Strange Love is in the Air

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In 1939, amidst the full-scale war between China and Japan, the Nationalist government dispatched a film crew, led by director Zheng Junli, to Qinghai province as part of a state initiative aimed at mobilizing the film industry for China's war effort. Although the documentary propaganda film "Long Live the Nation" (1941) that emerged from this endeavor has faded into obscurity, it is the folksong songwriter Wang Luobin, who travelled with the team, that is well-known today.

During the filming in the area locally known as Jinyintan, which literally means "treasure beach" by Qinghai Lake, Wang became enamored with a young local Tibetan girl. The brief encounter inspired him to write a love song for her. The song, based on a Kazakh folk melody and sung in Mandarin, has become as a symbol of Qinghai's minority cultures or minority cultures in western China in general.

<table>
<tr><td>In That Faraway Land

In that faraway land,
there is a pretty girl,
whenever people pass her tent,
they keep glancing back
her pink, smiling face
is like the red sun
her lively striking eyes
are like the enchanting moon in the evening

I want to cast aside belongings
and herd sheep with her
to see that pink smiling face of hers everyday
and that beautiful gold-trimmed clothing
I want to be a lamb
following at her side
I want her to take that thin leather whip
and keep lightly striking my body</td><td>在那遥远的地方

在那遥远的地方
有位好姑娘
人们走过她的帐篷
都要回头留恋的张望
她那粉红的小脸好象红太阳
她那活泼动人的眼睛
好象晚上明媚的月亮

我愿抛弃那财产跟她去放羊
每天看着那粉红的小脸
和那美丽金边的衣裳
我愿做一只小羊跟在她身旁
我愿她拿着细细的皮鞭
不断轻轻打在我身上那遥远的地方</td></tr>
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Despite the success of “In That Faraway Land,” especially in the postsocialist era when nationalism and national unity have emerged as the modus operandi of the party-state, it is noteworthy that the Jinyintan area disappeared quietly from the map in the immediate decades following the founding of the People’s Republic, as China faced another national emergency. In particular, the nuclear threats from the US during the Korean War convinced China’s leadership to reverse their anti-nuclear stance, and to receive technical assistance, from uranium mining to nuclear physics, from the Soviet Union to pursue its own nuclear weapons. The assistance from the Soviet Union did not last, however. By the late 1950s, due to growing ideological and geopolitical divisions between the two countries, the Soviet Union withdrew all its support, including its scientists and engineers.

Facing imminent threats from two nuclear superpowers, China forged ahead with its ambition to join the nuclear arms race, and it did so at a pace that surprised the world. In 1958, a secret atomic city internally referred to as Plant 221 was constructed in the Jinyintan area. While officials often characterized the region as “virgin land” and “nameless,” thousands of native households, including those from the communities depicted in Wang's song and Zheng's documentary film nearly two decades ago, were evicted. Equivalent to the US’s Los Alamos or the Soviet Union’s Semipalatinsk-21, Plant 221 quickly became one of China’s most secretive and restricted sites. In total, there were nearly a dozen such secret cities tasked with uranium extraction and enrichment, bomb research and development, and final testing located in southern and northwestern China. This chain of atomic cities, with their code designations and non-existent presence on maps, was pivotal to China’s nuclear weapons development during the height of Cold War mobilization when Chinese leaders believed that the nation was under nuclear existential threats from the two superpowers.

Today, decades after its decommissioning, Plant 221 is no longer shrouded in secrecy. Instead, much like many other former secret Chinese atomic cities, the remnants of its atomic past have been rebranded as industrial heritage for what is known as “red tourism,” even though the site could also be seen as part of the growing trend of dark tourism associated with contaminated and desolate places such as the exclusion zones around Chernobyl and Fukushima. The decommissioning of Plant 221 began in 1987. In 1993, the desolate city has acquired a new name, Xihaizhen, but it is better known as Yuanzicheng, the “Atomic City,” as it proudly presents itself in promotional materials. In the heart of the proving ground where bomb tests were conducted, there exists a massive granite monument built as a tribute to the renowned Han Chinese scientists who had contributed to the development of China’s nuclear weapons program. These oversized and dignified-looking figures are accompanied by smaller dancing Tibetan and Mongolian figures, symbolizing their embrace and welcome to the Han sellers most from cities of China’s industrial coast. Together, the narrative suggests, they transformed this area of the alpine steppe into a research and development center and a military proving ground.

Such displays of Han superiority and appropriation of local minorities is reminiscent of Wang Luobin's masochistic love song. After all, fate had it that Jinyintan was called upon to serve in national emergencies twice: first as a filming location for a wartime patriotic documentary film, and then as a site of nuclear weapons development. The two episodes, occurring decades apart, were perhaps not at all a coincidence. As the nation's hinterland, the region's strategic value lies in its distance from the metropolitan areas that were vulnerable to foreign attacks. As well, underneath the Han Chinese celebration of the region's wildness, natural beauty, and happy minorities, the Qinghai grassland has historically served as a site for resources extraction, including livestock herding to mining. The male, Han-centric, and patriotic views embedded in Wang's song certainly align well with that of the cultural politics of socialist and postsocialist China. As a result, "In That Faraway Land" is now firmly associated with the decommissioned Plant 221. The museum dedicated to Wang Luobin's music, in particular, stands out as one of the main tourist attractions in the newly branded Atomic City. Whereas the slogan "Where the Chinese nation stands tall" is inscribed in the giant archway erected at the entrance to the city," throughout the city, there are expressions saying that "In that faraway land, the Chinese nation stands tall."

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In a way, it's not surprising that Wang's masochistic erotic fantasy has been incorporated into the historical memory of China's nuclear weapons project. After all, to the extent that warfare serves as an expression of male aggression, nuclear weaponry represents the zenith of this manifestation of masculinity. Nowhere is this more aptly captured than in Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), which mocks how male chauvinism and racism push the world over the edge and trigger a nuclear holocaust. Released just two years after the Cuban Missile Crisis, *Dr. Strangelove* is a political satire that critiques the absurdities and perils of nuclear arms race. In the film, which is filled with sexual innuendos and masculine pride, love functioned differently from the kind of love themes that are commonly found in apocalyptic stories saturated in our contemporary culture. In many end-of-the-world stories, for example, love is frequently presented as having the capacity to compensate, resist, and transcend the end times.[1] True love, more than romance, especially aspires to make the final moment infinite, affirming the idea of humanity, even though the popularity and prevalence of these end-times stories is potentially a sign of our collective incapacity to imagine otherwise. (Fisher 2009: 2)

Kubrick's Cold War farce, which was made long before the public became desensitized by the avalanche of apocalyptic

[1] Some examples include McKellar, Don. (Director). 1998. *Last Night*. Lionsgate Films and Scafaria, Lorene. (Director). (2012). *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World*. Mandate Pictures. Ritter, Josh. (2015). The Temptation of Adam. On *Sermon on the Rocks*. Pytheas Recordings.

spectacles, does not use the trope of love to redeem its protagonists and bring comfort to its audience. Instead, love, or more precisely, loving the bomb, is fueled by the terrifying male ego and masculine military violence. The futurity imagined in the film, too, is grim and dreadful. The world will soon be annihilated by an all-out nuclear war between the US and the Soviet Union with the surviving population living in the world's deepest mineshafts. To repopulate their respective nation, male scientists, military officers, and politicians fantasize and propose a breeding program of ten women to each man as survivors wait for the radioactive earth surface to dissipate its half-life. In short, the two superpowers persist in their bellicosity and arms struggle, quite literally, in hell—in the form of a mineshaft race—each ensuring that there is no "mineshaft gap" with other. Therefore, far from overcoming the present, the post-apocalyptic world projected by *Dr. Strangelove* is promised to be more of the same, if not worse.

Chinese atomic love stories are manifestations of state propaganda. They were integral to China's affective mobilization, preparing for the possibility of total war, including a nuclear conflict

Significantly, in less than a year after *Dr. Strangelove* was released, China too successfully detonated its first atomic bomb, further complicating and heightening the global nuclear arms race. With its own perceived existential threats from the two superpowers, China's nuclear weapons development had moved in a pace that surprised the world. And, in official narratives as well as in private memories, the rapid advancement of China's nuclear project also involved its own kind of strange love stories, one that highlights the sacrifice of relationships, families, and intimacies in exchange for the security of the nation. The following are examples of love tales set in China's atomic secret cities. However, these narratives neither functioned as political critiques of the nuclear arms race nor served as commodities for consumers to navigate their anxieties in the nuclear age. Instead, Chinese atomic love stories are manifestations of state propaganda. They were integral to China's affective mobilization, preparing for the possibility of total war, including a nuclear conflict. Through these stories, ideas of secrecy, sacrifice, and national security were constituted at the height of China's Cold War efforts.

Love at the edge of the world

Among the many stories of love and intimacy associated with China's entry into the nuclear arms race, one stands out as the most frequently cited to the point of becoming a cliché. In the spring of 1959, when the construction of the nuclear test base codenamed Base 21, also known as Malan, had just begun, a young engineer received a secret transfer order to go to Lop Nur for research on testing technology. Due to the need for secrecy, she simply told her husband that it was a long business trip. More than half a year later, amid the endless desert, she and her husband unexpectedly crossed paths under a tree by a river inside the base. It turned out that her husband had received a secret transfer order just like her and was assigned to the same special unit, even though they belonged to different

departments.

When he heard this story, General Zhang Aiping, the top commander of China's nuclear weapons project and a lover of poetry, was so moved that he commented on it by invoking a seventh-century poem: "[They were] close neighbors, but as distant from each other as if they were at the edge of the world." Reportedly, he visited the tree with tears in his eyes, named it "the couple tree," and declared it a monument. (Liang 2019: 71)

That was just one version of the story, however. There are other reverberations that do not even involve a tree. In one alternate version, a young couple expressed their feelings through love letters. It took an eternity for those letters to reach each other because they had to be routed through Beijing in order to be cleared by censors, even though their workplaces were separated by just a wall. They felt as if they were at the end of the world, so it came as a delightful surprise when they saw each other at the celebration party for the successful atomic bombing.

Then there is yet another story that follows the same narrative structure but set in a different secret atomic city. According to this version, a newly wedded couple worked in different units of Plant 221. To maintain secrecy, they never discussed their work with each other, and they only reunited in Beijing for ten days every year. It wasn't until the successful detonation of the atomic bomb that they discovered that the other person had always been close by during the celebration banquet.

In fact, similar stories can be found in nearly all Chinese atomic cities, and many of them seem to involve a surprise and joyful reunion under a tree, or alternatively, in a celebration party after the success of a nuclear detonation. These stories have become so prevalent that there are now competing claims of the same story among the various former atomic cities, primarily due to tourism competition. Despite the proliferation of these stories—whether sanctioned by authorities or merely vernacular reverberations—it remains unclear who the actual couple was or if the tree even existed. Every inquiry into the matter has led to competing stories about that story—tales of individuals who claim to have worked with or interviewed at least one member of the couple. Yet, strangely, no one seems to remember their names or their work units. (Peng 2022) Nonetheless, in 2008, Xihaizhen, the most well-known Chinese atomic city, officially claimed the story by designating an old elm tree in the nearby desert as the official “couple tree.” A small monument was also erected, asserting that it was under this giant tree where the now deceased couple, Wang Ruzhi and Zhang Xianglin, met. However, an investigative journalist, based on interviews with Wang's and Zhang's co-workers and the couple's son, concluded that while Wang had indeed once worked as a member of the engineering corps inside the test site, her husband Zhang, a soldier in a tank division, had never been to the base. In short, Wang and Zhang were not the couple depicted in the story. Regardless, legends about the couple and the "couple tree" have continued to gain popularity on Chinese social media in recent years.

Radioactive love

In the written and oral accounts of China's first nuclear tests, certain threads are particularly common. Among them are narratives of personnel's unwavering commitment to risk their personal safety to secure the most accurate readings from equipment both within and around the ground zero shortly after the detonation. These daring and unauthorized actions often entailed entering the fallout zone before receiving approval or lingering inside the zone beyond the allowed time, leading to radiation exposure exceeding the permissible dosage limits.

One such incident occurred in the afternoon of December 28, 1966, shortly after the morning detonation approximately 250 kilometers south of Urumqi. An officer from the political division of the Propaganda Department, identified by the surname Pan, decided that he wanted to photograph the ground zero himself. Since he was not part of the specialized military brigade tasked with documenting the detonation and its aftermath, he knew it would be challenging for him to obtain permission to enter the restricted zone. Consequently, he instructed his driver, Xiaozhuang, to accelerate their jeep through the checkpoint at high speed. Several solders at the checkpoint tried to pursue them, but the pursuing vehicle eventually gave up at the boundary of the high contaminated area. Around two hours later, Pan and Xiaozhuang found themselves in a precarious condition as they arrived at the decontamination station. Their complexion had paled, and they exhibited symptoms of vomiting and speech difficulties.

Pan did not understand that radiation near the ground zero would render his film useless in the first place. In fact, the film in his camera would have exposed due to radiation. Pan and Xiaozhuang were eventually transported to the hospital at Base 21 from the field hospital. Since they were not supposed to enter the high contamination zone, they had no dosimeter with them. It was also confirmed that the film in Pan's camera was did not capture any image due to radiation exposure. Although doctors were initially uncertain about saving Pan and Xiaozhuang due to the nearly lethal exposure they had endured, both of them ultimately survived after intensive treatments. However, given the severity of their radiation exposure, they had to remain in the hospital as long-term residents for observation and further research. Pan reportedly felt guilty for involving Xiaozhuang in this ordeal, causing him permanent harm. He subsequently arranged for Xiaozhuang to marry his niece. Pan himself also found love and got married. A few years later, both of them had babies, and no abnormalities were detected in the newborns. Since one of the purposes of this particular test was to advance the understanding of the destructive effects of atomic bombs on equipment and organisms, Pan and Xiaozhuang, as well as their children, effectively became lasting subjects of study, contributing to the field of radiation sickness and medica research (Wang 2019).

Atom and Love

Released in 1980, *Atom and Love* is a tale of quad love involving four main characters: He Ziyuan, Ye Jieshan, Shi Mo,

and Xiao Yuping (Li, Weixin et al., 1980). Told in a reminiscent style from the late 1970s, the story is set in a secret atomic city responsible for the research and development of nuclear weapons in the mid-1960s and the late 1970s (Figure 1). During these periods, the protagonists were in their twenties and now in their middle age respectively. It explores how these individuals, once men and women, navigated the often-incompatible demands of nuclear work and love.

Figure 1: “Atom and Love” cover (Li *et al* 1980).

The screenplay is considered a classic and has even been adapted into a comic strip. He Ziyuan is a devoted and selfless nuclear scientist who spends most of his time conducting experiments in the laboratory and on the testing ground. Xiao Yuping, a doctor at the hospital, was once He Ziyuan's fiancée. Ye Jieshan, Xiao's cousin and a scientist herself, secretly harbored feelings for He Ziyuan. Meanwhile, Shi Mo, a fellow scientist, was interested in Xiao Yuping. In 1964, immediately after the successful detonation of China's first nuclear bomb, several dozen young men and women at the base were planning to get married as part of the celebration. He Ziyuan and Xiao Yuping were also supposed to get married on that day, but He Ziyuan decided to rush to the laboratory to deal with an accident involving radioactive material. He left Xiao Yuping a note explaining his urgent departure, but the note was taken away by Shi Mo. Angered by He Ziyuan's unexplained absence, Xiao Yuping eventually married Shi Mo. Toward the end of the story, as He Ziyuan was nearing the end of his life due to radiation-induced cancer, Ye Jieshan, who had come to the secret city from Beijing, where she had been working for the past decade, visited the hospital to see He Ziyuan one final time. The He Ziyuan before her was the same devoted and selfless individual. Recognizing that his days were numbered, he refused medical treatment and persisted in his work at the laboratory. Before heading to the laboratory, He Ziyuan asked Ye Jieshan to convey his enduring love for Xiao Yuping. Ye Jieshan promised to deliver the message to her cousin, even though she still secretly harbored strong feelings for him.

Atom and Love, written by the Art and Cultural Troupe of the People’s Liberation Army’s Political Department, aims to capture the tension between life and work in China’s secret atomic cities. If love and desire are unavoidable even in the time of national emergency, these characters certainly demonstrate different responses to them. For Shi Mo, he tries to

possess love by any means necessary, including betraying his co-workers. For Xiao Yuping, love occupies the highest priority. For He Ziyuan and Ye Jieshan, love is an unwavering commitment. But for He Ziyuan, especially, love is only secondary. He devoted his knowledge, youth, and life to the nuclear program, ultimately sacrificing everything, including his love for Xiao Yuping and his own life in exchange for the nation's security.

Strang love is in the air

It is often assumed that nuclear warfare entails the total annihilation of the world and humanity altogether. Nevertheless, nuclear bombs, conceived as weapons of mass destruction during the era of total industrialized warfare, are designed with the explicit intent to annihilate the targeted nations, with minimal discrimination between their military targets and civilians. At the core of this genocidal technology lies the dehumanization and racialization of enemy populations, condemning them to an unrelenting descent into death. Therefore, if biopolitics is the sovereign's authority over the safeguarding and (re)production of life, and that necropolitics is the sovereign's power of controlling and eradicating life, then nuclear weaponry is at once biopolitical and necropolitical. (Mbembe 2003) In this respect, the idea of nuclear deterrence, let alone the actual use of the bomb, is the nuclear sovereign state's assertion of its preparedness of eradicating the Other in the name of national security.

The structure of war, in other words, is built on the dichotomy between "us" and "them," or what could be characterized as the grievable versus the ungrievable. A dehumanized and ungrievable life, according to Butler, is one that is perceived as having no value. Its demise therefore requires no mourning. (Butler 2010: 15) Yet, as many studies have observed, national sacrifice zones are exceptional spaces where residents are generally regarded as equally disposable for the sake of national security and development. These especially include vulnerable and forgotten residents—often ethnic minorities, indigenous peoples, and the working poor—who are subjected to the insidious effects of "slow violence" resulting from the environmental and economic destruction wrought by the operations and legacies of the military and industrial complex. (Nixon 2011) But what about those workers who are constantly being foregrounded and celebrated as role models?

There were also countless stories of young men (and occasionally women) assigned to remote secret cities who were forced to break up with their lovers residing in metropolitan centers. Moreover, for every tale of young couples reuniting or getting married, there were countless other stories in which they had failed to find their mates because the workforce in atomic cities was predominantly male. In fact, that was one of the main complaints about life in these exclusion zones. Then, along with these stories of sacrifice, there are stories of couples reuniting by chance encounters or in celebration parties. As well, there are recurring accounts of young couples getting married in group wedding ceremonies after a successful detonation. One way or another, the fulfillment of love and the success of bomb testing are intricately bound in these narratives.

But even if the social reproduction in biopolitical terms was possible and celebrated in these closed cities, the stories that occupied a higher ethical ground were always about those who sacrificed their love lives, families, and indeed, their lives altogether. In essence, biopolitics, including hazard control, healthcare, and marriage, merely provided the backdrop for everyday life in the national sacrifice zone. Death, on the contrary, is the ultimate calling in these exceptional spaces. Thus, in these stories, even though all lives are presented as worth living and grievable, they are also subjected to the power of death and indeed worth dying. The atomic cities might have provided their residents with the best hospitals, cinemas, and other privileges, but these are always understood as an exchange for their unconditional and eventual sacrifice when needed. They too are subjugated to the same biopolitical and necropolitical dynamics.

Little wonder that so many of these atomic love stories set in China's nuclear sacrifice zones are so similar. Even with all the details and colors, tears and pain, joy and happiness, these tales are as abstract as they are real. Far from being dark humors, these stories are idealized narratives about role models, whose love and romance are heroically married to the bomb in the nation's nuclear consciousness. Of course, in Kubrick's masterpiece, *Dr. Strangelove*, Major Kong too sacrifices for his life for the nation as he rides the bomb to his own death, ending the world altogether with a big bang, in the most phallic way possible. It is in this sense, these atomic love tales tell us quite a lot about the logic of national nuclear sacrifice zones in China and elsewhere, as well as the logic of nuclear warfare in general.

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