Femininity, Desire and Rebellion as Taboos in the 1980s? Liu Xiaoqing's Characters in *The Savage Land* (1981) and *Hibiscus Town* (1986)

作为八十年代禁忌的女性意识、欲望及反抗? 刘晓庆在《原野》(1981)与《芙蓉镇》(1986)中的角色探讨

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Since the disclosure of her affair with the married actor and director Chen Guojun (陈国军) in 1983, Liu Xiaoqing (刘晓庆) has been in the spotlight for her unconventional private life and self-governing personality. Her off-screen anecdotes radiate many of her on-screen personas which demonstrate strong and courageous female figures with liberal attitudes towards love, sex, and morality. *The Savage Land* (原野, dir. Ling Zi 凌子, 1981) and *Hibiscus Town* (芙蓉镇, dir. Xie Jin 谢晋, 1986) are paradigms in Liu's acting career that challenged dominant ideologies and taboos; the two complex and controversial films were both banned by the authorities for domestic or overseas exhibition for some time in the 1980s. Liu's characters in both films are very different from the conventional definition of a 'good' woman in the official rhetoric, highlighting female emotions, sexual desires, and resistance to patriarchal values.

Adapted from Cao Yu's (曹禺) 1937 tragedy, *The Savage Land* depicts protagonist Chou Hu's revenge against the Jiao family after they buried Chou's father alive in order to take his land and property. In this film, Liu Xiaoqing – playing Chou Hu's then sweetheart Hua Jinzi, who married Jiao's son Daxing – is involved in a wild love affair with Chou Hu after returning to the village. Hua Jinzi's marriage is passionless. She suffers suffocating humiliation from Daxing's blind mother, who sees her as unfaithful and lascivious, while her ineffectual husband has no courage to challenge his mother's authority. Instead of endorsing the filial responsibility of being a good wife to peel away her mother-in-law's prejudices and warm her heart, Hua Jinzi plans to elope with her lover to emancipate herself from such Confucian moral persuasions and feudal principles. 'I only feel like a human being when I'm with you', says Hua Jinzi in the 'notorious' sex scene in the woods (Figure 1), where the lovers cuddle together with tousled hair and lightly unbuttoned collars. While extra-marital fornication and women's liberal approach to love and sex were once seen as moral taboos in the 1980s, the film's impact, which still resonates today, saw *The Savage Land* being abruptly retracted by the Film Bureau for its so-called 'inability to represent China' and withdrawn from the 1981 Venice International Film Festival competition line-up at the last minute (Yang 2009, p. 77).

Produced by Nanhai Film Ltd (a film subsidiary of China News Service [CNS], run by the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office at that time), the film was fully supported by the CNS, with a focus on targeting the overseas market as well as Hong Kong and Macau (Yang 2009). Although the film bureaucracy approved the production in the first place as well as the later overseas release, for seven years, *The Savage Land* was banned from all domestic public distribution and exhibition. There were rumours that Liu Xiaqoing appeared in nude scenes in *The Savage Land*, which directly caused the film to be banned for the domestic public audience. When the ban on *The Savage Land* was finally lifted in 1987,

Hua Jinzi and Chou Hu in the notorious sexual scene in *The Savage Land*

the rumour around Liu Xiaoqing's nudity was that it only appeared in the foreign version, but curiosity about her sexuality raised interest in the film.

If Liu Xiaoqing's performance in *The Savage Land* challenges the values that feudalism and patriarchy have inscribed on the female body, *Hibiscus Town* seeks to illuminate more complicated issues related to the commingling of patriarchal and socialist principles. Directed by Xie Jin, *Hibiscus Town* was shot in 1986, a decade after the Cultural Revolution. Xie Jin's family melodramas of the 1980s, such as *Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (天云山传奇, 1980) and *The Herdsman* 牧马人 (1982), mostly addressed individuality in negotiation with moral tradition and state ideology. Winning the Golden Rooster Film Award and the Hundred Flowers Film Award in 1988, *Hibiscus Town* has been seen as a masterpiece thanks to its rigorous analysis of the complexity of humanity and socialism. The film narrates the life of a young woman, Hu Yuyin (played by Liu Xiaoqing), between 1963 to 1979 in a small rural town in South China. Yuyin, the most attractive woman in town, runs a small bean curd stall with her husband Guigui – a nice hard-working man, but mediocre and irresolute, like Daxing in *The Savage Land*. While Yuyin and Guigui finally pull off their restaurant after days and nights of laborious hard work, they are condemned by the local Party leader Li Guoxiang as 'newly rich peasants' in the social movement centre. The conviction of being a 'new rich peasant' completely turns Yuyin's life upside down: she is deprived of her possessions, her husband's life, her neighbour's respect, her rights, and her dignity as a human being. Whilst ostracism and privation instil in Hu interminable despair, what lights up her life is the care and love from Qin Shutian (played by Jiang Wen 姜文), a 'rightist' who cleans the street with her. From engaging in pre-marital sex to conceiving an illegitimate child, their relationship is clearly verboten during the Cultural Revolution era, when human emotion and sexuality were utterly oppressed. Although at the end of the film, Yuyin gets her money and house back, as well as getting her second husband after the Cultural Revolution, what is most striking is that the imperious villain Secretary Li is still in power, no matter how much damage she has inflicted on people.

As it critically touches on humanity and the socialist system, it is not surprising that the exhibition of *Hibiscus Town* experienced a series of barriers from the authorities. 'When the film production was over, we were not even allowed

Hu Yuyin and Qin Shutian in *Hibiscus Town*

to exhibit it,' recalled Xie Jin (2005). Right before the start of the premiere ceremony in Shanghai, the two leading actors, Liu Xiaoqing and Jiang Wen, were told by the authorities not to come to the movie theatre to meet the audience. On the other hand, *Hibiscus Town* was only restricted for a short time before officially being released to the public and winning that year's Best Picture award from both the Golden Rooster and Hundred Flowers festivals. *The Savage Land*'s six-year ban for its soft-core adulterous engagement and *Hibiscus Tow*n's short-term restriction due to its defiant challenges to both patriarchal myths and socialist mechanisms demonstrate the authorities' progressive receptiveness to controversies surrounding sexuality, ethics, and politics throughout the 1980s, an openness that can hardly be found in today's Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime.

The intensity and lucidity of these two films together presents to the audience a charming female figure who is ambitious but genuine, tenacious but affectionate, tender but valiant. Focusing on the female protagonists in these two films, Hua Jinzi and Hu Yuying both represent 'imperfect' women with a grid of multifaceted characteristics. These women experience joy, desire, anger, and resistance. In one scene, the 'vicious' Hua Jinzi forces her ineffective husband to answer the platitudinal question: 'If your mother and I both fell into the river, who would you save?' 'Drown her to death, spit it out!' says Jinzi, with a resentful note in her voice. Jinzi insinuates that she will be intimate with him if he (verbally) commits himself to the thought of matricide. Jinzi clearly knows how to use her femininity to en-

Da Xing, the mother, and Hua Jinzi in *The Savage Land*

tice a man. In the opening scene in *Hibiscus Tow*n, Hu Yuyin coquettishly offers bean curd to local folks. In addition to the good taste of the bean curd, Yuyin's playful behaviour no doubt also attracts the large number of male customers surrounding her. And she likes to whisper in the ears of local Party secretary Li Mangeng (her old lover before marrying Guigui, who betrays her by giving all her savings to the local Party committee) and giggle together. Yuyin meanwhile inspires jealousy from other women in town, including Li Guoxiang and Li Mangeng's wife, who later denounces her as a 'newly rich peasant' and 'bad influence' in the town. In the stern and ascetic days of socialist China, not only were capitalist economy and private ownership prohibited but so was the display of individuality, femininity, and sexuality.

Li Guoxiang confessing to the red guards in the rain in *Hibiscus Town*

It is intriguing that, in contrast to Hua Jinzi and Hu Yuyin, the female villains in these two films (the mother in *The Savage Land* and Li Guoxiang in *Hibiscus Town*) wholly commit themselves to maintaining the dominant patriarchal and socialist/feudalist principles on the one hand, and on the other, act as the most sexually and emotionally repressed persons in the films. In *The Savage Land,* the mother is a blind old widow. Her late husband's photo hangs in the centre of the house, but she is unable to see it. With an extremely acute sense of sound, she invests herself wholly in spying on and tormenting Jinzi, an attractive young woman who enjoys sensual pleasure and has enormous emotional appeal. In *Hibiscus Town*, Li Guoxiang is discovered by the Red Guards at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution for secretly collecting men's belongings in her room. 'I am a leftist, a leftist', weeps Li Guoxiang in the rain, with broken shoes hanging around her neck (Figure 4). Does a desire-repressing leftist make a socialist exemplar? After regaining her power, she insinuates that Wang Qiushe, a local boastful sycophant and opportunist, should deliver himself in political allegiance and sexual relations with her as a way of demonstrating the determination of his loyalty.

While Li and Wang are engaged in their sordid comradeship, the affection between Yuyin and Shutian grows. The morning after Wang spends the night in Li's bedroom, Yuyin and Shutian are shown carrying out their everyday street cleaning. They witness Wang's grotesque act behind a corner wall nearby. This is the first time Yuyin and Shutian have body contact, a warm moment that sweeps away the sombre tone of the film. In the next scene, Yuyin creates a more intimate moment with Shutian by making him bean curd in her shabby home. Watching Shutian eating the food she has cooked, Liu Xiaoqing's performance perfectly presents Yuyin's mixed emotions of sexual desire, attraction, and reluctance. What follows is a passionate amorous bond between the two characters as a resistance towards dominant socialist principles and patriarchal myths that repress individual emotions and desires.

Their on-screen affection and rebellion towards official discourses also extended to off-screen life. Liu Xiaoqing had

an affair with Jiang Wen, then an early-career actor who eight years her junior, while still married to her second husband Chen Guojun. According to both Liu's and Chen's autobiographies, this affair directly catalysed the end of their marriage. The scuttlebutt about the love triangle between Liu Xiaoqing, Jiang Wen and Chen Guojun was a hot topic in the late 1980s, because, to some extent, it reinforced the public imagination of the star as being as resilient and romantic as her characters, transgressing the conventional values of marriage and sexuality. Liu was neither the first actor to represent female figures with a desire to explore liberal love and sexuality, nor will she be the last, but she was certainly pioneering in 1980s China, demonstrating great courage in challenging existing canonical authorities both onscreen and off-screen.

What is worth noting is, in order to support her then secret husband Chen Guojun with making his first film *My Lover, My Hate* (无情的情人, dir. Chen Guojun, 1986), Liu Xiaoqing established a film production company in Shenzhen (sponsored by Shenzhen municipal authority, Zhujiang Film Studio and Hong Kong Southern Film Corporation Ltd.), the first privately-funded film production company to be independent of the state film studio system. By tapping into a new form of film production outside the party-state apparatus, she became the first independent film producer in the People's Republic of China (Wang 2021a). In his recent interview with Chen Guojun, Wang Xiaolu (2021b) comments that 'the independent production was like an elopement, and the film served as an illegitimate child of the time, an outcome of passion and emancipation that transcended all the taboos. Purely driven by passion and instinct, it vividly represented the ethos of the (1980s) era.' [my translation] If the 1980s is deemed an era that celebrates passion, liberalism, and subjectivity, in the same way that Hua Jinzi and Hu Yuyin transgress the patriarchal and authoritarian codes of Chinese ethics in relation to female presentation on film, Liu Xiaoqing's endeavour of setting up the ground-breaking independent film production company for her secret lover reinforced her liberal, rebellious, and romantic personalities, challenging social and cultural taboos at the time.

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