No Dread for Disasters

Aftershock and the Plasticity of Chinese Life

by Cen Cheng

Screenshot Aftershock

Summary:

Aftershock is one of the few Chinese disaster films ever created. Based on the historic catastrophic earthquake in Tangshan, China in 1976, the film tells the story of one daughter who is considered dead and the two families that she does/does not belong to. The article investigates the construction of dread and the making of truth for the disaster victims, which sheds light on a great feature of Chinese life – its plasticity.

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Keywords:

China, disaster, dread, plasticity

Quotation:

Cheng, Cen (2012) "No Dread for Disasters. Aftershock and the Plasticity of Chinese Life", in: *manycinemas* issue 3, 26-39

Unlike Hollywood, a witness of two tides of disaster films in American cinema, Chinese film industry has only seen a handful of disaster films so far. Although the number of images and scenes of destruction are growing on the Chinese screen, disasters turn out to be a less favored realm for the Chinese imagination. Among this handful of disaster films, the majority have been triggered by historic disasters and stories. This tradition has been honored by a recent film, *Aftershock* (China 2010) which narrates the story of a family after being hit by the Tangshan Earthquake in 1976. The Chinese film scholar, Wang Xiangyu, calls this tradition an expression of the aesthetic realism of Chinese disaster films, which is further demonstrated by their ongoing effort to document disasters, rather than imagining them and presenting the imaginations (Wang 2008:117). The documentary inclination of Chinese disaster films can be the first aspect which distinguishes them from their Hollywood counterparts, the second distinguishing aspect lies in the blurring of binary oppositions in their treatment of man and nature.[1]

Binary oppositions in traditional Hollywood disaster films include the opposition between natural and man-made disaster, the opposition between the individual struggle for life and the formidable scale of disaster, and that between life and death, among others. Chinese disaster films tend to blur the boundaries of these oppositions, if not to omit them completely (cf. Wang 2008). In *Aftershock*, the depiction of earthquake lasts roughly 16 minutes, which is measured merely one eighth of the total length of the film. Moreover, the unveiling of the earthquake takes place in the first quarter of the film, which again forms a sharp contrast to the Hollywood tradition where disasters would usually last until the end, and with incremental degrees as the story develops. In the following three quarters of the film, there are virtually no scenes of the Tangshan Earthquake. Except for the last part where narration jumps to the more recent 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake, the majority of the film can be easily mistaken for a non-disaster film, or a film about ordinary life. The scale of the Tangshan Earthquake remains a spectacle, but it is not laboriously maintained or centered on in the rest of the film. The individual struggle in the face of disaster, therefore, is also weakened in the narrative of the film. Partly due to the physical nature of earthquake and partly due to the narrational focus on the survivors' recuperation and adaptation after the shock, the attention to in-

dividual struggles during earthquake is minimized. The two siblings in the family were trapped in a building too young to escape when the earthquake broke out; their only reactions were to cry and to call for their parents. The father's run into the tumbling building was interpreted as an instinctive response to his children's call, a protective act to save his wife, but never a struggle for his own survival.

The absence of a lasting confrontation with disasters diminishes the distinction between natural disaster and man-made disaster. The focus on the post-traumatic adaptation to losses and shock also relieves the pressure to identify the cause for the disaster. Except for immediately after the shock when the mother wailed over the buried body of her husband and howled "God nature, you bastard"[2], there is no other reference to the earthquake as a product of nature. Moreover, after this curse, the mother cried to the corpse of her husband "Why do you leave me alone (alive in this world)", which changes the previous rage and accusation of nature into a mourning accusation of her husband and his run into death, as if it were his agency not the nature's vitality which determined the death for him. Thus the mother's would-be conflict with nature is subtly reconciled, and substituted by her recognition of the sacrifice of her husband. This internalization of disaster once again downplays the distinction between natural and man-made disaster. One's harmony with nature is quickly restored, as no fear or dread over nature has been constructed. As the story progresses, one's emotional acceptance of nature and peaceful association with it will be revamped. Similar rendering of disaster is discernible in other Chinese films as well. In *Still Life* (China 2006), a film by Jia Zhangke on the fate of the people associated with the town scheduled to be inundated to give way to the construction of a giant dam, the categorization of disaster is also blurry. The only explicit lament over the loss of one's hometown takes place in the beginning of the story when the motor taxi driver pointed to a boat in the center of a quiet lake and told Han Sanming, the protagonist, that "My home is underneath the boat". A moment of mix-up strikes, for the tranquility of the water on the screen tells nothing of man-made ruin or destruction, but something of natural beauty and belonging. The agency of man and the vitality of nature once again seem interchangeable. A moment of atemporality also strikes, due to the lack of verb inflection as tense indicator in the Chinese language – the utterance of the driver can be translated into either "My home is under-

neath the boat" or "My home was underneath the boat" – the audience is thus granted the liberty to interpret and to choose the temporality of his old home, the same type of liberty the driver has himself. This liberty gives rise to a certain agency in individuals in their interpretations of disasters as well as their interpretations of history and memory, and shifts the burden of identifying the cause of disasters to that of choosing how to register disasters together with the losses.

Thus the opposition between life and death is not as essential as one's subjective interpretation of them. The line between life and death is continually blurred in the post-traumatic lives of the mother and the daughter, where their choices in the treatment of the family members overwrite the normal boundaries of life and death. The mother, who thought she lost both her husband and her daughter in the earthquake, decided to live with them, spiritually and emotionally, forever. Figuratively, she has the aid of portraits on the altar in the house to remember them and to feel their being on a daily basis. She has refused to leave Tangshan, the city once destroyed by earthquake, or the location of their house many times and quite stubbornly. Her refusals for leaving are always based on her sense of togetherness with the lost family members, and her belief that they are still in the city, that they need a home and family to return to. Her persistence in the belief of the return of the lost family members has been rewarded in the film, for at the end, the estranged daughter did choose to return to the mother, to reconcile with the portrait of the once dead girl on the altar and to reunite with the family. The mother also refused to remarry because of her wish to remain a faithful and devoted wife to her former husband for the entirety of her life. The daughter's adoptive father, after the death of her adoptive mother, made a similar decision never to remarry precisely for the

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same sense of togetherness with his diseased wife, which is discernible in his response to his daughter on the topic of remarriage: "your mother accompanies me everyday". It is for this sense of togetherness that the death of a family member is registered differently for them. The dead are not physically with us anymore, but they have not diminished or evaporated; it all depends on our memories and feelings of them, which could persist, or even prevail.

Similarly, many more binary oppositions are perceivable but not well retained in *Aftershock*. On the other hand, there is always a clear tendency to blur the boundaries between these oppositions; a jump back and forth takes place often. That bespeaks the plasticity of Chinese life: it is malleable, flexible and highly adaptable. In the face of disasters, the surface of Chinese life is sometimes only part of the true story. The true story is all about choices, and the choices are what make disasters less dreadful.

Do Not Dread: Man as Nature

In *Apocalyptic Dread: American Film at the Turn of the Millennium* (2007), Kirsten Thompson demonstrates how the second wave of American disaster films is all about apocalypticism and dread: memorial dread, familial dread, scopic dread, specular dread, eschatological/millennial dread, to name but a few. Certain types of dread do exist in *Aftershock*, however, dread is always subject to one's interpretation and choice, rather than to external forces.

Memorial dread for the daughter is the strongest expression of dread in the film. It stems from her mother's denial of her right to life from the daughter's perception. The moment the daughter heard her mother's utterance of "save the brother", in preference to saving her while both herself and her brother were under the same piece of debris after the shock and only one can be saved, triggers the onset of three decades of memorial dread and estrangement from family for her. For the many times of being asked to identify herself and her relatives, the daughter has chosen to remain silent, and in this way she has chosen a life of exile from the previous life and family. She was soon sent to the military relief team and adopted by a couple in the military. The daughter has not lost her memory at all, the fact that she blurted out her original name "Wang Deng" forcefully in rebellion to the new name her adoptive parents have selected is telling of her conflict over her old identity and her new

one. She constantly refused her old identity, and has chosen to unregister her life with her biological family, in response to the perceived betrayal of her mother to her life. However, the trauma and the memory could only be repressed rather than removed. And the most traumatic moment keeps haunting her in her dreams, with the repetition which is claimed by Freud to be one of the characteristics of the working of trauma. In response to the last query from her adoptive father on the topic, the daughter revealed to him the traumatic memory and admitted that "it's not because I can't remember, it's because I can't forget".

For the daughter, memorial dread is linked to familial dread. Her estrangement from both of her families is obvious. Her silence and the choice not to identify her biological family guaranteed her a new life, with a new family. Her final choice to return to her biological family took place thirty two years after the earthquake, thirty two years of what she admitted to be torture for her mother. The mother helplessly reprimanded her cruelty to stay completely away from the family; however, on the other hand, the mother also understood her impulse to exile from the family: at the news of the daughter's current residency in Canada, the mother signed "she's hiding so far away from me." The daughter seemed unable to belong to either of her families, for she was as far from her adoptive parents as she was from her biological parents. She cut the relationship with her adoptive family completely and exiled from family life again after dropping college and giving birth to her illegal child. Her adoptive father, once reunited with the daughter, reproached her for her unexcused absence for so many years in a similar helpless rage. The helplessness derives from the bottomless gap in the daughter's relationship with family in her psyche, a post-traumatic scar rendered in the ruins of the earthquake. Figuratively, in terms of the scene composition for her return to both of the families, the daughter is always positioned at the entrance of a house, always ready to leave and reluctant to enter, which betokens her dubious relationship to the institution of family.

Both memorial and familial dread in the daughter have been remedied at the end of the film, with a renewed interpretation of her mother's choice from a denial of her life to a pursuit for life for her brother through the sacrifice of hers. This renewal of understanding is triggered by the daughter's experience as

a relief volunteer for the 2008 earthquake. The witnessing of a mother's dilemma enlightened her with the realization that the denial of part of the child's body (the choice to amputate the child) is in fact a pursuit for life for other parts of the body, which would constitute the preservation of the child's life. The daughter's emotional involvement with the situation is reflected with the slow motion on the screen, which signifies a subtle transformation in her understanding of human choices in the face of disaster. This belated realization, together with the accidental encounter with her biological brother and the brother's narration of the mother's story, which affirmed her of the mother's sense of loss and grief, persuaded the daughter to return to and reunite with her original family. The memorial and familial dread is thus vanquished. In *Aftershock*, the dread in the daughter has been provoked by a misunderstanding of the mother's choice over her life and death; therefore, the dread will evaporate as soon as the misunderstanding is cleared. Dread thus becomes a totally subjective feeling, derived from human choices and dependent upon human interpretation. It is not about nature, it is always about man and man's choices.

In *Aftershock*, natural disasters are rendered without allusion to apocalypse, or the construction of apocalyptic dread. The lack of dread for natural disasters in the victims can be discerned by the reaction of the brother to a minor earthquake in his city, 32 years after the Tangshan Earthquake. While all the other employees went amuck with fear, the brother stayed calm and still, he commented "Don't run. There's no need to fear minor earthquakes, and there's no escape from major ones." The capacity to stay composed and rational in the middle of shock and uncertainty is a distinct heritage from his experience from the earlier earthquake. The absence of dread over earthquakes, and an almost peaceful relationship with natural disasters is evidence to the harmonious relationship with nature that he has achieved. Human agency, in the face of natural disaster, is manifest in one's choice of rationality and emotion, the ability to make judgments, and the capacity to adapt to the circumstance. Immediately after the minor shock, the first action the brother has taken is to make a call to his mother. The proof for a lack of dread for natural disasters and even apocalypse is further demonstrated off-screen. In one press conference for the movie, the leading actress in the film, Xu Fan (who played the mother) responded to one of the press' questions on the attitude towards natural disasters and catastrophes by saying that "the point is to live your life to the fullest ev-

ery day rather than to run away; if catastrophes were to come, there's no way to escape." The actress's own value system is obviously in agreement with the attitude depicted in the film.

The priority on human agency rather than nature in the film is a recognition of the distinction between man and nature, and a further push towards the unity between them. The subjective agency of man can compensate for the lack of subjectivity of the vitality of nature. The addition of such subjectivity in the course of natural events may not alter the natural events per se, but will result in an alteration in the relationship between man and nature. Nature's vitality is registered on the surface of human life, and man offers subjective interpretation towards the changes in nature. The indispensability of both man and nature in the making and registering of natural disasters are indeed a proof of the unity between the two. The mise-en-scene of both of the earthquake scenes in *Aftershock* is a reflection of the projected unity between man and nature in the film. The monochrome long take of the ruined buildings, destroyed nature, scarred lives and traumatized psyches is a depiction of the homogeneity among them. The shot of a drooping placard on top of the debris suggests a parallel to the shot of a drooping dead body over the broken structure. The nudity of the earthquake victims divests humans of their superficial protection and denies their difference from the natural world; it bespeaks the sameness of one other and the sameness of the texture of our bodies, which proclaims our proximity to animals and nature. Destruction kills the same thingness of things as the thingness of human bodies. Before disasters, man and nature are not much different.

Screenshot Aftershock

The use of aerial shots in the film is common: many of the shots of the aftermath of the two earthquakes, the shot of the traditional Chinese practice of joss paper burning during the ghost festival, the shot of a suitor with the mother in her house, the shots of the many new looks of the city of Tangshan, to name but a few. These shots seem to be non-point-of-view shots, or an omniscient point-of-view from non-humans, probably nature. However, in the context of the mother's communication with the dead through the traditional practice of burning joss paper, these aerial shots seem to suggest the point-of-view from the dead – the nebulous, the elevated ones – who were believed by the living ones to be witnesses to all their expressions of care and love. Thus nature, or a point from nowhere, incarnates the points-of-view of the lost ones, and the unity between nature and human agency is again achieved. The unity between man and nature, or commonly referred to as the harmony of man and nature, is an essential concept in Chinese philosophy and world view. Two major Chinese scholars of the 20th century, Ji Xianlin and Ch'ien Mu agreed on this concept being the "destination of the Chinese culture" and the "primary contribution of Chinese culture to the humanities."[3] Although debate in the definition of nature and the explication of the concept exist, many roots of the concept can be traced back to classical Chinese texts. Dong Zhongshu, a leading Confucian scholar in the Han Dynasty, says "the place where nature meets man, combines the two into one." Chuang Tzu, the leading Taoist philosopher, states "Nature and I live synchronously, all life and I are one."[4] The traditional belief in the unity between man and nature prompted the emphasis on human agency and choice instead of the vitality of nature in the film. With the emphasis on human agency, the trauma of natural disasters could also be assuaged and healed. Human agency thus functions as the substitute subjectivity of nature. Nature is man, and man is nature.

Truth as Subjectivity

Kirsten Thompson identifies Søren Kierkegaard to be the next philosopher after Descartes to understand truth as subjectivity (2007:17). Moreover, Kierkegaard has a heavy investment in the concept of dread and its relationship to choice. Kierkegaard identifies the root of dread to be the availability of choices, or the "radical freedom" one has. Free will, or the indeterminacy of our actions, is what enables us to commit wrong, unethical or sinful acts. It is

simultaneously the awareness of choice and freedom that produces dread and fear in us, rather than specific actions or beliefs per se. Therefore, it is the temptation to utilize our free will that causes our dread. Truth as subjectivity is also the motif of the story in *Aftershock*.

The perceptions of life and death are the major realm for the making of truth in the film. Different characters have offered the audience multiple perceptions of life and death. The mother, as mentioned earlier, chose to register death differently from the son. While the mother registered death as an alternate state of being together, the son registered death as a separation, a spatial and temporal disconnection. The mother's sense of togetherness with the dead family members was so strong that she would sometimes utter sentences surprising to his son as well as to the audience. The mother's sense of togetherness also leads to her belief in the growth of her dead daughter, which can be discerned at the moment when she blurted out, "I have successfully raised two children" (which refer to both the son and the "dead" daughter), and also revealed when the daughter's tomb was excavated and a copy of all the textbooks required in school has been provided to "her". The differences between the mother's and the son's treatment of death have caused collisions between them; and the mother's stubbornness on the issue has resulted in a quarrel with the son, which happened after her obstinate refusal to move either to a new city or to a new apartment in Tangshan.

(in a car in front of the new apartment complex the son has selected)

> ***Son**: Mom, get off and take a look, see whether you like it.*
> ***Mother**: Can we choose not to buy it?*
> ***Son**: This is it. I insist to buy.*
> ***Mother**: Buy it if you insist, but I won't live here.*
> ***Son**: (with discontent) Mom, why are you so against me like this? You won't go to Hangzhou (the new city where the son currently settles), you won't move to a new apartment. You just want to be tough on yourself, why?*
> ***Mother**: I don't feel it's tough, I feel it is fine.*
> ***Son**: (with rage) You feel it's fine, then how will all the old neighbors judge me? Like I don't take care of you when I'm successful?*
> ***Daughter-in-law**: Fang Da, don't shout at Mom, talk nicely.*
> ***Son**: Mom, even if I don't take care of you, I cannot justify it to my father and sister.*
> ***Mother**: But I am for the interests of your father and your sister. The last time we moved, I've told them how to get to the new location. It's been some*

> *twenty years now, if we move again, I need to tell them again. I am too tired now, too tired to instruct them again. Let's stay there, don't move.*

The mother continued to stress the importance of having a home in the city of Tangshan, as well as a home which the dead family members could know how to get to. Her major choice in being together with the dead has led to a series of other life decisions which affected every aspect of her life. Via this choice, she has constructed a different truth for herself. Her subjective agency has determined the reality for herself, as well as everything she believed in and practiced. For individuals, subjectivity makes truth and affects reality; and every one lives in the truth his subjectivity renders. The son, unable to persuade his stubborn mother to move to a new apartment, was in a rage and was reminded by his wife to "talk nicely" to his mother. Enlightened somehow, the son chose to apply the mother's "truth" as a tactic for persuasion; he referred to the father and the sister in an active and present sense and immediately received an affirmation from the mother. His tactic worked, unfortunately, it did not exactly meet his goal.

Besides a different concept of death from the mother's, the son has a nuanced concept of life himself. He chose to interpret the meaning of "giving birth" as the recognition of and the persistence on the value of his life, which is larger than the conventional interpretation of delivering the physical body of a baby. In a conversation with his would-be wife, the son stresses the importance of his mother to him and the fact that "my mom has given me birth three times" – the first time at his birthday, the second time when the mother insisted on medical treatment after doctor's announcement that he was too sick to be saved, and the third time during the earthquake.

The daughter has a particular truth of life and death to herself, too. Traumatized by her mother's "preference" of her brother's life over her own, the daughter chose to understand life as an act of loyalty and death as an act of betrayal. This truth also affected the orientation of her life. In a dual dilemma of being pregnant while at college and being asked to practice abortion by the boyfriend, the daughter chose to honor her truth and to stay loyal to the new life inside of her.[5] She responded to her boyfriend's request to abortion by claiming "Others can [choose abortion], but I can't." She apparently understands that her sense of truth and her subjective interpretation of abortion are

different from others'. Her subjectivity is a compound result of the earthquake, the traumatic memory and more importantly, her own interpretations of what has happened.

The Plasticity of Chinese Life

The film begins with shots on the railroad. With the employment of both aerial shots and bird's eye view shots, the film records well the pattern of the railroad in the city of Tangshan. This image is both a metaphor for the life of the residents in the city and the Chinese life in general: a pattern with changeable routes, with countless interconnections and a pattern which provides plentiful choices. The plasticity of Chinese life depends on the availability of varied choices. Lin Yutang, a pioneer Chinese scholar, stated in his introduction of Chinese culture that a Chinese is able to lead a peaceful life only with the help of *both* Confucianism and Taoism. While Confucianism motivates a Chinese to pursue secular successes, Taoism is a haven to escape to and to shed secularism if he/she should encounter failure in the process. With the support from both of them a Chinese will be able to find a balance in the course of all his life events. This is further evidence for the subjective choice of truth and the making of individual life for the Chinese – its flexibility is rooted in their belief systems. The power of choice of one's attitudes towards life events, positive or negative, constitutes the plasticity of one's subjectivity; and this layer of subjectivity can function as a cushion to protect its subject from dangerous repercussions from a powerful shock or blow. With multiple choices available and the freedom to choose from them, the Chinese will gain a good amount of adaptability to disastrous events, and flexibility to embrace changes while at the same time keep the individual belief and truth intact. This makes the plasticity of Chinese life.

The first aspect of the plasticity of Chinese life is its malleability. The film intentionally showcased a chronology of change in the city of Tangshan since the earthquake in 1976: immediately after the shock there were shacks built next to the debris; one decade after we see grids of brick houses and buildings; two decades after boulevards, factories, skyscrapers and privately-owned cars; three decades after more skyscrapers, more cars and fancy street lights. The camera does not fail to make an aerial shot or a panorama shot of the city in each decade, which emphasizes the city's constant change, its devel-

opment in terms of industrialization and modernization, and its recuperation in terms of recovery from the trauma of the earthquake. The malleability of the city is a silent but effective story of the malleability of the people of Tangshan. Moreover, it is a demonstration of at least two aspects of the malleability of its people: their recuperative capacity in the aftermath of disasters and their reconstructive capacity in their outlook for future.

Another aspect of the plasticity of Chinese life is its flexibility, which would demand one's sacrifice on some occasions. Flexibility entails active agency in the process of choice making. The choice over the meaning of life and death, the choice over truths and lies, the choice in the interpretation of life events, to name but a few, are among the many open options in life which would affect the orientation of one's life. In the narration of the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake, the flexibility is discernible in the choice of the mother to amputate her daughter's leg at the critical moment. The initial goal of saving her daughter intact has been transformed into a choice to sacrifice part of her daughter's body in order to save her life. The external harm has been subtly transformed into an internal harm, as the mother lamented "if she would grow up hating me, then let her." What is implied here is once again the emphasis on the power of subjective interpretation of the daughter's of her mother's decision at this particular moment. The objective fact of losing one leg may not be as important as the daughter's interpretation of it, or her understanding of her mother's choice back then. The internationalization of external factors grant man the power of agency again; during the process, the sense of helplessness in the face of uncontrollable external forces is minimized while the sense of agency and the strength of one's internal force is augmented. Thus harmony with nature can once again be restored; and the conflict in the time of disaster is then intricately transformed as a conflict among men, rather than between man and nature.

Tangshan Earthquake, one of the major earthquakes in contemporary China, leaves behind both shock and stories. The shock of the earthquake produced trauma, but the stories of the earthquake affirm us that trauma can be healed. The healing of trauma is not only about time, but about active choice and the making of truth for the Chinese. In Chinese life, truth is subjective; moreover, it is plastic.

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Filmography

Aftershock: China 2010, dir. Feng Xiaogang, Chinese.
Still Life: China 2006, dir. Jia Zhangke, Chinese

Notes

[1] In light of all the polemics around the term "nature", the definition of nature in the context of my paper is all being that is non man-made, in contrast, the artificial would refer to those that is man-made.

[2] All translations from the Chinese sources are mine.

[3] Both quotes are quoted by Ji Xianlin in *Thirty Years West of the River, Thirty Years East of It*. Beijing: Contemporary China Press, 2006.

[4] Both quotes are quoted by Ji Xianlin in *Thirty Years West of the River, Thirty Years East of It*. The debate over the definition of nature is bases on its possible references to God, or nature with a will.

[5] Chinese postsecondary institutions had banned marriage for undergraduate students until 2005