

Villain Stardom in Socialist China: Chen Qiang and the Cultural Politics of Affect

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Abstract:

Despite playing various kinds of roles across genres from 1949 and 1965, Chen Qiang acquired stardom mainly due to his remarkable screen performance as villainous landlords in socialist China. His villain stardom is an aberrant case, compared to the majority of film stars in Chinese socialist cinema who encouraged identification and emulation and helped propagate socialist ideology to reform Chinese citizens. Paying special attention to socio-historically specific film exhibition practices and the actor's own reflections on his villain performance, this article argues that Chen's stardom functioned as an important affective technology within a wider and complex Communist propaganda enterprise in that it helped cultivate class hatred necessary for the communist revolution and socialist land reform campaigns. Through this case study the article suggests that close engagement with both cultural-historical specificities of cinema and recent critical theories of affect opens up a space for researching the diversified star phenomena in contemporary China.

Keywords: *Chen Qiang, villain stardom, affect, performance, film exhibition, Chinese socialist cinema*

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The past two decades have seen a rapid expansion and reconfiguration of the field of star studies with the publication of an increasing number of academic work on transnational/global film stardom (Miyao 2007; Soila 2009; Yu 2012), niche film stars in independent cinemas (Pramaggiore 2004; Harries 2004; Negra, 2004), as well as cult film stardom (Egan and Thomas, 2012). Driven by a growing interest in complex boundaries of film stardom in an age of media convergence and by the newly forged dialogues between the area of film studies and the sphere of cultural studies of celebrity and fame (Holmes 2007), these studies bring forth diverse cross-media practices of film stardom and explore issues such as film stars' cultural and economic functions, particular modes of film experience, regional restructuring of film industry, as well as global mobility and transnational migration.

This essay hopes to contribute to the increasingly diversified star studies by turning attention to film stardom that is inextricably linked with notoriety. In particular, it investigates much neglected villain stardom in the early People's Republic of China (PRC) with a case study of Chen Qiang (1918-2012), an esteemed actor most associated with "enemy of the people". In the 1950s and early 1960s most Chinese film actors who became household names are the so-called Red Stars, whose remarkable screen performance and social performance shaped the ordinary people's imagination of the New Socialist Person and modelled their behaviours as much as they were moulded by the socialist ideology. They elicited affection, invited emulation, and formed camaraderie with the audience (Lu 2008). Unlike these stars, Chen Qiang was best known for his villain characters: the evil and treacherous landlord. Rather than embodying the socialist ideal, he was first and foremost associated with what the socialist ideology negates: the old feudal order and exploitative class relations. In 1962 when the popular film magazine *Dazhong dianying* (*Masses Cinema*) launched the first Hundred Flowers Awards –the most influential film awards in socialist China, over 100,000 readers voted Chen the Best Supporting Actor for his memorable villain performance in Xie Jin's film *Hongse niangzi jun* (*The Red Detachment of Women*) (Qi 1962: 8). When some young audiences bumped into Chen on everyday occasions, they openly showed their distaste for this 'evil landlord' (Chen 1962a).

Despite its uniqueness, villain stardom in Chinese socialist cinema has hitherto not received critical attention. While the meagre media coverage of Chen's on-and-off screen lives at the time may partly explain this absence, I would also point out that representation-centred analytical model of stardom precludes fruitful investigation of this particular kind of stardom. Chen's stardom in socialist China is not a matter of creating 'structured polysemic' star image. In actuality, social discourses about Chen's stardom largely revolved around audiences' negative emotional responses, particularly, their hatred toward the landlord class which were aroused and intensified by Chen's villain performance. Engaging with both historical specificities of Chinese cinema and recent cultural studies of affect, I argue that Chen's villain stardom was constitutive of and shaped by the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) project of engineering political feeling. Through an analysis of specific contexts as well as the actor's own reflections on his performance, I suggest that throughout the early years of the PRC Chen's villain stardom functioned as a particular form of political

technology of affect, which helped mediate and sustain the masses' receptivity to the CCP's official ideology and socio-political movements. However, the critical discourse of Chen's performance, which was under the paradigmatic influence of Stanislavskian System, belaboured the distinction between the actor and his villainous role. It thus distracted attention from, if not completely obscured, the transformative potential of villain stardom in shaping civic emotions in the young PRC.

The Negative Characters, Performance Context and the Production of Affect

Prior to performing on the silver screen, Chen Qiang received theatre training at Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts in 1938 at the Chinese communist base Yan'an. For much of the 1940s he travelled with drama troupes and wartime service corps (*zhanshi fuwu tuan*), bringing agitational theatre for soldiers and the rural masses in the Border Regions (Anon. 1959, 6). It was not until 1948 when the Northeast Film Studio made a short fiction film *Liuxia ta da lao Jiang/Save Him to Fight Jiang* did Chen make his screen debut as an old, sensible peasant who requests pardon of the death sentence a young People's Liberation Army soldier although his son is shot dead as the soldier's gun misfires. Between the years of 1949 and 1966 when a new Chinese cinema that aims to serve the workers, peasants, and soldiers gradually took shape, Chen Qiang played various types of roles in a dozen or so films. He appeared in bit parts in films such as *Jie Hun /Marriage* (Yan 1953), *Chuanchang zhui zong/Searching Evidences in Shipyard* (Lin 1959a) and *Gengyun boyu/The Weather Woman* (Wei, 1960). He also played lead roles such as a calculating middle peasant in the agricultural co-operation in *Sannian zao zhidao/No Mystery Three Years Ago* (Wang, 1958), an enthusiastic and experienced factory worker who pushes forward technological innovation in *Shi hang/Trial Voyage* (Lin, 1959b), and an overseas Chinese magician who returns to his homeland in *Moshushi de qiyu/Wondrous Encounter of a Magician* (Sang 1962).

In spite of Chen's effort to present himself as a well-rounded actor, he was best known for his villain characters: the hypocritical young landlord Huang Shiren in the film *Baimao nü /The White-haired Girl* (Shui and Wang 1950) and the treacherous local despot Nan Batian in the film *Hongse niangzi jun/The Red Detachment of Women* (Xie 1960). Produced a decade apart, both films deal with the conflict between the oppressive landlords and the innocent peasants. The former dwells on the sufferings that the vicious landlord Huang Shiren inflicts on the eponymous character, originally known as Xi'er, while the latter focuses on how the defiant maid of the local despot Nan Baitian, Wu Qionghua, develops into a disciplined communist soldier. For many audiences in socialist China, Chen Qiang was the ultimate incarnation of evil within a socialist state—the class enemy.

What is noteworthy is that villain stardom was often rendered as 'master-actors of the negative characters' (*fanpai dashi*) in socialist China. Subtle differences in these two phrases concern less about linguistic preferences than about culturally specific conceptualizations of the villain characters' role in the film. The term 'villain', as is used in Anglo-American playwriting and academic studies of theatre and film, emphasises moral deficiency or deviation of a person whose wickedness of mind, selfishness of character, or ab-normative motivates form an important element in the plot. In contrast, 'the negative characters'

(*fanmian renwu*) signifies a politically conceptualized category of characters. Standing in direct opposition to positive characters (*zhengmian renwu*) –the labouring masses and communist soldiers, the negative characters are individuals who either oppose or obstruct Chinese communist revolution and socialist construction. In Chinese literature and arts from the socialist period these characters range from foreign imperialists, over traitors and spies, to feudal landlords and local bandits. They inevitably possess despicable moral properties, which are more of a derivative of their political affiliation and less of a manifestation of their intrinsic moral value.

Without a doubt, portraying the new, progressive characters of workers, peasants, and soldiers assumed paramount importance in literature and arts under Mao. As early as in 1953, Zhou Yang, the Vice Minister of Culture, proclaimed that “Creating typical characters of advanced figures to cultivate our people’s noble character should be the central and fundamental task of our film and other arts” (Zhou 1985:197). Around 1959 when the aesthetic principle of Revolutionary Realism and Revolutionary Romanticism was promoted among writers and artists, an emphasis on creating heroic characters reached such a high level as to exclude the careful portrayal of other categories of characters, for instance, the middle characters who demonstrate hesitation and contradiction (Yang 1996:97). Nevertheless, construction of the negative characters was deemed indispensable throughout the Mao era. This was not only because inclusion of such characters would avoid partiality and thus reflect the real world more fully. The creation of the negative characters was also entailed by the Marxian dialectic, which interprets human history as a process of development through conflict, in order to lay bare the principal contradiction of Chinese society at a given time.

Despite ideological importance, most of the negative characters occupied a marginal narrative position. Underdeveloped characterizations in film scripts as well as film actors’ formulaic renditions often reduce these characters to indistinguishable, lacklustre screen villains if not outright flat caricatures.¹ Chen Qiang stood out among his fellow villain actors partly because he was cast to play a particular type of negative characters, the landlord, whose presence was intricately interwoven into the daily life of peasants – the majority of China’s population in the Mao era. Moreover, compared to other cursorily and stereotypically presented negative characters, the two landlord characters in the films *The White-Haired Girl* and *The Red Detachment of Women* are more fleshed-out, distinct individuals, partially thanks to the well-crafted film scripts. Furthermore, Chen’s villain stardom is a cross-media one. Chen’s reputation as a talented actor playing the negative characters was first established when he joined stage performance of *The White-Haired Girl*² in the pre-liberation era.

¹ See the stereotypical representations of Japanese military officers in films such as *Yehuo chunfeng dou gucheng* (*Struggle in an Ancient City*, 1963) and *Didao zhan* (*Tunnel War*, 1965) and underdeveloped sinister spy characters in *Shenmi de liban* (*Mysterious Companion*, 1954) and *Gusha zhongsheng* (*The Bell Rings at the Old Temple*, 1958).

² *The White-Haired Girl* was first staged by the cultural troupe of the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts at the Seventh National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 1945. Chinese communist cadres’ enthusiastic reception of the theatrical production encouraged further dissemination of the play in revolutionary base areas. See Ai, K. (1987), *Yan’an wenyi dundong jisheng* (*Chronicle of Literary and Art Movements in Yan’an*).

Based on northern Chinese folklores and written by He Jinzhi and Ding Yi in Yan'an, the revolutionary drama *The White-Haired Girl* dwells on the unbounded misery that a peasant girl Xi'er suffers. Xi'er first loses her destitute widowed father, who takes his life on the New Year's Eve when the landlord Huang Shiren pressures him to pay off his full amount of debt. She is then forcibly taken to Huang's house to work as a maid while her fiancé Dachun is evicted from the village. Later on, the girl is violated and then abandoned by the landlord. Hiding in a mountain cave, Xi'er survives by eating wild fruits in the mountain and food sacrifice in a temple. With her hair having turned completely white, she is taken as a white-haired fairy-spirit by the villagers. The drama reaches its climax when Dachun, who has joined the Eighth Route Army, returns to the village to rescue Xi'er, to overthrow the rule of the landlord, and to start the land reform. As it has been well acknowledged, the melodramatic mode of *The White-Haired Girl* makes the tale particularly effective in imparting the CCP's ideology of class. Xi'er's falling to an abyss of misery and suffering never fails to induce tears and provoke sympathy from the audience; polarized characterization not merely offers moral clarity but also functions as a strategic means of representing history. In addition, the necessity of class struggle, which is originated from socio-economic conflicts, is justified through a popular notion of the struggle between the moral and the immoral (Meng, 1993; Esther 1996).

Ever since the 1940s, *The White-Haired Girl* has become a seminal text within the popular discourse of land reform.³ Although land reform had been instituted in much of the liberated areas prior to the establishment of the PRC, it didn't sweep over most of the country until the passing of the Land Reform Law in June 1950 (Anon. 1950; Lippit, 1974). Over the ensuing months the reception, dissemination, and propagation of the Land Reform Law from the east coast to the heart of central and southwest China received particular media attention. Considering that the implementation of land-reform was by no means merely the execution by administrative means of relevant laws and policies but also involved stirring up passive and atomized peasants to political action, it was indispensable to produce supplementary cultural texts that would educate people on the necessity of the reform as well as win their hearts and minds. In the meantime, the newly emerging People's Cinema (*renmin dianying*) under the CCP's leadership strove to cultivate film literacy among the labouring masses and to build up its audience base in both urban and rural areas. These conditions made the adaptation of the revolutionary drama *The White-Haired Girl* into a film at once a politically viable option and an efficient industrial strategy.

Following its winning of the Special Award at the Karlovy Vary Film Festival, the film was premiered in 1951 in 120 cinemas across 25 cities in China, attracting 6 million Chinese audiences (Anon. 1951:8). Drawing in numerous audiences who had prior knowledge of Chen's stage performance, *The White-Haired Girl* conveniently established Chen's cross-media villain stardom. More importantly, enthralling accounts of audiences' kinetic responses to the actor's stage enactment of Huang Shiren laid the cornerstone of Chen's legend.

³ Other well-known texts include *Taiyang zhao zai Sanganhe shang/The Sun Rises Over the Sanggan River* by Ding Ling, *Baofeng zhouyu/The Storm* by Zhou Libo, and *Jinguang dadao/The Golden Road* by Hao Ran.

As Chen recalled, in 1946 the cultural troupe of Yan'an Lu Xun Academy of Arts and Literature travelled to Huailai, a small town famous for growing fruit, to stage *The White-Haired Girl*, as a means of providing a temporary respite to the battle-weary soldiers. While the actors on stage were shouting the slogan 'Struggling the Landlord Huang Shiren' at the height of the last act, audiences threw many fruits at the stage to express their indignation against the evil landlord. One of the fruits hit his left eye so hard that he got a black eye the next day (Chen 1962b:13). Another time when the drama troupe performed *The White-Haired Girl* in Hebei for army soldiers immediately after their "Speaking Bitterness" meeting,⁴ the audience's reaction became nearly life-threatening. Toward the end of the last act, most soldiers choked with sobs. A rookie soldier, who had been a victimized peasant, loaded his gun and aimed at the stage. The squad leader intercepted the gun just in time. When asked what he was about to do, the soldier replied firmly, "I will shoot him dead!" (Chen 1962b: 13) These anecdotes were so captivating that they have since been quoted and retold in many articles and memoirs.

However, simple restatement of these anecdotes may easily lead us to a tautological trap: invoke Chen's remarkable performance to account for audiences' affective responses and then use the same responses to validate the excellence of Chen's performance. Here, I suggest that critical theories of affect provide a useful analytical tool to help us better understand affective experiences evoked by Chen's performance.

Though the general turn to affect has taken place in humanities and social sciences for more than a decade, 'affect' remains a nebulous and much contested term.⁵ Drawing upon Benedict de Spinoza's notion of affect as both 'affections of the body by which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained' and 'the ideas of these affections' (1994[1677]:154), philosophers and cultural theorists such as Gilles Deleuze, Brian Massumi, and Teresa Brennan conceive affect as an energetic stream that emerges from an encounter between manifold beings and can be transmitted by the collective or atmospheric forces (Deleuze 1997; Massumi 2002; Brennan 2004). Compared to affect theories that are animated by the work of psychologist Silvan Tomkin, this Spinozan-Deleuzian strand of affect theories approaches affect with a notion of broad tendencies and lines of force, rather than with an idea of psychological topology. It pays a great deal of attention to a processual logic intrinsic to the transmission of affect and is concerned with the capacities of a body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise) to affect and to be affected (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010). Thus, Spinozan-Deleuzian theories of affect are pertinent to the discussion of the audiences' kinetic responses and impulsive reactions to the stage performance of *The White-Haired Girl*, which are clear registers of the intensity that

⁴ Speaking bitterness meeting refers to a political event where the oppressed speak about their exploitation in a public gathering. It has been regarded and used as an important political tool for the CCP to form class consciousness. For concrete processes of such meetings, see William Hinton, *Fanshen: A Documentary of Revolution in a Chinese Village*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997.

⁵ Nigel Thrift has identified four strands of affect articulations, which are stimulated by ideas of performance, the psychology of Silvan Tomkins, Deleuze's ethological reworking of Spinoza, and neo-Darwinism. See Thrift, N. (2004), 'Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect'. Sometimes, the term is used eclectically. For instance, Charles Altieri in his book *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetic of the Affects* uses 'affect' as an umbrella term for various psychological states such as feeling, mood, emotion, and passion.

audiences experienced and of the changing state of their bodies induced by audiences' encounter with performing bodies on stage.

Among Spinozan-Deleuzian theories of affect, Robert Seyfert's conception of 'affectif' is particularly useful in exploring the affective operations of Chen's site-specific villain performance, as it heightens the situational nature of affect. By 'affectif', Seyfert refers to 'the entirety of all heterogeneous bodies involved in the emergence of an affect' (2012:31). He coins this neologism mainly to redress a conceptual inconsistency in earlier cultural theories of affect: affect is simultaneously defined as an effect emerging from the encounter between bodies and a force external to those bodies (Seyer 2012:29). As the notion of *affectif* emphasizes a heterogeneous ensemble of elements and thus highlights the importance of performance context for the production of affect, Seyfert's theory cautions us against perceiving Chen's body or his bodily performance as a single point from which affect emanates. Specifically, it prompts us to consider how changing scenes of bodily presence constantly configure the affective environment and how audiences' interactions with one another influence their resonance with a highly charged and agitated atmosphere on location. Moreover, as *affectif* not only incorporates Spinoza's non-anthropologically centred idea of the body as myriad bodily form, both human and non-human, but also takes account of varied circumstances and temporal experiences of individuals, it allows us to expand our investigation of Chinese audiences' affective experience with stage actors' physical enactment of *The White-Haired Girl* to audiences' affective engagement of objects, such as the film screening of *The White-Haired Girl*. Furthermore, Seyfert foregrounds the issue of the receptivity of bodies and reconceptualises the transmission of affects as 'the different affective frequencies modulating the diverse ways in which various types of bodies interact (through tactile, olfactory, gustatory, electrical, etc., modes)' (2012:30). His theoretical insights draw our attention to auxiliary political programmes that not only fostered the individuals' capabilities of being affected but also constituted various modes of affective transmission. As Chen's reminiscence clearly suggests, the effect of *The White-Haired Girl* on audiences was amplified by the participants' affective receptivity, which was cultivated by prior propagandistic programmes such as the 'Speaking Bitterness Meeting'. It comes as no surprise that the rookie soldier who had just poured out his feelings of victimization in public was one of the most affected audiences, as his voluntary evocation of memory and venting of grievance made him more susceptible than usual to resonating with the stage enactment of mass struggle against the evil landlord.

In light of Seyfert's notion of *affectif*, highly politicized context in which *The White-Haired Girl* was staged plays a crucial role in enhancing the affective effect of Chen's villain performance. This finding points to the political embeddedness of Chen's villain stardom and entails a close examination of the intersection and interaction between cultural production and the Party's political campaigns, in particular, the circulation of Chen's villain image in specific contexts. Film exhibition practices of *The White-Haired Girl* in the early PRC particularly attest to the entanglement of the CCP's political engineering of affect and affective operations of Chen's villain stardom.

Apart from being screened in movie theatres in urban areas to showcase the new Chinese cinema's achievement, the film version of *The White-Haired Girl* was often screened

in the early 1950s as an integral programme of local land reform campaigns in villages and suburbs of major cities including Wuhan and Shanghai (Shang, 1952:27). A special report 'Peasants Watching *The White-Haired Girl* at the Height of Land Reform in the Outskirt of Shanghai' published in the September 1951 issue of *Masses Cinema* offers a rare glimpse into one such unconventional yet common film exhibition practice and brings the issue of the political use of Chen's villain performance to the fore.

As the *Masses Cinema* journalist reports, an open-air screening of the film was purposefully arranged on the evening before the 'Class Status Approval Meeting' (*tongguo jieji dahui*) held in Xinle Village, the first such meeting in the Xinjing township. The actual screening of *The White-Haired Girl* was preceded by a careful introduction of the film by a member of the local land reform work team in his local dialect to over 2,500 peasants. During the screening, many peasants were moved to tears and were compelled to make sympathetic comments. The screening was then followed by a film symposium on the spot, with over sixty cadres from all villages within the Xinjing Township attending. Apparently, these participants practised their newly acquired political vocabularies of class and extrapolated revolutionary lessons from the film. Besides reiterating some heart-wrenching episodes, much of their guided discussion dwelled upon the landlord Huang Shiren's despicable qualities as well as the nature of the entire landlord class. According to the report, peasant audiences drew the following conclusions: The landlords were able to play tyrants because they had ganged up with the KMT reactionary forces; now that peasants have been emancipated, vengeance against the landlord class must be sought and land reforms must be unwaveringly carried out (Lu, 1951:22).

Interestingly, this account of the open-air screening is framed within an elaborated narrative of the 'Class Status Approval Meeting'. With this textual strategy, the journalist not just called attention to the broader political context of the film screening, he also accentuated a significant bearing that the film screening had on the running of the mass meeting. As the report goes, over 1,500 peasants in the meeting were briefed on the personal history and exploitative deeds of a select group of people by village cadres. Afterwards, they cast votes, conferring the status of 'landlord' upon two persons, 'rich peasant with quasi-landlord status' upon other two, and 'rich peasant' upon the remaining two. Then ensued a struggle session against the newly labelled landlords which unleashed the peasants' profuse enmity:

When the previously enslaved, oppressed peasants enumerated the landlords' many crimes and indignantly pressed upon them their wrong-doings, a thunderous roar shook the meeting place. Holding thousands of hands up, the peasants shouted slogans, 'Eliminate the landlord class!' 'Punish dishonest landlords!' 'Brother Peasants, Unite! Utterly destroy the landlord class!' When a landlord named Shi Bopan – a typical landlord – tried to deny his cruelty and exploitation of peasants, an enraged villager pointed his finger at him, demanding 'Lower your head! Lower your head!' (Lu, 1951:20)

To be sure, such a detailed account of the participants' actions, moods and emotions was intended to set this mass meeting as an exemplary event so as to inspire other villages' land

reform campaigns. What is striking is that the documented struggle session mirrors the one featured in the film *The White-Haired Girl*: it was a political scene infused with intense emotions. Evidently, the film did not just teach the audiences a revolutionary lesson but also forged their dispositional propensity and their emotional relations with the landlord class. In short, hatred agitated by Chen's villain performance was partly retained and converted into political passion in struggling real-life landlords.

That Chen's villain persona was conveniently used as an affective technology to induce much desired hatred in the mass campaign points to the intertwined relationship between the production of affect and the cultivation of political feeling. The differences between affect and emotion have already been well noted. Whereas affect can be conceived as an autonomous communicable force, emotion and feeling, which are often used interchangeably, are believed to have their origins somewhere or in somebody. While affect is considered to be ineffable and non-cognitive, emotion and feeling are understood as subjective and conscious experience of sensations that can be expressed in culturally specific vocabularies (Thrift, 2004). Hence, it is necessary to introduce the CCP's official discourse on emotion, which can be traced back to Mao Zedong's elucidation of the Marxist view of human nature, emotion, and aesthetics in his influential 1942 'Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art'.

Combining the Marxist tenet of 'social being determines consciousness' with war-time realities of the Chinese society, Mao in his talks refuted humanism that had been holding much sway among Yan'an's intellectuals for its fallacious abstraction. He dismissed the ideas of universal human nature and inclusive love of humanity and stressed the decisive role that the objective realities of class struggle and national struggle played in forming people's thoughts and feelings. Mao concluded that in a class society there can only be class-bound feelings and that members from antagonistic classes can only feel enmity towards each other (1996:463).

What emerges from Mao's terse and plain formulation of emotion is in fact an ethics of emotion, an ethics that stresses the imperative and appropriateness of emotion in a time of revolution. Knowing what to love and what to hate is no longer a matter of personal preference or taste, but an issue of political attitude and motive. Moreover, Mao's aphoristic pronouncement 'there is absolutely no such thing in the world as love or hatred without reason or cause' (1996:478) posits that feeling, thinking, and judging are intimately related, if not interdependent. Consequently, one may surmise that expressing class feeling affirms or even reinforces one's class consciousness. However, class feeling shall not be taken for granted. As Marx argued, a class of itself is not necessarily a class for itself (1999). Thinking along this line, class feeling is by no means intrinsic to class, but needs to be cultivated and filled to class.

The cultivation of class hatred against the landlords was particularly pressing from the Yan'an era to the early years of the PRC when the CCP first introduced land reform on a regional scale and then expanded it nationwide. Among factors that seriously hindered the progress of China's land reform, the irresolute attitude of the peasantry informed by their petty-producer mentality was perhaps the most notable one. In William Hinton's documentation of land reform at Long Bow village in Shanxi province, he notes that the

villagers by no means reached agreement on the exploitative nature of the landlords. Some believed that where the land belonged to the landlords, through legitimate purchase or inheritance, rents should be paid, whereas others insisted that rent itself was exploitation (1966:129). Fearing the landlords' revenge and lacking confidence in the Communists, most villagers merely acted as apathetic onlookers when public accusation of a local landlord's collaborator was staged (1966:114). Similarly, C. K. Yang wrote in his sociological study of village land reform in Guangdong province that some poor peasants, because of their uncertainty about the durability of the new Communist regime or owing to their long-term friendship or family relations, even took temporary land ownership from the larger landlords so as to help the latter avoid being classified as the landlords (1965:140).

Land reform, which aimed to redress distributive injustice, was not merely important in economic terms: destroy the socio-economic basis of the old feudal system and prepare the peasants for agricultural collectivization. It also played a key role in consolidating the CCP's political rule as it not merely helped gain the support of the majority of the general populace but also radically transform Chinese peasants' mentalities and establish new class identities.

The Party demonstrated a good knack for engineering political feeling by utilizing affect. The actual project of cultivating class feeling concerned less about inculcation of a qualitatively distinct feeling than creation and transmission of objects or signs of emotion which would bind some subjects to others and consequently form political communities. After all, the question of class feeling is essentially not an ontological one – what is class feeling, but a practical one – what can class feeling do.

Chen's screen image as evil landlord expediently rendered itself as an effective tool for this purpose. For many audiences in the early PRC, Chen/villainous landlord was not simply an icon of evil. More precisely, he was a figure of hate. His physiognomy and psychology concretized the abstract notion of the landlord class. Not only did his evil deeds substantiate physical and psychological threats that his kind had posed or would pose to the innocent and the vulnerable, they also evoked reflections on personal experiences. As a participant in the aforementioned film symposium stated,

In the past, we were oppressed by landlords in the same way. Every winter, my heart was in my mouth whenever I thought about paying back debts. In the film, doesn't Dachun [Xi'er's fiancé] have to risk his life to cut firewood on a steep cliff in order to pay off debts? The landlord doesn't give a damn about his life and death. All he demands from Dachun is paying back the interest and the debt! ... Now that we have been emancipated, we must fight back against the landlords! (Lu, 1951:21)

Here, emotion of hate excited by the evil Huang Shiren moved sideways through associations between this fictional character and horrendous landlords in the real life; it also moved backward by evoking the repressed apprehension and memories. The circulation of hate produced a sense of 'apartness' of us (peasants) from them (landlords), made this peasant

firm up his class position, and even led him to think about political action. As this case attests, Chen's compelling villain performance made Chinese audiences more prone to accept the official ideology of class, particularly, the landlord's intrinsic exploitative nature. At the same time, audiences' incessant invoking of Chen's villain character in film symposiums, political study sessions as well as print media allowed this specific cultural sign of hatred to acquire cumulative affective value essential to the making of Chen's stardom.

Villain Performance as Negative Pedagogy

While Chen's reputation as a brilliant actor for landlord roles had been grounded in politically framed, site-specific performance context by the early 1950s, his stardom from the early 1960s onward has been largely sustained by discourses of realist performance, particularly, the actor's own meta-narrative of his villain performance. Although nationwide land reform campaigns waned around the mid-1950s (Meisner, 1999:134), unscrupulous landlords continued to occupy the marginal position in Chinese revolutionary films.⁶ Given the importance of class hatred for the CCP's political project of building a socialist citizenry and the Party's ultimate goal of building a classless society, there is little surprise that signs or objects of hatred were continuously produced, circulated, conserved to sustain the masses' destructive hate relation to the landlords. Among them, Chen's character Nan Batian in *The Red Detachment of Women*, a master of treachery, is an unrivalled screen villain. Aiming to commemorate the Party's revolutionary past instead of agitating immediate political actions, the 1960 film *The Red Detachment of Women* well combines the CCP history with a tale of the coming-to-consciousness of an oppressed slave girl, Wu Qionghua, at Nan's household. Relatedly, the film was screened in movie theatres rather than being integrated into political campaigns. This change in film exhibition patterns helped shift the focus of public discourses of Chen's stardom from contextually specific effects of Chen's performance to his convincing villain performance.

Chen's self-reflective accounts of his performance published in *People's Daily*, *Masses Cinema* and a special anthology on the production of *The Red Detachment of Women* constituted the majority of these discourses. They not only revealed considerable public interest in the actor as well as in great acting, but also closely engaged with the heated discussion of realist performance in the drama and film circles at the time. Indeed, performing the negative roles posed challenges for actors in Chinese socialist cinema at both technical and theoretical levels. Some actors assumed that performing the negative characters vividly was easier than playing the positive characters, as the negative characters normally take the stage either at the height of conflict or at the action-laden moments, which provide the actor with ample opportunities to showcase his skills and talents. Chen refuted such an assumption from his own experience. He pointed out that most of negative characters were not fully developed in film scripts, thus leaving little room for an actor's originality. In addition, while actors who played the positive characters could make use of their observations of numerous combat heroes or model workers in actual life, actors who

⁶ These films include *Pingyuan youji zhan* (Guerrillas on the Plain, dir. Su Li and Wu Zhaodi, 1955), *Hongqi Po* (Red Flag Chronicle, dir. Ling Zifeng, 1960) and others.

were cast to perform the negative roles had no such expedient choices (Chen, 1962b:13). Due to these constraints, many actors believed that so long as they held a critical attitude toward the negative characters and made them appear horrid, they would fulfil their performing task. As a result, pretentious and exaggerated performances dominated both stage and screen, giving rise to many stereotypical villains. Chen disproved such perfunctory attitudes and elucidated the drawbacks of these types of performance.

If an actor exaggerates the ugly and horrid aspects of a negative character so much that the character loses credibility, his performance will depart from the truth of our life and will weaken the persuasive power of art. Such a practice will not induce hatred toward a negative character from our audiences, nor will it deepen spectators' sympathy toward a positive character. As a result, this kind of performance destroys truthfulness and makes audiences aware that you are merely acting and that you are just making your character a laughing stock. (Chen, 1962b: 13)

In Chen's view, a successful rendition of the negative characters, which can somewhat be measured in terms of audiences' affective states, is predicated upon its truthfulness. To create truthful and distinct negative characters, actors should not only 're-create physical resemblance to class enemies but also probe their inner world'. In doing so, actors can 'disclose a negative character's despicable soul and hence repudiates his reactionary essence' (Chen, 1962a).

Evidently, Chen's formulation of his aesthetic ideal is realist in spirit and bears imprint of the Russian theatre director Constantin Stanislavski's conception of performance. In fact, during the 1950s and 1960s, the Stanislavski System—a set of psycho-physical techniques that Stanislavski developed to train actors to deliver realist performance rather than plastic imitation or formalist presentation—gained predominance over other performance theories in China and held great appeal to Chinese actors. Crucial to realist performance is the notion of the fusion of actor and his role. In Stanislavski's words, an actor must enter into the inner life of a role, insofar as is possible, *become* the character. Through research into the character's time and place in history, the actor is responsible for creating and enacting an underlying 'subtext,'—i.e., the character's deeper thoughts, feelings, and life context. A good actor becomes so fully immersed in a role, and believes so deeply in it, that the part is inside the actor even as the actor is inside the part (1963:27). Highly influenced by the Stanislavski System, many Chinese actors went to factories, countryside, and military bases to experience the lives of their roles, such as workers, peasants, and soldiers. Experiencing life first hand thus became a distinctive practice that characterises the Chinese actors' appropriation of the Stanislavski System. For many actors, experiencing life not only well prepared them to merge themselves with the new characters on Chinese silver screen; it also helped them to regulate themselves so as to approximate the ideal socialists in real life (Lu, 2008).

However, when applied to creation of the negative characters, this approach incurred much contention and invited theoretical debates among drama and film professionals. In an article entitled 'On the Question of Experiencing the Negative Character's Emotions,' a

theatre actor named Sun Bing pinpoints the ludicrous implications of rigid application of the Stanislavskian System. The prospect for those who play class enemies and the reactionaries to live evil lives in order to experience their roles' emotions would just be politically implausible. How then can actors truthfully play the negative roles? To tackle this methodological conundrum, Sun sets out to demystify the concept of 'experience' (*tiyan*) by explicating the differences between political attitude and artistic technique, between life experience and stage experience, and between the truth in the life (*shenghuo zhenshi*) and the truth in the arts (*yishu zhenshi*). As he elaborates, 'playing a role' shall not be understood as 'being that role,' nor should the actor's experience in life be equated to his self-conscious experience of performance on stage. For an actor who plays a negative character, his emotional experience of the role is fundamentally a technical issue. He may use various techniques of 'affective memory' to present appropriate and credible psychological states of the character, for instance, drawing upon his own feelings or resorting to emotions in experiences that are analogues to the prescribed ones (Sun, 1963). By broadening the signification of experience and by stressing the importance of affective memory, which Stanislavski believes to be 'the best and only true material for inner creativeness' (1988: 177), Sun encouraged his fellow actors to transcend the self-imposed ideological constraints and assured them of the vast space for creativity.

Chen's performing experience well illustrates Sun's view. In his essay 'How I Played Nan Batian', Chen points out that vicarious experience, analogous emotion, and external stimuli, rather than direct and immediate experience aided him to create his multi-layered characters. Specifically, his observations of the inconsistent behaviours of a school acquaintance and his family lent him valuable insights into man's complexities and helped him set the inner tone for his negative characters. As he recalled, however overbearingly his schoolmate acted in front of his peers, he never failed to comport himself with grace and respect when meeting the elder and the senior. The boy's father also behaved contradictorily. Although he had ruined lives and destroyed families, he persisted in teaching his children cardinal virtues of Confucianism (Chen, 1962c:322). Whence Chen inferred, to create a negative character one needs first and foremost to portray a true-to-life human being who has his own logic of action and his own joy and sorrow (Chen, 1962c:323).

While Chen's understanding of the psychological depth of villains was partially inspired by his lived experience, his crafting of film performance relied much on techniques advocated by Stanislavski. Before the shooting of *The Red Detachment of Women* started, at the female lead, Zhu Xijuan, asked Chen whether they could build animosity towards each other in daily life for the sake of preparing themselves for the roles. Chen happily complied. Later on, even when they had a break from the filming, the two still acted as foes and hurled words at each other (Chen 1962c:327). With such habitual practices, Chen gradually approximated the psychological objectives that he had designed for Nan Batian. In addition, he meticulously designed his characters' personality traits in accordance to the concrete social milieu in which they live. For example, as the film script of *The White-Haired Girl* describes, the young master Huang Shiren grows up in a feudal family steeped in Confucian and Buddhist values. Chen thus envisioned this character as a frivolous, hypocritical scoundrel who smacks childishness occasionally and displays ruthless ferocity and great

cunning at other times (Chen 1962c:324). As for Nan Batian, this landlord controls the local militia and colludes with local authorities in Hainan Island in the 1930s when the seeds of Communist revolution were just germinating. Therefore, Chen conceived him as a despotic, treacherous, and calculating landlord with great political ambition (Chen 1962c:329).

His much acclaimed use of small gestures in *The Red Detachment of Women* particularly evinces the influence of Stanislavski's technique of 'scenic action'. Scenic action, as Stanislavski defines, refers to 'the movement from the soul to the body, from the centre to the periphery, from the internal to the external, from the thing an actor feels to its physical form'. Since it is 'action in the spiritual sense of the world', scenic action is essential to the truly powerful realist performance (1978: 49). Employing this technique, Chen produced a memorable performance in the scene where Nan Batian is put under house arrest by the women. As Chen recalled,

When I played my role in this scene, I did not shed tears, nor did I beg for mercy by putting on a pitiable expression. Instead, I looked around coldly with a sneer, plotting. I said to myself, 'Wait and see, someday when you fall into my hands, I will make you taste my severe punishment.' [...] I cut a sorry figure when I sat on the chair before execution. When the camera zoomed, I used my hand to cover my left eye, as if I was messaging the bruise. However, when the camera zeroed in on my eyes, the audience could see a glint in my uncovered eye. [...] Since this uncovered eye was now the focus of the audience's attention, rolling that eye created an immediate suspense. (Chen 1962c:325)

Clearly, the actor's physical action was called forth by living feelings instead of dull reason. With the assistance of the cinematic apparatus, the effect of his move and gesture is drastically enhanced. Since Chen's seemingly ordinary gesture is bracketed by the close-up shot, it appears a bit dramatic, hence bringing attention to the character's psychological state.

Ingenuous design of small gesticulations not only helped Chen to attain psychological realism in performance, it also became the actor's unique solution to constructing typical characters that possess both universal characteristics of the landlord class and distinct personalities. Chen suggested actors shall deploy a small act, a brief dialogue, or a casual look at decisive moments of the narrative conflict to portray their negative characters. When delivered appropriately and effortlessly, these insignificant actions would not only give idiosyncratic expression to a certain negative character but also succinctly reveal his despicable soul. To Chen's mind, since such performance methods embody the aesthetic principle of realism – 'art typifies the essence of life' (1962c, 323), they offer an antidote to the two contradistinctive yet equally problematic ways of performing the negative characters – plain and dull rendition versus exaggerated and stereotypical presentation.

Although Chen embraced his negative characters in film performance, he spared no effort to intervene in the then prevailing discourse of realist performance in order to create necessary critical distance between him and his character. In an essay written for *Masses Cinema* in 1962, Chen puts forth his notion of 'negative pedagogy' (*fanmian jiaoyu*), which serves as a powerful metanarrative frame for his villain performance. The article details how

he had become willing to play the negative characters, particularly the impact of his political epiphany on his perception of villain performance. Chen confesses that when he was a young theatre actor in Yan'an, he was initially reluctant to play the evil landlord Huang Shiren. He grumbled about the work assignment, was worried about his professional competence, and was even concerned about the repercussion of playing the negative characters on his career development. To straighten him out and to ensure timely rehearsal of *The White-Haired Girl*, Chen's comrades from the performing troupe urged him to study Mao Zedong's 'Talks at Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art', in which Mao calls for cultural workers to adopt correct attitudes to create works that satisfy the needs of the masses. According to Chen, after reading the document several times and having examined his thoughts against it, he came to a sudden realization that 'whether playing positive characters or negative characters, it is first and foremost a glorious political task given to an actor' (Chen 1962b:12). With this new understanding of the political importance of one's artistic performance unleashed his enthusiasm for work and his creative energy. Chen started to adopt bold and fresh methods to portray Huang Shiren on stages, hoping to disclose 'the ruthless nature of the despotic landlord class', to arouse hatred among audiences, and to agitate them to overthrow the landlord classes (Chen 1962b:12).

As it was published in *Masses Cinema*, Chen's self-reflection may well be a self-conscious textual performance interpellated by the CCP's official ideology and hence needs to be taken with a grain of salt. Nevertheless, his account deserves attention for three reasons. Firstly, it discloses political subjectification as a process of complex negotiation between individual agency and political ideology. Instead of accepting Mao's talks as a call for compromising artistic standards, Chen discerned the possible reconciliation of his artistic aspiration and political obligation, and the commensurability of the artistic value and the political significance of performance as well. Secondly, this self-reflective narrative broadens the discursive framework of performance from an artistic one to a political one. In Chen's conception of 'negative pedagogy', an actor's role should be defined in a larger political culture as an embodied pedagogical agent who generates desired political feeling through their compelling performance and stimulates audiences' voluntary political thinking. By emphasizing the importance of affect in political education, Chen was able to affirm the necessity of well-crafted artistic performance. As he maintained, while actors who are cast in the positive roles shall feel content when their performance elicits great sympathy and identification from the audiences, actors who play the negative characters shall pride themselves on exciting immense hatred among the viewers. This is because such responses confirm the excellence of their performance (1962b:12). Lastly, with his notion of 'negative pedagogy', Chen carefully shifted critical attention from immediate theatrical presence to the issue of theatrical enactment and strategically called attention to the actors' double role as an essential medium of film narrative and a pedagogical agent of Party politics. In so doing, Chen successfully established a critical distance between him and his roles. Consequently, this opened up a space for audiences to acknowledge their ambiguous viewing pleasure of Chen's performance, a pleasure that oscillates between fascination and aversion—fascination with Chen's nuanced, three-dimensional performance and aversion to his morally despicable screen roles.

Conclusion

As this paper has shown, Chen Qiang's villain stardom is an aberrant case in a galaxy of film stars in Chinese cinema. Defined largely in affective terms rather than by structured polysemy of star image, Chen's stardom reveals the imbrication of political art and affective politics in the early PRC and unveils a hidden link between the CCP's use of affect and its exercise of power. To be sure, politically framed site-specific performance and film exhibition practices contributed greatly to the affective operation of Chen's performance and led audiences to feel their way into political thinking, thus establishing the actor's reputation as a remarkable villain actor. Chen's metanarrative of his villain performance as negative pedagogy in the early 1960s, which powerfully intervened in the predominant discourse of realist performance that conflates actor and his character, not just offered a political articulation of professionalism but also carved out space for audiences to engage with aberrant stardom within Chinese socialist cinema.

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