

## 4 Camp as a Critical Strategy in *And the Spring Comes*

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Gu Changwei's 2007 film *Li Chun* or *And the Spring Comes* tells the story of the unrealizable dream of the talented school music teacher Wang Cailing who wants to become a professional soprano in Beijing, a desire reinforced by her recurrent singing of Puccini's aria "Vissi d'arte," and her encounter with other artists who share a common dream of *living for art*. However, none of their artistic pursuits in Western arts, be it opera, ballet or modernist painting, seem to fit in the gloomy provincial city lost in China's industrial north where they live. One scene, which will be discussed in detail later, illustrates this dramatic incongruity: on the "stage" which is an open-air basketball field in daylight, surrounded by bumpkin-looking locals, the impeccably dressed-up homosexual dancer performs an excerpt from *Swan Lake*, followed by "Auf Flügeln des Gesanges" sung in German by the main protagonist of the film, the solemn-looking and soprano-outfitted music teacher Wang. They are not taken seriously either by the locals inside the film who jeer at them and urge them to get off the "stage," or by the spectators in the cinema who would likely burst into laughter. It is this constellation that produces the film's entertaining effects as well as its "camp" quality.

The film is constructed through a series of juxtapositions of different and supposedly incongruous realms: the local, the global, the foreign, the Chinese, the Western, the colonial, the ethnic, the deliberate and the naïve. These juxtapositions while producing campy moments effectively question the very categories and the hierarchical structure within which they are often posited. I focus particularly on how these categorizations, which often come with seriousness, have been alternately rendered as the undersides of each particular campy moment of performance and reception. Depending on different axes of knowledge, position and presumption that each audience is located on, the unappreciated and dirty underside that produces campiness (for them) is a different one. In other words, this chapter theorizes camp's simultaneous downward and upward movements as the film's critical strategy with which the very categorical certainty of what constitutes the "high" and what the "low" is, if not called into question, rendered frivolous and clumsy.

## When a Certain Kind of Spring Wind Blows

Gu Changwei opens *And the Spring Comes* with a voice-over by the main character, the music teacher Wang Cailing, who is affected by the spring wind:

立春一过, 实际上城市里还没啥春天的迹象, 但是风真的就不一样了。风好像在一夜间就变得温润潮湿起来了。这样的风一吹过来, 我就可想哭了。我知道我是自己被自己给感动了 [Right after the “Spring-Comes” solar term, in fact there are no traces of spring in the city, but the wind has become really different. The wind seems to have become milder and moister overnight. When this kind of wind breathes, I just want to cry. I know I am just moved by myself].<sup>1</sup>

立春 [*Li Chun* or *And the Spring Comes*], which is also the title of the film, has multiple meanings. It refers to one of the twenty-four solar terms, “Spring-Comes” of the Chinese lunar calendar. It also alludes to “the spring” of political and economic reform in Mainland China initiated by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s. It is difficult not to find resonance in this blowing spring wind that is “really different”<sup>2</sup> with the political rhetoric of the Chinese Government’s “open and reform policy” which started first in selected coastal cities in the 1970s, spread nationwide in the 1980s, intensified in the 1990s, and continues today. The grand opening of the whole country to the global market starting in the spring of 1992 is roughly the historical period in which the movie is set.

The voice-over by our protagonist Wang Cailing on the “Spring-Comes” and its sensitive wind at the outset of the film is sentimental and artsy. Wang’s heavy northern accent of the Inner Mongolian city of Baotou<sup>3</sup> seems to be incongruent with her poetic seriousness and makes her cheesy melodrama less deliberately pretentious than naively camp. Wang, at the same time, is aware of her own sentimental mood when she self-mockingly ends her lamentation: “I know that I am only moved by myself.” All this “suffering in quotation marks” (Halperin 186) amounts to a gay sensibility, which explains the film’s enthusiastic reception among Chinese gays who tirelessly recite this passage in private and on social media, especially each year when “Spring-Comes” comes. Such “failed seriousness,” according to Susan Sontag an important constituent of camp, permeates the film and the fates of not only Wang but also of her other artist friends, who all pursue some form of Western art: opera, ballet or oil painting. Camp needs an audience; therefore, even in the form of failure, it is closely related to the audiences in the film (the locals) and in the cinema (the spectators).

Invoking camp in a non-English-speaking context always seems to require a certain justification or redefinition of the term. As Patrick Paul Garlinger and H. Rosi Song in their discussion of Spanish camp argue, “camp is less than mobile, more fixed than fluid, in one key respect: as an

object of critical analysis, camp remains heavily tied to Anglo-American culture” (3). This essay on Gu Changwei’s film is not trying to define a “Chinese camp.” Both “Chineseness” and “camp” are so elusive and complex that their conjunction would lead us nowhere. Camp, which is highly skeptical about categories, cannot bear restraining supplements such as “Chinese,” “English” or “Gay.” And as I show in this chapter, whenever these seemingly self-sufficient supplements appear, camp is ready to turn them upside down (or the other way round).<sup>4</sup>

While mindful of Rey Chow’s critique of Chineseness, I remain critical of this kind of postcolonial metanarrative, which is too ready to claim that “the Western gaze has come to stand as the determinant of Chinese identitarian and cultural value,” and that “knowledge of the West, access to the West, and recognition by the West remain the very criteria by which ethnics judge one another’s existential value and social success in the postcolonial world” (Chow 2002, 188–189). In the following discussion, we see how the film *Li Chun* renders these metanarratives frivolous. Not only does the characters’ pursuit of Western arts in no way see “the West” as a point of reference or seek its recognition, but the undeniable hierarchical logic of coloniality is turned upside down through local receptions of “Western arts.” In the film, both the “Chinese” and the “Western,” in different campy moments, become camp’s dirty underside. As a critical strategy, camp trivializes these serious issues that often rely on categorical and hierarchical grand edifices. The “ethnic subject” has not only the right to be indifferent to the colonial appellation but also the capacity of camping it up (or down) and rendering any anguished, angry or sympathetic solemnity funny and clumsy.

### Convoluting the Local and the Global

Set in the decisive moment of China’s opening to the global market and capitalism, between 1988 and 1998,<sup>5</sup> *Li Chun* tells the story of the unrealizable dream of Wang Cailing, who describes herself as “poor and not good-looking but endowed with a good voice.” Her dream is to become a professional soprano in Beijing or Paris if need be, despite her humble background as a peasants’ daughter living in a provincial industrial town. This juxtaposition of what one is and what one does produces campy moments in the film, which is to be discussed in this part.

Wang is inflated with pride. Her soprano singing voice and professional dream seem so distant to her dusty surroundings. Even her neighbor, Teacher Zhang, a modern woman of a kind who proudly indulges in erotic pleasures, something that was denied and even condemned as capitalist decadence in the previous decades of communist China, does not seem to understand let alone appreciate Wang’s pursuit. At one point Wang announces to Zhang that the Central Opera invited her to watch *Tosca* in Beijing, perhaps to provoke jealous reactions from

Zhang. Zhang, who does not know about the opera, not to mention its unfortunate Chinese transliteration “tuo sika,” nevertheless hears the word “tuo.” Puzzled, she stops brushing her teeth to ask: “tuo” what? – strip what?

“Tuo” can be the word for “strip.” In fact, the word “脱” pronounced “tuo” as in Zhang’s question “tuo sha – strip what?” is a homophone of the word “托” in “tuo sika – Tosca.” We know from the previous scene that Wang actually went to Beijing to arrange a *hukou* (户口, a household registration) in the black market and bought the entrance ticket to an opera concert from a scalper at a lower price after the concert had started. In a kind of “closet narrative,” this scene achieves its campiness through multiple layers of lies/realities against which the viewer’s knowledge is tested.

On the first level, everyone except Zhang, who is her immediate audience, knows that Wang is lying about what really happened in Beijing. The Central Opera is neither “transferring”<sup>6</sup> her to Beijing, nor have they invited her to watch an opera, be it *Tosca* or anything else. However, her seriousness about the invitation expressed in her proud intonation and arrogance towards Zhang (she does not even bother to look at Zhang), seem to indicate that she has already forgotten that she is lying. Since Zhang doesn’t comprehend what being invited to watch “tuo sika” means, the only person convinced in this operatic grandiosity is Wang herself. The incongruity between her small-town looks, provincial accent and her carefully constructed self-presentation as an aficionado of high art duly recognized by the state opera house cruelly produce a camp effect on the screen. The humor intensifies when Zhang, clearly ignorant of what *Tosca* is, changes the famous opera’s transliterated name to an absurd question. In a nutshell, Puccini’s and Tosca’s efforts to dramatize the noble struggle for love, freedom and chastity, as well as Wang’s noble pursuit of high art are reduced to a vulgar act of stripping (tuo sha?).

The audience of the film needs to know what *Tosca* is and what “tuo sha?” means to burst into laughter at this misunderstanding. Meanwhile, as camp, its humor is never just for fun. The cruel social and class hierarchy that structures the alleged incongruity between Wang’s looks and her taste is the underside of camp at this moment. No political correctness, however, is allowed in this camp party of inclusion and exclusion, to use Cleto’s metaphor (33). The allegedly naïve camp performance, in this case Wang’s lie, is ready to turn back and laugh at whoever takes the issue too seriously so that she or he starts to submit the darker side of camp to a serious analysis of “class struggle” or the “postcolonial condition.” Zhang’s “tuo sha?” is a campy answer to Rey Chow’s question about whether “the ethnic has a choice of not responding” to the hailing “Hey you!” (*The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism* 108–109), complicating Louis Althusser’s and later Slavoj Žižek’s analyses of interpellation.

Camp's malleable capacity to elude the inclination toward seriousness and big concepts is implemented through an extremely insignificant detail. While Wang is waiting for the scalper to lower the price of the ticket for the concert to which she fantasizes that the Central Opera has invited her, an almost indiscernible aria leaks out from the opera house. The melody is the famous aria "O mio babbino caro" from *Gianni Schicchi*. Wang has not seen *Tosca*! Why would she even need to lie about this to the confused Zhang? Because *Gianni Schicchi* is much less well-known than *Tosca*. Wang carefully chooses a more popular opera, *Tosca*, for the non-expert Zhang to understand what she is talking about. If she nevertheless fails to impress Zhang, Wang's painstakingly conceived lie has deceived the director himself. The film's closing credits, which list all the music excerpts, do not include any reference either to the aria "O mio babbino caro" or *Gianni Schicchi*. Who just said that the only one who is convinced by her lie is Wang herself?

Meanwhile one soon realizes that Wang's "living for art," a project that is reinforced repeatedly throughout the film by her singing the aria "Vissi d'arte" from *Tosca* as well as by her pretension, sentimentality and sense of superiority among the locals, is her survival strategy. The hostility of the local community towards those who do not conform to the normative dictates is unpacked gradually through Wang's encounter with the oil-painter Huang Sibao and the ballet-dancer Hu Jinquan. They share the same love for art and also, less obviously yet plausibly felt, queerness, in Hu's homosexuality or Huang's and Wang's celibacy. The claustrophobic social surveillance of any possible trespasser of normativity starts to make the film viewers' laughter uncomfortable.

The encounter between Wang the singer and Hu Jinquan the dancer is the climax and also end of the film's campiness. Hu, the effeminate dance teacher from the city's People's Art Center, performs in a public show called "Singing Out a New World; Dancing Out a New Life" on a concrete open-air square in front of a Soviet neoclassical-style cinema called Red Star. The *kitsch* setting could not become *camp* without simultaneously displaying what is normally considered incongruent or improper. Right after the colorful folk dance enthusiastically received by the local audience on the square comes Hu. He enters the stage, impeccably dressed in white tights and bulgy ballet attire. He performs the waltz excerpt from *Swan Lake*. The local audience on the square, whose rustic look does not even seem compatible with the neoclassic theater adorned with giant Ionic pillars, begin to laugh almost immediately after Hu enters the "stage," a basketball field.

Hu does not seem to notice or care about the crowd. He needs the audience, however unappreciative or even hostile they might be. His solemnity in delivering his performance as well as the mannered facial expressions, seemingly unaware of the public's mockery, create for the film spectators a moment of campy amusement as much as Hu does

for the yelling local audience who are hostile yet nevertheless amused. This amusing moment does not last long. The jeers wake Hu up from his immersion in the carefully articulated *révérence*, *jeté* and *assemblé* steps. The audience of bumpkins starts to yell loudly in time with Tchaikovsky's ascending sequence. Almost in rhythmic synchronicity with the cadence, we hear "xia qu ba, xia qu ba! [get off the stage]." Hu gradually stops the *chaîne*-turns. Hands still in the air, his satisfactorily smiling face turns blue, first confused and soon saddened. He escapes from the "stage" as if having committed a crime and only very subtly shows his anger by forcing himself into the crowded bus that serves as the backstage, seeking refuge in anonymity.

Wang fares no better. Her appearance follows Hu's failure. She is slightly concerned by the hostile reaction the audience had towards Hu's *Swan Lake*. Nevertheless it is one of the few chances that she could perform in public with quite a big audience, which she also needs. She begins to sing solemnly "*Auf Flügeln des Gesanges*" in German with the soprano-outfit she has made herself. This time, the locals simply leave the square. The campy moment has quickly dissipated. Someone shouts, "look, it is snowing!" Spring has long gone.

On the bus after the show, now in a ratty military coat, Wang approaches and consoles Hu, "I have heard for a long time that a teacher from the People's Art Center dances very well." Hu replies to her, "I have heard about you too. You sing as well as Callas." Although Maria Callas is a famous opera diva in the West, she is unlikely to be known to anyone there who has never even heard of *Tosca*. With Hu, Wang obviously would not need to substitute *Gianni Schicchi* with *Tosca* if she were to tell him about the Central Opera's invitation. This very first encounter of the two "queer" protagonists after a fatal failure in the local reception of their performances unites them in a solidarity that is desperately isolated in the face of a double denial: nobody seems to be able to take their artistic pursuits seriously, neither the jeering locals nor the spectators of the film.

The locals on the square clearly prefer the folkloric dancing of "Rice Sprout Song" to the in fact also folkloric Russian ballet or the German song. What makes Hu's dancing funny and threatening is the foreign form, the music and particularly the costume. If the "typical" campy thing to do in a European context is to have the male dancer in a tutu, Hu's tightly wrapped legs, the glittering lace outfit, and the make-up on his face are queer enough to trigger a reaction from the locals who feel at once amused and threatened. The bulgy ballet attire, which certainly seems licentious to the locals, could very likely invoke the concept of "流氓" or "filthy rogue" used by Huang Sibao the painter's mother earlier in the film to refer to his nude paintings. This word was also used to refer to homosexuals, who were charged with having committed a crime of that same name, "流氓罪," until 1996. On the other hand,

for the spectators of the film what happens in this moment is Hu's (and also Wang's and Huang's) birth as a member of the very community that dislikes him: the heavy accent he shares with *them* is the thing that makes his pursuit of "high art" incongruous and funny, although there is nothing essentially "high" about ballet. That is to say, Hu's ballet excerpt is despised by the local audience because of its foreignness and by the film spectators because he is seen as belonging to that rustic and unwelcoming "localness."

This tragicomic scene, relying on its different audiences inside and outside the film, uses "the local" and "the foreign" alternately as the undersides of each campy moment. According to the locals on the square, the "the community as a whole" with its "Rice Sprout Song" dance constitutes the globally acceptable form. In relation to this local "globalism," "the West" with its ballet dance and opera songs is regarded as the particularized, the "local," and an intrusive stranger. Beyond the boundaries of the local, that is to say, when the film is disseminated and shown to a broader audience, the patronizing local (in its capacity as the global) stays straightforwardly the local and the specific. In camp's cruelty, none of the categories, "the local" or "the global" is spared. Tchaikovsky, often hailed as an artistic universal language, can function as much as the darker side of a particular camp context as the "Rice Sprout Song" does.

### Camp as a Critical Strategy

Wang's failed pretension about *Tosca* and Hu's ridiculed *Swan Lake* are campy moments in the film not only because they have invoked the "high camp" genres of opera and ballet and because of the incongruous environment in which they deliver these performances but also, more importantly, because it is their survival strategy in a normative environment that is hostile towards queer subjects. The local audience gives them an opportunity to express themselves, although the receptions are cruel. They are aware of the audience but do not take their opinion too seriously. And the same characters stop being campy when they begin to care about the audience, feel obliged to conform to their expectations or ignore them completely. The scene following the performance on the square illustrates this point.

Hu proposes a fake marriage with Wang on the grounds that because of their celibacy "people talk (badly) so much about us," but is refused. He then stages a fake rape of a female student whose husband/boyfriend previously assaulted him publicly as a "二腓子" (freak or queer). Hearing the girl's scream, the other members of the dance team gather outside the men's toilet inside which the staged harassment takes place. The girl runs out with torn clothes and Hu follows, chin up and chest out, heroically marching through the murmuring crowd. He has already surrendered.

The crowd neither helps the screaming victim nor yells at the villain as those on the square have done when he was dancing ballet. Passing a dark corridor, Hu, dressed all in white like a proud swan, arrives in the center of the dance studio, and begins to dance his last number from *Swan Lake* before he is arrested. This moment, although containing several camp elements, cannot be considered as camp any more. The performer is fully aware of the audience by ignoring them completely. The camera leads the film audience to Hu's inner world, that is to say, to a world without incongruity, without "the underside." The dance studio is converted into a dreamy stage with nobody other than himself in chiaroscuro. Hu sees himself (and we, him) in the psychologized big mirrors that give occasionally bifurcated reflections of the queer dancer.

As analyzed earlier, what constitutes the underside of camp is relational and culturally/historically specific, depending on what is considered as local or global, normative or queer. In fact, the two constantly run into each other. As we have seen, the artists of the industrial town in the movie use Western arts as a strategy to imagine a non-normative life and distinguish themselves from the constraints of the local. The local in turn urges a homogenizing and globalizing normativity on the individuals. These very foreign and strange art forms do not yield any attraction or value for the local audience. The habitual equation of the "West" with the "global," despite its historical actuality, is rejected in the film by the so called postcolonial ethnic community at the "local" level. They appear to stubbornly adhere to their "tradition" and narrowly-mindedly reject any foreign forms. There is no way to suggest that they long for access to or validation by the West as Rey Chow claims they do "consciously and unconsciously [...] as a whole" (*The Protestant Ethic* 189). The allure or burden of the Western gaze is not even relevant to the "ethnic" artists who evoke "Paris" in their imagination of the elsewhere. Where they do seek recognition, albeit failed, is the local audience, not any imagined "West."

The film's spectators burst into laughter about the performance and lifestyle of the artists who, as Wang says, "just don't want to be common." To some extent, the film spectators have coerced the artists back into the local community that rejects their "eccentricity." The two undersides of camp in this film, the Western "high art" and the parochial local "folklore" alternately retain camp's capacity to surmount its commodification for capitalist consumption in the sense that both the consumerist logic and the monumental, categorical and hierarchical structure of knowing are belied, deconstructed and camped. The coercive and class-bound identification of the three artists with the grim background/underside that allows the campy moments to emerge and to amuse the film audience is mocked and questioned towards the end of the film.

After the audience has been trained to sympathize with rather than laugh at Wang's fate, a girl (Gao Beibei), who claims to be a terminal



cancer patient, comes with her mother to Wang for help. She wants to participate in a singing competition for amateurs on television. They have learnt that Wang is being transferred to the Central Opera in Beijing. The aloof Wang, who had the words at hand to allude to Van Gogh<sup>7</sup> and Chekov as a gesture of her self-presentation as the morally elevated connoisseur, agrees to help Gao in this under-the-table deal. This agreement is not only out of her sympathy for the girl's terminal condition but mostly because Wang sees in her "a talent that is frightening" after Gao sings *Auf Flügeln des Gesanges*, also in German. As she cannot arrange contacts (which she does not have), she decides to help Gao financially with half of the money she was able to ask back from the black market dealer of the Beijing household registration.

Gao wins second prize in the competition. After watching the TV broadcast of the competition, which presents her as the one "who affects everyone's heart" (because of her fatal illness), Gao confesses to Wang that her cancer status is simply a lie: "it is too hard to become famous. There are too many talented singers out there and we are from small towns. I would not have been able to come this far without some special story." This scene breaches the boundary between the audience inside and outside the film. Inside, Wang is holding Gao in her arms weeping uncontrollably in front of the TV broadcast whose audience might also have tears in their eyes. The film spectators already trained to sympathize with Wang's ill-fated life at this moment of the film are unlikely not to have an affective response to this scene (if not to the TV melodramatic "regarding the pain of others" too familiar staging of anguish on a daily basis). It leaves little possibility for the audience to suspect that the girl with shaved head and bumpkin appearance might have lied.

Gao is able to convince Wang that, because of her singing talent, Wang can easily identify as her alter ego, who embodies the "Modernist purity of the artist who sacrifices all for his [*sic*] artistic vision" (Silvio in Lim 83). That she manages to convince the film spectators is mainly due to her background as a village girl accompanied by a "mother" (also staged, played by Gao's friend) who looks even more rustic than those around Wang. Their presence fits perfectly well the stereotype of the victimized "lower class," "honest and innocent," expected to be in a state of despair. A similar "underside" which leads the audience to judge Wang's allegedly misplaced aspiration for "high art" now returns with a more appropriate performer whom the audience is no longer able to find amusing. But this, too, is a lie, but a calculated one. The spectators who were laughing at the village soprano Wang but most likely sympathized with Gao Beibei the lower-class singer who "has cancer," are now being laughed at. The cinematic gaze turns back to the spectator and draws them into the camp tableau of failed seriousness. Again, no one is spared. This time, the failed seriousness does not produce humorous campiness. It is entirely serious about its critique of a capitalist

marketing strategy that relies on mobilizing affect at the “global” level through mass-media, a feature that Gao Beibei skillfully manipulates inside and outside the film.

### “And Spring Comes”

*Li Chun* effectively questions the weight of bulky and perhaps also bulgy identifications such as “community,” “generation,” “class,” “the West,” “Chineseness,” “spectatorship” by camping them up. This serious political critique achieved through frivolity becomes even clearer when put alongside other filmmakers with whom Gu Changwei has maintained intimate yet ambivalent relationships in the historical context of China in the late 1980s.

The title “And the Spring Comes” and also other small details in the film (such as the “Beijing 1990 Asian Games” poster on the wall) situate the film in the turbulent decade of contemporary Chinese history around 1988–1998 – especially after the historical incidents in Tiananmen Square in June 1989 which “erased the carnival atmosphere and signaled the end to a period of cultural reflection” (Cui 502). The “carnival atmosphere” Cui refers to is the “cultural fever” of the 1980s that sees rapidly emerging intellectual and artistic pursuits at a national level after the end, with Mao’s death in 1976, of the suffocating “Cultural Revolution,” and further encouraged by the “National College Entrance Exam (高考)” resumed in 1977, in which, for example, the painter Huang Sibao has had several, albeit failed, attempts.

The initial “opening” within China in the 1980s before its grand entry in the global market in the 1990s was the avid interest among Chinese people from all social strata in foreign art, philosophy, history and politics (Berry 554). Many domestically and internationally acclaimed artists from Mainland China were active participants in the cultural and intellectual movement of the 1980s. The artistic pursuits of the three main characters in the film are specific to this cultural and historical context: the schoolteacher of music Wang Cailing, whose dream is to become a soprano in Beijing or Paris; the worker at the local steel factory Huang Sibao, who aspires to become the Chinese Van Gogh; the queer dancing teacher Hu Jinquan, who just wants to dance ballet “no matter what.”

This historical period shares many similarities with the Madrilenian post-Franco artistic movement *Movida*, which nurtured artists like Pedro Almodóvar who brought the new Spanish cinema to the international stage. Different from the *Movida*, however, which “rather than counter-hegemonic [...] was eventually welcomed by Spain’s political elite as ‘the official image of Spain’” (Graham and Labanyi in Allinson 14), the Chinese artist-intellectuals, such as the fifth and sixth generation of directors, have a more ambivalent relationship with the state.

Gu Changwei was accepted to the Beijing Film Academy in 1978, the same year as the initiation of Deng Xiaoping's "open and reform" policy (改革开放). Together with Gu in the 1978 class were a group of filmmakers who gained international recognition in the mid-1980s, known as the "fifth generation" of Chinese directors that includes Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou and Jiang Wen, to name but the ones with whom Gu has closely collaborated as their cinematographer.<sup>8</sup> While his classmates are grouped among the "Fifth Generation Directors," Gu is, chronologically speaking, a "Sixth Generation" director who only started to direct his own films in 2004. Thematically, his films are less concerned with topics such as the Cultural Revolution (a heavily recurring theme of the "fifth generation") than with the transitional period in Mainland China from the late 1970s (post-Cultural Revolution) to the 1990s.

Gu made *Li Chun* after his first film, *Peacock*, set in the late 1970s and early 1980s (that is, the aftermath of the "Cultural Revolution"). The narrator of *Peacock* states towards the end of the film to the accompaniment of the low roar of a fast moving train: "I vaguely remember, after father departed, it was soon the 'Spring-Comes' solar term." *And the Spring Comes* is set in the decade after that of *Peacock*, the late 1980s. Different from *Peacock*'s asphyxiating stillness, *Li Chun* moves quickly through the camera work, the narrative and the recurrent images of fast-moving trains, as well as the characters' frequent inter-city displacement and their desiring of the "elsewhere," Beijing or Paris. All suggest a fast-moving Chinese "spring of reform and opening." This thematic and historical span puts Gu in an ambiguous position within the generational demarcation of the "fifth" and "sixth" generation of Chinese filmmaking.

The rapidly changing history of China in the transition from the culturally idealistic 1980s to the commercialized 1990s, as well as Gu's ambiguous position between the fifth and sixth generations, i.e. the filmmaker's dilemma between the nostalgic movie-as-pure art and the commercial lure of an expanding market,<sup>9</sup> is treated with humorous frivolity in *And the Spring Comes*. This frivolity, as I have shown earlier, is not depoliticized. It is a subtle and forceful critique of China's entry into global capitalism, a process that involves a complex negotiation between the global and the local, the foreign and the folkloric.

Now let us return to one last campy instant in *Li Chun*. Wang poses as a nude model for Huang the self-taught oil painter. A slow tracking movement of the camera reveals the recumbent Wang in the position of Diego Velázquez' *Venus del espejo*, only that the current Venus-aka-Wang is overweight. The tableau vivant hears Wang's nasal and slightly sensual voice asking Huang if he has ever read Chekov's play *Three Sisters*: "one of the three sisters can speak six languages and she always said that in a small town such as theirs, knowing six languages was a burden like a sixth finger [...] just like you and me." Later in the film, the

queer dancer Hu also calls himself the “sixth finger” (polydactyly) as a euphemism for his queerness.

The “sixth finger” used in *Li Chun* to allude to queerness in the context of a campy staging of Velázquez’s famous painting also appears in a “fifth generation” director’s film, Chen Kaige’s award-winning *Farewell My Concubine* (1993). Jiang Wenli (the same actress who plays Wang Cailing in *Li Chun*) plays a mother who chops off her child’s “sixth finger” to enhance his chances of being accepted into the Peking opera company where he would later become a famous transgender *dan* role. At the end of the film adaptation of Lillian Lee’s novel, Chen Dieyi in his *dan* role as the self-sacrificing concubine kills himself/herself following the ancient story, “turning drama into life,” while in the novel the characters just continue with their banal lives (Lim 74). In Song Hwee Lim’s psychoanalytic reading of the film, the director’s dramatic change of the novel’s ending shows his “propensity to valorize the heroic and reject the banal,” which reinforces a masculinist idea of the artist-intellectual firmly situated “in the public realm of nationhood, politics and the collective good” (87). The violent “castration” of the sixth finger in the opening scene is echoed in the end through the artist-concubine’s suicide.

In an interview after the release of *Li Chun*, Gu Changwei, who served as the cinematographer of Chen’s *Farewell My Concubine*, identifies himself with Wang Cailing: “I cannot be so extreme but I admire her.”<sup>10</sup> Gu has moved away from his classmates of the 1978 Beijing Academy of Film who continue to make epic films strongly invested in the (masculinist) monumental structure of feeling.<sup>11</sup> The lighthearted *Li Chun* adopts what can be recognized as “the critical strategy of camp,” ridicules the historical heaviness of the fifth generation and achieves a simultaneous critique of the local and the global, the Chinese and the Western. Instead of violently mutilating the “sixth finger” as something completely undesirable, the characters of *Li Chun* turn it into a lament not about their six-finger-ness but about the local environment’s inability to accept and appreciate them. The scene continues. Huang turns on the cassette player in order to cover the erotic moaning coming from Wang’s neighbor Teacher Zhang. Wang confesses to Huang that “I am still a virgin, [because] I don’t want to fall in this city.” The music that emits from the player is the famous intermezzo of the appropriately named opera *Cavalleria rusticana* (Rustic Chivalry).

The nationalist and Manichean propensity of a narrow-minded localism is not only to be found in the audience of yokels inside the film but also in the theoretical insistence on ethnic supplementarity, national allegory or the insurmountability of cultural differences. In this sense, the effort that keeps a malleable concept/performance/style/perspective like camp within the boundary of its “origin” also belongs to a laughable narrow-mindedness that needs to be camped up by the very act of

intersecting it with “improper” dimensions, be they ethnic, cultural or national. The global(izing) capitalism in which the Chinese state fully participates with its “spring wind of opening and reform” is duly ridiculed through Wang’s sensuous and sentimental opening remark of the coming spring, rendered funny by her heavily nasal accent. These trivial details of specific local culture and history, for example the knowledge of opera arias, “tuo sha?” and the comic effect of the accent among others, play an important role as the underside of camp, to elude the globalizing capitalist ideology of post-1980s China.

One cannot overstate the politics of language or more specifically “languaging” here. The SAPPRFT’s<sup>12</sup> aggressive but futile prohibition of the use of dialect in public media, a homogenizing act of a globalizing “Chineseness”<sup>13</sup> with Mandarin (or Putonghua, the common speech) complicit with the capitalist mechanism of producing homogenous consumers (such as those of the TV singing contest) is confronted humorously throughout the film. If the hierarchical power structure is the major reason behind the feeling of incongruity between a “high” and serious register of poetic sentimentality and political propaganda (in the name of “Spring-Comes”) and a “low” and funny form of enunciation, it is important to notice yet another banal detail: that Wang’s allegedly laughable “accent” is an imperfect imitation of an accent that is already a mixture of several accents of northern China which continues to be imperfectly imitated each year when “spring comes.”

*Li Chun* does not directly confront any big questions. Rather, it perverts epistemic certainty of categories and hierarchies, brings together otherwise incongruous qualities, practices, identities and discourses, and ridicules any too-muchness of seriousness and categories at different levels, the performance, the spectatorship and the analysis. No one is spared. Divine’s camp dictum: “Kill everyone now!” seems to be gently whispered throughout the film.

## Notes

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Chinese to English are mine.
- 2 The original version of this expression is itself rather kitschy: “改革的春风吹遍神州大地 [the spring wind of reform blows over the divine land of China].”
- 3 I am aware of the delicate issue of the language/dialect debate. All the “accents” that I mention are within the scope of the “Mandarin dialect group.” For more discussion, though in a different context, about foreign accent, see Chow 2014.
- 4 On a serious note: Rey Chow astutely points out that “the habitually adamant insistence on *Chineseness* as the distinguishing trait in what otherwise purport to be mobile, international practices” is a kind of “ethnic supplementarity,” a differentialist racism “which finds its justification no longer in the absoluteness of blood but in the insurmountability of cultural difference” (*Modern Chinese Literary and Cultural Studies in the Age of Theory* 2). Following

- Chow's critique, the danger does not lie in the "application" of camp to other contexts charged with academic colonialism, but in the compulsory ethnic labeling of an elusive concept such as camp, which travels from unknown and multiple "origins" to English (Cleto 10–11).
- 5 Another source has it as set between 1984 and 1994. See: [www.lifeweek.com.cn/2008/0121/20527.shtml](http://www.lifeweek.com.cn/2008/0121/20527.shtml). Accessed 9 Jan. 2017.
  - 6 Transferring (调工作) from one "work unit" (单位) to another reflects the state-planned economic system.
  - 7 In the beginning of the film, when Huang Sibao the painter's friend begs Wang to arrange connections needed for Huang to get into the "Art Institute" in Beijing because "he only has rotten luck" in the repeatedly failed exams, Wang coolly answers, "Van Gogh also had bad luck!"
  - 8 For example: *Red Sorghum* (Zhang Yimou, 1988), *Farewell My Concubine* (Chen Kaige, 1992) and *In the Heat of the Sun* (Jiang Wen, 1994).
  - 9 His third film, the less interesting *Zui Ai* [*Love for Life*] focuses on the issue of AIDS in the 1990s. Recently, Gu is reported to be turning to commercial productions.
  - 10 [www.lifeweek.com.cn/2008/0121/20527.shtml](http://www.lifeweek.com.cn/2008/0121/20527.shtml). Accessed 24 May 2014.
  - 11 For example, the recently realized, highly criticized epic film by Zhang Yimou, *The Great Wall* (2016).
  - 12 The State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of the People's Republic of China (中国国家广播电影电视总局) actively regulates the use of regional dialects in public media. A notice was released in 2005 and reemphasized in 2009. See: [www.sarft.gov.cn/art/2005/10/15/art\\_106\\_4370.html](http://www.sarft.gov.cn/art/2005/10/15/art_106_4370.html). Accessed 10 Jan. 2017.
  - 13 See: Chow (2000, 7–8) for further discussion on this issue.

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