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Taylor-Jones, K.E. orcid.org/0000-0002-4335-3119 (2018) Girlhood, bride-kidnapping and the postsocialist moment in Mángshān (Blind Mountain) (Li, 2007) and Boz Salkyn (Pure Coolness) (Abdyjaparov, 2007). Asian Cinema, 29 (2). pp. 225-242. ISSN 1059-440X

https://doi.org/10.1386/ac.29.2.225_1

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Girlhood, bride-kidnapping and the postsocialist moment in Blind Mountain/Mángshān (Li, 2007) and Pure Coolness/Boz Salkyn (Abdyjaparov, 2007)

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ABSTRACT:

China and Kyrgyzstan are at the point of national development where the interplay between a national past and a globalised future are still hotly debated. Both nations are at the crux of the global questions related to the universal dilemmas posed by the collapse of the revolutionary socialist challenge to the hegemony of capitalism (Sakwa 1999). This article will examine the interplay between gender and the vision of postsocialist modernity that is found in two films. Blind Mountain (Li, 2007) and Pure Coolness (Abdyjaparov, 2007) both present the respective stories of teenagers forced into marriage as part of a "tradition" that is supported by the broader local community (as opposed to been the act of an individual male kidnapper). I will explore how the girl simultaneously represents a vision of a localised space while operating as an indicative sign of cultural difference. In short, she is the site of the transmission of ideals of gender and modernity between moments in national development. We, therefore, see the girl caught in the crosshair of modernity, sexuality, tradition, nostalgia and capitalism in communities that, as will be explored, are struggling to find a sense of self in the Asian post-socialist moment.

Keywords: bride culture, bride kidnap, China, Kyrgstan, film, postsocialism

Girlhood, bride-kidnapping and the postsocialist cinematic moment in Blind Mountain/Mángshān (Li, 2007) and Pure Coolness/Boz Salkyn (Abdyjaparov, 2007)

Introduction:

Sharing a border and with substantive cultural, trade and immigration links, both China and Kyrgyzstan share many historical similarities, and both can arguably be classed as postsocialist states. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan has struggled to maintain political stability and has suffered from ethnic conflicts, the rise of radical Islam, economic collapse, a series of transitional governments and two revolutions (2004 and 2010 respectively). China in comparison, with strong communist party leadership and rapid economic growth, has faced other issues with limits on personal freedom and high levels of economic and social inequality. Both nations, therefore, are in the crux of the global question related to "the universal dilemmas posed by the collapse of the revolutionary socialist challenge to the hegemony of capitalism" (Sakwa 1999: 713; see also Sakwa 1999a). As Ales Erjavec notes,

> Today these (post-socialist) countries share very similar problems, such as rising unemployment, a crisis of values, a loss of identity, commercialisation, nationalistic ideas, and a resurgence of sympathy for the formers political system, but they also share something else. At the historical turning point that marks the beginning of their transition to capitalism, these countries also possessed a similar culture and ideological legacy. From this legacy there emerged similar kinds of artistic endeavours" (2003: 3).

This idea of similar artistic endeavour can be seen in the two films discussed herein, one from China and one from Kyrgyzstan. While Mainland China's substantive and continuing contribution to global cinema discourses cannot be argued, Kyrgyzstan has been far more limited in her cinematic outputs (although 2012 saw a record 100 films produced). Regardless of the very different cinematic traditions, in 2007 two not-dissimilar films made the headlines in their respective nations. Blind Mountain/Mángshān (Li Yang) and Pure Coolness/Boz Salkyn (Ernest Abdyjaparov) hold a similar narrative in that both focus on the act of bride kidnapping. While both take very different approaches to this act of gendered violence, via the modes of aesthetic and narrative engagement utilised, both films offer a response to the contemporary state of the director's respective nation with a focus on the role and status of girls inside these discussions.

This article has three interlinked strands of discussion. Firstly, I will explore how both contemporary Chinese and Kyrgyz cinema operate under the banner of the postsocialist moment (albeit in a variety of different ways). The bringing together of these two national cinemas is not common, but as I will argue, the common themes cannot be ignored and allows new insight into the role gender has played in the Asian cultural sphere. Secondly, this article contributes therefore to the wide-range of scholarly literature have emerged related to postsocialism in both the Chinese and the central Asian context (as well as further afield) but, notably, I will focus on a highly distinctive aspect of this period via a specific case study. I will explore how Kyrgyz and Chinese nationalised experience of postsocialism informs how the films present a complex and controversial subject – bride kidnapping. Literally, the kidnap and forced marriage of a young woman (approximately between 18-20) to a man she does not know, bride kidnapping has both historical and contemporary global resonance. In

the case of both China and Kyrgyzstan, the act of bride kidnapping has achieved both an upturn in occurrence and a new cultural resonance in the last three decades. In China, the decline of a female population due to systematic focus on the birth of a male heir and the resultant termination of female pregnancies or in many cases, infanticide of female children, has led more rural communities to undertake extreme and often illegal measures to procure wives for single men. In Kyrgyzstan, the situation is even more complicated since, as I will explore, alu katchu (literally take and run), has been re-established as an "old cultural rite" repressed by the USSR. While Kyrgyzstan has not had a history of female murder in the same terms as China, a more urban-oriented female population has lead to an emptying out of rural areas and a desire for a more upwardly-mobile partner, leaving many working-class, rural men as undesirable in the marriage market. However, despite the claims of the antecedents of alu katchu, there is little evidence alu katchu was a "traditional" process and therefore we see new modes of gender relations couched in terms of the desire for a national narrative of a past cultural moment.

Finally, I will explore how the girl simultaneously represents a vision of a localised space while operating as an indicative sign of cultural difference. In short, she is the site of the transmission of ideals of gender and modernity between moments in national development. We, therefore, see the girl caught in the crosshair of modernity, sexuality, tradition, nostalgia and capitalism in communities that, as will be explored, are struggling to find a sense of self in the Asian post-socialist moment. The interplay between girls and questioning national development is not a new one. The fin de siècle saw a focus on adolescence, not only as a mode of existence but as the carrier and transmitter of new forms of modern existence. This interplay between youth and national development and the modern moment has now been replaced by a

concerted focus on young women and girls as the site of anxieties about new cultural and social identities. As Anita Harris notes, “young women today stand in for possibilities and anxieties about new identities more generally” (2004:2). She continues to note that girls “have become key figures in the later modern moment” for two key reasons, namely “a restructured global economy and a class/gender system that now relies heavily on young women’s labour|” and secondly, “new ideologies about individual responsibilities and choices [that] also dovetail with some broad feminist notions about opportunities for young women, making them the most likely candidates for performing a new kind of self-made subjectivity”(ibid: 6).

Outside of the western dynamic (where Harris is basing her work), young girls across the globe are key foci in debates on national development. It can concern the female presence in public space such as schools, universities and public transport systems (South Korea, Afghanistan, Nigeria) or how young women are needed to contribute and develop the national economy (Japan, China, Romania). It can be seen in the Nike Girl Effect Campaign in 2011 in Uganda that, as Lyndsay Hayhurst notes, “assumes girls are agents of development and catalysts capable of bringing about 'unparalleled social and economic change’” (2013:1). However, this belief in the possibility of girlhood has all too often neglected the very real structural inequalities that limit many girls. As Hayhurst continues, "for these young women, becoming self-reliant agents of change is problematic when they are not supported structurally in their quest to challenge gender norms and to shift gender relations” (ibid: 7).

Anxiety about a nation’s progress and/or modernisation has often articulated itself around the social and political position of young women. The desire to regulate and control girls’ lives has been part and parcel of this with many nations, China and Kazakhstan included, experiencing a series of moral panics about multiple aspects of

girls' lives. In these films, the figure of the girl as kidnapped bride stands as both a clear, coherent vision of a localised space at odds with modernity and as a vision of the possibilities that the modern, as broadly defined, offers to the nation-state. We can see the contradictory and often highly ambivalent transformative processes that modernisation is bringing to the respective socio-cultural milieu via the embodied experience of the girl-bride.

I will show that the films visualise the kidnapped bride as a figure caught between tradition and modernity, but also how they show how postsocialist societies negotiate their relationship to their past and tradition through their attitude towards women. In the case of Blind Mountain the attitude toward women results both from a complex double entanglement of marketisation and the legacy of a Confucian tradition that desires only male children, whereas in Pure Coolness it is a reinvention of tradition which claims bride kidnap as a way to reconnect outside of the state of postsocialist abjection that arguably Kyrgyzstan struggles to escape from. What we see, in both the film case studies referenced here, is that cinema both reflects and interrogates wider cultural and historical gendered dynamics.

The Post-Socialist moment

Nearly 20 years after the fall of the USSR, many nations are still struggling to come to terms with the events of the last few decades. As Chris Berry states, "postsocialism is both a localised experience and a shared narrative" (2007:16). While the specifics of each nation vary widely (for example it would be impossible to conflate the post-communist experiences of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and for example Uzbekistan), the overall idea of a postsocialist experience

crosses linguistic, cultural and geographical borders. As Jason McGrath notes, the collapse of the alternative modernity of communism has resulted in a modernity that is defined as both the means and the outcome of global capitalism. He notes that since "global capitalism is always in flux postsocialist modernity represented a fundamental new stage of capitalist development" (2008:5). Yingjin Zhang summarises that subsequent academic discussions on postsocialism have found themselves articulated around four key concepts namely "postsocialism as a label of historical periodisation; postsocialism as a structure of feelings; postsocialism as a set of aesthetic practices and postsocialism as a regime of political economy" (2007:50). The role that gender has played has often been downgraded in favour of a focus on class, economy and social struggle. This lack of a gendered narrative, especially related to film, is something this article seeks to address with direct reference to the case study of bride kidnap.

The postsocialist moment in Kyrgyz cinema reflects the tensions that were present prior to, during, and after, Soviet rule. Before Soviet rule, the people living in the territory of present-day Kyrgyzstan were primarily clan or tribe focused, rather than people aligning themselves inside a national narrative (Pipes 1997, Smith 1990). The USSR was keen to promote an idea of nationhood to encourage the people to better bond with the broad socialist and specifically Russian desires for the nation. Hence, there was a consistent standardisation of national languages and the promotion of national literature and culture over tribal ones (Bulgakova, 1999:65). Gender played a vital role as women were consistently targeted by Soviet politics across central Asia as part of the eradication of local cultures and traditions. Traditions such as the payment of dowry, the veil or any other sign of Muslim or traditional allegiances, child marriage, polygamy and levirate were all banned in favour of a new

focus on women as the cornerstone of a Bolshevik state. However, as Douglas Northrop notes, "on one hand state action thus created unintended possibilities for women: a space where feminist concerns (under a different name) could survive or even thrive…the common ground of debate helped define a specific, local and deeply gendered lexicon" (2003:11). In short, these traditions themselves became "an act of political and national resistance to an outside colonial power" (2003: 11). The female subject became the battleground for a multitude of local and national narratives. Traditional gendered activities became both a sign of backwardness but also signs of ethnic distinction in the face of Soviet edicts and control. At the fall of the Soviet Union, multiple tensions in the national psyche began to emerge as local and regional traditions began to be reignited at the same time as the former Soviet nations entered the capitalist marketplace.

Kyrgyzstan announced her transition to a market-orientated democratic society after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989. The transition period that followed saw radical shifts in the very nature of the national infrastructure. Kyrgyz society saw political struggles (sometimes murderous), economic decline and then development, class polarisation, social equality and debates on gender and human rights dominate the lived experiences of the post-89 Kyrgyz citizens. After the initial dissolution of the USSR, Kyrgyzstan experienced a dramatic decline in the average standard of living, and although economic growth has improved in the last decade, the average standard of living is still comparatively low for a large percentage of the population. Cross-cultural evidence indicates that in any national transition periods, women are often at the forefront of suffering. In Kyrgyzstan, women were the greatest victims of early transformational consequences, such as wage arrears and erosion of social safety nets and there continues to be a clear gender divide regarding education, earnings and

living standards (Mitra and Yemtsov, 2006). As a recent World Bank report notes although personal freedom is growing in the post-soviet era, "the decreasing role of the state in regulating the private and personal sphere is reflected, on the one hand, by a liberalization of norms, and on the other, the strengthening of negative patriarchal phenomena like bride kidnapping, forced marriages and births, and polygyny" Ibraeva, Moldosheva and Niyazova 2011: 3) and they conclude that "patriarchalization of relations [is] accompanied by actual loss in women's status and opportunities" (ibd: 3). Just as there was a "plurality of socialisms" (Hann, 1993) so too are the postsocialist milieus equally complex and diverse.

While Kyrgyzstan is a more traditional vision of a literal post-communist nation and hence postsocialist state, allocating the term postsocialism to China is not without issue. China is officially a socialist nation, and yet radical restructurings of the economic and market systems between the 1989 Tiananmen Square protest and China's entry into the World Trade Organisation in 2001 resulted in a fundamental shift in China from a socialist to a capitalism market-driven system. The rush towards market economy was not dominated by the privatisation of whole swathes of national infrastructures and companies (as was seen in Russia and other former satellites of the USSR), but via the development of a curious interplay between public (but still profit earning) and the emergence of a new private industrial sphere that had to learn to "exist symbiotically with, and to find shelter in the legitimacy of the state sector itself" (McGrath, 2008:5).

China, in particular, can rather ironically be seen as a nation who "does not simply partake of global post-socialist modernity but may well prove to define it more than any other state" (ibid:17). Chris Berry in his work on post-Mao Chinese cinema has extended Paul Pickowicz's discussion of post-socialism as linked to and rooted in

a narrative of postmodernism. For him, the decline of American hegemony, the loss of 'grand' narratives, and "at the same time, a continuation of the old modernist (but not critical modernity) discourses of materialism, secularism and progress [combine to] constitute a polyvocal and eclectic culture with no single source of authority" (2004:13).

Wang Hui asks us to consider the variety of complex intersections that mark the new Chinese state: 'the changing relations between state, private, and foreign capital; about the emergence of new classes and social groups; and about the differences between the coastal regions and the ''backward'' hinterland" (2001: 188). The vision of modernity as offered by the communist state during the earlier part of the century was no longer applicable and, together with China's position inside a globalised media world, resulted in the postsocialist moment also simultaneously being a vision of a postmodern society.

In this period of ambiguity, the work of Katherine Verdery (1996), Martha Lampland (1995) and Carole Nagengast (1991) to name but a few, all emphasize that between the socialist and the postsocialist state there have been multiple continuities between the time periods rather than just seeing the transition as a moment of total rupture. Verdery therefore, calls for an analysis of postsocialism that questions ideologically embedded representations and images of progress and this is what I intend to do in reference to two films Blind Mountain and Pure Coolness. Pure Coolness became one of the most popular Kyrgyz-made films of the decade inside its home nation (Abikeeva, 2009:187). It was nominated as Best Film in the Russian based NIKA film awards 2007 and received an international DVD release complete with English subtitles. In China, Blind Mountain made the headlines, for more negative reasons as PRC censors initially refused a screening permit despite the film's

success at international film festivals (including a nomination for Prix un certain regard at Cannes 2007). More than 30 cuts and a very different ending was required before China awarded the film a general release (something that will be returned to later).

The postsocialist abject: market economy and female abuse in Blind Mountain

Blind Mountain is the second part of controversial director Li Yang's planned trilogy of films seeking to highlight areas of social problem in China. Blind *Mountain/Máng shān* (2007) turns a critical eye towards a continuing issue, the lack of women and girls in certain rural regions. Romance is far from the world of Blind Mountain. Bai Xuemei, a young college graduate, searching for summer work, is tricked by some traffickers into handing over her ID card and money and is then drugged, kidnapped and sold as a bride to a villager in the Quin Mountain in Shaanxi province. Trapped in the remote village, she is abused until she eventually conceives a son for her brutal and un-educated husband. She is one of several kidnapped girls and women but her multiple attempts, both to find allies to notify the authorities of her plight and to escape herself, are thwarted by the close-knit community and the remote mountain location.

The village has clear ideas of traditional gender roles. Xuemei's "husband" Degui must prove his masculinity by the act of rape and, when he falters, his parents aid him by literally holding Xuemei down. The rape is violent as Xuemei screams as the three adults hold her and strip her mercilessly. The only care that Degui shows is for his mother when Xuemei manages to kick her when she is attempting to remove Xuemei's underwear. The rape shear horror of the rape is enhanced via the films

complete removal of any suggestion that Degui has any right to Xuemei's person. The opening narrative made it clear that she has was deceived and while the family continue to refer to her as 'bride', the audience knows that this is nothing more than the excuse the community needs to abuse women in the name of procreation. The uneven power relations are made clear as after the rape the film cuts from Degui and his father having a celebratory drink to the beaten and naked Xuemei hidden in the corner of the squalid room in which she is sequestered.

For Zhang Zhen, Chinese Cinema has been the key witness to the trauma of Chinese economic and social transformations (zhuanxing). For Zhang, we see the movement as "a blatant form of capitalism that voraciously mixes the rawness of industrial capitalism and the slickness of the computer-age post-industrialism thriving alongside the residues of socialism" (2006:5). The interplay between capitalism, communist and local traditions make uneasy bedfellows. The process of bride kidnap is not couched in terms of the traditional (as we shall see in Pure Coolness) but in terms of market economy. As the mother says after "we spend so much money on you, I hope you can repay us by being a good wife". For the family, Xuemei is nothing more than an item they have bought and now wish to ensure its "proper usage". When she tries to escape, the family chain her up like a dog. They have taken her identity card and any evidence of the fake job she was offered, leaving her stranded with the family who believes they own her. The constant narrative about the kidnapped girls is that they have been bought and paid for and therefore need to get on the task at hand - serving their new families and bearing children, specifically sons.

Money and the market economy is a key player in the film. In one of her escape attempts, Xuemei manages to run several miles and manages to make it to the main road, but the one car she flags down refuses to give her a lift unless she pays. On

her return to the village, she is publically beaten and then dumped unconscious back into her cell. When Xuemei slits her wrists, they take her to a hospital, but money once again plays a vital role. The first thing her husband says when he goes to as the village teacher for help is 'lend me money; she has slit her wrists'. The ability to access money is the line between life and death as the doctor refuses to treat her until she has is paid.

In his analysis of the dystopian nature of late modernity and globalisation, Zygmunt Bauman notes how the wholly rational invisible hand of transnational capitalism does little to alleviate the suffering of "modernity's other" who are exploited, displaced, or simply abandoned in its wake (2004). Inside Blind Mountain, it is both the girls and the villagers who suffer from this fate. The villagers are struggling to engage with a market economy and wider culture that they don't understand. The girls are the physical manifestation of what Bauman labels irrational side effects or suffering (2004, 2011). Bauman notes that the system of exchange will always have a positive and negative and in Blind Mountain we see the postsocialist Chinese moment has, despite clearly benefiting some (who we don't see on screen), resulted in the sexual slavery of a group of young women in the name of consumer progress. The village believes they have managed to master the market economy but with fairly tragic consequences for all concerned.

In narrative terms, the film reinforces this ambivalence when Xuemei cuts her hair, an act that both confirms her abuse as she has lost her girlish innocence but also signals a resistance and also harkens back to early communist days when women cut their hair short as reflective of their commitment to the communist cause. She survives her suicide attempt and returns to the village where a group of other kidnapped brides try to comfort her by telling her to resign herself to her fate. As the

other kidnapped bride, Chen notes, "it’s easy to die, living is hard. Just think of your parents. You owe it to them to keep on living”. Xuemei takes this to heart and begins to eat again but, rather than offer this as a sign of acquiescence, in the next scene we see her cutting her long hair. Over the decades since the revolution, hair lengths have returned as part of a drive towards modernisation that sees a demand for a more feminine beauty. Xuemei's removal of her hair and the harsh and un-stylized cut she is left with symbolises the return to the past and the prison-like conditions that the village has enforced upon her. She removes any outward symbol of her status as a modern desirably educated female and refuses to adapt to her new surroundings. Each time she tries to escape, she is brought back to harsher beatings and abuse. The village is cut off by actual geography and the close-knit community's culturally isolation from the wider Chinese state. The postman monitors all the post from the village ensuring that no news of the women can reach the outside world. The village is forwarned when party officials visit, and all the kidnapped women are hidden away to prevent the village’s “reputation been ruined”. Even when officials do appear they are not prepared to intervene. When government officials do come to the family home (to ask for some unpaid tax on some pigs) Xuemei naturally assumes they will help her, but when she begs for help, they coldly state, "they don't handle family issues" and advise her husband to treat her with a heavier hand. We learn another kidnapped women had managed to contact the local police about her predicament but the police just returned her to her husband and the subsequent beating has left her permanently disfigured.

In formal terms, the film contrasts internal and external shots. The undoubtedly beautiful setting is never given a sense of nostalgia or the bucolic via the intercutting utilised. After each rape scene, after every beating, we go to the outside

space, but the local is marred by what we know is taking place in the small dark houses (this is in direct opposition to Pure Coolness that I will discuss in the next section). Village life has little to do with idyllic visions of the rustic pastoral. The local schoolteacher brings books for Xuemei, but we learn he only ever went to high school since he failed the last exam and now operates as the village's underqualified and sub-par teacher. He notes that he is a teacher who has never even seen a train. He asks Xuemei how she could have fallen for the lies of the trafficker and she says that after her graduation she wanted to earn money to help her parents with their debts and her brother's tuition fees. Xuemei, therefore, becomes the physical embodiment of direct criticism of the wider cultural shifts that now sees young college graduates forced to seek work all over China as part of the new globalised economy.

We see Xuemei visibly age in the harsh climate of the village as her skin roughens and her lips crack. She prostitutes herself to the local shop-owner for a paltry sum of money and tries to escape once more. She makes it as far as the nearest town, but she is captured at the local bus station and once again beaten and return to the village. When she discovers that despite all the violence she is pregnant her horror is visible as she beats at her stomach in despair. The role that pregnancy plays is key. The female body as the carrier of the new male generation supersedes all her rights as an individual. Her own body rebels against her, and she becomes what Jennifer Suchland has called the postsocialist abject. Writing on Lilja 4-Ever (Moodysson, 2002), Suchland comments that in the moment of the postsocialist abject, "the biological father is missing and the father/state figure is absent…. It is a western mythologising of Soviet failure: the father is bankrupt, the mother is a whore, and the child is a victim" (2013: 372).

The postsocialist abject is produced in the film through the lives of the captive women. They are beaten, abused and abandoned by the very state that should protect them. The State resoundingly refuses to aid the girls on multiple levels. The first is creating a situation where they are pressured into finding forms of income to cover debt and family obligation and the second via the various government representatives ignoring the women's pleas for help. Although she is not forced into mainstream prostitution like the title character in Lilja 4-Ever, Xuemei is forced into soft-touch prostitution, thus becoming the whore whom Suchland references. The role of the parental is also similarly abject. The father and mother are the ones who buy her for their son and then literally help their son rape her. In one scene the village finds a drowned girl baby, a direct reference to the murky history of infanticide that has led to the dearth of women and girls in the small community. The community has systematically murdered girls over the generations and then, once the destruction of this tradition becomes clear, make a misguided and unfortunate foray into the common market by buying women. At the end of the film, Xuemei's son is likely to grow up motherless (and fatherless in the international version) in a small, uneducated, poverty-stricken community. This ending directly illustrates the ever-widening gap in China between the rural and the urban economy and the increasing cultural divide that is developing as a result.

This radical divide is most clearly illustrated in the films ending. Eventually, via a young schoolboy, she has befriended, Xuemei's father is contacted and arrives to rescue her but he and the policeman accompanying him, are outnumbered by the angry villagers. The shear gap between the modern Chinese state and the village becomes apparent via clothing, language and attitude. The policemen attempt to get the villagers to understand the situation from Xuemei's point of view, but the villagers

react angrily to the notion that buying and selling wives is wrong. Amanda Weiss makes the important link between the past and the present in the final scene. She notes that

> “The villagers become the revolutionary peasant masses, their shouts mimicking the communal hysteria of an earlier era. However, the rhetoric they use is that of capitalism—purchases, receipts, refunds…. The villagers invoke collective socialist might and capitalist logic at random—their ideological consistency hopelessly flawed”(2013:3)

The films’ ending is a tragic one as the policemen abandon Xuemei and her father when they realise that they can’t fight all the villagers. Xuemei ultimately kills her husband with a cleaver after he attacks her father and we are left uncertain of her eventual fate as the film ends on her face as the credits roll. However, the Chinese version has a very different ending with Xuemei, and the other captive women rescued (although Xuemei is forced to leave her son behind). The film still ends on Xuemei's face, but this time she is staring at her vanishing son from the truck window as she leaves behind the village life.

The international version is deliberately ambiguous as we are left wondering about not only the fate of Xuemei but the whole system that has created such a complex and tragic situation. This is a case of what Berry calls a socialist tragedy “something bad that cannot be put right occurs after the 1949 establishment of the People’s Republic and can be attributed to the policies and programs of the party and state”(2008:140). The state is initially held responsible for this tragedy. Not only in the way Xuemei and the other women and girls are treated by the officials but also in the way the village has been removed from the mainstream narratives to create its

own crooked alternative mode of existence. While in the Chinese version, tragedy is present as the women leave their children; the state has been shown to be an active player in attempting to re-establish the status quo and to enforce mainstream laws and moralities. However, the departure of the young women has left the village without valuable and much-needed "resources", and thus, the whole process of restocking the wives will doubtless begin again. The bodies of the girls have become the living embodiment of the process of past, present and future in modern China and returning to Suchland, she comments that the "Postsocialism cannot generate new meaning, but can be used repeatedly as a reminder of failure and someone else's triumph" (2013:396). In the moment of the postsocialist abject, we can only see a closed circuit of depression and abuse with the girl as the central victim of this process.

Bride Kidnap and postsocialist nostalgia in Pure Coolness

I will now turn to a film with a very different approach to the same topic.
Boz Salkyn/Pure Coolness (2007) is the second feature film from Kyrgyz director Ernest Abdyjaparov. He rose to fame with the award-winning Saratan (2004), a comic-drama that dealt with the realities and complexities of post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. Abdyjaparov's next feature would engage with one of Kyrgyzstan's most problematic and perhaps notorious customs: bride kidnapping. The premise of the film is simple: Asema a city girl who has grown tired of the urban life goes to her boyfriend Murat's village to meet his family. At a party that evening Asema learns that a poor local girl called Anara, is about to be kidnapped and married to the shepherd boy Sagyn and that Murat's ex-girlfriend Burma still has strong feelings for him. Over the next few hours Murat embarks on an affair with Burma and, in a case of mistaken identity,

Asema is kidnapped to be the bride of Sagyn instead of the proposed Anara. Although she resists for a few hours, she finally accepts Sagyn as her husband and rejects Murat when he comes to rescue her. The second half of the film follows the young couple as they move to a remote yurt in the countryside to guard Sagyn's sheep and Asema's gradual acceptance and happiness in her new surroundings and the growth of love for her young husband.

The film's whole approach to postsocialist modernity can be summed up in the opening exchange between her parents. When her mother asks her father why he uses an old typewriter rather than his daughter's new laptop he comments 'there could be a virus in it'. This vision of the western world as a 'virus' is heightened when Asema suddenly arrives at her family home with the news she has quit her job at the bank and is intending to visit her boyfriend Murat's village. She states she is sick of 'debts and credits', the symbols of the market economy that Kyrgyzstan now is. She does however not believe her mother's warnings that village customs are not the same as in the city. Asema rejects her mother's fears, and Murat also states that the old ways are no longer relevant to the modern young couple. He rejects bride stealing as a custom and says he just wants Asema to see his local village.

The tensions between urban and rural are quickly highlighted when Murat's mother rushes to assure Asema that they are the most cultivated people in the village - as she says they even eat meat with a knife and fork. The film builds upon a set of binaries that raises a series of problems in seeking the film text as a representation of contemporary Kyrgyz life. The beauty of the rural environment is compared to the compact and restrictive boundaries of the city space of Bishkek. Murat's native village in the region of the Issyk-kul Lake operates as space of the in-between that allows Asame to move from the urban concrete of Bishkek to the remote yurt where she will

find happiness and fulfilment. Murat's family are initially horrified when he arrives with Asame and raise the issue that she will judge them for their "rural" behaviour. Murat and Asama have plans to marry the following year, and she is amused rather than frightened by his family's attempts to marry them within a few hours of entering the village. Asame's belief that there is no risk of her being kidnapped as a modern and educated young woman initially seems to hold true as Murat quickly berates his female family and takes Asame to meet some friends for a drink on the lakeside beach. For Birgit Beaumers, this new millennial focus on a return to the traditional is a key marker of contemporary Kyrgyz cinema. This is a generation who cannot remember the transition from the Soviet era, so for them, the postsocialism is the landscape that has always surrounded them. Films such as Pure Coolness, The Chimp (Aktan Arum Kubat: 2001), The Adopted Son (Adbykalykov, 1998), The Shepard (Yasup Razykov 2005) function to laud the teenager as the site where tradition is returned to and exalted. As she comments, "Central Asian teenagers have been exposed to a series of binaries they 'embody': Soviet and ethnic, urban and rural, past and present" (2013: 193).

The rural space fulfils a vital function in Pure Coolness. It offers both a space of identity re-negotiation as well as confirmation. The beach as a liminal space has been well documented in a variety of contexts, and the beach here becomes a site of contact, flux and shift (Handyside 2014). Murat will re-encounter the ex-girlfriend he abandoned to move to the city, and it is here that Asame will meet her future husband, the shy and reticent Sagyn. For Sagyn, the beach becomes the site where the final arrangements for the kidnap of his future wife are made.

For Asema the village and the surrounding countryside more broadly will eventually function as a coming of age space. The superficial urban teenager will

become a mature adult married woman. After her marriage, when Asame travels to her new home high up in the hills, she wonders to the edge of the mountainside to look over the fields and hills. Gazing at the view, she closes her eyes, and for the first time we see her breath deeply and smile. The rare non-diegetic music becomes a calming reflection of the inner peace we see Asame begin to feel in her new home. The film clearly constructs that for her, this is a return to the real - a return to the authentic moment. The difficulties and the disappointments of the postsocialist modern moment are visualised as opposite to the calm and peace of the traditional mountainside.

Her mother in law sees her reverie at the scenery and comments “You see my daughter, every stone, every blade of grass, even the water is blessed”. She continues this narrative by telling Asema that this land has belonged to her husband’s family for generations and this notion of inter-generational contact is a key element of the film. The various heirlooms, several centuries old, that she bequeaths to Asema, have been passed down the female generations and reflect a narrative older than the decades of Soviet command. This notion of passing on tradition is key in the presentation of bride kidnapping in Pure Coolness when compared to Blind Mountain. In Blind Mountain, bride kidnap is due to the market economy, while in Pure Coolness, tradition is the key element. Alu Katchu is presented as a very old localised tradition that has survived the Soviet era.

However, previous research on the practice of bride kidnapping, which has predominantly been based on ethnographic accounts and surveys, raises the point that perhaps this not such an established tradition after all. Kleinbach and Salimjanova suggest that non-consensual bride kidnapping “was not an accepted tradition or custom” but rather there is a connection between the Kyrgyz independence and the

rise in (non-) consensual bride kidnapping also indicate that non- consensual bride-kidnapping has already started to rise during Soviet times, whereas "prior to the Soviet period non-consensual kidnapping was rare" (2007:230).

This ambivalence about whether this is, or is not a tradition, is perhaps a moot point as a large percentage of the contemporary population have embraced this as a symbol of a pre-Russian past that is coming back into vogue despite the serious infringements of female human rights it allows. This is an invention of tradition that thus allows the hiding of female abuse inside the dialogues of a return to a prelapsarian idyll – in short as a restoration of the natural order as a way to resist globalisation – in the same way, that other traditions were used as a method of resistance in Soviet times. The kidnapped bride is therefore simultaneously traditionally feminine (via ideas of acquiescent, ownership, fecundity etc.) and also ideally modern (resistant to globalisation and hence the personification of a new ideal of Kyrgyz nation building). Bride kidnap is illegal, and there have been numerous cases of women committing suicide as a result of the kidnap, rape and forced marriage. However, in a 2005 survey conducted among Kyrgyz women the majority of the respondents, when asked about the reasons for kidnapping a bride, stated, "it is a good traditional way to get a bride" (Kleinbach et al., 2005:197). Alu Katchu is therefore located in the crux between nationhood, history and ideology and in Pure Coolness, it is made clear that it is an old tradition that has seen many successful marriages take place as a result of it. All the women in the film constantly repeat, "we were all married this way", and *Pure Coolness'* runaway success with the local audience implies that it has touched a nerve.

We see in Pure Coolness a focus on the traditional culture and more specifically the land itself. Its location in the rural rather than the urban enhances this

notion of an older and more authentic Kyrgyz experience. Asame's relationship to the urban space of post-socialism is generally negative. She is unhappy and bored in her job, and her parents' flat is filmed from the outside looking in and the partitioning of the walls in the centre frame emphases the cell-like nature of the grey apartment structures that are found all over the former Soviet Bloc. The director seems to be saying postsocialist moment (as seen in the city if Bishkek), is unable to allow the growth and development that the young people require. In short, what they need to do is to return to the past in order to move towards the future. As the village elder states to Asama's parents when they go to visit them to tell them of her marriage, "More young people go to the city, and the land is left without care". The placement of Sagyn and Asame as the new caretakers of the land once again reinforced the desire for a backward trajectory rejecting the postsocialist development that sees the young move into the urban metropolises abandoning the older communities.

The postsocialist era is a containing global movement and has coincided with the decline of American hegemony and influence in many regions on the globe. This decline of American influences, simultaneous to the rejection of former Soviet modes of understanding, is manifested in Pure Coolness via gender relations. Just as the modern consumer lifestyle offered by the modernising west is rejected, so too is the older Soviet model of gender equality. Elena Gapova made some key distinctions between older soviet gender relations (that was based on the de-sexualisation of women in favour of the communist need) to the new focus of 'women's rights' in the postsocialist states that engages with "the rights of women as independent individuals, their representation, autonomy, independent subjectivity, and their rights to their bodies and sexuality". Women in the public political sphere in Russia, the nation around which Kyrgyzstan oscillated for so many decades, has been increasingly

defined by their physical and sexual selves rather than any other means. Speaking about some specific incidences inside Russia, Nadia Kaneva and Ilza Ibroshcheva note that "While [these politicians] claim to be celebrating their sexual liberation, post-socialist female politicians play into existing and pernicious media stereotypes, helping to reproduce and expand the sexualization of women's bodies into the political realm" (2014: 235). Pure Coolness and indeed Kyrgyz politics in the main, rejects this new mode of female nationhood in favour of traditional gender relations that still make a nod to the contemporary narrative of female rights. Roza Otunbayeva the former (and first) female Kyrgyz President was notable for her conservative dress code and 'traditional' values while at the same time shattering political glass ceilings. Pure Coolness attempts to balance this tension between female autonomy and independence by ensuring that the women are active and passionate members of the social structures. Pure Coolness seeks to present tradition as not a patriarchal autocracy but a system that works for the benefit of all.

It is Sagyn's mother and other allied female family members who organise the kidnapping. The female matriarchs manage all the familial relations and the male members passively (and it turns out incompetently) take orders. All the teenage girls who attend the party are aware that Anara is due to be kidnapped and none seek to warn her or dissuade the men. The film has a wide range of female roles. Both Sagyn and Asema's respective mothers are intelligent and articulate, Murat's younger sister Barchyn is cheeky, mischievous and watches all the events unfold with an anarchic delight. While Burma is critiqued for her active sexual lifestyle, she does succeed in winning Murat back via a well-timed pregnancy. In the world of the film, women are not shown as repressed or marginalised; rather we are shown a narrative that presents

women successfully organising both the lives of the individuals who reside in the village and the broader village cultural structures for the benefit of all.

Women who are unable to place themselves inside this social matrix are the ones the film holds up as figures of pity. Asema's opposite in this respect is the scholarly Anara. While Asema rejects the city as empty and meaningless, for Anara it (mistakenly in terms of the film) functions as the symbol of all she hopes for but can never achieve. Anara in many ways is the most complicated character in the film. Determined to study Russian at university (a nod to the Soviet era), whilte demanding to know whether Sagyn loves her or just wants someone to take care of his sheep (a nod to 'modern' notion of love), she is left isolated. She is clumsy and awkward and set apart from the other local teenagers in all the social events of the film. In the one date, we see Sagyn and Anara have, she knocks hot tea into his lap as proof of her poor potential skills as a wife. It is her lamb that is killed by a wolf that visits Sagyn and Asema's homestead, and Sagyn worldlessly leaves the animal at her feet - a bloody sacrifice that reflects her own cultural position. Asema's replacement of her in Sagyn's life has left her nothing. Her refusal to 'embrace her fate' has left her alone without any financial, emotional or cultural support.

This idea of fate is common between both Pure Coolness and Blind Mountain. The idea that the embrace of your fate will result in potential marital success is offered up as a reason to be happy about the kidnap in both films. While in Pure Coolness marital happiness and love is shown as the outcome, Blind Mountain has numerous characters comment that life is less hard on you if you just accept the hand that fate has dealt you. What both films hold is that the female is key to the maintenance and growth of the family unit and the wide rural cultural sphere. In Pure Coolness, the socially approved and supported marital traditions that Sagyn and

Asema enter into are highlighted as superior to illicit sexual desire (Murat and Burma). Sex operates not as a sign of love but as further illustration of the tensions between the traditional lifestyle and the more modern approach to courtship. Murat, as the passionate modern lover is ultimately shown to be lacking. Burma's easy seduction of him leads him down a path where he is forced to marry her despite his reservations. Sagyn, although inarticulate compared to Murat, is shown as practical, kind and thoughtful. On their wedding night, he cuts his arm to drip blood on the sheets to prevent any fear in Asema that he will force his marital rights and when they finally couple is it a highly un-erotic event that seals a successful marriage rather than supports the idea of romantic love. For Pure Coolness, romance and sex are modern and westernised inventions that, when compared to the traditional marriage structures the film supports are seen as lacking. The film fully supports the eradication of the need for erotic frantic modern love. As Sagyn sings to Asema:

> Pure coolness
>
> Fir trees rising from the rocks in the mist
>
> Silence is everywhere
>
> But my heart is full of happiness
>
> Thy sky has sent me the girl of my dreams

Conclusion

The kidnapped bride is a figure who oscillates between objectification and desire; between abuse and victimhood. The globally circulating images of the kidnapped woman take place at the moment that sees marriage culture becoming a key element in the modern post-feminist discourses. The continuing instance of the desirability of marriage for the modern woman presents a 'double entanglement' of a 'neo-

conservative return to 'traditional values' being placed in direct conflict with a dominant narrative of liberalisation and freedom". While outside the category of 'post-feminist' for various obvious cultural, historical and political reasons, we can see a similar debate taking place with the presentation of the kidnapped bride in both Chinese and Kyrgyz cinema. The kidnapped girls are figures that vicariously exalt a return to traditional values (as seen in Pure Coolness) while operating as their greatest victims (as seen in Blind Mountain). The cinematic kidnapped bride in both films and the wider cultural milieu from which both films emerge, acts as a figure who simultaneously represents a clear and coherent vision of a localised space (in this case China and Kyrgyzstan but similar argument can be made for films emerging from nations such as Georgia, Nigeria and South Korea on this topic), whilst operating as an indicative sign of cultural difference and the transmission of ideas of gender and modernity between moments in national development. The bride, therefore, shows how postsocialist societies negotiate their relationship to their past and tradition through the female.

While the Chinese women are cast as the postsocialist abject due to the complex double entanglement of marketisation and the legacy of the interplay between the Socialist one-child policies the Confucian desire for a male heir. For Pure Coolness, we see a return to a perceived 'tradition' of kidnap as a way to reconnect to a sense of nationhood that exists outside of postsocialist abjection. Arguably, therefore, both films attempt to make the bride a figure who enables local communities to debate their abject status, despite the very abuse and harm the practice represents. In conclusion, the interplay and tensions between ideals of both the urban and the rural, the modern and the traditional, past and future are brought together in the malleable cultural figure of the bride.

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