
Tianming Wu's *River Without Buoys*: Socialist Realism and the Construction of the Post-Revolutionary State Ideology

By Huimin Deng

Tianming Wu's *River Without Buoys* (1983) is a feature film adapted from Weilin Ye's short novel of the same title, which is known as a significant literary work of the "scar literature" (Deng 1983: 27). After the collapse of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976),^[1] the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) sought to stop class struggle to operate social reform. Cultural works were thus conducted to carry out the criticism of the Cultural Revolution and even the pre-Cultural Revolution political movements (e.g. the Anti-Rightist Movement). As a result, Chinese intellectuals acquired more autonomy to reflect the socialist tragedies. In these circumstances, the "scar literature" appeared to reevaluate socialist movements and values, which have been widely advertised in the socialist system for decades, by exposing the painful experiences which Chinese people suffered in socialist movements. As an adaptation of the work of "scar literature", *River Without Buoys* is financially supported by Xi'an Film Studio, a state-owned cinema institution, and focuses on Chinese peasants' miserable sufferings in the Cultural Revolution. In this paper, I aim at clarifying how Wu's *River Without Buoys* carries out political criticism of the Cultural Revolution in terms of cinematic settings, character designs, and the introduction of visual political signs. I argue that socialist realism remains the aesthetic foundation of the expression of political struggle within *River Without Buoys*,^[2] including the binary opposition between the revolutionary and the anti-revolutionary, the construction of absolutely noble heroes and evil villains, and the exploitation of undisguised ideological slogans. *River Without Buoys* (1983) follows the story of three rafters Pan Laowu, Shi Gu, and Zhao Liang who live and work on a raft. The three rafters feed their families by delivering goods to big cities, which could be accused of capitalist business during the Cultural Revolution. Shi Gu's fiancée Gaixiu is forced by the current communist leader Li Jiadong, the follower of "The Gang of Four",^[3] to marry the son of another political leader. At the same time, the honest former communist leader Lao Xu is persecuted by the current leader. The three rafters thus struggle against the current communist governor to save Shi Gu's fiancée and the former communist leader. Unfortunately, Pan Laowu is dead in the conflict with the current communist force in the end. Adapted from Chinese "scar literature", *River Without Buoys* takes advantage of the impact of the Cultural Revolution on common people as its basic political and cultural theme.

Wu (1983) has stated that “common people’s poverty [in *River Without Buoys* (1983)] has exposed the miserable living conditions under the guidance of wrong political lines in the Cultural Revolution” (p. 56). After the collapse of “The Gang of Four”, the criticism of the Cultural Revolution and even former political movements made the first step for Chinese intellectual elites, who had been depressed in the socialist system, to reevaluate the socialist strategies. However, the heritage of the socialist revolutionary narrative system provided less creative and experimental rhetoric forms for Chinese intellectuals to subvert the Cultural Revolution (He 1996: 6). As Jiansheng Li (1996) pointed out, “existent socialist authoritative revolutionary ideology has influenced scar litterateurs much. It is a sort of unconsciousness for these intellectuals to take advantage of revolutionary aesthetic forms [to criticize the socialist revolutionary history]” (p. 14). Wu, an institutional director trained by Xi’an Film Studio and Beijing Film Academy, is definitely one of the Chinese elites. Confronting the poverty of cinematic aesthetics, he continued to adopt socialist realism and revolutionary rhetoric to carry out political criticism of socialist tragedies, which would be discussed in the following paragraphs. Followed by the experiences of the three rafters in *River Without Buoys*, the binary opposition is placed between the current potentate and the three rafters in the background of the Cultural Revolution. It is worth noting that the conflict between the two opposite forces is not designed as face-to-face struggle but hidden behind the transformative cinematic natural sceneries. The scenery of natural environment has been a significant signifier which signifies the increasingly tense relationship between the rafters and the local authority. The production designer of the film *Guangcai Lu* (1983: 58) pointed out that he took advantage of three parts of the river to express the three stages of the rafters’ struggle against the local government. The upstream is characterized by the beautiful scenery of mountains, with less people dwelling beside the river. The stream is quiet and tranquil, which creates a sense of peace. In contrast to the peaceful external environment, the rafters get stuck in depressed facial expression as well as ceaseless complaints and quarrels, implying an internal anxiety. The tall mountains and the mirror-like river make the whole scene a relatively closed natural shelter, which protects the rafters who are carrying out capitalist free trade from being threatened by the dominant communist authority. When it comes to the midstream, the landscape becomes dull and desolate flatlands, with farmers working on the farmlands beside the river. The three rafters as well as their capitalist business are exposed to local people. Such a scene is no longer quiet and peaceful but filled with the noisy chirping of cicada and burning sunshine. The flowing sweats on rafters’ face obviously refer to a blistering summer weather, which further emphasizes a sense of inner anxiety. At this stage, the rafters’ capitalist business has been exposed to the public. Besides, they tried to rescue Gaixiu, Shigu’s lover, and Lao Xu, the former communist leader,

who are persecuted by Li Jiadong, the follower of “The Gang of Four”. With the natural environment becomes more and more harsh and depressive, the atrocity of current communists and the chilly political environment become increasingly clear. Eventually, the conflict between the rafters and the communist dictator bursts into explosion in a rainy and stormy night in the downstream of the river after local officers forbid the rafters from rescuing the former communist leader Lao Xu. The landscape beside the downstream is filled with stark mountains and dead trees, and at the same time, the streams become torrential and violent (See Figure 1).

The sinister weather, the frightening streams, and the lifeless plants make the river a scary battlefield of the current communist dictator and the three rafters. In this sense, the binary opposition between the follower of “The Gang of Four” and the rafters has been coded within the transformative natural settings. The struggle of rafters against natural disasters serves as the epitome of the fighting against the communist officer. Wu (1983: 57) suggests that Chinese people are characterized by implicitness and endurance. Therefore, the expression of personal feelings should not be exaggerated but naturally presented. Consequently, the violent face-to-face confrontation between the good and the evil has been reduced to the struggle against natural environment. From the upstream to the downstream, the atrocity of the current leader is exposed step by step. Although the current governor only gets several shots through the whole film, the changing natural settings implies the persistent pressure he imposes on local people. In this sense, the natural environment serves as the spokesman of political environment. The struggle against harsh natural environment makes the

rafters fighters in the battle with both the blustering nature and the chilly political environment.

The binary opposition can be also found in the relationship between the noble communist Lao Xu and the follower of “The Gang of Four” Li Jiadong due to their different political identities. In the post-revolutionary era, Chinese intellectuals did start to reflect the painful sufferings caused by the Cultural Revolution, which gave birth to Chinese “scar literature” as well as adapted cinematic works. However, by no means did Chinese intellectuals try to retrospect the spirits of the May Fourth Movement - democracy and science (Liu 2016: 38).^[4] Instead, they just wanted to revive the socialist stage before the Cultural revolution. Scar cinema, together with the “scar literature”, is thus merely a cultural tool for Chinese communist reformists to defeat “The Gang of Four” and to stop the Cultural Revolution. As a result, Chinese intellectuals focus on the criticism of “The Gang of Four” and their followers rather than the reflection of China’s historical and cultural tradition (e.g. the Confucian patriarchal system). Such a didactic political narrative requires binary and ideology-oriented character designs of communists of different cliques, that is, the depressed communists (e.g. Lao Xu) in the Cultural Revolution should be designed as the righteous and revolutionary camp while their rivals (e.g. Li Jiadong) must be classified into the evil and anti-revolutionary camp.

Lao Xu, the former communist leader, has been described as an absolutely honest and upright officer. He is persecuted by the current communist dictators and subsequently got stuck in physical disease. For Chris Berry (2004: 99), unjust and premature death or permanent physical injury is a main signifier of socialist tragedy. The physical injury, either directly or indirectly caused by the current governor, becomes a mark of the persecution of the Cultural Revolution. The weakness of the former communist implies the internal division within the communist regime - noble communists and the followers of “The Gang of Four”. The fall of the noble communist leader is juxtaposed with the miserable life of common people, which makes the former communist officer an ideological sign which refers to the atrocity of “The Gang of Four”. In terms of the relationship with common people, the noble communist officer Lao Xu has been designed as a both a “father” and a spiritual leader who guide peasants to a socialist utopia. In the dramatic scene where Lao Xu stayed with the rafters on the raft (See Figure 2), Lao Xu laid against Shi Gu, with Pan laowu and Zhao Liang surrounding him.

The surrounding settings were all black so that only the four characters were put in bright areas, which enhances the alliance of the noble former communist leader and the rafters. It is by proposing such a composition that the film claims that Chinese people have already united with the noble communist, which further endows the subversion of “The Gang of Four” as well as the Cultural Revolution with legality.

On the contrary, Li Jiadong stands in opposition to rural peasants. He drove an old fisherman to kill his cormorants in the name of “cutting capitalist tales”, forced Shi Gu’s lover Gai Xiu to marry his relative, persecuted the former communist leader Lao Xu and spared no efforts to classify Pan Laowu as a capitalist. In contrast to the intimate relationship between Lao Xu and common people, Li Jiadong, the follower of “The Gang of Four”, remained separated from common people. At the end of the film, he demanded villagers to fix canals in a stormy night. Considering such a scene (See Figure 3), he was placed at the center of the stage when he made the inspiring speech.

Villagers, however, were put at the bottom right corner. The imbalance between Li and the crowd obviously expresses different power status within the social system of the Cultural Revolution. If the frame where three rafters surround Lao Xu on a raft refers to the equality, if not democracy, between common people and an honest former communist officer, the composition of this frame obviously represents that the follower of “The Gang of Four” enjoys priority over common people. In this sense, the contrast between the depressed communist Lao Xu and the dominant governor Li Jiadong could not be sharper, referring to their opposite political standpoints and legality. In *River Without Buoys*, the construction of the two conflicting politicians, to some extent, seems to

be inadequate when they only get a few shots through the whole film. The personalities of the two communists, such as happiness, disappointment, anger and desire, are strictly hidden behind their moral and political standpoints, the former an absolute public servant while the latter a public enemy. They are not presented as flesh and blood persons but abstract ideological signs of different political groups in the aesthetic system of socialist realism. They are simply introduced to criticize what Xinnian Kuang (2016: 12) stated that the Cultural Revolution has motivated hollow revolutionary slogans and expanding power corruption, and at the same time, depressed liberal thoughts and socialist *productionism*.

According to Chairman Mao's *Yan'an Talks*,[\[5\]](#) cultural works must serve politics. Didactic visual politics, if not political slogans, has been adopted by *River Without Buoys* to carry out political criticism. By combining political signs with Chinese traditional color system, *River Without Buoys* uses different visual systems to contrast the sociopolitical context of the pre-Cultural Revolution land reform with that of the sociopolitical chaos of the Cultural Revolution. During the land reform era, the former communist officer Lao Xu celebrated the liberation of Chinese farmers with local villagers on the stage (See Figure 4).[\[6\]](#)

The stage was filled with red elements, such as lanterns, the propaganda streamer, the communist party flag, and the cotton-padded jacket. The red color is of great significance within both socialist political context and traditional Chinese culture. It represents the blood of revolutionary pioneers on both the party flag and the national flag, whilst it also stands for happiness and luck in relation to Chinese traditional culture. Behind the two performers, the posters of Chairman Mao and the commander-in-chief Zhu were hung on the wall, and at the same time, the verbal slogans (which cannot be seen clearly but might advocate the land reform policy) were above the performers' heads. In the land reform, the Chinese Communist Party redistributed farmlands so that poor peasants eventually got their private farmlands and fruit trees, which was considered as the liberation of Chinese peasants. Combined with both the political leaders, the party flag, and the propagandized streamer, the red color of the decorations on the stage is endowed with political significance, advertising peasants' happy life under the governance of the Chinese Communist Party. However, in another scene where the rafter Pan Laowu met his lover again during the Cultural Revolution, his lover has become an aged and sickish beggar (See Figure 5).

They sat together in a pavilion. The verbal slogan “swear to consistently carry out the Cultural Revolution” was behind them and painted white. In contrast to the red color, the white color signifies death and adversity in traditional Chinese culture. In this sense, the inspiring revolutionary slogans and the scared and downhearted people construct an ironic scene, referring to people’s miserable sufferings in the absurd political environment of the Cultural Revolution. Considering the two political movements of the socialist system, the land reform of the 1950s and the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976 respectively, the combination of political signs and different color systems explicitly delivers opposing ideological standpoints, claiming that the Cultural Revolution has harmed China’s communist ideals. The didactic visual expression, on the one hand, subverts the Cultural Revolution, and justifies the authority of the Chinese Communist Party, on the other. It never conducts the audience to reflect what should be responsible for the rise of the Cultural Revolution in terms of Chinese historical and cultural dimensions. Instead, it only tells spectators what is right and what is wrong, as required by the post-socialist propaganda (Li 1996, Zong, 1996). As Jiansheng Li (1996: 14) has suggested, Chinese intellectuals tried to escape from revolutionary narrative modes (mainly socialist realism). However, they had to rely on them to express the subversive attitudes to the revolutionary history. Such a contradictory situation results in the fact that the rhetoric of scar cinema is still superficial and class struggle-oriented although it roots in the post-revolutionary ideology. The slogan-like visual expression provides less spaces for imagination and multiple interpretation, which makes *River Without Buoy* merely a post-socialist propaganda film.

To conclude, although *River Without Buoy* has escaped from a revolutionary power relationship by criticizing the Cultural Revolution, it is still controlled by the socialist realism and the revolutionary narrative in the post-revolutionary power system. The impossibility of subjectivity implies the dilemma of such a scar film, that is, it can never achieve independence and autonomy to reflect history within the ideology-dominated social and cultural context. With respect to the “scar literature”, Xinnian Kuang (2016) has pointed out that “the new era of Chinese literature [“scar literature”] was closely attached to the new era of Chinese political environment. There would be no new literature without the transformed political context. At the same time, the post-socialist politics needed the support of new literature” (p. 9). Directly influenced by the “scar literature”, Tianming Wu’s *River Without Buoy* stakes advantage of the contrast between the followers of “The Gang of Four” (e.g. Li Jiadong) and the noble communist Lao Xu to claim the refusal of class struggle and the desire for social reform in post-socialist China. At the same time, it also suggests that Wu’s *River Without Buoy* is

inevitably a cultural propaganda of the post-socialist state ideology.

[1]The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, launched by Chairman Mao, was a sociopolitical movement in China from 1966 to 1976. It aimed at eliminating the capitalist bourgeois within the Chinese Communist Party and purging traditional feudal elements. However, it played a negative role in interfering economic development and wrecking Chinese traditional culture. In 1981, it was declared by the Chinese government to be responsible for the most severe setback and the heaviest losses suffered by the Party, the country, and the people since the founding of the People's Republic. See *Resolution on CPC History (1949-81)*(Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1981), 32.

[2]Chinese socialist realist cinema of the socialist system is similar to the Soviet socialist realist cinema associated with the Stalin era. Its overdetermining principle is didactic, that is, to cater for the educational and propaganda needs of the socialist state ideology. See Chris Berry, *Post-socialist Cinema in Post-Mao China: The Cultural Revolution after the Cultural Revolution*(New York: Routledge, 2004), 29-30.

[3]"The Gang of Four" refers to the four Chinese communist potentates Jiang Qing (Chairman Mao's wife), Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, and Wang Hongwen, who came to prominence during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). See Wu Zhijun, "From the Leftist to the Rightist: The Confirmation of the Property of The Gang of Four [cong jizuo dao ji you: sirenbang xingzhi de queren]," *Beijing Dangshi*, no. 4 (July 2012), 18-21.

[4]The May Fourth Movement was an [anti-imperialist](#), anti-feudal, cultural, and political movement growing out of student participants in Beijing on May 4th1919. The spirit of such a down-top movement is "democracy" [*de xiansheng*] and "science" [*sai xiansheng*]. See Zhao Yao, "The Fine Tradition and Historical Role of the May Fourth Movement [wu si yundong de youliang chuantong he lishi diwei]," *Scientific Socialism*, no. 2 (April 2009): 4-7.

[5]In 1942, Mao's *Talks on Literature and Art at the Yan'an Forum*claimed that there was no separation between art and politics. Art must naturally serve the political demands of its class and party, and the revolutionary task of a given revolutionary age. SeeBerry,*Post-socialist Cinema in Post-Mao China: The Cultural Revolution after the Cultural Revolution*, 31.

[6]The Land Reform Movement (1950-1953) after the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) was an anti-feudal land policy led by

the Chinese Communist Party. The Chinese communist government redistributed farmlands to poor peasants who used to be exploited by their landlords, which has endowed the Communist party with high reputation within the poor. See Lin Mu, "The 'Outline of China's Land Law' of 1947 [1947 nian de zhongguo tudi fa dagang]," *General Review of the Communist Party of China*, no. 11 (November 2007), 28-29.

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