CHAPTER 7

"Disposable" Bodies on Screen in Xu Xin's *Karamay*: Biopolitics, Affect, and Ritual in Chinese Central Asia

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Abstract

Based on an analysis of political speech and embodiment in the film *Karamay*, in this chapter I argue that ritualized ways-of-being, which rose to the fore in Maoist China, continue to form a deeply felt common affect for marginalized people despite rapid changes in the built environment and economic structures of mainstream Chinese society. In an effort to explore these claims, I analyze the way the monumental documentary film *Karamay* describes the long duration of a historical trauma, injustice, and alienation through its embodiment by a group of Han and ethnic minority oil workers and their families. I then consider the way this ritual embodiment relates to an affective atmosphere of failure for those on the margins of economic development and social justice in Chinese Central Asia. In order to parse the sources and forces of this shared experience, the chapter considers the valence of the biopolitical concept of "disposability" in tension with the anthropological concept of "ritual." It argues that a refrain that emerges from a close reading of embodiment in contemporary independent cinema in Reform-era China is an effect of political rituals that fail to provide the sense of well-being they promised in the Maoist past. Yet, despite their failure, intimate portrayals of the motion of these rituals still hail the viewer as an embodied *phronetic* struggle for existential stability.

Keywords: Affect, Ritual, Disposability, Biopolitics, New Documentary, Xu Xin, Xinjiang, China

Introduction

One of the dominant themes that has emerged in many recent neorealist films and documentaries in the Chinese-language independent cinema of the People's Republic is a focus on forgotten spaces and alienation in the midst of rapid economic development. Films from influential directors such as Jia Zhangke and Wu Wenguang have led the way in escaping the programmatic *telos* of both critical and socialist realism. Instead, these filmmakers have promoted an "amateur" (*yèyú*) or "on-the-spot" (*jìshí zhǔyì*) *phronesis* (the social knowledge and ability to act politically). In so doing they have developed a set of practices that privilege the immediacy of direct personal engagement over high production values, melodramatic storytelling, and neat resolutions that typified earlier forms of realist Chinese cinema (*xiànshí zhǔyì*).[1]

By focusing on the lived experience of rapid economic change these films provide a powerful assessment of the efficacy of modernization. Yet, in the analysis of these films, direct attention has rarely been paid to the "stickiness" of pre-Reform comportments that continue to intervene in the embodied rituals of those on the margins of this radical social change; instead, analysis of an "aesthetics of disappearance" and "transformation" as modes of cultural production have been a central focus. Drawing on the work of Paul Virilio and Gilles Deleuze, among others, many scholars have (often quite brilliantly) analyzed Chinese New Documentary and independent cinema in terms of an emerging Chinese urban aesthetics rather than the long duration of ritualized behavior.[2]

This chapter joins this discussion by arguing that ritualized ways-of-being, which rose to the fore in Maoist China, continue to form a common affect for marginalized people despite rapid changes in the built environment and economic structures of mainstream Chinese society. I explore the valence of the biopolitical concept of "disposability" in tension with the anthropological concept of "ritual" to argue that a refrain that emerges from a close reading of embodiment in contemporary independent cinema in Reform-era China is an effect of political rituals that fail to provide the sense of well-being they promised in the Maoist past. Yet despite their failure the intimate portrayal of these rituals in action still hails viewers in an embodied phronetic struggle for political and

existential stability. In order to explore this claim I consider the way the monumental documentary film *Karamay* (2010) describes the long duration of a historical trauma through its embodiment by a group of Han and ethnic minority oil workers. I then consider the way this ritual embodiment relates to an affective atmosphere of failure for those on the margins of economic development and social justice in Chinese Central Asia.

Bodies on Screen in *Karamay*

Xu Xin's *Karamay*, is a meditation on the relationship humans have to the failure of ideology-driven Modernist political projects in our current historical moment. On December 8, 1994, the city of Karamay, the heart of the oil fields in Northwest China's Xinjiang Province, was the site of a horrific fire that killed 323 people, 288 of whom were schoolchildren. The carefully selected, high-achieving students present that day, clad in red and yellow, were performing dances from Mao's Eight Model Operas and singing Red Songs for state officials in a concert hall when a thin curtain positioned too closely to a 600-watt spotlight caught fire. As they moved in the synchrony of mass choreography, their red scarves tied neatly in place, acrid smoke from highly flammable insulation began to fill their lungs. Countering instinctual panic with Maoist discipline, the children in the audience were told to remain seated while the officials exited first. Due to lax safety standards, locked doors, and the delayed arrival of the fire department many of the children never escaped. When help finally arrived forty-five minutes later, the bodies of trampled and burned children were piled over a meter deep around locked metal exit gates; most died from smoke inhalation and the weight of bodies on top of bodies rather than the fire itself.

None of Karamay's city officials died in the fire. Despite initial admissions of guilt and promises of state-level martyr status—which carries with it economic and social security for the families of those who died—after the fire the story was heavily censored in the Chinese state media and street protests were met with brute force. Zhou Yongkong, head of PetroChina, the state-owned company that controlled post-Reform Karamay and today monopolizes China's oil, quickly stepped in.[3] Speaking on behalf of the children who died,

Zhou thundered in archival footage featured in the film, "Those children are in heaven hoping for Karamay's stability." Following these remarks and the demotion of Karamay's mayor, mourning the loss was taken as subversive to the goals of state stability, and the parents who demanded justice were marked as deviants under the Reformist social contract. The moral responsibility for the tragedy had been made to fall largely on the truncated family networks of settlers and already under-privileged local minorities affected by the fire. The families of Karamay were not allowed to publicly mourn their children, and instead were treated by local officials and other members of their work units as embarrassments and in some cases, as mentally deranged. The mayor's brother, who built the Friendship Hall and bribed the safety inspectors, was never formally charged.

With the exception of a minority of Uyghurs and Kazakhs, the majority of Chinese speakers in Northwest China come from elsewhere. Their families came to China's far Northwestern province of Xinjiang (*New Dominion*) in the 1960s to work in the oil fields and protect the Chinese frontier. Trading rural social networks for the future benefits of membership in the industrial proletariat, these parents placed their lives in the hands of the Party. They committed themselves to a national-communist project thousands of miles from their natal homes. They developed skills for coping with displacement. They disciplined their bodies and the bodies of their children as biopolitical weapons in a war with nature. Out on the frontier, rituals of patriotic citizenship took on an intensified significance; these pioneering settlers were on the front lines of the nation. If their sacrifice was not completely recognized in the central nodes of Chinese society, it was nevertheless deeply felt at its margins. Although times were extremely tough in Xinjiang, Maoist *biopolitics*—thought broadly as a system for managing the health and welfare of a population conceptualized as a social whole—enabled Han settlers to realize a poor, yet durable, existence. Xinjiang was not fraught with some of the insecurities that affected other parts of China during the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution. Relative to Beijing, Xinjiang was a stable place for settlers (less so for indigenous minorities under the new regime); rituals of sacrifice and interdependence that came with the infrastructure of rationing and cooperative social organization were largely effective in maintaining a sense of well-being.

Yet as the vitality of the Maoist social-national project dissipated in Xinjiang during the Dengist Reform era, some of these same people found themselves superfluous, caught up in forces much larger than themselves and what they were promised. After the 288 children of the city of Karamay[4] died in the horrific fire in 1994, unaffected officials and citizens moved on with economic redevelopment, apathetic toward the lingering economic, social, and institutional inequalities that continued to affect the families of the dead. In its late-Socialist iteration, the *ethos* of their work unit, PetroChina, and its subsidiary support units no longer seems to account for their well-being. The parents Xu Xin interviewed in this film feel stuck, unable to move with flows of power and wealth that buoyed the futures of so many Reform-era Chinese. More than an exposé of the tragedy of loved ones lost, this film is about the corporeal embodiment of social abandonment and failure.

Figure 7.1. One of the Uyghur parents screams in Mandarin in a street protest shortly after the fire in Karamay in 1994—86 of the 288 children killed were minority children in Xu Xin's *Karamay*. Image courtesy of dGenerate Films/Icarus Films.

Karamay lays bare the margin of raw violence of human interaction that accompanies the disenfranchisement of collective ideals (Fig. 7.1). In this late-

humanist moment "a concern for human beings finding themselves and becoming free in their humanity" is becoming increasingly untenable for those on the margins.[5] The precariousness of those without positive social ranking in China's late-Socialist context—the "common people" (*lǎobǎixìng*) as these parents self-identify—is becoming more acute. What *Karamay* does, then, is point our attention to what "disposable people"—to use Rey Chow's turn of phrase—look like in Chinese film.

In developing her concept of "disposability" Chow argues along with Étienne Balibar and Bertrand Ogilvie that the human condition of our present moment of global capitalism is one in which the lives of "millions of human beings *are superfluous*."[6] Reading Balibar and Ogilvie's claims through the lens of Martin Heidegger's phenomenology, Chow argues that in our current moment of global capitalism humans are increasingly entering into a state of existential "homelessness." That is, the *being-in-the-world* of humans is increasingly rendered in a *state of* "*oblivion*";[7] a state in which the *techne* and *poiesis* of political action, social organization, and human cultural processes are muted and ineffective.[8]

Discussing the way this phenomena is manifested in Chinese late-Socialism through an analysis of the cruel life world of Northern Chinese coal miners in *Blind Shaft*, Li Yang's neorealist 2003 film, Chow argues that "the major culprits here are the structural deficiencies that pervade the entire industrial production system in China."[9] As in other developing countries, a dominant feeling and experience among many "disposable" people in contemporary China is that the population exceeds the capacity of institutions to provide social welfare or biopolitical health. Yet as Chow points out, the implications of films like *Blind Shaft*, and I would add, *Karamay*, should not be thought of as particular to "third-world" states-of-exception. Instead, she argues, what we are seeing on film is "a dramatization … of the predicament of human community formation in general."[10] The embodied situations of both *Blind Shaft* and *Karamay* are entangled in the excavation of energy through which industrial, commercial, and cultural development are made possible. It was, after all, the Modernist project of securing oil and gas as resources for the nation that brought the people of *Karamay* to China's Northwest. In the end, the city of Karamay, like countless locations across the planet, is an industrial boomtown inextricably linked to political-economic development.

Certainly, throughout this process of development the people of *Karamay* have experienced sacrifice for their nation and their families. Yet, as Chow argues, it is only in our contemporary moment of the ascendance of global capitalism that marginalized people around the world have witnessed "the very mutation of the concept of 'human' … as the unconcealed process of species differentiation that is happening at the rupturing between … humanity-as-progress, or hope … and the ubiquitous biopolitical warfare around natural and other resources and, above all, around kinship and other types of group survival."[11] For the parents in Xu Xin's *Karamay* it is these basic intersubjective, embodied social relations that are at stake. As these relations are threatened by the welfare abandonment of the social state and its institutions, parents find themselves attempting to reclaim an attachment to the "kinship family," which throughout Chinese history has been thought of as an "inviolable basic social unit,"[12] and the corporeal rituals and gestures that give this affective attachment its embodiment.

Although the rituals that support the "right-to-a-family" and by extension "the good life" have undergone numerous involutions and deviations over the centuries, they have nevertheless been central and relatively stable modes of reproducing the relations of the individual to the state and of the individual to the family. These rituals of speaking and saving are what are embodied—a process of incorporating the social and material world corporeally—in *Karamay*. If "speaking bitterness" and "saving face" were actions that brought dominant cultural tropes into the historical lived experience of Chinese subjects, what do these rituals look like in this historical moment of capitalist expansion and the reterritorialized space of social welfare erasure? How are they embodied by people who have sacrificed so much, and, in Heidegger's sense of *being-in-oblivion*, seem to be so far from home?

Given its focus on the long duration of processes of failure, perhaps it should come as no surprise that *Karamay* is a difficult film to watch. It took me over a month to get through all five hours and fifty-six minutes. Why does it feel this way: compelling and repellent, tedious and captivating? Speaking about his feelings making the film, Xu Xin said: "I don't know how to understand happiness. Although the content of the film is very painful, I had a joyful feeling while making the film itself. I don't know what to think of this."[13] Such

ambivalence suggests that the film is more than a monument to tragedy. Though the topic is unsettling, the *pathos* that comes out in the slow minutes of the film is so visceral viewers find it hard to look away. I suggest that this training of attention is drawn from the points in which *affect*—as a range of feeling—comes to the surface and sorts itself out in emotion and then resubmerges as an unspeakable current in the nervous system. Engaging discussions of affect and ritual, I describe the way affect appears in human embodiment and corporeal sacrifice as a "wisdom of the body." Following this overview of my terms of discourse, I then turn to the specifics of *Karamay* as a particular embodiment of trauma and ritual therapy in Sinophone film. I conclude by arguing that the mirroring of the affective atmosphere of the production process which can be observed through the viewing process is important for understanding "disposable bodies" on screen in *Karamay* and Chinese independent documentary film more generally. Despite the particularity of the historical situation of *Karamay*, the embodied experience of viewing the film invites an intimate knowledge, an affective atmosphere, of the embodied, corporeal life from which no "exotic other" can be parochialized. Put simply, on the level of the body, viewers are invited to relate with the viewed.

Figure 7.2. One of the most outspoken parents discusses the historical legacy of protest in China while shaking his fist in Xu Xin's *Karamay*. Image courtesy of dGenerate Films/Icarus Films.

Affect and Ritual Embodiment

The anthropologist Hugh Raffles has noted that "people enter into relationships among themselves and with nature through embodied practice. … it is through these relationships that they come to know nature and each other."[14] These relationships, knowledge, and practice are always mediated "not only by power and discourse, but by affect … the perpetual mediator of rationality."[15] Defining this "affective sociality" as "intimacy," Raffles describes the ideology inhabited by localized rituals as "always within a field of power…always in place…always embodied… always, above all else, relational."[16] Raffles argues that if "relationality is a social fact," then "there is no universal against which intimacy is parochialised."[17]

Moving toward a more precise description of the relationship of the affective to fields of power, the anthropologist William Mazzarella tells us, *affect* is neither completely external to mediation nor simply a discursive *effect*.

Reviewing ethnographic writing on the subject from Émile Durkheim, Mazzarella concludes there is a "nonsubjective sensuous mimetic" power to this register of the social; particularly as it is converted to *ritual*.[18] He writes, "the language of ritual is the language of power;"[19] it is an untimely grammar that works through the mediation of the body to exert power in the world. As anthropologists have long observed, rituals—broadly defined as actions intended to reproduce social norms and political conventions—are what organize and animate a society in the absence of an intervening ideology. The range of action and feeling we see arising out of the socio-political atmospheres of late-Socialist Xinjiang are therefore a local iteration of historical forces and contemporary circumstances. Mainstream values such as social stability and economic development are meeting a ritualized system that is no longer amplified. The microphone that projected messages of bitter Socialist struggle has been unplugged, yet the embodied expression of these performative rituals still remains at the margins of Chinese society: confronted with a public space of petition in front of Xu Xin's camera, parents are first animated by the ritual of baring their scars only, in turn, to sag defeated as the ritual fails (Fig. 7.2).

If the institutionalized practice of "telling bitterness"[20] (*sùkǔ*) was a form of performative Socialist ritual, a mimesis or imitation of the affective that fitted power into place, then it seems likely that affective feelings entwined in Socialist subject-making are not something that have been completely jettisoned by Chinese late-Socialist reforms. Robert Chi's reading of *Red Detachment of Women*—Jin Xie's 1961 Maoist film—compels us to acknowledge that official narratives ascribed to "history" cannot be detached from mnemonics. Noting the way these performances of showing and telling bitterness serve "to focus particular attention on the body as the site of both memory (as suffering, as an effort against negation) and sociality … the mass public experience," Chi reads the legacy of Socialist ritual aesthetics as containing both a catalyst for "somatic gesture and as emotional stimulation."[21] If one of the dominant visual-somatic ritual elements of Socialist China was "the baring of scars and the shedding of tears,"[22] then the parents bearing witness in *Karamay* must be considered as disjointed, yet derivative, of that same Chinese "spectatorial body." As the disciplinary power of this past discourse dissipates and joins with the discipline of the Neoliberal state to come, we see Chinese citizens turning to the discipline

of new ritual forms of mediation. These are forms that involve the *techne* and *poesies* of the digital video camera, the video archive, the *presence* of the interviewer-as-interlocutor; yet, as Xu Xin's film shows us, the memories of those earlier forms of petition and protest have not yet been completely erased. When a man who is speaking bitterly hurls the Chinese sign for "six" at viewers with an up-turned hand, his pinky and thumb extended as he corporeally emphasizes the fact that fire fighters were stationed only five or six minutes away but still took forty-five minutes to arrive; when parents "bare their scars" through the onomatopoeic invocation of their phantom children running down the stairs (*dùng, dùng, dùng*) for the last time and then turn inward, heads bent, their elbows on their knees; when they hold each other heaving in pain and scream that "heaven is blind;" when they explain that their households are "broken"—their hands moving out from their chests in open-handed gestures; they are showing us that a shared affective experience, crystalized in the rituals of a Maoist political body, resists easy erasure. They are showing us that people always attempt to stay attached to the conventionality of life even when that form of life is mutating. They are showing us that the ordinariness of the long duration of social crisis forces people to struggle for existence using obsolete forms of composure even as a tractable future is steadily contracted.

Starting from the assumption of the theorist Lauren Berlant that "affective atmospheres are *shared*, not solitary, and that bodies are continuously busy judging their environments and responding to the atmospheres in which they find themselves,"[23] we can see that the ubiquitous horror of the fire provided a common historical grounding across class and ethnic divides for the families of those who died. At the same time, the easy disposal of children's bodies, the absence of death certificates for those who died, the quick dismissal of parents' claims to justice, the shunting to the asylum of those crazy with grief, and the way their bodies are wracked by nervous and psychic maladies, tells us something also about the contemporary mood and mode in which "common people" experience their value as Chinese citizens, people, and loved ones. Although it may be tempting to consider the collectively experienced disaster and subsequent position of the parents and children of *Karamay* as an exception to the Chinese narrative of progress building on a deep body of literature from Ann Anagnost, Pun Ngai, and many others, the symptomatic experience of

alienation and impasse felt by the parents of *Karamay* must be considered in light of the erasure of the Maoist class structure and the abandonment of social welfare concerns. This political-economic structural bifurcation geared toward rapid development and increased individual-family network responsibility is felt ubiquitously in contemporary Chinese society. Framed in this way, the situation in *Karamay* can be read as just one acute iteration of the simultaneous reshaping and durability of Chinese conventions.

Figures 7.3-4. Subjects seem to forget about the camera in moments of nervous distraction and unspoken melancholy in Xu Xin's *Karamay*. Images courtesy of dGenerate Films/Icarus Films.

Ritual Therapy under the Affect of the Impasse

In Bérénice Reynaud's 2010 reading of Chinese independent cinema as typified in Wu Wenguang's approach to documentary craft, we see that the aggressive silence of the filmmaker-as-therapist can be a quiet intervention that allows the subjectivity of the observed to emerge. Rather than invoking a scripted reaction, the therapy of silence can allow a subject "to express a discourse of desire."[24] Citing a pivotal scene in Wu's *Fuck Cinema* where the main protagonist confronts Wu by speaking directly into the camera, Reynaud argues with Lacan that it is in this encounter, where discursive desire falters and the imaginary fails to surface, that a version of "the Real" can be glimpsed. What makes *Karamay* distinct from *Fuck Cinema* is the repetition of the therapeutic silence necessary for a ritual circuit—as a repeated set of bodily techniques—to be performed on film in a wide range of similar yet slightly different circumstances. While *Fuck Cinema* is largely framed around a single decontextualized individual and aggressively questioned migrant women, *Karamay* is centered by a shared duration of a collective experience of trauma. This difference, along with the temporal scale of the film, are what make *Karamay* a limit case for analyzing the embodiment of ritual in Chinese New Documentary cinema.

By rendering the iterative collective process of *disposability* visible in what Gilles Deleuze refers to as repeated filmic "time-images," we can begin to identify a movement of affect as a range of feeling between anger and failure before and after it comes to be recognized as either of these discursive emotions.[25] It is in these moments when the play of ritual runs its course that an embodied gesture that resists symbolization appears: a movement of a hand, a turning away, a drawing into the body, a flash of life void of being, the sag of failure. Seeing the repeated circuit of this embodied turning from norms of resolution and social integration conveys something of the trajectory of existence for these parents; seeing the repetition of these somatic gestures captured in a time-image on film (rather than described in a text) conveys something of the immediacy of this sensorium. To my thinking, these instances are analogous to Barthes's idea of the *punctum* in a still image: the kernel of "the Real" or, on a discursive level, "the reality effect," which survives mechanical automatism.[26] It

is a kind of animacy that sears something into viewers' brains; it triggers empathy and intercorporeality. Wrapped around the failure of "telling bitterness" in *Karamay* it evokes an affective tuning that is more than the sum of its parts. These rituals of anger that inevitably turn to failure communicate the corporeal feeling of bodies rendered *disposable*. As the feeling of the *oblivion-of-being*, of being without place, is invoked, viewers are invited to share, to relate to, the embodied pain of the impasse.

The scenes of embodied disposability that rise to the surface in *Karamay* (Fig. 7.3-4), that bring forward the shattered affect of those who passed through the "door to hell" (as they refer to the lowered gate on the Friendship Hall), are the poignant images such as that of a mother, who after speaking for many minutes, lapses into silence and forgetting about the camera compulsively strokes at phantom dust on the frame of a photo of her dead daughter—an image of the void of being-without-language; there is the image of a father leaning back his eyes pinched in frustration, then defeat—an image of the slump of powerlessness; there is the image of a young woman who survived the fire who lapses into melancholy, thinking about her object of desire: Nanjing University and the promises of the good life she will never have. Her face, masked by ruined and grafted skin, contained by the anonymity of her secluded hospital room, still conveys an image of the pathos of human longing for a barred object of desire.

Xu Xin approached each interview with the same gray-scale palette, straight-ahead composition, and minimal direction. Like Huang Weikai and many other contemporary Chinese documentary filmmakers, Xu Xin's educational background was in painting and the fine arts. It is perhaps because of this training in color and frame that *Karamay* is so effective in constructing nested worlds of color and gray scale. With the exception of four scenes of Karamay's cityscape and flashes of horror from the parents' personal video archive of the fire, the world of the film is muted gray walls—there is no horizon for these parents. They are alone, stuck with their grief, and outside the affluence and forgetfulness afforded by Karamay's vast oil wealth. The repetition of framing and the minimalism of their colorless world have the effect of amplifying the tension in the non-linear narrative of the film. That is, the tension of the narrative in this *diegesis* displays not only the textual and ideological position of the film, but also the parameters that direct viewers as subjects and

expose the embodied presence of the filmed. As parents repeatedly smack the backs of their right hands into the open palms of their left and describe the injustice of their state, as they sketch the contours of the building where their children died, "the pull" (*lā*) of ripping off the locked gates that trapped their children, viewers sense that *Karamay* is the same brutal story told over and over again, yet slightly refracted by the many angles of singular storytellers.

In order to foreground the long-duration of trauma, Berlant has described such experiences of precariousness as "an impasse" (Fig. 7.5). This refocusing away from crisis-events, such as a fire or some other drastic action that seems to have a clear cause and effect, toward the long aftermath where interrupted norms of life are reconfigured, trains viewers' eyes toward inexplicable moments that appear outside narrative genre. The way Xu Xin captures dramatic gestures of anger, fingers pointing and fists clenched, followed by quiet gestures of failure, of heads buried in hands, of eyes looking to the side, lost in the middle distance, shows us how people are struggling to adapt to the impassivity of what we see as the Real. In Berlant's words, "An impasse is a holding station that doesn't hold securely but opens out into anxiety, that dogpaddling around a space whose contours remain obscure."[27] As the parents and children of *Karamay* come to terms with the ineffectiveness of old modes of ritual protest, the impassivity of the new situation simultaneously demands action and delay.

After a social catastrophe there is always a period of adjustment. This is the shared affective atmosphere in which we see the figures of *Karamay* forced into new gestures of composure, new forms of *phronesis*: for example, we see parents describing the way a person's shoulders are pulled back when they are manhandled by police during a protest; we see the embodied mimicry of suicides attempted. But even more affecting is the heavy gaze of *the disposed* at the end of the ritual circuit. There is a numb lifelessness in many of those looks—their eyes are open but they are not looking at anything. It is this diegetic world that exposes viewers to moments of affective rupture as autonomous time-images. As rituals of "speaking bitterness" are shown to be ineffective, the unarticulable affect of failed attachments rises as a punctuation that transforms viewers from passive spectators to active witnesses of powerful forces at work in the time-space of these disposable bodies on screen. As the time of repetition (*chronos*) is

interrupted by these small temporal events (*aion*), viewers are presented with a disorienting vision of the present within the duration of the lives we see on film.

As Xu Xin thinks of it, what he was trying to establish through this approach to interview was a "spiritual connection" that comes from honest exchange and direct recognition. He writes,

> I came to feel the kind of emotion that [the parents] had really deeply. Before every visit [I told them] "you don't have to speak to me." I told them …very explicitly, I'm making a documentary about the fire in Karamay. They were all very clear about what I had in mind. Because of this when I was shooting, they all looked straight into the camera. This aspect was extremely important: *I looked straight into their eyes, we really had a spiritual connection, I used my soul to listen to their stories*. If, say, we didn't have this exchange, they also could have spoken, but speaking is not the same as communicating. The things they kept in their hearts for the past ten years all of the sudden *burst out*.[28]

In order to get at this trust and catalyze this "bursting out" of a discourse of desire, Xu Xin positioned himself directly behind his camera and "just sat" there. The "soul tending" that Xu Xin is respecting here is the same feeling that invites viewers as they move deeper into the world of the film. As viewers learn to be intimate with failure, the disposable bodies on screen begin relating or "connecting" with viewers on a corporeal level. By allowing the camera to linger on center-posted parents during small moments of not speaking, framed by white walls on broad Chinese couches, Xu Xin allows us to become proximate to the feelings of these people.

Clearly there was much that these parents wanted to say; rituals are on one level an iterative public performance (in this case, for the camera). Yet, the readiness-to-hand of their rhetoric of "speaking bitterness," the naturalness with which they "bared their scars," and the sag of defeat that comes through as they lapse into silence point more deeply to an embodied intercorporeal experience rather than to narratives that operate solely on the ideological-political register of identity performance. Of course the embodied cannot be detached explicitly from the ideological.[29] Yet what this film points us toward is an understanding

of the weight of embodied experience that is immanent in the performance of political identity—be it national, ethnic, socialist, or capitalist. These parents—Chinese subjects officially recognized as Han, Hui, Kazakh, and Uyghur citizens—felt as though they had nothing to lose by speaking to Xu Xin, and they felt a catharsis in his public recognition of their personal stories. These rituals of petition, largely emptied of political force in this late-Socialist moment, still convey a catalytic pathway for the "somatic gesture and as emotional stimulation" of cultural replication.[30] Yet on the threshold of an economy of "development" and "progress" the repetition of these ritual performances of "baring scars and shedding tears" are now marking these parents as *disposed* rather than heroic.

Figure 7.5. The impasse in Xu Xin's *Karamay*. Image courtesy of dGenerate Films/Icarus Films.

Conclusion

I began this chapter with a discussion of *Karamay* as a film about the way bodies are caught in political projects and how blockages in these forceful systems can result in anomie and affective inertia. Yet *Karamay* is also a film about the relationship between cinema and witnessing. As Shoshana Felman writes about a similar project, Claude

Lanzmann's *Shoah*, a film can embody "the capacity of art not simply to witness, but to take the witness's stand: the film accepts responsibility for its times by enacting the significance of our era as an *age of testimony*, in which witnessing itself has undergone a major trauma."[31] In the context of precariousness, witnessing the objective reality of people under trauma becomes "in all senses of the word, a *critical* activity."[32] Yet like Laura Marks, I would emphasize a bit more strongly than Felman that both *Shoah* and *Karamay* do more than "authenticate," in a legal sense, the truth of the trauma survived by those filmed. Rather, these films unfold a "sheet of past from a peak of present."[33] The ethical nature of these films exists therefore "not in authenticating testimonies, but rather in demonstrating that some events are too terrible to be fully actualized…while insisting that they must be conceived of."[34]

In *Karamay* people find themselves in states of affective inertia—a nervous abnormality that renders them unable to act or react to their social world in normalized ways. As the bodies of their children and, likewise, their kinship family more generally, are rendered disposable, the parents in *Karamay* reel between anger and defeat. Although these feelings are certainly not evenly distributed across time-space among "common people" in Northwest China (many have found ways to detach from Maoist comportments and "move on" in the new political economy), in the sample population of the film we see a qualitative, palpable presence of these cycles: first fingers pointing, fists clenched, palms smacking, then heads buried in hands and, finally, almost universally, a vacant gaze disengaged both with the world of the film and, viewers are invited to extrapolate, the broader social world. What we see is that the worlds of the parents in *Karamay* are punctuated by states of psychic rupture and stall. In Xu Xin's gray-scale long-takes, time-space is therefore seen as charged with muted affective intensities and subtle feeling that appear to have an anomalous, unmotivated, autonomous temporality.

The long duration of the viewing experience of the durative present is important for understanding disposable bodies on film in *Karamay* and Chinese independent documentary film more generally. Like much of early Chinese independent film from Jia Zhangke to Wu Wenguang, Xu Xin's approach to documentary craft lends itself to a detachment of a humanist ethos of filmmaker-as-intervening benefactor. Instead, like the vast majority of Chinese independent cinema, it attempts to make explicit the terrain of the sensible in Chinese late-Socialism without foreclosing its message with programmatic narrative or ideological indictment. It is instead a documentary that bears witness to the duration of lived experience in Northwest China and allows critique to emerge from the material, embodied world on film.

When asked about the reasons he made the film, what sort of contribution he and his informants were hoping to achieve, Xu Xin declined to comment. He said that beyond telling their stories, those "deeper reasons I'm not capable of analyzing. Furthermore I don't want to analyze those reasons." Rather than pointing us toward a hopeful future or even a recognized clarification of the past, the film instead directs viewers to the embodied particularity of this shared historical moment after the capitalist mutation of the social state in a discrete social location in contemporary China. Even more important, it invites viewers to share in their feeling of first the animas of anger and then the slackness of anomie as the contours of a gutted existence come into view.

The parents' repeated demands for martyr status or at the very least, death certificates, for their children, are claims that operate on both a utilitarian and spiritual register. While the first claim is toward a project identity organized by a collective attempt to claw out a space of social security, the second is an intercorporeal operation that implicates all citizens of social states. By requesting martyrdom the parents are demanding that their children's sacrifice be recognized by the sovereign state as a contribution to the spiritual mission of the nation. By first promising then denying this recognition, the state is delineating its values in biopolitical management. For the state there seems to no longer be a utopian future toward which common citizens can sacrifice themselves. The new political economy depends less on ontological security and more on productivity. As Rey Chow puts it, "the future is contingent on the status quo … the continued solicitation, exploitation, and extermination of 'foreign' bodies that are considered as excess and disposable once they have served their utilitarian purpose."[35] For these parents, and viewers who share this embodied experience, the concept of the human itself is under mutation. Although manifested differently in other situations where alternate failed rituals operate in other margins, the intensity of feeling embodied in *Karamay* is indicative of an ordinary atmosphere of *disposal* in the shadows of the global capitalist iteration of biopolitical success.

Writing in response to Xu Xin's film and the way certain aspects of the Chinese world frequently disappear from view, Ni Ba had this to say about the film,

> When I asked a few of my friends if the name Karamay made any impression on them, a few friends said, "Is Karamay a country?" One friend said Karamay is a desert, still another said Karamay is a person's name. When I then told them about the great fire in 1994, they said: "Oh yeah!" They said that now they could recall it, vaguely…. *Perhaps this is precisely our society's present condition*. Development as the imperative, stability as the paramount priority, and

> patriotism that parrots the greatness of the motherland, have all served as powerful ideals for the duration of our great journey to revival. People with or without intention have chosen to forget about the way the lives of others confront the real and the future. Yet hearing the immediacy with which many regular people in *Karamay* know the way their children were blocked in the course of the events, and knowing that according to the official rhetoric better times should have come to that place, *I can't help but wonder what kind of success is bound up in* [*our economic development*].[36]

Cinematic witnessing, which we see exemplified repeatedly by Chinese independent films such as *Karamay*, is a presentation of objective reality that demands that the stratified order of things not return to normal. It makes us recognize that the normal discourses of the dominant are incomplete and inaccurate.[37] This radical cinema of witnessing is concerned with making visible "the sensible" as a terrain of *what can be shown and felt* on ethical, representational, and aesthetic registers. It presents a social project defined as a struggle for recognition and legitimation in which the "excluded part" of social systems demands a space of common relation. This sort of therapeutic intervention must be understood as a perpetual phronetic practice of sharing a feeling, sharing a cadence of a particular experience of the Real.

Many New Documentary films such as Zhao Liang's *Petition*, Wu Wenguang's *Fuck Cinema*, and neorealist fiction films such as Jia Zhangke's *The World* and *Still Life* use a long view of alienation and displacement to present an implicit critique of the disposability that accompanies rapid economic change. *Karamay* extends and amplifies these feelings of anomie by drawing out the ritual circuit of failure in a prismatic repetition of framing and narrative variation. By centering the film on the collective repetition of embodied rituals rather than the singular movements of isolated individuals, *Karamay* brings forward the way old feelings of collective affective atmospheres continue to operate in the durative present of contemporary Chinese traumas. Rather than describing an aesthetics *of disappearance* and *transformation*, *Karamay* hails viewers with an aesthetics *of feelings that remain*. The critical ethics of *Karamay* is one that belies the perception that problems experienced by disposed people are felt in largely singular, unmediated ways. Rather, it is in order to undermine the rhetoric of "free market" success and embody the stubborn shadows in narratives of progress, that Xu Xin gives us these "disposable" bodies on screen.

[1] Chris Berry and Lisa Rofel, introduction to *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement: For the Public Record* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 3–13.
[2] Here I am thinking in particular about work on contemporary cinema catalyzed by Ackbar Abbas and Zhang Zhen; Ackbar M. Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Zhang Zhen, ed., *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
[3] Zhou was also head of national security and Xinjiang security in particular under Hu Jintao's administration—making him the ninth most powerful man in China's Politburo. In August of 2013 a graft investigation of his political-economics was initiated by the Xi Jinpin administration.
[4] Karamay (Ch: *Kèlāmǎyī;* En: *Black Oil*) is historically a Mongol, Kazakh, and Uyghur city in what is today Northern Xinjiang. Due to its vast oil resources, over the past few decades it has become a seventy-five percent Han city dominated by state-owned enterprises. According to a 2011 list of richest cities, Karamay is now one of the wealthiest per-capita cities in China (Si Han, "China's Richest 20 Cities," 2012, http://business.sohu.com/20120327/n339020485.shtml.).
[5] Rey Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films: Attachment in the Age of Global Visibility* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 178.
[6] Étienne Balibar quoted in Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations*, 167.
[7] Ibid., 168.
[8] Ibid., 173.
[9] Ibid., 170.
[10] Ibid., 173.
[11] Ibid., 178.
[12] Ibid., 174.
[13] All direct quotes from Xu Xin in this chapter are my own translation drawn from a Chinese language interview conducted with Ni Ba, "'Kelamayi' daoyan su sin fangtan," Fanhall.com (2010), http://gsz2006.i.sohu.com/blog/view/154025600.htm.
[14] Hugh Raffles, "Intimate Knowledge," *International Social Science Journal* 54, no. 3 (2002), 326.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid., 332.
[18] William Mazzarella, "Affect: What Is It Good For?" *Enchantments of Modernity: Empire, Nation, Globalization* (London: Routledge, 2009), 298.
[19] Ibid.
[20] "Telling bitterness" finds its most visible institutional iteration in the Communist People's Courts of the 1940–1950s. These village meetings were a stage at which "common people" would articulate the injustices committed by their landlords. One could argue, however, that this mode of gaining a sense of agency and recognition has much deeper roots in Chinese literary traditions and popular culture. Since Guan Hanqing's Yuan Dynasty "Injustice to Dou E," Chinese popular culture has featured instances of misrecognized subalterns speaking "truth to power" as dominant themes in staged performances. See Ann Anagnost, *National Past Times: Narrative, Representation and Power in Modern China* (Durham, NC: Duke University

Press, 1997), 28–35, for a thoughtful account of how this ritual came to be embodied in revolutionary China.

[21] Robert Chi, "*The Red Detachment of Women*: Resenting, Regendering, Remembering," In *Chinese Films in Focus II*, ed. Chris Berry (London: British Film Institute, 2003), 154, 158.

[22] Ibid., 154.

[23] Lauren G. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 15.

[24] Bérénice Reynaud, "Translating the Unspeakable: On-Screen and Off-Screen Voices in Wu Wenguang's Documentary Work," in *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement: For the Public Record*, ed. Chris Berry, Lu Xinyu, and Lisa Rofel (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 175.

[25] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

[26] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Macmillan, 1981).

[27] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 199.

[28] Xu Xin in Ni Ba, "Interview with Xu Xin." Emphasis added.

[29] If, as Louis Althusser described, "ideology" is in many ways the relationship of our empirical experience to "the Real," social training in emotional expression are crucial nodes in the development of our mimetic practices. Rituals taught through social interaction introduce subjects to a dense play of signifiers. Yet the immediacy of embodied affect at the bounds of imagination and desire still seems to exceed this symbolization. Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy* (London: New Left Books, 1971).

[30] Chi, "*The Red Detachment of Women*," 158.

[31] Shoshana Felman, "Film as Witness: Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*," In *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 91.

[32] Ibid., 92.

[33] Laura Marks, "Signs of the Time: Deleuze, Peirce and the Documentary Image," in *The Brain Is the Screen: Gilles Deleuze's Cinematic Philosophy*, ed. Gregory Flaxman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 205.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations*, 175.

[36] Ni Ba, "Interview with Xu Xin." Emphasis added.

[37] Slavoj Žižek in Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 70–71.