Retributive Memories: Self-Realization in the Post-Mao Era

It is almost a given assumption of late that, when written memoirs of China’s political past, such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, need a generic makeover, film is always there as the most favored medium. What is not so readily comprehensible is the fact that films depicting such personal or collective histories have recently taken a turn for the unheroic and the mundane. These films have withdrawn from cathartic tales of betrayal, persecution and suffering of the heroic victims (mostly public social/cultural figures) and replaced them with bittersweet remembrances of everyday life by ordinary Chinese on the center stage. What makes it even more intriguing is their tendency to reminisce over those unforgiving times by way of one’s childhood; when placed against the fuzzy, naïve and playful humdrum of childhood, one could feel less depressed and offended about them. Is the turn towards everyday life a backlash against indiscriminate or even disingenuous indictment against the Maoist revolution? Or is it a playful trivialization of political traumas in the postmodernist vein, or even a mere rhetorical flourish of the quotidian as a critical vogue?

In response to such queries, we take note of an impressive turnout of in-depth journal articles and personal profiles of filmmakers that focus on how films’ depiction of everyday life hinges on a dynamic shift in memorializing personal or collective sufferings. Equally impressive, if still inconclusive, are the views derived from such studies: scholars have revealed the critical vigor of the quotidian in probing the presumed télos posited in prevalent memoirs and histories, but have parted their way over how the emphasis on the everyday unsettles or diffuses the grand narrative of political memoirs and official histories.1 Chen Xiaoming reviews the potency of adolescent sexual rivalry and fantasy in recent cinema as the form of quotidian that successfully evades the

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1 There are many journal articles on critiquing the teleological end of modernity by virtue of the quotidian in the realm of political memoirs of China’s recent past. Of these three have focused intensely on filmic memoirs such as Jiang Wen’s Bright Sunny Days 阳光灿烂的日子 (aka. In the Heat of the Sun), and they are collected conveniently in one issue of boundary 2: an international journal of literature and culture (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), Vol. 24, Number 3, fall 1997. Detailed citation of individual works will follow.
politically oriented trope of national allegory, affirms contemporary China's consumerist culture as “the residual by-products of globalization and its cultural imaginary,” and declares that “China... seems to have inevitably moved toward the final ‘end of history,’ or the ultimate triumph of global capitalism.”

Chen seems to be aware of China's need to charter alternative routes to modern development, but he is content to see China chug along the path of modern capitalistic development.

Liu Kang, on the other hand, revives and affirms the quotidian in Mao's political repertoire to underscore the concrete, the material and even “the bodily needs of the masses at the everyday level.” He evokes this culture of the masses as a crucial step in the Marxist historical teleology that informs Mao's utopian vision of a CCP-led cultural transformation. While echoing socialist modernity as a carrier agent of alternative modernity, Liu deplores Mao's error during his many political campaigns in letting this “everydayness” be sidetracked by the “non-everyday”—the political and social events such as violence, death, catastrophe and revolutionary martyrs that far outweigh the trivial and the ordinary in revolutionary rhetoric. His critical thrust is justly directed at the process of political instrumentalization and manipulation at the hands of Mao Zedong, a driven and often ruthless social transformer. Yet it is also obvious that Liu regards Mao's historical insight to launch a social revolution “as an alternative to the capitalist modernity,” and that as such, Mao considered it an exclusive (and often exclusionary) goal to conduct a downright ruinous crusade against bourgeois liberalist values, of which the quotidian forms a part. Had it not been these erratic disturbances, Liu seems to suggest, socialist China might have progressed successfully further towards the Marxist teleological end. Without a doubt, the end projected in Liu's revival of the Maoist everyday stands at odds with what Chen Xiaoming perceives as the culminating end of a modernist order of things. As much as we commend Liu's effort for its intellectual valor and insight, his project to explore everyday life as an alternative modern development remains incomplete: he hardly brings critical scrutiny to bear on how the popular and the ordinary in life during these historical events can be invested to discern errors and pitfalls in Mao's flawed strategies. Likewise, Liu has not demonstrated how personal experiences of the quotidian in those times can be valorized by way of the visual and

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3 Liu, Kang 刘康, “Popular Culture and the Culture of the Masses in Contemporary China,” boundary 2, 120–121.