

"Chinese State Ideology and Filmmakers since the Cultural Revolution, 1966-1999," a
CHINESE STATE IDEOLOGY AND FILMMAKERS SINCE THE CULTURAL
Revolution prepared by Dong An in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of
Arts degree at the School of Journalism and Communication. This thesis has been
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in the School of Journalism and Communication to be taken December 1999

Title: CHINESE STATE IDEOLOGY AND FILMMAKERS SINCE THE CULTURAL
 REVOLUTION: 1966-1999

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Dr. Deanna Robinson

Chinese film stands as a cinematic barometer for the country's ideological vicissitudes. This research studies the relationship between Chinese film and changing government political philosophy. This interaction is examined in three critical periods in light of film as a tool of the revolution, the notion of cultural imperialism, and China's entrance into the global economy.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Chinese film was reduced to "model Peking opera" films. In the New Era (1979-1989), China's film production and the filmmakers' creative exploration grew rapidly. The 1989 Tian'anmen Square movement ushered in the Post New Era, in which films that glorify the Communist Party's past and present flourish. Reinforced content control and the market economy both currently contribute to Chinese film's increasing global profile and the filmmakers' more careful political engagement in their films.

CURRICULUM VITAE

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China (or, Mainland China) to the Communist government. The research looks at how the Communist government has shaped Chinese film during different historical periods, and how Chinese film represents Chinese culture and politics at the same time. The purpose of this book is to provide an informed understanding of Chinese film with a focus on the political role it has played since the tumultuous period of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) in which very few movies were made, to the PRC and WU in which an average of more than 130 movies have been produced annually. However, any research into a complex cultural industry like cinema cannot be undertaken without exploring the specific cultural, ideological, political and economic environment in which it operates. Chinese film's political function is especially prominent because of its close relation to China's politics under the Communist regime. A few facts found in the preface to *Film in Contemporary China* written by the Chinese film director Lu Tiao gives us an overview of the Chinese cinema:

If Hollywood, with its treasure-battery, pursues the industrial strategy of capitalism through the production of films commodities, then in socialist China, the system of film production itself is part of the national apparatus. The Chinese film industry, as a state-run enterprise in which the Communist party and its

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Research Question and Related Theories

This research studies the relationship of Chinese film in the People's Republic of China (or, Mainland China) to the Communist government. The research looks at how the Communist government has shaped Chinese film during different historical periods, and how Chinese film represents Chinese culture and politics at the same time. The present research is devoted to an informed understanding of Chinese film with a focus on the political role it has played from the tumultuous period of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) in which very few movies were made, to the 80s and 90s in which an average of more than 130 movies have been produced annually. However, any research into a complicated cultural industry like cinema cannot be undertaken without exploring the specific cultural, ideological, political and economic environment in which it operates. Chinese film's political function is especially interesting because of its close relation to China's politics under the Communist regime. A few lines found in the preface to *Film in Contemporary China* written by the Chinese film theorist Li Tuo gives us an overview of this Chinese scenario,

If Hollywood, with its massive industry, perpetuates the mainstream ideology of capitalism through its production of filmic commodities, then in socialist China, the system of film production itself is part of the national apparatus. The Chinese film industry, as a state-run enterprise in which the Communist party and its

administration are the most important components, has never glossed over its responsibility to promote the mainstream ideology for the nation. (Li, 1993, xiii)

Film as a Tool of the Revolution

The theory of film being used and viewed as a political or revolutionary tool can be traced back to the Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein and his films. His vision of film as an effective mass machine for the new Soviet age turned the Soviet film into an art of mainly political means. Film's political, cultural and theoretical importance as emphasized by Eisenstein, his contemporary Dziga Vertov, and the later radical French film director Jean-Luc Godard can be interpreted in terms of Marxist dialectics, i.e., objective reality is separated from human beings' awareness of this reality. However, this gap between the reality and human beings' awareness of it can be bridged by practice. Film, as an art articulating objective reality, is also meaningful to objective reality, and was taken by Eisenstein and others as a new mass art form effecting human beings' practice and changes required for the coming of the Soviet age. As Dana Polan points out when analyzing Eisenstein's films,

Film is, furthermore, an attractive art for political intervention, since the very appeal of film as a "natural" medium is an appeal that can be utilized by the dialectical artist to trick audiences virtually into believing that they are seeing the same old naturalistic art. (Polan, 1985, p.43)

This "trick" or manipulation of audiences' visual perception, as we know it, is by means of the effective use of montage patterns. However, the references these filmmakers made extensively to film's political ends would require an artist to cooperate with the state and

serve the state's political agenda, as was the practice in the former Soviet Union and Communist China.

Jean-Luc Godard, a French director famous for his Marxist movies, challenged western audiences with audacious "class struggle" slogans. His movies turned many Westerners off. In *Film and Revolution*, James MacBean, exposing the hypocrisy in a capitalist society, said,

The way in which art is a product of class struggle, and how in each historical period and in each of its many stylistic trends, art is useful to the ruling class as an ideological tool that disseminates values (e.g., contemplation rather than action) that serve to perpetuate ruling-class power and privilege—such considerations of *use value* are taboo. (MacBean, 1975, p.141)

However, Godard, in his role of filmmaker as theorist, has a particular relevance for films that propagated Marxism, Leninism, and as far as China is concerned, Maoism.

Propaganda and political films flourished in most of the Communist countries. If film would not usually label itself as the ruling class's "ideological tool" in a Capitalist society, in a Soviet, Marxist or Maoist country, the ruling class, the proletariat which is supposed to be the majority of the country, would not disguise its full utilization of art as an ideological tool that propagates its Marxist ideals and political agendas, i.e., there would be explicit propaganda slogans throughout these films.

both in Capitalism
and Socialism

China, before it began reform at the end of the 1970s, apparently had adopted the Soviet model of film function. Chinese film was thus used as the Communist Party's political tool. However, China, as a member of the "Third World", is a subject for the cultural imperial discourse, too.

Film as in the Discourse of Cultural Imperialism

Herbert Schiller, in his 1976 book of *Communication and Cultural Domination*, defined cultural imperialism as the “sum of the processes by which a society is brought into the modern world system and how its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced and sometimes even bribed into shaping social institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the values and structures of the dominating center of the system.” Schiller elaborated mainly on the increasing worldwide dominance of American cultural products.

In fact, film was first introduced to China by westerners at the end of last century and Chinese film was greatly influenced by early Hollywood in its beginning years, both manipulations of cultural imperialism. Paul Clark (1988) asserts that film has been, “the most foreign art introduced into China in the Westernizing cultural upsurge known as the May Fourth movement at the beginning of the twentieth century,” and according to Jay Leyda (1972), “[u]ntil 1960 the Chinese film industry was either wholly or largely dependent on foreign manufacturers for its equipment and raw film stock.”

The cultural imperialism discourse tends to stress the dominating party. For instance, Edward Said, in his *Orientalism*, discussed impressively on Western dominance over the third world, from the very early colonial period, by means of an overwhelmingly imperial culture. However, the resistance of the “dominated countries” was a phenomenon that could provide the other side of the cultural imperialism scenario. The indigenous cultures’ resistance and opposition in response to western cultural imperialism, as examined in Said’s *Culture and Imperialism*, unsurprisingly, apply to China as well,

Along with armed resistance in places as diverse as nineteenth-century Algeria, Ireland, and Indonesia, there also went considerable efforts in cultural resistance almost everywhere, the assertions of nationalist identities, and, in the political realm, the creation of associations and parties whose common goal was self-determination and national independence. (Said, 1993, xii)

Cultural imperialism in its most violent form of war is felt in a complicated manner throughout China's modern history and politics. Outside forces interact with China's historical experience of resistance and contribute to the shaping of a "nationalist identity," which in China's case, is confused by the narratives of Soviet-version Communism. Said's explanation for his emphasis on narrative fiction serves partly for my interest in a political, as well as cultural, study of Chinese film,

The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them. Most important, the grand narratives of emancipation and enlightenment mobilized people in the colonial world to rise up and throw off imperial subjection;... (Said, 1993, xiii)

However, cultural imperialism, as debated mostly by Western scholars or West-trained scholars, has aroused more critical responses recently because of today's international context. The twentieth century sees the increasing expansion of Western culture which can be described as a process mainly of Americanization. Cees Hamelink (1983) tells us that the "synchronization" of the Western culture has been of unprecedented "global dimensions". Hamelink's theory of cultural "synchronization" implies a kind of unidirectional traffic of cultural products which has a "synchronic mode". Today's world, via its "information-age" media and transnational corporations, weaves essentially every country on the earth into the process of global homogenization. As Fred Fejes (1981) observes, "a major focus of the media imperialism approach has been on the role of

transnational corporations or media interests in shaping communications between developed and Third World countries.”

However, discovering the inadequacy of cultural imperialism discourses which concentrated on this one-directional flow of internationalized cultural products, Robinson, et al. (1991) questioned the negative effects of this flow in their study of popular music, and found other factors were “pulling in the opposite direction” such as “indigenization” and “new, eclectic combinations of world musical elements”. In response to the overwhelming evidence for the one-direction cultural “synchronization”, they have proposed that,

The best that peripheral countries can do is to resist by formulating information barriers via national cultural policies. While we see barrier policies such as quotas as important, we think there are other, more effective and more positive ways of encouraging national cultural production and local creativity, such as subsidization of local artists and recording companies. (Robinson, et al. 1991, pp. 19-20)

This is particularly applicable if we look into the new quota system Chinese film industry has adopted since the 90s when importing Hollywood-made movies.

Film as a Cultural Product

Film, the word itself is multifaceted, however, film is now primarily regarded as an “economic commodity”, “a cultural good” and “industrial enterprise” (Moran, 1996).

Film production and the accompanying distribution and exhibition comprise a complicated process of profit making under the circumstances of market economy.

Though officially termed as “the Socialist market economy”, the Chinese economic system has already adopted the notion of “free market”. China’s persevering World Trade

Organization (WTO) bid proves again that global ultra-capitalism has deeply involved the country which, only twenty years ago, was largely isolated from the outside world. China's entry into WTO will bring many changes. One important stipulation of WTO membership is that China will have to open up more of its market, which would inevitably give rise to greater competition for domestic industries, including, of course, the film industry.

In recent literature on the Third World and cinema, Frederic Jameson's "national allegory" has become an important theoretical framework. In his "World Literature in an Age of Multinational Capitalism", he argues that,

Those [Third World] texts, even those narratives which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic, necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public Third World culture and society. (Jameson, 1987, p.142)

My own study of the new Chinese films by progressive directors, such as Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou, confirms that this interpretative framework is particularly relevant and productive, as Wimal Dissanayake, an authority in Asian cinema study, has said,

The relationship among cinema, nationhood, and history is as complex as it is fascinating. Any investigation into this topic brings us face to face with questions of power, ideology, truth, colonialism, post-colonialism, and so on, and situates us at the center of some of the vital and invigorating debates taking place within the domain of modern cultural studies. (Dissanayake, 1994, x)

Significance of the Study

Chinese film is just one of those centers of "modern cultural studies". The above discussion produces a series of specific questions. Those questions, however, are

intended for different readers. For the general readers, the present research provides an informed understanding of Chinese films produced in different time periods and in terms of their particular cultural, political and ideological backgrounds. For film scholars who want to learn more about the relationship between China's politics and Chinese film, this research addresses questions such as: how has the Chinese government's control of film changed throughout the different historical periods; and how have filmmakers responded to government censorship and content control. For domestic filmmakers, answers to these questions can provide a better understanding of the changing aspects of the domestic environment in which cultural creators must work, and the importance of the international market which is exerting ever-stronger influence on their filmmaking. For the Chinese government and the domestic film industry, an up-to-date assessment about cultural imperialism as applied to Chinese film can be found in this research, and can be helpful for their later policy making. For the international film industry that is interested in entering China's film market, or participating in the production, distribution and exhibition of Chinese films, information about the government's film policy and regulations and profiles of some important Chinese filmmakers can be found in related chapters of this thesis.

Methodology

In order to address these questions, this research carefully reviews important historical conjunctures that contributed to the changing political and cultural environment through the different periods. However, this research is basically heuristic

and qualitative. The present research studies extensively the existing literature on Chinese film in different periods. Updates and original materials regarding Chinese film in the 1990s are provided and analyzed. The focus of this research is my primary analysis of selected films by two directors, Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou, in relation to the changing circumstances.

The Five Periods of Chinese Film

This thesis concentrates on several critical periods in China's modern and contemporary history. As shown in Table 1, the research explains how Chinese film represents Chinese culture and politics, and how the film industry has reacted to changing conditions of externally-imposed cultural imperialism and internally-imposed political philosophy. The present research covers especially those periods after the Cultural Revolution took place. However, a brief summary of the pre-Liberation¹ period is given in the present chapter and a longer look at the immediate post-Liberation period is provided in Chapter II in order to give the reader a sense of the early history of the Chinese film industry and of the events that led to the Cultural Revolution.

¹ The Chinese government uses, and much prefers "liberation" as an alias for the 1949 official establishment of the People's Republic of China.

Table 1. The Five Periods of Chinese Film

Period	Influences:	Functions of China's cinema:
Pre-Liberation: Before 1949	Western cultural Imperialism; Indigenous culture.	Western cultural imposition; Entertainment.
Liberation to the Cultural Revolution: 1949-1966	Communism; Nationalism; Russian revolutionary film theories; Little western imposition.	Helping shape a mass national culture; Tool for mass education; Entertainment.
The Cultural Revolution: 1966-1976	Communism; Leftist/extreme nationalism; Continued resistance against western imperialism.	Propaganda; Establishing a more Chinese cinema or Sinification of film.
The New Era: 1979-1989	Revised Communism; Reform and Open Policy; Fear of Western cultural imperialism.	National cinema; Propaganda; Entertainment Westernization.
Post New Era: The 1990s	Socialism with Chinese Characteristics; Market economy; Western cultural imperialism.	Cultural products; Entertainment Westernization; Propaganda.

Pre-Liberation China and Chinese Film

The Chinese modern history began in 1911, the year in which *Xinhai*² *Gemin* (Revolution) took place and overthrew the Qing Dynasty. However, film was brought into China even before that revolution, in 1896. The revolution marked the end of China's over two thousand years of feudal monarchy. The *Xinhai* Revolution was led by Sun Yat-sen, a doctor-turned revolutionary whose political endeavors manifested a clear denunciation of Chinese feudalism, but were ambiguous about adopting a Western democracy system. *Guomin Dang* (or, KMT), the National Party he founded and the first real political party in China's history, proclaimed to be based on his *Sanmin Zhuyi* (Three Principles of the People) which defied any easy association with either western democracy ideals or Communism. However, he was apparently fascinated by the success of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and showed sympathy toward the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) founded in 1921. He even incorporated many Communists into the government and the military in order to build up an alliance against the many regional warlords. After Sun died, Chiang Kai-shek, the military leader of the young Republic, defeated and subjugated the war lords and thus seized the national power. Both Chiang and his wife were Christians, which was quite unusual and upper class in China's political arena. Chiang adamantly objected to Communism and adopted a more pro-West stand in his authoritarian rule.

² *Xinhai* is one of 60 words that Chinese use to put years into a Chinese traditional calendar. 1911 is one of the *Xinhai* years.

The Chinese film industry took shape alongside these political upheavals in Shanghai, among other treaty-port cities which leased tracts of land to different western countries (including the United States, the Great Britain, France). *Zujie* (the Leased land) was not only the residence for respective foreign citizens, but also always one of the most prosperous business centers and provided soil for the entry and shaping of institutionalized western practices of business and entertainment of which film was one of the most important. Early Hollywood movies were shown regularly in the theaters in Shanghai. *Zujie* ceased to exist at the end of World War Two when China was formally regarded as a nation state and one of the allied countries.

The core Communists and the Red Army, under Chiang's consistent military pressure, however, were forced to relocate themselves in the county of Yan'an which is in the mountainous remote west province of Shaanxi. The Red Army kept and expanded its military force during the War of Resistance to Japan, which lasted for eight years from 1937 to 1945. Japan's surrender in 1945 marked the end of World War Two for the world, but for China, peace had yet to come. The three-year civil war between the People's Liberation Army (PLA, formerly the Red Army) led by Mao Zedong, and the Nationalist government army resulted in the PLA's victory and the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The other Republic of China retreated to the island of Taiwan (Formosa) and has maintained her sovereignty there till now.

After the People's Republic's establishment in 1949, Chinese film became the medium that had the most mass appeal because it did not demand literacy, and thus was more accessible to an audience that consisted of workers, peasants and soldiers, an

audience quite different from its treaty-port Shanghai counterparts before the Liberation. A longer discussion of this period immediately after the Liberation will be provided in Chapter II.

Organization of the Thesis

The Cultural Revolution Era (1966 – 1976) is examined in Chapter II. The history and political background of Chinese film during that period are provided. Chinese film's political function and its interaction with China's indigenous art are especially discussed.

Although few films were produced during this period, Chinese film at that time provides fresh insight in terms of nationalism, communism and cultural imperialism. Chinese film, guided by the Party's cultural policy, for a long time and especially during the Cultural Revolution, was a three-pronged tool of propaganda, education, and proletarian entertainment. And more importantly, Chinese film took on a much zealous national character during the Cultural Revolution era and significantly contributed to the shaping of a new national culture/identity that constituted the core of resistance against a Western, and even Soviet Union's, cultural imperialism.

Jay Leyda's monographic *Dianying: An Introduction of Films and the Film Audience in China* published in 1972 covers Chinese cinema up to the end of the Cultural Revolution. Chinese cinema, during the Cultural Revolution and even opener period before it, according to Jay Leyda, , was "more strictly organized than any other branch of cultural activity." Actually the terrible political atmosphere at that time made any artistically conscientious filmmaking impossible. Leyda makes his sympathy very clear,

I'm sorry for the talented filmmakers, many of whom will disappear or die without showing what they were capable of, and I'm sorry for the Chinese audience, who are fed so watery a film diet when they need the most robust of dramatic forms. (Leyda, 1972, xvi)

The New Era (1976 – 1989) is examined in Chapter III. I will look carefully into the dynamic relationship between the changing politics of a more open China and the development of Chinese cinema, and I will particularly study the respective debut works of two important directors, Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou, and attempt to discover their social, cultural and political importance.

The New Era was the most vigorous period of Chinese film so far in terms of quantity of production, the shaping of national cinema, and the international recognition of celebrated Chinese films and directors. Thanks to the *Gaige Kaifang* (Reform and Open) policy adopted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) after the historic 1978 *Sanzhong Quanhui* (the Third Plenum Session of the 11th Congress of the CCP), the Party shifted its agenda from class struggle to economic construction, and thus loosened up its once strict content censorship of cultural products. The film industry completed its reform during this period, and films that would explore the impact of the calamitous Cultural Revolution on ordinary people's lives were allowed to be produced. As Paul Clark (1987) put it, there is this "growing distinction drawn by intellectuals, including filmmakers, between political powerholders and themselves,..., [and] readier acknowledgement of more ordinary, personal concerns." It is during this era that terms

like the Fifth Generation³ came into fashion for film critics as well as Chinese film researchers domestic and overseas. Directors like Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou entered the international film scenario and won recognition in renowned film festivals worldwide. Before the 1980s, Chinese film was such an exotic domain to the outside world that only a few film academics like Leyda had the chance to be in touch with it. Suddenly, Chinese film seemed to be speaking a language that the outside world not only understood but also appreciated. However, this period was ended abruptly, though not unexpectedly, by changed policies regarding mass media after the Chinese government suppressed the pro-West Tian'anmen Square democracy movement in 1989.

The Post New Era, or, the Post-Tian'anmen Era, is examined in Chapter IV. I will continue examination of the changing political scenario of China which is striving for "socialism with Chinese Characteristics"(quoting the official slogan.) I also will continue reviewing films by the aforesaid two directors, Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou. The selections justify themselves in terms of political relevance.

After the 1989 Tian'anmen Square movement, the government has sustained a high level of vigilance toward pro-West (in terms of human rights, democracy, religious freedom, etc.) elements in Chinese cultural products. *Zhu Xuanlu*⁴ films flourish by virtue of generous government funding or subsidies, and an apparent trend toward commercialization and transnationalization as a result of the transition to a market

³ The Fifth Generation refers to a group of film directors who are mostly graduates of Beijing Film Institute in 1982, including such famous directors as Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, and Tian Zhuangzhuang.

⁴ *Zhu Xuanlu*, roughly translated in English as Main Themes, refer to films that say high praise of historical Communist leaders, the PLA's past victorious wars, and contemporary government events. Or as Chris

economy that China now is experiencing. An interesting phenomenon in today's Chinese cinema is that movies with controversial (actually a more appropriate phrase is "politically sensitive") subjects are continuously banned in China's domestic market, but still make their way into China after being "politically" re-edited⁵. As in the words of Sheldon Lu,

Under the dual pressure of censorship and the rapid shrinking of the domestic market, entering the international market seems to be the inevitable solution. Even well before the shooting of a film, a director may have already decided to abandon the domestic market. He is prepared for his film's being banned in China. Chinese filmmakers are active in seeking external, foreign funding. Joint film production is the rule, not the exception today. The filmmakers invest an interest in their films' commercial value. (Lu, 1997b, p.131)

The Post New Era, lies within a much broader, yet complicated global context. Also research on this era crosses a wider array of discourses that include Third World cinema, cultural imperialism, and post-colonialism.

Limitations and Goals

A comprehensive study of Chinese cinema in terms of nationalism, colonialism and cultural imperialism with a web of sub-issues such as politics, ideology, identity, narrativity and culture is somehow beyond the scope of this research. This research, in a limited attempt, that draws upon the advantage of the researcher's native Chinese background, tries to outline the dynamic relationship of the Communist government to

Berry (1993) who has a remarkable knowledge of both Chinese cinema and Chinese language, translated the phrase as "*leitmotif*," using a musical term.

⁵ However, there are movies that are banned without having any near hope of re-entering China's film market, like Tian Zhuangzhuang's 1994 movie *Lan Fengzheng* (*Blue Kite*) which describes a personal tragedy in the Cultural Revolution.

the development of Chinese film within a changing national and global context, through the specified time periods. The thesis provides a view of the nation through its cinema, and vice versa. Cinema can be understood as narrative representation of a nation, and in this particular case of Chinese cinema, as intertwined intricately with the nation's political and ideological struggle.

This research, besides carefully examining the trajectory of Chinese politics in relation to that of Chinese film, explores at a more "personal" level as well as national and global levels. This approach proves particularly productive in the case of the new Chinese cinema which has seen a dual flow of political contentions between film artists and the government. Recent Chinese movies which have won international recognition can serve as the subject for different cultural and political readings. On one hand, directors like Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige are recognized as representatives of Chinese film and their works take on an appeal exotically attractive and thematically acceptable to the western audience; on the other hand, the fact that Zhang and Chen's movies are more often banned and re-edited in China makes it irresistible, for both the Chinese and western audience, to read their works in a more politicized context, and naturally, would lead us to wonder about the way in which these directors interact with the Chinese government. My studies of these two individual directors' *cinema personne* lead to an expanded interpretation of Chinese culture and politics, and the transnationalization /globalization process of Chinese film.

Chinese film analysis is confused by a somewhat uncontrollable inclination toward analysis of aesthetics and filming techniques that compound the sinification of

cinema. In this research, analyses of film aesthetics and techniques are intentionally limited, done only wherever necessary as a supplement to my studies of the model Peking opera films and the two individual directors' films.

CHAPTER II

THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION ERA (1966-1976)

The Pre-1966 Period

The People's Republic of China was established in 1949 after the Communists defeated the republican Nationalists in the mainland of China. Even the young Republic was hardly stable in its first years. It was not until 1952 that the PLA fully controlled Xinjiang, Uygur Autonomous Region and Tibet, and even then, the PLA failed to recover Taiwan where the Nationalist retreated due to the intervention of the United States. The young Republic also devoted a large sum of its military equipment and personnel in support of the Korean Communist Party in the Korean War of the early 50s. The newly-established socialist planned-economy which followed a forceful liquidation of any capitalist-like business in nearly every part of China, was heavily involved by these continuous wars. However, the political atmosphere was relatively bearable and the CPC cultivated its "socialist democracy" in the 1956 Hundred Flowers Movement which invited disclosures from every walk of life on the Party and government's problems. However, this Hundred Flowers Movement turned out to be a conspiracy that the Party pre-planned to stage a nationwide Anti-Rightist campaign in the following year in which many people most of whom were bold intellectuals and artists who had been glibble enough to criticize the Party and government ended up in prison. Even some high-ranking Party officials who

CHAPTER II

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appeared to be challenging Mao Zedong's leadership in the Party and government shared that unhappy fate.

A devastating economic mobilization called *Da Yuejin* (the Great Leap Forward, meaning the socialist economy would soon have a great leap forward and outperform that of the Western capitalism) was to follow, in which the masses were mobilized to set up primitive furnaces everywhere to manufacture steel. However, those furnaces and the "steel" coming out of them could not meet industrial standards and thus proved useless. The result was a three-year long nation-wide famine from 1960 to 1962 which ripped apart about 30 million people's lives.⁶

Attribution of all these crises only to the inconsistency of the CCP's national policies is oversimplifying, if not misleading. The zealous Chinese people, thirsty for identification with a strong united China, greatly contributed to the expansion of nationalism. Communism, or only socialism as termed in China at that time, gave the majority of Chinese people hope for a better China that would no longer exist under the "Big Mountain" of oppression of Western imperialism. Mao Zedong, as early as in his Yan'an period, categorized China under the Nationalist government a "half-feudal, half-colonial" society, and noted that "the central theme of the long story is China's humiliation at the hands of imperialists." (Apter, 1993) The Chinese people, including the elite intellectuals, for the most part, agreed with Mao's theoretic framework and revolutionary agenda for a reconstruction of a war-ruined China.

On the Rostrum of Tian'anmen Square on October 1st of 1949, Chairman Mao declared to the world the establishment of the People's Republic. Notably, he finished his speech by powerfully delivering a simple sentence, "*Zhongguo Renmin Zhanqilaile!*" (The Chinese people have stood up!) which became quickly one of those typical Mao's quotes that unflinchingly for nearly 30 years before his death touched upon the national psyche and lifted up the whole nation's national dignity. A clip of Mao declaring this sentence has repeatedly appeared in an enormously varied collection of documentaries, TV shows, TV series and movies.

From this perspective, Communism (or Socialism during that time), was closely intertwined with a strongly-felt Nationalism that had been accumulated since the Western imperialists entered China and colonized many of the most prosperous coastal and riverine cities. Westerners, along with their industrial equipment, cultural products and daily commodities have long been in a position for paradoxical reception by the Chinese people. On one hand, The May Fourth movement in 1919, mobilized by young students and supported by elite intellectuals, gave rise to a painstaking journey seeking an alternative modernization framework in the name of "salvaging" the 5000-year old Chinese civilization. Modernization, as Third World now views it, has been a hidden alias for Westernization, though it is termed to avoid being identified with the other. Both capitalism and communism have their distinctive western roots. On the other hand, the fact that China used to be exploited heavily by the western imperialists, plus the

⁶ The number of death was ranged from 20 million to 40 million according to different sources, 30 million is the most cited figure. However, the Chinese government still blames natural disasters for the famine, and

humiliating existence of two colonies of Hong Kong and Macao that were still in the hands of the Great Britain and Portugal respectively⁷, makes it easy for the spread of nationalism. Nationalism, even before the Communists took over the national power, was encouraged, nourished and supported by those propaganda pamphlets and “revolutionary” poems written by the leftist and pro-Communist writers and artists. After the People’s Republic’s establishment, a feverish nationalism was legitimized by the Communist discourse promoting a new Soviet national identity.

The Soviet Union, built on the ruins of the Russian Empire, was absent from the Chinese list of Western enemies, thanks to the proletarian friendship that was supposed to surpass the boundaries of race and nationality. In order to help the government build up a Soviet-modeled planned economy, the Soviet Union dispatched to China a huge number of experienced engineers and technicians (officially called “Soviet specialists or advisors”). However, the friendship ended in 1960 when the conflict between the two Socialist systems went public and China saw a rapid departure of the Soviet advisors.

Chinese Film: A Shaper of National Culture

As early as in the spring of 1942, at a forum held in the Red Army’s base area of Yan’an, Mao Zedong delivered to an audience of elite Communists and leftist artists from Shanghai his, and the Party’s interpretation of the function of art under the new revolutionary circumstances. His speeches were later referred to as Talks at the Yan’an

terms it as *Sannian Ziran Zaihai* (Three-Years’ of Natural Disasters.)

Forum on Literature and Art, and became the most authoritative theoretical framework for China's cultural policies. Clark (1987) in his study of Chinese film's Yan'an tradition, finds in Mao's talks two central emphases: "that literature and art should serve political purposes, and that art should seek to widen its audiences."

A wider audience, in Mao's own words should consist of "workers, peasants, and soldiers, together with their cadres in the Party, the government, and the army." Mao looked to Shanghai, then the most important center of art and literature in which film already attracted growing attention from both ordinary people and the Nationalist government, for evidence of the different political purposes art and literature could serve. To his knowledge, the pro-West Nationalist (KMT) government, by catering to a bourgeois and colonial audience, had "kept workers, peasants, and soldiers away from literature and art." Using Leninist terminology, Mao stressed, "[i]nsofar as a work is reactionary, the more artistic it is the more harm it can do to the people and the more it should be rejected." The priority of political, or in a more explicit term, propaganda purpose, of literature or other art forms was somehow central to Mao's outlook of art.

Is it that Mao sensed, at a very early stage, all those vestiges of western cultural imperialism that would jeopardize the Chineseness that culturally united the nation together? It is true that, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and other treaty-port cities, were the most un-Chinese cities. Though not fully colonized, a considerable, and usually prosperous part of these cities gave full sovereignty rights to the western foreigners for their

⁷ The British colony of Hong Kong was back to China's sovereignty formally on July 1st of 1997; The Portuguese colony of Macao is to be handed back to China formally on December 20th. of 1999.

residences and businesses. The varied western style architecture thus set up on the Chinese land as well as the accompanying exotic ways of entertainment and even the western suits could be offensive to some, and inevitably provided the subject for a "Third World gaze." Film, however, the most fancy yet influential western art and entertainment introduced to China, served as a channel through which Chinese were "attracted to," and "corresponded to the values" of the West, and in this case, Hollywood. "Before 1949, more than three-quarters of the films that filled China's screens were imported, mostly from Hollywood." (Clark, 1988) The film audiences in the most western treaty-port cities, like Shanghai, were quite different from the majority of Chinese living in the "more Chinese" places.

Mao Zedong's denunciation of the Nationalist (KMT) government's pro-West policies and his Yan'an Talks' explicit promotion of a national art and literature that would serve the interests of peasants, workers and soldiers, and an equally urgent call for artists and writers to abandon their bourgeois background and adapt completely to a proletarian world outlook, could be both an adoption of the socialist model implemented in the Soviet Union and a nationalist reaction toward imminent fear of western cultural imperialism.

Even though Mao made little mention of film in his influential *Talks*, Lenin's view of film as "the most important art" for the proletariat, and the Party's will to expand its influence even in the Nationalist-controlled areas brought film into an important political battle-front. Though the majority of films people watched before the Communist take-over in 1949 were imported Hollywood movies, local film studios in Shanghai

began to make movies with distinct leftist, or termed at that time “progressive” (*jinbu*) elements that denounced the evil nature of capitalism and the appeasement policy the KMT government adopted in relation to the invading Japanese. However, these “progressive” filmmakers and actors were largely in an underground and insurgent position and went all the way to the Communist base in Yan’an to flee persecution from the 1930s on.

Even before the Communist victory in 1949, the Party sent some film personnel to Moscow to study the established Soviet revolutionary film system. These personnel, together with the leftist artists in Shanghai, Beijing and Guangzhou helped the Party transform the old film industry to one that could produce movies for a wider, and more “revolutionary” audience of “workers, peasants and soldiers.” Of course, Russian revolutionary films were taking the place of which the Hollywood imports once enjoyed in the local theaters. However, after the CCP broke economic ties, and escalated military confrontation with the Soviet Union in the early 60s, blaming the Russian Communist Party for betrayal of Leninism, while the latter labeled the CCP as Dogmatism, Chinese cinema saw a rapid cleansing of imported Russian films, which left only a handful of old Russian revolutionary films that were permitted to be shown in the country. Films from two allied communist countries, North Korea and Albania, began to be the staple of an already scarce film reserve. It is interesting to note that these imported films still attracted most of the Chinese film audience. Park Clark attributed this phenomenon to the overwhelming foreignness associated with film art,

To be sure, the choice of the Tirana studios as supplier of the imports that filled the void when Chinese film production stopped for almost five years after 1966

was a political one, when China and Albania were largely isolated from the wider intercourse of nations. But to most Chinese film viewers perhaps this did not matter as much as the fact that what was on the screen was a window to a wider world, even if that world was Hoxha's Albania or Kim Il-song's Korea. (Clark, 1988, p.176)

This, however, is only part of the scenario of the Cultural Revolution, *Jingju* (Peking Opera), the indigenous popular art form that has had a history of more than 200 years, closely interacted with Chinese cinema and produced the particular film genre of *yangban xi* (model Peking opera) film.

Yangban Xi: Political Function and Indigenous Art

The prelude to the onset of the Cultural Revolution is a politically intentioned critic debate on a Peking opera called *Hai Rui Baguan* (*Hai Rui's Resignation*⁸). Mao's faction, including his wife Jiang Qing, Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan⁹, criticized this opera severely on its alleged Rightist, and anti-socialism intention, while the other party, represented by the Beijing Municipal Party Committee, which had been challenging Mao's leadership (dictatorship) in the Politburo, maintained that "an opera is just an opera", and tried, later proved to be futile, to limit this ill-willed debate to the domain of scholarly criticism. However, the debate ended up in the dismissal of the Beijing Municipal Party Committee and personal persecution applied to its key members.

⁸ Another English translation of *Hai Rui Baguan* is "*Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*," as appeared in D. W. Y. Kwok's 1996 translation of Yan Jiaqi and Gao Gao's 1986 book *Zhongguo Wenge Shinihao Shi*, which remains to be the only monographic historical account of the Cultural Revolution and is banned in China.

⁹ The latter three, later together with Wang Hongwen, gradually took over the leadership of the Politburo of the CCP, and are now referred to as Gang of Four.

Mao's justification of the launch of a nation-wide mobilization of students, which were to be called *Hong Weibing* (Red Guards), was the alleged danger he felt in China's taking a revisionist road toward the restoration of capitalism and in an apparent loosening up of "class struggle" he sensed was encouraged by the faction supporting Liu Shaoqi, who was then the nation's Chairman. Mao's resistance to Revisionism should be, in his vision, in the form of a "*cultural*" deconstruction, of nearly every part of the national apparatus. As Yan Jianqi, in his monographic study of the Cultural Revolution, observes,

He[Mao] pointed out that such fields as literature, history, law, and economics must conduct a Great Cultural Revolution, must resolutely criticize, and must reveal the exact extent of their own Marxism-Leninism. He declared China should cultivate its own young scholarly authorities, and that young people should not be afraid of 'royal decrees.' (Yan, 1986/1996, p.32)

With the spread of the Cultural Revolution, people who had power in every walk of life were challenged by the insurgents, and the insurgents usually prevailed. It is true that the Cultural Revolution launched in 1966 under the auspices of Mao Zedong has its root deeply planted in not only the fierce and culminating factional struggle within the Communist leadership but also the fragility of a society that was ridden with wars and mass movements ever since the beginning of this century. The direct cause of the Cultural Revolution is a political one. However the adjective, "Cultural" might be taken literally, especially when China was to experience a series of drastic changes in various aspects of cultural activities.

Film, in its tradition of being a revolutionary tool for the Communist Party, had to be reconstructed. And the "reform" was manipulated by a sole figure, Jiang Qing, Mao's wife. Film, besides being an effective tool for the centralization of power Mao needed,

was also regarded in this scenario as a great propaganda battle field. As Paul Clark has pointed out,

As the most foreign artistic medium, staffed by former colleagues from cosmopolitan Shanghai, film was seen as a challenge to the insurgents' cultural policies, unless properly controlled....film became even more a tool or medium and less of an art or entertainment than it had ever been during the pre-Cultural Revolution years. (Clark, 1987, p.138)

Jiang Qing, who herself had been an actress in port-city Shanghai in the 30s, was at first enthusiastic about revolutionizing the traditional Peking opera whose historical contents were based on folklore from previous feudal dynasties and thus were no longer acceptable to the new revolutionary audience. Themes that sang high praise of the workers, peasants and soldiers began to take over. Eight scripts were approved after being carefully examined by Jiang Qing herself in terms of political correctness. These eight Peking operas remained for almost ten years as the only performances allowed in local theaters and thus were called the "eight revolutionary *yangban xi*" (model Peking operas).

For a time, the 'eight model dramas' were the only forms of expression of Chinese literature and art; they were the only dramas permitted to be performed by opera troupes around the country. Different local dramatic troupes all adapted them. The symphony *Shajiabang* and the arias of *Red Lantern* accompanied by piano were the only choices for those orchestras with mainly Western musical instruments. At all receptions, including those for foreign guests, only one of the eight dramas could be presented. (Yan, 1996, p.401)

Jiang Qing's apparently successful revolutionization of the Peking operas corresponds closely to Mao's Yan'an Talks which promoted at a very early time the formation of a new, in this sense revolutionary, national culture to serve the interests of a wider audience of to-be-liberated proletariat. Peking opera, an indigenous performing art with a tradition

of nearly 200 years and hundreds of artistically enduring operas, was greatly reduced to eight “modernized” *yangban xi*. *Yangban xi* abandoned the traditional costumes and used the contemporary costumes, in most cases the military uniforms or peasant’s clothing.

Yangban xi is a perfect hybrid of adopted communist ideology and nationalism. Note that *yangban xi* were only stage performances, and not movies. Many local Peking opera troupes brought these eight model operas to the audience. A natural next step for the revolutionary Peking opera reformer of Jiang Qing was to transfer those *yangban xi* to Chinese film to have a wider influence and to deepen the Cultural Revolution.

After Jiang Qing and her Gang took over the cultural apparatus in the first year of the Cultural Revolution, work at all levels of film production virtually stopped. It was not until 1970 that film production resumed with the first model opera film *Zhiqiu weihushan* (*Taking Tiger Mountain by Stratagem*) by Beijing Film Studio under authorization from Jiang Qing. The film, together later with other model Peking opera films, adopted the formalism of the model Peking opera, in an attempt to create a new film aesthetic as part of a new mass culture. As Paul Clark (1987) has observed, “Jiang Qing and her allies turned to the modernized ‘model operas’ as the epitome of the new mass culture and new film style. These operas were models both for the modernization of the operatic arts and for a whole new culture.”

In order to apply a full rejection of the “bourgeois” taste and style that was easily associated with cinematic art, a set of principles called *san tuchu* (three prominences, or emphases) was strictly followed by Chinese filmmakers until the end of the Cultural

Revolution era. The Three Prominences are, using a literal translation¹⁰, “give prominence to the positive among all the characters; give prominence to the heroes among the positive; give prominence to the major heroes among the heroes.” Though smacking of a rigid formalism characteristic of Communist literature, this approach might have had a closer tie to the formalism inherent in that indigenous art, Peking opera. An observation made by a Soviet filmmaker Grigori Chukhrai on Chinese film published in an October 1962 issue of *Films and Filming* (a London magazine) hints that Chinese film development might have already taken a more indigenous direction, rather than the Soviet film legacy,

I[Grigori Chukhrai] have been asked if the Soviet new wave is likely to influence other Socialist countries. This is a complex problem. For instance, there is a great difference between Chinese and Czechoslovak films. The Chinese films are an example of the dogmatic and anti-artistic way of thinking....The Chinese people themselves are not without emotions. They have as many as any man. But their films do not express this. Dogmatism and the process of logic are not essentials of art and with dogmatism and logic alone the Chinese artist cannot make good films. (Reprinted in Leyda, 1972, p.283)

However, rigidity in the formalism required by the century-old performing opera art contributed to the artlessness of Chinese film during the Cultural Revolution, as greatly as did Dogmatism that sustained the very political spirit of Mao’s Yan’an Talks.

In terms of this formalism, the transference of *yangban xi* to the screen also influenced greatly the later feature films most of which were on military topics, either in a setting of War of Resistance to Japan, or the Civil War. “In characterization and plot, therefore, the new films reflected a traditional Chinese lack of concern for artistic

¹⁰ Please see p. xxi of Introduction to *Chinese Film Theory*, George Semsel, et al. (Eds.), 1990.

originality.” (Clark, 1987) The exaggerated generalization makes film characters easily predictable, and thus very uninteresting. Though film production was resumed in the early 70s, it was still slow due to strict political control. Film supply remained short because of the banning of most films previously shown, both imported and domestic. It was possible for a film viewer to watch the same movie more than a dozen times a year.

The “revolution” Chinese film experienced through *yangban xi* constituted in a great part a decades long effort by the Chinese to create a new national culture that could enforce a strong nationhood and Chinese identity. The sinification of film, the most western mass medium ever introduced, under the circumstances of the Cultural Revolution, on one hand, was a result of the factional campaign Mao and Jiang waged against their opponents within the Party; and, on the other hand, was a rare case of indigenous culture pursuing its own narratives through a western medium. It was during the Cultural Revolution that only eight model Peking operas and their film versions could be watched for entertainment. That entertainment constituted propaganda plus mass education. It was then that, “the more artistic, the more it should be rejected,” Mao’s assertion back in 40s, became simply a motto and reality for China’s filmmaking.

However, before this *yangban xi* film took root, Mao died in 1976 and Jiang’s Gang of Four fell in the same year, which marked the end of a turbulent decade of the Cultural Revolution. A new transformation was on the way, and the new leadership of the CCP sought both legitimatization and a resurrection of a national economy which was on the verge of collapse (Yan, 1996). Film production was revived, though not at a fast pace, as Chinese film awaited its New Era.

CHAPTER III

THE NEW ERA (1979-1989)

Gaige Kaifang: Reform and Open

Though the Cultural Revolution ended in the late 1976, a leftist stand was somehow still sustained by the immediate successors who could not find a better legitimatization than the influence and authority Mao might still exert if he had not died. Hua Guofeng, then Chairman of the CCP, pronounced, in the following year of Mao's death, a Party decree that quickly developed into another cause for the factionalist struggle within the Party. The decree, which claimed that "every decision by Mao is right, and every directive by Mao is right," was an effort made by the leftist hard-liners to continue Mao's cult and prevent a drastic change in the political upper structure. Though the successors blamed much of the turmoil during the Cultural Revolution on the Gang of Four, Mao, as the Chairman that never left office, could not be exempt from the responsibility for all the policy decisions. The moderates, or reformists within the Party, challenged this effort of sustaining Mao's "class struggle" policy, and finally won out in *Sanzhong Quanhui*, the Third Plenum Session of the 11th Congress of the CCP held in December 1978. Deng Xiaoping, Zhao Ziyang and Hu Yaobang respectively took the offices of the Central Military Committee, the Central Government, and the Party, and apparently, in an attempt to re-establish the legitimacy and authority of the CCP,

admitted to the country that the Party had made mistakes in the last three decades. Thus, Mao himself could not be absolutely right and had made some mistakes, especially the launch of the calamitous Cultural Revolution.

The lesson Deng, the actual leader of the “tripartite,” learned was a profound one. Deng, who himself had been removed from office and persecuted during the Cultural Revolution, had to remedy the trauma the leftist policy, The Cultural Revolution in its extreme, had caused the country both politically and economically. However, the very same roots he shared with the leftists made it impossible for the dominating communist ideology to be dismissed.

Deng’s faction, in *Sanzhong Quanhui*, shifted the Party’s leadership of “class struggle” to that of “economic construction,” and engaged the whole country in *sihua*, or “four modernizations,” namely “modernization of agriculture, modernization of industry, modernization of science, and modernization of national defense,” which meant that China had to re-open itself to the world. *Gaige kafa* (reform and open) was thus adopted as both a Party decree and national policy. The dilemma is that modernization and an “open” policy inevitably implies a re-assessment of the West which could be politically, ideologically and culturally disturbing within a country burdened by the historical conjuncture of dignified nationalism and Maoist communism. The approach Deng adopted was one of loosening up the political climate and allowing more freedom in the cultural production line. As Paul Clark observes,

Deng Xiaoping and other leaders realized that the Party could not do everything, and that narrowing the scope of Party intervention in society might also narrow the range of Party responsibility for intractable problems....Artists and cultural leaders discussed, more frankly than they had done since 1956-7, the

shortcomings of the film system and the need for allowing artists greater creative autonomy. (Clark, 1987, p.155)

After the end of the Cultural Revolution, hundreds of previously-banned films again appeared in local cinemas, but not until Deng controlled the Party in 1978 did the film industry stop the production of model films and take on a reform agenda. That was, however, only a very limited “let-it-go” period. The Party continued to presume that it provided the cultural leadership necessary for the adopted communist ideology to take root in China.

The reform of the Chinese film industry was part of the economic reform China was undergoing at that time. The economic reform was carried out at two levels: at the domestic level, the government began to allow the peasants to “lease” (*chengbao*) the land for a certain period, which virtually dismantled the commune system forbidding private ownership of land; at the international level, China opened its border, and resumed trading with western countries which, not long ago, had been perceived as both corrupt and reactionary in respect to the revolutionary course represented by China. The reform, though under constant resistance from the hard liners within the Party, gradually proved itself to be economically effective, though ideologically compromising. Having not yet found a convincing theoretic remedy for Communism at stake, Deng, on one hand, forcefully maintained the sacredness of the Four Basis Principles, to which the country would forever adhere: 1. Socialist construction; 2. proletarian dictatorship; 3. CCP leadership; 4. Marxism, Leninism, and Mao Zedong’s Thoughts. On the other hand, he found that economic pragmatism might soothe both the Party conservatives as well as people who wanted a thorough re-evaluation of the Cultural Revolution and the

legitimacy of the CCP, which was manifested in the short-lived and suppressed Democracy Wall movement in 1978.

In short, this was an economically promising while politically ambiguous era. It was also the new era for Chinese film. Content control in the form of censorship was relaxed as long as it did not challenge the fundamental Four Basic Principles. As Paul Clark has summarized,

At the turn of the 1980s Chinese film directly reflected the concerns and problems of the nation as a whole to an extent not seen since the late 1940s. Many of the new films, like contemporary short stories and plays, were set in the Cultural Revolution, or explained their characters' current difficulties by reference to those years. (Clark, 1987, p.154)

Strict government control of people's cultural life, as exemplified in the country's unbelievable repertoire of the eight model Peking operas and like model films during Cultural Revolution, was somehow lifted up and began catching up with at least the standards of the seventeen-year period (1949-1966) before the Cultural Revolution (Semsel, 1990). Films began to address a much wider range of issues, including implicit or explicit denunciation of the Cultural Revolution and more personal issues that might not serve the Party's political agenda. A boost of the film industry as a whole was also felt. Ma Qiang, a native film scholar, provides some critical statistics,

[T]he Chinese film industry enjoyed rapid development in the first half of the decade. In 1980, 84 feature films were produced, with the number of moviegoers totaling 234 billion, which meant an average of 29 films per person that year. In 1984, 144 films were produced, a number exceeding even the expectations of the government....Furthermore, new film institutions have been mushrooming. In 1985, they increased to 190,000, with fifteen million employees. (Ma, 1988, pp.167-8)

Despite the expansion of the film industry, it was still not working in a way that could generate a big profit for the government. The decline of box office was somehow inevitable for a country that suddenly began to initiate its television network, and financial difficulty was felt throughout the industry,

In 1984, only twenty-six billion tickets were sold, down 10 percent from 1980. In their first quarter of 1985, the moviegoing audience was 30 percent smaller than during the same period the previous year. The result has been a loss of revenue of RMB 9.36 million (\$3.12 million.) (Ma, 1988, p.168)

That the film industry began to pay attention to its own financial difficulty reflected an important change of the political economy of the country. When we look back on the Cultural Revolution period, what we find is incredibly reduced national cinema that was backed up by a surprisingly high budget. Money had not been of concern for film production under Mao's dictum that film was the Party's propaganda and education tool and funded directly from the state. The film industry was state-owned and a centralized enterprise. During the Cultural Revolution, a huge sum of money was spent producing disproportionately few model films, as Paul Clark points out,

The Film Bureau estimated in 1978 that the fixed capital of the seven major film studios had increased by 184% between 1966 and 1976, in contrast to the great decrease of the number of films produced in those years. (Clark, 1987, p.139)

Not only the film industry, but all Chinese cultural production enterprises were state-owned and highly centralized. For example, during the Cultural Revolution, the state-controlled publishing line consumed a big sum out of the state coffer simply for the proliferation of Mao's works, including his *Quotes* and *Selected Works*,

...during the 10 years of the Cultural Revolution more than 40 billion volumes of Mao's works were printed and distributed, constituting, in mid 1979, 8 percent of all unsold books in China....Approximately 85 million yuan in interest-free loans

had been made available by state banks to produce this revolutionary tide of paper. (Barme, 1996, p.9)

However, in the New Era, under the new "Reform and Open" economic strategy, though the film industry was still state-owned and directly funded, the financial budget of a local studio began to be associated with the cost and profit induced by films production and distribution, which meant each major studio had to manage its investment and production carefully to ensure a minimum of box office in order not to get its budget cut by the state. The decline of box office for domestic films was even more worrisome to the cultural bureaucrats when it was juxtaposed with the increasing popularity of imported Hong Kong and western movies which could be put into a larger entertainment category, including kung fu, detective and light comedies. The major studios, though they had stopped making model films and had turned to interesting films relevant to people's lives, still were producing "propaganda" films in support of the current Party policies. It took years of debate and ill practice within the film industry before a significant pattern shift became necessary if the industry wanted to keep its audience. As Chris Berry puts it,

No longer was the discussion of money and profits beyond the pale. The economic policies that had been pushing studios to keep an eye on the bottom line since the turn of the decade were finally out in the open. Complaints about studios who made commercial films being money-minded also disappeared. (Berry, 1991b p.118)

However, the interaction between the Party, film artists and the audience in this New Era was a complicated one, and could not be simplified as only a shift toward commercialization. And a later burst of Chinese film, as represented by the works of the Fifth Generation, was not to be interpreted in only economic terms. The majority of the Fifth Generation films made before the 1989 Tian'anmen democracy movement was

acclaimed more for their cultural, political and ideological explorations rather than for being commercially successful.

The Fifth Generation: Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou

Though suffering from unprofitable production, Chinese film had never before been allowed such autonomy and freedom from political contingencies since the establishment of the People's Republic. Deng's declining intervention, even though strongly tied to the political bottom line of the Four Basic Principles, distanced the Party to a tolerable, if not comfortable, position for both the old and new film artist. As Ma Qiang has observed,

Despite the fact that mainstream films are still being produced as poor propaganda or crude entertainment, some relatively new directors who have been exposed to a large number of foreign films and contemporary film theories, and who have enjoyed the freedom of artistic expression that previous generations never had, have made a number of films that have been internationally acclaimed, even though they have often been failures at the box office. (Ma, 1988, p.170)

However, the freedom the film studios had in selecting film topics and even actual composing and selecting screenplays was still very limited under the careful State censoring process, though censorship was much less strict than compared to that of the last three decades. The provincial studios' administrations still took pains to produce films that would serve the political task the Film Bureau or the Ministry of Radio, Film and Television¹¹ assigned. Studios were assigned different quotas for propaganda movies,

¹¹ In March 1986, the Film Bureau became to be affiliated with the newly expanded Ministry of Radio, Film and Television, which was supposed to facilitate the management of the three mass media at both state and local level.

either of the contemporary achievements of the *Gaige Kafang* (Reform and Open) policies, or past glory of the Red Army or PLA. As Wu Tianming, head of Xi'an Film Studio, explains, "there are three audiences that have to be satisfied in China. One is the Government, one is the art world, and one is the ordinary popular audience....for the government, at the moment it is reform movies." (Berry, 1986)

1982 saw the graduation of a group of young, talented and ambitious film students from the Beijing Film Institute, whom later were labeled as the Fifth Generation in comparison to their previous alumni. Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou, Tian Zhuangzhuang, Zhang Junzhao, Wu Ziniu, among others, were assigned jobs in different local studios, and quickly made themselves a name in Chinese film circles. This fast success was possible thanks to the reform taking place in the film industry in accordance with the new state economic policies. A new film graduate usually endured a long apprenticeship before he or she could formally be assigned as a director or cinematographer, which would happen around his or her 40s (Rayns, 1991). The Fifth Generation graduates got a chance to expedite this process mainly because the local studios to which they were assigned happened to be small, faraway from the political center of Beijing, and usually possessed limited personnel resources. Guangxi Film Studio, in the south-east border province of Guangxi, gave young filmmakers, like Zhang Junzhao, and Zhang Yimou, unprecedented opportunity and political confidence, which they used to shoot the first Fifth Generation movie, *Yige he bage* (*One and Eight*). This film turned out to be a film different from any previous ones in terms of its political purpose or implication. As Tony Rayns has pointed out,

... the film [*One and Eight*] had a conspicuously unreverential attitude to the role of the Communist army. Inevitably, the Film Bureau in Beijing objected, particularly to the representation of the wronged Communist Officer. Many changes were demanded before the film was cleared for release....The revised version (which preserves the original 'look' of the film but crucially alters much of the meaning) was released in China with fair commercial success, but banned from export until 1987. (Rayns, 1991, p.108)

The success of *One and Eight* was more a political one than commercial, even though it was forced to be re-cut by State censorship. Its eventual release and an apparent absence of political consequences for the film team and the Studio, signaled a tolerance by the Communist regime for some old taboos and kindled among filmmakers a realistic hope for artistic creativity and political conscience. Encouraged by the common ideological mold the film broke, other Fifth Generation filmmakers began to make their own debuts, like Tian Zhuangzhuang's 1985 controversial *Liechang Zhasa (On the Hunting Ground)*, which, without exception, triggered critical debate within and without the Chinese film industry.

The apparent prosperity of the New Era largely pointed to the success, if not the whole picture, of our Fifth Generation directors. It would be misleading to assume that the revival of Chinese film was realized only by virtue of international recognition of some movies. The Fifth Generation contributed greatly to the maturation of a Chinese national cinema, even though their abstract, artistic and exploratory films which were such a phenomenon in the 80s, eventually got replaced by the more commercially promising ones under the market-wise circumstances of the 90s. The first wave of popularity for Fifth Generation films, however, triggered questions like: "what are the hidden political intentions," or "whether these new Chinese films are really Chinese or a

'synchronized' product of western cultural imperialism," rather than real financial concerns.

Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou, the two most internationally renowned Chinese directors, to a considerable degree, represented the New Era more than any other Fifth Generation directors. Chen and Zhang, are the most enduring and prolific directors compared to other Chinese filmmakers, who share many historical commonalities, yet stylistic differences. Both Chen and Zhang enjoy domestic as well as international profiles, as Paul Clark puts it, "Chen and Zhang chose a visual style that looks international but has deep Chinese roots." (Clark, 1987) It is this synergy between their respective Chinese roots, and western ways of reconstructing and representing Chinese life that not only has distinguished them in cinema but also has provided valuable cultural, political and ideological texts for research into China's new cinema. The rest of the Chapter is devoted to analysis of two early works by the two directors respectively.

In 1984 when Chen Kaige finished his film *Huang tudi (Yellow Earth)*, which trailblazed the Fifth Generation's path to the central stage of China's cinema and brought their challenging works to a much broader international audience. "Fifth Generation", along with the later much familiar names like Chen and Zhang, became a virtual synonym for Chinese film to foreign audiences for the time being.

Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth*, Chinese Film's Out-of-the-Dark Debut

The Beijing Studio where Chen Kaige served as an assistant to another famous director Huang Jianzhong had too long a waiting list for Chen to be able to quickly get an opportunity to direct his own film. Chen, apparently encouraged by a promising career future the faraway Guangxi Film Studio offered, asked for a transfer to join his classmate Zhang Yimou. Chen got approval for the transfer and teamed up with Zhang Yimou, then a cinematographer, and directed his first movie, *Huang tudi (Yellow Earth)* which was an immediate critical success for its fresh artistic maneuvering of a pretty simple plot.

The film is set in a remote rural area closer to the then Red Army base of Yan'an in the 30s when China was engaged in the War of Resistance to Japan. It's a setting that is unlikely to attract the Chinese audience which had been overfed with revolutionary themes. As a result, the film received very ordinary box office in its first releases in China. As one example shows,

..., this very film [*Yellow Earth*], which won many awards at numerous international festivals, when first released at home attracted only a small audience. A cinema in Beijing even had to apologize and refund tickets and replace the film with another program. (Ni, 1993, p.31)

The film, at first glance, does fit into the category of a typical film that a studio makes more for the government than for a mass audience. It would be no surprise for an ordinary moviegoer, seeing a Red Army soldier poster, to turn away to a much more

relaxing and enjoyable kung fu movie featuring Li Lianjie (Jet Lee) or Cheng Long (Jackie Chan)¹².

A careful viewing of the actual movie, however, reveals a political context far beyond the Party propaganda, a context which on the contrary, might be quite politically offensive to the Party hard liners. The film takes place in one of those poor, backward villages in the remote mountainous province of Shaanxi in the late 30s which the Red Army loosely controls under double pressure from the invading Japanese and the Nationalist (KMT) government which claims the Communists are rebels. However, the story has nothing to do with all those wars and battles, which makes this film quite unusual for such a setting. Gu Qiang, the soldier in the Red Army uniform, who is actually a folksong collector for the army, went to the village in the hope that he can recover some very old folksongs that are no longer in record. He is greeted first by a wedding parade welcoming the bride, and becomes both fascinated by the sub-culture represented, and concerned about the practice of a young girl thus marrying a much older guy, a practice later revealed to be common in the village. He is hosted by the family of Cuiqiao, a young peasant girl who lives with her father, who looks as old as age itself, and her younger brother. The living condition of the family only meets apparently minimum sanitary and survival standards. Cuiqiao, curious about the outside world, takes great interest in every bit and piece Gu Qiang, the new guest, talks about. Those new changes in the outside world, like women being able to learn how to write and read and

¹² Jackie Chan, though famous to the West at the beginning of 90s, has been a household name in East Asia since the late 70s.

choose to marry whom they really want, intrigue her deeply, and kindle a hope for her to escape the anguishing stillness and immutability of village life. She naturally asks him to take her to the Red Army so that she can start the new life he has described. Gu, however, tells her that he has to apply for her first before he can actually take her to the army. The film does not reveal clearly if this is only Gu's excuse. Gu, not accomplishing much in the village, soon returns to the army base, during which period, Cuiqiao is married to a quite old man. But soon after her reluctant marriage, she decides to seek the new life herself, and risks crossing the Yellow River which has posed for ages as a natural barrier against people going to the outside world. However, Cuiqiao drowns in it. Gu Qiang, remembering his promise to Cuiqiao that he would bring back information about her application, returns to the village next year, and happens to encounter a grand waist-drum performance by the village males as a prayer for rain. Gu Qiang, still in his army uniform and ignored by the village, is recognized and greeted only by Cuiqiao's younger brother.

The film raises politically challenging questions despite its setting and Gu's Red Army uniform. The failure of Cuiqiao's attempt to seek her new life and the later superstitious ceremony of rain praying, contrasts with Gu Qiang's promise of a new life that will soon bless everyone. *Yellow Earth* implies, rather sarcastically, that the Party's effort to reconstruct Chinese culture and inject it with a Communist thrust is futile. As Esther Yau pointedly comments,

Yellow Earth poses a number of issues that intrigued both censors and the local audience. The film seems to be ironic: the soldier's failure to bring about any change (whether material or ideological) in the face of invincible feudalism and superstition among the masses transgresses socialist literary standards and rejects the official signifieds....The censors were highly dissatisfied with the film's 'indulgence of poverty and backwardness, projecting a negative image of the

country.' Still, there were no politically offensive sequences to lead to full-scale denunciation and banning. (Yau, 1991, p.64)

There exists much discourse about the conventions of Chinese film that Chen broke in terms of filmic language and techniques. Chen's extreme succinctness in the film structure and use of dialogues, together with Zhang Yimou's long shots of vast barren land and indulgence in close-ups of people's faces, posed a sharp contrast to all the movies made previously in Communist China. However, its recognition in many international festivals, especially an award received at the 1985 Hong Kong International Film Festival, was the first award a Chinese film ever got from the western world (Hong Kong was then still under the British rule.) But artistry is not the only criterion, as Paul Clark, has pointed out, "*Yellow Earth* is a strongly political film. Its achievement lies in the use of film art to suggest its political points." (Clark, 1987) Never before *Yellow Earth*, had a Chinese film boldly explored or even alluded to questions like what is the core of Chinese culture, what did the Communist revolution really offer Chinese people, and what did the country's long history and feudalism inscribe into people's political minds and cultural lives. Saying the film represents a breakthrough in Chinese cinema has a double edge. On one side, *Yellow Earth* led a trend in contemporary Chinese film suggesting cultural, political and ideological retrospection; on the other, it reflected a significant, if not fundamental, change of the Communist regime's political agenda which adopted Deng's pragmatism and concentrated much of its propaganda energy in promoting *Gaige Kaifang* (Reform and Open) and thus tolerated, to a considerable extent, artistic inquiry, as represented by the films of the Fifth Generation directors, of a political nature. It was, in this sense, also a breakthrough for China's politics and that of the

Communist government, which at that time gave both China and the outside world much hope for peaceful reform to democracy.

Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum*: Cultural Critique De-Politicized?

Zhang Yimou, the cinematographer for both *One and Eight* (the first Fifth Generation film) and *Yellow Earth*, turned out to be more talented and aggressive as a director. He transferred himself to the Xi'an Film Studio which was under the management of the politically open Wu Tianming, himself a renowned working director. In 1987, Zhang got the novel *Hong gaoliang (Red Sorghum)* by a highly controversial writer Mo Yan, and succeeded in taking it to the screen, as a director. The film, *Red Sorghum*, starring the never-before-heard-of Gong Li who is now an international superstar, debuted in 1988 and won the Golden Bear Award at the Berlin Film Festival in the same year, by then the highest international acclaim a Chinese film had earned. *Red Sorghum*, actually astounded the western film audience who had just begun to keep track of a handful of new Chinese films that were both exotically attractive and culturally challenging.

Red Sorghum, though receiving very harsh criticism from some native critics and offending a portion of common audience for its rough, self-conscious and vulgar representation of Chinese rural life, (though the setting is in the 30s,) was a box office hit largely due to its Golden Bear Award publicity (Berry, 1991b). *Red Sorghum*, coincident to *Yellow Earth*, has the same national background of the War of Resistance to Japan, and a similar setting of a backward remote village, but deals with a quite different, unfocused

and ambiguous theme. The film has a first-person voice-over by a never-seen grandson, "I", who is supposed to give this recall of the hero-like deeds of his *yeye* (grandpa) and *nainai* (grandma) who in the movie are both in their 30s.

The film begins with a scene of a group of young sedan bearers taking a young bride, "my grandma" to the village of her husband-to-be, a leper who is thirty years older than her. The sedan boys, among whom one would later be "my grandpa", begin to rock the sedan and sing erotic songs to have some fun. The sequence, beautifully shot with the gorgeous barren yellow land and exuberant golden sorghum and action-full, music-loaded "sedan dance", together with the suspense of the young bride's fate, grabs the audience immediately. When we compare this to *Yellow Earth's* first sequence when Gu Qiang first watches the wedding parade, it seems that the two directors share an infatuation with folk art performance at its very original and spontaneous level, and display a consistently strong desire to explore the very core root of Chinese culture and re-create a very Chinese text through impressive visual effects. Zhang is especially skillful and talented in employing colors, lights and images according to his expressive needs, possibly due to his academic training and studio experience as a cinematographer.

The film is actually filled with sex, violence and drinking orgies. "My grandma" ends up being "raped" by "my grandpa", one of the sedan boys, in the deep, thick and dazzlingly golden sorghum field when she is on her way back to her own parents' home after three days of marriage according to Chinese custom. "My grandma" actually does not make much effort to resist the masculine young sedan boy even though she has used a pair of scissors to defend herself fearlessly against her legitimate husband for the

previous three nights. Her leper husband, also owner of a winery, is mysteriously murdered when she returns. "My grandma" takes over the winery and after some episodes "my grandpa", the sedan boy, eventually reunites with her and gets accepted by other workers in the winery. There is this blatantly explicit scene of "my grandpa" peeing into a wine vat which miraculously makes the wine much better and stronger, a scene followed by sequences of rough, rowdy and overwhelming carnivals by the males in the winery, drinking and singing crude *jiuge* (wine songs).

This wild, yet peaceful Dionysian village life, that is presented by the film as if taking place in a Utopia free of laws, politics and ideology, is suddenly brought to the reality of the War of Resistance to Japan. The Japanese soldiers enter the village and catch and flay publicly a local bandit who is believed to have attacked the Japanese troop, and Luohan, a friend of "my grandma and grandpa," who refuses to flay the bandit when the Japanese has asked him to. "My grandpa and grandma" and fellow workers who are greatly upset by the atrocity of the Japanese soldiers, decide to seek revenge by ambushing a Japanese platoon aboard a truck, only to end up being killed by the fully armed Japanese soldiers with only "my grandpa" and "my dad," who in the film is only a child, surviving the ambush. That's the end of the story.

The episode of the Japanese soldiers' disturbing the village could have served as a very common theme favored by most of the Chinese films that are set in the war-with-Japan period (1937-1945). Those films are favored by the film Studios because they happen to meet both the government's demand of eulogizing the Red Army whenever possible, and the common audience's predilection for entertainment from action-packed

films. These films, in order to please the state and its censors, would better reveal explicitly that the people who resisted fearlessly against the invading Japanese were Red Army soldiers, or people who later would decide to join the Red Army. In *Red Sorghum*, whether the flayed bandit is a Red Army soldier in disguise is never revealed. Usually after the ambushing sequence, a typical Chinese film from an earlier time would suggest that the surviving "grandpa" would join the Red Army in order to fight the Japanese. However in *Red Sorghum*, the film ends with the child, "my dad" chanting an elegy for his dead mom. The fight against the Japanese soldiers in the film is not initiated in the name of the Communist ideology, as another film would flatteringly indicate, but out of a natural indignation toward atrocity, loyalty to a friend, and fondness for the village in which the characters live.

Much has been said about a Chinese version of masculinity in its cinematic representation of *Red Sorghum* which aspires to a liberation of the human body, a liberation that hopefully will return Chinese people from their now uniform life-style and sterile way of thinking, to their nurturing, regenerating origins. (Zhang, 1994, p.39)

The beginning nearly 10-minute long sedan dance along the vast, dazzling sorghum field, the vehement, breathtaking kidnapping of "my grandma" into the heart of the deep sorghum field by "my grandpa" and their lovemaking there, and the repetitive carnivalesque scenes of wine makers' chanting and yelling of a handful of crude *jiuge* (wine songs) in the winery and outside, mark a dynamic display of Dionysian spirit and virile vulgarity. It is possible to dismiss this film as an intentionally depoliticized one for its apparent blurring of the political background and causal relations within the film.

structure. The aforesaid scenes seem to exemplify an apparent attempt to resurrect the libidinal power of the Chinese people, or the “liberation of the human body.” A more individual approach which recalls the Chinese people’s memory of the power and freedom they used to have in their search for happiness, love and dignity undermines the explicitness of *Red Sorghum*’s political tone. If interpreted in Frederic Jameson’s “national allegory” framework, *Red Sorghum*, could be received as a national allegory for the Chinese people with its artistically disguised political suggestiveness. Yingjin Zhang has asserted in his analysis of *Red Sorghum* that the film is “an allegory involving the experience of the whole Chinese nation,” with the “aspiration to liberate people’s thoughts from political indoctrination, to subvert the seemingly insurmountable authority of the dominant ideologies...” (Zhang, 1994)

Red Sorghum is also, to some, as much politically ambiguous, as culturally deconstructing in a Nietzsche-like way. As Yuejin Wang explains, “[n]ever before has the medium of Chinese cinema been so unquestionably given over to the countenancing containment of an unbridled and abandoned manner of life and visual wantonness and crudity,” so that it is a

shocking affront to many cherished and received formulae of Chinese cultural praxis; to the deep-rooted Confucian ethical and moral codes of sobriety and decorum; to the ingrained artistic codes favoring strategies of concealment and restraint; and to the aesthetic taste which prioritizes emotional delicacy and refinement. (Wang, 1991, p.80)

Red Sorghum, appreciated and hailed in the West by the symbolism of the Golden Bear, also engendered a cultural imperialism debate among Chinese critics. Many critics

and film scholars hold the view that Zhang virtually constructs an Orientalist text, by manipulating Chinese history and indigenous culture, to which the western ideological, aesthetic and political preferences are closely connected. The popularity of Zhang and also Chen's films might only reveal "the fact that Third World Cinema is compelled to be part of a hegemonic, Orientalist discourse in order to be accepted by the West, which dominates the global cultural market." (Lu, 1997b) Eventually, this cultural imperialism discourse embraces a wider audience and arouses deeper intellectual concern in the coming 1990s when the Chinese film industry is greatly affected by the transforming market economy at home and Chinese film's continuing process of merging into the ever homogenizing international/West market.

CHAPTER IV

THE POST NEW ERA: THE 1990S

Zhu Xuanlu Films and the Film Industry

Tragic moments in June of 1989 marked the end of the Reform decade even though the government still claimed that it would not change the *Gaige Kaifan* (Reform and Open) policies. However, the dismissal of reformist General Secretary of the CCP, Zhao Ziyang, and subsequent sudden changes made to the economic system, including a forceful *Zhili Zhengdun* (Manage and Control) strategy implemented in the financial system and state-owned enterprises in the name of curbing continuing inflation, attested that the government had begun to worry about whether economic reform had gone so far as to have threatened the political upper-structure.

To interpret the Tian'anmen Massacre, as the West defines it, or Tian'anmen Incident, as the Chinese government does, inevitably involves a careful review of China's political struggle both within the CCP and without during this *Gaige Kaifang* (Reform and Open) period. Within the CCP, political tension between different factions has always been an important factor influencing China's politics. The factional struggle contributed in a large part to Mao's launch of the Cultural Revolution and the termination of it. (Yan, 1996) Similarly, as many scholars in the field of contemporary Chinese politics have pointed out, the million-people demonstrations that took place in May of 1989

1989 could not be possible without the explicit message that *People's Daily*, the Party's official mouthpiece, gave out. *People's Daily* by then was controlled by the faction of Zhao Ziyang, then the General Secretary, who asked the newspaper to report the demonstrations positively. Zhao's intention became even clearer when he spoke out in the same month to the visiting Mikhail Gorbachev, leader from the drastically reforming Soviet Union, that it is Deng who decided every policy for the country. The conflict went public and Zhao failed to amass enough support within the Party leadership for his defiance against Deng. Zhao was swiftly deprived of his power, and Deng consented to use the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to disperse the students who continued to occupy the Tian'anmen Square.

What happened in Tian'anmen Square in 1989 was alleged to be a Democracy movement which demanded that the Communist regime give up its totalitarian rule and start a process of political reform alongside the economic one. This movement was believed to climax the Chinese people's continuous striving for a better political system. However, the authoritarian position the CCP has held for decades has always suppressed this request. If we look back on recent history, we can see at least three instances of resolute government suppression of dissident voices since the end of the Cultural Revolution.

The first instance is the Democracy Wall movement organized by several groups of elite intellectuals in Beijing from 1978 to 1979, in the wake of which Deng called for devotion of the whole country to *sihua* (Four Modernizations). There was a poster wall in the mall area of Xidan where these intellectuals posted their political essays for the public

¹ Wei was finally exiled to America in 1993.

to read. It was informally referred to as the *Minzhu Qiang* (Democracy Wall) by the public. It existed without government interference with it until Wei Jinsheng¹³ posted an article denouncing Deng as the new dictator, and demanding that the Party carry on the “fifth modernization” of democracy. Deng banned the Democracy Wall groups immediately after Wei made this challenge and put most of the advocates into prison. The second was the 1983 Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign launched by the Propaganda Department which was alerted by the influence of Western popular music, fashions, and literature on China’s young generation. However, this campaign shortly tapered off without arousing too much public turmoil or interest. The public’s indifference and resentment to this campaign embarrassed the CCP leadership. The Party made a third attempt in 1987 in the name of Anti-Bourgeois Liberalization which showed the deepened concern of the CCP about the Western/Capitalist influence which was more tangible than three or four years before. This similar campaign effected neither much compliance from intellectuals nor interest from the common public.

In this sense, the 1989 Tian’anmen Square democracy movement was a continuation of an ever accumulating force that demands more political reform in China. However, Tian’anmen Square could be viewed also as a dilemma for China’s democratization process. It is useful to ask questions like why democratization has succeeded in this country but failed in that one. However, people are still unable to arrive at consensus as to what are the general rules for a successful democratization. What we can say now is that many factors contributed to its 1989 failure in China. The

¹³ Wei was finally exiled to America in 1998.

Socialist/Communist ideology which is strongly held by the Party's leadership, militarily supported by the Party's PLA, and vigorously propagandized by every-level of mass media, is just one of the most decisive reasons. After the collapse of the Soviet Bloc in the early 90s, a need to reaffirm to the country, if not only to itself, that the current political system, "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics," has always been the best for the people, became really urgent.

It is no surprise that films made during this time again are picked up as the government's propaganda tool, evidence for which is provided by a number of government-funded, big-budget (the Chinese standard) *Zhu Xuanlu* films that are rushing into Chinese cinema. However, most scholars who follow recent Chinese films tend to overlook another face of Chinese cinema that is represented by those still vigorous Fifth Generation directors who continue to speak with a different voice, though in a more implicit and disguised way in the wake of a ruthless display of violence by the Communist regime.

First take a look at the current scholarly literature on Chinese film in this Post New Era period, which can also be more particularly termed as the post-Tian'anmen Era. What film scholars see in this current scenario, is a patching-up by the Chinese government. Chris Berry observed that the Chinese government's response to the shock caused by the Tian'anmen Square movement took three forms: "denial, simulation, and hysterical compensation." (Berry, 1994) And simulation and hysterical compensation have much to do with films.

...the government has responded with simulation by attempting to recreate a (mythical) happy time long, long ago when there was no conflict and fragmentation among the people of the People's Republic. (Berry, 1994, p.44)

What Berry and other scholars refer to are these so-called *Zhu Xuanlu* films, which “depict historic moments in the communist revolution, lives of important communist leaders, and stories of honest, model workers and cadres.” (Lu, 1997a) We also can include in the *Zhu Xuanlu* category films that describe the historic wars in which the Red Army or PLA participated, and honest model soldiers like Lei Feng. All those war films that have been produced in the wake of the Tian'anmen Square movement have a particularly ironic task of helping people come to terms with the very killings that were done to the Republic's own citizens by the PLA.

Berry, among others, also views these war films as the Party's hysterical compensation considering their respective generous government funding. But what Berry and others do not answer adequately is why this compensation in the form of a number of *Zhu Xuanlu* films is particularly different from a picture in other periods, say the Cultural Revolution, when even more generous government funds were spent on an inordinately few films. The key factor that many scholars tend to ignore is that most of these *Zhu Xuanlu* films have also been box office hits, which means that they are commercially more successful than most of the earlier Fifth Generation films. A countdown chart, as in Table 2, which I found in the June 1999 issue of *Dianying Yishu* (*Film Art*) published by the Chinese Filmmakers Association showed that six of the top ten movies that had the best Chinese box office throughout China in 1989 are *Zhu Xuanlu* ones. If the mushrooming of epic war films in 1991 was a government response to both

the wake of the 1989 Tian'anmen movement and the 70th anniversary of the founding of the CCP, the reason for the continued popularity of those *Zhu Xuanlu* films in 1998 which was nine years away from the tragic moment in 1989 is a different and more complicated one.

Table 2. The Ten Best-Box-Office Domestically-Produced Films in 1998

1	<i>Zhou Enlai wajitiao fengyun (The Diplomatic Episodes of Zhou Enlai)*</i>
2	<i>Jiafang yifang (Party A and Party B)</i>
3	<i>Hongse lianren (Red Lover)*</i>
4	<i>Hai zi hun (Soul of the Sea)*</i>
5	<i>Aiqing malatang (Spicy Chilly and Hot Love)</i>
6	<i>Zhou Enlai- weida de pengyou (Zhou Enlai, the Great Friend)*</i>
7	<i>Beiqi baba shangxue (Put Daddy on the Back and Go to School)</i>
8	<i>Gei taitai dagong (Work for Wife)</i>
9	<i>Gongheguo zhuxi Liu Shaoqi (Liu Shaoqi, the Chairman of the Republic)*</i>
10	<i>Dajinjun- xijuan daxinan (Great March- Sweep through the Great South-West)*</i>

* Film is a *Zhu Xuanlu* film.

Both No.1, *The Diplomatic Episodes of Zhou Enlai*, and No.6, *Zhou Enlai, the Great Friend*, depict the first Premier of the People's Republic who remained in office until his death and was always respected as more a hardworking statesman than an obstinate ideologue among the ordinary people. No.9, *Liu Shaoqi, the Chairman of the*

Republic, gives a positive re-evaluation of the once persecuted-to-death Chairman Liu before his miserable days in the Cultural Revolution. No.9, *Great March-Sweep through the Great South-West*, is a war film tells the story of the Civil War between the PLA and the Nationalists (KMT) in the South-west part of China. And No.3, *Red Lover*, and No.4, *Soul of the Sea*, are both about the “life and war” of ordinary soldiers and marines. The other four box office hits, not surprisingly, are all comedies.

There are several reasons why these *Zhu Xuanlu* films make the Chart. One was rightly observed by Chris Berry back in 1994 when he commented on the *Zhu Xuanlu* “trend” after the Tian’anmen movement.

In a speech to film workers in October 1989, Li Ruihuan, head of the Central Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China since the massacre and therefore the most powerful figure in the film industry today, announced a cutback in production to ensure greater Party control, and that from that date on sixty percent of films should be of the “*leitmotif*” (*zhuxuanlu*) variety. The Party has called for a stress to be put on the “*leitmotif*” in all cultural production. (Berry, 1994a, p.45)

This might explain the phenomenon of *Zhu Xuanlu* films’ unusual popularity in one part, i.e., the overall shrinkage of film production, and its relative boost (sixty percent of overall production) of *Zhu Xuanlu* films which enjoy favored publicity from government-controlled mass media, and thus become a much more possible choice for the Chinese audience.

However, a statistical table, as in Table 3, from the 1996 *China Statistical Yearbook* provides more information on film production throughout this sensitive period,

Table 3. Film Production (1985-1995)^a

Year	Film Studios*	Feature Films
1985	20	127
1986	20	134
1987	22	146
1988	22	158
1989	22	136
1990	22	134
1991	22	130
1992	22	170
1993	22	154
1994	22	148
1995	30	146

*Includes only those certified by the State Council

a: China Statistical Yearbook: 1996, Beijing: China Statistical Publishing House, p. 696.

It is true, from the table, that in 1989 only 136 films were produced compared the previous year's 158, which is a 13.9% decrease. Li's October, 1989 talk obviously effected this decrease. The film industry maintained this average of 134 annual production from 1989 to 1991, until in 1992 there was a sudden boost to 170, which was a 30.7% increase compared to the 1991 level. In the next year of 1993, the film production dropped to 154, but still it was at a very close match to 158 of 1988, the highest level before the Tian'anmen Square movement.

The 1992 production boost could be explained in a sudden re-generation of *Gaige* (Reform) spirit as pushed by Deng who saw a conservative stand adopted by Jiang Zemin, the successor to the dismissed Zhao, which might ruin his vision of an economically vigorous China. Using a method that has existed for decades in China's political arena, Deng traveled to the South in the Spring Festival holidays of 1992 to reassert his reform attitude which dated back to the early 80s. This *Nanxun Jianghua* (Talks During the Inspection of the South) politically rejuvenated the *Gaige Kaifang* (Reform and Open) which had been replaced by the more conservative *Zhili Zhengdun* (Manage and Control) after the 1989 Tian'anmen movement.

From this scenario, we can say that the Chinese film industry, which had enjoyed all the freedom of China's New Era, was restrained for only about 3 years immediately following the Tian'anmen Square movement. The Post-Tian'anmen Era cinema contains three prominent themes: One is the flourishing of the *Zhu Xuanlu* films; Two is the increasing popularity of domestically-made entertainment films; Three is the continued political allegories which the Fifth Generation directors, of which Chen and Zhang the

most important ones, continue to produce in their foreign-funded, internationally-crowned and often domestically-banned films.

The flourishing of *Zhu Xuanlu* films has its government face. Generous budgets, military hardware and personnel (most of which come free) and extensive advertisement carried by every level of the various state-owned mass media channels, all contribute to *Zhu Xuanlu* films' relatively better commercial success than other domestically-produced films. The commercial success of *Zhu Xuanlu* films proves that these new "propaganda films" are a world away from their counterparts during the Cultural Revolution era and even the "Reform" films of the New Era.

"Mobilizing" people, i.e., paying for their tickets by the propaganda departments of the places where people work, to see a film on which they might not want to spend money themselves is still a practice in China. However, the scope and range of this "campaign" have been much reduced since 1992 due to the financial crisis that the film industry has been experiencing since its reform at the beginning of the New Era. If we recall what we have discussed in Chapter III about the film industry's financial situation, State pressure on those individual film studios is exacerbated by the further development of China's market economy. The market economy, though officially termed as "the socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics", has required the film industry to strike a balance between satisfying the government's political agenda and *Zhu Xuanlu* quota, and being financially well-off despite the government's subsidies. Getting comparative statistics in this area is always difficult in China, but recent remarks from Feng Xiaogang, the highest selling comedy director known for his *Heshuipian* (Greeting-

the-New-Year Films)¹⁴ gives us an incisive overview of the dilemma suffered by both the film industry and individual directors,

The workers at the theaters are always happy when my movies are on, (because) they can get 1,500 *Yuan* for that per month. If there are no such well-selling movies, they can get only 700 *Yuan*....I am now attacked from both front and behind: I am bound by rules and codes. The American directors can let their imagination rule. They can set out to do whatever they feel is good. The biggest crisis they might face is lack of imagination, but what we are facing is that even if we have taken pains to figure out what we would like to do, we will still be asking ourselves this question, would this pass (the censorship)?....Sometimes, we feel that this would make people laugh to death, but we know this would not pass the censorship. (Feng, 1999)¹⁵

Chris Berry predicted back in 1991 that China film was facing the bottom lines of the market forces. The film industry in China is right in the middle of this dilemma, painstakingly seeking a leeway between the Communist government's wavering political scrutiny and the harsh economic rules characteristic of market economy.

The second feature of the increasing trend toward entertainment films (Shao, 1993), is part of the industry's economic transition. It is particularly relevant considering China's more and more globally-involved economy. Both foreign and domestic commercial films are attracted to the huge market of China and its big profit potentials. In the 1990s, China has adopted a new quota for Hollywood films, i.e., ten movies a year, which of course all have to pass state censorship. Films like *Seven Years in Tibet*, and *Red Corner* are still not allowed into the domestic market. However, the Chinese

¹⁴ *Heshuipian* do not necessarily have anything to do with New Year, but they are usually comedies shown in theater around New-Year time. This is originally a successful practice by Hong Kong cinema. Feng began to produce the first Mainland version of *Heshuipian* in 1998, *Jiafang Yifang (Party A, Party B)* which was a massive box office hit

¹⁵ I translated this from *Beimei Wenhui Zhoukan (North-America Digest Weekly)*, which is originally in Chinese.

government's recent World Trade Organization (WTO) bid will inevitably change this picture because the Chinese government will have to open more of its domestic markets, and dismiss or alter some of its protective or ideology-oriented barriers. Domestically, commercialization also is a very important feature of the Post New Era Chinese film, and relates closely to the changing of the Chinese society, as in the words of Lu,

In the post-Tiananmen era (1989 to the present), or what Chinese intellectual historians call the 'post-New Era' (*hou xin shiqi*), Chinese society is characterized by the expansion of consumerism, the spread of popular culture, the commercialization of cultural production, and the advent of postmodern formations. (Lu, 1997a, p.10)

I will explore the third theme, by analyzing again the politically provocative, though still in a disguised and allegorical way, works by Chen and Zhang. What we find is a special dual exchange of political information flowing between the government and the directors in a different way from what is the case in the New Era. The government's unyielding control of Chinese film justifies itself in fear of it becoming a playground for Western culture, ideology and such political ideals as human rights, democracy and religious freedom, while the domestic filmmakers are making efforts, despite being frequently frustrated, to find a middle ground between financial success, artistic creativity, political expression and government patronage. All the above contribute to the current tenuous situation of the political aspect of Chinese film in the Post New Era.

Toward a More Political or Commercial Cinema?
Continued Study of Chen Kaige's Films

Chen was not commercially successful until he made his *Bawang bieji*, *Farewell My Concubine*, which was a big box office hit in China in 1993, though the domestic

version was altered before its delayed release in China. This film won, together with Jane Campion's *The Piano*, the 1993 Cannes *Palme D'Or* Award. Chen's previous films after his ground-breaking *Yellow Earth*, including *Haizi wang (King of the Children)* and *Da Yuebing (Big Military Parade)*, did not fare well financially in China. *King of the Children*, sent to the 1988 Cannes Film Festival, got only an ironic "Golden Alarm Clock" vote by the journalists, alluding to its boringness, while Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* got the Golden Bear Award at the Berlin Film Festival in the same year.

Both Zhang's commercial success and critical acclaim served as incentives for Chen to elevate his career to a level beyond what he had achieved in *Yellow Earth*. Chen's *Farewell My Concubine*, tells the life stories of two Peking opera actors through the most turbulent years of China's modern history, spanning a half-century with focused reference to the War of Resistance to Japan, Communist Liberation, and the Cultural Revolution. The film was claimed to be "fascinating," "exotic", and "spectacular" in many contexts. If we recall Fredric Jameson's "Third World texts" serving as "national allegory," *Farewell My Concubine* can be viewed more politically even though it delivers a seemingly private narrative that deals with "the private individual destiny." In this perspective, the story of the two Peking opera actors' "individual destinies", turns out to be an allegory of "the embattled situation" of Chinese culture and society. At one level, the film has been received in the West mainly as a Chinese film about Chinese and China. As Wendy Larson has pointed out,

The twentieth-century setting, which progresses historically through the decades and recognizes the two major political and cultural events of the Japanese invasion and the Cultural Revolution, leads many reviewers to comment that this is indeed Chinese history and thus, China. (Larson, 1997, p.332)

The grandiose historical setting and realistic/conventional narration Chen has strictly followed by utilizing a Spielberg-like speculative and organizing power reveal clearly that *Farewell My Concubine* is intended first to be a commercial success prior to anything else. Chen's films, at this time together with works by Zhang, are funded by capitalists in places, such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan and Europe (Lu, 1997b). The film needs to be market-friendly in order to establish a rapport with the international investors who can provide directors like Chen a chance to film what he never could get funded and approved by the state-owned film studios. Far different from *Yellow Earth* which sold only thirty prints within China (Berry, 1991b), *Farewell My Concubine* has been shown throughout cinemas in Europe and most art cinemas in America. It also was a big box office hit when it eventually made into the theaters of selected Chinese cities with a re-cut version which obliterated its politically defiant messages according to the government censors.

What is the story of this epic *Farewell My Concubine*?

The name of the film is also one of a famous Peking opera. The opera tells an ancient King-and-his-Concubine story; however the film is not exactly a love story. The story begins in Beijing with the childhood of the two later famous Peking opera actors. One of the two kids, Douzi, later to be called Cheng Dieyi, is son of a prostitute who could not afford to raise him and sent him to a Peking opera school (*liyuan*). The school, like any other of its kind, is well known for its cruel training of young kids. However, this school turns down Douzi because he has an extra finger. The mother, however, cuts off that finger and Douzi is thus admitted. The cut-off of the finger, if read in a Freudian

context to which Chen might want a western viewer to relate, is a symbolic castration of his masculinity and provides the ground for psychoanalysis of Cheng Dieyi's later and complex sexuality.

Douzi's training years in the opera school are harsh but he is taken care of by a fellow student, Shitou, later to be called Duan Xiaolou. The relationship they build is a strong and intimate one that goes beyond normal friendship, but stops short of a homosexual affair. Shitou is depicted to be pretty normal, while Douzi, due to his childhood trauma of being abandoned by his mother who cut off his finger (castration), shows a profound struggle to identify his sexuality. There is one sequence where Chen deliberates extensively on Douzi's difficulty in differentiating reality and acting, that impresses any viewer who has Freud in his or her mind. In Peking opera, all characters are performed by males. (This characteristic was abandoned in the Cultural Revolution era when Jiang Qing carried out her model Peking opera "revolution." However, this artistic convention was restored after the Cultural Revolution.) Douzi is trained to be a *huadan* ("young female"). However, when rehearsing an opera, Douzi continuously recites the wrong word of "*nan'er lang*" (boy) instead of "*nu jiao'er*" (girl) which is supposed to be his identity in the opera. Douzi's apparently incorrigible mistake makes the trainer mad, and Douzi is punished physically by the trainer and even by Shitou. With blood filling his mouth, Douzi finally gets it right.

The film then directly goes on to their young adulthood when they finally make themselves a name in the opera circle. Shitou, now a famous *laosheng* ("old male") with the decent name of Duan Xiaolou, falls in love with Juxian who is a prostitute, and

decides to marry her. His decision, however, causes great turbulence in Douzi, who now is called Cheng Dieyi and plays Duan's opera partner as a *huadan* ("young female"), and who has developed a strong dependent (or nearly gay) longing for Duan. Duan, however, in an apparent attempt to break up this ambiguous relationship with Cheng, manages to marry Juxian despite the threat of Cheng's never performing again with him. Duan, however, soon gets arrested by the occupying Japanese for refusing to perform for the Japanese soldiers. Cheng, who has become a protege of decadent Master Yuan who has a good relationship with the Japanese, agrees to rescue Duan on the condition that Juxian must leave Duan after that. Duan, though released soon, despises Cheng for his performing for the Japanese. The film quickly ushers in the victory of the Chinese over the invading Japanese.

One defiant difference director Chen makes, and which no western analysis of this film seems to emphasize, is that the victorious army is the Nationalist army. The Communist government always downplays the role the Nationalist army played in the War of Resistance to Japan in order to justify the following civil war that finally resulted in the Communists' victory. The default message in most of the Chinese films also portraying this period would be that it is the Communist army led by the CCP who defeated the Japanese and thus rescued the Chinese people from falling slaves to the Japanese. There is a good reference to this euphemism in Chris Berry's *A Nation T(w/o)ó*, in which he discovers the assumption of "in the name of the people" held by the *Zhu Xuanlu* war films in 1991, which serves as the basis for the justification of the Civil War, and further the Tian'anmen Square killings.

This is also one of a few scenes in the film that disconcert the state censors. However, Chen moves quickly on to the Communist take-over of national power when everything suddenly changes. The changes that previous events have brought out, to Duan and Cheng, mean only the different audiences. During the Japanese occupation period, the audience is Japanese and Chinese who work for Japanese; when the Nationalists come, the audience is the government army soldiers. However, this time the changes would mean a lot more than the constitution of their audience. The Communist Liberation proves to be much more violent than the previous social upheavals. Master Yuan, who survives the War Lord era, the Japanese occupation and the Nationalist government, is killed by the Communist regime. His final fate invalidates Duan's earlier assertion that "Master Yuan will never fall no matter who is in control." Master Yuan, though decadent and an opium addict, stands as a symbol for the century-old Peking opera. In Cheng's words, "Master Yuan really knows Peking opera." His killing by the Communist regime signals the end of the traditional Peking opera.

The model Peking opera "revolution" initiated by Mao's wife Jiang Qing can be found in *Farewell My Concubine*. Duan and Cheng, who do not agree with the changes made awkwardly to the traditional opera costumes and performances, are eventually deprived of their chance to act. In the most turbulent days of the Cultural Revolution, both Duan and Cheng are paraded through the streets and publicly beaten and humiliated in their opera costumes and make-ups. The public humiliation scene is familiar to every Chinese who has survived the Cultural Revolution. However, unlike other Chinese films which would ultimately attribute all the violence and lawlessness to the Gang of Four,

this film alludes no more to the Gang than to the CCP itself. Chen's obsession with the Cultural Revolution could be traced back to his own personal experience in it. Chen once confessed to a Chinese journalist, that the one thing he most regretted was that he betrayed his own father by exposing materials to the Red Guards in the Cultural Revolution. In the film, Duan is forced by the Red Guards to expose in public any hidden evil secrets he can recall of Cheng. Chen later said that,

...he links *Farewell [My Concubine]* with his personal experience in the Cultural Revolution and a broader history outside the Cultural Revolution that he knows intimately. The entire film, he claims, is a result of his present anger at being 'duped' and, like the rest of the Chinese population, falling victim to revolutionary ideology. (Larson, 1997)

Looking beyond the dazzling visual exoticism, such as the Peking opera performances, the Red Guards' blandishing huge red flags, etc, what we really find is Chen's resolute intention to resolve his victim complex via an implicit protest against the Communist regime. At the end of the film, which is set at a time when Deng has seized power and begun to reform the Communist country, Cheng and Duan go to an idle theater, put on their costumes which they used to use when performing their best act of *Farewell My Concubine*, and begin to perform. At the suicidal part when Cheng, the concubine, is supposed to kill herself before Duan, the King of Chu, Cheng unsheathes a real sword and kills himself/herself.

This causes the biggest problem for Chen because he has to persuade the Chinese censors that his film is about no more than love, the Peking opera, and some commercial flavor of gay culture. The censors' logic is that Cheng has no reason to kill himself when the good time (Deng's time) finally arrives after all the social tribulations and personal

traumas he has endured so far. Chen later said in an interview that he himself would never bother to watch the re-cut mainland version of *Farewell My Concubine*.

Farewell My Concubine was eventually shown in China's theaters, though it was a re-cut version approved by the state. The political message Chen tries to convey, though blurred by the Western psychoanalytical conceptions, (Cheng's early childhood trauma and his sexuality crisis), burdened with his detailed exploration into the artistry of the indigenous performing art of the Peking opera, and further diverted by his personalized speculation on the modern Chinese history, is still a powerful one. And its immediate signified could be, in one part, the Tian'anmen Square movement of 1989. As E. Ann Kaplan has pointed out,

Already then [from 1983 to 1988], filmmakers had found an excellent strategy in producing narratives with double meanings—the specific narrative about a family or individual was often intended to be read as an allegory for the Chinese political scene. The power of *Farewell My Concubine* possibly derives from something similar: that is, the passion and power in the film seem to be fueled by grief over Tiananmen Square.... (Kaplan, 1997, p.273)

Though Chen's *Farewell My Concubine* is not necessarily fueled by the 1989 democracy movement, it is still strong ammunition against the Communist regime. As *Yellow Earth* did by exploring into the 1930s' mass rural land, *Farewell My Concubine* condemns the "revolutionary ideology" that has victimized so many Chinese people by creating an epic whose time span diversifies its political signifieds and makes a definite inquiry into its

¹⁰ Although I did not see the original *Farewell My Concubine* in the summer of 1993, and I worked as a video assistant at the time in Austin, I can't give the difference between the two versions because I could hardly

political intention impossible, that is probably why Chen's *Farewell My Concubine* passed the censorship after all¹⁶.

Zhang's Political Cinema: Continued Study of Zhang Yimou's Films

If we say that Chen's *Farewell My Concubine* is a historical epic, the road Zhang Yimou follows apparently was an ahistorical one until his *Huozhe (To Live)*, an epic with Chen-like style, was released in the overseas market in 1994. Zhang is one of the most prolific directors in China. He maintains the speed of approximately one movie per year, while Chen Kaige waited four years for his next film, *Feng yue (Temptress Moon)* released in 1996, and another three years for his *Jingke ci qinwang (Jingke Assassinating King of Qin)* to be released this year.

Zhang is also the most internationally renowned compared to other Chinese directors. He won the Golden Bear Award in the 1988 Berlin Film Festival with his *Red Sorghum*, won twice the Golden Lion Awards in the Venice (Venezia) International Film Festival, respectively with *Qiuju da guansi (The Story of Qiu Ju)* in 1992, and with *Yige dou buneng shao (Not One Less)* in 1999. His *Judou (Ju Dou)* was the first Chinese film nominated for Best Foreign Picture in the Academy Awards in the United States in 1991. In 1992, his *Dahong denglong gaogao gua (Raise the Red Lantern)* again was nominated for the same award. Western high-profile recognition and acclaim for his films have raised considerable controversy back home in China ever since his first directed film *Red*

¹⁶ Actually I did see in Shanghai *Farewell My Concubine* in the summer of 1993, and I watched its video a couple of times in America. I can't give the difference between the two versions because I could hardly recall those details of the Chinese version. It is a pity that China does not have its video-produced.

Sorghum was released. Critics condemn his de/re-construction of Chinese culture and history and insist that pseudo-folk customs in his films are meant to attract the Western viewers' Orientalist "gaze", and arouse a sexist curiosity about Chinese women. Yuejing Wang, back in 1989, pointed out that these films, as "cinematic representation of Chinese culture", contribute to a reconstruction of Chinese film as well as the national identity.

Rey Chow, in her interdisciplinary book of *Primitive passions*, asserts that Zhang's films are a kind of "exhibitionism" comprising both China's looking at the West and a "being-looked-at-ness." However, all this Western acclaim and the subsequent Western analyses of these non-Western films by West-trained academics tend to ignore the very possible danger of turning the commentators into messengers for the cultural imperialism against which they guard.

On what grounds are these "Third World" and "Orientalism" frameworks applicable to the new and post-new Chinese films? Perhaps they are more easily justified by today's global (multi-, trans-national) ultra-capitalism than by circumstances of any other time. Chen's popularity in the West might be grounded in his fascination, or obsession with the history (epic) of a country so culturally, politically and ideologically distanced not so long ago on one hand, and his crafty manipulation of Western fascination, or obsession with Freud on the other.

Zhang's success in the West might be a much more complicated one due to his own varied and far-ranging filmography. Zhang's versatility, shown in his pursuit of cinematic presentation of China and the Chinese people, if examined against the current

recall those details of the Chinese version. It is a pity that China does not have its video produced.

economic, political and cultural environment in China, might be a forced one: that is the freedom of his cinema is quite limited and he has to be careful not to embarrass the government too much. I have found no other western literature suggesting this very obvious phenomenon. As I mentioned earlier in the Introduction, Sheldon Lu (1997) has pointed out the inevitability of Chinese film entering the international market due to "dual pressure of censorship and the rapid shrinking of the domestic market." China's whole national economy is being merged into global ultra-capitalism, which is recently manifested by the Chinese government's unusual eagerness to enter the World Trade Organization (WTO). The government, as the result of its WTO bid, now encourages nearly every industry and enterprise in China to attract foreign investment. However, the government's intolerance toward any cultural products that perceivably defy the Communist regime makes the filmmakers have to think twice about their artistic life in China or even the possibility of shooting films in China. An example is Joan Chen. Chen, who now lives in the United States, went to the border of Tibet to shoot her first directed film *Xiu Xiu* without getting government approval in 1998. The Chinese government banned her from shooting films in the Chinese territory for one year and imposed a fine of ten percent of the film budget¹⁷. The film, *Xiu Xiu* which is a bitter indictment of the Cultural Revolution, is also banned in China. Much has been said about Zhang's "allegorical, spatial, ahistorical" approach. Many critics conclude that Zhang's style represents a filmic alternative characteristic of the Chinese traditional aesthetics, but none relate this to a possible disguise against the

¹⁷ See Joan of Art, *Time*, April 5, 1999, p. 61.

sensitive political censorship. In a telephone interview with some domestic journalists after Zhang won the Golden Lion Award for his *Not One Less*, Zhang, responding to a question about how he came to terms with the high acclaim which *Not One Less*, a film totally about the Chinese, had received outside China, said,

For people from another cultural background, you are not to use this or that setting if you really want to move them. What you rely on is film itself, the honesty of the filmmakers.¹⁸

“Honesty” was also the word used by the students in the Tian’anmen Square movement when urging the government to face its serious corruption. “Honesty”, also a synonym for “conscience” in the Chinese language, is often used alongside people’s defiance against the Communist regime. Zhang’s emphasis on “honesty” culminates in his later movies, especially his 1998 *Not One Less* in which he used only first-time amateurs in order to achieve this “honesty”. However, his 1992 film *The Story of Qiuju* marked his first experiment with his pursuit of “honesty”.

The Story of Qiuju, one of Zhang’s classics, tells a seemingly simple and crude story. Qiuju, a village woman with little education and literacy, goes from the village to the county, from the county to the city, and from the city to the province capital to ask for a “rounded explanation” (*shuofa*) for why the village head, who kicks the groin of her husband only because of a joke, can get away without apologizing. The bureaucrats in different levels of government she visits either cannot offer to help or can hardly find the right law to be executed for this situation, until she arrives at the last stop of the

¹⁸ I can get only an electronic copy of this news from <http://film.sina.com.cn/sina/ztw/news/movie/1998-9-14/08220.shtml>, the www.sina.com.cn portal is the biggest and most widely used one in China, so that I think

provincial capital. Qiuju, in the film, is a determined woman seeking justice for her sexually-disabled male. In her inquiry for law and justice, Qiuju encounters barriers she can hardly surpass herself. For example, she is illiterate, which makes it much more difficult for her to understand all the written materials. Western critics tend to arrive at a Feminist twist which they see in Qiuju's perseverance. However, what could be added is the spontaneous political defiance Qiuju, one of the most ordinary and under-privileged village women, demonstrates.

The first level of defiance is shown in Qiuju's asking for an explanation from the village head, which is denied. The second level of defiance can be found in Qiuju's refusal to recoil from or give up at the perfunctory, dismissing and bureaucratic answers she gets from the various levels of government agencies. When asked what she really wants, Qiuju says simply that she wants a "*shuofa*" (explanation, or justification). Unsurprisingly, the word, "*shuofa*" quickly spread throughout China and became a catch phrase. The Chinese audience easily identify themselves with Qiuju and immediately understand and further adopt her "pet phrase" of "*shuofa*". The reason why becomes quite evident when we take a retrospective look on all those cultural, political and ideological changes in the varied forms of war, revolution, movement and reform that have swept through China one after another for the most part of this century, and by an unfortunately without adequate justification for either of them. Just as Chen Kaige has said that the whole Chinese population has fallen victim to the "revolution ideology."

¹⁸ I can get only an electronic copy of this news from <http://living.sina.com.cn/movie/news/movie/1999-9-14/10090.shtml>, the sina.com.cn portal is the biggest and most widely used one in China, so that I think

As the Chinese government engages the country in economic transition toward a market economy, and further merging into global ultra-capitalism as shown by its diligent WTO bid, problems and side-effects characteristic of a developing market economy are looming large in the forms of higher unemployment and higher crime rate. Every Chinese living in today's China which is experiencing this crises-ridden economic transition could find in one moment that he or she could not relate to the reality and live in this existential "nothingness" without wanting an explanation. However, the courage of defiance is traced, ironically implied in the film, back to Qiuju's lack of education. In this sense, Zhang implies that the normal education the Chinese can get from the state is actually an "impotent" one that preemptively disables people when they need to garner up the confidence and courage to ask for a justification when being done wrong by the authority. The open ending of the film leaves more room for a simple interpretation of "Zhang's reconciliation with the Chinese state" (Lu, 1997b), in which Qiuju, when seeing the police take the village head away, has mixed feelings of justice and regret, for the village head just has helped deliver her baby.

The final authority Zhang attaches to the Chinese government by affirming the law/police's prevalence won the favor of state censors. However, Zhang's next, more political film *Huozhe (To Live)* which relates a number of tragedies experienced by an individual family through its three generations, was banned, sharing the fate of Tian Zhuangzhuang's 1992 film of *Lan fengzheng (Blue Kite)* which deals with a similar theme. The reason lies in the fact that most of the tragedies take place after the

establishment of the People's Republic, especially during the Cultural Revolution. *To Live* was adapted from an original work by avant-garde novelist Yu Hua, which nevertheless is not banned in China. We can say that the Chinese government still believes that the power, influence and impact of film, which the government has itself manipulated extensively to serve its own political agenda, are much greater than those of a book.

In the Post New Era, the government has sustained its strong content control of cultural products, and promoted a number of *Zhu Xuanlu* films in response to the Western cultural products that are gaining an ever bigger presence in China. However, the films by Fifth Generation directors, of whom Chen and Zhang are the most prominent figures, continue to demonstrate the domestic films' critical reaction to the external cultural imperialism as well as the internal Communist ideology.

These televised scenes revealed a China that tries hard to prove to the world that the country is no longer weak and will not tolerate condemnation any more. By demonstrating both an awe-inspiring military capability and an unlimited business potential for western capitalists, China seems to be communicating an implicit "No" to, if not an arrogant disregard for, all those criticisms on China's poor record on human rights, religious freedom and environmental abuse, among a long list.

However, China has changed, and so has its film industry. China's cinema, throughout the different periods since liberation, has basically served as a political tool for the Communist government. When we look back on the

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Summary

On October 1st, 1999 the Chinese government celebrated its 50 years of Communist rule with a grandiose People's Liberation Army parade, on the very ground of Tian'anmen Square where, ten years ago, hundreds of students and workers were crushed for their demonstration for democracy. Another interesting scenario of this half-century event is that a dozen visiting American CEOs who had given speeches on the inspiring business opportunities in China at the Shanghai Fortune Global Forum, were invited to honor the National Day celebration in Beijing. These televised scenes revealed a China that tries hard to prove to the world that the country is no longer weak and will not tolerate condescension any more. By demonstrating both an awe-inspiring military capability and an unlimited business potential for western capitalists, China seems to be communicating an implicit "No" to, if not an arrogant disregard for, all those criticisms on China's poor record on human rights, religious freedom and environmental abuse, among a long list.

However, China has changed, and so has its film industry. Alongside China's cinema, throughout the different periods since Liberation, has basically served as a political tool for the Communist government. When we look back on the

Cultural Revolution period, what we find is that the role the then government played in Chinese film was a mixture of adoption of Communist revolutionary film and resistance against Western cultural imperialism. China at that time was closed to outside world, and only befriended a few Communist/Maoist countries like North Korea and Albania. The beginning days of an overwhelming flow of Western, predominantly American, cultural products, did not involve the Far East country of China. Mao's policies refused anything that was labeled as Western and bourgeois, words which were always used side by side in Mao's discourse. His launch of a "cultural revolution" that aimed to change not only people's political lives but also their cultural minds, engaged the whole country in "class struggle" and put the film industry in a defunct state. The "revolutionization" of an indigenous art, the Peking opera, which Mao and his wife Jiang thought could set examples for any real proletarian arts, produced only eight model operas. The film industry was then allowed to make "model opera films" in response to this "opera revolution".

After the Cultural Revolution ended and Deng Xiaoping took over the national apparatuses, China adopted "reform and open" policies in order mainly to rescue China's economy. Reform inevitably opened China to the outside world, especially the West against which China had been guarded culturally, politically and ideologically. Though fundamentally altering the planned commune economy and compromising state ideology, Deng maintained that the Communist leadership was not to be challenged. Alongside economic reform, China's once Maoist strictness on cultural products was loosened up. In most of the 80s, China saw an increasing presence of Western cultural products in the

forms of popular music, television programs and Hollywood movies. The film industry was given unprecedented freedom. Chinese filmmakers, represented by the Fifth Generation, tentatively explored China's cultural and political areas that used to be taboos. However, the Chinese government continued to be alarmed by the invasion of the Western culture and ideals, and launched several campaigns in order to eliminate, in its own terminology, "spiritual pollution" and "bourgeois liberalization". These campaigns were all precursors of the ultimate crackdown on the 1989 Tian'anmen Square democracy movement. Though given much more freedom compared to their counterparts in the Cultural Revolution period, the new filmmakers still needed to be cautious about the "political correctness" of their films. However, the international recognition and acclaim some Chinese directors received, notably Chen and Zhang, complicated the scene, and evoked a much heated cultural imperialism debate at home. Their international success was largely viewed as the result of overwhelming Western cultural imperialism that compels Third World cinema to be part of a homogenization process of the global cultural market. The Fifth Generation directors seemed to de-/re-construct a Chinese history and culture in order to be accepted by the West. However, the present research finds that "being-accepted-by-West" is more of a means these directors employ than an end they pursue. Though basically agreeing with the homogenization of the global economy, culture and politics (as represented by the Third World democratization), the new Chinese films do have a Chinese-ness and reflect domestic political endeavors, so that, in the opposite direction of the West-to-East flow,

contribute to an understanding that counters a West-centric interpretation and its Western homogenization. Ironically, especially after the 1989 Tian'anmen Square democracy movement, commercial flavors and Third World allegories, which on the surface seem designed for Western audiences, appear to be essential elements of the two directors' films. The present research, however, finds that they can be interpreted as disguises for challenging political messages carried by these films. The "Western" elements can be seen as ruses that permit the films to pass state censorship more easily and thus allow access to the audience with whom the directors really want to communicate: the Chinese people.

This becomes even more apparent as transnational corporations involve China more inextricably in global ultra-capitalism. Even the tragedy of the 1989 Tian'anmen Square democracy movement did not stop the global capitalists from doing business with China because the world cannot afford to isolate China. The movement, however, did alarm the Communist regime and encouraged its leaders to re-emphasize cultural producers about whose politics and ideology do count even if the country has to do business with the Capitalists. In the Post New Era, people see a flourishing of domestically-made, government-subsidized and media-promoted *Zhu Xuanlu* films. This phenomenon could be understood at two levels: one is that it manifested the strategy the government uses to re-assert its content control of cultural products in response to the changed domestic cultural market; the other, however, is that these *Zhu Xuanlu* films are still produced by major studios and remain popular today. Thus they exist as an example of the effectiveness of government subsidization and government-controlled mass media

in promoting indigenous films, which also pose as a competing force against the Western cultural imperialism.

The government's control of domestic film production by both censorship and funding. These dual pressures also have forced domestic filmmakers to enter the international film arena and seek outside capital in the post-Tian'anmen era. Chen and Zhang's films, which are experiencing a hard time getting passed by state censors, are funded by capital from places like Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, Singapore and Europe, and managed and distributed by transnational film corporations. Their films are usually distributed in the overseas market before they finally get admitted, if passed by censors, to the domestic theaters in usually re-cut versions.

In conclusion, Chinese film has served as a political tool for the government through the different periods and a political weapon for some domestic filmmakers after the Reform took place. Chinese film was a blatant propaganda tool for the government during the turbulent Cultural Revolution Era. Furthermore, Chinese film has also been utilized as the government's response to the West: the "model Peking Opera" films during the Cultural revolution, and *Zhu Xuanlu* films in the Post New Era, both of which have constituted part of the Chinese reaction toward the western imperialism. The films by the Fifth Generation filmmakers, notably Chen and Zhang, can be view both as a "Third World" allegorical narration of China's history, culture and politics, and part of the merging process of Chinese film into the ever-homogenizing global market.

What we can project is that the adamantly sustained censorship in terms of Communist ideology will loosen up more when China is accepted into the World Trade

Organization (WTO) in the near future. More open markets, including the cultural products market, are required for entry into WTO. This will result in an unprecedented diversity of cultural products within China, which inevitably will make the government's political and ideological control of this flow extremely difficult, if not impossible. We can expect to see unprecedented prosperity for Chinese film, and further creative contributions by Fifth Generation directors and their progeny.

Indications for Further Research

There are at least five fields which have not been addressed in this study which are indispensable for more comprehensive research on Chinese film:

No.1. China's television network was fully set up in the nation during the reform period, and contributed to the decline of the Chinese film box office, as television did everywhere, for example, the United States in the 50s and 60s. Research can be done on the strategies which the film industry has used to combat the popularity of television, and the government's role in coordinating the two industries, for example the establishment of the new Ministry of Radio, Film and Television in 1986.

No.2. As we have seen, the representation of women in Chinese film, is not fully addressed in the present research. However, feminist study on film has contributed greatly to film research. Studies of themes about women in Chinese film throughout the different periods, utilizing a proper feminist framework, have proved to be productive in Chris Berry, Ann Kaplan, and Wendy Larson's respective works on this topic. Of course,

as “women in cinema” is a complicated issue, almost all the existing findings can be re-evaluated and extended.

No.3. The relationship of Chinese traditional aesthetics to film art, and the influence of traditional aesthetic roots on old and young Chinese directors remain largely unexplored. From this perspective, Chinese films can be interpreted in terms of traditional Chinese aesthetic values as well as Western and modern Chinese values. Research like this would involve case studies of many individual directors and their films through the years.

No.4. Analysis of the film of a bigger China that consists of countries and regions which constitute the so-called Chinese “Diaspora” should be undertaken. This research should look at commonalities and differences among films from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, and Chinese communities in North America. Research of this scope would involve more complicated historical examinations of this “Diaspora”, and explore the core of “Chineseness” of these places. Different film production, distribution and exhibition systems need to be studied both individually and comparatively in each of these contexts.

No.5. The impact of videos in the forms of videocassettes, VCDs (Video Compact Discs), and DVDs (Digital Video Discs) is still a virgin land for Chinese film research. Though many foreign films are not imported officially or even banned in China, a considerable percentage of audience has access to them in China by watching their video versions. Research can be undertaken in the channels through which people acquire these

videos, China's large piracy market, and the government and film industry's responding strategies, if any.

APPENDIX

FILMOGRAPHY OF SELECTED FILM DIRECTORS

Chen Kaige (b. 1952)

- 1984 *Huang tishi* (*Yellow Earth*)
- 1986 *Da yueding* (*Big Military Parade*)
- 1987 *Hai di wang* (*King of the Children*)
- 1991 *Bian zhoulan chang* (*Life on a String*)
- 1992 *Bowang bieji* (*Farewell My Concubine*)
- 1996 *Feng yue* (*Tempress Moon*)
- 1999 *Jinglu ci qinwang* (*Jinglu Assassinating King Of Qin*)

Zhang Yimou (as director): (b. 1950)

- 1988 *Hong gǒuhang* (*Red Sorghum*)
- 1990 *Ju die* (*Judith*)
- 1991 *Dahong dengtai guoguo yan* (*Rolls the Red Lantern*)
- 1992 *Qiu ju de gushi* (*The Story of Qiu Ju*)
- 1994 *Huache* (*To Live*)
- 1995 *Yao a yao, yao dao waiqifan* (*Shanghai Triad*)
- 1997 *Yousuo haohao shou* (*Keep Cool*)
- 1998 *Tige dou huaning shou* (*Not One Less*)
- 1999 *Wo de fuju muzhi* (*My Father and Mother*)

APPENDIX

Apter, David H. (1994). **FILMOGRAPHY OF SELECTED FILM DIRECTORS**. In Tu Weiming (Ed.), *China in Transformation*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Chen Kaige: (b. 1952)

- Dalio, Yvan (1996). *Adjusting to the New Global Economy: Hollywood in the 1990s*. In
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- 1984 *Huang tudi (Yellow Earth)*
- 1986 *Da yuebing (Big Military Parade)*.
- 1987 *Haizi wang (King of the Children)*. *Humorous Cult of the Great Leader*.
- 1991 *Bian zou bian chang (Life on a String)*.
- 1992 *Bawang bieji (Farewell My Concubine)*
- Berry, (1996). *Feng yue (Temptress Moon)*. *One of the Xi'an Film Studio*. *China*
- Genre: 1999 *Jingke ci qinwang (Jingke Assassinating King Of Qin)*

Zhang Yimou (as director): (b. 1950)

and the Viewing Subject in Li Shuangshuang
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- Lord, (1988) *Hong gaoliang (Red Sorghum)*.
- 1990 *Ju dou (Judou)*.
- Berry, (1991) *Dahong denglong gaogao gua (Raise the Red Lantern)*. *The Bottom Line*.
- In Chris Berry (Ed.), *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema* (pp. 114-140). London: British
 Film
- 1992 *Qiu ju da guansi (The Story of Qiu Ju)*. (pp. 114-140).
- 1994 *Huo zhe (To Live)*.
- 1995 *Yao a yao, yao dao waipoqiao (Shanghai Triad)*
- Berry, (1997) *Youhua haohao shuo (Keep Cool)*. *Cinema(s) and Nationhood(s)*. In
 Wim, (1998) *Yige dou buneng shao (Not One Less)*. *Run in Asian Cinema* (pp. 42-64).
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