirms the father's linkage with—his possession of and authority over—his child. In terms of food, we could say that whereas Youqing gives up eating his food in order to use it as a weapon of "disorderly conduct," Fugui attempts to restore order so that the group, including himself and his family, can resume eating.

Implicitly patriarchal, Fugui's act is typical of a certain attitude toward the community. The fear of ostracization means that the process of socialization—of learning to live with others—is one of punishment and discipline, and such punishment and discipline invariably entails sacrificing the minor, the innocent, the oppressed. The more unreasonable the community, the more relentless it will be in sacrificing such underclasses. Hence, the measures taken by Fugui against Youqing are intended less to discipline the child than to identify with the community—to demonstrate Fugui's own worth within the community. Sacrificing the minor, the innocent, or the oppressed in exchange for the acceptance of the community ultimately constitutes an act of *self*-empowerment and *self*-governance.

### The Space of "the Public"

The close links between sacrifice and socialization raise questions about the way "the public" is conceived and accordingly, the way

governance is practiced and mobilized. Like “the people,” “the public” is, theoretically, an empty space, a space to be manipulated. In the political culture of a nation such as China, which is governed by “strong men” rather than through the mediation of law, and where, as one critic puts it, the political machine “serves at the same time as a judicial apparatus,” “the public” becomes simply a space for the use of those who hold political power.<sup>15</sup> For the ordinary person afraid for his own life, then, “the public” functions much more as a space in which to submit to authority and to hide oneself than as an arena in which to speak out against injustice and to propose political alternatives. As modern Chinese history has demonstrated time and time again, those who dare to tell the truth are more often than not sacrificed.<sup>16</sup> The vigilance of “the public” is wholly aimed at *conformity and invisibility*, not dissent and intervention.

This requisite conformity and invisibility has prevailed to such an extent that even an event as revolutionary as the appearance of the Red Guards in the “public space” during the 1960s amounted to just another version of the oppression and persecution of the innocent. Conceived of as a groundbreaking intervention in China’s tradition, the Red Guards were supposedly the opposite of the patriarchal social order. Behind their mobilization was an uncompromised idealism: let our children, our oppressed classes speak up; let them overthrow corrupt forms of power; let them tell us what to do; let them create a new social space! And yet at the same time, the fundamental conceptualization of “the public” went unchallenged, so the fervor of the Red Guards simply degenerated into the very same self-righteous abuse of political power that had characterized their elders.

This conception of “the public” as a space in which to conform with the powerful is recognizably different from that to which those living in the West are accustomed. In the West, the public is arguably also a space of governance—but with a significant difference. With the mediation of law, “the public” functions in the latter context as a constraint on those who exercise power, subjecting them to scrutiny and holding them accountable. What this means is that the space of the public is no longer at the disposal of only those with political power; it is also where multiple discourses, reflecting vastly divergent, at times opposing, perspectives, achieve legitimacy solely through a continual competition for power. Any attempt to manipulate the public space in an authoritarian fashion will simply have too many hurdles to overcome and will thus be much less likely to achieve any extended dominance.<sup>17</sup>

Time and again, the West’s habituation to this legally bound “public” has blinded it to China’s alternative conception. During the Tiananmen Massacre of June 1989, for instance, even as the West was imagining that its intense gaze would check the Chinese authorities’ display of author-

itarianism, these authorities were reacting in exactly the opposite manner. They reacted as if they had been provoked into action in a public space where their authority had been challenged and needed to be reestablished. Thus it was precisely the West’s attention, aimed at discouraging militaristic violence, that helped to generate this violence. The Chinese authorities had to prove that they, proprietors of their own political power, were in control of the public space, and they did so by slaughtering their own “children.”<sup>18</sup>

In this regard, the scene in which the father publicly punishes the son in *To Live* can be read as a miniaturized rerendering of that dramatic punishing scene watched by the entire world in June 1989. In both situations, demands for social justice lead to protests and demonstrations, which in turn catch the attention of a crowd. Like Fugui under the pressure of public attention, the Chinese authorities reacted by striking out at the children who had embarrassed them—crushing them with tanks and gunfire. To this day, these acts of violence continue to be justified in terms of sustaining peace and prosperity—that is, of restoring “social” order.

These conflicting views of “the public” and of governance are replayed every time an outspoken person emerges to criticize the political regime in Beijing. Fang Lizhi, Wei Jingsheng, Martin Lee, Szeto Wah, Christine Loh, Emily Lau, and Harry Wu are just a few who come to mind.<sup>19</sup> In order to do what they seek to do, which is to bring about democracy in territories under (or soon to be under) Chinese rule, these radicals must act as though they were ignorant of the concept of “the public” that is implicit in that rule. In doing so, they have again and again provoked the Chinese authorities’ profound anger. What is maddening to these authorities is not merely what the radicals say in their speeches and writings about China’s various acts of social injustice, but also the defiant, “uncouth” manner in which they voice their criticisms in public. When that public is international, their “misbehavior” becomes unpardonable. In keeping with the circular reasoning of their essentialist governing ideology, the Chinese authorities typically handle such defiance by turning the radicals into outcasts, through criminalization and imprisonment or through deportation and ostracization. Often, such “outcasting” is put in explicitly nationalistic and ethnic terms, with trouble-makers accordingly labeled “traitors” who have betrayed China to the “foreigners,” the “Western imperialists.”<sup>20</sup>

With its overtones of absurdity and sentimentalism, the scene in which Fugui spans his son in submission to the pressuring public gaze is hence emblematic of the predicament of governance in Chinese political culture. Such governance is driven by a public sphere that, unable to serve as the site for a potentially autonomous opposition, readily collapses into a mechanism for coercion by brute force. Without

the effective intervention of a restraining legal apparatus, this public space requires the individual to assume a subordinate position vis-à-vis “public opinion,” a position enforced by discipline and punishment. The patriarchal implications of such subordination include the fact that its enforcement will always be aimed at the powerless, who must always be disciplined and punished regardless of the grounds on which their discontent is voiced. The governing-governed relationship in this context becomes tripartite: governance is enforced not only by soliciting the governed to serve the arbitrary and brutal interests of “the public,” but also by specifically manipulating them into willingly sacrificing those who are disadvantaged—in the name of the *public good*. In turn, these disadvantaged members of the public may internalize such governance as *self-governance*—by either becoming as violent as their governors (if they succeed in procuring power for themselves) or submissively enduring violence to themselves (if they remain “ordinary citizens”). Since the majority of society must remain “ordinary citizens,” governance means, ultimately, the dissemination of a political culture in which people are always prepared to tolerate violence and to accommodate further violence. It is under such patterns of governance and self-governance that “endurance” excels as the foremost moral virtue in the struggle “to live.” Perhaps nowhere is the violence that goes into the making of this moral virtue more evident than in the Chinese character for “endurance”—*ren*—which is composed of a “knife” above the “heart.”

### **We Endure, Therefore We Are**

Technically, how can a critique of an abstract quality such as “endurance” be made on the movie screen? With his usual penchant for understanding what works in the medium of film, Zhang added a series of events which are not found in Yu Hua’s novella. This “supplement” not only contributes to the spectacular cinematic visuality that is a hallmark of all of Zhang’s films, but also exemplarily allegorizes the contradictions inherent to the people’s “survival.”

Near the beginning of the film, after Fugui has reduced his family to poverty, he goes to Long’er for help. Having won the Xu family’s ancestral home that Fugui gambled away, Long’er refuses to lend him any money, but instead offers him the loan of a box containing some bric-a-brac from the past—a set of shadow-puppets.<sup>21</sup> From then on, Fugui, who, in an earlier scene, showed off his singing talent in the gambling house, will make his living by singing with a traveling troupe of puppeteers.

During one performance near the end of the Civil War, Fugui and his

fellow performers are conscripted into the Nationalist Army by force. Because the puppets are on loan from Long’er, Fugui insists on lugging them along in their heavy box. When the Nationalists are defeated by the Communists, Fugui, like many others, becomes a prisoner of war, only to discover that his burdensome puppets have suddenly become a treasure: accidentally picked up by the bayonet of a Communist soldier, the figures dazzling against the sun provide a means of entertainment for the troops. In performing for the soldiers and giving them some relief from the dull wartime conditions, Fugui becomes a minor hero and is awarded a certificate for having served the People’s Liberation Army. When he is finally able to return home, this certificate provides proof that he and his family are “exemplary” citizens at a time when others, especially landowners, are being hounded. (Long’er, for instance, is dragged off to be executed before Fugui’s eyes.)

Then, during the Great Leap Forward, when every household’s iron is confiscated for smelting as part of the national self-strengthening effort, Fugui’s puppets are, once again, threatened. But just as they are about to be confiscated, Jiashen makes a suggestion to the town chief: Why not use the puppets to entertain the workers? Fugui’s livelihood is thus salvaged a second time. Finally, during the Cultural Revolution, when relics of the past become dangerous to own because of their association with a “corrupt” ideology, Fugui is advised to burn his puppets before they are discovered. Even then, the wooden box in which the puppets had been stored is transformed into something useful: a nest for the chicks to be raised by Fugui’s grandson. As he had once told Youqing, Fugui now tells Mantou: when the chicks grow big, they will turn into geese; when the geese get big enough, they will turn into sheep; when the sheep have grown, they will turn into oxen. . . . As life gets better and better, the little boy will no longer ride on the back of an ox but on trains and airplanes.<sup>22</sup>

As a means of making a living, the shadow-puppets are richly suggestive of the complex significance of “the people” and “popular resistance.” The puppet theater is, first and foremost, a practice of the past—an art form associated with premodern China. Yet in spite of its anachronicity, the puppet theater is a resilient cultural mode that continues to be performed in various regions where it is associated with local folk traditions. In terms of the pedagogical mission of the political regime, it is precisely such relics as the shadow-puppet theater that interest Chinese Communist historians, for they are part of the “popular material culture” that constitutes the new conceptualization of a revolutionary China. Furthermore, as a symbol of the people’s tradition, the puppets in *To Live* endure, surviving one disaster after another. Even after they are finally destroyed, the box which once held them survives and nurtures new life. Are these puppets not the best testa-

ment to the common people's will to live? Instead of merely affirming this, Zhang's film makes us reflect on the nature of "endurance" itself: what precisely is endurance, and what does it tell us about the way China is governed?

Like the puppets, the characters in the film show a remarkable ability to persist through trying circumstances. Not only do they adapt to the physical hardships of life, but they seem equally capable of accommodating themselves to the ideological manipulations of the state. Once wealthy landowners, the Xu family adjusts to the low status of "poor townfolk," settling in and deliberately conforming with every move they make. In an early episode, for instance, Fugui and Jiazhen learn from the town chief that Long'er, the new owner of their ancestral home, refused to surrender the house to the authorities and burned it down instead in an act of "counterrevolutionary sabotage." Fugui's first reaction is one of shock at the destruction—after all, all that "sturdy timber" used to belong to the Xus. But, remembering that he is in public, he quickly adds that it is not their timber but "counter-revolutionary timber." Jiazhen gets the message immediately: "Yes," she echoes, "it's counterrevolutionary timber." In another episode, as the family sits down for a meal, Erxi, the son-in-law, mentions that their old friend Chunsheng, who had been an important cadre member, has been arrested and is in the process of being purged, so they should keep their distance (*hua qing jie xian*—literally, "draw a clear line") from him. Once again, Fugui readily acquiesces, glancing anxiously at the picture of Chairman Mao that was Chunsheng's wedding present to his daughter.

Such small incidents, comments, and details, which pass almost unnoticed because they are such a "natural" part of the story, cumulatively amount to an alternative reading of "the common people." This reading does not celebrate the common people's ability to live—to adapt to and endure harsh circumstances—as an unequivocal virtue; rather, it problematizes it as China's most enduring ideology.<sup>23</sup> In Zhang's film, the conventional notion of endurance as a strength is not simply reproduced but consciously staged, and it is through such staging, such dramatization or melodramatization, that a crucial fantasy which props up "China"—whether as a culture, a nation, a family, or a common person—is revealed. "We, the Chinese, are the oldest culture, the oldest people in the world," this fantasy says. "The trick of our success is the ability to stick it out—to absorb every external difficulty into ourselves, to incorporate even our enemies into our culture. We endure, therefore we are."

Like the structure of all powerful ideologies, endurance-cum-identity works tautologically: the ability to endure is what enables one to live, but in order to endure, one must stay alive. "To endure" and "to

live" thus become two points of a circular pattern of thinking which reinforce each other by serving as each other's condition of possibility. In accordance with this circular, tautological reasoning, the imperative "to live" through endurance becomes what *essentially* defines and perpetuates "China." As such, it operates as a shield in two senses: "living" protects China from destruction at the same time that it prevents China from coming to terms with reality. That is, China—preoccupied exclusively with its own survival—is *in reality* its own worst enemy because that preoccupation is precisely what has led China's political history, with all its catastrophes, to be repeated ad infinitum.

The best demonstration of this self-perpetuating ideology of endurance and survival in *To Live* is none other than the shadow-puppets, whose capacity for survival becomes most evident, ironically, in their own destruction. For if, as the town chief points out, the stories performed by the puppet theater are all "classic feudal types"—all about *dihuang jiangxiang, caizi jiaren* ("emperors, kings, generals, ministers, scholars, and beauties")—and that is why the puppets must be burned, then isn't the fascination with such stories reproduced in the very act of burning, which is, after all, an act performed in filial worship of Mao Zedong as an emperor, and in mindless obedience to the Party and the Revolution? Although the puppets are destroyed on account of their feudalist ideological import, *feudalist ideology itself is kept alive in the very event that seeks to extinguish it*. Moreover, tradition, now an empty box, continues "to live" nonetheless by supporting new life—both the grandson and his chicks. And this new life is imagined in the form of a fantastic, progressive *telos*—from chickens to geese, to sheep, to oxen, to trains and airplanes—of a life that keeps getting "better and better" without ever getting any better at all.<sup>24</sup>

By abandoning the singular perspective of one character and by foregrounding interactions among different characters over such additional, apparently "technical" elements as the shadow-puppet theater, Zhang enables a radically nonconforming view of endurance and survival to emerge. His approach is, strictly speaking, an *ethical* one insofar as it is an approach to the *ethos*—the way of life—of a group of people, in this case "the Chinese." Ethics in this sense is not the abstract moral/philosophical sphere of Western modernity but the structure, dynamics, and values of social life in a specific community.<sup>25</sup> More than any of Zhang's other films, *To Live* focuses on practices in the context of the Chinese ethos, elaborating—as it exposes—China's "national" ideology. Through this most accessible, chronological narrative of the lives of "common people," Zhang raises the most profound political question: how is China governed, managed, and fantasized as a collective? The answer proposed by his film is equally profound, and remarkable: China is governed, managed, and fantasized as a collective by the self-

165

fulfilling, self-perpetuating ideology of endurance and survival—by an ethical insistence on accommodating, on staying alive at all costs. And yet, such an insistence, despite its nobility, is not *ethical* enough, for it can be and frequently has been co-opted by precisely the forces it seeks to resist. The ideology of endurance and survival has been so thoroughly and “spontaneously” incorporated into “the imaginary relation” between the Chinese and their real living conditions<sup>26</sup> that the government can blatantly disregard human rights in the name of human rights, since, after all, “human rights” means “having enough to eat,” and China’s food supply is an essentially “internal affair.” When any intervention in China’s handling of this crucial issue can be successfully dismissed as “Western imperialism”—yet another external threat to be endured and survived by the Chinese—a time-honored form of governance remains in full force.

#### Refusing to Live: The Glimpse of an Alternative Political Culture

If my reading of this fundamental critique of Chinese society in Zhang’s film is at all tenable, then it should not be surprising that a saga of so many heart-rending episodes would also have many funny and farcical, indeed absurd, moments. If a film can be said to have an affect, that of *To Live* can only be described as the affect of excess. This excess stems from the crisscrossing of various modes of emotional intensity: melodrama and sentimentalism (with many tear-jerking interludes), comedy (with belly laughs at unexpected moments), and scenes that provoke other strong feelings (such as those generated by the wonderfully performed intimate relations among the various family members). But the affect of excess also points to the presence of an otherness, a chord of emotional dissonance struck from within the realistic narrative that neither tragedy, farce, nor familial bonding manages to muffle.

This emotional dissonance is the result of a narrative structure that alludes to the possibility of an alternative reading as it unfolds, so that the experience of “seeing” the film becomes one of virtually looking at a hologram. While there is undoubtedly a cohesive frame of reference, which allows us to follow the story, there is at the same time another configuration that is equally present on the surface, waiting to be seen. What is crucial is that the recognition of this other configuration inevitably disrupts, destabilizes, and distorts the more obvious one, although we can choose to “see” only that one and to ignore the other. Coming from a director who has lived for decades in a totalitarian state where the authorities continue to obstruct his work,<sup>27</sup> this holographic mode of storytelling is, we may surmise, a tactic of smuggling subversive messages past censors. As I have already mentioned, such

subversive smuggling is often achieved by means of passing incidents, comments, and details. As well, it is achieved by means of minor characters.

For instance, little Youqing, who disappears halfway through the film, subverts the predominant message of survivalist endurance more than once. After being wrongly punished in the communal dining hall, Youqing decides to play a practical joke on his father at the suggestion of his mother. During one of Fugui’s performances, Youqing serves his father a bowl of tea—laced with large amounts of vinegar and chili sauce. Drinking the tea unawares, Fugui chokes and spits it out, splashing the puppet theater screen and making everyone laugh. In a scene that is filled with the most infectious feelings of warmth and fun, thus, the son’s mischievous act—another spin-off of the idea of unincorporated food—provokes his father into a momentary “revolt.” A person who usually “swallows” everything, Fugui finally acts in a way that is, in terms of the ideological structure of the story, the opposite of endurance.

The other character in Zhang’s film besides Youqing who represents the possibility of an alternative behavioral code is Chunsheng. As Fugui’s sidekick in the gambling house and the traveling puppeteer troupe, then during the Civil War, Chunsheng is throughout the film kept in the role of a character on the side, a character who, unlike Fugui, is not central to the story. He sometimes strikes us as a bit crazy, such as when he claims—on a battlefield covered with corpses—that he wants to drive a car so much that he would gladly die for that experience. Years later, Chunsheng unexpectedly reappears as the district chief who has accidentally killed Youqing, and whom the Xu family (Jiazhen in particular) refuses to forgive. As a result, Chunsheng is relegated to the position of a suspect outsider. On important occasions, such as Fengxia’s wedding, he is neither formally invited to join the celebration nor served tea as a guest in the house.

During the Cultural Revolution, like many officials of standing, Chunsheng is tried and persecuted as a “capitalist” running dog. One night, after his wife has apparently committed suicide, he comes to see Fugui and confesses in despair, “I don’t want to live any more!” As Chunsheng bids him farewell, Fugui urges him to be strong and to go on living. For the first time since Youqing’s death, Jiazhen softens and asks Chunsheng to come into the house. She reminds him that he owes their family a life, a debt that endows his own life with value. Chunsheng, however, neither agrees nor disagrees. Although we hear the admonition “to live” loud and clear, Zhang’s film leaves it unclear as to whether Chunsheng will accede to this imperative. His disappearance into the dim light at the end of the street, an image of melancholic uncertainty, marks a departure from coerced survival at all costs.

## ETHICS AFTER IDEALISM

As someone who even considers refusing to endure, "to live," Chunsheng can be linked to some of Zhang's most defiant characters, such as the peasant woman, Judou, in *Judou* and the maid Yan'er in *Raise the Red Lantern*. In terms of the ideological structure of *To Live*, Chunsheng's walking away introduces a distance, a chasm, within the picture of a continuous collective "living" and offers a glimpse of the possibility of an alternative mode of self-governance and political culture. It is, however, no more than a glimpse. The working out of the implications of this barely glimpsed alternative would have to be a long-term intellectual, political, and ethical project.

## EIGHT

*A Souvenir of Love*


---

*We don't know what love is. Sometimes people even think it is a "local custom."*

—Lee Bik-wa/Li Bihua, *Yinji kau/Yanzhi kou*

---

ANY VISIT TO Hong Kong in recent years tells one that strong feelings of nostalgia are at work in the general consumer culture. As *wai gau/huaijiu*<sup>1</sup>—the most commonly used Chinese term for nostalgia—becomes a trend, the city culture of Hong Kong takes on the appeal of an ethnographic field. Architectural landmarks such as the Repulse Bay Hotel, the Peak Restaurant, and the Western Market have been rebuilt or renovated in such ways as to resurrect their former colonial "flavor." Exhibitions were held in 1992 of the postcards of Hong Kong from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, of Hong Kong film posters dating back to the 1950s, of Hong Kong cigarette and groceries posters dating back to the 1930s, as well as of various kinds of mass culture publications and daily wares from the 1950s and 1960s. Furniture, music, clothes, shoes, and cosmetics of the past decades are being revived, and it has become fashionable to collect "antiques" such as pocket and mechanical watches, records, old newspapers, old magazines, old photographs, old comic strips, and so forth, in addition to the more traditional collector's items such as coins, stamps, snuff bottles, utensils, paintings, calligraphy, and carpets. The nostalgic hold on history, tradition, and culture has made way for the endless production of commodities.

As a Hong Kong journalist writes, "For the nostalgic class and its rapidly expanding club membership, what is beautiful has to be in the past tense; to appreciate the beautiful is like entering a time tunnel in