Lost in Beijing: Ruthless Profiteer and Decadence of Family Values as Social Commentary and Its Limits

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Speedy economic development in neo-liberal China has generated significant anxiety about the impact of the prevalent money-oriented economic order on subjectivity and the private sphere. As Chinese citizens from all walks of life become more conscious of profits/benefits (*li*), the urge to acquire money and the pressure to strive for a viable livelihood might be felt more keenly by the social underclass. How do members of the underclass respond to the changing economic order? What are they willing to sacrifice for economic survival and in the pursuit of affluence? How have the concepts of self, family, and community changed accordingly? These questions lead me to examine the state-criticized film *Lost in Beijing* (*Pingguo*) (Li Yu, 2007), which portrays a ruthless economic subjects who destroys family bonds and affection. This article offers a contextualized, close reading of *Lost in Beijing* and explores how filmic representation offers social commentary through dramatized conflicts between money and family values. I argue that *Lost in Beijing*, which portrays the selling of a son, critiques the logic of capitalism and monetary profit for the way in which it reduces human beings and affective bonding to mere commodities.

Such a critical attitude results in not only portrayals of a ruthless economic subject but also sympathy of female victims of China's economic growth whose depictions elicit the state's censure. It can be observed that while the focus of *Lost in Beijing* is a ruthless economic subject, the film is also keenly aware of gender hierarchy within the impoverished lower class, especially the extent to which patriarchal structure and the gendered body shape an economic subject's agency and means of economic survival in globalized China. Female economic subjects with low education levels are subjected to patriarchal and capital exploitation: some become tools of patriarchal figures, molded to elicit profits, while some enter into prostitution and turn themselves into both the entrepreneur and the commodity. Not surprisingly, because it depicts a ruthless economic subject and the underside of contemporary China, *Lost in Beijing* has displeased the state and encountered many obstructions on its way to public screening. If we compare the international version and the mainland version of *Lost in Beijing*, we will find that the changes in the two film narratives refract complex power dynamics between filmmakers and the state censorship. Through the investigation of *Lost in Beijing*, I hope to unravel the complex collision and co-option that occur when independent filmic productions encounter the state. A comparison between the two versions reveals to us what kinds of element upsets the state and the ultimate prohibition of screening *Lost in Beijing* exposes.

I maintain that *Lost in Beijing* is a local response to a global, moral emergency. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman identifies a global moral crisis as one where strangers are seen as threats, attacked, and killed in liquid modernity; a term he coins to describe economic globalization processes in which the boundaries of society and culture become more and more permeable(Bauman 2008:8). In undergoing drastic social and economic changes, China also confronts moral catastrophes as people emerge as desperate

economic subjects craving financial security. Such subjects will sell or destroy human flesh for profit, be it that of their own body or of someone else's. Independent directors such as Li Yu tackle this issue of social degradation with a critical realist approach that reveals ruthless profiteering acts; yet, they face prohibition and challenge from the state. Arif Dirlik's concept of 'critical localism' appears pertinent here, reminding us of the politics behind local oppression. Instead of merely pointing to the 'local' as a site for working out 'alternative public spheres' and 'alternative social formations', Dirlik argues that the 'local' is a site of both promise and predicament.[1] The local embodies political and cultural manipulation given the issues of power involved. In order to unearth politics of representing ruthless economic subjects and wealth gap, I treat filmmaking as a site of competing ideologies where the state executes power through bureaucracy and law enforcement via the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (thereafter SARFT), while filmmakers negotiate strategic space for insertion of a critical voice.

Ruthless Profiteer and *Lost in Beijing* as a Critical Local Response

Local response to social change and money-oriented attitudes can be found in the independent cinematic productions of various Chinese directors whose work first circulated in the international art-house before (occasionally) inhabiting movie theatres in their homeland.[2] One such production is *Lost in Beijing,* directed by the young female filmmaker Li Yu (1973—) who previously directed the first feature film on lesbianism—*Fish and Elephant* (*Jinnian xiatian*) (2001)—in Mainland China. Li Yu, a former program host on CCTV, entered the filmmaking industry by shooting documentaries in the mid-1990s. Up to the present, she has directed four feature films: in addition to *Fish and Elephant* and *Lost in Beijing*, there are *Dam Street* (*Hongyan*) (2005) and *Buddha Mountain* (*Guanyin shan*) (2011). Each of these films won awards at various international film festivals and helped Li achieve worldwide recognition.[3] They share a unifying concern for socially marginal groups in contemporary China. The film *Lost in Beijing*, revealing social underside, unveils migrant workers' powerlessness and their appetite for money in a violently changing society that promotes both urbanism and accumulation of wealth. Depicting women migrant workers as powerless, sexualized, and mute, *Lost in Beijing* teases out their victimizer—the corrupt economic subjects who are enchanted, trapped, and shaped by global capital waves and the state's ideology of development and urban expansion while exploring the social and moral implications of China's economic escalation and its accompanying growing gap of wealth.

Lost in Beijing might be understood as a serious display of realism in which moral disarray is exaggerated to the point of near absurdity. However, the absurdity is suggestive of everyday social problems, hence stimulating controversy and provoking the SARFT's censure and ban. Critical independent productions depicting the inhuman profiteer are historically grounded in the bleak reality and social reconfiguration that Mainland China is confusedly wresting with. The economic reforms, opening up space for aspirations of wealth, together with the exacerbated speed of economic development under the state ideology of 'joining the global orbit' in the 1990s, have shaped a new form of economic subjectivity—one that pursues economic success and perceives becoming rich as glorious(Schell 1984). During the revolutionary era, the honorable class

of society was composed of the proletarians; in global China, wealth took the place of a revolutionary career, re-emerging as the premiere measurement of social success.

With the private marketing of state enterprises and the retreat of various kinds of social welfare (such as housing and medical care), the quest for money began to be experienced by people in all walks of life. The flood of foreign investment and the establishment of privately-owned enterprise have expanded the market economy and created job opportunities and new professions for those who were willing to go into business (known as 'jumping into the sea' or *xiahai*), to make huge profits as private entrepreneurs or senior/managerial Chinese employees in foreign firms. Although becoming a business person may be seen as morally weak or low-cultured in some circles, the fact that some cadres chose to stay in the state-owned sector offered no guarantee of economic saturation.[4] Many cadres grasped opportunities to tap into the pool of wealth through the convenience of their political capital or state policies.[5]

The aspiration of attaining wealth might be greater at the grassroots level. Among the urban poor, migrant workers not only face pressures from poverty but also contend with discrimination by native urban residents. The uneven rural-urban development and the great income gap between the developing countryside and the more developed city created a huge, floating population composed of poor people who, desperate to extricate themselves from poor living conditions and poverty, find themselves enchanted by urbanism's promise of wealth. In 2006, migrant workers, individuals from rural households employed outside of their home district, numbered 131 million (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2008).[6] Nearly seventy percent of the floating population possesses an agricultural household registration(Guojia tongjiju renkou he jiu yu tongjisi 2008: 107-9), and almost ninety percent of migrant workers possess an educational level equal to junior secondary school or below(National Bureau of Statistics of China 2008). Their lack of professional qualifications and skills together with the desire to obtain a higher income limit them to blue-collar or menial occupations, often in manufacturing or sales sectors,[7] some even end up working in the so-called 'Three D jobs' (dirty, dangerous, and demeaning job)(Gao and Russel 2011:163-182). Among all the Chinese cities, Beijing is one of the most attractive regions to the floating population, hosting about ten percent of all migrant workers. In fact, migrant workers made up more than one fourth of the total Beijing population in 2007(Guojia tongjiju renkou he jiu yu tongjisi 2007:113-6). The dream of becoming rich keeps these workers in the city, but what access do they have to future prosperity when they possess no professional knowledge? In order to acquire money, what are they willing to do and sell and how does it change their social and familial relations?

Li Yu's *Lost in Beijing* addresses these issues through a morally ambivalent transaction involving a child and two migrant couples in contemporary Beijing. The economically-deprived couple, An Kun and Liu Pingguo, engage in manual labor. While working as a masseuse at the Golden Basin Foot Parlor, an intoxicated Liu Pingguo is raped by her Cantonese boss, Lin Dong. Her window cleaner husband, An Kun, witnesses the rape through the glass while he is suspended up in the air at work. He demands compensation for his mental distress from Lin Dong, but is denied; in revenge, he later engages in an affair with Dong's wife, Wang Mei. Pingguo then finds herself

pregnant, but is uncertain of the baby's parentage. An Kun then devises a money-making scheme: if the baby's biological father is Lin Dong, he will sell the child to Lin Dong. Because his wife is infertile and he longs for offspring, Dong agrees to the purchase price of RMB 120,000. After Pingguo gives birth, An Kun changes the baby's blood type on the birth certificate behind his wife's back and sells his son to Lin Dong. Dong is overjoyed by the belief that he has a son. According to An Kun and Lin Dong's contract, Pingguo will act as the baby's nanny in Dong's household for six months; after this time period, Dong's family will cut off all connections with Pingguo and behave as if Lin Dong and Wang Mei had conceived the child. However, An Kun eventually becomes jealous of Lin Dong's fatherhood and kidnaps the baby. The truth about the infant's biological father is finally revealed to the other three protagonists after the police catch An Kun with the kidnapped baby and demand a DNA test. At this point, both An Kun and Lin Dong want the baby. At the end of the film, Pingguo takes the RMB 120,000 and her child and leaves without a trace.

In this open-ended film, exchange value replaces legal justice as a new ethical code. Cui Shuqin analyzes Li Yu's trilogy as a vehicle for discussing female sexuality from the perspective of a female director and women's cinema, but criticizes *Lost in Beijing* as fatally flawed and void of critical power concerning a woman's agency over her sexuality and body in comparison to Li's two previous works (Cui 2011:225-6). The assumption that Li Yu's trilogy centers only around female sexuality and that a female director's production must contain progressive feminist ideas ignores the possibility that the cinematic issue at stake could be the larger socio-economic context represented in the film, a context in which women (and men) reach an impasse. Li may be more concerned with the way in which hectic economic development and urbanism lead to a money-driven subjectivity and push the unsecured, working lower class to reduce morality and legal justice to a market value. Pingguo is the victim of Lin Dong's rape and should be protected by the law; however, instead of actually suing him, she merely threatens him with a lawsuit in order to keep her job, which is her sole means of making a living. Feeling humiliated and unjustified, her angry husband, An Kun, seeks monetary compensation totaling RMB 20,000 for his 'emotional distress' but fails to collect any remuneration from Lin Dong or his wife.

Both Pingguo and An Kun's behavior seems ridiculous and an affront to morality and justice. Marshall Bauman's interpretation of Marx's nihilism explains the reason for such behavior. Bauman states that 'any imaginable mode of human conduct becomes morally permissible the moment it becomes economically possible, becomes "valuable"; anything goes if it pays.' We then understand that it is the rape's economic value that puts the act of rape on the market, not in the courtroom. *Lost in Beijing* suggests that money has replaced justice in contemporary urban Beijing. As such, it contrasts significantly with another film about justice—*The Story of Qiu Ju* (*Qiu Ju da guansi*) (Zhang Yimou, 1992)—which illustrates a persistent pursuit of justice or *shuofa* in a rural setting in China. These differing approaches to justice offer us a glimpse of the ways filmic representation has responded to the changing ethical codes in China over the past two decades. In *The Story of Qiu Ju,* Qiu Ju and her husband Qinglai perceive an apology from the village chief, who violated Qinglai by kicking him, as more significant than

financial compensation, and they were willing to forsake their rights to indemnity based on the chief's apology. Here in *Lost in Beijing*, An Kun seeks justice by requesting monetary recompense. This suggests that market values significantly outweigh the importance of the law that Jiang Zemin developed at the 15th National Party Congress in 1997, rendering Jiang's slogan of governing the country with law a parody.[8]

Lost in Beijing examines the magnitude of commercialization in everyday life and the meaning of affective bonds in a highly market-driven China. Kinship seems to lead to unavoidable human bonding; as Rey Chow argues, family is at the very core of Chinese sentimentalism such that even murderers like those in the film *Blind Shaft* (*Mang jing*) (Li Yang, 2003) experience emotional attachment to the biological family(Chow 2007:176). The film *Blind Shaft* portrays two migrant workers who will do anything, including committing murder, to support their son. Conversely, Li Yu's film proposes a somewhat reversed causal relationship: migrant workers may do anything to achieve the ultimate goal of earning money, including selling their biological son. Not only do social relations and legal justice now bear a price tag, but so does intimate life, or in this case, kinship. An Kun, an economically depraved subject, turns into an opportunistic, ruthless profiteer selling his paternity and his biological son for a windfall. In one particular scene An Kun views the positive results of Pingguo's pregnancy test, and immediately denies being the father of the baby. However, he orders Pingguo not to abort the embryo because he sees it as 'a chance from the heaven', a key to wealth. He then informs Lin Dong of the news and proceeds to bargain with him concerning the transfer of the baby.

The bargaining scene best illustrates the ways An Kun and Lin Dong turn a child into a mere commodity. The bargain occurs on a grey rooftop of a building where An Kun cleans the windows. The dialogue starts with a close up on Lin Dong drawing a sketch of a person on the cement floor while asking for the blood types of Pingguo and An Kun. Lin Dong suggests that if he proves to be the biological father, he will offer RMB $100,000. An Kun disagrees claiming that,

> 'It's not right… I don't think we can do it like this. Earlier you denied you had …um my wife, so you refused to pay me. This is one issue. Now you want this child. That's a different issue. There are two separate issues…You didn't even want to pay me before because you denied you ever had…my wife. Since you want this child now, you have therefore admitted you screwed my wife so you must pay me 100,000 first, no, 20,000 for my emotional distress'.

An Kun's speech reveals absurd logic concerning the child after claiming that the deal is not right. Rather than pointing out Lin Dong's perception of a child as a commodity, he disputes the price. He has already forgotten the affective bonds involved in the birth of a baby. During this conversation, the camera constantly shifts right and left, providing detailed views of the speaking character's face, intensifying the tension. The close-ups on both the characters seem to magnify An Kun's greed and calculation and Lin Dong's anxiety over closing the deal. After an unknown woman steps into the scene, the camera shifts to a two shot, bringing out both An Kun and Lin Dong's frustration over not coming to an agreement. The unknown woman serves as a painstaking reminder to An Kun and Lin Dong of what their actions really signify—bartering for a human life, not a commodity. At one point, An Kun begins thinking the transaction is no longer significant

despite his attempts to convince Lin Dong to pay an additional 20,000, proclaiming that a child is worth more than just money, when he realizes the unknown woman has disappeared from the rooftop. Both men fear that the woman has jumped off the building, adding a touch of irony to their ruthless transactions: they dread a possible suicide, yet their cult of commodity blinds them from seeing that they are treating a renegotiation of human lives and familial bonds like an ordinary monetary transaction. Despite all that happens, they eventually sign a contract based on An Kun's terms—Lin agrees to pay RMB 20,000 as a first payment for An Kun's emotional distress. Further supporting their 'partnership', Lin will buy the baby at a cost of RMB 100,000 if he is the biological father. During the nine month pregnancy, both men are anxious to find out the paternity of the baby: Lin Dong, who craves offspring, is worried that he will end up without the product/baby; conversely, An Kun seems ambivalent, jealous of the possibility that Lin Dong may possess the child but also excited by the possibility of earning a large sum of money.

An Kun turns into a heartless profiteer who, in the end, sells his paternity rights and his biological son for a windfall. Following Pingguo's labor, An Kun's economic ventures encounter a twist and intensify as he alone holds the answer to the overdue question of who fathered the child, with a birth certificate that includes the baby's blood type. Looking at the birth certificate, An Kun smiles for a few seconds then returns to the doctor, where he lies, begs, and bribes him to change the blood type so that it matches Lin Dong's and enables him to complete the deal. His smile may indicate his joy of becoming a father or it could be pride in his victory in the sperm war with Lin Dong, but the market value of his paternity—RMB 100,000—instantly replaces his instant joy of his paternity. He decides to sell. The money-driven economic subject sees the intimate family issue of reproduction as another means of economic production where familial bonds are commodities ready for sale. Such a portrayal provides a realistic allegory of family life as a commodity, to the extreme point that even an individual's own product of reproduction is sold on the commercial market. It also extends the research of historian Eli Zaretsky and sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild concerning personal/intimate life in capitalism by offering a prophetic vision of a mutual constitution and re-configuration of the family and the economy.

Arguing that the organization of production in capitalist society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is predicated upon the expansion of personal life and a gendered division of tasks, Eli Zaretsky suggests that the family developed into a private haven from routine capitalistic exploitation, and through which the housewife's responsibilities were alienated from economic production. She is now responsible for the maintenance of the emotional and psychological realms of personal relations. In this sense, family as a part of personal life is sacred, pure, and separate from mundane production (Zaretsky 1976: 24, 29, 61).Yet, Hochschild proposes that in late twentieth century United States, family bonds grew looser, or perhaps shifted, as the boundary between profane and sacred changed and may have even reversed such that work had become more like home/sacred and home had become more like work/profane. As the number of women entering the workforce multiplied during the twentieth century and working hours were lengthened, the work of caring for family members was contracted out to people from

less developed countries and became a global commodity (2002:1, 9, 198). *Lost in Beijing* depicts a hyper-commercialized family structure that significantly contrasts with Zaresky's family that separates home life and the struggle for material wealth. An Kun's selling of his son is worse than the 'care deficit' that emerged in the United States as a result of women's entry into the labor force. Zygmunt Bauman, calling for ethics in a liquid-modern setting, would probably find *Lost in Beijing* more shocking than American reality shows, such as *Survivor*, that serve as a public rehearsal for the concept of disposability of humans due to the film's portrayal of the process of selling of one's own son and forfeiting an intimate blood bond for economic self-interest (2008:56). *Lost in Beijing* more bluntly expresses the dehumanizing effect of the consumer market than *Survivor,* a reality program in which competitors betray strangers in order to win the game. From Bauman's perspective, not only are ethics disappearing in interactions between strangers, but also in intimate life amid family members.

Through depicting the ruthless profiteer An Kun's active and aggressive participation in the wealth scramble game, the film weaves complex interactions between classes and genders. Moreover, it accentuates, exposes, and sympathizes with the dominated, sexualized economic roles of women and their perceived inferiority in the gender hierarchy, both in the public and private spheres. While neither An Kun nor Pingguo has professional knowledge with which to combat poverty, their genders determine their individual, yet differing ways that they can participate in the new economic order. Even in urban areas where there are more job opportunities, labor is sexually designated. Males sell physical strength to earn their bread and butter, while women are expected to exploit their 'natural' biological capital to sustain themselves. Workplaces that accept women as economic subjects and laborers exploit and eroticize the female body. As a foot masseuse, Pingguo experiences such conditions, as she has to tolerate her clients' harassments to keep her job.

The hyper commercialized economic order storms its way into the family, and the private space even exists for a price; such market value conspiring with a patriarchal family structure tends to strip away a female's subjectivity. The patriarchal power of the husband dominating the wife violently possesses Pingguo's body and her reproductive capabilities. A gender hierarchy allowing male domination and possession of one's wife enables the money-minded An Kun to become a capitalist who commercializes Pingguo's procreation. He then alienates her child from her, reducing her to the level of an exploited worker within the intimate realm of pregnancy. An Kun asserts his patriarchal ascendancy over Pingguo with rape after witnessing her having intercourse with Lin Dong. Likewise, when An Kun and Lin Dong sign their contract, they render Pingguo mute and submissive, as if she were a mechanical production tool. In this transaction involving a baby, the intimate relationships between the couple, An Kun and Pingguo, turns into an economic relationship between capitalists and workers. Holding the birth certificate in hand, An Kun's patriarchal power conspires with economic desire and determines to sell the baby and Pingguo's rights of maternity. This absurd story, if read as an allegory of China's economic development, predicts that inhuman conduct of individuals who exploit surplus value will lose affective bonding within the family; if read as a realistic and sympathetic representation of women from poor families, it depicts

women's double exploitation: at work, they are eroticized, and in the family, they are oppressed, betrayed, and reduced to tools that generate money for the financially starved patriarchal figure.

The fact that fifteen minutes are cut out in the approved Mainland version brings out an important issue of the various ways in which different local filmic representations are treated. The SARFT criticizes independent productions and scripts that expose the darker side of society and demands removals of 'inappropriate' scenes, or else it rejects their applications for public screening. This situation implies that there is a hierarchy that determines what kinds of filmic representations are better or more acceptable according to the state in Mainland China. *Lost in Beijing* presents an unusual case of censorship in that it first successfully obtained a screening permit after five different rounds of negotiation with the SARFT. Though the sixth re-submission was a version that left out seventeen minutes and obtained a screening permit, the same bureau eventually revoked the permit one month after its official public release, putting an end to its public screenings(Ding 2008: 55-7). In regards to Xiao Mei's story and issues of economic subjectivity, what is left behind in the officially approved version, and what is officially considered too indecent to show? A further comparison of the approved international version will shed light on these questions.

There are four major alterations in the officially approved version: the deletion of Xiao Mei's narrative, the elimination of prominent geographical references, a simplification of characters, and reductions/deletions of sexual scenes. Each of these leads us to nuances amid the larger theme of economic subjectivity related to sex, gender, and social commentary.

The narrative of Xiao Mei is a short subplot, which lasts only nine minutes out of the one hundred and thirteen minutes of total running time; yet, it encapsulates the problem of women's vulnerability to violence and crimes. Originally foot masseuse working towards the goal of buying a house in her rural hometown, Xiao Mei is fired for physically harming a client even though she was simply rebuffing his harassing advances. She continues to fall deeper into the impersonal nightmare for young and un/under-educated women, becoming a *sanpei xiaojie* or KTV bar companion/hostess and ultimately a prostitute.[9] Unfortunately, she had uprooted herself from her 'native soil' but dies without taking root in Beijing. This subplot was ultimately cut out of the officially approved PRC version in order to obtain a public screening permit. The deleted scenes delineating her decadent behavior and death are representative of the fates of multitudes of women migrant workers whose lives exist outside the spotlight of China's growing economic legend on the international stage. It serves as a reminder to audiences that not all parties benefit from the transforming economy. Xiao Mei's narrative presents a cannibalistic aspect of China's modernization, one that exposes citizens who are left behind and even destroyed by rapid economic growth.

The elimination of Beijing and its landmarks are attempts to downplay the relationship between Beijing, once the center of revolution and now the engine of capitalistic operations, and a hotbed of evils where a cruel and inhuman economic atmosphere is forming. One elimination of prominent geographical references is closely

related to Xiao Mei's plot. In the scene where Xiao Mei and Pingguo consume alcohol at a restaurant, the references to Beijing are intentionally deleted. In the international version, Xiao Mei puzzles over prosperous Beijing's inhospitality to a plebeian like herself. However, in the simplified mainland version, reference to the political center of China is replaced by a neutral, abstract space called 'the world'. A few lines later, the conversation about characters' lengths of stay in Beijing and slangs learned was also excised. This excerpt not only hides the identities of some migrant workers, but also implies social and economic disparity in the vast geographic space of China, complicating popular notions of China's burgeoning financial system and its global image as an engine of wealth. Geographical references including images of Tiananmen Square are also excluded in the censored version. Tiananmen Square originally appears in two long montages: one features moving images of different kinds of infrastructure and architecture signifying the transformation of urban space, and fragments of lives of Chinese citizens from all walks of life, emphasizing a passage of time and changes within the five protagonists. In the censored version, the gate of Tiananmen Square in which Mao Zedong's portrait hangs, one of the most recognizable landmarks of Beijing, is cut out from the first montage rolling along with the opening credits. The camera first establishes the montage from Lin Dong's point of view by showing him driving, then shifts to the road ahead and moving street scenes on both sides of the road, showing high-rises, flyovers, construction sites and cranes, all signifying progress and urban development. The use of fast motion in this montage portrays Beijing's hectic capitalistic development and construction, creating the dizzying feeling of being surrounded by hectic transformations. Mao Zedong's portrait in the Tiananmen Square embodies memories of revolutions and communism; and to cut out Mao Zedong's portrait from this montage diminishes the contrast between the current economic mode and the revolutionary era. Thus, it reduces tension and sarcasm regarding the Party's empty promise of a socialist utopia.

Simplifications of the economic subjects' characterizations are arguably associated with the CCP's orthodox requirements of clear-cut character distinctions. During the socialist era, the state regulated binary characterizations on the big screen, meaning that characters must either be politically bad or politically good(Yin and Lin 2002: 26). The major narrative of *Lost in Beijing* portrays an immoral transaction between 'bad' economic subjects; yet, there are subtle details that offer more multi-faceted depictions of these same subjects in the international version. Such ambivalent descriptions of protagonists are not accepted by the SARFT. According to the CCP's criteria, the capitalist as an economic subject exploits labor and thus should become a strictly 'bad' character; however, Lin Dong is shown treating sex workers fairly in the unapproved version. In the hotel room scene, a prostitute tells Lin Dong that he is short RMB 200 for her service while he yells into the phone to An Kun, who is attempting to blackmail him for RMB 20,000. The international version maintains the ending of this scene, in which Lin Dong calls back the prostitute as she prepares to leave. He pays her full wages and claims, 'I'm not the kind of guy [who takes advantage of others].' The deletion of this subtle plot development simplifies Lin Dong's characterization such that

he conforms to a stereotype of a selfish, libidinous capitalist, preventing more complex manifestations of a 'bad' economic subject.

The most controversial issue surrounding *Lost in Beijing* strangely lies less in the moral ambivalence of the economic subjects than in the presence of sexual scenes. The movie finally passed censorship after editors agreed to shorten or cut out several major sex scenes. However, the SARFT's countermand of the permit, after the film had already been screened for a month, cast doubt on the initial decision and was suspected of being made based on a political agenda.[11] According to the Regulations of Film Script Filing and Film Management, any scenes that contained obscene, erotic, philistine, or vulgar content including promiscuity, rape, prostitution, sex acts, sex perverts, or sex organs were to be excised (SARFT 2006). Thus, the shortening of An Kun and Pingguo's sex scene from two and a half minutes to forty seconds was an obvious gesture of compliance with the state policy. While the cutting of this scene seemed to suggest that it is the sexual acts of the economic subjects that are forbidden to the public, the fact that *Lost in Beijing's* screening permit was revoked may suggest it is the representation of these economic subjects per se that is intolerable to the state.

The banning of *Lost of Beijng* also offers us another insight into China's censorship system. Although the SARFT claims that the treatment of sex scenes is a reason for punishment, there are other clues indicating a possibility that it is negative representation itself that irritates high-ranking officials of the SARFT.[12] The deputy head of the Film Management Department of the SARFT criticized *Lost in Beijing* as an insulting portrayal of the era (Lu 2008:66-7). The particular portrayal most likely does not refer to the sex between An Kun and Pingguo because marital sex is anything but insulting. What the film may indeed be guilty of insulting is the collective face of the CCP's officials through negative portrayal of economic subjects that tends to expose a darker picture of China's modernization. It is also noteworthy that the film's screening period spread to the year 2008, the year in which the Olympic Games were hosted in China. During that time, the state attempted to create a positive impression as the official host of the Olympics. In spite of the fact that Li Yu, the director, defended the film by emphasizing that it is a realistic story (*zhenshi de gushi*) and, likewise, Pingguo is a realistic figure (*zhenshi renwu*)(Ge 2008:66-9), some Chinese film critics denied the historical desirability of such realism. Rather, these critics sanction films that glorify both humanity and society, or China, in this case (Yulinmufeng 2008:31). The state rewards socialist realism, a realism that serves and eulogizes a government that labels itself a socialist state, while punishing critical realism for exposing the darker sides of society. Regardless of whether or not *Lost in Beijing* is a film that uses obscene sexual scenes as gimmicks, the SARFT's prohibition dovetails with another layer of control of economic subjects: this time it is control over the filmmakers. Chinese articles echoed the SARFT objective that films involving sexual or erotic elements were vulgar, economically-driven and challenged the bottom line of morality (Wang 2008: 27-8). It implies that explicit sexual connotations or images harm the film industry and, consequently, are immoral. This point of view concerning what good films and good filmmakers should look like to pass censorship and please the state explicitly spell out what economic subjects should act like on and off-screen in the film industry. Although the censorship system seems

powerful enough to control what its citizens are able to see, the contradictory act concerning *Lost in Beijing* reveals that it is far from omniscient. Its function is to predict and eliminate, with a limited reservoir of resources, what may potentially spark effects that jeopardize the state and socio-political stability, but it is also impossible for the SARFT to control an audience's (both political leaders and citizens) sentiments upon seeing visual productions.

Conclusion

As a local response to a global moral crisis, *Lost in Beijing* depicts an inhuman migrant worker from the lower class who is willing to sell his biological son for profit, turning his paternity and familial affection into a commodity. The film also examines women's economic subjectivity and quandaries. Pingguo and Xiao Mei, without professional skills, engage in eroticized work to earn a living. Xiao Mei's subsequent employment as a prostitute offers both an allegorical reading of China's modernization and a literal reading of women's predicaments in a hectic time of economic growth. *Lost in Beijing*'s screening permit was voided due to the government's allegations that obscene scenes were circulating illegally. Such an excuse does not dissolve skepticism regarding the real reason behind the cancellation which was likely out of political consideration, as the film portrays so much of the darker side of society and goes against the official promise of progress and development.

Lost in Beijing allows us to trace the state's gesture towards sanitization of film and film's ability to contain socially critical messages within a restrictive creative environment. The variations between the international and PRC versions of *Lost in Beijing* hints at what components irritate the state, and the nullification of the PRC film's screening permit tracks the (im-) possibility that the censorship system can predict audience responses or to entirely stifle filmic social commentary. Li Yu's work reflects power dynamics between the political hegemony and its subjects, indicating that people actively negotiate with the state power both on-screen and behind the lens. The deletion of scenes or banning of *Lost in Beijing* implies that the state attempted to control representation of people's blind pursuit of wealth and social problems caused. Such narratives potentially reveal the darker side of contemporary Chinese society, which the state would rather obscure behind rhetoric extolling the virtues of progressing towards prosperity and striding forward towards global leadership. However, narratives such as *Lost in Beijing* are filmmakers' agency and subjectivity attempting to insert a critical voice into the state's slogan of 'building a harmonious society'.

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Endnotes

1. The use of the term "alternative public spheres" is from Giroux, quoted in Arif Dirlik, See Dirlik 1996:28.

2. There is no universally acknowledged umbrella term capturing alternative film production and film culture in contemporary China. For the nuances of different terms for these productions, see, for example, Pickowicz (2006: 1-22). For my cases here, I use the term 'independent production' instead of 'underground' because the former includes productions that negotiate with the state but are not necessarily 'illegal' or 'without' the state's notice, as the latter may imply. I also use the term 'independent production' as opposed to leitmotif productions (zhuxunlü) that receive support from the state for production, distribution, and screening.

3. Her feature film debut won the Elvira Notari prize at the Venice Film Festival in 2001; her second picture captured the C.I.C.A.E (Confederation Internationale Des Cinemas D'Art et D'Essai) Award in Venice anew and the Golden Lotus Award from the Deauville Asian Film Festival in 2006; *Lost in Beijing*'s screenplay garnered her and the film's producer Fang Li Honorable Mention at the Tribeca Film Festival in 2007, and

the film was nominated for Golden Berlin Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival and the Best Film at the Bangkok International Film Festival; most recently, *Buddha Mountain* won the Award for Best Artistic Contribution at the 23rd Tokyo International Film Festival.

4. In theorizing social-stratification in post-socialist China, Carolyn Hsu conducted interviews in northern Harbin in the late 1990's and observed that Harbin residents continued to interpret urban workplaces through Mao's propagation: work options are either 'inside' the state work unit or 'outside' the state work unit; those who remain in the work unit contribute to the collective good while those who go 'outside' have low education level, weak morality, and poor family background. See Hsu (2007: 16-19).

5. David Goodman argues that 'China's new rich are not readily separable from the Party-state as a social, political, or even economic force', for instance, it is uncommon for close family members of the CCP members become business people. See David Goodman and Xiaowei Zang (2008:6), and David Goodman (2008:35-6).

6. This number takes into consideration the rural migrant workers alone. According to the statistics in 2010, the total number of migrant workers hit 242 million, while the migrant workers employed outside their province reached 153 million, see National Bureau of Statistics of China (2011).

7. For example, the male and female interviewees in an article appeared on *Beijing Review* were a cabinet installer and a salesperson at a department store respectively. Although the city life and their working conditions were not utopian, and they were of low socio-economic status and felt that they are labeled as second-class citizens because of their identity as migrant workers, they remain determined of becoming urban citizens and settling down in the city. See Yin (2010).

8. Jiang Zemin emphasized that 'ruling the country by law is the basic strategy employed by the Party' or *yi fa zhi guo shi dang lingdao renmin zhili guojia de jiben fanglue*. English translation quoted from Baum (1997:147).

9. *Sanpei xiaojie*, literally, 'girls who accompany men in three ways', refers to KTV bar companions or hostesses who provide services that typically include drinking, singing, dancing, playing games, flirting, chatting, and caressing. See Zheng (2008:75). Although the term *sanpei xiao* sometimes is associated with sexual services, Xiao Mei initially does not offer sexual service. In addition to appearing in filmic representations, *sanpei xiaojie* also are protagonists on the TV, for research on these cultural forms, see Hackenbracht (2009).

10. The punishments also include a prohibition of the producer Fang Li from film production for two years, disqualification of Laurel Films from participation in the film industry for two years, criticisms of other involved film production companies and investors, and also the directors and actors. The three reasons that the SARFT stated for the cancellation of the permit are 1) the uncensored version of the film was submitted to the Berlin Film Festival without permission, 2) the deleted sex scenes circulated on the internet, and 3) the film's promotions are inappropriate and unhealthy. See SARFT (2008). Even though *Lost in Beijing* is banned, Ang Lee's film *Lust Caution* (2007)which was in theatre almost the same time was not banned. Such comparison can serve another interesting research topic.