

Trials and Justice in Awaara: A Post-Colonial Movie on Post-Revolutionary Screens?

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Introduction

Perhaps surprisingly, one of the most popular Chinese movies of all time is actually an Indian film. Filmed in 1951 in newly independent India, *Awaara* (*The Vagabond*) was released in China after the official introduction of the opening and reform policies in 1979, when the country embarked on its current post-socialist, post-revolutionary course. Known as *Liulangzhe* in China, *Awaara* received a rapturous response from Chinese audiences and even now everyone over a certain age remembers watching the movie. Thanks to the Internet, many younger Chinese have also seen *Awaara*, sometimes dubbed in Chinese (I first saw it dubbed in Chinese myself), or if they haven't seen it they can tell you why their parents and grandparents loved it so much.

Virtually everyone in China recognises the film's most famous number, 'Awaara Hoon' (I Am a Vagabond), and people of all ages can sing it. Indeed, Vikram Seth, writing in 1983 about his year in China, credited his singing of that tune and the 'astonishing popularity' of the movie with his success in obtaining a difficult travel permit to Tibet (Seth 1983: 11-14). In his 2000 film *Platform*, which is set in a small border town on the brink of those 1980s reforms, director Jia Zhangke depicted a local screening of *Awaara* in an early scene (Gopal et al 2008:

31-32); the Chinese audience seems enthralled by the performance of 'Awaara Hoon'.

Awaara was (and is) no ordinary movie. The film is widely recognised as a masterpiece of the 'golden age' of Indian popular movies (Gopal et al 2008: 16; Gokulsing et al 2004: 17) and it remains one of the 'biggest all-time hits of Hindi cinema' (Dwyer 2011: 131). Although *Awaara* is technically pre-Bollywood (Gopal et al 2008: 3-4; Vasudevan 2011: 7-8), the film has all the hallmarks of Bollywood movies, including music and dance, a melodramatic plot, and a long running-time. *Awaara* was produced and directed by Indian film icon and megastar Raj Kapoor, who also played the movie's central character. The movie co-starred his father Prithviraj Kapoor, a distinguished stage actor and director, as well as Indian screen legend Nargis, considered one of the greatest actresses of Hindi cinema (Rajadhyaksha & Willemen 1999: 119; 161-62). *Awaara* received lavish praise for its sets, lighting, dialogue, editing and music as well as for the quality of its acting (Kabir 2001: 137). The script was written by the well known K.A. Abbas and V.P. Sathe, and the songs by Shailendra and Hasrat. The movie's most famous sets, built for the long dream sequence, were designed by the art director M.R. Acharekar and reportedly took several months to shoot (Dwyer & Patel 2002: 78-80). Although Kapoor directed *Aag* (1948), *Barsaat* (1949) and *Shree 420* (1955), *Awaara* is universally recognised as his finest movie as well as the one that brought him international fame (Rajadhyaksha & Willemen 1999: 119-20).

Awaara is very much an Indian movie, and not merely in style. Kapoor filmed it just a few years after Indian independence, when many early cinema artists sought to create a socially meaningful cinema (Rajadhyaksha 2009: 80) that would also be a national (and nationalist) cinema for the Indian public (Gopal & Moorti 2008: 12-13). Thus Kapoor's films were 'socially conscious and Socialist-inclined with nation-building themes, they resonated in – maybe even helped to define – a newly independent India busy inventing itself' (Saltz 2012). During that era, the city was at the centre of many social and economic changes, attracting thousands of rural workers in search of

a better life, though many of them found hardship and exploitation instead. The R.K. Films company, which produced *Awaara*, often made the city the focal point of its movies (Dwyer & Patel 2002: 154), and *Awaara* was very much an urban-centered film. Kapoor's movie thus reflected changing issues and concerns in India, including the role of caste, the lack of opportunity for the less fortunate, and a belief in social determinism.

In some respects, *Awaara* is a dark film, and not only for its portrayal of sordid urban slums, bleak prison cells or repressive views of women. The movie's darkly surreal sets and images also depict scenes of wealth and power or deep, mostly negative emotions (Saltz 2012). Yet the film ends happily, and it generally reflects a positive view of human nature, offering the possibility of individual reform and redemption: in *Awaara* both love and justice triumph. Indeed, this is an India in which justice is possible and (despite the colonial trappings) it is Indian justice, including its plea to move beyond the country's caste-ridden past. Overall, this India is confident, optimistic and independent, and *Awaara's* core social justice message points towards a better Indian future.

Cinema can cross cultural barriers, and Kapoor himself believed that, 'a good film will always have universal appeal' (Saari 2011: 3). The film and particularly the title song 'Awaara Hoon' swept through Asia (Manschot & de Vos 2005: 106), and during the 1950s *Awaara* enjoyed phenomenal success throughout much of the world (Gopal & Moorti 2008: 16). *Awaara* was, for example, immensely popular in the Soviet Union (Dwyer 2011: 158), where the socialist undertones of its plot may have given it the right political cast. In China too *Awaara* was popular during the 1950s for many of the same reasons, and both the movie and its most famous song were said to be favorites of Mao Zedong (Creekmur 2006: 195). But how should we understand the special popularity the film enjoyed in China when it was shown again after 1979 (Sarkar 2010: 51- 52)? At least superficially, it is hard to imagine a less Chinese movie than *Awaara*, or indeed a movie so tied to its Indian place and time. What then accounts for the special place the

movie still holds in Chinese hearts? This essay analyses the reception of *Awaara*'s deep appeal to Chinese audiences after the Communist Party's 1979 introduction of opening and reform policies.¹ *Awaara* offers many attractions, but I believe it was the film's depictions of justice that made it seem so timely and so important when it was shown in China then.

1 The Three Trials of *Awaara*

Awaara is hardly the only Hindi movie with a legal theme, but it is probably the earliest example, credited with launching a new genre of commercial film: the musical law drama (Hoffheimer 2006: 71-2). The plot of *Awaara* is complex, but the legal matters form an essential element of the movie's appeal in China as well as the key to its ideas of justice. The film opens with a shot of the Bombay High Court, one of the most important courts in India, built in the late nineteenth century in Gothic revival style. We next see a large vaulted English-style courtroom, another direct legacy of colonialism but now staffed entirely by Indian legal experts and filled with Indian spectators. There is a high bench for the judge, with the jury box on one side and the dock for the defendant on the other; below the judge is the long bar table, where all the lawyers sit. The courtroom is packed, with journalists seated in the front gallery discussing the case. The judge and the barristers are all robed in the English style, although they have dispensed with English wigs.

A man enters the courtroom from the back; confident and distinguished looking, he strides forward and takes a place at the bar table, where he is obviously well known to the barristers already seated there. The judge enters and is seated on the bench; he sees that the prosecution is ready, the jury is ready and the defendant is in the dock – but where is the counsel for the accused? The defendant shakes his head. Suddenly a beautiful young woman enters the court and with all eyes on her she moves towards the bar table; she is dressed in a long white dress and a lawyer's gown. 'I told you that if you were ever arraigned I would defend you' she tells the defendant, and she too takes her place with the other lawyers.

The victim, who now proves to be the confident man who first entered the courtroom, takes the witness stand and is briefly questioned by the prosecution about the attack on him that the defendant is charged with committing. Then the young woman rises from her seat at the bar table to cross-examine the witness (she is wearing glasses so we can tell that she is smart as well as beautiful), and as she approaches him she asks his blessing, for this is to be her first cross-examination. We now realise that the defence lawyer has a relationship with the witness as well as the defendant. Then counsel begins asking the witness about his relationship to the accused and the reasons he might have committed the murderous attack. ‘Can you recount the circumstances when you cast your wife out of your house?’ she asks him. The witness looks uneasy, and we begin to think he is really the one on trial, that his life and his actions are up for judgement here. During the course of counsel’s cross-examination, the story is told in long flashbacks that occupy most of the movie.

The witness is actually Judge Raghunath, a man who once had a beautiful wife, Leela, who loved him. In defiance of social convention, he had married a widow, but they were happy together. One night, however, Leela is kidnapped by the evil Jagga and taken to his bandit lair. Jagga tells Leela that although he was the son and grandson of bandits he wasn’t one himself. But Raghunath, believing that the son of a bandit is necessarily a bandit, framed an innocent Jagga and convicted him of being a rapist. Jagga has kidnapped Leela to become the rapist he was imprisoned for being – but when he learns that Leela is pregnant, a different plan for revenge forms in his mind; he releases her without harm and she is restored to her husband.

After Leela’s return, Raghunath learns that she is pregnant and he suspects that she has been unfaithful or was defiled; gossip feeds his jealousy and suspicion. Although Raghunath was willing to break with social convention to marry a widow, he is quick to believe that his wife has deceived him and worries that the gossip will affect his chances for becoming a magistrate. When Leela goes into labour, Raghunath is overcome by his suspicions, and in the middle of a dark storm he

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casts Leela out in the street, where the baby is born. The movie then returns to the courtroom as the defence counsel asks Raghunath if he knows what happened to his wife and baby. 'They left Lucknow and the boy grew up in the slums of Bombay', she tells him. On hearing this news, Raghunath looks stricken, and our impression that it is his life and behavior on trial is confirmed.

The movie then returns to its story in flashbacks. Leela is raising her son Raj by herself, and although she is very poor, she sends him to school, telling him, 'you will be a lawyer, then a magistrate, then a judge,' she tells her son, and young Raj is studious. At school he meets the beautiful Rita, who is kind and good; despite her wealth and the difference in their circumstances, she loves him. When Raj attends her birthday party, he can only give her a flower for her hair. Rita's godfather, who proves to be Raghunath, is also at the party and when he sees her with Raj, asks about his father. 'Raj says he will be a judge when he grows up', she tells him. But Raghunath still wants to know who Raj's father is and firmly declares his belief that the son of a bandit will be a bandit and the son of a judge will be a judge.

When Leela becomes sick and unable to work, Raj works as a bootblack to support himself and his mother. Although Raj tries to attend school at the same time, he can't manage it and is expelled; Rita transfers to another school. But now Jagga appears on the scene, acts as Raj's protector and then forces him to steal. Jagga still has ideas of revenge, and wants to prove to Raghunath that one's character is not inborn but rather depends on upbringing, on nurture. In the end, with no one else to turn to, Raj does become a thief, with Jagga as his mentor and master (and 'father'), and the adult, Raj is in and out of jail. One day Raj steals the handbag of a young woman, and then pretends to restore it to her from the thief. Fleeing the police after another theft, Raj gains entrance to her home, which proves to be a sumptuous palace, and he decides her wealth makes her the perfect object of a con. But as they are chatting, Raj catches sight of a photograph of a young girl he recognises as Rita, and the young woman confirms it is her photo. Twelve years after they were separated, she is studying to

be a lawyer, living with her guardian, who has brought her to Bombay for her education. Jokingly she tells Raj that if he is ever arraigned she will defend him. When Raj takes her to meet his mother, she sees the identical photo of herself on the wall, and she realises that this is Raj, her childhood sweetheart. (Unfortunately for Raj, Rita's guardian proves to be Judge Raghunath).

Raj is still attracted to Rita, and he courts her, but he is torn by his life of crime and still threatened and controlled by Jagga. Although Raj tries to go straight and takes manual labour jobs, he is fired when Jagga lets his employers know he is a convicted criminal. Leela assures Rita that Raj can still be good, and Rita believes in him and thinks he can make a new life. But Raghunath is outraged by this romance: Raj has no name, no profession, he has been in prison, he is no good. Raghunath tries to pay Raj to leave Rita, and when Raj refuses, throws him out of his house. Then Raj appears at Rita's birthday party, a lavish affair that recalls the party he attended when they were children. For this birthday, however, Raj presents her with a diamond necklace, which he has actually stolen from Raghunath before the judge could present it to Rita. When a devastated Rita realises this, she understands that Raj is truly a thief and he has not reformed.

Meanwhile, Jagga has robbed a bank and fleeing the police he tries to hide at Raj and Leela's home. Raj returns home from the party to find Jagga attacking his mother – to save her he kills Jagga, just as the police who have been tracking Jagga burst through the door. In the next scene, we are once again in a courtroom, with the same layout as the first though on a much smaller scale. The same high bench for the judge and bar table below it – and Raj is again in the dock, this time accused of the murder of Jagga. And this time the judge is Raghunath, who looks at his ward's suitor with ill-concealed contempt. Yet Raghunath still asks Raj about his defence lawyer and adjourns the hearing until a lawyer can be appointed to represent him.

To help Raj, Rita goes to see Leela and learns that Raj killed Jagga to save her; Leela agrees to go to court to make a statement on Raj's behalf. But as Leela is on her way to court, she sees Raghunath's car

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pulling up in front of the courthouse and Raghunath going in to the building. She rushes up to speak to him but is struck by the vehicle and is very seriously injured. We next see Leela in a hospital ward, with her head and face totally swathed in bandages. Rita is there to take her statement about Jagga's death, which given Leela's condition Rita knows will be admissible in court as a dying declaration if she doesn't survive.

Leela's next visitor is a distraught Raj, who is devastated by his mother's injuries. Leela tells him that she saw Judge Raghunath on her way to court, and at last reveals that Raghunath is his true father. Finally, Raghunath himself arrives to see Leela, though he can't recognise her through the bandages and doesn't realise that the dying woman is actually his wife. Raj is in prison when he hears the news of his mother's death, and he believes that Raghunath has had Leela killed to protect his name and reputation. Desperate, Raj somehow escapes from prison, determined to kill the judge and avenge his mother.

That evening, Rita discusses the case with Raghunath and asks if he has made a decision. 'Don't let your emotions get in the way of justice' Raghunath tells her. Rita replies, 'justice is all I seek. Raj is completely innocent'. 'You have studied the law', Raghunath reminds her. Rita replies, 'but my heart has not read the law'. Raghunath seems about to agree with her: 'the laws and the heart. A strange concoction! But you are right. The heart heeds no laws. Not even mine'. Suddenly Raj appears in the window with a knife in his hand, but as he moves to attack the judge, he is distracted by the familiar photo of young Rita on the wall and Raghunath disarms him. 'Your lawyer has just convinced me of your innocence. I was going to let you off', he tells Raj.

Now the flashbacks leading to Raj's trial for his attack on Raghunath are over and we return to the first trial, which opened the movie. Rita is still cross-examining Raghunath and she points to him accusingly as she addresses the judge in the case. She declares, 'my lord, the one who is guilty is his father, who drove an innocent woman from his house and denied his own son. If Raj is punished for his crime, his father should be too'. But Raghunath replies that 'emotion has got the better of counsel for the defence. This is just a story to prove some criminal is

my son. But I ask, what evidence does counsel have?'. Rita tells Raj and Raghunath to look at each other and points out the strong resemblance between the two men. Then the judge in the case tells Rita, 'the law heeds no emotion'. Rita replies, 'nor does the heart heed any law.' Rita takes her place at the bar table, where she is joined by Raghunath.

The judge turns to Raj and asks if he has anything to say in his defence, which he does from the dock. Raj says that Rita has tried to save him, but he asks for no defence: 'all I want to say is that I did not inherit crime from my parents. Countless children who live in the slums will fall prey to that virus. Do not think of me – those children are the ones you must care for'. Raj says he knows the judgement the court is about to give and is willing to suffer any sentence, but he wishes to know the judgement of his father: 'what says your heart?'. The camera pans over the court, which is suddenly empty, with Judge Raghunath alone at the bar table, reflecting on his own life. That evening Raghunath visits Raj in his prison cell and declares that, 'tomorrow the court will pronounce judgement on you, but in the eyes of God I am the one who is guilty', and he finally addresses Raj as 'son'.

The next day everyone is assembled in the courtroom, with Raj in the dock and Raghunath and Rita seated together at the bar table. The judge announces the verdict: Raj has been found guilty of trying to kill Raghunath, but his sentence has been reduced to three years because of Rita's defence. In the movie's final scenes, Raj is back in prison, where Rita goes to see him. In an emotional scene, they embrace through the prison bars – perhaps this time they will finally kiss, but they do not. Raj tells her that he accepts his sentence; 'this penance is very important to me' he tells her, and adds that he will study to become 'a lawyer, a magistrate, a judge' – just like Judge Raghunath, his (true) father, and just as his mother wished. Rita promises to wait for him. As the prison door slams shut, Raj stands under the barred window, bathed in light: he has been redeemed.

2 *Awaara*'s Enduring Popularity in China

Awaara was a smash hit around the world, supporting Kapoor's view that the best cinema can be understood everywhere. But in China it seems to have been uniquely popular; what accounts for *Awaara*'s tremendous appeal there? For many of the same reasons it was such a hit elsewhere: though filmed in black and white, *Awaara* is colorful, dazzling entertainment. It offers beautiful and glamorous stars, lavish sets and costumes, exceptional music and dance, romance and drama, and a stunning dream sequence, not to mention a morally satisfying (and happy) ending. The plot of *Awaara* has everything, including a mother's sacrifices for her child, a son's devotion to his mother, a dramatic courtroom confrontation, childhood sweethearts reunited, true love rewarded, a poor man loved by a rich woman, a man torn between good and evil but saved through a woman's love, a proud man forced to see the error of his ways, a son restored to his true father.

Awaara's music, which played a key role in its international popularity (Gopal & Moorti 2008: 16-17), contributed greatly to the film's enthusiastic reception in China after 1979, as Vikram Seth's anecdote illustrates. The attraction of an exotic aesthetic was also powerful: *Awaara* was especially appealing because the film's aesthetics were completely different from China's (Ni 2005). In similar fashion, Chinese audiences of the 1980s were captivated by *The Sound of Music*, another foreign movie that offered them extraordinary entertainment. That film was equally removed from Chinese life and experience, and it too featured memorable music and beautiful settings, combined with themes that were easily understood (family, children, patriotism, love). Like *The Sound of Music*, *Awaara* was a glamorous movie that opened a totally different world to Chinese viewers, who lacked opportunities to travel or experience other cultures themselves. The mix of the exotic and the familiar that *Awaara* afforded them was powerful entertainment indeed.

Awaara's reception in the Soviet Union (and Russia) was in some ways parallel to its reception in China though in other ways it was quite different. Indian movies were very popular in the Soviet Union,

and *Awaara* was the first Indian film to be screened there in the 1950s (Rajagopalan 2005: 138). Indian films had long been recognised as a ‘unique cultural phenomenon’ because of strong historical and political ties to India, something China did not necessarily share. In addition, the Soviet government favoured Kapoor’s movies for their ‘socialist’ underpinnings, even though the appeal of his films went far beyond their social or political views. Meticulous editing, translating and dubbing of Indian film contributed to their popularity: Russian audiences were ‘equipped to make meaning out of Indian films’ (Doroshenko 2012: 161-64). Chinese viewers lacked that kind of careful introduction, and cultural references so important to Hindi cinema, such as *Awaara*’s allusions to the *Ramayana*, would largely have been lost on them. Nor would apparent Oedipal references (Raj kills one father and tries to kill the other) have been as obvious to Chinese as to European audiences then.

Yet despite vast differences in Indian and Chinese culture, many of *Awaara*’s values spoke to traditional Chinese beliefs – savagely attacked during the Cultural Revolution but not entirely destroyed – including the importance of family, the centrality of the parent-child relationship, and the vital importance of education. Thus Raj, though he becomes a criminal, is depicted as a very filial son, clearly devoted to his mother: he concentrates on his studies because she urges him to do so, and even as a child he tries to take care of her. Ultimately it is his belief that Raghunath has had his mother killed that drives Raj to the final desperate attack, leading to his trial for attempted murder. As for less attractive values, China had its own tradition of ‘chaste widows’ and the movie’s criticism of such values would also have struck home with Chinese viewers.

Many of *Awaara*’s conventions were also completely intelligible to a Chinese audience. Aspects of the film that might have troubled Russian audiences, such as its length, or the many song and dance numbers (Doroshenko 2012: 167) would have been no barrier to great enjoyment of the movie in China; on the contrary, they enhanced it. Although the musical wasn’t necessarily a popular film genre in China, many older

urban residents had seen Hollywood musicals before 1949, and song and dance are integral elements of Chinese opera, not detours that detract from the plot. Chinese traditional entertainment is long and intended to be so, and in any event Chinese audiences of the time were starved for genuine entertainment and hardly likely to complain of being offered too much. Movies were few and highly politicised, television was virtually nonexistent, good music and theater were unavailable, and even the traditional opera form was limited to a handful of model political operas. Nor could long song and dance numbers pose a problem for audiences accustomed to sitting through endless political meetings or listening to interminable speeches.

In addition, melodrama, narrative conventions such as the use of repetition for effect, the depiction of a story within a story, or the reliance on coincidence to further the plot were all familiar to Chinese audiences. The sentimentality and deep emotionalism of *Awaara* would have strongly appealed to Chinese viewers, especially at that time. Many great Chinese films of the 1930s and 1940s can be viewed as melodramas, whether social or political, and Xie Jin, the most popular of China's third-generation directors, often made emotional films sometimes dismissed by critics as melodramas. The very characteristics for which Xie Jin's movies have been criticised, such as the 'magnification of the emotions,' or themes such as 'the ultimate triumph of good over evil' (Zhu 144-145) are what made them attractive to Chinese viewers. Indeed, one commentator, seeking reasons for *Awaara*'s enthusiastic reception in China, has (rightly) suggested that it might be the film's 'melodramatic elements, thematic and formal, that elicit such passionate responses from Chinese audiences' (Sarkar 2010: 53).

To a large extent, *Awaara*'s extraordinary popularity – the response it evoked from Chinese audiences – connected directly to the time it was widely released in China, in the wake of the Cultural Revolution and just after opening and reform. It stemmed from the combination of new and old values the film embodied, as they were interpreted by Chinese viewers of that era. Thus on the surface *Awaara* presented acceptable

political ideas, but its deeper (possibly subversive) messages had much greater resonance. Superficially, the film's opposition to determinism and to rigid caste or class distinctions, which was aimed directly at post-independence Indian society, could be taken as socialist. But actually 'the film's theme that circumstances, not class, decide one's future was revolutionary. It busted the popular belief in China that class dictated one's future' (Prabhakar 2012).

At the same time, *Awaara* emphasised personal, individual values, especially love, romance and even sex, all in short supply in what passed for entertainment in China during and just after the Cultural Revolution. Rita loves Raj, and he loves her, but their relationship has nothing to do with political values or beliefs. Their passionate feelings for each other are openly expressed, in sharp contrast to Chinese movies of that era and even later, which offer very repressed romantic scenes, if they include any at all. *Awaara* was 'sexy,' in a way that Chinese films definitely were not, though without depicting explicit sex, which might have shocked or offended Chinese audiences then. Kapoor and Nargis, who were lovers off screen when *Awaara* was made, had very powerful on-screen chemistry; although in keeping with Indian film conventions Raj and Rita never actually kiss, they convey tremendous sensuality in their scenes together. In one scene, for example, Raj seems to kiss Rita's bare shoulder as he places a (stolen) necklace around her neck, an image used in the movie's most famous posters. Chinese friends of mine have never forgotten that image, and indeed for many Chinese viewers *Awaara*'s sensuality was a revelation.

Other non-socialist (and equally exotic) values included the depiction of wealth and success without condemnation, no longer portrayed as an expression of decadent capitalist values. *Awaara* showed the trappings of great wealth to people whose material wellbeing had been sacrificed to politics for decades. But now Chinese officials proclaimed that wealth might be glorious and that some could become rich before others. Rita may be rich, but she is beautiful and good, not some stereotype of a rich capitalist exploiting others; in fact she is idealistic and she believes in justice and love; even the photo of young

Rita, which we see at critical moments in the film, shows her with an apparent halo, like Chinese Buddhist angels or saints. Raghunath is also rich, but wealth is not his failing, rather it is pride and jealousy, and his wrong-headed deterministic beliefs, that cause him to act as he does.

The wealth portrayed in *Awaara* is extreme, particularly when contrasted with the desperate lack of money in the slums. The images are dark, though seemingly not because wealth is inherently bad. Thus the deep shadows in Raghunath's house in Lucknow, rather than critiquing the evils of wealth, suggest his twisted jealousy. The surreal interiors reflect his patriarchal ideas and unjust suspicion of a chaste and loving wife; it is those emotions and not his money that lead Raghunath to do her (and Raj) a great wrong. By contrast, the vast, overpowering wealth of the house Raghunath and Rita share in Bombay, with its extravagant interiors, huge ornate staircases, towering statues and columns everywhere, remind us of the enormous economic divide between Rita and Raj. This too is surreal, a 'hallucinatory pictorialism' (Rajadhyaksha & Willemen 1999: 194). Other dark images reflect the character or situation of a person, such as Jagga's lair or Raj's dungeon-like prison cell; the stormy night into which Leela is cast is another example of the importance of specific contexts within the film. Some dark scenes may even suggest that Raghunath has improper, possibly incestuous feelings for his ward.

Awaara's urban setting also contributed to the film's exotic appeal, especially for China's overwhelmingly rural audience, which was then still tightly locked into country life by the household registration system. Peasants are not featured in the movie, much less is their work or status glorified in any way. So although the film certainly highlights the disparities between the urban rich and poor, it offered a tantalising glimpse of urban pleasures still denied to almost all Chinese viewers at that time.

3 Ideas of Justice in *Awaara*

Awaara is about the power of true love, but it is also about justice, an important reason for the film's deep appeal in China when it

was screened after 1979. The film's depictions of justice resonated powerfully with people who had suffered through many political upheavals as well as the legal anarchy of the Cultural Revolution—and it was shown in China just as it seemed that their thirst for justice might finally be satisfied. Other highly popular movies of that time, despite entirely different plots, shared *Awaara's* themes, and they too evoked a passionate response from their Chinese viewers. In Xie Jin's *The Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (*Tianyunshan Chuanqi* 1980), for example, a woman loves a man who was unjustly purged as a political 'rightist'. She believes in him and stays with him whatever the cost, and he is ultimately rehabilitated, restored to his rightful position. Despite its radically different aesthetics and a plot grounded in China's particular political history, *Tianyun Mountain's* themes of vindication, redemption, and the quest for justice bear at least some similarity to those of *Awaara* (the story unfolds in long flashbacks too). Xie Jin's political melodramas resonated with Chinese audiences of that time, and I believe that *Awaara* spoke to them in much the same way.

A Traditional (and Popular) Justice

Despite *Awaara's* exotic setting, the popular justice aspects of its story were easily understood and appreciated in China. Karma is an important concept in both Chinese Taoism and Buddhism, and indeed most Chinese still believe in moral causality; a long folk tradition of *baoying* (moral judgement or retribution) also holds that the consequences of moral failure are a form of divine retribution. Thus the idea that the proud Judge Raghunath was the architect of his own (much deserved) suffering, depriving himself of the love of his chaste wife and true son, would have seemed entirely proper to a Chinese audience. In the Chinese world, moreover, people can be called to account in a trial-like setting after they die for what they have done in this life. Traditional Chinese folk prints show people being judged for their actions in the court of the underworld, and justice is definitely meted out to anyone brought before that 'court' (though Chinese religious practices do offer ways to escape such heavenly punishment). Thus *Awaara's* most

important ‘trial,’ the trial of Raghunath for the wrongs he has done to his wife and his child, would have been appreciated by almost any Chinese viewer.

Although the actual Chinese trial, whether modern or historical, is not the continuous event we find in common law systems, trials conducted by legendary officials such as Judge Bao and Judge Dee were often the subject of popular theater and drama. Chinese audiences knew and enjoyed the dramatic conventions, and they were certainly familiar with the idea of a ‘trial within a trial’. In the famous Chinese opera *Yutangchun*, for example, a senior official is sent out to hear the case of a woman accused of murder. During a key scene in the opera, ‘three high judges meet to retry the case’, it gradually becomes clear to the audience as well as to the two other judges that the senior official and the accused have a past—just as the three central characters in *Awaara* do.

Traditional Chinese trials, whether in this life or the next, had required procedures, but in both cases substantive justice was the goal: the innocent must be freed but the guilty must also be punished, as indeed Raj was. Whatever his situation or background, Raj was responsible at some level for the crime he was charged with, and possibly for many others. Through her cross-examination, Rita raises issues about Raj’s responsibility for his actions – is it his fault or Raghunath’s? – but the court finds him guilty, and he clearly accepts that result as a just one. From a Chinese point of view, therefore, the judgement in *Awaara* is completely satisfying: Raj acknowledges his crime and is punished, but not too much.

One commentator notes that the law helps Raj regain his social legitimacy, but at the end of the film it is nevertheless Raj who must serve a prison sentence while his father stands at least formally exonerated by the law: ‘even as the law is invoked as a guarantor of social justice it still punishes the victim rather than the aggressor’ (Sircar 2011: 134). It is true that Raj receives formal punishment while Raghunath does not – but only Raj has been formally charged in the Bombay High Court and only he can be sentenced there. Raghunath

isn't being tried by that court, even if Rita calls him to account in the courtroom and his is the only testimony we see. As a result, it seems fair to say that Raghunath has been judged and found wanting in his own 'trial,' and he too openly and rightly acknowledges his guilt.

B Social Justice

Awaara's emphasis on, and advocacy of, social justice is another reason for the film's official acceptance and vast popularity in many countries, including China, where social justice mattered, at least theoretically. The movie's anti-caste, anti-deterministic message is clear, and its opposition to any feudal view of status proved especially welcome in socialist countries. It is Judge Raghunath's core belief, stated throughout the film, that 'the son of a thief will always be a thief'. That is the reason he punished Jagga unjustly, that is why he fears a child who may be the son of a thief rather than his, and that is why he scorns Raj even when he is a little boy at Rita's party, asking 'who is his father?'. But the movie proves Raghunath wrong and he pays a steep price for his stubborn beliefs. Raj may be a thief but it is because he is raised by one and trained to be one himself: nurture not nature has made him what he is. Ironically, it is Raghunath's own actions that led directly to this result. When Raj addresses the courtroom at the end of his trial, he speaks for the young people in the slums, who need not be doomed to a life of crime: 'I did not inherit crime from my parents', he tells the court, 'I picked up crime from the gutter and the streets'.

Such a message spoke directly to Chinese viewers, and on more than one level. Orthodox Confucianism holds that all men are by nature good, even if education is still necessary, and the imperial examination system held out at least the hope that any boy could do well enough to become an official, regardless of family background or wealth. At least initially, Maoist views also emphasised re-education and suggested that individuals could reform themselves or be reformed. But for a Chinese audience when *Awaara* was widely shown in the 1980s, the film seemed to contain another, more hopeful meaning. China traditionally had no caste system, but after 1949 class background, however tenuous the

classification, determined people's lives and futures. Members of suspect classes suffered for it, even before the Cultural Revolution made them the despised targets of mass campaigns. If workers and peasants were safe, those with bad (and heritable) class backgrounds could never be trusted. Yet *Awaara* could be read to mean that political labels should not determine one's life any more than should caste in India, a post-revolutionary and very welcome message to many Chinese. In the words of one friend of mine when she told me why she had liked *Awaara* so much: 'your class background doesn't matter'.

C Procedural Justice

But the most striking depiction of justice in *Awaara*, at least for an audience that had witnessed the destruction of the Chinese legal system and the gross injustices of Cultural Revolution 'trials' was procedural. The year 1979 in China not only saw the formal introduction of new economic policies, but also ushered in a new emphasis on legal reform, including the enactment of the first post-1949 criminal procedure law. The next year the Chinese government adopted provisional regulations on lawyers, which clearly contemplated that a lawyer might act for a criminal defendant at trial. Those laws were praised as major achievements by the Chinese government, and indeed they constituted very important steps towards the restoration of law and legal institutions.

Awaara was released in China just as the criminal justice system was being restored and it offered Chinese audiences a dramatic vision of formal trials, dramatising what criminal procedure might actually mean in practice. Thus the first trial of Raj, for his attack on Judge Raghunath, takes place in a large formal courtroom, and the judge and jury, the prosecutor and the defence lawyer are all present in court, as is the chief witness, Judge Raghunath. This is formal justice, with the judge and the lawyers appearing in gowns and taking their set places in court. The trial obviously follows a prescribed order, with a major role for the defence – and the defendant is even allowed to speak on his own behalf. As a witness, Judge Raghunath is subject to examination

and then cross-examination, without which we would not learn the facts, much less understand who is really on trial in the film. All this made a deep impression on many Chinese viewers: one senior legal expert who saw *Awaara* as a young law student in 1980 can still recall the procedures it illustrated.

For many Chinese viewers, the most remarkable aspect of these foreign proceedings was the active role that lawyers played in the trial and the defence they could provide the accused. In both formal court settings, we see the lawyers (prosecution and defence) seated at the bar table, set in a prominent place at the front of the courtroom, just below the judge. The law is portrayed as a profession one can aspire to and lawyers clearly deserve respect. Indeed, two of the movie's main characters are lawyers, and it is Leela's hope that her son Raj will grow up to study law too; to that end she makes great sacrifices to educate him. The message for a Chinese audience was unmistakable, and several friends have told me that *Awaara* inspired them to study law themselves.

In Raj's second trial, which is shown only briefly, Judge Raghunath as the presiding judge asks the defendant Raj who his lawyer is. Although Raghunath despises Raj and absolutely rejects him as a suitor for Rita's hand, he still adjourns the hearing until Raj is represented by a lawyer. In the first and main trial, the judge also scans the courtroom for defence counsel; it is only when Rita appears and declares that she will represent Raj that the trial can proceed. Rita may save Raj from temptation through her love, but she also saves him as his lawyer when she defends him in court. Without her defence, Raj would have been utterly lost, but with it he not only receives a reduced sentence, in line with his actual crime, but is also restored to his father and the life he should have had.

Indeed, Nargis plays her court scenes as Rita with the same passionate intensity as she plays her romantic scenes with Raj. The actress reportedly visited the courts to study lawyers and observe their arguments (Saari 2011: 67), and her Rita is a dedicated lawyer as well as a woman in love. She advocates a role for the heart in the application of law, and she does love Raj no matter what. But Rita is still a lawyer

and her defence of Raj is based on the law; it is only through her actions in court – her arguments as a lawyer – that justice can be done.²

That would be a powerful message for anyone, but for a Chinese audience of that era the effect was electrifying. This is what procedural justice means, it is not dragging people through the streets or destroying them in public struggle sessions. Nor is it merely creating a façade of justice, as in the 1981 Gang of Four trial, staged to highlight the newly-adopted criminal procedure law about the same time as *Awaara* was shown. *Awaara* may be only a movie but it is not a political show trial and for many in the audience that made its message truer and much more affecting. *Awaara* ‘left a deep impression on me,’ said one viewer. ‘At that time, there were few lawyers in China. I was interested in how the hero of the film, who lived in lower-class Indian society, invited a lawyer to speak for him in court. I thought India must be another world’ (Ni 2005).

4 Conclusion

More than thirty years have passed since Chinese audiences first glimpsed *Awaara*’s exotic world and fell under its spell. The China they inhabited, with its dearth of entertainment, mobility and comfort, has been completely transformed, long since replaced for many people by the richer, more sophisticated China we know today; the urban pleasures (and wealth) that so amazed earlier viewers now seem within the reach of many. But *Awaara* is still fondly remembered for its values as well as its beauty, especially its portrayal of the power of love and the importance of justice. Commentators have long recognised *Awaara*’s fairy tale aspects (Rajadhyaksha & Willemen 1999: 194), and of course audiences understand that now too. Could Rita, for example, have saved Raj through her love and then won the battle in court? But true love and justice are ideals worth pursuing even if they are not so easily found. In the end, *Awaara* is about ideas of justice, and its inspiring message may account for the film’s special appeal to Chinese viewers even today.

Notes

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- 1 My friends and informants all saw *Awaara* in either 1980 or 1981, when it was widely released in China. All of them remember the year (and the month) it was shown, the exact circumstances under which they saw it (e.g., at a village showing outdoors, as a young student on a campus), and how many times they watched it. Although *Awaara* was released in China during the 1950s, the film had a broader impact on viewers during the early post-Mao period, and this essay focuses on the reasons for its popularity in that era.
- 2 A few famous 1930s or 1940s Chinese movies, such as *Goddess* (*Shennü* 1934) do feature brief courtroom scenes, but only *Bright Day* (*Yanyang Tian* 1948) has an extended courtroom sequence and a lawyer as its central character—though he acts for the prosecution, not the defence. Lawyers play no role in the trial in Xie Jin's *Stage Sisters*, which was filmed just before the Cultural Revolution but only released afterwards, and the film's message about courtroom justice is entirely different. That made *Awaara*'s depiction of procedural justice and the importance of a defence lawyer all the more striking for Chinese viewers familiar with trial scenes in earlier movies.

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