Today, who can imagine people giving up their negative freedom to follow a charismatic leader advocating a people's democracy? . . . The age when people would sacrifice their secular happiness for utopian ideals is gone. Now, the opposite holds true: People are willing to abandon any and all ideals in the name of realism.

—Gan Yang

Work in New Era Culture

It should not be surprising that Maoist concepts of work have been prodded and poked, renegotiated, and even thoroughly dismantled in New Era fiction and film. The worker loyal to the state and motivated by ideas of self-sacrifice for the common good has been replaced by all kinds of self-centered or simply disengaged working people. The very idea of the worker does not really fit the new image that has appeared because work, which under Maoism was at the core of the central notion of serve the people, in more recent representations is not necessarily at the crux of social or personal identity production, but rather simply a site among many—and not necessarily the most important one—where the self is formed. In many cases, emphasis moves from the work and its results to this self and its formation and existence in relation to work. In the post-Mao period, this self often is highly gendered, and the Maoist (theoretical) emphasis on non-gender-specific labor is rejected.
After Mao's death, writers and filmmakers immediately set out to deconstruct the revolutionary worker and the idea of work itself. In the literature of the wounded (shanghen wenzue) of the late 1970s and the early 1980s, we start to see the Maoist worker represented, but the idealism that sustains him or her has been gutted by the violence of the Cultural Revolution and the corruption of the state. In Wang Meng's 1979 Buli (Bolshevik salute), Zhong Yicheng actively looks forward to his late 1950s rehabilitation through labor and gushes romantically about the pleasure and value of hard work:

Work, work, work! Millions of years ago labor turned monkeys into humans. Millions of years later in China, physical labor was exercising its great strength to purify thinking and create a new soul. Zhong Yicheng deeply believed in this. . . . He scooped feces out of latrines. The smell of feces made him feel glorious and peaceful. One bucket after another, he mixed the liquid with earth, feeling from his heart that it was really and truly delightful.

Zhong recalls the morning struggle, afternoon struggle, and evening struggle—political/military terms used to describe the extra labor heap on by bad elements. He experiences some success in a system that uses categories to rank the elements based on their work. Wang Meng shows that the basic idea of reforming intellectuals through labor works, so to speak. Zhong's positive attitude and unstinting effort succeed in forging an emotional link between him and the peasants, and his labor gives him a new awareness. Zhong's disillusionment comes only when party hacks purposefully misinterpret his heroic fight against a fire. If only the party were more honest and less corrupt, Wang Meng implies, work would indeed cure intellectuals of real or imaginary attitude problems. The significant intellectual questioning that Zhong undergoes as he passes through various phases of contemporary Chinese history exists only for the male protagonists, and the female characters function in subservient roles that the male can use to contextualize his own intellectual journey.

Another similar example that deals with elite rather than strictly manual labor is Shen Rong's novel Ren dao zhongqian (At middle age). Ophthalmologist Lu Wentai devotes herself heart and soul to her job, eventually suffering a heart attack because of overwork and bad conditions. The author points out party corruption as contributing to the situation, but most of the blame lies on the lack of modernization that party control has produced. In this novel, as in Buli, the protagonists are true believers in the value of work, and their identities are formed largely within their practice and conception of work. While Shen Rong portrays some work-related problems as gender based, she does not bring out these issues as much as does Zhang Jie, who in her long novel Fangzhou (The ark) shows a highly gendered work environment in wh
women are subject to any number of abuses. Although her three female characters work hard and hope to achieve worthwhile accomplishments, there is little chance that they will be able to function successfully in the masculine power context that work really is. Far from being an idealistic realm where the people can be served, work is an arena where male bias against women and general social prejudice can flower.

In his writing about intellectuals sent to work in the countryside, Zhang Xianliang pushes aside the lyrical qualities associated with hard labor that Wang Meng exploits, drawing a stark line between physical work and intellectual endeavors, which he portrays as much more profound and pleasant. Basically rejecting the Maoist work-cure, Zhang also shifts the locus of identity construction out of labor and into sexual relationships and philosophical thought, expanding a trend that only deepens in the next twenty years. For Zhang, however, the agency in this redefinition always is ascribed to men; women function as convenient sexual or intellectual catalysts that allow the culturally important males to proceed along their road to self-understanding. Furthermore, the entire process whereby males figure out a way to gain power through sexuality and intellect is presented as crucial for national renewal. As for Zhang Jie, work is gendered at its most profound levels, but Zhang Xianliang promotes rather than critiques this gendering.

The most radical deconstruction of work came with the experimental writers—Yu Hua, Can Xue, Su Tong, Mo Yan, and others. In Can Xue’s enigmatic Huangni jie (Yellow mud street), a disturbing shell of socialist work structures remains in place to prick the reader’s expectation that some ordinary narrative and social progress may occur. Although committees meet, leaders convene, and typical work strategies of procrastination or indecision are in full effect, the point is not so much that nothing is accomplished as it is that these strategies are part of a larger set of unrealistic but strangely logical and real relationships between people in all aspects of life. Yet with the significant exception of the writing of this one famous female experimental writer, the important actors in the experimentalists’ stories are usually male. For example, Mo Yan’s short Shenpiao (Divine debauchery), which is a direct attack on socialist working mores, features wealthy landowner Master Ji, who, through his aesthetic and spiritual immersion into flowers and his complete disregard for common morality or any kind of productive labor, accomplishes what the socialist system never could completely do: the redistribution of wealth to the poorest in society. The main character in Yu Hua’s Hebian de cuowa (Mistake on the riverbank) is a dedicated policeman who begins to investigate a crime only to slowly lose control over his internal narrative of clues, guilt, cause and effect, and social responsibility. Eventually the idea of work in its entirety disappears from the policeman’s mind, which is taken over
by a mysterious internal process. In Su Tong's Qiujie chengqun (Wives and concubines) and the Zhang Yimou film Dahong denglong guoguo gua (Raise high the red lantern) based on it, work recedes in importance until it virtually disappears, replaced by a sexualized and male-controlled, performance-based, and culturally inherited structure of power and oppression.

In recent years, critiques of work under capitalism have sprung up alongside those of work under socialism. In Zhou Xiaoming's film Ermo, a peasant woman extracts herself from traditional village noodle making to set up a modernized noodle factory in the city. Her work, originally fully integrated into the rural community, becomes focused on one goal—that of buying the biggest television set in the village—and in a symbolically significant act, she sells her own blood to get extra money. In this narrowing of work to its exchange value, or the capitalization of work, Zhou exposes the emptiness of the process and the impossibility of Ermo ever really catching up with the images that motivate her: another neighbor instantly proclaims that she will buy a set bigger than Ermo's. Because Ermo's husband is disabled, she takes over the entrepreneurial work, and at the end of the film we see a brief but disturbing image of Ermo awake while everyone else in the room has fallen asleep. Her dull stare at a screen that produces only static implies budding self-knowledge and an intuitive understanding that something has gone wrong. Here the director continues a twentieth-century tradition of granting heightened awareness to women and other characters on the margins of cultural creation. However, although women can identify problems, social gender restrictions constrain their ability to act effectively on behalf of constructing a viable future.

Recently, young writers also have incorporated work into their projections of a contemporary global lifestyle. For Chen Ran's ubiquitous female character Dai Er, work is something of a distracting nuisance that gets in the way of her sensations and thought processes—unless, of course, it can be refashioned as part of the new way of living. Generally Chen Ran presents long-term salaried work as restricting: the requirement of set hours, a regular schedule, and, most important, the elevation of work goals above these of lifestyle prevent her characters from achieving the freedom and independence that are the unspoken conditions to which they aspire. This limitation, however, is more serious for men, who cannot escape the strictures of responsibility and thus are not as capable of the floating existence as are women.

The Postman

One topic of the 1995 film Youchui (The postman) by sixth-generation director Huang Jianxi (Huang Jixian) is urban labor and its gendered meanings. Although
like many post-Mao cultural works, The Postman presents a world quite different from that in which concepts—not to mention practices—of nei and wai were clearly delineated, in subtle ways both the theme and the aesthetics of the film depend on a gendered narrative of labor. One important aspect of this gendered story is the film's perspective on generative social space, which is not overtly but rather covertly marked as male.

In a seemingly contradictory way, the film presents two takes on work. On one hand, it relegates work to a nonidealized sphere that is no different than that occupied, both mentally and physically, by the innocent but alienated city dweller. In this kind of work, women and men inhabit the same world and are separated only by different levels of skill, strength, and normative hierarchy. Work becomes a repetitive sensual experience of sound and motion, a cynical consciousness, and an attitude of detachment, just as those attributes are part of city life in general. At the same time, work and the workplace carry with them a trace of possibility reminiscent of the idealized work concepts of revolutionary culture. Although work is mandatory for everyone, the ability to conceive of and bring out its utopian side belongs only to the male protagonist, who through this identification takes on the weighty burden of helping others live a correct life.

The film's plot is confusing, and it is not always immediately clear who is speaking or acting, a technique that, we eventually realize, puts us into a position similar to that of the main character. The film demands some mental detective work on our part since we must put various apparently unrelated scenes, people, and words together to form a meaningful narrative. Xiao Dou, a young postal worker, is assigned to replace Lao Wu, who is removed from his position as letter carrier in Xingfu (Happiness) district because he has opened and read other people's letters. Shy and awkward, Xiao Dou lives with his sister in a large rundown house passed on to them by their parents, who died when he was young. His sister has a boyfriend who frequently visits and complains that she must give up this old house so they can get married and move into a modern apartment. The sister is reluctant to follow this plan as it will leave Xiao Dou behind alone. As Xiao Dou prepares to take over the route, a young and attractive female coworker, Yunqing, assists him and, not long afterward, seduces him.

Xiao Dou immediately follows in Lao Wu's footsteps in more ways than one, opening and reading letters he is supposed to deliver. He goes farther, however, and tries to intervene in people's lives in four instances. The first is that of a woman (Qiu Ping) and a man (Zhao Zeren) married to others but involved with each other. Xiao Dou anonymously writes to Zhao, threatening him with serious but unnamed consequences unless he ends the relationship and leaves all of their correspondence at a prearranged spot for pickup. The
second is the case of a prostitute, Wan Juan, who gets introductions to clients from a doctor, Qian Yuzi. Xiao Dou visits the doctor after he sees Wan Juan go in and then goes to see Wan Juan, claiming the doctor sent him. He says almost nothing and rushes out before any intimacy takes place. The third involves two young people, most likely a married couple, who have written suicidal letters to the man’s parents. Xiao Dou writes a new letter that describes in sunny terms how everything is fine and sends it with the pictures originally enclosed in the suicide letter. The fourth is the drug addict Zhang Xin, who is melancholy and violent over lack of news from his homosexual lover, Chen Jie. Xiao Dou, who has withheld the letters from Chen Jie, goes to Zhang Xin’s apartment, pays the rent so the landlady will allow him to enter, listens to Zhang Xin talk about his relationship with Chen Jie and what it is like to be high, and removes some drug paraphernalia when he leaves. He later sees Zhang Xin taken out on a stretcher. Previously, Xiao Dou confronted Chen Jie when the latter asked if there were any letters for him. Xiao Dou said, “You’re Chen Jie, aren’t you? A writer?” but did not respond when Chen Jie asked him how he knew this.

The film presents a depressing society chopped into small, isolated, reified units spatially and materially, and therefore psychologically, a situation experienced equally by the male and female characters. The only healthy way people living in this environment can connect is through organic links developed when they were children—and these eventually fail them—or through the indirect method of letter writing. Barriers in architecture, work styles, and social habits and at the very level of consciousness are rigidly enforced by various normative structures, and these are what prevent face-to-face communication. Yet people retain a desire for emotionally satisfying relationships with other human beings.

Although the film’s portrayal of work is, on the surface, almost opposite to what we find in ideal Maoist images, in Xiao Dou’s attempt to right what has gone wrong we see idealism underlying his concept of what work should be. The seemingly blasé work environment that has replaced the Maoist vision of passion and positive social change is actually a physical and mental space—the only one in the film, and one presented with both irony and hope—where positive social change can be conceptualized and put into action. This vision of what work should be, diluted though it is, is inherited as a residue from a long contradictory discourse of labor under Maoism that includes first a glorification, and second a political relationship to authority that demands a challenge to inappropriate power. The nature of this authority, however, has radically changed and is dispersed into the surroundings, also drawing the viewer’s attention to the issue of space. Space, I argue, is none other than this diffusion of authority.
Xiao Dou’s job as a postman gives him the opportunity to intervene in personal relationships, strike at the heart of what he finds wrong with society, and help forge proper connections between people. Although Xiao Dou cannot find a clear authority to challenge, his intervention, ideological in nature, proceeds as if there were one and replaces letter delivery as his real work. The letter becomes a double-edged representation of the spatial segmentation and inability of people to communicate and of the hopes that Xiao Dou invests in his work. As the film progresses, Xiao Dou refines his activities, which eventually meet with failure.

The opportunities offered by this special work space, which is both partially imagined and partially remembered by Xiao Dou, are part of a gendered cultural sphere. Xiao Dou is a contemporary antihero, now diminished in his abilities and sensibilities, who still takes on the burden of cultural construction and directs his actions toward positive ends. His goal is to act within the space that is the diffusion of authority and find a place where he can intervene. Women stand in a familiar position, representing, first, the possibility of a natural life of honest human affection and, second, a sexual route that also offers Xiao Dou a path toward increased understanding of his personal and social role. The women themselves have no ability to transcend or even imagine transcending the deadening social limits against which Xiao Dou struggles. The film takes a position on the contemporary debate about Chinese modernity, holding that there is little—but still some—hope for a social life based on revolutionary values to emerge, as long as at least one male actor within this sphere can retain a grasp on his ability to move others toward a positive goal.

The World Doesn’t Seem to Need Us Anymore

The film portrays contemporary Chinese society as a visually and more generally sensually oppressive set of small boxes. What we first see are slow and gritty shots of rundown apartment buildings as they actually exist in many cities in China. Doors and entryways—foregrounded throughout the film—are blocked by old bicycles, trash, and other items. Paint is fading and falling off, the ground is grimy and dusty, and smog hangs in the air, with four industrial towers in the distance taking up the screen now and then. Colors are brown, beige, dull olive green, and gray. The urban environment is almost completely without charm, and there is not a shred of romanticism in these images.11 We see Xiao Dou working with a chain and hoist to install a new post office box, a scene that also reappears at the end and anchors the preoccupation with work—physical and mental—that structures the film. Many
shots in the post office are close-ups of hands doing their regular work, stamping letters, sorting, and filing.

Although Xiao Dou’s job at this point is manual labor, when I say “preoccupation with work,” what I mean is not only the actual job of setting up post boxes and delivering letters but also the more abstract cultural work that lies behind Xiao Dou’s actions: the ideological work of social change and the demand for cultural improvement directed at males and taken up by Xiao Dou despite his obvious unsuitability for the role. The close-ups of Xiao Dou heaving the box into place, of chains, the weight of iron, and the difficulty of moving the box appear at the beginning and end of the film and form a frame for the plot. Although here what we see is the resistance of matter in work, we soon discover that the post office box is not only physically heavy but also endowed with special metaphorical meaning as a spot where a once-removed (not face-to-face) exchange between people takes place. This world-space of human relations in the film has shriveled, it turns out, to the space occupied by this small circular container. The scene thus highlights both the physical labor of work and also its symbolic meanings; furthermore, we see that ideological work is also hard work. The sharply material images place Xiao Dou’s efforts and achievements, questionable though they are, within the context of a long discourse of ideologically meaningful manual labor.

He Yi’s approach, a kind of dirty realism, shows the grimy city and its dense structures at several points, but never directly implies that it once was otherwise, at least for adults. The camera tends to pan slowly from side to side or top to bottom over blocks of living quarters, lingering there and drawing our attention to their poor condition and deadening regularity, and there are many references to city life as ruins. For example, Xiao Dou’s sister lives in a large but dilapidated house that — judging from her constant attempts to get her brother and boyfriend to put on warm clothes — does not have central heating or adequate plumbing and bathing facilities. In the letter Xiao Dou writes to the old couple in their son’s name, he inquires about plans to tear down the neighborhood in which the parents live. And Xiao Dou’s sister’s boyfriend insists that the furniture in her house is too old and must be replaced with something modern, even though much of it is real wood, the sister protests.

Although He Yi does not present us with a vibrant world of human connections that once existed in older buildings and the social activities that took place in them (as, for example, in Zhang Yang’s 1999 film Xizao [Shower]), in his frequent straight-on pans across apartment blocks, in his centering of doorways leading from one space to another, and in the thematic elements discussed above, he brackets the division of space into unconnected units and replacement of the old by the new as an unsettling and unsatisfactory aspect of urban life. However, because the past exists not as any clear history or uni-
fied memory that can be manipulated into romance but rather as traces and
remnants—the repetition of the orchard story (described below), the orchard
keeper turned fortune-teller, the all-wood furniture inherited from parents,
and the soon-to-be destroyed neighborhoods—we can hypothesize that at
some point there either was a past different from the present, or that mini-
mally, there now exists a rapidly fading memory of a time when everyone
thought things could, should, or would improve.

Another aspect of this urban fragmentation and disintegration is a myste-
rious underlying violence that sometimes breaks through the surface. Our
first glimpse of this violence is Lao Wu being forced roughly into a car and
taken away after he confesses to opening mail. Following shortly is a scene
of a man running with several others chasing and yelling at him. Xiao Dou is an
observer who makes no move toward intervention and expresses no emotion.
At Xiao Dou’s home, we see the unhappiness of his sister’s boyfriend, who is
adamant that they must move into the new apartment that is waiting for
them. Lack of privacy is obvious, as the doors in the old house even when shut
are effectively kept open by windowpanes in the top half. It is awkward for the
couple to interact sexually with Xiao Dou in the house. Noises travel freely
and quickly, and we see Xiao Dou listening to his sister and her boyfriend as
they make love, and even peering through the window blinds. At the end of
the film, a mysterious scene with Xiao Dou’s sister crying in the background
and her boyfriend yelling, “Cry! Cry! Can you ever stop crying?” as he kills and
chops up a chicken for a meal again reveals a barely covered hostility and ag-
ger, with no clear explanation.

Other than the relationship between Xiao Dou and his sister, we see very lit-
tle warm human interaction, implying that the depressing environment has
infiltrated the consciousnesses of the people who inhabit it and violence is
most likely far from unusual. Yunqing seems to be more interested in sexual
satisfaction than in any long-term emotional relationship and calmly tells
Xiao Dou that her sexual encounter with post office manager Lao Liu half a
year before was the same as her encounter with him.13 Lao Liu compliments
Xiao Dou on his work but maintains a distance. Xiao Dou’s sister’s boyfriend
offers him a cigarette, but otherwise there is almost no interaction between
them. Xiao Dou fails to make a real connection with any of the people whose
letters he intercepts, although he desires communication. Even the party for
Xiao Dou’s sister and her boyfriend as they are preparing to get married,
which should be boisterous and fun, suffers from stiltedness, and the party-
goers complain of a lack of liveliness. Their solution, to take a picture, only
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boyfriend; the shot shows the sister and her fiancé standing next to each other
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The isolation of the characters is obvious, yet there is no clear cause presented within the film, nor does the film point to any authority responsible for the situation. Although we observe a few examples of the law stepping in to enforce social stability, for the most part what we see is a system of normative regulation that, like the repetitive pounding of cancellations that is the overwhelming sound of work at the post office, simply reproduces itself. The beauty within human society, the film implies, has been overwhelmed and subdued; the routines of daily life and the demands of a large population within a small space could be at fault, but the film does not exactly make that connection either. This portrayal is not unusual in modern film or literature. To bemoan, even subtly, the effects of modernity on human society has been a major cultural theme in the twentieth century and today. Yet one thing that makes He Yi's film interesting and unusual is its implied connection with and commentary on the Chinese revolutionary past in the pinpointing of work as a site where idealistic action can still be imagined and even, to a small degree and with questionable success, undertaken. The agent best suited to continue the positive aspects of the revolutionary past does not need to be a strong role model, but, as I discuss here, he must be male.

Latter-Day Confucian, New Age Maoist

What rather quickly becomes clear about Xiao Dou is that by contemporary standards he is almost dysfunctional. Bereft of friends, the only person Xiao Dou is able to talk to is his sister. This link, which often consists of chatting about a peach orchard that they frequented as youth, their fear of the orchard keeper, and their failure to taste a peach despite many attempts to steal one, borders on incestuous. Indeed, toward the end of the film we see Xiao Dou and his sister making love in a bed with the "double happiness" characters on the wall above; clearly this is the marriage bed of Xiao Dou's sister and her husband. As they lie in bed, a shocking admission floats out: although we are too far away to see moving lips, we hear the sister's voice as she states that she once was in the orchard without Xiao Dou and did taste the peaches all that. The comment about the orchard comes after several similar references at different parts of the film and the repeated statement that neither of them ever tasted a peach.

The meaning of the orchard is unclear, although the mysterious, exciting, and forbidden context, the reference to a torn skirt and blood running down the girl's leg, the constant desire for a peach that underlies their visits to the orchard, and the admission of a secret taste imply a sexual significance. At the same time, the tale of the orchard is the one Xiao Dou and his sister love to
share, suggesting that the orchard represents a private, preadult, idyllic childhood relationship. These idyllic childhood days are over, their close relationship is about to be terminated (she is about to get married), and now the pleasant memory of those times also is destroyed through this new revelation (that the sister did indeed taste a peach). Her admission of previously undisclosed experience could be interpreted as a statement that she has had other sexual experiences and also as a betrayal of their special past together.

We do not discover with whom, if anyone, Xiao Dou's sister had a sexual relationship, but another mysterious character drawing Xiao Dou's attention is the orchard keeper, who now has become a fortune-teller and banana vendor on the street. When Xiao Dou sees the man telling a fortune, he brings himself close and studies the man's face, and later the camera focuses on the fortune-teller's impassive expression as he reorganizes the bananas in front of him. Because Xiao Dou's sister did taste a peach after all, and because it was the orchard keeper who supposedly had prevented her and Xiao Dou from taking a peach, a vague and imprecise connection is proposed: as a child, was Xiao Dou's sister bribed with a peach to have sexual contact with the orchard keeper?

Thus, Xiao Dou's relationship with his sister, although deeply emotional for both of them, joins the other modern relationships as abnormal by ordinary social standards. In its many sexual references and sense of scurrying around the issue of sexual relationships, the film picks up a commonly heard complaint in the post-Mao days: under Maoism, sexual desire was suppressed by the state and repressed in each person, and this long-lasting suppression is still influential in affecting attitudes toward sex. He Yi participates in this interest by highlighting sexual motivation behind many events. His main character has sexual difficulties that within psychoanalytical theory may appear to be perversion or repression. For example, Xiao Dou watches his sister bathe through a window, and although he is first afraid when Yunqing kisses him, it does not take him long to respond actively and almost violently. Furthermore, three of the four situations in which Xiao Dou becomes involved—an affair between two people married to others, prostitution and pimping by a doctor, and a homosexual relationship between a drug addict and a writer—are concerned with so-called illicit sexual relationships, although in the case of the drug addict it is unclear whether Xiao Dou intercedes to "correct" the homosexual liaison or the drug use. The relationship between Xiao Dou and his sister, therefore, is not any different than the others.

My point here is that although sexual desire seems to be behind much of the action and clearly is important in some way, I do not see it as the main target of the director's concern. He Yi is not castigating sexual behavior as something that in itself has caused the dilemma, nor is abnormal sexual behavior a
clear result of excessive state control either now or in the past. Even more important, bringing sexual desire out into the open or centering it as a mandatory part of personal identity is not presented as an implicit solution to any problem presented in the film. We see no positive sexual models to which we as audience could imagine the characters aspiring, and the sexually “progressive” characters are as disturbed as anyone else. The director gives sexual repression as a concept pride of place, but not the power of origination, and it is here that his approach differs from that of many other films and novels that center sexual identity as something to be damned or praised.18

However, although the director is not making a statement about sexuality that corresponds to these more common interpretations, sexual relations clearly are of consequence in the film. Their importance lies, I believe, in several areas. First, sexual relationships are easily invoked as expressions of a more general desire that can transcend sexuality. What this film shows is that if anything has been repressed, it is not sexual desire but the idealism associated with a prior social life. Indeed, Xiao Dou’s tryst with Yunqing shows us what a simple task it is to become sexually involved, and Yunqing’s blasé comment about her sexual involvement with Lao Liu indicates no worry about sexual morality or fear of social condemnation. Yet achieving sexual pleasure does not make Xiao Dou any more content, and aside from Yunqing’s oddly expressed comment about how good she feels after sex with Xiao Dou, no character expresses the enthusiasm and excitement frequently associated with sexual desire and behavior. From the perspective of symbolic desire, we must place sexual desire within the larger concern of Xiao Dou’s social role and work before it makes sense; desire has been not only repressed and thwarted but also gutted of significance, and sexual desire can visually express and encapsulate that basic condition.

Second, from the larger viewpoint of gender relations, the film repeats and confirms a very conventional aspect of male-female sexual involvement. The relationships that Xiao Dou has with his sister and with Yunqing are similar to the relationships between central male characters and women in the films of Chen Kaige (with whom director He Yi has worked). For Chen, women always offer redemptive qualities that can help cure personal and social alienation in the forever-seeking male protagonists. To accept this comfort, however, means rejecting the most important male endeavor of cultural reformation and accepting a degree of social feminization, which is partially defined by freedom from this responsibility (and a corresponding lack of social importance).19

Along those lines, both Xiao Dou’s sister and Yunqing offer him a symbolic and practical way out of his predicament. The sister embodies an emotional connection that predates adulthood; it was set up before the uncomfortable
difficulties so obvious in adult relationships were in place. As a readily available source of labor to help with the tasks of cooking, eating, and wearing proper clothes, the sister structures daily life. This labor is significant not only in itself but also in that it presents a larger framework for work, which needs "something to come home to" as a counterbalance. Through her defining contribution, work is circumscribed and limited: it is not socially important so much as it is for the purpose of sustaining another life, that of family relationships. But if the sister wants to take up her own social role as a wife and transfer these services to her new husband, her relationship with her brother cannot be continued. However, she offers a replacement for all of her work when she finds an appropriate mate for Xiao Dou. As she brings in a sweater she is knitting for him to see if it is the right size, she broaches the idea of Xiao Dou going to meet a girl she has chosen. Her physical awkwardness and linguistic hesitation as she tests the sweater against Xiao Dou's body show that she is fully aware of the profound bond her action is breaking. She experiences great difficulty making the offer.

Yunqing, on the other hand, virtually throws herself at Xiao Dou, but her involvement lacks the deep emotional link inherent in the sister. What Yunqing offers is another balance that has the potential to redefine labor, possibly even more significantly than does the presence of a loving sister or wife at home. If Xiao Dou were to stay in Yunqing's world, work would not be just something to get away from as one goes home to a warm and caring environment, but it would itself become a site where new physical relationships can be negotiated. The office, in other words, would be redefined as a playground. Physical proximity allows sexual relations to be smoothly hidden under the movements, gestures, and language of work, which turn into both their cover and their necessary condition. In fact, in this model such actions are no longer simply labor, but become sexual in and of themselves. Negotiations and transactions do not have to proceed directly but can be carried out covertly, through the speech and acts that ostensibly are part of work. Even though Xiao Dou does not know Yunqing is attracted to him until she actually approaches, his lack of understanding comes from his innocence. If he were to accept this vision and become experienced in this form of work, he would notice another Yunqing's interest much earlier. This vision of work could easily displace both the family-life narrative and the alternative story that he eventually concocts and plays out through his efforts.

The fact that Xiao Dou has to be torn away from his sister, first by her agency and his passivity in finding him a mate and second by her admission that their past together has been based on a lie, shows that he is a severely weakened cultural hero. However, he is strong enough to realize that Yunqing does not offer him what he is seeking, and he is also strong enough to take the
crucial first step toward putting his idealism into motion. As in Chen Kaige's movies, although the film is informed by a basic misogyny that insists its conditions are mandatory, investigation of gender meanings is not central to its goal. The sex of the troubled agent in this fallen utopia is taken for granted; men hold in their hands and minds the power of cultural renewal, and women not only are excluded from this crucially important endeavor but also offer, in various forms, a dangerously alluring temptation that can cause the hero to veer from his track.

So the hero, surrounded and buttressed by, and even created against, tempting female-based alternative narratives, must be male. But what kind of a man is Xiao Dou? In many instances in the film, Xiao Dou's lack of basic social skills and fundamental inability to articulate his concerns are apparent. When Yunqing invites him out to eat and chat, he replies antisocially, "What's there to talk about?" His response to his boss's compliments on his good work is to look down silently. He runs off without doing anything after entering the prostitute Wan Juan's apartment, and he says almost nothing. And when he visits drug addict Zhang Xin, Xiao Dou cannot get a word out of his mouth. Yet within the context of the film, Xiao Dou's dysfunctional nature does not seem too extreme, because the camera work, slowly moving across cold, gritty streets and shabby rundown apartments, implies that the entire society is spatially depressing and mentally alienated. Such an idea comes across well in the sexual encounter between Xiao Dou and Yunqing: Xiao Dou's response to Yunqing's comment about sex being the same with him or with Lao Liu is to pick up a toy windup elephant in her apartment, wind it up, and watch it go through its mechanical movements, an exact expression of unthinking and unfeeling repetition.

Socially, what identifies Xiao Dou as a male hero is that despite his dysfunctionality, he is motivated by some notion of how things should be. He in no way directly expresses this desire, but we can intuit it from his actions. We see little hope for social improvement, or even any such concept, in the surroundings or the people who live in this society. Yet in all four cases in which he tracks people down through their letters and attempts to understand their lives, Xiao Dou creeps—or leaps—out of his observer status to get involved and set right certain perceived wrongs.

In the case of Zhao Zeren, the married man who is having an affair with Qiu Ping, Xiao Dou acts directly, writing to Zhao and urging him to consider several things: the cost of maintaining Qiu Ping's lifestyle, whether or not he could actually make her happy, and other vague but threatening consequences of their relationship. Although the letter is written anonymously, compared with his ability to voice (or write) his concerns in the other cases, here Xiao
Dou is fairly expressive. It is from this case that we can most directly see Xiao Dou’s desire to intervene. His ability to articulate his concerns exists only when he does not confront his targets face-to-face, however, and diminishes as the film goes on. As Yunqing states, it is hard to understand why people feel comfortable writing to each other but cannot directly state their feelings. Indeed, when Xiao Dou is with the prostitute Wan Juan, the elderly couple, the drug addict, and the novelist, because he cannot speak out, we cannot discern his rationale for visiting them. Without the first case to clue us in, we would not be able to tell what Xiao Dou is after.

Although he is weak and inarticulate, Xiao Dou uses the sterling opportunity presented by his work to straighten a society gone awry. His focus on proper relationships—of married adults (Zhao Zeren and Qiu Ping), of children to parents (the suicidal couple and their elderly parents or parents-in-law), between men and women (Wan Juan and her customers), and between (male) friends (Zhang Xin and Chen Jie)—makes his concerns strongly reminiscent of Confucian values, where these relationships anchor the morality of an entire society. Because Xiao Dou never explains his discomfort directly, we cannot fathom his exact objections to these relationships, but minimally we can see that all of the situations in which he has chosen to intervene to some extent fall outside conventional social morality. His own life is also in this category.

Xiao Dou’s sexual interest in his sister would make him only a very troubled Confucian. Regarding him as a New Age Maoist, however, illuminates the film’s strange and contradictory notion of gendered work and the relationship of work to social improvement. Anything attractive about work or labor has now been subdued both by the same forces that have produced an alienated population and by the disappearance of its glorification as a backbone of social morality in revolutionary culture. Yet with other social realms—family and sexuality—offering nothing other than diversion, it is work that retains for Xiao Dou the ember of revolutionary values. Another way to describe this situation is to say that when sparked by the efforts of a male cultural hero, labor’s lost ability to embody social improvement is restored. This narrative of work may have been open to both women and men when it was a strong revolutionary discourse, but now that it has faded to the point of disappearing, a male trigger must bring it back to our consciousness and present it to us as a social option. It also is worth noting that the new capitalist entrepreneurship, with all of its chaotic energy, does not so much as make an appearance—unless we consider the orchard keeper now turned into a street-side fortune-teller and fruit vendor, who does not in any way represent any redemptive possibilities. The traditional old post office, which has not mechanized or
benefited from even the most basic modernization, surely evokes an earlier period when state-owned industries based on the concept (if not necessarily the reality) of workers and the workplace serving the people was the norm.

The actual situation of workers in China is complex and a great deal has been written about their savvy and practical understanding of the highly romanticized discourse of the worker under socialism.21 The attitude of Yuning, for whom work seems to be nothing more than a way to sustain her life and a space where she can find sexual partners, may illustrate the post-Mao inheritance of decades of worker suspicion toward socialist labor fantasies. In this respect, Lao Liu also is an interesting character, for his attitude toward the workers under him contains a somewhat fatigued vestige of socialist paternalism. For example, Lao Liu responds in a semisympathetic fatherly way toward Lao Wu’s transgressions and urges him to accept the consequences. He uses concerned flattery to get Xiao Dou to help him set up the new mailboxes on a weekend, telling him that he is the only one around who knows how to do it and his services are indispensable.

With the near-total contemporary disillusionment of worker belief in the glory of labor, it is surprising to find a character motivated by altruistic social improvement. I believe Xiao Dou and his social improvement program derive from revolutionary culture, especially from the values associated with the model worker. One of the Communist Party’s most famous model workers, Lei Feng, now has a website (www.leifeng.com) with articles about the Lei Feng spirit, selections from Lei Feng’s diary, stories about Lei Feng’s life, and much more.22 The qualities of wholeheartedly serving the people and the party, of being a mere screw in the huge enterprise of revolution, the emotive intensity of loving and respecting one’s job all are listed. But it is selections from Lei Feng’s diary that most clearly depict the spirit of the socialist worker:

1 If you were a drop of water, did you moisten an inch of soil? If you were a ray of sunlight, did you brighten a patch of darkness? If you were a single grain, did you nourish a useful life? If you were the tiniest screw, did you maintain your position in life forever? If you wanted to tell me about certain ideas, did you spread those most beautiful ideals? Since you were alive, did you labor on behalf of those in the future, day by day making life more beautiful? I want to ask you, what have you done for the future? In the reservoir of life, we should not be just endless followers. (June 7, 1958)

Ah, youth, it always is beautiful and good, but true youth belongs only to those who struggle to swim against the current, who labor forgetting the self, who are forever humble. (October 25, 1959)
I must remember: “In work (gongzuo), we must learn from the comrades who have the highest enthusiasm; in life, we must learn from the comrades who have the lowest living standard.” (June 5, 1960)

Those who have no thought of themselves but only hold the People in their minds can surely obtain the highest glory and trust. And on the contrary, those who have only the self and not the People in their minds shall sooner or later be spotted out and rejected by the People. (March, 1961)

The most glorious thing in the world—labor (laodong).
The most thoughtful people in the world—laborers. (March 16, 1961)

[The People’s problems are my problems, to use a bit of my strength to help the People solve their problems is my responsibility, the place where I concentrate my efforts. I am a master, one of the great laboring masses, and conquering any bit of difficulty for the People is my greatest pleasure. (September 11, 1961)

One salient aspect of the Lei Feng myth is the intensity of emotions behind Lei Feng’s feeling for the people, brought out in a scene from the 1965 film *Lei Feng*: “At that time the sky was dark, it was pouring rain, the road was sticky with mud, and there was a long way to go, but Lei Feng first and foremost did not think of his own difficulties, but of those of others. He was full of limitless, burning love for the People, and without any hesitation carried the child for the woman and took them to their door.”

The familiar qualities of selflessness and self-denial, serving the people, hard work with no consideration of personal gain, exhaustion, or reward, identifying problems that others have and working to solve them, no concern with one’s own living standards, and faith in a better future and one’s own ability to contribute to it all have a resonance in Xiao Dou’s life. Like an overworked contemporary CEO or a tireless, earnest party cadre, Xiao Dou takes the office home with him, stuffing his drawers with letters to scan for people who need his help. He directs his own activity toward solving the problems he perceives others to have. Rejecting his sister’s attempts to find a girlfriend for him and initially, at least, showing little interest in getting involved with Yunqing, Xiao Dou appears to have no desire to improve his own standard of living or to strive for his own pleasures. As he tries to right the incorrect relationships he reads about in others’ letters, Xiao Dou is working for a better future for society at large. Xiao Dou’s latent idealism is expressed in the film not only thematically but also in a mystical ring of bells that occurs several times throughout the film and stands in marked contrast to the cold and unattractive daily-life reality that we see.
Lei Feng and Xiao Dou are both cultural figures who embody the male responsibility of social improvement and who show how work can—and must—be modeled and configured to meet that lofty aim. Compared with the historical Lei Feng and the image he projected, Xiao Dou has no visible passion or any clear ideological goal, yet his activities reveal similar ideals. The hidden nature of Xiao Dou's urges has a counterpart in Lei Feng as well; indeed, Lei Feng would never have been "found out" had it not been for his diaries, nor would Xiao Dou have been but for the film. The performance of political virtue, although criticized widely, appeared in this diary-losing form after Lei Feng's death as activists wrote and purposely lost diaries that they hoped others would find. Xiao Dou's activism likewise is hidden in his work, and he even receives praise from his boss for his excellent performance much as did Lei Feng—although Xiao Dou's ideological work is not what Lao Liu recognizes.

The film steers clear of several current approaches to culture. Critics have written about the nostalgia of recent years, when the ideals and passions of the revolutionary era are becoming disassociated from the violence and fear of the period and taking on a glossy veneer of attractiveness. The slogan "Make a revolution in the depths of your soul," the deep love for the people supposedly felt by model workers such as Lei Feng, the heartfelt loyalty expressed toward Chairman Mao in dances, declaration, and badge collecting all speak to an ethics of emotion, desire, and hope, qualities that may be somewhat more difficult to find in a consumer society where irony and self-consciousness are of paramount importance. Some believe that this lack has produced nostalgia for what many now imaginatively remember as pleasant and morally simpler days. However, it is difficult to envision He Yi's film as a nostalgic enterprise, because its relentless critique of contemporary culture never cracks open to allow that ray of escapist pleasure to emerge. The film's presentation of the past as a trace rather than as a fully imagined and embodied presence also does not lend itself to an interpretation of nostalgia as its primary motivation.

Another common topic is the moral decrepitude that comes with capitalist practices. Yet we can see that the lure of money and the decadent lifestyle does not entice Xiao Dou or anyone else in the film. Moreover, although we do see in the letters the strong need for human connection, the film is not suggesting that some recognizable aspect of society—corruption, greed, power manipulation—has caused people to lose a human essence, nor proposing a new humanism and subjectivity similar to that debated so actively in the 1980s. Although people have trouble talking to each other directly, in their letters they are full of easily described passion.
Xiao Dou's social intervention cannot be carried on face-to-face because the space available for this kind of direct action no longer exists. Likewise, the space available for any direct human interaction has shrunk, for reasons unclear. Although Xiao Dou has inherited a moral stance and a faint belief in his responsibility to act, the film presents no authority, reason, ultimate cause, or even suspicion of a spot against which he can organize his struggle. In place of the usual bogeys of evil, He Yi proposes this restricting spatial logic of human subjectivity, or the diffusion of inhibiting authority into the spaces in which people live. Although this filmic presentation of a problem has obvious relevance to actual urban society in China where space is at a premium, it is not precisely a realistic portrayal. Indeed, from the point of view of people taking pleasure in their lives and each other's company, and from the perspective of people talking to each other and communicating, the film presents things as much worse than they actually are. The attractive human energies of urban spaces—malls, discos, bookstores, department stores, sidewalks, theaters, food stalls, restaurants, stadiums, and so on—are always in full swing in reality but do not so much as appear in the film. The filming techniques, with their minimal camera movement and close-up attention to the disjointed movements of work, also do not project a sense of realism. The spatial dilemma is shown in the real-life separated living units and in consciousness that repeats in images of newly constructed apartments at the end of the film, but even more so it exists as a theoretical inquiry.

To imply as He Yi does that spatial organization has determined human consciousness and limited agency or even any thought of agency guts traditional ideas of authority, diffusing it into buildings, the ground, images in the sky, and the environment in general. As in many of the writings of the experimental writers, a specific history is no longer directly to blame; going a step farther, this director also portrays a material structure that weighs heavily against Xiao Dou's lingering idealism and dooms his project to failure. For Xiao Dou the body is culturally inscribed and the mind and heart are culturally inscribed; even worse, however, there is almost no place that is not inscribed by this diffusion of authority. When Xiao Dou's actions fall short in helping any of his targets, and when his own relationships with his sister and with Yunqing do not present him with either motivation or self-understanding, we see that the film gives us not only no authority against which to fight, but also no forcefully presented solutions.

The film offers two ways to think of the work space and the worker—even if hidden, unarticulated, and dysfunctional—as a barely functioning site of social hope. On one hand, to propose a place so seriously compromised in recent Chinese history must be taken as an ironic smile, the gesture of someone who wants to believe but cannot find a thread on which to hang his faith. By
muddying Xiao Dou's idealism with murky issues of sexuality and the ideals of childhood, incest and revolutionary heroism, He Yi hedges his bet and plays to the knowing viewer. No one who has been through the Maoist period and the Cultural Revolution or even heard firsthand the stories of parents and relatives who labored in May Seventh Cadre Schools to improve their political standing would be able to transparently and instantly believe in the curative power of work. On the other hand, by undermining recent approaches to understanding the self and society common in film and literature, and particularly by placing at the film's center his studied investigation of authority and resistance—so central to twentieth-century Chinese cultural discourse—He Yi carves out a space that demands that Xiao Dou's moral activism be taken seriously. Common sense tells us that the shy and bumbling Xiao Dou, who can almost never directly approach the targets of his altruism and calmly discuss with them the details of and reasons for their situation, should take up his concerned sister's offer of an introduction to a suitable mate and get on with a regular life. Yet he rejects this road, turning his work into a sly new form of serve the people.

In beginning this chapter with a quote from Gan Yang critiquing Chinese conservatism in the 1990s, I inserted The Postman into the contemporary debate on intellectual politics. As Gan Yang details, the debate can be simplified into procapitalism and prorevolution poles that are argued theoretically, historically, culturally, politically, and economically, although the various arguments hardly fit together in a seamless whole. As Gan Yang states, the multiple aspects of the procapitalist line "do not even coordinate well with one another. Rather, they betray a social mood that relies on tacit agreement" (italics added) (47). With The Postman in mind, I would like to quote a section of Gan Yang's text that could easily be taken to describe the film rather than the intellectual atmosphere at large:

In my view, this conservatism is bound to devitalize and suffocate Chinese intellectual life, leaving it epistemologically torpid and regressive. In fact, intellectual ossification, stagnation, and cynicism may already have set in, as evidenced by the publication of The Last Twenty Years of Chen Yinke. Full of cultural narcissism and fatalism, this biography evoked widespread resonance and self-pity among Chinese intellectuals. It looks as if Chinese intellectuals have collectively reached a dead end, and all they can do now is to intone mournful elegies for dead masters.30

Although The Postman is not about intellectuals, it is an intellectual film that makes a proposal about everyday life, work, and the possibility of revolutionary idealism. Projecting a world in which all are resigned to their bleak lives to the point of unawareness of any possible other option, He Yi does in-
deed project "a social mood that relies on tacit agreement." The film's suffocating editing recognizes this resignation as absolutely pervasive, but Xiao Dou offers some small relief.

The debate on a possible Chinese alternative modernity often centers on the question of to what extent the revolutionary period should be thought of as integral to the Chinese modern. One approach, promoted by Leo Ou-fan Lee in his book *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930–1945*, identifies a modernity developing first in Shanghai, later in Taiwan and Hong Kong, and then once again in Shanghai as the concept leaps over the revolutionary period entirely.31 Another approach has been developed directly by Liu Kang and more indirectly by a number of scholars working in literature, economics, political theory, and cultural theory.32 Arguing that revolutionary thought emphasizing equality, engagement, community, and cooperation has had a significant influence on the creation and experience of modernity in China, Liu Kang and others promote more intellectual awareness of this history and a commitment to its values. According to Zhang Xudong, the discourse of an alternative modernity or the "Chinese way" "keeps alive the suspended historic promise of bourgeois revolution and modernity, namely, the liberty, equality, and self-realization of mankind" and "the continued effort to extend the benefits of freedom (from oppression, deprivation, and coercion) and democracy to a perpetuated national and international underclass.” As such, this vision does not stem from a "utopian notion of History" but remains critical of the "disengagement from the commitment of the Chinese Revolution to the masses" that the economic reforms have put into place.33

*The Postman* presents us with an example of a bizarre hero who cannot think or act collectively, politically, or even with any clear vision of social improvement or moral right. Yet he develops a plan, and he acts on behalf of the social good and without thought to his own self-benefit. Within the context of the debate on Chinese modernity, what perspective does the film provide? Clearly He Yi is very critical of the society that has emerged in the mid-1990s. The reforms have produced not prosperity but a devastated urban environment populated by a people who are almost numbed into dullness and routine. It would never dawn on the characters to resist or even criticize the degradations of their social lives; for them, it is just daily life, and the masses have no awareness of anything else. The possibilities for change have almost evaporated, but they live on in an unlikely hero.

Whether this change should embrace gender equality at its most basic and generative level, however, is a question the film steadfastly declines to consider. *The Postman* takes for granted the belief that although all have been crushed into the same alienated and un-self-aware routine that has narrowed
their lives and robbed them of meaningful human communication, the
power to break through this monotonous world view resides only in men.
Xiao Dou is not as well-developed a hero as Lei Feng, but he still retains an
ability to perceive and act out a story of social improvement. Although this
narrative once may have been open to everyone, it now requires not merely
following a set role but actually conceiving and creating, as if for the first
time. Whether the social conditions are so desperate as to disallow the rad-
cal move of placing cultural creation in the mind of a woman or whether the
director simply cannot conceive of such a thing is unclear. While presenting
an original and thought-provoking vision of contemporary social life, The
Postman has little to offer women who envision for themselves a central role
in social construction.

Notes
2. It is important to note, however, that the Maoist model contained an inherent
contradiction between valorizing work, society, and others, and valorizing the self. As
the story of Lei Feng well shows, it was all too easy for the revolutionary worker to be
put forth as a model in diaries, poems, and images, and the following that Lei Feng
generated illustrated the fine line between promoting the socialized self and promot-
ing socialism itself. This contradiction was investigated in Cai Wei’s 1959 film Song of
Youth, where the protagonist fights an internal battle that wages true self-sacrifice
against self-glory in the name of sacrifice.
3. For this translation, see Wang Meng Bolihevik Salute: A Modernist Chinese Novel,
4. Published in Lianhe wenxue in 1992, Mo Yan’s Shenpiao was translated by
Andrew F. Jones with Jeanne Tai in Running Wild: The New Chinese Writers, ed. David
5. For a detailed analysis of this film, see David L. Li, “What Will Become of Us If
We Don’t Stop? Emo’s China and the End of Globalization,” Comparative Literature
6. See Wendy Larson, “The Self Loving the Self: Men and Connoisseurship in Mod-
ern Chinese Literature,” in Femininities and Masculinities in China, ed. Susan Browza
and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), for a dis-
cussion of the position of the marginalization of being female.
7. See Wendy Larson, “Women and the Discourse of Desire in Postrevolutionary
China: The Awkward Postmodernism of Chen Ran,” boundary2 41, no. 3 (Fall 1997):
201–24. For an example from Chen Ran’s stories, see “Ling yizhi er duo de qiaoji
sheng” (The sound of another ear knocking), Qianxing yishi (Hidden natures, lost af-

9. Xiao Dou, a damaged social innovator, has little agency of his own unless a door is opened on his behalf. The first opening is Lao Wu’s departure, and the second comes when Yunqing hands him a letter that has come open and asks him to re-seal it. He puts it in another envelope and rewrites the address on it. This letter turns out to be the first one that he opens and reads. By calling his attention to the letter, Yunqing has given him an opportunity to think of reading the letter and then to open it without detection and without direct deceit, since it was open anyway.

10. In her study of contemporary workers and their concepts of work and of themselves, Lisa Rofel comments that those raised on Cultural Revolution ideology believe that “struggle against improper authority is the singularly most important activity in life” (176). See Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China after Socialism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). The Red Guards are perhaps the most extreme example of a group motivated to fight against both conceptual authorities, such as feudal ideas and backward daily habits, and against those who represent authority, such as teachers or local leaders.

11. The only romantic image I could see was the older couple going out to take their birds for a walk. As we soon discover, however, their happiness is based on an illusion.

12. Several times we see people hesitantly approaching the box to mail letters and pausing, full of trepidation, before they drop a letter into the box.

13. In this scene, the camera is focused on Xiao Dou sitting on the floor in his underwear next to Yunqing’s bed. He yells out his question, “What was it like that time?” and we hear her disembodied response from a distance. The scene emphasizes Xiao Dou’s isolation and Yunqing’s lack of emotional connection. Although later in her bedroom she looks at Xiao Dou and comments about how good she feels, and then moves to caress and kiss him, we are unsure if Yunqing feels good because she is with Xiao Dou or because she has had a satisfactory sexual experience.

14. Such a sentiment is put into words by the letter from the young suicidal couple: “The world doesn’t seem to need us anymore” expresses their lack of a sense of positive social or physical space.

16. A lengthy shot of Xiao Dou and his sister talking as they eat is taken from a distance away and a little below, with the camera not moving during the conversation. The monotonous angle contributes to the general lack of liveliness in relationships, even in this one that is portrayed as more profound than others.

17. The voices of Zhang Xin and Chen Jie, which come out as Xiao Dou reads their letters, refer mostly to their love for each other, and thus it would make more sense that Xiao Dou is intervening because of the sexual relationship.

18. For a brief but illuminating discussion of the role of sexuality in the construction of the modern self, see Sussman, The Aesthetic Contract:

Eroticism will become a major metaphorical field for the exploration of a newly founded personal freedom. There is nothing "new" about assigning sexuality a certain centrality or essentiality in the unfolding of experience, as an ample body of poems deriving from Western antiquity attests. But there is a concentration of language in "The Canonization" and in others of Doane's lyrics that places eroticism and aesthetics in diplomatic, legal, and commercial contexts with specific nuances within an emerging modern age with an ideology of heightened personal experience. (81)


19. I have elaborated on these ideas in "The Concubine and the Figure of History: Chen Kaige's Farewell My Concubine, in Cultural Critique to Global Capital: Transnational Chinese Cinema, ed. Sheldon Lu (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 331–46.

20. Xiao Dou also writes to the elderly couple, but only in the name of their son.

21. Jackie Sheehan's Chinese Workers: A New History (New York: Routledge, 1998) details a long history of worker activism and an uneasy relationship between workers and authorities that spans the entire century. Sheehan also finds that although workers had to negotiate a position for themselves within socialist rhetoric about duties and their vanguard position, they generally took the concepts and ideas with a large grain of salt. Practical concerns such as working hours and conditions, wages, living and health issues, and access to various benefits were the motivation behind conflicts between workers and cadres, rather than ideological issues. In his analysis of biaoxian, or self-presentation, Andrew G. Walder (in Communist Neo-Traditionalism: Work and Authority in Chinese Industry [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986]) finds that, ironically, "it is the truly committed who must be the most calculating in their display of commitment" (146) and that there generally is deep resentment against "activists" who constantly try to present themselves as politically correct (166–69). Lisa Rofel finds that the group of workers who used "foot-dragging techniques" of resistance, or indirect techniques of subversion, were those who came of age during the Cultural Revolution, because those workers had developed a politics of authority that encouraged them to challenge improperly used power (Other Modernities, 174–75).
22. The website is hosted by the Wuxun dazhong zixun cuangbo youxian gongsi (listed in English as the Public Information Company); address, Yongan Lu #1, Xinwu qu, Xuxun xhi, Liaoning sheng; telephone, 0413-2628233; fax, 0413-2638730; e-mail, leifeng@www.leifeng.com. All translations here are by Wendy Larson.


24. See Walder, Communist Neo-Traditionalism, for a discussion of the anger that the blatant activist approach generated in other workers. It would be much safer to gain political recognition through a chance finding of a lost diary than through the daily performance of political virtue that angers colleagues so much.


27. A popular example would be Chi Li’s 2000 novel Lailai wangwang (Busy life) and Tian Di’s television series of the same name and based on the novel, which trace the moral downfall of a formerly upright man who once worked as a butcher and studied Mao’s writings in his spare time. Jia Pingwa’s famous Feidu (Abandoned city) also works along these lines.

28. For discussion of humanism and subjectivity in China, see Liu Zaiwu, Xingge zuhelan (On the composition of personality) (Hefei: Anhui wenyi chubanshe, 1999); also see Wang Jing, High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng’s China (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), chap. 1 on voluntarism and chap. 5 on romancing the subject; also see Kalpana Misra, From Post-Maoism to Post-Marxism: The Erosion of Official Ideology in Deng’s China (New York: Routledge, 1998), chap. 5. Humanism was proposed as a correction to Maoism throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s. The previously mentioned Bubi by Wang Meng, although still professing belief in socialism, has an underlying humanist message; Dai Houying’s Ren a ren (People, ah, people) (Hong Kong: Xiangjiang, 1985) is a key literary text in the promotion of humanism.

29. Wang Jing describes the preexperimental roots writers thus: “The body is culturally inscribed but the mind and heart are free” (High Culture Fever, 216).


31. Published by Harvard University Press, 1999.
