

THE POLITICS OF IMAGES: CHINESE CINEMA IN THE CONTEXT OF
GLOBALIZATION

by

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This dissertation explores the interaction between filmmaking and the changing exigencies of leftist political ideologies in China at different stages of modernity: semi-colonial modernity, socialist modernity, and global modernity. Besides a historical examination of the left-wing cinema movement in the 1930s and socialist cinema in the Mao era, it focuses on the so-called “main melody” films that are either produced with financial backing by the state or sanctioned by governmental film awards in 1990s China. As products of globalization, Chinese “main melody” films are growing in complexity and maturity with the deepening of globalization, especially in competition with Hollywood cinema. Inspired by Louis Althusser, this dissertation attempts to address the lacunae of existing scholarship on Chinese “main melody” films by analyzing the role of the film medium as a significant ideological state apparatus (ISA) in serving ideological transitions occurring in 1990s China. Meanwhile, it also examines how the operation of

the ideological mechanism in Chinese “main melody” films is different from the Althusserian definition. An examination of the polyphonic narration of history shows how the revolutionary history has been retold in “main melody” films in different ways to create a rich discursive space in post-socialist China. Special attention has also been paid to the cinematic representation of Chinese nationalism, contending that the instigation of nationalism in non-EuroAmerican societies—despite the fact that nationalism can be easily appropriated by the state as an effective ideological discourse to conceal domestic social conflicts—calls attention to the often ignored historical linkages between colonialism and the expanding global capitalism. In addition, it also examines the role of Chinese intellectuals in the discursive construction of nationalism. An analysis of Chinese masculinity shows that recent changes in gender discourse are closely related to China’s socio-economic development in the era of globalization. Based on Stuart Hall’s “encoding/decoding” model, the last part of this dissertation explores how the Chinese spectator as a subject can negotiate the ideological interpellation by the “main melody” film text in his/her own way.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

As a socially significant mass medium of education, propaganda, and entertainment, Chinese cinema did not receive the international attention it deserved until the mid-1980s, partly because of the inaccessibility of Chinese cinema in the international market, and partly because of a deep-rooted political hostility against Communism during the Cold War era, which viewed Chinese cinema produced under the socialist regime as a tool of propaganda and brainwash. Since the mid-1980s, with the appearance of some Chinese films, especially those made by the so-called Fifth Generation filmmakers, at major international film festivals, Chinese cinema has become the focus of intense interest amongst some Western film critics. Chinese film studies has become one of the fastest growing and most vibrant academic fields in the West, which, in return, created an echo in China, thanks to the increasing cultural communication between China and the West. Since the late 1980s, Chinese filmmakers and critics have begun to reexamine the history of Chinese cinema and map its future in a global perspective.

The flourishing of Chinese film studies, internationally as well as domestically, is the very product of the tides of globalization. During the Cold War era, although cultural exchanges between China and the West were not completely shut down due to the political confrontation, they were very limited. In terms of cinema, just as most Western

films could not be released in the Chinese film market, so was Chinese cinema not exhibited and distributed in the West. It was the end of the Cold War that brought about a global market where some Chinese films were introduced to the world and became transnational cultural productions. The appearance of Chinese cinema at the international film festivals, however, could not be regarded simply as a cultural matter, just as the end of the Cold War was not merely a political matter. Both foretold the powerfulness of the oncoming global capitalism at an unprecedented pace. Has the end of the Cold War melted away all the ideological messages that had been heavily encoded in Chinese cinema during the socialist years? Will ideological confrontations no longer be the fundamental source of conflict in the global era? Is global politics entering a new phase that is dominated by the clash of civilizations, as claimed by Samuel Huntington? At least in China, the last socialist country, or post-socialist country, in the world, there are no quick answers for these questions.

As an indispensable part of the visual culture, cinema has played an important role in the process of nation-building and globalization. This dissertation explores the interaction between filmmaking and the changing exigencies of leftist political ideologies in China at different stages of modernity: semi-colonial modernity, socialist modernity and global modernity, with the main body of the dissertation focusing on the so-called *zhuxuanlü* or “main melody” films of the global era. For those who are not familiar with this term, I would like to give a brief definition here. Film industry in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was under direct control of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Socialist cinema was first of all an important tool of propaganda. In comparison,

both its economic value and entertaining function were less important. However, a reform in the Chinese film industry since 1984 resulted in an excessive development of entertainment productions, especially martial arts films, which was obviously a profit-driven phenomenon. In order to stress the propaganda function of cinema, in 1986, the CCP government borrowed *zhuxuanlü*, originally a musical term meaning “main melody” or “leitmotif,” to define an official guideline in filmmaking. As this new term connotes, entertainment productions can be permitted only when the mainstay of the filmmaking continues to produce films that promote the Party leadership and (post-) socialism. However, filmmakers did not follow the Party call at that time; they were more interested in exploring how to make successful entertainment films. After the Tiananmen Incident in 1989, in order to accomplish an ideological transition from Socialism to post-Socialism and reinforce the Party’s control, the government-sponsored “main melody” films have been vigorously promoted. They are either produced with financial backing by the government or sanctioned by governmental film awards. Compared with other domestic productions, “main melody” films always have been given the best screening times. Some of them were extremely popular and well received by Chinese audiences. In this dissertation, I treat “main melody” films as a film category rather than a film genre because it is difficult to identify a consistent stylistic dimension in “main melody” films. In terms of thematic motifs, “main melody” films also display a rich variety; important motifs include: the revolutionary history of the CCP, socialist development after 1949, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), and achievements of the “open and reform” policy. Therefore, rather than defining “main melody” films thematically or stylistically, I

choose to take them as a film category based on their ideological function— serving the legitimacy of the CCP in China since 1990. To simplify matters, I use the Huabiao Awards, a governmental award established in 1994 to judge if a film is “main melody” or not. Almost all films I discussed in the second part of this dissertation are on the Huabiao list.

Two main reasons have led me to choose “main melody” films as the object of my research. First, my research on “main melody” films attempts to address the lacunae of existing scholarship on Chinese film studies. Film productions in China can be roughly divided into three categories: art cinema, entertainment films and government-sponsored “main melody” films (Sometimes a film can be put into more than one category). In terms of film consumption, we have to add another important category—imported foreign films, especially Hollywood films since the mid-1990s. However, current Chinese film studies is concentrated on a few films with international reputation, mainly works of the Fifth and Sixth Generation filmmakers, or art cinema in general, despite the fact that most of these films have very limited influence in China. For example, Chen Kaige’s *Haizi Wang* (King of the Children) had no copy sold in China; but after being shown at a few international film festivals, it became a hot topic in several works of Chinese film studies. As a matter of fact, if we consider the annual feature film productions in China, films made by the Fifth Generation since the mid-1980s and the Sixth Generation since the mid-1990s have never been the mainstay of film production and consumption in the Chinese film market. In the 1980s, besides Chinese audiences’ persistent ardor for foreign-produced films, box office revenues were mainly collected from Xie Jin’s

political melodramas as well as a few entertainment filmmaking experiments. On the other hand, when I decided my topic three years ago, there was no academic study on any “main melody” films, especially in the English-speaking world. In other words, there has been an uneven development between Chinese film studies and the film production and consumption in the Chinese film market. As some scholars have poignantly pointed out, it was the legacy of Orientalism and the Cold War attitude that contributed to a false prosperity of Chinese cinema in the international film market.¹ Consequently, Chinese film studies in the English-speaking world has been affected. Although a few essays on “main melody” films were published in the past three years, there is still no systematic study of this important film category. By focusing my attention on “main melody” films, as systematically as I can do, I believe that this dissertation will fill a gap in current Chinese film studies.

Secondly, my study aims to examine the ideological significance of Chinese cinema in a post-socialist global context. As I mentioned, “main melody” films have been largely neglected in Chinese film studies, especially by the English-speaking world. Sometimes when these films are referenced, they are merely treated as oversimplified works of propaganda. Therefore, the crucial ideological significance of “main melody” films is seriously underestimated. It suggests that a political-oriented film does not deserve any serious academic attention because politics no longer plays a leading role compared with culture, or capital, with which I cannot agree. In my point of view, such an underestimation, as Samuel Huntington’s clash of civilizations, conspires to the global

¹ Dai Jinhua, “A Scene in the Fog: Reading the Sixth Generation Films,” in *Cinema and Desire: Feminist Marxism and Cultural Politics in the Work of Dai Jinhua* (London & New York: Verso, 2002), 71-98.

expansion of capitalism. I argue throughout the dissertation that images on the screen reflect politics in everyday life, which not only applies to Chinese “main melody” films exclusively, but cinema in general.

My theoretical approach in this project is basically an ideological analysis. Inspired by Louis Althusser, this dissertation examines the role of the “main melody” films as an important ideological state apparatus (ISA). Althusser claimed that compared with the singular repressive state Apparatus, there is a plurality of ISAs, and its operation is full of contradictions. My examination of “main melody” films reveals the contradictory character of ideological operation. Meanwhile, I also want to examine how the ideological operation in Chinese “main melody” films is different from the Althusserian definition. According to Althusser, the ISAs as a body are not immediately visible, and ideology never says, “I am ideological.” Once the mechanism of ideology is exposed, it can no longer work effectively. In 1990s’ China, the co-existence of “main melody” films with many “non-main melody” films, mainly domestic entertainment productions and Hollywood blockbusters, means the ideological function of “main melody” films has been brought to light: Chinese audiences know exactly that “main melody” films intend to convey certain ideological messages. However, many “main melody” films achieved considerable success in the domestic market, and some even defeated Hollywood blockbusters. It seems that the exposing of the ideological intention causes no vital damage to the ideological operation of the “main melody” films. A possible answer to this theoretical paradox, I would like to argue, lies in the fact that the 1990s’ China was undergoing an unprecedented ideological transition, and “main

melody” films have provided the audience a way to keep up with this transition. That is to say, Chinese people’s uneasiness with the social changes, especially the expansion of global capitalism, to some extent, has facilitated the successful ideological operation of “main melody” films in post-socialist China. But this does not mean that the audiences fully identify with ideological messages conveyed by the “main melody” films. I will also question the Althusserian notion of interpellation by examining the subjectivity of Chinese audiences when watching “main melody” films.

In addition to ideological analysis, I attempt to combine culture studies with film studies in order to emphasize the importance of the context in reading films, trying to answer questions such as why and how a given “main melody” film gets produced, what kind of specific political message it carries, and to what extent its audiences will be successfully targeted. A textual-based approach has dominated film studies over years, while cultural studies pays more attention to the circulation and consumption of cultural products. By combining them together, I wish to offer a comprehensive understanding of “main melody” films in their socio-political context. For example, my reading of Xie Jin’s huge-budgeted “main melody” film *Yapian Zhanzheng* (The Opium War) is based not only on the film text, but also its production and consumption context—the hand over of Hong Kong in 1997. This contextualization shows how a cinematic narration of “a century of humiliation” actually works as a national celebration of the CCP regime. As shown at the end of the film, the Qing government ceded HK to the British after being defeated in the Opium War. In 1997, when China resumed its territorial rights on Hong

Kong, the CCP leadership, although absent in the film narration, was constructed as a powerful regime that finally could carry out fair play with the West.

Thirdly, this dissertation also attempts to examine “main melody” films and the Chinese film industry from a political economy perspective. As products of globalization, Chinese “main melody” films are growing in complexity and maturity with the deepening of globalization, especially in competition with Hollywood cinema. In this context, Chinese cinema has to be taken into account as an important section of cultural industry that should bring in economic benefits. I will explore the Chinese government’s efforts in reorganizing the film industry and producing more successful “main melody” films to compete with Hollywood blockbusters.

In brief, my interdisciplinary approach in this dissertation aims to counteract the textual-focus methodology in film studies, offering a more comprehensive understanding of Chinese cinema. I have to admit that this is a very ambitious project and I always have trouble to strike balances between different approaches. Even at this moment, I’m still not sure to what extent I have accomplished my ambition. But I believe that it is a task worthy of trying.

Before the 1980s, the orthodox Chinese language scholarship on the pre-1949 Chinese cinema is *Zhongguo dianying fazhan shi* (The History of the Development of Chinese Cinema) by Cheng Jihua in collaboration with Li Shaobai and Xing Zuwen, which was originally published in 1963 and republished in 1980 after having been banned as “poisonous weeds” at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Meanwhile, as opposed to Cheng’s history of Chinese cinema that is “so extremely

orthodox in attitude and in structure,” Jay Leyda’s *Dianying: an Account of Films and the Film Audience in China* (1972) is the only available source for Chinese film studies in the English-speaking world. French film historian Régis Bergeron also published *Le cinéma chinois, 1905-1949* in 1977.

Since the mid-1980s, there has been a veritable explosion of scholarship on Chinese cinema. With an acute awareness that “Chinese cinema is beginning to receive serious attention in Western academic circles for the first time now,” Chris Berry edited *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema* in 1985 and expanded it in 1991. Paul Clark’s *Chinese Cinema: Culture and Politics since 1949* (1988) is an important study of Chinese cinema during its socialist years. *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics*, co-edited by Nick Browne, Paul Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack, and Esther Yau, was published in 1994 and has become one of the most important collections on Chinese film studies. Rey Chow’s *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (1995) is an influential work of Chinese film studies framed by postcolonial theories. In *Transnational Chinese Cinema: Identity, Nationhood, Gender* (1997), Sheldon Lu also tries to construct a pan-Chinese film studies from a transnational perspective.

The approach of the hundredth anniversary of Chinese cinema (1905-2005) caused another wave of re-evaluating the Chinese contribution to the development of world cinema over the past century, practically as well as theoretically. In China, several new versions of the history of Chinese cinema were published recently. For example, *Xin zhongguo dianyingshi: 1949-2000* (A History of Cinema in New China: 1949-2000,

2002) by Yin Hong and Ling Yan portrays how Chinese cinema has transformed from a monistic political tool to a pluralistic artistic medium and a popular entertainment industry. *Dangdai dianying luncong* (Series on contemporary Cinema) collects almost all-important essays published in *Dangdai dianying* (Contemporary Cinema), one of the most influential film journals in China. Published in the U.S., *100 Years of Chinese Cinema*, as the editors claim, offers “a sweeping panorama of the evolution of the cinematographic arts in China in its historical context and through insightful critical analyses of major representative films from different generations of filmmakers.” Besides works focusing on films made by the Fifth and Sixth Generation, studies on films made in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and overseas Chinese have also attracted considerable attention. Thanks to silent film festivals, early Chinese cinema has aroused the interest of a few scholars. For example, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen, Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937* by Zhang Zhen provides “a rich and comprehensive review of the early Chinese movie industry,” as reviewed by David Wang. In *Projecting a Nation: Chinese National Cinema Before 1949*, Hu Jubin addresses the issue of Chinese nationalism as being part of the complex history of cinema in the early modern Chinese nation.

Based on the above-mentioned scholarship on Chinese cinema, my dissertation is divided into two parts. Part I examines the development of the leftist ideas in Chinese cinema at different stages of modernity: semi-colonial modernity, socialist modernity, and global modernity in three chapters. It not only highlights the relationship between Chinese cinema and the formation of Chinese modernity, but also provides a historical context to observe the development of “main melody” films in the 1990s.

Chapter 2 begins with a review of the birth of the Chinese film industry, examining the interaction between politics, domestically as well as internationally, and the development of Chinese cinema, especially the Left-wing Film Movement in the 1930s. I argue that the Chinese film industry was a product of semi-colonial modernity, and a persistent resistance to the very semi-colonial situation accompanied its development. Drawing from ideas of both Chinese film critics and Western scholars, a reflection on the relationship between cinema and politics aims to stress the theoretical significance to study the ideological function of the film medium.

In Chapter 3, I examine the politics and aesthetics of socialist cinema in the Mao era. Mao's Yan'an Talk is my point of departure because it decided the direction of cinema in socialist China—serving the Party politics. A reading of a classic socialist cinema *Baimaonü* (The White-haired Girl) shows how class discourse and gender coding were integrated to form socialist aesthetics, especially in terms of how gender coding was used to serve class struggle. By examining filmmakers' efforts in developing a national style in socialist cinema, I want to bring attention to the role of cinema in developing a socialist modernity under a Cold War background.

The end of the Cold War and the advent of globalization made the issue of national identity more complicated than before. Chapter 4 examines how political and economic reforms initiated by the CCP government since 1984 have changed the Chinese film industry in a global context. As important cultural productions that serve the CCP legitimacy in post-socialist China, both the quality and quantity of “main melody” films were increased in the 1990s. In order to compete with Hollywood, the industrial

reorganization of the Chinese film industry has taken the form of “state capitalism.” On its way to global modernity, how the CCP tries to work out the contradiction between its socialist legacy and capitalist agenda has been vividly represented in “main melody” filmmaking. A following case study “Disney in China” examines how global capitalism operates in China and the reaction from the Chinese government. It discusses issues of cultural imperialism, and local resistance.

Part II focuses on how new cinematic languages have been invented in “main melody” films to serve the ideological transition occurring in post-socialist China, and to cope with changes in the global era as well. In addition to an examination of three related themes: narration of history, nationalism, and Chinese masculinity, I also explore the issue of Chinese spectatorship.

The rewriting of history is the most significant characteristic of “main melody” films. Chapter 5 borrows a term “polyphonic” from Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of polyphonic novels to describe narrative strategies in “main melody” films. Bakhtin defines Dostoevsky’s novels as polyphonic novels, in which the character’s voice is never ultimately overpowered by that of the narrator. My use of the term polyphonic emphasizes the co-existence of different ways of historical narration in “main melody” films that are diverted from that of socialist cinema. Three films have been examined in detail in this chapter: *Dajuezhhan* (The Great Decisive War), a trilogy about the three military campaigns launched by the Communists to defeat the Nationalists during the civil war, gained considerable popularity in China with a distinctive epic narration; *Wode 1919* (My 1919) recalls one important historical moment, the Paris Peace Conference

after the WWI, in a highly personalized memoir style; and *Likai Leifeng de rizi* (Days Without Lei Feng) depicts a story of an ordinary people in post-socialist China who inherits the spirit of a selfless socialist hero. The polyphonic narration of history creates a rich discursive space in a quickly commercialized Chinese society, each with their special ideological function.

In chapter 6, special attention is paid to the issue of Chinese nationalism. In addition to the argument that nationalism can be easily appropriated by the state as an effective ideological discourse to conceal domestic social conflicts, I contend that the instigation of nationalism in non-EuroAmerican societies also calls attention to the often ignored historical linkages between colonialism and the expanding global capitalism. For example, in *My 1919* and *Hengkong chushi* (Magnificent Birth), a film on China's nuclear testing in the 1960s, a shared theme of "China can say no" speaks directly to a strong nationalist sentiment against the West in contemporary China. This chapter also examines how Chinese intellectuals have been involved in the discursive construction of nationalism.

In Chapter 7, I analyze discourses of Orientalism and Occidentalism in the cinematic representation of Chinese masculinity. We all know that Said's notion Orientalism as a system of discourse that constructs the images of the East in the eyes of the West. The Westerners often assume an authoritative position to read the non-Western "Others" as feminized objects, which has been vividly embodied in many Hollywood productions. The "Zhang Yimou model," which features "young women with numerous pseudo-traditional Chinese rituals," has been charged by many critics as self-Orientalism

that caters to the taste of the western audiences. In reverse, Occidentalism is about how the East views the West. It has been an important discursive system in modern China. Chinese masculinity has a rich representation in mass media. In this chapter, I shall focus on one predominant theme: cinematic representation of Chinese masculinity in contrast to Western masculinity. Occidentalism plays a crucial role in the cinematic imagination of Chinese masculinity in “main melody” films. For example, *Huanghe juejian* (Grief over the Yellow River) tells a story of how an American pilot is rescued by the Chinese during the WWII. In contrast to the American pilot, there are three male Chinese characters, two widowers and one sexually impotent. Although their male identity may be problematic viewed from an individual perspective, masculine characteristics emerge through nationalism once they form a collective male group to fight for the nation. It is in the mirror of American masculinity that a traumatized Chinese masculinity regains its vigor. In *Chongchu yamaxun* (Charging out Amazon), two Chinese soldiers not only defeat their Western classmates during an intensive military training, one even wins the admiration of a western female. This masculine imagination of China on the international stage is closely related to China’s socio-economic development in the era of globalization and the rising of nationalism.

Based on Stuart Hall’s “encoding/decoding” model, the last chapter explores how the Chinese spectator can negotiate the ideological interpellation from “main melody” films. It is one of my efforts in combining cultural studies with film studies. Hall argues that the dominant ideology is typically inscribed as the “preferred reading” in a media text, but that cannot be automatically adopted by receivers. According to him, there are

three kinds of readings: “dominant readings” are produced by those whose social situation favors the “preferred reading,” “negotiated readings” are produced by those who can alter the “preferred reading” by taking account of their own social position, and “oppositional readings” are produced by those whose social position puts them into direct conflict with the “preferred reading.” Due to the ideological transition occurring in 1990s’ China, these three kinds of readings have happened simultaneously to “main melody” films. For example, the success of films that promote model CCP members, I would like to argue, comes from the common people’s deep dissatisfaction with the status quo in 1990s’ China, especially their great resentment towards the issue of corruption. The box office winner in 2000, *Shengsi jueze* (Life and Death Decision), aims to glorify the Party leadership in the anti-corruption campaign. But “oppositional reading” reveals that the audiences are more interested in viewing the corrupt secrets that are generally unavailable in mass media.

As Part II shows, as an important ideological state apparatus in 1990s’ China, “main melody” films have also played an important role in developing Chinese modernity in the global era. In this process, the reconfiguration of Chinese subject happens at two opposite levels simultaneously: one is based upon the ideological interpellation from the “main melody” film; the other comes from a subjective agency that is capable of decoding the interpellation critically.

CHAPTER II

WHEN CINEMA MET POLITICS: THE LEFT-WING FILM MOVEMENT IN CHINA

When the motion-picture camera was first invented at the end of the 19th century, it was used either to record scenes of daily life, making a realistic simulacrum of a “living picture”, such as Lumière brothers’ early works, or to create a technological wonderland through trick effects, of which Georges Méliès’ *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (1902) is a telling example. By combining characteristics of other art forms, from painting to sculpture, from music to literature, cinema quickly grew into an ideal medium for reaching the masses. Some artists devoted themselves to the creative potential of this new art form, while many businessmen concerned more with its promising commercial future. Film historians generally take April 14, 1894—the date when New York City opened the world’s first Kinetoscope—as the commercial beginning of the motion picture industry in the United States.¹ Before America achieved its dominance in world cinema, the pioneering French and British filmmakers had occupied the forefront of the film technique in its early years.

This chapter examines the early years of the film industry in the semi-feudal and semi-colonial China, paying special attention to the development of the left-wing film movement in the 1930s. The late 19th and the early 20th century also witnessed the

¹ Tino Balio, ed., *The American Film Industry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 14.

expansion of new imperialism. Japan and the United States joined and accelerated the colonial expansion initiated by European powers. Accompanying the imperialist powers' aggressive competition for overseas territorial acquisitions, film technique was introduced into many colonized countries. By projecting moving images onto the silver screen, cinema could offer its audiences passive escapist entertainment, spaces of creative imagination, or other things, depending on individuals' different interests as well as their specific socio- historical circumstances. The encounter between the film medium and the political turmoil at given historical conjunctures, as shown in the rising of the left-wing film movement, sheds light on the characteristics of the film medium that are more complex than those of other mass media. Furthermore, recent debates about globalization that have been so dominating among scholars in humanities and social science also inspire me to situate "national cinema" in a broader cultural and political perspective. The international power configuration in which China was falling at the hands of the imperialism was the spark that ignited the anti-imperialist and anti-feudalist sentiments among Chinese in the 1930s, therefore a strong will to achieve national independence spread throughout the left-wing film movement. How the left-wing filmmakers gradually mastered the film medium in order to disseminate their leftist ideas will be explored through two films—*Chuncan* (Spring Silkworms, 1933) and *Yuguangqu* (Song of the Fishermen, 1935). The following theoretical discussion on the interwoven relationship between filmmaking and the changing exigencies of leftist political ideologies in China aims to bring attention to the political significance of the film medium.

Colonial Modernity and the Birth of the Chinese Film Industry

In the narratives of Chinese modernity, “the occlusion of (semi-) colonialism,” a trend in social science writings that shaped Cold War China studies, as Tani E. Barlow has convincingly argued, created an exceptionalist China that prevented the U.S. from ending up on the wrong side, that is, the side of imperialism and colonialism.² Or, as Andrew Jones interprets further, this occlusion precluded an engaged analysis of the intertwining of capitalist modernity and imperialism on a global scale.³ Therefore, Barlow calls for a post-Cold War project that requires “the construction of critical genealogies across national boundaries” to confront “the massive history of global European colonialism.”⁴ In the rethinking of the correlation of modernity and colonialism, “colonial modernity” has become a productive theory to interrogate the formation of modernity throughout a socio-historical perspective. As other modern phenomena arisen in the early 20th century’s China, the birth of the Chinese film industry cannot be examined more comprehensively through the framework of colonial modernity.

Compared with Western European countries and the U.S., China at the end of the 19th century was falling behind, especially in terms of its modern scientific development. The Celestial Empire was experiencing its most humiliating moment under the threat of the Western gunboat. A series of unequal treaties put China at the mercy of the Western powers. However, the fact that China became a semi-colonial country with many foreign

² Tani E. Barlow, *Formations of Colonial Modernity in East Asia*, 1997, 374-375.

³ Andrew Jones, *Yellow Music* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 8.

⁴ Tani E. Barlow, 1997, 398.

territories contributed to the birth of its film industry. In 1896, film as a new technology and form of entertainment was introduced into China. Soon after, short films were exhibited regularly as part of variety shows in Shanghai, then the most prosperous treaty port in China. It was phrased in Chinese as *yingxi* or *dianying*, which literally means “the shadow play of electricity.” In the following years, Chinese urbanites saw more and more foreign-produced *dianying*, most from France and the U.S. Movie going became one important symbol of modern life. In other words, if we could provisionally agree that “semi-colonial” was the socio-historical condition of China at the turn of the 20th century, then the Chinese film industry was the very product of this condition. When foreign films were regularly shown in Chinese cities, most film companies set up in China prior to 1917 were financed with foreign capital.⁵ Western businessmen were then the main investors in the Chinese film industry. They controlled not only film production, but film distribution and exhibition as well. For example, the first Chinese feature film *Nanfu nanqi* (The Difficult Couple, 1913) was produced by the American-invested *Yaxiya yingxi gongsi* (Asia Shadow Play Company).⁶ For example, Spanish businessman B. Goldenberg had owned the biggest chain theater in Shanghai, and monopolized Shanghai film distribution for many years until he left China with a big fortune in 1926.⁷

The fact that film companies in China during this period were either foreign-invested or privately owned, argues film historian Hu Jubin, demonstrates that both the

⁵ For the activities of the foreign film companies in China, see Li Suyuan and Hu Jubin, *Zhongguo wushen dianying shi* (Beijing: China Cinema Press, 1996), 2-23, 100-104.

⁶ Cheng Jihua et al. *Zhongguo dianying fazhan shi* (Beijing: China Cinema Press, 1982), 16-19.

⁷ Cheng Jihua et al. 12.

Chinese government and major political parties had yet to realize cinema's ideological significance.⁸ Another possible reason, in my point of view, lies in that most Chinese investors were unable to compete with their Western rivals in obtaining even a small portion of the domestic film market, in terms of both capital and technology. The Euro-American imperialist expansion in semi-colonized China directly served their pursuit of profits, and the opium trade was a telling example. Although cinema is fundamentally different from opium or other traditional products because of its cultural nature, what deserves special attention is its economic and technological nature. Filmmaking generally requires a higher budget. Once a film copy is produced, however, as Thomas Guback has pointed out correctly, huge profits will come in with a rather lower print and distribution fee, so that film distribution becomes the most important factor for making a profit.⁹ The bigger the market a film can reach, the more money it can make. In this sense, the importance of an overseas market for capital accumulation cannot be viewed more clearly than in the film industry. Not surprisingly, all colonized and semi-colonized countries became the markets of the Western film industry. Foreign films, especially those from Hollywood, were the predominant presence in the Chinese film market up to 1949, accounting for as much as 90 percent of the market.¹⁰

Under such an aggressive importation, the development of the Chinese film industry was greatly hampered. It was until the establishment of the Motion Picture

⁸ Hu Jubing, *Projecting A Nation: Chinese National Cinema Before 1949* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003), 45.

⁹ Thomas Guback, *The International Film Industry: Western Europe and America since 1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), 30.

¹⁰ Sheldon Lu, ed., *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 4.

Department of the Commercial Press in 1917 that Chinese national capital began to finance film production in order to promote education. With an acute awareness of the negative social values conveyed by foreign films released in China, the Commercial Press also aimed to enlighten Chinese people by producing films that could promote Chinese culture.¹¹ These efforts brought home vividly the tenuous struggle between the colonizer and the colonized in the cultural domain. Nevertheless, the Commercial Press could not change the prevalently marginal situation of the Chinese film industry single-handedly. Most Chinese entrepreneurs considered cinema merely as a less important business, and radical Chinese intellectuals also paid no serious attention to cinema, even after the May Fourth Movement in 1919. Only a few intellectuals such as Hong Shen and Tian Han recognized the significance of cinema as a potential means of mass education. Hong Shen argued that “*yingxi* is an effective tool to spread civilization” and it “can popularize education and improve the Chinese nationals.”¹² However, his opinion of filmmaking was condemned by others as “prostitution of art.”¹³

Despite pressures from foreign imports and ignorance from both Chinese entrepreneurial and intellectual groups, the Chinese film industry developed steadily from an experimental stage to its first commercial success in the 1920s. The emergence of some popular film genres, such as martial arts and costume dramas, indicated that the transformation of cinema from a western technology into an indigenous form of entertainment was carrying out successfully.

¹¹ Cheng Jihua et al. 39.

¹² Hong Shen, “*Women dagu de shiqi yijing guole me?*” in *Hong Shen wenji*, 1957, vol.4, 514.

¹³ Ibid.

Although no hindsight can change history, it is still valuable to argue against any teleological idea by imaging possible alternatives. Therefore, it is not absolutely meaningless to wonder: had the 1920s and the 1930s not witnessed an unprecedented national crisis, would the Chinese film industry have kept its commercial orientation? Examining the political situation in 1920s' and 30s' China, domestically as well as internationally, not only can help us contextualize the development of the Chinese film industry, but also can offer us a better understanding of the often overlooked subjectivity of the semi-colonized in a "one-sided approach to the construction of the modern world by global capitalism," to borrow a phrase that Arif Dirlik uses to criticize current studies on globalization. The term "colonial modernity," claims Arif Dirlik, is significant most importantly because "it recognizes the voices of the colonized without dissipating into globalization or postcolonial blurrings the power relations that have shaped the global as we encounter it today."¹⁴ The Chinese film industry in the late 1920s and 1930s, as I shall illustrate, uttered words of the colonized in its anti-colonial struggle for national sovereignty.

After China's imperial history of more than two millennia was brought to a close in 1912, the newly established republican China failed to obtain the backing of western powers to reclaim China's lost territories. Japan placed harsh demands about taking over German rights in China. In the process of learning from the West in order to strengthen China, some May Fourth thinkers were attracted to Marxism. Founded in 1921, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took warlordism, landlordism, and imperialism as its

¹⁴ Arif Dirlik. "The End of Colonialism? The Colonial Modern in the Making of Global Modernity," *Boundary 2* (Spring 2005): 1-31.

three main targets. In May 1925, after a communist worker was murdered by Japanese owners of a cotton mill in Shanghai, the British police fired at marching students and workers. This event became known as the May 30th Massacre, which resulted in a massive nationalist movement. The rise of nationalist sentiments in the Chinese society had significant influence on the development of the Chinese film industry. Mingxing Studio, established by Li Minwei in Hong Kong in 1922 and moved to Shanghai in 1925, aimed to “replace foreign films with Chinese films and even to sell Chinese films overseas, and this will effectively remedy the problems associated with foreign films.”¹⁵ The success of its 1923 feature film *Gu'er jiuzuji* (Orphan Rescues His Grandfather) not only made it possible for the company to further expand and develop, but also stimulated more entrepreneurs to invest in the film industry. With the establishment of more than 100 film companies by mid-1920s, film production flourished from about 10 films in 1922 to over 120 in 1926.¹⁶ Founded in 1930, Lianhua Film Company had “*Fuxing guopian* (Rejuvenating the National Cinema)” as its primary concern, claiming that:

In order to resist cultural and economic invasion by foreign film companies, intrinsic Chinese national virtues should be advocated and the consciousness of the age must be guided properly. To increase profits for domestic film companies, Lianhua must bring together Chinese-owned movie theaters and buy out foreign-owned ones, to compel movie theaters to show domestic films. . . .¹⁷

Regarding foreign films as tools of “foreign culture invasion,” Luo Mingyou, the owner of Lianhua, took the transition from silent film to sound film as an opportunity to

¹⁵ *Shadow Play Journal* (1922). Quoted from Hu Jubin, 2003, 51.

¹⁶ 180 is the highest number offered by Li Suyuan and Hu Jubin. According to their research, since 1927, the upsurge of setting up film companies gradually subsided and many film studios closed down. In the following years, the number of film companies was around 20 to 30: 32 in 1927, 23 in 1928, 31 in 1929, 26 in 1930 and 20 in 1931. See Li Suyuan and Hu Jubin, 1996, 193.

¹⁷ Hu Jubin, 2003, 52.

reorganize the Chinese film industry. In order to shake off the monopoly of the foreign films in China, Lianhua adopted a system integrating film production with distribution. With the release of *Gudu chunmeng* (Spring Dream in the Old Capital) and *Yecao xianhua* (Wild Flowers) in 1930, Lianhua was the first national film company that successfully attracted attention from Chinese audiences. The following years witnessed the first golden age of the Chinese film industry.

Viewed from this perspective, the Chinese film industry is not only a product of (semi-)colonial modernity; its development was also accompanied with a persistent resistance to the very colonial situation that conceived it. The struggle of anti-imperialism in the Chinese film industry did not concern only filmmakers; it echoed the general public's aspiration for a more powerful China. Sent into deep despair by the hostile international environment as well as domestic social problems that China had to face, more and more Chinese came to realize that it was time to engage in social activities. Led by a few radical intellectuals such as Hong Shen, they protested the offensive representation of Chinese images in foreign films and a few American capitalists' ambition to build an "Oriental Hollywood" in Shanghai. In his research on the film censorship during the Nanjing decade (1927-1937), Xiao Zhiwei lists the efforts that the Nationalist government made in controlling foreign film distribution and studio activities in China.¹⁸ Xiao argues that it was through the rhetoric of nationalism that the government and the Chinese film industry cooperated with each other.¹⁹ I agree with him that these efforts should be put into the context of the overall struggle to gain national

¹⁸ Hu Jubin, 2003, 35.

¹⁹ Xiao Zhiwei, 1997, 52.

sovereignty from the imperialist powers and to promote nationalist consciousness. It is undeniable that nationalism is a rhetoric that can be easily appropriated and manipulated by power groups. What should not be underestimated, however, is the historical situation that made a nationalist rhetoric possible and commonly shared. In other words, the political concern of the Chinese film industry that emerged in the 1930s was partly a result of the anti-imperialist struggle, which revealed that cinema was not only a form of entertainment but also a powerful means to mobilize and unify the Chinese people. The political characteristics of cinema crystallized in the Left-wing Film Movement (1932-1937) that I would like to speculate upon, especially in terms of its ideological function.

Politics and Techniques in Left-wing Cinema

In 1927, the first revolutionary alliance between the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was ended with a political coup launched by Chiang Kai-Shek, after that the Communist movement shifted its efforts to the countryside. Under the white terror of the KMT, the early 1930s witnessed a revolutionary tide arising in the cultural front. Left-wing organizations mushroomed in many cities, and most of them were involved by underground CCP members. In March 1930, *Zhongguo zuoyi zuojia lianmeng* (The Left-wing Writers' League of China) was established in Shanghai. *Zhongguo zuoyi xiju lianmeng* (The Left-wing Dramas' League of China) was established soon after. It was renamed as *Zhongguo zuoyi xijujia lianmeng* (The Left-wing Dramatists' League of China) in January 1931 and issued the guiding principles of filmmaking. According to the principles, besides theater performance, it was necessary for the League to give attention to Chinese cinema. In addition to producing

film scripts, and having members participate in activities held by film studios, the League would try to raise money to produce films independently. Another task was to organize film study groups, as well as progressive actors and film technicians, to build a base for the Chinese Left-wing Film Movement. In order to launch a struggle against the petit bourgeois trend in the field of Chinese cinema, it was indispensable for the League to criticize and purge the current Chinese Film Movement.²⁰

Japanese invasion further increased the political turmoil in 1930s' China. After the Mukden Incident, Japan took over Northeast China and proclaimed it an independent state in 1932 by installing Pu Yi, the last Manchu emperor, as the puppet ruler of Manchukuo. On Jan 28, 1932, Japan attacked Shanghai, and Chinese people's patriotic zeal reached an all-time high, asking film companies to produce more films as a way to fight against Japan, which provided a rare opportunity to launch the Left-wing Film Movement. Although anti-imperialism was not the primary task of the movement, it was necessary to work out an effective way to deliver left-wing revolutionary ideas in facing Japan's increased imperialist aggression. A group of CCP members thus entered film circles and made the Left-wing Film Movement a reality. The leader of this movement, Xia Yan, a distinguished scriptwriter and critic, recalled the situation as follows:

When the Japanese invasion became imminent and anti-Japanese sentiment more popular, those who advocated anti-Japanese ideas were supported by the masses. We were considered anti-Japanese and therefore supported by ordinary people. The film capitalists were no longer afraid to work with us. The situation was thus to our advantages.²¹

²⁰ According to Cheng Jihua, the guiding principles, *Zuixin xingdong gangling*, was passed in September 1931 and published in *Wenxue Daobao* on 23 October 1931, 6-7.

²¹ Xia Yan, "Xinde bashe," in *Zhongguo zuoyi dianying yundong*, 1993, 9-14.

Based upon its previous commercial success, the Chinese film industry was becoming an increasingly politicized enterprise. 1933 was the most productive year of left-wing film production, and Mingxing Studio produced more than 20 left-wing films. In the following years, as filmmakers gained more experiences with filmmaking, more successful left-wing films were produced, and some of them became classics of Chinese cinema. However, Shanghai fell to the Japanese soon after the breakout of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937, and the Left-wing Film Movement was terminated.

The Left-wing Film Movement has been the subject of extensive research. Cheng Jihua, Li Shaobai and Xing Zuwen first inaugurated the title of *zuoyi dianying yundong* (Left-wing Film Movement) in 1962 as an official-approved term to define the progressive film culture in the 1930s and the 1940s in *Zhongguo dianying fazhan shi* (The Development of Chinese Cinema), the most authoritative history of pre-1949 Chinese cinema.²² Before the publication of this book, left-wing cinema had been generally referred as progressive cinema. In 1993, an official list of 74 left-wing films produced between 1932 and 1937 was printed in *Zhongguo zuoyi dianying yundong* (The Chinese Left-wing Film Movement), an anthology dedicated to the Left-wing Film Movement.²³

Besides the two Chinese publications, a few English publications have appeared recently, including Laikwan Pang's *Building a New China in Cinema: The Chinese Left-wing Cinema Movement, 1932-1937*, Hu Jubin's *Projecting a Nation: Chinese National Cinema before 1949*, and Vivian Shen's *The Origins of the Left-wing Cinema in China*,

²² Laikwan Pang, 2002, 3-4.

²³ See Chen Bo, ed., *Zhongguo zuoyi dianying yundong* (Beijing: China Cinema Press, 1993).

1932-37. Amongst them, I find Pang's approach the most inspiring one. With the aim of illustrating how political, aesthetic, and commercial discourses fought and negotiated with each other in leftist filmmaking, Pang demonstrates that a new collective subject, referring to both filmmakers and viewers since they shared a common social commitment to a nation-building project, was constructed in and through the left-wing cinema.²⁴ In the following part, bearing her argument in mind, I shall examine two left-wing films – *Chuncan* (Spring Silkworms, 1933) and *Yuguangqu* (Song of the Fishermen, 1935) with the aim to show how left-wing filmmakers came to master the film medium as an important means to attract the masses and to deliver political messages. *Spring Silkworms*, an early attempt of the left-wing filmmaking, failed to attract an audience, while *Song of the Fishermen* set a new box office record for Chinese cinema. Both the failure and the success helped the left-wing filmmakers to better appreciate the characteristics of the film medium and its special political function. They brought home vividly that both commercial and artistic characteristics have to be taken into account together in order to carry out a left-wing filmmaking agenda.

Spring Silkworms was originally a short story written by Mao Dun (the pseudonym of Shen Yanbing, 1896-1981), one of the most versatile authors among the May Fourth generation of Chinese literati. A staunch advocate of Chinese Communism, Mao Dun turned decisively from a journalist and propagandist into a career as a novelist after the 1927 fiasco. In April 1930, after a short stay in Japan, he returned to China and joined the Left-wing Writers' League. *Spring Silkworms* was written in 1932 and published in 1933.

²⁴ Laikwan Pang, 2002, 73.

Set in a village of southern China, *Spring Silkworms* tells a story of an old peasant named Tongbao and his family members who make every effort to raise silkworms, with the hope that a good harvest of cocoons could pay off part of their debt. In order to buy more leaves to feed the worms, they even decide to mortgage their grove of mulberries, the last piece of property they own. The harvest, however, turns into a disaster because Japanese-made synthetic silk is dumped on the Chinese market, and most silk factories have shut down due to the oncoming Sino-Japanese War. Finally, they are forced to sell the crop at an extremely low price and got deeper into debt.

This story has been highly praised by the CCP literary critics in the sense that the miserable fate of the Tongbao family represents the bankruptcy of the peasantry under the double pressure of imperialist aggression and the traditional usury.²⁵ The economic destitution of Chinese peasants was represented vividly under Mao Dun's pen. Despite his critique of the inherent limitations of the proletarian genre, C.T. Hsia claims that *Spring Silkworms* is Mao Dun's best story, and perhaps the most outstanding achievement in Chinese proletarian fiction. As he states:

Although it is [Mao Dun's] articulate intention to discredit this kind of feudal mentality, his loving portrayal of good peasants at their customary tasks transforms the supposed Communist tract into a testament of human dignity.²⁶

The multiple layers of Mao Dun's writing always give more than one interpretation. *Spring Silkworms* is just one telling case. From a more economic perspective, David Deiwei Wang argues that this story "highlights the confrontation of modern machinery with provincial handicraftsmanship; of Western know-how with native values; and of a

²⁵ Yang Yi, *The History of Modern Chinese Literature* (Beijing: Renmin Press, 1987), 134.

²⁶ C. T. Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), 162-3.

capitalist monopoly with the rural struggle for cultural and socioeconomic autonomy.”²⁷ Considering Mingxing’s intention in producing this film, Wang’s idea is very convincing. The year of 1933 was called the “Year of Chinese Cinema” because a large number of domestic productions appeared in the market. One of Mingxing’s plans for this year was to make a series of feature films promoting China’s major industries, including silk, tea, coal, and salt. Besides *Spring Silkworms* on the silk industry, Mingxing also produced *Yanchao* (Salt Tide) and *Xiangcao meiren* (Tobacco and Beauty) for the salt and cigarette industries respectively.²⁸

Spring Silkworms was quickly adapted into a film soon after its publication. It was directed by Cheng Bugao, a left-wing filmmaker. Under an anonym of Cai Chusheng, Xia Yan, the leader of the Left-wing Film Movement, undertook the role of scriptwriter. Except for a few shots, his film script was faithful to Mao Dun’s original work. It follows the narrative of the story. As a silent film, almost all the captions come directly from the original, either through dialogues or by introducing the backgrounds of given scenes. While the novel only mentions briefly “this year Shanghai was seething with unrest and all the silk weaving factories have closed their doors,” the film stresses the exploitation of Chinese peasants by foreign imperialism and traditional usury by adding an opening scene to the original narrative. A long shot of a small town street follows a medium shot of a tablet—“Yuanlai Pawn Store.” The camera then focuses on a notice: “Store will be closed anytime after pawning 100 dollars.” People are crowded in front of the store door and the old Tongbao is one of them. In a following scene, Tongbao goes to buy silkworm

²⁷ David Der-wei Wang, ed., *Fictional Realism in 20th Century China*, 1992, 51.

²⁸ Laikwan Pang, 2002, 44.

seeds with the money from pawning some silk products. On his way back home, he bumps into his neighbor Ah Tu who comes to buy rice. Ah Tu complains: “I’ve already pawned my rice saved for the New Year. I have to pay back the debt of buying those damn fertilizers.” Tongbao agrees that this year is worse than last year: “All our money has been swindled away by the foreign devils.”

Later, Xia Yan creates another dialogue between Tongbao and a young landlord, Master Chen, to highlight Japan’s threat to the Chinese silk industry:

Master: It is very risky to raise silkworms this year. A war is going on in Shanghai. All silk filatures are closed. In America, Japanese-produced silk only asks for 500 dollars, whilst Chinese silk cost 1000 dollars.

Tong Bao: Your Master, no kidding. Our Chinese ladies and Misses need to wear silk clothes anyway.

Master: They are wearing Japanese man-made silk.

These two brief dialogues reveal how the peasants suffer from a double exploitation: imperialism (fertilizer, man-made silk) and Chinese usurers (pawn store, debt). As a prestigious writer of the leftist literature, Xia Yan’s creative adaptation in these two scenes succeeds in addressing the main political message of this film: it was the imperialist’s economic invasion and the domestic political turmoil that produced the bankruptcy of the peasantry.

Before *Spring Silkworms*, Xia Yan’s first film script is *Kuangliu* (Torrent, 1933), which was also the first left-wing film produced by the Mingxing Studio. It recounts how a schoolteacher fights the flood with his villagers while a landlord uses the name of charity to extort money. Calling it “the beginning of a new guideline for Chinese cinema,” left-wing critics paid high compliments to its cinematic representation of class

struggle in the rural China.²⁹ In terms of box office receipts, *Torrent* was also successful, partly due to the documentary footage of the Yangtze River flood in 1931, and partly due to the romance between the schoolteacher and the landlord's daughter.³⁰ Consequently, when left-wing filmmakers attempted to screen *Spring Silkworms*, a masterpiece of the left-wing literature, to spread their leftist ideas, Mingxing Studio willingly invested a large amount of money, anticipating another box office success after *Torrent*.³¹

In the CCP's official account of the Left-wing Film Movement, *Spring Silkworms* was praised as the first attempt of adapting a work of Chinese left-wing literature for the silver screen: "It triggered extensive discussions in the literate group, which considered this film a successful and meaningful attempt, an important work in the 1933's film production."³² This rhetoric created an impression that *Spring Silkworms*, just like *Torrent*, was a successful film too. As a matter of fact, *Spring Silkworms* only had a poor 5-day screening period. It was first released on October 8 in Xingguang Theater with a full house, thanks to the big advertising scheme Mingxing had launched.³³ As the theater probably did not see a satisfied box office, the film was withdrawn on October 12. It disappointed both the left-wing film critics and the general audiences, and the "extensive discussions in the literate group" were actually concerned with how to take lessons from its failure. Although Xia Yan expressed that what he attempted in this film was "a

²⁹ Cheng Jihua et al. 204.

³⁰ After shot the documentary footage, Cheng Bugao came out the idea of producing *Torrent*.

³¹ Cheng Bugao, *Yingtang yijiu* (Beijing: China Cinema Press, 1983), 1-2.

³² Cheng Jihua et al. 208, 211.

³³ *Shenbao* (Shanghai Daily), 9 October 1933.

documentary cinema style” that did not involve many interesting plots, it was obvious that neither critics nor audiences could acknowledge his artistic experiment.³⁴ Several critics claimed that since there was not a single climax, the audience could not figure out the central message from the boring and disorganized plots.³⁵ The CCP leadership must have found the severe critique of a leftist work harmful to the development of the left-wing film movement, so a pro-*Spring Silkworms* campaign was launched in the following days to praise its positive elements. Unsurprisingly, the short screening period of *Spring Silkworms* has never been mentioned in the CCP’s official account.

The poor box office performance of *Spring Silkworms* also indicated a failed political agenda. Pang argues briefly that the failure of *Spring Silkworms* heralded an apparent segregation between serious literature and cinema in the movement.³⁶ This segregation, in my point of view, sheds light on both the compatible and incompatible characteristics of literature and cinema. Literature is fundamentally a linguistic medium, while cinema is primarily visual. Robert Scholes locates the primary difference between written and filmed stories in the ways that “readers read” those texts differently. Borrowing from French narrative theory, he uses “narrativity” to refer to the process “by which a perceiver actively constructs a story from the fictional data provided by any narrative medium.”³⁷ According to him, the written narrative, conveyed by the more abstract sign-system of words, requires and rewards “a narrativity that concretizes and

³⁴ About the discussion on *Spring Silkworms*, see “Meiri Dianying” in *Chenbao*, 8 October 1933.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Laikwan Pang, 2002, 46.

³⁷ Robert Scholes, 419.

pictorializes the verbal images into more specific mental pictures of persons, places, actions, and things.” The success of Mao Dun’s original novel, I would argue, lies exactly in the written narrativity that brought sufferings of the Tongbao family to readers’ mind through verbal images. The failure of its film adaptation was much related to the inexperienced camera work that was incapable of offering its audiences clear messages, especially during the years of silent film. Besides this historical reason, the failure was also partly due to an inapprehension of the incompatible characteristics of literature and cinema. The concrete pictorialization of the filmed image, argues Robert Scholes, requires and rewards precisely the opposite kind of narrativity—the abstracting of highly specific stimuli into more general patterns of structure and theme. When the novel *Spring Silkworms* already has a highly abstracted narrativity, it requires a much lively camera work to accomplish a de-abstracting process, and to produce a pictorialized effect. A faithful adaptation of the original novel failed the de-abstracting process.

As the novel describes, Tongbao is a traditional Chinese peasant who has strong religious beliefs. The Tongbao family holds a divine ritual every year, from cleaning bamboo baskets to hatching eggs. On the second day of incubation, Tongbao smears a garlic bulb with mud and places them at the foot of the wall inside the shed. If, in a few days, the garlic bulb puts out many sprouts, it means the eggs would hatch well. Later, the garlic only gets four measly shoots, and the silkworms grow fast and thrive. But a good harvest does not bring happiness to the poor family because of the war situation and the economic invasion from Japan. Unfortunately, the irony of the “fateful” garlic cannot be fully offered by the camera work, and the highly praised “human dignity” as embodied

by Tongbao failed to be appearing on the screen, too. While literary narrative presents the religious spirit with spaces of imagination, the divine ritual in the film is covered by a series of silent shots, resulting only in becoming one of the most boring parts of this film. This is why Robert Scholes suggests that the language of description and reflection in a novel must be eliminated in cinematic translation.³⁸

However, a weakness of Robert Scholes' theory is that he makes no distinction between different film genres in term of "specific stimuli" that will undergo abstracting. If the inexperienced camera work in *Spring Silkworms* should take the main responsibility for its failure, how could we explain the success of some previous films such as *Orphan Rescues His Grandfather* or *Torrent*? Furthermore, despite the general failure of the camera work in *Spring Silkworms*, a fascinating part in this film that should be mentioned is the documentary-style shot in which the silkworms begin spinning their cocoons. This is a moment that the power of images overwhelms that of the literary language. In the story, old Tongbao and his elder son squat under the racks, hearing the small rustlings of the spinning worms, then Tongbao's younger son, Duoduotou, peeks at the cocoons several times. In the film, the camera shows how the brush was completely covered over with cocoons, as white as snow. In this sense, it is not daring to say that silkworms are "the true stars of the film."³⁹ Even measured with a contemporary standard, this poetic ambience still can place the film into the highest class of silent films.

In terms of character development, Duoduotou is the most impressive one in the film. Full of youthful passion, he enjoys working, but doesn't believe in taboos and

³⁸ Robert Scholes, 419.

³⁹ Vivian Shen, *The Origins of the Left-wing Cinema in China, 1932-37* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 144.

superstitions, or that one good crop would enable them to wipe out their debt and own their land again. Old Tongbao becomes ill from rage on the selling trip. After carrying his father into the house, Doudoutou takes the garlic in hand and squashes it, and finally throws it into river. It is obvious that the task of changing the statue quo is put upon the shoulders of the young generation, but how their rebellious spirit could serve this cause is left unanswered.

Unfortunately, both the shining cocoons and the rebellious Duoduotou were overshadowed by the monotonous narrative in the film. The unenthusiastic response of critics and audiences to *Spring Silkworms* instructed the emerging left-wing filmmakers to cast aside artistic ambitions and concentrate on a film's clarity and emotional engagement. In order to encourage emotional engagement, one characteristic that literature and cinema can share with each other is the ability to touch audiences and move them into tears. Melodramatic elements, or ways of melodramatic expression, contribute greatly in this respect. Peter Brooks has sought out the roots of the melodramatic imagination in the French popular theater and offers important reasons for its rise and persistence. According to him, melodrama arose out of a particular historical conjuncture: the post-revolutionary, post-Enlightenment, post-sacred world where traditional morality was questioned and there was a need to relocate and rearticulate a "moral occult."⁴⁰ There has been a long tradition of melodramatic expression in Chinese literature too, such as the vernacular *huaben* in the Song dynasty, or stage plays in the Yuan dynasty, in which the common people make efforts to overcome crisis and achieve justice. This

⁴⁰ Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 43.

tradition was further developed in the Mandarin Duck and Butterflies novels of the 1920s and 1930s. Catering into an established appreciation of melodramatic expression among the general audience, film adaptations of these novels were well received in the 1930s. In order to gain commercial appeal, and achieve its political goals as well, left-wing filmmaking had to take into account the established aesthetic tradition. If a lack of melodramatic plots was one main reason for the failure of *Spring Silkworms*, then the proficient use of melodramatic elements contributed greatly to the success of Cai Chunshen's left-wing filmmaking practice. Produced in 1934, *Song of the Fishermen*, with its pathetic protagonists, melodramatic plots and appealing musical works, offers a telling example of the interaction between art, politics and commercial success.

Song of the Fishermen tells the story of a poor fishing family living at the beginning of the 19th century. A poor fisherman's wife is left behind with her twins, a son and a daughter, after her husband's death. In order to make a simple life, she has become a wet nurse for a rich fish-lord He Renzhai's newborn son. The young master, He Ziyang, becomes playmate to the twins despite of their class difference. After school, the young master asks Little Cat, the daughter, to sing "Song of the Fishermen" before he teaches them what he has learned in school:

Clouds floating in the sky,
Fish swimming in the water,
Dry the fishing net in the morning sunshine,
The sea wind is touching my face....

As they grow up, the young master decides to study fishery abroad. "The life is hard for fishermen, I hope that I can learn some advanced knowledge abroad and things will be improved when I'm back," he promises to the twins. After he leaves, the village

is robbed by bandits, and the fish-lord moves to Shanghai, starting a fishery company with his friend Liang Zizou. The twins also come to Shanghai with their blinded mother. Because the twins could not find jobs, they have to pick up garbage, and make a living as street clowns. But they lie to their mother. The happy mother asks Little Cat to sing the song to her uncle:

The tide is rising, the wave is surging,
Fishing boats are going in every direction,
Casting the net and holding the rope,
It's difficult to catch the fish in the fog.

Fishing is hard and the rent is heavy,
Fishermen are poor from generation to generation,
The old fishing net that my grandpa left
We will live by it throughout another winter.

Premiered on June 14, 1934, *Song of the Fishermen* played for 84 straight days in Shanghai, which was an unprecedented great success for Chinese filmmakers.⁴¹ In addition, it was also the first Chinese film that won an international prize (an honorary “Outstanding Film”) at the 1935 First International Film Festival in Moscow. Why did this film become so successful? Director Cai Chusheng offered his own answer in *After 84 Days*, a short article written to his audiences:

A primary precondition for making a good film is to arouse the audiences' interests. There are several Chinese films with correct or close to correct ideas, but why don't they achieve perfect effects? It is because they are too boring to arouse the audiences' interests. So, in order to make it easier for the audiences to accept the author's idea, we have to sugarcoat the correct ideas.⁴²

⁴¹ As Laikwan Pang finds in *Shenbao*, the temperature of Shanghai in that summer was exceeding 100 F, and the Xingguang theatre used its new air conditioning for the first time in showing *Song of the Fishermen*, this simple reason might contribute to the high attendance at the film. See Pang, 2002, 157. Also see *Shenbao*, 11 June 1934.

⁴² Cai Chusheng. “84 tian yihou (After 84 days, to the audiences of *Song of the Fishermen*),” *Meizhou dianying* (1934): vol.1.

For Cai Chunsheng, there were three different groups of audiences. The first group was the intellectual elites who could explore the deepest meaning conveyed by a film; the second group was urbanites finding his film interesting and funny, and the third were those with lower education and understood only the surface part of his work.⁴³ It was based upon such knowledge that Cai consciously produced his works with rich aesthetic information, packaging powerful social critiques with attractive sugarcoat. If *Spring Silkworms* only interested audiences in the first group, then audiences at different levels enjoyed watching *Song of the Fishermen* together.

An engaging melodramatic climax in this film comes after the young master returns and works as an engineer in his father's company. One day he meets the twins and gives them some money, which only leads to their arrest on suspicion of theft. This incident is only a prelude for what will happen later. After having been released, the twins find that their mother has been accidentally killed in a fire. Soon after, the young master's father is betrayed by his mistress and his friend, and commits suicide. The three childhood friends start to do fishing together. However, Little Monkey is getting seriously sick. Before death, his final request for his sister is to sing "Song of the Fishermen" one more time. With the song going, the camera offers poetic and charming scenes of the East China Sea, which makes their situation in the city of Shanghai more miserable. Although the first part of the film has shown how much they have suffered as poor fishermen, nostalgia for their hometown comes out of a deep despair towards the big city where they even cannot find jobs. The condemnation of city life is a general theme among Chinese intellectuals in the 1930s under the process of urbanization and

⁴³ Cai Chusheng. "Zai huike shi zhong (In the Meeting Room)," *Dianying yu xiju* (1936): vol.1, 2-3.

modernity.⁴⁴ In this sense, “Song of the Fishermen” becomes the only thing that could connect them with their lost homeland.

As in other left-wing films, class difference is one of the most important themes in *Song of the Fishermen*. Cai Chusheng was very creative in describing the issue of class. In *Song of the Fishermen*, class confrontation was brought in through a juxtaposition of two families, one poor and one rich. After the twins were born in their shabby house, their mother has to nurse the young master to make a living. The class gap has been written into their lives from this moment. Lacking nutrition, Little Monkey was weak and mentally retarded. Although the three children get along well, the young master cannot prevent his wet nurse being fired by his inexorable father. Later, after both families move to Shanghai, the class gap between the rich and the poor is further exhibited by a series of meaningful and humorous shots:

Shot 1, a garden house, indoor. A young lady (fish-lord He’s mistress) is wearing make-up in front of a mirror. She puts some powder on her face.

Shot 2, outdoor, a garage box out of the garden house. Little Cat is putting mud on her face to avoid being sexually attacked. She plays with Little Monkey by putting mud on his face too.

Shot 3, inside the garden house. The fish lord comes to talk to his mistress. He pours himself a glass of wine and hides the bottle in his back. The mistress pretends to taste the wine but grabs the bottle and throws it out of the window.

Shot 4, in the garage box. The bottle hits Little Monkey’s head and he falls down. Little Cat is trying to get the bottle from another boy.

These consecutive shots show the audience how the life of the rich is totally different from that of the poor. Not only are cosmetics too luxurious for poor girls like Little Cat, but even her pretty face will cause her big troubles on the street. The wine bottle becomes a useful prop. When it is thrown out and hits Little Monkey, he has no

⁴⁴ Vivian Shen, 99.

way to ask for an apology, and what Little Cat and the other boy care about are who will have this bottle and sell it for money. When the bottle first hits down Little Cat and then gets broken in the fight, an implicit message is that the rich will not help the poor by any means. They can only make the poor's life more miserable. This message is conveyed skillfully with a sort of Chaplinian black humor. As Cai claims, a truthful portrayal of the social reality cannot be achieved without artistic skills:

We should pay attention to skills of description. For general audiences, when they are watching films, they are not taking classes in school, so the film itself has no way to force the audiences to accept its ideas. As filmmakers, our responsibility is to learn how to attract more audiences to watch our films. A film with good ideas may have 100 audiences, but if we add some artistic skills, it will attract 1,000 or even 10,000 audiences.⁴⁵

Cai was criticized by some leftwing film critics because of his sympathetic attitude towards the young master and his father in *Song of the Fishermen*. Furthermore, the bankruptcy of the poor fishermen is described a doomed failure of the traditional fishing industry in face of the modernized fishing industry. No clear clue has been offered in the film about the role of imperialist exploitation. The reformist young master has no way to save the national fishing industry when the film ends. "My original intention is, even a person like He Ziyang, a reformist with good will to improve the society, will undoubtedly end in disillusionment when his career cannot break away from the imperialist economic invasion."⁴⁶ Instead of providing other more radical revolutionary messages, Cai chose to set his political agenda at a level that would be

⁴⁵ Cai Chusheng. "Zhongguo dianying xiang hechu qu (Where is the Chinese Cinema Going)," *Diansheng dianying zhoukan* (1934): vol.3, 31.

⁴⁶ Cai Chusheng, *After 84 Days*.

easily accepted by the urban audiences, and this was another reason that contributed to his success, too.

Song of the Fishermen is a landmark in Chinese cinema. Besides the star power of Wang Renmei, the actress who played Little Cat in the film, the popularity of this film was traceable to its title song. Composed by Ren Guang, “Song of the Fishermen” remains today one of the best-loved and most memorable songs. It started a movie boom in Shanghai. For the first time, a film became best known to its audiences by its musical sound-track. Being issued by the Baidai Company, this famous sound-track was sold more than ten thousands copies. The significance of music drew great attention from the left-wing filmmakers. Consequently, they made more efforts to enhance the attraction of the left-wing films through music. For example, “Biyege” (Song of Graduation) in *Taoli jie* (Plunder of Peach and Plum, 1934), “Yiyongjun jinxingqu” (March of the Volunteers) in *Fenyun ernü* (Sons and Daughters of the Storm, 1935), “Sijige” (Song of Four Seasons) and “Tianya genü” (Wandering Singing Girl) in *Malu tianshi* (Street Angel, 1937) all became popular songs in the following years.

As a prominent filmmaker, Cai Chusheng contributed greatly to the success of the Left-wing Movement in China. The success of Cai Chusheng’s film career also highlights the difference between literature and cinema in terms of market promotion. Literary creation is less bound by the market, so readership is not the most important criterion to judge the value of a work. It is highly likely that people will acknowledge the artistic value of a work after a decade or longer. Things are totally different for cinema. With a higher production budget, the first aim of filmmaking is making profits; therefore a good

box office receipt becomes all-important. Since revolutionary ideas could not reach the masses until they like to sit down in theater, how to attract audiences becomes an important task of left-wing filmmaking. As a pioneer of Chinese cinema, Cai's filmmaking talent has been proved not only by the high artistic quality of his works, but also by their successful market performance. After the anti-Japanese War, he and other left-wing filmmakers continued to produce progressive films. Cinema became a powerful artistic weapon for them to criticize the KMT policies. In 1947, Cai Chusheng's film *Yijiang chunshui xiangdongliu* (A Spring River Flows East) set another box office record, thanks to his successful melodramatic representation of the ordinary people in the war-ravaged China.

When Cinema met Politics: A Theoretical Reflection

Based on a film list collected by Cheng's *The Development of Chinese Cinema*, up to 400 feature films were produced during 1932-1937, of them 74 have been officially stamped as left-wing films.⁴⁷ A small amount though, left-wing films deserve special attention because they embodied left-wing filmmakers' efforts in using cinema as an important medium to engage in politics. Much of the left-wing filmmaking tradition were inherited and developed in socialist cinema during the 1950s and 1960s.

An interesting episode occurred during the Left-wing Film Movement was the so-called "soft film and hard film debate." Initiated by the KMT in 1930, a Nationalist Film Movement, as part of the New Life Movement, aimed to revive traditional Chinese culture and moral principles that could best serve the KMT as the ruling party. Different

⁴⁷ Cheng Jihua et al. 133. Out of the 74 official-stamped left-wing films, only 31 are still available today.

from the Left-wing Film Movement, nationalist discourse in the Nationalist Film Movement was appropriated to downplay and even oppose class struggle. Made in 1932, Lianhua Studio's *Rendao* (Humanity) reflected the KMT's public policy of promoting traditional Chinese moral principles. In this film, a family tries to support its son in college under tough economic conditions, not knowing that the son has become a playboy. After getting a well-paid job, the son, however, does not give a hand to his father and wife at home. His father starves to death. Only after his mistress's betrayal is revealed that the son goes home and begs the heaven's forgiveness. Film like *Humanity* that promoted filial piety was very typically in the Nationalist Film Movement. In the face of growing left-wing criticism, a KMT-affiliated scholar Huang Jiamo published an article "*Yingxing dianying yu ruanxing dianying*" (On Hard Film and Soft Film) at the end of 1933, in which he contended that "Cinema is ice-cream for the eyes and a sofa for the mind," and attacked the left-wing filmmakers as "putting too much stress on ideology."⁴⁸ The terms "soft film" and "hard film" referred respectively to entertainment film and left-wing film since then. The aim of the "soft film" theory was to divert filmmakers' attention away from social criticism embedded in left-wing filmmaking. One task of the Left-wing Dramatists' League, as I mentioned earlier, was to criticize and purge the current Chinese Film Movement and to launch a struggle against the petit bourgeois trend in the field of Chinese cinema. Therefore a vigorous debate began

⁴⁸ Huang Jiamo. "Yingxing dianying yu ruanxing dianying (On Hard film and soft film)," *Xiandai dianying* (1933): vol.6, 3.

between left-wing film critics and supporters of the “soft film.” Lasting for 3 years, it was the first major theoretical debate in the history of Chinese cinema.⁴⁹

Viewed in hindsight, some “soft film” critics’ negative comments on left-wing films were valid. It was true that left-wing filmmakers needed to better master the film medium in order to attract more audiences. Pang argues that the debate was more than a simple theoretical discussion when the two camps were directly connected to two rival political parties—the KMT and the CCP.⁵⁰ I cannot fully agree with her on this point because no film can ever be studied as a pure artistic production unaffected by its socio-political context. Politics is part and parcel of filmmaking, especially in the 1930s when China was facing a formidable threat from Japan. Just like Xia Yan stated in his response to the “soft film” advocates: “Are things at the present time soft? ...International political and economic conflicts are quite hard. The Mukden Incident and Japanese invasion of Shanghai are surely not soft.”⁵¹ Films as artifacts of the era display concerns prevailing when they were made. The theoretical debate on “soft film” and “hard film” has to be situated into the concrete historical circumstance where politics matter the most. What emerged in the debate was the political function of cinema that was always underestimated, and the same underestimation continues today, either in the name of entertainment, or in the name of art.

The interwoven relationship between cinema and politics was not a topic that only occurred in 1930s’ China. Another discussion between two important members of the

⁴⁹ On the critique on soft film, see Hu Jubing, Chapter 4. Also see Zhen Zhang, 2005, Chapter 5.

⁵⁰ Laikwan Pang, 2002, 51.

⁵¹ Xia Yan. “*Ruanxing de yinglun* (The hard words of soft film theory),” *Chenbao*, 13 June 1934.

Frankfurt School further sheds light on the theoretical significance of the cinema-politics interaction. In 1935, as the Nazis began building up their war machine, Walter Benjamin interpreted fascist aesthetics of violence and war as the culmination of *l'art pour l'art*. His response to this anesthetized politics was to mobilize the so-called forces of aesthetic production for political ends. In his famous essay, "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction," besides a lament on the decay of the "aura," he praised the powerfulness of film in contemporary mass movements because "its social significance, particularly in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage." For him, mechanical reproduction of art would change the reaction of the masses toward art in the sense that "a progressive reaction is characterized by the direct, intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment with the orientation of the expert," which would thus pave the way for the predominance of the political function of art. Film, not only as a collective work of art, but also because of its ability of presenting an object for simultaneous collective reception, would become the ideal medium for the propagation of political content. Benjamin was well aware of some negative consequences of film, such as the shock effect that a film can exert on people's mind, and the market values as the very characteristic of film, but as far as he concerned at that time, the most urgent question was how to introduce into the theory of art concepts that would be "useful for the formation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art," as he remarked in the opening pages of this essay. The Left-wing Film Movement in 1930s China echoed Benjamin's

idea, and the success of this movement to some extent proved that cinema could be a highly effective political tool in mobilizing the masses for revolutionary goals.

However, the revolutionary potential is not an inherent characteristic of the film medium. It only works when the medium is under the control of revolutionaries. Otherwise, there is no way to explain the popularity of certain “soft films” in 1930s’ China, or Nazi films that engaged a whole nation in victorious war campaigns. As some critics point out, the revolutionary qualities that Benjamin ascribes to the film medium and the potential for class consciousness he ascribes to film audiences are contradicted by empirical conditions—the culture industry was already engaged in an effort to restore a counterfeit aura to film, by virtue of the “cult of stars.”⁵² In a direct refutation of Benjamin’s essay, Adorno argues:

Whether a technique can be considered progressive and “rational” depends on the meaning of its context and/or its place in the whole of society as well as in the organization of the particular work. Technical development as such can serve crude reaction as soon as it has established itself as a fetish and by its perfection represents the neglected social tasks as already accomplished.⁵³

In other words, whether the film medium can be considered progressive or not depends on its relationship with the hegemony, or the dominant ideology. In the western world, when the hegemony is a white, middle-class, male-dominated ideology, the film industry under such a control functions consensually in its mediation of hegemonic values and the class interests of the dominant group. In this regard, the “soft film” theory is just one more effort to represent “the neglected social tasks as already accomplished.”

⁵² Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (New York: Columbia University, 1982), 192-3.

⁵³ Theodor W. Adorno, “The fetish Character of Music and the Regression of Listening,” in *Essays on Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 288-317, 296.

What is closely related to, and complicates the issue of the hegemonic function of cinema is the development of the film industry in Japanese-occupied Manchuria and Shanghai during the war period. By the 1930s, after a prolonged silent era, film industry in Japan has become a thriving business. In 1933, after the seizure of the Northeast China, the Japanese built Manchuria Cinema Association, the so-called “Manying” in Changchun. Film production in Manchuria has rarely been studied, partly due to the lack of access to the first hand materials, and more importantly, due to the political sensitivity of this topic.⁵⁴ Japanese researcher Tadao Sato has argued that “though the Manchuria Cinema Association was established primarily to further Japan’s colonial designs, it also promoted the illusion that an intimacy could be created between the Japanese and Han Chinese.”⁵⁵ Did this illusion work effectively in Manchuria? Hu Jubin contends that Manchurian cinema received a cold reception because Chinese audiences refused to accept their new identity as “Manchurian.”⁵⁶ This phenomenon is worth pondering. It explains how a specific context could keep the audiences watchful and thus undermine ideological interpellation from the film text. Although Manying made painstaking efforts to appeal Chinese audiences, Chinese audiences’ strong nationalist sentiment against Japanese occupation led to their refusal of the Japanese colonial interpellation.

In November 1937, Shanghai fell to the Japanese after a three-month fighting, and became an “orphan island.” A large number of Chinese filmmakers retreated to

⁵⁴ Hu Jubing thinks that Hu Chang and Gu Quan’s *Manying: guoce dianying mianmian guan* (Manying: State Policy films from Various perspectives), published by Zhonghua Shuju in 1990, is the only available Chinese publication. See Hu Jubing, 2003, 118.

⁵⁵ Tadao Sato, “Li Xianglan and Yoshiko Yamaguchi,” in *The 16th Hong Kong International Film Festival: 1992* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Urban Council, 1992), 4-9.

⁵⁶ Hu Jubing, 2003, 118.

Chongqing or were moved to Hong Kong. But Shanghai remained the center of the Chinese film industry. The “mysterious” cinema boom during this period, mainly the mass production of costume films, observes Hu Jubin, was a clever negotiation between the issue of “national conscience” and the desire for profits.⁵⁷ For example, *Mulan congjun* (Mulan Joins the Army, 1939) features the ideal of loyalty and the virtue of filial piety. It interweaves a romance between Mulan and Liu Yuandu, a male general, and ends happily with a wedding ceremony. Viewed with a leftist perspective, both the traditional moral values and the entertaining elements in *Mulan Joins the Army* would label it as a reactionary “soft film.” However, since Shanghai was under Japanese control, leftist criticism lost its political edge. Producing more “soft films” became an effective strategy to survive the Chinese film industry. By illustrating how the Shanghai cinema both collaborated with the Japanese and resisted their cultural domination, Poshek Fu argues that the wartime Shanghai film industry was a site of political ambivalence:

It cooperated with the Japanese, but only to the extent of keeping the Shanghai cinema alive. It refused to serve the ideological machine of the occupying force. Its existence was to entertain Shanghai, not to propagandize for the “New [East Asian] Order.”⁵⁸

In *Mulan Joins the Army*, by telling how the legendary woman warrior Mulan takes her father’s place in the army when her country is invaded, the idea of resistance against Japanese aggression is disseminated implicitly.⁵⁹ Surprisingly, this film was released in Japanese-occupied areas and even in Japan because the Japanese thought that

⁵⁷ Hu Jubin, 2003, 120-131.

⁵⁸ Poshek Fu, “Struggle to Entertainment: The Political Ambivalence of Shanghai Film industry under Japanese Occupation, 1941-1945,” in *The 18th Hong Kong International Film Festival: Cinema of Two Cities: Hong Kong-Shanghai* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Urban Council, 1994), 50-62.

⁵⁹ For an analysis on the success of this film, see Poshek Fu, 2003, 11-21.

it “merely tells a historical story.”⁶⁰ This interesting fact further highlights the complicated colonial situation in Shanghai, where the colonizer and the colonized read the same text differently. While the colonizer was prone to maximize their colonial power, the colonized could sense the most inexplicit political message of resistance, thanks to the real social reality where they lived and suffered. Besides my critical attitude on Homi Bhabha’s notion of “ambivalence” because of its ignorance of the uneven power relationship between the two oppositional sides, I have to say that “ambivalence” also speaks to the historical circumstance in the wartime Shanghai. In other words, it was the existence of ambiguity that made not only the survival of the Chinese film industry a reality, but also the dissemination of resistance ideology possible.

After the outbreak of the Pacific War, the Chinese film industry in Shanghai was under a full Japanese occupation. As other cultural branches, it was required to advocate the idea of the Great Asia Prosperous. In 1943, an anti-British historical epic about the Opium War, *Wanshi liufang* (Eternity) was produced with the aim to legitimize the Japanese aggression in Asia in the name of opposing Western imperialism. The narrative in this film, however, focuses on romance rather than historical events, and the anti-British sentiment was projected as a vague anti-foreign nationalism, which, as Poshek Fu has correctly pointed out, revealed a shared public ambivalence about the symbolic politics of the Opium War, which emerged only with a historicization of Chinese experiences with imperialism and semi-colonialism in the 20th century.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Hu Jubin, 2003, 131.

⁶¹ Poshek Fu, 2003, 109.

Fu's examination of popular culture in wartime Shanghai opens us a new perspective to explore the politics of cinema:

It was in this dilemma that their tactical insistence on popular cultural values brought to the fore the political ambivalence of cultural production under brute power: in the highly politicized situation in which Shanghai filmmakers found themselves, *apolitical entertainment that was deliberately depoliticized became significantly political.*⁶²

Politics of cinema are not fixed, but metamorphic and floating, which allow us to rethink the ontology of cinema that regards cinema solely as an aesthetic object. The transition from apolitical to political, as formulated here, is decided by given socio-historical circumstances that conceive popular culture in general.

If we can argue that “soft films” were crude reactions in 1930s Shanghai due to their apolitical escapism, then the same apolitical nature indicated a resistant gesture to Japanese colonial control that became “significantly political.” Although cinema has rarely been considered innocent of complicity in ideological operation, film studies in general has been experiencing an aesthetic-centered and textual-based approach. In textual criticism, there is an overall ignorance of the context that determines the very ideological function of a given work. In this sense, Fu's theoretical evaluation of the tactical strategy of the Shanghai filmmakers under Japanese occupation is of great significance. It proves that any textual analysis that severs a film from its context is bound to be incomprehensive.

⁶² Poshek Fu, 2003, 131.

CHAPTER III
POLITICS AND AESTHETICS IN SOCIALIST CINEMA:
FROM THE WHITE-HAIRED GIRL TO FIVE GOLDEN FLOWERS

“Of all the arts for us, the film is the most important,” said V.I. Lenin in 1922, in consideration of the large illiterate population in a multilingual Russia.¹ The effects of cinema reached “where even the book cannot reach” in the Russian Revolution, and it was “more powerful than any kind of narrow propaganda.”² The great potential of cinema as an incomparable instrument to disseminate all sorts of ideas was quickly realized by different political groups, and how to exercise cinema’s broadest possible influence on the masses became their primary concern. Left-wing filmmakers in 1930s Shanghai made great efforts in bringing their political agenda closer to the urban audience. The CCP began to pay attention to the propaganda and educational function of the film medium during the Left-wing Film Movement. After the movement was terminated by the outbreak of a full-scale anti-Japanese war, the KMT government retreated to Chongqing and began to produce patriotic feature films and documentaries. While the Japanese-controlled Manchurian cinema aimed at promoting Pan-Asianism,

¹ From a conversation between Lenin and Lunacharsky in 1922, recalled by the latter in a letter to G. M. Boltvansky. On the same occasion Lenin also remarked, “You will have to develop production on a wider basis and, in particular, introduce wholesome films to the masses in the city and, to an even greater extent, in the countryside.” See Richard Taylor and Ian Christie, eds., *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents, 1896-1939* (London: Rutledge, 1988), 107.

² Stated by Anatoli Lunacharsky, the People’s Commissar for Education, in 1924. See Richard Taylor and Ian Christie, 109.

Shanghai under the Japanese occupation remained the center of the Chinese film industry by its massively produced “apolitical” entertainment films that ignored, and therefore indirectly resisted Japanese colonialization.

Due to the technological complexity and capital-intensive nature of the film industry, the CCP only made fewer documentaries during the anti-Japanese war and the following civil war. In the newly established People’s Republic of China (PRC), the film industry became a highly centralized Party organ dedicated to legitimize the authority of the CCP. Socialist cinema has been generally ignored in Chinese film studies despite the fact that many of these “red revolutionary canons” have influenced more than one generation. Post-socialist China has also witnessed a great amount of remade “red canons,” which further necessitates studies on socialist cinema.³ Starting with Mao’s 1942 Yan’an Talks, this chapter will trace the birth of socialist cinema, examining both its political and aesthetic characteristics. Special attention will be paid to two aspects: first, I want to explore how class discourse and gender coding were further politicized in socialist cinema; second, inspired by the 1930s discussion on *minzu xingshi* (national style), I shall try to map out the formation of national style in Chinese cinema and evaluate its significance under a Cold War background.

The Yan’an Talks and the Birth of Film Industry in New China

Yan’an, a small town in Northwest China, was the destination of the Long March that began Mao Zedong’s ascent to power in 1935. It grew into an influential

³ For a study on this phenomena, see Dai Jinhua, “Chongxie hongse jingdian (Rewriting Red Canons),” in Chen Pingyuan and Shangkou Xin eds., *Dazhong chuangmei yu xiandai wenxue* (Beijing: New World Press, 2003), 505-560.

Communist-led revolutionary base during the anti-Japanese War. In response to the expansion of the CCP, the KMT launched several economic blockades that isolated the base area. The Japanese also realized that the CCP was their opponent in the war and started to exterminate the base area. Meanwhile, various conflicts grew within the CCP—among Mao Zedong, Wang Ming, and Zhang Guotao, and between people from different parts of China. These conflicts increased and threatened relations between the Party and the peasants, the primary source of Party support. As these combined factors exacerbated the situation in Yan'an, Mao decided to launch a rectification movement to strengthen Party morale and discipline.⁴ During the movement, Mao delivered his influential speeches at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art in May 1942, stressing that creative writing and art must serve the workers, peasants, and soldiers, and criticizing those intellectuals who maintained a distance between themselves and the people:

Workers in literature and art...until now have been heroes without a battlefield, remote and uncomprehending...[They] are unfamiliar with the people they write about and with the people who read their work, or else have become estranged from them. Our workers in literature and art are not familiar with workers, peasants, soldiers, or even their cadres.⁵

Mao was interested in literature and art merely as a tool of propaganda and education. Between his two criteria in literary criticism—the political and the artistic, artistic creation must subordinate to political demand. In his typically pragmatic and authoritative way, Mao emphasized that only when intellectuals integrated with the

⁴ Mark Selden traced this movement back to early 1939 with Mao's triumph at the Party's Sixth Plenum. See Mark Selden, *The Yanan Way in Revolutionary China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971). Most historians consider February 1, 1942 as the official beginning of the Yan'an Rectification Movement when Mao delivered a lecture entitled "zhengdun dangde zuofen (Rectify the Party's Style of Work)."

⁵ Bonnie S. McDougall, *Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art": A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1980), 60.

masses of peasants and workers could they create works benefiting the revolution. He assigned literature and art to a position of assisting other revolutionary works in order to fight against the national enemy and accomplish national liberation:

[Our purpose is] to ensure that literature and art fit well into the whole revolutionary machines as a component part, that they operate as powerful weapons for uniting and educating the people and for attacking and destroying the enemy, and that they help the people fight the enemy with one heart and one mind.⁶

At the price of diminishing the diversity of literary representations and undermining the intellectuals' independency, the Yan'an Talks became the CCP's guidelines for making intellectual policy as well as policy in literature and art. The major reason for the importance of the Talks, as Bonnie McDougall points out, is that they embody Mao's ability as a political leader to organize the loose body of current literary doctrines among the leftists in China, formulate them with sufficient clarity and understanding as to make them a comprehensive literary policy for the present situation, and see to their immediate implementation in Yan'an.⁷ The Yan'an Talks made literature and art powerful political tool to launch land reforms, wage war against Japan, win public support, and spread revolutionary ideas across the country. Workers of literature and art at Yan'an began to conform their creative work to the Party guidelines. Zhao Shuli's novella *Li Youcai Banhua* (The Rhymes of Li Youcai, 1943) was one of the first works of fiction to be produced under the new guidelines. With a strong consciousness of serving the current policies, the author describes new changes brought by the land reform.

Written in a folk style, *Banhua*, the novella aims at the masses as its readership. It was so

⁶ McDougall, 60.

⁷ McDougall, 9.

highly praised by the Party that the term “*Zhao Shuli Fangxiang* (Zhao Shuli Direction)” became dominant during the 1940s and the 1950s.⁸

The Yan’an Talks also decided the direction of cinema in new China. Compared with Shanghai, Changchun, and Chongqin, the Yan’an base area in the 1940s was not ready for any mature filmmaking because of its poor economic situation. Although a Yan’an Film Team was formally established as part of the General Political Department, except for a few documentaries, it was unable to produce any feature films.⁹ After the Japanese surrender, some pro-Communist employees who used to work in the Japanese-controlled Manchuria Cinema Association set up a Northeast Film Company. Soon it was taken over by the CCP and renamed Northeast Film Studio. Most members of the Yan’an Film Team joined the studio and began their feature filmmaking experiments.¹⁰ As Paul Clark claims, the opportunity to apply Mao’s Yan’an Talks in feature filmmaking did not come until this moment.¹¹ The Northeast Film Studio, renamed again as Changchun Film Studio in 1955, has been known as the “Cradle of New China’s Cinema.”¹²

Two feature films produced by this studio show how the Party guidelines were carried out in a socialist-to-be China. Based on a true story, a short experimental feature film *Liuxia ta da laojiang* (Leave Him to Fight Chiang Kai-shek) was finished in

⁸ Tang Yiming, “Mao’s talks and Zhao Shuli Direction,” in *Wenyi Lilun yu Tongshu Wenhua* (Taipei: Zhongyang Yanjiuyuan Zhongguo Wenzhe Yanjiusuo Choubweichu, 1999), 39-54.

⁹ For the Yan’an Film Team’s achievement during the Yan’an years (1937-1947), see Cheng Jihua et al. 337-363.

¹⁰ For more details about the takeover, see Patricia Wilson, “The Founding of the Northeast Film Studio, 1946-1949,” in George S. Semsel et al. 1990, 45-56.

¹¹ Paul Clark, 1988, 28.

¹² On film productions of the Northeast Film Studio in its early years, see Cheng Jihua et al. 381-395.

February 1948. In this film, a PLA (People's Liberation Army) soldier has accidentally killed a young peasant and will be executed by the army. The victim's father, however, asks the army to save the soldier's life so that he can fight the KMT on behalf of his dead son. As the simple plot summary suggests, the Chinese peasantry and the PLA are undertaking the same revolutionary cause with a common enemy. For the sake of defeating the KMT, all personal feuds should be put aside. The good relationship between the PLA and the Chinese people became an important theme of socialist cinema.

The first full-length feature film *Qiao* (Bridge, 1949), set in a same civil war background, has a more complicated plot. In the spring of 1947, the military confrontation between the CCP and the KMT in the Northeast battlefield was in a critical moment. In order to transport the CCP military supplies to the front, a bridge needs to be set up in 15 days. Under Party leadership, workers in a steel factory launch a competition to complete the bridge. After overcoming many difficulties, they successfully accomplish the task. Besides the theme of how the well-organized workers support the army, a meaningful point in *Bridge* is the cinematic representation of the technical intellectuals. "Some technicians and a few workers had been worked in the Japanese-controlled Manchukuo factories for years," tells the introductory caption of the film, "they don't have enough understanding of the productive power of the proletarian class." At the beginning of the film, facing a lack of materials and equipment, a Western-educated chief engineer insists that he needs at least 40 days to finish the construction. He derides that passion alone is not enough to complete the bridge when a self-trained worker-technician tries to fix a steel-making furnace. Later, inspired by the proletarian workers, the chief

engineer confesses that he should work harder to follow them. At a critical moment of the construction, an important machine is out of order. The chief engineer comes to the construction site and fixes it, indicating that he has abandoned his old ideas and joins the workers. How the intellectuals are re-educated by the working class, as well as the peasants, would become another important theme in socialist cinema.

With the victory of the CCP over the KMT and the founding of the PRC in 1949, all the previous KMT-owned film studios were confiscated as national properties, which further strengthened CCP's control in the cultural domain. Until March 1951, besides three state-owned studios in Changchun, Peking and Shanghai, there were seven private-owned film studios and one joint-venture studio in China. Most films produced by the private-owned film studios were pro-CCP films, more or less influenced by the left-wing filmmaking tradition. For example, Shanghai Kunlun Studio made *Wuya yu maque* (Crows and Sparrows, 1949) on the eve of the CCP takeover. It portrays the struggle between the residents of a Shanghai building and their exploitative landlord during the last days of the KMT governance. The ideological motivation behind this film is allegorically implied by the film title: only when the weak "sparrows" are organized together could they successfully defeat the aggressive "crows." It ends with a New Year celebration – obviously a metaphor of an oncoming new era. Having political messages cloaked in a comic style, *Crows and Sparrows* has been considered one of the most successful films in the history of Chinese cinema.¹³

¹³ For analysis on this film, see Wang Yiman, "Crows and Sparrows: Allegory on a Historical Threshold," in Chris Berry ed., *Chinese Films in Focus: 25 New Takes* (London: BFI, 2003), 65-72.

However, the private-owned film studios did not maintain a long-term positive relationship with the CCP since the Party required the film industry to serve the transition to socialism in a strict ideological sense. Leftist films produced by those private studios could no longer fully meet the new political demands; these studios themselves would become obstacles of a grand nationalization project. It was the critical campaign on a biographical film *Wuxun zhuan* (Life of Wu Xun, 1950) in 1951 that facilitated a complete nationalization of the private-owned film studios into state enterprises.

Wu Xun (1839-1896) is a Qing landlord who promoted free education for the poor peasants. A film based on his good deeds was half-finished by the Kunlun Studio before 1949; many revisions were then made to fit new policies set by the CCP. Director Sun Yu, a prominent left-wing filmmaker, considered the revised script “a critical biography” that emphasized both the limits of Wu Xun’s reformism and his failure to liberate the poor. Although many intellectuals have regarded Wu Xun as an exemplary historical figure worthy of praise, in Mao’s eyes, his landlord class identity only made him an enemy of the Chinese revolution. As clearly stated in Mao’s Yan’an Talks, works of literature and art were to be for the masses, and their class stand was to be that of the proletariat, not that of the petit bourgeoisie, which marked a fundamental difference between the left-wing cinema in the 1930s and the socialist cinema in the 1950s. In the socialist China, writers and artists must learn from the workers, peasants, and soldiers, and then popularize only what was needed and could be “readily accepted” by those same groups. Therefore, when a landlord became a tragic hero on the silver screen, what Mao sensed was a common shared “bourgeois” attitude among the intellectual class that would

produce a negative influence on the class consciousness of the proletariat. Despite a positive response after its release, Mao launched a political campaign in May 1951, criticizing *Life of Wu Xun* as “a reactionary propaganda that insults peasant revolutionary struggle, Chinese history and Chinese nationality.”¹⁴ The criticism soon went beyond the film to question intellectuals’ political views, and guidelines lay down by Mao’s Yan’an Talks once again were the only criterion to judge the correct and the wrong.¹⁵ After *Life of Wuxun*, films produced by other private-owned studios were criticized one by one, and it became impossible for them to continue any filmmaking. Viewed historically, the Yan’an Rectification Movement suppressed the dissident voices in the field of literature and art, and the campaign on *Life of Wuxun* further carried out this movement in the field of filmmaking, only this time the targets were private-owned film studios.

The Chinese film industry completed its socialist transition in the mid-1950s, and experienced steady growth under a system adopted from the Soviet Union. A Film Bureau was set up, first under the Department of Propaganda in the Central Committee of the CCP, then under the Ministry of Culture, as the state branch specifically responsible for the film production.¹⁶ The Bureau formulated film policies and set every film studio’s annual production quota. More importantly, it censored every film before its release. Founded in February 1951, China Film Management Corporation, renamed as China Film Distribution and Exhibition Corporation (China Film), was the sole agency

¹⁴ Mao Zedong, “Pay attention to the discussion on film *The Life of Wuxun*,” *People’s Daily*, 20 May 1951.

¹⁵ This critical campaign has been studied extensively in Chinese. For a brief study in English, see Paul Clark, 45-55.

¹⁶ The Film Bureau has become a part of the Ministry of Broadcast, Film and Television since 1986.

responsible for distribution and exhibition across the country through its regional offices and provincial offices. An independent enterprise in name, China Film actually operated as a government enterprise. All films produced by film studios were sold to this sole distribution company for a fixed price (700,000 *yuan* each before 1980, approximate 250,000 USD).

By the end of 1965, China was capable of producing about fifty features a year.¹⁷ A population of 720 millions in 1965 seemed a lucrative market for China Film, but it did not produce huge film revenues. There were two main reasons: First, the rural people, which occupied 85 percent of the Chinese population, did not pay to see films until the mid-1980s because film viewing for them was more like a festival organized by the local Party organizations. The urban audience was the only source of box office revenue. Second, under strict governmental control, the price of film tickets was low and didn't rise for almost 30 years.¹⁸ As Zhang Yingjin points out, the term "film market" in socialist China was perhaps misleading since the film industry was characterized by their administrative rather than economic nature.¹⁹ The Party had a full control of this important cultural section—from production to distribution and exhibition—securing political function in socialist cinema as a priority to both its commercial and aesthetic considerations. Operated in direct response to the Party policy-making, the film industry was more strictly organized than any other branches of the cultural industry. This situation did not change until the late 1980s.

¹⁷ Chen Huangmei, *Zhongguo zuoyi dianying shi* (Beijing: China Cinema Press, 1990), 273-74.

¹⁸ Until 1993, the average price was still around 0.5 *yuan* to 1 *yuan*.

¹⁹ Zhang Yingjin, *Chinese National Cinema* (New York: Rutledge, 2004), 191.

The White-haired Girl: Class Struggle and Gender Coding in Socialist Cinema

One primary task that the film industry had to accomplish in the early 1950s was to legitimize the CCP's authority and the new socialist China. In March 1951, a one-month exhibition of films produced by state-owned studios' was held in 26 cities, presenting 20 feature films and 6 documentaries, which marked the first achievement of the socialist cinema. Ideologically motivated, many of the films were produced to glorify the CCP's military victories during the anti-Japanese war and the following civil war, or the revolutionary deeds of the Communist martyrs. A general presumption about films produced in the Mao era seems to be that they were pure propaganda films serving political goals. An underestimation and simplification of their educational and ideological significance, as well as their artistic achievement, results in a lack of scholarly study of socialist cinema. It is true that in comparison with left-wing filmmakers who were capable of striking balances among cinema's artistic, political and commercial agendas, filmmakers in socialist China faced a much more complicated situation, in which the political demands had to be fulfilled before any artistic pursuits. Strong Party control severely handicapped the healthy development of the Chinese film industry, but it did not suffocate filmmakers' passion. The late 1950s and the early 60s was a golden age of the socialist cinema.

In the English-speaking world, Paul Clark's *Chinese Cinema: Cultural and Politics since 1949* (1988) is an important study of the Chinese socialist film industry. It delineates the incorporative role of the film industry when the CCP took the political revolution further and reconstructed the nation by creating a new socialist culture. Clark

argues that the transition to socialism in Chinese filmmaking was a struggle for Shanghai filmmakers to accept the Yan'an ideology. Albeit a productive approach, what is lacking in his study is a detailed textual analysis that can shed light on the formation of a socialist aesthetic in cinema. In comparison, Ban Wang's *The Sublime Figure of History*, although not a study exclusively devoted to socialist cinema, offers a more comprehensive picture of the interplay between the aesthetic and the politics in modern China. He considers socialist cinema an important state ideological apparatus to reproduce (socialist) subjects through indirect, aesthetic means, such as the fulfillment and self-empowerment of an individual through participation in collective enterprises, or the assimilation and sublimation of sexual love into revolutionary and nationalistic goals.²⁰ Studies done in Chinese recently are also noteworthy. Of the most importance is Dai Jinhua's *Dianying lilun yu piping shouce* (A Manual of Film Theory and Criticism, 1993) that examines Chinese filmmaking from the 1950s to 1990s. As she observes, heroism, collectivism and optimism characterized socialist cinema, and more than a discourse on Communist revolutions and the maturation of heroes, it attracted and influenced a whole generation of audiences and turned itself into a meaningful part of modern Chinese history.²¹

Baimao nü (The White-haired Girl, 1950) is one of the most outstanding examples of the socialist cinema in terms of its long-lasting influence. In this film, Yang Bailao, a poor peasant father, lives with his only daughter, Xi'er, in a northern village. Xi'er is forcibly taken to the landlord's house as a maid, and is raped later by the

²⁰ Ban Wang, 1997, Chapter 4.

²¹ Dai Jinhua, *Dianying lilun yu piping shouce* (Beijing: Kexue jishu chubanshe, 1993), 168-179.

landlord. After Xi'er manages to run away from the landlord's house and hide herself deep in the mountains, her hair gradually turns white, and rumors spread in the village that a white-haired goddess lives in the mountain. It is the Red Army who rescues Xi'er and helps her get even with the hated landlord. Under the theme that "the old society turns a human being into a ghost, and the new society turns the ghost back into a human being," *The White-haired Girl* vividly represents how millions of Chinese peasants were exploited by the landlord class in the old China, promising that they will have a happy life in a bright new China.

Originated from the legend of a white-haired goddess in the border region between Hebei and Shangxi, *The White-haired Girl* was first created as a *Yangge* opera by members of the Yan'an Lu Xun Academy of Literature and Art. *Yangge* is a form of integrated folk art that is very popular in Northeast China. Generally it is performed festively, with singing and dancing. Responding to Mao's Yan'an Talks, a New *Yangge* Movement was initiated in the Yan'an base area, with the aim of learning from the folk culture and creating works for the masses.²² *The White-haired Girl* was a product of the New *Yangge* Movement. A successful work as it was, the national popularity of *The White-haired Girl* did not come about until 1950 when Shui Hua and Wang Bin adapted the *Yangge* opera into film.

Having erased all the legendary elements, an important theme of socialist cinema — class struggle — was the main narrative line in *The White-haired Girl*. The class

²² The first performance of this *Yangge* opera was on April 28, 1945, in *Yan'an zhongyang dangxiao* (the Yan'an Central Committee Party School). The opera script of *The White-haired Girl* was published in 1945 under the names of He Jingzhi and Ding Yi. For related study, see Meng Yuan, *Geju baimaonü yanjiu* (Peking: Zhongguo Renmin University Press, 2005).

consciousness of the peasants and their confrontation with the brutal landlord class were constructed from the very beginning of the film. The Yang family is befriended with other poor peasants such as Uncle Zhao, Danchun and his mother. They work together to make a living under the landlord's exploitation. After Xi'er is raped by the landlord Huang Shiren, it is another elder maid in Huang's house who comforts her. When the elder maid overhears that Huang's mother is going to sell Xi'er, she again helps Xi'er escape to the mountain. Distinct from earlier leftist films such as *Song of the Fishermen* or *Crows and Sparrows*, the ambiguous grey zone between conflicting classes was totally abandoned in this film; it stated clearly that only people from the same class will help each other.

The spontaneous class consciousness of the peasants contrasts sharply with the brutality and hypocrisy of the landlord class. The aggressive landlord Huang Shiren lays his eyes on the beautiful 17-year-old Xi'er and decides to set up her father. He allows Yang Bailao a time extension to pay the interest of his debt. On the New Year's Eve, Yang is forced to sell Xi'er when he is unable to pay both the interest and principal. The guilty father commits suicide, and Xi'er is taken from her wedding to the landlord's house. In the scene when the landlord Huang approaches Xi'er and rapes her, what is shown are close-ups of two tablets: one is *Jishan tang* (Hall of Charity), the other *Daci dabei* (Great Generosity and Big Mercy). These close-ups are accompanied by Xi'er's cries for help. While the landlord class often uses notions such as charity, generosity, and mercy to label themselves, what happens in the Hall of Charity actually is nothing but a merciless rape.

The juxtaposition of the rape scene with the tablets is worth pondering. It further visualizes the suffering of the peasant class through the theme of sexual exploitation. The theme of class struggle becomes more powerful and persuasive when it is dramatically interwoven with gender discourses. As we know, women's problems have been a topic that deserves great attention in modern China. In works of literature and art, women's problems have often been considered as a mirror of China's overall social problems. Many leftist films featured the urban experiences of women. For example, in *Shennü* (Goddess, 1931), the mother works as a prostitute, sacrificing herself for the sake of her son; *Xin nǚxing* (New Woman, 1935) shows how a woman writer has to face many difficulties in the city and finally kills herself. The gender discourse in *The White-haired Girl* is slightly different from the leftist films. With the peasant girl Xi'er as its heroine, the concerns in *The White-haired Girl* are not with women's problems, or women's liberation per se. What Xi'er symbolizes in this film is not only women peasants, but Chinese peasantry as a whole, or even all the oppressed Chinese people. Although a cinematic representation of Xi'er's partly proves Laura Mulvey's feminist account of the "gaze" in which male spectators always take pleasure in looking at women because when Xi'er is represented on the screen as a beautiful girl, the film emphasizes her class status instead of her gender identity. Or, in other words, Xi'er's gender identity in this film is subordinate to her class identity. Furthermore, when the camera focuses on the tablets instead of Xi'er, messages of class struggle were put into the foreground. This excellent *mise-en-scène* constructs the rape not only as sexual violence, but more importantly, as class exploitation.

The appropriation of gender discourses for class struggle is one salient feature of the socialist cinema. As in *The White-haired Girl*, the narrative of gender confrontation was fully incorporated into the grand narration of class struggle in many socialist films. Sexual exploitation is often represented as one form of class exploitation.

In 1965, *The White-Haired Girl* was adapted into a revolutionary ballet by the Shanghai Ballet School, as an effort to nationalize the ballet, a Western-originated form of art.²³ With affirmation from Mao Zedong, it soon became one of the eight revolutionary model plays during the era of the Cultural Revolution.²⁴ The ballet version is different from the film version in several aspects. First, Yang Bailao, the father, is killed by the landlord when he fights for his daughter. Second, it leaves out Xi'er's pregnancy and the birth of the baby. In a 1972 same-titled ballet film, Xi'er even successfully resists Huang Shiren and escapes before being raped. In her study of Chinese revolutionary literature, Meng Yue reads the successive revisions of *The White-haired Girl* as a progressive erasure of the gender oppression within class struggle when Xi'er is represented as the image of an oppressed class rather than an oppressed woman.²⁵ What ideological mechanism makes the gender discourse serve class struggle in socialist culture? I found one of Rey Chow's remarks very inspiring. She claims that women's problems in Chinese writings have been hard to be examined from a feminist perspective

²³ Based on the *Yangge* opera, the story of the white-haired girl was also adapted into a modern Peking Opera by Fan Junhong in 1958.

²⁴ On May 31, 1967, in order to celebrate the 25th anniversary of Mao's Yan'an talk, *People's Daily* published an editorial essay "Geming wenyi de youxiu yangban (The Excellent Models of the Revolutionary Literature and Art)," in which *The White-haired Girl* and *The Red Detachment of Women* have been selected as two of the eight revolutionary model plays.

²⁵ Meng Yue, "Female Images and National Myth," in *Gender Politics in Modern China* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 118-36.

because men always pre-empted women's place as the minor and claim that place for themselves to the extent that "the Chinese woman" doesn't yet exist. As she argues:

The common view that women's issues always seem to be subsumed under the "larger" historical issues of the nation, the people, and so forth is therefore true but also a reversal of what happens in the process of discourse construction. For in order for us to construct a "large" historical issue, a position of the victim/minor must always already be present. In terms of language, this means that for a (new) signifier to emerge as a positive presence, there must always be a lack/negative supporting it. The producer of the new signifier, however, always occupies (or "identifies with") the space of the lack/negative (since it is empty) in order to articulate.²⁶

In other words, in the process of discourse construction, it is not the larger historical issues that subsume women's issues. On the contrary, women's issues simply become nonexistent so it will be easier to appropriate the vacated place to form larger historical issues. Gender discourses in socialist cinema followed exactly the same rule. The reason that makes Xi'er's gender identity serve the larger class discourse so perfectly is because it has been pre-positioned as such. If we can argue that the new signifier in *The White-haired Girl* is the CCP or the new socialist China, then Xi'er is the supporting "lack/negative" that enables the CCP to emerge as a positive presence. Her identity, a peasant girl, makes her the most "lacking" in contrast to the dominant symbolic, therefore the most appropriate place for discursive construction. It is through the articulation of Xi'er, or more accurately, the articulation of the filmmaker on behalf of Xi'er, that the legitimacy of the CCP and the socialist China has been guaranteed.

What makes the gender discourse more complicated in *The White-haired Girl* is the role of the Party. As the film shows, Xi'er is not a passive sufferer of the oppression

²⁶ Ray Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Women's Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 110-111.

but a girl who embodies the resistant spirit of the laboring people. Neither Xi'er's father nor her fiancé can protect Xi'er. Her father has been forced to sell her, and Dachun has failed to help Xi'er escape when she is locked in the landlord's house. Although she cannot avoid her fate of being exploited and raped, unlike her father, she does not commit suicide. On the contrary, she shows strong will of resistance. In a stormy night, when the landlord Huang Shiren and his servant come to a temple for shelter, they are scared away by the white-haired Xi'er who is seeking food in the temple. Full of hatred, Xi'er chases them into the storm. However, Xi'er herself cannot accomplish revenge until the coming of the Red Army. In other words, besides their spontaneous class consciousness, both Xi'er and Dachun's revolutionary subjectivity have to be activated by the Party. When Dachun eventually rescues Xi'er from the mountains, his identity is different from the beginning when he has failed to help Xi'er. Now he is the male embodiment of the Party and it is the Party who undertakes the responsibilities of a father. By transcending the biological father to rescue the daughter, the Party assumes the position of a patriarchal father. In her study of socialist literature, Chen Shunxin argues that if we could attach a gender label to the dominant literary discourse throughout the socialist era, it would be a male label that represents patriarchal authority.²⁷ The same statement can be applied to Socialist cinema as well. At the end of the film, Xi'er is shown to have black hair again because of her happy life with Dachun. The Party is granted an almost supernatural power that can cure all the sufferings.²⁸

²⁷ Chen Shunxin, *Zhongguo dangdai wenxue de xushi yu xingbie* (Beijing: Peking University, 1995), 115.

²⁸ Another film describing the same supernatural power was *Qing chun* (Youth), a 1977 feature film made by Xie Jin, in which a deaf-mute peasant girl was cured by the miracles of PLA-administered acupuncture.

The interweaving of class struggle and gender discourses in *The White-haired Girl* has been established as the orthodox in the socialist years. It is not too hard to find that films such as *Liubao de gushi* (The Story of Liubao, 1957) and *Hongse niangzi jun* (The Red Detachment of Women, 1963) share some similarities with *The White-haired Girl*. In *The Story of Liubao*, a local warlord tries to seize a peasant girl as his concubine after he has tortured her elder sister to death. A soldier of the Eight Route Army falls in love with the girl, and has the CCP-led Army rescued her at a critical moment. In *The Red Detachment of Women*, a young housemaid cannot stand her cruel landlord and runs away. Later she joins the revolutionary army. The main narrative line focuses on how the girl gradually grows up to be a woman soldier under the tutelage of a male CCP member.

Besides peasant girls, the space of the “lack/negative” can be assigned to other marginal social groups whose non-existence could be appropriated to construct larger historical issues. *Qingchun zhige* (Song of Youth, 1959) follows Lin Daojing’s growing-up from a girl student to a revolutionary intellectual. As Bang Wang points out, in films like *Song of Youth*, the hero’s story is already told, and what the film requires is rather a candidate’s story, which tells of Lin Daojing’s “initiation into a place in revolution and interpellation into the subject position of history.”²⁹ The peasant class, however, has been proved the most “politically correct” space of “lack/negative”, and others such as that of intellectuals have been prone to criticism in the anti-rightist campaigns and the following Cultural Revolution.

The narrative strategy of *The White-haired Girl*— which promises a bright new socialist China by condemning the dark old feudal China— has also been shared by

²⁹ Ban Wang, 131.

many other films. For example, a vivid comparison between the old and new society can be found in *Longxu gou* (The Dragon-beard Ditch, 1952), a screen adaptation of Lao She's same-titled stage drama. The first part of the film focuses on the miserable lives of some Peking residents living on the bank of a smelly ditch under the KMT regime. The government did nothing to dredge up the ditch. As their living situation becomes worse and worse, the ditch engulfs a lovely girl during a stormy night. Yomi Braster points out that the remodeling of the irrigation system of Peking had begun under the KMT regime, and even the Japanese had done some work when Peking was under their occupation.³⁰ Unsurprisingly, in order to serve the sole legitimacy of the CCP, all these efforts have been ignored in *The Dragon-beard Ditch*. As told in this film, the CCP government is the only one that takes care of the people's living situation, and the remodeling of the dragon-beard ditch does not begin until Peking is liberated. Set in Tibet, *Nongnu* (Serfs, 1963) shows the suffering of Tibetan serfs by telling the life of a serf named Jampa. The serf's owner works him as a mule. Jampa is forced to flee with his owner when the PLA enters Tibet. Nearing the border, he throws the owner from his back. As the two fighting, a pursuing PLA soldier saves Jampa. *Serfs* ends with Jampa uttering his first words in years: "I want to talk. I have so much to say." The next shot shows him turning to a portrait of Mao, saying: "Chairman Mao." As in *The White-haired Girl* and *The Dragon-beard Ditch*, the dark days have passed, and what is waiting ahead is a bright new life.

As a major component of the socialist culture, socialist cinema responded to almost every policy change in China. Xia Yan, then the leader of the film industry, has

³⁰ Yomi Braster, "Chengshi jingguan yu lishi jiyi: guanyu 'Longxugou'," in Cheng Pingyuan and David Der-wei Wang eds., *Beijing: dushi xiangxiang yu wenhua jiyi* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2005), 125-45.

stressed that films should touch on the pulse of the time and tell stories full of political atmosphere.³¹ Such a highly intensified political consciousness made socialist cinema a political tool that could effect cultural transformation and shape people's worldview. Its powerfulness, as shown in *The White-haired Girl* and many other films, lies in an apparent simplicity of narration and an absolute absence of ambiguity. Almost every leading character in socialist cinema, borrowing Frederic Jameson's statement on third-world literature, could be read allegorically, no matter if s/he is a peasant girl or a Communist Party member. As ideology-loaded visual signs, all leading characters have to be read collectively, too. What has been achieved in the narration of revolution is nothing but women subjected to men/Party and individuals to the collective.

National Style and National Cinema

Compared with leftist films made in 1930's Shanghai, or those made after the anti-Japanese war such as *A Spring River to the East* and *Crows and Sparrows*, a noticeable feature in *The White-haired Girl* and many other socialist films is their extensive appropriation of the folklore culture. The popularity of *The White-haired Girl*, to a great extent, owed to its successful singing, originally a part of *Yangge*. At the beginning of the film, after the screen fades in on a village by a lake below a mountain and then cuts to a pan across a valley and a river, Uncle Zhao appears on a hillside, herding sheep and singing:

Clear flowing water and bright blue sky,
fields of grain below the hills.
The sorghum stretches to the horizon,
the Huang family's land is boundless.

³¹ Xia Yan, *Xie Dianying juban de jige wenti* (Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 1959), 8.

As the song continues, a montage of shots shows the fields, the valley, Madame Huang at home with her servants, young men laboring in the fields, and Yang Bailao cutting grain.

Then song is continued by a chorus in voiceover:

The master is in the mansion,
 tenant farmers bring in the autumn harvest.
 They bleed and sweat, working like beasts of burden.
 The older farmers' backs are breaking,
 their children are nothing but skin and bones.
 Their suffering has no end.

Often an impromptu composition, *Yangge* singing is an indigenous way for rural folks in Northwest China to express wishes and all sorts of emotions. In the typical *Yangge* style, this opening song introduces a beautiful rural landscape with clear message of class confrontation. When Uncle Zhao's solo is replaced by a chorus, a collective class identity emerges. It sets the basic tune of the film.

Having been integrated into the narrative, folk songs also help unfold the plot in a more artistic way. In the scene of the New Year Eve when Xi'er is going to marry Dachun, after cutting to Yang Bailao entering into the Huang mansion to pay the debt, the next shot shows Xi'er preparing for her wedding at home. Sitting in front of a mirror, Xi'er combs and ties her hair with red yarn. She then inspects herself in the mirror and sings in a happy tone:

Rich girls dress up with flowers when they are getting married,
 My father has no money to buy flowers,
 He bought me a strand of red yarn,
 I tie up my hair in front of the mirror. . . .

It turns out that the red yarn is the last tiny happiness she enjoys. By juxtaposing the song with Yang Bailao entering into the Huang mason, the happy wedding atmosphere is

overshadowed by an oncoming disaster – the father commits suicide and the daughter is taken away from her wedding. *Tying up the Red Yarn*, together with *North Wind Blows*, another song in this film, has become well-known across the nation.

In addition to its domestic popularity, *The White-haired Girl* has been screened in more than 30 countries and regions. It is said that hundreds of young audiences watched this film in the rain when it was screened in a National England Youth Celebration.³² At the Sixth Karlovy Cary International Film Festival in 1951, it won the Special Honorary Prize. The success of *The White-haired Girl*, domestically and internationally, signifies the development of a national style in Chinese cinema. If we can say that the left-wing filmmakers in the 1930s contributed greatly to the indigenization of the Western-originated film medium in China, their influence, nevertheless, was confined to urban areas. After their filmmaking experiments were abruptly interrupted by the Sino-Japanese War and the following civil war, it was during the socialist era that efforts in developing a distinctive national style of Chinese cinema paid off.

In modern Chinese history, the adjective term “*minzude*” (national) was the direct opposite of “foreign” and “western.” It can be understood as “Chinese-ness” or “Chinese characteristics.” Under the impact of Western culture, the May Fourth era witnessed an increasing concern of how to preserve and carry forward Chinese cultural tradition. In evaluating the revolutionary role of works of literature and art, Qu Qiubai, a prominent CCP theorist and critic, has pointed out that the Westernized tendency of May Fourth Movement upon which the Chinese revolutionary literary movement was based was alien

³² Meng Guda. “Shenmiao de shizhe—zhongguo dianying zai yingguo (Magical Missionary—Chinese cinema in England),” *Dazhong dianying* (1952): vol.14.

to the people. He worried that ignoring the rich, popular, folk “heritage” of the Chinese people would rob the leftist literary movement of a mass base.³³ His opinion led to the lively discussion on *Dazhong Wenyi* (literature for the masses) in 1932 to a new apex. Studies on this topic have been done extensively over years, including the CCP-stamped *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue shi* (A History of Modern Chinese Literature) by Tang Tao, C.T. Hsia’s *A History of Modern Chinese Literature* which goes against the grain of the Communist view, Marsten Anderson’s *The Limits of Realism: Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period*, and Paul Pickowicz’s case study *Marxist Literary Thought in China: The Influence of Qu Qiubai*, just to name a few. Among leftist writers who were concerned with the importance and necessity of *Dazhonghua* (popularization), it was Qu Qiubai who clarified its mission in two aspects: popularizing the proletarian culture and creating revolutionary mass culture. He also launched strong criticism of reactionary popular culture that poisoned the masses’ mind with feudalist ideas.

During the discussion on “literature for the masses,” the debate on *Minzu Xingshi* (national style) became a topic that resounded among Chinese intellectuals. Some agreed to promote new ideas through traditional literary forms such as folksongs, because they were more suitable to the masses with lower levels of literacy. Their opponents insisted that the old literary forms were incapable of disseminating new ideas. Others worried about the low artistic value of the popular literary forms. Mao joined in this debate and lifted the issue of national style to a position that was as important as international thoughts. He called for a literary movement of *Zhongguo zuofeng* (Chinese style) and

³³ For more discussion on Qu Qiubai’s literary opinion, see Paul G. Pickowice, “Qu Qiubai’s Critique of the May Fourth Generation: Early Chinese Marxist Literary Criticism,” in Merle Goldman ed. *Modern Chinese Literature in the May Fourth Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), 351-384.

Zhongguo qipai (Chinese manner). In his 1938 speech entitled “The Position of the Chinese Communist Party in the National Struggle,” Mao issued one of his first cultural directives to change the literary scene, and the national scene as a whole:

To make Marxism concretely Chinese, to ensure that its every expression manifest Chinese characteristics—that is to say, to apply Marxism with due regard for Chinese qualities—this is the urgent problem which the whole party should try to understand and solve. Foreign-slanted pedantry and obscurantism must be discouraged, and dogmatism must be arrested so that a fresh and vivid Chinese style and Chinese manner, of which the Chinese masses are fond, may take their place.³⁴

Mao carried forward Qu’s idea of striving for a literature completely alienated from the West and stressed the importance of Sinification: “Those who separate internationalist content from national forms do not understand internationalism at all, and we should combine these two aspects closely.”³⁵ This ideal of Sinification, however, was obstructed by the political crisis at Yan’an, which required literature and art to be tools of propaganda. In his 1942 Yan’an Talks, Mao further developed his view on literary forms:

Our specialists in literature should pay attention to the wall newspapers of the masses and to the reportage written in the army and the villages. Our specialists in drama should pay attention to the small troupes in the army and the villages. Our specialists in music should pay attention to the songs of the masses. Our specialists in the fine arts should pay attention to the fine arts of the masses. All these comrades should make close contact with comrades engaged in the work of popularizing literature and art among the masses. On the one hand, they should help and guide the popularizers, and on the other, they should learn from these comrades and, through them, draw nourishment from the masses to replenish and enrich themselves so that their specialties do not become “ivory towers”, detached from the masses and from reality and devoid of content or life.³⁶

³⁴ Quoted from C.T. Hsia, 1999, 301-302.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ McDougall, 35.

In the literary context the meaning of this paragraph was quite clear: workers of literature and art should learn the indigenous literary and art forms that Qu Qiubai had already praised in his promotion of “literature for the masses.” A “mass line” of “from the masses, to the masses” had been nailed down not only as the method of the Party leadership but also as the criterion to judge both the content and the form of literature and art. That is, the content should draw from the masses, and the form should be acceptable to the masses. In brief, from content to form, Mao’s views on literature and art directly served his political agenda. Although he was not directly against Western literary forms, the sinification project was temporarily put aside.

Soon after the outbreak of the Korean War (1950-1953), the newly established PRC was severed from the U.S. and its allies. In the early years of the PRC, private-owned enterprises were allowed to continue during the transition to socialism. This idea of New Democracy was an effective strategy to secure social stability and keep up rapid development in production.³⁷ As soon as the socialist transition was completed, Mao began exploring non-capitalist ways of development. Some historians of China regard Mao’s socialism as a “delinking” practice from the capitalist world system.³⁸ What we should bear in mind is, despite the fact that China was politically and economically severed from the West, the latter was always “an absented presence” that determined the policy-making in every aspect of the former.

³⁷ Mao Zedong, “On New Democracy,” *Selected Works*, II (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1965), 339-384.

³⁸ The term “delinking” comes from Samir Amin and has been borrowed by Arif Dirlik in his study on the development of socialism in China. See Samir Amin, *Delinking: Towards a Polycentric World* (London: ZED Books, 1990). Also see Arif Dirlik, *Postmodernity’s Histories: the Past as Legacy and Project* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2000), 19-62.

The “delinking” practice inevitably influenced socialist filmmaking. Western films quickly disappeared from the Chinese film market, and more and more films produced by the Soviet Union and other countries in the socialist camp were dubbed into Chinese. Meanwhile, except for film theories from the Soviet Union, Western film theories were scarcely known in China and had limited influence on Chinese filmmaking. It was during the Cold War era that the earlier debate on national style began to take on new significance. In the spirit of Mao’s Yan’an Talks, cinematic appropriation of the folklore culture became the most indispensable part of developing a national style of Chinese cinema. For instance, an important character in *The Dragon-beard Ditch* is a good-for-nothing performer nicknamed Crazy Cheng. He performs *Shulaibao*, a form of folk art that is characterized by poetic, fast, rhythmic, comical oral performance. After being assaulted by a local gangster, Crazy Cheng has escaped to the Dragon-beard Ditch and lives on his wife’s income from peddling cigarettes. After Beijing is liberated, he devotes himself to the reconstruction of the ditch. At the remodeling celebration, he praises the CCP government with a *Shulaibao* ballad:

To all you people, I joyfully state,
 The People’s Government is truly great.
 It mended the Ditch, and took great pains for us though we’re not rich.
 A first-rate government, loving all poor men,
 Help us stand straight and march with great strides and go laughing one,
 All workers must strive with their hearts as one.
 Must strive together, and work without cease,
 Then our land will be great, the people happy, and the world at peace!³⁹

³⁹ Liao Hungying, *Dragon Beard Ditch, A Play in Three Acts* (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1956), 100.

This ballad sings out the film's theme—the people's government is for the people. As a popular form of folk art, *Shulaibao* was simply a way to make a living in the old society. When the Party leadership is highly praised through the ballad created by the performer Crazy Cheng, it is indicated that the folk art's revolutionary potential has been waken up and flourished. The Communist Party liberated both the performer and the folk art. In this sense, it is easy to understand why this work earned its prestigious writer, Lao She, a title of People's Artist.

Besides the revolutionary usage of the folk art, a rediscovery of the Chinese past became one major trend of filmmaking in late 1950s and early 1960s. Cinematic representations of historical figures including Li Shizhen (1518-1593), an influential scholar of Chinese medicine; Lin Zexu (1785-1850), a national hero in the Opium War (1839-1842), and others. Historical events such as the uprising of the Small Sword Society (1853-1855) and the first Sino-Japanese war (1894-1895) were represented under the theme of anti-feudalism and anti-imperialism. All these historical subjects showed respect for national culture and contributed to the formation of a national style on the screen.⁴⁰

Minority film productions were often categorized as films with distinctive national styles, which made the development of national style in Chinese cinema a more complicated issue. Over thousands of years, China has served as home to many ethnic groups. Disdained as barbarians of one sort or another, minority uprisings against the Han majority in China happened from time to time. Mongols and Manchus even established

⁴⁰ They were *Li Shizhen* (1956), *Lin Zexu* (1957), *Xiaodao Hui* (1961), and *Jiawu Fengyun* (1962).

their dominance over the Han people in the Yuan (1271-1368) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties respectively. After the founding of the PRC, 41 minority nationalities were officially recognized in the 1953 census, including large ethnic groups such as Manchus, Miaos, Uyghurs, and Mongols. Later, 55 minority groups were recognized, which comprised around 10 percent of the total Chinese population. National solidarity is of great importance in any modern nation-state of multi-ethnicities. The CCP government set up important minority policies, including establishing ethnic autonomous areas, helping promote economic and cultural development of the minority groups, and more. Minority people are free to use and develop their ethnic languages, and to maintain their own cultural and social customs.⁴¹ The PRC's Constitution and laws guarantee equal rights to all ethnic groups in China, and ethnic minorities are well represented in the National People's Congress as well as governments at both the provincial and prefectural levels. Consequently, minority themes occupied a certain quota in the field of socialist filmmaking.

Another important political reason that facilitated the production of minority films has been generally neglected. In 1956, Mao issued a new policy-- "*Baihua qifang, baijia zhengmin*" (Let a hundred flowers bloom, and a hundred schools of thought contend), encouraging debate and criticism of the Party leadership. The so-called "Hundred Flowers" period brought in a relative political relaxation, making filmmaking experiments of a wider range of film genres and subjects become possible. A variety of film productions appeared in this liberal environment, including several satirical

⁴¹ One notable preferential treatment ethnic minorities enjoy since the 1980s is that they are exempt from the "One Family, One Child" birth control policy.

comedies. By June 1957 it turned out that Mao had allowed “one hundred flowers bloom” only as a means to lure dissidents out in order to crack them down. The following Anti-Rightist campaign delayed many films in mid-production, and many others became targets of criticism. Great pressure was put on filmmaking. After the Sino-Soviet alliance was terminated in 1957, socialist realism, the Soviet-originated literary orthodoxy, was replaced by “a combination of socialist realism with revolutionary romanticism,” which further necessitated the efforts of developing national styles in literature and art.⁴² In order to keep “politically correct,” most films then produced either dealt with the war theme or served as straightforward political propaganda for the Great Leap Forward Movement, which made Xia Yan, the leader of the Ministry of Culture, very unsatisfied.⁴³ He wanted films that could make the audience relax and feel lighthearted. Minority films became the first consideration not only because they could offer a different culture scenery that would attract the major Han audiences, but more importantly, because filmmakers could enjoy a relative artistic freedom in dealing with minority themes. As I mentioned earlier, minority groups in the PRC could maintain their own cultural and social customs, which was very different from the Han Chinese since much of the latter’s cultural tradition was criticized as feudalist legacy and abandoned consequently. In other words, the minority policies meant less party interference and more artistic freedom, especially in terms of “revolutionary romanticism.” This political background has to be taken into account to consider the popularity of minority films.

⁴² For related study, see Chen Shunxin, *Shehui zhuyi xianshi zhuyi zai zhongguo de jieshou yu zhuanbian* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2002).

⁴³ Recalled by Gong Pu, one of the scriptwriters of *Five Golden Flowers*, in *Dianying chuanqi* (Story of Movies), a TV series on Chinese cinema produced by CCTV, 2004.

About 20 minority films were produced in the 1950s, and the number was increased in the 1960s. Most of them enjoyed great popularity among the Han audiences, which is a noteworthy phenomenon.

Produced in 1959 as a “tributary film” for the 10th anniversary of the founding of the PRC, *Wuduo jinhua* (Five Golden Flowers, 1959) is one of the most successful minority films. It tells of the lives of the Bai people who live in concentrated communities in Dali, Yunnan Province.⁴⁴ A Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture was founded in November 1956 after the completion of the land reform and socialist transition. Situated on the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau, the Bai area is crisscrossed with rivers. The river valleys, dense forests, and vast tracts of land form a beautiful landscape and provide an abundance of crops and fruits. The Bai people are good singers and dancers. A March Fair, which occurs between March 15th and 20th of the lunar calendar, is a grand festival of the Bai people. Celebrated every year at the foot of the Diancang Mountain to the west of Dali city, the fair is an occasion for sporting contests and theatrical performances. People gather there to enjoy dancing, horse racing and other games.

Set in Dali, *Five Golden Flowers* opens with the March Fair. On his way to join the horse races, Ah Peng, a Bai young man, meets a group of pretty Bai girls who beg him to fix their broken wagon. He falls in love with a girl named Golden Flower, and she agrees to meet him again the next year, probably as a test for his love at first sight. Because Golden Flower is a very common name for Bai girls, the following year Ah

⁴⁴ Based on the Census of July 1, 1990, the Bai minority is listed as the 14th largest ethnic group with a population of 1,598,100.

Peng comes across four girls with the same name. After many set-backs, plenty of mistakes and numerous jokes, Ah Peng succeeds, at last, in finding the girl he loves.

What deserve special attention in this film are the different professions of the five girls. Ah Peng's lover is a deputy Commune director, and the other four are a fertilizer maker, herdsman, steelworker, and tractor operator, respectively. In other words, they identify with each other in terms of an equal enthusiastic participation in the socialist construction. The film echoes the Great Leap Forward Movement. Launched by Mao in 1957, this movement aimed not only to compete with the Western countries, but also to show the Soviet Union a Chinese approach of economic development. Two important strategies of this movement are a mass steel-making campaign and the formation of the people's communes. Correspondingly, the lead heroine in the film is a deputy Commune director, and Ah Peng a blacksmith. A more obvious plot is about the steelworker Golden Flower who looks for ironstones in mountains. Ah Peng helps her set up a furnace for steel-making. Ah Peng's quest to find his lover turns out to be a wonderful opportunity to stage the Chinese people's passion for the Great Leap Forward Movement. As shown in this film, even women of minorities are no longer confined at home, thanks to the women's liberation movement. They are devoting themselves enthusiastically in building a new Bai community, a miniature of the new China. "It is in the recycling of the individual's libidinal energy for revolutionary purpose, in the constant displacing of the individual's life and enjoyment into revolutionary experience that we find politics working in close concert with aesthetics", argues Ban Wang in his analysis on other two

“tributary” films produced in the same year, *Song of Youth* and *Nie Er*.⁴⁵ To me, *Five Golden Flowers* makes the concert of politics and aesthetics a visual spectacle through the power of images and obvious entertaining elements. For instance, comic elements have been skillfully interwoven in a love story in this film. The main narrative line is a series of misunderstandings that happen very often in our daily lives. Because Ah Peng knows only that the girl he is looking for can sing well, he is led to a herdsman who is busy taking care of a new-born sheep. Ah Peng stands outside and the woman inside, they don't see each other. When Ah Peng attempts to express his love for her in song, she considers him an idler and chases him away with a bucket of water. Later, when Ah Peng is about to recognize his Golden Flower's voice on the telephone, a wagon pulls down a telephone pole and the line is cut off. His search for love ends with a happy reunion of the five Bai girls and their lovers at the Butterfly Spring. When the entertaining comedic style was combined with picturesque landscapes, melodious music and songs, beautiful costumes, exotic customs and a romantic love story—an audiovisual treat occurred that was unthinkable in a highly politicized Han-majority setting. Therefore, Paul Clark claims that the enormous success of *Five Golden Flowers* is not surprising.⁴⁶ It achieved big box office revenues in Hong Kong, and even a Taiwanese newspaper reported that this film was “a crafty communist propaganda.”⁴⁷

Besides *Five Golden Flowers*, other popular films on minorities include *Liu sanjie* (Third Sister Liu, 1960), *Bingshan shangde laike* (Visitor on the Ice Mountain, 1963),

⁴⁵ Ban Wang, 124.

⁴⁶ Paul Clark, 99-100.

⁴⁷ Recalled by Gong Pu in *Story of Movies*.

and *Ah shima* (Ashima, 1964). *Third Sister Liu* tells how a folksong singer of the Zhuang minority fights against a local landlord. *Visitor on the Ice Mountain*, one of the most popular anti-spy thrill films, praises the solidarity between the PLA and the Uyghurs in defending the new China. *Ashima* is a legendary love story of the Sani ethnic group in which a beautiful girl drowns in a flood after having escaped from a forced marriage to an evil landlord's son. In general, minority films are different from films concerning the Han Chinese in terms of the entertaining elements.

The representation of the minority groups in this minority films, however, is very problematic. For example, the Bai people have their own dialect and most can only speak their dialect, instead of Mandarin Chinese. In *Five Golden Flowers*, the leading actress is of the Yi minority and speaks Yunnan local dialect, while the leading actor speaks Cantonese. All of the language differences are ignored in minority films. Mandarin dialogue is used throughout, aiming to serve the promotion of the standard Mandarin Chinese across the country. *Five Golden Flower* opens with the March Fair, which even though is portrayed as a Bai cultural tradition, is more a cultural exhibition for the Han people. What has been highlighted is a Bai culture that is exotic to the Han people, not only in terms of the Bai costumes. In this sense, I find myself in agreement with Dru Gladney's theory of the relationship between the Han cultural hegemony and the minority culture as "internal colonialism" and "internal Orientalism."⁴⁸ What I want to emphasize further is, with its unmatched powerfulness in constructing visual spectacles, the film medium has played an important role in the formation of Orientalist discourses. In the

⁴⁸ Dru C. Gladney. "Representing Nationality in China: Refiguring Majority/ Minority identities," *Journal of Asian Studies* (February 1994): 92-123.

long history involving issues of colonialism or Orientalism, it is the invention of cinema and the cinematic representation of the “other” that brings the influence of colonial or Orientalist discourses in the field of knowledge learning to its apex. Just to mention one fact: soon after the birth of cinema, Thomas Edison sent his cameramen traveling across the world to shot short films. Since then, cinema has become an important mass medium to spread knowledge of the “other,” and it is possibly the most effective way.

In *Five Golden Flowers*, two minor comic figures accompany Ah Peng’s love quest, an artist and a musician, both of the Han nationality. During their fieldtrip in Dali, both claim to be highly inspired by Bai folk artists. After attending the wedding ceremony of the tractor operator, the musician says that he has listened to many valuable folksongs, and the artist claims to have collected many designs of national styles. An interesting displacement happens here when the Bai culture is defined as one of national styles. Paul Clark finds it paradoxical that “one of the most effective ways to make films with ‘Chinese’ style was to go to the most ‘foreign’ cultural areas in the nation.”⁴⁹ Zhang Yingjin argues that the outcome of locating “national style” in ethnic cultural practices is a legitimization of minority people as part of the “solidarity” of the Chinese nation, and minority films functions as “an effective means by which the nation-state objectifies minority peoples through stereotypes and co-opts them in the construction of a socialist China.”⁵⁰ Reasonable if considered from a domestic perspective though, Zhang’s point

⁴⁹ Paul Clark. “Ethnic Minorities in Chinese Films: Cinema and the Exotic,” *East-West Film Journal I* (June 1987): 15-31, 25.

⁵⁰ Zhang Yingjin. “From ‘Minority Film’ to ‘Minority Discourse’: Questions of Nationhood and Ethnicity in Chinese Cinema,” *Cinema Journal*, (Spring 1997): 73-90, 88-89.

of view cannot explain why *Five Golden Flowers* has been highly praised internationally as an excellent work of art with vivid national style, too. In 1960, at the Second Asia-African film festival, *Five Golden Flowers* won the Best Director Award as well as the Best Actress Award. In the following years, it has been screened in over 50 countries. In this regard, another dimension has to be added into Zhang's argument, that is, minority cultures have been used as indispensable elements to establish national styles of Chinese cinema. This phenomenon actually shows a paradox of minority cultures. On the one hand, they are identified as minors in contrast to the major Han culture; on the other hand, their marginal existence has been integrated into the very formation of the Chinese cultural identity. Since the 19th century, the Han culture has been significantly westernized, especially after the May Fourth Movement. Located mostly in the hinterland China, minority groups have little contact with the outside world, thus Western culture hardly has any impact on their development. It is the intactness of minority cultures that makes them integral ingredients of a national culture in a non-Western context.

A similar emphasis on indigenous cultural heritages also could be found in the KMT-controlled Taiwan. In the 1960s, against the traditionalist aesthetic that dominated the literary scene of Taiwan throughout the 1950s and the KMT government's policy of promoting anti-Communist literature, a group of young writers launched a modernist literary movement, advocating Western modernist literary techniques and aesthetics. The tenet of Westernization was criticized in following literary debates. Progressive intellectuals urged writers to show more respects for their indigenous cultural heritages as well as greater concern for domestic social issues. By using Taiwanese dialect to

depict the plight of the poor people and the dilemmas of industrialization and urbanization, a nativist, socially responsible literature achieved considerable influence in the 1970s. *Er'zi de da wan'ou* (His Son's Big Doll, 1983), a film adaptation of one representative nativist writer Huang Chunming's works, marked the beginning of the New Cinema Wave in Taiwan. Sung-sheng Yvonne Chang has pointed out that "Taiwan's Modernist Literary Movement in the 1960s and the virulent Nativist resistance to it in the 1970s are exemplary of world literary history in the 20th century, a significant component of which is the global spread of Western social and cultural values along with the expansion of Capitalism."⁵¹ While the American power and the capitalist system were an "absented-presence" in the PRC, their threatening existence in Taiwan resulted in a more virulent anti-imperialism and a search for local and national identities.

It was not until the 1980s that the PRC reopened to the West. Consequently, a belated search of Chinese cultural identity re-emerged among Chinese intellectuals in the so-called *Xunge wenxue* (Seeking-for-root Literature), a resistance to and a reflection on the process of modernization. Han Shaogong is one of the most influential seeking-for-root writers. His essay "The 'Root' of Literature" is generally regarded by most as a "manifesto" of this new literary wave. He argues that "literature has its root, and the root of literature should be deeply planted in the soil of a national traditional culture, otherwise it will be very hard to have the leaves flourishing without a deep-root."⁵² He summons Chinese writers to stimulate national culture, "China is still China among all kinds of vicissitudes. We have a national selfhood, especially in the aspect of literature

⁵¹ Sung-sheng Yvonne Chang, 1993, viii.

⁵² Han Shaogong. "Wenxue degen (The Root of Literature)," *Zuojia* (March 1985): vol.6.

and art, and also in the aspect of a national deep-level spirit and cultural characteristics. Our mission is to release the heat energy of modern notions and remold and polish the selfhood.”⁵³ Once again, most of the works of the seeking-for-root movement were inspired by marginal minority cultures. Different from minority films produced in the 1950s and 1960s that contributed to the formation of national styles, this time, minority cultures have been rediscovered as a cure for cultural identity crisis. Ironically, the cinematic representation of this identity search led to the international success of the so-called Fifth Generation filmmakers, whose works have been criticized by many critics as self-Orientalism or exhibitionism.

The paradox of minority cultures is not an exclusive Chinese phenomenon. It happens to any non-Western national culture threatened by Western cultures. As both cinema and the system of nation-state are products of a Euro-American originated modernity, the efforts in developing national styles in Chinese cinema, as well as in other non-Western national cinema, cannot be studied comprehensively without a global perspective. Sheldon Lu has proposed a transnational perspective that is necessary for Chinese film studies after the end of the Cold War, which, in my point of view, bears some symptoms of amnesia, that is, an ignorance of the revolutionary legacy of Chinese cinema and its aesthetic characteristics. It was the Cold War era that led to the formation of a vivid national style in Chinese cinema.

⁵³ Han Shaogong. “Wenxue degen (The Root of Literature),” *Zuojia* (March 1985): vol.6.

CHAPTER IV

CHINESE CINEMA IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALIZATION

In Mao's China, the film industry was part and parcel of the ideological state apparatus, promoting Party leadership and socialism. Thanks to filmmakers' artistic endeavors, socialist cinema met with considerable success across the country, and some of them even achieved a worldwide influence. The Cultural Revolution (1966-76) saw the greatest setback in the history of Chinese cinema. A total of 589 features and over 1,000 documentary, animation, and educational titles that had been produced in the preceding seventeen years (1949-1965), as well as 883 foreign features, were banned as "poisonous weeds" almost overnight.¹ Hundreds of filmmakers were imprisoned or forced to work at labor camps. Film production came almost to a standstill. After the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese film industry has rebounded with enthusiasm and force. Film production has increased annually.

This chapter attempts to analyze how political and economic reforms initiated by the CCP government have changed the Chinese film industry in a global context. It begins with a historical review of the film industry reform, as the "open and reform" policy went deeper in the mid-1980s, and proceeds with the importation of Hollywood blockbusters since 1994. It will address five research questions: 1) What consequences have resulted from the film industry reform? 2) How was the political background for the

¹ ZhangYingjin, *Chinese National Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 217.

promotion of the so-called *Zhuxuanlü* (Main melody) films? 3) Why did China reopen its domestic market to major Hollywood film studios in 1994? 4) In competition with Hollywood, what kind of industrial reorganization has taken place in the Chinese film industry? 5) How have these changes affected film production as well as distribution in China? Correspondingly, this chapter is divided into five parts. A comparative study of the power structure in general, and the role of the state in China and in the United States in particular, may offer insights into the political economy of the film industry in a global context. In addition to historical and political economic approaches, textual analysis throughout this chapter will show how the policy changes have been embodied in film texts.

Film Industry Reform and Its Consequences

From 1949 to 1965, the Chinese film industry had made steady progress despite several nationwide campaigns against intellectuals in general and workers of literature and art in particular. Socialist filmmaking was subject to the unrelenting political demands of the CCP leadership. The Party guidelines were driven to extremes during the years of the Cultural Revolution. When Jiang Qing (Madam Mao) took control of literature and art, a new cultural policy was issued to all artists: “giving prominence to positive characters among all the characters, to heroes among the positive characters, and to the leading hero among the heroes.” Under the so-called “three prominences” principle, except for a few “revolutionary model play” films, no feature films were produced from 1966 to 1972. From 1973 to 1976, 76 feature films were produced to

serve class struggle as well as internal struggles within the Party.² For example, *Haigang* (On the Docks, 1972) is about the ideological backsliding of a dock worker who is tempted by an undercover class enemy and re-educated by an old worker and a local party leader; *Juelie* (Breaking with Old Ideas, 1975) depicts political campaigns against those “capitalist roaders” during the 1957 Great Leap Forward Movement.

At the landmark meeting of the Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee of the CCP in 1978, Mao’s thoughts of class struggle and a continuous cultural revolution were renounced, and the Party shifted its attention to economic development. Hundreds of films that had been denounced by Jiang Qing were rehabilitated and released. In the Fourth National Congress of Workers of Literature and Art in 1979, Deng Xiaoping announced that “works of literature and art are a special kind of spiritual creation, and the Party should not interfere in it.” He stated that literature and art should serve “the people and socialism,” and “what to write and how to write can only be answered gradually by artists themselves in their artistic exploitation.”³ As an effort to recover the film industry that had been seriously damaged during the Cultural Revolution, the State Council ratified a report co-issued by the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Finance, which, cited often as Document #198 1979, restored the basic structure of the Chinese film industry. While the state-controlled China Film was still the sole corporation to manage film distribution and exhibition throughout the country, a new China Film Export and Import Corporation was established at the end of 1979 as the only enterprise in China conducting film export and import in the international market. Before its establishment,

² Yin Hong and Ling Yan, *Xin zhongguo dianyinshi: 1949-2000* (Changsha: Hunan Meishu Press, 2002), 93.

³ *China Film Yearbook 1981* (Beijing: China Cinema Press, 1982), 19.

all import and export were assigned to China Film. In practice, the newly established corporation merely worked as a branch of China Film.

The new leadership of Deng opened a “New Era” (1978-1989) characterized by economic reform, modernization, and liberalization of thought. A Great Cultural Discussion, or “Cultural Fever” as it has been frequently referred to, swept over the nation.⁴ Filmmakers and critics actively participated in the discussion and launched debates on the nature of the film medium, including issues such as the relationship between film and literature, the modernization of film language, and the impact of Italian new realism. Since science and technology were highly promoted in official slogans, exploration of filmmaking techniques and film theories became a Party endorsed movement, which left visible marks on films produced in the New Era. In their efforts to eliminate the cliché-ridden class discourse, many filmmakers tried to depict the revolutionary history from new perspectives. For example, set in the civil war, *Xiaohua* (A Little Flower, 1979) tells a touching story about two girls who meet during the civil war and do not know that they are looking for the same person. Finally a PLA soldier is found to be the brother of both. Instead of presenting a panorama of the war, *Jinye xingguang canlan* (Stars Are Shining Tonight, 1980) focuses on a more intimate relationship between three young soldiers and a peasant girl who steps into their midst. More filmmakers engaged in reflecting the Cultural Revolution. Films such as *Kunao ren de xiao* (Smiles of a Pained Person, 1979), *Tianyun shan chuanqi* (Legend of the Tianyun

⁴ For studies on the “Cultural Fever,” see Wang Jing, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng’s China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) and Zhang Xudong, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms: Cultural Fever, Avant-garde Fiction, and the New Chinese Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

Mountain, 1980), and *Xiaojie* (The Alley, 1981) received favorable response among Chinese audiences with their vivid representation of the traumatic experiences people suffered during the ten-year catastrophe. The so-called Fourth Generation filmmakers, most of whom had received professional training before the Cultural Revolution but did not begin their career until the 1980s, contributed greatly to this fruitful era of Chinese cinema. Under an active and prosperous environment for filmmaking experiments, annual feature productions grew from 67 in 1979 to 144 in 1984.⁵

As the enactment of the “open and reform” policy brought about many changes in the economic field, such as the production responsibility system in the countryside and the rise of private ownership in cities, corresponding changes in the institutional level led to a weakening of the central Party leadership over local business. The film industry, which had long been regarded by the CCP as its mouthpiece, was also affected by the nationwide political and economic transformation. In 1984, the Third Plenum of the 12th Central Committee of the CCP further decided to let the market play a major role in developing the national economy. A previous “socialist planned economy” was replaced by a “socialist planned commodity economy.” As newspapers and the publishing industry began to participate in the grand wave of commercialization, the film industry was also redefined as a cultural industry rather than a political tool. The government adopted a policy to gradually cut subsidies and encourage commercialized financing in the film industry. The state-funded mode of film production had begun to give way to economic reform. Many film studios were pushed toward the market economy, producing more entertainment films with competitive market value. Meanwhile, the quick development

⁵ Zhang Yingjin, 2004, 227.

of China's television industry and other leisure activities such as watching pirated videotapes began to attract large audiences. The Ministry of Radio, Film and Television (MRFT) was established in January 1986, to consolidate and coordinate efficiently the three major sectors of China's audiovisual industry. As part of the nation's drive for reform and modernization, the Ministry of Culture handed film studio management to the MRFT in 1986, which has brought about more enormous changes to the Chinese film industry, quantitatively as well as qualitatively. The consequences of the film industry reform since 1984 can be examined through changes occurring in three aspects: film financing, film subjects, and film distribution.

1) Film Financing

The unprecedented financial pressure faced by film studios in China since the mid-1980s first led to the introduction of the contractual responsibility system. According to this system, once a contract is signed between filmmakers and the studio, the producers are free to form their own group and decide how to use the budget and organize the actual production. If a film makes money, the studio and filmmakers then divide the profit according to the contract. If the film fails, the studio may punish filmmakers by cutting their salaries, although it is impossible to cover the loss.⁶

Gradually, instead of competing for the limited state allocation, film studios and producers began to raise funds through other channels such as private corporations. Since only state-run studios could obtain the film quota to produce films, any outside investors had to affiliate with a studio in order to share the right of film production and make a

⁶ Wu Xianggui, *Chinese Film Industry since 1977*, Ph.D. Dissertation (University of Oregon, 1992), 160, 273.

profit. Sometimes a studio simply sold its production rights to collect a flat “management fee” of around 300,000 *yuan*.⁷ As a result, co-productions with Hong Kong, Taiwan, and many overseas investors have become increasingly popular. It was estimated that among 154 domestic products in 1993, 81 were made by non-state investment.⁸ All films made by Shanghai Film Studio in this year were co-productions or independent investment by outside investors.⁹ Generally, international co-productions, with more advanced film techniques and interesting narratives, were better received than domestic (co-) productions. Therefore, more overseas investors began to seek for profits in the Chinese film market, which quickened the process of deregulation in the Chinese mass media industry. In order to attract more enterprises to invest in film production, the required percentage for being a co-producer was reduced from 70 percent of total budget to 30 percent in 1996.¹⁰ Then, in December 1997, the MRFT issued a new policy to allow any provincial and lower level film companies and TV stations to produce feature films, which ended the 50-year monopoly of film production by the state-run studios and created a more competitive environment for the film industry.¹¹ Since then, private funds have been allowed to establish film companies that are no longer under Party control.

Independent film producers began to operate out of the state-run filmmaking system.

⁷ As film critic Ni Zhen points out, by collecting the “management fee,” the studios seized the opportunity of a continued state monopoly over production and distribution rights and played the state’s anti-free-market policy to their benefit. See Ni Zhen, 1994. 17.

⁸ Lin Lisheng, “The Economic Changes and Artistic Dividing Line of Films Produced in China in 1990s,” in *China Film Yearbook 1997*, 201-205, 203.

⁹ Zhu Ying, 2003, 82.

¹⁰ The 70 percent requirement was set up in 1995. See “Regulation for the Reform of the Management for Making Feature Films,” in *China Film Yearbook 1996*, 24.

¹¹ Yin Hong. “1998 zhongguo dianyin beiwanglu.” *Dangdai dianying* (January 1999): 21-28, 21.

2) Film Subjects

The economic reform did not fully abandon Party guidelines on filmmaking, especially during the early years of reform. Although class struggle was no longer the main theme, filmmaking was still required to serve Party policies, albeit in a more humanist way. Only a few entertainment films were produced in the early 1980s. Amongst them, *Shaolin Si* (The Shaolin Temple, 1982), a joint venture between China and Hong Kong, became the most successful martial arts classic. Chang Hsin-Yen, a Hong Kong director, ingeniously employed the Chinese martial arts athletes to perform main roles in this film. With the debut of then 18-year-old Jet Li, a member of the national martial arts team, the film tells a story of how a young monk learns kung fu in the Shaolin Temple and how he and 12 other monks saved the young emperor of the Tang Dynasty. Interwoven is a love story between the young monk and a shepherdess. A humorous scene is the mistaken killing of her shepherd dog and the not so mistaken consumption of the dog meat. Combining kung fu, romance, and comedic elements together, this film not only was a box office hit in China and Hong Kong, but also was popular in Southeast Asian countries and the U.S. Aside from sparking Jet Li's film career, this film also contributed to a renewed interest in kung fu practice amongst young Chinese.

Greatly inspired by the commercial success of *The Shaolin Temple*, many martial arts films were produced, and they occupied the top four positions at the domestic box office for five consecutive years since 1983.¹² For example, *Jinbiao Huang Tianba* (Golden Dart Huang Tianba, 1987) is a martial arts film based on a highly controversial

¹² Yin Hong and Ling Yan, 143.

figure Huang Tianba, a famous Robin Hood in the Qing Dynasty. As in the case of Jet Li, the lead actor, Wang Qun, is also a champion of the national martial arts competition.

Other entertainment film genres such as thriller, crime, and comedy have all been attempted by Chinese filmmakers since the mid-1980s. Among the 136 films produced in 1989, more than 90 were entertainment films.¹³ While state-funds were mainly allocated to major propaganda films, the non-state invested entertainment films were simply profit-driven cultural productions. Participation of overseas capital in the Chinese film industry predicted the onset of global capitalism.

3) Film Distribution

The third important consequence of the film industry reform took place in the distribution system. China Film was no longer obligated to buy every film from state-run studios after 1987. Instead of a flat fee (700,000 *yuan*), it paid according to a film's box office potential. In other words, the price of a film started to reflect its profitability. This change reduced the market risk of China Film, but studios still could not get enough revenue to sustain themselves. In order to increase the studios' share of profit from box office revenues, China Film signed new contracts with film studios in 1988. Four options of profit allocation were introduced: 1) China Film would grant a minimum guarantee to a finished film, and a distribution fee (50% of the box office) would be divided between China Film (71.5%) and the studio (28.5%); 2) China Film would pay for the prints (9,000 *yuan* each, raised to 10,500 *yuan* in 1989) it ordered from the studios; 3) China Film would acquire a film with a flat fee; 4) China Film would act as an agent for a

¹³ Wu Xianggui, 164.

studio on a commission basis.¹⁴ The first three options were selected by different film studios and the last one had never been employed. But two years later, all studios changed to the second option when they discovered that they would lose more by taking any other options.¹⁵ Though played to the studios' advantage in the short run, the new deal still made studios take the risk of losing their production cost if the film could not sell well. The average cost of a film was 900,000 *yuan* in 1988. So if a studio wants to break even, it had to sell at least 100 prints. But as a matter of fact, two thirds of the films produced in 1988 sold below 100 prints. As Zhu Ying points out, when a mandatory block booking system was left untouched in the reform, it gave economic incentives to neither studios nor distributors and exhibitors.¹⁶

The mid-1980s also witnessed the debut of the Fifth Generation filmmakers—a term generally referring to those who began to study filmmaking in Beijing Film Academy in 1978 and graduated in 1982.

As one film historian points out, the Fifth Generation filmmakers are the last beneficiaries of the planned economy since their cinematic experiment was carried out with no pressure from the market.¹⁷ Most films made by the Fifth Generation had poor market performance, partly due to the lack of successful market promotion. But a more important reason, as Wu Yigong, president of the Shanghai Film Studio, has observed, was that some Fifth Generation filmmakers had no consideration of the market and the

¹⁴ Luo Yijun, Li Jinsheng and Xu Hong, eds., *Zhongguo dianying lilun wenxuan, 1920-1989* (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 1992), vol.2, 333.

¹⁵ Wu Xiangui, 148.

¹⁶ Zhu Ying, 74.

¹⁷ Lu Shaoyang, 2004, 72.

audiences in their artistic pursuit.¹⁸ For example, *Huang tudi* (Yellow Earth, 1984), the pioneer work of the Fifth Generation, only sold 30 prints two years after its release. *Daoma zei* (Horse Thief, 1985), *Haizi wang* (King of the Children, 1987), and *Wanzhong* (Evening Bell, 1988) sold less than 10 prints. Interestingly, these works achieved great international prestige, and the Fifth Generation filmmakers therefore have become very attractive to overseas investors. Both Zhang Yimou's *Dahong denglong gaogaogua* (Raise the Red Lantern, 1991) and Chen Kaige's *Bawang bieji* (Farewell My Concubine, 1993) were co-productions sponsored by Taiwan and Hong Kong capital respectively. More importantly, the inpouring of overseas capital in Chinese cinema has defined the latter's commercial nature. In this sense, it is understandable that why Dai Jinhua laments the fall of the Fifth Generation from its artistic experiment to commercial success as a "glorious fall."¹⁹

From Entertainment Films to "Main Melody" Films

The reform in the film industry, as Wu Xianggui points out perceptively, "did not necessarily mean to give the film industry more freedom but rather to grab more profit."²⁰ While financial freedom did help studios grab more profit, no political freedom was granted to endanger the Party control. The trend toward entertainment film was seen as a simple matter of commerce. It did not attract any serious ideological attention in the mid-1980s. In other words, while the film reform was a profit-motivated reform, the freedom

¹⁸ Wu Yigong, "To be a Loyal Artist to the People," in *Chinese Film Theory, A Guide to the New Era* (New York: Praeger, 1990), 179-187.

¹⁹ Dai Jinhua, "Severed Bridge: The Art of the Sons' Generation," in *Cinema and Desire: Feminist Marxism and Cultural Politics in the Work of Dai Jinhua* (London & New York: Verso, 2002), 13-48.

²⁰ Wu Xianggui, 147.

of cinematic representation was still under tight Party control. As the overall mass media reform was moving toward greater openness and diversity, it suffered frequent political setbacks, especially during the anti-bourgeois liberalism campaigns in 1987.

In September 1985, Deng Xiaoping had called for both “social benefits” and “financial benefits” in propaganda, culture, education, and health circles. He claimed “all enterprises attached to these circles should take social benefits as the only criterion and produce more products with excellent spiritual qualities.”²¹ It was under this new rule that the Ministry of Culture stressed that filmmaking first of all should be educational. However, as a direct consequence of the entertainment filmmaking, the “social effects” were given much less consideration than the “financial gains” in producing a film. In 1986, the Film Bureau issued notices to all studios to limit kung fu and thriller films to one-seventh of the total number of film productions.²² In the National Filmmakers’ Conference held in 1987, “*zhuxuanli*,” originally a musical term of “main melody” or “leitmotif,” was used to define an official orientation of the film industry— “*tuchu zhuxuanli, jianchi duoyanghua*” (highlighting the main melody and insisting on diversity). Under this new guideline, entertainment film productions could be granted only when the mainstay of filmmaking remained a political tool of propaganda and education. A special fund was then set up by the MRFT to subsidize “main melody” films.

However, because of the propitious environment created by the Great Cultural Discussion, filmmakers and critics were deeply indulged in an imagined intellectual

²¹ Deng Xiaoping, “Speech in the National Congress of the CCP,” in *China Film Yearbook 1986*, 1.

²² Wu Xiangui, 149-150.

authority. Consequently, they paid lip service to the political call. In their advocacy of entertainment films, filmmakers and critics were not only concerned with the market per se. More often than not, entertainment films were used to oppose the Party guideline, which was embodied vividly in the 1985-1988 debate on entertainment films. Chen Xihe, a research fellow from the China Film Art Research Center, has expressed his opinion on entertainment films in the following words, which was typical among Chinese filmmakers and critics:

This flood of entertainment films must have been brought about by the changes in the socioeconomic system, which led people to modify their thinking and to reconsider consumerism. . . . Works of art no longer serve only as vehicles for moral principles and dogmatic teachings, but also bring pleasure and mental reaction. As long as modern life remains intense and fast-paced, people need change and relaxation. If there is a difference between “refinement” and “popularity” in art, then literature probably emphasizes refinement and motivates thought, whereas film leans more toward popularity, providing relaxation and entertainment. . . .²³

His preference for “popularity” instead of “refinement” implied a significant divergence from Mao’s emphasis on popularization. Out of a desire to get rid of the dogmatic teachings, filmmakers in the New Era wanted to bring audiences relaxation and entertainment rather than propaganda or education. Due to the deep-rooted socialist filmmaking tradition, entertainment filmmaking was a mission with formidable opposition. Zhang Huaxun, the director of the popular martial arts film *Golden Dart Huang Tianba*, has confessed that entertainment filmmaking in China was very difficult, and he felt pressure from all sides. He was accused of pandering to low tastes and

²³ Yao Xiaomeng, “The Entertainment Film: Dialogue 1,” in *Film in Contemporary China, Critical Debates, 1979-1989* (Westport: Praeger Publisher, 1993), 86.

pursuing an unhealthy mood in the audience with the amount of bloody terror.²⁴ Criticism of entertainment films was no less strong than the call for it. Some critics felt sad that several excellent directors gave up their aesthetic ideals and produced films on such popular subjects as robbery, murder and hijacking. But more powerful critiques were focused on the poor quality of entertainment films. Made for profit, though, most of those rough and slipshod productions were unable to cover the cost. Therefore, a credibility crisis in domestic entertainment filmmaking was triggered among Chinese audiences as well as critics. In response to this crisis, *Dangdai Dianying (Contemporary Cinema)*, one of the influential film journals, held a seven-day symposium in late 1988 to discuss the nature and the future of entertainment films within the overall culture. Chen Haosu, the editor-in-chief, argued that education was no longer the sole concern of cinema, and a monotonous overemphasis on propaganda might lead to an underestimation of entertainment films.²⁵ Song Chong, president of the Beijing Film Studio and director of several entertainment films, suggested that entertainment films should reinforce the heroic spirit of the Chinese nation, diminish vulgar tastes and foreign flavors, and strengthen the healthy trends of the reform era. His speech initiated a comparison of Chinese and American entertainment films, which yielded several points:

- 1) Ideology penetrates into the films of both countries;
- 2) American films emphasize both political benefits and economic profits, while Chinese films stress the political function;

²⁴ Shen Jiming, "The Entertainment Film: Dialogue II," in *Film in Contemporary China, Critical Debates, 1979-1989* (Westport: Praeger Publisher, 1993), 107-108.

²⁵ Zhang Wei, "Contemporary Chinese Entertainment Films: A Summary of a Symposium," in *Film in Contemporary China, Critical Debates, 1979-1989* (Westport: Praeger Publisher, 1993), 135.

- 3) American films, with high investments, aim at a global market, while Chinese films target only the domestic market with low investment;
- 4) The Americans use entertainment to realize ideologies, whereas the Chinese use education to realize ideologies;
- 5) American films draw upon multiform and modular genres, while Chinese films are uniform and synthetical. . . .²⁶

This comparison bore great significance because it brought forward a global perspective to consider the further development of Chinese cinema. With the deepening of the discussion, the participants concentrated on how to elevate the quality and promotional packaging of entertainment films to attract audiences. A basic conclusion of this symposium was that “the entertainment films should be the mainstream in China,” which was directly against the Party’s call for producing more “main melody” films.

One type of entertainment films that proved immensely popular was the film adaptation of Wang Shuo’s “hooligan” novels. Probably one of the most famous and successful popular writers in post-Mao China, Wang began to receive increasing attention starting in the mid-1980s, mainly because of his cynical representation of the life of the “dregs of society” characterized by dramatic departures from the mainstream cultural tradition, and subversive parodies of the socialist legacy. Although unacceptable to the Party authorities, his works have made him a best-selling author in China with over 20 novels and 10 million copies in print, appealing across the spectrum from the business community to factory workers, students, and elites.²⁷ The year 1988 was called “the Year

²⁶ Zhang Wei, 135.

²⁷ For detailed analysis on the popularity and characteristics of Wang’s writing, see Jing Wang, *High Cultural Fever* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

of Wang Shuo” in Chinese film history because four of his novels were adapted into films. For example, *Dachuanqi* (Out of Breath, 1988) was adapted from Wang’s novella *Xiangpi Ren* (Rubber Man). In this film, an ambitious urban youth comes to Guangzhou to seek his fortune through smuggling. In this southern metropolis, he witnesses a series of unfortunate events and experiences a number of personal setbacks. The opening prologue of the novella became a voiceover in the film when Ding Jian (the name of the protagonist) first meets Li Bailing, the female character, and sits down at the backseat of Li’s motorcycle:

Everything began with my first wet dream. At that time I just went to high school, and I had the same dream time and again. I dreamed of a faceless fleshy woman who was peeling her soft but heavy skin off like a dancing stripper, revealing open mouths all over her body. I passed away every time when I had this dream. It was as lively as a real experience although I was in dream...I was a scared boy when I was young. I grew up and become a man who spends all my days in horror and gloom.²⁸

This juxtaposition of the female image with the male voice produces a dangerous tension in their sexual relationship. Social instability is put into the foreground, and the plight of the marginalized male character is dramatically illustrated through a distorted expression of the female power. The commercial success of the Wang Shuo films echoed the sea changes occurring in a post-socialist China, which have brought in not only economic development but also new gender discourses.

The Tian’anmen Incident in 1989 is the most significant political event in the PRC. The CCP government in the post-1989 China encountered an unprecedented ideological crisis. After 1989, both the theoretical exploration of the entertainment films

²⁸ Wang Shuo, *Xiangpiren* (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1987). My translation.

and the filmmaking practice were officially denounced. Cultural life in China was re-oriented to a conservative standpoint. In spring 1992, the temporarily cooled-down reform was revitalized by Deng Xiaoping's inspection tour to Southern China. In 1993, the Third Plenum of the 14th Central Committee of the CCP issued "The Decision on Economic Reform," announcing that the object of the reform was to create a "socialist market economy." It replaced the previous "socialist planned commodity economy" and legitimized the leading role of the market. Consequently, China's economy in the 1990s underwent a rapid market-oriented transformation. Greatly affected by materialism and consumerism, the entertainment industry developed with amazing speed. Popular magazines, popular music, TV drama, and pirated videotapes swept into people's daily life. Amongst them, the exponential growth of TV ownership and the spreading popularity of TV programs became a direct cause for the decline of film audiences. As TV has occupied the preeminent place in the entertainment industry, domestic film production under strict ideological control gradually lost the glamour it had achieved in the mid-1980s.

Succeeding Deng Xiaoping, President Jiang Zeming warned the CCP members that they should realize the importance of ideological control through the 1989 Tian'anmen Incident. He stated that the party should advocate correct social values and healthy modest lifestyle, and create a healthy, positive, and progressive social environment.²⁹ At the National Propaganda Conference held in 1994, Jiang reiterated that the Party guideline on propaganda is to "promote model heroes in contemporary society through patriotism, collectivism, and other philosophies that are constructive to the

²⁹ Jiang Zemin. "Speech on the 14th Congress of the CCP," *Wenhui Bao*, 17 January 1994, p.1.

reform: modernization, social progress, and ethnic coherence.”³⁰ Based on the previous special fund set up by the MRFT to subsidize “main melody” films, a national film foundation was established by the government to promote the production of “main melody” films. According to the Film Bureau, five percent of the box office revenues should be turned in as special funds to produce films “on the Socialist revolution, construction and reform after 1949, or on the revolutionary history of the Party, the nation and the People’s Liberation Army, or on the revolutions since the 1840 Opium War, particularly after the May Fourth Movement.” It also required that 15 percent of all the films distributed annually must be “main melody” films.³¹

During the 1990s, “main melody” films have been massively produced to reinforce the Party’s ideological control over its people, including the following themes: 1) films focusing on the revolutionary history since 1840, with some made in a quasi-documentary style; 2) biographical films of heroic characters, especially communist revolutionary models; and 3) films representing the achievement of the contemporary political and economic reform. Different from earlier socialist films that focused on middle or lower-rank Party members and soldiers, almost all high-ranking CCP leaders, including Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping, and even Lin Biao, an officially condemned traitor of Mao, have “starred” in “main melody” revolutionary films. No longer simple-minded political preaching, these “main melody” films highlight humanist concerns that were rare to see in socialist cinema. Stories of model communist

³⁰ Jiang Zemin. “Speech on the National Propaganda Conference,” *Wenhui Bao*, 25 January 1994, p.1.

³¹ “Carrying out the work to Distribution and Release Main Melody Films Well,” in *China Film Yearbook 1996*, 25.

members and Party cadres were also told in a more sentimental way. For example, Mao's second wife appears in *Changzheng* (The Long March, 1996), and the film even shows how the couple was forced to send their newborn baby away under a tough circumstance.

Despite their ideological achievement, state-sponsored “main melody” films could not improve the overall exacerbated situation of the film industry under a double pressure from the market and the Party. Many studios relied on loans for production. Filmmakers took great risk in choosing film subjects other than the “main melody” ones. Given these constraints, Key Central Document issued in 1993 (Document No. 3) began to break up the 40-year distribution monopoly of China Film, allowing film studios to distribute their films through local channels. As the distribution system has been decentralized, China Film still kept the sole right of distributing imported films. At the same time, this document also permitted exhibitors to raise the price of the film ticket according to local conditions. The average price of a film ticket jumped from 0.5 *yuan* to 5 or 10 *yuan*.³² As some critics point out, changes in the CCP policy toward the film industry actually reflect the dilemma faced by the Party leadership in grafting the capitalist market onto the communist system as the Party tried to maintain its political and ideological control of the nation.³³ Without the previous governmental subsidies, yet still overburdened by the dead weight of a Soviet-style institutional structure, the state-run studios were pushed to a disadvantaged position in the market economy. The Party's ideological control further curtailed filmmakers' creative imagination and artistic

³² Wang Zhiqiang, “Comments on China's Film Market in 1993,” in *China Film Yearbook 1994*, 202.

³³ Hao Xiaoming, Chen Yanru. “The Chinese Cinema in the Reform Era,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* (Spring 2000): 36-45.

impulses. As a result, the Chinese film industry experienced distressing declines in both audience attendance and flow of capital in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Attendance dropped from 21 billion in 1982 to just under 4.5 billion in 1991.

Hollywood at the Door

As noted in Chapter 2, before the First World War, foreign capital controlled almost all exhibition facilities in China, and most films exhibited were French films produced by Pathé and Gaumont. After the war, they were gradually replaced by American productions, which had dominated the Chinese film market in the years up to 1949, accounting for as much as 90 percent of the market. By the end of 1952, however, as a direct consequence of the Korean War, Western films were totally withdrawn from China. Instead, films from socialist countries such as the Soviet Union, North Korea, Romania, and Albania were introduced into China; many were acquired through film exchange programs by paying a flat fee. All were voice-dubbed in Chinese and enjoyed great popularity. Popular foreign films exhibited during the socialist era included *Lenin in 1918* (1939), *The Gadfly* (1955), *The Danube Waves* (1959), and *The Flower Girls* (1972). Both before and after the Cultural Revolution, box office revenue of the Chinese film industry had depended heavily on foreign films. Shi Fangyu, the director of the Film Bureau, acknowledged in 1984 that foreign imports had been such a vital part of the Chinese film market that China could not stop importing foreign films for profit.³⁴

In 1978, China Film bought Charles Chaplin's films from a British company, and re-started importing Western films every year since then. China Film purchased most

³⁴ Shi Fangyu, "Zhongguo dianying shichang," in *China Film Yearbook 1984*, 123.

American films through independent distributors with a flat fee of \$30,000 to \$50,000. Trade battles accompanied business. During the 1980s, the film trade battle between China and the United States was mainly around the issue of how to optimize profit for each side, while the ideological difference was dramatically ignored, although it did not totally disappear. The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), a trade organization of Hollywood major studios, refused to do business with China since Hollywood majors complained that China Film paid too little. They wanted to split revenues instead of receiving a flat fee. After a long negotiation, the first deal between China Film and two Hollywood majors, Paramount and Universal, was signed in 1986 with an import quota of 24 films over three years. China Film would pay a rental fee (depending on the number of prints) and would grant the studios the right to sell advertising time (2 minutes per film per showing).³⁵ With this agreement, Hollywood majors began to reclaim the Chinese film market. The pursuit of mutual interests was the main motivation that brought both sides to put aside their ideological differences.

China has made efforts to join the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) since 1986, and attended the Uruguay Round Negotiation held in the same year.³⁶ As the largest trade negotiation ever, and probably the largest negotiation of any kind in history, this negotiation covered virtually every outstanding trade policy issue. One of the most debated issues in this negotiation was the international trade of cultural productions, especially between France and the U.S. The French insisted that in order to

³⁵ James Greenberg. "Par, Universal to Distribute Pics in China," *Variety*, 12 February 1986, 20.

³⁶ China was one of the original members who established the GATT in 1947. After the founding of the PRC in 1949, Taiwan has taken the seat in GATT, and the PRC became an observer member in 1984 and re-applied for an official membership in 1986.

preserve cultural diversity, cultural productions such as film could not be reduced to commercial productions to be traded internationally. The French introduced the concept of cultural exception into international trades, which was shared by other countries such as Canada. Many Canadians worried that the invasion of American cultural productions would damage not only the disadvantaged domestic economic development but also the construction of national identity. The United States, the biggest producer of cultural productions and services, especially of media productions, on the contrary, demanded that a full liberalization of trade should be applied to cultural trade, too. As American ways of thinking and lifestyle have been extensively promoted by Hollywood cinema all over the world, the film trade became a focus of the debate.

The China case is more complicated than the case of France and Canada due to the long-lasting Sino-American ideological confrontation. The end of the Cold War and the advent of globalization forced China to reconsider its position on the international stage. Euro-American capitalist cultural ideas and values, represented by film productions, had been violently criticized in socialist China. Despite efforts to re-connect with the world through the GATT, China has kept searching for “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” In this sense, the concept of cultural exception actually has been applied in China several decades ago.

After the Uruguay Negotiation, China’s request to be a founding member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995 was intervened by the U.S., partly due to the lobbyist activities of the MPAA. As Janet Wasko points out, the U.S. film industry does not rely only on its own resources to protect its business, but receives considerable

support and assistance from the U.S. government. As the international branch of the MPAA, the Motion Picture Association (MPA) is often referred to as “a little State Department.” It was established to promote the dominance of American films in the world market, and to respond to the rising tide of protectionism that either bars or restricts the imports of American films. As the organization’s literature explains, it “has expanded to cover a wide range of foreign activities falling in the diplomatic, economic, and political arenas.”³⁷

The connection between the U.S. government and the U.S. film industry cannot be underestimated, especially in light of the latter’s expansion in the European market after the WWII.³⁸ MPA was unsatisfied with its restricted rights in the Chinese film market and turned to the U.S. government for support. So far no details are available for MPA’s lobbyist activities. Viewed from hindsight, a new round negotiation between China and the U.S. must have been taking place after China’s request to join the WTO was refused. In March 1994, the most influential trade journal of American show business, *Variety*, declared that China would open its film market to revenue-sharing distribution.³⁹

This declaration turned out to have come from highly credible sources. In late 1994, the MRFT announced that 10 excellent foreign films, most from Hollywood, would be released in the domestic market every year on a revenue-sharing basis. Although the

³⁷ Janet Wasko, *How Hollywood Works* (London: Sage Publications. London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi, 2003), 122.

³⁸ For more research on this issue, see Thomas H. Guback, *The International Film Industry: Western Europe and America Since 1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969).

³⁹ Don Groves. “China Deals for Yank Pix: China Opens Screens’ Doors to Revenue-Sharing Distribution,” *Variety*, 21 March 1994, 1.

MRFT defined the criteria for imports as “reflecting up-to-date global cultural achievements and representing excellence of cinematic art and techniques,” in practice, as we can see, box office potential is the determining element. Warner Brothers was the first Hollywood major to sign a distribution agreement with China Film.⁴⁰ The first imported Hollywood blockbuster, *The Fugitive*, opened in Beijing on November 12, 1994, with an average ticket price of 20 *yuan*. However, it was suddenly withdrawn after one week with various official and unofficial explanations. The official *China Business Times* reported that the film was withdrawn because some film industry officials believed it would allow foreign distributors to “invade” the Chinese film market. Other sources reported, more precisely, that the problem stemmed from a struggle between the Beijing Film Distribution Company and China Film over the profit in distributing this film. China Film booked the film directly with theaters in the Haidian District, bypassing Beijing Film Distribution Company when the latter’s revenue-sharing arrangement was refused. After losing the battle, Beijing Film Distribution Company took the matter to its parent unit, the city’s Cultural Bureau, and to the Central Department of Propaganda, claiming that “using socialist money to fatten the capitalist pig” violated Chinese political mores.⁴¹

The matter was resolved when the Film Bureau issued Document No. 348, to take effect on January 1, 1995, clarifying that China Film cannot bypass the local distributors to distribute imported films. It also allowed authorized local distributors to deal directly

⁴⁰ Spring Greg. “Warner Bros. Inks Historic Movie Deal with Chinese,” *Los Angeles Business Journal*, 19 September 1994, 9.

⁴¹ Stanley Rosen, “The Wolf at the Door: Hollywood and the Film Market in China from 1994 to 2000,” in *Southern California and the World and the World in Southern California* (Westport: Praeger, 2002), 49-77.

with both imported films and domestic films.⁴² Therefore, the economic struggle occurred within the distribution system finally ended with an official reconciliation that allocated every level of the distribution system a share of the distribution revenue. By mid-January of 1995, *The Fugitive* reopened in Beijing as well as in many provincial theatres. This interesting episode shows that when economic pursuit becomes the primary concern of the distribution system at every level, a highly centralized distribution system will break down.

In early 1995, the U.S. and the PRC signed an agreement regarding intellectual property rights, resolving another debatable issue. Besides *The Fugitive*, other Hollywood blockbusters entered into the Chinese market in 1995, including *True Lies*, *Forrest Gump*, *The Lion King*, *Speed*, *Bad Boys* and *Die Hard 3*. In 1996, China further promised up to 20 films to be imported on the revenue-sharing basis from the time when China could enter the WTO, which betrays more obviously that the reopening of the Chinese film market to Hollywood majors drove a hard bargain for China's entry into the WTO.

Because of Hollywood's global dominance, it has been commonly regarded as one of the most important symbols of global capitalism. China's reopening to Hollywood also reveals that the CCP government has become actively engaged in global capitalism, or more precisely, making profits from global capital through China Film. As a state-controlled enterprise, China Film was an effective way for the CCP government to control the whole film industry in the socialist era. It brought back revenues to support the film industry under the Party guideline, and this function has undergone changes in

⁴² "Regulation for the Reform of the Management for Making Feature Films," in *China Film Yearbook 1996*, 24.

post-socialist China. As China has been marching into a market economy, the role of China Film has shifted to help the CCP government successfully transfer the state power into business capital. When profits shrink from the declining national film industry, the Sino-American agreement on a 50-50 revenue-sharing basis makes China Film the big beneficiary of global capitalism, especially when the ticket prices varies from 15 *yuan* to 25 *yuan*, much higher than those of domestic productions. In this sense, it is not too brave to say that the decision of importing Hollywood blockbusters is a conspiracy between state monopoly of the film industry and global capitalism. At the price of having the national film industry endangered, China Film was able to secure a major share of the revenues. Additionally, lower levels of the distribution system now challenge the monopoly of China Film. The intervention of the local distributor in *The Fugitive* case is an interesting episode that has brought to the surface conflicts that happened in the pursuit of profits.

Although Hollywood majors intend to maximum profits in the Chinese film market, they have to yield to the state monopoly in China. Conflicts, both ideologically and economically, have accompanied the conspiracy between the CCP government and global capitalism. In order to curtail the influence of Hollywood films, the CCP government has adopted highly restrictive policies in carrying out the revenue-sharing agreement. For example, a strict censorship has been applied to the importation of Hollywood films. Those containing abundant violence, explicit sex, or politically controversial themes cannot be imported. Given Hollywood's domination in other countries, foreign equity investment in film production, distribution, and exhibition is

banned in China.⁴³ As a matter of fact, the revenue sharing agreement allows the foreign studios, after payment of tax, other fees and duties, only about 13 percent of box office receipts. According to the U.S. official data, the total U.S. entertainment revenue from China in 1997 was a mere \$20 million, less than in Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, or the Philippines. Even a blockbuster like *Titanic* that brought in an unofficially estimated 360 million *yuan* at the box office in China, generated below 80 million *yuan* (around \$8 million) for 20th Century Fox.⁴⁴ Ideological and cultural struggles aside, economic interests are the “main melody” in the Hollywood-China trade. An examination on the Walt Disney Company’s activities in China will be offered as a case study after this chapter.

The Reorganization of the Chinese Film Industry

Predictably, Hollywood’s entry into the Chinese market aroused serious debate on the future direction of Chinese cinema. Intellectuals, industry people and some government officials worried that Hollywood imports would dominate the domestic market and lead to further shrinking of the Chinese film industry. Dai Jinhua published an article entitled “*Lang laile*” (The Wolf at the Door) in *Beijing Youth Daily* to express her deep concern on the invasion of Hollywood. Since then, “the wolf at the door,” referring to Hollywood’s invasion into the Chinese market and the subsequent dangerous situation of the Chinese film industry, became an opinion shared by many filmmakers.

⁴³ Brent William. “China’s New Pictorial Revolution,” *Variety*, 16 February 1998, 9.

⁴⁴ At the end of July 1998, the total box office of *Titanic* is \$1,835,400,000, while the U.S. gross is \$600,788,188, the overseas box office is \$1,234,600,000. The box office in China is said around \$45,000,000.

Despite the uneasiness about “the wolf,” an expected consequence of the importation was the revival of Chinese audiences’ interests in filmgoing. Enthusiastic Chinese audiences swarmed into the once desolate theaters to experience the spectacular images created by Hollywood dream factories. Correspondingly, Hollywood films became the main generators of box office revenue in the Chinese market. Total box office receipts in the first half of 1995 jumped 50 percent over the same period a year earlier, and summer attendance at theaters in Beijing increased by 70 percent.

A collateral effect, surprisingly to some film critics’ pessimistic prediction was audiences’ renewed interest in domestic film productions. In the 1990s, following the Hollywood style, many Chinese filmmakers began to favor big budget films, though on a Chinese scale. Several films produced in this manner, such as *Yangguan canlan de rizi* (In the Heat of the Sun, 1994) and *Hong yingtao* (Red Cherries, 1995) turned out to be very popular and grossed sizable profits. Based on Wang Shuo’s novella, *In the Heat of the Sun* recasts the years of the Cultural Revolution as “days full of bright sunshine.” In this film, Ma Xiaojun, a coming-of-age young boy, wanders around with his fellows when their parents are busy with the Cultural Revolution. A girl, Mi Lan, with her plump female body, becomes the object of sexual desire for those immature boys. Yomi Braester made an excellent analysis on the dialectic between cinematic narration and historical memory. He points out that this film is a prominent example of the now-widespread literary resistance to what Li Tuo derogatorily calls ‘the Mao genre’ and Geremie Barme dubs “Maospeak.”⁴⁵ The resistant stance displayed in this film is

⁴⁵Yomi Braester. “Memory at a Standstill: ‘Street-smart History’ in Jiang Wen’s *In the Heat of the Sun*,” *Screen* (Winter 2001): 350-362, 351.

fulfilled by ironic parodies of socialist culture. As Dai Jinhua argues, such references rely on the audience's familiarity with films from the "Socialist Camp," especially those produced by the Soviet Union.⁴⁶ When the Cultural Revolution is rewritten as a sexual initiation, it also indicates an initiation of the global consciousness, or more explicitly, the awareness of a pervasive capitalist culture, and furthermore, the participating desire to be a member of the globalization. Narrated in a nostalgic tone, it poses a farewell to revolution and a welcome of globalization. On the other hand, the Cultural Revolution as a narrative background labels this film with a Chinese trademark so that its "Chineseness" becomes a weapon to fight against globalization. In addition, marketing strategies learned from Hollywood also helped Chinese film to win back audiences.

In "Hollywood and China as Adversaries and Allies," Wan Jihong and Richard Kraus analyze the changing political economy of the film industry in China after 1993. As they observe, from China's perspective, competition with Hollywood is also a process of learning from and cooperating with Hollywood. Hollywood is a rival because it competes with the domestic film industry, but it is also possible for the Chinese film industry to co-operate with Hollywood in terms of improving technology, pushing the government to relax political control, and fighting against piracy and other unfair business practices. The Party also can learn from Hollywood on certain issues such as how to commercialize propaganda with film entertainment.⁴⁷ A statement made by President Jiang Zemin supports this argument. Jiang admitted at the National People's

⁴⁶ Dai Jinhua, *Yinxing shuxie* (Invisible Writing, Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Press, 1999), 237.

⁴⁷ Wan Jihong and Richard Kraus. "Hollywood and China as Adversaries and Allies," *Pacific Affairs* (Fall 2002): 419-434.

Congress that he was moved by *Titanic*, and said: “Let us not assume that we can’t learn from capitalism. *Titanic* has a budget of \$200 million. This is venture capitalism. . . . I invite my comrades of the Politburo to see the movie—not to propagate capitalism but to better understand our opposition, to better enable us to succeed.”⁴⁸

The huge revenues brought in by Hollywood blockbusters have undoubtedly made the CCP government reconsider the potential of the Chinese film industry. As some critics observe, there is a strong desire to construct large Chinese media conglomerates that can resist the likely incursion of transnational media corporations.⁴⁹ As a matter of fact, a strong horizontal integration has occurred in the Chinese TV industry even before the coming of Hollywood. In October 1993, Chinese Central Television Station (CCTV) took over the News Studio, a state-run studio specializing in producing newsreels. In April, 1995, the Science Studio, another state-run studio specializing in producing documentaries on new developments in science and technology, merged with CCTV, too. The “wolf at the door” has quickened the process of integration. In 1996, CCTV opened its cinema channel to facilitate co-operation with the film TV industries. Following the integration model of CCTV, Shanghai Animation Studio merged with Shanghai Television Station, and many provincial-level studios began to merge with local television stations.

Hollywood invasion, previously regarded as “the wolf at the door,” also encourages the CCP government to strengthen the bonds among the three sectors of the

⁴⁸ Quoted from Sheldon Lu, *China, Transnational Visuality, Global Postmodernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 20.

⁴⁹ Hu Zhengrong. “The Post-WTO restructuring of the Chinese Media Industry and the Consequences of Capitalisation,” *Javnost* (December 2003): 19-36.

film industry: production, distribution, and exhibition. China declared that it would reorganize the Chinese film industry in order to adapt to the new environment after China's entry into WTO. A basic strategy is to deepen the film industry reform by imitating Hollywood system. A number of large integrated film groups have been established in different regions through purchases or direct administrative decrees. Based on the Shanghai Film Studio, Shanghai Film and Television Group was set up in 1995. With its own distribution company and more than 20 theaters, Shanghai Film and Television Group has succeeded in building a vertical system from production to distribution and exhibition.

The biggest film group, China Film Group Corporation, was established in December, 1998. Having re-organized China Film, it also includes the Beijing Film Studio, Children's Film Studio, China Film Co-production Corporation, China Film Equipment Corporation, the Cinema Channel of the CCTV, Beijing Film Developing Factory, Merchandising & Rights Licensing Company, Hualong Film Digital Production Company, and others. As a state-run film enterprise, China Film Group is fully engaged in the film industry, from production to distribution, from importation to exportation, from rights licensing to digital technology.⁵⁰ In March 2001, China declared that it would set up three more film groups based on Zhujiang Film Studio, Xi'an Film Studio, and E'mei Film Studio. These regional film groups, however, have no way to compete with China Film Group. Having annexed all the important film resources, China Film Group has actually become a new monopoly film enterprise in China.

⁵⁰ At the end of 2003, China Film Group signed an agreement with Hong Kong Golden Harvest Film Group to use the latter's overseas distribution system to enter the international film market.

One important feature of the new wave of mergers in the Chinese film industry (and other industries) is the unchanged nature of state monopoly. Chinese conglomerations such as China Film Group are totally different from those in Western Europe and North America because they are financially supported by the government. These conglomerations are established through a bureaucratic-led merging process. In other words, China has to take the way of state capitalism, which is by no means based on free market competition. The restructuring of the Chinese film industry through conglomeration reflects the Chinese government's ambition to build a "national team" to compete with Hollywood in the process of globalization. As Zhu Ying points out, the survival of Chinese cinema in the face of transnational Hollywood will depend on the state's ability to provide sensible protective measures and the industry's ability to provide films that could capture Chinese audiences.⁵¹

Main Melody Films in the 1990s

In March 1996, another National Filmmakers' Conference was held in Changsha. At this conference, the pedagogical function and social impact of cinema were once again addressed. A new production plan was issued for the next five years, requiring 10 successful main melody films per year. In order to protect the national film industry, the Changsha Conference also mandated a quota that two thirds of screening time should be reserved for domestic productions. Before 1996, China Film assumed the sole responsibility in importing and distributing foreign films in China. In order to encourage studios to produce more successful main melody films, the MRFT made a new policy for

⁵¹ Zhu Ying. "Chinese Cinema's Economic Reform from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s," *Journal of Communication* (December 2002): 905-21, 920.

film distribution. According to this new policy, if a studio could produce a successful main melody film, it would be rewarded the right to distribute an imported blockbuster. In 1996, Changchun Studio, Beijing Studio, and Shanghai Studio were rewarded with distributing *Waterworld*, *Jumanji* and *Toy Story I* respectively.

Main melody films produced in the second half of the 1990s, under the influence of Hollywood, are characterized by high technology and refined narrative strategy. Zhang Jianya, a film director with great interests in film technology and special effects, produced a Chinese-style disaster film, *Emergency Landing* (Jinji pojiang, 1999). It was based on a true flight incident that happened at the Shanghai International Airport in the previous year. At the beginning of the film, many hints are offered about an approaching disaster. Then the film suddenly turns to promote the Party leadership and the cooperation among the crew. Regarding this narrative gap, the scriptwriter Yin Hong points out that it is actually a film awkwardly hesitating between “main melody” film and entertainment film.⁵²

To learn from Hollywood does not mean that the ideological conflict between a post-socialist China and a capitalist America no longer matters. Some Hollywood films are no less propagandistic than Chinese official films. The point, rather, lies in how to represent and package the propagandistic message. For example, after *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997) and *Kundun* (1997) were distributed in the U.S., the Chinese government felt that it was imperative to refute the defaming description of the Communist Party and the history of Tibet. *The Red River Valley* (Honghegu, 1996), starring a famous Chinese actress and shot in the beautiful Tibet, successfully combines ideological intention with

⁵² Yin Hong and Ling Yan, 172.

visual spectacles and refined narrative style. Set at the turn of the twentieth century, it tells the story of a young Chinese girl who escapes from a religious sacrifice, and is rescued by an honorable Tibetan herdsman. The two fall in love, but problems arise when she runs into trouble with a glamorous and proud Tibetan princess. Meanwhile, a British expedition is planning to invade the sacred mountain. Facing the country's common enemy, the three set aside their disputes and jealousy, joining the militia force to protect their homeland. Romance, religious rituals, frontier landscape, and nationalist sentiment are woven together to produce a magnificent picture of Tibet as an undeniable part of China. *Red River Valley* is one of the most popular "main melody" films with considerable commercial success in the late 1990s.

Films that I will label as "main melody" films and discuss in the following chapters are all chosen from the Huabiao Awards (Palace Columns Awards), a government award derived from the Excellent Film Awards by the Ministry of Culture in 1957. It has been renamed as the Huabiao Awards since 1994. Every year, in September, the Chinese government awards ten feature films (along with other categories) produced in the previous year. Although some may not have direct investment from the government, once they match the Party hegemony, they will be rewarded and received many benefits in distribution. For example, Zhang Yimou's blockbuster, *Yingxiong* (*Hero*, 2002), was produced with private investment. Photographed by the award-winning cinematographer Christopher Doyle, *Hero* is greatly influenced by Zhang's personal style. Most viewers were quite satisfied with the film, giving high praise to the eye-catching colors and impressive scenes. What interests me, however, is its very official

explanation of history in a successful commercial packaging. The Emperor Qin in Chinese history was a notorious figure for his cruelty. His aggressive and despotic manners has been written in numerous historical accounts. However, worship for emperors has a long tradition in China and has revived in recent years. In *Hero*, what appears on the screen is not a brutal despot but a benevolent emperor who has sacrificed his own fame for the sake of common people's interest. This kind of rewriting of history serves directly to the ideological transition in China today. After the 1989 Tian'anmen Incident, the stagnant economic reforms and the increasing number of unemployed workers have further threatened the social order and the CCP's governance. The common people's discontent with the CCP has been growing to the edge of explosion. Under this circumstance, the appearance of many historical TV series with the theme of praising the celestial emperors was not accidental. In these TV series, the emperor undertakes the responsibility of governing a great nation and solving all kinds of troubles, and the most influential one is *Yongzhen Wangchao* (Emperor Yongzhen). A theme appeared in works of literature is named "sharing hardship" after a same-titled novella. As Dai Jinhua points out, actually it is a call for the people to share hardship with the Party. In this perspective, *Hero* is a cinematic version of the same story, calling for an understanding from the common people. In this film, Broken Sword persuades Nameless to give up his assassination because only the Emperor Qin can stop the war and unify the nation. Broken Sword has got this ultimate truth from his calligraphy practice—the theory of a united nation with no killing. He further insists that compared with the common people's suffering, Nameless' personal feud couldn't be a real suffering. This kind of logic

resonates with the official statement on the Tian'anmen Incident, the unemployment phenomenon, and other social problems. The suppression of the democratic protest is for the sake of social stability, and the laid off workers will contribute to a healthy economic development. In *Hero*, the emperor complains that no one understands him except Broken Sword. His personal political ambition is reinvented as an effort to alleviate the common people's suffering. He successfully vindicates himself with the goal of unifying others and giving the people a peaceful life, which reminds me of Zha Jianying's perceptive observation of the post-1989 China: "I rule, you prosper, and let's forget all else." As she explains, as far as the Party is still running the country, and the country is still enjoying a boom, the boom will quickly erode memories of the past tragedies.⁵³ By presenting a benevolent Emperor Qin, what is implicitly delivered in *Hero* is a correct Party leadership that devotes to national prosperity. In order to achieve this ultimate goal, both the suppression of the Tian'anmen Incident and the increased laid-off number are prices that people have to pay, just like Nameless has to be killed at the end of *Hero*.

Hero's premiere at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing undoubtedly made clear that the government would support its national distribution. Zhang's transition from an anti-official filmmaker (several of his films made in the late 1980s were banned in China) to an official organ is not an exclusive example. As a matter of fact, most "(semi-) main melody" films are produced by the Fifth Generation filmmakers, and even the Sixth Generation. Their active engagement in "main melody" filmmaking can be explained from two aspects. Financially, when state-funds are allocated to "main melody" film

⁵³ Zha Jianying, *China Pop: How Soap Operas, Tabloids, and Bestsellers Are Transforming a Culture* (New York: New Press, 1995), 13.

projects, filmmakers are prone to accept them since it is better than having nothing to produce without money. For filmmakers with international reputation such as Zhang Yimou, although getting financial support from foreign capital and domestic private capital is an easy task, box office receipt from the domestic market is attractive, too. Politically, after the Tian'anmen Incident, in order to pass through an ideological transition, the Party resorts to dominant state ideology such as nationalism and neo-Confucianism that have been commonly accepted by Chinese people, and filmmakers are not excluded. Most of them are willing to direct "main melody" film projects. The cooperation between most filmmakers and the Party has led to a productive era of "main melody" films. After a case study on Walt Disney in China, the following chapters will concentrate on ideological changes that have been reflected in major "main melody" films.

Case Study: Walt Disney in China

As one of the best-known brands in the world, and perhaps “the most quintessential” one in terms of its synergistic global expansion, the Walt Disney Company not only has had a profound effect on the American media industry and popular culture, but has also achieved great success across the world, especially since the end of the Cold War and the advent of globalization. This case study will address Disney’s foray in the Chinese market, as well as the responses from the CCP government and the Chinese film industry. The interaction between Disney and China provides a telling example of what Roland Robertson has termed as “glocalization”: the local operation of global capitalism. After a brief historical review of the Walt Disney Company, I will examine the company’s various activities in the Chinese market. Both the CCP government and Disney have made economic profits their primary concern; nevertheless, ideological conflicts occurring between the two sides also betrayed how politics play behind the moneymaking business. Special attention will be given to the *Kundun* incident in 1996. Under the invasion of Disney productions, China has attempted to revive its animation industry. A Chinese animation *Baoliandeng* (The Magic Lotus lantern, 2002) was produced after the Disney model, therefore cultural imperialism is an important issue that will be discussed in this study. The grand opening of Hong Kong Disneyland in 2005

opened a new page of Disney's victory in the Asian market, but it also brought to the forefront different forms of local resistance to global capitalism.

The Growth of the Magic Kingdom

When Hollywood films dominated the Chinese market in the 1920s and 1930s, the Disney Company was still embryonic. In 1923, Walt Disney (1901-1966), the founder of today's most powerful magic kingdom, set up a small animation studio called the Disney Brothers' Studio in California with his elder brother Roy Disney. Walt Disney Productions replaced the original partnership in 1929.¹

According to historians of the company, Walt Disney first developed the image of Mickey Mouse during a train trip in 1928 and the cross-promotion of Disney's cartoon characters, the so-called "synergy", happened by chance in 1929. After the Company lost money in most of its early years, a stationery company executive offered Walt Disney \$300 for the right to imprint Mickey Mouse on school writing tablets. Walt Disney accepted this proposal. Donald Duck made his first appearance in 1934. They quickly became well-known cartoon characters. Later, licensed merchandise contributed great profits to the company.² In 1937, Disney produced *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the first American feature-length cartoon, with a huge budget of \$1.5 million. With a profit of \$8 million within one year, it unleashed a golden age in Disney's history of

¹ Many works have been done on Walt Disney and his company, including *Walt Disney: An American Original* by Bob Thomas (New York: Hyperion, 1976, revised 1994), *Disney's World: A Biography* by Leonard Mosley (Chelsea: Scarborough House, 1985, revised 2002), *The Magic Kingdom: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life* by Steven Watts (University of Missouri Press, 2002), *Walt Disney: The Triumph of American Imagination* by Neal Gabler (New York: Random House, 2006) and etc.

² For more details on the merchandising of Disney characters, see Gary Cross, *Kid's Stuff: Toys and the Changing World of American Childhood* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

animation.³ In the following years, Disney produced more successful animations including *Pinocchio* (1940), *Bambi* (1942), *Alice in Wonderland* (1951), *Peter Pan* (1953), and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959).

After Walt Disney died in 1966, the company went through a series of crises in the 1970s and 80s, mainly due to the impact of the TV industry and the dysfunctional internal management. In 1984, a boardroom coup led by Roy E. Disney (Walt's nephew) ousted Walt's son-in-law, Ron Miller. After a takeover battle, Michael Eisner (former president of Paramount) and Frank Wells (former vice chairman of Warner Brothers) were voted to be new heads of the Walt Disney Company—thus beginning the so-called Team Disney era.⁴ The new Disney leadership adopted a series of strategies to adjust its development. Operating income at Disney jumped from less than \$300 million in 1984 to nearly \$800 million in 1987.⁵ Besides a renaissance of their animation productions with *Little Mermaid* (1989) and others, Team Disney also produced live-action films such as *Dead Poets Society* (1989) and *Pretty Woman* (1990). Euro Disney was scheduled to open in April 1992. With staggering real estate assets and some of the world's most marketable cartoon characters, the Walt Disney Company of the 1990s became an entertainment giant. Meanwhile, a constant global quest also increased Disney's international revenues, which grew to 20 percent of its total revenue in 1999.

³ According to www.BoxOfficemojo.com, the total gross box office is \$184,925,486, and domestic total gross is \$66,596,803.

⁴ For details of the takeover, see Ron Grover, *The Disney Touch: How a Daring Management Team Revived an Entertainment Empire* (Homewood: Business One Irwin, 1991). Also see James B. Stewart, *Disney War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005). Michael Eisner, chairman of the Walt Disney Company (1984-2006), also wrote his own book called *Work in Progress: Risking Failure, Surviving Success* (New York: Random House, 1998).

⁵ James B. Stewart, *Disney War*, 96.

Academic studies on the Walt Disney Company and its productions are staggering in a wide range of disciplines, including art, mass media, and economics, and are conducted in different perspectives, such as feminism, psychoanalysis, and reception analysis.⁶ Many studies claim that Walt Disney was a creative genius, yet some recent studies debunk the “great man” approach by revealing him as a highly conservative, influential figure of American mainstream values.⁷ In addition to the controversial evaluation of Walt Disney, the cartoon images produced by the Walt Disney Company have also aroused critics’ special attention over years. In *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic* (1977), based on Donald Duck comics circulated throughout Latin America, Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart describe how Disney’s propaganda campaign portrayed the third world as a place to be exploited. Disney portrays revolutionaries as traitors and the reactionaries and oligarchs as heroes. For example, vultures are used to represent Hegel and Marx, and dogs dressed up like Che Guevara and Castro.

With an effort “to shatter commonsense assumptions regarding Disney’s claim to both promoting fun and games and protecting childhood innocence,” Henry Giroux confronts a hegemonic mass media corporation like Disney in *The Mouse that Roared*. As he points out poignantly,

It is important not to address Disney’s animated films by simply condemning Disney as an ideological reactionary corporation promoting a conservative

⁶ For a review of the different approaches, see Janet Wasko, *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy* (Cambridge: Polity; Malden: Blackwell, 2001).

⁷ Marc Eliot, *Walt Disney: Hollywood’s Dark Prince* (New York: Birch Lane Press, 1993). Despite that fact that this book has been intensively criticized for its lack of solid proof, mainly relying on hearsay and urban legends, certain items discussed at length in the book do seem to possibly be true, such as Disney’s suggested anti-Semitism, anti-Communism, and his hostile attitude towards the labor union.

worldview under the guise of entertainment. It is equally important not to celebrate Disney as the animated version of Mr. Rogers, doing nothing more than providing joy and happiness to children all over the world.⁸

As a matter of fact, Disney promotes both simultaneously. Cloaked by joy and happiness, what have been sold all over the world are conservative American mainstream values. For example, female characters such as those in *The Little Mermaid* and *The Lion King* are always subordinate to males, no matter if the men are fathers or husbands. Females define their power and desire almost exclusively in terms of dominant male narratives. Messages of racism, sexism, and anti-democracy have permeated all Disney productions. Henry Giroux picks “Arabian Nights,” the opening song of *Aladdin* (1992) to show how a racist message is conveyed in typical Orientalist stereotypes:

Oh I come from a land, from a faraway place,
Where the caravan camels roam.
Where they cut off your ear, if they don't like your face.
It is barbaric, but hey, it's home.

After a campaign protesting the anti-Arab themes, Disney has changed “Where they cut off your ear, if they don't like your face” into “Where it's flat and immense, and the heat is intense.” But they still keep the word “barbaric” in the last sentence.⁹ As Janet Wasko argues, many of the Disney images represent the dominant gender value, and many have obvious racial elements.¹⁰ For example, the evil character in Disney production always has dark skin, while the good character has typical fair skin, no matter they are human beings or cartoon images.

⁸ Henry A. Giroux, 1999, 90-91.

⁹ Henry Giroux, 1999, 32.

¹⁰ Janet Wasko, 2001.

Disney Re-enters China

During the 1930s and 1940s, Disney productions such as *Snow White* and *Pinocchio* were released in Shanghai and left vivid impressions on many Chinese filmgoers. The growth of Communism in China and other countries disturbed the Americans. Walt Disney worked with the FBI in its investigations of Communists in Hollywood. In 1947, he was one of the cooperative witnesses who testified before the House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC, 1938-1975) about Communist influence in Hollywood. He assured the HUAC that some Communists inspired the 1941 strike at his studio.¹¹ After the establishment of the PRC, Hollywood films disappeared in the Chinese film market. When Walt Disney spent \$17 million to build Disneyland in Los Angeles, which opened in 1955, *Snow White* and other Disney cartoon characters were gradually becoming dim images in Chinese people's memories. Occasionally, these cartoon images could be found in some dated print materials.

The Chinese film market was not officially open to Hollywood majors until late 1994. However, despite its anti-Communist tradition, the Walt Disney Company was a pioneer in exploring the Chinese market. It re-entered the Chinese market right after the enactment of the "open and reform" policy. In the mid-1980s, CCTV released *Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck*, which was met with great popularity. Later, Disney temporarily retreated from the Chinese market due to the copyright controversies. As we know, the lack of protection on intellectual property rights (IPRs) has become an issue

¹¹ The complete transcript of his testimony can be read at www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cold.war/episodes/06/documents/huac/disney.html. For more details, see Marc Eliot, *Walt Disney: Hollywood's Dark Prince* (Carol Publishing Corporation, 1993).

that is most likely to impinge on the profits of foreign companies in the Chinese market. The Walt Disney Company, on the other hand, is the most infamous company for its efforts on IPRs. For example, Disney has threatened legal action against three South Florida daycare centers for using Disney cartoon characters on their exterior walls. Therefore, it was not surprising that the first major copyright case in China involving a foreign party was the Walt Disney Productions vs. Beijing Publisher. In 1987, Disney made an agreement with a Hong Kong-registered Maxwell Company, granting a non-exclusive license to the later to publish and distribute Chinese versions of the works of Disney. In 1991, Maxwell “granted” a license to Beijing Children Reading Material Publisher to publish and distribute Walt Disney’s book in Chinese, which Disney did not permit. Disney books with Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, and Snow White has been published and widely circulated in the Chinese market without a certificate explaining the ownership of Disney’s Copyright. Because Beijing Children Reading Material Publisher is only a sub-division under the Beijing Publisher instead of an independent legal person, and the Maxwell Company became bankrupt in 1993, Disney sued Beijing Publisher for copyright infringement in the Beijing Mediate Court. The Court made a negotiation between the two sides, and the Beijing Publisher was asked to reimburse a small amount of money to Disney and stop publishing Disney books.¹²

In 1995, after the signing of a Sino-American copyright agreement, Disney, with other Hollywood majors, re-entered the Chinese film market again. *The Lion King* became one of the biggest grossing films in 1995. Excited by this success, Disney began

¹² For case details, see Zheng Chengsi, *Intellectual Property Enforcement in China, Leading cases and commentary* (Hong Kong: Sweet & Maxwell Asia, 1997), 48-51.

discussing a wide range of new business deals with the Chinese government, including issues such as co-production and the possibility of opening a Disney theme park in Hong Kong. Michael Ovitz, a powerful agent in Hollywood, then the group president of Disney after Frank Wells' accidental death, spearheaded Disney's foray into China and visited China many times.¹³ With his high-level contacts in the Chinese leadership, he even had a meeting with President Jiang Zemin in April 1996. No details are available about the meeting, but a Disney-invested radio program "It's a Small World" was launched in China.

The *Kundun* Incident: Ideological Conflicts vs. Money Business

How will a post-socialist China get along with an American corporation like Disney in the era of globalization? Will the fundamental source of conflict in the new world, as claimed by Samuel Huntington, not be primarily ideological or primarily economic? Will the end of the Cold War take away ideological conflicts, leaving nation-states to simply handle various conflicts between civilizations? Disney soon discovered that it had to deal with a Chinese situation that was much more complicated than the clash of civilizations.

In 1997, Touchstone Pictures, a Disney-controlled film studio, produced *Kundun*, a film about Tibet and the 14th Dalai Lama.¹⁴ It follows the reincarnation of the two-

¹³ As the head of CAA (Creative Artists Agency), Michael Ovitz has been expanding his activities more like an investment banker and a dealmaker rather than a traditional agent. His most visible role has been as an adviser to Japan's Matsushita Electric Corporation in its acquisition of Universal, and to Sony Corporation in its acquisition of the Columbia and Tri-Star studios.

¹⁴ Touchstone Pictures (a.k.a Touchstone films in its early years) was established by Disney in 1984. By producing many PG-rated or even R-rated feature films, Touchstone became a top source of income for Disney during the 1980s and 1990s.

year-old Dalai Lama into his adulthood. After the CCP took power in Tibet, the Dalai Lama travels to Beijing to attend a meeting with Chairman Mao. He expresses that he has been greatly impressed by the CCP's accomplishment (a previous shot shows that the young Dalai Lama is interested in socialism), and Mao replies:

Your attitude is good, you know. I understand you well. But you need to learn this: religion is poison. . . . It retards the minds of the people and society. It is the opium of the people. Tibet has been poisoned by religion, and your people are poisoned and inferior.

What follows in *Kundun* is the CCP's brutality in trying to crush Tibet's religious and political traditions. After the Dalai Lama has failed to defend his land and religious freedom by practicing the tenets of nonviolence, he escapes to India in 1959 and has been living in exile ever since. The title of the film, *Kundun*, is a Tibetan word that refers to the Dalai Lama by his family members, which means "the presence."

The mysterious land of the Tibetan Plateau, the "roof of the world," has offered all kinds of escapist tales for Western imagination. Again, cinema has played a crucial role in spreading the exotic image of Tibet in the West. The 1937 film adaptation of James Hilton's novel *Lost Horizon* was the first apotheosis of Tibet as a fantastic realm. The explosive development of the mass media industry in recent years not only has constructed Tibet a part of the Western popular culture, but has also strengthened the Orientalist discourse of Tibet in a global scale.¹⁵ As Orville Schell states in *Virtual Tibet*, a study of the Western representation of Tibet, Tibetan fantasies rooted themselves in almost every form of Western popular entertainment, and Tibet developed a divided

¹⁵ An enormous amount of books and documentary films on Tibet have been produced over years. In terms of feature films, before *Seven Years in Tibet* and *Kundun*, other important ones included *The Golden Child* (1986) and *Little Buddha* (1993). Recent productions included *Tibet, Cry of the Snow Lion* (2002) and *Dreaming Lhasa* (2005).

persona in the public mind of the West: “on the one hand, it retained all its associations of being a paradisiacal Shangri-La; on the other, after China’s occupation in the 1950s, it also came to be viewed as a victimized land and culture laid waste by an invading colonializing power.”¹⁶ Many non-governmental organizations were established to advocate the independency of Tibet. A few Hollywood celebrities, including Richard Gere, Harrison Ford, and Steven Seagal, have been ardent supporters of the Dalai Lama. In 1997, two films on Tibet and the Dalai Lama started production. Based on Heinrich Harrer’s 1953 classic tale, Jean-Jacques Annaud directed *Seven Years in Tibet*, which starred Brad Pitt as the Austrian climber Harrer who befriended with the young Dalai Lama during the political chaos of late 1930s and 1940s. Written by Melissa Mathison, Harrison Ford’s wife, *Kundun* was directed by the prestigious Martin Scorsese.¹⁷ Being labeled by the CCP government as a “splittist” who seeks to remove Tibet from China’s control, the Dalai Lama enjoys great popularity in Western countries. The production of these two Hollywood films turned the fad for Tibetan culture and the Dalai Lama into a torrent.

The general public interest in Tibet, politically as well as culturally, also means a potential box office success. This is the main economic reason that leads Hollywood studios to invest in films on Tibet. Although these two films claimed to provide a “real Tibet,” an interesting fact is that both were not shot in Tibet because of the CCP government’s sensitivity toward the subject. Annaud built his version of Lhasa in

¹⁶ Orville Schell, *Virtual Tibet, Searching for Shangri-La from the Himalayas to Hollywood* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000), 8.

¹⁷ After Michael Ovitz took position in Disney, he brought to Disney a list of creative talent, and many of them are his former clients. Martin Scorsese is one of them.

Argentina, and Scorsese chose the Atlas Mountains in Morocco. What has been offered in these two films is nothing but a replica of Tibet. Not to mention that English instead of Tibetan has been used throughout both films, even Chairman Mao speaks English, too. Released earlier than *Kundun*, *Seven Years in Tibet* encountered an unexpected failure in the domestic market, only bringing back half of its \$70 million budget. However, its international release collected a huge \$93.5 million, partly thanks to Brad Pitt's star power. Overall, *Seven Years in Tibet* is a profitable production, and the great percentage of its international revenue speaks to the importance of the international film market to Hollywood.¹⁸ This film was banned from being shown in China and both the director and its starring actors Brad Pitt and David Thewlis were banned from ever entering mainland China.

Different from the dramatic box office performance of *Seven Years in Tibet*, *Kundun* was involved in a much more complicated political situation. Due to the obvious anti-Communist messages in this film, the Chinese government was unhappy with Disney, threatening to rein in Disney's business dealings in China. In December 1996, despite the risk of economic blockade from the Chinese government, Disney issued a terse statement that its Buena Vista Inc. would distribute *Kundun* in North America.¹⁹ This decision was made out of two considerations: First, Disney could not bury the film with its \$28 million production cost, especially when it might bring in a big box office revenue; Second, when many Hollywood majors were looking forward to seeing Disney being struck down by

¹⁸ According to www.Boxoffice Mojo.com, *Seven Years in Tibet* has a worldwide revenue of \$131,457,682, including a domestic revenue of \$37,957,682 (28.9%) and a foreign revenue of \$93,500,000 (71.1%).

¹⁹ According to Orville Schell, Universal Studios had earlier refused to make a distribution deal with Scorsese out of fear that China might react hostilely. See Orville Schell, 297-298

China, Disney had to take a stand that would earn its leadership plaudits in Hollywood for “standing up for freedom of expression.”²⁰

Disney’s hasty decision turned out to be a great error. It underestimated the CCP’s vigorous protest against the Hollywood-inspired anti-Communist conspiracy, especially when a market of 1.3 billion Chinese people is the CCP’s best card in playing with all transnational corporations. Compared with other Hollywood studios, Disney was much more vulnerable to Chinese pressure because of its economic pursuit in the Chinese market, including feature films, TV programs, merchandise and toys, and the Disney theme park project. The CCP government responded with anti-Disney propaganda, suspending all Disney’s business in China, including the cancellation of a high-level Chinese delegation to Disney’s California headquarters. Martin Scorsese was also added to the list of people banned from entering Tibet. As a matter of fact, what the CCP adopted in the *Kundun* Incident was a strategy that has been commonly known in Chinese as “Shaji gei houkan (Kill the chicken to scare the monkey).” The real intention of the CCP government was to show the West that China would not allow any form of “interference in China’s internal affairs.” Unfortunately, Disney was chosen to be the poor chicken this time. Compared with Sony Pictures, the parent company of the TriStar Studios who produced *Seven Years in Tibet*, Disney undoubtedly is a better symbol of the West.

It is obvious that Disney will not give up its economic interests in China, the country with the world’s fastest-growing economy, especially in terms of the media industry—it had to work out a solution to repair its relationship with China. In fact,

²⁰ James B. Stewart, *Disney War*, 271.

Eisner was furious with the *Kundun* Incident, together with other conflicts between him and Ovitz over the previous year. Therefore, *Kundun* became an opportunity for Eisner to fire Ovitz. Then Disney quietly and discreetly hired Henry A. Kissinger, former Secretary of the State, to negotiate with China, *The New York Times* reported in October 1997.²¹ Eisner assured the Chinese government that Disney wouldn't promote *Kundun* aggressively, and that it would "die a quiet death."²² As the newspaper observed, it was not coincidental that Kissinger was brought aboard— by chairman Michael Eisner directly—as the company was preparing the release of *Kundun*.

It seemed that Kissinger had successfully assuaged Chinese anger over *Kundun* because Disney's next animation production *Mulan* was permitted to be released in China in 1999. The film was based upon an ancient Chinese folktale, in which a girl named Mulan disguises herself as a man and joins the army in place of her old father to fight off invading northern tribes. The girl Mulan has long been held up by the Chinese as the personification of duty to family and country. The production of *Mulan* was not out of a purely political concern, that is, holding out the olive branch to the CCP government. Actually, it was in production during the *Kundun* Incident. What has to be taken into account is the increasing percentage that international box office revenue occupies in the worldwide box office revenue. Compared with the European market and the African market, it is obvious that the Asian market has the greatest box office potential, especially after the re-opening of the Chinese market. Since the 1990s, more and more Asian images have appeared in Hollywood films in order to minimize the "cultural discount" and

²¹ Bernard Weinraub, "At the Movies, Disney Hires Kissinger", *New York Times*, 10 October 1997.

²² As a result, with a \$28 million budget, *Kundun* grossed less than \$6 million in the United States.

achieve better box office from Asian countries. Both Jackie Chang and Jet Li have become Hollywood's shining stars. The production of *Mulan* adopted the same "global localization" logic. On the one hand, the theme of *Mulan* caters into the Orientalist imagination of the East, especially of an ancient China, among the Western audiences. On the other hand, as a well-known Chinese legendary character, Mulan would undoubtedly attract many Asian audiences.

Mulan has been criticized by many for distorting the original spirit of the Mulan legend, being tailored to the Disney style.²³ Different from Snow White or the Sleeping Beauty, Mulan may be an independent, strong-willed young girl, but the ultimate payoff for her bravery still comes in the form of catching the handsome son of a general. The original *Mulan Ode* ends with Mulan putting on her dress again:

"I open the door to my east chamber,
I sit on my couch in the west room,
I take off my wartime gown
And put on my old-time clothes."
Facing the window she fixes her cloudlike hair,
Hanging up a mirror she dabs on yellow flower powder
She goes out the door and sees her comrades.
Her comrades are all amazed and perplexed.
Traveling together for twelve years
They didn't know Mulan was a girl.
"The he-hare's feet go hop and skip,
The she-hare's eyes are muddled and fuddled.
Two hares running side by side close to the ground,
How can they tell if I am he or she?"²⁴

²³ Before the Disney adaptation, an early literary debate on Mulan was brought in by Maxine Hong Kingston's bestseller *The Woman Warrior, Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1976). For the debate between her and Frank Chin, see David Leiwei Li, *Imagining the Nation: Asian American Literature and Cultural Consent* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

²⁴ Translation comes from *The Flowering Plum and the Palace Lady: Interpretations of Chinese Poetry* by Han H. Frankel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

In the film, after Mulan safely returns home, Grandmother is slightly unsatisfied, complaining to Mulan's mother: "She brings home a sword. If you ask me, she should have brought home a man." Then the general's son comes to look for Mulan, and the two women dumbly point to the garden. Grandmother becomes excited now: "Whoo! Sign me up for the next war!" The poetic ending of the *Mulan Ode* is replaced with a wholehearted welcoming of the general's son, which indicates a happy marriage in the near future. The theme of loyalty to one's family and country is interpreted as an opportunity to find one's Mr. Right. In addition, the squirrel-like red dragon Mushu, a typical supporting role in Disney animations, makes the Disney style more visible throughout the animation although it is unsuited to any mythic fable in China.

Despite the criticism, the \$90 million budgeted *Mulan* achieved a satisfactory box office—\$120.6 million domestically and \$183.7 million internationally. "Our best hope is not to worry about the competition and to focus instead on retaining our own commitment to excellence and innovation. *Mulan*, our summer movie for 1998, achieved that goal, drawing not just enthusiastic notices but the largest audience of any animated film since *The Lion King*," remarked Eisner later.²⁵ The success of *Mulan*, as expected, led to the production of the sequel *Mulan II* in 2004.

From *Kundun* to *Mulan*, what can be observed obviously is a compromise between ideological conflicts and economic interests, which, in my point of view, is the most salient feature of the entertainment industry in the global era. After the release of *Mulan*, both China and Disney began to yield to each other for the sake of doing business.

²⁵ Eisner, *Work in Progress*, 415. Earlier in this book, he claims that *The Lion King* was a film that played equally well to every kind of audience. See Eisner, 342.

The Hong Kong Disneyland project was announced in late 1999. The ideological struggle between Disney and the Chinese government cannot be fully comprehended if singled out and viewed separately from the larger picture of the global economic competition.

Global Culture or Cultural Imperialism?

China has a rich tradition of producing animation films. As feature filmmaking, the animation filmmaking in China was deeply influenced by the West in general, and by Hollywood in special. In the 1930s, the Wan Brothers, Wan Guchuan and Wan Laimin, began to produce Chinese animations with an aim of creating films that can “bear the character of their own countries.”²⁶ After watching *Snow White*, they produced *Tieshan gongzhu* (Princess Iron Fan, 1941), one of their pioneering works of Chinese animation. In the following years, animated film became one of the main film categories that developed indigenous Chinese characteristics, such as *Jianzhi* (paper cuts) and *Shuimo* (ink painting). *Rensen Wawa* (The Spirit of Ginseng) was the winning film at Leipzig in 1962 and Alexandria in 1979. *Danao Tiangong* (Uproar in Heaven) also won the best film award at the London Festival. Established in 1957, *Shanghai meishu dianying zhipian chang* (Shanghai Animation Film Studio) became well known for its excellent animation productions. However, the overall decline of the Chinese film industry in late 1980s and the 1990s also seriously hampered the development of Chinese animations. After Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, and the Lion King, it was Disney’s Children TV program, “Xiaoshenlong julebu (Club of the Little Magic Dragon),” that enjoyed the greatest popularity among Chinese children in the 1990s.

²⁶ Marie-Claire Quiquemelle, “The Wan Brothers and Sixty Years of Animated Film in China,” in Chris Berry ed., *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema*, 2nd edition (London: BFI Publisher, 1991), 175-86.

According to *China Daily*, cartoon-related industries score 1.3 billion *yuan* (\$157 million) every year in China, only 10 per cent of which is earned by Chinese companies.²⁷

Greatly inspired as well as threatened by the success of the Disney animations in China, Shanghai Animation Film Studio decided to produce *Baoliandeng* (The Magic Lotus Lantern) in 1998. This animated film is based on a Chinese ancient fairy tale about a child saving his mother through numerous hardships. More than 60 cartoon drawers and 20 background painters joined the creation, which cost about 12 million *yuan* in total (around \$1.5 million). It set a record in China's animation film industry. Hollywood production style and promotion strategy were thoroughly adopted in this film. Several famous film stars were invited to dub for characters' voices, and three top Chinese singers were invited to sing songs in this film. Inviting the stars to sing songs for an animation film is nothing new in Hollywood, but it is an adventure in China. It is *The Magic Lotus Lantern* that filled in the gaps in this field. The three songs set off the story quite well: "I Miss You 365 Days a Year" by Li Wen (Coco Lee), "The World in My Heart" by Liu Huan; and "Love is Just One Word" by Zhang Xinzhe (Jeff Cheung). After a series of MTV promotions with famous singers on CCTV and local TV stations, *The Magic Lotus Lantern* was first released in Shanghai on July 30 and then nationally released on August 1st, 1999. As an animation production that had the highest budget in China's animation film history, it gained box office revenues of over 20 million *yuan* (around \$2.5 million) and ranked third in the country in 1999, which was considered by many an unprecedented commercial success.

²⁷ Meng Xi. "Cartoons must draw in more interest," *China Daily*, 19 August 2001.

However, compared with previous Chinese animation productions, *The Magic Lotus Lantern* cannot be labeled a successful production in terms of its artistic quality. Its imitation of the Disney style brought home vividly the issue of cultural imperialism.

Cultural imperialism, as defined by Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, rests “on the power to universalize particularism linked to a singular historical tradition by causing them to be misrecognized as such.”²⁸ The particularism with which Bourdieu and Wacquant are concerned is the particularism of the U.S. society, especially the global expansion of the American academic discourse. Other theorists prefer media imperialism to cultural imperialism. From the perspective of the media industry, the global expansion of American popular culture, as represented by Hollywood productions, is the most telling example of cultural/media imperialism. Efforts against cultural imperialism in the third world have a long history. Originally written to encourage the Chilean people to resist foreign cultural productions, *How to Read Donald Duck* is one of the best-known studies of cultural imperialism focusing on Disney.²⁹ As a co-effort of scholars across the world, *Dazzled by Disney?: the Global Disney Audiences Project* offers a panorama of the “pervasiveness and symbolic ubiquity” of Disney through 12 national profiles.³⁰ One of the most important issues in this project revolves around the debate on cultural imperialism. In order to correct the one-way imposition paradigm of cultural imperialism,

²⁸ Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant. “On the Cunning of Imperialist Reason.” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 16.1 (1999): 41–58.

²⁹ Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart, 1971.

³⁰ Janet Wasko, Mark Phillips and Eileen R. Meehan, eds., *Dazzled by Disney?: The Global Disney Audiences Project* (London and New York: Leicester University Press, 2001). The 12 national profiles include Australia, Brazil, Denmark, France, Greece, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Norway, South Africa, United Kingdom and United States. However, China, with its biggest population in the world, is not included in this project.

several researchers emphasize the need to balance the local with the global. For example, in the Denmark profile, the author argues that parts of Disney lore are very much incorporated as aspects of the national media culture because translation and dubbing serve to enhance the “nationalization” of Disney productions. This argument reminds me that Li Yang, the Chinese dubbing actor for Donald Duck, should be granted special credits for his excellent dubbing performance. He was nicknamed “Uncle Donald Duck” by many Chinese children.

Compared with the “nationalization” of Disney productions, however, a more problematic phenomenon occurring in China and many other countries is a Disneyfication/Disneyization of the animation industry. Both Disneyfication and Disneyization are neologisms derived from the name of the Walt Disney Company to describe the massive spread of the principles of Disney theme parks throughout society.³¹ Here I borrow these two terms to describe a homogenizing process in which diverse animation filmmaking traditions will disappear gradually under the powerful influence of the Disney animation film style. That is, in their imitation of Disney, indigenous animation traditions are abandoned and what is left is a homogenized Disney style.

The Magic Lotus Lantern is a telling example to observe the invasion of cultural imperialism. The fairy tale of *The Magic Lotus Lantern* originated from a Tang dynasty Dunhuang *Bianwen* (Transformation text) entitled *Mulian jiumu* (Mulian Saves His Mother). In the story, Mulian (Sanskrit-Mahamaudgalyayana), a follower of Buddha,

³¹ Sharon Zukin uses the former term in her book *The Cultures of Cities* (Blackwell Publishing, 1996), and the latter was popularized by Alan Bryman in *The Disneyization of Society* (Sage Publications, 2004). Disneyfication of urban space is explored in Jeff Ferrell's *Tearing Down the Streets: Adventures in Urban Anarchy* (St. Martin's Press, 2001).

tries his best to save his mother from the deepest hell to which she has been sent for renouncing the tenets of Buddhism.³² After having been combined with many romantic folklore elements, the Buddhist text transformed to a fairy tale commonly known as *Chenxiang jiumu* (Chengxia Saves His Mother) or *Baoliandeng* (The Magic Lotus Lantern), in which the mother is a goddess who breaks the rules of the Heaven by marrying a mortal scholar. After giving birth to a son named Chenxiang, she is imprisoned beneath the Hua Mountain by her elder brother, Erlangshen, a strict and powerful god. When Chenxiang grows up and finds his ancestry, he battles his uncle and eventually succeeds in freeing his mother.³³

The following paragraph appeared in *Variety*, offering a compliment of this Chinese animation production:

Gleefully borrowing animation techniques from sources as disparate as old-style Disney and native practitioners such as the Wan Brothers, “Lotus Lantern” is a bright, very telling of a Chinese folk tale that you don’t need a Ph.D. in Asian literature to decipher. With the background clearly explained at every stage and a trim running time, this would make a perfect kidvid for Western markets in dubbed versions.³⁴

The influence of the Wan Brothers comes directly from the borrowing of the Monkey King from *Uproar in Heaven*. Rather than “its iconography, leaps of imagination and simple innocence” that marks the film as absolutely Chinese, traces of the “old-style Disney” and many Hollywood influences can be found throughout this film.

³² For a study of the Mulian story and the Mulian Opera, see Bell Yung et al. *Harmony and Counterpoint: Ritual Music in Chinese Context* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

³³ With its premiere in 1957, *The Magic Lotus Lantern* is the first grand dance drama in contemporary China, a symbolic presentation of the art form in China’s history. It was a graduate work by the first choreography class of the Beijing Dance School. In 1959, *The Magic Lotus Lantern* was made into an art film and was highly acclaimed.

³⁴ See Derek Elley’s review of *Lotus Lantern* in *Variety*, 2 October 2000.

In the opening scene, a white scarf floats in the sky, crossing rivers and mountains, just like the dancing white feather that opens *Forrest Gump*. When camera slowly moves closer to the goddess, it is surprising to see that her face is just a cartoon version of Xu Fan, the actress who dubs the voice of this character. Later, when Erlangshen comes to punish his rebellious sister, his face is surprisingly faithful to Jiang Wen, the dubbing actor of Erlangshen. A commercialized star system has been vividly revealed in the art design of the main characters.

With the help of the magic lotus lantern, the goddess defeats her brother and marries her lover. Seven years later, we see Chenxiang playing with his mother on a boat when the boat is moving smoothly among beautiful lotus. Thanks to an appropriation of skills from the Chinese art, it becomes one of the most impressive shots of the film. Like a colorful version of the traditional Chinese landscape painting, this shot presents a happy mortal life-- "Happiness is staying with your mother."

After Erlangshen kidnaps Chenxiang, the goddess is forced to accept punishment, being imprisoned underneath the Hua Mountain. Much of the central plot describes the son's efforts to free his mother. He is accompanied by a lovely monkey. As in most Disney animated productions, minor characters, always personifications of small animals, such as Mushu in *Mulan*, Flounder in *The Little Mermaid*, and Blue Genie in *Aladin*, all play important roles in unfolding the plot and helping the main characters to fulfill their missions. Two songs appear in a typical Disney style, too. "I Miss You 365 Days a Year" follows the boy's quest for the Monkey King, because only he knows how to beat Erlangshen. Accompanied by song, Chengxiang travels day and night, as time flies from

one season to another. After experiencing many difficulties in his journey, a grown-up Chengxiang continues his quest. The second song “The World in My Heart” shows how different cubs grow up and play with Chengxiang. Similar scenes with songs are not hard to find in *Lion King* or *Tarzan*. Furthermore, similar to the portrayal of the northern minority with dark skin in *Mulan*, in his journey to save his mother, the boy befriends a tribal girl, and her brown skin color makes her look more like an American Indian. A following scene of fire dancing bears more visible traces of the Western tribal culture. When the tribe helps Chenxiang recover a magic ax he needs, the musical number here, even the *Variety* reviewer realizes, “looking like Busby Berkeley meets the Maoris, is as ridiculous as anything Hollywood might dream up.”³⁵

Chang Guangxi, director of the film, boasted that *The Magic Lotus Lantern* would be a landmark in China’s animation filmmaking. It was the first full-length Chinese animation film to follow the international practice of creating the music and dialogue before the cartoons are drawn. “Digital stereo recording system and three-dimensional computer-aided special effect technology were employed,” said he.³⁶ What is greatly neglected, however, was an artistic exploration of the rich Chinese animation tradition. Although incorporating elements from Chinese folktales such as “the heaven dog eats the moon” or “the Monkey King was born from a stone,” Chinese artistic aesthetic is hardly embodied in the overall visual design of *The Magic Lotus Lantern*. The fact that many Chinese audiences enjoy Disney animations does not necessarily mean that they will

³⁵ See Derek Elley’s review of *Lotus Lantern* in *Variety*, 2 October 2000.

³⁶ See “Drawing A Crowd in China: Success of *Magic Lotus Lantern*,” in *The Hollywood Reporter*, 31 August 1999.

welcome a Disneyized Chinese animation film. As shown in the Global Disney Audiences Project, for some Disney resisters, the company epitomizes “commercialism, materialism and mass production.”³⁷ A globalized culture actually is a commercialized culture, and the pursuit of capital is its primary motivation. Capitalism has played an omnipotent role in promoting the notion of “globalization” during the post-Cold War era. In this sense, the resistance to cultural imperialism is part and parcel of the resistance of global capitalism.

Conclusion

China is becoming the largest market for Disney’s global expansion in the next several decades. In the company’s 1999 annual report, Eisner noted: “Hong Kong Disneyland could help redefine our entire company for consumers in the most populous region on the planet.” Hong Kong Disneyland, including a Disneyland-style theme park and two hotels, was scheduled to open in September 2005. As many were still haunted by the shadow of the Asian economic crisis, the project was expected to create new economic growth and provide more job opportunities. It was the first time that a Disney theme park received direct government funding. Hong Kong invested \$2.8 billion in return for a 57 percent stake.

The opening of Hong Kong Disneyland in 2005 was a milestone of Disney’s victory in the Asian market. As Disney’s 11th theme park in the world, Hong Kong Disneyland attracted numerous visitors from Asian countries. But its opening has also brought different forms of local resistance against global capitalism to light. An anti-

³⁷ Janet Wasko et al. 2001, 332.

Disney campaign has been launched in Hong Kong. *Dishini bushi leyuan* (Disney is Not a Happy Land) is the title of a book published by several Hong Kong intellectuals.³⁸ A club named *Xiaoxin miqi* (Caution of the Mickey Mouse) aims at reminding people the bloody exploitation made by the transnational corporations. However, their public effect is still limited. During the Chinese New Year holidays in February 2006, Hong Kong Disneyland had to close its gate to hundreds of visitors holding pre-purchased tickets because it had reached the maximum accommodation capability soon after its opening.

Although Disney is a relative laggard compared with more aggressive rivals like Time Warner and Viacom in expanding the Chinese market, it also means that Disney has the biggest potential in the future. Before the opening of the Hong Kong Disneyland, Disney's headquarter of the Asia-Pacific region had moved to Shanghai and started its first Chinese-language film project, *Baohulu de mimi* (The Secret of the Magic Gourd), which marked a new step of Disney's "Global localization" strategy. The Broadway musical *The Lion King* was staged in Shanghai in July 2007. "We look at this as an important tool to build our brand in China," Disney's China managing director Stanley Cheung told Reuters in an interview in February 2006. He claimed that the company had not made any deal to build a park in Shanghai, but rumors spread that a Shanghai Disneyland would open in 2010, the year Shanghai is scheduled to hold the World Expo. China is becoming a big arena where all transnational corporations attempt to secure a share. How the Chinese government will play the role of the host in their competition is an open question. Some scholars are optimistic on this issue. In her reflection of the Hong

³⁸ Shi Xiangpeng and Ye Yincong eds., *Disney is not a Happy Land* (Hong Kong: Jinyibu Multi-Media Co., 1999).

Kong Disneyland, Mirana May Szeto points out that maybe the only possibility of taming global capital lies in China, since China is such a huge market that Disney has to pay special attention and adjust its marketing policy.³⁹ Viewed from an economic perspective, her assumption is highly possible, and the *Kundun* Incident is a perfect note of this assumption.

What concerns me most, however, is not only the issue of building a nationalist economy in the global era, but also the mission of preserving a national culture. Due to Disney's omnipresence all over the world and the fact that more and more Chinese children grow up with a Disneyized imagination, little room will be left for a more indigenized as well as more diversified world of animations, and the world of culture in general. As a direct response to the invasion of Disney, more and more Chinese begin to recall old Chinese animations that they watched in their childhood. Japanese and some European productions released in 1980s' China also become the objects of nostalgia, because at least they represented a diverse tradition of animations. Recently, the declining box office of Hollywood blockbusters in the Chinese film market speaks to the same issue. The prosperity of the domestic TV drama productions also offers a potential possibility for the national film industry to triumph over Hollywood. It is too risky to arrive at a quick judgment that the invasion of Hollywood will only damage the national film industry. Besides an economic concern, in facing of cultural imperialism, how the Chinese film industry, including Chinese animation, could keep its Chinese characteristics in the process of global modernity is an important issue.

³⁹ See an interview conducted by Cheng Qijin, "Who is Picking a Hole in Mickey Mouse," in *Nanfang Daily*, 30 September 2005.

CHAPTER V

THE POLYPHONIC NARRATION OF HISTORY IN “MAIN MELODY” FILMS

What is history? Historians have different ways to define history as a discipline. Among them, R.G. Collingwood's definition in *The Idea of History* has been generally accepted for the past several decades. According to him, the object of history is actions of human beings that have been done in the past; and history proceeds by the interpretation of evidence for the sake of human self-knowledge.¹ The prime duty of the historian, argues Collingwood, is “a willingness to bestow infinite pains on discovering what actually happened” not only in terms of the “accuracy in facts” but also in terms of how to interpret facts through “a historical imagination.”² Historians have produced voluminous studies that either revise or argue against the proceeding accounts. The constructive activity of interpreting facts bridges distance between history and other disciplines of the humanities, especially philosophy and literature. The resemblance between the historian and the novelist, as Collingwood was well aware of, reaches its culmination in the sense that both work with imagination. Despite the fact that a historian's picture is meant to be true while a novelist's task is to construct a coherent story that makes sense, the past is reconstructed through narration. The reconstruction of

¹ R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), 9-10.

² R.G. Collingwood, 55-56, 242-249.

the past is not only an exclusive task of historians. Sometimes historians have to resort to literary skills to fulfill their historical narration, which was exemplified by the great Chinese historiography Sima Qian and his highly praised work *Shiji* (Records of the Grand Scribe).³

Events happened in the past have been a dominant subject of literature. Although history provides a well-organized way to access the past, readers in general are prone to be more impressed by historical novels, such as those written by Walter Scott, than by big volumes of history. In the field of literary studies, against the formal analysis of works of literature in New Criticism, Stephen Greenblatt, the founder of New Historicism, suggests that one should oppose to “a historicism based upon faith in the transparency of signs and interpretative procedures” and be suspicious of liberatory narratives since “the work of art is itself the product of a set of manipulations.”⁴ Being caught up in the circulation of power, all cultural products are a part of larger discursive structures that can offer clues to the ideological mechanism of a given time period. In *Nation and Narration*, Homi Bhabha specifically illustrates the ambiguous relationship between literary narration and ideological construction:

It is the project of *Nation and Narration* to explore the Janus-faced ambivalence of language itself in the construction of the Janus-faced discourse of the nation. This turns the familiar two-faced god into a figure of prodigious doubling that investigates the nation-space in the process of the articulation of elements: where meanings may be partial because they are in *medias res*; and history may be half-made because it is in the process of being made; and the image of cultural

³ For a study of Sima Qian, see Stephen W. Durrant, *The Cloudy Mirror: Tension and Conflict in the Writings of Sima Qian* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

⁴ Stephen Greenblatt, “Towards a Poetics of Culture,” in *The New Historicism* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 1-14, 12.

authority may be ambivalent because it is caught, uncertainly, in the act of “composing” its powerful image.⁵

Bhabha’s notion of the “half-made” history is of particular relevance here because the rewriting of history has become an important cultural phenomenon in post-1989 China. In Mao’s China, class analysis and economic constraints in determining historical outcomes were held as chief tenets of Marxist historiography.⁶ After the Cultural Revolution, while class struggle was no longer the primary task of the CCP government, historical materialism was still the orthodox philosophy in China. Since the late 1980s, however, historians have tried to reinterpret the history of the late Qing and the Republican China in order to reexamine Chinese modernity. New Confucianism has become a hot topic subsequent to the rise of capitalism in East Asia. Literary critics have begun to challenge the Party-endorsed literary history by re-canonizing certain literary classics. In the film industry, historical subjects continue to be the most plentiful resources that can be conveniently reinterpreted to legitimize the Party leadership, and to overcome the post-1989 ideological crisis. American film theorist Brian Henderson has commented on the meaning of narrative works: “Finally the operation of a myth...always has to do with the time which the myth is told, not with the time that it tells of.”⁷

As one can expect, the way in which the revolutionary history is being told in “main melody” films is different from the previous years. In this chapter, I will examine how different narratives have been employed in “main melody” films to retell the

⁵ Homi Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 3.

⁶ See Arif Dirlik, *Revolution and History: The Origins of Marxist Historiography in China, 1919-1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

⁷ Brian Henderson, “The Searchers: An American Dilemma,” in Bill Nichols ed., *Movies and Methods: An Anthology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), 429-49, 434.

revolutionary history in modern China, and what kind of ideological function these narratives have achieved.

Mikhail Bakhtin defines Dostoevsky's novels as polyphonic novels by the relationship between narrator and character, in which the character's voice is never ultimately overpowered by that of the narrator. They co-exist independently, both working as valid voices in the novels. As its opposite, most "monologic novels" have the word of the narrator taken final authority.⁸ I would like to borrow the Bakhtinian notion of "polyphonic" to describe the co-existence of different historical narratives in "main melody" films, especially in terms that neither could be overpowered by others. In socialist China, the theme of "only the CCP can save China" or "only socialism can develop China" represented a monologic narrative in cinema, as shown in *The White-haired Girl*, *The Dragon-beard Ditch*, *Five Golden Flowers*, and many others. In contrast, the cinematic representation of the modern Chinese revolutionary history in "main melody" films, borrowing Bakhtin's account of polyphonic novels, has employed a set of polyphonic narrative styles. How the polyphonic narration of history in "main melody" films underpins the ideological transition in 1990s' China is the focus of this chapter.

The Great Decisive War: Making Revolution into Epic

Modern Chinese history is always a dominant theme in Chinese cinema. In socialist China, cinematic representation of the Party-led revolutionary history contributed greatly to the legitimacy of the CCP regime. For example, *Nanzheng beizhan*

⁸ See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

(From Victory to Victory, 1952) re-stages a series of battles between the PLA and the KMT troops in 1947. Set in Anti-Japanese War, *Xiaobing Zhang Ga* (Little Soldier Zhang Ga, 1963) features the growing up of a boy hero; *Didao Zhan* (Tunnel Warfare, 1965) portrays the brave struggle of Chinese people in central China who fought Japanese soldiers through various underground tunnels. War films produced during this period always featured ordinary soldiers or low-ranking officers as the protagonists. Rather than seeing them as propaganda, the audience “tended to identify with the heroes and marvel at their courageous deeds and unrelenting revolutionary spirit.”⁹

Chinese cinema did not feature the Mao character, the great savior of the Chinese, as well as other high-ranking CCP leaders, until a 1978 film production *Dahe benliu* (The River Runs). In this film, Chairman Mao inspects the Yellow River and meets the heroine, a woman cadre who has fought with the KMT in the river region. Prime Minister Zhou Enlai also appears at the end of this film when a flood is threatening people living near the river. Since then, Mao and other CCP leaders have been featured in several films such as *Fengyu xia zhongshan* (Storm from the Zhong Mountain, 1982), *Sidu Chishui* (Crossing the Chi River, 1983), *Weiwei Kunlun* (The Great Kunlun Mountain, 1988). The fact that the high-ranking CCP leaders did not appear in Chinese cinema before the Cultural Revolution deserves special attention. The Cultural Revolution brought the Chinese society into chaos. After the ten-year catastrophe, in order to strengthen confidence in the CCP regime, the appearance of Mao and other leaders on screen has become part and parcel of the ideological mechanism to glorify the CCP leadership.

⁹ Zhang Yingjin, *Chinese National Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 193.

In late 1980s, a “Mao Fever” swept through Chinese society, catering to the rising popularity of the revolutionary history in cultural consumption. The emergence of this “Mao Fever” was closely linked to the political and economic climate of China when many were dissatisfied with the status quo and expressed nostalgia for the past.¹⁰ The bestseller *Zouxia shentan de Mao Zedong* (Mao Zedong: Man, Not God, 1989) offered an image of Mao both as a great statesman and an ordinary person. This double-narrative strategy has been further promoted in “main melody” films. The Central Department of Propaganda requested that “main melody” films should represent “major revolutionary historical events.” Therefore, from the birth of the CCP in 1921 to the world famous Long March in 1935, from the political struggle between the Communists and the Nationalists during the second civil war (1945-1949) to the founding of the PRC in 1949, the CCP-led revolutionary history has been fully represented in “main melody” films such as *Kaitian pidi* (The Birth of a New Age, 1997), *Changzheng* (The Long March, 1996), *Dajuezhan* (The Great Decisive War, 1991), and *Kaiguo Dadian* (The Founding Ceremony, 1999). Instead of portraying the war through stories of ordinary soldiers and low-ranking officers, “main melody” films aim to re-stage grand warfare from a panoramic perspective, featuring Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Zhu De, Chen Yi, and other high-ranking CCP leaders as the main heroes. For example, compared with *Wanshui qianshan* (The Long March, 1959) that describes how a group of the Red Army soldiers overcame many difficulties in the Long March, the 1996 “main melody” film *Changzheng* is extended to two episodes, with a total running time of two and a half

¹⁰ For an analysis on the “Mao Fever,” see Dai Jinhua, “Redemption and Consumption,” in *Cinema and Desire: Feminist Marxism and Cultural Politics in the Work of Dai Jinhua*, 172-188.

hours. It opens with a bird's-eye shot of a bombardment on the Xiang River, accompanied by a solemn voiceover: "In the early winter of 1934 AD, on the age-old planet where the people live, on the land of south China, occurred an astounding war." The bombing scene lasts for 4 minutes, exhibiting the severities of the war, and the camera then cuts to the Soviet adviser Li De (Otto Braun) and his Chinese comrades. The low-ranking instructor and captains of a Red Army battalion in the 1959 production are replaced by the CCP leadership represented by Mao in the 1996 production. A same-titled 24-episode TV series, produced in 2001, adopts the same way of narration, featuring almost all high-ranking CCP officials. Both the 1996 film and the 2001 TV series, like many other "main melody" war productions, have gained considerable popularity.

Historical narration in these "main melody" productions is characterized by glorifying the success of the CCP leadership. From off-stage to on-stage, from minor roles to protagonists, the emerging of high-ranking CCP leaders on Chinese screen indicates the necessity of ideological transition in post-socialist China. In a certain degree, the newly produced "main melody" historical war films can be categorized into "epic films" because the cinematic narration of the CCP-led revolutionary history bears similarities with epic poetry, and Hollywood epic filmmaking tradition as well.

As a broadly defined genre of poetry, the epic retells the life and works of a heroic or mythological person or group of persons in a continuous narrative, such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in the West, or *Gesa'er wang* (The Epic of King Gesar) in the East. The composition of epic poetry or of long poems in general, has become uncommon in

the modern world. The meaning of the term epic then has evolved to refer to prose works that are characterized by great length, multiple settings, large numbers of characters, or long span of time, such as *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy, or *Ulysses* by James Joyce.

Corresponding to epic poetry, epic film generally refers to films that have a large scope, often set during a time of war or other conflicts, and sometimes taking place over a considerable period of time. From D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) to David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), from George Lukas's *Star Wars* (1977) to the more recent *Troy* (2001) starring Brad Pitt, Hollywood has a long tradition of epic filmmaking. "Main melody" films on the CCP-led revolutionary history share characteristics with these epic films, especially in terms of grand war background, heroic characters and extraordinary length. While the major reason for the Hollywood epic production is economic—collecting higher box office receipt with spectacles—why has the Chinese revolutionary history been retold in an epic style? What kind of ideological messages do these "main melody" epic war films carry? To answer these questions, it would be worthwhile to consider the ideological significance of the epic in general.

According to *Longman Companion to English Literature*, epic poetry can offer "inspiration and ennoblement within a particular cultural or national tradition." The epic always carries a peculiar and complex connection to national and local culture, especially in terms of its political potency. In a study on the development of 19th century Balkan literature, Margaret Beissinger points out that the systematic collecting of epic poems among Serbs, Croats, Bulgarians, and Romanians did not begin until the 19th century. Coinciding with the rise of nationalism, aspirations for liberation, and the formation of

national or revival literature, literary epic became an important means for forging a sense of male-dominated nationhood.¹¹ Other critics also point out acutely,

...[O]ne of the purposes of epic literature is to present a national or religious identity in times of change. It is the peculiar ability of the epic to derive its basis from very real events but to transmute the ingredients into a timeless form; the past has always excited man's imagination more than the tangible present, since its gives him greater scope to dream....¹²

Post-1989 China has been facing one of the most important periods of change in the history of the CCP's governance. In a profit-driven post-socialist China, the ideology of self-sacrifice has been exposed as an expired propaganda. Under the unprecedented ideological crisis, the previous war films featuring the sacrifice of the ordinary soldiers no longer can sustain the identification between the ordinary people and the CCP regime. In an era that literature has been increasingly marginalized vis-à-vis visual culture as the dominant form of cultural consumption, in order to fill in the blank left by the wearing out of the self-sacrifice for the sake of the nation, the epic war film has become an effective replacement, especially when government subsidies are ready to produce visual spectacles that were unimaginable before. Partly thanks to the attractive visual spectacles, epic war film constitutes one of the newly formed ideological state apparatus in China.

According to the "Parry-Lord Theory," an active current in 20th century oral literary studies established by Milman Parry and Albert Lord, epics most likely have six main characteristics: a) the hero is of imposing stature, of national or international importance, and of great historical or legendary significance; b) the setting is vast,

¹¹ Margaret Beissinger, "Epic, Gender, and Nationalism, the Development of Nineteenth-century Balkan Literature," in *Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World, The Poetics of Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 69-86.

¹² Derek Elley, *The Epic Film: Myth and History* (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 12.

covering many nations, the worlds or the universe; c) the action consists of deeds of great valor or requiring superhuman courage; d) supernatural forces--gods, angels, demons--interest themselves in the action; e) a style of sustained elevation is used; f) the poet retains a measure of objectivity.¹³ “Main melody” epic war film has successfully transplanted the major characteristics of epic literature onto the silver screen.

The most telling “main melody” war film is the large budget trilogy *The Great Decisive War*, produced in 1991. It exhibits how the CCP won China by defeating the KMT and its affiliated American forces through three major military campaigns in 1948—the Liaoshen campaign, the Huaihai campaign and the Peking-Tianjin campaign. After the Japanese surrender of 1945, military clashes between the Communists and the Nationalists afflicted many parts of China and finally developed into a civil war (the so-called Liberation War by most Chinese historians). By March 1948 the Nationalist army’s situation was becoming desperate. Both Mukden and Changchun in Manchuria were surrounded by Communist troops and could be supplied only by Nationalist air force planes. In the Liaoshen campaign, conducted from September 12 to November 2, 1948, the PLA forces conquered the Manchurian provinces then swept into North China. Mao Zedong announced that the Communist armies were going to shift from a strategy of predominantly guerrilla warfare to one of conventional battles in open country. In the following Huaihai campaign, after successfully cutting off and destroying one of the most powerful battalions of Chiang’s army force, the PLA managed to seize and hold Kaifeng, the city on the Yellow River that guarded the key railway junction in central China, for a

¹³ For related essays, see Milman Parry’s posthumous work, *The Making of Homeric Verse* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), and Albert Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960).

week before the KMT reinforcements counterattacked at the price of a huge casualties. The situation for the KMT was getting worse when the U.S. government decided not to provide any military aid. While Chiang made all kinds of efforts to coordinate his fellow generals to fight against Mao, Mao took advantage of the internal division within Chiang's camp. In the Peking-Tianjin Campaign, after Tianjin was captured in January 1949, the PLA successfully persuaded the KMT general who commanded Peking to surrender. After the three military campaigns, the KMT lost its most powerful army force and North China to the CCP. South China was soon taken over by the PLA and Chiang retreated to Taiwan.¹⁴

The Great Decisive War opens with a bird's-eye view of Mao walking on the north plateau. Then he stands in face of the rising sun, the sound of ice breaking echoing afar. An introductory voiceover comes when the camera cuts to the melting down of the frozen Yellow River:

August A.D. 1945, Japan announced its surrender. The Chinese people eventually gained the first complete victory of anti-invasion wars in modern times. However, our ancient Orient country, after plenty of war sufferings, was soon facing choices of two fates and two futures. The KMT reactionary force headed by Chiang Kai-shek attempted to establish a state under landlord and bourgeoisie dictatorship, while the CCP, according to the historical development and the will of the people, aimed to set up a China of New Democracy. . . . The war ended long ago. Both victory and defeat have become history. But if we have time to restore the war in a chessboard, we can still feel the marvelous of the military arrangement; feel the force of every step in the game.

Based on this sublime tone, great efforts were made in *The Great Decisive War* to represent the three military campaigns that unfolded in 142 days. Each campaign is shot in two episodes. Consisting of three sections, with a running time of more than 9 hours,

¹⁴ For more details about these three military campaigns, see Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 2nd ed. (W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), Chapter 18, The Fall of the Guomindang State, 459-488.

the trilogy reflects not only the military confrontation between the CCP and the KMT, but also their struggles in fields such as politics, economics, and foreign affairs. It is the first time that such an epic war film with complex narratives and numerous characters produced in the history of Chinese cinema.

Instead of focusing on individual battle sequences, the main narrative line in *The Great Decisive War* is constructed through the political confrontation between the CCP and the KMT. Much of the trilogy deals with military strategies adopted by the two opponent parties, and polarized and represented by their respective leaders: Mao Zedong and Chiang Kai-shek. The struggle between the progressive CCP and the repressive KMT is represented as an inevitable historical destiny that led to the eventual triumph of the CCP under Mao's superior leadership. Consequently, the camera moves alternatively between the two opponent sides. For example, *Huaihai Campaign*, the second section of the trilogy, begins with a casual conversation between Mao and Zhou Enlai in the Xibaipo village. They draw out basic strategies to take over Kaifeng and Xuzhou, the cities that guard the key railway junctions. Then the camera cuts to Chiang's house in Nanjing. Madam Chiang is comforting her husband about the loss of the northeast, and Chiang is planning to launch a battle again. This kind of comparative representation is a basic narrative device used frequently throughout the trilogy. The camera cuts back and forth time and again between Mao and Chiang when both announce their strategies in their respective military conference. The ideological function of epic narrative in "main melody" films such as *The Great Decisive War* testifies Bakhtin's comments on epic as a master discourse par excellence:

The epic, as the specific genre known to us today, has been from the beginning a poem about the past, and the authorial position immanent in the epic and constitutive for it (that is, the position of the one who utters the epic word) is the environment of a man speaking about a past that is to him inaccessible, the reverent point of view of a descendent. In its style, tone and manner of expression, epic discourse is infinitely far removed from discourse of a contemporary about contemporary issues addressed to contemporaries.¹⁵

Based on the cinematic representation of the revolutionary history, the “main melody” epic war film shows how the ruling Party tries to maintain the status quo by idealizing a past that is “utterly different and inaccessible,” to borrow from Bakhtin again. It defies the possible act of questioning the status quo by immersing the audience into nostalgia for the irrevocable past.

The Great Decisive War was produced by August First, an important PLA film studio in China. While the average feature film production cost was 1 million *yuan*, the trilogy has a huge budget of 100 million *yuan*. Meanwhile, the film shooting was assisted by thousands of PLA soldiers. Both the budget and the participation of the PLA contributed to the most impressive feature of the trilogy: many grand-scale battle scenes that are unprecedented in the history of Chinese cinema. Before *The Great Decisive War*, August First produced many successful war films—but none of them can compare with *The Great Decisive War*. One of the most breathtaking battle scenes in *Liaoshen Campaign* is the general attack of Jinzhou, one of the most important cities in Manchuria in term of transportation. A long shot shows artillery carts lay outside Jinzhou, ready to fire. As a voiceover describes, “it is the first time in the history of Chinese war that a thousand cannons are roaring at the same time toward the same target.” Under the covering fire of the artillery column and the tank column, thousands of PLA soldiers start

¹⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 13-14.

to attack Jinzhou. The battle scene lasts for more than ten minutes, interrupted by mid-shots of both the PLA and the KMT leaders in their headquarters respectively.

Besides a visual representation of the exciting battle sequences that can match, and sometimes even can overwhelm, the literary narrative of grand warfare in epic literature, the poetic voiceover enhances the epic style of the trilogy. Like the opening scene of the trilogy, after exhibiting how the CCP takes over Jinzhou within 31 hours, a voiceover comes to accompany another bird's-eye view of the city:

In those days flying birds have got used to gunshots, and the sky with powder smoke, but they have never seen the whole city trembling, shaking, tilting, and rotating. They could not image the ancient city Jinzhou was thus bathing in the flames so impassionedly.

Hollywood influence is discernable in “main melody” filmmaking, especially in term of the cinematic creation of war spectacles. In order to show the vast scale of war, the traditional Hollywood master-shot is used extensively to produce visual richness. In addition, high-angle bird's-eye shots appear frequently in the trilogy to create a grand effect. Inspired by Hollywood narrative style, Chinese filmmaker have also designed cinematic details that could create strong emotional power. In a battle near Jinzhou, a young soldier dies in the front, his red scarf flying into the air. This red scarf, originally owned by a newlywed woman who has donated all her betrothal gifts to the front, is a symbol of the good relationship between the army and the people. As the director mentions, they were inspired by the ending shot of *Schindler's List*, where a girl in red dress walks alone against a black and white background. In *Liaoshen Campaign*, slowly, the red scarf falls down to the burning battlefield, where a whole battalion of soldiers has

died in gunfire. It not only represents the people's wish to liberate China, but the huge price they have paid for this grand cause.

“The epic *telos* of tears,” argues Thomas Greene, can create a community of shared mourners.¹⁶ The unnumbered dead soldiers in combat leave the audience in sorrow. The sorrow was formerly an effective way to identify the audience with the revolutionary cause and the CCP leadership. But as I have mentioned earlier, this sort of ideological interpellation no longer works in post-1989 China, when the bond between the Party and the people has been put into question. Consequently, the sacrifice of nameless soldiers in “main melody” war films is represented as a magnificent visual background, and high-ranking CCP leaders occupy the foreground. It is the great CCP leaders that are shining as a galaxy in the film.¹⁷ The success of *The Great Decisive War*, to a great extent, is due to the trilogy's humanist representation of the CCP leaders. As embodied by the abovementioned bestseller *Mao Zedong: Man, Not God*, Mao in *The Great Decisive War* is represented as both a great leader and an amiable father. In *Huaihai Campaign*, before Mao's elder son Mao Anying and his girlfriend Liu Siqi go to join the land reform team, Mao tells Siqi not to be afraid of dogs in the village, and puts his coat on Anying's shoulder: “You wear it in daytime, and Siqi can take it as a quilt as night, so you two can go through the winter.” The same humanist concern can be found in many other epic films. In *The Founding Ceremony*, when Mao's son comes to talk about his plan to get

¹⁶ Thomas Green “The Natural Tears of Epic,” in *Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 189-202.

¹⁷ Although the 1952 production *From Victory to Victory* was praised as a model of “epic scope”, mentioned Zhang Yingjin in *Chinese National Cinema*, in terms of the cinematic representation of the CCP leadership, it was different from the “main melody” films in the 1990s. See Zhang Yingjin, *Chinese National Cinema*, 100.

married, a friendly family atmosphere is constructed on screen. Mao approves his marriage and wants to schedule a time to see the daughter-in-law. However, after Mao finds that the marriage is against the newly issued Marital Law because the girl is under 18 years old, he instantly withdraws his approval. His son angrily protests: “When you married my mom, she was not yet 18 years old.” This anecdotal plot brings Mao’s family issues to light in addition to his military decisions, making the image of Mao more believable. After the ideology of constructing Mao as the savior of China and the red sun of the East expired, the image of Mao is re-erected as a flesh and bones human being.

As in epic poetry, “main melody” war epic attempts to retain a measure of objectivity. The moral judgment that has been a salient feature of the previous war films—that the CCP is a progressive force and the KMT reactionary—is represented through the operation of military strategies. The same emphasis on leadership occurs on the KMT side too. In *The Great Decisive War*, the failure of the KMT is described as a result of its internal strife: most of the KMT generals are suspicious of others and cannot cooperate with one another although they know clearly that all of them are in the same boat. Not all KMT generals are stereotyped as totally corrupt. Even Chiang himself is sometimes represented in a positive light. An interesting plot is that several KMT generals play mahjong together in an air-raid shelter. They all despair of winning war over the Communists. When Chiang Kai-shek comes to visit the front without notification, they are worried that Chiang will excoriate them. Surprisingly, Chiang asks who lost the game and plays for him, and wins the player’s money back. Before he leaves, he says, “You are not good at playing mahjong, and I’m not good at fighting the

war. The task of keeping the Communists from crossing the Yangtze River will fall on your shoulders.” Deeply moved by Chiang’s words, the general swears that he will fight to the death. Not merely presented as the head of the KMT who successfully mobilizes his underlings, Chiang is also represented several times in the trilogy with his family members. At the beginning of *Liaoshen Campaign*, Chiang first appears as a grandfather, talking about Chinese culture with his grandsons. In *Peking-Tianjin Campaign*, at the end of December 1948, we see Mao’s daughter comes to ask for a birthday gift, which is followed with another shot of Chiang celebrating Christmas with his family.

In order to achieve objectivity, an important historical character that cannot be ignored in this trilogy is Lin Biao (1907-1971), the executive commander of the Liaoshen campaign. Lin rose to political prominence during the Cultural Revolution, climbing as high as Mao’s designated successor and comrade-in-arms. In 1971, according to the PRC official account, Lin planned a coup and escaped after the assassination of Mao was aborted. His plane crashed, and all on board were killed. Since then, Lin has been labeled as a traitor and never politically rehabilitated. *The Great Decisive War* is the first time that Lin appears on the silver screen as a Communist leader who has achieved great military victories. In *Liaoshen Campaign*, in order to prevent his army from suffering a high number of casualties, Lin often uses strategies that are different from Mao and the politburo’s decisions. However, the character is not stereotyped as a headstrong leader. Roasted yellow beans, his favorite snack, are used as a prop to illustrate his personality. When he cannot make a military decision, he chooses to eat many beans while thinking. After an order is delivered, he is happy to pick up the bean again. Despite his failed coup

in 1971, the film presents Lin Biao as an excellent military leader in the civil war period. By representing the historically disputable character in a positive light, the cinematic rehabilitation of Lin Biao indicates a significant ideological message, that is, the historical narration in the whole film production is more objective than before.¹⁸

Stalin had a high evaluation of the CCP's military campaigns. He said that 600,000 PLA soldiers defeating 800,000 KMT soldiers was a real miracle. The ending voiceover of *Huaihai Campaign* borrows his comments, annotating that "38 years later, a senior researcher of the U.S. Army traveled all the way across the Pacific Ocean to study the Huaihai campaign battlefield, attempting to discovery the mystery." Although there is no supernatural force present in modern warfare, the CCP is granted mythical power, which further enhanced the epic characteristic of the trilogy. Despite the fact that historical accuracy is the prime concern in "main melody" epic films, this very metamorphosis of history into myth is worth pondering. It serves the ideological transition of the time. As symbolic tales of the distant past, myths in general are connected to people's belief systems or rituals. Nothing can be better appropriated by the ideological mechanism than the long-lasting effect of myths. Since myths are undecipherable miracles, one can do nothing but appreciate the glory of the myths. It is thus no surprise that *The Great Decisive War* gained considerable popularity in China, winning three major Chinese film awards: the Huabiao Award, the Golden Rooster Award, and the Hundred Flowers Award. The success of *The Great Decisive War* enables

¹⁸ As the director Li jun mentioned in a essay, whether *The Great Decisive War* can portray the Lin Biao character faithful or not is one of the audience's biggest concern. See his interview in *Dangdai daiyin* (Feb, 1992), 38-59, 43.

other similar productions such as the 2-episode *Dazhuanzhe* (The Great Turning Point, 1996), and the 4-episode *Dajinjun* (The Great Military Advance, 1996-1999).

My 1919: Personalizing History in Postmodern China

Germinated in the cultural soil of Western post-industrial or late capitalist society, postmodernism has been accepted by many scholars as a valid description of the cultural phenomena that have occurred in most Western countries over the last two decades. Since the early 1990s, Chinese postmodernism has attracted many domestic and overseas Chinese intellectuals as well as some Western scholars in China studies. In *Postmodernism and China*, a collection discussing the applicability of postmodernism in grasping the condition of contemporary Chinese societies, an agreement has been arrived by most of its contributors—with the global expansion of capitalism, postmodernism is no longer a monolithic Western phenomenon; instead, it has generated different forms both in the West and in the East.¹⁹ Therefore, Chinese postmodernism, despite the fact that it is not a cultural dominant in China yet, has become a valid category to examine certain cultural phenomenon in China.

In his work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-Francois Lyotard refers to what he describes as the postmodern condition, which he characterized as increasing skepticism toward the totalizing nature of “meta narratives” or “grand narratives”:

Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it. To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of

¹⁹ Arif Dirlik and Zhang Xudong, *Postmodernism and China* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it. The narrative function is losing its factors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements--narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on [...] Where, after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside?²⁰

Postmodernist thinkers have associated postmodernism with the end of grand narratives. However, grand narratives are hardly absent post-socialist China, as shown in many “main melody” films. As renewed grand narratives, these epic films still hold “its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal” in a central position. One important feature of Chinese postmodernism, in my point of view, is the juxtaposition of grand narratives and alternative narratives that become visible in the 1990s, including theories of modernity, the revival of Confucianism, feminism, and others. Together, they contributed to the formation of a multi-layered social discourse that is no longer dominated by a single class analysis. The ideological function of alternative narratives is no less important than that of grand narratives. In the following part, by examining how history is retold from a personalized perspective in a “main melody” film *My 1919* (Wode 1919, 1999), I will argue that the consumption of history is becoming a new strategy that resides legitimacy in a post-socialist and postmodern China.

The year 1919 is one of the most important dates in modern Chinese history because of the May Fourth movement. The movement grew out of the Chinese people’s great dissatisfaction with the Paris Peace Conference. The Chinese warlord government (1912-1927) joined the First World War on the side of the Allied Triple Entente in 1917. After the war ended with the Allies’ victory in 1918, an international conference

²⁰ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv-xxv.

organized by the victors of the war for negotiating the peace treaties took place in Paris on January 18, 1919. The Chinese warlord government sent a delegation to the conference with three goals: 1) to return Chinese territorial integrity of Shangdong; 2) to abolish the Twenty-one Demands Treaty with Japan; and 3) to annul all imperialist privileges in China. After the last two requests were refused by the super power under the name of maintaining the world peace before the conference began, the Treaty of Versailles transferred German concessions in Shandong to Japan. When the news of the Shandong resolution reached China in early May of 1919, it immediately triggered a student protest in Peking, which were followed by mass demonstration in many cities.²¹ Though many historians consider the movement as the outgrowth of anarchism, the CCP official account regarded it as the outset of the “new democratic revolution” in China. The betrayal of Versailles reinforced the nationalist sentiment amongst the awakened Chinese, and paved the way for an unprecedented mass enlightenment movement. Marxism was systematically introduced into China during this period, and became the CCP’s most important theoretical weapon in the following years.

However, in *My 1919*, a “main melody” film dedicated to the 50th anniversary of the PRC, this significant historical moment is represented in a way that is very different from the Party-approved interpretation.

First, *My 1919* chose Gu Weijun (V.K. Wellington Koo, 1888-1985), a disputable political figure, as its protagonist. Gu was one member of the Chinese delegation to the Paris Peace Conference. He defended China’s rights on Shangdong, and many Westerns

²¹ For more details on the May Fourth Movement, see Chow Tse-tsung, *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960).

recognized him as an outstanding diplomat, which laid down the base for his future diplomatic career.²² An interesting fact is that, despite his diplomatic achievements in Republican China, Gu was once charged a war criminal by the CCP in 1949. His name was on the list of war criminals mainly due to his service in the KMT government.²³ As one of the most outstanding diplomats in modern China, and a witness of many important historical events, Gu finished an 8-volume memoir in his late years, which was translated and published in Chinese in 1982.²⁴ The CCP never issued any statement on his political status until his death. The appearance of Gu on screen, just like the case of Lin Biao, indicates that, compared with the previous political-bias historical account, a more objective perspective will be offered to reexamine one of the most significant historical events in modern China.

In the past, the corruption of the warlord government and its failure in foreign affairs were considered the main reasons that sparked the May Fourth movement. In *My 1919*, however, the far-off events at Versailles and the Chinese delegation are brought up in a positive light. The film opens with a celebration of the ending of the WWI on November 11, 1918, in Europe. A black and white documentary effect is used to build a

²² For studies on Gu's contribution to modern China's diplomacy, see Willian L. Tung, *V.K. Wellington Koo and China's Wartime Diplomacy* (Taipei: Biographical Literature Press, 1978). Also see Chu Pao-chin, *V.K. Wellington Koo, A Case Study of China's Diplomat and Diplomacy of Nationalism, 1912-1966* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1981). The most recent scholarship is Stephen G. Craft's *V.K. Wellington Koo and the Emergence of Modern China* (The University Press of Kentucky, 2004).

²³ Because Gu begun his diplomatic career in the Chinese Warlord government, he had been put on the wanted list by the KMT government too. See Jin Guangyao, *Gu Weijun zhuang* (Shijiazhuang: Hebei renmin chubanshe, 1999), 255. Also see Xiao Gan's *Gu Weijun Zhuan* (Beijing: zhongguo wenshi chubanshe, 1998), 290.

²⁴ *Reminiscences of Wellington Koo* was originally recorded in English and collected in Columbia University library.

real historical sense. Then the screen cuts back to color— a mid-shot shows Gu sitting in a carriage. His voice-over introduces the historical background of his mission in Paris:

The First World War has ended. As a member of the victorious allies, China will take part in the Paris Peace Conference. I have the honor of being one of the representatives of the Chinese delegation... I have been studying the international affairs as well as China's foreign affairs during the WWI. I'm regarding the oncoming conference as an extraordinary opportunity for China. I wish that China could take this chance to recover from its diplomatic defeats of the last one hundred years.

Throughout this film, Gu is portrayed as an excellent diplomat who is always ready to fight for China's rights, and he pursues a diplomatic way to achieve this goal. One episode occurs during a visit to Georges Clemenceau, the Prime Minister of France. When Gu and the head of the Chinese delegation, Lu Zhengxiang, arrive at the minister's residence, the minister is just finishing his fencing practice and still wears his fencing uniform. Although they are coming to seek Clemenceau's support to maintain 5 seats for the Chinese delegation in the conference, Gu politely suggests that they should start the meeting after Clemenceau changes into formal attire. In the meeting, Gu refused to sit down because he will have no seat if the seats allocated to the Chinese delegation are reduced to 2. Gu is highly praised in this film for the great efforts he has made for the nation despite the fact that his mission is destined to be a failure due to China's unfavorable position on the international stage. Consequently, the warlord Chinese government that is represented by Gu and his fellows is no longer totally corrupt. This kind of cinematic rewriting of history is one of the most significant cultural phenomena in post-1989 China. Not only the warlord government and the Nationalist government appear in a positive light, even emperors of the Qing dynasty and their feudalist

patriarchism have been interpreted anew in many TV dramas.²⁵ The highly politicized socialist discourse is replaced by a more liberal one. The ideological transition in post-1989 China, to a great degree, has been first achieved in the cultural field through “main melody” films and “main melody” TV dramas.

Set against the backdrop of the Paris Peace conference, *My 1919* not only draws most of its historical facts from Gu’s memoir, but also adopts the memoir’s first-person narrative style, which is the second key point that deserves special attention. This is not to say that first-person narrative as a literary technique is rare to see in cinema, but generally it is affiliated with an individual’s experience of growing up, such as the first-person narrative in *Forrest Gump* and *Memoirs of A Geisha*. What is interesting in *My 1919*, however, is its first-person narrative of a major historical event. It echoes a rising trend of “Jishi wenxue (Documentary Literature)” in 1990s’ China that satisfied the reader’s natural curiosity and voyeurism in a way that serious literature or even popular novels never could, and a major part of the “Documentary Literature” was on the life of *Zhiqing* (an abbreviation of intellectual youths, or sent-down youths) during the Cultural Revolution. Characterized by sensationalism, this sort of *Zhiqing* literature provides its readers anecdotes that are not recordable in the official account. Consumerism quickly takes ground when readers have been motivated by a desire to learn more about the past that goes against the grain of the official account. *My 1919* caters to the wave of consumerism even though its personalized rewriting of history is still confined by the contemporary political situation. Or, in other words, the first-person narrative in *My 1919* actually makes history a cultural artifact that can be consumed in post-socialist China.

²⁵ The most influential one is *Yongzheng Dynasty*, which I have mentioned in Chapter 4, 126.

Rather than challenging the socialist historiography, what has been achieved in *My 1919* is a commercialization of history.

An interesting case to observe the relationship between personalization and commercialization is a pop song from the early 1990s entitled *Wode 1997* (My 1997). In this song, a girl is making wishes for the return of Hong Kong in 1997:

...I have spent longer time in Canton because my boyfriend is in Hong Kong,
He can come to Shengyan but I cannot go to Hong Kong...
1997 please come quickly! So I can go to Hong Kong;
1997 please come quickly! So I can stand in Hung Hom Coliseum;
1997 please come quickly! So I can go with him to see the midnight show....

For the composer and the singer of this pop song, Ai Jing, 1997 would be the time she could travel freely to Hong Kong, meeting her boyfriend and enjoying the dazzling world. The colonial history of Hong Kong and its return to mainland China have no political meaning for her. What she cares, and what most Chinese will care, too, is how Hong Kong would bring changes to their personal life. *My 1919* bears an analogy with this song not only in terms of their similar titles. As embodied in the song, what is obvious in the film is a same attempt of appropriating the grand history to personal goals, although its nationalist thrust cannot be ignored, which I will discuss in next chapter.

While Hong Kong is the symbol of a dazzling commercial world in *My 1997*, *My 1919*, shot in Paris, offers the audiences an exotic Western scenery, and part of this film uses foreign languages to create the exotic mood. In addition, it has an interesting cinematic representation of Chinese men and French women. Gu lives with a noble French family, an old French lady and her daughter Jeanna, and Jeanna has a good impression of Gu. When Gu comes to pick up a friend in the train station, he is flirted with by several

French prostitutes. Meanwhile, surprisingly to most Chinese audiences, the head of the Chinese delegation, Lu Zhengxiang, has a beautiful French wife. May Fourth Movement, in contrast, is only briefly mentioned. Therefore, in terms of visual effect, *My 1919* is a film of Paris in 1919 rather than one of China in 1919. This exoticized visual representation implies not only a “farewell to the revolution” but also a warm welcome of Western capitalism.²⁶ It is the commercialization of the revolutionary history that makes this farewell-welcome gesture a postmodernist one.

According to historical records, under great domestic pressure, after the Western powers decided to hand Shandong to Japan, the Chinese delegation did not attend the ceremony when the powers signed the treaty. China’s failure in the Paris Peace Conference was regarded as a national humiliation in orthodox Chinese history. However, the film provides a fictional scene in which Gu not only attends the final session and refuses to sign the treaty, but also delivers a public lecture to express his outrage:

I’m very disappointed. The super committee disregarded the right of Chinese people and sold out China to Japan... What right do you have to betray the Shandong Province of China to Japan? ...Such a treaty of betrayal and humiliation, who may accept? Therefore we refuse to sign the treaty. Please remember, Chinese people will never forget this humiliating moment.

At the beginning of this film, the director has tried to create a faithful-to-history effect by a quasi-documentary opening shot. The first-person narrative also aims to strengthen its historical accurateness against grand narratives. Will the fictionalized last scene ruin its

²⁶ *Bidding Farewell to Revolution* actually is the title of the book written by Li Zehou and Liu Zaifu, two famous Chinese intellectuals after the 1989 incident, in which they conclude the cultural atmosphere in contemporary China as “bidding farewell to revolution.” See Li Zehou and Liu Zaifu, *Gaobie gemin* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Tiandi Book Inc, 1995).

previous efforts? I would like to argue that the juxtaposition of the fact and the fiction is an essential part of a postmodernist rewriting. Those who have no knowledge of this historical event may tend to believe that Gu did deliver the lecture full of nationalist sentiment, which speaks to the power of the film medium in constructing our way of knowing. For those who know exactly that Gu's lecture is merely a fiction, there is no harm in indulging in an illusion of parodying history. As a matter of fact, postmodernist parody is one of the most salient features of contemporary Chinese culture, and it is always related to sensitive political issues.

The third interesting point in *My 1919* is its overall critical attitude on the student movement. Triggered by the Paris Peace Conference, the May Fourth Movement was defined by Mao as the beginning of the new democracy revolution, and was often mentioned together with the massive protest against the Gang of Four in 1976. However, after the Tian'anmen Incident in 1989, the Party needs to revise the legitimacy of the student movement. Since students were the main participants of the May Fourth movement in 1919, a film about this year will probably awake the audience's memory of the 1989 incident.²⁷ Therefore, in *My 1919*, the May Fourth movement is briefly introduced with several quasi-documentary shots. Instead of directly representing student movement at home, a subplot is introduced through a fictional Chinese student leader in France, Xiao Kejian. As Gu's childhood friend, Xiao is described as a passionate and immature young student. Due to his political activities, he has been arrested when his

²⁷ One example is the restaging of Lao She's *Teahouse* after 1989. In the play, the teahouse owner is confused with the student movement under the KMT control: "they said it was a student protest, now how does it become a riot?" Ironically, the same change happened to the 1989 student movement too. I was sitting in the audiences, hearing people bursting into laugh at his confusion.

wife comes to visit him. Gu has to take care of her, while complaining to her, “What else can he do? Going on strike, organizing protest, and finally being arrested...what he did could not contribute to the county and the society.” After Xiao is released, he throws himself again into protests against the unfair Shandong resolution. While Gu is seeking a professional, diplomatic way to strive for China, Xiao engages in student activism, from printing and distributing pamphlets to organizing public lectures. He even hides two guns in his apartment, which indicates that he is ready to take terrorist action protesting the Versailles Treaty. By contrasting how Gu and Xiao take different approaches to defend China’s rights, it is not accidental that Gu’s approach is shown positively and Xiao’s approach negatively. Xiao’s lack of concern for his wife makes him more a negative radical political activist, especially when this attitude contrasts sharply to that of Gu’s, who not only loves his son and cherishes the memory of his deceased wife, but also takes good care of others around him. What is promoted here is family value that was denied in socialist cinema. Xiao ends up burning himself in front of the Versailles when he finds no effective ways to protest the Versailles Treaty. His suicidal image in flames is contrasted with scenes of Gu’s powerful public speech condemning the injustice of the Treaty, which, according to Xiao Zhiwei, implies “a rejection of popular nationalism as associated with excessive emotions and radicalism” in contemporary China.²⁸ Xiao Zhiwei further argues that the director Huang Jianzhong’s distaste for this character (Xiao Kejian) reflects “the new thinking about the revolutionary legacy among China’s intellectuals” as represented by the trend of “bidding farewell to revolution.” An

²⁸ Xiao Zhiwei and Yin Hong, “The Revisionist History in Recent Chinese Films: A Case Study of *My 1919*,” in *100 Years of Chinese Cinema: A Generational Dialogue* (Norwalk: EastBridge, 2005), 97-111, 101.

important point that he does not scrutinize is the implicit relationship between the character of Xiao and the 1989 student demonstration. To make the point more clearly, the negative representation of Xiao in the film is a supplement of the official account of the 1989 student movement. Combining sympathy with criticism, *My 1919* indicates implicitly that students' ardent patriotism is unpractical and useless in reality.

Days without Lei Feng: From Socialist Hero to Ordinary Hero

Lei Feng was a well-known name for those who grew up in China during the 60s, 70s and 80s. Born in 1940, Lei Feng was brought up by the Party after his parents died in 1946. He joined the PLA and became a model soldier that was fully dedicated to Socialism. He died in 1962 when a telephone pole, knocked down by an army truck, killed him while he was directing the truck. On March 5, 1963, Chairman Mao published his inscription "Learn from Comrade Lei Feng." Since then, Lei Feng has been further promoted by propaganda nationwide as a selfless socialist hero. March 5th has become the official "Learn from Lei Feng Day." Story of Lei Feng was widely taught in elementary school.²⁹ Over decades, Lei Feng has been used as a model to educate the Chinese people in terms of self-sacrifice and altruism. Posters bearing his image were also produced in large quantities.

Soon after his death, Lei Feng's life was adapted into film. *Lei Feng* was produced by August First Film Studio in 1965. Released on March 5th, this film aims to promote the Lei Feng spirit: serving the people wholeheartedly. It tells how Lei Feng, as a good student of Mao Zedong thoughts, tirelessly studies Chairman Mao's writings and

²⁹ For example, in the early 1980s, when I was studying in an elementary school, I was asked to recite the story of Lei Feng for the June First Children's day celebration,

does good deeds. *Leifeng zhige* (The Song of Lei Feng) was finished in 1978. In this film, after joining the PLA, Lei Feng is eager to go to the battlefield to avenge his parents. Gradually, he realizes that he ought to do whatever the Party asks. As “a screw that will never rust,” he put his limited life into the endless serving for the people. The term *Huo Lei Feng* (literally alive Lei Feng) has become a noun (or adjective) for anyone that is seen as selfless, or anyone that goes out of their way to help others.

The Song of Lei Feng was a major propaganda film in the 1980s, widely released to combat moral erosion after the Cultural Revolution. As one can expect, the Lei Feng spirit has been gradually swept away because of the newly introduced individual economic incentives. Many people thought the Lei Feng spirit was “foolish” and anachronistic. For example, *The Song of Lei Feng* still features how Lei Feng defends socialism and the people’s community. In order to keep up with the political changes, the Party needed to update the Lei Feng image for a better propaganda effect. In 1989, a documentary film *Lei Feng shishei* (Who is Lei Feng) was produced to promote the Lei Feng spirit.

As more and more young Chinese have no idea whom Lei Feng is, a “main melody” film *Likai Leifeng de rizi* (Days without Lei Feng, 1997) brings him back to people’s mind. Different from the films listed above, in *Days without Lei Feng*, the protagonist is Qiao Anshan, the driver who accidentally knocked down the telephone pole that caused Lei Feng’s death. After left the army, Qiao got married and has been working as a driver. Although most people knew that he was Lei Feng’s comrade-in-arms, few knew that it was he who accidentally killed Lei Feng.

The production of *Days without Lei Feng* has an interesting story. In 1996, a scriptwriter of the Changchun Film Studio, Wang Xingdong, finished an 8-episode TV drama script based on his interview of Qiao Anshan. The theme of his script is how Qiao Anshan inherits the Lei Feng spirit in his life after he retires from the PLA. Unable to find a producer in Changchun, Wang came to Beijing and made contact with the newly-founded Forbidden City Film Company. This company is a special case among the state-run film studios because of its special ways of organization and operation. Although there are several film studios located in Beijing, none of them is under the administrative control of the Beijing City Hall. While both Tianjin and Shanghai have their own film studios, the Beijing Film Studio and many others were under control of the Ministry of Culture before 1996. They were handed to the MRFT (Ministry of Radio, Film and Television) after 1996. It is said that the Beijing City Hall has been eager to establish its own film studio to compete for awards in domestic film festivals.³⁰ Viewed with hindsight, economic concern is a more important motive for the Beijing City Hall to establish a local-controlled film studio. With supports from the upper levels, the Forbidden City Film Company is co-invested by the Beijing Bureau of Culture and the Beijing Bureau of Radio and Television; the vice-director of the Beijing Bureau of Culture became the company's first leader. They were looking for an excellent film script as the company's first product, which had to be a "main melody" film with great commercial potential. *Days without Lei Feng* turned out to be the one that fit perfectly to the company's expectation. In order to make its premiere on March 5, 1997, the 35th

³⁰ Chen Tao. "Zijinchen de mimi (The Secrets of 'The Forbidden City')," *Caijing* (May 1999): 5-13.

anniversary for Mao's inscription of "learning from comrade Lei Feng," the film was shot in six weeks.³¹

At the end of *The Song of Lei Feng*, the audience is told that Lei Feng dies at his post. *Days without Lei Feng* begins with the accident: on the Memorial Day of 1996, the protagonist Qiao Anshan visits Lei Feng's cemetery in Shengyang, as he does every year. In a sepia-colored documentary style, Qiao Anshan recalls how he accidentally killed Lei Feng. Since Lei Feng had been erected as a model soldier at that time, in order to protect Qiao, his name is not revealed in any news release.

The narration of this film is made up with three major plots. In the first plot, the camera cuts to 1978. Qiao has retired from the PLA and becomes a bus driver. One day, he turns down his leader when he tries to take advantage of the bus transportation. Several episodes occur on the bus that day: an old woman looks for her gold ring; a thief steals a passenger's money, and a pregnant woman needs to go to the hospital. Qiao is represented as an honest, warm-hearted driver that is always ready to help others. After sending the woman to hospital, he makes the thief returned the money. A ticket collector finds the gold ring on the bus and, inspired by Qiao's Lei Feng spirit, she decides to return it to the owner. Lei Feng's dedication to socialism is out of sight in this plot. What is highlighted in the Lei Feng spirit is a willingness to help others, moral honesty, and righteousness. All of the three qualities are highly cherished in a profit-driven China due to the very lack of them.

The climax of the film comes from the second plot set in 1988. A young couple accidentally hits an old man and runs away. A sedan driver stops and then drives away as

³¹ Chen Tao. "Zijinchen de mimi (The Secrets of 'The Forbidden City')," *Caijing* (May 1999): 5-13.

well, because of the possible trouble. It is Qiao Anshan who picks up the old man and sends him to the hospital. However, he gets himself into big trouble when the old man's sons and daughters do not want to pay the medical costs, charging Qiao as the hit-and-run driver. The old man is afraid that his children will abandon him in the hospital, identifying Qiao as the man who has hit him. Qiao's teenager son suggests his father not to do good deeds any more since everyone is talking about money. He even concludes that those who learn from Lei Feng are stupid. After a TV reporter interviews Qiao and broadcasts his story, the sedan driver finally shows up at the TV station to help Qiao get out of trouble, and the real criminals are brought to justice. But Qiao's wife is outraged: what would have happened if the real criminals had not been arrested? This plot ends with Qiao sitting in the Lei Feng cemetery, being confused about the outcome of his good deed. As the most touching part of this film, this plot moved many audiences into tears, not only because of the actors' excellent performances, but also because of the lost Lei Feng spirit—a mutual belief among people. When money becomes the primary concern in people's philosophy of life, social justice is suspended. The moral corruption in contemporary China has been vividly shown in this plot.

The last plot is set in 1995 when Qiao and his son work in long distance transportation. His son refuses to stop when some people ask for help. He has learned enough lessons from his father's bad experience. When a bloody-faced man tries to stop their truck, his son quickly realized that there are gangsters who intend to blackmail the drivers. He warns his father, "We should be very careful on our way. When you drove with Lei Feng, there was not this kind of situation." Qiao cannot argue back since his son

is absolutely correct on this point. The truck then gets stuck and nobody stops to help. They have to spend the night on the roadside. Next morning, when Qiao and his son start to unload the truck in order to drive it out of the mud, a group of young volunteers come to help. It turns out that their leader is a school principal that was lectured by Lei Feng and Qiao Anshan when she was a student. She organizes her students to do volunteering work every weekend. Qiao is happy to announce: Lei Feng is still alive.³² What we can see here is a successful update of the Lei Feng spirit to volunteering work, a concept that is more consistent with contemporary society.

From Lei Feng to Qiao Anshan, from “a socialist screw” to young volunteers, *Days without Lei Feng* bridges the distance between the selfless socialist heroes and the ordinary people, renewing the Lei Feng spirit under new situation. It is not a disavowal of the socialist heroes, but a promise that everyone could become a hero, a self-disciplined and self-fulfilled hero in post-socialist China. Socialism is a history that produced numerous heroes, and post-socialist China still needs heroes—but they will be represented as the ordinary people who dedicate themselves to individual moral perfection, no longer serving any political slogans.

The narrative style in *Days Without Lei Feng* is closely related with the overall media representation of ordinary people’s daily life in post-1989 China. CCTV launched a program called “tell stories of the ordinary people” in October 1993, and it has had an unprecedented viewing rate. In *The Practice of Everyday life*, Micheal de Certeau examines the ways in which people individualize mass culture, altering things from

³² Wang Xingdong and Chen Baoguang, *Likai Lei Fengde rizi* (Days without Lei Feng), Beijing: Jiefangjun wenyi chubanshe, 1997. Also see Mia Turner. “After He killed Lei Feng,” *Time* (June 1997): 9-13.

utilitarian objects to street plans to rituals, laws and language, in order to make them their own. What happens in “tell stories of the ordinary people”, however, is an opposite process in which people’s everyday life has been selected and encoded by the mass media as a representative moment. Examined from perspectives of both psychoanalytical and an ideological operation, the account of people’s daily life on screen can exert a subtle influence on how the ordinary people will identify themselves. Generally, they will consider these stories more truthful and closer to their real life than other ways of narration. When this highly encoded virtual reality is broadcasted to the audiences, and making most of them identify with the images on the screen, what is intentionally concealed or successfully bypassed in this visual narrative technique is who the teller is and according to what criteria a story is told. As Wang Hui has pointed out, this program is a TV collaboration of independent producers, state propaganda apparatus and enormous commercial capital.³³ The emergence of “the ordinary people” in this program, argues Luo Gang, only provides a “mirror image” that the audience will identify with.³⁴ The same ideological operation can be found in *Days Without Lei Feng*, too. When Lei Feng was promoted as a PLA model, logically it was impossible that every PLA soldier could become Lei Feng, and what was promoted is just to “learn from comrade Lei Feng.” When Qiao Anshan, a person that carries out the Lei Feng spirit is represented on screen, this image is much closer to the ordinary people. What he has encounters in his life, as being told in the film, may happen to many people. In an era that socialist heroes

³³ Wang Hui, “The Significance of Cultural Studies,” in *jiuying yu xinzhì* (Jilin: Liaoning Educational Press, 1996), 34-45, 42.

³⁴ Luo Gang. “Jiangshu laobaixing ziji de gushi? (How to tell stories of the Ordinary people?),” *Tianya* (February 2000): 17-21.

are becoming dysfunctional, the new heroes are the ordinary people that are selectively represented by mass media, a newly formed symbol of power in post-socialist China. The conspiracy between mass media and ideology in writing histories of ordinary people is not an exclusive Chinese phenomenon. Both Dustin Hoffman's *Hero* and Tom Hanks' *Forrest Gump* are familiar Hollywood examples to most American audiences. In the Lei Feng case, however, what is discernable is the embarrassing situation of ideological transition. It seems that Lei Feng comes to post-socialist China by a time machine, only finding that everything has become totally different. As he faces many difficulties to adjust to a new sphere, it is the cinematic representation of Qiao Anshan that successfully integrates him into post-socialist China.

Another important "main melody" filmmaking trend in post-1989 China is the documentary or quasi-documentary film productions. Documentary has been generally considered as an instrument of information, education and propaganda. In socialist China, many politicized historical documentaries were made to glorify socialism. Short scientific documentaries were frequently shown with feature films. Since the late 1980s, more and more "main melody" documentaries of important historical figures or major historical events have been produced, drawing considerable audiences. Among them, *Zhou Enlai Waijiao Fengyun* (Zhou Enlai's Diplomacy Legends, 1997), a documentary on the Prime Minister Zhou Enlai's excellent diplomatic strategies in the 1950s was the most popular one. In addition to several biographical films and TV series on Zhou's life, this documentary focuses on Zhou's diplomacy, exhibiting the newly-established PRC's

diplomatic achievements. *Jiaoliang* (The Bout, 1995), another documentary recording of the Korean War and the negotiation was one of the top 10 box office makers in 1995. Both, to some extent, appease Chinese people's dissatisfaction with China's passive role in contemporary international affairs. Put aside the fact that the objectivity of the documentary genre is problematic, the popularity of such a documentary narration of history mainly comes from the audience's thirsty for more historical facts that were unrevealed before. Meanwhile, it also offers a consumable socialist history. This topic deserves a special study and cannot be covered in this chapter. What I want to draw attention here is that both documentary and quasi-documentary narratives play important roles in rewriting the revolutionary history in contemporary China.

From revolutionary epic to historical memoir, to stories of the ordinary people, the narration of history in "main melody" films exhibits a Bakhtinian polyphonic characteristic: the co-existence of many voices instead of a monologic one. As each character in Dostoevsky's work represents a voice of an individual self, distinct from others, the above discussed three major narratives of history in "main melody" films carry out different ideological functions respectively, aiming to complete the ideological transition in post-1989 China. The ideological operation of polyphonic historical narratives in "main melody" films also bears an analogy with Bakhtin's polyphonic concept of truth. For him, truth is a number of mutually addressed albeit contradictory and logically inconsistent statements. It cannot be expressed with "a single mouth," but requires many simultaneous voices. The polyphonic narration of history in "main melody" films is characterized by the same simultaneity. Different ways of narration do

not simple complement each other. More often than not, they are contradictory and logically inconsistent. It is the very co-existence of many voices that serves the mechanism of ideology. After polyphony, Bakhtin further introduces the concept of carnival to better describe a situation in which distinct individual voices are heard, flourish, and interact together when regular conventions are broken or reversed. This carnival situation, to some extent, is a perfect description of the situation in contemporary China, in which the co-existence of different narratives creates an illusion of many free choices in a quickly commercialized Chinese society. When people get intoxicated in the carnival, ideology works. On the other hand, the co-existence of different narratives also means more interstices will be produced to observe the ideological operation, especially when the transition from old ideology to new ideology is interrupted by both socialist legacy and people's concrete living experience, which I will discuss in the last chapter.

CHAPTER VI

CHINESE NATIONALISM AND ITS CINEMATIC REPRESENTATION

The collapse of the Soviet Union and other Eastern European socialist countries marked the end of the Cold War and the advent of globalization. Surprising to scholars who predicted either the end of nation-states or clash of civilizations, nationalism has become one of the most powerful forces in the modern world. In China, as faith in Marxism and Maoism has declined, a strong nationalist sentiment re-emerges. In this chapter, by examining the cinematic representation of three important historical events in “main melody” films: the Opium War in 1840, the Anti-Japanese War in the 1930s, and China’s nuclear testing in 1964, I will illustrate how nationalism has been constructed as an effective ideological discourse in contemporary China, and how Chinese intellectuals have been involved in this ideological construction. Chinese nationalism was the product of Western imperialism and its global expansion. A review of the historical origins of Chinese nationalism and its development will shed light on the changing ideological functions of the nationalist discourse at different historical conjunctures. In semi-colonial China, nationalism unified Chinese people of different classes, especially during the anti-Japanese war. In a globalized post-socialist China, by using the past to interpret the present and create the future, the CCP appropriates nationalism to conceal domestic social conflicts and overcome the post-1989 ideological crisis. Meanwhile, when nationalism becomes a diplomatic force defending Chinese national interests against

global capitalism, as a form of local resistance supported by Chinese intellectuals, nationalism can also bring home vividly the often ignored historical lineage between colonialism, imperialism, and global capitalism.

The Opium War and the Origin of Chinese nationalism

According to *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, the term “nationalism” is generally used to describe two phenomena: 1) the attitude that the members of a nation have when they care about their national identity, and 2) the actions that the members of a nation take when seeking to achieve (or sustain) self-determination. Built on the philosophies of liberty, equality, and fraternity, the French Revolution has been regarded by most scholars as the beginning of the modern nation-state system, where nationalism came into existence. When the new French Republic was at war with most of Europe, responding to the deep popular sentiment for political independence, nationalism became a determining force to unify the French people.

Based upon analysis of European history, the definition that nationalism arises when nations seek to become modern nation-states, as some scholars correctly point out, does not apply very well to China.¹ Due to a variety of crises caused by both domestic and international factors in the second half of the 19th century, the birth of Chinese nationalism predated the founding of a modern Chinese nation-state. Strictly speaking, “China” did not exist as a modern nation-state until the founding of the Republic of China in 1911. Before 1911, the Qing Empire (1644-1911), founded by the Manchus, had ruled the Han Chinese and other ethnic groups for almost three hundred years. Until the

¹ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983),141.

18th century, Europe was an “underdeveloped” region that could not compete with China’s more “developed” commodity production including porcelain utensils, silk textiles, and so on. As Enrique Dussel has pointed out, China is an example that demonstrates the degree to which European world hegemony was impossible before the Industrial Revolution.² Despite the rise and fall of different dynasties, China as a cultural nation was never challenged by others. A pre-modern cultural nationalism was formed in imperial China through contacts with those “barbarians.” However, after the Industrial Revolution empowered the Western countries, Celestial China gradually became a super-sized market for Western capitalism. In order to balance a huge trade deficit with China, the British began to grow opium in India in significant quantities starting in the mid-18th century, and an illegal opium trade flooded into southern China, mainly through the East Indian Company.³ Viewed from this perspective, the dynamics that finally led to the Sino-British conflict in the Opium War is nothing but the aggressive expansion of Western capitalism.

In contrast to the fast development of European countries and their growing economic interests in the East, the Great Qing Dynasty, the once glorious empire, was plagued with rampant corruption, a steady decentralization of power, rebellions, and economic disasters. Faced with the social and economic problems associated with opium use, the Qing government prohibited the smoking of opium in 1729 and reaffirmed its ban on opium use in 1799. The decree had little effect to slow down opium use and trade.

² Enrique Dussel. “World-System and ‘Trans’-Modernity,” *Nepantla: Views from South* 3:2 (2002): 221-244.

³ Before the trade deficit, the financial drain on Europe’s silver had been already squeezed by European wars.

In 1838, the British were selling 1,400 tons of opium annually to China. In March 1839, the Daoguang Emperor appointed Commissioner Lin Zexu to control the opium trade in Canton. After Lin confiscated and burned nearly 1,200 tons of opium, the British sent warships and soldiers to attack China's coastal towns. Armed with modern muskets and cannons, they threatened Beijing, the capital of the Qing Dynasty. The scared Emperor dismissed Lin and sued for peace. The Treaty of Nanjing became the first unequal treaty in the history of China.⁴ Since 1840, Chinese people had witnessed a series of military defeats and the consequent humiliation. The Western invasion in the following years and the unequal treaties imposed on China made the "foreign" seem more devilish than angelic. Some scholars argue that the concept of modern nationalism did not enter into the Chinese mind until the first Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895).⁵ In my point of view, the origin of Chinese nationalism could be traced back to the First Opium War in 1840 when the intrusion of Western gunboats coincided with the decline of the Qing Dynasty. Engels has pointed out that the people's war in southern China after the first Opium War, as all struggles against the foreigners, was a popular war for the maintenance of Chinese nationality.⁶ It was against this historical background that the Qing court started the Self-Strengthening Movement (1861-1894) with a hope that a strong nation could protect its

⁴ Under this treaty, the Qing government was obliged to pay the British government 6 million silver dollars for the opium that had been confiscated by Lin Zexu in 1839 (Article IV), 3 million dollars in compensation for debts that the Hong merchants in Canton owed British merchants (Article V), and a further 12 million dollars in compensation for the cost of the war (Article VI). The total sum of 21 million dollars was to be paid in installments over three years and the Qing government would be charged an annual interest rate of 5 per cent for the money that was not paid in a timely manner (Article VII). In addition to the huge compensation and other indemnities, five ports were opened for foreign trade, and Hong Kong was ceded to the British "in perpetuity" (Article III).

⁵ Guoqi Xu, "Nationalism, Internationalism, and National Identity: China from 1895 to 1919," in *Chinese Nationalism in Perspective*. 102.

⁶ Engels, "People's War in China," in *Marxism and Asia*. 123-124.

sovereignty against Western aggression. Threatened by an awareness of national extinction in a ferocious social Darwinian world, the nationalist sentiment aroused in China was a direct response to colonialism and imperialism. No matter how pre-modern or underdeveloped a country was, their attitudes and actions against imperialist aggression should be recognized as modern nationalism.

Transforming Sorrow to Celebration: Nationalism in *The Opium War*

The Opium War opened China's "Century of Humiliation." China's defeat in the first Sino-Japanese War further reinforced the consciousness of *Wanguo miezhong* (the loss of one's state and the extinction of one's race) among Chinese people. Looking back on the development of Chinese nationalism from 1895 to 1937, Jing Tsu reconceptualized the production of a Chinese identity "predicated not on idealized images of empowerment and plentitude but, rather, on their absence."⁷ As he argues, "humiliation, despite its dishonorable beginnings, has inaugurated a productive condition for national and cultural identity in China in the 20th century."⁸ In a study of China's new nationalism, Peter Hays Gries also points out that the crucial national narrative, or more precisely, the continuously reworked narrative of the "Century of Humiliation" from the mid-19th century to the mid-20th century is central to the contested and evolving meaning of Chinese nationalism today.⁹

⁷ Jing Tsu, *Failure, Nationalism, and Literature: The Making of Modern Chinese Identity, 1895-1937* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 226

⁸ Jing Tsu, 223.

⁹ Gries Peter Hays, *China's New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy* (University of California Press, 2004), 45.

Both the first Opium War and the first Sino-Japanese War have been represented frequently in Chinese literature and cinema to promote nationalism. Made in 1959, the film *Lin Zexu* depicts Chinese people's heroic resistance to British imperialism. In this film, Commissioner Lin Zexu enjoys popular support in his efforts against Western opium smuggling. A film on the navy battle in the first Sino-Japanese War, *Jiawu Fengyu* (The Naval Battle of 1894) was produced in 1962, focusing on Deng Shichang, a patriotic official who tragically dies with his crew when their ship is hit by a Japanese torpedo. In both films, China's defeat is explained in terms of the incompetent Qing government and its corrupted high officials instead of its backwardness in technology and weaponry. In *The Naval Battle of 1894*, Deng Shichang is presented as a national hero. By condemning the rampant corruption of the "feudal" system, the film suggests that the war could have been won if passionate patriots like Deng Shichang would have had their way. One interesting plot in *Lin Zexu* is how the Cantonese fishermen help Lin capture Danton, the British merchant, in order to force him to hand in his opium. Once hearing that Lin will arrest all the British opium merchants, Danton manages to escape with the aid of several corrupt Qing officials. A young fisherman discovers their plan but fails to catch them. Then, an older fisherman organizes a team to inspect all the boats, and the team finally catches Danton. One of the playwrights, Ye Yuan, has claimed that this plot was added into the original script in order to convey the idea that "the true master of the history is not Lin Zexu, but Chinese people who stand behind him."¹⁰ Consequently, the film does not end with a defeat. After Lin has been dismissed, the film continues with another long

¹⁰ *Lin Zexu: From Script to Film* (Beijing: China Cinema Press, 1962), 214. Both Zheng Junli and Zhao Dan, the director and the lead actor of this film, had undergone political criticism in the Wuxun campaign. Therefore, they had to be very careful in standing with the people.

shot, in which a banner of “Pingying tuan” (Annihilate the British League) waves over the people who are preparing to fight against the British. A voiceover claims: “From this day onwards, Chinese people start the anti-imperialist and anti-feudalist struggle,” which became an orthodox account of the Opium War in scholarly historical writings as well as works of literature and art produced in socialist China.

The colony of Hong Kong was the most lasting legacy of the Opium War. In 1860, the colony was extended into the Kowloon peninsula. In 1898, the Convention of Peking further expanded the colony with a 99-year lease of the New Territories. Although the Chinese government, under different regimes, had insisted that Hong Kong is Chinese territory, it was not until 1984 that an agreement on the future of Hong Kong between the U.K. and the PRC governments was signed after long negotiations. According to the Sino-British Joint Declaration, China would resume its sovereignty over Hong Kong on July 1, 1997.

In 1994, an electronic clock was erected on the east side of the Tian’anmen Square in order to countdown the seconds for Hong Kong’s return. In the center of the Square is the Monument to the People’s Heroes, which was constructed during the 1950s in memory of the martyrs who laid down their lives for the revolutionary struggles. On the pedestal of the monument, eight huge bas-reliefs carved out of white marble tell eight revolutionary events, and the first one describes a scene of the First Opium War—Chinese people fighting against the British. From this bas-reliefs to the countdown clock, a meaningful time-space structure was formed to observe a different interpretation of the Opium War in nationalist discourse. The marble relief features Chinese people’s

revolutionary spirit. However, as this historical event was concreted in the white marble, China's defeat in the Opium War became a long-ago historical fact. On the other side, the countdown number on the electronic clock, flashing every second, became a new attraction of the Square. It seemed that the electronic clock was speaking to the marble relief with a triumphal gesture: "The time to wash away the national humiliation is coming."

As a film dedicated to the return of Hong Kong, a great event in Chinese history, *The Opium War* offers another telling example to observe the changing nationalist discourse in an era of globalization. The film begins with the text: "Only when a nation really stands up, can she reflect and face squarely her history of humiliation." This inscription deserves special attention in terms of the contrast it makes between "stand up" and "history of humiliation." In October 1949, at the founding ceremony of the PRC, Mao declared that Chinese people eventually stood up. Obviously, the "standing up" in the text does not refer to Mao's 1949 declaration. Instead, it refers to the economic prosperity that China achieved in the 1990s. In other words, it is economic rather than political criteria that decide whether a nation stands up or not. This "economic determinism" is the inevitable consequence of global capitalism, and what is erased in this new worldview is the anti-imperialist history.

Compared with the narration of mass resistance in the 1959 production, *The Opium War* offers a favorable description of Lin Zexu as "the first Chinese who opens his eyes to the world." Besides his Chinese cultural superiority, Commissioner Lin is also eager to learn the essences of modern Western knowledge to improve China. However,

this kind of awareness comes too late; British gunboats have already appeared in the China Sea. After being dismissed, Lin leaves his globe to the Emperor, hoping him to know that there are many powerful nations in the world and the Qing Dynasty could no longer afford to be out of touch with this reality. As revealed by the Lin character, the narrative of *The Opium War* starts to shift from a mass resistance to a reflection of China's undeveloped modern technology. The defeat of the Qing Empire in the war is no longer merely explained by its corrupt government, but China's backward situation, which, in turn, legitimizes the CCP's "open and reform" policy in contemporary China. It is the great achievement brought in by the "open and reform" policy that contributes to China's standing-up today.

Xie Jin, the director of *The Opium War*, is one of the most famous film directors in China. Despite a strong humanist-based critique on the leftist Party policy in his post-Cultural Revolution works, Xie Jin is a strong advocate of the "open and reform" policy. For example, one of his well-received films made in the 1980s is *Furong Zhen* (Hibiscus Town, 1986), a melodrama following the life and travails of a young woman who lives through the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution. By borrowing a moral perspective from Confucianism to criticize the extreme leftist ideas and justify a new concept of the self-sufficiency in the new economic order, as Nick Browne observes, the film actually finished the ideological task of introducing the legitimacy of individual entrepreneurship, a shift in the Party's policy toward economic development.¹¹ Xie's personal political stance determines that *The Opium War* first of all will endorse the Party's commitment to

¹¹ Nick Browne, "Society and subjectivity: On the Political Economy of Chinese Melodrama," in *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics*, 53.

openness and economic development today. Therefore, the most striking revision in *The Opium War*, the Qi Shan character, becomes understandable. As the chief negotiator of the Qing court after the dismissal of Lin, Qi was charged as a national traitor in many historical accounts. In Xie's film, however, Qi's appeasement of the British is explained in terms of his pragmatism and realistic assessment of China's inferior military force. In a meeting with local officials including Lin Zexun, Qi argues that he is saving China from its quick doom by seeking a truce:

Now everyone talks about fighting to death. Why don't I hear anyone saying "fight to victory?" I am a member of the imperial family and have received many favors from the Emperor over years. Don't assume that I am afraid of death. If any of you can assure me a victory in the end, I will be the first to go into the battlefield....

Compared with Lin's heroic anti-imperialist spirit, the Qi Shan character in *The Opium War*, argues Xiao Zhiwei, represents a trend of "rational nationalism" in contemporary China, which emphasizes openness and modesty towards the West. According to Xiao, "rational nationalism" is different from the extreme nationalism characterized by strong anti-West sentiments.¹² The key message of this film, in my point of view, lies not in the promotion of rational nationalism against extreme nationalism. Both Lin Zexu and Qi Shan, after being re-interpreted, albeit to different degrees, work as mouthpieces of the reformists in contemporary China. When the closed-door policy of the Qing court is criticized by a cinematic presentation of many Qing officials who indulged in a Sino-centric worldview, what is highly praised is the CCP's policy of openness, which is absent in the film narration but present in its reception context.

¹² Xiao Zhiwei, "Nationalism in Chinese Popular Culture: A Case Study of *The Opium War*," in *Exploring Nationalisms of China* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002), 43.

The rewriting of the Qing court, as I have mentioned, has been an important cultural trend in 1990s China, and *The Opium War* is one telling example. The narration of the “Century of Humiliation” in this film opens with an urgent official document asking Lin Zexu to report in Beijing. Compared with the previous negative representation of the Qing court, both historically and literally, what Xie Jin presents is a good Emperor Daoguang who is deeply disturbed by the evil effects of opium and wants to ban it at any cost. A gloomy dark blue light washes over the Forbidden City, creating a smothery atmosphere. It is here that the Emperor orders the execution of Lin’s mentor, an opium-addicted official Lu Zifang. Lu’s last confession is “His majesty puts me to death to show his determination to ban opium,” which firmly places the film in the genre of heroic tragedy. After Chinese people’s resistance against the British failed due to a corrupt government and military inferiority, a shot of the Treaty text is followed with another dark blue scene of the Forbidden City, and Emperor Daoguang kneels down in his ancestral temple, wailing miserably. His sons kneel after him one by one, and the youngest one is dozing off. Outside the temple, a heavy rainstorm washes over a stone lion with bloody eyes. Echoing the beginning inscription, another text appears on the screen: “On July 1, 1997, the Chinese government reclaimed sovereignty over Hong Kong. It has been 157 years since the Opium War.” Both the Emperor’s wailing and the final text show the Qing court as a victim of Western imperialism. Criticism of the court’s corruption is not as strong as that in *Lin Zexu*.

Besides an obvious sympathetic attitude to Emperor Daoguang and Qi Shan, *The Opium War* also emphasizes the heroic resistance of the Qing army. In the film, the

British approaches Dinghai, a southeast coast town, and threatens a local Qing official: “If you don’t agree, we will wipe you out!” The official shows great courage by facing of advanced Western weapon, replying: “I have never seen such a big ship, and such powerful cannons, but we must resist. The soldiers of the Great Qing would rather die than surrender.” In the Dinghai battle, no single Qing soldier surrendered to the British. Keeping this in mind, I cannot agree with Xiao Zhiwei that this film has more to say about the Qing government’s ill-preparedness for the war than about the British wrongdoing.¹³ On the contrary, rather than claiming China’s ill preparedness for the war, *The Opium War* shows more the aggressiveness of British imperialism, mainly through the evil scheme set up by Captain Charles Elliot. When China’s defeat in the Opium War is represented as a historical tragedy, raging wrath goes towards colonialism and imperialism, which echoes the strong nationalist sentiment against the U.S.-led global capitalism.

Another striking difference between *Lin Zexu* (1959) and *The Opium War* (1997) has to do with the way in which foreigners are portrayed. Throughout *Lin Zexu*, the Westerners are portrayed as treacherous “foreign devils.” In contrast, the representation of the British in *The Opium War* has been viewed by many as displaying a lack of historical “bias.”¹⁴ For instance, in the 1997 production, the same Danton has a daughter named Mary who shows deep sympathy to the Chinese plight and strongly opposes the opium trade. However, Rebecca E. Karl argues that this film creates its “bias” more totalistically, and thus more effectively than did the earlier *Lin Zexu* by “an attempt to

¹³ Xiao Zhiwei, 2002, 45.

¹⁴ Ibid.

recolonize Chinese history with the promise of an alternative mode of ‘liberation’: a universal history of sameness rather than a claim to an alternative universalism of socialist difference.”¹⁵ I found myself in agreement with Karl while watching the young, vigorous Queen Victoria in *The Opium War*. This character constructs a mirror to reflect the old, indecisive Emperor Daoguan, albeit not without “critique of capitalist expansionism in the form of British imperialism.”¹⁶

Based on an insightful account of the unremittingly favorable depiction of Western culture and the negative characterization of Chinese culture in early post-Mao China, Chen Xiaomei argues that Chinese intellectuals’ appropriation of Western discourse—what she calls “Occidentalism” — can actually have a politically and ideologically liberating effect on contemporary non-Western culture.¹⁷ However, as Dai Jinhua points out, this Occidentalism was soon drawn upon by the Party to legitimize the transformation of the Chinese socialist system, to evade its inherent structural ideological contradictions. Therefore, a temporarily overlapping space between the official ideology and the anti-official Occidentalism has been formed.¹⁸ The collusion between intellectuals and the regime is embodied vividly in Xie Jin’s *The Opium War*. For example, a conversational scene between Queen Victoria and her officials is set in a sunny garden and then moves indoors. A warm, bright light is set throughout the whole scene. Queen Victoria has required that the English merchants must not ship opium to

¹⁵ Rebecca E. Karl, “The Burdens of History: *Lin Zexun* (1959) and *The Opium War* (1997),” in *Wither China? Intellectual Politics in Contemporary China* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 229-262.

¹⁶ Rebecca E. Karl, 2002, 245.

¹⁷ Chen Xiaomei, 1995, 5.

¹⁸ Dai Jinhua, Preface of Chen Xiaomei’s *Occidentalism*, 2.

China. But after learning that Lin Zexu is determined to ban opium, she insists, “we must teach them a lesson of free trade” because “whoever gets hold of China will have the entire East, the 19th century.” While most Chinese will probably disagree with Rebecca Karl that the “lesson of free trade” in this context is an “unimpeachable Historical Logic”, I’m not sure if they will feel surprised when the importance of China is remarked upon by a British Queen, because such a way of narration has gained great popularity in post-socialist China. Isn’t that part and parcel of the recolonization of Chinese history?

Right before the conversation, a hot debate occurs in the British Parliament about whether or not they should go to war with China. While some are joking that the Qing Navy is only made up by indefensible fishing boats, one member raises to praise Confucius and Zhuangzi as well as the profundity of their thoughts. When China has to resort to the West to blazon its superiority, the dilemma of China’s modernization project is brought to light. On the one hand, the project is a forced response to, and a competition with Western countries; on the other hand, discourses of Chinese modernity often invoke the authority of the same West that has deeply humiliated China. From theory to practice, modernization in China is becoming a process of recolonization.

The Opium War had a huge budget of 100 million *yuan* (more than \$12 million), and its three-year production involved in a group of leading intellectuals. Released in the summer of 1997, the box office receipt was reported to have reached 720 million *yuan*, the biggest box office in China ever.¹⁹ Of course this commercial success could not be achieved without Party-organized group viewing. Although not directly funded by the

¹⁹ At that time, the average cost of a Chinese film was about 3 million *yuan* (equivalent to \$300,000), so *The Opium War* was the most expensive film ever made in China before 1997.

government, the film was commonly considered a piece of government propaganda. The large amount of money required for producing *The Opium War* was raised by Xie Jin privately from Chengdu Huitong Bank.²⁰ All Chinese banks are either governmental banks or semi-government owned. With the deepening of the economic reform, Chinese banks are required to look after their own financial interests. The fact that Huitong Bank willingly financed the production of *The Opium War* not only means that the high-level management of the Bank fully identified with the reformist messages in this film, but also indicates that the Bank expects a profitable return based on market survey.²¹ As in the case of *Hero*, as soon as the Central Department of Propaganda found *The Opium War* fitting well to the Party line, full support was given to aid the film's national distribution and exhibition.

The cinematic representation of the "Century of Humiliation" in *The Opium War* evokes a strong nationalist sentiment in terms of "national sorrows," which, according to Ernest Renan, "are more significant than triumphs because they impose obligations and demand a common effort."²² When the representation of "national sorrows" occurred at the same time of "national celebration," the former's ideological function has to be reexamined. In the years surrounding 1997, the return of Hong Kong to China was represented in Chinese media as a historical moment that could "wash away a century's humiliation." Besides a series of government-organized celebrations, a spontaneous mass

²⁰ Ou Niao and Fei Ming. "Yibu jupian de dansheng (The Birth of a Blockbuster)," *Dianying shijie* (1997): vol.7, 8-9.

²¹ Ou Niao and Fei Ming. "Xiying Xianggan huigui, xixue bainian guochi (Welcome the Return of Hong Kong, Avenge a Century's Humiliation)," *Dianshi yuekan* (1997): vol. 7, 21.

²² Ernest Renan, "What is a Nation?" in J. Hutchinson and A. D. Smith, eds., *Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 17.

celebration happened in the Tianan'men Square on June 30, 1997. Between the tragic failure of the Qing government in the film and the mass celebration in 1997 China, what is visible is a process that is similar to *yiku sitian* or “recalling past bitterness and savoring present sweetness,” an ideological operation that was applied in socialist China in order to promote the legitimacy of the CCP’s leadership. During the land reform period of early 1950, Chinese peasants were organized to recall their sufferings in the old society and share the sweetness of the new China. A compliment to the Party leadership in the era of reform, “textually absented” in the cinematic narration though, is an evident “presence” in its receptive context, and this very presence is reinforced by the mood of celebration. By presenting the return of Hong Kong under the CCP regime as a symbol of China’s standing-up, the CCP made the best use of this moment to overcome the post-1989 ideological crisis.²³ The whole propaganda project of the Hong Kong return was characterized by a strong nationalist pride. Deng Xiaoping was recalled again as a great national leader whose “one country, two systems” policy facilitated the return. A vivid contrast between a weak Qing Empire who ceded Hong Kong to the British and a powerful CCP government who reclaims China’s authority in Hong Kong has been well constructed in 1997 China. The recall of the “bitterness” China suffered in *The Opium War* will definitely legitimize the CCP leadership that brought in the “sweetness” of the Hong Kong return.

²³ Immediately after the 1989 Tian’anmen Incident, the whole nation was devoted to the 1990 Asian Games, which is one of the CCP’s efforts to overcome the legitimacy crisis because “international sports, as the most important form of metaphoric war between nation-states, often have a nationalist focus.” See Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological perspectives* (London: Pluto Press, 1993), 101, 110. His point of view offers a good note to understand the enthusiasm among Chinese people in all kinds of international sports.

National Anthem and Chinese Intellectuals' Crisis Consciousness

Compared with the belated consciousness of modernization among the Qing officials, the Meiji Restoration of 1868 had transformed Japan from a feudal and comparatively backward society into a modern industrial state. Sino-Japanese conflicts occurred frequently over the control of Taiwan and Korea, which led to the breakout of the first Sino-Japanese War in 1894. The most disastrous battle in the war was the defeat of the Chinese Beiyang Fleet by the Imperial Japanese Navy.²⁴ After the war, The Treaty of Shimonoseki was signed in 1895. In addition to a huge indemnity, China recognized the total independence of Korea, and ceded Taiwan and the Pescadores Islands to Japan.²⁵ The first Sino-Japanese war exposed the weakness of the Qing Empire compared with not only the Western world but also its Asian neighbor, Japan. It resulted in the beginnings of revolutionary activity against the Manchu rulers in China.

After China's disastrous defeat by its Asian neighbor Japan in 1895, fears for China's survival as an independent country mounted. It was during this period that Chinese nationalism developed along with urgent appeals to the Qing court for more radical reform. When Japan defeated Russia in 1904, China was both astounded and celebratory, using Japan as an accessible model to modernize China. Various new concepts from the West entered the Chinese minds, often through Japan. Gradually,

²⁴ Established in 1888, the Beiyang Fleet was the best-equipped modern navy in Asia. As an important project of the Self-strengthening Movement, the development of the Beiyang Fleet was seriously handicapped by corruption. After the purchase of ammunition stopped in 1891, the funding was embezzled to build the Summer Palace in Beijing. Therefore, the Beiyang Fleet was soon listed after the Imperial Japanese Navy.

²⁵ Originally, Liaodong Peninsula was ceded to Japan too. Later, in order to obtain rights to operate Japanese ships on the Yangtze River, to operate manufacturing factories in treaty ports and to open four more ports to foreign trade, Japan gave up the Liaodong Peninsula in exchange for another 450 million *yen*.

Chinese intellectuals arrived at a consensus that a resolution of all the crises required a strong nation-state.

Among Chinese intellectuals, Liang Qichao played an important role in disseminating the idea of nationalism in China. In 1899, Liang used the term *goumin* or “national” to analyze the lack of the democratic citizenship in China: “In our country, ...the people do not know that they belong to a state while the state does not treat its peoples as nationals. ” In order to replace *chenmin* or “subjects to the Emperor,” he suggested the concept of *guomin* that would make people feel that they were members of the state.²⁶ According to Liang, only when individuals would become *xinmin* (new nationals) would China be organized into a strong and healthy nation. He insisted that the Manchu are certainly members of the Chinese political community and denigrated anti-Manchu ideas as “small nationalism.” Liang’s idea, as Rebecca Karl has pointed out in her study on the formation of Chinese discourses of nationalism in relation to the non-Euro-American world, responded to a strong trend of Asianism then that emphasized mutual assistance among all peoples who were engaged in struggles for national and cultural independence in Asia.²⁷

After the founding of the Republic of China in 1911, China was obsessed with being accepted as an equal member in the family of nations to actively engage in world affairs. The international dimension of Chinese nationalism, that is, Chinese people’s perception of China’s position in the nation-state system, is one of its most important

²⁶ Originally published in *Qiyibao* by Liang Qichao, quoted from Hong-yuan Chu and Peter Zarrow, “Modern Chinese Nationalism: The Formative Stage,” in *Exploring Nationalism of China* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002), 22.

²⁷ See Rebecca Karl, *Staging the World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

characteristics.²⁸ In order to make its new international approach known to the world, the newly established Republican China published a document titled “Manifesto from the Republic of China to All Friendly Nations.” By criticizing the Manchu regime’s failure to face the new world configuration because of its outdated Sino-centric idea, the document informed the world that China “cherished the hope of being admitted into the family of nations not merely to share their rights and privileges but also to cooperate with them in the great and noble task called for in the up building of the civilization of the world.”²⁹ In 1924, Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the founder of the Republic of China, further developed his idea on nationalism in his “three principles of the people,” which speaks to the very historical imperative of nationalism in modern China:

...[T]he Chinese people have only family and clan groups; there is no national spirit. Consequently, in spite of four hundred million people gathered together in one China, we are in fact but a sheet of loose sand. We are the poorest and weakest state in the world, occupying the lowest position in international affairs; the rest of mankind is the carving knife and the serving dish, while we are the fish and the meat. Our position now is extremely perilous; if we do not earnestly promote nationalism and weld together our four hundred millions into a strong nation, we face a tragedy—the loss of our country and the destruction of our race. To ward off this danger, we must espouse nationalism and employ the national spirit to save the country.³⁰

China’s long struggle for autonomy culminated more painfully in the Anti-Japanese War (1937-1945), which did more than anything else in creating a strong Chinese nationalism with a lasting presence up to today. The development of Chinese

²⁸ Zhang Yongnian, 1999, xi.

²⁹ Xu Gouqi, “Nationalism, Internationalism, and National Identity: China from 1895-1919”, in *Chinese Nationalism in Perspective*, 101-120.

³⁰ Sun Yat-sen, *The Three Principles of the People* (Taipei: China Cultural Service, 1953), 5. The proposal of “national survival” made earlier by Dr. Sun Yat-sen for *Tongmenghui* (the Revolutionary Alliance) was a call that could be better described as anti-Manchu ethnic nationalism, or “small nationalism” in Liang’s definition.

nationalism during the war era is not the focus of this study. Rather, I am more interested in examining how Chinese nationalism, crystallized in Chinese intellectuals' crisis consciousness during the war era, offers Chinese intellectuals a discursive ground to consistently play the role of enlightening the masses in post-1989 China.

The 1989 Tian'anmen incident suffocated the independent voice of the intellectual group. Starting in the 1990s, Chinese intellectuals have been quickly marginalized in a commercialized society. By presenting the birth of the national anthem of the PRC in 1935, a critical moment when China was facing the Japanese invasion, the "main melody" film *Guoge* (National Anthem, 1998) was one of the many efforts that aimed to bring the marginalized Chinese intellectual group back to the central stage via a nationalist discourse.

Arise, You all who refuse to be slaves,
 With our very flesh and blood, let us build our new Great Wall.
 When the people of China are at their most critical moment,
 Everyone must roar defiance.
 Arise, Arise, Millions of hearts with one mind,
 Brave the enemy's gunfire, march on!

"March of the Volunteers," written by Tian Han and composed by Nie Er, was a song that first appeared in *Fenyun ernü* (Sons and Daughters in a Time of Storm, 1935), a left-wing film directed by Xu Xingzhi. In this film, two young Chinese are exiled to Shanghai after Japan has occupied northeast China. Xin Baihua, famous for his patriotic poems, is pursued by a rich widow, while his friend Liang Zhifu joins the anti-Japanese war. After hearing that Liang has died on the battlefield, Xin gives up his cozy life and follows the steps of his friend by joining the army. Inspired by the heroic death of his friend, Xin creates a poem entitled "March of the Volunteers," which was then composed

as a song to mobilize Chinese people to join the anti-Japanese war. The song was appointed as the acting national anthem on October 1, 1949.³¹ In 1998, Wu Ziniu, one of the Fifth Generation filmmakers, was assigned to direct a film on the life of Tian Han, who wrote the lyrics of “March of the Volunteers.” The original intention of the film on Tian Han, as one of the scriptwriters mentioned, like the 1959 musical biographical film *Nie Er*, would be biographical. Born in the Hunan province, Tian Han was a famous leftist scriptwriter in the 1930s. He served in various anti-Japanese capacities during the war. He was jailed during the Cultural Revolution and died in 1968. In 1979, Chinese authorities posthumously rehabilitated him. Supervised by the Ministry of Propaganda in the Hunan Province, the script was slowly tailored as a “main melody” film dedicated to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the PRC.³²

National Anthem opens with a long shot night scene: after the 1931 Mukden incident, the last train from northeast China passes through the Shanhai Passage, and several Japanese soldiers erect a milestone of Manchuria, evoking an intense atmosphere of national crisis. Then the camera cuts to Shanghai where a train loaded with refugees from northeast China enters the crowded station. Tian Han and his fellow members of the Dadao Troupe are doing fieldwork at the station for an anti-Japan stage play. After they become acquainted with a couple of student lovers from the northeast, they invite them to contribute their real life experience to the troupe members. What the film delineates from the beginning is Tian Han’s strong nationalist concern and how he carries out this

³¹ Nie Er, the composer of “March of the Volunteers”, drowned in Japan before *Sons and Daughters in Storm* released. For a reading of the 1959 biographical film *Nie Er*, see Ban Wang, Chapter 4.

³² See Zhang Jipin. “The production of the Script for *National Anthem*,” *Dangdai dianying* (1999): vol.5, 6-7.

concern through anti-Japanese cultural activities. After Japan attacked Shanghai in 1932, Tian Han realized that film was the most effective medium to record the anti-Japanese war. Besides filming documentary footages of the war, he began to write a film script entitled *Sons and Daughters in a Time of Storm*. However, the Nationalist Party arrested him soon after he finished the script. It was Xia Yan who completed the shooting script. The premiere of the film coincided with the day of Tian's release from the prison. In order to maintain Tian Han in the lead role, the cinematic narration in *National Anthem* is not conducted in a faithful biographical way. It portrays Tian Han as the acting director of *Sons and Daughters in Storm*, and he writes "March of the Volunteers" after the student lovers join the Northeast Volunteer Army and die in the battlefield. The consequence of these two shots deserves special attention because the representation of Tian Han's creative work after the death of the soldiers indicates that anti-Japanese cultural activities are as important as the martyrs' sacrifice, if not more important.

Created at a moment of national crisis, "March of the Volunteers" represented Chinese intellectuals' artistic contribution in building an unconquerable Chinese nationality. Despite their different historical background, the same symbolic significance is evident in "La Marseillaise" in France as in "March of the Volunteers" in China. The lyrics of "La Marseillaise" speak of the bloody battles of the French Revolution and call for its citizens to take up arms. Debates were carried out on whether or not to alter the lyrics to suit a more peaceful time, but the original words of "La Marseillaise," capturing the spirit of the French revolution, remain the same. Similar debates happened to "March of the Volunteers" in China as well. During the Cultural Revolution, when Tian Han was

imprisoned, “March of the Volunteers” was therefore banned. As a result, there was a period of time when “The East Is Red” was used as the unofficial national anthem. An altered lyric of “March of the Volunteers” was then used after 1978. The original song was formally named national anthem of the PRC in 1982. The production of *National Anthem* in post-1989 China not only reveals the Party’s effort in building a national consciousness, but also demonstrates the role that Chinese intellectuals have played to construct nationalist discourse in contemporary China.

Since the May Fourth era, Chinese intellectuals—writers, artists, critics, and educators—have assumed a position at the vanguard of “enlightenment” and “national salvation” for the uneducated masses. Left-wing filmmakers in the 1930s, as Laikwan Pang argues, contributed greatly to the formation of a collective subjectivity.³³ After a series of political campaigns launched by Mao to reeducate intellectuals, an elite intellectual group rose again to a preeminent position in the so-called New Era (1976-1989). Through the “Great Cultural Discussion” or simply the “Cultural Fever,” intellectuals actively participated in the national project of modernization. Born in the “Cultural Fever,” the Fifth Generation filmmakers initiated a modernization of the Chinese cinematic language. The Tian’anmen democratic movement, to a certain degree, reflected the ideological bifurcation between the Party and some intellectuals. In the field of filmmaking, there was a continuous challenge of Party censorship. In 1994, seven filmmakers were banned by the MRFT, which further displayed the tension between the intellectual group and the government.

³³ Laikwan Pang, 2002, 2.

When the intellectual group as a whole was quickly marginalized by the commercial wave in the 1990s, some, including a few Fifth and Sixth Generation filmmakers, began to seek a truce with the CCP regime in order to regain their discursive authority. The advent of globalization, especially the importation of Hollywood films since 1994, made the collaboration more imperative. Nationalism became an effective ideological discourse that both the intellectuals and the CCP government started to promote in contemporary China. To some extent, it is market potential that has brought a consensus to the reformist government and some filmmakers.

In the 1980s, Wu Ziniu was known for his persistent cinematic exploration of the anti-Japanese war. Against the discourse of patriotism and heroism, he wanted “to represent war from a higher angle,” and his war films were characterized by humanism and anti-war internationalism.³⁴ In 1994, when he decided to shoot *Nanjing Datusha* (The Rape of Nanjing, 1995), nationalist sentiment emerged through a cinematic representation of one of the most violent historical moments in the anti-Japanese war. Wu believes that an education consisting of humiliation and hatred is necessary for a nationality that had undergone many catastrophes.³⁵ In other words, what is embodied in his works is an intellectual’s consistent pursuit of educating the masses.

Before *National Anthem*, Wu Ziniu had never directed any “main melody” films. However, he has a positive view on “main melody” films. As he puts it, both audiences and filmmakers have certain misunderstandings of “main melody” films and therefore label them as vulgar works that only glorify achievement and promote government

³⁴ For an overview of Wu’s filmmaking, see Zhang Yingjin, *Screening China*, 176-190.

³⁵ Wu Ziniu. “My intention of filming *National Anthem*,” *Dangdai Dianying* (1999): vol. 5, 5-6.

policies. In his point of view, some excellent Western blockbusters are essentially “main melody” because of their obvious patriotic messages. In *National Anthem*, Wu sets out to describe the sacred mission of promoting national culture that was shouldered by Chinese intellectuals during the war. He quoted a sentence from Tian Han, “A nation without crisis consciousness is hopeless and helpless.” Facing the disappearance of spiritual value and idealism in Chinese cinema after the full commercialization of the Chinese film industry, Wu emphasizes that crisis consciousness and national spirit are necessary to further develop and strengthen China in a more complicated world.³⁶ Although crisis consciousness in *National Anthem* refers to the Japanese invasion in the 1930s, the film also indicates a message about the threat of commercialization and the fate of China today. The scriptwriter agrees with Wu that the theme of this film is not only anti-Japanese, but also a consciousness of national crisis that has gone through the history of modern China since the Opium War. So they co-design a scene in which the imprisoned Tian Han lectures several college students on the catastrophic history of modern China. The scene resumes the position of intellectuals as the spokesmen of history. Therefore, the production of *National Anthem* is more an appropriation of the “main melody” film for the intellectuals’ use—to reclaim the marginalized intellectual group a discursive authority by revisiting moments of national crisis.

In order to emphasize the role of culture and intellectuals, plots of song, stage play, and film shooting constitute the main body of *National Anthem*. In addition to the creation of “March of the Volunteers,” the representation of two Japanese songs in this film deserves special attention. The first one is a Japanese Navy song, sung by Japanese

³⁶ Wu Ziniu. “My intention of filming *National Anthem*,” *Dangdai Dianying* (1999): vol. 5, 5-6.

soldiers when they are training in Shanghai, which Tian Han can hear in his apartment.

The second one is “March of Manchuria”:

Look over at the war memorial!
 There the bones of our heroes.
 Died in the war between Japan and Russia,
 Are long buried.
 Stained with a red river of blood.
 The evening sun shines upon it,
 Soaring high over the endless plain.³⁷

“March of Manchuria” was a hit song in 1932 Japan, identifying Manchuria with the Russian-Japanese War. In *National Anthem*, it is sung by several Japanese in Shanghai. Angrily, Tian Han asks them to stop singing. As Laikwan Pang correctly points out in her study on the Chinese left-wing cinema movement, music itself is a great propaganda tool in terms of its direct emotional impact and availability, and the Left-wing films’ social criticism and wish for changes were also effectively put forward through the manipulation of film songs.³⁸ In *National Anthem*, the importance of song is used to legitimize the importance of Chinese intellectuals and their cultural activities. By contrasting “March of Volunteers” with “March of Manchuria,” the film implies a continuous cultural struggle led by Chinese intellectuals.

In addition to *National Anthem*, co-written by Wang Xingdong, the scriptwriter of *Days without Lei Feng*, the Forbidden City Film Company produced *Gongheguo zhiqi* (Flag of the Republic, 1999), a film recalling the birth of the national flag of the PRC. As in *National Anthem*, the role of the Chinese intellectual in the nation-building project has

³⁷ English translation of lyrics comes from Louise Young, *Japan’s Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism* (University of California Press, 1998), 92.

³⁸ Laikwan Pang, 2002, 216.

been brought to foreground through a cinematic representation of the designer's strong nationalist sentiment. Other well-known intellectual figures, such as Jiang Zhuying (1939-1982), a scientist who devoted his life to scientific research after the Cultural Revolution, Zhan Tianyou (1861-1919), a national hero for his role in building China's railroad system, and Shi Guangnan (1940-1990), a composer that is awarded "the people's musician," have all been featured in "main melody" films.³⁹ From the role of awakening people's consciousness at times of national crisis to the role of modernizing China, from whole-hearted dedication to China's scientific research to an invaluable contribution to the development of national music, these films embody filmmakers' desire to reestablish the central position of the marginalized Chinese intellectual group in post-socialist China.

The Magnificent Birth and "China Can Say No!"

The dilemma between modernization and Westernization is the most problematic issue facing Chinese political and intellectual figures. The tension between the struggle for national dignity and independent economic development in 1990's China results in a backwash against the trend of excessive Westernization and commercialization. The complexity and ambiguity of Chinese modernity can be found in two conflicting orientations: on the one hand, it pursues modernity by participating in the global economic system; on the other hand, it attempts to maintain a distance from the system by resisting total integration and emphasizing the uniqueness of its national identity.

³⁹ *Jiang Zhuying* was produced in 1993 and *Zhan Tianyou* in 2000, both are biographical films. Loosely based on the life of Shi Guangnan, *Chuntian de kuangxiang* (Rhapsody of Spring) was a musical produced in 1999.

Inspired by *Japan Can Say No* (1989), the Chinese bestseller *Zhongguo keyi shuo bu* (China Can Say No, 1996) cannot be ignored if we want to examine the trend of anti-Westernization in China today. Subtitled “The Political and Sentimental Choices in the Post-Cold War Era,” *China Can Say No* was published at a time when much of the growing discontent in China was resulted from the supposedly renewed Western—primarily American—attempts to “contain” China. The Tian’anmen Incident in 1989 certainly chilled Sino-U.S. relations overnight. Attributed to the U.S. Congress, Beijing lost its 1993 bid to host the 2000 Olympics. When Lee Tung-hui, President of the Nationalist Party at Taiwan, visited Cornell University in 1995, Chinese outrage soon escalated into a military practice in the Taiwan Strait. Written by five young journalists and poets, *China Can Say No* advocated tough responses to the West. Saying ‘No’ to political, economic, and cultural influences from the U.S., Japan and other nations seemed justified to many Chinese who believed that these countries try to hinder China from becoming a world power. A primal scene that is revisited time and again in this book is the Opium War. In 1997, *The Plot to Demonize China*, a book focusing on real and imagined anti-China schemes in the Western press, became another national bestseller. Although the publication of this book had no official support, official endorsement came quickly after it gained popularity.

Under such an anti-Western atmosphere, the fictional ending of *My 1919*, in which Gu attends the final session of the Paris Peace Conference as the only Chinese delegate and refuses to sign the treaty, and delivers a public lecture to express his outrage, is understandable. Another interesting point in this film is the conclusive caption

appeared at the end of the film: “On June 28, 1919, Chinese people finally for the first time said NO to the imperialist powers!” Obviously, it is inspired by the bestseller *China Can Say No*.

In order to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the PRC, *Hengkong Chushi* (The Magnificent Birth, 1999), another “main melody” film made in the same year of *My 1919*, offers a cinematic expression of “China Can Say No” as well. From the filmmaking team to its production style, *The Magnificent Birth* is a typical “main melody” production. Compared with the imagined NO gesture in *My 1919*, *The Magnificent Birth* revisits one of the most proud moment in the history of modern China: the birth of China’s first nuclear bomb in the 1960s, representing China as a powerful nation-state in terms of its military capability. Made by Beijing Film Studio, this highly publicized film was enthusiastically supported by the Central Department of Propaganda, the MBFT, and the Nuclear Industry Corporation of China. Zhang Wannian, vice-chairman of China’s Central Military Committee, paid special attention to the film and offered handwriting of the title. The director, Cheng Guoxing, also belongs to the Fifth Generation filmmakers.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ He was assigned to the Beijing Film Studio in 1982 and started to make films and TV programs in the mid-1980s. Before *The Magnificent Birth*, Chen had produced several important “main melody” films, including *Yijia liangzhi* (Two Systems in One Family, 1994), *Kong Fansen* (Kong Fansen, 1995), and *Hei yanjing* (Colors of the Blind, 1996). *Two Systems in One Family*, borrowing Deng Xiaoping’s “One nation two systems” policy on Hong Kong’s return, is about a marriage between a Beijing girl and a Hong Kong businessman; *Kong Fansen* features a CCP cadre who works and dies in Tibet, and *Colors of the Blind* tells how a blind girl becomes an athlete. Other films Chen directed include *Shanhun pili* (The Mountain Soul, 1987), *Qinghuo* (Love Puzzle, 1990), *Lihun dazhan* (The War of Divorce, 1991), *Linshi baba* (Temporary Daddy, 1992), *Bianwai zhangfu* (A Back-up Husband, 1992), and *Qiqing shagua* (The Love Lorn, 1993). He also directed a “main melody” TV drama series *Jueze* (Decision, 1998), which was remade into film entitled *Shengsi jueze* (Life and Death Decision, 2000), which I will discuss in the last chapter. Besides his film career, Cheng is politically active. He was a member of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and became a member of the CCP in 2004.

A hostile Cold War environment is constructed by a series of documentary footages at the beginning of *The Magnificent Birth*: One year and five months after the Korean War, the U.S. and Taiwan sign a mutual defense treaty. In face of the nuclear threat from the U.S., China decides to produce its own nuclear weapon. A group of soldiers secretly moves into the northwest desert to prepare for China's nuclear testing program.

During the Cold War era, both the U.S. and the other Western countries were physically absent in China, which would create narrative difficulties in *The Magnificent Birth* since the presence of a national enemy is necessary to create a nationalist sentiment. Therefore, the Soviet Union becomes the main target in the narration of *The Magnificent Birth*. First, in choosing the nuclear experimental site, Feng Shi, a PLA general who has just returned from the Korean battlefield, debates with an expert sent by the Soviet Union, claiming "our Chinese has no fear of difficulties, and no difficulty can prevent us from making the nuclear bomb." When the Russian expert repeats that the Soviet Union can protect China, and China only needs hydrogen bombs, General Feng replies with a Chinese saying: *Dieyou niangyou buru zijiyou*, meaning "that father and mother have it (nuclear bomb) is not as good as possessing it yourself." Although he knows nothing about nuclear science, he shows a strong will to achieve national military independence. The harsh situation of nuclear testing worsened when the Sino-Russian dispute ended with a full withdrawal of Russian experts from China in 1959, which has been dramatically represented in the film. An episode happens between a Russian expert and his Chinese translator during a rainy night: the expert says that it is always the taller

person holding the umbrella. This implicit political statement angers his Chinese translator. As this plot implies, what China is facing is not only American imperialism but also chauvinism from the Soviet Union. Therefore, a theme that is repeated several times by different characters in this film is “China cannot stand up straight without the nuclear bomb.”

The main narrative of this film, as one can expect, is not the final success of the nuclear testing, but the difficulties overcome by the Chinese. The success of nuclear testing in China has long been constructed as a myth, especially because it was conducted during the era of a three-year long natural disaster (1959-1961) in Mao’s China due to the Great Leap Forward Movement and other political and natural reasons. Because of the high confidentiality of nuclear testing, it is impossible to show the scientific details in a feature film like *The Magnificent Birth*. Instead of focusing on scientific aspects, this myth is narrated as a co-operation between the soldier group and the scientist group. After the withdrawal of the Russian experts, Chinese scientists have to dig out half-burned documents and re-calculate the data by abacus. One striking scene occurs in a big hall of the Institute of Nuclear Bomb: Chinese scientists sit side by side, with abacuses on the table, and the sound of the movable counters echoes in the hall. They do not have time to eat; steam buns are left beside the abacuses. It is under such harsh conditions that they finally prove the data from the Soviet Union incorrect. For audiences today, it is hard to imagine that the success of China’s first nuclear bomb was achieved with the abacus, a traditional Chinese invention. When this historical fact is displayed on the

screen, as a way to visually signify the uniqueness of China, it also contributes to the cinematic representation of Chinese nationalism.

A meaningful part in this film, besides the theme of nationalism, is the cinematic representation of the Chinese intellectual group, as represented by Lu Guangda, a scientist who was in charge of the nuclear testing. As in *National Anthem*, the representation of Chinese intellectuals takes a symbolic role, speaking to the contemporary situation. Since the founding of the PRC, Chinese intellectuals' confidence in the CCP government has been seriously undermined by their traumatic experiences in the anti-Rightist campaign in 1957, the ten-year Cultural Revolution, the anti-Bourgeois campaigns in the early 1980s, and the 1989 Tian'anmen Incident. One important ideological task of *The Magnificent Birth* is to fix the problematic relationship between the intellectuals and the Party through the magnificent birth of the nuclear weapon, a splendid moment that could not be achieved without contribution of many Chinese scientists. The heroes in this film are two groups that are indispensable for the final success of the nuclear test, the soldier group and the scientist group, with their respective leaders, general Feng Shi and scientist Lu Guangda. By restaging the "high spirit" of the 1950s and the early 1960s, a decade of passion, ideals, altruism, and patriotism, *The Magnificent Birth* presents a harmonious relationship between the army and scientists by describing their cooperation for the sake of a common cause in a sentimental way.

Lu Guangda in *The Magnificent Birth* is an American-educated scientist who has returned to China after the founding of the PRC. He is soon assigned to carry out the nuclear project. In order to carry out the nuclear experiment, Lu has to leave his wife,

who cannot know anything about this high-confidential project due to her problematic family background. They have been separated for several years and Lu makes no complaint, fully devoting himself to nuclear testing. When General Feng comments that if Lu stays in the U.S., it is possible that he can win the Nobel Prize, Lu offers a simple answer: "I have promised, I would like to be anonymous for my whole life." This character is based on a real life Chinese nuclear scientist, Deng Jiaxian (1924-1986). He studied nuclear science in the U.S. and returned to China in 1950, spending 28 years in the forefront of developing China's nuclear weapons. In the last months of his life, while dying of cancer, Deng's secret experience in nuclear testing was revealed in media. Since then, Deng has become well known as the founding father of China's atom bomb and hydrogen bomb.

As many intellectuals, Deng was criticized during the Cultural Revolution. In the film, this experience is rewritten in a plot in which Lu accidentally encounters one of his former classmates from the U.S. at an airport. Since his classmate is also a nuclear scientist who works for the American government, Gu is soon suspected to have betrayed China's nuclear secrets to the Westerners. Consequently, he is asked to stop working at a critical moment of nuclear testing, pending further decision. When general Feng attempts to make a guarantee for Deng's patriotism, his supervisor refutes: "How could you make such a guarantee on behalf of a ten-year project with thousands of people's painstaking efforts?" Finally Gu is cleared and goes back to nuclear testing site. However, when the vehement criticism on intellectuals in general during the Cultural Revolution is rewritten as a necessary decision for the sake of protecting the nuclear confidentiality, the Party's

wrongdoing on intellectuals has been excused. Furthermore, when general Feng persuades the authority to resume Lu's position, a message of the mutual confidence between the army and the intellectual group is evident. Earlier, because of the three-year natural disaster, the nuclear testing site is running out of food, general Feng decides to secure food for scientists first, soldiers second, and Lu suggests that the scientists will share food with soldiers anyway. This plot presents a cooperative effort between the intellectual group and the army for the sake of the nation. Nationalism becomes a unifying discourse to consolidate the intellectual-army cooperation.

A more interesting representation of the Party-intellectual relationship comes from a minor character of this film—Lu's wife, Wang Ruhui. She and Lu were classmates. However, even though she is a nuclear scientist, she cannot join the testing because her father has business contacts with the U.S. Army, although her parents divorced and she grew up with her mother. After being separated from her husband for several years due to this suspicious family background, she is asked to give lectures on nuclear science. Obviously, this indicates that her background has been cleared. She is surprised after the door opens to a room of PLA generals. When they all stand up to show respect to her, and the respect causes her to burst into tears. For me, this scene has much to say about the intellectuals' forgiveness to the Party's wrongdoing in the name of China's modernization. Wang Ruhui, as she is called in the film, represents Chinese intellectuals that have been criticized and suffered during the Cultural Revolution and other political campaigns. When the Party allows them to contribute to the nation-building project, they willingly put away all personal sufferings. Wang finally joins her

husband at the nuclear testing site at the end of the film. As the mushroom cloud blooms out in the sky, she stands by her husband, cheering in tears. This scene can also be read as a call for intellectuals' continuous contribution to development of the post-socialist China after 1989.

After a decade-long experiment, China shocked the world with the successful test of its first nuclear bomb on October 16, 1964— a great achievement that forever changed the geopolitical landscape of the world. In the film, a meaningful shot precedes this historical moment. When soldiers and scientists are waiting for the arrival of the bomb at the launching site, General Feng recalls to Lu his Korean War experience: “Our weapons were too backward and we had to suffer a lot in the war. But our Chinese are never afraid of Americans. They bully us from time to time. I really want to shout out ‘No! Damn you!’ ” Feng speaks Chinese all the time except the word “No,” which, spoken in English, echoes the anti-Western nationalist sentiment that *China Can Say No* represents.

The 1999 revisiting of the detonation of China's first nuclear bomb in 1964, like the narration of “the history of humiliation” in *The Opium War* at the moment of Hong Kong's return, once more provides a powerful image of the CCP regime.⁴¹ On March 1986, China stated that it had not conducted atmospheric testing for years and announced a permanent end to its aboveground testing. However, a positive evaluation of the nuclear testing from Deng Xiaoping has been offered in both *The Magnificent Birth* and

⁴¹ In addition to *The Magnificent Birth*, a documentary on the same historical event, *Dongfang juxiang* (Explosion in the East, 1998) was recognized by the 1999 Huabiao Awards. “*Luohou jiuyao aida* (Falling behind will suffer failures),” as “China cannot stand up straight without the nuclear bomb,” is a theme that goes throughout the documentary. It pays special attention to decision-makers such as Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai as well as several important scientists.

Explosion in the East: “If China did not produce the nuclear bomb and the hydrogen bomb, and did not launch the satellite in the 1960s, then China could not achieve a powerful international position now. These achievements reflect the capability of a nation, and they are also symbols of the prosperity of a nation state.”

Since 1989, China has successfully gone through a turbulent political transition and managed to achieve high economic growth. In a study of the post-socialist culture in China, Liu Kang argues that Chinese nationalism still provides an attractive and viable option of resistance for post-revolutionary China.⁴² I agree with him that the revolutionary legacy has played a crucial part in the post-socialist culture, especially through Chinese nationalism, as shown in the films I discussed above. When nationalism is appropriated as an effective ideological discourse to legitimate the CCP regime, it also acts as a unifying force to conceal and distract the increasingly diverse social conflicts. The polarization of class and the increased gap between the rich and the poor, as a consequence of commercialization and globalization, have become the most severe social conflicts in China since the 1990s. The number of laid-off workers is increasing at an alarming rate, as Chinese economic reform moves vigorously ahead. Most state-owned factories have closed down; many workers and low-level managers have lost their jobs. There is almost no encompassing welfare system or social security benefit for the laid-off workers, and many of them are on the verge of starvation. These people grew up with the socialist “iron rice bowl” and are not prepared for the psychological trauma associated with being laid-off. Behind the glamorous commercial prosperity displayed in the cities,

⁴² Liu Kang, “Is There An Alternative to (Capitalist) Globalization: The Debate about Modernity in China,” in *The Cultures of Globalization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 164-190.

there is a far more profound, disturbing, and yet invisible issue of division between classes, and between the people and the government.

While the above-mentioned issues cannot be discussed publicly because of a strict censorship, the reporting of several political conflicts between China and the U.S. overwhelmed the mass media at the turn of the century. In May 1999, after the Belgrade embassy bombing, many Chinese expressed their nationalist outrage, which resulted in a violent nationalist protest against the U.S. Chinese across the globe poured into the streets to protest. In April 2001, an American surveillance plane and a Chinese jet fighter collided over the South China Sea, and the Chinese pilot was killed, which further goads the nationalist sentiment against the U.S. As William C. Kirby pointed out in his forward for *Chinese Nationalism in Perspective*: “In China, as the Three People’s Principles, Marxism, Maoism, even Deng Xiaoping theory have come and gone, Chinese nationalism remains the bedrock of any political legitimacy.”⁴³ Extensive media coverage of these two incidents, along with many others, successfully distracts people’s uneasiness with many serious social problems by channeling their resentment to the West.

The cinematic representation of Chinese nationalism in “main melody” film cannot be explained merely as a result of official ideology. It echoes the resurgence of the nationalist sentiment in the era of globalization. As commercialism has become the most powerful expression of the 1990s, more and more people feel unprecedented economic pressure and cultural confusion, which has a lot to do with the advent of global capitalism in China. Nationalism, at this historical conjuncture, becomes the most convenient

⁴³ See Wei, C.X. George and Liu, Xiaoyuan, eds., *Chinese Nationalism in Perspective: Historical and Recent Cases* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001), 2.

discourse for Chinese to express their uneasiness. The birth of Chinese nationalism was a product of Western imperialism and Japanese invasion. Its spontaneous reemergence in the post-socialist China speaks to the contemporary global politics in which capitalism, under a globalization disguise, reenters China to fulfill its unfinished imperialist project. In this sense, the rising of nationalism in China and many third world countries bring home vividly the often ignored historical lineage between colonialism, imperialism and global capitalism.

In the historical development of Chinese nationalism, intellectuals have played an important role. More importantly, in post-socialist China, nationalism also becomes a discourse that the intellectual group can appropriate in order to regain the discursive authority that they used to enjoy in the 1980s. It is in this sense that cooperation between intellectuals and the Party on the cusp of forming. The cinematic representation of nationalism in “main melody” films therefore carries a double mission. On the one hand, it is an effective way to promote the Party’s reform policy; on the other hand, it also creates opportunities for many filmmakers to reclaim the intellectuals’ discursive authority in the post-socialist China.

CHAPTER VII

ORIENTALISM, OCCIDENTALISM, AND CHINESE MASCULINITY IN CINEMA

Feminism was born as a social movement and a cultural-critical theory that is concerned with women's oppression and the ways and means to empower woman. After the hegemonic notion of "sisterhood" was challenged by women of color in the 70s, feminism had to reexamine its essentialist theoretical ground, paying more attention to differences among women. Consequently, since all men do not share equal masculine rights and privileges either, men and masculinity became objects of study that had to face questions of differences. Masculinity studies, despite controversy involving its relationship to feminism, has grown into a vigorous field that analyzes the complexity of social power arrangements since feminism's turn toward gender study.

A few works on Chinese masculinity have been appeared in the field of China studies, including *Masculinity Besieged?: Issues of Modernity and Male Subjectivity in Chinese Literature of the Late Twentieth Century* by Zhong Xueping, *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China* by Kam Louie, and *The Fragile Scholar: Power and Masculinity in Chinese Culture* by Song Geng.¹ In comparison to substantive scholarship on Chinese women and femininity, studies on Chinese masculinity falls behind in both China and the West, which cannot be simply explained in a chronological sense. Why have studies on Chinese masculinity have been underplayed in the academic

¹ Also see Cui Shuqin, *Women through the Lens: Gender and Nation in a Century of Chinese Cinema* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003).

field? The first part of this chapter attempts to trace one possible reason back to the dominant legacy of Orientalism, which not only constructs a feminized image of China but also feminizes China studies. The second part aims to contribute to the currently inadequate studies on Chinese masculinity by examining its cinematic representation in “main melody” films. Since there is no way to conduct exhaustive research on Chinese masculinity, or more exactly, Chinese masculinities, even only limited in “main melody” films, I shall focus on one predominant theme: cinematic representation of Chinese masculinity in contrast to Western masculinity. Drawing from studies on masculinity or the masculine body in Hollywood cinema as well as Hong Kong cinema, I attempt to sketch a small part of the complicated gender discourse and its ideological significance in contemporary China. As global capitalism further complicates gender discourse in today’s global cultural economy, I also attempt to reveal the interrelation between discourse of masculinity and nationalism. Some comparative studies between Chinese “main melody” films and Hollywood productions will be drawn upon to show how discourses of masculinity, serving different political regimes nevertheless, are closely related with discourses of nationalism.

Orientalism and Gender Discourse

Gender discourse of both men and women is always constructed socio-historically. The relative stableness of a certain gender discourse in a given historical period and how it undergoes transformation became the focus of many scholars. In socialist China, one important gender discourse was *fünü jiefang* or women’s liberation, which called for women’s full-time participation in the labor force. As a sociopolitical campaign launched

by the Communist party from the top down, women's liberation as well as its literary and cinematic representation were not examined from a gendered perspective until the mid 1990s when feminism was systematically introduced into China, except for a few works by Western scholars. Once the alleged natural order of male dominance is deconstructed, efforts made by generations of Chinese women have been "emerging from the horizon of history."² From the May Fourth "new woman" to the defeminized "iron girl" in Maoist China, to the white-collar office lady in today's transnational corporations, gender performance and gender discourse in modern China have shown a richness that is no less colorful than its Western counterparts.

Despite the fact that feminism provides literary critics a theoretical weapon to question the patriarchal system and opens a new perspective to examine Chinese literature and culture, Chinese women's literature, as Tani E. Barlow and other scholars have pointed out, is just becoming another commodity on the global culture market.³ This disturbing tendency indicates an always-already feminized China in the eyes of the Westerners. In other words, the burgeoning studies on Chinese women's literature inevitably serve the re-colonization of China to dominant Western discourses, including feminism.

Corresponding to the commercialization of Chinese women's literature on the global cultural market, a similar problematic phenomenon has occurred in the global consumption of China cinema since the late 1980s. After his directorial debut *Hong*

² "Emerging from the horizon of history" is a phrase I borrow from Dai Jinhua and Meng Yue's same titled study on modern Chinese women writers. See Dai Jinhua and Meng Yue, *Fuchu lishi dibiao* (Zhengzhou: Human renmin chubanshe, 1989).

³ Tani E. Barlow, Introduction in *Gender Politics in Modern China*, 1-13, 9.

gaoliang (Red Sorghum, 1987) received the Golden Bear Award at the Berlin Film Festival in 1988, Zhang Yimou has become an internationally acclaimed Chinese filmmaker. His following production *Judou* (Judou, 1990) was nominated for Best Foreign Language Film in the 1991 Oscar Awards. *Dahong denglong gaogaogua* (Raise the Red Lantern, 1992) won Zhang a consecutive Oscar nomination. The international popularity of Zhang's films, argues Sheldon Lu, "is the result of the filmmakers' efforts to satisfy the tastes of the Western audience, and more damagingly, the result of their willful surrender to the dominant discourse of First-World culture."⁴ *Red Sorghum* exhibits a cinematic libidinal liberation, through which "my grandpa" frees "my grandma" from the age-old repression represented by an old leper, the owner of a sorghum-wine house. *Judou* tells of an incestuous affair between Judou and her nephew, where both Judou's husband and lover are represented as symbolically castrated male figures, "one sexually impotent, another socially impotent."⁵ In *Raise the Red Lantern*, a young woman becomes a concubine of a wealthy landlord during China's warlord era. She joins the other three wives to fight for the old man's attention and secure power in the house, and goes insane in the final scene. Lu Tonglin summarizes the main characteristic of Zhang's films as "young women with numerous pseudo-traditional Chinese rituals," which she labels as the Zhang Yimou model.⁶ A sexually impotent old man, no matter if it is the old leper, Judou's husband, or the wealthy landlord, is always represented as feudalist old China that is characterized by sexual suppression.

⁴ Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, 2002, 128.

⁵ Cui Shuqin, 149.

⁶ Lu Tonglin. "The Zhang Yimou Model," *Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese* (1999): vol.3, 1.

Interestingly, none of them is the focus of the screen—sometimes they even do not appear on the screen—which by no means is a coincidence. Instead, Chinese women, beautiful victims of the repressive Chinese society, occupy the screen. As objects of the Western gaze, the images of Chinese women also symbolize a feminized China in the Western eyes.

As a matter of fact, after the Cultural Revolution, many writers used sexual repression frequently as a way to express their political frustration, and the literary representation of sexual liberation consequently became a way to challenge the Party authority. For instance, an influential and arguable novel was Zhang Xianliang's *Nanren de yiban shi nüren* (Half of Man is Woman, 1985). It immediately became the object of enormous controversy because of its description of sexual desire that was almost absent in Mao's China. The novel tells the experiences of a political prisoner, Zhang Yonglin, in the years of the Cultural Revolution. Two narrative lines go throughout the novel: one is the hero's philosophical and political contemplation on China's fate and his own fate; the other is his repressed sexual desire and his sexual relationship with Huang Xiangjiu, a female prisoner. After an accidental peek at the naked body of Huang Xianjiu, who is taking a bath in a lake surrounded with reeds, Zhang is astounded and runs away.

However, he soon falls into deep regret:

I felt the extreme vexation of having lost my chance. At the same time, I felt the self-conceit of having successfully come through a severe trial—yet what exactly that trial had been I could not say. What was the invisible demon barrier that had held me back? What had kept me from plunging ahead? The same desire, mental and physical, tormented us both. The same mark of suffering branded both our bodies. Why couldn't we take a moment of joy in the midst of hardship?⁷

⁷ Zhang Xianliang, *Half of Man is Woman*, translated by Martha Avery (London: Viking, 1988), 41.

Here, sexual desire is legitimized by the author's accusation of the twisted and oppressed humanity during the Cultural Revolution. The legitimatization of sexuality is a subversive rewriting of socialist literature although the personal sexual desire is still subject to a collective career: social reconstruction on the ruins of the Cultural Revolution. When sexual desire is highlighted as the key to both personal and national recovery, the author indicates that personal sexual liberation is the premise of social reconstruction. Wang Anyi, one of the most important women writers in 1980s China, represents sexual desire as a natural and universal affair between male and female free of political confinement. In post-1989 China, among numerous novels and films devoted into representation of sexuality, Jia Pinwan's novella *Feidu* (The Abandoned Capital, 1993) was the most debatable one. The author uses an excessive erotic description of a post-socialist male intellectual, especially his sexual relationship with several females, to express a male intellectual's political frustration after the Tian'anmen Incident. In brief, discourses of sexuality in post-Mao China have obvious political implications, including the three Zhang Yimou films listed above. As a matter of fact, these three films are all adapted from post-Mao avant-garde literature that aims to subvert socialist ideology by constructing alternative narration of history in literature.⁸

However, when avant-garde literature is adapted into films, its political concern is significantly weakened by Zhang's cinematic language that aims at creating a visual

⁸ In *Misogyny, Cultural Nihilism, and Oppositional Politics: Contemporary Chinese Experimental Fiction*, Lu Tonglin argues that the common desire of post-Mao avant-garde literature is to subvert the Communist ideology by means of misogynistic discourse, given the special function of women's emancipation in socialist China. Considering the narration of history in the avant-garde literature that is directly against the socialist ideology of class struggle, I cannot fully agree with her.

spectacle that is “allegorical, spatial, seemingly ahistorical,” as claimed by Sheldon Lu.⁹ Despite the fact that Zhang’s films provide “alternative aesthetic conventions of filmmaking and new ways of viewing to the domestic audience,”¹⁰ when the visual spectacle is exhibited in front of Western audiences, the political significance of sexuality is immediately displaced into discourses of Orientalism in which the Orient is an irrational, weak, feminized “Other” in contrast with the rational, strong, masculine West. In other words, under the long lasting legacy of Orientalism, the Westerners often assume an authoritative position to read the non-Western “Others” as feminized objects. The Zhang Yimou model provides them a perfect cinematic representation of feminized China. It is in this sense that the Zhang Yimou model has been condemned by many critics as “self-Orientalism” and Zhang Yimou “part of the cultural and ideological apparatuses of the discourse of Western postcolonialism in the 1990s.”¹¹

Regardless the vehement criticism, more filmmakers have followed the Zhang Yimou model, and most of them have achieved considerable international success. The international success of the Zhang Yimou model empowers the Orientalist representation of the Asian people in Hollywood cinema that often subordinates Asian males and fetishizes Asian females.¹² The appearance of more Asian faces in recent Hollywood

⁹ Sheldon Lu, 1997, 131.

¹⁰ Sheldon Lu, 1997, 132.

¹¹ Zhang Yiwu. “Quanqiu xing houzhimin yujing zhong de Zhang Yimou (Zhang Yimou in the Global Postcolonial Context),” *Dangdai dianying* (1993): vol. 3, 18-25.

¹² For example, Paul Ng Chun-ming, “The Image of Overseas Chinese in American Cinema,” in Kar Law, ed., *Overseas Chinese Figures in Cinema* (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1992), 84. Also see Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the “Yellow Peril”: Race, Sex and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

productions does not fundamentally change this Orientalist legacy. For example, Jackie Chan's success as a martial arts star in Hollywood is totally different from the masculine roles he has played in Hong Kong. Appropriated by mainstream American stereotypes of effeminate Asian males, he is now presented as a heroic and comical kung fu fighter without any sexual appeal. His heroism lies "in his uncanny capacity to withstand pain and his relentless tenacity in defeating his evil opponent."¹³ A comparison between the roles played by Jackie Chan and the James Bond character makes this point more visible. No matter how the narrative goes, every Bond film ends up with a sexual romance between the Caucasian Bond and different Bond girls, and this never happens to Jackie Chan in Hollywood films.

In order to fill the lacuna of studies on Chinese masculinity, Kam Louie develops a *wen-wu* paradigm of Chinese masculinity through literary studies, in which *wen* represents literary attainment and *wu* martial virtue. Brave as it is, this theoretical paradigm is also a risky one because the *wen-wu* scheme, as some critics argue, might turn out to be a product of male fantasy: an enclosed world without women, where literary cultivations and martial skills are the necessary foundation of Chinese males' self-fashioning.¹⁴ But at least Louie is right to point out that the affirmation of a Chinese masculinity was a major concern in Chinese contacts with the West throughout the twentieth century. In my point of view, the affirmation of a Chinese masculinity has been a process of struggling and negotiating with discourses of Orientalism. For instance, two

¹³ Wai Kit Choi, "Post-Fordist Production and the Re-appropriation of Hong Kong Masculinity in Hollywood" in Laikwan Pang and Day Wong eds., *Masculinities and Hong Kong Cinema*, 199-220.

¹⁴ See Yao Souchou's review in *Australian Humanities Review* (September 2002), 12-3.

phrases that were frequently used to describe the image of China in the eyes of the West deserve special attention. One is the “sleeping lion” remarked by Napoleon, on seeing China’s potential; and the other is the “sick man of East Asia (Dongya bingfu),” insulting a weakened China since the first Opium War. Both carry clear masculine connotations. While the “sleeping lion” indicates that China may regain its lost glory, nothing could better embody the masculinity crisis of Chinese under the Western invasion as in the “sick man” phrase.

Mao’s declaration of “the Chinese finally stand up” at the founding ceremony of the PRC in 1949 can be considered as a direct answer to the “sick man” phrase. Gender discourse was highly politicized in socialist China. Women’s emancipation was carried out under a larger nation building agenda and operated within the state discourse. “*Funü nengding banbiantian* (women can shoulder half part of the sky)” became a professed ideology of equality. Despite the fact that the word “mother” was frequently used as a trope for both the Chinese country and the Communist Party, gender discourse in socialist China was based on a de-feminization of women and their conformity with male standards in terms of political consciousness, hard work ethic, and plain dressing. A masculinized political culture predominated the socialist era, submerging alternative gender performances of both men and women.

In the last two decades of the twentieth century, with the rise of Chinese economic and political power on the international stage, discourses of Chinese masculinity have to be reconsidered in a global context, especially through their close relationship with discourses of nationalism. In this regard, China’s enthusiasm in all kind

of international sports contests is the most telling example. The 1989 Tian'anmen incident marked socialist China entering into a post-socialist era. This political transition has brought changes in gender discourse at various levels, attracting great attention from social critics and scholars. The socialist concept of sex equality has been re-examined from a feminist perspective, and homosexuality is no longer a social taboo. By tracing how the image of Confucius, the conscience and guardian of Chinese values, has been resuscitated as entrepreneur in neo-Confucianism, Louie shows that the *wen* notion in Chinese masculinity is undergoing changes in an economically driven social climate. The *wu* component of masculinity is also changing, but Louie's examination of this change in martial arts films does not speak directly to situations in post-socialist China. In the following section, an examination of the cinematic representation of Chinese masculinity in two "main melody" films will attempt to display how the process of globalization complicates the construction of Chinese masculinity that is divergent from the *wen-wu* paradigm.

Redemption and Sublimation of Chinese Masculinity

In her study on left-wing cinema, Laikwan Pang discusses the construction of Chinese masculinity that penetrates the surface of the left-wing ideology and reveals a collective subjectivity in its formation. As she notices, the overtly revolutionary films were often heavily underpinned with libido, which defined both its ardor to the nation and to the opposite sex, as represented by *Sons and Daughters of the Storm* and *Dalu* (The Highway, 1934). The former constructs "a male composite figure of the filmmakers' collective" and the latter successfully redirects libidinal desires to political

participation.¹⁵ She points out that sexuality is celebrated and glorified in this film only under the condition of being a collective activity, which is significantly different from the individualistic manhood prevalent in the American context.¹⁶ A highly masculinized version of nationalism thus was established in the 1930s, a time when China was facing the imperialist invasion from Japan. Under the call for national salvation, romance between the heroic poet and a rich widow in *Sons and Daughters of the Storm* was criticized and the sacrifice made by the women in *The Highway* was highly praised.

The condemnation of romance and sexual desires was further developed in socialist China. Many works of literature and art resorted to female images to legitimize the Communist authority, and female images gradually became highly politicized codes, or as Meng Yue argues, “to an extent, the heroine’s unsexed image is an empty because she is not a flesh-and-blood person but a political name.”¹⁷ More often than not, from the revolutionary girl in *Red Women Detachment* to the hard-worked woman peasant in *Li Shuangshuang* (Li Shuangshuang, 1962), the women characters were constructed to serve Party policy.¹⁸ What dominated socialist China was still a patriarchal power represented by stereotypical male party leaders. In this sense, the male subjectivity in Mao’s China was also an empty code in the symbolic power system because, like the flesh-and-blood female, male image is ideologically constructed in the symbolic domain of power. In

¹⁵ Laikwan Pang, 2002, 92.

¹⁶ Laikwan Pang, 2002, 101.

¹⁷ Meng Yue, “Female Images and National Myth,” in *Gender Politics in Modern China* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 118-36, 133.

¹⁸ Chris Berry, “Sexual Difference and the Viewing Subject in *Li Shuangshuang* and *The In-Laws*,” in *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema*, 2nd ed. (London: BFI Pub., 1991), 38.

other words, both femininity and masculinity are ideological discourses that sustain the power operation.

“Main melody” films produced in the 1990s China, to a great extent, inherited gender discourse from the socialist era, especially in terms of subordinating individual sexual desire to a sacred nationalist course. However, it is wrong to argue that the discursive construction of Chinese masculinity is identical with that of the socialist period. A comparative examination between two films, a Hollywood blockbuster *Pearl Harbor* (2001) and a Chinese “main melody” film *Huanghe Juelian* (Grief Over the Yellow River, 1999), which share not only a narrative continuity but also an ideological similarity, may shed light on the interaction of masculinity and nationalism, and reveal how discourses of Orientalism and Occidentalism are employed to construct Chinese masculinity in the era of globalization.

In *Pearl Harbor* (2001), the event of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor is told through the eyes of two childhood friends, Rafe and Danny, both who dream of flying planes. After Rafe is selected for the British Royal Air Force and joins World War II in Europe, Danny enlists with the U.S. Army Air Corps. When Rafe is shot down in an attack and presumed dead, Danny comforts Rafe’s girlfriend, Evelyn, a dedicated Navy nurse. Gradually, they fall in love. However, Rafe turns up alive, and best friends become rivals in love. After spending one and a half hours to set up the love triangle, intercut by numerous vignettes involving political and military leaders in Washington and Tokyo, the climax of this film comes with the Japanese attack, and the computer-generated effects of bombardment bring the tragedy back to life with staggering power and intimacy. In the

face of this unexpected and unprepared American defeat, Rafe and Danny immediately team up and shoot down seven Japanese planes. A patriotic message is evidently conveyed in this plot: individual grudges should yield to national interests. As a matter of fact, the attack on Pearl Harbor was one of the most significant events in the history of the U.S. that created the upswing of patriotism, love of the American flag, and the popularity of the saying “United We Stand.” In the film, when Danny and Rafe fight hand in hand against the Japanese, the two young American pilots embody an overtly glorification of American patriotism.

After a 40-minute visual spectacle of the attack on Pearl Harbor, the film continues with a revenge attack on Japan, the so-called “Doolittle’s Raid.” Historically, “Doolittle’s Raid,” the first air raid by the United States to strike back at the Japanese home island of Honshū happened four months after the Pearl Harbor attack. *Pearl Harbor* is not a historically accurate work.¹⁹ By advancing the raid immediately after the attack in the cinematic narration, American patriotism is endowed with heroic spirit. In the film, both Rafe and Danny will join the raid. General Doolittle decides that as soon as the bombing planes take off, the aircraft carrier will head straight back to Hawaii. One pilot asks, “But with the carriers at home, where do we land?” General Doolittle answers, “I have a phrase I want you to memorize, ‘woshi yige meigou ren.’ It means ‘I am an American’ in Chinese.” The pilots are instructed to land in China and seek help from the Chinese. After they finish the mission and land in north China, Danny dies in an encounter with the Japanese patrols, and Rafe is rescued by the Chinese.

¹⁹ In comparison, two other films on the attack on Pearl Harbor, *30 Seconds over Tokyo* (1944) and *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970) are more faithful to history.

I found this episode very amusing because the story of an American pilot's crash landing in China during the war has been told in a Chinese "main melody" film, *Huanghe juelian* (Grief over the Yellow River, 1997) two years earlier than *Pearl Harbor*. *Grief over the Yellow River* features the Chinese people's heroic resistance of the Japanese invasion during the same period. This film was directed by Feng Xiaoning, a filmmaker who graduated from the Art Design Department of the Beijing Film Academy in 1982, along with other internationally renowned Fifth Generation directors. He is the director and scriptwriter of the "main melody" film *Red River Valley* (1996) that achieved considerable success in the domestic market.²⁰ In *Grief over the Yellow River*, Feng single-handedly takes the role of director, scriptwriter and photographer together. While nationalism is clearly not an issue that preoccupies only the Chinese, why are both Chinese and American filmmakers interested in screening American pilots? Does the role of the pilots in both films embody the same ideological messages?

Grief over the Yellow River begins and ends with the American pilot Owen's trip back to China in the 1990s. The film's main theme is a flashback of what happened during the anti-Japanese War. In his flight to revisit China, Owen recalls his experience in 1943:

Everyone has special times in his life; one of my greatest memories is a few short days I've spent in China more than 50 years ago. I'll never forget the land raged by the war, or the valiant Chinese people who face the challenges of their incredibly hard lives with unwavering courage and spirit, the cave dwellings, the ancient temples and the magnificent Yellow River.

²⁰ Feng Xiaoning has worked for China's Children Film Studio as an art designer after the initial years of graduation, where he made his film debut by *Daqiceng Xiaoshi* (The Disappeared Atmospheric Layer, 1989). Then he directed *Zhanzheng Ziwuxian* (The War Meridian, 1990). He has won many domestic and international film awards.

It is through Owen's recollection that the Chinese people's heroic resistance during the anti-Japanese war is displayed on screen. One cannot help to ask why a "main melody" film employs an American to validate the Chinese people's courage. Such a way of narration, in my point of view, carries different ideological messages simultaneously. First, by using an outsider to tell the history of China, the film aims to offer its audience a "more objective" account of history that is not officially endorsed, which obviously belongs to the polyphonic narrative of history discussed in Chapter 4. Secondly, when the American pilot becomes the narrator, maintaining an authoritative voice in the film, despite his regret for not fully understanding the Chinese soldiers, an Orientalist perspective is thus established. In other words, it invites the Western audience to identify with the narrator, and the cinematic narration subsequently. If we consider the fact that *Grief over the Yellow River* was China's sole official entry into the Best Foreign Film category of the 2000 Oscars, its Orientalist perspective is understandable. Trapped between the international success of the Zhang Yimou model and the ideological demands of "main melody" films, *Grief over the Yellow River* tries to strike a balance between Orientalism and the Party ideology. Intentionally or not, the American pilot becomes the only possible narrator in the film after all the Chinese characters, except a little girl, die in the film.

Throughout the Orientalist perspective of narration, what deserves special attention in *Grief over the Yellow River* is its representation of masculinity, both Chinese and American. American masculinity in this film is represented by Owen's pilot identity and a romance between Owen and a Chinese girl. The image of the combat pilot is a

masculine ideal. The melding of man and machine, as argued by some critics, carries a clear masculine and ultimately military connotation and has evolved over time from depictions of individual knights to an emphasis, after 1933, on the pilot's national feeling and his integration into a German community.²¹ Correspondingly, the brotherhood between Danny and Rafe in *Pearl Harbor* is associated with their common passion for the pilot career. The love triangle in *Pearl Harbor* also contributes to a cinematic representation of both pilots' sexual masculine. But more importantly, their masculinity is embodied by the melding with the combat plane, and the heroic deeds of defending the American community as patriotic American pilots.

The same masculine pilots appear in *Grief over the Yellow River*, too. At the beginning of the film, as Owen recalls, on an autumn day in 1943, two American pilots fly to Japan to take pictures of the Japanese military facilities. On their way back to the U.S. base, the other pilot Robert decides to bomb a Japanese warship because his brother died in Pearl Harbor. In order to portray his masculine manner of behavior, the director creates an excellent bombing scene with special effects. However, there is also an implicit hint that Robert's death in this battle is partly due to his over-individualistic decision, which can be understood as a Chinese critique of the American-styled individualism.

After Owen manages to land in China and is rescued by a group of Communist-led soldiers, he is soon attracted to a Chinese girl soldier named Angel. On their way to the interior revolutionary base, they fall in love. The transnational love story between a

²¹ Stefanie Schueler-Springorum, "Flying and Killing: Military Masculinity in German Pilot Literature, 1914-1939," in Karen Hagemann and Stefanie Schüler-Springorum eds., *Home/Front: The Military, War and Gender in Twentieth-Century Germany* (New York and Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2002), 109-23.

Chinese girl and an American pilot is not an accidental plot. Although his plane crashed, Owen's masculinity is manifested by his pursuit of Angel. Angel first appears in Owen's eyes when he recovered from a coma, with her face dazzled by a bright backlight. This typical "to-be-looked-at-ness" constructs her as the object of a Western man's gaze. Angel was a medical student in Peking and has joined the army after the war broke out. Because of her medical training and English speaking skills, she is assigned to accompany Owen. "It seems the God has sent to me an angel. I couldn't believe I was crossing the Great Wall of China, one of the greatest wonders of the world, which will lead me to a fascinating land." His adventure in China is tuned with an exotic color.

The Owen character is not always cast in a positive light. Several debates between Owen and his Chinese companions are set up in the film to represent Owen as a naive American with no knowledge of the Chinese war situation and Chinese values. On their route to the interior base, Owen insists on taking the highway instead of the mountain trail, which results in an encounter with the Japanese and the loss of one nameless soldier. After Heizi, a male Chinese soldier and the leader of the detachment, decides to cross the Yellow River from his hometown, the group is arrested by Angel's father, a local triad leader who has business connections with some collaborators. When they are jailed by Angel's father, Owen believes in the Geneva Agreement and wants to surrender to the Japanese. Both Angel and Heizi disagree with him. As Angle says, "I would sacrifice my life rather than losing the esteem of being a soldier." The debate ends in a fight between Heizi and Owen. Owen's naivety of the Chinese situation, to some extent, undermines his masculine power.

In comparison with American masculinity characterized by military power and the capability of love-pursuit, Chinese masculinity is displayed in a more complicated way. Three Chinese male characters in this film have their respective masculine problems, yet they all dedicate their life to the anti-Japanese war. First, Heizi, the leader of the detachment is “a dark-faced fellow of few words, who looks unsatisfied with my presence,” as described by Owen. A competition between Owen and Heizi is set up implicitly. In one scene, Angel is bathing in river; Owen peeks at her through bushes. Heizi unhappily calls Owen back, which symbolizes that Angel is possessed by Chinese men. However, Heizi cannot prevent the two from falling in love. The capture of a Chinese girl from other Chinese men is nothing but a symbolic affirmation of the Western masculinity. Later we are told that Heizi is a widower; both his wife and son were killed by the Japanese three years ago. The fact that he has no son, only a daughter, implies that his masculinity is in a default blank since only sons are considered the “seeds” to pass on the family line. Meaningfully, Heizi’s primary identity in the film is neither husband nor father, but the leader of the detachment. A collective identity replaces his masculine role in the family. In other words, his masculinity is backed up with the anti-Japanese Eighth-route Army.

The second male character is Angel’s father. With the plots unfolding, it turns out that Heizi and Angel come from the same village, and they have had a clan feud for generations. Angel’s mother was killed in one fight, thus Angel’s father is also a widower, with two daughters. Like Heizi, his primary identity in the film is a local triad leader, and his triad maintains a subtle business relationship with Chinese collaborators. At first,

Angel's father jailed Heizi, Owen and Angel and wanted to turn Owen in to the Japanese. But Angel threatens her father, saying that she would kill herself if he does so, and forces him to release Owen. The same nationalist discourse—personal feud has to yield to national interest— appears in this film, just like in *Pearl Harbor*, when Heizi successfully persuades Angle's father to put aside the feud and resist the Japanese invaders together.

The widower identity of both Heizi and Angel's father in this film symbolizes the deprivation of their male subjectivity: the loss of wife indicates a suspension of their masculine sexuality. Two quick flashbacks show the death of their respective wives, one burned by atrocious Japanese soldiers, and another killed in a disordered clan fight. By narrating their death in flashbacks full of violence, a “historically traumatized” male subject, to borrow Silverman's term, is vividly constructed on screen. Regardless of the traumatized male subjectivity, the cinematic representation of Chinese masculinity in *Grief over the Yellow River* is different from that in the Zhang Yimou model. One important ideological mission of this film is to construct Chinese masculinity against American masculinity. Although an Orientalist narrative is employed to represent Chinese in the war, it is in the mirror of American masculinity that a traumatized Chinese masculinity regains its vigor. If not because of his fellow pilot Robert's individualist venture to bomb the Japanese warship, they probably would have safely flown back to the U.S. base and handed in the pictures they had taken. The cinematic representation of Chinese masculinity is set directly against the imagined individualist-based American masculinity. Angel's father could kill Heizi to avenge for his wife and his clan members.

Heizi could choose not to cooperate with Angel's father because of the clan feud. However, both do not seek the individualist approach for the sake of the nation. To help Owen safely arrive at the interior with the important pictures, for Heizi and Angel's father, is more important than their personal feud. In order to defeat the Japanese invasion, they can sacrifice everything, including their life, not to mention personal feud. Nationalism becomes a powerful ideological tool to unify Chinese in a collective spirit, which can also be found in a conversation between Owen and Angel. When Owen asks Angel to marry him and move to the U.S., Angel turns the proposal down since she has to fight for the nation. One more disagreement takes place between the lovers. For Owen, to be a soldier is to fulfill his duty. After a three-year service, he will leave the army and build his own family. For Angel, there is no service length. As long as her nation is in war, she will keep fighting for it. Although the presence of an American pilot who is capable of wooing a Chinese girl makes the Chinese masculinity crisis more acute from an international perspective, what has been embodied in their conversation is the conflict between American individualism and Chinese collectivism/nationalism.

The most interesting male character in this film is a triad member named Sanpao, who works for Angel's father. He was injured in a clan fight and lost his male potency. Sanpao is the person who does business with the collaborators frequently and who suggests to hand Owen over to the Japanese. In several plots, he is represented as a stereotypical collaborator character that is ready to cooperate with the Japanese. He enjoys singing folk love songs, but these songs only make him a more pathetic figure. Angel's father even wants Angel to marry him. At the end of the film, Angel's father

comes to the bank of the Yellow River, preparing boats for Owen. However, one of his triad members has betrayed him to the Japanese. Refusing to surrender, he shoots down two Japanese soldiers and dies on the bank of the river. Sanpao is with him, but he is too scared to fight. The Japanese jail him in a small hut. Unknown what has happened on the bank, Angel, Owen and Heizi are coming to the ferry. Surprisingly, the jailed Sanpao manages to burn down the hut to warn Angel. When the Japanese bury Sanpao alive on the bank, he sings his favorite folksong till the last minute.

The problematic Chinese masculinity is represented more strikingly in the Sanpao character than the two widower characters. The masculine sexuality for the two widowers is only suspended, while Sanpao's masculine sexuality is totally deprived. The three male characters die on the bank of the Yellow River, as heroic as any revolutionary martyrs. If we can argue that nationalism saves Heizi and Angel's father from dying in trivial clan feud, Sanpao's death, in a more tragic way, represents how the anti-Japanese nationalist spirit will eventually redeem an impotent man and elevate him to the position of national hero. In other words, a masculine nationalist discourse is firmly constructed in the film through a repeated theme: a sublime cause can redeem the wounded male subjectivity.

Sublime is a keyword to examine both aesthetics and politics in socialist China. As Bang Wang points out, "If the grand narrative of modern Chinese history is a tragic drama, the spectator has been induced to endow the dominant actor with sublime qualities."²² He traces how sublime or *chonggao* has been made to resonate with the language of Marxist historical materialism in the Chinese context, and how

²² Ban Wang, 1.

sublimation—the converting of libidinal energies to serve culturally acceptable goals—defines the psychic mechanism of Chinese revolutionary cinema.²³

China's transition from socialism to post-socialism does not mean that there are no continuities between the two, and ideas about gender difference and sexuality are often recruited to construct continuities in history. The notion of sublime, with a clear masculine denotation, is one of the ideas that has successfully connects post-socialism with socialism. As shown in *Grief over the Yellow River*, unified under the nationalist discourse, the three male characters are represented as an undefeatable China. Although their male identity may be problematic viewed from an individual perspective, masculine characteristics emerge once they form a collective male group to fight for the nation. The 1990s was a decade where China had to face the continuous retreat of socialist system to capitalist expansion. Therefore, it was necessary to construct an imagined cinematic redemption of the castrated male subjectivity with the backup of nationalist discourses. As China's still unfavorable status in the global competition was symbolized by the wounded masculinity, *Grief over the Yellow River* promises a possible way to achieve a sublimation that will be recognized by its Western counterparts. In the film, the traumatized Chinese masculinity works more like a libido bridge to a sublimation of the nationalist discourse.

Occidentalism and Chinese Masculinity

If we can agree with Zhong Xueping that Chinese male intellectuals, especially writers and critics, constituted the most active force in China's response to the

²³ Ban Wang, 13, and Chapter 4.

Enlightenment-informed modes of modernity, then we can agree with her that male desire for a strong and potent self in 1980s' China was part and parcel of Chinese cultural nationalism since the male desire was legitimized by a larger project of modernization.²⁴ In her examination on the subjectivity of modern and contemporary Chinese male intellectuals, Zhong Xueping identifies the Chinese male gender anxiety over masculinity as “a preoccupation with the lack of a male power position,” which she calls a male “marginality complex”:

It is a male psyche predominantly manifested through Chinese (male) intellectuals' preoccupation with the weakness of the country, the culture, and Chinese men. In this sense, the complex is also a male desire, a desire to overcome marginality and to search for (masculine) identity.²⁵

This “marginality complex,” as I understand, is more related with male intellectuals' desire for both cultural and political authority when questions at the economic level do not yet emerge yet. In other words, the “marginality complex” is constructed as a motivation for male intellectuals to pursue power endlessly. For instance, in Zhang Xianliang's *Half of Man is Woman*, Zhang Yonglin's lack of sexual potency is added to his marginal identity as a political prisoner, and his political rehabilitation follows his sexual liberation.

Zhong mentions that Chinese male intellectuals, in relation to their Western counterparts, are obsessed with the notion of male weakness, too. Unfortunately, Zhong focuses her study on Chinese intellectuals and their literary works and does not examine the issue of masculinity in a cross-cultural perspective, especially in the prosperous field

²⁴ Zhong Xueping, *Masculinity Besieged?: Issues of Modernity & Male Subjectivity in Chinese Literature of the Late 20th Century* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2000), 14.

²⁵ Zhong Xueping, 11, 37.

of mass media culture. What kind of changes has been taken place on discourse of Chinese masculinity when China starts to set foot on the way of globalization?

When both the intellectual group and literature have been quickly marginalized in 1990's China, the most vivid cultural presentation of Chinese masculinity has appeared in visual culture. A TV soap *Beijing ren zai niuyue* (Beijing Sojourners in New York) may offer a good example to observe the new changes. This 21-episode TV soap was aired in 1993 and was extremely popular. The soap tells the adventure of a Chinese man in New York, from a poor immigrant to a successful entrepreneur. Wang Qiming, the main character, is a Beijing-born musician. During his first few years in New York, in addition to economic pressures, he has to face many cultural shocks as well as an identity crisis. His wife leaves him and marries an American factory owner, David McCarthy. An important part of the story focuses on how Wang starts his own manufacturing business and competes with David. It is interesting to see that the dramatized Sino-American competition ends with David being defeated, because his Chinese wife reveals his business secrets to Wang, her ex-husband.²⁶ Lydia Liu reads this TV serial as “a logical product of the transnational co-authorship of the ideology of business entrepreneurship between the post-socialist official discourse of China and that of the mainstream American media.”²⁷ What interests me in *Beijing Sojourners* is how “gender, class and race all collapse into a single assertion of troubled Chinese masculinity” in a

²⁶ This TV drama is based on a same title novel written by an overseas Chinese writer. However, the American businessman David is a TV creation that does not exist in the original novel.

²⁷ Lydia H. Liu. “*Beijing Sojourners in New York: Post-socialism and the Question of Ideology in Global Media Culture*,” *Positions* 7:3 (Winter 1999): 763-797, 790.

transnational context.²⁸ Wang's odyssey in American begins with the loss of his wife to David. Then his economic success cures his wounded masculinity, as hinted by his mistress. As Lydia Liu has noticed, although white women rarely make a significant appearance in *Beijing Sojourners*, the closing scene of the final episode shows Wang stopping his luxury car at a traffic light after he has gambled away his entire fortune, sticking up his middle finger at a white woman sitting in the next car. This time he has secured a strong masculinity against the Westerns, both male and female, with his symbolic power of engaging in global capitalism.

This crisis of male weakness, or masculine crisis, as shown in *Beijing Sojourners*, has displayed more complicated characteristics when China is involved in the process of globalization. Not only Confucius, as observed by Louie, became an entrepreneur, rather, it is businessmen in general who started to dominate the Chinese screen. In other words, economic power has become the most important element of Chinese masculinity. Furthermore, the visual display of a growing Chinese entrepreneur class is always taken place in a transnational background. One important strategy that has been employed to reconstruct Chinese masculinity in a global era, to paraphrase Chen Xiaomei, is Occidentalism. For Chen, the appropriation of Western discourse, such as feminism and democracy, can actually have a politically and ideologically liberating effect on contemporary Chinese culture. What I mean by the word Occidentalism, however, is slightly different from Chen's definition—a counter-discourse used by the intellectuals in post-Mao era to oppose the political regime— but much closer to her notion of “official Occidentalism,” that is, a dominant ideological practice that intentionally constructs the

²⁸ Lydia H. Liu, 788

Western “Other” as the inferior counterpart of the Chinese. In other words, the operation of “Occidentalism” is merely a Chinese version of “Orientalism” in which the Western “Other” is eroticized and feminized to legitimize China’s growing economic power as well as political influence in international affairs. Interestingly, both Orientalism and Occidentalism play important role in representing either a feminized China or Chinese masculinity in visual culture.

The success of *Beijing Sojourners* in China and many oversea Chinese communities is not because it follows the tendency that Douglas Kellner has termed “a fetishism of audience pleasure,” but lies in its ability of creating this pleasure in “its use of cultural artifacts.”²⁹ In other terms, the audience pleasure does not exist independently from or take precedence over mass cultural products; rather, it is constructed through the practice of consuming. The reaffirmation of Chinese masculinity against American masculinity, as in *Grief over the Yellow River*, has been employed as an effective cultural artifact to identify the audiences with the new ideological transformation from socialism to post-socialism when China has drifted into the global process.

After *Beijing Sojourners*, more and more Chinese mass media products show great interests in portraying the transnational migration, and “the reassertion of Chinese masculinity takes the form of transnational fantasy,” which directly links to struggles in the financial arena.³⁰ In his study on a particular type of TV soap opera that describes love affairs happened in today’s China between male Chinese and female foreigners,

²⁹ I agree with Lydia Liu that the valorization of audience pleasure is precisely what has rendered “critical” analysis of cultural production one-sided, if not superfluous, in the first place. See Lydia H. Liu, note 7.

³⁰ Sheldon Lu, 2001, 221.

Sheldon H. Lu reveals how this type of TV soap opera becomes a way of imaging Chinese national identity in the age of transnationalism and globalization. As he points out, in the domestic and global arena of image production and consumption, there are “two opposite yet complementary strategies in the politics of China’s self-representation”: in the global cultural market Chinese artists offer localized narratives and images of China by employing the strategy of self-exoticization and self-eroticization for the gaze of the Western spectator; while in the domestic cultural market it is the foreign females that has been eroticized, domesticated and tamed by Chinese males through a new “transnational male imaginary” or “transnational libidinal economy.”³¹

Compared with TV productions, films of the same transnational romance theme such as *Kuangwen eluosi* (Kissing Russia, 1994), *Dabianzi de youhou* (The Bewitching Braid, 1996) or *Fenni de weixiao* (On the Other Side of the Bridge, 2002) did not secure good box office returns, partly due to the overall gloomy situation of the domestic film market under the impact of Hollywood blockbusters, and partly due to the fact that most Chinese filmmakers lack experience in producing attractive narrative strategies as in the TV soap. Without government support, these transnational romances have no way to compete with Hollywood blockbusters, especially in terms of market promotion.

When economic development has become the real “main melody” in China, have “main melody” films adopted the same strategy to represent Chinese masculinity? As I have discussed in previous chapters, one important theme of the “main melody” film is the revolutionary history and the CCP leadership. Chinese intellectuals also made considerable efforts to regain their authority through cinematic representation. In general,

³¹ Sheldon Lu, 2001, 128-9.

“main melody” films display a masculine character that is not economically determined. It still portrays Chinese masculinity in political perspective, that is, a commitment for the nation state. To some extent, this divergent representation of Chinese masculinity in mass media reflects one of Deng Xiaoping’s guidelines for post-socialist China: to grab both material civilization and spiritual civilization with two hands. While the development of spiritual civilization falls far behind economic development, it is the “main melody” films that aim to shoulder this mission. Meanwhile, in order to achieve ideological effects, the production of “main melody” films has to draw lessons from the popular TV soaps. In this regard, *Chongchu Yamasun* (Charging out Amazon, 2002), a “main melody” film that set the representation of Chinese masculinity in a transnational background and narrated in Occidental discourses deserves special attention.

This film is based on a true story. In August 1999, two Chinese soldiers from the Chinese Airborne Special Forces were selected to join the prestigious “International School of Hunters” for a 87-day military training session held in the Amazon region, with another 31 soldiers from four different countries. After his Chinese colleague was wounded, Wang Yalin successfully completed the training, becoming one of the seven international soldiers graduated from this school.³² The PLA-controlled August First film studio found this story very attractive and decided to put it into film: sending two Chinese soldiers to a foreign land and having them trained with other Western soldiers is a spectacle, not to mention the exotic tropical Amazon region that will interest many audiences. The

³² An interview of Wang Yalin “Tiyan shengli jixian (Experiencing the Physical Limit)” was published in *People’s Daily*, 27 August 2002, p.12.

production of *Charging out Amazon* soon became a media focus, partly due to propaganda works, partly due to its box office potential.

According to Ming Zhenjiang, the director of the August First studio, due to the fact that Chinese film genre is very different from international categorization, China should learn lessons from the international film genres such as thriller, action, romance and gangster since they have accumulated rich experiences, therefore developing a Chinese way for military filmmaking.³³ By producing *Charging out Amazon*, Ming expected a reform on Chinese filmmaking in order to connect with the international development. Meanwhile, he also emphasizes that the aim of this reform is to promote the revolutionary heroism and patriotic spirit by representing the image of the contemporary Chinese soldiers.³⁴ Did *Charging out Amazon* fulfill these requirements? Regardless of its narrative dysfunction, the representation of Chinese masculinity in this film contributed greatly to the construction of the revolutionary heroism.

Our heroes in *Charging out Amazon* are renamed as Wang Hui and Hu Xiaolong. A theme throughout this film is their performance in the international competition represents the image of China. Masculinity is closely related with Nationalism. As a school rule, all foreign students in this school should raise their national flags every morning. If they fail the training, they should knock a fog bell and their national flags will be lowered down. The film makes it clear that this is the first time that the Chinese national flag is appearing in the Hunter School, indicating China's growing power in

³³ Information comes from a group interview done by the Chinese Cinema Channel in September 2002. <<http://www.cctv.com/entertainment/newmovie/105.html>>

³⁴ Ibid.

international affairs. How to keep the red star flag flying high in the air becomes two Chinese soldiers' primary concern.

In order to build a powerful image of Chinese masculinity, two narrative lines are set up in this film. The first one is the competition between Chinese soldiers and their Western classmates. The two Chinese soldiers stand among American and European soldiers who are taller and stronger, creating a comedic effect, but it only makes their final triumph more impressive. Hu even cannot find himself a size small uniform and boots. What they have to face in the next two months is not only physical ordeals reaching the human limit, but also contempt from some of their Western classmates. The Italian flag becomes the first flag taken down when an Italian soldier cannot stand the training. When the Italian soldier cries with his face in the folded national flag and is carried away, a reverse shot shows Wang and Hu shaking hands together in the foreground. "Do it for our country," they encourage each other. Out of focus is a red Chinese national flag flying over their heads. This shot reminds me of Roland Barthes' semiotic reading on the cover image of a black French soldier making a salute. He points out that "French imperialism condemns the saluting Negro to be nothing more than an instrumental signifier."³⁵ In our case here, both the two Chinese soldiers, with their hands together, and the flying national flag in the background, are instrumental signifiers of nationalism. This symbolic meaning is further enhanced by their presence on the foreign land, among Western soldiers.

³⁵ Stuart Hall ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1997), 45.

Although the narrative in *Charging out Amazon* cannot compete with Hollywood blockbusters such as *Saving Private Ryan* (2001), the ideological messages that they are trying to convey is almost identical. *Saving Private Ryan* opens and ends with shots of the American star-spangled flag. The humanist mission of saving Ryan aims not only to cover the brutality of the war but also encourage more Americans to identify with the nation, to inspire more devotion in their lives for the nation. What is outstanding in *Charging out Amazon* is a strong nationalist sentiment in front of the Westerners. When instructor “crocodile” is reported that someone has stolen food from the kitchen at night, he suspects Wang and Hu, “Deny your mistake is exactly you Chinese will do.” This sentence enrages Wang, “If you accuse Chinese a liar, then what I can do is to give up.” He intends to knock the bell and take down the Chinese flag. Hu gives Wang a slap and reminds him, “Have you forgotten what we are going to prove by coming here?” They decide to admit the stealing in order to carry out their mission: to have Chinese flag flying in the school. Out of guilt, a Western soldier confesses that he is the person who has stolen the corn cake.

One Chinese critic argues that the existence of the Western soldiers does not carry out a practical narrative function throughout the whole training process.³⁶ I would like to say that the Westerners are intentionally set up as a mirror to construct both Chinese masculinity and Chinese nationalism. During a training break, after the little man Hu successful wrestles a strong American classmate in the mud, even the instructor shows his high appreciation of Chinese Kung Fu. Later, when another Western soldier betrays their boss in a torturing dry run, it is Hu that shows his Chinese Kung Fu again and beats

³⁶ Yao Ruyong, “A Cultural malice aforethought,” in *Playwright* (April 2003): 23-7.

down the disguised instructor. This time, the tough instructor has to admit that Hu is “a real soldier.” Throughout the film, there is no real training competition between the two Chinese soldiers and the rest of the Westerners, and the latter’s existence simply works as a background for a cinematic showing-off of the Chinese. To some extent, we can argue that the dysfunction of the Westerners is a failure in narration due to the inexperience of Chinese playwrights in dealing with such a new topic. Meanwhile, it is also possible to argue that this self-conceited and self-consoled cinematic representation of Chinese soldiers, in contrast with its Occidental representation of the Westerners, achieves an imagined cinematic realization of Chinese masculinity, especially when we recall the long humiliating history of China being the “sick man of East Asia.” The confrontation between Chinese and Westerners has been intentionally constructed as an acknowledgment of the braveness of the Chinese. Wang and Hu’s outstanding performance in the school actually becomes an exhibition of the Chinese nationality on the international military stage. The film also shows that Wang befriends an African American soldier, Johnson, which reminds me of a political slogan that was promoted in Mao’s China: “Asia, Africa and Latin America are one family.” When this Cold War legacy is reflected in the film, African Americans become brothers of the Chinese.

This masculine imagination of a powerful China is further displayed by the cinematic portrayal of a Western female character and her interactions with the Chinese soldiers. Lieutenant Lena Ruth is a doctor working in the Hunter School, and she expresses deep concerns to Wang when he is wounded in a test practice. She is the only person who cheers for Hu when he defeats other soldiers who look down on him. When

the instructor asks Lena: “You like Chinese soldiers or Chinese Kung Fu?” She answers: “Both.” Later, it turns out that Lena is the daughter of the school principle, General Collin Ruth. In the second part of this film, when an international drug-smuggling group kidnaps Lena to blackmail General Ruth, the Chinese hero Wang, overcoming his acrophobia, single-handedly sneaks into the smugglers’ base and kills them with a bomb. A harsh ending notwithstanding, the point is still clear enough—it is the Chinese soldier who saves the Western female from danger. Here again we see the oppositional discursive politics between Orientalism and Occidentalism, with the same ideological function. In *Can subaltern Speak*, Spivak has mentioned the importance of a white man saving an Indian woman in the Sati practice, which shows the hegemonic position of the Westerners to the Indians. This Orientalist cliché can be found in many Hollywood films. For example, in *Red Corner* (1994), it is the American businessman who rescues the Chinese female lawyer who is prosecuted by her fellow Chinese and the inhumanly Communist environment. What we find in *Charging out Amazon* is a very meaningful reversal—it is the Chinese man who saves the Western woman, and moreover, different from Jackie Chan’s Hollywood comedy, the Western female in *Charging out Amazon* is almost ready to fall in love with Wang. After Wang has been awarded the honor medal for best student, we see Lena sending him flowers and kissing his face. They stand together like a couple, waving their hands to the people around them.

However, what hides behind the Occidentalism discourse in the film text is a disturbing Self-Orientalism. As the director has explained, “in order to prevent this film being too boring with a dominant training process, another supportive narrative on the

feud between General Ruth and the drug-smuggling group has been added to cross-develop the whole story.”³⁷ As a matter of fact, the double narrative structure comes directly from a Hollywood production, *G.I. Jane* (1997). Directed by Ridley Scott and starring Demi Moore, *G.I. Jane* tells the story of how Jordan O’Neil, a woman lieutenant, is selected to join in the Navy commando force for three months of intensive military training. No one expects her to succeed in this test case because of the standard 60% dropout rate for men. The strong-willed O’Neil is determined to prove everyone wrong. When training in the Mediterranean Sea is interrupted, the team joins a battle occurring at the Libyan coast. O’Neil rescues their injured Master Chief from the vehement crossfire. It is interesting to see that the two Chinese soldiers in *Charging out Amazon* actually occupy Jane’s position in *G. I. Jane* —sexism is replaced by racism. One can argue that the film scriptwriter of *Charging out Amazon* must have decided to copy *G. I. Jane* because his lack of creativity, but to have Chinese male soldiers to assume the female position in its original also has something to tell about a deep-rooted influence of self-Orientalism, as happened in both *The Opium War* and *Grief over the Yellow River*.

As a matter of fact, the interweaving of Occidentalism and Orientalism has become a salient feature of “main melody” films. It reflects an uncertainty of China in the reconfiguration of the world. On the one hand, it tries to get rid of the Orientalist discourses such as “sick man of East Asia” to present a powerful China; on the other hand, it always resorts to the West to affirm its powerfulness. In *Charging out Amazon*, Lena’s birthday is October 1st. At her birthday party, General Ruth congratulates Wang and Hu because it is also the fifty anniversary of the PRC. He also prepares them a gift: a

³⁷ See the director’s interview on *Jiefangjun ribao*, 15 August 2001, p.6.

satellite TV broadcasting news of the military celebration held in the Tian'anmen Square. In a close-up shot, the film shows alignments of Chinese soldiers in the Square, representing the inviolability of a strong China. One may argue that the insertion of the Chinese military demonstration is a narcissist cinematic performance shared by Hollywood films. At the end of *Independence Day* (1996), we see Americans cheering for July Fourth as the Day of the Earth. However, a difference also emerges at this moment. When Hollywood films are obsessed in fighting against all kinds of aliens to save the Earth and human beings, the narcissist Chinese as represented in *Charging out Amazon* and many other “main melody” films always resort to the acknowledgment of the Westerners, which shows the uneven power relations between China and Western countries. Gender politics become an effective instrument to cover this unevenness and the Western female Ruth becomes a symbol to show the masculine attractiveness of the Chinese.

Released on August 1st, 2002, the 75th anniversary of the founding of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), *Charging out Amazon* was highly promoted by party organs such as *People's Daily* and won the Golden Rooster and Huabiao Awards later.³⁸ It also won the One Hundred Flower Award with the highest voting number from the audiences. The success of this film, as some reviews have emphasized, lies in its impact to the audience's patriotic passion, especially “the birth of self-esteem and glory that

³⁸ The film aimed at being a Chinese blockbuster with a budget of 15 million *yuan*. According to the screenplay, the whole story in *Charging out Amazon* should happen abroad, and besides the two Chinese soldiers, all the rest characters are foreigners. However, its final released version is dubbed in Chinese. It gives the audiences a hyper-feeling of watching a dubbed Hollywood blockbuster, although it is hard for me to tell if this is the producer's original intention. The Chinese title of this film is identical with Chinese translations of two Hollywood products: *Flying Virus* (2001) by Jeff Hare and *800 Leagues down the Amazon* (1993) by Luis Llosa. This film attended film weeks held in Australia and Pakistan in 2004.

contemporary people are expecting for.”³⁹ Critics point out that the overt promotion of the mainstream cultural discourse has put the hero into the back stage as pseudo-hero, and the real hero in the front stage actually is the official ideology. This official ideology has been clearly summarized in another review:

To be connected with the world and participated in the global competition is the main theme of our era. *Charging out Amazon* has observantly caught this theme. Through the screen story of how Chinese soldiers are growing up in fight with soldiers across the world and become the winner, it proves that China is catching up the pace when all countries in the world are taking the road of strengthening their military force.”⁴⁰

As a telling note to the military policy that has been carried out in China, this film is also an ideological production and reproduction of the raised position of China in the international stage, and the corresponding Chinese nationalism. Masculinity and nationalism have been perceived by a number of critics as going hand in hand because the latter was understood in terms of certain qualities such as assertiveness, power, strength, aggressiveness, and fierceness, which were embodied in the heroic male body.⁴¹ The cinematic representation of Chinese masculinity in “main melody” films follows this rule, especially in several films of the contemporary military themes such as *Dandao Wuhou* (Traceless Bullet, 1994) and *Chongtian feibao* (Flying Panther, 2000). *Traceless Bullet* describes the growing up of a PLA soldier, and *Flying Panther* tells how two generations of Chinese pilots carry out test flights for China’s first battle plane. The

³⁹ Tuo Lake. “Zhangsheng conghe erlai (Where Does the Applause Come from)?” *Wenhui Bao*, 9 August 2002, p.4.

⁴⁰ Yun Ding. “Xiezai guoqi shangde junwei (Military Power Written on the National Flag),” *Guangming Daily*, 6 November 2002, p.4.

⁴¹ Agnes S. M. Ku, “Masculinities in Self-Invention: Critics’ Discourses on Kung Fu-Action Movies and Comedies,” in *Masculinities and Hong Kong Cinema* (Hong Kong & London: Hong Kong University Press & Eurospan, 2005), 221-3.

masculine-nationalist connection in “main melody” films has to be considered in a larger socio-economic context in which China was asserting its newly acquired superpower status.

The practice of masculinity discourses cannot exist independently; it is always carried out with other discourses. In the Chinese context, two important discursive practices are economic development and nationalism. Therefore, it is not a surprise to see discourses of masculinity are closely related with these two discursive systems. In both literary and cinematic representations, which side is assigned masculine characteristics and which side will be the feminized role is never an innocent decision. It always has full of implications of power. As Laikwan Pang critically points out, “Masculinity is a source of power, and a site where power operates, so that is it also subjected to power. Therefore, any simple political agenda that involves using one form of masculinity against another simplifies their ultimate interconnectedness, which is manifested in different ways under different social and cultural circumstances.”⁴² In contemporary China, it is either businessmen or military figures instead of intellectuals that are assigned masculine characteristics. These two ways of representations are not against but supplement to each other, which reflects the changing social situation in China. Intellectuals, if not the whole group but at least part of them, here I mean those involved in producing both the transnational TV soaps and main melody films I have listed above, are active producers of these new masculinity discourses. In the 1980s, Chinese male intellectuals’ crisis of masculinity was fully represented in literature. In the 1990s, it was popular TV soaps and

⁴² Laikwan Pang, Introduction in *Masculinities and Hong Kong Cinema* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), 4.

films featuring successful businessmen that represented their endangered social status from an economic perspective. The “main melody” films of the 1990s tried to channel the crisis into nationalism, which, to some extent, was successful. However, when an economic versioned or a militarized Chinese masculinities is becoming increasingly visible and popular in the Chinese screen, the masculinity of intellectuals remains in threat or at least in question on the level of representation.

CHAPTER VIII

ENCODING/DECODING:

“MAIN MELODY” FILMS AND THE SUBJECTIVITY OF THE SPECTATOR

As a technological novelty, cinema has immediately become a true mass medium because it quickly reached a large number of populations, especially the illiterate working class. The presence of the spectator is an essential part in studying film medium as an important branch of mass culture. Consider a group of people seated in a dark theater, watching the moving images on the screen— why some are cheering while others are feeling uneasy? Why do people have different views of the same film? What kind of interaction takes place between individual spectators and the film text? How can the messages conveyed by the film reinforce or change the spectators’ worldviews? This chapter will address the issue of the spectatorship, or to be more exact, the subjectivity of the spectator in viewing Chinese “main melody” films.

Since the end of the Cold War, the CCP has encountered more difficulties in carrying out its ideological operation, under extensive Western influences. As cultural products of ideological reinforcement, all “main melody” films are labeled propaganda, or even brainwash, by the Westerners. For people in China, after witnessing an unprecedented socio-political transformation in the 1990s concerning both China and the world, most of them have acquired a more critical awareness of the Party governance. One interesting fact, however, is that many “main melody” films are still very popular

among Chinese audiences, with considerable box office receipts. Some “main melody” films were better received than many domestic productions, and a few even defeated Hollywood blockbusters in the domestic market.¹ Does this mean Chinese audiences fully identify with the ideological messages conveyed by the “main melody” films? If not, what kinds of different interpretations do they have when watching these films? And how could we evaluate these interpretations against the grain of the ideological operation?

Before attempting to disentangle these complicated issues regarding the subjectivity of the Chinese audience in viewing “main melody” films, it is necessary to review the theories on human subjectivity in general, and on the subjectivity of the film spectator in particular. From structuralism to post-structuralism, from Marxism to psychoanalysis, theories on human subjectivity have undergone sea changes over years, which have directly influenced the study of film spectatorship. Among different theoretical trends, the development of cultural studies since the 1960s has contributed greatly to a comprehensive understanding of the spectatorship.

Subjectivity: From Passive Victims to Active Participants

V.I. Lenin proclaimed in 1922 that cinema was the most efficient medium for propaganda. He remarked, “You will have to develop production on a wider basis and, in particular, introduce wholesome films to the masses in the city and, to an even greater extent, in the countryside.”² In his famous 1937 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin also predicted the potential of this new

¹ For the box office list, see *Dianying yishu* (March 1999): 12.

² From a conversation between Lenin and Lunacharsky in 1922, recalled by the latter in a letter to G. M. Boltvansky. See Richard Taylor and Ian Christie, 1988, 5.

technology for the formulation of revolutionary demands. An assumption that Lenin and Benjamin share with each other is that only when the film medium is under the control of the revolutionary side can it be applied to revolutionary demands. However, a few film studios have monopolized film industries in most Euro-American countries soon after the birth of cinema, and Hollywood is the most telling example. Under such a situation, could the film medium still play its revolutionary role?

According to Marx and Engels, the ruling class, on the basis of its control of the means of material production, will also have control over the means of intellectual production by representing its own interest as the common interest of all the members of society, and these members will accept it through what Marx defines as “false consciousness.” So Marx argues:

If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process.³

Therefore, most Marxist followers, despite their theoretical divergences, do not think that films produced under capitalism can offer any possibility for the masses to actively engage in overthrowing the status quo. The subjectivity of the masses is greatly de-emphasized, or even missing in Marxist critical perspectives. For example, in “The Cultural Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” a well-known piece of the Frankfurt School’s critiques on mass culture, Adorno and Horkheimer claimed that the basic characteristic of the cultural industry is standardization because it produces nothing but uniform entertainment products. The application of new technologies creates in the consumers an illusion of being enlightened, but actually it is just a “mass deception”

³ Karl Marx and Frederic Engels, *The German Ideology* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1970), 64-65.

because it works effectively by controlling the individual consciousness.⁴ According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the ultimate goal of the cultural industry is to help the ruling class defend social order. Adorno's essay "On Popular Music" further argues that the standardized popular music only works as "social cement" to promote passive consumption, turning consumers into passive victims.⁵ In this sense, film industries in the capitalist society, maybe the most powerful branch of the cultural industry, only contribute to indoctrinate the ruling ideas into the masses' minds. The subjectivity of the masses was totally denied.

Psychoanalysis, a theory built by Jacques Lacan, tries to explain the subjectivity in a way that is totally different from the Marxist tradition. But both end with a denial of subjectivity. According to Lacan, there are three stages in the formation of human subjectivity—the imaginary phase in which the infant identifies itself as part of the mother; the mirror phase in which the infant realizes itself as a separate being, and the symbolic in which the infant seeks to step into the world of language, the world of the Father. By describing the world of language as an unbreakable symbolic order, psychoanalysis shares the same negative view on human subjectivity with the Frankfurt School. Christian Metz has taken Lacan's theory further and defines the role of cinema as a way to temporarily fulfill the longing for the imaginary, the sense of unity.⁶ As some critics pointed out, the interaction of spectator and film text actually produces the viewer

⁴ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, "The Cultural Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 94-136.

⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, "On Popular Music," in *Essays on Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 437-469.

⁶ Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana Press, 1982).

to be the subject in the process, so psychoanalytic film theory is concerned with “establishing the complex, myriad mechanisms by which the relationship of spectator to screen links the human psyche, particularly the unconscious, to the film text.”⁷ Either to be an element of the symbolic world or to be exiled from this world, it seems that there is a teleological end towards which all human subjects will walk despite their longing for the unity.

In “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Louis Althusser linked the operation of ideology to the notion of the unconscious. He argued that ideology works unconsciously as a system where we live, which speaks on behalf of us, and gives us the illusion that we are in charge so that we could freely choose to believe the things we believe. In his formulation, “all ideology has the function of ‘constructing’ concrete individuals as subjects.”⁸ His notion of “interpellation” also leaves no room for the subject to actively and critically engage in resisting the ideology produced by the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), and the mass media occupy an important position in the ISAs.

In the fields of linguistics and semiotics, there has been a general underestimation of the role of the speaker/reader, too. For instance, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure focused on *langue* rather than *parole*, on formal systems rather than on processes of use and production. In giving priority to the determining power of the system, structuralism can be seen as fundamentally conservative.

⁷ E. Deidre Pribram, “Spectatorship and Subjectivity,” in Miller, Toby and Robert Stam, eds., *A Companion to Film Theory* (Malden & Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1999), 146-164, 149.

⁸ Louise Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 142-6, 162-77.

The rediscovery of audience as a group was a significant point in the history of mass communication theory during 1940s and 1950s. Unfortunately, the audiences were mainly treated as market because, as McQuail argues, “it links sender and receivers in a ‘calculative’ rather than a normative or social relationship, as a cash transaction between producer and consumer rather than a communication relationship.”⁹ This rediscovery was embodied in film producers’ catering to the audience’s taste, and also their cinematic construction of taste. Audience studies then was focused on an uni-directional film consumption rather than a two-way interpretation. In the interaction between film industry, film text, and film audience, no emphasis has been put on film reception and the actual use of film text by different groups of people.

For the first part of the twentieth century, structuralism dominated the field of social science. The full denial of the agency of the masses, a weak point of the so-called “Western Marxism” and the Althusserian “scientific Marxism,” had aroused great academic controversy. In 1960, structural linguist Roman Jakobson proposed a model of interpersonal verbal communication that moved beyond the basic Saussurian transmission model of communication, highlighting the importance of the codes and social contexts involved. According to Jakobson, in order to make the addresser and the addressee stay in communicate effectively, a code that is either fully, or at least partially common to the addresser and addressee, is required for an effective operation of the message.

Then what will happen if the addresser and the addressee do not share a fully identified code system? Or only some of the addressees share with the addresser the same

⁹ Denis McQuail, *Mass Communication Theory*, 4th edition (New York: Sage Publications Ltd, 2000), 226.

code system and others do not? In the field of literary studies, as a response to the textual emphasis of New Criticism, the reader-response theory argues that a literary text cannot be a fulfilled text without considering its reception. Wolfgang Iser sees reading as a dialectical process between the reader and text. For Hans-Robert Jauss, a reader's aesthetic experience is always bound by time and historical determinants. In brief, the reception process is not only determined by the information provided in the text, but also, and sometimes more importantly, is related to the reader's specific social experience.

Therefore, the issue of subjectivity has been reconsidered with new theoretical developments against structuralism. A simple passive subjectivity lost out to a consideration of the possible intervention of the human agency in all kinds of social activities. Theorists and critics have started to pay more attention to the formation of the human subjectivity. Most of them agree that the human subjectivity is constructed by multi-layered, and sometimes competing discourses. As Foucault has delineated, discourses are systems of thoughts or knowledge that can form into certain ideologies through repetitive practice such as discipline and punishment, or discourses on heterosexuality. In other words, human subjectivity is nothing but a product of different discursive practices that never complete but undergo continuous struggles and negotiations. Although Foucault leaves the readers an impression of the omnipresent power system that can engulf and integrate into itself all sorts of resistant activities, his discursive theory is of great significance in terms of the interstices between different ideological discourses.

Among theories on human subjectivity, what I want to highlight is the re-affirmation of the audience's subjectivity in the field of cultural studies since the 1960s, especially in research done by Stuart Hall. As a major figure in the revival of the British political left in the 1960s and 70s, Stuart Hall has argued that although the mass media do tend to encode interpretations that serve the interests of the ruling class, they are also "a field of ideological struggle" where the audiences, based on their concrete living social experiences, can actively decode the ideological messages.

In his theoretical account of how messages are produced and disseminated in "Encoding/Decoding," Hall inserted a semiotic paradigm into a social framework.¹⁰ He argues that the dominant ideology is typically inscribed as the "preferred reading" in a media text, but that cannot be automatically adopted by receivers, as the Frankfurt School and Althusser have insisted. On the contrary, the social situation of the receiver may lead him/her to adopt different stances. According to Hall, there are three kinds of readings: "dominant readings" are produced by those whose social situation favors the "preferred reading;" "negotiated readings" are produced by those who can alter the "preferred reading" by taking account of their own social position; and "oppositional readings" are produced by those whose social position puts them into direct conflict with the "preferred reading." Hall insists that the meaning of a text is located somewhere between the producer and the reader. Even though the producer encodes the text in a particular way, the receiver could negotiate the meaning of the text in a slightly different manner if not all oppositional.

¹⁰ This essay was originally published in Stuart Hall, *Encoding and Decoding in Television Discourse* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1973).

Hall's model of encoding/decoding shares a common ground with Gramsci's notion of "hegemony." According to Gramsci, a class is dominant in two ways, leading and dominant. "Hegemony" refers to a situation in which the dominant class does not rule a society by simply imposing its ruling ideas on the rest of society, but actively leads it through continuous practice of moral and intellectual leadership. In other words, the continuous practice of leadership means the operation of ideology is by no way seamless and always-already dominative, thus it is highly possible that the subject can partly achieve his/her subjectivity. In the formation of subjectivity, ideological interpellation is accompanied by a consistent resistance of this very interpellation. Nothing can better explain this than the rising of feminism and vehement criticism on the patriarchal society.

Viewed from a Chinese perspective, despite the fact that Chinese Marxism is preoccupied with political struggles, the issue of subjectivity has remained central to a few Marxist literary theorists. For example, Hu Feng's theory of a "subjective fighting spirit" in realism linked the concept of social revolution with that of individual consciousness.¹¹ For Hu Feng, "the unity or combination of subjective spirit and objective truth has produced a militant new literature, which we call realism."¹² Mao launched a political assault on Hu's "bourgeois subjectivism," but Mao himself, as many studies have point out, emphasizes the subjectivity of the masses in order to carry out the revolutionary cause. To some extent, the Cultural Revolution was an extreme case of an uncontrollable performance of mass subjectivity in a negative sense. In Mao's China, the

¹¹ See Liu Kang, "Subjectivity, Marxism, and Cultural Theory in China", in *Politics, Ideology, and Literary Discourse in Modern China* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 23-55, 24.

¹² Hu Feng, "Xianshi zhuyi zai jintian (Realism Today)," in *Zai hunluan limian* (Chongqing, 1943), 9.

people's collective subjectivity was used to undermine an individual subjectivity. In the 1980s, Li Zehou and many other intellectuals undertook the mission of reconstructing subjectivity in Chinese culture, attempting to "distance cultural activity from political reality by valorizing culture over and above other aspects of social life."¹³ This reconstruction in the cultural field, I would argue, is more a strategic way to secure a room for the subjectivity of the intellectual group from the domain of the Party ideology. Unfortunately, this effort ended with the traumatic 1989 incident in the Tian'anmen Square.

Born as an attempt to undermine the dominance of the mass media in capitalist society, Hall's model of "encoding/decoding" can be appropriated to a Chinese context, examining the relationship between the subjectivity of Chinese audiences and the ideological function of Chinese cinema at different historical periods. During the 1930s and 1940s, the Japanese invasion led to a large-scale movement of "national salvation." Hu Feng describes the genesis of artistic creation as "stemming from the struggle with the real life of flesh and blood... in which the critics must grasp the social significance of the object from its concrete, lively, and sensuous experience, and instill into this experience the author's positive, affirmative, or negative viewpoint." This interaction between subjectivity and the social conditions was not only embodied in works of realist literature, but more vividly, in the left-wing film movement. Thanks to the subjective identification between filmmakers and most audiences on issues of anti-feudalism and anti-imperialism, left-wing films were enthusiastically received among the urbanites. In the 1950s and 1960s, the passion for socialist construction was effectively evoked in cinema.

¹³ Liu Kang, 1993, 25.

If we can argue that Mao partly succeeded in creating an ideological identification between the masses and the Communist leadership to build a socialist society, then the so-called “socialism with Chinese characteristics” in post-1989 China has become a problematic notion. One legacy of socialism is a full-denial of capitalism. Then how can China practice capitalism while holding the flag of socialism? This ideological crisis provides a rare interstice to view the ideological operation, especially when new ideological messages are divergent from socialist legacy that the common people have inherited. An “ideological jet lag,” therefore, makes not only “negotiated reading” but also “oppositional reading” in Hall’s definition highly possible when Chinese audiences watch “main melody” films.

Nostalgia for Socialism in *Jiao Yulu*

One of the first successful “main melody” films released after 1989 was *Jiao Yulu* (1990), a biographical film based on a real life person. Jiao Yulu (1922 -1964) is a Communist Party member. At the end of 1962, he was appointed the secretary of the Party committee of Lankao County in the Henan Province where people were suffering from waterlogged and alkalized soil. Jiao worked tirelessly to improve people’s living conditions; he died of liver cancer in 1964. After his story was propagandized by the Xinhua Agency, the organ of the CCP, in 1966, Jiao became well known nationally as “a good Party cadre.” Part of the news report was included in high school textbooks for years. According to this news report entitled “The Model of County Secretaries—Jiao Yulu,” Jiao brought with him *The Selections of Mao Zedong* to Lankao:

He thinks, according to Chairman Mao's instruction, in order to carry out all his missions, one first of all must be familiar with the situation by investigation. 'No investigation, no right to speak.' ...

He always feels that Comrade Mao Zedong's methods of going into the masses and doing investigation are very important, so he decides to organize all the cadres in the county to talk with the peasants, and solve difficulties with the wisdom of the masses....

He says, when the masses are in big difficulties, CCP members should come to them; when the masses need helps, they should take care of them and help them...

On his dying bed, he leaves his will: "I only have one request after my death. Please send my body back to Lankao and bury me in the sand hill. I cannot improve the sand condition, but I can see how you finish the task in future!"¹⁴

The film *Jiao Yulu* tells the story of how Jiao devotes his life to people in the Lankao County, much like what was told in the news report. It begins with the re-location of Jiao's tomb in 1966, conducted in a local ritual. With black crows flying in the sky, white mourning flags emerge from the horizon of the bared sand hill. Among the wails and a heartbroken tune played by *suona*, a traditional Chinese musical instrument, the only discernable voice is from an old man: "Come back, Secretary Jiao!" It shows clearly that people are crying for a person who is already gone. Set in this mournful atmosphere, the film recalls how Jiao worked in Lankao County until his death.

Jiao took up his position just after the three-year natural disaster (1959-1961). It is understandable that this historical background is not clearly presented in the film since it will damage the image of the CCP leadership. The situation in Lankao County, as displayed in the film, was much worse than other parts of China because of its poor natural conditions. The film shows that Jiao Yulu faces many problems—Party cadres are eager to leave the destitute place, and common people are fleeing from famine. As the new secretary of this county, Jiao has to fight against not only the natural disaster but also

¹⁴ This news report was written by Mu Qing, in collaboration with others, and published in *People's Daily*: 4 February 1966. Mu became the director of the Xinhua News Agency from 1982 to 1992.

the dogmatist trend of other party cadres. In the film, Jiao visits an old sick woman, saying, “I am your son. It is Chairman Mao who sends me to see you.” Then he goes to see an old herdsman, discussing ways to improve the alkalized soil. When many people are starving, he risks his career to appropriate the administrative fund, buying and distributing food to the starving people. His wife complains that he always thinks of others first, never taking care of his own illness.

Jiao Yulu was in production before the Tian’anmen incident and released right after it, winning all the important film awards in China. In addition to the government Huabiao Awards, it was also the best picture winner of both the Golden Rooster and the Hundred Flowers Awards. While the former is an award voted by film professionals, the latter is decided by mass voting. The lead actor, Li Xuejian, won the best actor title of both awards.

By concentrating on the love Jiao Yulu holds for his people and the love the people have for him, the film successfully seizes the audiences’ attention. Deeply moved by the image of Jiao, a party cadre who wholeheartedly serves the people, many audiences burst into tears while watching. Why is this film so popular and successful if it is only a piece of propaganda? I would like to argue that one possible answer comes from the common people’s deep dissatisfaction with the status quo in 1990’s China, especially their great resentment towards corruption, which actually sparked the 1989 democratic movement. The fact that so many cry for the death of Jiao doesn’t mean that they unconditionally identify with the “preferred reading” that has been encoded in the film text, the positive image of the CCP member who serves the common people. Several

biographical films based on deeds of good communist cadres were made in the 1990s. For instance, *Jiang Zhuying* (1992) tells the story of a real life intellectual who devoted his life to scientific research, and died in 1982. As a prominent optician who made great contribution to China's scientific development, Jiang was admitted to Party membership and received the title of "the national model" posthumously. *Kong Fansen* (1995) is about another real life Party secretary who had worked in Tibet for many years and died in a traffic accident in 1994. Neither was as successful as *Jiao Yulu*. One possible reason, I will suggest, is because the party cadres in these films are not as symbolic as Jiao, "a good party cadre" in Mao's socialist China when the issue of corruption was fully under control. In an analysis on the social and cultural phenomena of "Mao Zedong Fever" at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, Dai Jinhua has pointed out that the onset and peak of the fever "signifies an imaginary redemption and a nostalgic return to the past."¹⁵ To some extent, *Jiao Yulu* can be regarded as a byproduct of the "Mao Zedong Fever." The economic reforms after the Cultural Revolution led to a widespread corruption in the 1980s. While the common people have no way to deal with the corruption problem in reality, they resort to films such as *Jiao Yulu* to express strong nostalgia for the socialist days and the "good Party cadre."

In the final shot of *Jiao Yulu*, the camera moves closer to Jiao who is coming from the faraway horizon of the sand hill, then the background suddenly changes into a green farm with modern agricultural machines, in which Jiao is coming closer again in front of people holding red flags, and a voice-over singing "The CCP is our wholehearted

¹⁵ Dai Jinhua, "Redemption and Consumption: Depicting Culture in the 1990s," in *Cinema and Desire: Feminist Marxism and Cultural Politics in the Work of Dai Jinhua* (London & New York: Verso, 2002), 172-188, 174.

leader.” The romanticized ending of this film contrasts sharply with the real social situation, especially when Henan was still one of the poorest provinces in 1990s’ China where many peasants made a living by selling blood.

The social effect of *Jiao Yulu* can be seen in two aspects. As expected by the Party, the film successfully channeled the resentment of the audience into nostalgia and lament, especially through an overall mournful atmosphere that is constructed by several heartbreaking crying scenes. Meanwhile, maybe unexpected to the Party, this film also makes the audience feel more pain about the serious corruption problem they have to live with in contemporary China. On the screen, audiences see the bright image of a model party member that is already gone; out of the screen, news releases frequently expose corrupt officials, most of them occupying high positions in the Party. It is easy to tell which image is more applicable to people’s real life. Thus it is easy to explain why some audiences could keep a critical attitude to the official ideology when watching a “main melody” film such as *Jiao Yulu* in tears. The contrast between the film text and the social reality provides a chance for the audience to do a possible “negotiated reading” in which the bright image of Jiao as represented in the film has been discounted by a not-so-bright social reality.

Life and Death Decision: An Anti-corruption Triumph?

In 1994, as a pre-condition for China to join the WTO, Hollywood blockbusters re-entered the Chinese film market. The co-existence of Hollywood blockbusters and Chinese “main melody” films in the same sphere—the Chinese film market of the 1990s has constructed a juxtaposition of two oppositional ideological systems. In terms of

consumption, Hollywood films and Chinese “main melody” films have been viewed differently, at least by most Chinese audiences, who identify the former as entertainment and the latter propaganda. When the entertaining function of Hollywood films has been taken for granted, the ideological messages encoded in the film text, working as an invisible hand, will effectively indoctrinate the audiences. For example, Hollywood films such as *The Fugitive* (1993) or *Enemy of the State* (1998) play more with the Chinese audiences’ imagination of American democracy and justice. In *The Fugitive*, the first Hollywood blockbuster released in China in 1994, the wrongly convicted hero Dr. Richard Kimble escapes from a prison bus and tries to find out who killed his wife. The injustice that has been fallen on him will be exposed by his heroic individualism. In *Enemy of the State*, when a successful labor lawyer Robert Clayton Dean finds himself on the run from a corrupt NSA official and his men after receiving evidence to a politically motivated murder, a game of cat and mouse begins. Dean turns to ex-NSA agent Brill for help and protection. Working together, they find the exonerating information and release it to the public. In numerous Hollywood productions like these two, although the hero is framed by others, he or she can always find the way out and bring the criminal to justice.

In the Chinese context, however, Chinese audiences are often well aware that the “main melody” film they are watching is a piece of propaganda, which means that its ideological function has been exposed to some degree, if not fully. Therefore, they can make a rather critical interpretation of the “preferred reading” that has been encoded in the film text. In addition, a cinematic narration of the dark, corrupted force and its final defeat by a brave protagonist with strong belief in notions such as democracy, freedom

and equality is hardly seen in “main melody” films since the Party leadership cannot be blasphemed. Individualist heroism is subject to collectivism. When the dark side is defeated, it contributes to maintain the bright image of the Party leadership. Both the reception context and the narrative feature decide that Chinese “main melody” films, especially films involving contemporary political issues, will be read rather critically.

Shengsi Jueze (Life and Death Decision, 2000) was a film produced to promote the CCP anti-corruption campaign. It is adapted from the novel *Jueze* (Decision, 1997).¹⁶ Based loosely on many identical events that happened in real life, which is far too common in China, the novel paints an accurate picture of the rampant corruption in China, namely, the “connection net.” This novel won its author Zhang Ping the Fifth Mao Dun Literature Award in 2001, the highest literature award in China.¹⁷ In the novel, Li Gaocheng is the mayor of the city of Haizhou. One day in early 1996, before the Chinese New Year, workers of a textile factory (where Li used to be chief) are in an uproar because they have not received their salaries for months because the factory leaders have stolen the money allocated to the factory in the name of reform. When the factory leaders want to cover their dark secrets by declaring bankruptcy, workers begin to protest. Initially, Li can’t believe the team he selected is corrupt, but more and more evidence is revealed, and the person who promoted Li to mayor turns out to be the senior backer of this corrupt scheme. Furthermore, Li’s beloved wife is involved in this conspiracy. What

¹⁶ This novel was first published in a literary journal *Zhuomuniao* (Woodpecker, 1997): vol. 2-4.

¹⁷ Zhang Pin is a writer from Xi’an. He is very good at portraying the anti-corruption struggle in contemporary China. Before *Decision*, he has published *Fahan Fenxi* and *Tianwang*, both with considerable success.

will Li do? Will he risk his wife and boss to expose the truth behind the corrupt scandal? Li is now facing a fatal decision...

“The appearance of *Decision* is not accidental. Last year when my colleagues and me did interviews in several state-owned enterprises, it never happened to me that workers were so enthusiastic about our interviewing...I always believe that literature must actively exert its influence on the society and the people,” said Zhang Ping, the author of the novel.¹⁸ Many writers like him have undertaken painstaking investigations and managed to unearth corrupt details from local police, public prosecutors and judicial officials. It was said that after *Decision* was published, Zhang received threatening letters from enraged local officials, who believed he used them as models of the corrupt characters in his work. But Zhang also got many encouraging letters for exactly the same reason, attesting to how true-to-life the novel is.¹⁹ In 1988, *Decision* was adapted into a same-titled TV drama of 8 episodes and broadcasted by more than 100 TV stations.

The popularity of *Decision* also attracted attention from people in the Shanghai Film Group. In order to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the PRC, some in the Group suggested adapting this novel into a film but others hesitated since they had never dealt with such a political theme. Later, they received support from the Shanghai CCP committee. As a matter of fact, the final approval of this film was also thanks to the “connection net.” After the Shanghai Film Studio finished a three-month postproduction work, they realized that this film had little chance to pass the censorship board because

¹⁸ Zhang Pin, “Writing for the Common People Forever,” in *Decision* (Beijing: Qunzhong chubanshe, 1997), 254.

¹⁹ The TV series was directed by Chen Guoxing, the director of *The Magnificent Birth*.

the cinematic representation of corruption was still too sensitive, so they managed to hand it over to the Shanghai-rooted President Jiang Zemin. Since Jiang had stated many times that anti-corruption was a big issue related to the life and death of the CCP, leaders of the Shanghai Film Group decided to add “life-and-death” before “decision” in order to highlight that anti-corruption was a party-approved issue.²⁰ In order to support his Shanghai fellows and show his determination of combating corruption, Jiang authorized the film’s national release. All members of the Political Bureau of the CCP watched this film on August 8, 2000. Subsequently, CCP members at different local levels were organized to watch this film.

The film opens with the worker protest in the textile factory, an event which is hardly seen in any mass media reports in China despite the fact that it happens frequently due to the high rate of unemployment in recent years and other social confrontations between the people and the local government. The first climax in this film comes after Li secretly visits a nightclub run by one of his brothers. It is Li’s wife who arranged Li’s brother this position through some factory leaders. Then Li interviews an old woman worker in a privately owned textile factory, which is actually financed with funds and equipment stolen from the state-owned enterprise. Not knowing of his identity, several safeguards assault Li and pull him to the factory owners, most of who are cadres of the state-owned enterprise. After regaining his consciousness from the coma, Li angrily overturns their dinner table. Through a series of plots, Li is represented as a good Party cadre who is innocent of his wife’s involvement in corruption. However, this image is not

²⁰ Ma Jianlong. “Shangying jituan dajueze (A Big Decision of the Shanghai Film Group),” *Meiri xinbao*: 22 August 2000, p.3.

as persuasive as those party cadres who victimize the workers for their private economic interests, especially when Li single-handedly fights with a group of corrupt cadres. As expressed by one corrupt factory cadre, “if everyone is corrupted, then corruption does matter anymore.” The only cadre who does not join in the corrupt team is a young man. But he has to collaborate with the team in order to protect himself. Later it turns out that Li’s promotion to mayor actually is a result of bribe by his men in the factory. A word that is repeated in both the novel and the film is “collective corruption”—the connection between factory leaders and some high-ranked Party officials, especially the vice secretary of the province who has promoted Li.

Director Yu Benzheng admits that he has drawn inspiration from some real life corruption cases to produce this film.²¹ Around the year of 2000, many severe corruption cases were disclosed to the public, partly because the Chinese media have begun to play its role in supervising governmental officials, and partly because the CCP has to deal with the rampant corruption. For example, many leading party officials, including the former Vice-Minister of Public Security, were involved in the smuggling activities in Zhanjian and Xiamen, especially in the well-known case of Lai Changxing. “We will fight corruption unswervingly, unremittingly and without showing any tolerance or mercy,” President Jiang Zemin made the remarks in his interview with *The New York Times* in 2001.²² According to the Xinhua Agency, China has begun to enhance its efforts

²¹ Yang Yang, “Dazao shengsi jueze, fang daoyan Yu Benzhen (Directing *Life and Death Decision*: An Interview of Yu Benzheng,” *Ha’erbin ribao*: 25 August 2000, p.6.

²² This interview was conducted on August 8 and published in *People’s Daily*: 13 August 2001.

to fight official corruption since 2000 and reported investigations of more than 134,000 cases and punishments given to 136,161 officials.²³

Different from the novel, an interesting narrative in the film is the relationship between Mayor Li and the Vice Party Secretary Yang Cheng. At the beginning of the film, it seems that Li and Yang do not get along well since they are competing for the same position of the Executive Party Secretary.²⁴ A tension is built between Yang and Li when Yang seems happy to see Li getting into trouble. Gradually they arrive at a consensus that they have to work hand in hand to fight against the corrupt side. This representation of their cooperation, to some extent, balances the cinematic narration between the dark corrupt reality and a belief in the Party leadership, although it is hard to tell if such cooperation would take place in real life. Another change is the revising of the images of mayor Li's wife and daughter. In the novel, Li's wife is a corrupt party cadre. Their daughter is a college student who spends most of her time in a far away university. She is astounded to see that her parents are taking oppositional sides in the anti-corruption campaign. In the film, however, Li has a mentally retarded daughter who likes painting flowers. He does not know that the flowers sent to his house are very precious and expensive. His wife takes care of the daughter, as well as her husband's sick parents and poor brothers. She wants to save money for her daughter's future; therefore she unintentionally gets her husband and herself into a dangerous situation. Just as Li said, "I'm fighting against corruption outside, but the real corruption happens at my home." Compared with the novel, the film offers a very sympathetic description of Li's

²³ *Xinhua meiri dianxun* (Xinhua Daily Telegraph): 17 June 2001, p.7.

²⁴ In China, the mayor as an administrative leader is always below the party secretary.

wife. After having realized that she has caused her husband much trouble, she asks for a divorce and goes on to confess her crime. This changed image of Li's wife offers a special educational message for all party cadres' family members since one important issue in the combat against corruption is to help the Party cadres better prevent their spouses and children from being involved in corruption-related affairs. This is why in some provinces not only the Party members but their families were required to watch this film.

Like in all typical Hollywood narrations, the evil side will be executed at the end. When the corrupt Vice Secretary wants to dismiss Li from his position, the provincial boss comes back on time and announces: "No matter who has been involved in the corruption case, and no matter what kind of difficulty we will encounter in dealing with this case, we will arrest and sentence all those who deserve the legal punishment." Li Zhun, an influential Chinese writer, and the vice president of the Association of Chinese Writers, relates the success of *Life and Death Decision* to the literary debate of "singing the praises and exposing the problems" that happened in the early 1980s. According to him, as long as one grasps the essentials of his time, the spirit of the epoch, singing the praises and exposing the problems actually do not conflict with each other. A wholehearted praise of the real, good and beauty things is necessarily accompanied with a vehement critique of the false, ugly and evil things, as well as a compelling exposure of the corrupt things, and courage to face squarely the conflicts and confusions in the reality.²⁵ The paradoxical relation between "singing the praises" and "exposing the

²⁵ Li Zhun. "Shengsi jueze shi shidai de xuyao (*Life and Death Decision* is the need of time)," *Huashang bao* (Chinese Business News): 5 September 2000.

problems” constructs the dynamic of this film. If it comes only with “singing the praises,” it cannot attract the audiences; if it only focuses on “exposing problems of corruption,” it has even a less chance to access the audience. In order to promote this film and help the audience to watch it in the way of the “preferred reading,” extensive propaganda work was conducted nationwide through all kind of mass media. Among the numerous movie reviews and related new reports, I found one entitled “*Zhenhan, Guwu, Yihuo* (Astounded, Inspired and Confused)” echoes perfectly to Hall’s theory of encoding/decoding. It was published in *Changjiang ribao* (Yangzi River Daily), the party organ in the Hubei province:

Anti-corruption is the primary concern of the common people. On August 18, 100 citizens were organized to watch *Life and Death Decision*. They had very strong feedback. According to the Film Company (in the Hubei Province) that organized this activity, these 100 citizens’ feedback on the significance of this film can be generalized into three aspects: astounded, inspired and confused.

First of all, this film reflects the problem of reform in the state-run enterprise with a very realistic, persuasive description of the reason of corruption and its social damage, as well as the two sides of the struggle. It is very striking. ... Those serious social problems have never been represented in film, so the audiences are deeply astounded by the great courage of the film crew.

Secondly, the brave exposure and the reasonable examination of the corruption can inspire many people. The concern from President Jiang after the film’s release is another inspiration. It symbols that the Party’s big decision in carrying out the anti-corruption campaign to serve the people.

The third is confusions besides the good reviews. Question one: Do we have a good mayor in our real life as mayor Li in the film? Question two: If we could have such a good mayor, will there be a good provincial party secretary who will fight against the corruption, too? Will it be too coincidental? Question three: At the end of the film, the provincial party secretary solves the serious corruption issue with a few sentences, which gives the audiences an impression that China is still in the phase of “*Renzhi* (a few people’s governance)” rather than “*Fazhi* (a legal system)”....²⁶

²⁶ Zhai Xiaolin. “Zhenhan, guwu, yihuo, guangzhong kan shengsi jueze (Astounded, Inspired and Confused, Audiences Watching *Life and Death Decision*),” *Changjiang ribao* (Yangzi River Daily): 24 August 2000.

This report displays vividly how the audience can read the film differently from the “preferred reading.” Only part of the “astounded” can be categorized as the “preferred reading” since their astounding is not only comes from the courage of the film crew in exposing the issue of corruption, but also the first cinematic representation of this very issue. Maybe some audiences feel “inspired” by the highest party leader’s decision of combating corruption, but how to carry out the campaign is not promising for most audiences, shown clearly in their confusion. From astounded to inspired and confused, although these three different reactions have been refined rhetorically in order to fit the propaganda tone, one still can sense that rather than accepting the “preferred reading” as expected by the Party organ, audiences can still actively question the credibility of the “preferred reading” according to their real social experience, especially when “collective corruption” has become an omnipresent social phenomenon in China.

Another movie review published in *Beijing qingnianbao* (Beijing Youth News), a Youth League owned newspaper where Party control is not as strict as those provincial Party organs, brings the confusion to a more suspicious level:

What is corruption? How much do the common people know about it? What they see is the shut down of their beloved factories and their fate of being laid-off. Life becomes worse and worse. What is the reason for this poor situation? It is related with the overall economic situation. However, what is fearful is not the natural disasters but those committed by man! Look at those fat rats. They are frequent to the luxurious places by group. What they are drinking is people’s blood, what they are eating is people’s flesh. The poor workers have no way to sue them since they have built an intimate connection net. It is just like a moth seeking its own doom. Haven’t you see even the mayor is beat so terribly in the film when he is mistaken as a common people? In order to break the connection net, mayor Li combats his intimate fellows, his boss and his wife. What kind of courage and self-sacrifice spirit does he have? Could he do this in reality? Those who have promoted him can dismiss him very easily. Without power, he can punish nobody. The only one that will be punished is himself. Film is an art of idealism. But *Life*

and Death Decision can aroused great echoes among the people, which speaks to the fact that people hate the corruption so much... They are expecting. Hopefully when they walk out of the dark cinema, a bright blue sky is waiting for them.”²⁷

If a publicly published movie review can be as critical as this one, then what is the general response from the audiences that cannot appear in any newspapers and TV news programs? One won't be too surprised to find that many said, “I finally know how corrupt they are!” Compared with the end in which justice has long arms, what attracts the audiences the most is the detailed, sometimes dramatic description of the corrupt Party cadres, which speaks to the fact that audiences can have their own choice to decide which message they will accept and which they will refuse within a given text. An interesting episode about this film is, in order to warn potential investors or merchants of the corrupt tactics practiced by Chinese officials, *Life and Death Decision* was aired in Taiwan and Hong Kong, the top two major investors in China.

Since Deng Xiaoping launched China's economic reform in the late 1970s, the Chinese economy has been growing at an exceedingly high rate, and corruption crimes have become more and more widespread. The average social wealth loss in each corruption case has become more and more substantial. Although the Party has put more energy in solving this issue such as raising the salaries of the civil servants to prevent corruption, the overall situation has deteriorated day by day. Worker protests and local conflicts cannot be reported in Chinese media. For example, one of the official documents issued by the Central Department of Propaganda clearly states that all news media cannot report the suicides of laid-off workers, especially women workers. Instead,

²⁷ Ding Xin. “Huashuo shengsi jueze: laobaixing de hushing (On *Life and Death Decision*: Call from the Common People)”, *Beijing qingnianbao* (Beijing Youth News): 1 September 2000.

what have appeared in media coverage are stories of how laid-off women workers become “female bosses.” Many books that portrayed the dark insidious side of corruption were published, and banned immediately. Being circulated in the underground book market, these books further intensify the common people’s voyeurism.

The Party censorship on TV production, compared with that on filmmaking, is less strict. In the 1990s, several TV drama series featuring the issue of corruption have been well received, yet more in the thriller genre. Beside the abovementioned *Decisions*, based on the corruption case that occurred at Beijing Capital Steel Company, a “main melody” TV series *Hongse kangnaixin* (The Red Carnation, 2001) was broadcast with great popularity. As the genre soon proved to be profitable in the market, and more and more writers tackled the theme and joined in the production of TV series, debates began. Critics worried that some works could arouse uncomfortable feelings because writers always adopted a naturalistic way to describe corruption. Also under the theme of “fighting corruption,” some writers focused more on specific political tricks and administrative schemes. This trend attracted attention from the Central Department of Propaganda. As a result, a ban was extended to all TV dramas focusing on corruption issues. Under such circumstances, thanks to the special authorization from President Jiang, *Life and Death Decision* collected the biggest box office revenue in 2000. However, no film featuring the theme of corruption has been produced after *Life and Death Decision* despite big box office potential, which reveals the Party’s uneasiness with the audience’s possible “negotiated readings” and “oppositional readings.” In the field of TV production, instead of the anti-corruption theme, TV series of revolutionary

history have gradually adopted the thriller genre, especially in some anti-spy series such as *Hongse zhuijiling* (Red Wanted Order, 2002) and *Ruci duojiao* (So Splendid, 2004), both featuring the anti-spy struggle between the CCP and the KMT in the beginning years of the PRC.

Intervening the Encoding Process

The theoretical turn from an irresistible ideological interpellation towards an emphasis on spectatorship or readership marks a significant step in studying the issue of subjectivity. The spectator is no longer framed in passive subjectivity. Rather, he/she can offer active readings of the ideological messages offered by the text. This is exactly what has happened in *Jiao Yulu, Life and Death Decision* and many other Chinese “main melody” films with successful market performance. An absolutely passive spectatorship could not explain the popularity of these Chinese “main melody” films.

What is very valuable about Hall’s “encoding/decoding” model can be observed through comparisons with his coevals and followers. Traditional Marxist theorists tend to emphasize the role of mass media in the reproduction of the status quo, in contrast to liberal pluralists who emphasize the role of the media in promoting diversified speeches. Richard Dyer’s essay *Entertainment and Utopia* (1977) put the issue of subjectivity on the agenda of cultural studies through his research on the Hollywood musical and the entertainment industry as a whole. He argues that Hollywood musicals can express the audience’s real needs for a utopian society, and the unusual characteristics of the entertainment industry lie in that the subordinate groups could play important roles in the development and definition of entertainment. Dyer’s recuperation of entertainment has

helped pave the way for cultural populism. Later, John Fiske launches a postmodernist celebration of an unlimited subjectivity, in which audiences are seen as capable of appropriating the media in an infinite variety of ways according to their prior needs and dispositions. As he argues:

How actual audience groups actively use television as part of their own cultures—that is, use it to make meanings that are useful to them in making sense of their own social experiences and therefore of themselves.²⁸

This utopian notion of resistance goes beyond the parameters of dominant ideology, which leads him to conclude that “exploring the strategies by which subordinate subcultures make their own meaning in resistance to the dominant is currently one of the most productive strands of cultural studies.”²⁹ What has been underestimated in his argument is that the encoding process, to a great extent, limits possible ways of decoding.

In comparison, what insightful of Hall’s “encoding/decoding” model is that he rejects both traditional Marxist and liberal pluralists by standing between the base/superstructure formulation and the subjectivity of the receiver. As a neo-Marxist, Hall sees the media as part of an ideological arena where various class ideas are fighting. At the same time, he does not ignore the various ways in which audiences use mass media although these ways are still confined by the overall ideological structure. In other words, the subjectivity is always one that cannot totally break away from the ideological net. How to maintain a position for political intervention is a main concern in cultural studies, in consonant with its Marxist origin. Hall seeks to avoid the totalizing over-

²⁸ John Fiske, 1992, 300.

²⁹ John Fiske, 1992, 304.

determinism of psychoanalytic theory and Althusserian-based concepts of ideology in which the subject is interpellated by the ideologies that constitute that person. Then, what kind of radical politics could be offered by Hall's "encoding/decoding" model? In my point of view, if the filmmaker can make the best use of the discrepancy between the encoding system and the decoding ends, it will make both "negotiated readings" and "oppositional readings" highly possible. However, it requires filmmakers to be not only good at using the cinematic language but also familiar with the common people's social experiences.

As I have mentioned earlier, in order to compete with Hollywood, the CCP government has begun to co-operate with some Fifth and Sixth generation filmmakers in producing more successful "main melody" films, both politically and commercially. For many filmmakers, to get financial support from the government is also important, which lays the ground for collaboration. Li Shaohong, an important female director from the Fifth Generation, is one of those who began to work with official approval.³⁰ However, this by no way leads to a full identification between filmmakers and the government. For instance, the cinematic representation of nationalist discourse, as I discussed in Chapter 5, serves the Party and the intellectual group differently. Li Shaohong's "main melody" film *Xingfu dajie* (Happy Street, 1997) further shows how the director can suggest possible "oppositional readings" through certain narrative strategies.

³⁰ As one of the growing numbers of female directors in China, Li Shaohong has produced not only a few successful films but also many popular TV dramas. Her early works include *Yinshe mousha'an* (Silver Snake Case, 1988), *Xuese qingchen* (Bloody Morning, 1990), *Sishi buhuo* (Family Portrait, 1992), and *Hongfen* (Blush, 1994). Li has received praise from audiences and critics alike meriting her China's best female director.

Happy Street tells a story of a laid-off worker in Beijing. The term “laid-off” in China is commonly known as “xiagang” or lost one’s job. In news media, this disastrous event has been represented as an opportunity to venture into individual business success, and those who fail are labeled as lazy people who cannot adjust to the new environment. In the field of literature, the so-called “realism returning on horseback” shares the same opinion through a theme of “sharing hardships with the nation,” as termed by Dai Jinhua.³¹ When the laid-off female workers finally become visible, they are represented as bearers of all misfortunes that could happen to them, and being laid-off is just one episode. This kind of melodramatic representation greatly distracts the reader’s attention away from the serious social problem.

Happy Street to some extent obeys this convention, but it is also slightly different from those realistic novels. In *Happy Street*, a worker has been laid off and he cannot face telling his wife that he has lost his job. He pretends to go to work everyday. Elements of social criticism are overwhelmed by a sentimentalist description of the poor couple. However, the laid-off husband seems not to be the protagonist of the film, especially when his wife steps in as the narrator. It is a story of a laid-off husband, but it is narrated by his wife. This strategy is of great significance especially when the voice of the laid-off women workers is hardly heard in the mass media during the mid 1990s. By narrating a laid-off man’s experience through the eyes of his wife, the voice of laid-off women workers emerges on the screen in disguise.

³¹ Dai Jinhua, “Invisible Writings” in *Cinema and Desire: Feminist Marxism and Cultural Politics in the Work of Dai Jinhua* (London & New York: Verso, 2002), 213-234.

As the story goes, the wife, who works in a meatpacking factory, offends the factory leader. The director gives many clues that she will likely be laid-off soon. However, she is rewarded 200 *yuan* instead because she has bravely defended the factory's interest in the black market. The unexpected reward won't prevent the audience from thinking in another way: what if she is laid-off too, after her husband? The film ends with a confession from the wife: "This is my story. The director lets me to tell the story in this way. I have more to say, but the director said this is enough." This ending voice can be read as an ironic confession of the director herself under the censorship of the government: "this is the story told as required by the government, although I have more to say, but the government obviously won't allow it." It leaves the audience to imagine what else the director wants to tell. Actually the title of this film is ironic, too. There is nothing happy about this poor couple throughout the film although they live on Happy Street. The notion of "happiness" is directly related to the legitimacy of the CCP, since one promise of the Party is to make people live happily. *Happy Street* was censored for a long time before its final release on July 1998 under a new title, *Hong xifu* (Red Suit). The red suit in the film is bought by the wife as a birthday gift for her husband. Western suit in China is generally a dress code for successful businessmen. However, as we can see, the husband has no chance to make big money. The husband has no chance to wear the suit, especially when he finally finds job as a bike repairman on the street. Before he decides to take this job, he has been working in a hotel as a restroom waiter. When a rich customer asks him to tie his pants, the husband angrily quits the job.

Therefore, the red suit becomes ironic too, symbolizing a dream of the ordinary people that can never be actualized.

In the process of encoding, as we can see, the director makes efforts to undermine the “preferred reading.” Despite the long censorship it has undergone, as a film that expresses social concerns on the laid-off workers, this film was still awarded a governmental Huabiao award. Although its box office performance was not good, at least it shows the possibility that filmmakers can actively intervene in the encoding process to offer the audience possibilities to read “main melody” films critically.

The efforts in constructing a national identity, both for its citizen and its culture, informs a continue struggle of the Chinese nation-state in the international order that is established by the dominant Western powers. The Chinese film industry was a product of semi-colonial modernity, and a persistent resistance to the very semi-colonial situation accompanied its development. Socialist cinema has played an important role in the CCP’s pursuit of socialist modernity that is de-linked from the capitalist world. The advent of globalization only intensifies the process since both the ideological and psychological demand for maintaining a stable national identity becomes more urgent than before.

Film productions in 1990s’ China can be divided into three categories: government-sponsored “main melody” films, private-invested entertainment films, and art cinema. As propaganda has remained a major mission of the film industry, dramatic changes have happened to what was categorized as propaganda. In her study titled “Media, Market, and Democracy in China,” Zhao Yuezhi suggests a new broadened

concept of ideology with a critical examination of the intertwining of Party control and market forces in the Chinese news media. According to her, ideology in contemporary China is “an active practice operation on the level of common sense and everyday consciousness and discourses, rather than as merely an explicit and static set of doctrines.”³² Besides “main melody” films, TV drama, stage drama, literature, and even revolutionary song are all influential ideological state apparatus of the Party hegemony. Sometimes they have interactive relations with the “main melody” film productions. In terms of film production, while there was a clear boundary between “main melody” films and entertainment films during the 1980s, more and more “semi-main melody” films have been produced since 2000, aiming at both commercial and ideological achievements. Both “main melody” films and “semi-main melody” films are productions in China’s pursuit of a global modernity

The most important characteristic of the film medium is its ability to combine entertainment with education and propaganda, and this characteristic becomes more salient in the global era, as embodied vividly by Chinese “main melody” films. Different ideological messages in “main melody” film do not simply complement each other. More often than not, they are contradictory and logically inconsistent. While *The Great Decisive War* focuses on Party leaders, *Days without Lei Feng* goes in the opposite direction by creating the image of the ordinary person. In *My 1919*, the staging of an individual at a major historical event hints a bankruptcy of socialist collectivism; while the cinematic representation of Chinese masculinity in *Grief over the Yellow River*

³² Zhao Yuezhi, *Media, Market, and Democracy in China: Between the Party Line and the Bottom Line* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 5.

reclaims the collective subjectivity vis-à-vis American individualism. The mechanism of ideology in “main melody” film is characterized by these confictions, which is exactly how ideology works. These confictions, on the other hand, also create interstices to observe the operation of ideology, therefore makes ideological criticism a meaningful intellectual challenge.

APPENDIX

THE CHINESE CINEMA HUABIAO AWARDS

(中国电影华表奖)

The Huabiao Awards is based on the Excellent Film Awards by the Ministry of Culture (文化部优秀影片奖). It began in 1957. After 22 years intermission, it was resumed since 1979, as an annual award. In 1985, the Film Bureau of the Ministry of Culture was reorganized into the Ministry of Broadcasting, Film, and Television (MBFT), and this award was renamed as the Excellent Film Awards of the MBFT. It has been renamed as the Huabiao Awards (Palace Columns Awards, 华表奖) since 1994. From 1994, the Chinese government awards 10 feature films along with other categories produced in the previous year.

Films mentioned in this dissertation are marked by * with English title.

1989-1990Best Feature Films:

Kaiguo dadian (The Founding Ceremony) 开国大典*

Jiao yulu (Jiao Yulu) 焦裕禄*

Baise qiyi 百色起义

Longnian Jingguan 龙年警官

Laodian 老店

Tequ dagongmei 特区打工妹

Jianü zhenqing 假女真情

Dachengshi 1990 大城市 1990

Lianshou jingtān 联手警探

Zhongguo bawanghua 中国霸王花

Douji 斗鸡

Duminghan 赌命汉

Beijing nizao 北京，你早

Huanghe yao 黄河谣

Nihao taipingyang 你好，太平洋

Baiqi'u'en: yige yingxiong de chengzhang 白求恩：一个英雄的成长

Best Documentaries:

Zhou enlai (Zhou Enlai) 周恩来 *

Leifeng shishui? (Who is Lei Feng?) 雷锋是谁? *

1991Best Feature Films:

Da juezhan (The Great Decisive War) 大决战*
 Zhou enlai (Zhou Enlai) 周恩来 *
 Kaitian pidi (The Birth of a New Age) 开天辟地*
 Mao zedong he tade erzi (Mao Zedong and His Son) 毛泽东和他的儿子*
 Guonian 过年
 Juezhhan zhihou 决战之后
 Liehuo jingang 烈火金刚
 Qingsa pujiang 情洒浦江
 shijie wuji de taiyang 世界屋脊的太阳
 Gaopeng manzuo 高朋满座
 Xinxiang 心香

1992Best Feature Films:

Jiang zhuying (Jiang Zhuying) 蒋筑英*
 Queli renjia 阙里人家
 Liu shaoqi de sishisi tian 刘少奇的四十四天
 Zhanzhibie bie paxia 站直了，别趴下
 Zhongguo ren 中国人

1993Best Feature Films:

Fenghuang qin 凤凰琴
 Chongqing tanpan 重庆谈判
 Donggui yingxiongzhuang 东归英雄传
 Diyi youhuo 第一诱惑
 Paobing shaoxiao 炮兵少校

1994Best Feature Films:

Beigao shanggangye 被告山杠爷
 Dandao wuhen (Traceless Bullet) 弹道无痕 *
 Buru huihuang 步入辉煌
 Liucun chakan 留村察看
 Yijia liangzhi (Two Systems in One Family) 一家两制*
 Tianwang 天网
 Juejing fengsheng 绝境逢生
 Jinghun 警魂

Best Foreign Film:

The Fugitive 亡命天涯*

1995Best Feature Films:

Kong fansen (Kong fansen) 孔繁森*

Yingjia 赢家

Qiqi shibian 七七事变

Shibing de rongyu 士兵的荣誉

Xingfangban zhuren 信访办主任

Jiuxiang 九香

Hong yingtao (Red Cherries) 红樱桃*

Best Documentary:

Jiaoliang (Bout) 较量——抗美援朝战争实录*

1996Best Feature Films:

Dazhuanzhe (The Great Turning Point) 大转折*

Honghe gu (Red River Valley) 红河谷*

Xilian 喜莲

Fuchang qihe 夫唱妻和

Likai Lei feng de rizi (Days without Lei Feng) 离开雷锋的日子*

Nanhun nüjia 男婚女嫁

Yihan jiemeng 彝海结盟

Junsao 军嫂

Qingnian Liu bocheng 青年刘伯承

Yi keshu 一棵树

1997Best Feature Films:

Yapian zhanzheng (The Opium War) 鸦片战争*

Dajinjun (The Great Military Advance) 大进军: 席卷大西南*

Anju 安居

Yidai tianjiao Chengji sihan 一代天骄成吉思汗

Reshi shengfei 惹事生非

Hei yanjing (The Colors of Blind) 黑眼睛*

Changzheng (Long March) 长征*

Hong xifu (Red Suite, aka Happy Street) 红西服*

Dengta shijia 灯塔世家

Feichang aiqing 非常爱情

Best Documentary:

Zhou enlai waijiao fengyun (Legend of Zhou Enlai) 周恩来外交风云*

1998Best Feature Films:

Chuntian de kuangxiang (Rhapsody of Spring) 春天的狂想*

Nan funü zhuren 男妇女主任

Shiji zhimeng 世纪之梦

Kuaile laojia 快乐老家

Yige dou buneng shao 一个都不能少

Guyuan qiuse 故园秋色

Bujian busan 不见不散

Longfei fengwu 龙飞凤舞

Liangxin 良心

Shanghai jishi 上海纪事

Best Foreign Film:

Save the Private Ryan 拯救大兵瑞恩*

1999Best Feature Films:

Hengkong chushi (The Magnificent Birth) 横空出世*

Dajinjun II (The Great Military Advance II) 大进军：大战宁沪杭*

Guoge (National Anthem) 国歌*

Jinji pojiang (Crash Landing) 紧急迫降*

Wode 1919 (My 1919) 我的 1919*

Huanghe juelian (Grief over the Yellow River) 黄河绝恋*

Wode fuqin muqin 我的父亲母亲

Nüshuai nanbing 女帅男兵

Chongtian feibao (Flying Leopard) 冲天飞豹 *

Sailong duojin 赛龙夺锦

Best Animation:

Baoliandeng (The Magic Lotus Lantern) 宝莲灯*

Best Documentary:

Dongfang juxiang (Explosion in the East) 东方巨响*

2000Best Feature Films:

Shengsi jueze (Life and death Decision) 生死抉择*

Xiangban rongyuan 相伴永远

Zhenxin 真心

Yueyuan jinxiao 月圆今宵

Yingxiong Zheng chenggong 英雄郑成功
 Mao zedong yu sinuo 毛泽东与斯诺
 Cailian dangkongwu 彩练当空舞
 Zhan tianyou (Zhan Tianyou) 詹天佑*
 Zuochu xiaoyan de nüshen 走出硝烟的女神
 Zuoguo yandong 走过严冬

2001

Best Feature Films:

Mao zedong zai 1925 毛泽东在 1925
 Chongchu yamaxun (Charging out Amazon) 冲出亚马逊*
 Beishui yizhan 背水一站
 Shengzhen changkong 声震长空
 Tianshang caoyuan 天上草原
 Faguan mama 法官妈妈
 Lizhi hongle 荔枝红了
 Miandui shengming 面对生命
 Gaoyuan rumeng 高原如梦
 Geda meilin 嘎达梅琳

Best Foreign Film:

Pearl Harbor 珍珠港*

2002

Best Feature Films:

Jintao hailang 惊涛骇浪
 Deng xiaopin 邓小平
 Meili de dajiao 美丽的大脚
 Shouxi zhixingguan 首席执行官
 Shijie shang zuiteng wode nageren na qule 世界上最疼我的那个人哪去了
 Ku'erban dashu shang beijing 库尔班大叔上北京
 Zhou enlai wanlong zhixing 周恩来万隆之行
 He ni zai yiqi 和你在一起
 Nuanchun 暖春

Special Award:

Yingxiong (Hero) 英雄*

2003

Best Feature Films:

Taiwan wangshi 台湾往事
 Tiandi yingxiong 天地英雄
 Jingxin dongpo 惊心动魄

Canlan de jijie 灿烂的季节
 Sanshiba du 三十八度
 Yi'an zhonghun 疑案终魂
 Xintiao motuo 心跳墨脱
 Nuan 暖
 Nuoma de shiqisui 诺玛的十七岁
 Mao zedong qu anyuan 毛泽东去安源

2004

Best Feature Films:

Yilun mingyue 一轮明月
 Ren changxia 任长霞
 Wode falanxi suiyue 我的法兰西岁月
 Deng xiaoping 1928 邓小平 1928
 Zheng peimin 郑培民
 Huayao xinniangu 花腰新娘
 Fengqi yunyong 风起云涌
 Keke xili 可可西里
 Chenmo de yuanshan 沉默的远山
 Zhang side 张思德

2007

Best Feature Films:

Taihang shan shang 太行山上
 Dongjing shenpan 东京审判
 Wode changzheng 我的长征
 Yunshui shao 云水谣
 Qianli zou danqi 千里走单骑
 Xiaoxiang zongli 小巷总理
 Biena ziji budang ganbu 别拿自己不当干部
 Shangxiang shuji 山乡书记
 Shengsi tuofu 生死托付
 Xiangbala xinshi 香巴拉信使

Best Co-production:

Baohulu de mimi (The Secret of the Magic Gourd) 宝葫芦的秘密 *

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