

# Scars on Screen

How Is Maoist China Depicted on Film?

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## Introduction

Following the definite end of China's Cultural Revolution in 1976 and the "reform and opening-up" initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, restrictions on art eased and alternative accounts of life in China under Mao started emerging, that conflicted earlier official accounts.<sup>1</sup> Notably, the genre of so-called "scar literature" (伤痕文学) emerged, depicting the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) as a period of trauma and political campaigns gone wrong. Since then, a number of films depicting this so-called decade of turmoil, and the years preceding it, have been produced. While some of these are more or less in line with the viewpoint of the scar literature, which "treats the negative effects of the Cultural Revolution decade," others take a more nostalgic view or avoid controversial aspects of the era.<sup>2</sup> According to sociologist Yang Guobin, the diversity that exists in portrayals of the Cultural Revolution implicates growing opportunities to discuss and debate not only the past, but also the social and political problems of the present.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of this essay is to examine variations in depictions of the Maoist heyday on film, focusing on the Cultural Revolution while not restricting the examination solely to depictions of the years 1966-1976.

The examination will be made by studying and comparing two feature films: *Hibiscus Town* (first released in 1986) and *In the Heat of the Sun* (1994). These particular films have been deliberately chosen to represent differing pictures of the era they portray. The period under scrutiny "has generated many versions of history," and there are, of course, just as many different pictures of Maoist China as there are accounts given.<sup>4</sup> The films selected are intended to represent two "types" of accounts, as it were, in how they are perceived as representing the era. Furthermore, they have been chosen for being noteworthy films, whose impact were relatively large: *Hibiscus Town* has been called "groundbreaking," while *In the Heat of the Sun* "won immediate success in China and abroad, and . . . was acclaimed by major critics as the most

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1 For a comprehensive history of the PRC, see for example *China: A New History* by John King Fairbank and Merle Goldman; for a more in-depth study on the Cultural Revolution, see for example *Mao's Last Revolution* by Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals; for a history of early and modern Chinese film, see *Chinese National Cinema* by Yingjin Zhang.

2 Berry, Chris 2004. *Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China: The Cultural Revolution after the Cultural Revolution*. p. 4.

3 Yang Guobin 2005. "Days of Old Are Not Puffs of Smoke: Three Hypotheses on Collective Memories of the Cultural Revolution." p. 33.

4 Lu Tonglin 2004. "Fantasy and Ideology in a Chinese Film: A Žižekian Reading of the Cultural Revolution." p. 539.

important work in Chinese cinema since *Red Sorghum*.<sup>5</sup> Before the examination of the two films is carried out, a brief historical background will be given; then, *Hibiscus Town* will be examined, followed by *In the Heat of the Sun*. The examination of the latter will also feature a comparison between the two films. In studying the films, I will use secondary sources to support my claims and arguments—these sources will mainly consist of previously conducted studies of the films by film scholars—however, I will mainly rely on my own study of the films, which I have watched in their original Chinese.

In the five years that immediately followed the end of the Cultural Revolution, a large number of films depicting the decade of 1966 to 1976 were made—in *Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China*, Chris Berry studies 89 such films.<sup>6</sup> Berry mentions 1981 as a “cut-off date,” after which, due to the criticism of the film *Bitter Love*, films depicting the Cultural Revolution decade “have not appeared in such numbers or with such common themes, character types, plots, and styles” as between 1976 and 1981.<sup>7</sup> In a resolution passed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee in 1981, an official stance was declared: the Cultural Revolution was bad, but one ought not to pry into the details.<sup>8</sup> It seems that in the 30 years that have passed since then, the number of films depicting the Cultural Revolution has yet to reach 89. Because Berry’s study has already exhaustively covered the 1976-1981 period films, and because of my attraction to those films that do explore what has evidently become somewhat of a taboo topic, my focus lies in films made after 1981, despite the low quantity of such films.

## Background

After years of civil war, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was founded in 1949, led by the CCP, with Mao Zedong as its chairman. During the eight first years following its foundation, the PRC saw positive growth and restoration. The year 1958 saw the start of the Great Leap Forward (大跃进) campaign, which was aimed at making production more effective and improving agriculture, but which backfired, causing great famine

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5 Braester, Yomi 2003. *Witness Against History: Literature, Film, and Public Discourse in Twentieth-Century China*. pp. 193-194.

6 Berry, Chris 2004. *Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China: The Cultural Revolution after the Cultural Revolution*.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

8 Yang, p. 14.

and the death of 20 to 30 million people.<sup>9</sup> The campaign lasted until 1961, and the next few years were a period of slow economic recovery. Meanwhile, despite the failure of the Great Leap Forward, the CCP had strengthened its authority, and a cult of personality had developed around Mao, whom people trusted. During 1963 and 1964, two political campaigns with similar goals were launched: the Socialist Education Campaign (社会主义教育运动) in the cities and the Four Cleanups Campaign (四清运动) in rural China. The purpose of these campaigns was to rectify corrupt local cadres throughout the country, as well as to educate the peasants about the “class struggle.”<sup>10</sup>

In some ways a continuation of the Four Cleanups Campaign, in 1966, Mao launched the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (无产阶级文化大革命), which was to last a full decade and wreak havoc in the country. It was a mass movement orchestrated by Mao, for the purpose of weeding out “revisionists” and what were referred to as “persons in power walking the capitalist road.” Partly because he was not satisfied with the results of the Four Cleanups Campaign, and partly because he did not trust elements within the Party itself, instead of sending out cadres, this time Mao mobilized millions of teenage youth, who formed the so-called Red Guards. Between 1966 and 1968, the Red Guards, instructed to “learn revolution by making revolution,” traveled around the country and caused tumult. Targeting mainly intellectuals and officials, some of them broke into homes, humiliated people, tortured and beat them, and even killed, and they seized control of important institutions at many levels of society. Eventually, factional fighting within the Red Guards led to “open warfare” in the cities. After they were disbanded in 1968, the youth were sent to the countryside to “learn from the peasants.”<sup>11</sup>

The production of art was extremely controlled in Maoist China, and the control reached its peak during the Cultural Revolution. What was allowed was “a combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism, not a picture of the world as it then was, but a vision of a utopian society to which the Communist Party . . . aspired.”<sup>12</sup> The “socialist cinema” was characterized by “conformity and uniformity.”<sup>13</sup> Production of feature films in the PRC was completely suspended between 1967 and 1969, while hundreds of previously produced national and foreign films were locked away; between

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9 Fairbank, John King and Merle Goldman, 2006. *China: A New History*. p. 368.

10 Fairbank, John King and Merle Goldman, 2006. *China: A New History*.

11 Ibid.

12 King, Richard and Jan Walls 2010. “Introduction: Vibrant Images of a Turbulent Decade.” *Art in Turmoil: The Chinese Cultural Revolution, 1966-67*. Ed. Richard King. pp. 3-4.

13 Zhang, Yingjin 2004. *Chinese National Cinema*. p. 214.

1970 and 1973, a total of 13 films were produced; in 1974, 17 feature films were produced, and film production was recovering.<sup>14</sup> During the Cultural Revolution, which “in film circles” started as early as in 1964, a large number of films were deemed “inappropriate,” “counter-revolutionary,” “poisonous” or even “evil” in large campaigns of film criticism, and ultra-leftist model plays became the only acceptable film form.<sup>15</sup> After the end of the Cultural Revolution, restrictions eased considerably, policies changed, and films depicting China’s Mao years in a bad light appeared, something that would have been impossible only a few years earlier.

### *Hibiscus Town*

“ . . . sometimes I’m a ghost, sometimes I’m a man.”

—Qin Shutian, *Hibiscus Town*

Released in 1986, *Hibiscus Town* (芙蓉镇) is a melodrama set during the Cultural Revolution and the Four Cleanups Campaign that preceded it. The film was directed by Xie Jin (谢晋), in the 1980s already a veteran in Chinese film-making, who had himself been a victim to the Cultural Revolution—he was imprisoned for several years, accused of being a “bourgeois humanist.”<sup>16</sup> The plot of *Hibiscus Town* revolves mainly around a small-town saleswoman, Hu Yuyin, who lives with her husband, Li Guigui, in Hibiscus Town. They make their living making tofu that they sell at a street stand. They work hard and eventually save up enough money to buy a new house, only to come under accusation of “walking the capitalist road.” Though Hu maintains that she and her husband have done nothing wrong, they decide to give their saved-up money to a friend for hiding. Out of fear, the friend hands the money over to the Revolutionary Committee, and Hu flees south to hide. When she returns to Hibiscus Town, she learns that her husband has been persecuted to death. As the Cultural Revolution comes, Hu spends her days sweeping the streets, just like the Rightist, Qin Shutian. Soon her only friend, Qin and Hu come to spend more and more time together, and eventually fall in love. When Hu conceives a child, Qin asks the Party secretary’s permission for them to marry, but they are denied the right, and shortly afterwards they are arrested for

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14 Zhang, Yingjin p. 196.

15 Zhang, Yingjin p. 217-220.

16 Denton, Kirk A. <<http://people.cohums.ohio-state.edu/denton2/courses/c505/temp/hibiscustown.html>>.

“disrespecting the dictatorship of the proletariat.” Qin is sentenced to ten years’ imprisonment, Hu only to three years’ labor, since she is expecting a child. Years later, after the end of the Cultural Revolution, Qin is able to return to Hibiscus Town, and is reunited with Hu and their son, and together they reestablish Hu’s tofu business.



*Hu Yuyin serving tofu.*

*Hibiscus Town* starts with a series of shots depicting Hu Yuyin and her husband working in the darkness of their home before dawn, ardently making tofu. Cut to a bustling street scene: it is 1963, and in Hibiscus Town, Hu and Guigui are busy selling spicy tofu to an eager stream of customers. Down the street, the state-run restaurant is not doing as well, with few or no customers, and manager Li Guoxiang in a grumpy mood. She goes to Hu’s stall to demand to see a business license, but is chased off by Director Gu, who tells Li to take it up with the tax station instead, and by customers proclaiming that Hu’s tofu is “just *so* good!” At this early point in the film, the audience gets a taste of what is to come: we see an industrious local entrepreneur, popular with the townspeople, harassed by an authority representing the Party. Hu asserts her right to sell tofu, and insists that she pays her taxes, but Li keeps at it until she realizes she does not—yet—have the authority to make a fuss. The image presented of Li is that of a figure of authority attempting to abuse her power, with arbitrary and unjust motives, and opposed by the populace.

Film theorist Nick Browne claims that “[a]t the very outset of the film, the population of Hibiscus Town consists of three groups: the ‘people,’ the ‘bad elements,’

and the Party.”<sup>17</sup> Although “bad elements” is an erroneous epithet for the second group—the “five elements” is a better translation—the grouping itself is correct and relevant.<sup>18</sup> At this point in the film, Hu and her husband are still part of the “people” group, in close contact with the rest of the townspeople. This is in contrast with the next major character to be introduced in the film: Qin Shutian, also called “Crazy Qin,” who has been classified as a “Rightist” and assigned the job of cleaning the streets of Hibiscus Town. He first appears in the street scene described above, as a customer at Hu’s tofu stand, “almost in passing”<sup>19</sup>—part of the “five elements” as he is, he must acquire his bowl of tofu and consume it aside from everyone else (the “people”), almost hidden, even, from the view of the camera. Qin is not fully presented to the audience until the next time he appears, when he is ordered by Wang Qiushe to round up the town’s “elements” for a roll call. This is when we first hear his nickname, “Crazy Qin,” which further cements his status as an outsider, as do his eccentric manners: climbing, when called out of his home by Wang, out of his window instead of answering at the door; stutteringly repeating his “yes sir” in affirmation of commands; and answering his own roll call (“Rightist Qin Shutian? Present!”). This outsider role is purely a result of his classification as part of the “five elements” by the Party. As the film progresses, Qin is revealed to be a regular person. But before he is to earn his respect as one, his situation will take a turn for the worse.

The character of Wang Qiushe is a character whose role shifts throughout the film, and these shifts illustrate a theme in *Hibiscus Town*, namely the system of arbitrary and unjust rewards and punishments exercised by representatives of the Party. Wang is portrayed as possessing a number of bad personal traits: he is lazy, as shown in the scene where he wakes up much later than everyone else in town; he is superstitious, keeping a Buddha figurine in his home; he is an informer, readily disclosing to his superiors who in town might be newly rich; he is lewd, gluttonous, wasteful, and so on. And yet, he is the one who is rewarded—he is eventually promoted to Party secretary, and celebrated upon his return from Beijing. The contrast to the honest, hard-working Hu, who is instead purged, could not be clearer, and the implications about the society

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17 Nick Browne 1994. “Society and Subjectivity: On the Political Economy of Chinese Melodrama.” *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics*. Ed. Nick Browne et al. p. 43.

18 “Bad element” was a subcategory of the “five elements,” which also included Rightists, landlords, rich peasants, and reactionaries.

19 Hayford, Charles W. 2003. “Xie Jin’s Hibiscus Town: Revolution, Love, and Beancurd.” *Chinese Films in Focus: 25 New Takes*. Ed. Chris Berry. p. 9.



that *Hibiscus Town* presents are all but spelled out: it is an unjust system that rewards the lazy and punishes the industrious.

Hu Yuyin is in many ways Wang Qiushe's opposite, a cog in the machinery of society, working hard and getting up before dawn to make her tofu. She is, at the start of the film, a married woman—a “virtuous maternal figure.”<sup>20</sup> In her normal state—before being purged—she is popular with the townspeople, not only as a tofu vendor, but also as a friend who arranges a generous feast to celebrate her and her husband's new house. But the festive mood barely survives the feast, for not long after it, the series of events that leads to the criminalization of the lucky couple, and eventually to the death of Hu's husband and the ostracization of herself, starts unfolding.

The series of events leading to the purging of Hu starts with the arrival of Li Guoxiang, now a Party secretary, in Hibiscus Town in 1964. After her arrival, she inspects the home that Wang Qiushe has been assigned during land reform bemoaning his poverty.<sup>21</sup> When she inquires about the noise coming from town, Wang informs her of Hu's feast, which has just started, and Li answers with a tone of disapproval: “Hu Yuyin—the one that sells rice tofu?” The day after, when Hu is cleaning up after the feast, Wang walks by her home and she asks him why he did not come join them yesterday. His answer is ominous: “The rich are rich, the poor are poor; indeed, a campaign is needed.” The implication is that Wang, previously excited about Hu's feast, has been “educated” by Party Secretary Li about the class struggle and the impending campaign to restructure the class ranks. In the next scene, Li pays Hu an unexpected visit at her home. She comes representing a work team that has come to Hibiscus Town to “make an assessment of the political and economic situation of every household.” Because Li has tried to cause problems before, Hu is visibly nervous, but Li is all smiles. Li then presents to Hu what she knows about her household: among other accusations, she contends that the couplets at Hu's front door have been written by the Rightist, Qin Shutian, and that Hu has been buying rice cheaply, only to turn it into profit for herself. Hu protests, saying that what she has been buying is not rice but rice scraps, which many people feed to their pigs, but Li ignores her explanations.

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20 Ma Ning 1994. “Spatiality and Subjectivity in Xie Jin's Film Melodrama of the New Period.” *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics*. Ed. Nick Browne et al. p. 36.

21 The land reform was a huge campaign carried out by the CCP, during which not only land but also housing and other possessions of the landlords were redistributed, and which resulted in millions of deaths.

What follows next is a mass meeting directed by Li, during which Qin Shutian is held responsible, and consequently reprimanded, for being assigned and executing the “honorable task” of painting revolutionary slogans on the walls of Hibiscus Town. At the end of the meeting, Li launches her attack on Hu, which is to change Hu’s life forever:

Not long ago, a street vendor in our town had a new house built. As someone has pointed out, this house is more imposing even than the two largest shops that the town had before the Liberation. And by the way, in the last two years and nine months this street vendor has accumulated a net income of 6,600 yuan. 6,600 yuan! Some of us cadres hold that she is walking the capitalist road.

After this, Hu is ostracized by the townspeople, amongst whom she was previously popular. Out of fear for being associated with a potential “capitalist roader,” they shun her—for as has been shown in the case of Qin Shutian, as vague a connection as displaying couplets written by the hand of a Rightist (even if the message itself is revolutionary) can be held against you, should you find yourself the next victim of the investigations carried out by the Party. The town is thus transformed into a place of fear, and Hu chooses to flee and goes to stay with her husband’s relatives in Guangxi (and even there she feels hounded—her hosts are pressed by Party investigators to provide proof of their guest’s class background, without which she will not be allowed to stay very long). Browne observes that “[i]n posing the question of how, fifteen years after the founding of the socialist state, hard work leading to the purchase of a house can be regarded as a crime, the film points directly to the contradictory ideology and practices of socialism in the reform years.”<sup>22</sup> When Li is visiting Hu in her home, she advises her that “being honest with the work team is being honest with the Party,” but when Hu tries to tell the truth, the work team representative—that is, the Party representative—does not listen, but upholds her presupposition and carries out her arbitrary political agenda. “In *Hibiscus Town* the agents of the Party are designated as oppressors,” as Browne notes, and the main oppressor at this point in the film is Li Guoxiang.<sup>23</sup>

Qin Shutian, too, is denied the privilege of defending himself. At the campaign meeting, he is slammed by Li, and when answering truthfully that it was his superior

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22 Browne, p. 44.

23 Browne, p. 45.

that assigned him the task of painting slogans on the walls, Li pays it no attention, and orders him off the stage after calling him a “stutterer” who is “up to something”—using a Chinese expression which literally translates as “having ghosts in his heart” (心里有鬼). Later, when Hu returns to Hibiscus Town, after learning of her husband’s death, she is struck with grief and takes to the cemetery. There, she stumbles across Qin, but in the darkness does not recognize him. When in confusion and fear she asks him whether he is a man or a ghost, Qin answers with a suggestive line: “How do I put this—sometimes I’m a ghost, sometimes I’m a man.” This echoes Li’s accusation against Qin, and reflects his confusion about his own status and identity, his responsibilities and his rights—he is shunned and regarded as evil as a ghost, but his responsibilities are those of a man.

Thus ends the first part of *Hibiscus Town*, and the second part opens loudly: it is 1966, and the Cultural Revolution is under way. The sounds of drums and fervent voices shouting for Chairman Mao are mixed with documentary shots showing huge crowds of Red Guards at Tiananmen Square, as well as images from Hibiscus Town: Red Guards arriving, red flags, and big-character posters—one of which, in passing, denounces Li Guoxiang as a “false leftist” and a “slut.” In the following scene, as the plot picks up, Li is being pushed through the rainy streets of Hibiscus Town by a band of frantic Red Guards, led by none other than Wang Qiushe. While the Red Guards seek shelter from the rain under a roof, Li is forced to stand in the rain with a pair of old shoes hung around her neck—“worn-out shoe” (破鞋) being the literal translation of the Chinese expression for “slut” used in the film. Li protests, saying that she is a leftist and arguing that there must have been some kind of mistake, but the Red Guards continue to heckle and laugh at her. As Wang notices Qin and Hu, who have been taking shelter under the eaves of a nearby house, they too are called out—“you think someone in your position can take shelter?”—to stand beside Li in the rain. In an ironic turn of events, the former oppressor has been reduced to the level of her “victims.” However, rather than being a case of justice being made, the public humiliation of Li only shows that the society has descended further into turmoil—the spectacle is a further example of scrutiny and persecution ad absurdum, carried out by Party representatives. It is not a victory for Qin and Hu, because it only reinforces the practices that criminalized them, and also because the experience does not appear to humble Li in the least—when the Red Guards leave

the three standing in the street, Li appears utterly pathetic and at a loss, and Qin offers her his broom—but her expression turns sour, and the only words she has for him are “You, reactionary! Rightist!” In a last attempt to bring her around to realizing the reality of her situation, Qin leaves her with the words: “You’re human, too.”



*Li being humiliated by Red Guards. The person to the left is Wang Qiushe.*

Despite the humiliation of Li, before long she has been rehabilitated, and she returns to Hibiscus Town to resume her old duties. Her return coincides with that of Wang Qiushe, who, in his new capacity of Party secretary, was sent to Beijing and now makes a boisterous return, welcomed by a celebratory meal. As he munches down a chicken leg, “giddy with red fervour and newfound power,” he explains to a group of incredulous locals that the whole country is now “dancing.”<sup>24</sup> After irritatedly declining to be updated on the state of affairs in town, he does a loyalty dance (忠字舞) to Mao to satisfy the laughing spectators. More than anything, Wang appears as a clown who makes people laugh, but whose aptitude as a Party secretary is dubitable. His knowledge is insufficient and he is not serious about his duties—it is clear that his position is based on his lower class background and his willingness to offer information about his fellow townspeople to his superiors. His former superior and mentor, Li, arrives by car just after Wang has performed his short dance display. When Wang realizes who it is that has returned, he curses his own stupidity, recalling his enthusiastic participation in the public humiliation of Li. As she steps out of her car, Li appears collected, pays little

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<sup>24</sup> Hayford, p. 12.

attention to Wang, and immediately starts discussing work with her colleagues; unlike Wang, she wastes no time. During the remaining part of the film, Wang tries to win back Li's favor, and after he succeeds, the two begin a secret, sexual relationship.

Meanwhile, Hu and Qin spend their days sweeping the streets—for a while, that is all that they are seen doing. They start before sunrise, and they sweep all day, in any weather. Slowly, they develop a friendship—at first hesitantly, since Hu is still in grief over Guigui, and since part of her blames Qin for having brought misfortune upon her and her husband by singing inappropriate songs at their wedding. The turning point in the relationship between Hu and Qin comes one day when Hu is sick. Qin takes care of her while she is confined to bed, making her soup and comforting her. At this point in the film, Qin has become a major character, and has developed beyond the “Crazy Qin” of the beginning of the film. Now that he is seen in situations other than interacting with Party representatives—i.e. in situations where he is not simply being treated as an “element” and an outsider—his “crazy” features are gone, and we see the caring, serious, good person that he is. After Hu recovers, she returns the favor by making Qin dinner—spicy tofu, which, it is hinted, she has not made since she was forced to shut down her business. Independent scholar Charles W. Hayford notes that “[n]ow that they have prepared food for each other, the relationship progresses. Qin teaches her that when you do it right, sweeping is not shameful . . . [Hu] Yuyin lets [Qin] into her kitchen, heart, and bed.”<sup>25</sup> The two develop a romantic relationship, and eventually conceive a child.

The relationship between Hu and Qin is contrasted with that between Li and Wang, which is very different. Hayford sees the “caring table and bed of [Hu] Yuyin and Qin,” but the “nervous, dyspeptic feeding, careless drinking, and illicit coupling” of Li and Wang.<sup>26</sup> The relationship of Hu and Qin stems from the mutual affection of two outcasts who find each other at a time when everyone else shuns them. It is based on care and respect, and through its slow progression, the formation of the couple comes naturally. Browne observes how “[t]he bodily movement of the work of sweeping becomes the dance of the courtship ritual.”<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, the relationship between Li and Wang appears awkward and loveless. It takes its start in a scene where Wang, dressed-up and

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25 Hayford, p. 11.

26 Hayford, pp. 12-13.

27 Browne p. 48.

with newly cut hair, appears at Li's door late at night to "give a report." Li is in the middle of dinner, and has been drinking. After showering her with polite phrases and expressing his regrets about what he once did to her, Li is still not happy about his visit, but when he offers information about who has been criticizing her, she changes her mind, saying that he is "not so bad." They drink together, and Li invites Wang to sit next to her. After she voices plans to give him a promotion, he falls on his knees, apologizing to her and begging her to punish him. Li hits Wang repeatedly, but then starts fondling him. The next morning, he is spotted by Qin and Hu as he climbs out of Li's second-floor bedroom window; later, he is seen doing this again on several occasions. The couple of Li and Wang is presented as being depraved and immoral, based on favors and returns of favors rather than love, and of consisting mostly of "illicit coupling" with no intent of marriage. Li, who was previously accused of being a "slut," now pursues a sexual affair with her former persecutor, despite having expressed that she has not taken a liking to a single man in Hibiscus Town, when asked about whether she plans to marry.

Yet despite all this, it is Hu and Qin who will be denounced as a "black couple," and by none other than the weird couple of Li and Wang. After the slow-moving part of the film that shows the courting of Hu and Qin, the situation quickly escalates as Hu gets pregnant. Qin goes to Wang to seek permission to marry Hu. Wang is skeptical, but is persuaded by Qin to look into the possibility of allowing the marriage. Relieved, Qin confesses that he and Hu are already expecting a child, at which Wang is outraged, and he takes back what he has said about looking into the matter. Later, Wang shows the marriage application to Li, whose reaction is similar: Hu and Qin are, in her words, "disrespecting the dictatorship of the proletariat." In the next scene, Wang orders them to be rounded up and arrested. Standing in the rain under a banner acclaiming the feats of the Cultural Revolution, Qin and Hu are informed of their sentences:

. . . the traitor, Rightist and counterrevolutionary Qin Shutian is sentenced to ten years imprisonment. Traitor, reactionary and new-rich peasant Hu Yuyin is sentenced to three years imprisonment. Due to pregnancy, she will serve her sentence outside prison, and her future conduct will be observed. The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution has already achieved great victories . . .



*Hu and Qin being sentenced.*

After they hear the announcement, Qin urges Hu to “live on, like livestock.” Once more, Qin and Hu are demoted to the lowest of social ranks. When trying to convince Wang to let him marry Hu, Qin argued with him: “We are wicked, we are bad. But we are all human beings, are we not? Even the cock and the hen, the boar and the sow, the dog and the bitch—even they cannot be prohibited from being together, right?” When their marriage is banned, and they are sentenced to years of imprisonment for having had a sexual relationship, they are reduced to a status that is lower than that of chickens, pigs and dogs—they are reduced to being as loathsome and base as ghosts. For the second time in the film, Hu’s life is shattered; she made the mistake of trying to lead the life of a human. The Party acts swiftly in rectification. Browne compares the story of *Hibiscus Town* with the socialist cinema of previous decades, finding an interesting inversion of dogma:

. . . the film inverts the dogmatic formula of the 1950s in which the Party leaders come to the small village and liberate the people from an oppressive feudalism by dissolving the forced marriage contracts that serve as the quintessential emblem of feudal patriarchy. *Hibiscus Town* inverts this formula by showing that the Party system of social control through classification by type leads to persecution and criminalization of a marriage between two persons freely choosing each other outside the authority of the Party.<sup>28</sup>

In *Hibiscus Town*, thus, the Party, which for decades has promoted itself as being the

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28 Browne, p. 45.

liberator, the bringer of freedom and justice, is presented as having become the very mechanism that instigates and upholds oppression. Likewise, the “class struggle” that the Party is promoting becomes ironic, as a new, oppressive classification by type is established by the Party.

It is not until after the end of the Cultural Revolution that regular life returns to Hibiscus Town. Years after the verdict, Qin is able to return to Hibiscus Town to be reunited with Hu and their child. On his way back to Hibiscus Town by boat, Qin encounters Li, who calls him “comrade,” and reminds him that it was she who signed the order for his rehabilitation. Qin answers, “Comrade? That sounds strange.” Before getting off the boat, he reminds her that it is time for her, too, to live the life of a commoner, and not to make life hard for the rest of them.

### *In the Heat of the Sun*

“I keep promising to tell this story truthfully, but no matter how strongly  
I want to tell the truth, things just keep getting in the way.”

—Ma Xiaojun, *In the Heat of the Sun*

The second film that will be examined is *In the Heat of the Sun* (阳光灿烂的日子), directed by *Hibiscus Town* lead Jiang Wen (姜文), his directorial debut, first released in 1994. The film has been criticized as “indiscriminate nostalgia” and condemned by some writers for its representation of the Cultural Revolution—“scar literature” writer Feng Jikai (冯骥才) has been quoted saying: “I regret that the Cultural Revolution [*In the Heat of the Sun*] represents has nothing in common with mine. Until now no film has truly represented the Cultural Revolution.”<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Xie Jin, the director of *Hibiscus Town*, has commented on it, saying: “A lot of people watch this movie and laugh; me, I cannot bring myself to laugh.”<sup>30</sup> This essay will, however, argue that while the film indeed is not as direct in its denunciation of the Cultural Revolution as *Hibiscus Town*, there is some darkness to the reminiscences in *In the Heat of the Sun*, and it does not deserve the epithet of “indiscriminate nostalgia.”

The film is set in the early 1970s, and tells of the young Ma Xiaojun and his gang of four friends, who are, like himself, the sons of military men who live in a military

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29 Quoted in Braester, p. 192.

30 <[http://history.huanqiu.com/txt/2008-10/256834\\_5.html](http://history.huanqiu.com/txt/2008-10/256834_5.html)>.



compound in Beijing. They are in their early teens, too young to be sent to the countryside like those who are a few years older, and their parents are away on military assignments most of the time, giving them the freedom to do almost anything they want to. Ma and his friends spend their days biking around town, smoking, getting into fights, chasing after girls, and occasionally attending school. Ma's favorite pastime is picking locks with his homemade skeleton key and sneaking into people's apartments—and since almost no one is ever at home, he gets away with it. One day, he spots the picture of a beautiful girl in an apartment. Enraptured by her beauty, he spends his days in the vicinity of her house, trying to catch a glimpse of her. When he finally spots her in walking down the street, he strikes up a conversation with her, and is surprised to find out that she is Mi Lan, a girl who is reputed among his friends, but whom no one actually knows. He tries to befriend her, and with much effort he manages to convince her to be his big sister. They occasionally spend time together, and after Ma introduces her to his friends, she becomes a part of their gang. When Ma returns to Beijing from a short trip, he learns that Mi Lan and Liu Yiku, the leader of the gang, are now a couple. Ma is upset, and though he tries not to show it, he is unable to withhold his feelings as the gang is having dinner at a restaurant to celebrate Ma's and Yiku's shared birthday. He gets into a quarrel with Mi Lan, and when Yiku interferes, Ma breaks a wine bottle and stabs Yiku repeatedly in the stomach. But here, the frame freezes, and the narrator expresses doubt that this is how things happened. Rewinding the scene, the narrator vows to be more truthful, and the dinner is seen again, this time without any fight and with another girl present. After the dinner, in heavy rain, Ma rides his bike to Mi Lan's house and, standing in the rain, declares his love for her. A few days later, Ma goes to Mi Lan's apartment and tries to rape her, but she fights him off. The film ends with Ma ostracized by his friends.

As film scholar Yomi Braester points out in *Witness Against History*, “from the very beginning, the film blurs the distinction between history and fiction,” thus “disclaiming the reliability of [the narrator's] memory.”<sup>31</sup> Indeed, even before the first images appear, the narrator—an older Ma Xiaojun—commenting on how fast Beijing has changed in the last two decades, informs us that “these changes have already damaged [his] memories, so that [he] cannot tell imagination from reality,” rendering himself and his

<sup>31</sup> Braester, p. 193.

account unreliable. This statement is greatly significant. In a way, it is a disclaimer to the viewer not to accept anything in the film as true, a hint that things may not be what they seem. If the film appears nostalgic, it is not necessarily because everything was glorious “back then”—rather, it may be a sign of the opposite. This theme of the narrator’s unreliable memory is alluded to more than once throughout the film, and notably peaks in the scene where the action is suspended altogether because the narrator himself cannot believe what is happening, as the story has spun out of control. This will be discussed further below.

In the monologue at the start of the film, after discrediting his own memory, the narrator also informs the audience that “[i]n [his] memory, the sun always shone brightly during this period, as if there were only one season, summer. In fact, it was too bright, so that my vision has occasionally been obscured.”<sup>32</sup> Throughout the film, almost every scene takes place in this bright, everlasting sunlight, which is also alluded to in the title of the film. The abundant sunshine in *In the Heat of the Sun* is significant in several ways. Firstly, it epitomizes the carefree, nostalgic mood of the film. The shining sun makes the film literally “bright,” just as it is bright in its upbeat tone, carefree characters and in its avoiding of touching directly upon serious topics. Secondly, and relatedly, the sunshine is an example of the film’s active dissociation from objectivity and the rejection of the usual portrayal of the Cultural Revolution. Because the film depicts a past of eternal summer, which is obviously unrealistic, “the past in this film . . . is imaginary . . . Since it has only one season, summer, unlike so-called historical reality this past does not claim to be objective.”<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, scholar Lu Tonglin notes that by describing the period during which the film takes place as “hot, bright and passionate,” the narrator runs “[c]ontrary to the usual portrayal of the Cultural Revolution as the darkest moment in recent Chinese history.”<sup>34</sup> Or, as Braester puts it, the director “reject[s] the subjection of personal experience to the national narrative of suffering during the Cultural Revolution.”<sup>35</sup> Instead, the story that is told in *In the Heat of the Sun* is highly personal—albeit fictional—and therefore subject to a faulty memory, which can recall such unrealistic things as everlasting summers. The

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32 As translated by Lu Tonglin, “Fantasy and Ideology in a Chinese Film: A Žižekian Reading of the Cultural Revolution.” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*. p. 555.

33 Lu, p. 556.

34 Ibid., p. 555.

35 Braester, pp. 202-203.

narrator remembers what his consciousness, at some level, wants him to remember, namely the glorious, carefree days of his youth—the title of the film has been alternatively translated into English as “*Those glorious days*” and “*Those brilliant days*.”<sup>36</sup>



*Mao and the bright blue sky.*

The “brightness” and rejection of objectivity in *In the Heat of the Sun* stands in stark contrast to the darkness in *Hibiscus Town*. The latter quite literally takes place in darkness: in dark homes, at night, or under heavy rainclouds, with few shots of the sky at all. There are a few notably sunny scenes in *Hibiscus Town*, but they are all either in flashbacks from better times, or at the end of the film, after the Cultural Revolution has ended, thus enhancing the contrast of the dark reality in the film. Furthermore, contrary to *In the Heat of the Sun*, *Hibiscus Town* adheres to the “national narrative of suffering,” in line with the scar fiction which was “based on faith in collective memory.”<sup>37</sup> Hayford points out that “[t]he fictional town [Hibiscus Town] is based on places in Western Hunan . . . where the author of the novel grew up; the story of Hu Yuyin was inspired by actual people and events.”<sup>38</sup> But apart from the environments of the two films being

36 Larson, Wendy 1999. “Never This Wild: Sexing the Cultural Revolution.” *Modern China*. p. 433; Larson, Wendy 1997. “Women and the Discourse of Desire in Postrevolutionary China: The Awkward Postmodernism of Chen Ran.” *boundary 2*. p. 204.

37 Braester, p. 24.

38 Hayford, p. 8.

very different, while *Hibiscus Town* tells a much larger story, about the lives of several characters during a long period of time, *In the Heat of the Sun* tells a highly personal story, seen solely through the eyes of Ma, who is present in every scene and is the central character of every scene. This, among other things, makes the two films very different.

Another aspect of the abundant sunshine in *In the Heat of the Sun* is the sun as a political metaphor. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong's personality cult peaked, and he was often compared to the sun; for example, *The East is Red*, the Cultural Revolution's "unofficial anthem," goes: "The East is red; the sun has arisen; a Mao Zedong has appeared in China."<sup>39</sup> Just after the monologue in which the narrator comments on his memory of the period as brimming with sunshine, the first images appear: a bright blue sky, and then a huge statue of Mao appears like an ascending sun from the bottom of the screen, all the while accompanied by a pompous song: "In the raging storm of revolution / The soldiers' hearts turn toward the sun / O Chairman Mao! Chairman Mao! . . . / Your brilliant thoughts have nurtured us like the dew and sunlight."<sup>40</sup> Immediately, the film connects the sunshine with the Great Leader. It is not only the sunshine that is abundant in the narrator's memory, but also the glow of Mao. The Chairman is always present: through images, sculptures, songs, sayings, and through his politics. Like the sunshine in summer, Mao permeated life during the Cultural Revolution in the memory of the narrator of the film. When the narrator says that it seemed to "always be summer," it is not only a reference to his reminiscing his own "glorious" youth, but also to the reign of Mao. Braester mentions that "the depiction of the Cultural Revolution as a period of brightness becomes ironic when one recalls that the Red Guards would at times order incarcerated 'counterrevolutionaries' to look straight at the sun, hours on end."<sup>41</sup> *In the Heat of the Sun* deliberately uses irony in its depiction of the Cultural Revolution as a means of commenting on the period. It highlights aspects of the era which are not the most obvious targets of criticism, and by doing so, it makes comments and raises questions that are overlooked when "viewing the Cultural Revolution through the single prism of political oppression," which *In the Heat of the Sun* avoids.<sup>42</sup>

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39 Braester, p. 203.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Braester, p. 199-200.

One of the aspects of the era that the film unusually highlights is enjoyment. Whether they are smoking and talking about girls, swimming, playing pranks on their teachers, or acting out scenes from their favorite Russian film, Ma and his friends are, in general, enjoying themselves. This contributes to the film's classification as a comedy. However, the laughs that *In the Heat of the Sun* may or may not draw from its audience are rarely based on directly making fun of the Cultural Revolution, since politics and social issues "stay at the fringes of the plot and do not seem to touch the adolescent protagonists."<sup>43</sup> Many of the humorous antics of Ma and his friends could have taken place during any time in history—in this film, they happen to have taken place during the Cultural Revolution. Enjoyment did exist during the Cultural Revolution, as it has at any point in history. Indeed, it not only existed, but played an important part in it; "[e]njoyment does not subvert the dominant ideology from its margins; by contrast, it is situated at the heart of the dominant ideology as its ultimate support."<sup>44</sup> The immense suffering that occurred during the Cultural Revolution was a result of the enjoyment of those who caused the suffering; this notion echoes the words of Chairman Mao himself, who, as early as in 1955, wrote that ". . . the day of joy for the people is a day of woe for the counter-revolutionaries."<sup>45</sup> *In the Heat of the Sun* shows both enjoyment and suffering, but at a level which is not usually associated with the Cultural Revolution, namely the life of a 15-year-old boy in love. While some critics have lamented the the film for being too nostalgic and upbeat, seemingly concluding that making a comedy that takes place during the Cultural Revolution is sacrilege, others are more positive. Lu Tonglin argues that "despite its apparently self-indulgent nature, *In the Heat of the Sun* is more subversive than most artistic works lamenting the Cultural Revolution, since it inadvertently unmask[s] one of the most significant mechanisms of the Maoist ideology, enjoyment."<sup>46</sup>

Unlike *Hibiscus Town*, in which Mao is barely seen or mentioned at all, *In the Heat of the Sun* highlights the personality cult surrounding Mao at the time of the Cultural Revolution. Mao is heavily featured in the film, not only through metaphors such as the sun, but also through direct references by the characters, through songs, pictures—and through "Maospeak," i.e. Maoist rhetoric. Braester writes that "*In the Heat of the Sun*

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43 Ibid., p. 199.

44 Lu, p. 557.

45 Mao Zedong 1977. *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung, Vol. 5.* p. 174.

46 Ibid., p. 558.

readily rehashes phrases, tunes, gestures, and icons from the Cultural Revolution. Maospeak, having once made tragic history, reappears as farce, and as such gains a critical edge.<sup>47</sup> One significant feature of Maoist rhetoric that is caricatured in the film is heroism, which was revered and promoted through literature and art during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>48</sup> In the film, the protagonist and his friends have noticeably absorbed these ideals of heroism. In the beginning of the film, before the main plotline takes off, we see a young protagonist: it is 1969, and Ma's father is being sent to Guizhou with the military. Ma holds his father in high esteem, as he does the nation's military heroes. "My biggest dream," the narrator tells us, "was for war to break out between China and the Soviet Union, because I believed that in a new world war, the iron fist of our great army would smash the Soviet and American war machines to pieces. The world's eyes would be fixed on the new war hero—and that would be me." Ironically, these dreams of war and fighting reflect an innocence in the young, unspoiled Ma—whose given name, Xiaojun, literally means "little army"—as he still believes in heroism, in the greatness of his country and of his father, and in himself and his future. Throughout the rest of the film, these ideals break down, one by one.

As the main plot picks up, the teenage Ma has started disrespecting his parents, and adults in general. He mocks his teacher and skips class, and is taken in by the police as he hangs around the wrong part of town at the wrong time. His mother subsequently reprimands him, hitting him and comparing him to his no-good father. But he still believes in heroism—in one scene, he is seen putting on his father's medals and acting like a war hero in front of a mirror. Later, his desire to be a hero, like those he has been taught to idolize, gets him into activities that are less innocent. At one point, wielding butchers' knives and bricks as weapons, Ma's gang engages in a retaliatory street fight, which ends with Ma dealing another kid a blow to the head with a brick, leaving his victim knocked-out and bloody after kicking him and repeatedly hitting him with a bicycle lock. After the fight, he brags to his friend that he would have "made the boy handicapped for life" if Liu had not ordered him to stop.<sup>49</sup> All through the fight scene, the "Internationale" is played in the background, a song that "has long been a filmic trope for revolutionary martyrdom," which the director of the film "associated . . . with

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47 Braester, p. 194.

48 Ibid., p. 197.

49 Lu, p. 560.

heroism.”<sup>50</sup> Its use in this scene is highly ironic, as Ma’s petty act “is far from the martyrdom at the execution grounds depicted in the Maoist productions.”<sup>51</sup> Lu Tonglin keenly observes that “[a]fter each blow to this body, Ma looks to the side, as if he were on stage, waiting for his audience’s applause.”<sup>52</sup> Ma has grown up idolizing the heroes and martyrs in the narratives of the Cultural Revolution, but sadly fails to live up to the standards that has been set for him—and his attempts to do so give an ironic twist to Maoist rhetoric. This is even more obvious later in the film, in the restaurant scene.

The character of Mi Lan is central to the plot of *In the Heat of the Sun*, as an object of admiration and obsession by Ma. She, too, can be construed as a metaphor for Mao. Ma first sees her picture through a telescope that he finds in her apartment, her image filling his field of vision. At first, he cannot find the physical photograph, and holds the telescope to his eye, fixated on her picture, and makes his way through the apartment to locate the picture. He finds it hanging on the wall beside her bed, bathing in sunshine. She is dressed in a red bathing suit, and her smile captivates him. “Like Mao, she is equated with sunlight, associated with red, and bigger than life.”<sup>53</sup> Another hint is Liu Yiku’s words when Mi Lan is first mentioned by name in the film. At that point, he has never met her, but wants to be introduced to her: “I always hear people bring her up. She’s legendary! A lot of people have fought for her, friendships have ended. Some have even died.” The fact that Chairman Mao is associated with the protagonist’s object of sexual desire suggests that the narrator and protagonist associates the time of the story with a strong, blind love for Mao. During this period, Mao was “too bright,” as the narrator says about the sunlight in the beginning of the film, so that his memories are infected with the Maoist rhetorics of the time and he cannot tell what really happened and what did not—“even in postsocialist China, memory is tinted with red and tainted by residual images of Maoist iconology.”<sup>54</sup>

Before Ma even gets to know Mi Lan, he is infatuated with her. After they become friends, they spend a great deal of time together, and she becomes an object of sexual desire to him. She is often seen in exposed positions: washing her hair; in a bathing suit; changing clothes; sleeping on her bed. Several academics have discussed *In the Heat of*

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50 Braester, p. 201.

51 Ibid., p. 201-202.

52 Lu, p. 560.

53 Braester, p. 205.

54 Ibid.

*the Sun* in the context of sexuality in portrayals of the Cultural Revolution. For example, literary theorist Wendy Larson has noted that the film “depicts the Cultural Revolution as a spontaneous, real, and sexual time when true freedom reigned.”<sup>55</sup> This is greatly divergent from how sex is represented in *Hibiscus Town*. As has already been shown in the previous chapter, *Hibiscus Town* presents a society where relationships are subject to scrutiny and control by the Party representatives, and sexual relations even more so.



*Mi Lan, partly obscured by the glaring sunlight.*

But Ma’s friendship with Mi Lan, too, is subject to his flawed memory. At one point, as the two are talking in Mi Lan’s bedroom, Ma wonders where the picture of Mi Lan in her red bathing suit has gone. Mi Lan tells him that there was never a picture of her in a red bathing suit. However, toward the end of the film, she wears such a suit; this suggests that the order of things is confused in the memory of the narrator. Shortly after this, the narrator tells us that he would often boast to Mi Lan, and tell her stories that he had heard from other people, stories that were not plausible considering his own age, making them his own while exaggerating and embellishing; that when he had told her that he had snuck into her home and played with her telescope, her only reaction was: “Is that so?” This leaves the viewer in doubt: did Ma never actually sneak into Mi Lan’s

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<sup>55</sup> Larson, 1999. p. 433.



apartment? Does he not possess the ability to make keys, which indeed, is impressive for a 15-year-old—when the narrator told the audience that he got his talent from his father, did he actually mean that he was lying about a talent that his father possessed, but not himself? Shortly after telling about his boasting, the narrator expresses doubt in his own memory—maybe he did not ever see Mi Lan sleep on her bed. “But,” he says, “if I did not, how come her sleeping figure is etched into my brain?”

The culmination of the breakdown of the narrator’s memory occurs in the restaurant scene. The group of friends, with Mi Lan, go to a restaurant to celebrate Ma and Liu Yiku, who were born on the same date—“a commonality,” according to Lu Tonglin, “that suggests an intersubjective link. Liu is both the hero’s ego-ideal, the desired self-image, who intensifies his desire for Mi Lan, and the rival, whose very existence serves to frustrate the same desire.”<sup>56</sup> At this point, Mi Lan has become Yiku’s boyfriend, and Ma is jealous, since he wants Mi Lan to himself. While the group is waiting for their food, Ma plays a prank on Mi Lan, with the purpose of getting her to utter a sexual innuendo. He succeeds, and they all laugh, but when she ruffles his hair, his mood suddenly switches—he smacks her wrist, and snaps at her that he is not her son. His friends are bemused, and after Mi Lan attempts to find out what she is guilty of, Ma demands that she leave the restaurant. When she tries to leave, Yiku pushes her back into her seat. Yiku and Ma exchange unpleasantries, and start slapping each other’s faces. Then, suddenly, Ma yells: “I’m going to cut you up!” then picks up a wine bottle, breaks it, and starts stabbing Yiku with it after his friends fail to stop him as he makes for Yiku’s side of the table.

As Braester points out, “[u]p until this point, some 100 minutes into the film, the story has been told in a straightforward manner and the camera work has supported a realistic feeling. . . . Then realism breaks down all of a sudden.”<sup>57</sup> The stabbing, which goes on for a full thirteen seconds, seems not to hurt Yiku, who incredulously stares first at Ma’s stabbing arm, then to the side of the screen whereto their friends have fled, then at Ma—looking around him “as if he does not belong in the scene.”<sup>58</sup> Ma’s stabbing motions slow down, and he, too, looks around. As he looks straight into the camera, the frame freezes, and the narrator laughs:

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56 Lu, p. 547.

57 Braester, p. 195.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 196.

Ha-ha-ha! Whatever you do, don't believe this. I have never been this brave, this heroic. I keep promising to tell this story truthfully, but no matter how strongly I want to tell the truth, things just keep getting in the way. I sadly realize that it is impossible to return to the truth. . . .

The image slowly starts moving again, but this time backwards, slowly rewinding the stabbing scene while the narrator continues to ponder over memory, reality, and his relationship with Mi Lan: "I now suspect that my first meeting with Mi Lan was a fabrication. . . . I never really knew Mi Lan." The narrator tells us that he was never close to Mi Lan, but got to know her through Yiku—contrary to what has been shown in the film, which shows Ma being friends with Mi Lan before introducing her to the gang. The narrator discredits it all as lies, leaving large parts of the scenes seen in the film in a gray zone—did they happen, or is it all lies and products of a bad memory? When the restaurant scene has been rewound, the narrator vows not to give up, and to tell the rest of the story truthfully. The birthday dinner is played again, but this time differently—everyone is happy and laughing, with no animosity, and there are even other people present. "In the end, we all got drunk," says the narrator.

After the restaurant scene, the story continues, but something has changed. Ma is seen on his bike immediately after the birthday feast—it is raining. For the first time in the film, fifteen minutes from the end, the weather has switched. And so has Ma's mood. In the dark, rainy night, he fails to see a hole in the ground, and he falls head first into it. As he stands up, we see that he is crying pathetically, shouting Mi Lan's name, having, in reality, failed to act out his feelings at the dinner. He goes to Mi Lan's house and calls her out, and then confesses his love for her. But in the days that follow, Mi Lan acts as though nothing has happened, even when Ma tries to remind her. In a tragic turn of events, Ma decides to rape Mi Lan—he ditches his shoes already in the staircase on his way to her apartment. But as he tries to force himself on her in her bed, she fights him off, and he leaves the apartment. After this, Ma is ostracized by his friends, and the film ends. In contrast with the carefree mood of most of the film, everything that happens after the narrator vows to be more truthful is tragic—we see the downfall of the protagonist, the former aspiring hero. We see a character we do not recognize, because we do not know the "real" Ma of the last part of the film, since the Ma we know was told through untruthful memories.



*The freeze frame in the restaurant scene: Ma Xiaojun stabbing Liu Yiku.*

The restaurant scene marks the end of the “nostalgic” narrative in *In the Heat of the Sun*—which, as it turns out, is full of lies and misinformation. Even in this false narrative, the protagonist is the most “heroic” when he participates in insignificant street fights and restaurant brawls. In the latter case, the stabbing of Yiku is cut short—“I was never this heroic,” says the narrator. Describing the base act of stabbing a friend with a wine bottle as “‘heroic’ . . . is not simply ironic. Understood in the context of Maoist rhetoric, it reveals an ambivalence toward the Cultural Revolution, during which ‘heroism’ was used to refer to political and aesthetic ideals, especially as expounded in the model plays.”<sup>59</sup> Even more than in the street fight scene, the discordance between ideals and reality is seen, and even commented on directly by the narrator.

Despite the fact that most scenes in *In the Heat of the Sun* depict a carefree young protagonist, going about his idle life in the company of his good friends and his love interest, the film is far from a shallow piece of nostalgia. More than anything, it is a comment on people’s ability to remember things correctly, and a critique of attempts at objectiveness and collective memoirs.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this essay was to examine and compare two films that take place in

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<sup>59</sup> Braester, p. 197.

Maoist China: *Hibiscus Town* and *In the Heat of the Sun*. The historical background of the period was summarized, after which the examination of the two films was carried out. First, *Hibiscus Town* was summarized and analyzed, then *In the Heat of the Sun*; occasional comparisons were made.

*Hibiscus Town* was shown to be a film which straightforwardly criticizes the state of the Chinese society during the 1960s and 1970s by telling a fictional small town where honest, hard-working people are oppressed, while those who cooperate with the Party representatives are rewarded. The Party representatives are portrayed as the oppressors. *In the Heat of the Sun*, on the other hand, portrays a carefree group of youth, who enjoyed “true freedom” during the Cultural Revolution. *In the Heat of the Sun* portrays the period as bright, while *Hibiscus Town* shows a society in darkness, both literally and metaphorically.

*Hibiscus Town* begins in 1963, and ends after the end of the Cultural Revolution. It tells of several main characters, and of the state of the society that is the town itself. *In the Heat of the Sun*, on the other hand, tells a highly personal story, through the eyes of its protagonist. At the beginning of the film, the narrator admits that his memory is not perfect, and the story told is subject to the imperfect memory of the narrator; some events, it is hinted, did not happen at all, while others happened in a different order than what is portrayed. At one point, the story is halted and rewound because the narrator cannot believe his own narrative. The whole story takes place during what seems to be one summer. *Hibiscus Town* tells a more traditional, chronological story, and upholds realism all the way through the film.

Whereas *Hibiscus Town* focuses on oppression, power abuse and the hard lives of ordinary small-town people, *In the Heat of the Sun* tells a story of adolescence and the remembrance thereof. The latter shows the impact of propaganda and Mao’s personality cult, which are fused together with the narrator’s memories. *In the Heat of the Sun* shows a controversial image of the Cultural Revolution as a period of enjoyment. The film ends, as the narrator promises to be more truthful, tragically, with an attempted rape and the ostracization of the protagonist. *Hibiscus Town* ends with a return to normal life, after the Cultural Revolution has ended and the political and social madness has ceased.

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