Trial from Hostages? Scar Art and the Break of History

Tian-le HUANG*
Doctor of Film Studies, Communication University of China, China
*Corresponding author

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Abstract. This paper analyzes how the artistic images and sexualized artistic subjects in Chinese scar art works represented by Father, The Maples and Youth, etc., changed with state ideology in the early 1980s. This paper points out that art works always “exist” in the society, so they are not only text waiting for interpretation, but also the carrier and object of social practice. In the process of subjectification, narration and representation of the gender differences consolidates the existing symbolic order unconsciously. On this basis, the paper further explores the close relationship between the artist subject and the mainstream ideology of the country in shaping and referring each other.

Frederick Jameson vividly called the 1960s as the “Long 60’s”. The Cultural Revolution in China was undoubtedly an important component and representative event of the great “Global 60’s”. As a reflection and rebellion against the collective experience of the Cultural Revolution, a series of avant-garde art movements emerged in the early 1980s in Chinese Mainland, which are regarded as the origin of Chinese contemporary art by the academic circle. The cultural and political nature behind this trend is just as Li Xianting, an art critic, puts “The revival of art is not a revolution of art itself, that is, language paradigm, but a movement of mind emancipation [1].” From the perspective of historical witnesses, Li points out the main axis of artistic ideology that runs through the post-cultural revolution era. “All of these are driven by a rebellious mentality, and the core of the change is social consciousness and politics [1].” Li’s point of view reminds us that the beginning of Chinese avant-garde art is closely related to the change of state ideology.

The vicissitudes of national destiny and the turning point of national history have become part of the artist’s personal life and memory, which not only possesses individuality, but also possesses collectivity and constructs the cultural and political subject of the 1980s dialectically and interactively.

Reproduction of the “Invisible”

As an art trend of speaking the history and memory of the times, “scar art” originated in the late 1970s from the retrospect and summary of the traumatic experiences in the Cultural Revolution. Like the concept of “scar literature”, scar art generally refers to the trend of thought and the atmosphere of artistic creation in the early 1980s, rather than a rigorous genre definition. As a linguistic act and discourse practice, “naming” aims to establish a clear referential relationship between the signifier and the signified. The term “scar literature” is originally used as a derogatory term to express negative meanings along with terms such as “accusatory literature” and “virtueless literature”. The word is originated from Lu Xinhua’s novel Scar published in Wenhui Daily in August 1978. The emergence of this kind of works immediately triggered a discussion on the praise, accusatory and tragic writing of socialist literature. The formation process of scar works vividly reflects the complex conflict of artistic ideas and ideological disputes in the post-Cultural Revolution era.

In the existing literature of Chinese contemporary art history, Luo Zhongli’s painting Father (Figure 1) is often recognized as the origin of scar art. As Li says, “The so-called scar is the feeling of being hurt inside. At that time, people all painted big figures, those ‘tall, big, perfect’ figures. However, Luo draws those ‘nobodies’. Later, the officials scolded Luo for painting those ‘small, suffering, old’ figures. These officials summarized well. The drawing of those of small figures, their misery life and backward appearance, is aim to against those ‘tall, big, perfect’ and ‘red, radiant, bright’ figures [2].”
The dark weather-beaten face in the painting *Father* is no longer the lofty and sacred peasant image in the propaganda slogans. On contrary, it reveals the simplicity and poverty of the peasants in real life. Although *Father* won the first prize of the National Fine Arts Exhibition for Young Artist, many disagreeing voices still appeared. Shao Yangde, a famous art critic, wrote a representative article, accusing the painting *Father* of being full of negative emotions such as “numbness”, “dullness”, “resignation”, “pessimism” and “disappointment”, without injecting any lofty revolutionary ideals [3]. According to Shao himself, he did take a copy of *Father* to the countryside for field investigation. Shao found that the peasants did not like the way they were painted. A work that speaks for peasants cannot be accepted by peasants. This interesting phenomenon reveals that the Luo’s peasant-themed works actually attracted other circles of people instead of peasants. Shao did acutely sense the contradiction between the “aesthetic-political” effect in *Father* and the official legitimate narrative. Another well-known critic, Jia Fangzhou, has also discussed who are the “consumers” that *Father* really presupposes. Jia says, “That pair of ‘eyes as gentle and kind as cattle and sheep’ will not understand the painter's good intentions, and the ‘fathers’ in life will not feel any aesthetic pleasure from this work which generalizes their images. Perhaps the artist’s merit lies in aroused a deep sense of humanity, guilt and responsibility as well as a strong desire for China to move towards civilization and modernization as soon as possible through his own art in countless audiences with consciousness and aesthetic ability [4].” Therefore, the real appreciators of *Father* are those who have the ability to write the history, in this case, those patriotic intellectuals who are thirst for modernity.

These criticisms review this piece of work as a reminder of the negative emotions experienced by the collective. Apparently, this piece of work, together with these criticisms, challenges the mainstream ideology. Upon these, a national debate around this work unfolds. Ironically, Luo Zhongli didn't think much about this artistic image when he painted it. Dark wrinkled face, callous hands holding a broken porcelain bowl, a common peasant was having his day under the heavy burden of life. Luo just happened to meet this “most ordinary” peasant when he went to work in the rural area as an educated urban youth during the Cultural Revolution. As Luo said, “He was still there under the dusk light. The cold of the night squeezed him into the foot of a bridge near the dunghill. His body huddled into a ball, while his eyes, like cattle and sheep, stared at the dunghill as if he were forced into a dead corner... ‘I must shout for them! ’ This was my initial impulse to conceive the painting [3].” It can be seen that political intentions or ambitions like expressing “negative emotions” and exposing “the dark side of society”, are not Luo's original intention.

As Shao’s comments on *Father*, “In the old society, peasants worked ‘hard’. In the new society, peasants still work ‘hard’.” Superficially, the ‘hardship’ is the same. However, it's totally different. In the old society the peasants’ hardship was endless while in the new society, the hardship is for the happiness in the future [3].” If we jump out of the historical context, it is not difficult to see that the validity of this discourse is not based on the negation of what we see, but on the way that affects people's understanding of what we see.

Jacques Rancière once put forward the concept of aesthetic regime. The sensibility distribution of the subject, including vision, was included in the process of power reproduction, which influences and decides whether something was visible or invisible [5]. Building on this, I believe that the exertion and growth of power require more micro-sensibility/emotion foundations than we think. In the horizon opened by *Father*, what really touches and attracts the viewers is its successful reproduction of the
“invisible” category which was silenced in the past. The invisible things prohibited in official discourse target the shadow of symbolic order, like “dark side of the moon”. Describing or viewing this “dark side” will arouse certain psychological pleasure of the subject. Aristotle believes that watching tragedy and experiencing the sympathy and fear caused by the tragedy will bring about the effect of purifying the mind, which still serves as a helpful aesthetic political explanation in this case. This suffered “father” tells the secret that people were unwilling or unable to say at that time. Yi Ying once said, “That dirty and dark ‘father’ image has gone beyond the general aesthetic category, even if he is ‘ugly’, it is also our father. Who should be responsible for his suffering? Who has the power to hide his suffering? ... As a big agricultural country, the fate of farmers is the fate of the state and the nation [6].” The painting Father is finally pointed to the collective destiny of the country and the nation. Yi’s words, to a large extent, represent the common mentality of many viewers of that generation (including the opponents of the work). Patriotism and nationalism are the ideological basis for the dialogue between these two sides.

Negative memory not only can be expressed though reconstructing and rewriting the mythical “bright” image of the working class, but also can be conveyed by the image of women. In fact, “female” as an empty signifier is even more suitable than “peasants” to play a vulnerable role of resignation to suffering. From the viewpoint of Chinese modern art history, it’s fair to say the aesthetic technique of using female images to describe the collective traumatic memory of nation reached its peak in scar art.

Before Father gained national attention thanks to the intellectual community, a piece of scar art work had already attracted people's attention. The comic book The Maples (Figure 2 & 3) is adapted based on Zheng Yi’s novel of the same name. It is co-created by Cheng Yiming, Liu Yulian and Li Bin, three Shanghai intellectuals from Heilongjiang Construction Corps. The story revolves around the tragic fate of the heroine Lu Danfeng. (In Chinese, “Danfeng” means red maple leaves.) Because of its direct description of the tragic fighting scenes during the Culture Revolution as well as its tragic ending of the death of both the hero and the heroine, it has produced far more social influence in the readership beyond the content itself. Lu Peng, a professor at the China Academy of Arts, comments, “In his lamentation for his contemporaries, the author of The Maples poeticized the death that may fall into the Naturalistic grotto. The principle of “three prominences” is destroyed under the impact of the author's instinctive passion for creation, which is finally accomplished by the author's deep sympathy for the protagonists. The work reflects Lu Danfeng is not a specific woman in the author's eyes, but a woman who deserves the deepest sympathy as a symbol of beauty [7].”

This successful shaping of the female role evokes many contemporaries’ lamentation about similar experiences. The author's narrative may help us to understand: “This may be the tragedy of our generation. When we re-express this theme with painting, we are very passionate, which urges us to make every effort to show the purity, sincerity and sadness of the youth at that time. With images and colors and crude realities, we tear apart the best things of this youth generation and present it to viewers.” The heroine’s experience symbolizes a process of losing her innocence. Her image represents the self-projection of a whole generation. Nation, collective and self-imagination are interacted and reproduced successfully through this artistic image. Sharing the same traumatic experience and reading the relevant art texts have resulted in the mutual recognition of “history-society” group consciousness in this generation of educated youth. Subtle dislocation, interweaving and convergence occurred among this group consciousness, the mainstream ideology and the revolutionary historical narrative [8].

In the 1980s, it was a group of young students from Sichuan Fine Arts Institute who really pushed the scar art to its climax. In National Art Works Exhibition Celebrating the Thirtieth Anniversary of the
Founding of the People’s Republic of China, the first official national art exhibition after the reform and opening-up, the exhibited works presented by these students all show a tendency of obvious sadness. Unexpectedly, they all chose the same type of prominent female role to convey this sadness, mostly “female educated youth”, that is, the adolescent girl, who has to go to the countryside and fight against the world. In the middle of the 19th century, it was a conventional prominent artistic type and role-shaping way in China to use young girls to represents light and hope as well as the purity of political beliefs and the dedication to collective ideals. For example, Zhou Shuqiao’s *Willow in the Spring Breeze* (Figure 4) conveys an optimistic socialist romantic atmosphere with young, innocent and smiling educated female youth. In short, the elaboration on the theme of “female youth” is a typical character processing mode of revolutionary narrative in the art history of China.

However, the original optimism has been totally lost in the works of these students from Sichuan Fine Arts Institute. For example, in Gao Xiaohua’s *Why* (Figure 5), there is an injured and powerless female student lying in the left side of the painting. In Cheng Conglin’s *X Month, X Day, 1968* (Figure 6), a girl in ragged clothes is in the center of the painting, looking sadly at her surroundings as if she has just survived from a disaster. For Wang Chuan’s *Goodbye! Path* (Figure 7), in the background of dim light, a young girl is facing of the unknown path leading toward the future in melancholy. He Duoling’s *Spring Wind Has Waken* (Figure 8), “Youth” (Figure 9) and Wang Hai’s *Spring* (Figure 10) are perhaps the most widely disseminated and influential scar art paintings. The protagonists’ slightly relaxed look in a bleak era convey a sense of hazy sadness, isolation, tension and delicate. The background is a mix of theatrical light and shadow which gives it an atmosphere of loss.

He Duoling once described *Youth* in this way: “She is surrounded by heavy shadows. Her beauty is isolated, short-lived and tense. However, I want her to be in nature, in the land that she cultivated and connected with. Here I introduced sunshine, which tore her delicate face, and its shadow was the footnote of that bleak era. Eagles and ploughs also cast shadows as they skimmed over the picture and threw sharp but short sorrows as a complement to the opposite of the lofty concept of ‘youth’ [9].” In the picture, a girl who has experienced the years of the Cultural Revolution is sitting between the “ruins of the past” and the “foreboding of future devastation” As a typical character in a particular era, her image deeply touched many viewers with the similar experience.
Reconstructing “Subjectivity”

The female images in scar art works all present a blank expression, youth melancholy and poetic hesitation. Burdened with seemingly unspeakable real experience plus their numbness life attitude, these female images no longer show any spirit of enthusiasm and optimism. The creators who devote themselves to scar art attempt to create a typical image of women in this “new era” after the Cultural Revolution. In this context, personal experience is transformed into imagination and care for the collective destiny of the nation through the reference and representation of cultural/artistic texts. Only through constantly claiming of abandoning that memory and the “absent attendees” and adding new meanings to the traumatic narrative based on the “legitimate” constructed by official discourse can we provide some historical rationality for the break of various realistic political and cultural scenes between the past and the present. By reproducing the past repeatedly, the traumatic memory is healed or forgotten.

In Of the Gaze as Object Petit a, Lacan mentioned, “The gaze is outside, I am looked at, that is to say, I am a picture.” Through gaze, people complete the subjectivity of themselves. Nicholas Mirzoeff also reminds us that the operation of "male/female" and "active/passive" patterns of seeing will also help to establish dominant relations in the areas of nationalism and colonialism. This makes it difficult for us to ignore how an aesthetic-political visual art model based on gender reproduction can relate and penetrate with the existing patriarchal order.

In regard to the initiative male /positive and the passive female/negative, the former occupies the main position and positive reference, while the latter is defined as the “negative”. In patriarchal culture, only when female is a male peeping dissident, can she return to people's horizons in an acceptable way. Through the female images mentioned above, we can see such dissident characteristics: The artistic images symbolize the common scar endured by male elites in the process of national construction. At the same time, by shaping and defining these “females” as male self-reflection, intellectual elites reconstruct the damaged subjectivity. These “females” are the injuries they suffered. On how the female image exists as a “non-male” object which is deficient in male gaze, Griseda Pollock, a feminist art historian, concisely illustrates it as: Females in patriarchal culture are reproduced as negative versions of males, who are mutilated and castrated. Through viewing this “female/negative” text, the male reconstructs and restores his power imagination as a historical subject in order to overcome castration anxiety for a period of time.

Here, we can vaguely see a kind of “prototype” mode of ideology with the connotation of national modernity, which emerges from the appearance of gender. The characteristic of this prototype is that when male intellectuals face serious collective anxiety about national identity, cultural identity and class identity, they often tend to “feminize” the symptoms of the identity crisis and corresponding national imagination. They reorganize their turbulent modern life and answer confusion and problems of their modern identity crisis by reorganizing the symbolic order of gender. In short, male elites project the gap and contradiction between ideas and reality, and the uneasiness, fragmentation and rupture resulting therefrom, onto women, making female existence otherness, heterogeneity and objectification, and more importantly, symbolizing their nation.

Thus, in the early 1980s, collective memory in the past was specifically reproduced as negative images such as women and low status people. As a presentation of cultural subconscious, it was visualized and structured into a gender scene and placed on the object and viewing position, as a negative reference of history, waiting to be banished and forgotten, but constantly tempting people to watch. Through this process, male elites are able to reconstruct their own cognitive map and reconfirm their position as the subject of history and desire.

Now, we may able to confirm that gender reproduction is closely related to the construction of symbolic order. By using visual symbols with gender connotations, artists connect to state ideology. However, we still need to ask: what is the social process that can produce this connection, and how does state power function in this process?
Power comes from Lower Strata

Speaking of the call of nationalism to the subject, it seems inevitable to mention Louis Althusser’s classical exposition on the ideological state apparatuses: The dominant ideology is internalized by the individual through transmission, making it the main body of the power center, in order to facilitate the reproduction of the existing production relations and the dominant mode [14]. Michel Foucault puts forward similar view in his book *Discipline and Punish*: The creation of power relay on the self-generated discipline of the subject. Its characteristic is that in different situations, through various mechanisms, discipline information is permeated, which forms the appearance of “autonomy” and “self-discipline” in modern subjects [15]. The genealogy of modern power systematizes and homogenizes the special context of contradiction. Through creating a flexible speech mechanism, tension becomes a dynamic “great domination”, in which the subject is constantly undergoing its own configuration and transformation, which can be regarded as a process of continuous subjectivity [16].

That is to say, subject has duality: On the one hand, it refers to the actors responsible for their own actions, which have subjectivity. But on the other hand, the subject means subordinate state, which makes people voluntarily submit to authority [17]. Dai Jinhua, a professor at Peking University, also expressed similar views in the Chinese context. “The subjective structure which Chinese male intellectuals formed in the 1980s is based on the self-imagination which views the centralized politics and historical violence as “the other”... More specifically, when political power or violence becomes the only other in the subject/self structure, it undoubtedly has dual meaning of adversary and ideal self. Thus, the structure of subject/self and others has once again completed the deep internalization of the structure of political power [18].”

Avant-garde artists’ resistance to reality is more or less reflected in their works. The fact that many works lose their significance and avant-garde after leaving the “social context of China” can be seen as evidence to support the argument made above. When artists adopt certain positions or attitudes, they cannot avoid to dialogue with them. They will inevitably experience the inexplicable thing that is approaching and oppressing them, that is, “imaginary community”. In this way, the existence of the nation gains its incessant impetus. The foundation of state and nationalism is based on individual subjectivity. The germination of the subjectivity of Chinese contemporary art originated from the Oedipal rebellion, namely “patricide”, against the “kill-sub” complex in the late 1970s. Needless to say, these two are essentially the same origin, that is, the admiration for patriarchy.

In the 1990s, various “post-” discourses developed vigorously. The collective ideology behind them is actually a collective desire to transcend the insurmountable history. Trauma and repressive experience were sublimated by the new “fetish” experience. As a result, the huge and heavy historical ghost was provoked, desecrated and deconstructed by the desire of the subject. However, since the internal logic of the field of aesthetic modernity is constantly breaking away from all the objectified and legalized structure of artistic production, avant-garde art has gained endless creative momentum. In other words, the particularity of the contemporary era is based on the various traditions which it intends to negate or transcend. Therefore, such “post” imagination is essentially the same as the scar art in the 1980s. Neither of them can surpass nor part from “national narrative”. To the subject, the process of “transcendence” is full of the blasphemous pleasure of breaking taboos. The obsession with politics of “pleasure”, and the addiction to the fragmented narrative subject, namely the “post-subject”, plunges the subject into the mire of endless relativism and nihilism. Due to the oversensitivity of the subject's mind, social forces are more intensely traversing and throbbing their bodies and daily practice. The ghost of history has not disappeared, and has entered the soul of artistic creators with the same fundamental role.

Through Julia Kristeva’s analysis of the relationship between the subject and the symbolic order, we can find that the subject is always placed in the symbolic order [19]. That is to say, the individual must accept a subject position already in the symbolic order, since it cannot speak in the “other party”. From this point of view, although many highly personal or extreme works of art have produced a strong sense of delight in provocative the strict symbolic order for the subject and the viewer, and serve as the drive for negativity during the writing time of the text, they cannot really reject the Phallus central structure of the existing authoritarian order.
Trial or Collusion?

The late famous Italian director Bernardo Bertolucci called the young generation, including himself, who had experienced the radical movement of the left party in Europe in the last century “the hostages of history”. His films also repeatedly depicted “national allegory” of “patricide/father-seeking”. Among them, The Dreamers, adapted from the novel of the same name tells the story of a “naive” American student (viewpoint character) who came to Paris on the eve of “May Storm” in 1968. He happened to meet a pair of “masterminded” French twin brother and sister, and was trapped in the “mire” from then on. The problem is that when this viewpoint comes from an equally sophisticated European, the narrative begins with a rather ambiguous reflexivity in nature, that is, the trial of the “kidnapper” was done by an individual who has been seized as a “hostage” by history, which obviously has the same symbolic meaning as the scar art discussed in this paper.

As the “son of the Bourgeoisie”, Bertolucci seemed to imply an imagination of unilateral domination of state power, but often such “seizures” or “trials” cannot stand the inquiries. At least, it is “non-unilateral” to a large extent. The effectiveness of governance skills or state power will lose all the foundation for its realization if the individual/subject does not “performance on the same stage”. Foucault believes that power comes from the lower strata. The more effective the governing relationship is, the more it is based on the constructive interaction between the ruler and the ruled [16]. Foucault’s point of view effectively explains why the self-expression of the artistic subject is constantly integrated into the larger historical narrative of the nation-state. In fact, in the context of modernity since modern times in China, the nation and the state are not only the contents that cannot be ignored when artistic subjects express themselves and create art, but also were the only and absolute subject in a long historical period. (Inspired by Althusser’s Idéologie et Appareils Idéologiques d’Etat, the author italicized the only and absolute subject in order to distinguish it from the other subjects.) Individual subject only appears as a unique manifestation of the idea of nation-state in different periods [20].

In traditional of psychoanalysis, vision is often defined as the “erection of penis”, that is, the extensions of gender symbolic order [21]. This is very helpful for us to understand the meaning of female images. It’s worth noticing that the “peeper” in this case is not referring to a specific male with a “penis”, or any male in biological sense. It is a symbolic “patriarchal eye”, consisting of national/dominant ideology, social collective order and public will and so on. It also refers to “the Other” proposed by Lacan, which is invisible and untouchable but always hangs over us. Foucault’s panopticism theory regards “hidden eyes” as the core of power, and explores how the gazed person is shaped as a subordinate of power and the relationship between viewing and subjectivity [22].

Similarly, the object that the “patriarchal eye” gazing here is not limited to women in biological sense, but closer to a cultural trait, a metaphor and a symbol. There is an obvious hierarchical relationship. Positive, progressive and superior position is named masculinity. While the opposite negative, backward and inferior position is designated as “femininity”. In this respect, we can even say that men or women in biological sense are not the ultimate support of gender operation, because their body image or gender performance is in fact “negative”. In a certain social sense of gender, they are all “daughters” of the nation-state, that is, the negative object under the gaze of the nation-state.

Žižek has also discussed how gaze works between imaginative and symbolic identities. The former refers to the recognition of certain images, involving value representation. The latter refers to the recognition of a position from which we are observed by others and watched by ourselves. In short, symbolic identity means the recognition of the gaze from the other. Žižek holds the opinion that he plays a role for the other, the ‘other’ is himself. For the existence of the other is for the existence of himself. He plays a role for some kind of gaze, and he has already recognized this gaze symbolically [23].” This also explains why most intellectuals and artists are ambivalent about the machine and ideology of the state, but they still constantly have difficulties in leaving the scope of the state to think about the world and self. According to Žižek, they are attached to the gazed position, because actually there are “pleasant”. Because in such entangled struggle and interaction, when the other, as the object of desire, is invested in many imaginations, people will also recognize the existence of self.
The “collusion” between the subject and the subject reminds us that ideology is effective because it confirms Marx's famous description that the dominant class describes its own interests as the common interests of all members of society [24]. Moreover, not only has it been described as the interests of the ruling class, it also has been unconsciously/consciously referred to its own interests by the ruled.

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References


