

Chinese Working-class Identity in the Piano in a Factory

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Abstract: *The Piano in a Factory* (2011) is a Chinese award-winning social realist film on working-class life. Set in the 1990s when state-owned enterprises laid off over 20 million workers in enterprise ownership reform, it tells the story of Guilin Chen, a now unemployed iron-and-steel worker, struggling in his divorce for the custody of his musical daughter, who wishes to live with whoever can provide her with a piano. Lacking money to secure custody, Guilin managed to make a piano from a heap of scrap steel together with his loyal workmates to fight for a father's dignity. The film explores the crisis in masculinity resulting from the collapse of old industrial base and revives workers' past glory, dignity and community spirit in a nostalgic and utopian manner. This paper explores the major themes on working-class identity and analyses the identity change from a cultural studies perspective. It argues that the shift from proud workers to reform victims is closely associated with the Chinese economic reform ideology. In arousing sympathy for and bringing dignity to the working class, the film is an elegy for a glorious time passed and represents the hard effort of an independent director to call society to its humanitarian consciousness.

Keywords: *The Piano in a Factory*, laid-off workers, masculinity crisis, nostalgia, identity, ideology

1. Introduction

The Piano in a Factory (2011) directed by Meng Zhang is a Chinese award-winning social realist film on working-class life. Set in the 1990s when state-owned enterprises laid off over 20 million workers in enterprise ownership reform, it tells the story of Guilin Chen, a now unemployed iron-and-steel worker, struggling in his divorce for the custody of his musical daughter Xiaoyuan, who wishes to live with whoever can provide her with a piano. Without money to secure custody, Guilin makes an unusual decision to make a piano from a heap of scrap steel together with his loyal workmates to fight for a father's dignity. The film explores the crisis in masculinity resulting from the collapse of old industrial base, revives workers' past glory, dignity and community spirit in a nostalgic and utopian manner, and shows concern and pays tribute to the existential worries and hope of working class in a society of drastic economic changes. Nostalgic Russian songs and a **comic tone are used** to soften the harsh reality.

There have been a few reviews of the film. Xiaobo Wu, in "The Sorrow of the Chinese Working Class," provides us with the background information concerning enterprise ownership reform and the miserable effect on the laid-off workers in northeast China. He shows great sympathy for the workers who "did not commit any errors, but had to withstand the reform cost" (2011, para. 8). Hanmo Zhao's "Lost Class" (2011) also focuses on background information

and tells more about the director's intention in making such a film. Yunlei Li's "Workers' Life, Historical Change and New Possibilities" analyses the implications of piano making in the context of historical change. Li sees piano as an image of middle class taste, the community spirit as "class-brother" relationship, and suggests that the film is a critical introspection of reality, which leads people to think that the practice of increasing efficiency through laying off workers is worth reconsideration (2011, p. 71). Xiaolei Liu's (2011) interview with director Meng Zhang on the micro politics in his films offers the director's own explanation about some metaphors in the film. Making reference to the above literature, this paper offers a more comprehensive, systematic and deeper analysis of the working-class identity as represented by the film.

This paper explores the major themes of working-class identity through textual study and analyses the identity change from a cultural studies perspective. It argues that the shift from proud workers to reform victims is closely associated with the Chinese economic reform ideology. In arousing sympathy for and bringing dignity to the working class, the film is an elegy for a glorious time passed and represents the hard effort of an independent director to call society to its humanitarian consciousness.

2. The Story and Its Background

The Piano in a Factory tells the story of the making of a piano out of steel by a group of laid-off steelworkers in northeast China. The protagonist Guilin Chen (played by Qianyuan Wang) used to work in a foundry plant of a large state-owned iron-and-steel enterprise, but he and his wife, together with many workmates, have all been made redundant. While Guilin's wife runs away with a man who makes a fortune by selling fake medicine, Guilin, as he can play accordion, forms a small band with close friends and his lover Shuxian (played by Hailu Qin) and performs in weddings, funerals and shopping promotions for a little money. The wife now comes back to ask for a divorce as well as the custody of their daughter. When the latter demand is refused, she proposes that they let the daughter decide. The primary-school girl who is passionate about playing piano appears very realistic; she would choose to live with whoever can provide her with a piano. In order to keep his daughter, Chen first draws a piano keyboard on cardboard and helps the daughter to practice by humming the tune. Then he tries to borrow money from his generally hapless workmates and relations, yet gets nothing. Later, he organizes his fellow mates to steal a piano from a school and is taken to the police station. When all attempts fail, the only way left is to make his own piano, enlisting the help of his loyal and skillful friends. Engineer Wang draws the design. After forging, casting, polishing, and much more delicate work, a "steel piano" is created in an abandoned workshop. "Daddy, can the piano you made me make sound?"¹ asks the daughter. With piano-makers nervously standing by, the daughter plays a beautiful tune. The story reveals to us the working-class condition in the post-socialist period.

The story was set in the 1990s when China was transforming from planned economy to

¹ All quotations without citation are from the film itself.

market economy and undergoing enterprise ownership reform. In the government's effort to revitalize the state-owned enterprises, those big and important state-owned enterprises were changed into share-holding companies with majority shares under state ownership and continued to enjoy policy favors, but the vast majority of small and medium-sized ones were sold completely to private hands or had their majority shares sold to existing managers. Reform after 1996 quickly reduced the number of workers in state-owned enterprises from 72 million to 29 million (Chen & Che, 2010, p. 74). Many workers were directly transferred to the private sector; but still millions were laid off. With no social security system in place at the time, most workers were paid with a humble sum based on the years they had served, and thrown back into the society. Official statistics showed that between 1998 and 2003, laid-off workers from state-owned enterprises amounted to as many as 28,180,000 (Sun & Guo, 2010, p. 146). The old working-class communities were shattered and their life became a hard struggle.

The story is based in Liaoning Province, northeast China, which used to be the country's most significant heavy industry base. Iron-and-steel industry occupied a key position and a Soviet-style planned economy system was most comprehensively developed in Shenyang, the capital city of the province. The director of the movie, Meng Zhang, who comes from northeast China, has a good memory of the numerous smokestacks in Shenyang. The three smokestacks of the smelter, each over a hundred meters high, simply became the landmark of Shenyang and the signpost for going home. But they were all removed in 2004. For Zhang, "steel" and "laid-off" are two unavoidable topics. Seven members in his extended family once worked in Liaoning Iron-and-steel Factory and the Tiexi Foundry. These became the source of his creation ("Three Northeasterners," 2011, para. 16). Location shooting was used.

3. Major Themes on Working-class Identity

The film begins with Guilin's wife returning to him asking for divorce and the custody of their daughter. Their conversation is set to take place in front of a run-down construction—a weighing station. The station has two rain covers, one on each side, like two wings. One rain cover has been reduced to fragments, but the other is still in good shape. So it looks like "one wing is fully-fledged and the other can no longer fly." According to Zhang, the director, these two wings are metaphoric for the different states of Guilin and his wife. The wife represents the power of capital, while the husband has only the bones left (Liu, 2011, p. 90). The whole scene suggests that the doom of their marriage "is closely related with the overturning of original values in Chinese society" ("Elegy," 2011, para. 4). After this scene, we see Guilin playing the accordion and performing the sad Russian song "Troika" with his team for a funeral. Then the funeral worship stage freezes in the middle of two large smokestacks for up to 30 seconds, during which time the names of production team are shown. With this beginning of divorce and death indicating the demise of the old industrial base and an era, the audience is confronted with the fate of a working class hero and his mates, in which the following themes on working class identity are presented.

3.1. The Erosion of Working-class Pride and Masculinity

The film presents numerous images of abandoned factories, shabby workers' residential areas and a run-down cinema, conveying a bitter mood of the collapse of an industrial base. The reform and the shift in industrial pattern have destroyed the city's prosperity and its steel industry, leading to erosion of working-class pride and masculinity and frustration about working-class fate. There is a central connection between unemployment and working-class disempowerment.

Guilin used to be a proud member of the glorious working class. In him we see a reflection of some outstanding characteristics of Chinese workers of the passionate heavy industry era: well-skilled, intelligent, hard working, living a tight life, caring for the old and the young, practical and a bit cunning. But now Guilin and his mates have been made redundant. Losing the collective backing of the work place, they are robbed of their high spirit and confidence. The reform has made them useless, helpless, anxious and pessimistic.

Caught in the swift wave of change, what can they rely on to safeguard their spiritual pride? Obviously, nothing. To make a living for survival becomes their most urgent concern. With little social relations or skills, they can only do whatever they can for some money. So we see Guilin forming a small band with a group of musically talented mates, performing in marriage ceremonies and funerals in the street, playing the songs reflecting past glory. His lover Shuxian acts as a singer of the band. Big Liu becomes a pig butcher and pork dealer, running his "pig-killing enterprise." Brother Ji, in the air of a gang leader, is leading men in digging scrap metal while doing some dark dealings on the remains of the old factory. Fast Hand, so nicknamed for his past thefts, is using the technique trained in the factory to copy keys for people, alone by himself in a tiny box space. For these laid-off foundry colleagues, all their past glory has derived from their status as skilled working-class; all their present frustration is because this proud identity of theirs has been completely set aside in the wave of reform.

It is the working class themselves who were expected to liberate their mind to do whatever was available, no matter how low the payment and esteem could be. In the film, Guilin's sister talks about the collapse of her husband's factory. The brother-in-law is an excellent carpenter, so Guilin suggests that he could look for jobs in interior decoration. The sister explains that carpenters from north China are thought to be less delicate than those from the south and are less favored, so Brother-in-law can only join to do odd jobs with low payment and he worries that "people would laugh at him." Hearing this, Guilin immediately offers to teach him the lesson: "How can you make money if you are afraid of being humiliated...If you worry about being laughed at, you'll never make a penny. You have to liberate your thinking before you can liberate yourself." Guilin himself is willing and prepared to do any job. When he visits Brother Ji and knows that those people selling lunch boxes around Ji's place have struck rich, he immediately asks for a favor: "Brother Ji, I could sell some lunch boxes too, right?" The offer is turned down by Brother Ji as "Bullshit. That's not work for men. Shame on you."

Life is hard for the laid-off workers. The factory residential areas look shabby. Guilin has lost his wife due to his poverty and is minding his daughter and his mentally deteriorating father alone. He brings a slice of pork to his sister, but it is stolen from the bicycle handle. Fat Head would rather be chased by three women than paying the 20 RMB (=USD \$3.5) mahjong

gambling debt, disregarding his male dignity. For the ownership of a hunk of scrap metal, Brother Ji's followers have a group fight to the extent of breaking a man's head and have to go to the hospital for stitches. With his wife gone, Guilin even learns to knit woolen underwear for his daughter. For Guilin, he is frustrated about losing breadwinning power, losing his wife and being unable to meet the needs of his daughter. His fight for the custody is not only out of natural kinship affection but more out of defending his own dignity and ability. The two landmark towering smokestacks are finally blown up after much effort from workers begging for the tower to remain standing. For director Zhang, this image represents masculinity crisis: "Those two smokestacks symbolize the penis of the working class. Blowing them up is a castration of the working class and is to never let them stand up again." (Liu, 2011, p. 91)

3.2. Glory, Dignity: A Utopian Remasculinization

Guilin and his mates are small potatoes in society, but they had a glorious past when workers were treated as masters of the country and their contribution was duly acknowledged and respected. Although the era has been cruelly ended, the eagerness for dignity still exists at the bottom of their hearts. Thus, making the piano, a naïve and stupid idea for the many, becomes a tacit agreement, an opportunity to awaken their passion and a struggle to defend their dignity. "In a manner which subverts the normal and the logical, they engage in a collective action of dream fulfillment" ("Elegy of an Era," 2011, para. 6).

Making the piano is treated as something celebrative, so they explode firecrackers at the gate of the foundry before starting their work. Wang, a retired engineer, shows them the design drawing, and explains that a piano is made up of more than 8000 components—strings, the frame, the sound box, the sound board, the casing, the action, and etc. When Fat Head and Fast Hand quarrel and nearly have a fight, Brother Ji solemnly teaches them the lesson, "When you work, behave like you are working." In the process, they can't find the materials for a wooden framework, so Guilin decides to go for a metal framework instead: "After all, we know more about steel than wood." And he boasts, "What is a piano? It's just a machine that makes sound. We'll overcome all difficulties." Wang agrees, "We workers can do anything if we put our minds to it." In the workshop, each conducts his own assigned job with professionalism and serious look, accompanied by the background music of rhythmical Russian songs. When the police come to take Brother Ji away as he is ratted on for selling stolen goods, Ji's primary concern before he goes is to check that there is no problem with the sand mold he is making. In making the piano, they fully display their dignity as experienced skilled steelworkers. Thus the reconstruction of masculinity is achieved around their skills.

The collective "socialist" way of production has been criticized and negated as "iron rice bowl" and has lost its "legitimacy" in the market economy. Yet the film, in a fresh way, reminds us of the warmth and nice memories of that life style. But such reflection is achieved through the effect of triple dislocation. The workers continue the old behavior in a time and space which do not belong to them. The fiery working scenes are reproduced against the desolate factory, a contrast carrying strong ironical dramatic effect. Besides, the presenting of such scenes is accompanied by cheerful and nostalgic music. So when we feel close to the scenes, the artistic effect of music distances us from the "reality." Furthermore, the aim of their "uniting together"

is very much different from the past. Before they were laid off, they cast steel to contribute to the country or the socialist cause; now they are together only for the private purpose of helping Guilin to make a piano. The steel piano does not help to fulfill the wish of Guilin and his likes, but through the utopian heroism, “it tells this new world which has abandoned them what glory they had in the past and why” (“Elegy of an Era,” 2011, para. 9).

3.3. Nostalgia and Humor

The film is dominated by a nostalgic mood. The two big smokestacks of the foundry which are typical representation of the past industrial glory now become symbols of workers’ nostalgia to which they have strong attachment. They are even two years older than Guilin’s father. When news comes that they are going to be demolished, the workers try every means to appeal against the decision, writing petitions and signing with finger prints. Guilin holds that “If you want to stop them being demolished, you have to give them perceived value.” So he suggests to Wang, the engineer, that they can be turned into two missile silos, or rocket launchers, or even two abstract chopsticks to become a worthwhile tourist attraction. Soon, Wang convenes a big crowd of workers in the old factory house to talk about his designs to transform the smokestacks. On the blackboard are designs of giraffes, “Long March I” rocket, bungee jumping, and etc. Through Wang, we hear the most touching speech of nostalgia:

For some, they represent memories of growing up. For some, they are a signpost on the way home from work. For some, they are just two smokestacks. For me, they are like a long forgotten old friend. One day you hear that they are leaving, and it occurs to you that they have always been close to you. You don’t know whether to persuade them to stay or silently watch them depart. Suddenly, you feel indescribably sad, as if there’s something you should say, but you don’t know what it is. Time passes imperceptibly. Society changes, and the current march to development requires them to go. But we should always try, and if we succeed, they will be transformed into a beautiful attraction. If we fail, they will become our most treasured memories.

Nostalgia is also conveyed through the Soviet shadow. The innovative use of old Soviet pop songs as the soundtrack — tunes apparently fondly remembered from the Sino-Soviet friendship era, adorns the story with a nostalgic luster and makes it more emotionally appealing. The film is continuously dominated by old Soviet songs, e.g. “Troika” at the funeral in the beginning, the soundtrack when Guilin catches pond fish (as a gift for Engineer Wang) by killing them with explosives, when the team are immersed in their piano-making work, and when the group collectively help Fat Head to chase his teenage daughter’s irresponsible boyfriend. Wang, the engineer, is depicted as having received a university education in the Soviet Union. He is highly respected by female workers for his remaining single because of his love for a Russian girl whom he could not marry due to the breakdown of Sino-Soviet relations. There are Russian books in the factory library, from among which Guilin lays his hand on the book on how to make a piano. Shuxian can easily sing Soviet songs in Russian as her generation all learned Russian in the schools of northeast China. The projection screen

in the cinema is showing an old Soviet movie. All these nostalgic Soviet traces remind the audience of “the good old days” of this old heavy industry base. For Guilin’s generation, the Soviet model is more favored, because at the time when heavy industry and glowing metals were prioritized, they had a “heroic” role to play as industrial workers.

The serious social issue of unemployment is tackled with a gentle, warm, yet somewhat aching sense of humor. Centered on the plot of getting hold of a piano, the obsessed father and his gang of friends engage in many comical actions and conversations, which make the movie a delightful experience. The scenes of stealing a piano at night are the best example of amusement. Before setting off for the task, the mates have a good drink for courage, as Chen says “how much a person can drink, [shows] how much he can achieve.” Then they get on the pork car and sing Paula Tsui’s song “Love of Heart” between the hung half-pigs. Their exaggerated body movement and the lyric — “I secretly had a glimpse of her, but found there is a man accompanying her” — inspire the audience to laughter. Then the men arrive at the school, climb and jump off the wall, and queue in an orderly line across the playground to sneak into the piano room, all accompanied by the rhythmical and comical Russian music. When the theft is discovered, Guilin finally even chooses not to escape. He goes back to the piano in the middle of the playground and plays “To Alice” in the snow under the spotlight. The almost magical tune and poetic snowy scene melt the sadness and hopelessness of nobodies into the endless winter night. The theft is treated lightly. They are caught but not punished. Later, the sequences of constructing the piano often get interrupted by comical fights, chases and Guilin’s boasting of jumping off the smokestack if he can’t make a piano, none of which are treated as very serious by the director.

In a sense, these workers are very unrealistic. “They are often nostalgic about a past which the present cannot tolerate and dream a dream not commensurate with their actual strength. But this is the spiritual source for their tenacious survival.” (“Elegy of an Era,” 2011, para. 3)

3.4. Community Spirit

If Guilin and his mates existed as a class before being laid off, now they appear as separate individuals, sacked and dispersed, cut from collective protection and each facing the pressure of one’s own life alone. But when Guilin calls for their help in the mission of piano making, they are still able to come together, which reveals the solidness of their emotional connection and community spirit.

They are willing to help for the simple reason that if Guilin can make a piano, his daughter will stay with him. So, seven men plus Shuxian come together for a common cause. Brother Ji lets Guilin use the factory house now under his care to cast a steel frame; Guilin requisitions the butcher’s truck. Before entering the factory, they meet in a Karaoke, drinking and singing a famous song entitled “Oh, Comrade-in-arms,” which praises friendship among soldiers. In making the piano, there are division of labor as well as collaboration; contradictions as well as unity. Fast Hand, who has completely quit theft, is even swayed to steal several piano keys for imitation. When the frame is pushed in to be molded, five mates stand side by side, watching with solemn facial expressions. This group of people in the lowest stratum of society completes a task which should be impossible for them; the lack of any one would have made it unfinished.

Near the end of the story, piano construction ceases to be for the sake of keeping Xiaoyuan. When Guilin is worrying about having to finish the piano before the court hearing, or “it’s too late,” Shuxian sharply awakens him to face the reality that Xiaoyuan will go with her mother anyway. Disheartened, Guilin declares that the work is cancelled. But still the mates continue to its final fulfillment.

So, besides private friendship, we need to see another important reason behind the enthusiasm of Guilin and his mates, i.e., eagerness for collectivity and strong emotions about past life. They share warm memories of that glorious past, which is most cherished in their life. That past represents the glory of not only themselves, but also the whole iron-and-steel industry as well as the northeast old industrial base. It is just these beautiful memories and their emotional feelings towards each other grown out of past life that have bonded them together again in a new way.

In essence, the relationship between them is a kind of “class brothers” relationship. On their class relationship is superimposed a “brother” relationship, forming unique and intimate Chinese interpersonal connections (Li, 2011, p. 71). The whole logic of the film story is built on this “class brother” relationship. The film displays the imagery of a northeastern working-class community regaining their dignity and pride through a healthy burst of team spirit. But this collectivity/community is out of step with the historical context, representing an imagined community of working-class solidarity. By making great effort in providing collective solutions to personal problems, the film in every sense is about group therapy.

The film ends firstly with a surreal dance. Facing the cinema audience, women headed by Shuxian perform the famous Spanish Paso, turning the workshop into a stage. The dance is mixed with scenes of the men’s happy labor assembling the piano parts together. The workers are back where they belong, center stage, with a new kind of self-esteem. Then in a really slow pace, Shuxian climbs onto a crane, lifts the piano, moves it through the destitute workshop, and lowers it down in an open space. Though crude in design and tune, the factory piano awaits its first and final performance from Xiaoyuan. Guilin’s wife now seems to show respect. The surreal sound from the daughter’s playing touches everyone’s heart, the characters as well as the audience. The last scene of the film shows Guilin proposing to marry Shuxian. He has made the piano, given up the daughter, seen the smokestacks demolished, but has to continue his life. Farewell should be said to all that can’t be held to stay. The film, with a take-it-easy attitude and light bright ending, tells the audience that this is life.

4. Victim Identity, Reform Ideology and Cultural Resistance

That film has ideological functions is universally accepted. Frederick Jameson pointed out that cultural artifacts are “socially symbolic acts;” “the aesthetic act is itself ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is ... an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal ‘solutions’ to irresolvable social contradictions” (2002, p. 5, p. 64). Stuart Hall categorized theories of representation as not only reflective, but also intentional, or constructionist (1997). For Aldgate and Richards, film functions:

to reflect and highlight popular attitudes, ideas and preoccupations, and to generate and

inculcate views and opinions deemed desirable by film-makers, [and to] act as a potent means of social control, transmitting the dominant ideology of society and creating for it a consensus of support (1999, p. 2).

In applying theory to *The Piano in a Factory*, it can be argued that the change in working-class identity from proud workers to victimized laid-offs reflects the Chinese dominant ideology of practicing reform and seeking wealth at all costs. In reminding people of the dignity and sacrifice of the working class and in designing a collective utopian solution, the film represents cultural resistance to the dominant ideology.

4.1. Laid-off Workers as Reform Victims

As it has been analyzed, the film depicts the working class as losers. Their victim identity is closely associated with the ownership reform of state-owned enterprises.

In the early 1990s, Chinese state-owned enterprises were suffering from losses and hard to sustain. At this crucial moment, the country's leader Deng Xiaoping toured South China and delivered the famous speech — to “let some people get rich first” — which has become the dominant ideology ever since. From 1992, China began its transition to market economy and conducted the ownership shift of state-owned enterprises on a large scale.

Out of this ownership reform, which is not strictly regulated, grew numerous new-rich. In contrast, the restructured enterprises implemented internal early retirement, termination of labor contracts, and paid buyout of workers' past working years. The workers, many of whom had got jobs through replacing parents' positions, for the first time found that the “iron rice bowl” — secure jobs in their hands — could be easily taken away. The working class who had been treated as “masters of the country” now suddenly were transformed into contract workers, temporary workers, and laid-off workers, always fearing about the uncertainties of the next day.

Old industrial bases, like the northeast China of heavy industry portrayed in the film, were hit the most. Once out of work, the workers immediately became *lumpen proletariat*. Guilin and his mates are just such a group, who are suddenly abandoned and left to bear the outcome on their own. It is the unemployed individuals who should try every means to meet the challenge. Such ethos shifts the responsibility as well as the blame away from the government and management onto the unemployed workers themselves. “They did not commit any errors, but had to withstand the reform cost which was beyond their capability” (Wu, 2011, para. 8). For Zhang, the director, increasing efficiency through laying off workers is a necessary process that reform should go through, but it is unfair that “working class themselves alone digested the resulting pain” (Liu, 2011, p. 90).

In the film, we see the fervor of the past “collective” time and the destitution of the present plant. For Li, “steel” as an image is seen as molten iron flowing beautifully of the past, but as scrap metal of the present; only in the process of making the piano that past fervor and passion is reinvented in a way of a sudden spurt of activity before doom (2011, p. 72). The death of Guilin's father near the end of the film may symbolize the end of an era. The political side is muted throughout the representation. There is no direct comment on reform itself and no mentioning of any organizations from which workers can seek help. Community spirit functions

not in any political sense, but only in cultural resistance and self-healing. By projecting a victim image of the working class, the film conveys the dominant ideology of reform at all costs and draws our awareness of the tremendous sacrifice of the laid-off workers.

4.2. The Triumph of Middle Class Values over Working Class Values

Before the reform, the working class and peasantry were masters of the country or the ruling classes, enjoying dominant political, economic and cultural rights. This resulted from the socialist nationalization in the 1950s which removed private ownership in China and eliminated the exploiting classes, such as landlords, bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie.

Yet entering the 1980s, with economic reform and diversification of ownership patterns, numerous new classes emerged and stratification inside a class increased. Intellectuals regained their respected social status. The self-employed and private business owners gained wealth and wanted their voices heard. In contrast, the economic status of the working class and peasants began to decline. Those who got rich first triggered the social identification with the mentality of “seeking wealth”. The further expansion of individual and private industrial and commercial sectors contributed to the substantial growth of the middle class. The pursuit of wealth became nothing to be ashamed of and even fashionable. The virtues of the traditional working people lost their due respect. The values of the Chinese people underwent a subversive change.

So, Guilin, a glorious worker in the past, now has lost his self-respect. He tells Shuxian that his parents gave him the name “Guilin” in the hope that he’d be like the scenery in Guilin, which is thought to be the best in China. But he regrets he hasn’t made it and hence must get his daughter to learn piano to fulfill his dream. So, despite the hardship of life, he pays mightily for his daughter’s piano lessons. Here, as Li argues, the “piano” serves as a symbolic sign, representing the middle class or bourgeois lifestyle which pays attention to style and taste. In their collective effort of making the piano, their deteriorating working class consciousness is infiltrated by the class consciousness of middle class or mainstream ideology (2011, p. 70). The aim of their effort is to provide for Chen’s daughter a symbolic sign for the lifestyle of another social class. So the value they agree with is not much different from Guilin’s ex-wife. The only difference is that the way they provide is more difficult and tortuous.

Guilin’s wife’s new love, who makes a fortune through selling fake medicine, becomes the representative of the new rich. The market reform inspired mentality and opened opportunities for seeking wealth at all cost. With the power of material wealth, such people mercilessly destroyed the spiritual home of the old working class represented by Guilin, whose honesty and quiet dedication used to be greatly valued. As Guilin tells his father, his wife “is now with a guy who sells fake medicine and has finally realized her dream of living an easy life without hard labor.” The wife now dresses beautifully every time she appears and is very generous to her daughter, keeping buying things for the child to win her favor, which hurts Guilin’s dignity a lot. When the daughter tells Guilin that her mother has come to see her with loads of gifts and asks what he thinks of this, he explodes by pushing the daughter outside the room and breaking the cardboard piano keyboard. What is worse, Xiaoyuan is saying that she will go with whoever buys her a piano. This certainly makes her in a way as heartless as her mother—“a pack of heartless wolves” in Guilin’s angry words. Money has risen greatly in importance, so

we see Shuxian awakening Guilin that his daughter won't go with him anyway: "Even if you can make it [the piano], do you really think Xiaoyuan won't go with her mother?" Guilin's final agreement to his wife's taking over the daughter suggests that he has faced the true reality and seen that "the power of capital is far stronger than pure passion" (Liu, 2011, p. 91). The ending of the film shows Xiaoyuan coming with her mother in a car to play the steel piano, reinforcing the dominant middle class value of comfort.

The triumph of middle class values is also reflected in the poor acceptance of this film with laid-off workers as protagonists. The film won numerous awards (e.g. best actor of the Tokyo Film Festival), all positive comments in the film circle, and "zero negative assessment" in the media. Yet it was shown for only a few days in mid-July 2011 with a poor box office turnout, just enough to cover its low cost. Chinese workers have almost completely disappeared from the screen in the recent two decades, except limited minor supporting roles to compliment factory directors and company managers. The survival status and mental outlook of nearly 300 million workers in China are not reflected, especially of enterprise workers. This certainly reveals changes in our dominant ideology. From "masters of the country" to a profession people are most reluctant to take, workers are no longer the mainstream of Chinese society and social life. What's worse, they have sunk into a state of "self-despise" (Liu, 2011, p. 89). When the crew was doing location shooting in the city, they once blocked the way by which workers went home. "These silly idiots, film the working class, are they mentally ill? Who on earth would like to see!" the workers so cursed (Zhao, 2011, p. 63). The Chinese society has lost respect for as well as interest in workers.

4.3. The Value of Not Forgetting

With the principle of "letting some people get rich first," the working class were sacrificed and little remedy has been made. The social attitude toward laid-off workers is to "consciously or unconsciously forget." They were once even regarded as the horrible "social bomb" which carries potential harm to social stability. But this is definitely unfair. The country has no reason to be aloof or indifferent.

Director Zhang's effort with the film represents conscious cultural resistance to the dominant mood of "forgetting." Understanding from his personal family experiences that the laid-off workers in his film now "no longer represent the mainstream of life," he explained his sense of mission with the film, "We still need to bring back that period and lay it in front of all people. Laid-off workers should not be forgotten like this, or continue to feel lost." (Zhao, 2011, p. 12) What he wanted to do with the film was just to bring back the group which had almost been forgotten by society and to reproduce that era and the passion of the lost working class through presenting a "collective carnival" of workers (Liu, 2011, p. 90). The film is intended to call the Chinese society to its humanitarian consciousness as he says, "Today we are moving too fast. It is high time that we stop our steps and wait for our souls." (Zhao, 2011, p. 12) The film gives those who attempt to escape from reality in the cinema a chance of sudden and direct encounter with contemporary China.

Zhang's effort has stirred social and media response. Yuhua Guo, who studied social security system for the laid-off, affirmed that there has been a mentality to "just let time bury

this group of people.” For her, “These people bear the cost for society as a whole. Some regrets now are unable to make up, but they should not be ignored or forgotten.” (Zhao, 2011, p. 12) Xiaobo Wu, a famous finance writer, offered sharper criticism in reviewing the film:

This generation is just so abandoned...Today the fruits we are enjoying are gained at the cost of eradicating a generation of industrial workers of 40-60 years old. They completely sacrificed their own professional life...Reform most crucially is not to protect the interests of those who benefit a lot, but to protect the rights of vulnerable groups (Zhao, 2011, p. 12).

For Wu, China’s reform is continuing and “if this issue can not be...rethought from the legal and ethical point of view, our future reforms will continue to be achieved at the expense of sacrificing the interests of some people” (Zhao, 2011, p. 12).

The laid-off workers and their sacrifice should not be forgotten. The value of not forgetting is also much acknowledged in other societies. Ken Loach, a famous British filmmaker of social realism and a determined and persistent fighter for social justice, has never lost faith in his belief that film can play a role in changing attitudes and that ordinary people deserve fairer treatment. He quotes Milan Kundera’s phrase to define his fight as “the struggle of memory against forgetting” (Rowbotham, 2001, p. 87). Edward Said, from a different aspect, has also argued, “the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging” represents a crucial mode of cultural hegemony (as cited in Kirk, 2003, p. 187). So the working class “must be seen in order to confirm that class is there. The ‘must be seen’ of working-class subjectivity is intimately connected to modes of representation and power.” (Hitchcock, 2000, p. 21) In this sense, Zhang’s work carries tremendous cultural significance as it gets Chinese working class “seen” and represented. In showing sympathy and concern about the dignity and sacrifice of the working class, the film offers cultural resistance to “collective forgetting” and displays the humanistic concerns of a Chinese independent director. It serves as an elegy for a glorious time passed.

4.4. Black Humor and Fantasy Solution

The story is a thorough tragedy and should have been sad and heart-wrenching, with such plots as divorce, losing the custody of the daughter, the demolishing of smokestacks and the death of the father. Every character in the film conveys a sense of loss and helplessness. But the director of the film adopts a poetic, comic and romantic tone to soften the dreariness of harsh reality. The misery told with a smile and self-mockery is more touching and penetrating. The constantly inserted songs and dance scenes, whether surreal or ironic, make this sad story less depressing. The characters in the film deal with all sorts of awkward happenings in the most calm and relaxed way; life simply has to go on.

Humor, or comic satire, is taken as one effective strategy. The men’s vulnerability and dilemma are transformed into an affirmative upbeat story. Besides humor, nostalgia for “the good old days” arouses emotions around the lost industrial prosperity, working-class pride and the powerful emotional bonds of working-class communities.

The fantasy solution of remasculinization through collective piano construction transforms the problems of male unemployment, economic hardship, loss of self-esteem, etc., into a feel-good story. Working-class characters regain male pride and dignity through collective actions and mutual support, a tendency identified by John Hill as “utopianism” when discussing British working class films (2000, p. 178). Utopian fantasy is used to relieve the stress, hardship and agony. Such remasculinization is naturally ambivalent. It can be no more than a one-off event. Time has changed. The workers’ coming together after the lay-off and dispersion is greatly different from their working together before. The run-down factory house, the abandoned pipes and smokestacks all illustrate that an era has ended. The joy of their reunion and labor form a sharp contrast with these scenes, achieving an almost absurd comic effect. So, when the abandoned factory is once again filled with their busy figures, their laughter, and the dancing steel flower, the scenes bring back not only the warm memory of history but also a critical reflection of reality. Hill sees the explicit reliance on fantasy as “an acknowledgement of the very ‘impossibility’ of escape, a ‘magical’ resolution to conflicts which remain unresolved, and an ironic recognition of the actual impotence” (1999, p. 170). So the solutions offered can only be symbolic and inevitably problematic.

The comic element may be challenged as weakening the sharp edge of social criticism. But in this post-socialist age of China, bear in mind that our most recent dominant ideology is to construct a “harmonious society” and working-class themes have lost favor with the audience. I would argue that humor, when it goes hand in hand with satire, can be as powerful as bitter tragedies. Black humor in the film takes absurdity and sarcasm as silent cultural resistance toward the dominant ideology, suggesting the absence of any hope for more sensible and dignified solutions.

5. Conclusion

The Piano in a Factory is a men’s film about the crisis in masculinity as well as the glory and dream of some ordinary iron-and-steel workers. Through the story of a group of humble grassroots laborers, the film shows a deep concern about the collapse of the old industrial base and male disempowerment — the loss of economic power, political status, gender privilege and the associated loss of family and traditional working class male community — by providing sympathetic portrayals of working-class identity as reform victims. No real solution is offered to the erosion of traditional working class identity except cultural resistance and collective consolation which is seen as largely nostalgic and utopian. Stylistically, it is a funny lightweight comedy. But beneath the surface, a much darker and sadder story is being told.

By projecting a victim image of the working class, the film conveys the dominant ideology of practicing reform and seeking wealth at all costs. In the process of “letting some people get rich first,” the Chinese working class interests were compromised and their sacrifice tends to be forgotten. In arousing sympathy for and bringing dignity to the working class community, the film is an elegy for a glorious time passed. Further, in reminding people of the sacrifice of the working class and designing a utopian solution, the film represents cultural resistance to the dominant ideology. It is a hard attempt of an independent director to call society to its humanitarian consciousness.

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