



## **Realism, Hybridity, and the Construction of Identity in Wang Xiaoshuai's *Beijing Bicycle***

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Chinese filmmaker Wang Xiaoshuai's *Beijing Bicycle* (2001) uses the struggle over a bicycle between Guei, a rural migrant, and Jian, an urbanite schoolboy, to represent the disorienting effect that economic modernization and consumerism have had in China. In this article, I show how Wang adopts a hybrid filmic style that integrates urban realism with traditional Hollywood genre forms. I argue that by first employing and then undermining certain narrative and visual clichés from these genres, Wang complicates both the commercial character of these genres and the rosy picture of urban modernization sanctioned by the political and economic forces of capitalist globalization. Finally, I correlate the film's hybrid style to Wang's construction of Guei's hybrid identity and read both as Wang's negotiated response to China's emerging capitalist economy and consequent social upheaval.

### **Wang Xiaoshuai & Chinese Cinema**

According to Chinese filmmaker Wang Xiaoshuai 王小帅 (b. 1966), “the bicycle is the most typical representative of China.”<sup>1</sup> Wang explains that up until the time of economic modernization, owning a bicycle, along with the remaining Big Four commodities—sewing machine, television, and washer/dryer—meant that a family was considered “modern.” By 2001, however, aspiring simply to own a bicycle reflected “a failure to move forward.”<sup>2</sup> It is no wonder, then, that in *Beijing Bicycle* (2001), Wang chooses the struggle over a bicycle to represent the effects the dramatic economic, social, and cultural changes of the previous twenty years have had on the everyday lives of the Chinese people. Indeed, if “to get rich is glorious,” as Communist Party leader Deng Xiaoping (1904–97) once said, then the failure to own a bicycle is a clear sign that one has not succeeded in the new China.

*Beijing Bicycle* was originally one of six films in the “Tale of Three Cities” project that looked at urban life in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China. It is Wang's most commercially successful film, and it garnered him international acclaim by winning the Grand Jury Prize (the Golden Bear) at

the 2001 Berlin International Film Festival. By this time, however, Wang had already established himself as a founding member of China's Sixth Generation of filmmakers with such films as *The Days* (1993) and *Frozen* (1996).<sup>3</sup> Working outside the state studio system, Wang exploited the budgetary and technical constraints he and other Sixth-Generation directors faced by developing an urban realist style characterized by location shooting, non-professional actors, handheld cameras, and minimal artificial lighting. Adapting storylines from the lives of young performance artists in Beijing also lent his early films a quasi-documentary feel.

In his next film, *So Close to Paradise* (1998), Wang began to combine stylistic elements of urban realism with those of traditional Hollywood film genres—such as film noir—to explore the underbelly of economic modernization through the lives of a migrant worker, petty criminal, and torch singer eking out an existence on the fringes of China's state-authorized market economy.<sup>4</sup> With *Beijing Bicycle*, Wang not only continues exploring the plight of migrant workers in urban China but also integrates urban realism with Hollywood genre forms and narrative “clichés” in a manner that, as I argue here, creates a parallel between the film's hybrid style and the construction of a hybrid identity of the film's main protagonist, Guei. In the film, Wang employs and then undermines generic formulas from melodrama, comedy, teen romance movies, and narratives constructed around the migrant's virtuous stance against the corrupting influence of urban life. I argue that, by so doing, Wang simultaneously critiques the influences of economic modernization and consumer capitalism on Chinese society and posits a hybrid ethic for the migrant worker that reflects a realistic response to the social and economic conditions he or she must confront daily in contemporary urban life.

### Synopsis of the Film

*Beijing Bicycle* opens with Guei, a country boy, getting a job as a bicycle courier in Beijing. The city's urban landscape is daunting, and its inhabitants are unwelcoming; yet Guei works diligently to pay off his company-issued bicycle. Through his only friend, an older, seemingly wiser man from the same village who runs a small store in a *hutong*,<sup>5</sup> Guei learns about the city and its inhabitants. During one of his last deliveries before taking over ownership of the bicycle, Guei gets caught up in a public bath while trying to deliver a letter, and his bicycle gets stolen. In his despondency, he forgets to continue his deliveries and loses his job. Convincing his boss to take him back if he can retrieve his bicycle, Guei begins the search for his bicycle through the callous city.

The next scene introduces us to Jian, a Beijingers schoolboy, and his friends, who ride their bicycles through a high-rise building under con-

struction. We then meet Xiao, a female schoolmate, with whom Jian begins a romantic relationship. When Jian and Xiao stop by a local store, Guei's friend spots the familiar bicycle. Things turn violent when Guei tries to steal back his bicycle and is beaten by Jian and his friends. Jian suffers a similar fate at the hands of his father, who realizes Jian has stolen family money to buy the (stolen) bicycle at a local market. Not accepting Jian's father's decision to give the bicycle back to Guei, Jian and his friends force Guei to share the bicycle with Jian.

By this time however, Jian has lost Xiao to an even hipper bicyclist; and Jian's anger leads him to strike the new boyfriend with a brick before relinquishing the bicycle to Guei. This brief moment of reconciliation ends abruptly as Xiao's new boyfriend and his gang chase both boys through a *hutong* and inflict a severe beating on them. The film culminates with a dramatic twist when the battered Guei hits a member of the gang on the head with a brick to stop the boy from destroying his bicycle. The final scene shows Guei walking off into the modern streets of Beijing while carrying his broken bicycle on his back.

### Reading *Beijing Bicycle*

For the most part, discussions and interpretations of *Beijing Bicycle* center on Wang's use of Guei, Jian, and the bicycle to represent the impact of economic modernization and consumer capitalism on China and, more particularly, on the generation of Chinese growing up in the middle of the social and cultural transformations wrought by these economic developments.<sup>6</sup> Although the movie explores universal themes such as the migrant's alienating experience in the city and attempts at identity formation and social enculturation by teenagers like Guei and Jian, personal struggles in the film are contextualized within the contemporary milieu of China's rapidly developing capital. For Wang, Guei represents the "floating population" of rural workers, mostly unskilled and poor, who fled the countryside to seek employment in the country's "economic zones" and urban centers. Uprooted from their work units, families, and the social networks that provided them economic and personal security throughout the Communist period, they are estranged from the city and its inhabitants, whose apartments they build and dinners they serve. In his insightful discussion of the floating population, Xu Jian defines these rural migrants as a "newly emergent subaltern class" and "nomads of subjectivity" who "linger in a liminal space [in] which they belong neither to the country [n]or the city."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Dror Kochan astutely notes that "Wang sees the rural migrants as urban society's 'other,' and uses them to criticize urban society itself."<sup>8</sup>

In contrast, Jian's social world and values have been formed in the emerging consumer society that China's new market socialism has em-

braced. His bicycle is the key to his entrance into teen society; it allows him to bond with his friends who spend their afternoons performing bicycle tricks and hanging out in the video arcade, awkwardly jumping to "Dance, Dance Revolution."<sup>9</sup> Jian's identity as materialistic, selfish, and enamored with youth culture is constructed in opposition to Guei's rustic innocence, determination, and work ethic. As his family's apartment shows, Jian is not from a wealthy family; but they are urbanites and can afford to send both Jian and his younger stepsister to school. Although Jian is still coming to terms with his father's new wife and daughter, the family is in the process of becoming bourgeois. Guei, on the other hand, is alone and does not go to school. His job as a bike courier allows him to make his first step toward establishing and maintaining some form of economic stability.

Jian's estrangement from his father arises because the latter has gone back on his word to buy Jian a bicycle and has spent the family's meager savings on his stepdaughter's education instead. Elizabeth Wright reads Jian's theft of the family money charitably, asserting that "Wang does not reduce Jian's motivations simply to the selfishness of the younger generation but attempts to sympathize with Jian via his father's empty promise of a bicycle."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, even Wang himself states that he "intended for the audience identification with both characters to be almost identical" and did not "really place a moral judgment between these two" boys; rather, "they're both victims of the same tragic story of youth."<sup>11</sup>

Given Jian's chastisement of his father for not rewarding his schoolwork with a bicycle, his curt treatment of his younger sister—who, in a manner beyond her years, tries to console him after he gives the bicycle up to Guei—and the cruel way in which he turns on his friends and Xiao when he loses his bicycle, accepting a moral equivalence between the two boys is difficult. Nevertheless, Wright further maintains that the equality between Guei and Jian is represented through each boy's relationship to the bicycle. Although she acknowledges a difference between Guei's "practical need" for the bicycle and the manner in which it "grants Jian status amongst his peers and impresses his girlfriend," she also maintains that the bicycle functions in a similar way for Guei because it "symbolizes his participation and success in the city."<sup>12</sup> However, Xu argues more persuasively that although "it is too neat to say that the boys' struggle over the bicycle represents a conflict between use value and exchange value," the different way the bicycle functions for each boy is important.<sup>13</sup> For Guei, the bicycle's primary function is its utility—it is a means of survival in the city—while, for Jian, it is a sign of his youth culture status that "symbolically mark[s] him as cool."<sup>14</sup>

Xu provides the most interesting and challenging reading of Guei, Jian, and the spectator's understanding of these characters through his interpretation of Wang's filmic style. Xu holds that, unlike previous films, includ-

ing those of Fifth-Generation filmmakers—which essentialize rural migrants as stubborn, unsophisticated peasants whose virtue rests with their dogged determination—with Wang, this representation of the rural peasant “functions as the pre-condition (or raw material) out of which historically contingent migrant subjectivities emerge.”<sup>15</sup> For Xu, Wang’s social realism problematizes rather than reaffirms the rural migrants’ traditional identity and pluralizes the possibilities of their urban experience so that they emerge “as a heterogeneous people with different ambitions.”<sup>16</sup> Stated differently, whereas classical realism attempts to document the universal plight of the migrant other’s real-life experience, with at least two of the film’s three rural characters, Guei and the enigmatic maid (whom we will meet later), Wang offers varying representations of the rural migrant’s experience and thereby presents more realistic representations of their multiple stories of migration. For this reason, Wang’s realism is more ethical because his films “resist the fetishizing power of images” and “allow heterogeneous meanings and possibilities to arise.”<sup>17</sup>

Xu contends that the ambiguities that allow for multiple meanings emerge from the experimental qualities of Wang’s films. Although Xu insists that “the films’ subtle experimentalism does not make the films equivocal about social suffering,”<sup>18</sup> he asserts that, by combining documentary realism and experimentalism, Wang presents polyvalent representations of the rural migrants’ experience that, in turn, allow for polysemic readings of their plight.

I agree with many of the claims Xu makes, particularly his understanding of how Wang uses his characters to depict different vectors of value identification with urbanization and consumer capitalism. However, I disagree with Xu’s ambivalent reading of Guei and his violent defense of his bicycle at the film’s closing. I also question the degree to which *Beijing Bicycle* can be characterized as “experimental” and how much narrative ambiguity it creates. Xu fails to provide sufficient examples of the film’s experimentalism; and recognizing experimental qualities within the film’s narrative and style is indeed difficult. Rather than reading *Beijing Bicycle* through its experimental features, I argue that it is Wang’s exploitation of stylistic elements characteristic of various popular genres that provides him with the narrative framework through which he presents his criticism of economic modernization. I also contend, contrary to Xu, that Wang offers an explicit assessment of negotiated values that rural migrants like Guei must adopt in order to survive amid the difficulties of urban China.

I begin this alternative interpretation of *Beijing Bicycle* by comparing the film’s realist style with that of Italian neorealism to establish the affinities between neorealism and urban realism. Using the work of scholars who explore the mix of social realism and popular, generic formulas in neorealist film, I apply their understanding of stylistic hybridity to *Beijing Bicycle*.

As with neorealist films, these genre styles and clichés, along with certain false parallel constructions between characters, are developed so that they may be contested and then replaced by new identities for the film's main characters. To this end, I suggest that Wang deftly employs a subtle form of stylistic hybridity to construct a correlative, hybrid ethical identity for Guei and, by extension, for rural migrants like him who struggle to adapt to the urban worlds they now inhabit.

### Italian & Chinese Bicycles: *Bicycle Thieves* & *Beijing Bicycle*

Harry H. Kuoshu astutely recognizes that “the identical historical efforts in post-Mao and post-Fascist societies to deviate from the yoke of totalitarian ideologies encouraged a homage of post-Mao filmmaking in China to Italian neorealism.”<sup>19</sup> Beyond the historical parallel between the reaction of Italian neorealism and the Sixth Generation's urban realism to the state ideological apparatuses of Italy and China, economic and social correlates between post-World War II Italy and post-Mao China also exist. Kuoshu explains: “If Italian film portrayed the dilemmas of the working poor in the postwar economy, its Chinese counterpart depicts the similar difficulty of Chinese villagers who are forced to leave the farm to work in the cities in the post-Mao economic boom.”<sup>20</sup>

Although Wang asserts that his approach to and the subject matter of *Beijing Bicycle* are “totally different” from Vittorio De Sica's (1901–74) *Bicycle Thieves* (1948),<sup>21</sup> strong similarities between the two films suggest otherwise. Both Antonio Ricci and Guei are members of the urban poor whose livelihoods depend upon their bicycles. When both have their bicycles stolen, their stubborn determination to earn a living sets each protagonist on an urban odyssey.

Symbolic correlations and stylistic correspondences between the two films reinforce narrative similarities. Both films open with the main character searching for employment: Antonio is alongside other members of the Italian urban proletariat; Guei, with other Chinese rural migrants. Through the similar manner in which both films present the litanies of the men's names who seek jobs, we recognize that Antonio's and Guei's situations reflect larger social conditions of the Italian or Chinese working poor. When both characters search for their lost bicycles, similar pan shots over rows of bicycles reflect the difficulty they face. Their desperation to maintain their means of employment is contrasted with images of the Italian bourgeoisie, who, in their pursuit of leisure, pass by Antonio on racing cycles, and with groups of Chinese urban youth, including Jian's friends, who entertain themselves by performing bicycle tricks. The boys' baggy jeans, tennis shoes, and punk haircuts indicate how American pop culture has undermined traditional Chinese culture in the same way that the Rita Hayworth poster for

*Gilda* (1946), put up by Antonio when his bicycle is stolen, signifies how American “cinematic fantasies”<sup>22</sup> had come to overwhelm Italian daily life.

Adhering to the neorealist principle of location shooting, both films, for the most part, tell their stories on the streets of the cities in which they take place: Rome and Beijing. Yet neither film offers a glimpse of either city’s historic landmarks.<sup>23</sup> Rather, *Bicycle Thieves* often contrasts extremely long shots of the desolate spaces of Mussolini’s EUR<sup>24</sup> with medium-range shots of centuries-old Italian piazzas, city streets, underground meeting places, and buses jammed with strangers going about their private lives. In a similar manner, *Beijing Bicycle* juxtaposes long shots of Beijing’s burgeoning urban sprawl, replete with new construction sites and skyscrapers, with medium-range shots of streets jammed with bicycle riders overwhelmed by their cargo and old men playing checkers, oblivious to their surroundings. The message of both films seems consistent: Neither the past nor the present can bring relief from the sense of alienation that engulfs Antonio, Guei, and the rest of the urban subalterns who inhabit these spaces. Rather, the representation of each city as a confusing maze of buildings and streets magnifies Antonio’s and Guei’s seemingly futile searches for their bicycles and their estrangement from these urban spaces.<sup>25</sup>

Yet, although Antonio never finds his bicycle, Guei does; and, with this contrast, an important difference emerges with respect to whether the rightful ownership of the bicycles is established in each film’s narrative. Before Antonio sets out on his first day of work, his son Bruno notices a peculiar dent on the bicycle, but the dent never comes into play in finding the bicycle. According to Millicent Marcus, by not using the dent to identify ownership, De Sica is able to break with traditional storytelling techniques of providing “narrative resolution” to the film by establishing a relationship between the mark and the bicycle’s owner.<sup>26</sup> To this extent, the dent reads as an unfulfilled source of familial identity. Guei, however, marks his bicycle with a scratch that is used later as evidence for Jian’s father that Guei really owns the bicycle. Thus, whereas Antonio cannot convince the police or the crowd that has gathered in Rome’s Via di Panico that the suspected thief has stolen his bicycle, Guei’s mark and its inclusion in the film’s narrative allows *Beijing Bicycle* to construct a stable identity for Guei through the bicycle. The mark also signifies the ethical basis upon which Guei and Jian and his friends must negotiate an acceptable compromise for sharing the bicycle before the film’s narrative can move forward.<sup>27</sup>

### **Stylistic Hybridity: Realism, Genre Formulas & Narrative Clichés**

Comparing *Beijing Bicycle* to *Bicycle Thieves* establishes the similarities (and differences) between how the realism of each film creates meaning through the respective narrative structures and visual imagery. In this section I ex-

plore how, similar to many Italian neorealist films, *Beijing Bicycle* also employs certain generic narrative structures, techniques, and clichés taken from classical Hollywood. To do this, I begin with a more detailed discussion of the mixing of genres and the use of filmic clichés in Italian neorealism.

### *Realism & Genre Formulas*

André Bazin writes that “neorealism does not necessarily exist in a pure state and one can conceive of it being combined with other aesthetic tendencies.”<sup>28</sup> One finds in neorealism “traces still of traditional realism,” but all neorealist films are a combination of “documentary realism *plus* something else” (original emphasis).<sup>29</sup> This combination not only provides neorealism with familiar narrative structures, characters, and visual imagery that lend its films a popular appeal but also helps establish ideological claims made by these generic forms that can then be made problematic or refuted by the political–ethical message of neorealism.

Frank P. Tomasulo shows that, for all the talk about its unmotivated narrative structure that mimics Antonio’s meandering through Rome, *Bicycle Thieves* is clearly constructed upon elements of classical plot development, including a complication (Antonio needs a bicycle), reversal (the bicycle gets stolen), and climax (Antonio tries to steal a bicycle).<sup>30</sup> The film also plays upon melodramatic visual imagery, with the villainous suspect who wears a German military cap and the famous *mise en scène* of the rain-drenched market that functions as the “metonymic structure for the sorrow depicted throughout the film.”<sup>31</sup> Yet its melodramatic inclinations are undermined when we realize that the suspected thief is poorer than Antonio (and perhaps epileptic) and that Antonio, who takes his anger out on his son and resorts to thievery himself, is not the ideal protagonist we first imagined him to be. As Marcus writes, “by violently shocking us out of our unexamined identification with the protagonist, De Sica is challenging not only our naive assumptions about poetic justice, but our most intimate film-viewing needs.”<sup>32</sup>

### *Clichés of Identity & Representation*

Clichés abound in *Beijing Bicycle*, as do generic strategies and techniques.<sup>33</sup> Through his stubbornness, Guei is marked as a rural peasant. His unwillingness to give up his job, his search for his bicycle, and—more literally—his grip on his bicycle (when Jian’s friends try to tear it from his fingers) function as a series of metonymic substitutions for the persistence with which the peasant must work the land in order to survive in the countryside. Temporally, his inability to imagine his world otherwise signifies a traditional worldview devoid of progress and change. For his boss, Jian’s friends, and the other urbanites Guei confronts, his dogged determination mark him as animalistic: bullish, pigheaded, and stubborn as a mule. Still, our sympa-

thies lie more with Guei's rustic obstinacy than with the bullying tactics of Jian's friends or the corporate coldness Guei must confront at the bathhouse and delivery service counters. We also identify with Guei due to our "habitual perceptions" of the resolute determination of Cuiquiao (*Yellow Earth*, 1994), Quiju (*Story of Quiju*, 1992), and other characters who populate the rural allegories of Fifth-Generation films,<sup>34</sup> as well as the countless depictions of migrants who journey from Kansas to New York, Sicily to Milan, or Shaanxi to Beijing yet remain steadfast in their rural convictions and resist the corrupting influences of the city.

Along with his stubbornness, Guei's otherness is represented by his silence. Guei's characterization as a shy and uneducated country boy has already established that his wariness of speaking will keep his country accent hidden long before his friend advises him "not to let anyone know you're not from here." When he does attempt to communicate, as in the case of his exchanges with the girl behind the bathhouse counter, the women working at the delivery service, and Jian's friends, he is often reduced to the repetition of simple statements—or to complete silence. Yet Guei's silence signifies more than being inarticulate. It is a sign of his tie to the rural world, a connection experienced more directly through the body and physical labor than through language and social discourse.

Reading Guei through the literary and cinematic cliché of the virtuous migrant's journey to the corrupt city does not preclude us from recognizing that his story is also based, in part, on the teen movie genre. Although more concerned with his economic integration into the city than with his social integration into the gang of cool kids, his rustic ways and outsider status present him with a variety of obstacles. We are touched by his awkward shyness when sneaking a peek at the pretty city girl (whom he later discovers is actually a maid from the country), and we feel pity when, as the outsider, he is defenseless against Jian's well-established social network of bullies. Indeed, the teasing Guei endures as the outsider, the masculine posturing Jian's gang performs for one another, and Jian's attempt to befriend Guei as the two continue to exchange the bicycle parallels narrative components of the classic American coming-of-age film, *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955).

In the relationship between Jian and his father, Wang establishes the trope of generational conflict that pits the adult world of family obligation against the teen world of peer relationships and identity formation. From a cultural perspective, this familial struggle juxtaposes his father's traditional Confucian ethic of deference to paternal authority with Jian's pursuit of personal pleasure through the consumer products and social practices that define him as part of urban youth culture. Jian's relationship with Xiao reflects another major component of the teen movie genre: the heterosexual romance. Jian's romance with Xiao begins immediately after Jian buys the bicycle. Indeed, we are led to believe that the bicycle gives Jian the confi-

dence to approach Xiao, functioning, therefore, as a means to his ultimate end: a budding romance with his classmate. But just as Jian and Xiao are about to kiss—when the romantic score swells and the camera tilts to the sky to imbue us with the lightness of youthful, romantic love—Guei steals the bicycle.

### *Triads of Desire*

From this point in the film, Wang begins to undermine the romantic clichés upon which he has established Jian's relationship with Xiao. At the video arcade, Jian retreats into the solipsistic pleasure world of his video game and rudely ignores Xiao's request to be escorted home. At school, Xiao attempts to assure Jian of her affections and fidelity by offering him a ride home on her bicycle, but her suggestion to reverse gender roles with Jian causes her to suffer the cruel wrath of his wounded masculinity. These scenes both occur immediately after Guei recovers the bicycle (even if only temporarily), linking Jian's loss of the bicycle with his loss of his masculine identity. What becomes clear in these scenes is that Jian never saw the bicycle as a means to a romantic relationship with Xiao; rather, the bicycle was the object of Jian's fetishistic desires,<sup>35</sup> functioning in the film's narrative as a floating signifier that drives his actions both toward and away from Xiao. For Jian, Xiao was simply a secondary prize that pointed to his success or failure in finally possessing a bicycle, which was, for him, the ultimate sign of status and success. Xiao was never really the object of Jian's desire, nor could she function as a substitute for it.

Regardless of whether Xiao recognizes where Jian's true affections lie, she quickly moves on and begins a relationship with another, distinctly more "rad" bicyclist. Xiao's change of heart allows Wang to play upon the relationship between economic and social codes that tie the winner-takes-all ethic of competitive capitalism to gender identity. Wang introduces the new boyfriend through a montage of point-of-view shots taken from the positions of Xiao, Jian, and other teenagers marveling at the talented bicyclist, who looks like Bruce Lee, the iconic kung fu film star, performing bicycle tricks. Integrated into this montage is a series of shot/reverse shots of Jian recognizing the new boyfriend as a better bicyclist and Jian voyeuristically watching Xiao admiring the bicyclist. Although Jian starts a fight with a friend who has accused him of stealing the bicycle, he still sees Xiao leave with her new boyfriend. Yet the fight is not enough of a diversion for either the film spectator or Jian to see that he is no competition for the bicyclist in terms of bicycle skills or popularity. Since the gaze of the male traditionally defines the (female) object of desire, Jian's masculinity is doubly challenged. The subordinate positions (and denuded gaze) he now maintains vis-à-vis the superior bicyclist and Xiao mark him as feminine.

Wang again subtly challenges Jian's gender identity in the scene where Xiao's new boyfriend confronts Jian. The scene begins with Jian stopping Xiao and riding circles around her as if she were prey that he is about to devour. His actions make him appear as more of a sexual threat than a worthy romantic protagonist. Yet the scene becomes erotically charged only when Xiao leaves and the new boyfriend confronts Jian. At this point, Wang deftly plays with very interesting gender reversals that construct the new boyfriend as both Jian's object of identification and sexual desire. While the new boyfriend's bicycle skills and musculature have previously designated him as masculine, when they finally meet, the umbrella he holds and the manner in which he asks Jian to light his cigarette mark him temporarily as feminine. Nevertheless, Jian's dueling feelings of sexual awkwardness and physical intimidation when talking with the boyfriend and, more particularly, when the boyfriend shoves his cigarette into Jian's mouth, reestablish the boyfriend's dominant masculinity. By the end of the scene, Jian's angry face shows us that, once again, his own masculinity has been threatened, both sexually and physically. The new boyfriend's threat to his masculinity and his ability to control Xiao undermine the clichés of the heterosexual romance previously established between Jian and Xiao and ultimately lead Jian toward a violent confrontation with the boyfriend.

A parallel love triad between Guei, his country friend, and an elusive city girl similarly establishes another romantic cliché, this time in terms of the melodramatic formula whereby class barriers prevent potential lovers from uniting. But Wang spends little time on having the two county boys compete for her affection or developing Guei's desire for the girl. Instead, he employs this subplot so that he can later reveal that the city girl is actually another rural migrant who dresses in her employer's cosmopolitan clothes. Her wanton pursuit of material desires ultimately leads to her dismissal by her employer, signifying the misdirected ambitions of some rural migrants. The loss of her personal identity from the fantasy of personal fulfillment through consumer capitalism thus renders her more like Jian than Xiao. To this extent, Wang is not establishing parallel romantic conflicts between two men (Jian and the new boyfriend, or Guei and his country friend) for a woman (Xiao and the country girl) but is presenting these romantic plotlines so as to render them false. In the process, he returns the spectator to the realization that the real triad of desire remains among Guei, Jian, and the bicycle.<sup>36</sup>

### *Rhetorical Strategies & Politics*

Wang also adopts a variety of melodramatic rhetorical strategies to depict Guei's struggles. Throughout the film, Guei is characterized by his peasant perseverance and childlike innocence, which are both portrayed as virtues he will retain even as he suffers the injustices and violence of oth-

ers.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, in several scenes, Guei is severely beaten by Jian's friends, who try to wrestle the bicycle from Guei's hands. Like the market scene in *Bicycle Thieves*, the mise en scène of Guei, prostrate but clinging to his bicycle, functions melodramatically to evoke "excruciating moments of sympathy and pity at the sight of such prolonged and undeserved suffering."<sup>38</sup>

Representing Guei as a victim of teenagers ready to destroy his only means of survival for their own misguided sense of personal desire and community values—both of which emerge from a dysfunctional consumerist culture—Wang renders Guei's plight not only melodramatic but also political. For Nick Browne, the tradition of Chinese melodrama has taken on various historical forms in response to various transformative moments in Chinese history, including the Communist Revolution and Mao's Cultural Revolution.<sup>39</sup> Drawing on the work of Ma Ning, Browne asserts that the Chinese melodrama of the post-Cultural Revolution period "renegotiates the relation between tradition and modernization in a narrative that introduces a justification for a new economic order."<sup>40</sup> Although *Beijing Bicycle* critiques rather than justifies Deng's policy of economic modernization, it still functions as a distinctly Chinese political melodrama in that it focuses more on the political-economic structure of China that causes the social condition of "injustice" rather than on the familial-psychological dilemmas played out in Western melodrama. Hence, Wang's subversive restructuring or redefining of Western melodrama through insertion of the political renders the film's style as a distinctly postcolonial form of stylistic hybridity.

The political character of the film is enhanced even more by having Guei smash a brick over the head of a boy who is destroying his bicycle in the film's climactic scene: Guei's act is not so much motivated by his psychological identification with the bicycle but by the economic conditions China's market socialism have forced upon him. With this scene, Wang once again disrupts the film's narrative continuity and challenges the spectator's sense of Guei's innocence, clearly signified at the scene's opening by having him play with a child while waiting for the bicycle. Yet to understand fully how the film's depiction of Guei's violent act undermines generic clichés, we must examine how Wang employs comic elements first to construct and then to subvert Guei's rustic virtues.

### *Comic Elements*

Guei's comic characterization emerges from antics established in the silent comedy tradition commonly associated with Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton.<sup>41</sup> Although the film includes some comic lines, Guei is never the speaker. Instead, due to Guei's limited speech, he, like Chaplin's "Little Tramp," relies more on facial expressions, bodily contortions, and physical gags to bring together comedy and a "sentimental concern"<sup>42</sup> for the outsider.

For the most part, Guei's comic antics help define him as naïve and unworldly. Because of his country naïveté, Guei gets caught in the revolving doors of a modern hotel during his first delivery. His lack of urban sophistication is further conveyed when his friend advises Guei to brush his teeth, which he does apprehensively, as if for the first time. Although such comic routines strain the film's realism, they often enhance Guei's tragicomic character. In the bathhouse scene, the shots of Guei showering and walking naked through the bathhouse are humorous. But our laughter is immediately replaced with sadness and sympathy for Guei when he gets thrown out of the bathhouse and finds that his bicycle has been stolen.

Later in the film, Wang delivers a mixture of humor and pathos with a purely physical gag. In this instance, Guei has borrowed an old bicycle from his friend to continue making deliveries while he and Jian share their bicycle. When the chain falls off, Wang provides a close-up shot of Guei continuing to peddle awkwardly while going nowhere, an experience at which we can laugh as well as empathize. Building upon these mixed sentiments, Guei is next shown trying to fix the chain, yet he is constantly interrupted as the seat pad repeatedly hits him in the face. Such "pie in the face" gags are intended to be an "emphatic, violent, and embarrassing gesture,"<sup>43</sup> and, indeed, the gag functions in this manner here. However, when not directed at the powerful, such gags lend spectator sympathy to the powerless while signifying their inability to integrate into a society that mechanically never seems to work for them.

If the film's comic antics lure us to laugh at yet empathize with Guei, the contrast between two classic comic chase scenes dramatically alters our understanding of him and undermines the various melodramatic and comic clichés that have guided the film's representation of his rural virtues.<sup>44</sup> Employing a classic montage sequence for a comic chase scene, Guei steals the bicycle from Jian, and Jian runs after Guei through a *hutong*. Wang then cuts between shots of Guei trying to get away and a flour truck reversing out of an alleyway. Although we only hear the sound of their collision, the next few shots are of Guei sprawled out motionless in the truck bed, followed by Guei's face and clothes covered with flour as he tries to extricate himself from the crowd that has gathered. Pathos follows comedy as Jian and his friends restrain Guei and take the bicycle. When the film cuts to the next scene at the video arcade, Guei, still fully covered in white flour, watches from outside like a tragic vagabond desperately peering into a shop full of goods he can only hope to acquire.

The exaggerated manner in which Guei sprawls on the truck bed and the extended use of the whitened face into the next scene "serves to establish a level of implausibility that removes the events from the world of harsher dramatic realism, where the consequences of the destruction unleashed might be felt more painfully."<sup>45</sup> For the spectators, the sorrow induced by

Guei's unsuccessful attempt to reclaim his bicycle is eased not only by the humor employed but also by our sense that his determination and virtue are still intact and will guide his later attempts to retrieve his bicycle.

### From Comedy to Violence: Constructing Guei's Hybrid Identity

In the film's penultimate scene, Guei and Jian are chased through a *hutong* by Xiao's boyfriend and his gang. By returning to a chase sequence, Wang disjoins the spectator's previous experience of comic pleasure in the earlier chase from the tragic ends the boys meet when they are finally caught. Regardless of how we feel about Jian's beating, Guei's is undeserved. For this reason, then, we sympathize even more with his plight. Disregarding Guei's pleas, one of the gang members continues pouncing on Guei's bicycle. Only at this point does Guei overcome his timidity and resort to violence by picking up a brick and knocking the boy unconscious. With this act, the brick in Guei's hand is paradigmatically substituted for the clownish flour on his face, and a violent ending to this chase is exchanged with the comic conclusion of the previous one. For Geoff King, the result is that the earlier comic scene is now used against the spectator to inscribe more forcefully the violence of Guei's action.<sup>46</sup> Along with replacing the comic with the violent, Guei's actions signify that his identity has been transformed by the social conditions which preclude him from adhering to a country code that previously defined him as stubborn but docile. Hence, with this act of violence, Guei adopts a new hybrid ethic and identity that combines his rustic persistence with a requisite urban savagery.

Insofar as such violence aligns Guei with the violence that, up until this point in the film, has been found only among urbanites, his act does signify his "moral decline."<sup>47</sup> Indeed, Wang appears to establish this equivalence by revealing the instrument of violence through the same close-up shot of the brick in Jian's and then Guei's hand. Nevertheless, although we understand that Jian's act is motivated by personal vengeance, we realize that Guei acted out of a desperate need for survival. By forcing viewers to consider the different reasons why the two boys acted similarly—Guei for economic survival and Jian for retribution against the threat to his masculinity—Wang removes any ambivalence as to the moral equality of these two acts. Here, again, it appears that Wang has established a false parallelism, this time between the two boys' violent actions. However, if we consider how, in the last two exchanges of the bicycle, Jian acknowledges Guei as an individual by asking Guei his name and then relinquishes his own identity by giving up the bicycle to Guei, we begin to recognize a change in Jian's self-identity and his relationships to others. By having Jian finally recognize Guei as a person, Wang is opening Jian to the possibility of developing a new, more ethical sense of himself—and, by metaphoric extension, to the

possibility that other urbanites, too, will open themselves and their city to their country brethren.

The film remains ambiguous as to whether Jian truly adopts a new hybrid identity. Yet such is indeed the case for Guei. With respect to post-colonial theory, hybridity “commonly refers to the creation of new trans-cultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization.”<sup>48</sup> Within the narrative codes established in *Beijing Bicycle*, violence functions only as an attribute of urbanites and desires, while migrants like Guei are implicitly encoded as persistent yet nonviolent. Regardless of whether this claim can be maintained historically or culturally, the violence Guei embraces defines him as a hybrid individual who must go through a “difficult, agonistic process of negotiation”<sup>49</sup> between his old culture and a new one that is integrally intertwined with the material desires and acts of violence emerging from global capitalism. That Guei adopts a negative, corrupting ethic from his urban experience speaks to Wang’s realistic assessment of the demands of the contemporary practices of market socialism in China, practices that offer no economic or ethical alternative for many rural migrants.

I read the film’s final scene, which directly follows Guei’s attack on the boy, as an illustration of how the migrant other, in return, mutually transforms urban spaces and the dominant culture. Here, Wang effectively employs *mise en scène* to show Guei carrying his wrecked bicycle across a busy Beijing street. Exploiting the design of the city’s traffic lanes, Guei moves across the screen left to right (a movement that is, coincidentally, indicative of China’s political move from the Communist left to right of market socialism), first past bicyclists and then cars stopped at a traffic light. His movement here correlates with historical changes of contemporary Beijing, which is itself moving from a city where bicycles were once the main means of mobility to one where automobiles are emerging as both the dominant means of transportation and symbols of social status. That these bicyclists and cars must stop while Guei passes not only reflects the reality of the city’s traffic codes but also that Guei, and rural migrants like him, are part of the city and must be accommodated. The final long shot of the film is of a busy city intersection in which Guei does not appear. With this shot, then, Wang acknowledges that Guei has become one of countless other urbanites who shape Beijing’s daily life.<sup>50</sup>

### **The Double Nature of Hybridity in *Beijing Bicycle***

By combining urban realism with principles and filmic techniques derived from Italian neorealism and traditional Hollywood genres, *Beijing Bicycle* constructs a hybrid filmic style that, in the process of subverting the commercial character of these genres, provides, at the structural level, the basis for its critique of economic modernization and its effects on China. The

film's hybrid style also establishes a correlate in the hybrid identity and ethic for Guei if he is to survive in urban China. For Guei and the rural migrants he represents, this ethical identity integrates country determination with the urban sense of virulent self-reliance that the harsh conditions of global capitalism force on them. As for Jian and others like him who are caught up in the endless pursuit of material desire, perhaps they, too, must seek to create a hybrid identity by looking outside of themselves and capitalist culture—perhaps even back to the Chinese countryside—for the personal fortitude that will allow them to resist the dubious aspirations of consumer capitalism.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Jean Tang, "Paradise Lost: Wang Xiaoshuai's Nostalgic *Beijing Bicycle*." January 25, 2002, [http://www.indiewire.com/people/int\\_Wang\\_Xiao\\_020125.html](http://www.indiewire.com/people/int_Wang_Xiao_020125.html) (accessed June 30, 2007).

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Other producers identified with China's Sixth Generation of filmmakers—a generation of producers who have flourished since the 1990s and who bring individualistic, edgy, and quasi-documentary feels to their films—include Zhang Yuan 張元 (b. 1963), Jia Zhangke 賈樟柯 (b. 1970), and Lou Ye 婁燁 (b. 1965). For a more complete description of Wang's early films and his struggles as a blacklisted director, see Michael Berry, "Wang Xiaoshuai: Banned in China," in *Speaking in Images: Interviews with Contemporary Chinese Filmmakers* (New York: Columbia University Press), 162–81: 163–71.

<sup>4</sup>*So Close to Paradise* was filmed with the approval of the Chinese Film Bureau (see Berry, "Wang Xiaoshuai," 164, 171–73). For an excellent discussion of the use of film noir and the gangster genre in *So Close to Paradise*, see Xu Jian, "Representing Rural Migrants in the City: Experimentalism in Wang Xiaoshuai's *So Close to Paradise* and *Beijing Bicycle*," *Screen* 46, no. 4 (2005): 433–50, 437–42.

<sup>5</sup>*Hutong* 衚衕 translates as "alleyway" but refers more generally to the neighborhoods of narrow lanes and courtyard houses that were constructed as early as the Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368). At one time, most Beijing residents lived in houses located in *hutongs*. Today, modern apartment complexes and high-rise buildings are quickly replacing these neighborhoods.

<sup>6</sup>Elizabeth Wright, "Riding Towards the Future: Wang Xiaoshuai's *Beijing Bicycle*," *Senses of Cinema*, December 2001, [http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/18/beijing\\_bicycle.html](http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/18/beijing_bicycle.html) (accessed June 30, 2007); Dror Kochan, "Wang Xiaoshuai," *Senses of Cinema*, September 2003, <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/03/wang.html> (accessed June 30, 2007); Xu, "Representing Rural Migrants," 433–49; and Harry H. Kuoshu, *Fin de Siècle Urbanites: Blooming Cinematic Urbanism in Post-Mao China* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>7</sup>Xu, "Representing Rural Migrants," 434.

<sup>8</sup>Kochan, "Wang Xiaoshuai."

<sup>9</sup>"Dance, Dance Revolution" is a video game, originally from Japan, that is played by replicating the dance steps of simulated dancers who are projected on a screen in front of the game's players.

<sup>10</sup>Wright, "Riding Towards the Future."

<sup>11</sup>Tang, "Paradise Lost."

<sup>12</sup>Wright, "Riding Towards the Future."

<sup>13</sup>Xu, "Representing Rural Migrants," 443.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 444.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 435. Xu's statements here characterize his readings of both *So Close to Paradise* and *Beijing Bicycle*.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 434.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 437.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 448.

<sup>19</sup>Kuoshu, *Fin de Siècle Urbanites*.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Berry, "Wang Xiaoshuai," 174–75.

<sup>22</sup>Millicent Marcus, *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 57.

<sup>23</sup>This analysis of how Rome and Beijing are portrayed in the films develops out of remarks made by Marcus, *Italian Film*, 73; and Wright, "Riding Towards the Future."

<sup>24</sup>The EUR, or Esposizione Universale di Roma, was Mussolini's model for the modern Fascist city. The EUR was intended to signify the new glory of Rome. At the time of the film's shooting, the EUR was still incomplete, making it a richly symbolic representation of Fascism's unfulfilled promise of Italian prosperity and grandeur.

<sup>25</sup>André Bazin, "An Aesthetic of Reality: Neorealism," in *What is Cinema?* trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 2:14–60: 22.

<sup>26</sup>Marcus, *Italian Film*, 60.

<sup>27</sup>Although this argument does not totally refute Xu's claim of the open-ended quality of *Beijing Bicycle's* narrative, the comparison between the two movies does at least show that other realist narratives, which are less likely to be considered experimental, allow for more narrative ambiguity.

<sup>28</sup>André Bazin, "De Sica: Metteur en Scène," in *What is Cinema?* trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 2:61–78: 67.

<sup>29</sup>André Bazin, "In Defense of Rossellini," in *What is Cinema?* trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 2:93–101: 100.

<sup>30</sup>Frank P. Tomasulo, "Bicycle Thieves: A Re-reading," in *Vittorio De Sica: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Howard Curle and Stephen Synder (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 160–71: 163.

<sup>31</sup>Tomasulo, "Bicycle Thieves," 168.

<sup>32</sup>Marcus, *Italian Film*, 72.

<sup>33</sup>My analysis here opposes Xu's claim that Wang's unmediated depiction of the rural migrants' suffering and the potential of polysemic readings of the film are "neither diluted by . . . melodrama nor exploited for . . . commercial entertainment." Xu, "Representing Rural Migrants," 449.

<sup>34</sup>For a similar description, see Ibid., 435.

<sup>35</sup>Wright, "Riding Towards the Future."

<sup>36</sup>Xu does not recognize how these romantic clichés function in the narrative. For his reading of these relationships, see his "Representing Rural Migrants," 445–47.

<sup>37</sup>The various melodramatic strategies discussed here are taken from John Mercer and Martin Shingler, *Melodrama: Genre, Style, Sensibility* (London: Wallflower Press, 2004).

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 85.

<sup>39</sup>Nick Browne, "Society and Subjectivity: On the Political Economy of Chinese Melodrama," in *Celluloid China: Cinematic Encounters with Culture and Society*, ed. Harry H. Kuoshu (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), 54–68.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 56.

<sup>41</sup>Guei, according to Wang, was never “intended to be a comic representation.” Tang, “Paradise Lost.” Still, considering that Chaplin was “emphasized in [the] Beijing Film Academy’s curriculum” where Wang studied directing, and that Chaplin has long been a favorite in China for his critical stance toward “the ills of capitalist modernity,” it is likely that Wang has some familiarity with Chaplin’s comedy. Kuoshu, *Fin de Siècle Urbanites*.

<sup>42</sup>Frank Krutnik, “General Introduction,” in *Hollywood Comedians: The Film Reader*, ed. Frank Krutnik (London: Routledge, 2003), 1–18: 6.

<sup>43</sup>Donald Crafton, “Pie and Chase: Gag, Spectacle and Narrative in Slapstick Comedy,” in *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, ed. Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins (New York: Routledge, 1995), 106–19: 108.

<sup>44</sup>On Wang’s use of these chase scenes featuring bicycles as a realistic response to Chinese imitations of Hollywood action films, see Berry, “Wang Xiaoshuai,” 174.

<sup>45</sup>Geoff King, *Film Comedy* (London: Wallflower Press, 2002), 173–74.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>47</sup>Xu, “Representing Rural Migrants,” 444.

<sup>48</sup>Bill Ascroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (London: Routledge, 1998), 118.

<sup>49</sup>David Hubbart, *Homi K. Bhabha* (London: Routledge, 2006), 113.

<sup>50</sup>For Xu’s reading of this final scene, see his “Representing Rural Migrants,” 444–45.