Heredity's Aesthetic Infrastructures

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I am the family face;
Flesh perishes, I live on,
Projecting trait and trace
Through time to times anon,
And leaping from place to place
Over oblivion.

Thomas Hardy, "Heredity" (1917)[1]

WHEN Thomas Hardy published his poem "Heredity" (1917), which notes the survival of "the family face" and the "years-heired feature" beyond the lives of individuals, his scientific contemporaries were hard at work tracing inheritance to the discrete physical unit known as the gene. As Emily Steinlight has noted, the poem resonates a view of inheritance as biologically determined, breaking from the Darwinian world of possibility and adaptation that scholars of the Victorian period have long associated with the rise of liberal capitalism and free markets. As Steinlight also illuminates, similarly Weismannian resonances infuse the discursive world of Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895), in which Jude and Sue repeatedly reach for "root-stock" explanations to narrate the eventual suffering of their line (e.g., they were the "wrong breed for marriage").[2] Yet the poem's fascination with heredity's discrete "leaps" simultaneously runs askance from lineage-oriented narratives of inheritance: in setting up the hereditary unit's utter disregard for and separation from "the flesh" of a single human being, Hardy gives voice to an alien register as careless of biological determinism as of Darwinian development.

I focus on the poem's emphasis on the imaginative potential of discrete hereditary units—whether "projecting" or "leaping"—over a more developmental or degenerative teleology, because this focus unfolds particular consequences for realist form. How does heredity influence

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realism, this essay asks, when imagined as out-of-joint with the usual aesthetic infrastructures of inheritance—including the political, psychological, biological as well as economic infrastructures that support racial capitalism and colonialism? As I will explore in this essay, realist works of art that make use of an aesthetics of heredity more jagged and discrete can reveal cracks in the imagined totality toward which social realism strives. Against the sense of continuity that typically undergirds realist form's understanding of how the past molds the present, heredity that jumps blankly "[t]hrough time to times" and "from place to place" is capable of showing us what heredity's infrastructure actually looks like beneath the surface. As I will also argue, an aesthetics of heredity as blank contingency also provides another way of valuing the individual person paradoxically without any recourse to existing models of personhood.

I develop these ideas through the use of an uncanny comparison between Hardy's *Jude* with a contemporary Chinese neorealist film, director Wang Xiaoshuai's *So Long, My Son* (2019). Though Hardy's work reflects upon biopolitical management and social reform in the British nineteenth century, and Wang's upon China in the postsocialist era begun in the 1980s, as I have elsewhere noted, the conditions of China's rapid economic rise mirror key aspects of the Victorian period.[3] More specific to the objects of interest at hand, Hardy's focus on the effects of urban development, village removal, exploitative labor conditions, and the creation of a migrant labor class finds strong echoes in the work of key so-called "Sixth Generation" directors including Wang, whose neorealisms reckon with China's entrance into the Darwinian world of global markets and follow lives that become exhausted in the wake of modernization and national becoming.

For my purposes here, I am also interested in how the ideological conditions of postsocialist China produced distinctive approaches to realism in film. As Jason McGrath has explained, contemporary filmmakers seek to leave behind the dramaturgical, propagandist styles of socialist realism while also turning attention to the cruelties of the reform era's embrace of capitalist markets. Seeking therefore a "less ideologically encumbered encounter with reality," filmmakers including Wang adopt features such as episodic vignettes and long takes as well as on-location shooting, nonprofessional actors, handheld camerawork, and ambient, naturalistic sound in order to limit, at least as much as possible, discursivity.[4] In *So Long, My Son*, the use of such features makes way for unexpected ruptures that, when routed through a plot centered on

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inheritance and eugenics, points elsewhere toward heredity's blank projections as imagined in Hardy's poem. The extremity of this direction likely owes also to the ideological whiplash specifically around the science of genetics, which was banned wholesale as "bourgeois" in the Maoist era, only to come back with something of a vengeance after the Cultural Revolution—most notoriously, in the form of Deng's one-child policy instituted in 1979.[5]

Wang's *So Long, My Son* shares with *Jude* a central tragedy that emerges from the biopolitical management of "excess" individuals in the name of economic growth. Following the entwined fates of two families from the 1980s into the present, the film explores the disastrous personal impacts of the one-child policy. Much as with Jude and Sue, Wang Liyun and Liu Yaojun are a doomed couple who resist but eventually comply with contemporary biopolitical imperatives—only to lose more after compliance. When Liyun accidentally becomes pregnant with a second child, their close friends and fellow factory workers push her to abort the child, after which Yaojun and Liyun's only son drowns. In the wake of this tragedy, the couple moves outside their hometown and, in yet another act of compliance with capital's logic of interchangeable bodies, adopts a new son, perversely giving him the dead son's nickname. Meanwhile, over the course of thirty years, the friends that had fatefully advised them to comply with the state become wealthy from the rapid development of their hometown, and *their* son—who had actually goaded his friend to play in the water—becomes a respected city doctor.

As with *Jude*, the sense of heredity as biologized inheritance, acting ruthlessly in concert with economic inheritance, gathers strength in how characters with an instinctive resistance to group imperatives end up punished the most even when they comply. That the drowned son resists joining the other boys by the water, while the friend bullies him into compliance, notably mirrors respective parental traits in relation to group behavior—for which one line is punished and the other rewarded in an overdetermined manner that marks the film's Hardy-esque aesthetics. Yet at the same time, the film's drive to limit discursivity produces moments of stubborn, earthy loneliness that separate characters from one another, rendering them discrete in a strangely material way that works against the premise of inheritance as likeness and linearity. Speech is scarce, and as the camera follows characters that remain largely silent as they attend to the everyday acts and ambient sounds of cooking, cleaning, eating, working, traveling, or wandering, idiosyncrasies of

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acting and embodiment exceed social realism's totalizing aspirations in momentary flares and flashes.

I argue that these idiosyncrasies suggest a form of singularity attached to inherited material that jumps across the unmapped space and time of "oblivion," in a manner reminiscent of how "instinct" sometimes gets described in *Jude* as exceeding not only the constraint of social norms but also the expected trajectories of lineage and the taxonomical bent of characterological types in a Darwinian setting. In Hardy's novel, for instance, Phillotson's "strange instinct of solicitude quite beyond his control" remains a steady and substantial kernel of his being that eventually guides his (fateful) decision to release Sue to live with Jude. In Wang's film, what is strange in each of us that exceeds our capacity to control—or perhaps even to perceive—emerges more substantively as hereditary without the overdetermined sense of a predictive linearity or logic of resemblance.

As I will demonstrate through an example sequence of scenes near the film's beginning, *So Long, My Son* characteristically suggests something like this through bleak and systematic breakage every time relations of linearity and likeness begin to coalesce. From the anguished scene of mourning the drowned son, nicknamed Xing Xing, the film skips to the teenage scenes of the second adopted Xing Xing, corralling viewers into confusion as to whether the first boy had not drowned after all. The scenes show the second Xing Xing refusing to eat with his parents, having trouble at school, and running away. Forced home by a rainstorm, Liyun and Yaojun give up on the search for their son and attend to the flooding in their home. Liyun fishes a photograph of the three of them and woefully peruses it, and after sitting down, the couple share a short dialogue that culminates in Yaojun bursting out: "No matter how much he looks like our Xing Xing, our Xing Xing is gone. He is dead!" This is the moment that finally dissipates any confusion between the two boys, and which also suggests something unexpected: that it is a mistake to think that physical resemblance is a basis for any other form of likeness. We would expect here a more Darwinist notion that biological offspring are a better fit for kinship than adoptees, but Yaojun's reference to physical likeness skirts this. As if having learned, then, that physical resemblance says nothing at all about characterological traits, Liyun picks up a different picture of their biological son, and the camera cuts to a scene in the past before the first Xing Xing's death, when the two families—consisting of one couple and one son each—are posing for a single portrait. The film then reverts farther back to a scene of the two

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little boys celebrating their birthdays together, in which Yaojun remarks that the fact of their proximity in age must mean that they were brothers in another life. This retrospective moment is heavy with dramatic irony given the later betrayals, and as such, the film in this moment simultaneously rejects social bonds of kinship and any transcendent bond of kinship that would be legible to creatures of the earth.

These scenes form a gutting sequence that ultimately suggests it would be a mistake to feel that the tragedy of the drowned son is compounded by the earlier abortion. That is, we feel here again the stubborn loneliness captured by the film's earthy aesthetics, motivated toward the suggestion that everyone is unique on the basis of whatever it is they may be made up of, with implications that will be, for the most part, opaque to each individual and to one another. Put another way, I detect in Wang's disjointed aesthetics of heredity a keen interest in how we are each of us the last of our kind, and neither biological nor social forms of resemblance or kinship can counter the final truth of such a position. However, that it is a moral mistake to think the loss of one is compounded by the loss of another also gets us to a radical perspective that resists collectively minded justifications of eugenics—whether in the collective service to economic accumulation or to a socialist utopia-to-come. To extinguish any one of us is equally immoral, full stop.

I want to close with the observation that this radical position on the value of the individual—based not on agency, character, or kinship but on the basis of how unmapped inheritance makes each materially different from the other—is accentuated in social contexts that are particularly shuttered. The social landscape of Hardy's late Victorian Britain and Wang's postsocialist China share many similarities, in that both are characterized by the pressures of accommodating global capital's accelerating demands for growth and a corresponding turn to tools of eugenicist management in order to contend with "problems" of population. The turn to heredity's leaps in both Hardy's novel and Wang's film creates something of a release valve in both works, rending open a heterotopic space in social realism's taut fabric.

The hereditary unit's disjointed aesthetics disrupts the explanatory work of realist worlding, regardless of whether realism is attending to "socialism with Chinese characteristics" or global capitalism. Both Wang and Hardy seem compelled to make way for a singular form of estranged agency outside familiar terms of selfhood, Western or Eastern, and even—perhaps precipitously—selfhood formed in relation. Against the coherence of realism's ambitions to capture a comprehensive

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vision of social life, both works resonate the intrinsic value of an individual being, apart from any sense of who they are, with an emphasis on what they are made of. It is a radical form of individualism with cold comforts, which asserts that everyone is equal because of how they have singularly come together as a hereditary package, capacitated by forces "oblivious" to the ways that human beings organize their relations with one another. Heredity's nonsignifying, projective logic promises to release us—if only just momentarily—when the pressures of collective life are too many.

Notes

1. Hardy, "Heredity," ll. 1–6.
2. Steinlight, *Populating the Novel*, 181–99; Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, 139.
3. See Wong, "Reading Enclosure," 71–78.
4. McGrath, "A Long Take," 244.
5. See Dikötter, *Imperfect Conceptions*, on the discursive history of eugenics in China from the late imperial (Qing) period into the postsocialist reform era.

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