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## **From the Sublime to the Obscene: Modalities of Totalitarianism and Jouissance**

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# From the Sublime to the Obscene: Modalities of Totalitarianism and Jouissance

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on Yan's novella *Serve the People* (2005), the author examines the metamorphosis of the titular master signifier that has served as a central moral mandate in the Chinese Communist Party's ideological discourse. Relying on a Lacanian framework via Zizek's and others' writings, this paper attempts to show that totalitarian ideological transformation hinges on the organization of jouissance (enjoyment) that has undergone three ideological modes - proto-, post-, and neo-totalitarianism. In the first mode, the subject procures enjoyment from the symbolic order through a gesture of sacrifice. Due to the collapse of the imaginary of the Socialist New Man that sustains the totalitarian gaze, the post-totalitarian subject's cynical distance from the "official" ideology functions as the very support for the effectiveness of the ideological apparatuses. Finally neo-totalitarianism is characterized as the inverse of proto-totalitarianism: the obscene underside that supports the totalitarian order is brought to the front stage as the new symbolic mandate to enjoy. The manifestations of such metamorphosis in literary and filmic works follow the path that starts from the sublime and ends at the obscene. [PUBLICATION ABSTRACT]

## FULL TEXT

### Headnote

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Drawing on Yan's novella *Serve the People* (2005), the author examines the metamorphosis of the titular master signifier that has served as a central moral mandate in the Chinese Communist Party's ideological discourse. Relying on a Lacanian framework via Zizek's and others' writings, this paper attempts to show that totalitarian ideological transformation hinges on the organization of jouissance (enjoyment) that has undergone three ideological modes - proto-, post-, and neo-totalitarianism. In the first mode, the subject procures enjoyment from the symbolic order through a gesture of sacrifice. Due to the collapse of the imaginary of the Socialist New Man that sustains the totalitarian gaze, the post-totalitarian subject's cynical distance from the "official" ideology functions as the very support for the effectiveness of the ideological apparatuses. Finally neo-totalitarianism is characterized as the inverse of proto-totalitarianism: the obscene underside that supports the totalitarian order is brought to the front stage as the new symbolic mandate to enjoy. The manifestations of such metamorphosis in literary and filmic works follow the path that starts from the sublime and ends at the obscene.

(ProQuest: ... denotes non-USASCII text omitted.)

The recent coinage of the term "neo-totalitarianism" (Gorniak-Kocikowska, 2001) initially characterizes the seemingly much integrated global network made possible through the Internet, which homogenizes the various spheres of our life such as work, communication, entertainment, and consumption in accordance with superimposed principles, rules, and logic. Recently, Xu's (2005) characterization of contemporary China's political regime as neo-totalitarian has brought to our attention the question that, in addition to the radical socioeconomic changes, what really distinguishes ideological neo-totalitarianism from its predecessors, namely, proto-totalitarianism and post-totalitarianism. If, as Xu (2005) argues, neo-totalitarianism is an attempt to return to

(proto) totalitarianism and at the same time the impossibility to complete such a return, then how is this impossibility inscribed in the neo-totalitarian ideological field? Put differently, if, as Laclau postulates, "The ideological would consist of those discursive forms through which a society tries to institute itself as such on the basis of closure," (Laclau 1990: 92) and the ideological, instead of relying on misrecognition of any positive essences, pivots on a "non-recognition of the infinite play of differences" (Laclau 1990: 92), how then is the impossibility to return to a totalitarian Utopia foreclosed in the neo-totalitarian discourse? Where is the paradox that confronts the political regime, namely, the need for the regime to identify with and at the same time distance itself from its past, embedded in the neo-totalitarian ideology?

To answer this multifaceted question, this paper draws on Yan Lianke's (2005) novella *Serve the People*<sup>1</sup> to shed light on the symbolic coordinates of the three modalities of totalitarian ideology and their transformational possibilities. Yan's story appeared in one of the most prestigious literary journals in China, *Flower City*, enjoyed a brief popularity, and suffered an almost immediate ban by the Propaganda Ministry of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The novella tells a story of a young soldier who is seduced by his division commander's young wife and only learns after their affair that the seduction is from the beginning the commander's plan. The reason why this literary work presents an excellent narrative to investigate the three modalities of totalitarian ideology resides in its undaunted motive to confront and disclose the truth/secret of the metamorphoses of totalitarianism, old or new. In a sense, Yan's *Serve the People* was banned not because of its explicit sexual contents that permeate the whole story but because it, intentionally or unintentionally, discloses the inherent logic of various totalitarian ideological symbolic systems.

Another reason why this novella is chosen is Yan's effort to intentionally obscure the story's historical context and to erase the character's individual traits. Clearly the author mocks but follows the principles of "revolutionary realism" - to create typical characters in typical environment, which functioned as the dominant doctrine in China's "official" culture up to the 1980s. The effect is that the characters in *Serve the People* appear uncannily realistic and "typical." Moreover, the rituals and slogan-ridden re-educational procedures depicted in the story could take place anytime between 1950s and late 1980s. It is obvious that the author's intention is not to tell a story set against any specific historical background. By erasing almost all historical specificities, the author is able to confront the secrets of a social-political form.

Relying on a Lacanian framework of psychoanalysis via Zizek's and others' works, this paper attempts to show that totalitarian ideological transformations hinge on different organizations of *jouissance* (enjoyment) made possible by the three ideological forms and their internal split (transgressions). Of course, the three totalitarian ideological modalities can be approached from other angles; for instance, Zizek's works on "the subject who is supposed to know" and "the subject who is supposed to believe" (Zizek 1997) may very well provide insightful analysis on the issue. Nevertheless I focus on the central Lacanian notion of *jouissance* (enjoyment) in the following analysis. According to Daly (1999:228), "discourses are themselves structured and animated through a 'libidinal economy' of enjoyment." That is to say, paradoxically, the discursive/symbolic itself is a structured field (ideology) of enjoyment and the libidinal economy of enjoyment is the life source of the discursive/symbolic. It should be noted here that enjoyment (Lacanian *jouissance*) is not to be understood in terms of pleasure, but "is much closer to a kind of satisfaction through suffering (thus, for example, psychoanalysis identifies an obscene enjoyment in acts of duty and sacrifice)." (Daly 1999: 227)

In the following sections, I try to show that first, *Serve the People*, a core doctrine/slogan of CCP's ideology, as a master signifier, entails a sequence of ideological equivalences (Laclau 1996) and the master thus produced is hidden, split between the symbolic and its obscene underside; and its inherent (moral) transgression (Zizek 1998b) that supports the workings of the totalitarian ideology relies on a collective disavowal; thus the impossibility to

return to the proto-totalitarian Utopia, as perceived in neo-totalitarianism, results precisely from the neo-totalitarian ideology's symbolic incorporation of the obscene jouissance. second, I will show that the post-totalitarian ideology results from the collapse of the imaginary that sustains the totalitarian gaze, namely the (impossible) New Socialist Man; and the cynical distance thus resulted between the post-totalitarian ideology and the subject functions as the very support for the effectiveness of the ideological system. Finally neo-totalitarianism is characterized as the inverse of proto-totalitarianism: the obscene underside that supports the totalitarian order is brought to the front stage as the new symbolic mandate to enjoy - its manifestation of such metamorphosis in literary and filmic works follows the path that starts from the sublime and ends at the obscene.

### Serve the People: A Totalitarian Master Signifier

"Serve the people" was the title of Mao Ze-dong's elegy at a soldiers memorial in the 1940s, right before the end of WWII. Soon turning into CCPs mandate to its members, this slogan has served as the core of the CCP's moral commandment till today. Most recently Jiang Zemin's "Three represents" and Hu Jintao's New Three Peoples Doctrine<sup>2</sup> are perceived as contemporary variations of the same call, though these calls appear to be desperate efforts to hold together a disintegrating ideological façade. Since the call to Serve the People is no longer found in official propaganda except in its variations, the tide of Yan's novella *Serve the People* is thus a literal (satirical) return to its origin, though, as to be seen, such a return ought to be understood as one to the deadlock in the ideological symbolic order.<sup>3</sup>

To start, a distinction between revolutionary discourses and totalitarian ideological discourses is to be drawn. According to Žižek, an authentic revolution is an act that transforms the coordinates of the objective social political order, for instance, the Leninist revolution that ushered in the communist party as a real political force onto the stage of world politics (Žižek 2002: 114). More importantly the revolutionary discourse entails a subjective position in relation to the objective sociopolitical reality: a subject that is willing to 'take a leap, throwing oneself into the paradox of situation' (114), though the objective conditions may be perceived as premature for revolutions. The Stalinist totalitarian ideology "return[s] to [this] objectivist' logic of the necessary stages of development." (Žižek 2002:114) That is to say, Stalinist totalitarianism is not revolutionary precisely because the agent positions itself not as the subject of revolution but as the instrument of historical evolutionary Law. This is why Žižek locates the rise of (communist) totalitarianism at the initial stages of Stalinism instead of Lenin's revolution.

This distinction is crucial because, on one hand, as revolutions opened new spaces for social and political transformation, the emergence of the totalitarian ideology is precisely through an act to foreclose such spaces; and on the other, Stalinist totalitarianism, in exactly the Lacanian sense, perverts the revolutionary discourse in presenting the Party as the fetishized object embodying the historical Law. Nevertheless, it was the Leninist revolution, a form of politics Žižek calls meta-politics legitimated "by a direct reference to the scientific status of its knowledge" (Žižek 1999: 191) and grounded in "historical necessity" (192) that rendered possible not only totalitarian violence but also the very act of perversion. The Lacanian concept of perversion, as presented in his well-known discourse of the analyst/pervert (Žižek 1998a), is a social link/discursive form<sup>4</sup> in which the position of the agent is occupied by an object (the object of a, a fantasmic object that mediates the subject and knowledge/discourse) that serves as the tool of knowledge (see Figure below). Therefore, on one hand the totalitarian agent functions as the fantasmic object or lure that appears as the real Thing of enjoyment; and on the other, the totalitarian subject forms a relation of fantasy<sup>5</sup> with the agent (the Party and the Leader) that stands in as the embodiment of Historical Law. An excessive enjoyment is then derived from being the instrument for the symbolic, an enjoyment of one's sacrifice. Where then does *Serve the People* fit in the structure?

Zizek's answer is in the (Laclauan) ideological equivalencing of the Law with the innermost longing of the people:

His (the totalitarian agent as object) entire legitimacy derives from this position of pure servant of the People: the more he 'modestly' diminishes and instrumentalizes his role, the more he emphasizes that he merely expresses and realizes the strivings of the People themselves, who are the true Master, the more all-powerful and untouchable he becomes, since any attack on him is effectively an attack on the People themselves, on their innermost longings. ... "The People" is thus split into actual individuals (prone to treason and all kinds of human weaknesses) and the People embodied in the Master. (Zizek 1999:193)

Thus the fundamental discursive gesture in Serve the People is one that instrumentalizes the totalitarian subject as the object that embodies the historical Law qua People's innermost longings. A close look at the mandate shows that, different from Judaic Laws such as the Ten Commandments that postulates, "Thou shalt not...", "Serve the People" appears as a proposition without subject. As Terry Eagleton (1991:9) argues, "[I]deology is less a matter of the inherent linguistic properties of a pronouncement than a question of who is saying what to whom for what purposes." An important distinction to be drawn here is one between the subject of the speech act (enunciation) and the subject of the statement (enunciée). Here already this distinction is at work: the erasure of the subject of enunciée (stated contents) discloses the subject (position) of the enunciation, the position of power that promulgates such symbolic mandate. As Lacan indicates (see figure above), the product in the analyst/pervert's discourse is precisely a master hidden from the subject (lower right corner).

In his effort to revive the theory (critique) of ideology, Laclau (1996) proposes two theses. First, ideological discourses rely on strategies of emptying and floating master signifiers so that master signifiers can be freely associated with other "ordinary" signifiers. second, an ideological discourse is ultimately completed through an operation of "equivalencing," free association with other competing signifiers, one of which will eventually serve as the Lacanian *point de capiton* (button tie or quilting point) (Fink 2004: 89) that anchors and fixes the whole ideological field. Precisely because Serve the People is empty, lacking specific contents, it functions as such a master signifier so that acts and practices can be rendered meaningful in association with a stable ideological system. Therefore, inherent to the demand "serves the people" is a lack, as is true with any master signifier. This lack is primarily one of specific contents, which resists any constative settlement in order to sustain the master signifier's performative power. As a law-like command it does not forbid but encourages. Most importantly, it does not specify what acts should be regarded as "serving the people." Instead of restraining one from certain acts, such as the successfully interpellated subject would do with regard to the Law "Thou shalt not," the subject interpellated by the hail of "serving the people" is always at loss as to what accounts as its duty. In real life this lack has to be resolved through relations established by a power. At the imaginary level, the lack in the master signifier "Serve the People" precisely fits the definition of the phallus as the signifier of desire so long as the Other, the social symbolic order, is perceived as lack/object-cause of desire. Here a few points concerning Lacan's notion of desire need to be made. First, desire is always the desire of the Other (Lacan 1975[1998]: 4). As Fink (1995) puts it, one learns to desire through one's perception of other's lack. second, what desire aims at is not its satisfaction. Instead, authentic desire aims at sustaining itself as pure desirousness. On the surface, the Master-Other's call addressed at the subject is one for sacrifice that sustains the Other as Master at the symbolic level. Simply put, the Other is perceived as desiring one's sacrifice that would complete the Other as lack. At a more profound level, however, the efficacy of the master signifier solely relies on the subject's participation and its willingness to renounce the pathological needs of the stand-in masters.

Yan's young soldier is in the first place depicted as one successfully interpellated subject: ready to be objectified as a tool to serve the master's need and at the same time willing to renounce the pathological quotidian obscenities of the Master's empirical stand-in, his commander. In other words, Yan's story reveals the disavowed

operations necessary to actualize the relations among the Master signifier, its empirical stand-ins, and the subject. On two occasions in the story, Yan uncannily describes processes of Laclauan ideological equivalencing. When the young soldier is first assigned to serve the division commander's family, a junior officer who is also his immediate supervisor asks him:

"What are the most important rules you need to remember as you work for the commander's family?"

"Do not ask questions that I ought not to; Do not do what I ought not to; and Do not say what I ought not to."

The managing director asks, "What else?"

He answers/"Never forget the principle that serving the commander's family is to serve the People." (Yan 2005)

On the second occasion, when the young soldier is frightened of his own realization that the commander's wife is indeed trying to seduce him and flees from his post, another junior officer "educates" him with the following reasoning:

"how could you not understand the basic rationale of Serve the People? ... The commander is not home right now; you cant even serve Liu Lian (commander's wife) well. The commander is at a conference in Beijing, (if he learns that) you cannot even make her happy, he might get worried; if he does not have a peaceful mind, our whole divisions work and study, training for (war) readiness would be affected; if our divisions preparedness lags behind, the whole army's capability would be compromised." (Yan 2005)

In the above cases, a sequence of equivalences sliding from "serving the commander's family" to "the army's war capability" is anchored at the quilting point of Serve the People. In a reversed view, it is in relation to Serve the People that one's daily routines acquire meanings. At this point, we should recognize that a power hierarchy is already at work, coinciding with a military hierarchy. If serving the commanders family is to serve the people, the soldier's role is to serve but not to be served. In other words, the logic in Serve the People is asymmetrical once it is concretized in and supported through a power structure: the commander always already serves the people no matter what he does; it is the specific individuals, members of the people, that have to serve the commander in order to serve themselves. No wonder the mandate Serve the People is coupled with a command to disavow not only the pathological idiosyncrasies of the powerful but also the very secret of the power structure itself. As indicated in the first quote above: "Do not ask questions that I ought not to; Do not do what I ought not to; and Do not say what I ought not to," a successfully interpellated subject is not only willing to conform with the mandate but also willing to blind oneself to its secret/truth.

### The Internal Split and Obscene Support of Ideology

According to Zizek's (1989, 1998a) elaboration on the workings of ideology, a gap between the ideological and the practice that sustains it is the very mechanism through which the ideological discourse effectively works. The practice that supports the workings of the ideological is obscene precisely because it transgresses the normative moral mandate. Zizek's discussion on gay persons in the military best explicates the notion of ideology and its obscene support. Writing from his own experiences, Zizek argues that the military's insistence that gay people should not be allowed to serve results not from a concern that the presence of gay people would intrude and break the normal order of discipline. On the contrary, the sustenance of the military order relies on homosexual jokes, pranks, and gay bashing. Here a gap already exists between the formal military disciplinary order and its obscene underside, namely, sadomasochist homosexual bonding among the soldiers. In order for the formal military order

to work, this underside has to be disavowed, renounced, and kept secret. To emphasize, what is renounced is the obscene support of the symbolic order - the domain that offers *jouissance* (enjoyment) as the symbolic demands sacrifice.

This is why the young soldier in Yan's story has to vow to disavow his right of questioning before he is assigned his duty. What happens next in the story, however, is precisely an exposé of how moral transgression functions as the obscene support of the ideological. At the beginning, the soldier addresses the commander's wife as "aunt," (Ah-Yi) following the traditional Chinese kinship terminology since the commander appears to be old enough to belong to an older generation. In order for the final love affair to materialize, such a cross-generational relation has to be crossed. Therefore, the first seductive signal from the commander's wife is to persuade the soldier to address her as "sister" (Jie-Jie). Here the soldier's obedience already amounts to a symbolic (incestuous) transgression. The real paradox of the symbolic mandate is that in order for the soldier to conform to the call of his duty to serve the commander and his family, he has to have sex with the commander's wife. Put bluntly, the symbolic mandate - a stand-in for the Master - now demands sex.

Yan perspicaciously recognizes the two interdependent sides of the totalitarian mandate and discloses its dirty secret through a short circuit between the two sides, staging the dark side as the truth of the symbolic. In the next plot, Yan pushes the situation to its absurd extreme. After the soldier flees the commander's residence, frightened by the possibility of his romantic involvement with the commander's wife, the "community" represented by a junior officer who is charged with the responsibility of taking care of the soldier's morale, scolds the terrified soldier and stresses his duty to unconditionally obey the commander's wife. In this final move, *Serve the People* completely coincides with serving the Master's sexual demand.

How then does one derive *jouissance* (enjoyment) from one's sacrifice? The answer already lies in the internal split of the Master's mandate: at the symbolic level the Master demands sacrifice, but in the real underside the mandate amounts to a demand "Enjoy!" The soldier's trauma is precisely caused by the fact that he discovers the Master's secret. In an astonishing narrative move, Yan lets his protagonists procure enjoyment literally from the symbolic Master. The first move of the commander's wife in carrying out her plan of seduction involves directly a wooden plaque with "Serve the People" etched on it. She tells the soldier that he should come up stairs if he sees the plaque removed from the dinner table. Here the linguistic sign of *Serve the People*, the purely symbolic, is used as a sign of sexual *jouissance*, deprived of its moral contents. Moreover, after the "educational" talks with his officers, the soldier returns to the commander's house and tells the commander's wife that he is ready and determined to "Serve the People." In the next scene, in which the wife orders the soldier to strip in the name of "Serve the People," this symbolic (moral) mandate literally becomes a sign that intensifies their sexual pleasure. Do we not witness exactly the convergence of the symbolic mandate and its obscene underside in these scenes? The "political incorrectness" of Yan's story precisely resides in his endeavor to bring the two sides of totalitarianism together, to present them as one and the same ideological field.

What should be supplemented with real life cases is yet another form of enjoyment that is produced through the interplay between the symbolic mandate and its imaginary; for instance, in reiterating the communist doctrines while imagining self-sacrifice. It was those who got carried away by their fantasy of self-sacrifice that presented cases detrimental to the regime. During the Cultural Revolution, numerous instances of young folks, soldiers and Red Guards, who overwhelmed "class enemies" attempts to "subvert socialist construction", were reported. Most of them have been proved to be false. In these cases, young fanatics murdered "evil-looking" people (oftentimes old folks) and wounded themselves as signs of self-sacrifice. Although it is ambiguous as to how one should read such instances: as acts of criminal opportunists or as acts of authentic fanaticism the perpetrators of which never had slightest doubts about what they did. It is undeniable that both interpretations imply certain form of



jouissance: the selfish opportunist's enjoyment in the calculated consequences or the fanatic's enjoyment in the act itself. It is a fact that the totalitarian regimes (CCP in particular) often implemented temporary suspension of Law for political purposes that usually led to mass killings and random executions. However, the sustenance of the totalitarian order relied on a minimal gap between the symbolic and the imaginary. Once this gap collapses, i.e., once the imaginary leads to real acts, the symbolic itself disintegrates, being exposed as criminal murdering.

#### From Totalitarian Gaze to Post-Totalitarian Pseudo-Victims

No ideological system has dominated human life as a ubiquitous gaze as much as modern totalitarianism, Stalinism and Maoism, in particular. The portraits of leaders hanging in every household were the Master's Gaze objectively concretized. The subjective aspect of this gaze resides in the register of the imaginary: everybody knows the leader or the party is not watching over us at any moment, nonetheless one acts as if they indeed penetrate every dark corner of one's life. From the side of the totalitarian gaze, however, our quotidian pathological (in opposition to free ethical) concerns, our sufferings and miseries, our selfish behaviors and individual quirks are regulated through their exclusion from the totalitarian gaze. Such pure totalitarian gaze was best exemplified in the Eight Model Operas that were the only permitted entertainment during most of the Cultural Revolution period (1966-1976). The heroes and heroines in these cultural products were all purged of their personal traits and rendered as embodiments of the communist/revolutionary Ideal.

What should be noted on the Master's side is the relentless insistence of the symbolic gesture to rid of the individual idiosyncrasies. It is here that we encounter the notion of the Socialist New Man, which is precisely a form free of personal pathological concerns - a result of symbolic subtraction/castration, a fantasmic object posited through and supports the totalitarian gaze. Coupled with such images that objectifies and supports the big Other's Gaze, artistic works in China's totalitarian period were dominated by the notion of the Sublime. Typically, the Eight Model Operas presented scenes of the sublime: brief moments of the hero appearing between life and death, moments of ultimate sacrifice for the "Revolutionary Cause." Thus the sublime is the (impossible) fleeting occurrence of the Thing qua Communist Cause created through the gap between the hero's (biological) death and his/her symbolic eternity. Merely indicating that such works ignored people's real life and their sufferings misses the point: such works were necessary to support the totalitarian gaze, without them, the totalitarian gaze, though in the imaginary, would collapse. It should also be noted that the sublime moment is precisely the reversal of the totalitarian victim's death (Such as those killed by Red Guards in the 1960s): the victim is symbolically dead (humiliated and forced to reject their own symbolic identities) before his/her biological death (Žižek 2001: 87-88).

If post-totalitarianism is the arrival of cynicism in relation to the protototalitarian ideology, an intentional distancing on the subjective side from the symbolic Other, the seed of post-totalitarianism is already sowed in the field of proto-totalitarianism. In the workings of the totalitarian ideology, the constant effort required by the Master to erase one's subjectivity and pathological concerns is already the mechanism that supports the symbolic itself, though here the everyday pathological individual traits exist as the repressed. Therefore, the passing from proto-totalitarianism to post-totalitarianism only needs one move at the level of consciousness: to recognize the gap/split as such - namely as the very subjective position one occupies in order to survive the harsh reality of totalitarian rule. The result of such recognition is precisely a cynical distance from the symbolic order.

What should be emphasized is, as Žižek would argue (for instance, Žižek 1989:28-30), that in a post-totalitarian regime the cynical distance a subject holds towards the official ideology is already one of the conditions that the post-totalitarian regime relies on to achieve its ideological efficacy. In other words, the post-totalitarian symbolic order has already taken into account of the cynicism towards it as the condition for its possibility. Yan's story *Serve the People* captures this very mechanism, at a certain level, differentiating the story from other Chinese post-



totalitarian literary and filmic works. Soon after the story of seduction unfolds, Yan reveals the "real" pathological motivation of the soldier's obedience: he expects that the commander would use his power to elevate him from a rural to urban resident, an almost invincible barrier in the social hierarchy created by the Chinese communist regime. Although the soldier is not yet a fully formed post-totalitarian subject since he has not consciously recognized the gap between the ideological symbolic and the real of the power's workings, he nonetheless acts as if he does. That is to say, he acts upon his pathological human concerns without cynically distancing himself in his discourse from the symbolic. What is subversive in Yan's story is similar to that in Milos Forman's films as discussed by Žižek (1989: 107): disturbing the totalitarian gaze by "mocking small, ordinary people" since the very totalitarian gaze is supported by the Socialist New Man who sacrifices his life for the Cause. Instead of directly confronting the totalitarian bureaucracy, such a strategy depicts People as individuals with selfish ordinary concerns who struggle to survive.

Literary and filmic works that replace the Socialist New Man with small ordinary individuals occurred in China in the 1980s and 1990s, exemplified by works such as Zhang Yimou's early Cannes award winning movie *To Live* and many of Wang Shuo's stories and novels. Even in *To Live*, Zhang Yimou has a tendency to, on one hand, depict his characters as victims of totalitarian random rage, and on the other, beautify traditional Chinese family and friendship relations as remaining spheres of minimal jouissance. What is missing from such post-totalitarian works is precisely the fact that totalitarianism does not allow for such spaces. Totalitarianism's totalitarian-ness, at least in its communist version, precisely resides in its effort to totally dismantle the existing social structure. The only jouissance (enjoyment) one can procure is from the Master, from the obscene (underside of the) Master. It is in this sense that (communist) totalitarianism does not create victims, its victims are always guilty in victimizing him/herself. However, it did create ethical heroes: individuals who unconditionally reject the totalitarian order, though there were only few of them.<sup>7</sup>

The post-totalitarian symbolic emerged at least partly through its rejection of the totalitarian gaze - objectified in the images of the Socialist New Man that is not positively embodied in reality. In the domains of literature and filmic art, the transition from proto-totalitarianism to post-totalitarianism relied on a gesture of humanizing characters that suffer personal losses because of the harshness of totalitarian tyranny. What is noteworthy is the new form of demand for sacrifice: the heroes in the post-totalitarian literary and filmic works, although suffer from the unrelenting totalitarian rage, never lose their faith in communist/socialist Cause. Their suffering is presented as the very test of their faith. Hardly with any exception, the final resolution in these works, i.e., the redemption of the protagonist is always an intervention from the Big Other, the very source of his/her suffering, in a purely symbolic gesture of rectification. The symbolic cost of this gesture is again a split internal to the Other, between the tyrannical fatherly image of the leaders(s) such as Mao and the comforting motherly image of the Party. What could be a better image to sustain a motherly gaze than a suffering child? Typical of this redemption-from-above genre are Xie Jin's filmic works that occurred in the 1980s. In his early works such as *The Legend of Tianyun Mountain* and *The Herdsman*, the protagonists, both men, suffered from random purges of the power regime and find redemptions in feminine love and final rectifications from the above. There is, however, a noticeable change in Xie Jin's later works such as *The Hibiscus Town*, in which traditional social ties are presented as a remaining space to resist totalitarian violence and the final redemption from above is minimized. Neither Zhang's *To Live* nor Xie's *The Hibiscus Town* depicts the main characters as heroes. Instead, all of them rely on family members and romantic love to resist the catastrophic events the regime imposes on them. Their final redemptions are also achieved through social ties other than the rectification from the Big Other. Such artistic works, though achieved high popularity, caused minimal disturbances in the symbolic order. What compromises the subversive effectiveness of these works is precisely their compromising gesture: even under the harshest circumstances the regime caused, it was still possible to have familial and romantic love; it was still possible to adhere to basic traditional values to maintain minimal human dignity.

Back to Van's story *Serve the People*, it is not difficult to discern the uncompromising gesture in rejecting the notion of the survival of "normal" family ties. The Master demands transgressions: the soldier not only has to break his pseudo-family relation with the commander's wife but also has to get involved in an extra-marital affair to improve his own family's situation. It is in this sense that Van's story transcends the post-totalitarian literary modality of totalitarian victimization and, reveals the truth of totalitarianism: it is a system that exonerates nobody from his/her guilt.

#### From the Sublime to the Obscene: The Neo-Totalitarian Jouissance

With its surprising dénouement, Van's *Serve the People* lets us get a peek into the secret of neo-totalitarianism: the Master's direct call 'Enjoy !' and its secret adherence to the symbolic as an empty yet powerful form. After the young soldier's sexual encounter with the commander's wife, he is sent away for a long vacation. He comes back only to learn that the woman is pregnant and the commander has used his connections and power to complete the whole bureaucratic procedure to relocate the soldier and his family into an urban area. All along, the commander knows and plans the whole affair in order for his wife to bear a child, which is impossible because of his impotence. What is more frightening for the soldier is the fact revealed to him by one officer that all the junior officers know what is going on all along - the community in which the soldier is embedded "knows" the secret of the Master and willingly keeps it a secret. What ensues is a collective effort of the junior officers to keep the soldier from getting into the sight of the commander since the soldier's presence signifies precisely the commander's impotence and his obscene pleasure. Here the Master's impotence and his power converge in his command: "Enjoy!" In a shrewd move, the impotent Master retreats into a pure symbolic order, in this case the formal military hierarchy, and mandates its subjects to enjoy so long as the social, the community collectively disavows his impotence and secret pleasure. In this light, it can be argued that the metamorphosis of totalitarianism from its prototype to neo-type involves, first of all, a shift from its sublime imaginary support - the New Socialist Man, to its obscene underside, a gaze of obscene enjoyment. Simply put, the neo-totalitarian gaze is supported by the enjoying subject: the notion of People reoccurs in People who enjoy. The Master transforms itself into the provider of jouissance. This is evidenced in recent nationalist discourses in China: any criticism of the current situation in China spoils "our" enjoyment of "the rise of the Chinese Nation." At the same time, the state continually offers new objects of enjoyment: the Olympic Games, the skyscrapers arising in big cities, and the stunningly fast economic growth, etc.

Moreover it should also be pointed out that the gaze of the Master has resigned into the backstage as a perverse voyeuristic one that enjoys through other's enjoyment. In *Serve the People*, Yan narrates all the transgressions the young couple commits as if the master's gaze is always present. On at least one occasion, the Master's possible intrusion is even provoked to spice up their sexual games. Here the father's gaze serves as the frame that constitutes the object of desire and that participates in the sexual transgressions. Furthermore, the Father's gaze enjoys the transgression, though its enjoyment is of a different order from that of the desiring subjects. Thus, different from the totalitarian gaze that relies on the exclusion of the everyday pathological obscenities such as bodily functions and sexual acts, the neo-totalitarian gaze has already included them as its support. If the epitome of the totalitarian gaze is the statues erected in the front of almost all important government bureaucracies, the most illustrative example of the neo-totalitarian gaze would be the scenes in many contemporary Chinese TV shows that display beautiful young people to compete for titles and prizes. The difference here between such TV shows in China and those similar shows in any democratic capitalist society is that the Chinese shows are perceived as always already "permitted" - the viewers are conscious of the Master's gaze that sets the boundaries and enjoys through the enjoyment of the audience. That is to say, the purely capitalist gaze at scenes of enjoyment is in the last analysis indifferent; whereas the neo-totalitarian gaze is deeply concerned with scenes of

jouissance because contingent and accidental transgressions may shatter the gaze at any moment.

In addition, if the neo-totalitarian Master is an obscene and impotent fatherly figure that enjoys through others' jouissance, its impotence is not to be understood as its inability to use violence to assert its power and control. Instead, its impotence is witnessed by its failure to symbolically interpellate subjects. In reality, neo-totalitarian regimes exercise of power, following Xu's (2005) characterization of contemporary China's political regime, may appear to be impotent rage that manifests in excessive violence. Arguably this is the difference between Deng Xiaoping's crackdown on students' movement in 1989 and Maoist violence through political mass mobilization: Mao's success precisely depended on the gripping power of the symbolic while Deng's violent measure precisely resulted from the failure of the ideological.

If one switches perspective to examine the social relations inscribed in Yan's diegetic space, one finds the following: the almost invisible but ubiquitous shadow of the fatherly figure, namely, the commander; the hysteric subject of the young soldier who is astounded to discover the internal split of the symbolic mandate; the woman who, as the object of desire, circulates within the underlying libidinal network shielded by the symbolic command; and finally the "community" represented by the junior officers who insist that the young soldier ought to perform his duty without knowing the truth. Such a structure of power has at least one element that is homologous to the fundamentals of the film noir as analyzed by Žižek (1992), in which the impotent "obscene-knowing father" (160) qua "Master of Enjoyment" (160) disposes of the woman in exchange with the protagonist. The unique feature in *Serve the People*, of course, is the visible community that functions as the accomplice of the Father, rather than an indifferent crowd in film noir. Is this not an indication that in the totalitarian community nobody is innocent and everyone is always already knee deep in sharing the father's arbitrary political rampage and in transgressing normative social boundaries? Moreover, different from the figure of femme fatale whose status is a pure object of desire and whose existence totally relies on the protagonist/subject's recognition as such; the woman, the commander's wife in Yan's story is a figure of pure desirousness. In other words, she desires the young soldier despite her knowledge that the patriarchal gaze is omnipresent and that her object of desire is an offering from the obscene father. One question arises here: How do we explain such an oddity that seems to remain within the grip of and yet defiant of the master's cobweb? It is true that she is an offer from the master as the object of pure sexual jouissance and she functions as the Lacanian small object of a circulating between the master and the subject. However, she is also clearly the only character who authentically desires without any utilitarian concerns (unlike the soldier and the commander) and refuses to compromise her desire even though she knows all the secrets of the Master. She appears to be the only ethical figure that has traversed the fantasy (Žižek 2005: 282): coming to realize that the symbolic order that grips her and dominates her life experiences including her romantic encounter with the young soldier is all along a fake. She nevertheless loves the soldier. This excess of love created through the commander's plotting and planning is not accounted in the commander's scheme. What lies beyond the neo-totalitarian Master's staging of People enjoying democracy, enjoying social justice, enjoying equality might very well result in a real love of democracy, social justice, and equality that transcends the Master's boundary.

#### Concluding Remarks

Drawing on Van's story *Serve the People*, I have analyzed the internal logic and the ups and downs of the totalitarian mandate "Serve the People" in its historical contexts. My real purpose, however, is to address the transformation of the three modalities of totalitarianism as reflected in literary works. Following Lacan and Žižek's analytical frameworks, I have focused on how the three forms of totalitarianism create and organize jouissance (enjoyment). Along this line I have shown that proto-totalitarian mandate depends on a disavowal of its obscene supplements, i.e., practices that paradoxically transgress and at the same time support the symbolic order. Thus the primary form of jouissance is to be procured from the very symbolic demand for sacrifice.

At the level of consciousness, the emergence of the post-totalitarian order merely entails recognizing the split internal to the proto-totalitarian order. The imaginary gap emerging from the split is the fantasmic object that the subject can hang on to assert certain subjectivity: the illusion that a cynical distance would in fact distance the subject from the symbolic order. What the subject holds onto is nothing but his own discursive gestures to maintain the distance. The support of the ideological order is effectively displaced from the subjective to the objective: the subject nevertheless acts as if he believes in the ideological doctrines even if he/she tries consciously to reject them in his/her discourse. Put it differently, the fact one enjoys the very cynical distance from the Big Other in forms of jokes, parodies, and sarcasm is the very mechanism through which the symbolic order was sustained. The regime tolerated various artistic works to a certain extent precisely because these works hardly ever present real challenges to its power. However, these were also the most fragile moments of the totalitarian order. No wonder the totalitarian regimes in East Europe and the former Soviet Union did not survive this period. At least partly reacting to the threat highlighted by the velvet revolutions, the Chinese communist regime resorted, though ambivalently, to nationalism, which has succeeded in installing an object of desire in its symbolic order, namely the Nation Thing. The way such an object functions is that, in Žižek's words, through anamorphosis. According to Žižek, "anamorphosis designates an object whose very material reality is distorted in such a way that a gaze is inscribed into its 'objective' features." (Žižek, 2001:150) It is through such a distorting perspective that the social trauma (such as the 1989 crackdown on Students' Movement) that shattered the symbolic order is repressed and the social reality is given a unifying feature. Furthermore, if the proto-totalitarian regime had to repeatedly stage its revolutionary past to sustain its ideological field, in post-totalitarian order, the revolutionary drive only functions as a spectral shadow that, on one hand, legitimizes the power, and on the other, serves as a nostalgic loss that nonetheless is posited as its spiritual past.

The neo-totalitarian order emerges the moment this spiritual past becomes past, a past that is put to its symbolic death. The repressed - the disavowed obscene underside in the totalitarian order, returns to its place. As Xu (2005) points out in drawing distinctions between proto and neo-totalitarianisms, "the latter (neo-totalitarianism) opposes forms of human beings' free thinking (such as democratic system) to their biological needs (i.e., so-called stability), lures people into excessive indulgence in bodily functions, and makes them believe that that is what they must pursue in life, and in so doing leads them away from the need for free thinking." In a sense, neo-totalitarianism is no longer a unified ideological field; and behind the scenes of obscene jouissance is nothing but a pure will for power. In an ironic reversal, it is sheer power that supports jouissance, as opposed to proto-totalitarianism. No wonder Xu (2005) calls the scenes in contemporary China apocalyptic. Is not the Biblical apocalypse precisely scenes of pure obscene jouissance in which ethical decisions and choices become impossible? If authentic revolutions occupied an ethical position, a position from which new spaces for social political transformation were opened, proto-totalitarianism foreclosed such spaces while attempting to imitate the revolutionary spirit through random violent acts. It was neo-totalitarianism that announced the death of revolution, leaving the revolutionary spirit as a spectral shadow looming in the past. Neo-totalitarianism is thus the second death of the spirit and the Cause. Ultimately, what is lost in neo-totalitarianism is precisely the possibility of ethical acts: as Xu (2005) puts it, the neo-totalitarian order is one of desire (jouissance) without purpose.

#### Footnote

1. This novella was published in the first issue of Flower City in 2005. According to Radio Free Asia, CCP's Propaganda Ministry soon ordered Flower City's Editorial Board to retrieve the copies that had already been distributed. Therefore, the corpus on which I base my analysis is obtained from the Internet at the following site. ([http://www.huanghuagang.org/library/wei\\_renmin\\_fuwu.htm](http://www.huanghuagang.org/library/wei_renmin_fuwu.htm)). Please also note that if *Serve the People* occurs in italic, it refers to Yan's story; whereas, it refers to the ideological mandate if it appears in regular font.

### Footnote

2. There is no inherent connection between Hu's New Three People's Doctrine and Dr. Sun Yat-Sen's original Three People's Doctrine. Hu's new doctrine addresses primarily government officials and demands that they "to use one's power for people, to tie one's love to people, and to work for people's interest."

3. Symbolic order here is used to refer to an ideological system. Its origin is in Lacan's delineation of his three-dimensional psychoanalytical field: the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real.

### Footnote

4. Lacan's well-known four discourses provide a unique perspective to examine discourses as social relations. Of particular interest to this paper is his analyst's discourse which Žižek recognizes as having the same structure to that of the discourse of the pervert: both agents (the analyst and the pervert) occupy the position of surplus enjoyment. Here a thin line distinguishes the two: in the analyst's discourse the agent reduces himself to the void behind the fantasmic object, which allows the subject to confront the truth of his desire; whereas, the pervert presents himself as the fantasmic Object-Thing that functions as the lure (Žižek 1998a: 80).

5. Lacan's notion of fantasy refers to a relation between the fantasmic object *petit a* and the subject that is barred/split: *SOa*. Please see Žižek (1998a) and Fink (1995).

### Footnote

6. Master in capital is not to be understood as any personality. For instance, the Party as a Master does not coincide with any specific individual. However, certain individuals may function as stand-ins of the Master in concrete situations. Please also note that the term Big Other refers to the symbolic order qua ideological system, not necessarily the notion of Master.

### Footnote

7. Such ethical (in a Kantian sense) heroes were few. Lin Zhao and Yu Luoke are two names often remembered nowadays. To call them victims is to minimize the ethical character of their acts and stance.

### Footnote

8. In Lacanian terms, the hysteric subject is one that questions but not necessarily rejects the Master's interpellation.

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