

What Remains of Tiananmen? Postpolitical Reduction to Bare Life in Emily Tang's *Conjugation* (2001)

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Abstract

Conjugation, Emily Tang's first feature film, describes the difficult love of a young unmarried couple, seeking to build a home away from the turmoil of the times after the Tiananmen events. Telling the story of their precarious active life, the sorrow about giving up their ideals, and the memories of fallen friends and comrades, *Conjugation* marks a *temps mort*, a time no verb can be conjugated with. In this article, I would like to think Emily Tang's attempt at expressing the post-Tiananmen malaise in relation to the more general background of neoliberal globalization. More precisely, I would like to show how the existential itinerary depicted in *Conjugation* can be read as a powerful allegory about how neoliberalism operates as a reduction of the political to a *postpolitical*, economic management issue. Following on the work of Giorgio Agamben, this reduction will be thought of as an *extraction of bare life* that can be understood as the production of a *form of survival*. In the last instance, I wish to show how Emily Tang's film constitutes a paradigmatic cinematic itinerary illustrating the complex passage from qualified form-of-life to a form of survival or bare life, a passage whose relevance far exceeds the Chinese context and can directly contribute to a better understanding of the formatting of subjectivities corollary to the ongoing global *oikonomic* mobilization.

Keywords

Chinese cinema, Giorgio Agamben, Bare life, Tiananmen, Neoliberalism

How to Conjugate (Bare) Life?

It is difficult to measure the depth of the trauma caused by 1989 Tiananmen Square incident. More than 20 years later, the task is made even more difficult by the silence the Chinese government continues to impose regarding these events, therefore considerably limiting the possibilities for a collective appropriation of this political tragedy. Most young Chinese seem to have little if any knowledge of what happened; foreign websites mentioning the events are still being either censored or blocked. Notably, the presence of articles on that matter was quoted as one of the reasons for China blocking access to Wikipedia. A simple mention of these subjects on websites or blogs in China nowadays can still cause them to be shut down.

Recent Chinese cinema has obviously not been spared from this harsh censorship. In fact, there are very few films (to my knowledge at least) that directly deal with the 1989 Tiananmen Square events. Among them figures *Summer Palace* (2006) by Lou Ye, who has been bold to the point of reconstructing a few scenes of clashes with the police (he was banned from filming for five years as a result).¹ Most movies addressing the Tiananmen Square events try to avoid direct reconstitutions and focus on figuring the profound malaise that followed up the brutal suppression of the June 4th movement. Consider for example Wang Xiaoshuai's excellent *Frozen* (1996), which tells the story of an artist who decides to perform a suicide through four rituals relating to the four seasons. Grounded in the precarious condition of a small Beijing performance art community, *Frozen* offers a convincing and well-informed allegory of the aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen massacre as well as an interesting glance at what has become one of the most dynamic sectors of Chinese underground culture at the end of 20th century and beyond. In a way, *Frozen* succeeds in "congealing" on film the post-Tiananmen despair.² A similar attempt at expressing the post-Tiananmen existential malaise characterizes Emily Tang's first feature film, *Conjugation* (2001), a poignant elegy taking place in the winter following the events. In 2001, Tang wrote:

More than 10 years ago, a serious historical event happened in Beijing. I was a student at the time. This event weighted heavily on Chinese youth and we are still unable to dispel the shadows. If, in

¹ For more details about this film, see Érik Bordeleau "Une jeunesse chinoise de Lou Ye." <http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/UNE-JEUNESSE-CHINOISE-DE-LOU-YE.html>.

² For more details, see Érik Bordeleau, "Frozen de Wang Xiaoshuai: la performance comme extraction de vie nue?" <http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/FROZEN-DE-WANG-XIAOSHUAI.html>.

facing reality, most people chose to flee, it is because when there is no escape in real life, one could only escape in his ideal. But often, renunciation makes one even more desperate. As for us, on the winter that followed the summer of 89, the feeling of a heavy weight got to everybody and reached its culmination. It is from this feeling that my movies came to be. It attempts to bring under the light the depths of a few mutating souls.³

Conjugation describes the difficult love of a young unmarried couple, seeking to build a home away from the turmoil of the times, despite their illegal status (at that time in Beijing, a man and a woman had to be married so they could share the same apartment). Telling the story of their precarious active life, the sorrow about giving up their ideals, and the memory of fallen friends and comrades, *Conjugation* marks a *temps mort*, a time no verb can be conjugated with. It suggests with rare efficiency how the historical divide creeps into existence's intimate grammar, between subjects and verbs (the "movement-words", as they are called in Chinese), paralyzing all actuation.⁴ In the winter following the events, the terror of repression has indeed imposed its calm, and deathly silence reigns. Students do not care anymore about the country's situation. In their relation to media, they adopt a "four-negations" policy: do not listen, do not read nor watch, do not believe, and do not ask. They take refuge in love stories, in alcohol, in mahjong: like the characters in *Conjugation*, they are trying to kill time, to switch to something else—to just *pass*. It is the simple fact of living that becomes problematic: a world is broken, and with it, the aspirations of a whole generation. "Winter, 1989—The bullets spared them / but life did not," reads on the cover of the VCD.

The theme of conjugation crystallizes many elements representative of the post-Tiananmen situation, and is invested with cruel irony. First, it is noteworthy that verbs are invariable in the Chinese language: there is no conjugation, so to speak. The conjugation theme therefore entails a direct reference to the foreign, in this case, France, the country of human rights. With Guo Song, her lover, Xiao Qing is the main protagonist of the film. She works as a waitress in a café, and is

³ <http://www.abc-lefrance.com/fiches/Lachineestproche.pdf>

⁴ Emily Tang explains that the decision to explore the psychological effects of the events of Tiananmen Square was partly due to budget restrictions affecting the film: "Our production, which strives to be independent, cannot reconstruct historical scenes of that time, so I can only focus on the characters' feelings following this event. Almost all references to facts or the exterior conflict have been avoided to make way for the consequences they brought to their mental world."

passionate about French culture. Toward the beginning of the film, we see her in class, studying the conjugation of verbs in the past tense. The ceiling of her bedroom is also covered with tiny sheets of paper on which she wrote verbs in French conjugated in the indicative present tense. Significantly, she looks at them from a distance, using binoculars. This metaphor of disjunctive existential grammar or of the impossibility to conjugate her life to the political present tense is further emphasized in the movie through parallels drawn with the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution. This indirect relationship established between the events of Tiananmen Square and those of the French Revolution intensifies the sinking and confinement feelings paralyzing the characters.⁵ Moreover, the film stresses this confinement by directly referencing a new government rule requiring graduate students to “serve the country” for 6 years, or else to pay 20,000 Yuan, an astronomical amount of money at the time. As in *Summer Palace* and its Berlin scenes, the question of exile is one of the recurring themes characterizing the representation of the period immediately following the Tiananmen events, and *Conjugation* is no exception.

In this article, I would like to think Emily Tang’s attempt at expressing the post-Tiananmen malaise in relation to the more general background of neoliberal globalization. More precisely, I would like to show how the existential itinerary depicted in *Conjugation* can be read as a powerful allegory about how neoliberalism operates as a reduction of the political to a *postpolitical*, economic management issue. Following on the work of Giorgio Agamben, this reduction will be thought of as an *extraction of bare life* that can be understood as the production of a *form of survival*. In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Agamben offers an acute analysis of the irreducible ambiguity that runs through the verb “to survive”: “From the beginning, the verb also has a reflexive form when referred to human beings, which designates the striking idea of survival with respect to oneself and one’s own life” (132). In this perspective, one of the crucial questions that post-Tiananmen Chinese cinema cannot but try to answer is: *how can this reduction be put into images?* Or to put it another way: of what exactly is *Conjugation* the cinematic remnant? In the wake of Agamben’s understanding of the ethical-political paradox of survival, I

⁵ The contrast is even more vivid since revolutionary China has long thought itself in relation with the French Revolution. “The French and Russian Revolutions were central models for China, and orientations towards them defined the political divisions of the time. The New Culture movement of the May Fourth period championed the French Revolution, and its values of liberty, equality and fraternity. . . . Following the crisis of socialism and the rise of reform in the 1980s, the aura of the Russian Revolution diminished and the ideals of the French Revolution reappeared.” Wang Hui, “Depoliticized Politics, from East to West,” *New Left Review*, 41, 2006.

wish to show how Emily Tang's film comes about as a paradigmatic cinematic itinerary illustrating the complex passage from qualified form-of-life to a form of survival or bare life, a passage whose relevance far exceeds the Chinese context and can directly contribute to a better understanding of the formatting of subjectivities corollary to the ongoing global *oikonomic* mobilization.

From Politics to *oikonomia*: Reduce at Low Heat

治國若烹小鮮

To rule a great nation is like cooking a tiny fish.

—Laozi, *Daodejing*, chapter 60 (244)

Conjugation ends with the announcement of the martial law being lifted in some parts of Beijing, which demonstrates, or so says the government, that the Party is able to properly manage state affairs and ensure the country's long-term stability. The end of the announcement is particularly ironic: "Regardless of the turbulence that can affect the world's course, we will always be marching firmly on the way of socialism." Facing the pressure exerted by the demonstrators, the Chinese State has put stability of the social order as the sole premise of its own legitimacy, exposing the pure founding violence of the State. The king is naked.

Beyond repression itself and its traumatic effects, the Tiananmen Square events marks a turning point in China's evolution toward market economy and the establishment of "Chinese-style socialism," a euphemism for the authoritarian capitalist regime prevailing nowadays. A superficial and highly ideological approach to the events of June 4, 1989, conditioned by the context of the Cold War, often leads liberal commentators to consider Tiananmen in a frame of simple opposition between communism and liberal democracy. But in order to properly understand China's current economic and political situation, we must seriously challenge the common assumption that, in a Chinese context, the neoliberal advocacy for market economy necessarily undermines state authoritarianism. "While neoliberalism takes every opportunity to cast itself in the image of the resister," as Wang Hui suggests, "Chinese society has pushed forward a process of market extremism . . . by which the state used economic liberalization to overcome its crisis of legitimacy" (60, 44). Wang Hui is sharply contesting the one-dimensional fatalism of the neoliberal discourse and how it shaped a distorted view of recent Chinese history. His understanding of how neoliberal forces in China have

taken advantage of the international outrage following the Tiananmen Square events is of particular interest:

The interpretation of the 1989 social movement in the world at large has developed in a direction advantageous to those interest groups advocating radical privatization. This group has used its status as real “radical reformers” . . . to present itself to the world as a progressive force moving toward the world market and democracy. (62)

Following the Tiananmen events, the intensification of economic reform has been followed up with a radical change in mindsets: after the political idealism characterizing the eighties, we can see a population massively accepting a worldview essentially oriented by the idea of economic growth. He Baogang surveys this turnabout:

After the Tiananmen demonstrations of 1989, some intellectuals and dissidents talked about “yishang yangzheng,” promoting political activities through wealth or engagement in business. Increasingly a different trend has taken over: “jinshang qizheng,” business interests eclipsing political interests. (270)

For the film industry the intensification of economic reforms and the corollary eclipse of the political will have significant consequences. The State progressively abandoned the subsidized production system and censorship was strengthened. Besides much less favorable production conditions than those in the eighties, filmmakers who emerged after Tiananmen also had to mourn the loss of this particular climate of intellectual openness. The “cultural fever” (*wenhua re*) was replaced by what some called, not without nostalgia, the “consumerist cultural fever” (*wenhua xiaofei re*). For Wang Chao, a well-known 6th generation filmmaker,

The eighties were a golden age for Chinese intellectuals. The 5th generation filmmakers like Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige were integrated to society; they accompanied its evolution until the Tiananmen events. Their films were feeding a quite rich aesthetic debate. We suffer from nostalgia of this time. For us this doesn’t exist anymore, we are alone and marginalized. (Prudentino 69)

It is important to conceptualize as clearly as possible this lasting eclipse of the political, as it seems to deeply define not only China's present but the West as well. Over 40 years ago, Vaneigem, concisely and elegantly, had already resumed this idea: "Survival is, in the reign of economism, both necessary and sufficient" (90). It seems like this survivalist attitude prevailing in the postpolitical era can only be apprehended properly if it is considered as a reduction. Speaking of reduction entails that something was lost in the process, or at least diminished. The challenge is to account for this loss, which ultimately involves postulating something like an essential political dimension in human existence. It is in this context that Agamben articulates his crucial conceptual distinction between bare life and form-of-life. Bare life is an amputated or reduced life: a *survival*. In Agamben's words, a *form-of-life* is "a life that can never be separated from its form, a life from which it is never possible to isolate something like a bare life" (*Moyens* 13-14).⁶ The concept of bare life is often wrongly equated to a kind of pre-social state of nature, or even to mere biological life (in which case the concept of bare life would become completely unnecessary)⁷; it always involves a sampling or an extraction. Bare life, Agamben tells us, "dwells in the biological body of every living being" (*Homo* 151), noting at the same time that "there are not *first* life as a natural biological given and *then* their implication in law through the state of exception. . . . Bare life is a product of the [biopolitical] machine and not something that pre-exists it" (*State* 88). In the context of this article, bare life is thus first to be understood as the result of an extraction operated by sovereign power and producing a depoliticised or disqualified life.

In *Il regno e la Gloria* (2007), Agamben further develops this idea through a theological genealogy of the economy and the government, trying to understand why power (in the Christian West) took the form of an economy. In this perspective, modern political economy is made to appear as a secularization of the Trinitarian *oikonomia* dogma developed by the Fathers of the Church. According to Agamben, the introduction of economic logic within the Holy Trinity serves mainly to cover the "stasiologic fracture": "Since even in monarchy a civil war, an internal *stasis*, can occur, only the displacement of a political rationality towards an "economy" can insure against this danger" (26). Etymologically, *oikonomia*, means the management of the household. It suggests a functional organization, a management

⁶ The excessive importance given to the concept of bare life in the reception of Agamben's work somewhat obscures the broader messianic horizon within which it operates.

⁷ For more details on this matter, see my analysis of *Outland* from Pierre Ouellet, entitled "Sans cesse sans reste. *Outland*, ou du sacrifice de la vie nue." *OVNI*, N.1, Montréal, 2008, 46-49.

activity. This managerial paradigm defines the semantic sphere of the term *oikonomia* (31). Agamben further exemplifies this essential tension between the oikonomical and the political paradigms by citing Plato and Aristotle's disagreement over the notion of *polis*. In Plato's work, the distinction between *polis* and *oikos* isn't made in opposing terms, as in Aristotle's; the latter thus criticizes the platonic notion of *polis*, saying that by insisting too much on the unitary character of the city, one risks turning it into a house. "It is clear that if the unification process comes to grow to a certain point, writes Aristotle, there will be no more city. A city is multiple by nature, and if it becomes too *one* it will no longer be a city but a house (*oikia*)" (35). If the political is conceived of as essentially multiple, we are then perhaps in a better position to understand why the transition from a political to an oikonomical paradigm is perceived as a reduction and comes represented as such.

This understanding of the complex relationship between *oikos* and *polis* strikes an unexpected resonance with Ackbar Abbas' concept of "decadence" in colonial Hong Kong. For Abbas, the notion of decadence refers not so much to the idea of decline as to the type of effects produced by the colonial situation of Hong Kong over the expression of vital energies present in the city. From *oikos* to colonial administration, there would be just one step that Abbas takes by showing how it reduces the horizon of the political multiple to the unified sphere of the economy:

One of the effects of a very efficient colonial administration is that it provides almost no outlet for political idealism . . . ; as a result, most of the energy is directed toward the economic sphere. Historical imagination, the citizens' belief that they might have a hand in shaping their own history, gets replaced by speculation on the property or stock markets, or by an obsession with fashion or consumerism . . . we find therefore not an atmosphere of doom and gloom, but the more paradoxical phenomenon of doom and boom: the more frustrated or blocked the aspirations to "democracy" are, the more the market booms. . . . If the situation I have been describing can be called decadent, it is decadent not in the sense of decline (because we see what looks like progress everywhere) but in the sense of a one-dimensional development in a closed field. (5)

The analysis of the colonial situation of Hong Kong proposed by Abbas can be productively transposed to post-Tiananmen China. With the repression of the protest movement, the political horizon opened up in the eighties is brutally shut down, leaving little possibility but to immerse body and soul in economic development. The Chinese situation is even more paradoxical as the regime is still claiming to be socialist and, by extension, affirms a kind of predominance of the political. With *Conjugation*, Emily Tang has succeeded in showing, as we will now see, how this reduction to the economy comes about as a form of survival or, in other words, how the process of reduction of the political to the oikonomical or domestic sphere corresponds, on an existential level, to an extraction of bare life.

Bare Life—Raw Life

In ancient times, as I recollect, people often ate human beings, but I am rather hazy about it. I tried to look this up, but my history has no chronology, and scrawled all over each page are the words: “Virtue and Morality.” Since I could not sleep anyway, I read intently half the night, until I began to see words between the lines, the whole book being filled with the two words—“Eat people.”

—Lu Xun, *Diary of a Madman* (1918)

Conjugation culminates in a scene of great poetic intensity, taking on the distinctive pattern of cannibalism developed by Lu Xun in *Diary of a Madman* (1918). The cannibalism theme was originally used to stigmatize what was perceived as China’s intellectual and material backwardness by Lu Xun and the intellectuals behind the movement of May 4, 1919. *Diary of a Madman* tells the story of a man who enters a kind of paranoia that makes him suspicious that his fellow villagers are plotting against him and planning to eat him. For the madman, this hatred he feels he is subjected to may be stemming from the fact that some twenty years ago, he stepped on old accounting papers belonging to Mr. Gu Jiu. In Chinese, “gu jiu” (古舊) means “ancient days.” Lu Xun makes no mystery about the meaning of the metaphor of cannibalism: Chinese tradition devours its own children, and it is the source of the backwardness of the country; it should therefore be overthrown. As Anne Cheng reminds us,

Rarely has a culture so radically denied itself in the years following this movement that reflects the frustrations of intellectuals facing a

humiliating Chinese reality, desperately in need for modernity . . . advocating for a radically new culture (*xin wenhua*) that has to undergo a total westernization (*quanpan xihua*). (89)

The importance of the 1919 May 4th movement in modern Chinese history may help explain, at least in part, the persistent occurrence of a “culturalist” type of argument in the Chinese public debate concerning the alleged incompatibility—or as advocated by the “new Confucians,” the perfect cultural compatibility—between Chinese tradition and democracy. In the eighties, the thesis of incompatibility was predominant, and *Conjugation* unfolds within this horizon of thought. Following these indications, we can appreciate all the better the role played in the film by the reference to France and its revolution as a prime symbol of modernity, rationality and democracy.

In *Conjugation*, the metaphor of cannibalism is subtly introduced through a seemingly innocuous story told by Xiao Qing to entertain her clients at the cafe-bar where she works. Repeatedly beaten up by her husband, a woman decides to kill him. She sharpens her knife again and again, and one day finally stabs him. But as Xiao Qing points out, “it is easier to kill people than to dispose of their dead bodies.” Xiao Qing interrupts her storytelling at this point, leaving everyone on their appetite. The allusion to the Tiananmen massacre is veiled but effective: what to do with the leftovers after conducting a slaughter? One could always cook them. . . .

Later in the film, Xiao Qing’s story finds its denouement in a sequence whose composition is certainly amongst the richest of recent Chinese cinema. Xiao Qing is in a motel, with a businessman she met at the cafe. Sitting side by side on the couch they watch TV, visibly uncomfortable. Meanwhile, in the kitchen of his friend’s new restaurant, Guo Song is starting to work. He pulls out a long knife, sharpens it and starts cutting up a large piece of beef into thin strips, making fondue meat. The bloody red pieces of meat are piling up in a bowl before him while Xiao Qing’s voiceover resumes telling the story where she had left it:

The woman led a peaceful life after her husband died. She told other that her husband was lost. The villagers didn’t believe it at first. But with the elapse of time, many people came to believe it. Finally, no one mentioned the disappearance anymore. Many years passed, even the woman herself couldn’t remember it clearly.

But one day, the younger sister of her husband came and asked at diner: “Where is my elder brother?” The woman said: “he was lost long time ago.” She said it with an easy conscience, as she thought nobody else would have known about the truth. Her two years old son was on the spot then, but he mustn’t have remembered it. The son became a mute later anyway. However, before the dinner ended, her son suddenly started speaking. He asked: “Mama, is Papa’s meat in the pickle pot eatable now?”

This last sentence coincides with a shot of Xiao Qing in the dark, leaning against the bed’s headboard and lighting a cigarette, a gesture indirectly (if there even was a need for it) confirming the nature of the relationship between her and the stranger. The subtle staging of this one-night prostitution during the first post-Tiananmen winter as an act of survival foreshadows eloquently the central place the prostitution issue takes in the 6th generation’s cinema. Emily Tang’s suggestive and masterful treatment of this subject gives it a quasi-paradigmatic value: by juxtaposing prostitution, a story about cannibalism and images of raw meat being cut thin, she is paving the way for an interpretation of this phenomenon along the concept of bare life—to be understood literally here as finely chopped life to be sold and consumed by the piece. Paraphrasing Guy Debord, one could say that prostitution submits living men in the exact measure that economy has already submitted them.

Following the shot of Xiao Qing smoking, the sequence continues with a close-up, back to the bowl of sliced meat but with the addition of a strange music, fleeting and harrowing at once, a music that has already been heard a few times earlier during the movie. Its staccato rhythm, the linearity and repetitiveness of Guo Song’s cutting motion and the disorderly and insistent accumulation of the meaty red colored bursts are marking a second period in the sequence. Contrasting with the narrative suspense, they create an automation effect, a kind of production device through which energy comes channeled to a one-dimensional closed field production, reminding the process Abbas was pointing out in relation to colonial decadence. The phenomenon of economic reduction, first illustrated by the act of prostitution, is reinforced by the act of cutting’s mechanical quality, and further assented by the juxtaposition, made in an extremely disturbing fashion bordering with the paradoxical, of a third diegetic element. This third element is the last letter written by an enigmatic character that disappeared following the Tiananmen events,

“Foot finger,” read in voiceover.⁸ The reading of these letters plays an important part in the film’s development, their repeated interpolations being reminiscent of the spectral presence of the spring events’ victims.

Assuming the traits of a blessing and a farewell, this last letter is particularly touching, especially so considering it was sent from Delingha, a small town isolated from Qinghai, a remote province near the borders of Xinjiang and Tibet, in western China. Delingha is actually one of the largest camps for reform through labor (*laogai*), a camp like those that can still be found in some remote areas of China, where many participants in the Tiananmen Square demonstrations were sent.⁹ Actually, the letter is a slightly adapted version of Haizi’s most famous poem, “Facing The Sea, With Spring Flowers Blossoming” (面朝大海，春暖花开). Haizi, a pen name of Zha Haisheng, is considered one of the most influential poets of the post-Cultural Revolution period. He committed suicide on March 25, 1989, two months after composing this poem, at the age of 25.

Sister, I'll be a happy man from tomorrow. Feed the horse, chop firewood, travel the world.

Sister, from tomorrow concern food and vegetables.

Sister, starting tomorrow, correspond with every relative. Tell them my happiness. What the lightning of happiness told me, I will tell everybody.

Sister, give every river, every mountain a warm name.

Stranger, I also bless you. Wish you a brilliant future; wish lovers would get married. Wish you all found happiness on earth.

I only want to face the sea, while spring is warm and flowers are blooming.

⁸ If the film never confirms the identity of who the letter is sent to, there is room to believe they were written by “Foot finger” himself. This is the conclusion drawn by his relatives Tian Yu and Guo Song, whom the letters finally got to. Also, it is worth noticing that Tian Yu and Guo Song open up the restaurant with the money they gathered from sympathizers during the Tiananmen events. Indeed, one of the central dramatic elements of the movie consists in their hesitation to use Footfinger’s share and convert this “political” money into start-up capital for their economic venture.

⁹ Nowadays, we can also find in these camps activist who recognize the Pope, Tibetan resisters and a large number of Falun Gong followers. Note also that these labour camps are an integral part of China’s economy. The camp director is considered a business leader, and as highlighted in a document from the office of the Laogai Department of Justice, “our Laogai facilities are both state services and specialized companies.” Excerpt from: *Manuel de réforme de procédure criminelle approuvé par le Bureau du laogai du ministère de la Justice*. (<http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laogai>)

The collected and mystical tone of the letter matches the elusive and enigmatic musical soundtrack. Surprisingly, rather than negating Guo Song's efforts, or making them look uninteresting and empty (which would have been a possibility, given the latent critical drive of the sequence), the reading of the letter produces rather a disjunctive effect, emphasizing the economic reduction but without lapsing into bitterness or acrimony. There lies the powerful paradox of the scene, which preserves the tragedy of the circumstances while opening on a sort of quiet celebration of everyday life. Helping to accomplish this effect of paradoxical peacefulness is the emphasis on enlightenment and happiness, and also the letter's repetition of the syntagm "from tomorrow," imperceptibly mixing in with the committed nature of Guo Song's efforts and turning them toward what, with Agamben, could be called a *coming community*. This blessing in the shape of prayer seems indeed to suggest a sort of path of redemption, inviting to simply and freely coincide with daily domestic gestures. Considered as a counter-effectuation of the process of reduction to bare life, Haizi's poem would thus bring this sequence to a higher poetic level or *inoperativeness*, that is, a state in which, as Agamben suggests, "the *how* integrally replaces the *what*, in which the life without a form and the form without a life coincide in a *form of life*" (*Comunità* 92). After this sequence of great beauty, the couple will then be seen eating a fish they have previously dug out of a frozen pond. This can be both interpreted as sign of good fortune (indeed, in Chinese culture, fish is a symbol of wealth), and as an image that confirms, if there was any need for it, the preponderance of economic concerns for the time to come.

The culminating sequence of *Conjugation* ends at dawn, on a voluntarily more prosaic note. The male client takes Xiao Qing back at home. Upon exiting the car, the music ends on an incongruous exclamation, in French moreover: "Sophie—I love you." In silence, Xiao Qing goes inside her house, where her boyfriend awaits her. An initiatory nocturnal cycle ends—a fragment of survival is completed.

Conclusion: Whatever Singularities on Tiananmen Square?

The people lost the trust of the government,
The government decided to dissolve the
people and elect another one.

— Berthold Brecht

In *The Coming Community*, Agamben characterizes the Tiananmen Square events as a fatal confrontation between the State and what he calls “whatever singularities”:

The novelty of the coming politics is that it will no longer be is that it will no longer be a struggle for the conquest or control of the State, but a struggle between the State and the non-State (humanity), an insurmountable disjunction between whatever singularity and the State organization. . . . Whatever singularity . . . is the principal enemy of the State. Wherever these singularities peacefully demonstrate their being in common there will be a Tiananmen, and, sooner or later, the tanks will appear. (85-87)

Agamben’s insistence on the opposition between whatever singularity and State strongly contrasts with Wang Hui’s approach of the Tiananmen events, which, in a more classical manner, puts at the center of his thought the problem of constructing a strong Nation-State capable of countering the deleterious effects of global capitalism. Wang Hui for example sustains that “all critical movements since the 19th century had taken the nation as the only effective arena for political struggles” (126); he even went to suggest that the Tiananmen events are a direct prefiguration the Seattle manifestations against the WTO in 1999, that is, that Tiananmen should be considered as the first anti-globalist demonstration. I believe that Wang Hui here is not giving enough consideration to the different ethical composition of these two movements, precisely underestimating the profound defiance against the State characterizing large fractions of the present cycle of the anti-globalist struggles.

The concept of whatever singularity doesn’t address this ethical difference as such. But it allows thinking of the insurrectional force of the 1989 movement in the flesh. In Agamben’s work, the whatever singularity constitutes a key element in defining a non-identificatory and post-State ecstatic politics, meaning one that does not root itself in presumption of collective belonging but that is entirely summarized by the manner and movement by which it *makes* a community. This being said, it is still extremely difficult to say in what way such a concept can effectively help understanding the Tiananmen events; and it is neither clear how the horizon of a *coming community* uniting these whatever singularities *as such* can be truly operative on a political level. If anything, I would suggest that Emily Tang’s *Conjugation* does constitute itself as a threshold from which to envisage how the extraction of bare life out of the whatever singularities is a process that can be

rendered inoperative—if only we can experience how we are all, in a way, potential contemporary remnants of Tiananmen.

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