

**Review of *Postsocialist Conditions: Ideas and History in China's "Independent Cinema", 1988-2008* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018),
by Xiaoping Wang**

Zhen Zhang

Union College, NY, USA

China's "independent cinema" produced by the Chinese "sixth-generation auteurs" is a cultural phenomenon that draws much attention from Western critics. While there are abundant scholarly articles studying particular directors and films, book-length treatment of the subject matter is scarce. *Memory, Subjectivity and Independent Chinese Cinema*, written by Qi Wang and published by Edinburgh University Press in 2014, appears to be the first monograph dealing with this subject. The pioneering book, however, has a wide-ranging focus, dividing its attention between narrative films, documentaries and experimental video art, thus leaving the most popular genre, narrative films, a small portion of its content. Put in this context, Xiaoping Wang's two recent monographs, both of which were recently published in 2018 and devoted to narrative films by the sixth generation directors, are a much-needed addition to the existing scholarship on Chinese "independent cinema."

The first book, *Ideology and Utopia in China's New Wave Cinema: Globalization and Its Chinese Discontents* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), describes China's "new wave movement," particularly on new wave films' portrayal of both China's "new poor" and the emerging middle class, the tension between narration of socialist experiences and the neoliberal construction of socialism as an "other." Going beyond the new wave movement, Wang's *Postsocialist Conditions: Ideas and History in China's "Independent Cinema", 1988-2008* (Brill, 2018) offers a more comprehensive, historically situated treatment of China's postsocialist society, a milieu sixth generation directors and their Western critics seek to contain and simplify using neoliberal discourses. The most important contribution of the book is its introduction to the cinematic studies field a localized Chinese socialist hermeneutics that organically integrates Marxist approach, social analysis, and textual analysis.

Postsocialist Conditions is organized into three parts and eight main chapters. The Introduction sets the book's goal as "to provide a cognitive mapping of the politics and the aesthetics of this cinema, by explicating its political unconscious and aesthetic innovations as well as their mutual, dialectic interactions." Part One lays out the general socio-political contour of the post-socialist Chinese society by articulating its

dominant cultural-political logic and introducing its “structure of feeling” or social ethos. Part Two discusses the cinematic treatment of class strata in the figures of the working class, the abjected subaltern, the artists, and women in contemporary China. The last part returns dialectically to the ideological position(s) of the directors and through them, the visage of China’s present and future in the neoliberal age.

Whereas neoliberal society naturalizes its version of “human nature,” casts itself as natural and apolitical, while rewriting China’s socialist past as too politically entrenched, Xiaoping Wang’s dialectical contrast of ideological framing and class (re)positioning represents the book’s effort in repoliticizing “the natural.” Through using denaturalization to combat depoliticization, *Postsocialist Conditions* demonstrates an eloquent and timely critique of the depoliticized discourse of “human nature” and “love.” This repoliticization effort helps critics go beyond the “naturalized” discourse of modernization, urbanization, globalization, commercialization, to describe social transformation in postcolonial China. Xiaoping Wang’s Chinese socialist hermeneutics gives voice to a genuine Chinese dialectical experience of economic opening up, a locally distinct reality that has been doubly drowned out by neoliberal ideologies either of the liberal inclination of the sixth generation directors, its Western liberal critics, or the neoliberal logic of international cinematic market place.

In particular, Xiaoping Wang points out the inapplicability of postcolonial theory, identity politics, and politics of dignity in Chinese film critique due to their oversight, neglect, or repudiation of China’s successful socialist revolution. It proves effective to use “political unconscious” to explain the socialist legacy. The work also finds fault with new historicism on the grounds that new historicism “stresses on understanding the past through the perspective of the present, especially through the ‘universal humanity’ irrespective of historical change.”

Another value of this work lies in its unabashed critique of the sixth generation films and directors, instead of promoting alternative media practices. While acknowledging the merits of the sixth generation films, the book lashes at these films’ limitations and blind spots, such as deficiency of class analysis and failure to account for the real causes of the gigantic transformation through exploring the social-political matrix of contradictions. As a result, these film directors tend to adopt sentimental, religious, fatalistic, and/or humanist perspectives that prevent them from probing deeper into social contradictions to effectively explain the complex postsocialist world they both depict and live in.

Indeed, it is most meaningful to call attention to the blind spots of these cinematic works as well as those of film critics. Critics biased toward the socialist era did not do enough to carry out ideological analyses. *Postsocialist Conditions* highlights the significance of Chinese people’s political practices and conceptual visions in China’s

socialist era. Film critics and elite film directors in the China field tend to join to repudiate the socialist experimentation in China and deny the socialist values, thus they lack self-interrogation against the real ideology of the cinematic works itself. The insufficiency and inefficiency to probe this dimension in sixth generation films as well as in the film critics refracts how timely this work is.

In all, *Postsocialist Conditions: Ideas and History in China's "Independent Cinema", 1988-2008* is a solid academic work, properly documented, aware of and interacting with recent scholarship and showing detailed knowledge of primary sources and demonstrating mastery of the subject. It makes a real contribution to the field of study, and is a must read for understanding the sixth generation films produced in market era China.