From Routes to Roots or Vice Versa: Transformation of Urban Space in China’s “New Urban Films”

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Toward the late 1990s, a different group of urban films were produced in China. Unlike the independent films on urban China, which is known as the Sixth Generation, and also known as the “Urban Generation” since most of their films focus on the new urban reality of post-reform China,¹ this new group of urban films has been both warmly received by the domestic audience and accepted by government censors. Chinese journalists immediately put a label to these films, classifying them as “new urban films” in an attempt to differentiate them from the urban films made by the Sixth Generation filmmakers. The new label involves an up-to-the-minute rhetoric of urban space transformation shaped by post-reform expansion of urbanity. Themes of socially produced spatiality and personal, family, and social relations are prominent. Contemporary Chinese urbanization and transformation of space are marked by a fundamental social shift from “roots” to “routes.” New social-cultural spaces, values, practices, and relations reshape urban experience and sensibilities. A fundamental unsettling of interpersonal, familial, and social relationships accompanies the post-reform “concrete revolution.”

In this paper, I focus on the two so-called “new urban films”—Spring Subway (Kaiwang Chuntian de Ditie 2002, dir. Zhang Yibai) and Shower (Xizao 1999, dir. Zhang Yang).² Both films touch upon displacement and de-localization in urban experience. Spring Subway creates a mode of transit and emotional experience associated with the philosophies and values of new capitalism. The socially coded urban space of the hyper mobile subway is a strong metaphor for China’s economic acceleration toward private sector prosperity, which generates new social relationships such as future-oriented and horizontal liaisons of kinship, partnership, or informal sociability.⁴ The subway sensibility is a hyperbolic manifestation of an open and problematic future with new social promises of opportunities and heightened awareness of risks and anxieties that come along with them. Shower, on the other hand, returns to the familial and communal roots of traditional Chinese culture, and critiques the increasing erosion of traditional and familial values by development. The film features a traditional bathhouse upholding values of family loyalty, fraternal solidarity, and kinship obligations to counter the pursuits of materialism, consumerism, and
progressivism. Traditional societal bedrocks such as communal care and family intimacy defend against uncertainties in society at large. Its cinematic attempt to revive the traditional cultural and social order reflects the emerging rhetoric that locates traditional heritage as the ultimate moral horizon for China. The spatial changes that stem from social and economic structures all play themselves out against the background of the change of Chinese family culture.

**Post-Mao Urbanization**
Contemporary urbanization is a direct reversal of the official policies of the socialist period. Chinese cities and urban life were radically reconstructed after the communist revolution of 1949. The characteristics associated with former Soviet Union and Eastern European socialist cities by sociologist Ivan Szelenyi are evident in Chinese cities in the Maoist era: socialist cities are under-urbanized as a result of elimination of private property and limitations on rural-to-urban migration. The socialist urban space is functional, spartan, and homogenous in character with less diversity and a dearth of recreational facilities (Smith, 2000:181).

After 1949, the Chinese socialist government regarded the cities as “hostile territory, and made it difficult for artists to express the complexity of urban life. By denying a voice to urban Chinese who were not proletarians, the party disavowed their authenticity” (Kraus 1995:147). Maoist pattern of urbanization

*Asian Cinema*, Fall/Winter 2008
was “significantly influenced by the Communists’ ideas about egalitarian spatial development” (Smith, 2000:183). The Maoist egalitarian urban spatial development has reduced urban life to ideological, moral, and social homogeneity. Maoist social organization contributed to “an impoverishment of everyday life” by way of a “moral homogenization,” which “takes the form of moralizing feelings, social relations, and quotidian routines” (Tang, 2000:278). The socialist vision of deurbanization froze urban identities--other than that of the “worker-peasant-soldier” identity--to ensure class purity.

Leaving the traditional community. Shower.

The primary focus of the Party’s development strategies of urbanization in socialist China was on rapid heavy industrial production, at the expense of developing consumer services and city infrastructure (Chen, Clark, Gottschang, and Jeffrey, 2001:5). In “Mao’s valorization of the rural, nativist, and national-popular culture Chinese society was deurbanized in an ideologically sanctioned effort to construct the alternative vision of a ‘Third World modernity,’ which involves overcoming the difference between town and country and negation of domestic and international market forces, for urbanism was often ‘identified and condemned as the embodiment of evil modern capitalism’” (Tang, 2000:275).

Urbanization is a consequence of the open-door and economic reform policy. In post-Mao China, the city “has arrived to occupy the center stage in cultural orientation and the social imaginary” (Tang, 2000:274). While the
transition to a market economy in China began with the reform of agriculture under the "responsibility system" in 1983, by the 1990s, cities were the area of greatest economic dynamism, when capital, labor, housing, commodity, and cultural markets moved closer to the liberal model of freer choice (Farrer, 2002:12). Urban spaces emerge from the structures of socialist planning to be more fluid in spatial and functional specialization (Gaubatz, 1995). Consequently, new social values emerged as a result of the transformation from rural/community centered values of stability, communality, and homogeneity to new values of "mobility, privacy, and diversity" (Tang, 2000:276). In their sociological research on Chinese urban life under reform, William L. Parish and James Farrer also provide analysis about how the microsocial and macrosocial mechanisms of socialist and market institutions respectively affect the family. The market under the liberal economy creates conditions for individual autonomy and wider choices of fulfillment, which allows autonomous impulse to readily become action (Tang and Parish, 2000).

Contemporary Chinese urban culture develops in the reform period, when economic boom and transnational globalism facilitate a wave of massive urbanization. This period also sees the advancement of new urban concepts. Statistics show that China’s urbanization rate increased one percentage point annually and reached some 37 percent in 2002 (Lian, 2004:4). In the 11 years between 1990 and 2001, the number of regional cities increased from 188 to 269. The number of cities with a population exceeding 1 million increased from 31 to 41. The percentage of urban total land area expanded from 20 percent in 1990 to 42.6 percent in 2001, with a 10.3 percent urban population increase (Ni, 2003:26-27). Cities in China spend billions of RMB on urban area expansion to accommodate the inflowing population. The new urban films reflect both the physical transformation of the urban social milieu and its accompanied social mechanism of unfettered market relationships.

New Urban Films

New urban cinema is an offshoot of the post-socialist expansion of urban culture. It is not a coincidence that 2002, when *Spring Subway* was made, was named as China’s “city year” (Teng, 2004). Constant urbanity is a distinguishing note of Chinese cinema of the late 1990s and the turn of the 21st Century China. More and more filmmakers began engaging the urban experience in filmmaking as the nation itself experienced an “urban great leap forward” at the turn of the 21st century.

According to Qian Chunlei, a Chinese journalist who is probably the first person to propose the label “New Urban Films,” Zhang Yang (*Spicy Love Soup [Aiqing Ma La Tang]* 1997; *Shower [Xizao]* 1999) and Zhang Yibai (*Spring Subway [Kaiwang Chuntian de Ditie]* 2002) are the two representative directors of new urban films. Both Zhang Yang’s *Spicy Love Soup* and Zhang
Yibai’s *Spring Subway* are up-to-date urban romances set in contemporary Chinese metropolis. Other directors include Lu Le (*The Poetic Years* [*Shiyi de Niandai*]), and Li Xin *Dazzling the Eye* [*Huayan*] (2002), who focus their lens on the life style of the 20s & 30s generation of the urban middle class (Qian, 2002). The new middle-class is developed out of the contemporary economic boom and a vibrant, modern, and stylish life. Their films use taxi, subway, cellular phones, and beepers as metaphorical backdrops to convey the sense of contemporary urbanity. *Spring Subway* director Zhang Yibai defines a “new urban film” as “discovering the beauty of urban life; discovering the real reality in life while bestowing a bit fantasy and admiration; befitting mainstream social value.” He claims that it is only after the economic reform that there is urban culture in the genuine sense. New urban films, according to Zhang, are made to reflect a fresh perspective of the changed urban milieu (Qian C.L., 2002).

New urban films indicate a changed perception of urban China. Unlike the Sixth Generation films, whose depictions of a bleak and quotidian urbanity directly contradicting the government’s claim that “quality of life in China’s cities was approaching Western standards without ‘Western’ ills like prostitution, gangs, and crime,” new urban films offer a picture of post-reform urban China compatible with the official perspective. A newly emerged middle-class replaces the urban alienated hooligans who populated the immediate post-Mao cities. The ideological space of a new urban film is one of urban China with no apparent social and political antagonism. Gone is the so-called “preliminary-stage syndrome,” which was used to refer to social antagonism and political anxieties of the so-called “preliminary stage of socialism,” which refers to an immediate post-socialist condition. Also gone are cities visualized in the immediate post-socialist conditions as sources of social antagonism and tensions—the tensions “between totalitarian control and the fragmentation of the ideological totality” (Kuoshu, 1999:152).

A new urban film is the product of independent commercial production that seeks official censorship approval. For a long while, there have been two Chinese cinemas: the official cinema and the underground independent cinema, which often wins prizes at international festivals. With the disintegration of the old studio system from the early 1990s on, a number of independent production companies came into being. After 2001, independent directors could apply for a production permit, which resulted in the development of a hybrid sector (Reynaud, 2003). Some are privately owned, some jointly owned by foreign investors, and some privately managed but with collective ownership. A number of foreign-funded independent companies played important roles in fostering this hybrid sector. They are a significant force for change in methods of production, distribution, promotion, management, new techniques and fresh concepts, drawing audience, and turning profits. For
these independent production companies, neither the company nor its output ventures far beyond mainstream sensibilities. According to Tony Rayns, the American émigré Peter Loehr’s Imar Film Co. “develops projects designed to appeal to the young urban audience and works with youngish directors from the music video and advertising industries” (Rayns, 2000: 58). These productions, which target the middle ground of the film market, are mainly new urban films. *Shower* is Imar’s third production (Rayns, 2000: 58). And *Spring Subway* is the first production of the new Beijing-based independent production house Electric Orange Entertainment. Made with the Film Bureau’s approval, *Spring Subway* treads the same path as *Spicy Love Soup* and *Shower*, as a rare example of an independent film with official approval and commercial appeal. *Spring Subway* shows how this pathway works: “it avoids major state-owned studios; can reach local audiences; therefore boasts a welcome commercial potential; and, as a bonus, retains international appeal. As such, it forms a complementary alternative to the ‘sixth generation’ films that, avoiding the censorship approval process, can’t profitably and openly be distributed with in China” (Kraiser, 2002). In other words, new urban films acquire some artistic merits while also heading toward commercial release and making their ways into domestic theaters. They are the product of compromise between art and box-office.
Spring Subway is director Zhang Yibai’s first movie. Before this he directed popular TV dramas, MTV clips, and TV commercials. An urban floater himself, the director left Sichuan at 23 to enroll in Central China Theater Academy’s Drama and Literature Department. When asked why he made this movie, director Zhang Yibai responds that the film “found a means to accurately and frankly express and present emotional life of young people” (Li Y.L., 2003:18). Zhang also explains that his so-called “new urban film” is meant to reflect urban senses and sensibility (Mu Z.Y., 2003). For Zhang, as a modern means of transportation, the subway is the best medium to communicate a contemporary mode of existence and sensibility, and to embody a complex alignment of practices of contemporary social mobility. Spring Subway is an urban romance set in the sleekly modern subways of Beijing. The major plot of the story revolves around the movement of urban floaters in the polished and mobile space of the subway, which shows the increased speed and mobility of Chinese cities. As a motorized method of commuting and transporting, and a symbol of urban sprawl as well as individual and social mobility, the subway suggests the dynamics of transformation and social energy of the modern city.

In contrast with the post-utopian age “landscapes of disenchantment” that appear to be pervasive in Sixth Generation films, the operational presence of the subway becomes a single-minded excavation in a type of space that is
dynamic, uprooting, promising, and symbolic of uninterrupted expansion and horizontal liaisons. And what accompanies strong indicators of economic and social development is a narrative of unfolding uncertainties in which marriage and communal sensibilities are refashioning themselves. The emotionally charged mise-en-scenes of subway rides are informed by spatial expressions of the massive growth in urbanization, the atomization of social relationships, and the decline of hierarchical social control. The film also implies the destabilization of social security and welfare by the unrelenting march of the market and privatization. The protagonists’ drifting between opportunities and uncertainties in *Spring Subway* is a revelation of urban middle class’ drifting between promises and yearnings in search for an identity between vanishing values and a promising but indeterminate future. The subway mode is an apt metaphor for China’s new mode of urban existence.

Henri Lefebvre’s theory of social space views physical space as produced and encoded; it is the medium in which social environments are meaningfully configured. Social spaces manifest the physical traces of various modes of social practice; they may be constructed within the regimes of these practices; or they may appropriate and mold existing natural or social spaces as their own (Laughlin, 2000:38). As Charles Laughlin asserts in his analysis of narrative subjectivity and social space, “Social space is ideological insofar as its production relies on spontaneous collective contributions based on shared values and assumptions. It is defined by the activities of the groups that inhabit it, and it shapes their identity and their subjective experience dialectically” (Laughlin, 2000:38).

The socially produced spatiality, according to Edward Soja, is “like society itself, exists in both substantial forms (concrete spatialities) and as a set of relations between individuals and groups, an ‘embodiment’ and medium of social life itself” (Soja, 1989: 120). Arjun Appadurai sees global cultural interaction specifically in spatial terms of a “disjunctive” series of “scapes”: ethnoscapes, technoscapes, finanscapes, mediascapes, and ideioscapes (Robertson, 1992:103). And Fredric Jameson attributes the emergence of China’s postmodernity to three factors: the advances of global capitalization, cyber time (the popularization of computers and other high-tech advances), and consumer culture, which have generated new scapes of sociability (Dirlik and Zhang, 1997: 38).

Film critic Manny Farber claims that there are several types of movie space, the three most important being “(1) the field of the screen, (2) the psychological space of the actor, and (3) the area of experience and geography that the film covers” (Farber, 1971:3). The spatial changes of urban China as visualized in the city mise en scene of postsocialist new urban films are significant. *Spring Subway* focuses on a persistent “temporalization of space” through using the most popular urban transportation tool as a framing device.

*Asian Cinema*, Fall/Winter 2008
As the mobile subway becomes a signifying space, social themes take on temporal characteristics. A metaphorical free flow of restless energy is introduced into the succession of plot and character developments, and the psychological space of the film also takes on temporal characteristics. As the response to and the consequence of the outside flux of the social space, the psychological space is informed by a desire to be on the go. It is also linked to the apparently infinite possibilities that the city provides, as well as a multitude of new expectations that the physical and social mobility engenders and affords. In the film, the Beijing subway occupies not only the field of the screen and the psychological space of the main characters, but also covers the area of experience and geography of the film. Systematically visualizing the subway as a standard trope, the film intensifies a new urban framework. The all-glass subway train windows, polished walls and floors, and 21st Century.com advertisement board in Spring Subway present an almost science-fiction-like urbanization with “a polished mirror-glass world of contemporaneity” (Kraiser, 2002).

Xiao Hui and Jian Bin arrive in Beijing from the south after they graduate from college. They belong to the large “floating population” in the tidal wave of urban migration as state policies on social mobility loosened in post-Mao reform era. One of the biggest social changes in post-socialist China is the emergence of large “floating populations” in many big cities. The end of collectivization and the loosening of migration constraints have ended the strict rural-urban demarcation and increased the scope for individual autonomy and mobility. And in the post-reform era or the post-Deng Xiao Ping era since 1997, competitive labor market gradually prevailed over the socialist job assignment system. Labor market changes have enabled young urbanites to seek self-development in different ways. Spring Subway’s new notion of space thus has close relevance to the interpretation of social-cultural transformation in urban China.

In socialist China, cities were so closely integrated into the national economic system that tight restrictions on personal mobility were imposed (Naughton, 1995:25). Public space was state regulated and subject to social surveillance. Forced collectivization, the restrictions on migration, and the nature of work in the collectives require most Chinese to be bound for life to work and live in the gated compound of a “work unit,” which is a microcosm of social control. The majority of urban adults have worked in state-owned work-units, and assigned lifelong employment and housing up till the 1990s. Housing, travel permits, marriage permits, and family affairs are all controlled by the state through the work units. Work unit “means a basic social cell that receives and executes various policy programs of the communist party and government” (Shaw, 1996: xi). Through the management network and party system of work units, the central control of the government structures the life opportunities and professional development for ordinary Chinese.
The homogenized social relations and pursuits of the Maoist city find physical consequentialities in its transportation tools: the proletarian bicycle and the overcrowded bus. As Tang Xiaobing claims, as a social necessity, transportation may also be the ideal metaphor for modes of production and historical condition (Tang, 1994). Pictures of large crowds of man-powered bicycles with symbolic values of self-reliance, austerity, urban scarcity, populism, and egalitarianism were constantly referred to as representing socialist China. The overcrowded and slow-moving city bus was another revelation of Maoist urban inefficiency, poor-service, and inconvenience. Its overburdened appearance is an apt metaphor for the stagnation of economic function of the socialist city.

The underdeveloped and centralized socialist social-economic infrastructure is now replaced by the privatized enterprises of a free market economy. The new social-economic infrastructure can be traced through the urban transportation tool again: the efficient and dynamic urban subway as a symbol of development, mobility, and individual freedom. Although the subway’s crowd-carrying function is public transportation by nature, it contains a level of social mobility that is relevant to the newly emerged social structure of capitalist labor markets and consumer markets. With faster speed, efficient management and service, and flexibility of individual choice and space, it also registers the fundamental symptoms, modes of thinking, and structure of feeling shaped by the speedy urban and spatial expansion, socially produced mobility, and increasing acceleration of pace of life.

Central characters Jian Bin and Xiao Hui’s arrival in Beijing marks their significant moment in life, which is at a Beijing subway station, where the young couple gets off the subway train with rosy visions of a better and
happy life in the capital city. This is where Jian Bin promises Xiao Hui happiness in the future. From the very beginning of the film, the subway is associated with a social mobility that offers access to opportunities for young college graduates. It is also associated with an urbanity that delivers the social promise of personal development. It seems only a natural result that after seven years in the city, Xiao Hui and Jian Bin become white-collar, get married and settled in an Ikea-furnished apartment in Beijing. The subway sensibility is associated with the formation of China’s new middle-class. Xiao Hui’s white-collar success in the capital city of China is significant for an ordinary out-of-towner. The formation of a subway community made up of urban floaters signifies the incipient integration of these floaters into the dominant social order. Commercialization of urban housing makes it possible for urban floaters to have access to urban household residence. Jian Bin and Xiao Hui need only to worry about the rent rather than residential restrictions to be settled into Beijing’s apartment. New commuter patterns emerge and replace the highly controlled environment of the enclosed workplace-residence compound typical of the socialist era (Gaubatz, 1995).

The subway is symbolic of a developing social order-in-formation. As a force for geographic and social mobility, it is also synonymous of free social assimilation. As a result, the formation of an urban floaters’ community is possible. Urban floaters learn to adjust to new environments and to share their first-time dreams, emotional adventures, and economically driven incentives. This formation of new class, community, and sensibility is one of the major aspects of the film. The urban localism and xenophobia that characterize urban films of the former generations are absent from the so-called new urban film Spring Subway. Gone are open discrimination and overt
hostility toward non-residents, which feature prominently in previous
generations of urban films. Outsiders are not featured as treated as second or
third class citizens. And social contradiction between local and outside people
is invisible. Out-of-towners such as Jian Bin, Xiao Hui, and Li Chuan merge
effortlessly and seamlessly with local residents. The film features no
antagonism between a “host” community and a “guest” community as many
Sixth Generation films do.

Further in the film, the spotlessly clean and spacious waiting area of the
subway station, along with the subway compartment turn into the congregation
area for lonely souls to confess, meet, and find love. While intercity relocation
and rural-urban migration generate a “floaters” community, daily intra-city
movement and free exchange of consumer service make it possible for floaters
and commuters to engage in horizontal liaisons. The subway peddler Li Chuan
and commuter Wang Yao who hit it off on the subway eventually tie knots and
give wedding candies to fellow subway commuters with whom they establish
kinship. For the young dumb boy in the film, social mobility enables him to
transcend geographical and internal distance, and brings him out of his
physiological isolation and communication blockage. His daily rides in the
subway make it possible for him to pursue Tian Ai. The subway as a space of
horizontal mobility provides open and active opportunities for a peer-governed
culture of dating with future-oriented chance encounters and choices.

Moreover, increasing prosperity of urban China brings into being new
urban consumer culture and new concepts of leisure among the urban middle-
class. Studies of the politics of private time in Maoist and post-Mao China
indicate that in the early Maoist era, the state has control over the amount of
leisure time and the forms and content of leisure, and directs it to cultivate
proletariat ideas. Leisure activities take the form of collective action, such as
officially organized sporting events, movie screening, and dances, etc. In the
Cultural Revolution era, the state completes its monopolization of private time
and saturates people with Maoist propaganda (Wang S.G., 1995). Politicization
of social life in Maoist era has rendered leisure as a “battleground between
the proletariat and the bourgeoisie,” and it is “politically dangerous to enjoy
pastimes in a carefree mood” (Wang S. G., 1995:154). During the reform era,
leisure is depoliticized but commercialized under the new social contract. “Profit
has replaced ideology to become the primary concern for most providers of
recreational products” and leisure has become a “cultural market” (Wang S.
G., 1995:172). While an extravagant pattern of leisure is available for the new
rich to flaunt their elite status, for ordinary Chinese, home-centered kill-time
activities such as watching TV, playing video games and mahjong, and listening
to music have replaced group-oriented collective leisure.

It is only until recently that the notion of pure leisure, or the ability to
spend spare time in creative ways, comes into being, and reflected in the film.
Along with the subway sensibility is affiliated with other urban sensibilities and newly acquired concept of personal fulfillment among urban middle class. Tiger critiques the office salarymen’s rush for wealth at the expense of ignoring other more important aspects of life. This critique is further affirmed by Tiger’s environmental consciousness. Tiger adopts baby bears and leases a barren land to grow trees in the outskirts of the city. For the urban middle class, personal fulfillment is defined by individual aspirations and progressive awareness rather than limited to or dictated by a conventional professional career.

Yet despite all the hopeful promises of the “springward subway,” the story line also revolves around other effects of reform. While enormous economic dynamism brings increased individual mobility and autonomy, it has also brought employment insecurity and uncertainty. Jian Bin, who has been abandoned by the competitiveness of the new labor market, continues to dress and take the subway each day, pretending to go to work and trying desperately not to be left behind by the speed of the urban society. While middle class professionals like the couple enjoy the material comforts of a modern apartment and the newly acquired mobility of overseas traveling, they also experience anxieties and instability that come along when emotional attachments and family ties disintegrate as a social consequence of mobility. Sentiments of resignation and urban anomie are expressed through Jian Bin who has been laid off. His daily circling-the-city subway rides form the setting of the story, as he observes the intertwined life and romantic endeavors of various couples that share his subway commuting through the underground heart of Beijing.

Jian Bin shuttles regularly between two lives: one the domestic home, and the other the open road. Jian Bin’s transient odyssey across the undercity of Beijing takes the central topic of marital ennui. The film features the contrast between a mundane domestic setting permeated with familial stagnation and an on-the-road dating culture. The subway voyage is experienced as a substitute shelter for Jian Bin, who is suffering from emotional and communicational blockage. Against the subway rides, which open up new relationships and contingencies, however, stands his difficulty in attachment and commitment.

Jian Bin’s position as a subway commuter projects the viewpoint of an eternal passenger, who always views urban society in fleeting images from the world of transit and impermanence. The subway passenger is the perfect medium through which to view urban expansion and transformation. The stories of subway passengers’ on-the-road search for emotional attachment, which leaves them in transience between mobility and settlement, is much like China’s own search for its future, which has created a city in an indeterminate state between a disappearing past and an unknown future.
Transformation of Space and Familial Intimacy: *Shower (Xizao 1999)*

If *Spring Subway* conveys a futuristic and progressive sense of Chinese contemporaneity with its delivery of promises, *Shower* problematizes it, and critiques the moral situation inherent in the logic of material gain at the expense of cultural heritage. The film uses the notion of spatial transformation to admonish the danger and fundamental flaws of this shift, and advocates a concept of Confucian modernity based upon traditional modes of familial intimacy and communal care. Directed by Zhang Yang, the film uses the existence and demolition of a traditional public bathhouse and the transformation of familial intimacy as focal points for polarizing and putting into contrast several dichotomies: modernity and tradition; materialism and spirituality; cultural heritage and excessive commercialization; kinship obligations and vicious competitiveness; instant gratification and simple pleasure; acquisitive individualism and communal care. If the subway sensibility of a new Beijing marks a cultural shift from “roots” to “routes,” the bathhouse sensibility in *Shower* features a cultural nostalgia for a vanishing old Beijing in the face of urban expansion, and a moral perspective that idealizes the traditional space of Confucian “heredity” rooted in traditional familial intimacy.

Zhang Yang was born in 1967. He received his BA in Chinese Literature from Zhongshan University in 1988, and continued his study in the Directing Department of Central Drama Academy in Beijing, where he graduated in 1992. After graduation, Zhang directed the Chinese dramatic reproduction of *A Kiss of the Spider Woman*. Zhang entered Beijing Film Studio and started his career as a director there. For several years later, Zhang directed over 20 music videos before dedicating himself to a type of film that speaks to the emotions and experiences of mainstream urban Chinese in the post-reform period. He
has won numerous domestic and international awards. Zhang’s faddish themes and mainstream values result in domestic box-office success, and differentiate him sharply from the Sixth Generation underground filmmakers.

In 1997, Zhang broke onto the scene with his first feature film *Spicy Love Soup (Aiqing Ma La Tang)*, which deals with the emotional lives of different age groups of urban middle-class. It soon became a popular domestic hit and swept a number of domestic awards. In 1999, Zhang Yang made his second feature film *Shower (Xizao)*, which is appealing to both Chinese and Western audiences. This film reaped a number of international awards. In July 2000, *Shower* also received excellent reviews when Sony Pictures Classics released it in the United States. His commercial success can be attributed to his choice of a more conventional character-driven and plot-driven technique of filmmaking that cares more about reaching wide audiences than about social documentation/criticism and individual style.

The film *Shower* is a story about a newly-made middle class businessman’s return to his family. The film creates a traditional bathhouse as a haven of older communal values. It laments the disappearance of a traditional cultural space, as well as the purity and simplicity of traditional kinship obligations, all of which give way to material pursuits and self-interest. Zhang Yang himself claims: “Bit by bit, the city’s history and unique architecture styles are fading, becoming little more than fragments of people’s memories. Traditional kinship—those intimate yet relaxed bonds that once joined families in their quadrangles—is wiped out when people move into high-rises. I am not against modernization or change. But if ‘progress’ takes place at the expense of one’s cultural heritage, then it is horrendously damaging” (Zhang H. and Zhang Y., 2000).

*Asian Cinema*, Fall/Winter 2008
The conflict between traditional forms of intimacy and kinship commitment and new concepts of instantaneous efficiency and disposability is epitomized through the contrast between a disappearing traditional bathhouse culture and that of a modern shower culture.

*Shower* starts out with a possibly imaginary scenario of a futuristic “shower-on-the-go” in the street booth of a flourishing Beijing. The street-corner shower booth is machine operated and impersonal, which reminds the audience of a car wash: the customer is rotated as he is rubbed down with whirling brushes, soaped up, sprayed by jets, and blown dry by fans. Its assembly line, mechanical treatment is all about a technology-organized life and a fast-food culture that valorizes a cold-blooded efficiency and functionality. Its isolation and “time-space compression” fits well into transnational capitalist ideology. The contemporary technological advancement, which is reflected by the mechanical shower, is accused of taking human qualities out of life. Furthermore, its on-the-go efficiency bespeaks of the newly emerged fast food culture of instantaneity.

The impersonal alienation of the mechanical shower is contrasted with the communal care of a bathhouse, which is a friendly open-floor environment with a human feel. The kinship bond, warm leisure, and family intimacy are in sharp contrast with business efficiency and mechanical coldness. It is a community ruled by an ideology of intimacy, which advocates the concept that closeness between human beings is morally good. It is also a time-honored Chinese space securely anchored in the age-old communal lifestyle, with kinship and leisure as the prevailing modes.

Traditional time, space, and social pattern are idealized and appreciated. The Confucian ethic system governed by family intimacy and kinship ties predominates. The conceptual framework of Confucianism defines itself in terms of kinship and community. Confucianism perceives the human being as a center of relationships rather than as the isolated human individual, with preference for duty, harmony, consensus, network, ritual as core values. Present in the bathhouse are all of the central elements of Confucianism, such as “the emphasis on role-based ethics, the Confucian ideal of community, the respect for seniority and the elderly, and the preference for harmony rather than litigation” (Chan, 1999:237).

The bathhouse functions as the men’s community center, the neighborhood Chinese medicine clinic, the therapeutic consulting service, and the local entertainment club. It predisposes local residents/customers to close human connections and mutual dependency, and ensures the stability of traditional Confucian ethical system. Men of all ages and types gather together to bathe, laugh, chat, play games, joke, sing, massage, and even seeking emotional solace and therapeutic treatment for life’s problems. The bathhouse is much more than a simple consumerist enterprise. Rather than

*Asian Cinema*, Fall/Winter 2008
resorting to marketing and advertising strategies, the bathhouse appeals to regulars by winning the heart of the people. The constancy of the traditional space comes more from establishing intimate kinship than from seeking profits. Old people are still able to enjoy the traditional Beijing leisure cultural activities such as cricket fights, playing chess, and listening to opera. The bathhouse customers are treated like extended family members. Intimate kinship, communal care, human interaction, and social harmony prevail in such a quintessential traditional space. These values follow the philosophic ideals of traditional Chinese architecture as well. The artistic characteristics of classical Chinese architecture include the harmonious relationship between the parts and the whole (Liu L., 1999).

The high rise apartments and the marriage in yellow lights. *Spring Subway.*

Moreover, the traditional bathhouse space is associated with spiritual virtues. The film summarizes the essence of the traditional space in its name—“Clear Water House” (n4l‘l), which implicates the moral state of traditional space. Although the bathhouse is situated in a dingy and rundown background without shiny appearance, its morals are clear and its values are virtuous. The door of the “Clear Water House” is framed with a viewpoint of ancient wisdom: “heavenly virtue is like water (Shang Shan Ruo Shui),” which summarizes the essence of the bathhouse in specific terms. The episodes of heritage ritualistic baths (in Shaanxi) and religious baths (in Tibet) inserted into the film are preachings of spiritual renewal and soul-cleansing sanctity. As the guiding principle of the bathhouse, the water element is associated with ancestral cultural heritage, spiritual nourishment, human compassion, environmental sanctity, and soulful blessings, all of which are considered to be neglected by contemporary developmental discourse in China.
The bathhouse also signifies the stability of the Confucian ethical system, with a benevolent authoritative figure. Traditional seat of local authority is moralized and reinforced in this film. In his role as the head of the bathhouse, Master Liu is not only viewed as the owner of the bathhouse but also as community chief, because it is often the case that many in the neighborhood will approach him for help and advice when they are in trouble. And as a kind father, Master Liu plays both maternal and paternal roles in his care of the handicapped younger son Er Ming. The irony present in this familial and social relationship is that in the films of the more politically-radical and artistically-innovative Fifth and Sixth Generation directors, there has been an emphasis on the father figure as a patriarchal oppressor, which refers to Maoist and feudal authoritarianism and patriarchal oppression of women. Yet while the absence of the mother figure in the film reinforces the Confucian nature of the space, the attachment of both femininity and masculinity with Master Liu establishes an image of the traditional ideal Confucian man, who is peaceful, virtuous, benevolent, and feminized.

It is unclear whether the bathhouse is privately owned or jointly run by the government. The film presents it more as a cultural space than a political or a commercial space. In Maoist China, traditional space has been associated with state and political power. More than other representations, the sort of urban images constantly reinforced were those of traditional and newly built monuments that establish Beijing as the center of state power and authority. The physical experience of the city lies largely with identifying the new political power with traditional imperial power. Other forms of traditional spaces were slighted and underrepresented. If immediate post-Mao filmmakers have associated traditional space with inhuman political repression and feudal backwardness,\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Shower} makes an attempt to revitalize traditional cultural order as humane and benign, through its choice of the popular bathhouse as the physical embodiment of traditional social and cultural order. Traditional space is now linked with Chinese cultural, religious, ritual, and folk heritage, as well as with the\textit{private} lived experiences of ordinary folks. In a swinging attempt toward reversing excessive commercialization of urban China, the current cinematic revival of traditional cultural and social order reflects the concurrent views of tradition as the ultimate moral horizon for China. Moreover, the contemporary reconfiguration of a traditional social center—with a benevolent leader as positive and nourishing—fits in tightly with the dominant political discourse, which tries to reclaim the traditional social order for stability concerns and takes advantage of traditionalism in its political affirmation of nationalist agendas.\textsuperscript{13}

Being the chief of the traditional space, Master Liu is a kind, reliable, and supportive caretaker who provides humane care for people through services of massage, traditional medical treatment, and family dispute consultation.

\textit{Asian Cinema, Fall/Winter 2008}
and therapy. His tolerant leadership is based upon sympathy. He pacifies potential violent eruptions, mediates domestic conflicts, and offers therapy, consultation, and even admonitions for those who need them. He is not only the owner and operator of the bathhouse, but also a mediator and problem solver as well. He cherishes his relationship with his son Er Ming, and because he has the love of his son and the love of the community, he is not interested in materialistic aspirations. And as a leader, he claims both institutional authority and moral authority. Master Liu personifies the traditional Confucian concept of hierarchy, which is based upon a two-way flow of responsibilities: that is, obedience to authority and accountability of authority. As John Naisbitt says, “Confucianism is not just, ‘Listen to thy father.’ The father must also be accountable to the son.” And in Tu Weiming’s words, “Confucianism is not simply the advocacy of obedience to government, but also the accountability of government” (in Naisbitt, 1997:61).

Da Ming, the elder son of the family, is uprooted by the new economic dynamic from traditional familial space and migrates to the southern city of Shenzhen for material pursuits. After decades of social control of individual mobility with the system of residency permits, China is witnessing the emergence of an increasingly larger floating population. As a member of the floating population, Da Ming’s relocation from China’s political center and capital city of Beijing to the special economic zone city Shenzhen implicates the nation’s shift of focus from politics to economy.

Da Ming leaves his family and ventures out to the economically booming south. Instead of staying with his family and helping his father, Master Liu, with his business, Da Ming steps out of the customary “routine” in order to prosper in the economic boom. In his pursuit of material wealth and individual gains, the professionally dressed and technologically adept Da Ming has become physically and emotionally removed from his family. He becomes a social floater like Jian Bin in Spring Subway, in pursuit of individual autonomy. His preference for cold showers over warm baths and the cell phone over face-to-face communications shows his alienation from family intimacy and warm human bond. Da Ming is coupled with the Big Dog guy, another member of the young generation who daydreams of quick fortunes through selling hot dogs, and engages in seedy business deals. He is always coming up with new ideas in order to get rich quick; in many ways, he epitomizes the prevailing contemporary impetuosity surrounding China’s economic boom.

Da Ming has built a new life and family in Shenzhen, and returns home only when he believes that his father is dying. Daming’s return to the intimacy of traditional space prepares him for his slow but sure transformation. He learns to appreciate the virtues of simple pleasures and human warmth at home through observations and interactions with his father and younger
brother, and gradually comes to understand that these are as valuable as (if not more than) what material life has to offer.

In contrast with Da Ming, the film affiliates the younger son Er Ming with uncorrupt qualities of human warmth and trust. He is emotionally attached to the way of life he lived and loved, and sticks to easy routines. Unlike Da Ming, who ventures out of his home and home city in pursuit of materialistic goals and professional establishment, Er Ming is steeped in the basics of life, and within his boundaries and limitations, knows to enjoy its simple pleasures. He is the only faithful audience of the “bathhouse opera singer.” He also appears to value the natural instinct of human bonding most in his emotional devotion to the father, and in his unfailing support for the “bathhouse singer.”

Er Ming expresses contemporary nostalgia for old sources of security: a routine life with simple pleasures, relaxation, and enjoyment. Er Ming makes us recognize that the bathhouse is a form of traditional cultural/physical space that provides traditional sources of care and security. An important aspect about Er Ming’s retardation is his insistence on the secure regularity of life at the bathhouse, for he is the only person who does not alter the routine schedule of the bathhouse after his father dies. He has a preference for routine and takes security in the familiar. Er Ming’s retardation gives him a child-like simplicity and an undemanding behavioral pattern driven by lack of conventional desires. If Da Ming, with his embracement of change and materialistic lifestyle, represents the future, Er Ming is deeply attached to his past and slow to change. His retarded rigidity is referred to as an untouched-by-time essence, and is highlighted as virtuous and moral. Similar references can also be found in the film’s treatment of the elderly bathers, who are portrayed to be charmingly childish as they engage in fun loving pastimes.

_Xiaohui with TV monitor and train. Spring Subway._
In particular, the treatment of the *O Sole Mio* man is significant. For this disturbed youth, the bathhouse was a zone of comfort and familiarity, which was why he was able to sing his heart out when he showered here. Furthermore, the only couple in the movie had their marital problems solved and intimacy rekindled through Master Liu’s arrangement of traditional baths. Even the Big Dog man was shielded from violence in the bathhouse, under Master Liu’s protection and wisdom. The portrayal of these characters signifies post-reform nostalgia for the traditional laid back tranquility and comfort disappearing in today’s impetuous rush toward prosperity.

Another important aspect related to Er Ming is the way people treat him. Not only Master Liu, but the neighbors also take care of him. This is particularly interesting because scholars have shown that in Chinese societies, mental illness is often associated with shame and stigma (Tsang, 2003). Yet, rather than the neighborhood stigmatizing Er Ming, they do quite the opposite, looking after him as an extended family might. Their behavior evokes the social welfare system of the pre-reform era, which takes care of everyone, including the weak and poor. And the people who reject Er Ming are Da Ming and his wife, the representatives of the new middle-class. The film here blames economic dynamics not only for fracturing traditional family bonds, but also for neglecting the weak and the disabled. Moreover, it is important to note here how this rejection of Er Ming is associated with Da Ming’s wife, a modern woman absent from this traditional space.

The apparent conflict between the father (Master Liu) and his elder son Da Ming, between Er Ming and the change of times, between social mobility and familial intimacy, and between urban space renovation and the demolition of traditional neighborhoods, points hence to an inherent contradiction within contemporary society: while the aged social infrastructure needs support in much the same way as the age-old bathhouse needs structural repairs, the repairs themselves generate a demolition that fractures the traditional infrastructure and breaks down traditional ways. Change comes in the form of restructuring the local community and tearing down the bathhouse. This is also manifest in a wave of contemporary massive urban renovations in Beijing that breaks the traditional fabric of the capital city by tearing down 200-year-old traditional *siheyuan* (quadrangle) and *hutong* (alley way) to improve traffic flow, or to make place for high-rise apartment buildings or commercial plazas and office spaces (Jia H., 2001).

The traditional quadrangle style residence is known as *siheyuan*. It originally emerged in the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368). With the demolition of the traditional residential area, traditional kinship and intimate and relaxed bonds that join families and residents from the local neighborhood are wiped out when people move into new high rises. The death of crickets when moved
into high rises is metaphorical of the dangerous situation humankind will put themselves in when losing roots and heritage.

The clash between the traditional and the new is made abundantly clear when traditional China has to vacate to make way for new China. The demolition of the traditional spaces of bathhouse and its neighborhood, and the death of Master Liu have brought to an end of an “era,” but they also bring Da Ming and Er Ming reunified emotionally as a family unit. The newly fixed shiny neon sign (a symbol of excessive commercialism originally associated with the unreliability and the moral inferiority of the Big Dog) flashing at the entrance of the bathhouse after Master Liu’s death and before the demolition, also suggests a desire to combine traditional virtues with the modern technology, an up-to-the-minute effort to promote and publicize the traditional space, and the capability of traditional cultural space to accommodate new economic situations. Although development and progress have come at the expense of family bonds and cultural heritage, the relationship between Da Ming and Er Ming has been strengthened. Thus the film ends on the optimistic note that the new middle class is making efforts to find a balance between roots and routes.

Conclusion

New Urban Cinema focuses on the impact of urbanization on traditional social relationships and family relationship. *Shower* relocates traditional space as an essential cultural space associated with traditional values such as intimate family ties, communal care, bonds of mutual dependency, and spiritual qualities. For years, Chinese cinema, especially the Fifth Generation films (such as Yellow Earth, Ju Dou, Raise the Red Lantern, etc.), has problematized and politicized the traditional space of the Chinese family as negative, hierarchical, and unwelcome of change. This new cultural repositioning appeals to the Confucian values of cultural and heritage preservation in an attempt to find balance between progress and roots, and questions the moral direction of urban spatial transformation. This counter discourse of Confucian modernity also appeals to a form of Confucian humanism based on the principle of family bonds and personal ethics. Francis Fukuyama says, “The essence of traditional Chinese Confucianism was never political Confucianism at all, but rather an intense familism that took precedence over all other social relations, including relations with political authorities. That is, Confucianism builds a well-ordered society from the ground up rather than the top down, stressing moral obligations of family life as the basic building block of society.” And according to Tu Weiming, “the more important legacy of traditional Confucianism is not its political teaching, but rather the personal ethic that regulates attitudes towards family,
work, education, and other elements of daily life that are valued in Chinese society” (in Naisbitt, 1997: 62,61).

Although the traditional social center disappears and change triumphs, the film features in its ending the moral victory of traditional kinship values over the fast-food culture and technological advancement of transnational capitalism. It attempts to bridge the gap between tradition and progress with Da Ming’s decision to take over and take care of his younger brother. Its moral victory and transformative potential send the signal that the Confucian social-cultural framework may serve as spiritual and moral foundation for economic development, social stability, and cultural identity.

While the deteriorating bathhouse community in *Shower* is an enclosed dwelling ruled by an ideology of kinship intimacy with benevolent leadership, the emerging subway ethos is about open space, free horizontal liaisons, and choice, as well as the anxieties of this choice. In addition to the difference between the traditional communal space and the contemporary mobile “non-place,” the films also feature sharp contrasts between the “emotivist self” (such as Jian Bin and Xiao Hui in *The Spring Subway*), which is preoccupied with self-centered individual desires, narcissistic indifference, and freedom of choice, and the “ethic self” (such as Master Liu in *Shower*), which concerns most about accountability and community.

Although the dynamics of progressive change roll on inevitably, and generate social desire for mobility, as manifest in the subway sensibility, the dual envisioning of two different spaces in *Spring Subway* and *Shower* expresses contemporary China’s desire to be connected with the world, and to retain its traditional cultural heritage. The cultivation of this double cultural vision involves the new middle class’s aspiration to embrace the future and preserve the past.

**Endnotes**

1 There are over 60 young film directors working outside the state-owned studio system. There have been different ways of categorizing them. According to Tony Rayns, the “Sixth Generation” was coined to the “underground” directors such as Zhang Yuan, Wang Xiaoshuai, He Jianjun, and many others who made films outside the state-controlled studio system (Rayns, 1999). Chinese scholar Dai Jinhua links the sixth generation broadly to the generation of directors after the fifth generation. She separates them into three groups: independent filmmakers of the 90s separate from official film production and censorship, popular young directors…working within the filmmaking system, and turn-of-the-century documentary-filmmakers closely connected with the artists’ village at the Yuanmingyuan Summer Palace (Dai, 2002: 75). The sixth generation directors themselves however resist being branded under a general label. They are more concerned about
establishing an auteur style. But critics notice one commonality that they all share: i.e. their realistic views on contemporary urban China. Also, most of them, such as Zhang Yuan, Lou Ye, Guan Hu, Zhang Ming, Lu Xuechang, were born in the 1960s and are 1989 graduates from the Beijing Film Academy (Yu, 2002). The term “Urban Generation” was first used in 2001 to describe the new generation of filmmakers from contemporary China in a program organized by the Film Society of Lincoln Center. At the time, 11 films by 10 new generation Chinese directors were shown in Lincoln Center, New York City, from Feb. 23 to Mar. 8. This term is considered by some critics to be more accurate in classifying the new generation of directors.

2 Zhang Yang and Zhang Yibai are considered to be the two most important directors of the New Urban Cinema. A detailed discussion of New Urban Cinema will follow the discussions of post-Mao urbanization and a brief history of post-Mao urban cinema.

3 These terms were originally used in the French cultural context. I find them also applicable to the space themes in Spring Subway and Shower given their definitions. According to John Tomlinson, French anthropologist Marc Auge’s argues that contemporary capitalist modernity creates a distinct mode of mundane locational experience described as “supermodernity.” And the supermodern locales are “non-places” (as in distinction from the “anthropological places” that create the organically social) such as highspeed trains, airport departure lounges, and supermarkets. The “anthropological place” provides “cultural identity and memory, binding its inhabitants to the history of the locale through the daily repetitions of ‘organic’ social interaction”. It is important to note here that as Tomlinson suggested, what “non-places” imply “are not necessarily so intrinsically alienating, but can be places where social relations can be re-embedded.” They may also involve “the processes of individual ‘life planning’ from a self-contained context centered on physical locality…” (Tomlinson, 1999: 109, 112, 115). It is this latter set of attached “non-place” connotations that is closely related to the “subway sensibility” as I propose in the chapter.

4 I am indebted to Deborah S. Davis’s (2003) discussion of change of social relations in contemporary China for this association.


6 This government claim of post-reform urbanity resulted in the film bureau’s order to have Wang Xiaoshuai’s film So Close to Paradise change its temporal setting to “the late 1980s.” So Close to Paradise portrays the seedy, illegal, and gangster operations of the underworld of the city of Wuhan. Shannon May. “Changing States: China’s Sixth Generation Filmmakers.” Online posting. <http://www.harvardadvocate.com/issues/summer2000/display.phtml?rowID=14>
7 The notion of “the preliminary stage syndrome” was proposed by Liu Yiran in his 1989 novella _Rock Kids_ (GdÚnR—t^), which is about the first generation of post-Mao urban youngsters in the late 1980s China. They were eager to break away from social and parental restraints, as well as orthodox ideology, and were sometimes equated with the “lost generation” (Liu Y. R., 1989: 9); see also Kuoshu, 1999: 138-139.

8 Christopher Smith uses the term “landscapes of disenchantment” by quoting from Vladimir Tismaneau’s _Fantasies of Salvation: Democracies, Nationalism, and Myth in Post-Communist Europe_. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, p.61). Smith believes that the widespread social disaffection with the chaos, anarchy, poverty, political decadence, and moral decrepitude of contemporary era is applicable to post-socialist China (Smith, 2000:13).

9 The construction of Beijing subway dated back to the year 1965 and on the eve of the Cultural Revolution. State surveillance was manifest early on in its socialist era operation. After its completion of first-phase construction in 1969, operation and management of the Beijing subway were transferred to the 15th Division of the Railway Army (Tiedao Bing). On Jan. 15, 1971, when the first-phase subway launched its initial operation, tickets were sold only to Chinese with specific official approval letters. It was not until 1981 that Beijing Subway Company was established. Online posting. <http://www.bjsubway.com/chinese_ver/index.asp>

10 The Chinese title of _Spring Subway_ literally means “Springward Subway (Kaiwang Chuntian de Ditie).”


12 The best examples for the negative configurations of traditional home space are Zhang Yimou’s _Ju Dou_ and _Raise the Red Lantern_.

13 This reclamation in fact echoes Maoist Chinese state discourse, where “there is no obsession with male virility, but…a family state of degendered revolutionary subjects led by a wise father,” who is the paternal savior of China (Yang M., 1999: 45).

14 Xinhua News Agency. “Individuals Encouraged to Buy Siheyuan in Beijing to Preserve Heritage.” Online posting. <http://fpeng.peopledaily.com.cn/200405/05/eng20040505_142407.html> It is worth mentioning here that by 2004, according to this source, the Beijing municipal government has become aware of the importance of preserving traditional residences and cultural heritage, and encourages individuals to buy the traditional quadrangle residences. The buyers will enjoy favorable taxes and charges on land-use right transfer for the purchase.

15 Chinese culture had always been fixated on history and tradition. For Confucius, “the golden age was in the past – a time when society functioned harmoniously and the country was at peace” (Schoppa, 2000:37).
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*Asian Cinema,* Fall/Winter 2008


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*Asian Cinema*, Fall/Winter 2008