

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

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LISA ROFEL

Dai Jinhua is the equivalent of a rock star in China. Students, intellectuals, and the general public flock to hear her searing, radical insights into the enormous transformations in contemporary life—and the injustices and ills they have wrought. For over two decades she has brought her feminist Marxism—framed through film theory, psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, and cultural studies—to bear as a prescient public intellectual of and for our times. Her works have become celebrated classics of the academic studies of Chinese cinema. While she locates herself in China—a deliberate, self-conscious choice—Dai is equally in dialogue with cultural theorists from Europe, the United States, Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Dai Jinhua and Meng Yue were the first to initiate post-Mao feminist literary criticism in China with their renowned *Emerging from the Horizon of History*. She also founded the first film theory specialization at the Beijing Film Academy and established the Institute for Film and Cultural Studies—the first in China—at the premier Beijing University. Finally, Dai has participated in numerous global activist organizations, including the Third World Forum, World Social Forum, and the initiative to nominate one thousand women for the Nobel Peace Prize, as well as rural women's organizations in China.

This collection of her recent essays focuses on questions of history, memory, and the historical revisionism of the new millennium. As a film theorist, Dai uses a specific film in each essay as a touchstone for a broader discussion of China as it exists today within global capitalism. As she has stated elsewhere, she departs from approaches that treat film as a text internal to itself, instead placing each film within a broader cultural discourse and sociopolitical context.<sup>1</sup> Far more than a film critic, Dai is penetrating and illuminating in addressing the forces, contexts, and incidents in the imbrication of national and transnational scenarios. This volume follows on

the previous English-language translation of Dai's essays, *Cinema and Desire*, edited by Jing Wang and Tani E. Barlow, published over a decade ago.

If, in that earlier collection, Dai analyzed the 1980s in China—what in retrospect we would call the beginning of the postsocialist era—as a moment when “history experienced reconstruction,”<sup>2</sup> then in this set of essays she diagnoses symptomatically the first decade of the new millennium, under the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism, as a moment when history experiences its own disappearance. Dai is both reading and writing allegories of our contemporary moment, as in her discussion in her introduction of a discarded, rusty advertising sign with Marxist political pop she found in the trash heap behind a newly built suburb for the international, cosmopolitan middle class of Beijing. As she asks in that essay, “Communism was once a specter from the future floating over the present. Today, is Marxism a phantom from the past that now and then emerges and takes shape in the present?”

In all of the films she addresses in this volume with the exception of two, socialist subjectivity has been hollowed out and forgotten in favor of global, depoliticized images. The war films and epic narratives, for all their historical sweep and invocations of memory, display the signs of the erasure of collective politics and social movements that constituted the alternative narrative of modern China. Dai finds instead the reduction of collective history into an individual story of trauma, as clearly delineated in films such as Lu Chuan's *The City of Life and Death* (*Nanjing! Nanjing!* 南京! 南京!), which celebrates the universal image of the human, and among filmmakers influenced by Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* (discussed in the finale).

One of Dai's central arguments in this volume is that the erasure of the past simultaneously forecloses imagining the future. Dai's abiding concern is that this disappearance of history leaves us with no hope of moving beyond the degradations of the present into a future that might offer us a socially just world. With an equal dose of pessimism and passion, Dai serves up an incisive indictment of our times and calls for a return to utopian thinking. She urges us to do so by way of the past: to not forget the important socialist-inspired utopian thinking that tried to present us a true alternative to capitalism. Her goal is not a return to socialism—and certainly not an embrace of Maoism—so much as an excavation of the urge to find that alternative.

The title of this collection, *After the Post-Cold War*, points toward this erasure of history. Dai contends that with neoliberal globalization, we have moved beyond the post-Cold War era. This post-post-Cold War development refers to the forgetting of the previous ideological and political tensions between China's socialist path and Euro-American modernization. The end of the Cold War gave the impression that this conflict had been replaced by economic globalization, the end of modern history, and the closure of the political imagination of an alternative future. Yet the global scramble for supremacy means that a complex mixture of old and new ideological forces has created the new era of the post-post-Cold War. Dai is able to see and diagnose these contradictory forces in the textual detail of film.

This post-post-Cold War era begins, in her view, with the U.S. war on terror, which she argues provides new grounds for globalization. A key year is 2008, with the financial tsunami; the Sichuan earthquake, which enabled the visible emergence of China's new middle class (through its donations and volunteer efforts); the Olympic games held in China; and China's emergence as the United States' greatest creditor. Indeed, she contends that the Cold War has been readily forgotten in this era of global capitalism, as if it were part of a misty past, or an ancient "scary fairy tale" (see Dai's introduction). At the same time, she recalls the legacies of the Cold War. From the positionality of China, Dai reminds us that the Cold War was never just a binary. After 1960, China was neither in the camp of the Soviet Union nor in that of the U.S. Instead, it created an alternative third world position and set of alliances. From that neither-nor position, China offered an alternative development path for formerly colonized countries. Radical intellectuals and movement revolutionaries around the world were inspired by some forms of Maoist thought. But Dai, in her fearless quest for (at least contingent) truth, and her ability to think dialectically without totalities, goes on to deconstruct that very path, arguing that a dream of modernization is also part of the problem, not least because of the environmental nightmares it has wrought.

Dai is uncanny in her sense of how to craft a genealogy of the present. One could say, following Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, that her unique vision finds its inspiration in the undercommons.<sup>3</sup> While Dai positions herself from within a leftist perspective, she deconstructs the well-worn debates by and about the so-called New Left and the neoliberals in China. Dai

is not so easily pigeonholed. In her introduction, for example, she analyzes their shared nostalgic melancholia for a lost past (albeit different), which creates blurred thinking about the present. While some would accuse the left in China of giving the Chinese state a pass, Dai, as shown in these essays, clearly implicates the Chinese state in the conditions wrought by neoliberal capitalism. Throughout, she also deconstructs the relation of China to the West, reminding us of a history when these relations were otherwise—that is, China’s alliances within the third world. Finally, she analyzes global anxieties about the so-called rise of China, as well as the manner in which China has entered into the fold (borrowing from Deleuze) of neoliberal capitalism.

Indeed, Dai Jinhua exemplifies the quintessential Deleuzian thinker—always in motion, restlessly seeking possibilities for impossible thinking. Her ability to self-consciously interpret the political unconscious of her generation of intellectuals is unparalleled. Dai has honed these intellectual tools since her undergraduate days. Dai was in the cohort of 1978—the first generation of students after the Cultural Revolution who entered college based on the revival of entrance exams, when a full decade of young people vied in the competition (see my interview with Dai in this volume).<sup>4</sup> The seeds of her feminist thinking began, however, in the previous decade during the Cultural Revolution. On the one hand, she truly felt that women and men were treated equally—she was a student cadre and leader of the group that went together to the countryside during that era. On the other, she had contradictory experiences for which there was no language.

One of Dai’s first set of explicit conflicts was with the masculinist critique of Maoist socialism that started just as she entered Beijing University as an undergraduate student. The dominant voices were all from this masculinist perspective—how Maoist socialism had emasculated men and masculinized women.<sup>5</sup> These voices then ridiculed women with the admonishing prescription “marriage should be your only business,” as many workplaces in the 1980s laid off urban women in the name of economic efficiency and growth.

“What is a woman?” became a guiding question Dai pursued in her studies of literature and later film. For Dai, women’s rights (*nüquan zhuyi*) is not the main problem; the main problem is *nüxing zhuyi*, that is, women’s consciousness or gender ideology. In China, women had a great deal of legal rights—at least until the revision of the constitution in the 1980s.

What was needed was a consciousness of the way women experience a patriarchal injunction as well as an understanding of the naturalization of gender discrimination that came with post-Mao reforms.

During this period (the 1990s), Dai became increasingly disturbed with both the growing difference between rich and poor and the way the rhetoric of gender was used to cover over these seismic social shifts by making these problems seem small (i.e., they were only about women). She began to write about this new kind of violence: the redistribution of wealth, which also sacrificed women's lives in the process. Dissatisfied with the way women's studies programs addressed women in the new middle class and used feminist theories for those who benefited from the reforms but not for those who were exploited, Dai turned to reanalyzing class. Thus, while Dai's feminism may seem oblique in this volume, she brings from feminism an understanding of how to analyze the naturalization of power, difference, and inequality.

As Dai explains in my interview with her (this volume), given the wholesale rejection of Maoist socialism, there was no way in the 1990s to talk about class, even as a great deal of violence was perpetrated through growing class inequalities. The language of class was rejected, although the theory of class subtending this language (i.e., Marxist-inspired theories) was exactly what was needed. However, as Dai states, those theories originally inspired by Marx also had their lacunae that needed to be addressed: the conflicts between the countryside and the city and between different regions of the country; the relations between middle-class women and the rural domestic servants they hire, displacing their own oppression onto these women; and the displacement of dispossession onto gender relations. Thus, one sees in the essays presented here Dai's inventive and capacious approach to class inequalities that takes into account how class is shaped in and through capital's originary and uneven accumulation strategies, which include gender relations, nationalism, and regional disparities.

Dai has also turned for inspiration to third-world movements and the theories that subtend them, from Samir Amin's Third World Forum to Subcomandante Marcos's Zapatista Army of National Liberation, from global environmental movements (she served on the first board of Greenpeace in China) to China's new rural collective movements. Over the last fifteen years, then, Dai has brought an assemblage of theoretical tools to bear on questions about history and memory as they intersect with global

capitalism and nationalism, most importantly because of the manner in which China has become imbricated with the global capitalist world.

Dai's leftist cultural critique in these essays comes after the rapid privatization and profitization of China's economy were well under way and after the discourse about the rise of China became pervasive. Rather than drawing a division between domestic affairs and global ones, these essays delineate how China is in the global capitalist world and, equally, how that world is in China. If, in her earlier work, she was concerned with the orientaling gaze of the West and the uncritical adoption of Western theories by Chinese intellectuals, in these essays she builds on those earlier insights, examining the impossibility of separating the local from the global while simultaneously insisting on the specificity of Chinese historical experience. She develops these insights by analyzing contemporary life and ideology in China while never losing sight of the mutual imbrication of China and global capitalism. In critiquing China's global capitalist developments, Dai repeatedly reminds us of the productive and heuristic potential of the earlier political imagination of China's twentieth-century history. In refusing to forget, she cautions against the alignment of the Chinese middle class with the global financial elites at the expense of the working people, whose liberation, mobilization, and newfound subjectivity constitute the essence of China's past revolutionary culture. If the middle class has its way, China's touted rise will amount to adding a new player in the global scramble for wealth, power, and supremacy.

In these essays, Dai brings to bear her mastery of film's visual techniques along with her theoretically innovative approach to the interpretation of contemporary cultural life. While she takes off from a particular film, she locates in filmic scenes, cinematography, and visual signifiers the political unconscious of contemporary Chinese life. She has a masterful command of film language and film technique to interpret contemporary ideas, sentiments, and contradictions. In each essay, she further demonstrates the underlying links and echoes among multiple texts, including video games and popular novels, that seem at first glance far removed from one another.

Dai thus reads and diagnoses the signs of our times—in film, but also in material objects and structures of feeling. This is a locational reading of China, but readers would be misinterpreting Dai's arguments if they concluded she is merely doing a study of her country. Rather, she is reading the contemporary global moment as it manifests in and through and

out of China. Dai thus analyzes the national/political/cultural struggles enmeshed in film both visually and in terms of content. In these essays, she emphasizes how these struggles shape the erasure of history. At the same time, she excavates history in the aporia of these erasures. She does so in order to task us with the reconstruction of memories otherwise from those we have been fed in the years after the post–Cold War. She gains insight from globally circulating theories while challenging their pretension to universality from no location. Her abiding questions are the following: In this age of “after theory,” how do we define a new and effective social criticism? Do we need a new historical subject (*zhuti*)? How do we avoid a grand narrative? How do we avoid using the kind of historical subject such as the proletariat but then still think about capitalists? Do we need utopia?

In Part I, “Trauma, Evacuated Memories, and Inverted Histories,” Dai offers cinematic analysis that lays out one of her most important arguments in the book: that China’s current situation is the imbrication of unresolved contradictions: the world (i.e., the global capitalist world dominated by the West) is always already within China, even as China grapples with its own self-image in relation to that world. Chapter 1, “I Want to Be Human: A Story of China and the Human,” discusses the film *City of Life and Death* (*Nanjing! Nanjing!*), directed by Lu Chuan, a tale of the Nanjing Massacre by the Japanese during World War II. Dai lays out the dense contextualization of the ambiguous status of the Nanjing Massacre (not Hiroshima, not the Holocaust, never recognized as a human catastrophe) and thereby helps us to grasp how “China’s” (Dai deliberately uses quotation marks to signify its contingent narrative status) modern relationship to its own history is always already seen through a global gaze.<sup>6</sup> Dai views the massacre as the kind of suspended, shared, open trauma whose displaced memory causes the evacuated subjectivity of the post-post–Cold War that China suffers from today. This is the kind of terrible space in which Dai wishes to dwell in this book. The film is a recuperation of universal humanity through a portrayal of the Japanese soldier’s Christian humanism purged of blood and death. The Chinese characters in the film, however, do not get placed in this universal humanity. But by casting the film in this light, Dai also slyly makes legible that Lu Chuan’s heavily criticized choice to cast as his protagonist a sympathetic Japanese soldier was useful in the way it ventriloquized, through one of its perpetrators, a regret for the massacre that the Japanese government has, to this day, been reluctant to express. This

first essay also introduces the important contradiction of the rising middle class and its role in a concomitant rise of nationalist/culturalist sentiment.

This sets the stage for chapter 2, “*Hero and the Invisible Tianxia*.” Dai argues that, like *City of Life and Death*, Zhang Yimou’s *Hero* (英雄) mines history but similarly evacuates it of any meaning that could be used to envision a future for China. It does so by inverting the story of the assassins of the first emperor, Qin Shihuang, from how to assassinate the king to how not to assassinate him. The film relies heavily on the term *tianxia*, or “all under heaven,” to make this historical inversion appear logical. Tracing the contemporary use of *tianxia* by bringing in popular culture sources beyond the film (video games and fantasy novels), Dai argues that *tianxia*, instead of being a space of all under heaven in today’s China, is now associated with power, conquerors, and hegemony—the “private property of the victors.” Dai delineates how this new meaning replaces its usage not just in the imperial past but also under Maoist socialism, thus opening a key theme in this collection of essays: that the visitations into pre-twentieth-century history are done in the service of outflanking and forgetting China’s revolutionary history of the twentieth century. *Tianxia* in the film represents an aporia, or evacuation, of meaning. The social symptomaticity of this aporia is reflected in the way the film empties out the alternative possibilities (alternatives to modernity and capitalism) that had been contained in the term, turning it into merely an empty signifier of China. Yet along with this pessimistic assessment, Dai continually urges us to find resources for imagining a more just future. Thus, she ends this essay with the query: in what sense, from which angles, and to what extent can China serve as a method to sketch an alternative world imaginary?

Part II, “Class, Still Lives, and Masculinity,” offers a close interpretation of the past, present, and possible future of class in China. There are two filmmakers, both of whom got their start in independent art cinema, whom Dai praises for their ability to break through what she calls the “delirium and aphasia” of ahistorical histories. They do so by consistently portraying the lives of China’s subaltern classes experiencing capitalism’s intensive exploitations and marginalizations. Jia Zhangke is one of them, and Zhang Meng is the other. Chapter 3, “Temporality, *Nature Morte*, and the Filmmaker: A Reconsideration of *Still Life*,” discusses one of the most important films to come out of China in years. Jia Zhangke’s *Still Life* (三峡好人) addresses the controversial Three Gorges dam project and the

precarious lives of China's internal migratory classes. The Three Gorges reservoir, the largest hydro-engineering project in Chinese history and the largest water conservation project in the world, led to a massive forced migration. Dai analyzes how Jia Zhangke moves aside the grand images at the heart of mainstream depictions that glorify modernization projects such as the Three Gorges dam to show us the so-called insignificant people behind the canvas. She reads the film as a contemporary Chinese parable about rebuilding or drowning, creation or destruction, remembering or repressing. She puts this film in conversation with documentaries and art installations about the Three Gorges project and, more generally, about exploitation and violence. Thus, it is temporality, or the development projects carried out in the name of progress, that, as Dai states, "sweeps away historical and natural spaces like a hurricane and rewrites them."

Chapter 4, "*The Piano in a Factory*: Class, in the Name of the Father," discusses the way the director Zhang Meng breaks through the amnesia about the socialist past. Here, in a more optimistic vein, Dai argues that this is almost the only feature film that counters the erasures of history to depict the tremendous upheavals in the lives of millions of people in China over the last thirty years. *The Piano in a Factory* (钢的琴) depicts the lives of factory workers laid off under the 1980s economic reforms that closed many bankrupt state-run enterprises. But rather than a melodrama, this film is full of black humor, including music and dance sequences, as one of the main characters rallies his former fellow workers—many of whom have been forced to turn to a variety of illegal activities—to build a piano for his daughter, as part of his fight to retain custody of her. Dai's in-depth analysis of the film's cinematography leads her to conclude that what she calls Zhang Meng's "anticinematic" idiom fits with the black humor approach to the heavy theme of the abandonment of workers in the postsocialist era. But the film's formal language also signifies the theme of dignity in labor and creation. In this sense, the film is a paean to socialist culture's efforts to create new human beings, even as it also highlights the lost masculinity—as "masters of the country"—of the former working class.

In Part III, "The Spy Genre," Dai takes up the spy as a pretext for a film genre that was popular during the Cold War and that has recently been revived. In its historical genre, Dai interprets the spy as a brilliant figure through which to apprehend the sufferings and failings in the struggles for personal and political identity under the pressures of the socialist

experiment and its bruising campaigns. In its more recent recasting, Dai sees a genuine anxiety over identity. In chapter 5, “The Spy-Film Legacy: A Preliminary Cultural Analysis of the Spy Film,” Dai argues that, in true spy-film genre, the spy film itself is not what it seems. Dai first reviews the Cold War history of the spy film, finding that despite the mutual isolation of enemies from each other’s cultures, the spy-film narrative subgenre is distinctive in being the only type of film, nearly without exception, to cross Cold War boundaries and antagonisms. Moreover, China made spy films as well, despite its lack of attachment to either side of the Cold War binary. Dai further argues that the spy film departs from other popular films in its treatment of gender. Chinese films from the 1950s to the 1970s made illegitimate the scopical desire of the male subject; not so the spy film, in which the treacherous female is in fact the activator of scopical dynamism. Dai then addresses the film’s current popular revival, arguing that the current spy films, unlike Cold War-era spy films, exude hesitation and self-doubt about identity. In Dai’s view, the spy films in the post-Cold War era address the abyss that has opened up between society and memory. They portray a world split with cracks and fissures, as they continue to address unresolved questions around the basic nature of the nation-state itself, and of personal and national identity. In this essay, rather than analyze one film in depth, Dai offers an overview of the breadth of spy films from the 1940s to the present, both nationally and internationally.

Chapter 6, “In Vogue: Politics and the Nation-State in *Lust, Caution* and the *Lust, Caution* Phenomenon in China,” interprets Ang Lee’s film *Lust, Caution* (色·戒)—a hit throughout the Chinese-speaking world—as resolving the contradiction between the legitimacy of a communist regime dependent on socialist ideology and the reality of class division with China’s full turn to capitalism. The film addresses patriotic resistance to Japanese military rule in the period leading up to World War II. The film avoids previous interpretations of this history, which highlighted the struggles between communists and nationalists, and their quite different forms of resistance. Instead, it addresses a group of elite students who infiltrate the Chinese government installed by the Japanese military regime. Dai argues that the film presents a depoliticized history of the twentieth century, framed within a patriotism that enables the evasion of history and politics. Dai further argues that *Lust, Caution*’s popular, and somewhat controver-

sial, reception delineates a genealogy of China's new middle class and its cosmopolitanism. Dai concludes that the film has constructed a floating stage detached from history in an age of globalization. In the two films presented in this part, Dai thus develops her uncompromising analysis of the formation of the subject and subjectivity in relation to global politics, history, and memory.

The "Finale," "History, Memory, and the Politics of Representation," takes off from Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* and its influence on the fifth generation of Chinese filmmakers to reflect on the transformations in historical writing in the last half of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century. Dai argues that Bertolucci used the individual (in the person of the last emperor of the Qing dynasty [1644–1911], who became a puppet emperor under Japanese colonialism) to erase the history of modern China by using space and stereotypical historical background settings to de-historicize historical events. She argues that Chinese films have adopted his approach, similarly using space to erase time or the temporality of twentieth-century struggles for alternatives to capitalist modernity. Since the beginning of economic reforms, Dai contends, historical writing has deconstructed mass memory by using individual experience and memory so as to call into question any critique of the past. At the same time, paradoxically, there has been a deep self-awareness of the significance of history for politics and culture. Dai argues that China has seen what she calls the "reversal of the reversal," that is, a rejection of the socialist history of China's past and a restoration of the mainstream logic of the modern world. Dai diagnoses a current sociopolitical difficulty that China faces: the continuation of Communist Party rule along with an economic and political rupture with the past. This tension produces dilemmas for interpretations of the past: is there a continuation of past ideologies or the construction of new ones? The result has been what she calls ahistorical histories.

Finally, I have also included a brief interview I conducted with Dai in the summer of 2014 as well as a selected bibliography of her books.

These lucid, inspiring essays together offer a scathing indictment of the way global capitalism has eviscerated hopes of a better world. In a talk entitled "A Cultural Landscape without Coordinates" that Dai delivered at the University of California, Santa Cruz, she spoke of how cultural critics in China have lost the means to describe the realities of the present. She

diagnoses our current ills with uncompromising insight, while she goads us not to give up on dreams of a better world. True to her uncompromising commitment to refuse the cynicism of the current moment, Dai ended her talk by invoking a popular slogan from the May 1968 uprisings in Paris: “All Power to the Imagination.”