In the Heat of the Sun (陽光燦爛的日子, *Yángguāng Cànlàn De Rìzi*, 1994)

Rui Kunze

dir. Wen Jiang; prod. Youliang Guo, An-chin Hsu, Ki Po; screenplay Wen Jiang; photography Changwei Gu; music Wenjing Guo. 35 mm, color, 140 mins. China Film Co-Production Corporation and Dragon Film, distrib. Gala Film Distribution Limited.

Officially released in mainland China in 1995, *In the Heat of the Sun* immediately caused controversy for its unconventional way of addressing historical memory and the experience of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). From an early 1990s perspective, the protagonist Ma Xiaojun (played by Wen Jiang) looks back at his younger self in Beijing of the 1970s and recalls the Cultural Revolution through a teenager's life in the privileged and protected environment of military family housing: hanging out with friends, street fights, and initiation to sexual matters. The film was criticized for its nostalgic portrayal of the Cultural Revolution—right around the time when Mao nostalgia was emerging in China.

In the Heat of the Sun stands in stark contrast to the Chinese films that appeared in the 1980s, films that denounced the injustice and brutal violence of the Cultural Revolution. Nick Browne identifies these films as political melodrama, in which »the political process is narrativized as a trial that occupies the thematic center in the way that the family conflict does in the family melodrama« (46). Different from the mimetic storytelling of the past in post-Mao political melodrama, *In the Heat of the Sun* features a double perspective of both the adult and teenage Ma Xiaojun, which offers a skewed version of what may have happened. Its foregrounding of the adult Ma's struggle to remember correctly, in particular, suggests the intervention of one's desire and emotion with memory, and hence puts into question »earlier depictions of the Cultural Revolution which have emphasized reliance on memory and especially on remembrance of its atrocities« (Braester 351). On the other hand, the film deploys in diegesis the melodramatic conventions of revolutionary spectacles and pathos within transnational socialist culture (film, music, and literature) during the Cold War, especially Soviet culture that survived the Sino-Soviet split of the 1960s and continued to exist in Chi-

na for a long time as a legitimate source of foreign culture and entertainment. These salient melodramatic formulae celebrate pageantry and martyrology as aesthetics of masculine ideals and build dramatic clashes between suffering and saving, between solidarity and betrayal of victim, villain, and hero. By showing that these spectacles and pathos help shape the teenage Ma Xiaojun's self-perception, daily behavior, and ways of articulating his personal feelings, this film reveals a sentimental politics of Maoist China that is structured by the interpenetration of public ideology and private desires as well as the oscillation between fantasy and everyday life.

The teenage Ma Xiaojun (played by Yu Xia) enjoys unprecedented freedom in the early 1970s, when authority figures such as teacher and father are either denounced or constantly absent. Growing up in the highly militarized everyday life of the Mao era, Xiaojun fervently wishes for the outbreak of a Sino-Soviet war, from which he would surely emerge as a hero. His hobby of making keys and picking locks may appear less glorious, but he aggrandizes it by comparing the gratification at the moment of opening a lock to that of the Soviet soldiers conquering Berlin. In his fantasy, Xiaojun measures himself and his daily life against the military heroism exemplified in pageantry and martyrology—formulaic and hyperbolic spectacles repeatedly presented and promoted in socialist film, literature, and music. In the (locked) drawer of his father, a military officer, Xiaojun finds objects that satisfy his fantasy of a soldier hero: daggers, medals, military insignias—and two condoms, which the boy has no clue about. After waving the daggers as if in a combat, Xiaojun goose-steps to the mirror, decorating his sleeveless undershirt with the medals and insignias, humming the military anthem of the Chinese People's Liberation Army. Looking at himself in the mirror, he first performs as a solider in a parade and then as the protagonist in the 1964 film *Heroic Sons and Daughters* (英雄儿女), who sacrifices himself in the Korean War. With the theatricality of military pageantry and martyrology, Xiaojun acts out in the mirror his own fantasy of being a war hero. All this dissolves into mundanity and farce in the eyes of the audience and the adult narrator, however, when Xiaojun blows a condom into a small Zeppelin and imagines it bombing the enemy, while the condom flies slowly in front of a photo of his parents and then shrinks.

Military heroism, with its morally charged notions of friend and foe, however, is displaced, if not misplaced, in Ma Xiaojun's everyday life. In one impressive sequence, Xiaojun and his friends enter a street fight to avenge a friend, who was hurt by other teenagers when trying to protect a neighbor with mental disabilities. The sequence starts with Ma Xiaojun's gang searching for their foes to bring them to justice and ends with Xiaojun knocking out a teenager with a brick and beating him nearly to death with a metal stick. »The Internationale,« which was played each evening at 8:30 p.m. on the radio during the Cultural Revolution (Jiang 33) or sung by martyrs at the climactic moment of their sacrifice in revolutionary films or plays, serves as the background music of the whole sequence. If the street fight is choreographed to perfectly match the rhythm of »The Internationale« to produce pathos and heighten the mood, then the tension between the music's (*melos*) grandiose theme to fight for humanity and the visuals' senseless violence reveals precisely the melodramatic excess of Xiaojun's imagined heroism and the boys' self-righteous feelings. In contrast, the Soviet song »Moscow Nights,« in another scene, offers an alternative moment of friendship. Sitting on the rooftop against a dark blue summer night sky and singing the song in unison, the boys enjoy a sense of solidarity—not by fighting together, but by sharing their soft feelings through the song's lyrical mood.

The formulae of revolutionary spectacles and pathos in socialist culture offer individuals a way of organizing and articulating their feelings and, in doing so, operate at the intersection of private desires and public ideology. When Ma Xiaojun first invites Mi Lan (played by Jing Ning), the girl he desires, to meet his friends, he and his friend Big Ant (played by Hai Wang) reenact a scene from the 1939 Soviet film *Lenin in 1918*. In the film, Lenin's guard, Vasily, risks his life by jumping from the second floor to prevent a counter-revolutionary conspiracy. Xiaojun and Big Ant make the dangerous jump to impress Mi Lan—by appropriating the revolutionary courage and sacrifice in the original scene to communicate their feelings and desires in gender relations. After Mi Lan has become the girlfriend of his friend Liu Yiku (played by Le Geng), Ma Xiaojun has a long dream, in which he and Mi Lan transform into a hotchpotch of characters derived from socialist Chinese and Soviet film and literature. Mi Lan addresses him as »comrade,« so they may fight together against enemies, who appear either in Nazi military uniforms or in the caricaturist image of Japanese soldiers, as often depicted in anti-Japanese Chinese war films. Xiaojun dreams of himself as Pavel Korchagin, the protagonist of Nikolai Ostrovsky's 1936 fictionalized autobiography *How the Steel Was Tempered* (translated into Chinese in 1942), while Mi Lan appears as Tonia, Pavel's teenage love who later sides with the bourgeois class. In the next scene, Xiaojun discovers that Mi Lan turns out to be the female assassin of Lenin in 1918, and he participates in executing Mi Lan, the traitor, even though he hysterically cries. The dream—absurd and chaotic as it seems—puts together some of the most popular melodramatic moments in the socialist culture of Maoist China, whose treatment of solidarity and courage, suffering and sacrifice, trust and betrayal, was predicated on »the moral universe of class struggle« (McGrath 350) and the just causes of revolution and patriotism. Ma Xiaojun's frustration, confusion, and desperation come from his failure to establish an intimate relationship with the girl he wants, but they are relocated and reformulated in terms of class struggle and war—with radical binaries of friend/foe, proletarian/bourgeois, and soldier/traitor. These binaries and their dramatic clashes in Xiaojun's dream, with their ideological implications and functions of social norms, bring to light a sentimental politics of socialism that is profoundly ingrained in the mode of the melodramatic.

As the adult narrator makes clear in the course of the film, his younger self's desires for both military heroism and Mi Lan intervene powerfully with his own memory. With its exploration of a teenager's growing pains in Maoist China, told by an unreliable narrator, this film presents a storytelling about the Cultural Revolution that is different from that of the post-Mao political melodrama and, in doing so, refuses to view the complicated history »through the single prism of political oppression« (Braester 356). It remains, however, debatable how to perceive the film's conspicuous reference to the formulaic revolutionary spectacles and pathos. Does the film reproduce the ideals and ideology of Maoist China? Or does it rather subvert Maoist and socialist aesthetics and politics by sarcastically recycling these melodramatic formulae? Treading the fine line between deploying and reprocessing revolutionary spectacle and pathos, this controversial film precisely demonstrates the ability of melodramatic formulae to trigger and accommodate various feelings, impulses, and interpretations—and it thereby attests to the power and vitality of the genre.

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