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Black as Coal: The Transcultural Travel of the Noir into Chinese Cinema

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In the dark underground of the mine shaft, Tang Chaoyang (Wang Shuangbao) and Song Jinming (Li Yixiang) ask their victim whether he is homesick, to which the answer is yes. They promise to “send you home” (*song ni hui laojia*), which is not a lie, because the phrase can be understood in slang as “to send you to death.” In one moment, the home that the migrant worker longs to return becomes his death. Yet this is not all. After the murder, Tang obtains monetary compensation for the death of the victim, for whom they faked the identity card so as to bring him to the mine as Tang’s relative. After this murder, Tang and Song leave the illegally operated small coal mine to look for their next victim and next job in another mine. Thus begins Li Yang’s (1959-) film *Blind Shift* (*mang jing*, 2001). Diao Yinan (1969-) opens up his crime story *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (*Bairi yanhuo*, 2014) with an equally disturbing, coal-related scene: On the black coal shipped by a freight train are some pale-colored, dismembered human body parts. They are being distributed to various production locations in the region.

I select the beginning of these two films to call the reader’s attention to the tropes of mobility and anonymity as well as violent crime in them. They are typical of the themes of the canonized American film noir of the 1940s and 1950s, but now find their Chinese root in the dark coal-related locations: the illegally operated small coal mine notorious for its inhuman working conditions and a factory district in north China. There workers not only deal with coal in the job, but sell themselves cheap, like coal, to fuel the fast economic development. The tropes of mobility and anonymity in these films articulate their senses of dislocation, disenchaisement, and alienation. This paper focuses its analysis on how mobility and anonymity destabilize and dislocate social relations, in particular family and sexual relations. In their exploration of the unseen and unseeingly side – for example, poverty and violence – of the economic miracle in postsocialist China, this paper attempts to argue, these two films demonstrate the transcultural travel of the noir into Chinese cinema.

1. The Noir on the Move

The category of “film noir” is notoriously vague. The term originated not from that of a film genre but from that of a critical category. It was first used by French film critic Nino Frank (1904-88) in his review essays in August 1946, where he saw “a new, darker quality” that differentiates some postwar American films from those made by Hollywood major studios.1 *Panorama of American film noir* (1955) penned by Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, on the other hand, attempted to define film noir as a mood and a zeitgeist as well as a genre – “a group of nationally identifiable films sharing certain common features (style, atmosphere, subject).”2 They notice its destabilizing effect on the viewer which generates a profound sense of

1. William Luhr, “Chapter Three: Critical Overview,” *Film Noir* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012) pp. 50-72. The five movies Frank believes to represent the features of film noir are: The Maltese Falcon, Laura, Murder, My Sweet, and Double Indemnity. In Luhr’s view, Frank’s use of film noir “carried with it associations of ‘black’ French films of the 1930s (such as Marcel Carne’s *Hotel du Nord*, 1938, or Le Jour se lève, 1939) as well as Marcel Dulhame’s *Serie Noire* books, which were largely translations of British and american crime novels that Gallimard began publishing in 1945.” Luhr, 51.

2. Luhr 52-53.
appear. The mine shaft is the underworld crime scene, but the story can also be seen as one of the crime on the road, made possible by the mobility and anonymity of the characters. Tang and Song are migrant workers who want to make quick money. They go from one private coal mine to another to sell theirs labor cheap and look for their victims at the train/bus station, where plenty of new migrant workers are looking for jobs. They take the identity card for the victim – and possibly for themselves, too – before bringing him to the next coal mine. Their geographical mobility as migrant workers instead of promising possibility of upward social mobility, rather brings dislocation and alienation. They leave their hometown and family. No one knows and cares who they are. They thus take advantage of their mobility and anonymity to commit crime, turning their equally disfranchised peers into anonymous victims.

Standing in the center of their crime is the dislocated and displaced “family” relationship made up of strangers. Like other migrant workers, Song and Tang maintain the relationship to their real families through financial support and long-distance calls. As part of their criminal plan, however, one of them always faces a family tie with the victim. They also do not have normal husband-wife relation. This relation is with the victim. When Tang and Song pick up Yuan Fengming (Wang Baoqiang), a sixteen-year-old boy looking for his father and a job, as their victim, the tension in these dislocated relations arises.

The fact that Fengming might be the son of their last victim -- a fact never clarified in the film -- boths Song and his disagreement with Tang leads to the major suspense of the film: will Fengming be killed? As the story unfolds, the fake uncle-nephew relation between Song and Fengming reciprocates into a displaced father-son relation. Fengming’s interest in reading and pride in his smart younger sister touch Song, whose major concern of his own son is his study at school. Notice the boy’s puberty curiosity of sex, Song brings him to the prostitute in order to make him “men.” The scene that Tang and Song become desperate when Fengming disappears on the market on their pay day is rich of implication on how one can read the desperation as both losing the child and losing the prey. The appearance of Fengming with a chicken in his hand, then, confirms the appearance of family, namely, he intends to express his gratitude to the two “uncles.” Song goes on playing his father role when Tang attempts to murder Fengming in the mine shaft. This leads to the escape of Fengming and the demise of both criminals, who do not have time to evacuate the shaft when dynamite is detonated. As a result, Fengming’s identity will never recover the compensation for the dead “uncle” whose true identity he will never know. The film ends with Fengxiang looking at the smoke rising from the crematory.

Most probably he is grateful to his foster uncle who refuses to “send him home.”

The concrete social contextualization of the criminals as disfranchised migrant workers offers a clear social critique of the political economy of postsocialist China, where social and economic inequalities are perpetuated instead of resolved. Li Yang’s particularity about “making it real” – using non-professional actors, natural light, real sound, no stops shooting locations, eye-level camera, etc. – forces the viewer to confront the unsettling violence and brutality.

Blind Shaft, in a way, is a film focusing on males: the violence takes place among men; the (displaced) family relation is that of father and son. The female characters are given little psychological depth: their existence serves to portray the male character. Black Coal, Thin Ice remedies this lack by centering its dark story around a woman, the laundry worker Wu Zhizhen (Kuei Lun-Mei), whose traits of the femme fatale – sexual mobility and manipulation – are revealed step by step in a subtle, subdued, and somewhat ambiguous way. As the opening scenes suggest: this is a story of dismemberment and disintegration: not only the individuals are displaced in one way or another, but the relations between man and woman are characterized by deception, betrayal, and death.

The film specifies the time of the story as between 1999 and 2004 and the location as in a factory district in North China. This combination helps the viewer to place the setting and the characters. She married a worker of a large position Wu Zhizhen’s economic and social standings. She married a worker of a large position Wu Zhizhen’s economic and social standings. She married a worker of a large position Wu Zhizhen’s economic and social standings. She married a worker of a large position Wu Zhizhen’s economic and social standings. Wu Zhizhen’s economic and social standings. Wu Zhizhen’s economic and social standings. Wu Zhizhen’s economic and social standings. Wu Zhizhen’s economic and social standings. Wu Zhizhen’s economic and social standings. Wu Zhizhen’s economic and social standings.

When the film opens, Wu Zhizhen is a 19-year-old migrant worker who identified herself as a cleaner, a job she was never trained for but which she has learned on the job. She does not work on the factory floor; instead, she works in a private laundry and food production factory. Often, Wu has to work long hours. The film opens with Wu Zhizhen’s perspective, the viewer first learns about Liang’s murder and then Wu Zhizhen’s work at the factory. The film shifts to Wu Zhizhen’s perspective to see how she is affected by the murder. Zhizhen turns Liang into a murderous stalker, who kills the man trying to have a relationship with his wife. Zhang Zili (Liao Fan) is the ex-cop who blames himself for the senseless death of his colleagues in their investigation of the 1999 dismemberment case, tries to do justice with Wu with the purpose of investigating all the family cases related to her.

Adopting Zhang Zili’s perspective, the viewer first comes to know Liang’s family. The family is a dislocated and displaced “family” relation composed of strangers. The family is broken by the murder of the mother, who was the glue that held the family together. The family is broken by the murder of the mother, who was the glue that held the family together. The family is broken by the murder of the mother, who was the glue that held the family together. The family is broken by the murder of the mother, who was the glue that held the family together. The family is broken by the murder of the mother, who was the glue that held the family together. The family is broken by the murder of the mother, who was the glue that held the family together. The family is broken by the murder of the mother, who was the glue that held the family together. The family is broken by the murder of the mother, who was the glue that held the family together. The family is broken by the murder of the mother, who was the glue that held the family together. The family is broken by the murder of the mother, who was the glue that held the family together. The family is broken by the murder of the mother, who was the glue that held the family together. The family is broken by the murder of the mother, who was the glue that held the family together. The family is broken by the murder of the mother, who was the glue that held the family together. The family is broken by the murder of the mother, who was the glue that held the family together.
accompanying danger visually and symbolically. When she says “do not follow me” again, it takes on new meanings: it is a warning for the man of the danger, but not necessarily a rejection; it can even be a flirtation, intending to increase the man’s interest in her; and most important of all, her repetition of this line suggests the impatience with her husband’s constant surveillance. The distrust and betrayal between man and woman points to the disintegration of family in the film. The wife of the first dead does not call the police after the disappearance of her husband, because she is convinced that he chooses to leave with a woman. Towards the end of the film, Wu Zhizhen is brought to the apartment, where she used to meet and then stabbed the man, to identify the crime scene. She narrates the extramarital sex and violence and illustrates the different furniture arrangement in the same space. Her description of the crime scene creates an uncanny double of the space at a different temporal point. The violent ghost inhabiting in the double unsettles what appears to be a normal family – a young couple expecting a baby – and their life in the present apartment.

3. Conclusion
In summary, this paper attempted to demonstrate that Blind Shaft and Black Coal, Thin Ice represent two important moments of the transcultural travel of the noir into Chinese cinema. They bring the Chinese noir into being, which is thematically obsessed with and anxious about violence, which destabilizes family relations and sexual relations. Such violence results from social injustice and economic inequality, geographical and social dislocation and alienation, which are represented in the films in the tropes of mobility and anonymity. This is the noir of postsocialist China, offering critique – but not rejection – of China’s relentless pursuit of economic development and warning the possibility of the Chinese Dream turning into nightmare. Outside the diegesis, these films form part of the transcultural communication network of film noir, which boosts their international reception by the market and the critic.

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