The Woman Basketball Player No. 5, completed in 1957, made the director Xie famous. The film won the Silver Prize in the international film exhibition at the World Youth Festival of the same year, gathered good domestic box office, and received acclaims for the film crew as well. Yi Qun declares in an article published in the ninth issue of Chinese Cinema (Zhongguo Dianying): “This film gives people sufficient feelings of vividness and liveliness and a carefree, delightful viewing experience. This is not only due to the fresh subject matter and clear-cut theme but also the director’s fresh and concise artistic technique.”1

However, in three months, Xia Yan, who ranked at the top among Chinese filmmakers either politically or professionally, wrote an essay titled “Some Questions Generated by Woman Basketball Player No. 5” (Cong nülan wubao xiangqi de yixie wenti). In it he pointed out “a flaw of the film that is rather unnoticeable but grave in nature.”2 Although at the beginning and the end of the essay Xia Yan approved Woman Basketball Player No. 5, the flaw he pointed out, when we revisit it today, is likely to turn out to be the fundamental question for the cinema of the People’s Republic, especially when it also concerns visual representations of women.

Xia Yan believed that in Woman Basketball Player No. 5, it was impossible for the single mother Lin Jie to live in a fancy home with her daughter after leaving her bourgeois family. Thus he deemed it as...
an inappropriate setting design in the film. This inappropriate design is detrimental to the positive image of the character Lin Jie: how does she make a living? Although it is but a small detail, Xia Yan concludes solemnly, “I think it shows a tendency unduly promoted in film and theater; it is an ideological problem.” This inclination to “beautify life,” according to Xia Yan, should be reflected upon by artists and writers.3

Half a century later, the film critic Rao Shuguang challenged Xia Yan’s critique. Rao thinks that Lin Jie’s room in the film was not fancy enough to be considered as a “beautification of life.” He believes that, even from a realistic point of view, Lin Jie’s residence seemed believable. Rao further points out that the audience cared about the love between Lin Jie and Tian Zhenhua, so “for her to live in a shabby place and wear plain clothes would not be a good choice for winning sympathy from the audience, if the character herself did not seem to care about where to live and what to wear.” Therefore, Rao asserts, “The problem is not that Xie Jin was using an unrealistic setting to portray Lin Jie’s living condition, but the ideology in China at that time could not tolerate a teacher living a nice and mainly old-style life, regardless of her family origin and of the living conditions of people at that time.” “Therefore,” Rao concludes, “Xie Jin did not forsake realism, but the political struggle no longer needed this kind of realism.”4

Rao Shuguang’s challenge and his unearthing of historical mutations in film criticism seem well founded. Nevertheless, Rao reveals that Xia Yan’s criticism of Xie Jin in fact undermined Xie’s “true” artistic power. But in my view, half a century later it is no longer significant to evaluate whether Xia Yan’s criticism violated “realism” or not. The question worth pursuing, I think, is why it is the female protagonist’s room, and not the male protagonist’s orchid, that provoked Xia Yan’s criticism? What is the true objective of his criticism?

On July 2, 1949, during the first All-China Congress of Literature and Art Workers, Chairman Mao welcomed in person “the two armies of artists and writers from the liberated area and the KMT-controlled area now coming together.”5 These two armies, roughly speaking, represented the two schools of Chinese cinema: the Shanghai cinema tradition and the Yan’an cinema tradition. The former put emphasis on representing the lives of urban dwellers, while the latter gave priority to the revolution.

When the new China was founded, Xie Jin was only 26 years old but by then he already had had nearly a decade-long experience in theater and cinema. He was born into a big feudal (gentry) family and had studied in Shanghai Huaguang Theater College and Jinxing Film Training School by the time he was 18. By 1947 he had transferred