

# ***Chinese Cinema***

## **Study Kit**

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**Semester 1, 2010**

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# CHIN 2302/GENT 0421 Chinese Cinema

Course Convenor: Dr Jon Eugene von Kowallis

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Malu tianshi (Street Angel)

# 馬路天使

date: 1937

director: Yuan Muzhi

lyricist: Tian Han

starring: Zhao Dan (male) and Zhou Xuan (female)

cast: Musician (Zhao Dan); Newspaper Vendor (Wei Heling); Young Singing Girl (Zhou Xuan); Qin Player (Wang Jiting); The Hooligan (Ma Zhicheng); The Parasite (Chen Yiting); Chief Barber (Qian Qianli); Barbershop Owner (Tang Guofu); Hawker (Shen Jun); Unemployed Person (Qiu Yuanyuan); Young Widow (Yuan Shaomei); Street Walker (Zhao Huishen); The Procuress baomu (Liu Jinyu); Lawyer (Sun Jing); Man Fallen on Hard Times (Xie Jun); Woman Fallen on Hard Times (Liu Liying); Policeman (Han Yun); Landlord (Li Tiaozhi); Playboy (Yao Ping); Chauffeur (Yuan Afa)

\* \* \*

Zhao Dan and Zhou Xuan were probably the most famous movie stars of the 1930s and '40s. Zhao Dan, in addition to being an well-known actor was a political dissident against the Kuomintang or Nationalist government. Zhou Xuan, the heart-throb of a generation, is still widely known today for her singing, having acquired the nickname jin sangzi (golden throat).

The film opens with the credits superimposed over real-life scenes of Shanghai in the 1930s, starting with the neon signs of various nightclubs and bars, some in English and some in Chinese, which suggest the cosmopolitan nature of what was then China's largest and most "developed" city. Next we are shown flashes of daylight scenes -- the impressive edifices, the foreign-style parks, and the well-dressed middle and upper-class Chinese who frequented them. The traffic seems imposing at first, later out of control. Music becomes ominous. The crowd scenes become oppressive. They are, in turn, contrasted with the towering steeples of foreign churches, then the domes of banks, the customs house, and entertainment centers.

The camera's eye then focuses on the top of one of Shanghai's newest and most impressive skyscrapers (motian dalou) and slowly moves its way down. In white characters, we are given the date: "AUTUMN, 1935". The words "AT THE SUBTERRANEAN LEVELS OF SHANGHAI" then appear on the screen and the story begins with a drum-roll.

First we see Zhao Dan (called Xiao Chen), who plays a musician in a for-hire marching band, the type which abounded in treaty-port society and would be hired out by mid-level to well-to-do families for weddings and funeral processions. These bands

wore western-style uniforms and played western-style music. The hybrid nature of the wedding procession we see, embodying elements of both traditional Chinese convention (the bride is carried in a veiled sedan chair and wears a traditional outfit, there are Buddhist monks, prayer flags and traditional musicians in the procession as well) reflects the schizophrenic nature of life in treaty-port society.

Zhao rents a room in a slum-like apartment complex ironically called Taiping li (Lane of Great Tranquility). His roommates, neighbors and associates are newspaper vendors, street hawkers and a shop full of lower-class barbers as well as the young singer (Xiao Hong), played by starlet Zhou Xuan. The singer has been sold in childhood to her owner, the Qin player and his wife the procuress (who also "owns" and older woman, Xiao Yun, whom she has forced into prostitution as a yeji or "street walker").

We see the Qin player and Xiao Hong perform in a teahouse. When first asked to sing by customers, she sings "A Song of the Four Seasons" (si ji ge), i.e. one which speaks of the times. The lyrics tell of a pair of mandarin ducks (symbolic of lovers) who are rent asunder by war (an allusion to the impending Japanese invasion -- by 1935 there had already been fighting in the north and around Shanghai as well). At this point a fat underworld figure called Mr. Gu (his surname is a homonym for "antiquity") takes a fancy toward the singing girl, making bold to touch her person as he compliments her singing.

At home in the Great Tranquility Apartments we get a glimpse of her life. She is constantly being rebuked by her owners and is intimidated by the grave visage of the black-clad street walker. Her few moments of joy are spent in the company of her neighbors, the musician and the newspaper vendor. Apparently her owner the Qin player has had some sort of sexual affair with the street walker, because we overhear him attempting to rationalize his failure to come to her defense when his wife suspected them and beat her. We assume that both women, as white slaves, are subject to frequent beatings by the procuress.

The second song is sung by Xiao Hong as she flirts in an innocent way with the musician. The song is a form of dialogue and suggests tragedy at a national-level in the north -- again, the actions of the lovers in the song hint at the Japanese invasion. Moreover, we are told: "Friendships formed amid adversity are the deepest."

Mr. Gu and his henchmen frequent the barbershop downstairs from the Tranquility Apartments in preparation for a "date" with the young singer, which has been arranged through the Qin player and his wife the procuress. He takes her and her owner out for a meal, first buying her a piece of "foreign cloth," probably material for a dress. This she accepts, unaware that it is

intended as a sort of betrothal gift. When the musician learns of this from his friends, he is angered and, in a jealous rage, flings the cloth out the window into the street. With the musician thinking that she plans to forget about him and go with Mr. Gu simply because the latter has money, they quarrel and she walks out, the situation misunderstood on both sides.

Later, when the musician and the newspaper seller are drinking in a wineshop, he spots Xiao Hong on the stairs there and demands that she sing for him, since he is a paying customer. This underscores her place in society as being only one step above that of a prostitute. She is humiliated and grieves as she sings a "Song about Finding Oneself the Ends of the Earth" (Tianya ge) -- one that underscores feelings of alienation and isolation. The musician is saddened, too, and leaves, causing a stir. Lao Wang, the newspaper vendor, smooths things over.

Mr. Gu arrives at Xiao Hong's owners' apartment to present more gifts in order to ask for her hand. Shocked and mortified, she has only the street walker to turn to for comfort. The street walker advises her to swallow her pride and tell the musician of her plight. She is reluctant at first, but finally does so. At her appearance, the older newspaper vendor counsels the musician toward moderation. They make up once the true nature of the situation becomes clear to the musician.

The newspaper vendor spots a news item on an old newspaper they have used for wallpaper about a procurress being sued by one of her "charges" (yang nü). The musician then suggests they see a lawyer, whose name (Wang Naifa -- "Wang Who Is The Law") and address they also see in an ad. Riding an elevator to the attorney's office atop a skyscraper, they disembark, exclaiming: "This is like being up in heaven!"

The lawyer, Mr. "Wang Who Is The Law," is the only high-class Chinese we see in the film. He uses terms such as qisu (to litigate) instead of more common words like da guansi, which give the friends some difficulty. When he informs them that he charges "Five hundred ounces of silver to appear in court..." they leave, discouraged.

At home, another newspaper ad "Missing Person Wanted," inspires them to flee. The musician tells Xiao Hong they will elope together. When she expresses trepidation, he reminds her of the number of friends/brothers (dixiong) he has everywhere to help them. That night he mimics a revolutionary general inciting the masses, which humors and encourages Xiao Hong. When she invites the street walker to join them, the latter refuses, saying that the musician and his merry men look down on her as a prostitute. The two women find comfort in each other's arms.

After they flee the street walker is left to face the wrath

of the procuress who hopes to beat the whereabouts of Xiao Hong out of her. The Qin player, unable to watch, makes an excuse to leave. The rod-wielding procuress orders her to close the door, to disrobe and come toward her. As undergarments fall, the camera suddenly switches from the beating scene to a massage parlour in a bath house -- from women beating each other to men massaging each other. There Mr. Gu is informed by the Qin player that Xiao Hong has taken flight.

At the barber shop, Xiao Hong is given a permanent in an attempt to disguise her. The musician gives her a new piece of cloth, symbolic of their union. The youngest apprentice asks the newspaper vendor why he is always pasting newspapers to the wall as wallpaper. He replies: "This broken wall makes me feel sad" (a reference to the body-politic of China, or the imperfection of their lives perhaps).

Their motley gang of friends put on a wedding dinner for Xiao Hong and the musician at which he performs a magic trick called baiyin chukou (a word-play meaning "all our silver exported"), a veiled criticism of the Nationalist government's fiscal policies. The next day the owner of the barbershop comes to tell his employees he can not afford to pay them their back-wages. They are aghast.

Lao Wang, the newspaper vendor seeks out Xiao Yun, the street walker, and urges her to flee her owners and join them. One rainy night, when confronted by a policeman, she does so. The musician, though outraged, eventually speaks up for her, and the policeman allows her to stay. Lao Wang then buys her medicine and urges her to leave prostitution.

The landlord who owns the barber shop then sends a thug to collect rent, threatening to evict the entire crew if the rent is not paid in three days. The musician decides to drum up business for them by playing out of their store-front, but this only attracts a group of Buddhist monks, who already have shaven heads. When the thug assigned to collect the rent shows up, however, the barbers mistake him for a potential customer and forcibly shave his head. In a rage, he breaks up the shop.

The Qin player tells Mr. Gu he has discovered Xiao Hong's hiding place (probably by following the street walker there). The next day when they go looking for Xiao Hong, the street walker spots them through the window first and tells Xiao Hong to flee. When they enter and try to force her to talk, the street walker throws a knife at her former "owner". Lacking the strength or determination to kill him, she misses, but he throws the knife back at her, striking her in the left side of the chest.

When Xiao Hong reaches the musician (Xiao Chen) and the newspaper vendor (Lao Wang), a quarrel ensues between the two men

when Xiao Chen asks Lao Wang whether or not it is worth taking risks to defend "that sort of woman." The musician ends up apologizing.

Bringing the wounded street walker back, Lao Wang leaves to get a doctor. As she lies dying, the musician apologizes to her for having rejected her in the past as an unclean woman because she was a prostitute. She replies: "There is no need for anyone among us to ask forgiveness of the other. We are all persons who have shared the same bitter fate." Waiting for Lao Wang's return, the street walker sees a policeman through the window, whom she mistakes for him. In her delirium she then imagines the police have arrested Lao Wang and pleads for his release, saying: "Let him go. He is a good man who helps the poor." She then mutters her last syllables: "Ants....Ants" (meaning "We are all ants!") and dies.

Lao Wang returns, saying: "I didn't have enough money, so the doctor wouldn't come." As Xiao Hong sobs, the camera returns to the black subterranean depths below the skyscraper. Slowly it works its way up the skyscraper to the very top.

\*finis\*

questions for discussion:

1. What kind of social critique of modernization do you think is implicit in this film?

-- The "modernization" of third-world countries does not necessarily bring equality and justice with it. In some instances, injustice is magnified.

2. Is this critique still valid today?

3. What about gender roles?

4. Are the only bad people men?

5. Is the procuress more the agent of oppression than her husband the Qin player? Why?

6. Why do women oppress other women?

7. What themes do you think this film stresses?

-- Class unity, team spirit, an end to male-female exploitation, an end to female-to-female and female to male exploitation, an end to the worship of the superficial trappings of the Western.

8. What do you think the top of the skyscraper symbolizes at the very end of the film?

-- It might be heaven, as the musicians naively exclaim when they first get off the elevator, but it might also be Olympus, in the sense that it is the abode of those who are responsible for the state of affairs down below. In Chinese, the mortal world is sometimes referred to as xia tu (the earth below).

# ENCYCLOPEDIA OF CHINESE FILM

**Yingjin Zhang and Zhiwei Xiao**

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## Chinese cinema

*Zhiwei Xiao*

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### 1 Introduction

The first film was shown in China in 1896. Since that time, this new medium has gradually sunk its roots in the country to become one of the most important forms of popular entertainment. Unlike artists working with other media and genres introduced into China from the West – such as oil painting, symphonic music and spoken drama – Chinese filmmakers had no indigenous traditions to draw on in their efforts to assimilate this foreign novelty. Yet over the century they have completely mastered the art of filmmaking and their works have earned international recognition. To date, more than six hundred Chinese titles have won film **awards** at various international film festivals, including Cannes, Berlin, Locarno, Nantes, New York, Toronto and Venice.

Many distinctive features developed by Chinese film over the last hundred years are the result and testimony of the particular kinds of interaction linking culture and politics in twentieth-century China. As a form of mass entertainment, Chinese film has been affected by historical forces in a unique way. To understand fully Chinese cinema's recurring motifs and images, predominant narrative modes and thematic orientations requires a thorough knowledge of both the industry's internal development and the historical changes taking place in society at large. In fact, one of Chinese film's most striking attributes is the way it has responded

and reacted to political events. Hence, any narrative history of Chinese film must be informed by an understanding of the general history of the country.

The conventional narrative of Chinese film history is usually divided into eight distinct periods: (1) early experiments, (2) the 1920s, (3) the Nanjing decade, (4) wartime, (5) post-war revival, (6) the first seventeen years of the PRC, (7) the Cultural Revolution and (8) the New Era. Each of these periods corresponds to a specific phase of socio-political development in modern Chinese history.

### Further reading

S. Li (1991), containing essays on periodization and other methodological issues; ZDX (1995: 1–32), a discussion of film historiography.

## 2 Early film activities, 1896–1921

The first period begins with the introduction of film into China in 1896 and ends with the release of the first Chinese-made long feature, *Yan Ruisheng* (dir. Ren Pengnian, 1921). During this period, China saw her final days of imperial rule under the Manchu Dynasty, which was overthrown by the revolutionaries in 1911. But the founding of the new republican government did not immediately bring wealth and power, two goals sought by the revolutionaries. On the contrary, the political disintegration that had already become evident in the late nineteenth century only escalated during the early Republican period. Following the death of Yuan Shikai, the first president of the Republic of China, the era of warlordism began. Meanwhile, Western and Japanese imperialists increased their political and economical exploitation of China. China's defeat in the 1895 Sino-Japanese war and the Allied intervention following the Boxer Uprising of 1900 marked the high tide of imperialism in China. It was in this context of increasing foreign penetration and intensifying internal conflict that film was first imported.

On 11 August 1896 in Shanghai, a Spaniard named Galen Bocca exhibited the first motion picture to a Chinese audience at an entertainment centre called Xu Garden (Xuyuang) where variety shows and acrobatic performances were given daily. A year later, an American came to China and screened movies at a number of teahouses in the city. These screenings lasted for more than ten days and created a sensation. At this time, as in most parts of the world, movies were considered a novelty and were viewed as popular entertainment. Early films mostly took as their subject matter exotic places and peoples, thus reinforcing the view of film as exotica. Films shown in China during this period include *The Tsar's Visit to Paris*, *The Serpent Dance in Florida*, *The City of Madrid*, *The Spanish Dance*, *The Exhausted Mule* and *The Boxer*.

These titles illustrate both the nature and the appeal of early movie shows. One Chinese described what he saw: 'I recently saw some American electric shadowplays (*yingxi*) that contained wonderful scenes and were full of surprises. One scene showed two cute dancing blondes, who were then replaced by another scene of two Western wrestling men. One other scene showed a bathing woman. In yet another scene, a man tried to sleep but was annoyed by insects. He got up, caught a few insects and put them in his mouth, which made the audience laugh. In one other scene, a magician covered a woman with a blanket. When he unfolded the blanket the woman was gone. Minutes later the woman reappeared from behind the blanket.' This early eyewitness account suggests that the first movies to be screened in China had not yet developed mature narrative techniques and were mostly one-reelers. But works reminiscent of the two most important filmmakers of the day, the Lumière brothers and Méliès, were presented to Chinese audiences. The short film about a man trying to sleep arguably

reminds one of the Lumières' own brand of cinematic realism, while the story of the magician seems to borrow heavily from Méliès' famous techniques. These two diametrically opposed orientations in filmmaking were to have tremendous impact on later developments, and they were to be echoed in China as well as throughout the rest of the world.

That foreigners played such a prominent role in the early development of film in China should come as no surprise. China was not alone among non-Western nations in this regard. As an industrial enterprise, film first had to establish itself in the exhibition and distribution sectors in China, because there was hardly any native film production. As a result, the majority of early titles shown in China were Western imports, and all the first-run theatres were located in foreign concessions and owned by foreign interests.

Chinese film production began in 1905. A photographer named Ren Fengtai (1850–1932), who owned a photographic studio in Beijing, built the city's first movie theatre at the turn of the century as a sideline business venture. By that time, moviegoing had become so fashionable that the supply of foreign films could not keep pace with demand. So Ren decided to make his own films. In spring 1905, with the help of his assistants, Ren filmed a segment of *Conquering Jun Mountain*, featuring Tan Xinpei (1847–1917), then the 'King of Beijing Opera', and he continued to film some more stage performances by Tan and other renowned Beijing opera singers later that year. The fact that the earliest films attempted to integrate the new Western medium with traditional Chinese theatre says much about the terms on which film was adopted by pioneering Chinese filmmakers. In 1909, Ren's studio was mysteriously destroyed by fire, and his brief adventure in film came to an end.

Besides Ren's **filmed stage performances**, a number of other experimental short features were also made during the 1910s, although without exception all these early productions involved foreigners who either worked as technicians or provided finance for pioneering Chinese filmmakers. Among the many foreign filmmakers who came to China, the American Benjamin Brodsky was the first to set up a studio, Asia (Yaxiya) Film Company. Apart from a **documentary** entitled *China*, Brodsky also produced a couple of shorts before entrusting his business to another American named Yashell. Yashell, who was interested in making films about Chinese life with Chinese casts, hired **Zhang Shichuan** to manage the new business. Within four years Asia Film Company had produced about eighteen films, including the first Chinese short feature, *The Difficult Couple* (1913).

Although Asia Film Company was the first to start, the Commercial Press's Motion Picture Department actually became the industry leader. As a publishing house, the Commercial Press's involvement in filmmaking was initially only minor. In 1917, an American filmmaker arrived in China to launch a big movie venture. However, in two years he had spent all his money and not produced anything particularly significant, with the result that he had to sell his film equipment for a return ticket to the USA. The Commercial Press seized the opportunity to acquire all of his equipment for only three thousand yuan (Chinese dollars). In 1920, the Board of Trustees of the Commercial Press officially approved the formation of the Motion Picture Department, and within a year the department had expanded its production base by purchasing more equipment from the USA. Besides producing films, the Motion Picture Department of the Commercial Press developed film stock for other studios.

In addition to Asia Film Company and the Motion Picture Department, two other smaller studios were also involved in filmmaking. Based in Hong Kong, Huamei (Sino-American) Films, managed by **Li Minwei**, produced *Zhuangzi Tests His Wife* (1913), while the Shanghai-based Huanxian (Fantasy) Film Company was headed by Zhang Shichuan and Guan Haifeng. Each of these companies produced only one film before going bankrupt. In total, only five studios, including Ren Fengtai's sideline venture, made films in the 1910s.

Since no equivalent for the term film was available in traditional Chinese vocabulary, expressions such as ‘electrical shadowplay’ (*dianguang yingxi*) or simply ‘electric shadow’ (*dianying*) were soon deployed. These terms are suggestive of how Chinese people understood what film was taken to be. While the ‘electric’ component of this expression emphasized the technical aspects of this new medium, ‘shadowplay’ was simply an appropriation of an existing Chinese word referring to a traditional form of popular entertainment called *piying xi* (leather shadowplay). The techniques and operating principles of the Chinese shadowplay are quite similar to that of the motion picture. In this form of Chinese folk art, human and animal figures are carved out of leather (mostly donkey skin, which is why in many parts of China this art is also called *lü piying* – donkey skin shadowplay) and projected on to a screen. While the puppeteers and light sources are kept to one side of the screen, the audience watches the movements and shadowy images from the other side. An example of this practice can be found in *To Live* (dir. **Zhang Yimou**, 1994), where the protagonist was originally a shadowplay artist. Understandably, when the Chinese first saw motion pictures, they likened them to their traditional shadowplay, and because of this similarity, some Chinese are still claiming to this day that the origins of motion pictures should be traced to the traditional shadowplay in China.

While ‘electric shadowplay’ was the earliest Chinese expression for movies, other terms such as ‘Western shadowplay’ were also used. In fact, during the 1910s and early 1920s, ‘shadowplay’ was the most frequently used word for movies. It was not until the early 1920s that the Chinese began to use the current word, ‘electric shadow’ (*dianying*), to refer to the motion pictures. This progression in terminology is indicative of the progression in Chinese understanding of film as an imported medium. Obviously, the Chinese were increasingly aware of the medium’s technical dimensions and so began to realize the incongruity of likening movies to traditional Chinese shadowplays.

Outside of questions of naming, the early Chinese response to movies was nothing short of enthusiastic. While some commented on how the representation of the world in movies provides the supreme demonstration of the illusive nature of reality, others were more impressed by film realism. People were amused, amazed and ultimately entertained by this new technology and the various possibilities it presented. As more films were imported into China, film watching also became more popular. In 1904, when Empress Dowager Cixi celebrated her seventieth birthday in the imperial palace, the British embassy in Beijing presented her with a film projector and several reels of film. Unfortunately, though, the generator exploded during the screening at the party, and Cixi, taking this as a bad omen, ordered the prohibition of any future film exhibition in the Forbidden City.

Cixi’s ruling may have prevented her officials from seeing any more films within the confines of the imperial palace, but film attracted an ever larger audience outside the palace walls. In 1901, the first theatre houses exclusively devoted to movies appeared in Hong Kong and Taiwan. The first theatre in Beijing appeared in 1907, while around the same time movie theatres were being built in Shanghai by Western and Japanese businessmen. By 1926, the number of movie theatres in China had mushroomed to 106, with a total seating capacity of 68,000, figures that do not take into account other entertainment sites, such as YMCAs, where films were shown regularly. Despite many failures, the development of film in these three decades prepared Chinese filmmakers for the bigger strides they were to make in the next phase.

**See also:** theatre and film

### Further reading

Zhong *et al.* (1997), a historical study of early film exhibition and film audiences.

### 3 The movie craze of the 1920s

During the 1920s, Chinese industry and national economy enjoyed a brief respite from foreign competition due to the destructive effects of World War I in Europe. The Western powers, preoccupied with post-war reconstruction, relaxed their grip on China. The war had also significantly cut supplies from Europe and so created a shortage of available films for exhibition. While this situation allowed Hollywood to step in and fill the vacuum, it also gave Chinese filmmakers a share of the market. Furthermore, as the popularity of movies increased, so did the demand for full-length feature films. Theatre owners could no longer satisfy audiences with programmes consisting of only short films. To cater to this market demand in 1921, Chinese filmmakers produced three long features: *Yan Ruisheng*, *Sea Oath* (dir. Guan Haifeng, 1921) and *The Vampire* (dir. **Dan Duyu**, 1921).

*Yan Ruisheng* was based on a sensational Shanghai murder case of 1920. The case involved a young man named Yan Ruisheng who killed a prostitute for money. The victim, Wang Lianying, was not an ordinary hooker, but a concubine of great renown in the pleasure quarters of Shanghai, where she bore the title 'Queen of the Flowers'. The case received huge publicity. The Shanghai Cinema Studies Society decided to make a film about it and asked Yan's good friend Chen Shouzhi to play Yan. Chen not only looked like Yan, he had the same mannerisms. In the hope of achieving a sense of authenticity, the studio also found a former prostitute to play the victim.

*Sea Oath* concerns a **romance** between a modern girl named Fuzhu and her artist lover. After they have declared their love for each other, Fuzhu then decides to leave the artist when she is tempted by a wealthy suitor. However, Fuzhu's conscience awakens at her wedding and she goes back to the artist. The latter, angry, refuses to see her. The girl then goes to the seashore with the intention of committing suicide, but the artist arrives just in time to rescue her. The two are reconciled and live happily ever after. At a time when arranged marriage was still the dominant practice, the 'free love' between Fuzhu and the artist in this film represents a challenge to tradition. Interestingly, the narrative of *Sea Oath* looks rather Western, thus rendering the film both refreshing and outlandish. The film was a commercial success. Its female lead, Yin Mingzhu, who was a well known figure in Shanghai society, soon became one of the earliest Chinese film stars.

The third long feature was *The Vampire*. Its director, Guan Haifeng, based the film on a French detective story so as to cash in on the detective and **thriller** genres that were in vogue at that time, especially among younger audiences. *The Vampire* centres on the kidnapping of Doctor Bao and his rescue by the girl who loves him. The evil characters are mainly beautiful young women who live in a secret cave, a fact that, together with the use of special effects, contributed to the film's success at the box-office.

An important backdrop to the growth of the Chinese film industry in the 1920s was the relative freedom enjoyed by filmmakers operating in places such as Shanghai. The political fragmentation of China by the warlords had, ironically, created an environment in which intellectual pluralism and cultural diversity could flourish, and film's rapid growth at this time was directly linked to this *laissez-faire* condition. The absence of any effective government spared the Chinese film industry direct state interference, a luxury that it would never again enjoy for the remainder of the century.

During this decade, moviegoing became a fashionable pastime for city dwellers, and film stars began to join ranks with social celebrities. Many adventurous capitalists were eager to invest in the film business. In response to the movie craze, the number of theatres rose dramatically throughout the country, and new film studios mushroomed in Shanghai and other major cities. Many businessmen who had earlier refused to take film seriously now began to get

involved in production and exhibition. By the mid-1920s, a total of 176 studios had been established in the country, 146 of them in Shanghai alone.

The mushrooming of film studios may have been indicative of a new enthusiasm for film, but it would be wrong to see the 1920s as the golden age of Chinese cinema. In fact, very few studios survived for more than a year, and even fewer actually produced any films. Most of these studios were started by opportunist capitalists looking to make some quick money. With only a few thousand yuan in their pockets, they borrowed equipment, shot pictures in rented studios and cast family members with no prior acting experience. The manner in which these studios were operated was bound to produce films of poor quality. And yet, by increasing the market supply of films, they substantially reduced a film's per copy price. What had sold for 7,000–8,000 yuan per copy in the early 1920s could sell for only 1,000–2,000 yuan by the middle of the decade. As a result, a large number of mediocre and junk films flooded the movie theatres.

This situation worried the established film studios. They accused the smaller studios of damaging the healthy growth of the film industry by alienating Chinese audiences from domestically produced films and so driving them to better-produced foreign titles. In 1928, setting out to squeeze out their small rivals, six major movie establishments in Shanghai – Mingxing, Minxin, Da Zhonghua-Baihe, Shanghai Film Company, China Theatre and Youlian – joined forces to form a corporation named 'Liuhe' (the United Six). In their manifesto, Liuhe stressed the need to advance the Chinese film industry by improving production quality. The real issue, however, was the elimination of the rival studios. Liuhe's strategy of 'fighting poison with poison' (*yidu gongdu*) meant not only that the new corporation was going to compete with the smaller studios by duplicating what the latter planned to produce, but that it was going to do it with more capital, better equipment, bigger stars and a faster rate of production. By all accounts, the strategy worked, because by the late 1920s fewer than a dozen film studios were still in business.

While engaging in direct combat with small studios, the major studios also appealed to the government to establish official control over the industry in the hope of further weakening their rivals. They won public sympathy by resorting to nationalistic rhetoric, arguing that in order to fight off foreign dominance of China's film market, it was necessary to stamp out the irresponsible smaller studios. By the late 1920s, the Kuomintang (KMT) government had begun its censorship operation, with films dealing with martial arts, **legends and myths** among the first targets. Since most of the smaller studios were completely dependent on profits generated by these genres, the government's action directly threatened their existence. Although the major studios were also involved in making these types of movies, their production base was more diversified, and so they could better adapt to new government policies. After this self-structuring from within and government intervention from without, the Chinese film industry moved toward a period of further consolidation in the 1930s.

**See also:** censorship and film; detective film; genre films; love and marriage; martial arts film

#### Further reading

S. Hong (1995), on commercial films of the 1920s; C. Tan (1995), a survey of early cinema.

## 4 Early film people

In the early days, Chinese filmmakers mainly came from the *xinxi* (i.e., new Western-style spoken drama) tradition. Theatre was traditionally one of the most popular performing arts in China. At the turn of the century, there was an enormous audience for Beijing opera and

various regional operas. At this time, some returned Chinese students introduced Western-style plays to Chinese audiences. This new form of theatre, called *xinxi* or *wenmingxi* (civilized play), was particularly popular with young people because it dealt with contemporary issues and events.

In formal terms, the Western-style theatre took a more naturalistic approach to stage design and acting, differing markedly from the highly stylized and 'expressive' aesthetic traditions of Chinese theatre. For this reason, it was easier for the 'new theatre' to make the transition from theatre to film. For instance, **Zheng Zhengqiu**, the 'founding father' of Chinese cinema, began his career as a professional Beijing opera critic, and wrote, directed and acted in a number of 'new plays' before starting to make films. Another important film producer of the 1920s–30s, **Shao Zuiweng**, who founded Tianyi Film Company in 1925 and subsequently directed many films, also had previous experience as a theatre manager. When he made the transition to filmmaking, he brought the entire staff of his theatre with him.

Film actors and actresses were even more closely linked to the 'new theatre' movement, but unlike the 'brain power' of the film industry – screen writers, studio managers and directors – who mainly came from well-to-do families, film actors and actresses were usually recruited from the lower social strata. This situation arose because in traditional society acting was considered a lowly occupation, one which respectable families would not let their sons and daughters enter. Popular perceptions of actresses equated them with dancing girls and prostitutes. Not surprisingly, then, the social ritual of electing a reigning 'Queen of Movie Stars' was conducted in exactly the same fashion as the election of the 'Queen of the Flowers' in late Qing. However, movie stars themselves felt superior to their fellow entertainers. On one occasion, a group of film actors took offence at an advertising poster that listed their names beneath those of *mingpiao* (famous opera performers) and *minghua* (famous flowers, that is, prostitutes).

The lack of respect given movie stars was a major obstacle to the development of Chinese cinema. It deterred many talented people from entering a world looked upon as corrupt. The relatively low salaries paid to film actors and actresses also reflected this social status. During the 1920s, for instance, film actresses were usually paid between one and four yuan a day, hardly a handsome income. As movies became more established in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the major studios developed a casting system. A small group of 'stars' were paid fees for every film in which they appeared, in addition to their base salaries. The basic cast were just paid a regular monthly salary. For instance, **Hu Die** (Butterfly Wu), one of the leading female stars of the 1920s–30s, earned a monthly salary of 2,000 yuan, at that time the highest salary for a Chinese movie star, while Ai Xia (? – 1935), a member of the basic cast of Mingxing Film Company, made slightly over 100 a month. The leading male star at Lianhua, **Jin Yan**, sometimes referred to as 'the king of cinema', earned only 320 yuan a month, while a 1930s dancing girl could make as much as 1,100. Although movie stars enjoyed greater social prestige than dancing girls, the lack of financial incentives made many stars abandon the film world and join dance clubs instead. The consequent shortage of talented actors created a situation whereby, as some contemporary observers complained, anyone who appeared in a movie was treated as a star, regardless of their actual abilities.

Like movie stars elsewhere, Chinese actors had tremendous mass appeal. They set fashion trends and were invited to conduct opening ceremonies and promote domestic products. They were also the subject of gossip. Although stars were not necessarily guilty of the sins they were accused of, their private lives were put under constant public scrutiny. Because of their social influence, efforts were made to mould them into living models for society. Such efforts ranged from open criticism and ridicule of some stars' 'libertine' life-styles to the publicly offered advice of good intent; that is, from the offering of best film actor/actress awards to the studio's direct

interference in the private lives of its stars. The suicides of Ai Xia and **Ruan Lingyu** well illustrate the social pressures faced by, in particular, female stars. On the whole, though, few actors or actresses were as politically committed as the screen writers and film critics.

During the 1920s, fiction writers from the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly school figured prominently in the world of film. Many films produced in the 1920s were either scripted by them or adapted from their works. This literary genre was enormously popular with urban readers, and many in the film industry shared the sentiments of its writers. In comparison with the radical May Fourth intellectuals, these writers were much more ambivalent about Western culture. Written in traditional narrative styles, their works featured protagonists torn between the forces of the old and the new.

It might be argued that before the 1930s very few people were committed to politics. When it came to writing film scripts, even a figure such as **Hong Shen**, otherwise an outspoken social critic and iconoclast of the New Culture movement, wrote in a more subdued manner. In many ways Hong's scripts resembled those of the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly writers. But that is not to say that early Chinese filmmakers were not concerned with socio-political issues. On the contrary, one of the most accomplished film directors of the period, Ren Pengnian, portrayed patriotic heroes elevating the interests of the nation above those of personal love in two films, *Secret Told at Last* (1922) and *Umbrella of Patriotism* (1923). Zheng Zhengqiu stated that his *Orphan Rescues Grandfather* (1923) dramatized the importance of education. Similarly, *Abandoned Woman* (dir. Li Zeyuan, **Hou Yao**, 1924) addressed the complex issue of women's liberation. In many ways, socially conscious filmmakers of later generations inherited their sense of responsibility from this founding generation.

### Further reading

X. He (1982), on Zhang Shichuan and Mingxing; C. Tan (1992a,b), two studies of Zheng Zhengqiu.

## 5 The Nanjing decade, 1927–37

The founding of the KMT Nanjing government in 1927 signalled the beginning of the end for the lawless situation that had marked the second phase of development in Chinese film history. The new regime's efforts at political centralization and ideological control ushered in a new era of state intervention in cultural and intellectual life. In the early 1930s, as the Nationalists gradually consolidated their control, they began to exert more authority over the entertainment industry. The establishment of the National Film Censorship Committee in 1931 was just one example of the government's efforts at constructing a new national culture. State censorship was designed to enlist the services of the modern media in the project of national reconstruction and so dictate what could or could not be produced. This political intervention was to have a tremendous impact on film's development during the 1930s, and its legacy can still be seen in mainland China and Taiwan today.

In addition to state involvement, two other factors also shaped the film industry during the 1930s. Firstly, the increasing Japanese aggression against China created a sense of national crisis. Secondly, a group of dedicated underground Communist writers and film critics managed to infiltrate the film industry. The combination of these political and historical forces was to change the course of Chinese film history.

The developments at three studios best reflect these trends. One of the oldest and most important studios in China, Mingxing Film Company, was founded in 1922 by **Zhang Shichuan**, **Zhou Jianyun**, **Zheng Zhengqiu**, Ren Jinping and Zheng Zhegu, all of whom

recognized film's potential for financial profit and social reform. Indeed, the twin drives to make money and provide a positive moral influence on society dominated the company's history. While Zhang Shichuan is representative of the more pragmatic, profit-oriented approach, Zheng Zhengqiu was more idealistic about film's social responsibility. Zhang wanted to make entertaining films free of moral didacticism. Zheng, on the other hand, strongly believed in providing audiences with moral guidance.

The company's first productions apparently followed Zhang's line of thinking. After its debut, a newsreel about a French general's visit to Shanghai, Mingxing churned out three comedies and one drama on subjects ranging from Charlie Chaplin's visit to Shanghai to a real-life case of patricide. However, these films failed to generate the expected profits and placed the company in financial trouble. Only after the commercial success of *Orphan Rescues Grandfather* in 1923 was the company able to regain financial strength. The success of this morally explicit film seemed to prove that Zheng was right to insist on film's social responsibility. Besides, commercial success and moral didacticism were not mutually exclusive. Mingxing later produced a series of movies in a similar pattern, all of which presented the struggle between good (e.g., motherly love, philanthropy, education) and evil (e.g., old social customs, warlords, the tyranny of the traditional **family**). Good always triumphed in the end.

In some ways, it was this emphasis on moral didacticism that opened the door for the leftist filmmakers of the early 1930s. As one of the general managers of the company, Zheng may not have shared leftist ideology, but he certainly shared a belief in film's social and moral responsibilities. Such shared belief lay behind the company's decision to hire a group of well-known leftists for its script department. It is no coincidence that Mingxing was actively engaged in producing leftist films in the early 1930s.

Lianhua Film Company was founded in 1930 by **Luo Mingyou**, who had started a theatre business while still a student at Beijing University. Luo's strong sense of mission would eventually lead him to a Christian priesthood, but in the early years it revealed itself in the way he managed business and selected films. Under his management, Zhenguang Theatre in Beijing earned a reputation for showing quality films in the early 1920s. His low price admission fees allowed more people to enjoy movies. Ironically, Luo's seemingly nonchalant attitude toward profit actually brought in more revenue. By the late 1920s, Luo managed more than twenty movie theatres and controlled the entire distribution network in Northern China.

In 1929, Luo went to Shanghai and persuaded two studios, Minxin and Great China-Lily (Da Zhonghua-Baihe), to jointly set up a new company. Minxin was founded by **Li Minwei** in Hong Kong on 14 May 1923 and moved to Shanghai in 1926. Great China-Lily, as the name suggests, was the result of a merger between Great China and Lily in 1926. The new company employed a group of highly educated people noted for their progressive 'Westernized' views. The alliance of Luo's distribution network in Northern China and the production capabilities of these two Shanghai studios led to the establishment of Lianhua Film Company. On Lianhua's board of trustees were: He Dong, a millionaire from Hong Kong; Xiong Xiling, the former prime minister of Duan Qirui's Beijing government; Feng Gengguang, general manager of the Bank of China; Yu Fengzhi, wife of the Northeastern warlord Zhang Xueliang; Luo Wengan, foreign minister of the Nanjing government and Luo Mingyou's uncle; and Luo Xuefu, Luo's father and chair of the Hong Kong Chamber of Commerce. With so many powerful figures, Lianhua Film Company enjoyed close ties with the Nanjing government.

In its manifesto, Lianhua declared its mission to elevate art, promote culture, enlighten the masses, and rescue China's film industry from degeneration and deterioration. Such pronouncements were very much in accord with cultural policies of the Nanjing government. As a highly respected studio, Lianhua staffed its management, writing, directing and acting

departments with well-educated people. Many employees had Western education and a 'progressive' outlook. Lianhua produced twelve films in its first two years. The first two releases, *Memories of the Old Capital* and *Wild Flower* (both dir. **Sun Yu**, 1930), greatly impressed audiences and brought a new look to domestic production. Many titles deal with pressing contemporary issues. Too melodramatic to qualify as realism, they nevertheless engaged social conditions of the 1930s.

Lianhua's films rejected the highly theatrical and exaggerated acting styles of the new theatre in favour of an emphasis on the cinema's visual potential. Their sophisticated use of montage, camera angle, lighting and visual effects sets them apart. Many contemporary observers believed that the emergence of Lianhua ended the prevalence of such genres as martial arts and **ghosts and immortals**. In this regard, Lianhua initiated a new trend for social films. Between 1930 and 1937, the studio produced ninety-four titles, including the well known *Humanity* (dir. **Bu Wancang**, 1932), *Big Road* (dir. Sun Yu, 1934), *New Woman*, *Song of the Fishermen* (both dir. **Cai Chusheng**, all 1934), *Goddess* (1934) and *Little Angel* (1935, both dir. **Wu Yonggang**). In contrast to Mingxing, whose audience came mostly from the leisure class, Lianhua established a loyal following among the better educated, especially young students.

Financially independent, Lianhua voluntarily cooperated with the KMT government, mainly because of Luo's close ties to Nanjing. When the KMT authorities prepared to set up their own film studio in the mid-1930s, Luo was appointed advisor to the planning committee, and he was among the delegation of Chinese industrialists later sent by the government on a tour of Europe and the USA. In return, Lianhua produced *Iron Bird* (dir. Yuan Congmei, 1934) in support of



Plate 1 *Memories of the Old Capital* (1930)

the government's call for public support. By late 1935, Lianhua had released *Little Angel* and *The Spirit of the Nation* (dir. Luo Mingyou, 1935), both of which aimed to advance the New Life Movement sponsored by the government. In this regard, Lianhua contrasted drastically with Mingxing, which on more than one occasion refused to take orders from the government.

Tianyi was founded in 1925 by the Shao (Shaw) brothers, with the oldest, **Shao Zuiweng**, in charge. During the 1920s, Tianyi opposed the imitation of Western models and took the lead in making 'genuinely' Chinese films. To ensure such authentic 'Chineseness', a number of Tianyi productions were based on popular legends and myths or adapted from classical literature. Far removed from contemporary social concerns, these movies catered largely to the tastes of the lower classes. Tianyi productions of the 1920s were usually scorned by progressive-minded critics who charged that they perpetuated superstitious beliefs, lacked historical accuracy in their costume dramas and were of lowly artistic standard. Nevertheless, out of the 140 studios operating in Shanghai during the 1920s, Tianyi was one of only a dozen to survive into the 1930s. It even managed to become one of the three major movie establishments in the country. From 1930 to 1937, it produced a total of sixty-two films, second only to Mingxing and Lianhua.

After the Japanese invaded Manchuria in September 1931, a strong nationalistic sentiment swept China. Suddenly, entertainment and fantasy films seemed irrelevant and frivolous. Films addressing nationalistic concerns found an enthusiastic audience. Tianyi, which had long been notorious for churning out commercial flicks, was pressured into adjusting its policies. Beginning in 1932, the studio made several films dealing with the national crisis caused by Japanese aggression. For instance, *Two Orphan Girls from the Northeast* (dir. **Li Pingqian**, 1932) concerns two girls forced to flee their invaded homeland in Northeastern China. Stranded in Shanghai, they meet a young doctor and both fall in love with him. But when the Japanese attack Shanghai in 1932, the two sisters put aside their personal feelings, join a medical team and nurse the wounded soldiers. Touched by the two girls' patriotic spirit, the doctor also offers his services. *Struggle* (dir. Qiu Qixiang, 1933), another Tianyi production, calls for rapprochement between warring Chinese in the name of the fight against the common Japanese enemy. The story centres on a young peasant whose wife has been raped and killed by an evil landlord. The peasant joins the Chinese resistance and, getting the chance to avenge himself on the evil landlord, decides to save his bullets for the Japanese instead.

These films reflected the change of mood among Chinese filmmakers as well as among the general audience. Indeed, audiences now seemed to demand films that addressed their concerns. In this context the making of socially responsible films was not necessarily incompatible with the earning of profit. It is no exaggeration to say that the large number of serious films produced in the early 1930s was the result of the studios' attempt to respond to changed tastes. It was against this backdrop that leftist cinema made its first appearance.

**See also:** comedy; costume drama; documentary; family; ghosts and immortals; leftist film; martial arts film; melodrama

### Further reading

Li and Hu (1996), a history of silent cinema; M. Severson (1996), a report of Chinese silent films screened in Italy; ZDYZZ (1996), a large collection of historical material on silent cinema.

## 6 Leftist film

The term leftist film refers to a group of titles produced in the 1930s highly critical of the KMT government. They usually depict society's dark side, express indignation over social injustice

and advocate radical social reform. It is a mistake, however, to assume that all leftist films were made by leftist filmmakers. In fact, their producers came from diverse cultural and political backgrounds. Some, such as **Bu Wancang**, **Zhang Shichuan** and **Zheng Zhengqiu**, were veteran film directors of the 1920s. They took the view that film ought to promote social progress and improve people's living conditions. Because of their conviction, their films consistently dramatize the misfortunes of the working class, the sufferings of the weak and powerless, and the moral corruption of the rich and powerful. But their critiques of social injustice were rooted in a humanistic concern for the downtrodden, whereas people like **Tian Han**, **Xia Yan** and **Yang Hansheng** were committed underground Communists with specific political agendas and interests. Their primary objective was to discredit the KMT government by highlighting its widespread failures. The portrayal of poverty, injustice, class conflict, and the moral decay of the rich and powerful in leftist films thus served a subversive purpose. Finally, there were people like **Cai Chusheng**, Sun Yu and **Wu Yonggang** who, while not Communists themselves, were persuaded by leftist ideals and formed alliances with leftist filmmakers. Films by this last group of people contributed significantly to the development of the leftist cinema movement.

Although the beginnings of the leftist cultural movement in China can be traced to the 1928 debate on revolutionary literature, leftist cinema was not set in motion until the 1931 formation of the League of Leftist Performing Artists. This organization included a number of Communist intellectuals who were to play important roles in the leftist cinema movement. As the brainchild of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the League served in the front line of the party's ideological war against the Nationalists. Among other things, the League's manifesto stressed the need to develop proletarian cinema. In the following year, Xia Yan, Zheng Boqi and Qian Xingcun (**Ah Ying**) were invited by Mingxing's management to join its script department. Meanwhile, Tian Han was offered a position as screen writer by Lianhua and appointed Director of the Script Division by Yihua Film Company. Thus, the creative nucleus of China's three major studios was under the influence of the CCP. In 1932, Xia Yan organized the 'Communist cinema group', whose members included Qian Xingcun, Wang Chenwu, Shi Linghe, and **Situ Huimin**. The group was accepted by the League as a subdivision and subject to the direct leadership of the CCP's Cultural Committee. The combination of able leadership, individual talent and ingenuity, and favourable circumstances resulted in the production of a large number of leftist films that exerted an influence throughout the industry.

The true identity of Communist workers was kept secret. After the purge of 1927, in which thousands of Communists were arrested and killed by the Nationalists, no one in the film industry wanted to be openly associated with the CCP, although many harboured sympathy for leftist platforms. Some studio producers and managers, such as Lianhua's Luo Mingyou and Mingxing's Zheng Zhengqiu, and, to some extent, even a number of Nationalist officials, shared the view that film must play a positive role in China's social progress by doing more than just offering entertainment. Such sentiments provided a fertile and relatively protected ground for Communist activity in the film industry. Indeed, leftist films were mainly characterized by their focus on social problems, which chimed well with the industry's general shift toward more socially conscientious positions. To some extent, the serious nature – rather than the critical edge – of leftist films was congruous with cultural policies of the KMT government, as both lashed out at what was considered frivolous subject matter. Since the early 1930s, the regime had encouraged films concerned with national issues, and in this respect some leftist titles were more in keeping with state policies than the escapist fantasies of entertainment movies. When it came to selecting films to represent China at international film festivals, the Nationalist censors picked titles later identified as leftist.

The reasons for the Nationalist censors' tolerance of leftist film are extremely complex. Certainly, ambiguity over what actually constituted a leftist film generated a good deal of confusion for both the censors and studio managers. In addition, factional power struggles within the KMT government reduced the effectiveness of control over the film industry. Finally, some Nationalist officials, including many film censors, were in sympathy with the views expressed by leftist cinema. After all, the Nanjing government was not a monolithic entity, and from time to time more liberal-minded opinions managed to hold sway. These factors allowed for the production and exhibition of films antagonistic to the regime. For example, *Twenty-Four Hours in Shanghai* (dir. **Shen Xiling**, 1933) portrays the hardships endured by ordinary city dwellers in their daily lives. *Wild Torrents* (dir. **Cheng Bugao**, 1933) tells the story of flood victims' confrontation with an evil landlord. *The Uprising* (dir. **Xu Xinfu**, 1933) sympathizes with the salt workers who rebelled against the capitalists. Other films, such as *Dawn Over the Metropolis* (dir. Cai Chusheng, 1933), *Plunder of Peach and Plum* (dir. **Yuan Muzhi**, 1934), *Big Road, Goddess, New Woman* and *Street Angel* (dir. Shen Xiling, 1937), share similar ideological orientations.

In addition to producing a large number of influential films, the leftists also controlled the public forum of film **criticism**. In their capacity as editors of, or contributors to, several major newspaper columns, leftist critics dominated the public discourse on cinema. Their views on film had tremendous influence over directors and studio managers. By making a concerted effort to engage and discredit their political opponents, leftist film critics greatly shaped public opinion.

But the political thrust of leftist film, particularly its evocation of class struggle, irritated many right-wing Nationalists who found the film industry's turn to the left disturbing and worried that such radical ideology might fan already widespread social discontent. Because the Film Censorship Committee, the only government agency authorized to deal with such matters, took a rather lenient attitude towards film censorship, right-wing Nationalists found it difficult to stop the production and exhibition of politically antagonistic films by official means. So they took matters into their own hands. In the early morning of 12 November 1933, a group armed with sticks and bricks stormed Yihua and trashed its equipment. In addition to leaving pamphlets full of slogans such as 'Eradicate the Communists', they also posted a public letter and signed themselves as members of the 'Anti-Communist Squad of the Film Industry in Shanghai'. The next day many film studios in Shanghai received letters warning them of the menace of Communism. The studios were instructed to stop hiring leftists. These letters and pamphlets identified filmmakers like Tian Han and Xia Yan, and listed the titles of films considered suspect.

Right-wing Nationalists also blamed the government film censors for allowing these films to pass through their office, and they accused the censors of being blind to Communist propaganda. Their scare tactics were effective. Within a few weeks, many of the known leftist filmmakers were in hiding. Although Lianhua and Mingxing continued to produce a few more leftist titles, Yihua reverted to the production of just entertainment films. Yet the movement's influence remained strong. The legacy of leftist film was not only revived in the late 1940s; it also continues to inspire filmmakers of the 1980s–90s.

**See also:** censorship and film

### Further reading

C. Berry (1989b), a brief discussion of leftist film; Bo Chen (1993), a large collection of historical material on the leftist cinema movement; N. Ma (1989), a critical analysis of leftist film.

## 7 Soft film

The violent right-wing Nationalist response to the leftist film group reveals the fierceness and intensity of the fight to control film production. Yet not everyone took such a partisan position. Some considered it sad that film had become so politicized and began to stress the medium's other values. They rejected the didacticism so prevalent in many leftist films by calling film 'ice-cream for the eyes' – sensuous, pleasing and devoid of politics. They complained that leftist films were dominated by ideology and lacked artistic refinement. They believed that a film's representation of life should remain 'soft' – a quality that resembled film stock itself. The type of film thus promoted has been termed soft cinema.

The champions of soft cinema included artists, poets, film critics and screen writers, most notably Liu Na'ou (1900–40), Mu Shiyong, Huang Jiamo and Huang Tianshi. They began to publish essays in early 1933 calling for a new approach to filmmaking. In their view, the primary function of film was to entertain the audience, to please their senses and make them feel good, rather than to lecture them and force ideas down their throats. As one essay put it, movies should be 'ice-cream for the eyes and a couch for the soul'. Advocates of soft cinema accused leftist films of over-emphasizing content and neglecting form. For them, leftist film did nothing but expose social ills and peddle propaganda for the CCP.

Understandably, the leftists responded with torrents of counter accusations. Critics argued that as there was nothing soft about poverty, injustice and class conflict, films must confront hard social realities. But the leftists' triumph over soft cinema in film **publications** did not stop the industry's drift away from serious films. By the mid-1930s, the majority of film directors and screen writers had softened their critical stance and begun to stress the values of entertainment. Following the commercial success of *Girl in Disguise* (dir. Fang Peilin, 1936), a film scripted by Huang Jiamo, a significant number of films were made using the same formula: engaging story, sensational event, fantastic visual effects and apolitical world view.

The rise of soft cinema in the mid-1930s had its roots in political history. Ever since 1905, filmmakers had oscillated between two approaches, one focusing on film's entertainment value, the other on its social function. This division may not be absolute, but it has always existed. The two box-office hits of the 1920s, *Yan Ruisheng* and *Orphan Rescues Grandfather*, represent two early examples of this split. The commercial concern held sway until the early 1930s. Films of ghosts and immortals, legends and myths, as well as tales of martial arts heroes and heroines, were industry staples during the 1920s. By the early 1930s, however, a series of changes turned the industry toward the production of more socially conscious films. This development contributed to the rise of leftist cinema. Soft cinema, a reaction to the excesses of leftist filmmaking, advocated a revival of the legacy of entertainment films of the 1920s. But at the same time, its emphasis on the importance of artistic refinement and good craftsmanship reflected a sincere concern to improve the quality of Chinese film.

### Further reading

Bo Chen (1993: 142–74), contains original pro and con articles on soft cinema.

## 8 Sound film

The world's first sound film, *The Jazz Singer* (dir. Alan Crosland, 1927), was publicly screened in the USA on 6 August 1927. Four months later, Shanghai had its own encounter with this new invention. On 16 December 1927, the city's Hundred Stars Theatre showed a number of American sound documentaries and exhibited relevant equipment after the performance,

so that the audience could learn the operating principles of the new technology. By 1929, Olympic Theatre, the only movie theatre in Shanghai equipped with sound facility, was showing the first feature-length American sound film, *The Wings* (dir. William Wellman, 1927). Sound's popularity encouraged other prestigious movie theatres to install the new equipment as well. Because of the huge costs involved, the majority of movie houses in Shanghai could only afford to show silent films. However, since Hollywood had now turned to the production of sound films, the supply of silents could only be met by Chinese studios. Movie houses were thus put under pressure to make the transition.

In general, Chinese filmmakers felt ambivalent about the coming of talkies. On the one hand, they realized that sound represented the future of filmmaking and were keenly aware of the necessity of adopting the new technology. On the other hand, the transition from silent to sound required extra capital: both studios and theatres needed to be renovated, and such funds were not immediately available to Chinese filmmakers always plagued by investment shortages. Interestingly, with Hollywood switching to talkies, Chinese filmmakers saw an opportunity to expand a domestic market previously dominated by American products. They concluded that the language barrier, a minor factor during the silent era, would soon amount to a major obstacle for foreign films. In addition, the majority of Chinese-owned movie houses were technically incapable of showing sound films: they had no choice but to show silents. Here was a golden opportunity for growth and development. According to this point of view, there was no urgency or incentive for the Chinese film industry to make the transition from silent to sound, and as a result, Chinese studios continued to churn out silent movies well into the mid-1930s. Some of the most important films of this period, such as *Big Road*, *New Woman* and *Goddess*, were made without sound.

Yet the Chinese apprehension about sound could only slow down, not prevent, the period of transition. In early 1931, both Mingxing and Youlian finally released sound films. Mingxing premiered *Sing-Song Girl Red Peony* (dir. Zhang Shichuan), starring **Hu Die**, on 15 March at New Light Theatre, while Youlian screened *Yu the Beauty* (dir. Chen Kengran, 1931) at Olympia Theatre on 24 May. In both cases, dialogue and song were not synchronized on the soundtrack, but recorded first on a phonograph and then broadcast during screenings. Only dialogue and singing were recorded, and no background sounds were included. Despite such limitations, the two films were a huge box-office success. Audiences enthusiastically swarmed the theatres, forcing other studios to reconsider their position.

On 1 July 1931, Huaguang Film Company publicly screened *Reconciliation* (dir. Xia Chifeng, 1931), the first Chinese film to feature a real soundtrack. Three months later, Tianyi released its own first sound film, *A Singer's Story* (dir. **Li Pingqian**, 1931). These films were produced using foreign experts. In the case of *Reconciliation*, post-production was completed in a sound studio in Japan, while the participation of foreign technicians in the making of *A Singer's Story* proved crucial to its success. With the release of these films, the Chinese film industry finally entered the sound era. Although silent films continued to be produced, they were gradually phased out by the late 1930s.

### Further reading

W. Guan (1976), a memoir of early Chinese cinema and its connection with the West; Hong Kong Arts Centre (1984), a collection on the films of the 1920s–30s, with synopses; L. Lee (1999), on the urban milieu of Shanghai in the 1930s; P. Pickowicz (1991), a historical survey of the 1930s, with emphasis on urban corruption.

## 9 Wartime film, 1937–45

The fourth period of Chinese film history begins with the outbreak of the second Sino-Japanese war in 1937. During the next eight years, the war of resistance was to overshadow every aspect of Chinese life, including the production of film in both occupied and unoccupied areas. In the wartime capital, Chongqing, Central Film Studio (Zhongdian) and China Motion Picture Studio (Zhongzhi), both run by the KMT government, employed a large number of patriotic filmmakers who continued to work with anti-Japanese themes. In the occupied areas, Manchurian Motion Pictures (Manying) in Changchun served as a propaganda machine for the Japanese, whereas film studios in Shanghai turned to the production of entertainment films. Some historians view many Shanghai genre films as constituting a passive resistance to Japanese attempts at indoctrination through Japanese propaganda films. Wherever they were produced, though, films tended to reflect the uniqueness of wartime conditions.

The outbreak of war in 1937 brought film production to a halt. Japanese bombardments of Shanghai caused severe damage to many studios. Mingxing's facilities were completely destroyed, Lianhua was soon dissolved, and Tianyi was relocated to Hong Kong. As the situation stabilized, film production resumed in two separate areas: the unoccupied and the occupied.

In the unoccupied areas, film production was concentrated around Central Film Studio, which operated briefly in Wuhan and then in Chongqing. Other filmmakers scattered around places like Hong Kong and Taiyuan also played their part. Before Hong Kong fell to the Japanese in 1941, its filmmakers produced a number of patriotic titles. Except for *Orphan Island Paradise* (dir. **Cai Chusheng**, 1939) and a few others, most Hong Kong productions belonged to Cantonese movies, which had formerly been banned by the KMT government. When the Japanese took over Hong Kong, Chongqing became the centre of film production in the unoccupied areas. China Motion Picture Studio and Central Film Studio both released a number of highly acclaimed wartime films, including *Protect Our Land* (dir. **Shi Dongshan**, 1938), *Children of China* (dir. **Shen Xiling**, 1939), *Storm on the Border* (dir. **Ying Yunwei**, 1940) and *Japanese Spy* (dir. Yuan Meiyun, 1943). Needless to say, as a part of the government's propaganda machine, the dominant themes of these films were **nationalism** and Chinese resistance.

In the occupied areas, film production was centred around two places. While Shanghai resumed its leadership in filmmaking as soon as the situation stabilized, Changchun, a city in Northeastern China, hosted Manchurian Motion Pictures, brainchild of the collaboration between the Japanese and their puppet regime, Manchukuo.

Until the outbreak of the Pacific War, Chinese filmmakers in Shanghai were in a peculiar position. Because of the existence of the foreign concessions, they were protected by British–French neutrality and so relatively free from direct Japanese harassment, and a group of patriotic intellectuals were able to continue influencing public opinion through their control of journals and newspapers. Taking advantage of the situation, some patriotic filmmakers managed to produce films, such as *Mulan Joins the Army* (dir. **Bu Wancang**, 1939), in which strong nationalistic sentiments were wrapped in a historical framework. However, the majority of films produced in Shanghai during this 'isolated island' (*gudao*) period were far removed from contemporary political life.

As early as 1939, the Japanese had sponsored the formation of China Film Company (Zhongying), which controlled the distribution of Shanghai produced movies in Manchuria and other occupied areas. Many Shanghai industry heads were concerned about profits and therefore reluctant to make films likely to offend the Japanese. Instead, they turned to politically safer subject matter. Detective, horror, **romance** and other entertainment genres dominated

the market during this period. After Pearl Harbour, the Japanese military moved into the International Settlements as well as the French Concession. Numerous newspapers and magazines were closed for their alleged anti-Japanese bent. Meanwhile, the Japanese proceeded to tighten their control over the Chinese film industry by launching China United Film Production Corporation (Zhonglian) in early 1942. This organization subjected all the film-producing facilities in Shanghai to Japanese control, even though the acting managers were all Chinese, including wartime mogul **Zhang Shankun**. Under these conditions, the resistance and defiance demonstrated by some Chinese filmmakers in the early years of the occupation all but disappeared. The best they could do was to assume a stance of 'passive resistance' by making commercial flicks in an attempt to deflect the Japanese usage of film as a vehicle for ideological indoctrination.

Besides Shanghai, Manchurian Motion Pictures also produced a large number of films during the war. Founded in August 1937 in Changchun under the financial as well as political sponsorship of the Japanese and their puppet regime, Manchukuo, Manchurian Motion Pictures produced more than six hundred films between 1937 and 1945. Not surprisingly, most of these films, including three hundred newsreels, served as propaganda for Japanese military expansion in Asia. In February 1938, Manchurian Motion Pictures set up a branch studio in Beijing (then called Beiping). Unlike China United Film Production Corporation, which always maintained the facade of Chinese management, Manchurian Motion Pictures was under direct and total control of the Japanese. In fact, many of its key staff members were Japanese. After Japan surrendered in 1945, Manchurian Motion Pictures was taken over by the KMT government, but not before the Communists grabbed a substantial portion of its film production facilities. These formed the basis of Northeast (Dongbei) Film Studio, the predecessor of what is today's Changchun Film Studio.

**See also:** Cantonese cinema; propaganda and film

### Further reading

S. Stephenson (1999), a critical study of the actress Li Xianglan and the Shanghai film audience.

## 10 The post-war revival, 1945–49

The fifth period of Chinese film history stretches from the end of the war to the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in October 1949. During these four years, the Communists and the Nationalists engaged in a ferocious civil war which ended in the Nationalist defeat and retreat to Taiwan. The military conflict between the two parties was paralleled by the equally intense battle for influence over public opinion through control of modern media like film. Both sides tried to use film for political ends. While the Nationalists took steps to nationalize the film industry and so increase government supervision over production, Communist and leftist filmmakers deliberately set out to produce subversive films that undermined the legitimacy of the KMT regime. These polemical weapons played an important role in bringing about the demise of the KMT regime.

One important development during the war was the trend towards consolidation of the industry. While the Japanese-controlled China United Film Production Corporation brought all Shanghai studios under one management system, and Manchurian Motion Pictures monopolized film production and **distribution** in Northern China, in Chongqing, the KMT government's wartime capital, Central Film Studio and China Motion Picture Studio incorporated all independent filmmaking in the unoccupied areas. In both cases, governments were

actively involved in the process of centralization under a unified national authority. This trend continued after the war as the KMT government confiscated both China United Film Production Corporation and Manchurian Motion Pictures as enemy properties. Meanwhile, the Central Film Services, a government agency formed in 1943 to oversee film distribution, took control of a large number of theatres and monopolized the distribution system. With most production facilities under its control, Central Film Studio quickly expanded its operation, setting up two branches in Shanghai and one in Beijing. The industry came the closest it had ever come to being nationalized.

The films produced by Central Film Studio can be divided into three groups. The first group includes such titles as *Loyal Family* (dir. **Wu Yonggang**, 1946), *Code Name Heaven No. 1* and *From Night to Dawn* (both dir. Tu Guangqi, both 1947). These films are strongly pro-government. *Loyal Family* shows how an ordinary Chinese family maintains its loyalty to the KMT government during the war. *Code Name Heaven No. 1* glorifies the Nationalist underground agents. *From Night to Dawn* gives the government an extremely positive role in the reconstruction of rural China. The second group consists of films that were meant to entertain rather than indoctrinate audiences. These films usually focus on romantic triangles, crime and punishment, or music and song. The romantic songs in *The Singer* (dir. Fang Peilin, 1946) and the melancholy mood of *Turning Back* (dir. **Yang Xiaozhong**, 1948), for instance, were markedly removed from contemporary politics. The third group of films were produced by leftist filmmakers employed at Central Film Studio. These films preserved the leftist legacy of the 1930s by presenting critical views of society. While *Dream in Paradise* (dir. **Tang Xiaodan**, 1947) depicts injustices in post-war China, *Diary of a Homecoming* (dir. Yuan Jun, 1947) satirizes the corrupt Nationalist officials who take over private property in Shanghai.

While some leftist filmmakers continued to work within the confines of government-controlled studios, others set up their own. In 1946, **Yang Hansheng**, **Cai Chusheng** and **Shi Dongshan** formed Lianhua Film Society and recruited a number of their former Lianhua colleagues. Within a year they had completed *Eight Thousand Li of Cloud and Moon* (dir. Shi Dongshan, 1947) and the first part of *Spring River Flows East* (dir. Cai Chusheng, **Zheng Junli**, 1947). The success of these two films led to Lianhua Film Society's merger with Kunlun Film Company in 1947. The reorganized Kunlun attracted a large number of leftist filmmakers and became the centre of 'progressive' filmmaking. In addition to completing the second part of *Spring River Flows East*, a masterpiece of leftist filmmaking, Kunlun also produced other highly acclaimed films, notably *Myriad of Lights* (dir. **Shen Fu**, 1948), *Female Fighters* (dir. **Chen Liting**), *An Orphan on the Streets* (dir. Zhao Ming) and *Crows and Sparrows* (dir. Zheng Junli, all 1949).

However, not all private studios were antagonistic to the government. Some sought a neutral position by keeping their distance from both the government and the leftists. One such studio was Wenhua, previously known for its high level of artistry. The impressive list of Wenhua releases includes *Phony Phoenixes*, *Night Inn* (both dir. **Huang Zuolin**), *Long Live the Mistress!* (dir. **Sang Hu**, all 1947), *Spring in a Small Town* (dir. **Fei Mu**, 1948) and *Sorrows and Joys of a Middle-Aged Man* (dir. Sang Hu, 1949). *Spring in a Small Town*, in particular, has been regarded as one of the best films of the pre-1949 period. Wenhua's films represent the humanistic tradition of Chinese filmmaking at its best. However, the majority of films produced by other private studios tended to give the audience what it wanted by offering sex scandals, sensational news, cheap thrillers and romantic encounters. Titles such as *Thorny Rose* (dir. Yang Xiaozhong), *Pink Bomb* (both 1947) and *Beauty's Blood* (1948, both dir. **Xu Xinfu**) are indicative of their general thematic orientation.

Although the country's political instability limited the industry's potential to grow, the four years from 1946 to 1949 witnessed a spectacular revival of filmmaking. Chinese films now

surpassed those of previous decades in both quantity and quality. When the CCP came to power in 1949, the new regime inherited a vital industry with a rich legacy and a framework for nationalization already laid out by the Nationalists.

### Further reading

Y. Bao (1985), a survey of pre-1949 film; R. Bergeron (1977), a history of Chinese film up to 1949; J. Cheng *et al.* (1963), a two-volume film history from the Communist perspective; Y. Du (1988), a two-volume film history from the Nationalist perspective; J. Ellis (1982), a report on early Chinese cinema screened in Italy; L. Gongsun (1977), an anecdotal history of early Chinese film; P. Wilson (1987), a study of Northeast Film Studio.

## 11 Film in the PRC: the first seventeen years, 1949–66

The Communist victory of 1949 brought profound changes to Chinese society and film. Before 1949, political authorities could only influence film production. In some cases, film studios could even refuse to act on requests by the government. After 1949, however, the state enjoyed complete control of every aspect of filmmaking, often in the most tyrannical manner. The development of film in the People's Republic of China (PRC) was, therefore, drawn ever closer into the orbit of party politics.

During the first seventeen years of the PRC, the CCP implemented a series of policies that drastically changed the country. The party abandoned any pretence of being a democratic coalition and openly defended its 'proletarian dictatorship'. The numerous political campaigns not only acted to suppress dissident voices, but also purged the party of those who dared question or oppose Mao Zedong, the supreme CCP leader. Economically, the state nationalized the country's finance, industry, transportation and other key areas and transformed China into a socialist planned economy modelled after the Soviet Union. These dramatic social and economic changes were accompanied by an intense effort to launch an ideological battle for control of people's minds. Film was transformed from primarily a mass entertainment into a machine of political indoctrination. With just a few exceptions, films produced between 1949 and 1966 reflect the party's political and ideological agenda more than the tastes of the film **audience**.

The CCP has always considered film an important propaganda weapon. Its involvement with the medium began as early as 1932, when Xia Yan formed an underground Communist cell in Shanghai with the specific goal of penetrating the film industry. During the war of resistance, many Communist intellectuals worked in the propaganda department of the coalition government under Chiang Kai-shek's leadership. When Japan surrendered in 1945, the CCP took over part of Manchurian Motion Pictures and used it as a basis for the building of its own film studio. In Shanghai, underground CCP members not only infiltrated the Nationalist-controlled Central Film Studio, together with other private studios, but also set up their own company. Consequently, when the CCP finally took control of the country in 1949, it immediately moved to nationalize the film industry. Even before the founding of the PRC in October, the party's central committee had set up the Central Film Bureau in April 1949. This agency was in charge of all matters related to film production, exhibition and **distribution**. In essence, it was the highest authority in charge of the entire film industry.

By November 1949, the CCP had not only established a firm control over the film industry nationwide, it also owned and operated three major film studios producing eighty per cent of the country's total output. As early as October 1946, the CCP had turned part of Manchurian Motion Pictures into Northeast Film Studio, with staff members drawn mostly from the group

who made newsreels in Yan'an, the Communist headquarters during the war. Although Northeast produced a large number of newsreels, it did not release its first feature film, *Bridge* (dir. Wang Bin), until April 1949.

The beginnings of Beijing Film Studio can be traced to January 1949, when the Communist army entered the city and seized the branch belonging to Central Film Studio. In April, the military turned it over to the newly formed civilian government, which then organized what was initially called Beiping Film Studio. A former actor and veteran CCP member, **Tian Fang** was appointed as first general manager of the studio, and the studio changed its name to Beijing along with the city in October 1949.

Shanghai Film Studio was officially founded on 16 November 1949. The newest among the three studios, it was the best equipped and had the largest production capability. The material basis of Shanghai Film Studio comprised confiscated film-producing equipment formerly owned by the Nationalists. Shanghai Film Studio also attracted the largest number of veteran filmmakers. In comparison with their colleagues in Northeast and Beijing, they tended to have much more experience of feature film production.

In accordance with a CCP political platform that envisioned several stages in the country's social, political and economic transformation, the PRC government's initial policy with regard to private studios was to encourage their growth. Of the seven studios not associated with the government, four received loans totalling twenty-one million yuan. The government also provided film stock and equipment. Considering the economic blockade imposed on China by hostile international forces led by the USA, not to mention China's military involvement in Korea, the government seemed quite generous in allocating its resources to private studios.

But the policy began to change once a number of studios produced titles considered to deviate from the party line. From the party's point of view, these problematic films, which amounted to a betrayal of the government's trust, demonstrated the necessity for tighter ideological control. For many filmmakers, the nationwide campaigns against *The Life of Wu Xun* (dir. **Sun Yu**, 1950), *Commander Guan* (dir. **Shi Hui**, 1951) and *Husband and Wife* (dir. **Zheng Junli**, 1951) signalled a difficult time ahead, as official criticism adversely affected their distribution and box-office returns. In 1952, all private studios 'willingly' merged with the state-controlled Shanghai Film Studio, and private studios were nonexistent for the next three decades.

In the meantime, the state set out to establish more studios of its own. After first launching the military-affiliated August First (Bayi) Film Studio in August 1952, officials approved the establishment of five more provincial studios by the late 1950s: Xi'an Film Studio in Shanxi, Pearl River Film Studio in Guangdong, Emei Film Studio in Sichuan, Tianshan Film Studio in Xinjiang and Inner Mongolian Film Studio in Inner Mongolia. These studios, along with Changchun (formerly Northeast), Beijing (Formerly Beiping), Shanghai and August First, produced the bulk of films between the 1950s and the 1980s.

One of the reasons the PRC government reorganized the film industry was that the party wanted to use film effectively, as a vehicle for the teaching of new values and new ideas. Due to their sense of mission, the officials in charge probably did not consider their work political indoctrination. They were simply trying to bring 'good' films to the people. What was considered good or bad, however, was dictated by the specific political needs of the moment.

Soon after the CCP came into power, it began to purge Western films, especially Hollywood productions. Even before the outbreak of the Korean war, the PRC had taken steps to reduce the influence of Western cinema. In addition to limiting the number of days Western films could be shown in theatres, the government sponsored negative publicity campaigns. With China preparing to enter the Korean conflict, the party orchestrated anti-American parades

throughout the country, and the watching of American films became socially stigmatized. It did not take long for the general denunciation of the USA to turn into the specific denunciation of Hollywood. To substantiate official charges, numerous personal accounts of the harm done to Chinese people by American films were published. This campaign was obviously effective, because by October 1950 American films had all but disappeared from China.

After driving American films out of the market, the government filled the resulting vacuum with Soviet Union and Eastern European imports. Dubbing these films became an important part of the studios' daily schedule. Between 1949 and 1952, a total of 180 Soviet films were dubbed. To further encourage the attendance of Soviet films, the state lowered ticket prices for urban dwellers. However, imported Soviet films did not immediately catch on, in part because of audience unfamiliarity with Russian culture and history. Chinese exposure to Soviet film in the pre-1949 period had been limited to a few private screenings sponsored by the Soviet Embassy and attended mostly by leftist intellectuals. To help Chinese audiences understand Soviet films, the news media published essays and reviews with background information and synopses. Meanwhile, Chinese filmmakers were sent to the Soviet Union for advanced training, and Soviet filmmakers were invited to teach in China's newly established Beijing Film School, later the famous Beijing Film Academy (BFA). With the help of official sponsorship, Soviet films soon replaced American films' former position in the marketplace.

For the CCP, the banning of American films and the introduction of Soviet films were only the initial steps in the plan to produce domestic titles that could further the cause of socialism. Early productions from the state-controlled studios illustrate some characteristics of this new cinema. In *Bridge*, workers' revolutionary enthusiasm is portrayed as the driving force behind the completion of a difficult construction project, whereas the chief engineer's expertise is represented more as obstacle than asset. In *Daughters of China* (dir. **Ling Zifeng**, Zai Qiang, 1949), a sense of nationalism and heroism prevails throughout. *The White-Haired Girl* (dir. Wang Bin, **Shui Hua**, 1950) depicts the oppression of Chinese peasants under the old regime and their liberation by the **Communist revolution**. And *Shangrao Concentration Camp* (dir. Sha Meng, Zhang Ke, 1951) glorifies the sacrifice and devotion of Communists imprisoned by the Nationalists.

In 1950, the government developed a quota system to subject studios to an annual production plan. For instance, the Film Bureau forecast a total of eighteen films for 1951, of which at least three should deal with the CCP's war against the Japanese and the Nationalists, four to five with **socialist construction**, two with land reform and **rural life**, two with world peace, one with science, one with issues of ethnic minority, one with cultural matters, and one with children. This system of allocating specific subject matter continues to serve as a basic working model for the state because it can carry the party's political priorities at any given time.

This quota system theoretically applied only to state-controlled studios, which meant that private studios were exempt. But by approving and disapproving film scripts, the Film Bureau retained a great deal of power over what private studios could produce in the early 1950s. In fact, the party's distrust of private studios grew after the national campaign against *The Life of Wu Xun*. This **biography** was written and directed by the veteran director Sun Yu, who had earlier played a major role in the leftist cinema movement. Although production began in 1948, the film was not completed until 1950. The story was based on the life of the historical figure Wu Xun, an illiterate peasant determined to change the destiny of the poor by giving them an education. In contrast to his friend who joined the peasant rebels, Wu sought change within the existing system.

When the film was released, it initially received extremely favourable reviews. Several major newspapers in Beijing and Shanghai published articles praising it as a breakthrough in historical drama and an illustration of the peasants' awakening to the power of culture. But when Mao Zedong saw it, he found serious deviations from revolutionary ideology and orchestrated a nationwide condemnation. Beginning on 16 May 1951, *People's Daily*, the official party organ, published a series of articles criticizing both the historical figure Wu Xun and the film of his life. On 20 May, Mao himself wrote an editorial questioning Wu's class background and essentially 'conformist' stance. In addition, Mao alleged that the reviewers who praised the film lacked understanding of Marxist doctrines. Following Mao's lead, a national campaign to denounce *The Life of Wu Xun* was launched. Between May and late July 1951, an overwhelming number of articles were published in major newspapers and journals. In June, Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, led an investigative team to Wu Xun's home town with the aim of collecting evidence in support of Mao's denunciation. A 45,000-word report, published in *People's Daily* between 23 and 28 July 1951, claimed, amongst other things, that the real Wu opposed peasant revolution, that his attempts at building schools came to nothing and even helped 'repair' the feudal establishment, that he had ties with the local underworld and extracted money from people, and that his school was never exclusively for children from poor families.

With Mao's editorial and Jiang's investigative interventions, the fate of *The Life of Wu Xun* was sealed. Not only was the film banned, but all involved in making, distributing and promoting it were subject to tremendous political pressure. Many had to offer 'self criticism' or recant their views in public. Most important of all, the ban and the campaign served as a warning to intellectuals throughout the country. They should familiarize themselves with Marxist teachings and pay attention to the party's view of history. Any deviation from the official line would carry serious consequences.

The campaign against *The Life of Wu Xun* had a chilling effect on the entire film industry. The rate of production dropped drastically in the early 1950s. Given the financial risks involved, private studios found it particularly difficult to operate under a system of strict censorship and began to merge with state-owned studios. Filmmakers became more concerned with not making political mistakes than being artistically creative or even productive. In 1956, following the de-Stalinization in the Soviet Union, Mao encouraged candid criticism of his regime during the Hundred Flowers period (1956–7). His chosen slogan was taken from an ancient expression: 'Let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend.' Now the term refers to a period of pluralism in intellectual life. Scholars, writers and filmmakers responded to Mao's call with an often bitter denunciation of many aspects of life under the CCP's rule, with the latter in particular voicing their resentment toward heavy-handed interference from studio management, the Film Bureau and the Ministry of Propaganda. While some complained about censorship, others ridiculed the uneducated party officials who meddled in the complicated process of film production. A number of films from this period also veered away from the party line. For instance, the first **comedy** produced in the PRC, *Before the New Director Arrives* (dir. Lü Ban, 1956), ridicules officials who try to curry favour with their superiors. Another film, *Loyal Partners* (dir. Xu Changlin, 1957), casts intellectuals as the heroes, a major departure from mainstream **representations of intellectuals** over previous years.

This atmosphere of political openness was short-lived. Alarmed by the discontent revealed during the Hundred Flowers period, particularly from the intellectual community, Mao launched the Anti-Rightist Campaign in June 1957 to suppress dissident voices. As a result, many in the film industry were labelled Rightists. Both *Before the New Director Arrives* and *Loyal Partners* were recalled from circulation, and several people involved in their production were publicly condemned. Shanghai Film Studio was particularly hard hit. Several veteran

filmmakers, including **Shi Hui**, **Wu Yin** and **Wu Yonggang**, were labeled Rightists. After the campaign, filmmakers became even more nervous. They were now to toe the party line more carefully than ever before.

**See also:** children's film; dubbed foreign film; ethnic minorities, film of; historical film; science and education film

### Further reading

D. Hsiung (1960), a preview of PRC films of the 1960s.

## 12 Socialist realism

Besides imposing specific subject matter on filmmakers, the state also dictated specific aesthetic principles and creative procedures. In 1950, **Yuan Muzhi**, the first Director of the Film Bureau, suggested that 'revolutionary realism' be followed as a general rule. In other words, while depicting post-1949 social conditions, filmmakers must take up a revolutionary or progressive position. They must identify with the party's interests. Yuan specifically warned filmmakers not to identify with the petty bourgeoisie and not to cater to the tastes of politically backward urban dwellers. Critical realism of the 1930s had been concerned with representing reality the way it appeared, which meant that authenticity and accuracy were primary objectives. Revolutionary realism, however, demanded that post-1949 reality be understood from a politically correct perspective, obtainable only through devout loyalty to the party line. According to this logic, truth was not to be found on the surface; the party alone could grasp the real, deeper truths. Therefore, only by following the party could an artist get closer to the Truth.

As the Soviet influence increased, socialist realism was introduced as a new slogan. Socialist realism refers to a set of aesthetic values imposed on writers and artists by Stalin, who believed that socialist reality demanded a new approach to creative activity. Central to this Socialist version of realism was the requirement that writers and artists identify with the party's point of view. If a conflict between an artist's view and the party's view arose, the individual perspective must be abandoned in favour of the party's. In this sense, socialist realism was in essence not very different from the concept promoted earlier by the CCP itself. However, the party decreed that, although China still had a long way to go before it would transform itself into a socialist nation, enough socialist elements were already in place. Filmmakers must look for those elements and not concentrate on temporary problem areas. The message was clear: sing the party's praises and do not criticize life in China under the CCP.

During the Hundred Flowers period, the view of socialist realism as the only correct creative method was challenged. Critics of socialist realism proposed a new approach combining revolutionary realism with revolutionary romanticism. Although this new synthesis was further removed from the realist principles still found in both revolutionary realism and socialist realism, the radical social changes initiated during the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s helped revolutionary romanticism gain a following. From the point of view of its advocates, China was changing too rapidly to validate any realist representations of social life. Given the speed of progress, any verbatim adherence in the arts was doomed to become outdated. Therefore, in order to represent such a fast-changing society in a truly accurate and realistic fashion, one must be guided by a futuristic vision of revolutionary ideals.

Dictated by these guidelines for revolutionary romanticism, filmmakers were frequently pressured into presenting an ideal picture of reality by means of distortion, exaggeration or complete falsification. For instance, historical evidence shows that, during the land reform movement of the 1950s, the majority of peasants resented collectivization. Yet films dealing

with this subject had to show how enthusiastic peasants were to join and work for People's Communes. The reason for this discrepancy between history and representation is simple: the party – or rather, Mao himself – believed that collectivization represented the future of agriculture in China. According to the party line, the peasants' reluctance to participate was nothing less than backward thinking, correctable given time, so that films should focus on what reality ought to look like, not how it actually appeared. Typical examples of this 'romantic' approach include *Steel Man and Iron Horse* (dir. Lu Ren) and *Love the Factory as One's Home* (dir. Zhao Ming, both 1958). Such films were not only conceptually simplistic and naive; they were also technically craggy. Once produced to meet the studio quotas, they were often forgotten by audiences and filmmakers.

The failure of the Great Leap Forward to transform the country radically in 1958, together with the subsequent economic and natural disasters which claimed millions of lives in rural China, forced the CCP to re-evaluate its policies. Under political pressure within the party, Mao went into semi-retirement in the early 1960s. A group of moderate leaders then took responsibility for economic reconstruction, including the reduction of the massive operation of People's Communes across the country. In the cultural and intellectual realms, the new leadership also reversed many of its earlier policies by taking a new, more moderate approach to cultural activities. New censorship regulations decreed that, when determining whether the problem in a controversial film is political or artistic in nature, it should be treated as an artistic problem, for the time being at least.

By the early 1960s, after a decade of integrating art and politics, Chinese filmmakers had successfully learned to combine the two in a more sophisticated way and so come closer to developing an aesthetic of socialist realism. Their success is evident in films such as *Legend of the Banner* (dir. Ling Zifeng, 1960), *Revolutionary Family* (dir. Shui Hua), *Red Detachment of Women* (dir. Xie Jin, both 1961), *Naval Battle of 1894* (dir. Lin Nong, 1962) and *Early Spring in February* (dir. Xie Tieli, 1963). These films fulfilled the party's ideological expectations with their thematic emphasis on class struggle, the Communist revolution, nationalism and socialist construction. At the same time, they are also marked by a high level of artistic achievement and appealed to the popular audience.

As interest in China's traditional culture began to surge in the early 1960s, filmmakers turned to the production of **filmed stage performances**. Based on traditional operas, films like *Women Warriors of the Yang Family* (1960), *Boar Forest* (1962, both dir. Cui Wei, Chen Huaiai) and *Dream of the Red Chamber* (dir. Cen Fan, 1962) were well received by both party officials and audiences. But serious efforts were also made to depict life in post-1949 China. Three light comedies stand out as representative: *Big Li, Young Li and Old Li* (dir. Xie Jin), *Li Shuangshuang* (dir. Lu Ren, both 1962) and *Satisfied or Not* (dir. Yan Gong, 1963).

The release of these films in the early 1960s, together with the laughter they brought forth, suggests a more relaxed political climate than that of the late 1950s. But this 'cultural thaw', as some people have called it, soon came to a halt. A new political storm was gathering momentum on the horizon, and when it came, it swept the nation like nothing ever seen before.

### Further reading

J. Lösel (1980), a history of PRC film from 1949 to 1965; L. Lee (1991), on the literary tradition of social realism; Rayns and Meek (1980), a dossier of background information.

## 13 The Cultural Revolution, 1966–76

Although the Cultural Revolution officially began in 1966, its overture started with a speech delivered by Mao in December 1963, in which he stated that problems were abundant in the

fields of literature and arts and that cultural officials who had deviated from the party line were now on the verge of yielding to the revisionist camp. Under the political pressure, the CCP's Department of Propaganda and the Ministry of Culture launched a rectification campaign, with the film industry singled out as primary focus. Within a few months, ten films, including *City Without Night* (dir. **Tang Xiaodan**, 1957), *The Lin Family Shop* (dir. **Shui Hua**, 1959), *Southern Wind Blowing North* (dir. **Shen Fu**, 1963) and *Early Spring in February*, were identified as targets for public criticism.

Once the Cultural Revolution was set in motion, Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, expanded the blacklist to a total of fifty-four films. She accused these of advocating erroneous ideas and selected some twenty titles for nationwide re-release so as to provide the people with negative examples. In the process of this political 'witch hunt', not only were the films made in the first seventeen years of the PRC completely trashed, but the legacy of leftist cinema from the pre-1949 period also came under attack. Moderate cultural officials were removed from their posts; many filmmakers were sent to re-education camps; some were even imprisoned on false charges. Film studios across the country were placed in the hands of a small party faction in charge of the new movement. According to these ultra-leftist ideologues, the total destruction of the old establishment was a necessary step in the construction of a new world order.

A prime target of attack, feature film production was suspended for several years. As for new construction projects, a decision was made in June 1968 that the eight model revolutionary operas (*yangban xi*) supervised by Jiang Qing should be adapted for the screen. After going through numerous revisions, *Taking Tiger Mountain by Stratagem* was released in 1970. Within the next two years, the remaining seven operas were also produced. Obviously, those films were made for political reasons. The theoretical elaboration of the 'success' of the original plays, as well as the film adaptations, was meant to propose a new set of guidelines for revolutionary filmmaking, namely the 'principles of three prominences' (*san tuchu*) that give exclusive attention to a film's central hero. In this sense, the film adaptation of model plays became the model for filmmaking. Based on these highly formulaic opera movies, a small number of feature films – including some remakes of earlier war films – were produced in the mid-1970s. They actively promote ultra-leftist ideology by serving the interests of radical factions within the party.

During the ten years of the Cultural Revolution, China witnessed the most radical and bloody political turmoil of its recent history. Government offices and schools were closed; students and workers formed factions and started fighting each other, first with sticks and stones and then with knives and guns; and a portion of the urban population was forced to settle in the remote countryside or border regions. The chaos lasted until Mao's death in 1976. As far as film was concerned, the state became more involved in production than at any other time in the century, and political criteria were always of the utmost importance. For many veteran filmmakers, the Cultural Revolution was a chapter in Chinese film history that contained practically nothing good.

**See also:** filmed stage performances; war film

### Further reading

C. Berry (1982), a study of narrative models during the Cultural Revolution; P. Clark (1984), on the film industry in the 1970s; J. Leyda (1972), a film history from the beginnings to the 1960s.

## 14 The new era and beyond, 1976–96

When Deng Xiaoping took control and implemented a series of economic reforms in the late 1970s, China entered a new era. The country slowly changed from a centrally planned economy

to a market-oriented economy. Foreign investments were encouraged, and new technologies eagerly sought. The new interest in advanced Western 'know how' soon spilled over to the realms of culture and ideology as well. More and more students were sent abroad to study in foreign universities, and an increasing number of foreign books, music and movies began to circulate. By no means democratic by Western standards, the CCP government under Deng's leadership became more liberal than it had ever been. It was against this backdrop that Chinese film made its quantum leap.

In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, the events of the recent past continued to overshadow film production. Many films produced in the late 1970s were hardly distinguishable from the propaganda films of the Cultural Revolution period. The revolutionary aesthetic formulated over previous decades was still rigidly observed in films like *The October Storm* (dir. Zhang Yi, 1977) and *Traces of Tears* (dir. Li Wenhua, 1979). The primary purpose of these films was to pay lip service to the current leadership by denouncing the 'Gang of Four' (i.e., Jiang Qing and her clique). After all, official propaganda at this time decreed that the Gang of Four was to blame for all the evils of the past decade.

As far as film is concerned, one of the most significant changes of the new era was that filmmakers began to explore the trauma caused by political radicalism from diverse perspectives. For instance, in its examination of the psychological impact of political repression, *Bitter Laughter* (dir. Yang Yanjin, Deng Yimin, 1979) was concerned not so much with political correctness as with the integrity of ordinary people facing political pressure. *The Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (dir. Xie Jin, 1980) traced the origins of political repression to the Anti-Rightist Campaign of the late 1950s. In so doing, the film criticized the party's cultural policies and placed the Cultural Revolution in a broader historical perspective. These two films exemplify the technical advances being made in this transition phase: they rely heavily on devices like flashbacks and voice-overs seldom favoured by socialist realism.

By the early 1980s, the cinematic focus on the 'wounds' or 'scars' (*shanghen*) of the Cultural Revolution was gradually being replaced by an interest in a variety of new subjects and issues. The formulaic categorization of characters prevalent in the earlier decades had largely been abandoned. Intellectuals, scientists, urban youth, overseas Chinese, and the aristocrats of the Qing dynasty all made their appearance on the screen, some for the first time in the PRC period. The depoliticization of the film industry in the early 1980s also allowed for a more realistic approach to contemporary life. In *At the Middle Age* (dir. Wang Qimin, Sun Yu, 1982), poor living conditions and a distrust of intellectuals are presented as serious problems. In *The Corner Forsaken by Love* (dir. Zhang Qi, 1981), poverty and ignorance are portrayed as causing such evil practices as arranged marriages, traditions attacked by the first generation of filmmakers back in the 1920s.

As economic reform gained momentum in the mid-1980s, people's lives were profoundly affected by the resulting drastic changes. The filmmakers directed their attention to the new problems now confronting China. In *Alarm Bell* (dir. Ma Erlu, Wen Yan, 1981), the protagonist is a determined reformer who overcomes numerous obstacles to turn his debt-ridden factory into a profit-earning enterprise. Similar stories and characters can be found in other contemporary films focused on the subject of reform.

The frustrations and problems experienced by many people in the reform era led to a cultural reflection movement. After all, resistance to social progress does not emanate from political authorities alone. The country's leading intellectuals began to search for the roots of social practices not compatible with the modern world. They came to regard traditional Chinese values and beliefs as the biggest obstacle to China's drive towards modernization. Many middle-aged directors, also known as the **Fourth Generation**, came to participate in this critical

re-examination of traditional culture. Noted titles here include *Sacrificed Youth* (dir. **Zhang Nuanxin**), *Good Woman* (dir. **Huang Jianzhong**, both 1985), *A Girl from Hunan* (dir. **Xie Fei**, 1986) and *Old Well* (dir. **Wu Tianming**, 1987).

Nevertheless, the most original contribution to this process of cultural reflection came from a group of young directors labeled the **Fifth Generation**. The group's landmark film, *Yellow Earth* (dir. **Chen Kaige**, 1984), attracted international attention for its visually striking images of the barren landscape in Northwestern China and the entrenched traditions that have burdened peasants' lives there for thousands of years. In the film's powerful final scene, the crowd of illiterate and superstitious peasants comes to resemble the torrents of the Yellow River – the familiar symbol of Chinese civilization itself. The boy named Hanhan is groping his way against this human tide, trying to reach the Communist soldier standing against the backdrop of a bright sky. In an earlier scene, Hanhan's sister had drowned in the water while attempting to cross the Yellow River. The audience is therefore left to wonder whether the boy will be crushed by the human tide at the end. Such a critical view of traditional Chinese culture remains a dominant theme throughout the films of the late 1980s and early 1990s. *Raise the Red Lantern* (dir. Zhang Yimou, 1991), for instance, presents the oppressive, backward and inhumane aspects of traditional Chinese life.

However, these serious concerns for history, culture and reality were soon swept aside by a rising tide of moral cynicism, political apathy and existential anxiety in the late 1980s. One of the most outspoken cynics of this time is a young Beijing novelist named Wang Shuo. In a number of films either scripted by him or adapted from his popular fictional works, such as *Transmigration* (dir. **Huang Jianxin**, 1988) and *Half Flame, Half Brine* (dir. **Xia Gang**, 1989), traditional notions of morality, decency and integrity are relentlessly ridiculed. What had been regarded as sacred and saintly is represented as hypocritical or even farcical. The opening scene of *The Trouble Shooters* (dir. Mi Jiashan, 1988), where a policeman directs traffic, illustrates Wang Shuo's vision of chaos surrounding symbols of authority. Although the policeman's hand gestures and his bodily movements are choreographed gracefully, he is completely ignored. The following shots of skyscrapers, cars and pedestrians in the street, children in the playground, and a manic pop singer performing on stage, are intercut into a collage of confusing sights and sounds that suggest both the dynamism and disarray of contemporary Chinese life. As far as Chinese filmmaking is concerned, the influence of Wang Shuo's vision is that, at least for a while, films dealing with serious subjects appeared silly, naive or even phony. Wang's influence on representations of **urban life** has been particularly strong, as demonstrated by *In the Heat of the Sun* (dir. **Jiang Wen**, 1994) and other urban films of the mid-1990s.

However, the widespread cynicism of the late 1980s has not prevented other filmmakers from exploring different avenues. Since the early 1990s, three major trends in Chinese filmmaking have emerged: (1) 'commercial film' (*shangye pian*) or 'entertainment film' (*yule pian*); (2) 'mainstream film' (*zhu xuanlü dianying*) or propaganda film; and (3) **art film**. On the one hand, under financial pressure resulting from the restructuring of the old system of production and distribution, major studios have competed with one another to produce a large number of commercial films. These titles follow the formula of successful **genre films** from Hong Kong, Taiwan and, to a lesser extent, Hollywood, by relying increasingly on sex, violence and abnormal characterizations for box-office appeal. On the other hand, the government has regained some control over the film studios by sponsoring a series of blockbuster war films, as well as biographies of its top leaders and model workers. Like the productions of the 1950s–60s, these 'mainstream' propaganda films glorify the Communist revolution, legitimize the party's rule and promote its policies.

Finally, in spite of the dominance of entertainment and propaganda films in the 1990s, a small number of filmmakers have continued to make art films. Titles by this last group demonstrate diverse ideological orientations, aesthetic tastes and stylistic concerns. Many Fourth Generation directors, particularly those on the faculty of BFA, have maintained their stature by consistently making quality films. The glory of the Fifth Generation, however, has gradually faded because most of their films, financed by foreign capital, are now aimed at the international film festival circuit and have thereby become increasingly irrelevant to concerns of the mass Chinese audience.

A new development in the 1990s is the emergence of the so-called **Sixth Generation** directors, who arrived at a time when the industry had suffered huge financial losses and could no longer afford to take risks with inexperienced youngsters as it had done earlier with the Fifth Generation. As a consequence, a handful of Sixth Generation titles fared even worse than their predecessors in terms of domestic mass appeal. In fact, many Sixth Generation directors have started as independent filmmakers producing films outside the studio system before being brought back into the state-owned circuit, if they so choose. In spite of their difficult financial and political situation, however, the emergence of a Sixth Generation has brought a new dynamism to the Chinese film industry. Their films provide evidence of real talent. There is no doubt that they will follow the footsteps of their predecessors by playing a major role in the future development of Chinese film.

**See also:** cultural reflections

### **Further reading**

R. Bergeron (1984), a history of PRC film up to 1983; H. Chen (1989), an official history of PRC film in two volumes; P. Clark (1987a), a book-length study of PRC film; Eder and Rossell (1993), a catalogue on the period with interviews; M. Feng *et al.* (1992), a film history from the beginnings to the 1980s; X. Hu (1986), a history of Changchun Film Studio; L. Liu (1992), a dissertation on socialist realism of the 1980s; P. Pickowicz (1989), a study of popular film and political thought in post-Mao China; Rayns (1992, 1993, 1996), three reports on the 1990s; Semsel *et al.* (1993), a collection of Chinese film reviews; M. Shao (1988), on films of the reform era; X. Wu (1992), a dissertation on the film industry since 1977; ZDX (1985), an official collection of surveys of various studios and genres in PRC film; Chengshan Zhang (1989), an excellent study of film genres and directors of various generations; X. Zhang (1997), a theoretical work on the 1980s; Zhong and Shu (1995), a textbook history compiled for BFA; X. Zhou (1985), a historical study of screen writing as a literary genre over the century.

Wuya yu maque (Crows and Sparrows)

烏牙鳥與麻雀

date: 1949

director: Zheng Junli, Kunlun Studios

script: Chen Baichen

cast (partial): Zhang Lide (as Lao Wei); Zhao Dan (Shopkeeper Xiao), Wang Pei (Xiao Amei); Sun Daolin (Hua Jiezhi), Hua Zongying (Yu Xiaoying), Shangguan Yunzhu (Mrs. Hua), Wu Yin (Mrs. Xiao); Xu Weijie (Da Mao); Wei Heling (Kong Youwen); Li Baoluo (The Principal); Li Tianji (Hou Yibo)

\* \* \*

By the winter of 1948 the Kuomintang or Nationalist army was being routed in the civil war against the Communists. During the Japanese occupation of Shanghai (1941-1945) a collaborator surnamed Hou (a homonym of "Monkey") expropriated an apartment building from its rightful owner, old Mr. Kong. At the outset of the film, the collaborator, now an officer in the Nationalist army, is attempting to lease the building to a new landlord prior to his flight from Shanghai to Taiwan with his mistress.

In order to make the building more presentable to prospective lessees, Hou wants first to evict all the current tenants. After Hou's mistress delivers the bad news, the tenants approach old Mr. Kong about claiming back the building. Hou expropriated the building from him during the Japanese occupation by saying that Kong's son had gone off to join the resistance (the communist-led New Fourth Army). After the Second World War ended, Hou claimed he had actually been an underground worker against the Japanese; the Nationalists reaccepted him into governmental service and allowed him to keep the property he had confiscated because they opposed the New Fourth Army as well. Kong is pessimistic about his chances of getting justice, given Hou's connections in the present government. The tenants then ask Mr. Hua, an intellectual who has been burning his own books in anticipation of a political crackdown by the desperate Nationalist authorities, to represent them to Hou. Hua is reluctant, saying that he'll cross Hou too easily and thus the negotiations will get nowhere. Meanwhile, Hou returns from Nanjing (the Nationalist capital) and begins to make advances toward Hua's wife.

At the Zhongzheng (Chiang Kai-shek) Middle School where he teaches, Mr. Hua proves equally indecisive. Two teachers have just been arrested for their political sympathies by the Nationalist authorities, yet Hua is reluctant to sign a petition in protest. When he approaches the administration for housing on campus, the principal of the school tries to turn him into an informer on his

colleagues. He takes the pressure he is feeling out on his wife.

Shopkeeper Xiao begins to speculate on the gold and commodities markets in order to come up with the cash to sublet the entire building from Hou. Hou is also involved in speculative trading in gold and grain ("If you have any problems transporting the grain," he orders an underling, "just say it is a shipment of provisions for the army!").

Mr. Hua's colleagues at school plan a strike to protest the arrest of their fellow teachers. When Mr. Hua tries to go to classes, the principal suspects him of playing dumb and has him arrested as a ringleader, along with most of the other striking teachers. Meanwhile Hou has hired thugs threaten Mr. Kong. They slap him around and break up his apartment in an effort to scare him into moving. Storekeeper Xiao intercedes, asking that they give Kong a week to leave, to which they agree. Mrs. Hua tries in vain to get help for her husband from lawyers, the Ministry of Education, and the arresting military garrison headquarters. Eventually Hou, who works for the Ministry of Defence, agrees to help her, if she will go with him "in person to meet some people." Waiting all night in front of the Department of the Treasury to buy gold with Nationalist banknotes at the official exchange rate, Storekeeper Xiao is roughed-up and kicked out of line by gang members who are trying to control speculation themselves.

Hou takes Mrs. Hua out to a coffee shop, where he attempts to take liberties with her in exchange for promises to help her husband. She flees into the rain. Returning home, Mr. Kong tells her that her small daughter has taken ill. A doctor who has been called to treat the Xiaos examines Hua's daughter and says she needs injections of penicillin, then a costly drug. Her mother despairs when she cannot come up with the money to pay for the medicine. Ah Mei, the maid servant of the Hous, steals a box of penicillin from their chest of drawers and sneaks it to old Mr. Kong. The little girl receives the injections and recovers.

When Shopkeeper Xiao and his wife explain to Hou that they are unable to come up with the money required to lease the building, he confiscates their deposit (all their assets). Hou then orders all the tenants to vacate their apartments immediately facilitate sub-leasing to someone else. Xiao and his wife urge the other tenants to stand up to Hou. In a confrontation on the stairs which is precipitated by the maidservant being beaten by Hou's mistress for stealing the penicillin, the tenants finally defy Hou. A telephone call then comes from a superior in Nanjing ordering Hou to return the large sum of money entrusted to him by the government. Hou decides to flee to Hong Kong with his mistress by plane, rather than face the Nationalists, whom he has cheated, or the Communists, who will soon march into Shanghai.

As he and his mistress flee in the early hours of the

morning, their maidservant is awakened and, in her confusion, cries out: "Thieves!" Old Mr. Kong gets up and confronts Hou in his temporarily stalled auto. Hou threatens to return to Shanghai one day to avenge himself on the whole lot of them. As Hou's car speeds off over a bridge toward Longhua Airport, another car releases Mr. Hua from prison, part of Li Zongren's (the new Nationalist president's) "sham" amnesty. As he limps home, Mr. Hua, who has been tortured in prison, is tailed by a spy.

On Hua's return, the tenants all have a happy reunion. Hua then makes a speech about how much this experience has taught him. He tells the others a new society will soon arrive and that they should all remake themselves.

1. Is it possible to make an allegorical interpretation of this film? What might the apartment building represent?

The building may represent China. The tenants may be the urban classes "allied to the revolution" -- petty entrepreneurs, intellectuals, office personnel (Kong is a proofreader) and servants (we are told Ah Mei will now be free to return to her village and go back to work in the fields). The building is the rightful property of Kong (the same surname as Confucius), but has been expropriated by the opportunist/traitor Hou (Monkey). The struggle is to give the building back to its legitimate owner, who is loved by the tenants, and to the people who live in it.

2. It is said that the movie's ending was tacked on after the Communist victory. Do you think that is so? Why?

One would expect the victors to feel entirely vindicated, not to make a speech about how they are going to have to remake themselves to fit into a new society.

(review article)

Encyclopedia of Chinese Film. Yingjin Zhang, Zhiwei Xiao, et al. London: Routledge, 1998. 475 pps. (incl. introductory essays 72 pps.; bibliography 14 pps.).

This one-volume encyclopedia is a well-stocked supermarket for the student of Chinese film and a handy reference work for any scholar working with films from mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. The book begins with a series of introductory essays, including three on the development of cinema in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan; one on "Transnational Cinema", one on "Chinese Film in the West", and one on "Foreign Films in China", the first three of considerable length and the last three quite short (2-3 pages each). These essays are historical in their approach; although they contain suggestions for further readings, they do not include footnotes or any other type of citations that pinpoint their exact sources.

The longest of the introductory essays, "Chinese Cinema" (pp. 3-30) by Zhiwei Xiao, Assistant Professor of History at Cal State San Marcos, is divided into 14 sub-sections primarily concerned with the history of the development of mainland cinema. It is filled with interesting anecdotes like the first time a film was to be shown in the Forbidden City (1904) and the generator exploded, which Empress Dowager Cixi took as a bad omen and promptly forbade the screening of movies within the precincts of the palace (p.6). It is factually rich and speaks in detail of the film of the early periods, post-war (late '40s) film, and the four periods into which PRC film has been divided.

I find a contradiction in Xiao's analysis of Kuomintang (KMT) policy toward leftist cinema (p.15). On the one hand, he argues that the governmental authorities were surprisingly tolerant, on the other that within a few weeks after the right-wing of the KMT first sent out thug squads on 12 November 1933 to storm Yihua Film Studio and trash its equipment, the leftist film movement was effectively squelched. Firstly, leftwing filmmaking continued well after this, but turned more underground and less direct. Secondly, if governmental authorities had not wanted it to happen, the so-called "white terror" would never have occurred in the first place. On p. 16 Xiao continues that "soft cinema" (a form of apolitical cinema advocated in the 1930s by Liu Na'ou, Mu Shiyong, Huang Jiamo and Huang Tianshi) was a reaction to the excesses of leftist filmmaking. But cannot the retreat into escapism and sensuality also come about as one reaction to totalitarianism? Witness a number of intellectuals under fascism and during in the late stages of Communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

Xiao's section 9 ("Wartime film") also wants for a more thorough treatment of the cinema produced under Japanese occupation in Dongbei and in Chinese collaborator studios during World War II. One interesting film, which he treats is "Mulan Congjun" (Mulan joins the army), made in Shanghai in 1939 with a patriotic theme

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which, nevertheless, sparked a riot when it was shown in Chongqing (supposedly because it originated from a "Japanese-controlled" area, but I suspect the riot may have been an orchestrated one because someone in Chongqing thought an implied allegorical reading of the film made the KMT war effort look less-than-inspired). And inasmuch as Shanghai was effectively an "Isolated Island" at the time, the studio was hardly in a "Japanese controlled" area.

Xiao and the other authors make no attempt to discuss the availability of the films or their sources (film archives?). Yingjin Zhang's article "Chinese Film in the West" (pp. 66-69) gives the one exception to this, but only as regards a single film, "Song of China" (1935), which Zhang tells us is available through Facets Multimedia, a video company in Chicago, a city "in the USA", as the text informs us (p. 66). It would have been much more helpful to researchers and scholars if the authors had provided a list of films which have been exported by the PRC and are available abroad on video or cd, and another list which would indicate which films are available only through what archives, libraries and film archives.

In the second introductory essay (pp. 31-46), the Hong Kong-based American television host, actor and film critic Paul Fonoroff emphasizes how much the development of Hong Kong cinema paralleled that of mainland China in the early years (i.e. up until 1949), with the periods in which a great exchange of talents went on between Hong Kong and Shanghai, long the center of mainland filmmaking. But by 1950, according to Fonoroff, with the political turmoil in China and the refugee influx, Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong had in fact surpassed Shanghai as the center of Mandarin filmmaking.

Fonoroff does an excellent job of tracing the evolution of Hong Kong cinema in his ten-part essay, treating the rise to popularity from 1955-1965 of the opera movie, including both Cantonese opera and, in Mandarin cinema, of the northern folk opera style called "huang-mei diao" (lit. "yellow plum melodies"), the 1970s rise of Mandarin cinema, with kungfu, comedy and kungfu comedy and the 1980s return of Cantonese comedy, but he does not attempt to address the reasons that Bruce Lee films such as "Return of the Dragon" and "Enter the Dragon" achieved their "considerable popularity in Europe and North America" (p. 41).

Beginning with the mid-1970s, according to Fonoroff's article, the distinctions between Mandarin and Cantonese cinema disappeared because they used post-dubbing techniques to create Cantonese versions for the Hong Kong and Malaysian markets and Mandarin versions for Taiwan and Singapore. But why did "the percentages of Mandarin releases shrink from 100 percent in 1972 to 20 percent in 1979"? (p.41) Might this not have had to do, at least partially, with re-negotiating the Hong Kong self-identity? Similarly, his treatment of the "New Wave" cinema of the late 1970s and early 1980s is a bit dismissive: "the 'wave' turned out to be a mere

ripple, with many of the young filmmakers absorbed by the commercial movie establishment they had ostensibly sought to reform." (p.42). If that were the case, why did the government still make an effort to blacklist films like Allen Fong's "Fu zi qing" (Father and Son) as late as 1981? Ru-Shou Robert Chen is more accurate with his assessment of the same movement and the "challenge it presented to Taiwan," which in fact he credits with contributing to the birth of New Taiwan Cinema in the early 1980s (see Chen's article, p. 56).

Re. political censorship of film in Hong Kong under the British, Fonoroff says: "In the 1980s the film world discovered that TELA" [the Television and Entertainment Licensing Authority] which censored films in Hong Kong "actually had no legal right to do so" (p. 43). But he does not explain how it was possible for it to do so "since the 1950s" (industry connivance?). By contrast, his analysis of the role of the triads in forcing film quality down in the 1990s in order to ensure for quicker profits and a quicker turn-around time, is incisive (p. 45).

The five-part article on "Taiwan Cinema" (pp. 47-62) by Ru-Shou Robert Chen, Associate Professor of Cinema Studies at National Taiwan College of Arts, is well-written stylistically and a bit more analytical than the first two. Aside from the influence of Hong Kong New Wave on the birth of the New Taiwan Cinema movement (p. 56), he also considers the 1975 establishment of the Foundation for the Development of the Motion Picture Industry in the ROC under the Government Information Office to have been of vital importance. Chen tells moving stories about the solidarity between the new filmmakers, such as how Hou Hsiao-hsien financed Edward Yang's movie "Terrorizer" by mortgaging his own house (p. 58).

Describing one aspect of the innovative methods characteristic of the New Taiwan Cinema, he writes:

...those new directors make an effort to develop a new cinematic language that stands apart from the dominant mode of the classical Hollywood narrative. The way they tell a story in their films, if there is indeed a story, tends to be elliptical. Unlike Hollywood, narrative flow in those films is never clearly defined. Sometimes it is multi-directional: more than two story lines are perceived simultaneously, as in "Terrorizer". Most of the time those films do not have what we usually associate with a 'regular' film -- a beginning, a middle, and a climactic ending. They are more like pieces of one's lived experience cut loose and sent drifting along in one's memory. Hou's early works used this type of narrative strategy. (p. 58)

Taiwan directors, at this juncture in history, found it necessary to tell their story and that of their island in a wholly new style, one that in fact came to embody an anti-narrative (at least

anti-to the Hollywood style). But in a way, this has been influential on Hollywood, too. The Mike Leigh film "Topsy Turvy" (1999), which recreates the lives and scenes of Gilbert and Sullivan in Victorian London, uses a similar technique and has played to rave reviews in the US.

Still, there are gaps and unanswered questions in Chen's article as well. In the early period of Taiwan cinema (1901-1945), Chen never makes it clear exactly what language(s) the soundtracks of the talkies were in. Unlike the Hong Kong article, Chen sees the rise of kungfu films in the late 1960s, with their story lines that "did not conflict with the official ideology", as a symptom of "decay" (pp. 52-3). But he does not clarify the meaning of this decay (all show and no social content?). Neither does he examine serious modern film which existed prior to the New Taiwan Cinema movement, such as "Qiu Jue" (Execution in Autumn, circa 1968). Nor does he address the question of KMT censorship of foreign films through cutting or distorting the contents by intentionally mistranslating the subtitles (such as the American film "Chinatown") or the use of absurd commentaries published on certain films, such as "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest", which readers of the Taiwan semi-official press under martial law were told was a tale of the trials and tribulations endured by a nurse in a permissive society.

The rest of the book consists of short entries (averaging approximately 320 words, i.e. 3-4 paragraphs each) arranged alphabetically about films, film-makers and other topics as varied as "action film", "the Cultural Revolution", "melodrama", "modernity". A major strength of these short entries is the way they are cross-referenced and followed by suggestions for further readings. This is indicative of good planning and scholarly value. Some entries, like "representations of intellectuals" and "representations of women", both by Yingjin Zhang, are longer. The latter are cogent and insightful.

The quality of the short entries varies considerably -- some are analytical and others merely recap plots. A good comparison is the entry for "Big Parade" (Da yuebing; 1985) on pp. 93-4 with that for "Stage Sisters" (Wutai jiemei; 1965) on pp. 316-7. The treatment of "Big Parade" is only three paragraphs, but it manages not only to summarize the plot, but to propose a novel comparison with the earlier American film "Full Metal Jacket" (1981) and add several sentences of cogent and carefully considered analysis. Contributor Shuqin Cui observes (p.93):

Ostensibly an account of nationalistic pride, the film raises the question of how loyalty to the state can be reconciled with the individual's need for personal expression...

While these soldiers willingly [but not without incredible hardship] conform to the values and dictates of military life, Lu Chun, an educated man with an

individual mind, voices his confusions over the political rhetoric used to justify self-sacrifice. His is the voice which asks why all possibility for individual expression has been foreclosed.

The film concludes with the honor parade in Tiananmen Square on national day (footage added under the pressure of censorship). Behind the glorious image remains an unsettling skepticism. Over months of brutal training, these soldiers have covered thousands of kilometers on foot, yet in Tiananmen Square they are required to march just ninety-six steps, the work of a single minute.

I find her analysis not only sensitive and accurate, but also stimulating. By contrast, the entry for "Stage Sisters" merely summarizes the plot and says nothing in terms of analysis, nor does it attempt to place "Stage Sisters" within a larger context of Chinese films which immediately preceded and followed it (i.e. the costume dramas of the early 1960s and the revolutionary model operas of the Cultural Revolution), which would show what a break and innovation, as well as a major re-thinking of China's place in the cinematic world that "Stage Sisters" represented.

Similarly, the treatment (p.151) of "Zaochun eryue", mistranslated as "Early Spring in February" (Eryue in Rou Shi's original novella by that title refers to "the second lunar month", not February), while offering a sentence of analysis, skirts many of the major issues surrounding the movie, including the reasons it incurred Communist secret police chief Kang Sheng's wrath, an ironic twist, since Rou Shi, author of the novella on which the screenplay is based (a good adaptation), was a revolutionary martyr murdered by the KMT secret police at Longhua Garrison Headquarters in Shanghai in 1931. The entry also neglects to comment on the origins of the film's wonderful soundtrack and theme song. True, a short entry cannot encompass a full scholarly treatment, but neither can platitudes replace the valuable insights offered in other entries.

Another minor drawback is the way that no Chinese characters appear in the text and films are usually referred to by a title in English translation. There is no index, save for the shorter entries themselves (and these are by no means entirely comprehensive), which leads the reader from the sometimes unstandardized English translations back to the original Chinese title, however, one has been provided to go the other way (from pinyin to characters to English translation).

The encyclopedia's greatest omission lies in the fact that although Zhang pays attention to the critical concept of "transnational cinema" in his own essay (pp. 63-65), the book fails to situate it more clearly in the diaspora, neglecting films like Wayne Wang's "Chan is Missing", Shirley Sun's "Beijing gushi / A Great Wall", and Clara Law's "Floating Life" which are principally Chinese reactions to life in the American and

Australian diasporas, as well as home-coming/going and the ultimate impossibility for diasporic peoples to go "home". These are not simply "Asian American" (or Asian Australian) films, as one of the short entries contends (p. 169). Even if they are, in view of their historic contribution, don't they deserve a place in an Enlightenment undertaking like an encyclopedia? I would urge the editors to consider adding the appropriate section for the next edition of this fine project, to which I look forward.

Jon Eugene von Kowallis  
University of New South Wales

(in **JOSA** [Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia],  
Sydney: March 2000).

# 祝福

Zhùfú (lit. Benediction; usu. trans. "The New Year's Sacrifice")

date: 1956

director: Sang Hu

original short story: Lu Xun (February 7, 1924)

screenplay: Xia Yan

cast (partial): Bai Yang (as Xiang Lin Sao); Wei Heling (He Lao Liu); Li Jingbo (Lu Si Laoye); Shi Lin (Lu Si Taitai)

\* \* \*

The film credits have only a solid background behind them (cf. the ornate collage of images in the credits to "Street Angel"). A quotation from the author, Lu Xun (his profile appears as a relief image on what looks like a fake gold commemorative medal), prefaces the movie, although this quote does not actually come from the short story on which the film's script is based. The quotation urges readers to turn from cruelty, ignorance and superstition. One might assume the film makers are telling us the gist of the movie in advance. Lu Xun, as an author of creative fiction, was usually subtle than this.

A voice informs us that this story begins in a mountain village some forty years back (from 1956), "around the time of the 1911 Revolution" in which the Qing dynasty was overthrown. At the outset, Xiang Lin Sao's husband is dead only six months and her in-laws are already plotting to sell her off in marriage to a man from a more remote location in the mountains (where brides are hard to come by) for a price which they will get. They plan to use the money, in part, to pay the price of a wedding for their youngest son, the brother of her dead husband.

Informed of this plan by her young brother-in-law, Xiang Lin Sao ("Sao" is a respectful form of address for a married woman; Xiang Lin itself means "Auspicious Grove") seeks employment instead as a servant in the Lu family, a scholar-gentry household in town. The patriarch, Lu Si Laoye (Old Fourth Master Lu), has reservations about hiring her because she is a widow. Widows were considered either unlucky or immoral by some sanctimonious persons in those days. But the mistress of the household speaks up on her behalf and she subsequently proves herself a model worker. After serving in the Lu household for some time, she is tracked down by her in-laws who abduct her from the riverside, where she has been sent to wash clothes. Her former mother-in-law, who emerges from the same boat that abducts and confines her, explains to her employers that they need her to work in the fields at home, as they are short hands, but that they will let her return to the Lus once planting is complete. She does not appear at this meeting since she has been forcibly detained in the canopied boat (wupeng chuan) on the river.

Lu Si Laoye, the patriarch, agrees to let them take her, over some mild objections from the mistress of the household.

Bound, gagged and carried up the mountains in a bridal sedan chair, Xiang Lin Sao tries to flee her wedding ceremony. When she is physically prevented from doing so, she deliberately bangs her own head against a table and is knocked unconscious by the strength of her fall. But the marriage ceremony is performed anyway. Her second husband, He Lao Liu, turns out to be a good-hearted man, a debtor who is also victimized by the system. He sympathizes with her and seems innocent of the injustice of the bride-for-sale method by which he has come to marry her. On their wedding night he covers her against the cold and then goes out to sleep on a haystack after he realizes how unhappy she is. When he offers to take her back home, either to the Lu household or to the family of her former mother-in-law, she decides to stay with him.

They work hard, live together happily and have a son, Ah Mao. But no matter how hard he works, He Lao Liu is able only to pay the interest on his loans. One day, after he has already been injured at work, he takes up an offer to work as a "tracker" (la qian de), a coolie who pulls boats with a rope -- a particularly strenuous job. He takes ill afterward. As his creditors hound him on his sickbed, Xiang Lin Sao sends their toddler son Ah Mao out to shell beans. He wanders off after a bird and is killed by a wolf. By the time Xiang Lin Sao returns from having discovered the child's remains (little is left except bloodstains and a slipper) her husband is dead also.

She returns to the Lu household, tells her tragic story to the mistress and is re-employed, although cautioned not to "mope around". Nevertheless, she keeps repeating the story to anyone who will listen: "I was really stupid, really... I only knew that when it snows wild animals come down out of the mountains into the villages foraging for food. I didn't know that they come in spring as well." When it comes time for the ancestral sacrifice, the Lu family does not want her touching any of the implements, so they prepare all the dishes without her, because the ancestors might be unwilling to accept them if they have been touched by someone who is tainted (since two of her husbands have died, she is considered even more immoral/unlucky).

Xiang Lin Sao is then told by another servant that when she dies, because she has had two husbands, she will have to be sawed in half by King Yama of the nether world so that each husband may have at least half a wife. She is then shown an illustration of this in an old book as proof. This terrifies her. Later, when she hears that by donating a large sum of money to the local Tutelary God's Temple to buy a threshold in her name she can atone for her sins in this life and avoid punishment after death (people will step on and over the threshold instead of her body), she hurries to do this, even though the cost, ten strings of cash, is more than a year's wages for her.

Initially overjoyed at having "atoned for her sins," her bubble of euphoria bursts when she is again shunned by the Lu family at the time of the next ancestral sacrifice at the winter equinox. When she protests that she has already made up for her sins by buying the threshold, she is rebuffed by Lu Si Laoye, who tells her no matter how much money she donates, she'll still be unlucky: "You cannot make up for your sins even with a lifetime of atonement!" She talks back to him and is fired.

The household accountant, a man of a lower class than the Lus, seems more sympathetic, asking her gently to leave. She returns to the temple by night and hacks at the threshold with a cleaver until she is driven off by the caretaker.

The next scene shows snow falling. It is again the Lunar New Year. Xiang Lin Sao, now a beggar, looks half dead as she limps along, holding onto a pole. Facing the camera, she queries in a feeble voice: "When a person dies, is there a soul which continues to exist?" Walking on, she stumbles and falls over on the snow-covered road, alone. A voice tells us:

Xiang Lin's Wife, this hard-working, well-intentioned woman collapsed and died after suffering countless depredations and humiliations. This is something that happened over forty years ago. Yes, something which transpired during a bygone era. And fortunately for us, that era is past and will never return again.

1. What differences are there between the short story and the film adaptation?

2. What has become of the narrator in the short story?

-- He is transformed from a self-doubting intellectual who is the person most sensitive to the plight of Xiang Lin Sao to a pontificating voice of authority who makes straightforward, though simplistic, statements.

3. Is this a loss or a gain? Why?

4. Why do you think the story had to be re-written in communist China during the 1950s?

5. In mainland China today people continue to praise this film. Why do you think they do that? Do you think those who praise the film have thoroughly read and understood the story?

6. Which presents the more caustic social indictment, the story or the film? Why?

7. Are there aspects of the film which tend to "orientalize" China? If so, what are they and how did they end up there? Is it Lu Xun who orientalizes China or the Communist scriptwriters? Why would he or they do so? What kind of an ideology is Communism? Think about:

a. the music in the film

b. the gestures and postures of the actors

c. the role of religion/superstition



Lu Xun at fifty,  
photographed in Shanghai in September 1930

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# LU XUN

## SELECTED WORKS

### VOLUME ONE

*Translated by*  
YANG XIANYI and GLADYS YANG

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## THE NEW-YEAR SACRIFICE

The end of the year by the old calendar does really seem a more natural end to the year for, to say nothing of the villages and towns, the very sky seems to proclaim the New Year's approach. Intermittent flashes from pallid, lowering evening clouds are followed by the rumble of crackers bidding farewell to the Hearth God\* and, before the deafening reports of the bigger bangs close at hand have died away, the air is filled with faint whiffs of gunpowder. On one such night I returned to Luzhen, my home town. I call it my home town, but as I had not made my home there for some time I put up at the house of a certain Fourth Mr. Lu, whom I am obliged to address as Fourth Uncle since he belongs to the generation before mine in our clan. A former Imperial Academy licentiate who believes in Neo-Confucianism,\*\* he seemed very little changed, just slightly older, but without any beard as yet. Having exchanged some polite remarks upon meeting he observed that I was fatter, and having observed that I was fatter launched into a violent attack on the reformists.\*\*\* I did not take this personally, how-

\* On the twenty-third of the twelfth lunar month the Hearth God was supposed to go up to heaven to make a report.

\*\* The Confucian school in the Song Dynasty (960-1279) which claimed that all things in the universe and the feudal order were ordained by "Reason" and could never change.

\*\*\* Referring to Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao and others who in 1898, supported by Emperor Guang Xu, started a bourgeois reform movement. After this was crushed by the die-hards, Kang Youwei and others fled abroad and organized a royalist group advocating constitutional monarchy, becoming a reactionary political clique.

ever, as the object of his attack was Kang Youwei. Still, conversation proved so difficult that I shortly found myself alone in the study.

I rose late the next day and went out after lunch to see relatives and friends, spending the following day in the same way. They were all very little changed, just slightly older; but every family was busy preparing for the New-Year sacrifice. This is the great end-of-year ceremony in Luzhen, during which a reverent and splendid welcome is given to the God of Fortune so that he will send good luck for the coming year. Chickens and geese are killed, pork is bought, and everything is scrubbed and scoured until all the women's arms — some still in twisted silver bracelets — turn red in the water. After the meat is cooked chopsticks are thrust into it at random, and when this "offering" is set out at dawn, incense and candles are lit and the God of Fortune is respectfully invited to come and partake of it. The worshippers are confined to men and, of course, after worshipping they go on letting off firecrackers as before. This is done every year, in every household — so long as it can afford the offering and crackers — and naturally this year was no exception.

The sky became overcast and in the afternoon it was filled with a flurry of snowflakes, some as large as plum-blossom petals, which merged with the smoke and the bustling atmosphere to make the small town a welter of confusion. By the time I had returned to my uncle's study, the roof of the house was already white with snow which made the room brighter than usual, highlighting the red stone rubbing that hung on the wall of the big character "Longevity" as written by the Taoist saint Chen Tuan.\* One of the pair of scrolls flanking it had fallen down and was lying loosely rolled up on the long table. The other, still in its place, bore the inscription

\* A tenth-century hermit.

"Understanding of principles brings peace of mind." Idly, I strolled over to the desk beneath the window to turn over the pile of books on it, but only found an apparently incomplete set of *The Kang Xi Dictionary*, the *Selected Writings of Neo-Confucian Philosophers*, and *Commentaries on the Four Books*.<sup>\*</sup> At all events I must leave the next day, I decided.

Besides, the thought of my meeting with Xianglin's Wife the previous day was preying on my mind. It had happened in the afternoon. On my way back from calling on a friend in the eastern part of the town, I had met her by the river and knew from the fixed look in her eyes that she was going to accost me. Of all the people I had seen during this visit to Luzhen, none had changed so much as she had. Her hair, streaked with grey five years before, was now completely white, making her appear much older than one around forty. Her sallow, dark-tinged face that looked as if it had been carved out of wood was fearfully wasted and had lost the grief-stricken expression it had borne before. The only sign of life about her was the occasional flicker of her eyes. In one hand she had a bamboo basket containing a chipped, empty bowl; in the other, a bamboo pole, taller than herself, that was split at the bottom. She had clearly become a beggar pure and simple.

I stopped, waiting for her to come and ask for money.

"So you're back?" were her first words.

"Yes."

"That's good. You are a scholar who's travelled and seen the world. There's something I want to ask you." A sudden gleam lit up her lacklustre eyes.

This was so unexpected that surprise rooted me to the spot.

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<sup>\*</sup> Compiled by Luo Pei in the Qing Dynasty for use in the imperial examinations.

"It's this." She drew two paces nearer and lowered her voice, as if letting me into a secret. "Do dead people turn into ghosts or not?"

My flesh crept. The way she had fixed me with her eyes made a shiver run down my spine, and I felt far more nervous than when a surprise test is sprung on you at school and the teacher insists on standing over you. Personally, I had never bothered myself in the least about whether spirits existed or not; but what was the best answer to give her now? I hesitated for a moment, reflecting that the people here still believed in spirits, but she seemed to have her doubts, or rather hopes — she hoped for life after death and dreaded it at the same time. Why increase the sufferings of someone with a wretched life? For her sake, I thought, I'd better say there was.

"Quite possibly, I'd say," I told her falteringly.

"That means there must be a hell too?"

"What, hell?" I faltered, very taken aback. "Hell? Logically speaking, there should be too — but not necessarily. Who cares anyway?"

"Then will all the members of a family meet again after death?"

"Well, as to whether they'll meet again or not. . . ." I realized now what an utter fool I was. All my hesitation and manoeuvring had been no match for her three questions. Promptly taking fright, I decided to recant. "In that case . . . actually, I'm not sure. . . . In fact, I'm not sure whether there are ghosts or not either."

To avoid being pressed by any further questions I walked off, then beat a hasty retreat to my uncle's house, feeling thoroughly disconcerted. I may have given her a dangerous answer, I was thinking. Of course, she may just be feeling lonely because everybody else is celebrating now, but could she have had something else in mind? Some premonition? If she had had some other idea, and something happens as a result, then

my answer should indeed be partly responsible. . . . Then I laughed at myself for brooding so much over a chance meeting when it could have no serious significance. No wonder certain educationists called me neurotic. Besides, I had distinctly declared, "I'm not sure," contradicting the whole of my answer. This meant that even if something did happen, it would have nothing at all to do with me.

"I'm not sure" is a most useful phrase.

Bold inexperienced youngsters often take it upon themselves to solve problems or choose doctors for other people, and if by any chance things turn out badly they may well be held to blame; but by concluding their advice with this evasive expression they achieve blissful immunity from reproach. The necessity for such a phrase was brought home to me still more forcibly now, since it was indispensable even in speaking with a beggar woman.

However, I remained uneasy, and even after a night's rest my mind dwelt on it with a certain sense of foreboding. The oppressive snowy weather and the gloomy study increased my uneasiness. I had better leave the next day and go back to the city. A large dish of plain shark's fin stew at the Fu Xing Restaurant used to cost only a dollar. I wondered if this cheap delicacy had risen in price or not. Though my good companions of the old days had scattered, that shark's fin must still be sampled even if I were on my own. Whatever happened I would leave the next day, I decided.

Since, in my experience, things I hoped would not happen and felt should not happen invariably did occur all the same, I was much afraid this would prove another such case. And, sure enough, the situation soon took a strange turn. Towards evening I heard what sounded like a discussion in the inner room, but the conversation ended before long and my uncle walked away observing

loudly, "What a moment to choose! Now of all times! Isn't that proof enough she was a bad lot?"

My initial astonishment gave way to a deep uneasiness; I felt that this had something to do with me. I looked out of the door, but no one was there. I waited impatiently till their servant came in before dinner to brew tea. Then at last I had a chance to make some inquiries.

"Who was Mr. Lu so angry with just now?" I asked.

"Why, Xianglin's Wife, of course," was the curt reply.

"Xianglin's Wife? Why?" I pressed.

"She's gone."

"Dead?" My heart missed a beat. I started and must have changed colour. But since the servant kept his head lowered, all this escaped him. I pulled myself together enough to ask.

"When did she die?"

"When? Last night or today — I'm not sure."

"How did she die?"

"How? Of poverty of course." After this stolid answer he withdrew, still without having raised his head to look at me.

My agitation was only short-lived, however. For now that my premonition had come to pass, I no longer had to seek comfort in my own "I'm not sure," or his "dying of poverty," and my heart was growing lighter. Only from time to time did I still feel a little guilty. Dinner was served, and my uncle impressively kept me company. Tempted as I was to ask about Xianglin's Wife, I knew that, although he had read that "ghosts and spirits are manifestations of the dual forces of Nature,"\* he was still so superstitious that on the eve of the New-Year sacrifice it would be unthinkable to mention anything like death or illness. In case of necessity one should use veiled allusions, but since this was unfortunately beyond me I had to bite back the questions which kept rising to

\* This was said by the Song Dynasty Neo-Confucian, Zhang Zai.

the tip of my tongue. And my uncle's solemn expression suddenly made me suspect that he looked on me too as a bad lot who had chosen this moment, now of all times, to come and trouble him. To set his mind at rest as quickly as I could, I told him at once of my plan to leave Luzhen the next day and go back to the city. He did not press me to stay, and at last the uncomfortably quiet meal came to an end.

Winter days are short, and because it was snowing darkness had already enveloped the whole town. All was stir and commotion in the lighted houses, but outside was remarkably quiet. And the snowflakes hissing down on the thick snowdrifts intensified one's sense of loneliness. Seated alone in the amber light of the vegetable-oil lamp I reflected that this wretched and forlorn woman, abandoned in the dust like a worn-out toy of which its owners have tired, had once left her own imprint in the dust, and those who enjoyed life must have wondered at her for wishing to live on; but now at last she had been swept away by death. Whether spirits existed or not I did not know; but in this world of ours the end of a futile existence, the removal of someone whom others are tired of seeing, was just as well both for them and for the individual concerned. Occupied with these reflections, I listened quietly to the hissing of the snow outside, until little by little I felt more relaxed.

But the fragments of her life that I had seen or heard about before combined now to form a whole.

She was not from Luzhen. Early one winter, when my uncle's family wanted a new maid, Old Mrs. Wei the go-between brought her along. She had a white mourning band round her hair and was wearing a black skirt, blue jacket, and pale green bodice. Her age was about twenty-six, and though her face was sallow her cheeks were red. Old Mrs. Wei introduced her as Xianglin's Wife, a neighbour of her mother's family, who wanted

to go out to work now that her husband had died. My uncle frowned at this, and my aunt knew that he disapproved of taking on a widow. She looked just the person for them, though, with her big strong hands and feet; and, judging by her downcast eyes and silence, she was a good worker who would know her place. So my aunt ignored my uncle's frown and kept her. During her trial period she worked from morning till night as if she found resting irksome, and proved strong enough to do the work of a man; so on the third day she was taken on for five hundred cash a month.

Everybody called her Xianglin's Wife and no one asked her own name, but since she had been introduced by someone from Wei Village as a neighbour, her surname was presumably also Wei. She said little, only answering briefly when asked a question. Thus it took them a dozen days or so to find out bit by bit that she had a strict mother-in-law at home and a brother-in-law of ten or so, old enough to cut wood. Her husband, who had died that spring, had been a woodcutter too, and had been ten years younger than she was. This little was all they could learn.

Time passed quickly. She went on working as hard as ever, not caring what she ate, never sparing herself. It was generally agreed that the Lu family's maid actually got through more work than a hard-working man. At the end of the year, she swept and mopped the floors, killed the chickens and geese, and sat up to boil the sacrificial meat, all single-handed, so that they did not need to hire extra help. And she for her part was quite contented. Little by little the trace of a smile appeared at the corners of her mouth, while her face became whiter and plumper.

Just after the New Year she came back from washing rice by the river most upset because in the distance she had seen a man, pacing up and down on the opposite bank, who looked like her husband's elder cousin — very

likely he had come in search of her. When my aunt in alarm pressed her for more information, she said nothing. As soon as my uncle knew of this he frowned.

"That's bad," he observed. "She must have run away."

Before very long this inference was confirmed.

About a fortnight later, just as this incident was beginning to be forgotten, Old Mrs. Wei suddenly brought along a woman in her thirties whom she introduced as Xianglin's mother. Although this woman looked like the hill-dweller she was, she behaved with great self-possession and had a ready tongue in her head. After the usual civilities she apologized for coming to take her daughter-in-law back, explaining that early spring was a busy time and they were short-handed at home with only old people and children around.

"If her mother-in-law wants her back, there's nothing more to be said," was my uncle's comment.

Thereupon her wages were reckoned up. They came to 1,750 cash, all of which she had left in the keeping of her mistress without spending any of it. My aunt gave the entire sum to Xianglin's mother, who took her daughter-in-law's clothes as well, expressed her thanks, and left. By this time it was noon.

"Oh, the rice! Didn't Xianglin's Wife go to wash the rice?" exclaimed my aunt some time later. It was probably hunger that reminded her of lunch.

A general search started then for the rice-washing basket. My aunt searched the kitchen, then the hall, then the bedroom; but not a sign of the basket was to be seen. My uncle could not find it outside either, until he went right down to the riverside. Then he saw it set down fair and square on the bank, some vegetables beside it.

Some people on the bank told him that a boat with a white awning had moored there that morning but, since the awning covered the boat completely, they had no idea who was inside and had paid no special attention to begin

with. But when Xianglin's Wife had arrived and was kneeling down to wash rice, two men who looked as if they came from the hills had jumped off the boat and seized her. Between them they dragged her on board. She wept and shouted at first but soon fell silent, probably because she was gagged. Then along came two women, a stranger and Old Mrs. Wei. It was difficult to see clearly into the boat, but the victim seemed to be lying, tied up, on the planking.

"Disgraceful! Still . . ." said my uncle.

That day my aunt cooked the midday meal herself, and their son Aniu lit the fire.

After lunch Old Mrs. Wei came back.

"Disgraceful!" said my uncle.

"What's the meaning of this? How dare you show your face here again?" My aunt, who was washing up, started fuming as soon as she saw her. "First you recommended her, then help them carry her off, causing such a shocking commotion. What will people think? Are you trying to make fools of our family?"

"*Aiya*, I was completely taken in! I've come specially to clear this up. How was I to know she'd left home without permission from her mother-in-law when she asked me to find her work? I'm sorry, Mr. Lu. I'm sorry, Mrs. Lu. I'm growing so stupid and careless in my old age, I've let my patrons down. It's lucky for me you're such kind, generous people, never hard on those below you. I promise to make it up to you by finding someone good this time."

"Still . . ." said my uncle.

That concluded the affair of Xianglin's Wife, and before long it was forgotten.

My aunt was the only one who still spoke of Xianglin's Wife. This was because most of the maids taken on afterwards turned out to be lazy or greedy, or both, none of them giving satisfaction. At such times she would

invariably say to herself, "I wonder what's become of her now?" — implying that she would like to have her back. But by the next New Year she too had given up hope.

The first month was nearing its end when Old Mrs. Wei called on my aunt to wish her a happy New Year. Already tipsy, she explained that the reason for her coming so late was that she had been visiting her family in Wei Village in the hills for a few days. The conversation, naturally, soon touched on Xianglin's Wife.

"Xianglin's Wife?" cried Old Mrs. Wei cheerfully. "She's in luck now. When her mother-in-law dragged her home, she'd promised her to the sixth son of the Ho family in Ho Glen. So a few days after her return they put her in the bridal chair and sent her off."

"Gracious! What a mother-in-law!" exclaimed my aunt.

"Ah, madam, you really talk like a great lady! This is nothing to poor folk like us who live up in the hills. That young brother-in-law of hers still had no wife. If they didn't marry her off, where would the money have come from to get him one? Her mother-in-law is a clever, capable woman, a fine manager; so she married her off into the mountains. If she'd betrothed her to a family in the same village, she wouldn't have made so much; but as very few girls are willing to take a husband deep in the mountains at the back of beyond, she got eighty thousand cash. Now the second son has a wife, who cost only fifty thousand; and after paying the wedding expenses she's still over ten thousand in hand. Wouldn't you call her a fine manager?"

"But was Xianglin's Wife willing?"

"It wasn't a question of willing or not. Of course any woman would make a row about it. All they had to do was tie her up, shove her into the chair, carry her to the man's house, force on her the bridal headdress, make her bow in the ceremonial hall, lock the two of them into their room — and that was that. But Xianglin's

Wife is quite a character. I heard that she made a terrible scene. It was working for a scholar's family, everyone said, that made her different from other people. We go-betweens see life, madam. Some widows sob and shout when they remarry; some threaten to kill themselves; some refuse to go through the ceremony of bowing to heaven and earth after they've been carried to the man's house; some even smash the wedding candlesticks. But Xianglin's Wife was really extraordinary. They said she screamed and cursed all the way to Ho Glen, so that she was completely hoarse by the time they got there. When they dragged her out of the chair, no matter how the two chair-bearers and her brother-in-law held her, they couldn't make her go through the ceremony. The moment they were off guard and had loosened their grip — gracious Buddha! — she bashed her head on a corner of the altar, gashing it so badly that the blood spurted out. Even though they smeared on two handfuls of incense ashes and tied it up with two pieces of red cloth, they couldn't stop the bleeding. It took quite a few of them to shut her up finally with the man in the bridal chamber, but even then she went on cursing. Oh, it was really. . . ." Shaking her head, she lowered her eyes and fell silent.

"And what then?" asked my aunt.

"They said that the next day she didn't get up." Old Mrs. Wei raised her eyes.

"And after?"

"After? She got up. At the end of the year she had a baby, a boy, who was reckoned as two this New Year. These few days when I was at home, some people back from a visit to Ho Glen said they'd seen her and her son, and both mother and child are plump. There's no mother-in-law over her, her man is a strong fellow who can earn a living, and the house belongs to them. Oh, yes, she's in luck all right."

After this event my aunt gave up talking of Xianglin's Wife.

But one autumn, after two New Years had passed since this good news of Xianglin's Wife, she once more crossed the threshold of my uncle's house, placing her round bulb-shaped basket on the table and her small bedding-roll under the eaves. As before, she had a white mourning band round her hair and was wearing a black skirt, blue jacket, and pale green bodice. Her face was sallow, her cheeks no longer red; and her downcast eyes, stained with tears, had lost their brightness. Just as before, it was Old Mrs. Wei who brought her to my aunt.

"It was really a bolt from the blue," she explained compassionately. "Her husband was a strong young fellow; who'd have thought that typhoid fever would carry him off? He'd taken a turn for the better, but then he ate some cold rice and got worse again. Luckily she had the boy and she can work — she's able to gather firewood, pick tea, or raise silkworms — so she could have managed on her own. But who'd have thought that the child, too, would be carried off by a wolf? It was nearly the end of spring, yet a wolf came to the glen — who could have guessed that? Now she's all on her own. Her husband's elder brother has taken over the house and turned her out. So she's no way to turn for help except to her former mistress. Luckily this time there's nobody to stop her and you happen to be needing someone, madam. That's why I've brought her here. I think someone used to your ways is much better than a new hand. . . ."

"I was really too stupid, really . . ." put in Xianglin's Wife, raising her lacklustre eyes. "All I knew was that when it snowed and wild beasts up in the hills had nothing to eat, they might come to the villages. I didn't know that in spring they might come too. I got up at dawn and opened the door, filled a small basket with beans and told our Amao to sit on the doorstep and shell

them. He was such a good boy; he always did as he was told, and out he went. Then I went to the back to chop wood and wash the rice, and when the rice was in the pan I wanted to steam the beans. I called Amao, but there was no answer. When I went out to look there were beans all over the ground but no Amao. He never went to the neighbours' houses to play; and, sure enough, though I asked everywhere he wasn't there. I got so worried, I begged people to help me find him. Not until that afternoon, after searching high and low, did they try the gully. There they saw one of his little shoes caught on a bramble. 'That's bad,' they said. 'A wolf must have got him.' And sure enough, further on, there he was lying in the wolf's den, all his innards eaten away, still clutching that little basket tight in his hand. . . ." At this point she broke down and could not go on.

My aunt had been undecided at first, but the rims of her eyes were rather red by the time Xianglin's Wife broke off. After a moment's thought she told her to take her things to the servants' quarters. Old Mrs. Wei heaved a sigh, as if a great weight had been lifted from her mind; and Xianglin's Wife, looking more relaxed than when first she came, went off quietly to put away her bedding without having to be told the way. So she started work again as a maid in Luzhen.

She was still known as Xianglin's Wife.

But now she was a very different woman. She had not worked there more than two or three days before her mistress realized that she was not as quick as before. Her memory was much worse too, while her face, like a death-mask, never showed the least trace of a smile. Already my aunt was expressing herself as not too satisfied. Though my uncle had frowned as before when she first arrived, they always had such trouble finding servants that he raised no serious objections, simply warning his wife on the quiet that while such people

might seem very pathetic they exerted a bad moral influence. She could work for them but must have nothing to do with ancestral sacrifices. They would have to prepare all the dishes themselves. Otherwise they would be unclean and the ancestors would not accept them.

The most important events in my uncle's household were ancestral sacrifices, and formerly these had kept Xianglin's Wife especially busy, but now she had virtually nothing to do. As soon as the table had been placed in the centre of the hall and a front curtain fastened around its legs, she started setting out the winecups and chopsticks in the way she still remembered.

"Put those down, Xianglin's Wife," cried my aunt hastily. "Leave that to me."

She drew back sheepishly then and went for the candlesticks.

"Put those down, Xianglin's Wife," cried my aunt again in haste. "I'll fetch them."

After walking round in the hall several times without finding anything to do, she moved doubtfully away. All she could do that day was to sit by the stove and feed the fire.

The townspeople still called her Xianglin's Wife, but in quite a different tone from before; and although they still talked to her, their manner was colder. Quite impervious to this, staring straight in front of her, she would tell everybody the story which night or day was never out of her mind.

"I was really too stupid, really," she would say. "All I knew was that when it snowed and the wild beasts up in the hills had nothing to eat, they might come to the villages. I didn't know that in spring they might come too. I got up at dawn and opened the door, filled a small basket with beans and told our Amao to sit on the doorstep and shell them. He was such a good boy; he always did as he was told, and out he went. Then I went to the back to chop wood and wash the rice, and

when the rice was in the pan I wanted to steam the beans. I called Amao, but there was no answer. When I went out to look, there were beans all over the ground but no Amao. He never went to the neighbours' houses to play; and, sure enough, though I asked everywhere he wasn't there. I got so worried, I begged people to help me find him. Not until that afternoon, after searching high and low, did they try the gully. There they saw one of his little shoes caught on a bramble. "That's bad," they said. "A wolf must have got him." And sure enough, further on, there he was lying in the wolf's den, all his innards eaten away, still clutching that little basket tight in his hand. . . ." At this point her voice would be choked with tears.

This story was so effective that men hearing it often stopped smiling and walked blankly away, while the women not only seemed to forgive her but wiped the contemptuous expression off their faces and added their tears to hers. Indeed, some old women who had not heard her in the street sought her out specially to hear her sad tale. And when she broke down, they too shed the tears which had gathered in their eyes, after which they sighed and went away satisfied, exchanging eager comments.

As for her, she asked nothing better than to tell her sad story over and over again, often gathering three or four hearers around her. But before long everybody knew it so well that no trace of a tear could be seen even in the eyes of the most kindly, Buddha-invoking old ladies. In the end, practically the whole town could recite it by heart and were bored and exasperated to hear it repeated.

"I was really too stupid, really," she would begin.

"Yes. All you knew was that in snowy weather, when the wild beasts in the mountains had nothing to eat, they might come down to the villages." Cutting short her recital abruptly, they walked away.

She would stand there open-mouthed, staring after them stupidly, and then wander off as if she too were bored by the story. But she still tried hopefully to lead up from other topics such as small baskets, and other people's children to the story of her Amao. At the sight of a child of two or three she would say, "Ah, if my Amao were alive he'd be just that size. . . ."

Children would take fright at the look in her eyes and clutch the hem of their mothers' clothes to tug them away. Left by herself again, she would eventually walk blankly away. In the end everybody knew what she was like. If a child were present they would ask with a spurious smile, "If your Amao were alive, Xianglin's Wife, wouldn't he be just that size?"

She may not have realized that her tragedy, after being generally savoured for so many days, had long since grown so stale that it now aroused only revulsion and disgust. But she seemed to sense the cold mockery in their smiles, and the fact that there was no need for her to say any more. So she would simply look at them in silence.

New-Year preparations always start in Luzhen on the twentieth day of the twelfth lunar month. That year my uncle's household had to take on a temporary manservant. And since there was more than he could do they asked Amah Liu to help by killing the chickens and geese; but being a devout vegetarian who would not kill living creatures, she would only wash the sacrificial vessels. Xianglin's Wife, with nothing to do but feed the fire, sat there at a loose end watching Amah Liu as she worked. A light snow began to fall.

"Ah, I was really too stupid," said Xianglin's Wife as if to herself, looking at the sky and sighing.

"There you go again, Xianglin's Wife." Amah Liu glanced with irritation at her face. "Tell me, wasn't that when you got that scar on your forehead?"

All the reply she received was a vague murmur.

"Tell me this: What made you willing after all?"

"Willing?"

"Yes. Seems to me you must have been willing. Otherwise. . . ."

"Oh, you don't know how strong he was."

"I don't believe it. I don't believe he was so strong that you with your strength couldn't have kept him off. You must have ended up willing. That talk of his being so strong is just an excuse."

"Why . . . just try for yourself and see." She smiled.

Amah Liu's lined face broke into a smile too, wrinkling up like a walnut-shell. Her small beady eyes swept the other woman's forehead, then fastened on her eyes. At once Xianglin's Wife stopped smiling, as if embarrassed, and turned her eyes away to watch the snow.

"That was really a bad bargain you struck, Xianglin's Wife," said Amah Liu mysteriously. "If you'd held out longer or knocked yourself to death outright, that would have been better. As it is, you're guilty of a great sin though you lived less than two years with your second husband. Just think: when you go down to the lower world, the ghosts of both men will start fighting over you. Which ought to have you? The King of Hell will have to saw you into two and divide you between them. I feel it really is. . . ."

Xianglin's Wife's face registered terror then. This was something no one had told her up in the mountains.

"Better guard against that in good time, I say. Go to the Temple of the Tutelary God and buy a threshold to be trampled on instead of you by thousands of people. If you atone for your sins in this life you'll escape torment after death."

Xianglin's Wife said nothing at the time, but she must have taken this advice to heart, for when she got up the next morning there were dark rims round her eyes. After breakfast she went to the Temple of the Tutelary God at the west end of the town and asked to buy a

threshold as an offering. At first the priest refused, only giving a grudging consent after she was reduced to tears of desperation. The price charged was twelve thousand cash.

She had long since given up talking to people after their contemptuous reception of Amao's story; but as word of her conversation with Amah Liu spread, many of the townsfolk took a fresh interest in her and came once more to provoke her into talking. The topic, of course, had changed to the scar on her forehead.

"Tell me, Xianglin's Wife, what made you willing in the end?" one would ask.

"What a waste, to have bashed yourself like that for nothing," another would chime in, looking at her scar.

She must have known from their smiles and tone of voice that they were mocking her, for she simply stared at them without a word and finally did not even turn her head. All day long she kept her lips tightly closed, bearing on her head the scar considered by everyone as a badge of shame, while she shopped, swept the floor, washed the vegetables and prepared the rice in silence. Nearly a year went by before she took her accumulated wages from my aunt, changed them for twelve silver dollars, and asked for leave to go to the west end of the town. In less time than it takes for a meal she was back again, looking much comforted. With an unaccustomed light in her eyes, she told my aunt contentedly that she had now offered up a threshold in the Temple of the Tutelary God.

When the time came for the ancestral sacrifice at the winter solstice she worked harder than ever, and as soon as my aunt took out the sacrificial vessels and helped Aniu to carry the table into the middle of the hall, she went confidently to fetch the winecups and chopsticks.

"Put those down, Xianglin's Wife!" my aunt called hastily.

She withdrew her hand as if scorched, her face turned ashen grey, and instead of fetching the candlesticks she just stood there in a daze until my uncle came in to burn some incense and told her to go away. This time the change in her was phenomenal: the next day her eyes were sunken, her spirit seemed broken. She took fright very easily too, afraid not only of the dark and of shadows, but of meeting anyone. Even the sight of her own master or mistress set her trembling like a mouse that had strayed out of its hole in broad daylight. The rest of the time she would sit stupidly as if carved out of wood. In less than half a year her hair had turned grey, and her memory had deteriorated so much that she often forgot to go and wash the rice.

"What's come over Xianglin's Wife? We should never have taken her on again," my aunt would sometimes say in front of her, as if to warn her.

But there was no change in her, no sign that she would ever recover her wits. So they decided to get rid of her and tell her to go back to Old Mrs. Wei. That was what they were saying, at least, while I was there; and, judging by subsequent developments, this is evidently what they must have done. But whether she started begging as soon as she left my uncle's house, or whether she went first to Old Mrs. Wei and later became a beggar, I do not know.

I was woken up by the noisy explosion of crackers close at hand and, from the faint glow shed by the yellow oil lamp and the bangs of fireworks as my uncle's household celebrated the sacrifice, I knew that it must be nearly dawn. Listening drowsily I heard vaguely the ceaseless explosion of crackers in the distance. It seemed to me that the whole town was enveloped by the dense cloud of noise in the sky, mingling with the whirling snowflakes. Enveloped in this medley of sound I relaxed; the doubt which had preyed on my mind from dawn till

night was swept clean away by the festive atmosphere, and I felt only that the saints of heaven and earth had accepted the sacrifice and incense and were reeling with intoxication in the sky, preparing to give Luzhen's people boundless good fortune.

February 7, 1924

## IN THE TAVERN

During my travels from the north to the southeast I made a detour to my home and then went on to S—. This town, only thirty li from my native place, can be reached in less than half a day by a small boat. I had taught for a year in a school here. In the depth of winter after snow the landscape was bleak; but a combination of indolence and nostalgia made me put up briefly in the Luo Si Hotel, a new hotel since my time. The town was small. I looked for several old colleagues I thought I might find, but not one of them was there. They had long since gone their different ways. And when I passed the gate of the school that too had changed its name and appearance, making me feel quite a stranger. In less than two hours my enthusiasm had waned and I rather reproached myself for coming.

The hotel I was in let rooms but did not serve meals, which had to be ordered from outside, but these were about as unpalatable as mud. Outside the window was only a stained and spotted wall, covered with withered moss. Above was the leaden sky, a colourless dead white; moreover a flurry of snow had begun to fall. Since my lunch had been poor and I had nothing to do to while away the time, my thoughts turned quite naturally to a small tavern I had known well in the past called One Barrel House, which I reckoned could not be far from the hotel. I immediately locked my door and set out to find it. Actually, all I wanted was to escape the boredom of my stay, not to do any serious drinking. One Barrel House was still there, its narrow mouldering front

Zaochun eryue (Early Spring in the Second [Lunar] Month; usually translated "February")

早春二月

date: 1963

director: Xie Tieli

original novella: Rou Shi (1902-1931)

adapted by: Xie Tieli

music: The Central Philharmonic (Zhongyang Yuetuan)

cast (partial): Sun Daolin ( as Xiao Jiangiu); Xie Fang (Tao Lan/"Miss Tao"); Shangguan Yunzhu (Wen Sao/"The Widow"); Gao Bo (Tao Mukan); Fang Xuefeng (Mother Tao/Tao "Bomu")

The credits are given in front of a wood-paneled wall which resembles the interior of a river boat. Through a square resembling a window or port-hole we see the countryside pass by outside, as though we were already aboard a boat. The theme music is played by a Western-style symphonic orchestra and sounds a bit like a Riuichi Sakamoto piece in that it combines Eastern and Western motifs, although it clearly predates his popularity.

The film begins aboard a river boat in south China, judging from the scenery it is filmed in the river country of Zhejiang province in southeastern China. An educated traveler, Mr. Xiao, riding with the masses below goes out on deck to observe the passing countryside. There he encounters a little girl of about three or four whose father was a member of the revolutionary army, slain in the fighting near Guangzhou (Canton). We later deduce that the movie takes place sometime in the mid-1920s.

Mr. Xiao is a city-educated intellectual on his way to a job as a teacher at a middle school in a small town, Furong zhen, founded and run by an enlightened former classmate, Tao Mukan. Furong is described as a shiwai taoyuan (a classical allusion to a "Land of Peach Blossoms," i.e. a fictitious haven of peace, away from the turmoil of the world). The town being small and isolated, its inhabitants are naturally somewhat suspicious of strangers. When Xiao shows up with his Western-style leather shoes (indicative of someone who has come from abroad or some large treaty-port type metropolis), he elicits comments from those who see him.

Schoolmaster Tao's educated younger sister, Lan ("Orchid"), lives together with him and his mother on campus, where she is subject to the unwanted attentions of Mr. Qian, her would-be suitor. She has already heard many favorable things about Mr. Xiao from her brother and is obviously excited by his arrival. She immediately tells Mr. Xiao she feels cut off from the outside world in this small town. Knowing he has traveled extensively

throughout China, she asks him to explain recent events to her. He modestly says he understands very little about the world.

In a discussion with other faculty members, Fang Zimou and Mr. Qian (his surname means "money"), Mr. Xiao is told Mr. Fang is an advocate of Dr. Sun Yat-sen's San Min Zhuyi (Sanminism or "The Three Principles of the People," what became the official ideology of the Kuomintang or Nationalist Party.<sup>1</sup> Mr. Qian is a believer in capitalism and opposes the Three Principles of the People because he says they would restrict the free growth of capital and limit the development of industry. They then ask Mr. Xiao what "-ism" he professes; again he modestly declines to state a position. (It is also possible that Xiao is concealing his position because he fears it is too controversial).

Mr. Xiao goes to the home of the revolutionist's widow, Wen Sao, to enquire after the well-being of her two children. He takes the eldest, the daughter, into his school and begins to use his salary to support the destitute widow and her infant son. Tao Lan ("Orchid") finds out and is impressed with his generosity, although rumors begin to circulate throughout the town that he must be having sex on the side with the widow. As the story progresses, Lan expresses her love for Mr. Xiao, who has become preoccupied with the widow's problems, although his feelings for Lan are most probably mutual.

Xiao receives a poison-pen letter in the form of a doggerel verse which speaks of a lecherous stranger come to town, who now desires to possess both a widow and the flower of the school. Soon afterward the widow's infant son dies after a prolonged fever, possibly poisoned or untreated by a bad prescription. Xiao tells Lan he plans to marry the widow, since she has "no other way out" in this society. Lan is stunned and retreats to the inner sanctum of her home. Xiao then learns the widow has just hanged herself. His feelings of shock and resentment are intensified when he hears that some of the townspeople are now proclaiming the Wen Sao a model of widowly "chastity" and saluting him as a sincere benefactor of the widow's family, on the grounds that the her suicide, timed as it was almost immediately after her infant son's death, proves that she and Xiao were not "carrying on" in secret.

Lan takes the one remaining child in. Mr. Xiao then asks for leave to go to a mountain retreat for a few days to recover his thoughts. After his departure a letter is discovered begging Schoolmaster Tao to accept his resignation and saying that he has gone back to the city to take part in the struggles now raging

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<sup>1</sup> The three principles are: minzu (nationalism), minquan (people's rights, sometimes called democracy), and minsheng (the people's livelihood, sometimes called socialism). Though enshrined as the official ideology of the Nationalist party, they were virtually abandoned as a practical basis for governance after the Nationalist victory in 1927.

there. One can assume, from references within the film to the leftist journal Xin Qingnian [The New Youth], which arrives in the mail for him from "a friend in Shanghai" and from the news of the successes of the Northern Expedition, that Mr. Xiao is going off to join the fight against the warlords in the north. Whether he will do so on the side of the Nationalists or the Communists we do not know. On reading the letter, Lan runs out of the school, saying she intends to find him.

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Questions for discussion:

1. Why do unmarried men, widows, and unmarried women often arouse suspicion in small towns?
2. Why is Wen Sao, in particular, suspicious to the good people of Furong zhen? What about Mr. Xiao?
3. Why do you think Lan has been unwilling to consider marriage to Mr. Qian?
4. What is it about Mr. Xiao that seems so appealing to Lan?
5. Is Headmaster Tao angered by Mr. Xiao's refusal to marry his sister? Why not?
6. Why does Mother Tao think her daughter should consider Mr. Qian's proposal?
7. Who do you think produced the poison-pen letter?
8. Is there a possibility of malpractice in the death of the widow's son? What was the doctor's reaction to Mr. Xiao's presence in the widow's home, along with that of Lan?
9. What themes does the film stress?
10. Rou Shi, the author of the novella on which this film is based, was executed without a trial by the Nationalist government in Shanghai in 1931 as a communist subversive. In 1962, thirteen years after the Communist victory, their own studios produced this film, yet even before the Cultural Revolution began in 1966, Kang Sheng, the head of the Communist government's secret police, had already denounced the film as a "poisonous weed."<sup>2</sup> What do you think he found so offensive about the film?

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<sup>2</sup>Zhongguo dianying jianshi [A Concise History of Chinese Film] (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 1990), p. 470.

Wutai jiemei (Stage Sisters)

# 舞台姐妹

directed by Xie Jin; Shanghai Tianma Film, 1965

This film is a product of Liu Shaoqi era in the mid-1960s, when China had left the Soviet block and had struck out on its own, attempting to redefine itself as a leader of the Third World and non-aligned nations. Unfortunately, it was produced on the eve of the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" (1966-1969) and as a result was not actually released until after the political thaw of the late 1970s, when it won several international prizes.

Zhu Chunhua, the heroine, is a peasant girl sold as a child bride. She flees this forced marriage to join a traveling Shaoxing Opera (Yue ju) troupe. The music instructor's daughter, Xing Yuehong, takes a liking to her and the two become "sworn sisters". When the troupe performs in Shaoxing, a wealthy opera aficionado tries to extract sexual favors from Yuehong. After the troupe stands up to him, he induces the local police to bust up and ban the show on morals charges (having women perform on stage). In the ruckus that ensues when they try to apprehend Yuehong, Chunhua fights back, saving her. For this Chunhua herself is arrested and tied to a post, where she is exposed to the elements and public humiliation for three days. A younger peasant girl, also named Chunhua (Spring Flower) brings her water and encouragement during her ordeal. That much of the film's concerns have to do with stressing the need for solidarity among women becomes clear.

When Yuehong's father dies, Chunhua and Yuehong go to Shanghai, where their hard-earned excellence in acting leads to success and recognition. But when their new manager, Mr. Tang, asks Chunhua to play a more sexually suggestive role, she refuses. Eventually Yuehong (Red Moon) decides to marry Tang for financial security, though she admits to Chunhua that she does not love him. The two "sisters" begin to drift apart.

After the suicide of a fellow actress, Chunhua comes under the influence of Communist underground women activists and decides to act the lead role of Xiang Lin Sao in an operatic version (Yue ju) of Lu Xun's short story Zhufu (New Year's Sacrifice), which the Kuomintang authorities tell Tang to squelch. When he fails, he orders his underling Ah Gan to throw limestone into Chunhua's face, which outrages the public. The KMT authorities reluctantly hear the case in court. Tang persuades Yuehong to say she hired Ah Gan to commit the act out of professional rivalry, but Chunhua points out in the public trial that the act was politically motivated and orchestrated by Tang. Tang slinks off.

With the Communist victory in 1949, Tang flees to Taiwan, abandoning Yuehong, whom Chunhua encounters while playing the lead role in "The White Haired Girl" in Shaoxing. The sisters are reconciled. Although the film ends with them sitting side by side on a motor boat speeding forward, whether Yuehong will be welcomed back into the new Communist-led troupe is unresolved.

questions for discussion:

1. The film begins in 1936 and ends in 1949. What historical eras has China gone through in the process and how have women been effected?
2. Are there similarities between this film and "The World of Suzie Wang"?
3. What attracted Chunhua to play the role of Xiang Lin Sao in "The New Year's Sacrifice"?

舞台姐妹 Wú-tái jiě-mèi (Stage Sisters)

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When Xie Jin made *Two Stage Sisters* in 1964, it marked the culmination of a certain aesthetic thrust within post-1949 Chinese cinema. At this time, Xie Jin already had a reputation for making films with strong female protagonists and clearly revolutionary themes, including *Woman Basketball Player #5* (1957) and *The Women's Red Army Detachment* (1961). As a part of the first generation of filmmakers to come of age after the Revolution, Xie embarked on his career at a time when the new People's Republic of China was searching for self-identity outside as well as within the cinematic world. Blending elements of Hollywood melodrama, Soviet socialist realism, pre-war Chinese critical realism, and folk opera traditions, *Two Stage Sisters* can be looked at as an answer (particularly after the Sino-Soviet split in the late 1950's) to what a peculiarly Chinese socialist film should look like. Using the lives of women in an all-female Shaoxing opera troupe to represent the changes the Revolution brought, Xie Jin, working from an original script (unusual in an industry which still bases most of its productions on well-known literary works), also used the Shaoxing opera troupe as a way of exploring the tremendous aesthetic, cultural, and social changes that gripped modern China.

Covering the years 1935 through 1950, *Two Stage Sisters* focuses on the lives of two very different women. One, Chunhua (Xie Fang), is a young widow who runs away from her in-laws and finds sanctuary in the world of Shaoxing opera. The other, Yuehong (Cao Tindi), is born into that world. Both suffer the hardships of the life of itinerant performers. However, when they find themselves in Shanghai, Chunhua throws herself into her career and eventually into revolutionary politics, while Yuehong chooses a romance with their prosperous and ruthless theatrical manager. After 1949, both return to the countryside—Chunhua with a travelling Communist theatrical troupe and Yuehong to eke out a living after being abandoned by her husband. The film ends with the

✓ WUTAIJIEMEI. (Two Stage Sisters.)

China, 1964.

Director: Xie Jin. 謝晉 (b. 1923)

Production: Tianma Film Studio, Shanghai; color; running time: 114 minutes; length: 10,223 feet. Released 1964.

Production manager: Ding Li; screenplay: Lin Gu, Xu Jin, and Xie Jin; photography: Zhou Daming; editor: Zhang Liqun; sound recordist: Zhu Weigang; art director: Ge Schicheng, stage scenery: Xu Yunlong; music: Huang Zhun, music director: Chen Chuanxi.

Cast: Xie Fang (*Chunhua*); Cao Yindi (*Yuehong*); Feng Ji (*Xing*); Gao Yuansheng (*Jiang Bo*); Shen Fengjuan (*Xiao Xiang*); Xu Caigen (*Jin Shui*); Shangguan Yunzhu (*Shang Shuihua*); Ma Ji (*Qian Dukui*); Luo Zhengyi (*Yu Guiqing*); Wu Baifang (*Little Chunhua*); Li Wei (*Manager Tang*); Deng Nan (*Aixin*); Shen Hao (*Mrs. Shen*); Dong Lin (*Ni*); Ding Ran (*Pan*).

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Wutai Jiemei

sisters' reunion; however, the fate of Yuehong remains somewhat uncertain despite the film's generally optimistic resolution.

In spite of the extremely positive view of revolutionary change the film puts forward, however, *Two Stage Sisters* was suppressed during the Cultural Revolution and only really came to the screen in the late 1970's. The reasons behind this range from the personal displeasure of Jiang Qing (Madame Mao—then in power as head of "The Gang of Four") with one of the advisors on the film to its condemnation as "bourgeois" for incorporating characters which were neither "good" nor "bad" vis-à-vis the Revolution (e.g., Yuehong) and thus opening the text to ambiguous readings. Unfortunately, looking at *Two Stage Sisters* as some sort of veiled statement against either Mao or the Revolution misses the point. The film really must be taken as a contribution to the construction of socialist film aesthetics in China, even though it represents a very different path than that taken by Madame Mao in her support for the highly stylized "model opera."

*Two Stage Sisters* represents an eclectic aesthetic which blends the critical vigor of the "golden era" of left-wing filmmaking of 1930's Shanghai with the "revolutionary romanticism" of the arts that developed in Yanan, where the Chinese Communist Party had a stronghold during World War II. Like many earlier Shanghai films, *Two Stage Sisters* has a Hollywood flavor. After all, it deals with the occasionally glamorous world of the opera stage and the lives of its charismatic stars. Also, like its Shanghai predecessors, the film has a critical realist's eye for the gritty details of urban life. From Yanan, however, *Two Stage Sisters* takes its heroic elevation of ordinary people through the revolutionary process, its interest in folk-life and folk aesthetics, and an often ethereal, fairytale-like quality which comes from a blend of these folk roots with political idealism. To all this, the sobriety of the historical moment, an interest in looking at the nature of class oppression, feudal gender relations, nationalism, and the Japanese occupation within a dialectical framework grounds *Two Stage Sisters* within the tradition of its better known Soviet cinematic cousins. Its epic sweep from the poor villages of Zhejiang province to the grandeur of the Shanghai opera stage puts it within a tradition of epic socialist dramas made in other post-revolutionary societies.

However, *Two Stage Sisters* seems to add up to more than the sum of its aesthetic parts. Perhaps this is due to the elaborate mirror structure of the film which uses the world of the stage as an aesthetic reflection of the changes taking place in the lives of the film's characters. The Shaoxing opera stage, for example, represents an inverse reflection of the feudal world of the countryside. Whereas the stage features stories of warrior heroines and romances between beautiful ladies and young scholars, the actual conditions the actresses live in show a world of poverty, oppression, and constant humiliation at the hands of men.

In Shanghai, *Two Stage Sisters* shows a different kind of opera emerging. Based on the work of the radical author Lu Xun, this new opera goes outside the realm of highly stylized heroines and the fantasy of romance to deal with the poor and the homeless. Decidedly anti-romantic, it features the gritty, everyday world of contemporary Chinese life.

Lastly, *Two Stage Sisters* features opera after the Revolution with a snippet from *The White-Haired Girl*, perhaps the best-known revolutionary play to emerge from Yanan. It has the folkloric roots of Shaoxing and the critical sensibilities of Lu Xun blended together within a fantasy which features an everyday woman who becomes a revolutionary heroine.

All three of these aesthetic traditions are self-consciously represented in *Two Stage Sisters*. They serve as markers of historical change. They also allow the viewer a certain ironic distance from the drama to stand back and place the film's fiction within a broader political and cultural context. However, more than simply documenting aesthetic and social changes by incorporating these opera allusions, *Two Stage Sisters* chronicles its own aesthetic roots, giving the viewer a rare glimpse of the history behind Chinese film aesthetics of the mid-1960's. It is as a document of this unique Chinese socialist cinematic sensibility that *Two Stage Sisters* is particularly important to an understanding of Chinese film culture as well as socialist cinema aesthetics generally.

—Gina Marchetti

Qing gong yuan (Injustice in the Qing Palace) 1962 清宮冤

original play: Yao Ke (alt. Yao Xinnong; d. 1991); this is an operatic adaptation of a "spoken play" (huaju) which follows many of the conventions of traditional Peking opera. In a sense, it is "contemporary" Peking opera.

Defeated by the West in the Opium Wars (1839-1842; 1859-1860), weakened by civil war (the Taiping rebellion of 1851-1864), humiliated by Japan in 1895 and hard-pressed by the Western powers for trade and territorial concessions, China has needed reform for decades. But the conservatives within and without the Qing/Ch'ing ruling house have rallied around the person of the empress dowager to resist those who advocate anything but minor changes. Finally a young emperor comes to age and assumes the throne. A series of measures called the wuxu bianfa (1898 Reforms) are enacted by the young Guangxu emperor, with the support of his loyal, reform-minded tutors and advisors, Weng Tonghe, Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, Tan Sitong and his beloved consort Zhen Fei (the "Pearl Concubine").

The conservatives convince Cixi, the empress dowager, that the reforms are aimed at her. She orders Rong Lu, her most trusted minister, to suppress them. The young emperor, upon learning that the conservative faction plans to move against him, awards Yuan Shikai, general of a modern-style foreign-drilled arm, the honor of supreme command to defend the emperor and his palace, the Forbidden City, against the impending coup and gives Yuan a silver arrow as a token to show that whatever Yuan does is by special permission of the emperor. But rather than moving to check the conservatives, Yuan goes directly to the Yiheyuan Summer Palace, where the empress dowager is living in "retirement" and informs her. When she sees the silver arrow the emperor has given Yuan, she orders that he command his troops to move against the emperor, which he does.

The empress dowager, who looks a bit like Chairman Mao in this film version of the play, orders the emperor under house arrest for life, beheads those among his loyal advisors who can be captured (including Tan Sitong and Kang Youwei's younger brother) and has the Pearl Concubine tortured to death for daring to talk back to her. This is the yuan (injustice/wrongful verdict referred to in the title).

questions:

1. The text of the play was seen by radical critics as an historical allegory criticizing Mao Zedong. Do you think this is possible? Why or why not?
2. Yao Ke was a student of Lu Xun's. Do you detect any influence from Lu Xun on him?
3. Is there any irony in the use of Peking Opera to present this theme? Why do you think Yao Ke's original spoken drama was adapted to a more traditional form?

director: Wang Ping (orig. Wang Guangzhen, 1916-1990), veteran actress & woman director. Produced jointly by the August First Film Studio (Bayi dianying zhipianchang), Peking Film Studio (Beijing dianying zhipianchang), The Central Newsreel and Documentary Film Studio (Zhongyang xinwen jilu dianying zhipianchang).

When first released, this film was billed as a historic epic poem (shishi) which re-tells the story of the Chinese revolution in song and dance. The official blurb which accompanies the film reads:

This is an epic created in commemoration of the 15th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. More than 3,000 people from some 70 units in Peking, the capital city, Shanghai and the People's Liberation Army contributed to the creation with revolutionary fervour.

Beginning with the prologue "Sunflowers Face the Sun," it is divided into six parts -- "Dawn in the East," "A Single Spark That Sparks a Prairie Fire," "On the Long March," "Flames of War Against Japanese Aggression," "Burying the Chiang Kai-shek Regime," and "The Chinese People Have Stood Up." There are 28 scenes with 24 dances, song-dance performance and songs with dramatic action, 30 revolutionary songs and 14 pieces of recitations. The whole epic is an affair of grandeur and colour, giving a graphic account of the events beginning from the birth of the People's Republic in 1949 -- the historical course of the revolution of the Chinese people, who have put up a tough fight to liberate themselves and advanced wave upon wave under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and Chairman Mao.

During the Deng Xiaoping era the film fell into disfavor in China, save for an interest in its technical aspects. Later on, greater interest in it was revived.

Discussion questions:

1. Why do you think the film fell into disfavor in China after the mid-1970s?
2. Are there elements in the film that you might imagine a Chinese audience found attractive at the time it was produced?
3. Why has this film and newer films with similar subject matter (such as "Song of the Chinese Revolution", co-dir. By Wang Ping and Huang Baoshan, 1985) come back into governmental favor?

Baimao nǚ (The White Haired Girl)

白毛女

date: 1972

director: Sang Hu

This film is one of the most famous **geming yangban xi** or Revolutionary Peking Operas. It combines singing, traditional operatic movements and modern ballet. An earlier version was done in 1950, directed by Shui Hua.

This story is supposedly based on a folk-tale from north China about a young girl who fled landlord oppression and sexual exploitation to live alone in a cave, where, because of a lack of certain nutrients in her diet, her hair turned prematurely white.

Due to this unnatural aspect of her appearance, people in the area mistook her for a ghost and shunned her, which is, in part, what she wanted -- to be left completely alone (and therefore unharmed) by society. But the lack of social intercourse further traumatizes her. She lives off sacrificial offerings left by worshippers in a nearby temple, which the local villagers interpret as visits from a deity.

When the People's Liberation Army (PLA) enters the area, soldiers gradually coax her out of her seclusion. She is overjoyed when she is finally made to realize that the PLA has brought with it a new socialist order in which landlord oppression is a thing of the past.

There are a number of differences from the 1950 version of the film.

questions:

1. Where do you think the original "folk-tale," if there was one, left off and where does the "propaganda" begin?
2. Formalistically speaking, this film relies on techniques taken from Western-style modern dance and ballet. Do you think these are employed effectively?
3. How do you think the film succeeded or failed in its mission to convince the audience of the superiority of the new order?

# 决裂

Jué lie (Breaking With Old Ideas) 1975

"Breaking With Old Ideas" is one of the few non-operatic feature films made during the "Gang of Four" era, that is the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1969) and its immediate aftermath of hard-line "ultra-left" Communist rule (1970-1976). The so-called "Gang of Four" (Si Ren Bang) included Madame Mao (Jiang Qing), an actress from Shanghai in the 1930s who had gone to Yan'an, where she met Mao. It was alleged by their critics that they had seized power during Mao's dotage and perpetrated many of the excesses of the Cultural Revolution, a nation-wide purge of "revisionist" and "capitalist" elements within the Communist Party, including State Chairman Liu Shaoqi and his number two man, Deng Xiaoping (who again came to power in 1978, after the fall of the "Gang of Four"). Since Jiang Qing herself had been an actress, she was particularly interested in theater and film productions and was the prime mover behind the Revolutionary Model Peking Opera (geming yangban xi) genre which developed during the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath.

"Breaking With Old Ideas," however, is a spoken drama and has none of the singing and operatic movements of the yangban xi. Set in the late 1950s during an earlier period of struggle between two lines (the revisionist line, which was broadly similar to that of the Soviet Communists in Russia, stressing the value of expertise and urban technology, and the "purer" communist line advocated by Mao Zedong, which stressed rural revolutionary zeal, dedication and volunteerism). This was sometimes referred to as the struggle of "Red" vs. "expert."

The story centers around an attempt by the radical pro-Mao faction (in this case represented by one handsome middle-aged man who begins to look more and more like the Chairman himself) to reform university education, already in the hands of the revisionists, who look like spindly bureaucrats and choking smokers. In essence, it is a struggle between two different factions within the Communist movement.

Highlights of the film include river rafting, warm embraces, pig castrating, cancellation of entrance exams to university, and the celebration of the multiple talents and virtuosity of a re-entry woman (and mother) as a mature-age university student.

One of the tenets of Maoism was that a person can change his/her thinking, i.e. fundamental world outlook or approach to life, and become a revolutionary even though he/she may have once held mistaken views. In a way, that is an essential theme of this rare film -- rare in that it is one of the few existing works of art or literature in which the Gang of Four, i.e. the radical Maoists, are still able to argue their case. For that reason it is, ironically, one of the few films in this selection now banned in China.

questions:

1. Who are the revisionists in the film and who are the true revolutionaries?
2. How do the "radicals" gain the sympathy of the audience in the film? What qualities do they have to recommend them?

3. What insights to the Chinese revolution did you gain from this film?
4. How would you compare it with the geming yangban xi (Revolutionary Model Peking Operas)?
5. Why do you think this film was made in 1975?

Director: Xie Jin, starring Liu Qiong; Shanghai Film Studio

Mr. Xu, a billionaire Chinese businessman from America, returns to mainland China around 1979 to "see the motherland again" and, at the same time, to locate his eldest son (by his first marriage), whom he has not seen in 30 years. While they are staying in the Peking Hotel, the billionaire's female secretary, who is supposed to be a Chinese-American, asks a representative of the Chinese government for help in this. Soon the son, Xu Lingjun, now a teacher in the grasslands of northwest China, is on his way to Peking by plane from Lanzhou. Not long after they are reunited, it becomes clear that there is some tension between them. Lingjun feels that his father abandoned him and his mother, who died just days after Mr. Xu left for America with another woman. His father mouths the communist slogan "Wang qian kan!" (Let's look toward the future [and not dwell on the past]), which seems to irritate Lingjun because he does not believe his father understands the context in which this is meant.

Through a series of flashbacks, interspersed with scenes of his father and the private secretary spending large sums of money on lavish dinners and souvenirs, we are gradually introduced to Lingjun's life over the last thirty years: how he initially thrived as an orphan under socialism, what a good education he received from the state and his many sincere teachers, how all this evaporated during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, when he was labeled a rightist because his father was a capitalist who lived in America, how he was "sent down" to the countryside as a form of exile and how the people in the grasslands, most of whom were herders, took him in and made him feel at home, how they "gave" him a wife (a girl fifteen years his junior who had fled famine in Sichuan), and how he came to love her after their marriage.

As Lingjun's father gets to know him better, he realizes that the son has real strength of character, unlike his foppish half-brother and flighty half-sister, who have grown up in the States. This makes him all the more eager to take Lingjun back to America and train him to take over the family business, a chemical plant in the San Francisco bay area. When the father decides his son is a Marxist, having grown up in China, he even tries to make the West sound appealing from that angle, telling him: "Abroad they study Marxism too, and probably do a better job of studying it there than here..." but Lingjun replies: "There they are only studying it. Here we live it."

Finally the father offers to bring Lingjun's wife and son over as well, but Lingjun replies: "Perhaps if you had come five years ago I would have agreed to go, but now the situation in China has changed. Now I can live up to my potential here and make real contributions to society." His father can only give him an expensive watch to take back to the grasslands for his wife.

Lingjun tries to refuse, saying: "She cannot use such an expensive watch there." Thinking of the difference between the two societies, or even of the difference between Peking and the grasslands, there is a disturbing grain of truth to what he says. Lingjun sees his father and the personal secretary off at the airport, then returns home to the land of the herdsmen.

\*finis\*

questions:

1. Why do you think the herdsmen protected Lingjun during the Cultural Revolution?
2. Do you think Lingjun's choice is a realistic one or not? Why?
3. Is this film plausible?

# 芙蓉鎮

Fúróng zhèn (lit. Hibiscus Town; also translated as: A Small Town Called Hibiscus), Shanghai Film Studio

date: 1986

director: Xie Jin

original novel: Gu Hua

screenplay: [Zhong] Ah Cheng, Xie Jin

cast (partial): Liu Xiaoqing (as Hu Yuying), Jiang Wen (Qin Shutian/Qin "Dianzi"), Zhang Zaishi (Gu Yanshan/Director Gu)

The film begins in 1963. Hu Yuying and her husband Guigui operate an outdoor restaurant which sells doufu (beancurd). They are doing well under the new economic policy implemented by Liu Shaoqi, then Chairman of the PRC (but later branded "the chief person in authority taking the capitalist road" during the Cultural Revolution) which allows for small businesses run on a limited scale. The community also appreciates the service they provide. They are planning to adopt a child as soon as they move into their new house. At the same time they are celebrating their connubial bliss by hosting a party for the whole town, Communist Party Section Chief Li approaches the town by sampan. She is espied by Wang Qiushe, a "land reform activist" (i.e. a local Party do-be), who rushes to welcome her. When she pays an unexpected visit to his home, however, he rushes to hide his statue of the Guanyin (Avalokitesvara, aka the Buddhist "Goddess of Mercy") in order not to appear superstitious.

A man carrying a gong marches through the town proclaiming: "A Movement! A Movement [i.e. a political purge] is Here!" This marks the beginning of the Socialist Education Movement, direct precursor to the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" (1966-1969/78). As the movement gets underway, Section Chief Li targets the doufu seller, her husband, and Director Gu, who had been supplying them with unwanted surplus foodstuffs.

Hu Yuying flees, entrusting a sum of 1,500 yuan (legally obtained profits from the business) to a relative in the Party, whose wife then forces him to betray Hu. When Hu Yuying finally returns home, having found no permanent refuge elsewhere, she is told that her husband, Guigui, has been shot when he tried to kill the Party Section Chief for tormenting him and others.

Yuying is sentenced to sweep the streets with Qin "Dianzi" (Madman Qin), an intellectual branded as a rightist because he wrote a play supposedly "with an anti-feudal theme which was intended as a satire on [the dictatorship of] the Party." Such works were originally encouraged by the Party during the short-lived campaign for liberalization in 1957 known as the Baihua qifang or Hundred Flowers Campaign, named after a quotation from Mao Zedong: "Let a hundred

flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend." Yuying falls in love with him after he nurses her back to health during a sickness. When they discover that she is pregnant, they petition for permission to marry, which at first seems possible while the town is temporarily under Wang Qiushe, a zany rebel leader at the high point of the chaos during the Cultural Revolution, but is then denied them after Section Chief Li returns. She has Qin sent to prison for ten years.

In 1979, after the Cultural Revolution and the so-called "Gang of Four" era are over, Qin meets Section Chief Li on a ferry boat as they are both returning to Hibiscus Town. She attempts to apologize to him, since the Cultural Revolution has now been denounced by the new national leader Deng Xiaoping, himself a victim of its excesses. Qin accepts her apology only with great irony in his speech. Finally, when she asks if she can do anything for him, he says: "Just leave the people alone. They get by easily enough on their own, but sometimes [someone makes it] not so easy [for them]..."

Back in Hibiscus Town, after a tearful reunion with Hu Yuying and his small son, Qin and Hu see a man with a gong, this time Wang Qiushe, now insane, walking through the town crying: "Movement! [We Need Another Political Campaign] -- Again!" The crowd are obviously displeased, but Qin and Hu give him a bowl of doufu to assuage his hunger and he walks off he crying: "Movement! A Movement's Here Again!" They reflect that only the people can guard against such a movement's return.

questions for discussion:

1. How does this depiction of the Cultural Revolution differ from the depiction of the leftist/Maoist line in the 1975 film Juelie (Breaking With Old Ideas)?

2. Do you see physical resemblances between characters in this film and political figures in the China of the Cultural Revolution?

-- CP Section Chief Li looks a bit like a younger version Mao's wife Jiang Qing, associated with the radical faction in the Cultural Revolution.

3. What are the political implications of the two final scenes?

# 黃土地

"Yellow Earth" (Huang Tudi) -- 1984

Beginning with the 1985 Hong Kong Film Festival, this became the first Chinese film to be hailed internationally by Western film critics. Directed by Chen Kaige with cinematography by Zhang Yimou (who later became famous in his own right as the director of Red Sorghum, Ju Dou, Raise the Red Lantern, To Live, etc.), the film is set in northwestern China in 1939, two years into the Japanese invasion of China. At the time, the Nationalist Government under Chiang Kai-shek had withdrawn into Sichuan (far off in mountainous southwestern China) where it was sustained in Chongqing, largely by an American airlift and allied support (British political commentators jokingly referred to the Generalissimo as "Cash My Check"). In the power vacuum created, the Communists expanded rapidly throughout rural portions of Northern China which were not closely controlled by the Japanese forces.

Gu Qing is a soldier-intellectual from the Propaganda team of the Communist-led Eighth Route Army sent out among the peasants in Northern Shaanxi to collect folksongs, to which the Communists intend to write new lyrics to inspire their soldiers and peasant followers to fight the Japanese and work for the revolution. Walking through villages on the loess plateau along the Yellow River, he meets with a wedding procession and is invited to the reception by peasants, who treat him as a government official. He is surprised to see wooden fish served (as a token for good luck - the word yu for fish is a homonym of yu meaning surplus or abundance) instead of the real thing.

That night he stays at a peasant's home. The father says he is 47, but looks 77 (prematurely aged by poverty and the harsh climate). He lives with his fourteen year-old daughter Cuiqiao and her younger brother Hanhan. She will be married off in the Fourth Lunar Month to an older man, who gave half of the bridal price beforehand (it was used to pay for her mother's funeral) and will give the other half later, which will be used to pay for her brother's wedding.

The father is suspicious of Gu Qing's notebook and will not sing for him, but Gu Qing stays on and helps out in the fields. We get the impression he has not had much experience ploughing, another indication that he is an intellectual. One morning Cuiqiao notices he can sew, which she thinks a quite remarkable accomplishment for a man. Gu Qing tells her that women in Yan'an (the capital of the Communist base area) crop their hair and fight the Japanese invaders just like the men do. She seems impressed. Later he tells her father that "in the south" (i.e. Yan'an) they do not look favorably on the custom of marrying off young girls. The father objects, saying that 13 or 14 is not young and how should they get married without arraigned marriages. When Gu Qing asks him why certain women have to suffer so much in life, the father replies: Ming! (Fate). Gu Qing talks about freedom of marriage and the other things Chairman Mao wants to see brought about in China -- like everyone having shoes and decent grain to eat. The father declines

to comment, but Cuiqiao seems impressed. He makes friends with the younger brother Hanhan and Hanhan sings a folksong about a bedwetting child bridegroom and the Dragon King (the water god). Gu Qing then teaches him one with what sounds like an old melody but beginning with the words: "Liandao, Langtou..." (Sickle and hammer...) -- the symbols of Communism.

When Gu Qing eventually announces his imminent departure, Cuiqiao seems shocked and distraught. He tells her he will leave her money to buy food and red cloth. She replies: "I have some." She then keeps asking more questions about Yan'an. Her father, worried that Gu Qing may be demoted for failing in his mission to collect folksongs, so he sings for him. The next day Hanhan sees him off and Cuiqiao meets him on the road, asking him to take her with him to Yan'an. He replies that he is a public servant and public servants must obey their rules. She protests: "Then you should change the rules!" He says he will have to go back first and ask permission of the leadership in Yan'an in order to take her, but tells her: "I'll definitely be back" (Wo yiding huilai). She replies: "I believe you" (Wo xin le). She exhorts him to be careful enroute and advises him on how to travel, as an elder sister or a wife might. As he leaves, she sings a moving song about how "a free man came here from the Communists" and that she has made a choice of her horse from among many, adding "I'll never be able to forget you my whole life... but how can we poor people turn our fate around?"

The Fourth Month comes and Gu Qing has not returned. We see brief scenes of Cuiqiao's wedding and a longer scene of her dressed in red, with her head completely covered, then unveiled by an old, dark hand. We witness the fear on her face when she first meets her new husband this way. This is contrasted with the next scene, which Gu Qing sees: an energetic waist-drum dance performed by peasant recruits in Yan'an.

One day by the river Cuiqiao tells Hanhan she has decided to flee to Yan'an to join the army. She gives him a pair of hand-sewn shoe soles for Gu Qing when he returns. She then sets out in a little row boat to cross the mighty Yellow River, which ends up inundating her as she sings a Communist song (she doesn't get the dang or "Party" out in Gongchandang or Communist Party).

When Gu Qing finally arrives he finds no one at home. The local peasants, led by Cuiqiao's father, are clad in leaves and performing a rather primitive-looking shamanic rite in the hope of bringing rain to their drought-stricken land. They are singing: "Dragon King, come save us all." Hanhan spots Gu Qing at a distance and tries to run toward him, but is blocked by the surge of humanity madly running in the opposite direction as part of the ritual. As the camera pans the scene and Hanhan gets submerged in the crowd, we again see the yellow earth and hear Cuiqiao's voice singing: "The Communist Party shall save us all."

Questions:

1. Are there elements of Orientalism in the film, if so where? What function might these play both in terms of the message of the film and in terms of its appeal to Western audiences? Is there a political dimension to both?
2. Broadly speaking, what is the mission of the Communists and how successful has it been, according to this film?
3. Can the film be interpreted as an allegory for the entire Communist cause in China? If so, what does it say about the success or failure of that cause?

Spring 1987  
long-suppressed dissenting voice

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Time and Change on China's  
—Orville Schell



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# SEEDS OF FIRE



**CHINESE VOICES OF CONSCIENCE**

**GEREMIE RORMÉ & JOHN MINFORD**

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“As long as there shall be stones,  
the seeds of fire will not die.”

*Lu Xun, December 1935  
(from the original manuscript)*

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# SEEDS OF FIRE

*CHINESE VOICES  
OF CONSCIENCE*

*Edited by  
Geremie Barmé  
and  
John Minford*

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895.107005 Foreword by  
Orville Schell  
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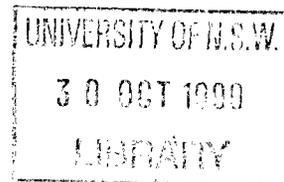
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To Lu Xun,  
on the fiftieth anniversary of his death,  
October 19, 1936.

83



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## VIII: YELLOW EARTH



The makers of this film have thought deeply and seriously about society and life; and even if their feelings are vague and obtuse at times, they have gone far beyond the social analyses and statistics of our philosophers and sociologists.

*Huang Zongying*

... cinematic innovation must keep pace with what the masses can accept and enjoy.... If we let things go, there will be an unconscious drift towards "art for art's sake" and "innovation for the sake of innovation".

*Xia Yan*

## Yellow Earth

### —an Unwelcome Guest

WHEN THE FILM “Yellow Earth” was screened at the Hong Kong International Film Festival in March 1985, it was immediately hailed by local and international film critics as representing the long-awaited breakthrough in Chinese cinema. It was subsequently invited to festivals in Europe and America, and bought for commercial release in many countries, making it internationally the most popular Chinese film made since 1949.

“Yellow Earth” was completed in late 1984, and initially refused international release by China’s film censors amidst considerable controversy. Many critics found the perspective of the director, Chen Kaige, and Zhang Yimou, his cinematographer, to be politically suspect, condemning the film for using mass art as a vehicle to “display the backward and ignorant aspect of the Chinese peasantry.” Chen was regarded as being too young to understand what Yan’an was all about, and he was accused of distorting the Communist spirit. The striking simplicity of the plot and stunning cinematography—both rare achievements for a film culture that has if anything become more theatrical and contrived since 1949—were roundly decried for being “arty” and “naturalistic”. In fact, “Yellow Earth” was only one of a number of controversial films made by new directors—the so-called “fifth-generation” of film-makers trained in Peking since the Cultural Revolution. However, it was the popularity of Chen’s work with young urban audiences and the international attention that brought the debate surrounding the new cinema into the open.

On a deeper and, for orthodox Communist viewers, more disturbing level, “Yellow Earth” reflected the vision of the Urbling generation of the Cultural Revolution, the dispossessed young people sent to be “re-educated” by the peasants. The director as well as most of his film-crew belong to this group, and the understanding of Chinese realities that their exile afforded them is in striking contrast to the distorted and blinkered vision of the older Party and cultural leaders.

Although critics made much of the tragic fate of the heroine, Cuiqiao, it is perhaps in the character of her younger brother, Hanhan, and the deceptive silence with which he preserves his individuality, that we can find the most striking message of the film.

The dispassionate yet pessimistic picture presented by the makers of “Yellow Earth” and its relevance to China today struck the film’s supporters as well as its opponents. Huang Zongying, one of the most open-minded members of China’s film establishment, demonstrated her understanding of the real significance of “Yellow Earth” when she said: “I am convinced that the next generation of film-makers will leave us all far behind. But what worries me is that the conservative stodginess of our veteran film-makers is making the young despise them.”

In the following we offer a short synopsis of the film and a pictorial introduction to highlights of the work, along with a selection of contrasting comments from a discussion of “Yellow Earth” by the committee which chose the Golden Rooster Awards (China’s Oscars), in 1985.

*For Chinese film audiences and critics alike, the arrival of “Yellow Earth” was quite unexpected. It was like a pleasant social gathering where people are awaiting the arrival of a friend: the doorbell rings, the door opens, but the person who steps in is a stranger that no one recognizes. The interloper and the guests gape at each other, a lively conversation that has been in progress gradually dies out and there is an awkward silence. If the unbidden stranger apologizes, says he has come to the wrong place, then turns and leaves, the matter could end there. However, if he is stubborn, and declares that he is going to join the party anyway, there could be some trouble. Two things could happen: he might be rudely ejected, or he may be grudgingly accepted and become a friend.*

—Li Tuo, film critic and novelist

## Synopsis

SPRING 1939, North Shaanxi. As part of a mass effort to mobilize the peasants against the Japanese invasion, the Communist-led Eighth Route Army propaganda teams are engaged in collecting and disseminating folksongs in the north-west.

Gu Qing, a soldier in the Eighth Route army, is walking to each of the villages on the loess plateau by the Yellow River, when he sees a wedding procession and follows it into a village, where he is invited to join the feast. The peasants are so poor, however, that wooden fish are offered instead of live ones to the guests.



*The Village Wedding Feast*

A young girl, Cuiqiao, has come to watch the wedding, anxious to learn something of her own fate. Afterwards she goes to the Yellow River to fetch water, and sings to the tune of a local folksong:

In the sixth month the ice in the River hasn't thawed,  
It's my own father who is dragging me to the wedding board.

Of all the five grains, the bean is the roundest,  
Of all the people, daughters are the saddest.

Up in the sky pigeons fly, one with the other,  
The only dear one that I long for is my mother.

That night Gu Qing stays at a peasant's cave home. The father is in his late forties but looks much older, and he lives with his two children: fourteen year-old Cuiqiao, and her brother Hanhan, who is about ten. Gu Qing explains that he has come to collect folksongs, and asks them if they can sing, but they are non-committal. He learns that the bride he saw earlier was only fourteen. He tells the family that the Communist Party opposes child marriages, but the father is not impressed.

The next morning Cuiqiao brings water for Gu Qing. He starts mending his clothes, explaining that in the Eighth Route Army the women are soldiers just like the men, and the men mend their own clothes. On the doorframe outside, Cuiqiao sticks up the New Year couplets. Gu Qing is surprised to see that instead of Chinese characters there are only black circles. Cuiqiao tells him that there is no one in the area who is literate. She also explains that her father is suspicious of Gu Qing's notebook.

Gu Qing climbs up the ridge to the family's field, desolate in the spring drought, where he finds the father and son. He lends a hand, and the family is surprised at his skill. The father reveals that his wife is dead; his eldest daughter married into a family that he thought could support her, but since her marriage she has often gone hungry.

Cuiqiao comes with the midday meal: millet gruel. Before eating the father says a short prayer. Gu Qing laughs, and is rebuked. Gu Qing asks the father if he can sing. He answers that he only feels like singing when he is happy or sad. Gu Qing asks how people can learn all the



*Gu Qing with Cuiqiao's Family*

local songs. The father replies: "When you have had a hard life it's easy to remember and understand." Gu Qing explains that folksongs help to raise the soldiers' morale. He also explains that in the Eighth Route Army, all soldiers are taught to read and write, including women.

Later that day, Hanhan sings for Gu Qing:

When the pomegranate flowers, the leaves start showing,  
My mother sold me off to him, without me knowing.

All I ever asked for, was a good man to wed,  
But what I ended up with was a little wetabed.\*

\* A child bridegroom.

When you pee, I'll also pee,  
Curse you, you can pee with me.

In spring next year, when flowers blossom red,  
Frogs will start croaking, under the bed.

Right to the East Ocean, flows a river of pee,  
To the Dragon King's palace, under the sea.

The Dragon King laughs, as he hears the pee:  
"This little wetabed's in the same line as me."\*\*

\*\* The Dragon King produces rain.



*Hanhan Singing for Gu Qing*

In turn Gu Qing teaches him a Communist ditty.

Cuiqiao returns home to find the matchmaker has come to settle her betrothal. Her father tells her that she is to be married in the fourth month, and she'll be better off than her sister: her husband is older, and therefore more dependable. He explains that the bride-price he gets will pay for a wife for her brother. Cuiqiao doesn't want to let Gu Qing know what has happened. She asks him how far it is to Yan'an, the headquarters of the Eighth Route Army, and how women soldiers there live. Gu Qing tells her that he will be going away the next day but will return in a few months. He leaves some money to cover the cost of his food and for her to buy new clothes.

Cuiqiao's father is concerned that Gu Qing might get into trouble if he fails to collect enough folk songs, so that night he sings for him.

The next morning Hanhan accompanies Gu Qing as far as the ridge. Further along the way, Cuiqiao is waiting for him. She wants to go with him to join the army, but he replies that he must first get permission. He promises to come back to fetch her.

Time passes; it is the fourth month, and the marriage procession arrives to take Cuiqiao to her new home. On her wedding night, she shrinks from her new husband.

Yan'an; Gu Qing arrives back to see a peasants' send-off to new recruits. The recruits perform a waist-drum dance.

Back in the village, it is now Hanhan's task to fetch the water. One evening he sees Cuiqiao by the river bank. She tells him she is going to cross the Yellow River to join the army, and bids him to take care of his father. She hands him a pair of hand-sewn shoe soles to give to Gu Qing on his return. He gives her the sewing kit with a red star on it that Gu Qing had given him.

Cuiqiao rows the small boat into the turbulent Yellow River. The next morning her body is found washed up on the opposite shore.

Gu Qing arrives back at Cuiqiao's old home. Finding no one there he goes down to the village. The peasants, led by Cuiqiao's father, are praying for rain:

Over the fields let the good rains fall,  
Oh Dragon King, come save us all!  
Come save us all!

East Sea Dragon, let the crops grow tall,  
Oh Dragon King, come save us all!  
Come save us all!

Hanhan sees Gu Qing, and runs towards him, but Gu Qing is too far away. The film ends with the sound of Cuiqiao singing as the camera focusses on the yellow earth.

—Bonnie McDougall

## The Debate

We wanted to express a number of things in "Yellow Earth": the boundless magnificence of the heavens; the supporting vastness of the earth. The racing flow of the Yellow River; the sustaining strength and endurance of a nation. The cry of a people from the depths of primitive obscurity, and their strength; the resonant paean that issues forth from the impoverished yellow land. The fate of a people, their feelings, loves and hates, strengths and weaknesses. The longing those people have for a brighter future, a quest hampered by ignorance but rewarded by an earthy goodness. In fact, the actual physical objects we could film were extremely limited: there was the earth, cave-dwellings, the Yellow River itself and the four characters. We wanted to use our "limited artistic tools to paint a vast canvas of life; to use our 'inks' to paint a world of resounding power."

—Zhang Yimou, cinematographer

... in terms of cinematic structure, I want our film to be rich and variable, free to the point of wildness; its ideas should be expressed with great ease, without any limitations or restrictions. However, most of the actual contours of the film must be mild, calm and slow . . . . The quintessence of our style can be summed up in a single word: "concealment".

—Chen Kaige, director, addressing his film crew

If the trickling streams of the upper reaches of the Yellow River can be said to represent the youth of the river, and the thunderous surge of its lower reaches its old age, then Northern Shaanxi sees the river in its prime. For here it is broad, deep and unhurried. It makes its stately progress through the hinterland of Asia, its free spirit and serene depths somehow symbolic of the Chinese people—full of strength, but flowing on so deeply, so ponderously. By its banks an unbounded expanse of hills rises up, land which has not seen rain for many years. The Yellow River flows through here in vain, unable to succour the vast barren wastes which have made way for its passage. This sight impressed on us the desolation of several thousand years of history . . . .

. . . In a more sombre mood if we meditate on the fact that this river gives life to all things, but by the same token can destroy all things, then we realise that the fate of Cuiqiao, who lived among the people of old China, had an inevitably tragic cast. The road she chooses is a very hard one. Hard, because she is not simply confronted by the malign forces of society in any narrow sense, but rather by the tranquil, even well-meaning, ignorance of the people who raised her . . . .

—Chen Kaige

The loess plains of Shaanxi are the birthplace of the Chinese people. It is an old liberated area, but even today it is poor and backward . . . . The question is how should we regard such a place? The most important thing is to change the environment, or as the Party Centre has directed “to plant grass and trees” . . . . [In the case of cinema] it is a question of how to get people to see the problem of the loess plains in the proper way. Should the audience come out of the film thinking that Shaanxi is a dreadful place, or should they go away feeling that it deserves their affection?

We're not scared of telling the truth; we're not afraid of revealing the obtuseness and backwardness of that region in the past. But this is not our aim. By revealing these things we are calling on our people to wipe out this ignorance and overcome their backwardness. We do not approve of artists revelling in such things simply for the sake of it. Needless to say, we thoroughly disapprove of an attitude that delights in the ignorance and backwardness of the masses.

—Xia Yan, critic and doyen of Chinese film

All I have to say is that the cinematographic achievements of the film are divorced from its content.

—Ling Zifeng, veteran director

I don't think this is such a faultless film. [The film-makers] have ignored the fact that our audiences, especially people in the countryside, cannot possibly cope with a film like this . . . . They've paid a great deal of attention to the composition of a lot of the shots and visually the result is stunning. But what happens in these scenes has absolutely nothing to do with the inner working or actions of their characters. All in all, it's a bit like a foreign art film. There are a lot of shots in which the camera simply doesn't move, and the characters remain immobile and silent for long periods. You can't really tell what they're supposed to be thinking.

—Yu Yanfu, director



*A Scene in Cuiqiao's Cave Home. One of the many quiet and brooding scenes that baffled older critics.*



*Cuiqiao Working Outside Her Home*

This film brings to mind the Italian director Antonioni's documentary "China". I'm not going to get involved here with the question of whether the criticisms made of him in the past were justified or not; let me simply say that his film depicted the backwardness of China: women with bound feet, spitting, as well as the insular ignorance of many people. All Antonioni did was present an objective account of the realities of China. He didn't attempt to show China as it should be, and his work revealed no desire or ability to change the realities which confronted him. In comparison it is obvious that "Yellow Earth" is not an objective, dispassionate study of the ignorance and backwardness of its subject. Nor does it take an indulgent stand in regard to these things. Rather it assumes a serious and historical perspective with the aim of awakening people to these realities.

—Deng Baochen, science documentary film-maker

And that boy seems to be too much of a simpleton. He's always standing around and doesn't say a word for ages. This is completely unrealistic. Everyone knows that the universal characteristic of children is that they are energetic and lovable, regardless of whether they are from rich or poor families. The doltishness of the boy in the film is clearly something imposed on him by the director.

—Han Shangyi, veteran art director



*Cuiqiao's Father*



Hanhan

The peasant who sings the folk songs in the film is very ugly. Why did they have to go and choose such an actor? The duty of film is to reflect life as realistically as possible, and to retain its true face. But we must not encourage naturalism, nor let our film-makers waste their energies by indulging in voyeurism and the depiction of the remnants of the primitive past . . . . Generally speaking, innovation inevitably involves exploration, and when exploring we must be prepared for both success and failure.

—Chen Huangmei, critic and cultural bureaucrat

I think we should encourage the innovations of the young, but surely we should actively discourage “creative endeavours” that no one wants to see.

—Han Shangyi

It may not do very well at the box-office, but I can assure you that the classmates of these film-makers would give them a comradely slap on the back and say, “You’ve got a winner there.” “Yellow Earth” has shown me what our young film artists are capable of. This group of young creators have poured their heart’s blood into this film. It sparkles with warmth and enthusiasm, and it reflects their historical sense and aesthetic view. They have thought deeply and seriously about society and life; and even if their feelings are vague and obtuse at times, they have gone far beyond the social analyses and statistics of our philosophers and sociologists.

Let me put a question to all of you: why hasn’t the Peking Film Studio which is situated at the “very feet of the emperor”, or Shanghai Film Studio, a studio strategically located in the commercial and cultural centre of China, or any of the other “senior” film studios for that matter, produced a few good films by young directors? Just how many films made by young people have you made to date? Surely, it is within this context that we are forced to recognize the impact and power of “Yellow Earth”. I am convinced that the next generation of film-makers will leave us all far behind. But what worries me is that the conservative stodginess of our veteran film-makers is making the young despise them.

—Huang Zongying, writer, film producer  
and actor Zhao Dan’s widow

All right, if the director likes the peasants as much as you say, then how come he never gave a thought to making a film they really want to see? I’ll go out on a limb here by saying that I don’t think the broad masses of peasants would necessarily like such a film . . . they like light comedies, war films, *kungfu* movies and historical

dramas . . . but they can't accept what some experts call "new cinema" . . . . What are you supposed to do if you've got a mass art form that the masses don't understand? How can the making of such films be an expression of your love for the peasants? Why do you have to give them something they don't understand?

—Yu Min, screen-writer



*One of the old peasant's many pregnant silences*

Our films are made for hundreds of millions of people to see, and it is for this reason that cinematic innovation must conform with what the masses can accept and enjoy . . . . If we let things go, there will be an unconscious drift towards "art for art's sake" and "innovation for the sake of innovation", as well as other types of artistic self-expression.

—Xia Yan

. . . [Surely,] there is a spark that sets light to the young girl's [Cuiqiao] heart, but as for the broad masses—those countless people kneeling on the ground praying for rain—they haven't seen the faintest glimmer of that spark . . . . I simply fail to understand how people so close to Yan'an could remain completely untouched by the new spirit that came from Yan'an . . . .

—Xia Yan

Why can't you tolerate such things in a film? Let me tell you something: it's our own children who can no longer tolerate the unchanging realities of China, the stagnant productive forces of the peasants as well as the dead film language we use. They have the courage to break all the rules and they have rubbed you oldies up the wrong way. But the future is on their side.

—Huang Zongying



*Drum Dance at Yan'an*



*Praying for Rain*

Chen Kaige: These two scenes [the drum dance and the rain dance] were the result of very careful thought and planning . . . . The Chinese people can throw themselves enthusiastically into a lively drum dance, or equally give themselves over heart and soul to a blind and superstitious prayer for rain. This is symbolic of the two sides of the Chinese national character.

Reporter: Some comrades are of the opinion that the prayer for rain scene exaggerates the ignorance of the people. One even hears the comment that this sequence is somewhat voyeuristic in tone. What do you think of such comments?

Chen: Praying for rain is one of the most ancient rituals of our people, and it survives even today . . . . People often begin praying for rain just as it is about to start raining. Thus it is not simply an expression of superstitious ignorance, for there is also an element of enjoyment in the dance. Our aim in filming this scene was not at all "voyeuristic", or calculated to show up the ignorance of the peasants, but rather to express the formidable energy and force of the peasants —although that energy is still blind and undirected, as long as it exists it has great potential if properly tapped and directed.

—Chen Kaige



*Cuiqiao's last meeting with her brother by the Yellow River*

"Yellow Earth" is an outstanding work. If nothing else it is a controversial film. Its appearance means that we can no longer simply sit back and take things easy. After today's discussion everyone is going to have a hard time getting to sleep . . . . It has made us all reflect on many things, most of all on the future of Chinese cinema.

—Zhu Xijuan, actress and producer

# 錯位

Cuòwèi (Displacement; also translated as Dislocation)

date: 1987 Xi'an Film Studios

screenplay: Huang Xin; Zhang Min

director: Huang Jianxin

music: Han Yong

cast: Liu Zifeng (as Zhao Shuxin and the Robot); Yang Kun (Yang Lijuan);  
Mou Hong (the Secretary); Sun Feihu (Mr. An)

The title means literally "in the wrong place" or "in the wrong position". Billed as the sequel to another film "The Black Cannon Incident," (about foreign trade intrigue, or imagined intrigue) this is one of China's earliest "science fiction" movies. A scientist who feels his research impeded by the time he has to spend in meetings and political study sessions contrives to create a robot duplicate of himself that can take his place at those time-consuming meaningless activities, so as to enable him to spend more time on his research. However, the experiment backfires when the robot begins to develop a personality of its own, starts mismanaging his affairs and making advances on his girlfriend.

The film begins with the title written in crooked, disjointed characters. We see a modernistic machine, on which a metallic ball gyrates back and forth on a thin arm, mimicking a perpetual motion machine. The machine recurs throughout the film. We then see a surreal operation in a hospital setting, which turns into a nightmare. The scientist then goes into his study, plays with a toy robot and gets an idea. We see a strangely shaped car and modern buildings. A meeting with Germans who are interested in the scientist's research is interrupted by his secretary who announces: "Kaihui de shijian dao le!" (It's time for you to be off to a meeting). The camera pans on huge statues carved of white stone in sparring postures (surreal). At a meeting, an example of successful research is shown to him. We do not see it, but get the impression he is irritated by this showmanship. Driving back with his secretary, who looks and acts a bit like Agent 99 in "Get Smart", the scientist pulls into a gas station (Esso).

Disturbed by the need to go to more meetings (the secretary keeps reminding him: "It would be bad if you don't go."), he creates a robot that looks exactly like him, telling the robot time is limited in life, so he does not want to spend his time performing meaningless tasks. The robot talks back. His girlfriend comes over and asks for his help in getting her transferred to his work unit. He tells her he can't help her precisely because she is his girlfriend. In the next scene, he walks with his secretary through a series of self-opening doors along a long white hallway. The secretary keeps addressing him as "Juzhang," a bureaucratic title meaning "Bureau Chief," which he does not enjoy.

Meanwhile, the robot is sent to stand in for him at an insurance convention. When the robot's back begins to smoke, it comments during the opening speech: "Someone just said my back's on fire. Well, it isn't. But if it was, it wouldn't matter anyway, because I am insured!" The entire assembly burst into laughter and applause. They toast him afterward and he short-circuits (in a secret back room, first calling its inventor for help). The scientist shows up in time to save the robot. We are subsequently taken to more meetings and see more modern buildings. The robot tells its inventor it wants to have its own personality. He refuses, responding, rather mechanically: "I created you to obey my orders, otherwise I'll destroy you." The robot asks about love. He is unnerved and, thinking that the robot has been hitting on his girlfriend, slaps it's face, hurting his own hand. The robot later borrows romance novels in an attempt to learn about love.

More surreal rides through a white world, people appear in a white building which he walks through. This leads to a desert wasteland where a sage like Laozi (Lao Tzu) appears, watching a commercial for Toshiba on a television set. The scientist demands a circular from the Central Committee of the CP on combating bureaucratism, which the robot has concealed from him. He tells the robot he will limit its nengliang (capacity for thinking and performing). Again, we see the sparring figures, looking like they are carved from white ice and this time including a revolving female torso. This is the sculptor's studio where the robot's body was made. The inventor presents a short speech saying that some people want to work but being stopped by others. The robot plugs into a defective socket and shoots off sparks at an entire auditorium. He then walks into a parking structure and accidentally brushes against a taimei or juvenile delinquent's "moll". Gang members try to intimidate him into apologizing, then attempt to beat him up, but he forcefully resists, defeating them easily, then breaking their guitar in a rage against humanity. The inventor is woken by his secretary, who tells him he must go to more meetings. In an office, he runs into the robot impersonating him. When they come to confront each other face to face, the secretary screams and lightning flashes. The inventor then awakens from another bad dream. Does the robot survive or will the inventor...?

questions:

1. Is this more a science fiction story or more a comment on the contemporary Chinese reality?
2. If there is satire in this film, what do you think is the object of the satire?
3. What do you think the device on the inventor's desk, which the camera focuses on several times symbolizes?

4. What are the implications of the film's title "Displacement"?
5. Does the "contradiction" between the inventor and his creation, the robot reflect the contradiction between the "public" and "private" faces of an individual in communist society?
6. Did this film remind you of early examples of Japanese science fiction? Why or why not? What differences do you think there were between the Japanese reality of the 1950s and early '60s and that of China then and now?

"Red Sorghum" (Hong gaoliang) 1987

# 红高粱

director: Zhang Yimou  
starring: Gong Li

Based on the novel Red Sorghum by Mo Yan (the novel has been translated into English by Howard Goldblatt), this was the first major film directed by Zhang Yimou, who had already achieved a degree of acclaim as cinematographer for Chen Kaige's film "Yellow Earth" (1985).

The novel was part of the "search for roots" (xungen) genre which emerged in China in the mid-1980s, partly, it is alleged, due to the influence of translations into Chinese from Latin American literature and also due to the example of the American made-for t.v. mini-series "Roots". "Red Sorghum" is also a prime example of the use of "Naturalism" in the films of mainland China's Fifth Generation filmmakers. It is narrated by the voice of the grandson of its female protagonist who prefers to go by her informal nickname Lao Jiu ("Old Ninth" -- a homonym for "old wine" and also "The Ninth Category" -- a truncated form of the term of abuse applied by Mao to intellectuals during the 1966-9 political campaign known as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution).

Beginning in the late 1920s with Lao Jiu's marriage to Mr. Li, a leper (you mafeng bing de) who owns an isolated distillery at some unspecified rural location in north China which produces Gaoliang jiu, a type of clear distilled spirit, which the movie claims is red, we are shown her troubled trip via sedan chair to her marriage, in which she is shaken for the fun of it by disrespectful bearers and nearly kidnapped in the mysterious gaoliang fields by someone posing as the notorious bandit San Pao, translated in the subtitled version as "Baldy San". The bandit is then overcome by a bearer whom the narrator identifies as his grandfather and delivered to her intended husband, Leper Li. Soon after sleeping with her in a disturbing wedding-night scene, we are told Leper Li is murdered. The narrator tells us the murderer was never caught, although he suspects his own grandfather, because the two had begun an illicit love relationship.

Lao Jiu convinces the distillery workers and their foreman Luo Han to remain and work for her. They use the spirits they produce to disinfect the entire living quarters and burn the leper's possessions. After a strange rite, which involves much drinking and singing performed before the God of Wine, the narrator's grandfather, deep in his cups, insists on entering his new boss' quarters in front of everyone. When she summarily throws him out, he yells that her attitude has always been different when she takes her pants off. At that point an older woman hands her a huge paddle and the workers hold him down while she spansks him with it, which he insists does not hurt. "It feels good," he yells. They then dump him in an empty vat where we are told he sleeps for three days. In his absence, Lao Jiu is abducted by the real San Pao.

Ransomed back by master distiller Luo Han and her workers, she runs

a successful business, despite the fact that San Pao has urinated in the wort as a gesture of contempt. In fact, it ends up being their best batch in years. They all prosper and a son is born to her (the narrator's father). She recognizes it as his grandfather's offspring and the two seem to take up together again, although with her wearing the pants in the family. This goes on for nine years.

The Japanese invade China and bring an end to everyone's happy times. Forcing the local peasants to trample down the sorghum fields, they plan the grisly execution of a man who killed one of their soldiers by having him flayed (skinned) alive. Their victim turns out to be none other than the bandit San Pao, who probably tried to resist them. The local butcher ruins this for them by stabbing San Pao in the heart. The Japanese then order his assistant to flay the second prisoner, the former master distiller Luo Han, alive, in a gory, horrifying scene. We are told by the narrator that Luo Han (the name means "arhat") was an underground Communist operative who had been organizing resistance to the Japanese in the locale.

Lao Jiu and the locals plan to attack the Japanese convoy using their liquor as an incendiary device, which works, but Lao Jiu and many Chinese are killed in the assault. Her son then appears with his father in the light of a red sun and sings a song about how his mother has gone to the southwest, to live a life of wealth and prosperity among the dead.

questions:

1. Given that Naturalism is a legitimate literary and filmic genre, is there a chance that it nevertheless plays into some orientalist sentiments and fantasies, given the context here? If so, how?

2. How does the female character in this film (Lao Jiu) differ from the girl Cuiqiao in "Yellow Earth" and any other Chinese films you have seen thus far?

3. Chris Berry, a specialist in Chinese film studies, has said that Lao Jiu represents the "younger generation" of Chinese in the 1980s, especially with the lyrics of the song at the outset of the film which urges her to "keep on advancing without turning around to look back." Do you think this is possible?

4. What about the use of music and song in the film? Did you notice anything different? What about the lyrics of some songs such as: Hehe zan di jiu, ah, zui bu chou! ("Drink, drink our wine/ Then your mouth will smell fine...") etc.

# 菊豆

Ju Dou (PRC 1990) directed by Zhang Yimou, starring Gong Li and Li Baotian.

Set for the most part in a die factory in 1920s China, this film tells the story of the factory's owner, an impotent old man, surnamed Yang, who takes a young wife, called Judou, at great expense (having tormented his first two wives to death). He mistreats her, tying her up nightly on the bed and beating her instead of having sex. The wife eventually instigates an affair with the owner's nephew (and also his adopted son), Tianqing, who makes her pregnant. The child is then mistaken for that of her legal husband, Old Mr. Yang, and named Tianbai, since he is thought by the clan elders to be of the same generation as Tianqing, in actuality his natural father. The names Qing and Bai fit together, as one elder notes, in the compound qingbai, or in qingqing baibai -- of "sterling reputation" (irony here?). When the old man goes off on business, she and Tianqing rejoice in secret, only to be interrupted by the return of his donkey, sans rider. Tianqing finds the old man collapsed along a wooden path. Tianqing carries him home, where a doctor pronounces him paralyzed below the waist.

Tianqing and his beautiful "aunt" (this was the first major role for Gong Li -- he addresses her from the outset as Sher, or "Auntie") carry on more openly, provoking the wrath of the invalid old man, who tries repeatedly to kill them or burn the die factory down, while pushing himself about in a wheel-chair like wooden bucket ("Your pants are full of nothing but shit," mocks Judou after he fails to strangle her). At one point, when they happen to inadvertently leave their toddler son unattended (he makes his way back home to the die factory while they frolic in the fields), the old man attempts to kill him by pushing him into a vat of die, but the filial "grandson's" timely shout of "Daddy!" wins over the old man's affections, especially when it dawns on him that there is a chance he can use the child's new-found realization of the familial hierarchy, to humiliate his natural father and undercut the couple's short-lived security.

One day the old man is killed in an accident when left unsupervised with Qingbai, who inadvertently nudges his wheel-chair into a die vat. The child, not fully comprehending the process of drowning, laughs at the sight of the old man floundering in the vat of die. After his death, Judou and Qingtian are required to wear white mourning attire and ritualistically attempt to block his coffin 49 times, while the child rides triumphantly atop the coffin. Finally they are alone, but the clan elders decide that Qingtian must sleep at the home of the neighboring Wang family, so as to avoid gossip. As their son grows older, he seems to relish locking Qingtian out at night. One day, when he overhears gossip about his mother and Qingtian in the street, he pursues the principal gossip-monger with a meat cleaver and eventually kicks Qingtian, when he gets home. "You've just struck your own father," Judou cries, at the end of her tether, but the simian-featured boy seems to grow even more incensed, rather than being cowed by her remark.

Finally, in an attempt to be alone one last time "as man and wife," as Qingtian puts it, they enter what appears to be a dried-up well, where they begin to suffocate to death in each other's arms, after making love (we assume). Tianbai enters the well and carries his mother out, saving her. When she regains consciousness and calls for Tianqing, though, the boy hauls his father out, only to dump him in a die vat, where he drowns amid Judou's helpless screams (she is still too weak from the asphyxiation to come to his aid. Judou later sets fire to the cloth and the entire die factory is consumed in a gigantic conflagration.

Questions for discussion:

1. What might the die factory be a metaphor for?
2. Could the whole film symbolize the abortive democracy movement of 1989?
3. Who might Judou symbolize? (The Chinese people or the intellectuals asking Zhao Ziyang to do something, to move against the dictatorship, as did Gorbachev and Yeltsin?).
4. In her book Primitive Passions Rey Chow challenges the idea that Zhang Yimou's films simply play on orientalist exoticism. In a review of her book, Australian film critic Chris Berry observes:

Here, suffering women are not only objects of sympathy but also of identification by virtue of their admittedly problematic discursive deployment as symbols of China itself.

The particular still on the cover of Primitive Passions is taken from a scene in Judou, discussed at length in Chow's chapter on the trilogy of Zhang Yimou films (142-172). Here Judou is not only spied upon by Tianqing, her lover-to-be, when she is bathing the wounds inflicted by her sadistic husband. Perceiving Tianqing's presence, she also turns to face him, defiantly displaying herself and her wounds to him.

Just as the character Judou perceives her own objectification and turns it back on her viewer, so Chow argues Zhang's film seizes all the sexist, patriarchal, orientalist baggage of China as a locally and globally circulating set of signifiers and displays it as an act of defiance... Voyeurism becomes exhibitionism, and objectification is answered with defiance. Yes, the image seems to say, I am that thing! And just as this act initiates Judou's agency within the world of the film, so Zhang's move has enabled his films and Chinese cinema to engage with and actively participate in the international cinema. (UTS Review 2:2, Nov. 1996, 181-2).

Do you agree with this analysis? If so, why. If not, why not?

Raise the Red Lantern (Da hong denglong gaogao gua) PRC 1991

director: Zhang Yimou

starring: Gong Li

# 大紅燈籠高高挂

This film was produced on mainland China in the wake of the suppression of the demonstrations at Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989. It is set in the early Republic (circa 1920). The female protagonist, Songlian, is 19 and has been a "foreign-style" student (yang xuesheng), i.e. one who studied subjects on the Western model in a "modern school". Her name means "In Praise of the Lotus", which is a reference to the Song neo-Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi's (1130-1200) essay Ai lian shuo, in which the lotus becomes a symbol of integrity -- something which can live among decay but rise above it.

At the outset of the film the camera focuses on her face as her step-mother tells her that their family's economic straits will force her to drop out of university and marry. She declares: "Let me marry a rich man then," to which her mother replies: "You can only do so as a concubine." She decides to do just that and the next scene witnesses her setting off on foot for her new home in a the outfit of a young university student, instead of a traditional bride's attire (a red dress) and without being carried in the traditional sedan chair. She seems determined and also in the habit of bucking convention. The head of the household servants seems incredulous at her arrival and the lack of ceremony for which she has opted. Her personal handmaid shows resentment toward her immediately, huffing: "Ni jiu shi nei ge si taitai." (So you are that fourth wife." (note that si "four" in Chinese is a homonym of "death" and so is taken to be inauspicious).

On her first night there she is treated to a foot massage (it is later asserted by the master that the feeling of the feet corresponds in a wholistic way to the entire well-being of the woman) and red lanterns are used to designate her quarters as those of the favored wife (she is the youngest of four). But in the middle of the night the master is called out of her boudoir by an unexpected message from the third wife, who says she is ill and it's an emergency. The next night the third wife attempts to repeat the ruse, but Songlian tells her new husband: "If you go to her, don't come back here" and so he refuses to go. When a personal servant of hers talks back to him, saying: "How can I explain that," he snarls: "What do you mean 'explain'?" We seldom see the husband, we mostly hear his voice as the camera constantly studies Songlian's face and somewhat controlled expressions.

Early the next morning they are awakened by the third wife singing opera on the roof. Songlian, who can't sleep, goes out to meet her. #3 wife is clad in red opera costume, sings and gesticulates with an affectation noticeable even through her operatic guise. She snubs Songlian by saying she no longer has any inclination to keep singing when Songlian has expressed an interest in hearing her continue. Songlian is then introduced to #3's seven year old son, which further exasperates her. She finds a friend, or so she thinks, in wife #2,

an older and gentler woman who appears very sympathetic to her. Songlian asks her about a little brick shed she noticed on the roof that morning which appeared to have a pair of metal shackles or a garrote in it. #2 wife says: "Don't bring that place up. It's called the 'House of Death'. A couple of women from previous generations hanged there (the Chinese term used, shangdiao, is ambiguous as it implies that they took their own lives)." Songlian later brings it up with the master, who responds in exactly the same way as #2, but Songlian then asks: "Were they yitaitai (concubines)?" He tries to avoid answering.

At a Mahjongg game organized by #3 while the master is away, Songlian notices her rubbing the leg of Dr. Gao (one of two invited male guests) with her foot. It dawns on her that #3 is having an affair with Dr. Gao, in part out of protest against the fact that the master's attentions have switched to her and, more of late, to the kindly older #2, who totally fawns over the master in private. Songlian tries to start an affair with the master's eldest son by wife #1, a young man in his 20s, but this is thwarted by the master and the household. She discovers her handmaid has been sleeping with the master on any occasion possible and also finds a voodoo doll of herself among the handmaid's things. Because the handmaid has lighted red lanterns in secret in her own room, in violation of the guiju or rules of the household, Songlian insists that she be punished according to the age-old traditions of the house, which demand that she kneel outside over night. That night it snows and the handmaid eventually dies of pneumonia.

Songlian then gets drunk as she celebrates her own lonely birthday and blurts out in the presence of an old woman servant and #2 wife: "#3 has Dr. Gao. What do I have? I have nothing. #3's with him in town now. Who do I have?" When she wakes up the next day, it is to the ruckus created by a large group of male servants returning with #3, bound and gagged. Caught in adultery, she is condemned in a secret hearing before the master, which we do not see, and hanged on a snowy morning by a retinue of older male servants in the little shed on the roof referred to earlier as the House of Death. Songlian looks on from a distance at the group going toward the shed and sees only the legs of a woman kicking to get free. We do not see what happens inside the shed, but we see the men leave very quickly. Songlian then goes to look. We hear only her scream and then her screamed accusation, many times, of: "Sha ren. Nimen sha ren!" (Murder! You have killed a human being! [You are killers]). The master later interviews her, asking: "What did you see?" and then answering for her: "You saw nothing."

In the next scene it is night. The red lanterns are inexplicably burning in #3's quarters. This is reported to the servants, who carry clubs to investigate. When they enter, they hear her singing opera and are scared by the many opera masks she collected while alive, so they flee. A rather satisfied-looking Songlian emerges: having put a record of #3 on the victrola, she cranks the handle to keep it playing. The final scene begins with the sound of firecrackers. It is the next

summer, we are told. A new bride has arrived, clad traditionally in red. She asks: "Who is that woman?" and is told: "That's the former Fourth Wife. There's something wrong with her mentally." A distraught and disheveled-looking Songlian is shown indistinctly, pacing in the courtyard, outside the room with the red lanterns. (End)

Questions:

1. This film and Ju Dou, another well-known and widely-distributed film by Zhang Yimou, have been read by Chinese critics as veiled allegories to Tiananmen and its aftermath. Can you analyze the film according to this interpretation?

2. The film has also been taken as exemplifying certain orientalist stereotypes. What are these?

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Lu Xun at fifty,  
photographed in Shanghai in September 1930

LU XUN  
SELECTED WORKS

VOLUME ONE

*Translated by*  
YANG XIANYI and GLADYS YANG

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鲁迅：呐喊 自序

Lu Xun / Lu Hsün (1881-1936)

PREFACE TO *CALL TO ARMS*\*

When I was young I, too, had many dreams. Most of them I later forgot, but I see nothing in this to regret. For although recalling the past may bring happiness, at times it cannot but bring loneliness, and what is the point of clinging in spirit to lonely bygone days? However, my trouble is that I cannot forget completely, and these stories stem from those things which I have been unable to forget.

For more than four years I frequented, almost daily, a pawnshop and pharmacy. I cannot remember how old I was at the time, but the pharmacy counter was exactly my height and that in the pawnshop twice my height. I used to hand clothes and trinkets up to the counter twice my height, then take the money given me with contempt to the counter my own height to buy medicine for my father, a chronic invalid. On my return home I had other things to keep me busy, for our physician was so eminent that he prescribed unusual drugs and adjuvants: aloe roots dug up in winter, sugar-cane that had been three years exposed to frost, original pairs of crickets, and ardisia that had seeded . . . most of which were difficult to come by. But my father's illness went from bad to worse until finally he died.

It is my belief that those who come down in the world will probably learn in the process what society is really like. My eagerness to go to N — and study in

\* *Call to Arms*, Lu Xun's earliest collection of short stories, contains fourteen stories written between 1918 and 1922.

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the K — Academy\* seems to have shown a desire to strike out for myself, escape, and find people of a different kind. My mother had no choice but to raise eight dollars for my travelling expenses and say I might do as I pleased. That she cried was only natural, for at that time the proper thing was to study the classics and take the official examinations. Anyone who studied "foreign subjects" was a social outcast regarded as someone who could find no way out and was forced to sell his soul to foreign devils. Besides, she was sorry to part with me. But in spite of all this, I went to N — and entered the K — Academy; and it was there that I learned of the existence of physics, arithmetic, geography, history, drawing and physical training. They had no physiology course, but we saw woodblock editions of such works as *A New Course on the Human Body* and *Essays on Chemistry and Hygiene*. Recalling the talk and prescriptions of physicians I had known and comparing them with what I now knew, I came to the conclusion that those physicians must be either unwitting or deliberate charlatans; and I began to feel great sympathy for the invalids and families who suffered at their hands. From translated histories I also learned that the Japanese Reformation owed its rise, to a great extent, to the introduction of Western medical science to Japan.

These inklings took me to a medical college in the Japanese countryside.\*\* It was my fine dream that on my return to China I would cure patients like my father who had suffered from the wrong treatment, while if war broke out I would serve as an army doctor, at the same time promoting my countrymen's faith in reform.

I have no idea what improved methods are now used to teach microbiology, but in those days we were shown

\* N — refers to Nanjing, and K — to the Kiangnan (Jiangnan) Naval Academy where the author studied in 1898.

\*\* This refers to the Sendai Medical College where Lu Xun studied from 1904 to 1906.

lantern slides of microbes; and if the lecture ended early, the instructor might show slides of natural scenery or news to fill up the time. Since this was during the Russo-Japanese War, there were many war slides, and I had to join in the clapping and cheering in the lecture hall along with the other students. It was a long time since I had seen any compatriots, but one day I saw a news-reel slide of a number of Chinese, one of them bound and the rest standing around him. They were all sturdy fellows but appeared completely apathetic. According to the commentary, the one with his hands bound was a spy working for the Russians who was to be beheaded by the Japanese military as a warning to others, while the Chinese beside him had come to enjoy the spectacle.

Before the term was over I had left for Tokyo, because this slide convinced me that medical science was not so important after all. The people of a weak and backward country, however strong and healthy they might be, could only serve to be made examples of or as witnesses of such futile spectacles; and it was not necessarily deplorable if many of them died of illness. The most important thing, therefore, was to change their spirit; and since at that time I felt that literature was the best means to this end, I decided to promote a literary movement. There were many Chinese students in Tokyo studying law, political science, physics and chemistry, even police work and engineering, but not one studying literature and art. However, even in this uncongenial atmosphere I was fortunate enough to find some kindred spirits. We gathered the few others we needed and after discussion our first step, of course, was to publish a magazine, the title of which denoted that this was a new birth. As we were then rather classically inclined, we called it *Vita Nova* (*New Life*).

When the time for publication drew near, some of our contributors dropped out and then our funds ran out, until there were only three of us left and we were penniless.

Since we had started our venture at an unlucky hour, there was naturally no one to whom we could complain when we failed; but later even we three were destined to part, and our discussions of a future dream world had to cease. So ended this abortive *Vita Nova*.

Only later did I feel the futility of it all. At that time I had not a clue. Later it seemed to me that if a man's proposals met with approval, that should encourage him to advance; if they met with opposition, that should make him fight back; but the real tragedy was for him to lift up his voice among the living and meet with no response, neither approval nor opposition, just as if he were stranded in a boundless desert completely at a loss. That was when I became conscious of loneliness.

And this sense of loneliness grew from day to day, entwining itself about my soul like some huge poisonous snake.

But in spite of my groundless sadness, I felt no indignation; for this experience had made me reflect and see that I was definitely not the type of hero who could rally multitudes at his call.

However, my loneliness had to be dispelled because it was causing me agony. So I used various means to dull my senses, to immerse myself among my fellow nationals and to turn to the past. Later I experienced or witnessed even greater loneliness and sadness which I am unwilling to recall, preferring that it should perish with my mind in the dust. Still my attempt to deaden my senses was not unsuccessful — I lost the enthusiasm and fervour of my youth.

In S — Hostel was a three-roomed house with a courtyard in which grew a locust tree, and it was said that a woman had hanged herself there. Although the tree had grown so tall that its branches were now out of reach, the rooms remained deserted. For some years I stayed here, copying ancient inscriptions. I had few visi-

tors, the inscriptions raised no political problems or issues, and so the days slipped quietly away, which was all that I desired. On summer nights, when mosquitoes swarmed, I would sit under the locust tree waving my fan and looking at specks of blue sky through chinks in the thick foliage, while belated caterpillars would fall, icy-cold, on to my neck.

The only visitor to drop in occasionally for a talk was my old friend Jin Xinyi. Having put his big portfolio on the rickety table he would take off his long gown and sit down opposite me, looking as if his heart was still beating fast because he was afraid of dogs.

"What's the use of copying these?" One night, while leafing through the inscriptions I had copied, he asked me for enlightenment on this point.

"There isn't any use."

"What's the point, then, of copying them?"

"There isn't any point."

"Why don't you write something? . . ."

I understood. They were bringing out *New Youth*,\* but since there did not seem to have been any reaction, favourable or otherwise, no doubt they felt lonely. However I said:

"Imagine an iron house having not a single window and virtually indestructible, with all its inmates sound asleep and about to die of suffocation. Dying in their sleep, they won't feel the pain of death. Now if you raise a shout to wake a few of the lighter sleepers, making these unfortunate few suffer the agony of irrevocable death, do you really think you are doing them a good turn?"

"But if a few wake up, you can't say there is no hope of destroying the iron house."

\* This magazine played an important part in the May 4th Movement of 1919 by attacking feudalism and spreading Marxist ideas. Jin Xinyi is an alias for Qian Xuanton, one of the editors of *New Youth*.

True, in spite of my own conviction, I could not blot out hope, for hope belongs to the future. I had no negative evidence able to refute his affirmation of faith. So I finally agreed to write, and the result was my first story "A Madman's Diary." And once started I could not give up but would write some sort of short story from time to time to humour my friends, until I had written more than a dozen of them.

As far as I am concerned, I no longer feel any great urge to express myself; yet, perhaps because I have not forgotten the grief of my past loneliness, I sometimes call out to encourage those fighters who are galloping on in loneliness, so that they do not lose heart. Whether my cry is brave or sad, repellent or ridiculous, I do not care. However, since this is a call to arms I must naturally obey my general's orders. This is why I often resort to innuendoes, as when I made a wreath appear from nowhere at the son's grave in "Medicine," while in "Tomorrow" I did not say that Fourth Shan's Wife never dreamed of her little boy. For our chiefs in those days were against pessimism. And I, for my part, did not want to infect with the loneliness which I had found so bitter those young people who were still dreaming pleasant dreams, just as I had done when young.

It is clear, then, that my stories fall far short of being works of art; hence I must at least count myself fortunate that they are still known as stories and are even being brought out in one volume. Although such good fortune makes me uneasy, it still pleases me to think that they have readers in the world of men, for the time being at any rate.

So now that these stories of mine are being reprinted in one collection, for the reasons given above I have chosen to entitle it *Call to Arms*.

Beijing  
December 3, 1922

Primitive  
Passions

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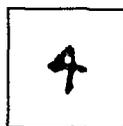
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### Elements of a New Ethnography

#### The Force of Surfaces:

#### Defiance in Zhang Yimou's Films

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The decisive element in every situation is the permanently organised and long-prepared force which can be put into the field when it is judged that a situation is favourable (and it can be favourable only in so far as such a force exists, and is full of fighting spirit).

Antonio Gramsci, "The Modern Prince"

This chapter centers on three films by Zhang Yimou—*Red Sorghum* (Hong gaoliang; Xian Film Studio, 1988), *Judou* (co-directed with Yang Fengliang; Star Entertainment, 1990), and *Raise the Red Lantern* (*Da hong denglong gao gao gua*; China Film Co-Production Corporation, 1991). I will not, however, offer "close readings" of these films in the manner of the previous chapters but will instead use Zhang's films as a way to raise some issues in cross-cultural interpretative politics. This does not mean that I will neglect the specificities of Zhang's films. On the contrary, my argument is that these specificities can be fully appreciated only when we abandon certain modes and assumptions of interpretation.

The three films in question constitute a distinctive type. Their characteristics have become the "trademarks" of Zhang's style.<sup>1</sup> The "background" in these films is uniform: it is an oppressively feudal China. The historical details are blurred, even though we know from the original novellas from which the films are adapted that the events take place in the precommunist period.<sup>2</sup> The oppressiveness of feudal China is usually personified by an unreasonable, domineering older male figure, such as Jiuer's leper husband in *Red Sorghum*; Judou's husband, Yang Jinshan, the owner of the dye mill; and Chen Zuoqian, the landlord who owns several wives in *Raise the Red Lantern*. Because they are powerful within their class, these old men have the license to be abusive: they purchase wives, use them for both perverse sexual pleasure and reproduction, and sometimes murder them when they become disobedient or inconvenient. In terms of representing the maltreatment of women, the blurriness of historical background in Zhang's films is matched by an obliviousness to class differences. The mental or psychical suffering of Songlian, the new concubine in *Raise the Red Lantern*, is as intense as that of Judou, even though Songlian has attended university and Judou is an illiterate peasant. For Zhang, woman is very much a typical sexual body that is bound by social chains and that needs to be liberated.

As I mentioned in part 2, chapter 1, these tales of gothic and often morbid oppression are marked by their contrast with the sensuous screen design of the films. Zhang's film language deploys exquisite colors in the depiction of "backwardness." The color red in *Red Sorghum*, the bright solid colors of the dyed cloths in *Judou*, the striking, symmetrical screen organizations of architectural details, and the refined-looking furniture, utensils, food, and costumes in *Raise the Red Lantern* are all part and parcel of the recognizable cinematographic expertise of Zhang and his collaborators such as the talented cinematographer Gu Changwei.

In many respects, these three films can be described as constituting a new kind of ethnography. The first element of this new ethnography is that it presents the results of its "research" in the form not of books or museum exhibits but of cinema. Zhang's films have become a spectacu-

Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies, Oedipus,  
and the Tactics of Visuality

Zhang astutely places the center of interest on femininity in his construction of this “new aboriginality.” Femininity in his films is the place where the contradictory nature of culture-writing—as a retrospective capturing of the past’s violence and chaos, and as a progressive, forward-looking investment in the possibilities of rewriting and enlightenment—becomes clearest. Women are here the prototype of “the primitive” in all the ambiguities of that word—they are the bearers of the *barbaric* nature of a patriarchal system that has outlived its time and place; their abuse is a sign of China’s *backwardness*; through them we come to understand the *fundamental* horrors about a culture. At the same time, women’s sufferings reveal a larger human *nature* that has been unjustly chained and that seeks to be liberated; they are a kind of wronged, maligned, exploited *noble savage* whose innocence must be redeemed.

Insofar as they melodramatize womanly events in what often turn out to be trivial, hackneyed narratives, Zhang’s films are, in terms of ethnic lineage, inheritors of the popular Mandarin Duck and Butterfly fictional modes that run throughout Chinese literature and film in the twentieth century. I have argued elsewhere that the predominant feature of Butterfly fiction is that women’s problems serve as the hinges of many narratives.<sup>10</sup> If we translate the Butterfly novelists’ narrative strategies into cinematic terms, we may say that it is women who are the objects of cinematic close-ups and slow motions, and that it is women who provide the suturing points at which the narratives “hang together.” Unlike Butterfly novelists who had to focus on women with the abstract means of verbal language, however, Zhang has in the film medium an obvious means of visual display. Whereas Butterfly novelists must devise strange plots in which women characters’ loved ones mysteriously disappear so that they are left alone for dramatization, Zhang has at his disposal a much more palpable means of externalizing and thus reifying women’s oppression. If the subject matter of these films is the kind long decried by canonically minded critics as feminine and thus insignificant, Zhang makes us realize anew the fascination of such trivial matter. His films do not change the mundane nature of the stories but enlarge the possibili-

ties of our enjoyment of precisely those unspeakable, at times pornographic fantasies that are, shall we say, a culture’s “shame.”

Furthermore, whereas in the traditional Butterfly novels, the enjoyment of such fantasies still had to be “covered up” by moralistic prefaces and didactic justifications, in Zhang such a “cover-up” is not necessary because film, at the same time that it provides him with a palpable means of expressing womanly contents, also provides him with an alibi: he is merely showing such (pornographic) contents in order to give a “realistic” picture of China. The didactic excuse, which the Butterfly novelists had to insert explicitly into their narratives, is already there, in the silence and ambiguity of the filmic image.

Indeed, there is every indication that whatever Zhang does, he does in order to emphasize not the thematic concerns or even characterization but the filmic or visual nature of his films. This is where the prominence of womanly content—that conscious invention of an ethnic primitivism—must be seen as part and parcel of the cross-cultural significance, the emergent ethnographicity, of his practice. This practice is, above all, a conscious and tactical mobilization of every kind of event toward visual display, a display that is most effectively achieved through women. Hence, even though Zhang’s interest is not inherently in women’s problems themselves, he relies for his culture-writing on a focalization, a “zoom-in” on the women characters.

To this end—that of skillfully displaying women as bearers of his filmic ethnography—Zhang makes full use of the modernist conceptual method that many have called, after Freud, *Oedipalization*. Examples: In *Red Sorghum*, Jiuer’s husband was mysteriously murdered before “my grandpa” shows up to claim her. In *Raise the Red Lantern*, there is the suggestion that the eldest son of Songlian’s husband, the young man called Feipu, might be romantically attracted to her but there would be no hope for such a romance since his father is alive and well.<sup>11</sup> The woman’s body/sexuality becomes, in both films, the place where Oedipal rivalries—rivalries between men—are visually, visibly staged.<sup>12</sup>

In *Judou*, Oedipal rivalries literally take the form of incest: Judou lives her life between her husband and his nephew Tianqing. Apart from the background of a dye mill, Zhang introduces a significant number of changes in the Judou story in order to enhance the Oedipalist focus on femininity. First, the title of the story is changed from the name of a mythic male figure in Liu Heng’s novella—Fuxi is the mythic emperor

lar and accessible form of imaginative writing about a “China” that is supposedly past but whose ideological power still lingers. While many of the ethnic customs and practices in Zhang’s films are invented,<sup>3</sup> the import of such details lies not in their authenticity but in their mode of signification.<sup>4</sup> Such import makes up the second major element of the newness of Zhang’s ethnography: the use of things, characters, and narratives not for themselves but for their collective, hallucinatory signification of “ethnicity.”

Roland Barthes theorized this type of signification in terms of what he called “mythologies” in the 1950s. With his characteristic good humor, Barthes gives a comically precise example to explain what he means by mythical speech:

I am a pupil in the second form in a French *lycée*. I open my Latin grammar, and I read a sentence, borrowed from Aesop or Phaedrus: *quia ego nominor leo*. I stop and think. There is something ambiguous about this statement: on the one hand, the words in it do have a simple meaning: *because my name is lion*. And on the other hand, the sentence is evidently there in order to signify something else to me. Inasmuch as it is addressed to me, a pupil in the second form, it tells me clearly: I am a grammatical example meant to illustrate the rule about the agreement of the predicate. I am even forced to realize that the sentence in no way *signifies* its meaning to me, that it tries very little to tell me something about the lion and what sort of name he has; its true and fundamental signification is to impose itself on me as the presence of a certain agreement of the predicate.<sup>5</sup>

The “imposition” of this other significance—other to the obvious meaning the sentence seems to denote—is, for Barthes, the activity of myth: “In myth there are two semiological systems, one of which is staggered in relation to the other: a linguistic system, the language . . . which I shall call the *language-object*, because it is the language which myth gets hold of in order to build its own system; and myth itself, which . . . is a second language, in which one speaks about the first.”<sup>6</sup>

I will return to the full implications of Barthes’s analysis of myth later. For now, his example of the lion suffices in providing a parallel to

the type of signifying activity we find in Zhang’s films. Like Barthes’s loquacious lion, the ethnic details in these films are not there simply to “mean” themselves; rather, they are there for a second order articulation. They are there to signify “I am an ethnic detail; I am feudal China.”

The difference between the ethnic detail as such and its self-conscious articulation is not the kind of difference that separates the time of the ethnographer’s “fieldwork” and the time of her writing. Rather—and here we come to the third major element of the newness of Zhang’s ethnography—because the ethnographer here is himself a “native” of the culture he is transcribing, the difference made conscious by the second order articulation becomes in effect a culture’s belated fascination with its own datedness, its own alterity. Although Zhang may think that he is making films about China, what he is doing is representing a timeless China of the past, which is given to us in an imagined because retrospective mode. This “China,” which is signified mythically, is the China constructed by modernity—the modernity of anthropology, ethnography, and feminism. It is also a “China” exaggerated and caricatured, in which the past is *melodramatized* in the form of excessive and absurd rituals and customs.<sup>7</sup>

In his mythical construct, what Zhang accomplishes is not the reflection of a China “that was really like that” but rather a new kind of organization that is typical of modernist collecting. The chaotic, overabundant elements of the past are now (re)arranged in a special kind of order.<sup>8</sup> In this way Zhang’s films enact cinema’s capacity, described by Paul Virilio, for gratifying the wish of those away from home for a dreamy “homeland” at the same time that it turns everyone who watches into a kind of migrant:

The cinema gratified the wish of migrant workers for a lasting and even eternal homeland. . . . The cinema auditorium would not be a new city agora for the living where immigrants from the whole world might gather and communicate with one another; it was much more of a cenotaph, and the essential capacity of cinema in its huge temples was to shape society by putting order into visual chaos. This made cinema the black mass necessary for the country to achieve *a new aboriginality* in the midst of demographic anarchy.<sup>9</sup>

who invented the *bagua* (octogram) and the weaving of nets—to that of a poor and insignificant woman, a female subaltern, in modern times. Second, Zhang rewrites Liu Heng's plot in such a way as to connect the dramatization of femininity with patricide. Whereas in Liu Heng's novella, the old man Yang Jinshan dies a quiet natural death with a smile on his face and Tianqing, Judou's lover, commits suicide in a vat, in Zhang's film these two men, both of whom are fathers to the youngster Tianbai, are killed by him (accidentally in Jinshan's case and deliberately in Tianqing's). Third, instead of living to a great old age as she does in the novella, Judou burns down her house in what seems to be a revolutionary but suicidal ending. The implications of Oedipalization are the twin deaths of the father and the mother. If fathers are often murdered, mothers, if not murdered, commit suicide or go mad.

Together, the repeated associations of patricide typical of Oedipalization—the physical impotence, symbolic castration, and ultimate death of fathers—constitute a reading of China's modernity and "ethnicity" that is a *self-subalternization*: we are made to feel that, being fatherless, China is deprived of power; China is a subaltern in the world of modern nations. At the same time, this self-subalternization is unmistakably accompanied by the fetishization of women—a fetishization that can, I think, be more accurately described as a *self-exoticization* through the tactics of visuality.

Such tactics of visuality are apparent once we examine other alterations Zhang made in the literature he borrowed.<sup>13</sup> In my brief discussion of *Judou* in part 2, chapter 1, I already mentioned, for instance, that the background of a dye mill in *Judou* was not present in the original story by Liu Heng but added in the film so that the audience can see the drama on the screen as primarily a drama of colors. In *Raise the Red Lantern*, the eye-catching family ritual of lighting lanterns in the courtyard of the favored concubine is not present in Su Tong's novella "Qi qie cheng qun" [Wives and concubines], from which the film was adapted. Moreover, in Su Tong's story there is a well in which concubines were thrown previous to Songlian's arrival. The well, located in a neglected part of the garden, is a symbol both of femininity and of the inevitable death that awaits women in the Chen family.<sup>14</sup> In Zhang's film, the well disappears. Instead we find an architecturally spectacular rooftop where various members of the household make their presence and where stylized singing, conversations, and conflicts take place. The space of mur-

der is changed to a small house locked up on one side of the roof. Unlike the well in Su Tong's novella, this house, in which concubines who commit adultery are hanged, is much more prominently visible on the screen.

Examples like these indicate that what Zhang performs here is not really a liberation of sexuality—neither a vibrant male sexuality nor a repressed female sexuality—in the narrow sense but, first and foremost, a production of filmic signs. To return to Barthes, Zhang is building one semiotic system on another, in such a manner as always to bracket the denotative meaning of the "raw" first level of signification.

### The Art of Seduction

While Barthes uses the word *myth* to describe the bracketing of this first level, Jean Baudrillard, in a more dramatic manner, calls it death, a death he associates with seduction: "To seduce," writes Baudrillard, is "to die as reality and reconstitute oneself as illusion."<sup>15</sup>

Borrowing from the etymology of the word *seduction*, which refers to the act of leading astray or leading away, Baudrillard defines seduction as the turning of a sign away from meaning, from its own truth.<sup>16</sup> Following Baudrillard, we may say that what we see in Zhang's films is a "transubstantiation of sex into signs that is the secret of all seduction."<sup>17</sup> What is displayed is not so much woman or even feudal China per se as the act of displaying, of making visible. What Zhang "fetishizes" is primarily cinematography itself. If we speak of a narcissism here, it is a repeated playing with "the self" that is the visuality intrinsic to film. *This play is the sexuality of Zhang's works.*<sup>18</sup>

Barthes writes that "myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message."<sup>19</sup> Baudrillard writes that "seduction . . . never belongs to the order of nature, but that of artifice—never to the order of energy, but that of signs and rituals."<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, the seduction of Zhang's films—the appeal of his visual ethnography—is that they keep crossing boundaries and shifting into new spheres of circulation. The wish to "liberate" Chinese women, which seems to be the "content," shifts into the liberation of "China," which shifts into the liberation of the "image" of China on film, which shifts into the liberation of "China" on film in the international culture market, and so on.

With the shifting of attention from “message” or “nature” to the form of utterance and to artifice, meaning—that culturally loaded thing—is displaced onto the level of surface exchange. Such a displacement has the effect of emptying “meaning” from its conventional space—the core, the depth, or the inside waiting to be seen and articulated—and reconstructing it in a new locus—the locus of the surface, which not only shines but *glosses*; which looks, stares, and speaks.

In the light of this seductive locus of the surface, which constitutes the space of a new culture-writing, Zhang’s modesty about his own work becomes very interesting.<sup>21</sup> Speaking in regard to *Red Sorghum*, for instance, Zhang has said that he has not really thought too clearly about how to shoot the film (or films in general) and that he likes discussing with friends in “theory circles” because they can help him figure out many problems. Speaking guilelessly thus, Zhang is like the seducer described by Baudrillard—the seducer who does not consciously know that he is seducing even though he is fully engaged in the game of seduction. Zhang’s films, it follows, are the seducer’s snares—the enigmatic traps he sets up in order to engage his viewers in an infinite play and displacement of meanings and surfaces—and, most important, to catch these viewers in their longings and desires, making them reveal passions they nonetheless do not fully understand.

### The Search for Concreteness

Oppressive feudal practices, ethnic details, myth making, magnificent cinematography, female sexuality—these elements I have summarized as the recognizable trademarks of Zhang’s films are also those that have most interested his critics, whether or not they are sympathetic with his projects. What I find most revealing about readings of Zhang’s films is that regardless of their evaluation, they all tend to revolve around assumptions about depths and surfaces. I will begin with the readings that are critical of his works, readings that fall into three main types.

First, we hear that Zhang’s films lack depth, a lack that critics often consider as *the reason* why his films are beautiful. For instance, in a short review of *Red Sorghum*, David Edelstein writes that “Zhang’s superb eye masks his lack of interest in his subjects’ psychology.” Edelstein con-

cludes that the film is a “robust crowd-pleaser from mainland China” and that “the depth of its dumbness must have been a secondary consideration, a small price to pay for sweep and novelty and unimpeachable politics.”<sup>22</sup> H. C. Li writes that *Red Sorghum* is “a film intended to please the eye and excite the senses, and a film endowed with superficial brilliance but not deep content.”<sup>23</sup> Wu Ruozeng says that one should not talk about *Red Sorghum* in terms of “profundities” (*shenke*) but should simply understand the strong feeling (*ganjue*) it puts forth for a return to human nature.<sup>24</sup>

Second, Zhang’s “lack of depth” is inserted in what become debates about the politics of cross-cultural representations. The beauty of Zhang’s films is, for some critics, a sign of Zhang’s attempt to pander to the tastes of foreigners. Yang Zhao, for instance, writes that the visual design of *Judou* is specially made to cater to those who are familiar with the established rules of American film culture, which is characterized by a kind of “tourist’s psychology” (*guanguang xintai*).<sup>25</sup> Dai Qing, who charges the crew of *Raise the Red Lantern* for taking “outrageous liberty with such details as decor, dialogue, and diction,” writes that “this kind of film is really shot for the casual pleasures of foreigners.”<sup>26</sup> For Paul Clark, who is speaking about 1980s mainland Chinese films in general, the international awards won by films such as Zhang’s suggest that “the strong visual qualities of these films could reach across borders,” even though “for the comparatively tiny Chinese audience who followed these films . . . the new movies were distinctively Chinese.”<sup>27</sup> There is in these remarks a feeling that the use of appealing visual qualities exoticizes China and that it is such exoticization, rather than the genuine complexities of Chinese society, that accounts for the success of such films in the West.<sup>28</sup> Even though Zhang and his contemporaries are “orientals,” then, they are explicitly or implicitly regarded as producing a kind of orientalism.<sup>29</sup>

Third, this lack of depth, this orientalism, is linked to yet another crime—that of exploiting women. Zhang’s films are unmistakably filled with sexually violent elements, such as the kidnapping of Jiuer by “my Grandpa” in *Red Sorghum*, Jiuer’s eventual submission to him, the voyeuristic treatment of *Judou*, and the commodification of women in *Raise the Red Lantern*, in which wives and concubines are portrayed as jealous enemies preying upon one another in order to win the favor of the despotic husband who dominates them all. It is said that by fetishiz-

ing the female subaltern, or the female-as-subaltern, Zhang is simply reinforcing the patriarchal interests for which women are merely sex objects. Hence feminist critics such as Esther Yau and Peter Hitchcock write of Zhang's films: women such as Jiuer are "being engaged in excessive sexist exchanges motivated by male desire";<sup>30</sup> Zhang and Chen Kaige "remain remarkably mute about how reactionary technologies of gender may inform their own discourse"; Zhang's "close-ups of [Jiuer's] face and soft focus are entirely traditional in their aesthetic effects";<sup>31</sup> and so forth.

I would like to clarify at this point that I am fully in agreement with the feminist intent of critics such as Yau and Hitchcock. Insofar as he adopts a traditional, mainstream understanding of male-female relations, it is clear that Zhang's films do not depart at all from the politics of the polarization of male gaze versus female body that was problematized by Laura Mulvey's influential essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."<sup>32</sup> On the contrary, Zhang's films provide a demonstration, from the perspective of a non-Western culture, of Mulvey's incisive observation of what in many ways is still the predominant heterosexual problematic. It seems to me, however, that rather than simply reinscribing Zhang within this problematic (and condemning him for it), we need to go further and ask what we would be disabling and prohibiting from surfacing once we adopt, as we must from time to time, the moral overtones of this admittedly justified feminist position. The reason why we need to go further is that, in criticizing Zhang's "traditional" or "patriarchal" treatment of women, feminist criticism may unwittingly put itself at the service of a kind of conservatism that values depths over surfaces, and nativism over universalism, in a manner that is, ultimately, antifeminist. How so?

#### Jia chou bu ke wai yang

To explain what I think is the central problem here—the universal prejudice against exhibitionism and self-display—let me return to one of the most reactionary responses to Zhang, such as that coming from the mainland Chinese authorities. Apart from the explicit sexual contents of Zhang's films, it is believed that the Chinese authorities are displeased by Zhang because his films transgress the "Chinese" taboo,

*jia chou bu ke wai yang*.<sup>33</sup> The English equivalent to this Chinese expression would be something like "Don't air your dirty laundry in public." But the Chinese phrase is much more precise in that it points to the exact area that is being tabooed—not the "dirty laundry" itself but *wai yang*, the act of showing, brandishing, exhibiting (to the outside). The point, in other words, is not that there should not be such dirty laundry around—that is taken for granted, as a matter of course about *jia*, the family. The point is rather that such shame and dirt should not be flaunted.

In the language of visibility, what the Chinese authorities' disapproval signals is a disciplinary surveillance from above, but it is not exactly a surveillance over the "content" of backwardness in Zhang's films as is often assumed (many mainland films of the past few decades also use such content to point their morals).<sup>34</sup> Rather, the surveillance is over the act of exhibiting and displaying. The reactionary response of the Chinese authorities in fact contains much more intelligence than most of their critics are willing to grant them, for in their disapproval lies the correct intuition that Zhang's films are not simply about backwardness but about a different kind of signification. Hence even though all the settings of Zhang's three films date back to the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s—the period before the People's Republic of China was established—the authorities remained firm for a long time in their prohibitive resolve. Zhang's casual remarks about his filmmaking are revealing in this regard, for they point precisely to this deliberate flaunting, this defiant display of difference that disturbs the authorities:

In *Red Sorghum* I did not deliberately try to combat or contradict the traditional way of making film. . . . [However] that was indeed the purpose when we made *One and Eight* [*Yi ge he ba ge*] and *Yellow Earth*, and especially when we made *One and Eight*. At that time I was filled with anger whenever I set up the camera. All of us were basically fed up with the unchanging, inflexible way of Chinese filmmaking, so we were ready to fight it at all costs in our first film. I would set down the camera and take a look, and [say to myself,] Oh, god, the composition is still the same as the old stuff! No! Turn the lens around—just turn it around, raise it, just for the sake of raising it. Actually *if you ask me whether there was any concept*

in this kind of incomplete composition, the answer is no; but the point was simply and deliberately to be different.<sup>35</sup>

What the Chinese authorities sense is perhaps exactly this kind of *gestural* force that, according to Zhang, has nothing “beneath” it. In its “emptiness,” Zhang’s filmmaking challenges the deep-rooted attitude of approval, ingrained in the understanding of representation across cultures, toward depth, profundity, and interiority. This attitude, which associates depth, profundity, and interiority with “virtue,” is also the preference for a *somethingness* in representation.

### *Shi* versus *xu*: The Ethnic Paradigms of Evaluation

It is well known to the practitioners and scholars of Chinese literature and culture that this attitude toward deep meanings is part of a pervasive bifurcated moralism of *shi* (fullness or concreteness) versus *xu* (emptiness), which are often used as criteria for judging virtues of aesthetic representation. Ultimately, such criteria must also be seen as major ways of *producing value in a culture*. For the purposes of our discussion, a table schematically contrasting the associations commonly attached to *shi* and *xu* may be drawn up as follows:

<i>SHI</i>	<i>XU</i>
full	empty
concrete	abstract
deep	shallow
earnest	superficial
authentic	fake
real worth	cosmetics
content	form
history	fiction
male	female

The notion of *shi* is linked to an approved concreteness of content in any representation, a concreteness that by extension would also be

described with metaphors such as *shendu* (depth) and *neihan* (inner meaning).<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, with the exception of philosophical discussions (typically, of Daoism) in which *xu* is attributed with the significance of the nonsaid, and with the exception of moralist advice of modesty and open-mindedness,<sup>37</sup> the notion of *xu* is almost always invoked pejoratively in the language of cultural evaluation, as a way to express contempt for the kinds of associations listed in the right-hand column of our table. We think of expressions such as *xuruo* (weak, debilitated), *xuwei* (pretentious), *xufu* (superficial, slick), *xurong* (vanity), *xuhuan* (illusory), *xuwang* (fabricated), *xujia* (fake, artificial), *xu you qi biao* (superficial; literally, “possessed only with the surface”), *xuqing jiayi* (hypocritical display of affection), and *xu zhang sheng shi* (much ado about nothing; literally, “making empty noises and gestures”).

When Zhang’s critics criticize him for a lack of depth and an empty display, they are hence simply reinvoking the criteria of the reactionary *xu/shi* structure. As we will see in the following, precisely because this structure has to do not only with evaluation but with the production of value itself, it becomes even more crisis-laden once it is confronted with the politics of cross-cultural interpretation.

### The Eyes of the Foreign Devil

In postcoloniality, this traditional or ethnic polarization of the criteria for aesthetic merit is complicated by the presence of that entity called the *foreign devil*. What may be added to our table now are “China” and “native” in the left-hand column and “the West” and “foreigner” in the right.

Among the Chinese, as among many non-Western peoples, there is a *postcolonial way of expressing contempt for one’s fellow “natives”*: *zuo gei waiguoren kan*—such-and-such is done “for the eyes of the foreigner,” with “foreigner” usually meaning those from the advanced industrial West. (See remarks from critics such as Dai Qing, cited earlier.) One thinks of expressions of contempt such as *chongyang* (worshiping the foreign) and *meiwai* (fawning on the foreign), which allude to the obsequious ways in which “natives” identify with the foreign devil rather than with their own culture and countrymen. These expressions, however, also reveal a highly ambivalent attitude toward the foreign, for the con-

tempt they proclaim is, in fact, not possible without a keen observation or imagination of the foreigner's gaze and what may be done to attract or please that gaze. In other words, these expressions of contempt already contain *in themselves* the acts of looking at foreigners—of natives looking at or imagining the foreigner looking, of natives looking at or imagining fellow natives being looked at by foreigners, and so forth. And yet, while clearly recognizing in the foreigner a power to authenticate and endow value themselves, those who harbor such contempt are frequently quick to repudiate such acts of looking *in others*. Their contempt for fellow natives' looking is thus, we may say, ultimately an attempt to censor or prohibit this exchange between native and foreigner, even though, in their very mode of proclamation, they have already attested to the inevitability of this exchange.

Very often, and I think this is the case with the reception to Zhang's filmmaking, the expression of contempt is really the expression of an envy or jealousy at the success enjoyed by those who *have* captured the gaze of the foreigner. These ambivalent sentiments, which are laden with the injustices of history and politics, and which are transindividual, nonetheless manifest themselves prominently in the behavior of many individual "natives," in academia as much as in other circles, who look upon their fellow "natives" with suspicion, belittlement, and scorn, even while the same people who accuse others of pandering to the foreign devil remain themselves subserviently respectful to the foreign. Whenever the phrase *zuo gei waiguoren kan* (or its equivalent) is invoked, therefore, it is always the symptom of a self-contradictory sentiment, the meaning of which is "They have made it! They are actually being seen by the foreign devil!"—followed by a moralistic type of dismissal and self-assurance: "But of course they did it only by improper, shallow means." The fantasy that lies at the heart of such contempt is that we must prove "from within" that we are worthy of that foreign gaze and that if we do it properly, the foreign devil will look closely and deeply "inside" us for our authentic value.<sup>38</sup>

### Zhang, Too, Is Concrete, Not Empty

Although no books are written on how these postcolonial sentiments translate into aesthetic criteria, it is possible to see in the attempts to

evaluate an artist like Zhang the inscriptions of the dilemmas of cross-cultural interpretative politics. If the more reserved of these evaluations tend to focus on the "superficial" quality of Zhang's films, the laudatory evaluations, too, are symptomatic of the bifurcated structure of moral-aesthetic criteria. These laudatory evaluations, which come by and large from male critics, would show how *meaningful* Zhang's films are.

For instance, H. C. Li writes that *Red Sorghum* is "a Dionysian ode to life . . . a tribute to the heroic spirit of the Chinese people."<sup>39</sup> Yan Xianglin praises *Red Sorghum* for its portrayal of a nonidealized humanity, which "returns aesthetic truth to values of simplicity and authenticity" [*dui yishu zhendi de fanpuquizhen*];<sup>40</sup> while Wu Ruozeng, who rules out using "profundities" as a criterion for *Red Sorghum*, praises the film for returning us to the forces of human nature.<sup>41</sup> Others draw on authors such as Bakhtin and Racine to compare the carnivalesque atmosphere and intensity of Zhang's films.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps the most articulate of this type of reading is Yuejin Wang's, who sees *Red Sorghum* as a return of the collective repressed and an evocation of the cultural unconscious. Basing his interpretation of feminine sexuality entirely on Jiuer's looks, which he describes as "autonomous ecstasy," Wang upholds the film as containing a theory about a strong femininity as well as a marginalized but transgressive masculinity.<sup>43</sup> These critics' interpretations are close to Zhang's own. Among Zhang's favorite descriptions of *Red Sorghum* are *reqing* (passion) and *huoli* (energy). When speaking about Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum Family*, on which his film was based, Zhang repeatedly refers to the "sensuous motion of life," the "enthusiastic human pursuit of life," and the "eulogy of life" signified by the narrative.

In their laudatory mode, the masculinist reviewers disprove the more negative conclusions of Zhang's critics but not their premise, which they in fact share. This is the premise that the value of a work of art consists in the concreteness, the "somethingness," of its content. What these enthusiastic reviewers uphold here is the "somethingness" of what we might call primitivism. In a way that reminds one of the eulogies of "nature," "life," and "sexuality" that characterize male modernist writers such as D. H. Lawrence and Henry Miller, we find in the positive readings of Zhang an overwhelming consensus about "energy" and "human nature" *in spite of* the apparent superficiality of his films. Instead of accusing Zhang of a lack of depth in the mode of being *xu*, then, these reviewers affirm, by their identification of the "energy" in Zhang, that

his films are *shi*—that is, sanguine, earthy, instinctual, close to the people. Together they produce a reading based on male homosocial bonding, a reading that says, Zhang, too, is concrete, not empty.

Feminist criticism, when confronted with the basic masculinism of this kind of “pro-life” clamor, has little choice other than pointing out the untenability of Zhang’s “energy.” Once it does this, however, it is putting itself at the service of the *xu/shi* interpretative machinery. Against the kinds of *shi* qualities affirmed by male critics, feminists must charge that Zhang’s films are false representations of women’s sexuality, that they fictionalize women’s sufferings, and so on. In other words, feminists must *demystify* Zhang’s films by saying that they are inauthentic representations of women. In the words of Yau, for instance, *Red Sorghum* is an example of China’s “filmic fantasies” whose “defenses” are to be undone by “history.”<sup>44</sup> Another way of putting this would be to say that Zhang has left out the truth (*shi*) that is female subjectivity in favor of the lie (*xu*) that is the (fetishized) female image. In a manner perhaps unintended by most feminist critics, this type of feminist criticism would then, by implication, be helping to consolidate the kind of conservatism that would distrust all filmic representation on account of its superficiality, or that would repudiate all Westernized ethnic representation on account of its eagerness to cater to “foreign” consumption.<sup>45</sup>

Whether positive or negative, therefore, evaluations of Zhang’s films tend to leave the central problem of the moral-aesthetic polarization of *shi* and *xu* intact, allowing the values espoused therein to return under multiple guises. Despite their otherwise different or opposed politics, these readings have one thing in common—the assumption that there is a hidden truth, a core of meaning that is other than or interior to what we see on the glossy surfaces of Zhang’s films. In Michel Foucault’s terms, all these interpretations, regardless of their race, class, or gender perspectives, share the symptom of the “repressive hypothesis”—the hypothesis that some fundamental secret or nature has been “repressed,” that human beings are awaiting emancipation, and that the representation of sexuality equals the revelation of truth:

This oft-stated theme, that sex is outside of discourse and that only the removing of an obstacle, the breaking of a secret, can clear the way leading to it, is precisely what needs to be examined.

Does it not partake of the injunction by which discourse is provoked? Is it not with the aim of inciting people to speak of sex that it is made to mirror, at the outer limit of every actual discourse, something akin to a secret whose discovery is imperative, a thing abusively reduced to silence, and at the same time difficult and necessary, dangerous and precious to divulge? . . . What is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it *ad infinitum*, while exploiting it as *the* secret.<sup>46</sup>

The “repressive hypothesis,” in other words, does not so much affirm the truth of sexuality or its need for emancipation as it testifies to the complex institutional networking of power through “discourse.” Whether in terms of a modernist reading of China as an impotent old man chaining his descendants to his rigid ways, or a Marxist-masculinist reading of vibrance and energy, or a feminist reading of the still-unarticulated truths of female sexuality and subjectivity, the tropes of prohibition, repression, and liberation that run consistently throughout readings of Zhang’s films in effect load them with power—the power of interpretative ideology, of *discursive meaning-ful-ness*.

My primary objection to these interpretations is not that they do not tell the truth about Zhang’s films—they do, and with great sensitivity and sophistication—but rather that, in concentrating on the search for concrete meanings, they seem to miss the predominant fact that filmic images operate as images, as surfaces whose significance lies in their manner of undoing depth itself. In order to deal with the problem of reading that Zhang’s films cause, it is hence not enough simply to provide alternative analyses and hermeneutical exegeses of the “deep meanings” of the films.

This is the place where a kind of reading different from those legitimated by the “repressive hypothesis” must intervene and where a reference to someone such as Baudrillard is necessary. As is characteristic of all of his writings, Baudrillard’s target in his book *Seduction* is Western culture’s ingrained beliefs in production, depth, and the metaphysics of interiority. He argues that even ground-breaking, subversive modern theories such as Marxism, psychoanalysis, and feminism are complicitous with such beliefs when they systematically *avoid* seduc-

tion in favor of interpretation.<sup>47</sup> While I do not find Baudrillard's deliberately scandalous rhetoric unproblematic—this rhetoric is itself an example of seduction, aimed at turning the reader away from even the most intimately held “truths”—I think that in a context in which the “deep” and “concrete” tendencies of interpretation are adamant, such as the present one, Baudrillard's theoretical excessiveness can be useful. Baudrillard's mistake lies in his assumption that “deep” interpretative tendencies are diseases of “the West” only. His orientalist romanticism about non-Western peoples<sup>48</sup> blinds him to the fact that what he is criticizing is also a firmly cultivated legacy of the non-West, in this case China.

### Approaches to Illusion: Zhang and Chen Kaige

Inherent in Zhang's tactics of visuality is an astute, almost militaristic understanding of the way *time* works in cinema and, even more so, in mass culture. In order to be successful, film must communicate as if it is automatic and unmediated, in such a way as to make people feel that they can follow without having to make an effort. In their crudity and simplicity, Zhang's films contain this shrewd grasp of the essential illusion of transparency that film audiences are after. The following lucid remarks reveal his mastery of what makes film not only a formally specific medium but also a mass event:

[In film adaptation] even very good literature . . . has to become filmlike. The first thing I can do is to reduce the complexity of the events, and make the story simple and popular [*tongsu*]. Film is a “one-time deal.” The form of its watching is compulsory: there is no time for turning back, and there is no time for thinking; you must follow the screen. When it is a matter of concise, charming words, you can keep reflecting; even when you have arrived at the last chapter [of a book] you can turn back to the front. Film [however] is a one-time deal, and very few ordinary people watch the same film two or three times. Everywhere else in the cinema it is dark and silent; only the screen has light and sound. Watching can

only follow screen time. You can't let people pass without having understood what is going on.<sup>49</sup>

In other words, the irreversible time (or speed) of watching imposes itself on the filmmaker as a strict discipline. For Zhang, filmmaking is about learning and submitting to the *dominance* of this “one-time deal.”<sup>50</sup>

Zhang's pragmatic and disciplined (pragmatism-cum-discipline) approach is one of the major differences between him and his contemporary Chen Kaige. Whereas Zhang makes maximal use of the limited but predominant mode of time on the screen to construct the kinds of images that would be accessible to a large number of people, in Chen's films there is, as my foregoing discussions indicate, a fundamental distrust of the positivity of screen images. Hence the images in Chen's films are much less accessible and much more “allegorical” in the sense of not saying everything.<sup>51</sup> This approach to the image is part of Chen's way of bringing a traditional Daoist understanding of (visual) presence—as only the partial truth if not altogether a distraction—to bear upon his use of a medium that, ironically, is predominantly defined by visuality. Juxtaposed with Zhang, Chen can be described to have put into play the *philosophical* meaning of *xu*, as a steady *emptying* of presence. In Chen's films, blanks signify and silences speak: this is why they invite *interpretation*. Moreover, interpretation must supplement the predominant imagistic and narrative presences in the films with nonimagistic and nonnarrative significations such as (as I demonstrated in the previous two chapters) music and nature.

As a result, however, Chen's films demand from their audiences a kind of attentiveness that automatically excludes a large number of people. Juxtaposed with Zhang's, Chen's approach presents itself as a more traditional scholarly belief in truth as that which is inward and invisible,<sup>52</sup> and which can be apprehended but not positivistically seen. Zhang, by contrast, does not rely on the audiences' philosophical perceptiveness, patience, or fondness for contemplation to get his films across; instead he operates at an obvious and crude level that guarantees him an audience. Instead of an idealist and idealistic notion of truth as that which resides inside his own mind, inside the nuances of his films, or inside his characters' or the audience's subjectivities, Zhang, like popular novelists and mass culture—producers, relies on attention-seiz-

ing strategies that seduce audiences away from whoever they happen to be and whatever they happen to be doing. If “plot” has become weak in both Chen and Zhang, it is for entirely different reasons. In Chen the weakening of the plot has to do with the distrust of storytelling as a means of arriving at the truth; it is the distrust of a convention because it is too conventional, because it has already been used by too many people and has thus become uninteresting.<sup>53</sup> In Zhang the weakening of the plot is really a heightening of effects. Zhang’s films do rely on storytelling, but it is storytelling purged of its more cumbersome complexities. The story is now used for the most direct purpose of generating and sustaining interest. If storytelling is mobilized in the most conventional way, it is simply because convention is where the crowds are.<sup>54</sup>

If Chen’s way of critiquing culture is deconstructionist, in the sense of a careful, meditative, vigilant disassembling of culture’s components from within its structures, Zhang’s critique comes from a more popularized Marxist and Maoist idealism, in the sense of a belief in the force of the masses and in the changeability and adaptability of cultural production.<sup>55</sup> Zhang, who bought his first camera by selling his own blood,<sup>56</sup> often speaks of a close identification not only with China but in particular with China’s peasants,<sup>57</sup> and of art as a liberation from oppression.<sup>58</sup> In other words, Zhang’s social critique follows Chinese communism’s way of discrediting tradition from below rather than from within culture’s core of coherence. If Chen has inherited the traditional Chinese literati’s way of doing “culture” through philosophy and poetry, Zhang’s lineage is that of the popular dramatist, novelist, and street performer whose modes of enunciation are inseparable from the masses. For Chen, even a simple act like that of pissing becomes, as I indicated in the previous chapter, an occasion for philosophical reflection (on the animalistic truth about human culture). For Zhang, piss is, as it is in *Red Sorghum*, what unexpectedly makes wine taste better, what enhances the quality of a collective form of production.

These differences also mark their respective treatments of women. While Zhang uses women for the obvious, conventional, pornographic purposes of representation—as fetishized body parts<sup>59</sup> complete with the melodrama of mental suffering—in Chen women occupy a much less clear-cut, because much more idealized, space. Cuiqiao’s brave determination to change her life leads her to her death in *Yellow Earth*; women do not appear in *The Bia Parade* except in idyllic scenes that are brought

about by feverish daydreams; Laidi in *King of the Children* appears in the role of a coarse, fat sister and mother; the women in *Life on a String* are either mysteriously motherly or frustrated and suicidal. The hardly visible or hardly material place women occupy in Chen’s works is the symptom of an idealism that regards truth as that which is hidden, which is other than the here and now. Chen’s critique of traditional Chinese culture stems from a belief in the invisible inward depths that have been veiled and distorted by culture’s untrustworthy surfaces. Zhang’s critique stems, instead, from the material force of such surfaces—from their vulgar womanly focus, their seductive accessibility, their irreversible time, their illusion of transparency.

### The Deep Habits of Ideology-Criticism

What Zhang’s films force and dare us to do, ultimately, is to see ideology in terms other than those of a moralistically denounced “illusion”—what Barthes calls mythical speech. As my brief overview of Zhang’s evaluators shows, we can be so caught up in our habits of thinking by way of depth that we would read even those discourses that are meant to be critical of depth in a deep way. When the truth is thought to be something lying behind, beneath, below, and beyond ideology, ideology becomes simply a mask and a veil to be indignantly stripped away. But ideology is seldom, if ever, that.

We can now return to the implications of Barthes’s *Mythologies*. In retrospect, we realize that ideology-as-mask constitutes what is the “content” part of Barthes’s inquiry. For Barthes, the mass culture phenomena of France in the 1950s—from detergent advertisements to plastic to the cover pictures of popular magazines—were a kind of mythologized language, a second order signification that was saturated with the ideology of the bourgeoisie. This mythologized language entices the masses with wishes for those things that, precisely because of the hierarchical class structure of bourgeois society, they will never be able to possess. Barthes’s chief reference here is Marx’s and Engels’s *German Ideology*, in which ideology is defined as an upside-down version of reality, a camera obscura.<sup>60</sup> Accordingly, myth for Barthes is a kind of veil that naturalizes—that hides the real social conditions of their making

Even though Barthes was writing about French society in the 1950s, the problems crystallized by his remarkable little book remain germane to this day. Central to these problems is the age-old tendency, among intellectuals in particular, to distrust surface phenomena. As a result, whatever is glossy, beautiful, or glamorous always takes on the status of the suspect. Depending on the type of criticism being mobilized, myth or ideology is alternately mapped onto “the culture industry” (Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer), masculinist “visual pleasure” (Laura Mulvey), or orientalism (Edward Said), but the rhetorical move remains the same: what is ideological remains the illusion that prevents us from seeing or knowing the truth; and criticism’s task, it is believed, lies in unveiling that illusion. We see how this is the case in some of the interpretations of Zhang’s films: all the talk about his lack of depth and his pandering to the tastes of Westerners is part and parcel of this universal distrust of surface phenomena, phenomena that tend to be treated as myth, error, and deception. To put it in the terms of our ethnic paradigm, such attitudes amount to a continual repudiation of the associations of *xu*.

Toward the end of *Mythologies*, Barthes realizes that the demythifying activity he has been pursuing places him in an impossible situation: he would either have to maintain a critical stance and forsake all the pleasures of mass culture or, if he decides he would have a good time after all, he must allow himself to fall prey to ideology. Writing at a time when French intellectual life was inseparable from existentialism, he calls this “alienation”: “The fact that we cannot manage to achieve more than an unstable grasp of reality doubtless gives the measure of our present alienation: we constantly drift between the object and its demystification, powerless to render its wholeness. For if we penetrate the object, we liberate it but we destroy it; and if we acknowledge its full weight, we respect it, but we restore it to a state which is still mystified.”<sup>61</sup>

At the same time, however, the “tool” that Barthes uses to deal with this ancient problem of myth—the tool of semiotics—does not allow him to stop simply at the moralistic stance of “turning ideology on its head” that he took from Marx and Engels. Once it is understood that the sign is constituted in a *shifting* relationship between signifier and signified, the halting of signifiers at specific signifieds that leads to the formation of ideology is, far from being permanent, itself subject to further shifting. In other words, there is nothing in the makeup of the sign

itself that is intrinsic to myth; accordingly, semiotics, when used radically, would render the “content” part of Barthes’s analysis (the understanding of ideology as upside-down reality, as distortion, as deception) problematic. The “tool” that Barthes is using hence becomes no longer merely a tool but a fundamental challenge to his thesis about ideology: this tool shows that not only is signification ideology but ideology, too, is signification. And as signification, ideology also is constructed from a shifting relationship between signifier and signified, and thus subject to change.

Eventually, Barthes would realize the untenability of his position in *Mythologies* and fundamentally revise his thesis. As he writes in the 1970s:

I believe . . . that even if the new semiology . . . has not applied itself further to the myths of our time since the last of the texts in *Mythologies* where I sketched out an initial semiotic approach to social language, it is at least conscious of its task: no longer simply to *upend* (or *right*) the mythical message, to stand it back on its feet, with denotation at the bottom and connotation at the top, nature on the surface and class interest deep down, but rather to change the object itself, to produce a new object, point of departure for a new science.<sup>62</sup>

My point in recapitulating the problems epitomized by Barthes’s book—problems that are no doubt already familiar to many readers—is to underscore how persistent the habit of thinking about ideology as illusion remains. This is particularly so in academic circles, because the scholarly way of thinking specializes in analysis and penetration, and, therefore, in showing that things are not what they seem. As scholars, we tend to distrust what appears and to believe in what does not appear. We are, in other words, much closer to Chen Kaige than to Zhang Yimou in our ways of approaching the world. Consequently, when dealing with someone like Zhang, scholarly investigations continue to be mired in their own deep habits and to move farther and farther away from the obvious intervention—from the intervention that takes the form of the obvious—introduced by Zhang.<sup>63</sup> The result of such investigations is that the prejudices already built into ethnic paradigms of

evaluation such as *xu* and *shi* are now reinforced *transculturally* by the equally strong anti-illusion compulsions that characterize many critiques of cross-cultural representation, and vice versa.

If, on the other hand, we give up our deep habits (positive or negative), we will see that the challenge offered by Zhang's films is so basic that it undermines the ways of seeing—to use John Berger's famous title—that are cherished in *both* Western and non-Western cultures. In the remainder of this chapter I will attempt to specify what this challenge is.

### The Oriental's Orientalism; or, Exhibitionism Between Cultures

Surfaces are not simply another type of "production." The superficiality of Zhang's films does not arise simply from the fact that they constitute a spectacle of oppression and dehumanization in feudal China. Equally important is that such a spectacle seems familiar, conventional, at times even banal. In other words, if a certain force emanates from surfaces, it is not only because surfaces are glossy but also because they are hackneyed and clichéd. To explain this, I will take a key series of scenes from *Judou*.

Near the beginning of the film, Tianqing secretly watches his aunt wash herself every morning through a hole in the wall. As Judou discovers this to her shame, she first tries to cover up the hole but then changes her mind. One morning, after making certain that Tianqing is watching as usual, she slowly turns around and, while sobbing, uncovers her naked upper body. Jenny Kwok Wah Lau observes perceptively in regard to this scene:

One finds that the explicit erotic content of the film—beginning when Judou deliberately turns around to expose her naked body to the peeping Tianqing—is not derived from a simple act of narcissism. Indeed, her tired, dirty, and bruised body, together with the melancholy accompanying music, offers no "visual pleasure" for Tianqing or the film audience. Judou's turning around repre-

sents a decisive move against the gerontocratic and patriarchal rule that operates against her. And I propose that it is her implicit attack on this rule that has aroused the Chinese authorities' antagonism and the Chinese audience's unease.<sup>64</sup>

Lau's comments point succinctly to the basic *defiant* mood of all three of Zhang's films. Similarly, writing about *Judou*, W. A. Callahan points out that "Ju Dou makes a political decision when she decides to let Tianqing peek at her through a hole in the wall as she bathes."<sup>65</sup> As Judou turns around, what begins as an episode of voyeuristic eroticism takes on entirely different implications. As she confronts Tianqing with her naked body, Judou is, we may say, taking into her own hands the "to-be-looked-at-ness" that conventionally constitutes femininity. If the female body in its "to-be-looked-at-ness" is a cultural cliché, Judou's move is that of *quoting the cliché*: she exhibits her female body for the male gaze literally, in the manner that one cites a well-used platitude. The effect of this gesture—of quoting the most-quoted, of displaying the most fetishized—is no longer simply voyeuristic pleasure but a heightened self-consciousness.

But even though this level of self-display-as-citation marks Zhang's film with a postmodernist sense of irony, the mood of defiance does not stop at the formalism of irony only. With her naked front in full view to Tianqing, what Judou exposes is not the beauty of her body but the way it has been abused. What is on display, what is being cited, is not simply the cliché of the female body but, crucially, the signs of violence it bears.<sup>66</sup> Judou's "turn" thus amounts to an exposition of what we might call the *brutality of the cliché and the brutality of convention* (brutality in the sense of both cruelty and bruteness/rawness): she turns the eroticism of the spectacle into a deliberate *demonstration* of and against the patriarchal order that crushes her. Her female body—that crude, banal surface that patriarchy raids and idealizes at will—becomes in this scene a literal means of confrontation.

At the same time, this brave self-display also changes the relationship between voyeur and fetishized woman. The erotic interest that initiates Tianqing's and Judou's exchange now takes on the additional significance of a sympathy and empathy between them as *fellow victims* of the same feudal order, in which those who are dependent on the master for

their survival—be they a man or a woman, a horse or a pig—are fed, used, and exploited uniformly. If Judou's self-display gratifies Tianqing's fantasies, it also turns the classic masculinist greediness of those fantasies into an identification between them, an identification that would continue in the form of their lifelong *alliance* against the patriarchal order that sacrifices women and powerless men alike.<sup>67</sup>

Other examples from Zhang's films also indicate the force of defiance that he associates with surfaces and surface behavior. If such defiance is a sign of resistance against power, this resistance is consistently being externalized. We think of Jiuer's unfeminine gesture of assuming her dead husband's wine-making business and turning it from private proprietorship into a communally owned production, and her "unchaste" gesture of openly letting another man into her widowed life. We think of Songlian's deliberately uncooperative behavior and her blatant lie about being pregnant as well as of her spiteful way of picking fights with her rivals in the Chen household. Most of all, we think of the young maidservant Yaner's death in *Raise the Red Lantern*. On discovering that Yaner helped expose her fake pregnancy, thus robbing her of her esteemed status in the house, Songlian takes revenge on Yaner in a cruel way: she shows everyone Yaner's most treasured secret—a collection of old red lanterns that Yaner secretly lights in her servant's quarters in imitation of the family ritual so cherished by the ladies of the house. But it is not enough to put Yaner to shame in public: as her lanterns are set on fire in the courtyard, the first wife of the house also orders that Yaner be punished by kneeling in the cold until she apologizes. Yaner refuses to apologize and, in a debilitated state, dies. By demonstrating with her own life, Yaner's is the ultimate gesture of defiance. She does not harbor her resistance inside her; instead she uses her female body—that pathetic, insignificant piece of banality—to *face* the monstrosity of an order whose victims, such as Songlian and the other wives, can just as easily turn into victimizers.

In Zhang's films, all such behavior of defiance signifies a challenge in the literal sense of a fronting, facing, and daring of convention with the self-assurance of desperation. The power of surfaces is thus the power of confrontation, which ultimately makes us, the spectators, aware of the sensation of being stared at. Against the screen of vivid colors and images, we suddenly find ourselves the objects of the gaze emanating from the images on the screen. This gaze is intense and discomforting:

especially for those spectators whose identities are sutured with the culture-specific images on the screen—who think of themselves as "Chinese," in other words—the force of surfaces jolts them into a particular kind of *self-consciousness*, a consciousness of their "ethnicity" in none-too-flattering terms.

At this point, I would like to borrow from Thomas Elsaesser's study of Rainer Werner Fassbinder in order to contend that, like Fassbinder's, Zhang's cinema is about the affect of exhibitionism rather than (as is often assumed) that of voyeurism.<sup>68</sup> In his analysis, Elsaesser associates the exhibitionism in Fassbinder's films with specific historical happenings, such as the German security state during and after the Second World War. Elsaesser suggests, for instance, that the pleasure of fascism for the average German is perhaps "less the sadism and brutality of SS officers than the pleasure of being seen, of placing oneself in view of the all-seeing eye of the State."<sup>69</sup> Fassbinder's films, accordingly, capture the structure of identification that is inscribed in the fascistic specularization of public and private life and that may be sloganized as "to be is to be perceived."<sup>70</sup>

For Elsaesser, Fassbinder's films are interesting not simply because he represents this structure of "being seen" but also because Fassbinder takes the all-pervasive surveillance of a state machinery and its coercive formation of subjectivity as his starting point, and produces, *in parody*, a kind of self-estranged exhibitionism in his characters: "In the face of a bureaucratic surveillance system ever more ubiquitous, Fassbinder toys with . . . an act of terrorist exhibitionism which turns the machinery of surveillance—including the camera—into an occasion for self-display."<sup>71</sup> By arguing that exhibitionism is actually a way of problematizing the state's all-pervasive gaze, Elsaesser thus shows that exhibitionism does not have to be the frivolous gesture it is taken to be by moralistic critics but instead can be seen as a subversive way of engaging with political authoritarianism.

Even though the film contents of Fassbinder and Zhang are worlds apart, what they share is, I think, this understanding of exhibitionism. This understanding is part of a determination to respond to political authoritarianism aesthetically through popular rather than elitist (philosophical) means. These means include banal and at times sentimental cinematic elements that recur in both Fassbinder's and Zhang's films, such as melodrama,<sup>72</sup> pretty women, stereotyped characters, illicit sex

petty gossipy neighbors, collective memories of the oppressiveness of fascism, playacting, intense colors and color contrasts, and melodious music. But what makes a comparison between the German and Chinese filmmakers especially revealing is their mutual sensitivity to the immobility of conventional social boundaries, to the pernicious vigilance and hypocrisy engendered by such boundaries, and to the severe ostracization awaiting transgressors. This sensitivity leads, in different but equally remarkable ways, to Fassbinder's and Zhang's tactical deployments of stylized gestures of self-display in constructing the chief interests of their cinemas.

In Zhang, the machine of surveillance is not the German security state before or after the Second World War but *the double gaze of the Chinese security state*<sup>73</sup> and *the world's, especially the West's, orientalism*. The exhibitionism of his films hence moves beyond the male masochists that typically embody Fassbinder's use of exhibitionism to include the "primitives" that are women and the ethnographic details that signify "China." In other words, for Zhang, the problem of a predominantly visual culture-writing is how to look at this double gaze of the Chinese state and the West in such a way as to return to it the very cruelty that emanates from it. How, his films ask, do we make images so as to "render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's"?

What Zhang's films display are therefore also double. We see, on the one hand, the sadness of powerless lives under Chinese rule. In films like *Judou* and *Raise the Red Lantern*, the melodramatic staging of ethnic practices—such as the naming ceremony for a newborn son, the ritual of *lan lu dang guan* ("blocking the road and coffin") required of survivors to show filial piety to the dead, the absurd family customs of raising red lanterns, giving massages to favored concubines, requiring wives and concubines to share meals, and so forth—amounts to an exhibitionism that returns the gaze that is the Chinese family and state's inhuman surveillance. On the other hand, as I already argued in part 2, chapter 1, the "ethnicity"—"Chineseness"—of Zhang's films is also the sign of a cross-cultural commodity fetishism, a production of value between cultures. Precisely because ethnic practices are theatricalized as arcane and archaic, Zhang is showing a "China" that is at once subalternized and exoticized by the West. The "ethnicity" of his films amounts to an exhibitionism that returns the gaze of orientalist surveillance, a gaze that demands of non-Western peoples mythical pictures and stories to which

convenient labels of otherness such as "China," "India," "Africa," and so forth can be affixed.

It would hence be imprecise, though not erroneous, to say that directors such as Zhang are producing a new kind of orientalism. For if orientalism, understood in the sense Said uses it, is in part a form of voyeuristic aggression, then what Zhang is producing is rather an exhibitionist self-display that contains, in its very excessive modes, a critique of the voyeurism of orientalism itself. (Mis)construed by many as mere self-display (in the spirit of airing one's dirty laundry in public), this exhibitionism—what we may call the Oriental's orientalism—does not make its critique moralistically or resentfully. Instead, it turns the remnants of orientalism into elements of a new ethnography. Like a Judou turning around, citing herself as fetishized woman and displaying to her voyeur the scars and wounds she bears, this ethnography accepts the historical fact of orientalism and performs a critique (i.e., evaluation) of it by staging and parodying orientalism's politics of visibility. In its self-subalternizing, self-exoticizing visual gestures, the Oriental's orientalism is first and foremost a demonstration—the display of a tactic.

The result of all this, paradoxically, is that Zhang has won high international acclaim for all his films, including those for which he served as cinematographer and actor, such as *Yellow Earth* and *Old Well*. Perhaps in response to the no longer negligible worldwide renown that Zhang is enjoying, the Chinese government first banned *Judou* and *Raise the Red Lantern* and then, for reasons that are equally incomprehensible, lifted the ban in 1992. The Chinese Xinhua News Agency even applauded Zhang's more recent *The Story of Qiuju* (1992), claiming that it was, "after all, the work of a first-rate director."<sup>74</sup>

Elsasser writes in regard to the West German Cinema:

The strategy of treating artefacts and cultural objects as commodities, in order to make them enter into but also create a market, is much clearer with the New German Cinema than in other cases. . . . It was a cinema created around the very contradictions of culture and commodity, of (self-)expression value and (self-)exhibition value, in a modern capitalist economy that depends on export to sustain internal growth . . .<sup>75</sup>

*Some Contemporary Chinese Films*

The Germans are beginning to love their own cinema because it has been endorsed, confirmed, and benevolently looked at by someone else: for the German cinema to exist, it first had to be seen by non-Germans. It enacts, as a national cinema, now in explicitly economic and cultural terms, yet another form of self-estranged exhibitionism.<sup>76</sup>

If we substitute the word *Chinese* for the word *German*, these passages could become precise descriptions of the fates of Zhang's films in mainland China as well. If their glossy surfaces are the "myths" that commodify and betray China, Zhang's films nonetheless achieve for modern Chinese culture the attention and status that many sophisticated others fail to bring. Most important, they do this with a force of defiance that challenges us to abandon our most deeply cultivated -- and most deeply cherished--intellectual habits.

Part 3

*Film as Ethnography; or, Translation between Cultures in  
the Postcolonial World*

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Editors: Meaghan Morris and Stephen Muecke  
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The

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## WRITING AS A FOREIGNER

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Chris Berry

*Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography and Contemporary Chinese Cinema.* Rey Chow. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995, 252 pp. ISBN 0 231 07683 5

Before undertaking this review, and I admit partly because I was daunted by the task, I decided to see what others have said about Rey Chow's previous writings and how her work gets deployed in their critical thought. The results surprised me. I found no shortage of glowing reviews in journals ranging across a wide variety of fields from visual anthropology to women's studies and even, on occasion, Asian studies. However, despite the speed with which her comet has risen since the release of *Woman and Chinese Modernity* and the frequent citation of her work as an exemplar of postcolonial critique, I found few extensive deployments of her work.<sup>1</sup> There were plenty of references in footnotes, mentions in lists of important new thinkers and so forth, but few detailed discussions or analyses.

In *Primitive Passions*, Chow tackles what is probably the most widely known body of texts she has written about to date. The contemporary Chinese films selected are mostly internationally circulated and recognised arthouse movies. Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth (Huang Tudi)* and *King of the Children (Haizi Wang)* feature particularly strongly along with Zhang Yimou's trilogy, *Judou*, *Red Sorghum (Hong Gaoliang)* and *Raise the Red Lantern (Da Hong Denglong Gao Gao Gua)*. The result is certainly the most sophisticated, challenging and insightful collection of writing on these filmmakers so far. Furthermore, as the lengthy (and weighty) subtitle of the book indicates, its relevance extends far beyond

Cinema Studies to encompass a wide range of contemporary critical concerns.

As in her other writings, Chow turns texts into pretexts for her own spectacular discursive displays of erudition. She does not make a meal of them. She transforms them into an intellectual banquet, a feast of references and topics spun out across both Chinese and English language critical thought, rich in insights and often infuriating in provocations. Hence the central core of the text, which consists of two new and two previously-published but revised essays on specific films, is bookended by two longer and more general essays. The latter consider such topics as the role of cinematic visual culture and gender in the construction of Chinese modernity, and the re-imagining of Chinese ethnicity in a post-Mao era marked by disillusion with the models of the socialist heyday and the challenge of engagement with the globalising capitalist economy.

In the face of all this, it is difficult to know where to begin. Maybe this is part of what inhibits other writers from using her insights. But, I would suggest, maybe it is also the postcolonial challenge to existing epistemological frameworks issued by her work. Therefore, rather than attempt the impossible task of summarising all the arguments about particular films and concepts made in the book, it is these more general issues that I wish to focus on, taking one particular and central argument as my starting point. In this way, and in a manner that rhymes with Chow's own take on contemporary Chinese cinema, I hope to consider her writing and the resistances it seems to be encountering as manifestations of the very globalising, postcolonial culture she addresses.

Starting from the cover of the paperback edition of *Primitive Passions* is Gong Li. Established as China's only film actor with international box office pull, Gong Li is a veritable emblem of Chinese cultural participation in that globalising, postcolonial culture. Her image is also almost certainly what first comes to mind whenever Zhang Yimou's films are mentioned.

Yet, unlike the many other commentators she cites, Chow is not satisfied to see Zhang Yimou's images of Gong Li as merely further instances of male voyeurism upon objectified women, compounded by orientalist exoticism. Instead, she seeks to move beyond this, arguing that there is more to be said. She does so by drawing on her earlier work in *Woman and Chinese Modernity* and placing Zhang's films in a long heritage of Chinese popular fiction. Here, suffering women are not only objects of sympathy but also of identification by virtue of their admittedly problematic discursive deployment as symbols for China itself.

The particular still on the cover of *Primitive Passions* is taken from a scene in *Judou*, discussed at length in Chow's chapter on the trilogy of

Zhang Yimou films (142–172). Here Judou is not only spied upon by Tianqing, her lover-to-be, when she is bathing the wounds inflicted by her sadistic husband. Perceiving Tianqing's presence, she also turns to face him, defiantly displaying herself and her wounds to him.

Just as the character Judou perceives her own objectification and turns it back on her viewer, so Chow argues Zhang's film seizes all the sexist, patriarchal, orientalist baggage of China as a locally and globally circulating set of signifiers and displays it as an act of defiance. In so doing, in tactically taking on board these established signifiers but re-deploying them in what Bhabha might call an act of 'colonial mimicry', the very assumption of agency pulls the carpet out from under them, so to speak, reversing the poles of power and action they depend upon to maintain their established valencies and significations.<sup>2</sup> Voyeurism becomes exhibitionism, and objectification is answered with defiance. Yes, the image seems to say, I am that thing! And just as this act initiates Judou's agency within the world of the film, so Zhang's move has enabled his films and Chinese cinema to engage with and actively participate in the international cinema.

In *Primitive Passions*, Chow's discussion of this image is both the culmination of her argument and its linchpin. In the preceding chapters, she has covered a number of films which, like Zhang's, re-write China on the screen. Chow sees these texts as participating in a new ethnography, a new writing of Chinese self-conceptualisation in response to the crisis provoked by the loss of faith in Maoist socialism and the encounter with globalising capitalism.

However, what is at stake in her argument is not only the particular interpretations of the particular texts, but also the grounds upon which such interpretations should be undertaken. At the beginning of her chapter on Zhang's trilogy, she states:

I will ... use Zhang's films as a way to raise some issues in cross-cultural interpretative politics. This does not mean that I will neglect the specificities of Zhang's films. On the contrary, my argument is that these specificities can be fully appreciated only when we abandon certain modes and assumptions of interpretation (142).

What are the modes and assumptions that Chow's interpretation calls upon us to abandon? Who is the 'we' she is addressing? And what are the new modes to replace those abandoned? Perhaps most immediately clear to those engaged in English-language cultural studies from this example is the assumption that any display of a female character, especially by a male director, is always, already and only a sexist objectification. As Chow states, she is fully in sympathy with the 'feminist intent' of such an approach, but 'in criticising Zhang's "traditional" or "patriar-

chal" treatment of women, feminist criticism may unwittingly put itself at the service of a kind of conservatism ...' (152).

This conservatism is presumably that type of feminist framework which has reached a limit where it cannot see or facilitate any potential breaks with patriarchy, because its own legitimacy as a pure counter-discourse has become paradoxically dependent upon maintaining the enemy it simultaneously rails against. This argument is not in itself unfamiliar, and Chow's own interpretation of Judou provides an example of an alternative mode which sees oppression but places emphasis on the fact that, no matter how unbalanced the poles of power, there is always the possibility of response.

However, what is also at stake here is the politics of anti-colonialism. In the context of a Chinese popular fiction discourse where women carry symbolic status as China, Chow's refusal to take the line between male Subject and female Other as an unbreachable given simultaneously also constitutes a refusal to assume the impermeability of the line between First World Subject and Third World Other in the context of the globalised circulation of Zhang's films. In this, her particular postcolonial feminism is clear.

Her discussion of Judou, and indeed her work in general, should also be seen as an engagement with the critics of postcolonial criticism. It achieves this not so much through a direct engagement with them, but more through its status as an example of what politically engaged postcolonial criticism can be and entails. In particular, the critical discourse practised in *Primitive Passions* counters many of the allegations that have been levelled at postcolonial critique by the adherents of the three worlds discourse.

Ella Shohat's 'Notes on the "Post-Colonial"' is an oft-cited example of the criticism of postcolonial discourse, recently revised for inclusion in *Unthinking Eurocentrism*.<sup>3</sup> The latter work maintains a three worlds perspective, but attempts to append various insights gained from post-colonial criticism. The main thrust of Shohat's article is to accuse postcolonial critical discourse of depoliticising the field. This is potentially a very serious charge, and it would be more convincing were it backed with more concrete instances drawn from postcolonial critique itself. For example, in common with many others, Shohat accuses post-colonial discourse of homogenising and blurring difference; 'As a descriptive catch-all term, "hybridity" fails to discriminate between the diverse modalities of hybridity: colonial imposition, obligatory assimilation, political co-optation, cultural mimicry, and so forth'.<sup>4</sup>

However, a generalised and homogenised account of the dynamics of postcoloniality is precisely what Chow's work avoids. To return to the

example of her analysis of the shot of Judou on the cover of *Primitive Passions*, she locates it very carefully in a complex and specific matrix that simultaneously accommodates a legacy of melodramatic popular fiction centring on female characters, the internal Chinese cultural crisis of the mid-eighties, and the work's international circulation. To turn Shohat's criticism on its head, these simultaneous ambivalences are what hanging on to the three worlds discourse risks making invisible and cannot accommodate. Such approaches are limited to an either – or binarism, which makes it impossible to see both the complexity that Chow so carefully delineates and the political engagement in the deconstruction of colonial power dynamics she argues it enables. Unlike 'First World', 'Third World' and so forth, which function as pure, essential, ontological concepts, 'hybridity', 'syncretism', 'postcoloniality' and so forth do indeed function as descriptive categories. And this is what enables them to be specific and flexible in their usage, for each instance of their application is particular rather than an expression of an underlying pure concept.

Thus, the three worlds discourse also risks a conservatism that runs counter to the intentions of its proponents. As Chow details at some length (151–6), both inside and outside China Zhang, Chen Kaige and many other Chinese filmmakers successful overseas are accused of peddling exoticised images of Chinese backwardness to titillate Western viewers, of orientalism. This criticism is issued not only by critics following the Chinese government line, but also by those with a well-established independent stance. One of the best examples is the well-known cultural and political commentator Dai Qing, who went to prison following her support for the 1989 student Democracy Movement.

In an article translated into English and cited by Chow, Dai complains that Zhang's movies are made for foreigners and expresses her outrage at his tendency to invent apparently traditional decor, customs, costumes and so forth which never existed.<sup>5</sup> For example, the whole business of hanging the red lanterns in *Raise the Red Lantern* has no basis in fact, there is no historical basis for the dyeing works architecture shown in *Judou*, and the liquor distilled from sorghum is red in *Red Sorghum* but clear in reality.

In this critique of Zhang and others, issues of authenticity and betrayal are linked by a discourse in which Chineseness is understood in terms of national identity. Reading this type of critique, it seems that not only is telling lies about China to please foreigners, but pleasing foreigners is always already to tell lies about China. For Chow, however, the highly stylised and foregrounded unauthenticity of Zhang's work is part of what appeals to her politics, for it displaces the concern with authenticity that underlies such discourses. Instead, the foregrounded fictitious quality of

Zhang's work emphasises that although his works are engaged in a Chinese ethnography, that ethnography is always already a mythology, one of many possible constructed discourses rather than a claim to authenticity. In this way, it can be mobilised to disrupt any attempt to base Chinese self-conceptualisation in a model of a singular, authentic, identity.

Yet, for Dai and the others who criticise Zhang in this way, Chow suggests it is precisely the obsessive belief that there is and must be a singular and authentic Chinese identity that risks conservatism and blunts their critique. The risk lies precisely in the ease with which these writings are co-opted into the government's own nationalistic attacks on Zhang and others. Possibly intended to divert attention from internal tensions, these were notably mobilised in the wake of the Tiananmen Square Massacre of 1989 and have most recently manifested themselves in the disputes over war exercises in the Taiwan Strait at the time of the Taiwanese presidential election in early 1996.<sup>6</sup> Like the government line, these writings operate from a theoretical framework which makes no space for internal difference within Chineseness let alone the concept that Chineseness is constructed through its international as well as local circulation. Although few of these writers would see themselves as followers of a government line, the epistemological identity of their framework to that of the government makes it impossible for them to maintain adequate distance.

Perhaps we can get some further sense of what is at stake in Chow's resistance to the national identity that forms the basis for third world nationalism, not only in terms of the problems of the three worlds discourse but also in terms of who pays the price and the possibilities that are lost, by turning to one of her other essays, recently published in *UTS Review*: 'The Politics of Admittance: Female Sexual Agency, Miscegenation and the Formation of Community in Frantz Fanon'.<sup>7</sup> Contrary to those who hold that Fanon has little to say about the 'coloured woman' in his writings, Chow finds that she is what troubles his vision of the anti-colonial nation. She haunts that vision as a sexual agent who poses the threat of miscegenation, itself a blurring of the clear line between the anti-colonial nation-in-formation and the First World at the same time as her own sexual difference disrupts that fantasy of a unified formation from within.<sup>8</sup> As Chow writes:

The ultimate danger posed by the Negress and the mulatto is hence not their sexual behaviour *per se*, but the fact that their sexual agency carries with it a powerful (re)conceptualisation of community – of community as based on difference, heterogeneity, creolisation; of community as the 'illegitimate' mixings and crossings of colour,

pigmentation, physiognomy – that threateningly vies with the male intellectual's (21).

Likewise, for those who can only conceive of communities as pure, unified formations with clearly delineated borders, the display of Judou to Western viewers via the international circulation of Zhang Yimou's texts can only constitute an act of betrayal, a sort of virtual miscegenation. Chow writes:

... what makes the women's conscious or unconscious desires for miscegenation such a traumatic event in Fanon's theory is that such 'sexual' desires in fact share with the male intellectual's race-conscious, anti-colonialist message a common goal – the goal of ending the compartmentalised, Manichean division of the world into coloniser and colonised, us and them, that is colonialism's chief ideological legacy (19).

Returning to my opening curiosity about why Chow's work has not been more extensively deployed, it is clear from this passage and from the example she sets in *Primitive Passions* and her other work that politically engaged postcolonial criticism requires a wholesale theoretical and critical reorientation. It is more than just appending a few passages attempting to accommodate phenomena such as hybridity and syncretism within what is otherwise a three worlds discourse. This is what is done, of course with the best intentions, in Shohat and Stam's *Unthinking Eurocentrism*.

Furthermore, this wholesale reorientation involves not only a primary focus on phenomena that breach the defining categories that subtend colonialism and its legacy. It also involves the enunciatory location of the critic. This has also been a major issue in criticisms of postcolonial discourse. Perhaps the most extended example of this challenge can be found in Arif Dirlik's article, 'The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism'.<sup>9</sup>

Dirlik has been a most insightful and innovative Marxist critic, but postcolonial discourse clearly sticks in his throat. In particular, in the article, he notes the failure of postcolonial critics to analyse the conditions of their own existence. Sticking to the three worlds discourse, for him, they are 'Third World intellectuals [who] have arrived in First World academe' as a result of the globalising forces of capitalism itself (329). Noting in a footnote with some disdain Gayatri Spivak's position at Yale (330), he concludes that:

To put it bluntly, postcoloniality is designed to avoid making sense of the current crisis and, in the process, to cover up the origins of postcolonial intellectuals in a global capitalism of which they are not so much victims as beneficiaries (353).

Coming from the Professor of History at esteemed Duke University and

a man who claims to be '(more or less) one of the Third World intellectuals in First World academe' (328), this borders on hypocrisy or, at a very minimum, hoisting oneself on one's own petard.

More important, however, it demonstrates once again the pertinence of Chow's remarks about the inability to see the subtleties and political possibilities of the current situation if one persists with interpretive modes and assumptions that exclude them. For Dirlik, it seems, intellectuals can only be First World or Third World (he acknowledges the demise of the Second World on p. 350). And those who term themselves postcolonial can only be accommodated into this epistemology as traitors from the Third World trying to be First World, much as the same framework can only see Zhang Yimou's films as pimping Gong Li as an orientalist titillation for Western viewers.

However, what the alternative position might be remains inadequately articulated in postcolonial discourse. This is not a matter of giving an individual, personal or psychological account of one's enunciatory position. Rather, it requires an explicit account of how the postcolonial intellectual locates herself or himself in relation to the reconfigured topography of globalising capitalism in order to remain politically engaged. As Stuart Hall notes in his sophisticated and penetrating account of the various challenges mounted against postcolonial critical discourse, for all the failings of Dirlik's article, in pointing out the absence of such an account he has indeed 'put his finger squarely, and convincingly, on a serious lacuna in the post-colonial episteme'.<sup>10</sup>

Chow does not answer this larger question directly in *Primitive Passions*. However, she does make a striking statement about her own position. She claims that 'I write about contemporary mainland Chinese cinema ... ultimately as a foreigner' (51). What are the implications of this remark? For Dirlik, this would presumably mean nothing more than a disavowal of her Third World roots. I doubt whether this is the case, nor do I think this is offered as any sort of apology for a lack of authenticity. Although such a remark certainly cannot constitute the fully articulated analysis of the relationship between postcolonial criticism and global capitalism that Hall and Dirlik both call for, it does offer some clues about what is entailed.

For, in claiming to 'write ... as a foreigner', it seems to me that Chow is provocatively marking out both her rejection of the concept of the authentic voice and her rejection of the idea that Chinese culture is a self-enclosed entity that only those living in and belonging to a self-designated national community have a stake in (in other words, the Chinese government line that outsiders should not intervene in China's internal affairs). As her discussion of Fanon indicates, national communities are constituted in our world as patriarchal. For Chow, it is only possible to

be both a feminist and an anti-colonial intellectual by working in a post-colonial framework that admits multiplicities of difference. The very writing of *Primitive Passions* is an attempt to produce such an enabling framework.

Once again, the implications of this are daunting for other scholars who wish to write about cultures other than their own. For it requires a wholesale reorientation and rethinking of their enunciatory position. In a world where the line between First World and Third World is no longer impermeable, as the very existence of what Dirlik persists in calling 'Third World' intellectuals in the 'First World' itself illustrates, they cannot claim to be writing from an uninvolved distance anymore. In a situation where the former populations of the Third World cannot be seen as simply the objects of colonialist capitalism but also as agents within the societies of globalised capitalism, scholars need to rethink their relations to both the former First World and the former Third World. What exactly are their various interests and concerns in a world where the former Third World can, to greater or lesser degrees, choose to accept or reject their work with consequences not only for the former Third World but also for them? What do they hope to gain from engaging in the anti-colonialist struggle, other than a sense of their own nobility? How should this situation cause them to address their work and to attempt to engage politically?

*Primitive Passions* is addressed to both Chinese intellectuals, in and outside the People's Republic, and to other intellectuals interested in China. I interpret this to stem from Chow's understanding that all their various responses will impact upon her efforts to encourage and participate in carving out the kind of postcolonialist world and Chinese culture she requires for her own self-empowerment and that of other Chinese women. In other words, Chow's writings work from the assumption that Chinese intellectuals and intellectuals elsewhere in the postcolonial globe are located in a shared (but not undifferentiated) space.

By way of contrast, in *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, Shohat and Stam seem to address their calls for a multicultural pedagogy to the intellectuals of the First World alone. Although I am sure that both authors are globally engaged in many aspects of their work and their own lives, the logical implication of this rhetorical address, intentional or not, is that First World intellectuals are still the only ones that really count, that can actually exert power, and of course this is one of the hidden assumptions of the three worlds discourse. Also as a result of this epistemological framework, their well-motivated calls for a multicultural pedagogy are not, as far as I can tell, grounded in an attempt to explain how this will benefit their (implicitly First World) readers and work for their political and material interests, because again the three worlds discourse assumes that the interests of

these First World readers can only be aligned with colonialism and neo-colonialism. Rather, the logic of this seems to come down to an appeal to self-sacrificing liberal fairness. In this sense, Shohat and Stam are disabled by their own epistemological framework. For, although they quite admirably call for solidarity with the Third World, it is impossible to see how this can be achieved with a thinking that cannot articulate the grounds of meaningful contact, mutual impact, common interests against other foes, and so forth.

In conclusion, then, I would argue that it is these larger challenges implicitly issued by Chow's critical practice in *Primitive Passions* and elsewhere that are daunting and yet most demand explicit articulation and consideration. This book is not a conventional study of a certain cinema. There is no attempt to discuss the institutional context of filmmaking in China at present. There are no tables indicating numbers of films produced in different studios. There is no discussion of major trends and general directions across the industry as a whole. Put simply, it is not a mapping exercise conducted from some external space.

Rather, *Primitive Passions* attempts to articulate another, engaged framework within which that cinema can be analysed, and this framework attempts to make visible what is at stake in the texts analysed for those engaged in such an interpretive project whether as writers or as readers. As such, it itself constitutes a part of and moves the reader into postcolonial Chinese culture as one which is challenging the remnant epistemology of the colonial order and demanding our attention as a space mobilised by a range of various empowered players. And in the case of Chinese filmmakers, as Chow rightly assumes, the very global circulation of their texts attests to the extension of that power well beyond the borders of the People's Republic itself.

## Notes

1. Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading Between East and West* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).
2. Homi Bhabha, 'Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse', in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 85–92.
3. Ella Shohat, 'Notes on the Post-Colonial', *Social Text* no.31/32 (1992), 99–113.
4. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the media* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 43. For a review of the book that takes a somewhat more generous approach, see Laleen Jayamanne, 'Unthinking Multiculturalism', *UTS Review* 1:2 (November 1995), 202–207.

5. Dai Qing, 'Raised Eyebrows for *Raise the Red Lantern*', *Public Culture*, 5:2 (1993), 333–337.
6. See, for example, Chris Berry, 'A Nation T(w/o)o: Chinese Cinema(s) and Nationhood(s)', in Wimal Dissanayake (ed.), *Colonialism and Nationalism in Asian Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 42–64.
7. Key Chow, 'The Politics of Admittance: Female Agency, Miscegenation and the Formation of Community in Frantz Fanon', *UTS Review* 1:1 (August 1995), 5–29.
8. In her response to Chow's essay, Susan Schwartz finds evidence of other roles for female agency in the creation of new Algerian nation in those of Fanon's writings Chow does not use for her essay. However, in Schwartz's very account of Fanon's revolutionary woman who drops the veil and becomes a sister in the struggle, she concedes that this woman is masculinised and her difference is thus neutralised. This only supports Chow's arguments about the patriarchal quality of national formations and their oppression of those that disrupt them. Susan Schwartz, 'Fanon's Revolutionary Women', *UTS Review* 1:2 (November 1995), 197–201. Much recent work on Chinese women's experiences under Maoism indicates similar sacrifices. See, for example, Phyllis Andors, *The Unfinished Liberation of Chinese Women: 1949–1980* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983); Kay Ann Johnson, *Women, the Family, and Peasant Revolution in China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Judith Stacey, *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); and Marjorie Wolf, *Revolution Postponed: Women in Contemporary China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985).
9. Arif Dirlik, 'The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism', *Critical Inquiry* 20 (Winter 1994), 328–356.
10. Stuart Hall, 'When Was "the Post-Colonial?" Thinking at the Limit', in *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, ed. by Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 258.

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# 暗戀桃花源

**Àn liàn táo huā yuán** (Secret Love: The Peach Blossom Land) 1993 Taiwan

Directed by Stan Lai (Lai Shengchuan), starring Lin Ching Hsia, Jin Shijie and Li Liqun, this film is a cinematic remake of Lai's avant-garde play "The Peach Blossom Land". It was highly acclaimed and awarded at the Tokyo Film Festival in 1993.

In 1998 the play was performed by the Chinese Students Association (consisting mostly of Taiwan, Malaysian and Indonesian students) at the University of Melbourne in both Chinese and English versions under the title "Two Stages" (directed by Jin Yi).

In the film two separate plays are being rehearsed at the same time in the same theater and the actors and directors have to fight for the stage. The first is the story of two lovers, Yun Zhifan and Jiang Bin, who are together in Shanghai at the end of the Second World War (1945), but become separated during the Chinese Civil War. Both go to Taiwan separately, but each believes the other remained on the mainland and is hence incommunicado.

The second is an unconventional stage adaptation of the Jin-era poet Tao Qian's (aka Tao Yuanming 372-427) story **Taohuayuan ji** (Record/tale of the Peach Blossom Spring) about a Never-Never Land discovered by a fisherman who boats his way up to the source of a certain stream. In the original story, the Peach Blossom Land is full of happy people who have escaped from war and chaos and remain blissfully ignorant of the year or dynastic changes back in China. The postmodern stage version is far less perfect, with nagging questions of identity loss, amnesia, dishonesty and adultery constantly rearing their ugly heads. The tension is at points relieved by a sense of the absurd, reinforced by the use of slapstick comedy.

Shot entirely in a studio, the film relies on extensive dialogue.

(See the following article from the book **Transnational Chinese Cinemas** for more details).

Questions for discussion:

1. What do you learn about the Chinese Civil War from this film?
2. How is the Chinese diaspora reflected in the film?
3. What aspects of the film are "postmodern"?

# *Transnational Chinese Cinema*



**Identity,  
Nationhood,  
Gender**



*Edited by*

**Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu**



Zhang Yimou's first film, *Red Sorghum*, took the Golden Bear Award in 1988 at the Berlin International Film Festival. Since then Chinese films have continued to arrest worldwide attention and capture major film awards, thus winning an international following that grows annually. With this increasing popularity, the Chinese film industry has attracted a sizable amount of foreign capital and

has been involved in frequent joint productions. Internationalization on this scale at both the production and consumption levels has raised the question of what constitutes "Chinese cinema." In this collection, critics from various disciplines discuss the central topic of a national cinema and analyze the more recent emergence of "transnational cinema" in Chinese film studies. Applying different methodologies and approaches, they explore the interrelations of national cinematic style, global capitalism, the evolution of the modern nation-state, cultural politics, censorship, and gender identity.

*Transnational Chinese Cinemas* spans nearly the entire length of twentieth-century Chinese film history. Among the film artists discussed are Cai Chusheng, Xie Jin, Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou, Ang Lee, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Stan Lai, John Woo, and Jackie Chan. The volume opens with essays tracing the evolution of Chinese national cinema and transnational cinema in the mainland from the early decades of the twentieth century, through the pre-1949 period, the Mao era, and the post-Mao era, to the age of transnational capitalism at the end of the century. Other essays consider what have been the peripheral and marginalized traditions in relation to mainstream (mainland) Chinese cinema. They explore the construction of local, national, and transnational identity in the films of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Chinese diasporic communities. The final set of essays demonstrates that gender identity has been central to the formation of Chinese national cinema from its earliest days to the present. Femininity, masculinity, and sexuality have been an integral part of the filmic discourses of modernity, nationhood, and history.

This volume represents the most comprehensive, wide-ranging, and up-to-date study of China's major cinematic traditions. It is an indispensable source book for modern Chinese and Asian history, politics, literature, and culture and will be of great interest to teachers, students, and scholars of film studies, cultural studies, gender studies, comparative literature, nationalism, and transnational studies.

**Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu** teaches film, cultural studies, and Chinese literature at the University of Pittsburgh.

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Chapter 6

The Diaspora in Postmodern Taiwan and Hong Kong Film  
Framing Stan Lai's *The Peach Blossom Land*  
with Allen Fong's *Ah Ying*

Jon Kowallis

I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives.

Jean-François Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*

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Born in the United States but educated in Taiwan after the age of twelve, Taiwan “mainlander” Chinese director Stan Lai (Lai Shengchuan) might be better described as an American Asian than an Asian American. Already noticed by *Newsweek*, *Time*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, and the *Asian Wall Street Journal*, he is certainly one of the most prominent theatrical innovators in East Asia today.<sup>1</sup> Recently, he turned from stage to cinema to produce his first full-length feature film, *The Peach Blossom Land* (Anlian Taohuayuan; lit., “Secret Love: The Peach Blossom Spring”).<sup>2</sup> The film won first prize in the young filmmaker’s division of the Berlin Film Festival and the Silver Medal at the Tokyo Film Festival (where a \$100,000 prize enabled him to finance a second film). *The Peach Blossom Land* later took first place in the Asian Film Festival in Singapore. This was a wholly unexpected response to a film most American critics would probably write off as “an art house hit.” Who is Stan Lai and why all this fuss over what might seem, at first glance, an experimental film by a theater director?

After graduating from Furen (Fu-jeu) University in Taiwan, Lai earned his Ph.D. at the University of California, Berkeley, in the Department of Dramatic Art, with a dissertation titled “Oriental Crosscurrents in Modern Western Drama” in 1983, a time when the term “Oriental” was still au courant at Berkeley. In 1982 he studied new techniques of actor-training under Shireen Strooker of the Amsterdam Werkteater, who was then visiting at Berkeley. Enthused about the techniques<sup>3</sup> he had learned and armed with the vital qualification of the Ph.D., he returned to Taiwan to serve as artistic director and professor at the newly founded National Institute of the Arts, where he “did everything anew the right way” (according to Dunbar

Ogden, his old adviser at Berkeley) and currently teaches his own graduate students. Lai writes:

What drew me to Shireen's work was precisely the process of "making" a play that was radically opposed to conventional methods of approaching theatrical production. In a nutshell, I see conventional practice in America, in general, to be an attempt to assemble the divided pieces of production—acting, lighting, scene design, sound, etc.—into a final, cohesive whole. This process involves lots of unknown factors and chance—can an actor attain the certain quality of a certain role? Is the "chemistry" right? Will the scenic designer's ideas conflict with the director's? How will the actors adjust to makeup and costumes? The Amsterdam Werkteater's techniques employed by Shireen Strooker invert this process: Instead of pieces toward a whole, she takes the essence—some guiding thought or emotion—first, and from this genuinely heartfelt essence, the form and pieces of production begin to take shape. Though the end product is never predictable, this process eliminates much of the chance factors of conventional means. From the standpoint of the actors, they are not asked to "inhabit" a role, but rather to use *themselves* to *create* a role. From the standpoint of the designers and technicians, the ideas come by necessity, from the process itself.<sup>4</sup>

Lai also founded his own professional troupe in Taiwan, which he calls, with an American matter-of-factness, Performance Workshop (Biaoyan gongzuofang) and directed numerous plays before making the switch to film. He still intends to "move back and forth between theater and film," but judging from the unlikely critical success of *The Peach Blossom Land* and my hopes for his second feature, *The Red Lotus Society* (1994), chances are that his future will be more and more in cinematic arts, despite temporary protestations to the contrary. I say "unlikely" only because *The Peach Blossom Land* is so avant-garde and innovative, particularly when compared with the work of Mainland filmmakers such as Zhang Yimou and even Chen Kaige. In *The Peach Blossom Land*, historical and temporal frames are constantly switched on the audience to an almost irritating degree of frequency. Some of the sets are so contrived and theatrical that the audience is continually slapped with the "reality" that life is stage and stage is life, while all the time a pseudo real-life drama unfolds, much of it from a hospital bed in Taipei. Regarding this technique, Roswitha Mueller once observed:

The inorganic work of art, the object constructed out of fragments, has its own history. In an article "On Brecht and Eisenstein," Rainer

Friedrich pointed out that Brecht often used the term “montage” to contrast modern art with traditional art. The traditional Aristotelian concept of art, argued Friedrich, centers on the concept of mimesis as *natura naturans*, the productive process of nature. The rise of modern subjectivity in the Renaissance, Friedrich continued, did not do away with the concept of mimesis, but instead merely altered it. The artist was now considered *ut alter deus*, another god. The implication was that the artist no longer imitated nature but was the creator of another nature, the realm of art. The latter was subsequently considered a higher form of reality. Insofar as the aesthetic realm still presented itself as natural and the organic work of art was the norm, the moment of construction first entered on the basis of negating its own artificiality, its constructedness: “For the practical principle of the organic work of art is *ars est celare artem*, art as the concealment of art.”

The hallmark of the modern work of art, on the other hand, is divesting itself of the pretense of being nature and freely displaying itself as artifact. In that sense Friedrich contended that montage is the principle of the modern work of art. The emphasis montage places on the separateness of elements and on heterogeneity prevents the formation of an organic unity. In film, as Sergei Eisenstein has pointed out, it is the mechanical process itself that requires the cutting and juxtaposition of shots.<sup>5</sup>

In Brechtian fashion, Lai’s film begins in a theater (sans overbearing “stage manager”). Sleek female figures grope their way through the dark walkways behind the stage. We are shown the empty seats of an auditorium, as the director and actors talk to one another. Then we are presented with a mock-up set of a play about two new lovers in Shanghai at the end of the Second World War, titled *Anlian*, or *Secret Love*. The young woman, Yun Zhifan (actress Lin Ching-hsia) has family in Guilin and needs to return home just once more to see them, while the man, Jiang Binliu (played by Chin Shih-chieh) is from Dongbei (Manchuria) and longs to see his own family but cannot easily go there.<sup>6</sup> The world for Chinese people has been radically uprooted, and even greater changes (the Communist victory in 1949 and the Taiwan diaspora) are clearly in store. These events separate the lovers, who both go to Taiwan, but each mistakenly believes that the other has remained on the Mainland.

Another set of actors then intrudes on the stage, insisting that the facility has been rented to them for the evening for a dress rehearsal of a play to take place the next day (a Brecht-inspired if not Brechtian device). Much argument ensues, and we are unclear which side will be victorious (perhaps



Fig. 12. Taiwan actors just don't seem to "get it right" in portraying a scene from late 1940s Shanghai. From Stan Lai's film *The Peach Blossom Land* (Anlian Taohuayuan), 1992.

an analogy to the Chinese civil war, which goes on and on with no final resolution?). The lines of dialogue in the Shanghai scene are delivered in high northern-style stage Mandarin, but the intrusion of the actors from the second troupe abruptly brings in the southern Mandarin "Taiwan 'si bu si' accent," another dose of reality for both the audience and the members of the first group of actors.

We are then introduced to the recurring reenactment (by the second troupe) of Tao Yuanming's (A.D. 365-427) fifth-century story, *Tale of the Peach Blossom Spring* (Taohuayuan ji), in which the classical Chinese language intrudes amid a predominantly farcical vernacular (*baihua*) narrative. Premodern stage techniques from traditional opera are used (such as waving blue paper to simulate a river's waves) in the protagonist's upstream journey by boat to a magical Never-never Land called the "Peach Blossom Spring," where he discovers other-worldly refugees "who have known nothing of the outside world since before the Han dynasty."<sup>7</sup> Questions like:



Fig. 13. A parody of Chinese antiquity and the “alternative reality” of Taiwan’s phantasmagoric existence as doppelgänger for Mainland China. From Stan Lai’s film *The Peach Blossom Land* (Anlian Taohuayuan), 1992.

“Do you know where Wuling<sup>8</sup> is?” are met only with bemused incredulity. To make matters worse, the protagonist, an impotent fisherman called Old Tao (Lee Li-chun) feels that his disloyal young wife, Spring Flower (Ismene Ting), and her lover, Master Yuan (Ku Pao-ming), may have been reincarnated there to torment him (in the form of a white-gowned man and woman who look surprisingly like their counterparts back in the “real” world), so the traditional ideal of the bucolic and peaceful Peach Blossom Spring, far away from the troubles and strife of the world, has been skewed into a kind of self-made (or at least uncontrollable) hell, much like what Taiwan became for a number of the refugees from the Mainland. Then there is the hopelessness of finding any direction back: to the question “Where’s Wuling?” the incredulous woman in Peach Blossom Land responds: “What’s ‘Wuling’? Why would you want to get to Wuling?” The protagonist despairs of even describing Wuling to someone who has never been there.

Even though they both speak Chinese, all of the referents are different; just as Taipei has a Jingmei, but Taiwan has no Shanghai, Taiwan unintentionally became, for many people, something of a phantasmagoric doppelgänger for or an ersatz version of China.<sup>9</sup>

Even the name of Taohuayuan is continually questioned throughout the film, when different accents are placed on one of the Chinese characters that make up the name: “Tao HUA Yuan, TAO Hua Yuan, Tao Hua YUAN.” One thinks, perhaps of Tai-wan Sheng, TAI-wan sheng, Tai-wan SHENG (“Taiwan Province,” the official Mainland designation for the island, skewed) and the perceived spiritual, if not intellectual, need for the “rectification of names”—is it really what it purports to be? And what say, if any, do its people have over this? Many of Lai’s word plays are a form of postmodern anarchistic linguistic play. Old Tao decides eventually to return “home” to ask his wife to join him in the Peach Blossom Land. Although the protagonist has enjoyed a prolonged period of uneasy physical safety there (one cannot call it a “life” in any real sense of the word), how much of a refuge is a refuge if you can never go back? Of course, this is the dilemma of modern man as well, not just the mainlanders on Taiwan. Lai writes:

[This] interruption creates chaos on the stage. The person in charge of the theatre cannot be found and each troupe tries to assume authority of the stage by performing fragments of the plays. As it goes, scenes of the tragic and the comic start to interact with each other, and opposite themes and styles begin to mesh and blend.<sup>10</sup>

Shortly thereafter, a young woman in her twenties wanders onto the set, ostensibly from off the street, continually calling the name of her boyfriend in Taiwan-accented Mandarin, which is not recognized by the actors of either troupe, although each assumes him to belong to the other. The viewer gradually begins to suspect that she and her elusive friend may represent Taiwan’s Generation X, members of which are attempting to lead their own lives outside of the reality created by their parents, but nevertheless must do so with the risk of either being engulfed by that reality or constantly marginalized by it.

Meanwhile, as *Secret Love* continues, now in the Taipei of the early 1990s, the aging Jiang Binliu, who was deeply in love with the woman in Shanghai and, despairing of ever finding her, has married a Taiwanese woman in 1963, now languishes in a hospital. An impetuous Taiwanese nurse discovers that he has run a front-page ad in *Zhongguo shibao* (*The China Times*, a popular centrist newspaper) asking for information on the whereabouts of the woman from Shanghai. Concealing it from his Taiwanese wife with some effort, the nurse presses him for personal details of the

romantic attachment and prods him about the failure of the Shanghai woman, Yun Zhifan, whom both of them now know to be somewhere in Taiwan, to appear. More time-frame switches back to the Peach Blossom Land, where characters degenerate into slapstick reminiscent of the Three Stooges (one wonders whether Stan Lai saw them as a child on television in Washington, D.C., where he spent his formative years). With frustration mounting upon frustration in the land of refuge—one also begins to wonder if the metaphor of the Peach Blossom Land might not extend to America, as well, the “new mainland”<sup>11</sup> to which many mainlanders wandered from Taiwan in the later 1950s and 1960s and continue to end up now.

After we have seen the protagonist’s Taiwanese wife lifting him into bed out of a wheelchair and caring for him tirelessly without complaint, after we have heard her describe to the nurse how he would never drink the Taiwan tea she prepared for him and how he would lapse for years into long, unexplained silences and pensive moods, finally the woman from Shanghai appears at the hospital room door, asking for “Mr. Jiang” (a homonym: Mr. “Rigor-mortis”? Mr. Jiang as in Jiang Jieshi—Chiang Kai-shek from the Mainland? We don’t know what the surname means, really, but the informed audience member probably has suspicions at this point, for the seasoned reader of Chinese literature often looks for double entendre).

At that point the nurse suggests that she accompany the wife downstairs to “pay the bill” (although the hospital stay is not over). The protagonist and the woman from Shanghai then compare notes on the last forty-plus years. She tells him she thought he remained in Shanghai and continually wrote him letters, which she must have had smuggled to the Mainland, since there was no legal mail service from either side of the Taiwan straits. Never receiving a response, her brother persuaded her to marry, “as one will grow old” without having done so. He gives her his own account, which is strikingly similar, questioning her on why it has taken so long (five or more days) for her to respond to his running ad, about which the nurse has goaded him repeatedly. She starts to fib: “I just saw it today—” but breaks off in mid-sentence, telling him she has always loved him, but that her current husband “is a good man,” whereupon she takes her leave. Jiang is left with his Taiwanese wife to face up to the question of his own mortality and his place in the world, with greater clarity, we hope.

Despite his skillful employment of the Brechtian techniques of “distancing” (*Verfremdungseffekt*), montage, and the trappings of the postmodern stage, what Stan Lai has produced still comes thematically, at least, under the rubric of the “literature of exile” produced by Bai Xianyong and other skilled Mainland exiles in the 1950s and 1960s. This is not to say that his film is dated or already passé but rather a reflection of the basic reality that

although the Chinese civil war may be over as an armed conflict, its consequences are far from resolved. The diaspora that has been created has spilled over not only to Taiwan but also to America and elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> Just as the Lai brothers in their youth tried to bring different Americans together, Stan has continued to bring the “two Chinas” closer. There is a somewhat Quixotic element in his endeavor, but that does not make it any less admirable.

*Ah Ying* (Banbian ren), a Mandarin film from Hong Kong<sup>13</sup> by Allen Fong (Fang Yuping; Cantonese: Fong Yuk-ping) released in 1984 and based loosely on the life of the all too short-lived Taiwan director Ge Wu (Koh Wu), whom Allen Fong knew, deals with the intellectual diaspora in a way that exhibits more consciousness of class and educational differences between Chinese from both Taiwan and Hong Kong and introduces ruminations on the “applicability” of graduate study in America, as well, which some viewers may wish Stan Lai had done. For example, what does it mean, *Ah Ying* proposes, to live out one’s youth abroad in order to acquire knowledge that will supposedly benefit one’s own society and then find that knowledge inapplicable or only partially applicable on one’s return years later. Zhang Songbai, the character based on Ge Wu, is hard-pressed to use his knowledge of acting and theatrical sophistication to help Ah Ying, the young lower-class Hong Kong girl student who falls in platonic love with him. His own mortality (he was infected by a needle used for mass inoculations in the Taiwan army) prevents him from marrying her and benefiting her in that way as well.<sup>14</sup> Just as his parents were deprived of a country, the diaspora has deprived this middle-aged intellectual of a family and a livelihood, despite his scholarly achievements, which are a result of his patience, and his own hard work. As the two protagonists of *Ah Ying* watch his Volkswagen bug (the ideals of the international youth movement of the 1960s?) being crushed into a small metal block in a Hong Kong junkyard, we get a sense of foreboding concerning Ge Wu’s own fate. These issues of the intellectual diaspora are also broached in modern Chinese literature in a number of the short stories by Lu Xun and other Chinese writers as well. How can the “returned” intellectual make use of what he has learned in a country where nothing he has learned from abroad applies?<sup>15</sup>

In a way, Lu Xun and Allen Fong extend the inquiry where Stan Lai cuts it off. On a personal level, the moral dilemma of the diaspora is how we deal with others while coming to terms with our own displacement (e.g., in *Schindler’s List*, Schindler is not really a “pure” German but comes from Moravia in the former Czechoslovakia<sup>16</sup> and finds himself in Poland at the outbreak of the war. But the dilemma is how he places himself vis-à-vis other people, not the map). As T. S. Eliot’s confused speaker’s voice reminds us: “Bin gar keine Russin, stamm’ aus Litauen, echt deutsch.”<sup>17</sup> Rather than

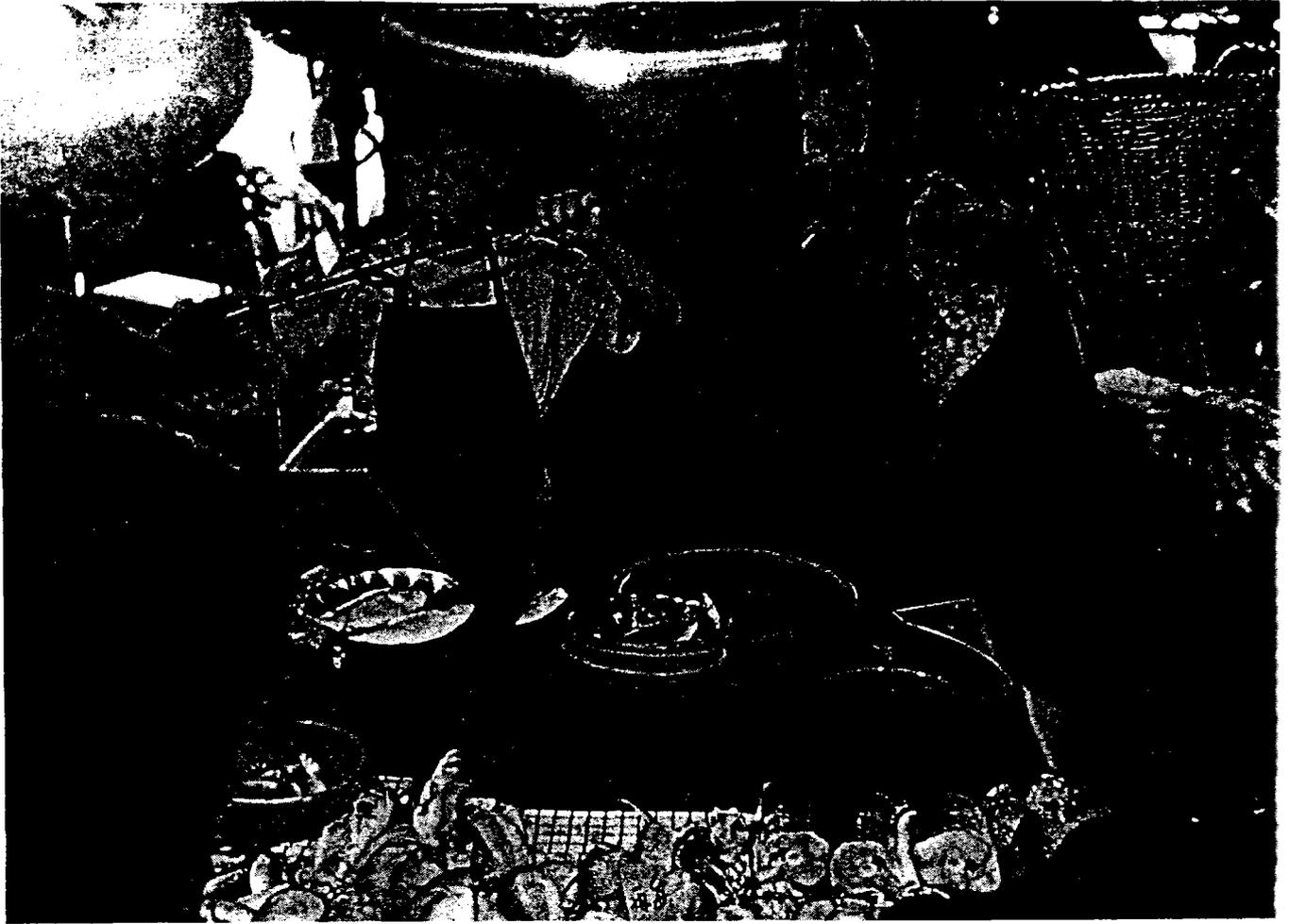


Fig. 14. Would-be actress Ah Ying's life in "real world" Hong Kong, where she works as a fishmonger. From Allen Fong's film *Ah Ying*, 1984. Photo courtesy of Steve Horowitz and Fenghuang Motion Picture Company (Hong Kong).

conclude "there is no going back," which Stan Lai's own life disproves, his film concludes, we need to tell ourselves "our *qi* is here" and live as *Menschen* with that.<sup>18</sup> The question of "going back" is largely irrelevant, which is what I think *Peach Blossom Land* demonstrates.

*Ah Ying* is also similar to *The Peach Blossom Land* in that it contains a play within the movie. The Cantonese-speaking actors put on a Mandarin-language play adapted from the short story "Jiangjun zu" (A race/people of generals) by Taiwan dissident writer Chen Yingzhen. "Jiangjun zu" is something of a Lu Xun-inspired story about members of a private marching band, which played at funerals, people from the lowest strata of Taiwan society.<sup>19</sup> The fact that director Allen Fong (born in Hong Kong in 1947) included it within the movie says as much about his own goals in filmmaking at the time as it does about his own analysis of the role of the film itself. It is a tragedy based on the lives of unfortunates in a sick society. Fong and

Chen Yingzhen, like Lu Xun, hoped to “draw attention to this sickness and suffering, so that a cure might be sought.”<sup>20</sup> In a way, that is also what Stan Lai does, but Lai operates on a less graphic and more existential level. That is where we see more Brecht and less Lu Xun, at least in terms of technique, if not inspiration. As Peter Brooker defines it:

*Verfremdung* has been described as ‘the key concept’ of Brecht’s theory of theatre. . . . Brecht’s term itself has been variously translated as ‘alienation’, ‘estrangement’, ‘eloignement’, ‘distanciation’, and ‘defamiliarisation’. As he described it, it employed elements of stage design, music and lighting as well as a gestic acting style in a conscious—and in some ways self-conscious—attempt to historicise characters and events. In this way the theatre-goer’s practically instinctual tendency to empathise with supposedly ‘eternally human’ characters and ‘universal’ situations would be frustrated, and the ‘single chain’ of a ‘timeless’ narrative necessary to a conventional illusion of reality would be interrupted. Instead of a unified and pacifying, or even simply ‘entertaining’ work of art, with all its aesthetic and ideological concomitants, Brecht wished for an epic theatre in which acting, music and design, conceived as a ‘bundle of separate elements’, would operate autonomously, but at the same time in a relation of commentary and contradiction with each other. The immediate effect of this separation (principally of actor and audience from theatrical character and incident) would be one of surprise, dismay and perhaps discomfort, as the audience’s unexamined assumptions about art and society took a jolt. Brecht’s audience would then be ‘verfremdet’, and would react, so Brecht says, in the following way: ‘I should never have thought so—That is not the way to do it.—This is most surprising, hardly credible.—This will have to stop. This human being’s suffering moves me, because there would have been a way out for him. This is great art: nothing here seems inevitable—I am laughing about those who weep on stage, weeping about those who laugh.’<sup>21</sup>

This technique, in turn, becomes Stan Lai’s tower of strength (though he employs this modernist technique in an ironic patchwork and, I would argue, a definitively postmodern way)—the device that successfully forces his audience to contemplate the drama, on one level or another, in a detached manner.

Of all its reviewers, David Thomson, in the announcement of the 1984 San Francisco International Film Festival, provides the most insightful assessment of *Ah Ying* when he writes: “*Ah Ying* is a film of much promise and many virtues—it is gentle, funny, observant, compassionate; it has a fine

sense of the great varieties of Chineseness in the world today, and of the precarious poise of Hong Kong; but it is most acute in its feeling for actuality turning inevitably into a composed story, of the raw seeming chosen.” Other reviewers, however, were all too quick to misunderstand the film as being “too realistic” and therefore less than satisfactory. In this, they failed to grasp the irony of its postmodern pastiche critique, which goes beyond simple realism. Some prominent critics, missing the various levels of intertextuality embedded in the film, produced accounts that were simply laughable to anyone who had even a rudimentary appreciation of the movie or had read Chen Yingzhen (the story had already been translated into English),<sup>22</sup> such as Janet Maslin’s review in the *New York Times*, which concludes:

Like his own filmmaker-character, Mr. Fong seems convinced that merely transposing real experience to the screen is enough to hold an audience’s interest. The scenes involving Ah Ying’s family seem less artificial than the film school episodes, and have somewhat more drama to them. A family of about eight lives in a two-room flat, and in this setting Ah Ying is addressed simply as “Third Sister.” It’s not surprising, then, that she seeks the wider and more personalized recognition that an actress commands. By the end of the film, Ah Ying is triumphantly co-starring in a play with her revered teacher, he playing an old man and she a prostitute who, for some reason, seems to be dressed as a drum majorette.<sup>23</sup>

Of course, Ah Ying is “dressed as a ‘drum majorette’ ” because she was portraying, on stage, a character in Chen Yingzhen’s short story “Jiangjun zu” who made her living in a for-hire marching band that played primarily at funerals. But I am reminded here of Rey Chow’s observation, “it remains the case that the ‘people’ of the ‘third world’ are invoked only in the form of an indistinguishable mass, while the ‘first world’ intellectuals continue to have names”<sup>24</sup> because I would submit that there is more to Ah Ying’s would-be acting career than a quest for “personal recognition.”<sup>25</sup> In part Ah Ying is seeking a way out of the class and gender traps of Chinese society in 1980s colonial Hong Kong;<sup>26</sup> in part she is facing an existential crisis and a star-crossed platonic love affair. Her solution is the attempt to redefine herself as a member of a larger Chinese community (i.e., one that embraces the cultural heritage of Taiwan, the international overseas Chinese community, and, by extension, that of Mainland China as well): this is part of a spiritual/intellectual development process that transforms her from an ordinary Hong Kong girl-fishmonger into a Chinese artist and intellectual and will ultimately remain with her longer than the material benefits accrued



Fig. 15. The art of survival at their first lesson: Zhang Songbai (Peter Wang) warns his drama class that to be actors, they may have to wait tables first. From Allen Fong's film *Ah Ying*, 1984. Photo courtesy of Steve Horowitz and Fenghuang Motion Picture Company (Hong Kong).

from a potential acting career. In a way, this is the crux of liberation from colonial status: identifying with a larger whole that is beyond the power of one's colonial masters to define. It is also the reason she learns to speak in Mandarin.

For these reasons, the "public" response to these two films was also markedly different. As already mentioned, mainstream critics have a hard time coming to terms with Fong. Although the two directors share an enthusiasm (Fong on screen and Lai off) for method acting, one critic even misinterprets this, writing off Zhang Songbai as "a knowing hipster who leads the class through encounter-group exercises and the like, and whose own ambition is to become a film maker."<sup>27</sup> And this was not the first time

Allen Fong had difficulties with the reception of his films. As a news item in the column "This Week" in the supplement to the *South China Morning Post* revealed:

A new, first feature film by a local director which has excited world interest would seem the ideal choice to open Hong Kong's fifth International Film Festival. Or so you'd think. Unfortunately, there was an embarrassing snag to Allen Fong's *Father and Son* [*Fu zi qing*]. It was produced by Feng Huang, which is a left-wing motion picture company, and that, decided the Urban Council, really wouldn't do. So extreme was the reaction, in fact, that it was decided that *Father and Son* shouldn't be included in the festival at all.

Apparently this riled many involved in the HKIFF, who considered the ruling arbitrary, unjust and more than a little ridiculous considering *Father and Son* had already been shown at the prestigious Berlin Film Festival and been invited to screen at the Melbourne, London—and possibly Cannes—Film Festivals later in the year. Eventually, emotions became so heightened that the Urban Council did an about-turn and lifted the ban—but by then it was too late. Insulted to the core, the Feng Huang people decided to withhold the film from the HKIFF and arrange their own local premiere and showings instead.

Fong was clearly made to suffer for his frankness and his associations, even in the "democratic" climate of Hong Kong. One wonders if the current slump in the career of this world-class and pioneering Chinese director may not be at least partially attributable to just such a reception. It is precisely that reaction which Lai seeks, successfully, to avoid through his use of the *Verfremdungseffekt*.<sup>28</sup> For although Lai does not challenge the status quo in Taiwan on the basis of class, he does do so, like his Mainland predecessor Cao Yu, on the basis of interpersonal relations (a key concept in Confucianism) and, unlike Cao Yu, identity (the linchpin of much of twentieth-century Chinese political rhetoric). To pull this off as well as he has is no small accomplishment, albeit that his timing was certainly better than Chen Yingzhen's. As Lai has written:

Taiwan in 1983, when I began creative work in the theatre, was pregnant with contradictions that were soon to evolve into political confrontations and acute social and cultural changes. Foremost among these contradictions was (and still is) the question of identity, not only the gross political questions, but the subtle questions of cultural identity and direction as well. . . . The precept for using improvisation as the key creative tool was, given the influx sociopolitical environment of

Taiwan, ready-made forms of arts were inadequate; art had to define and continually redefine itself, just as did the individual and Taiwan society as a whole. The philosophy behind the technique used was that improvisation would become a channel for one's inner concerns, and that under proper direction, individual concerns would give shape to collective concerns, and collective concerns, once discovered through the process, would give shape to the performance piece.<sup>29</sup>

Central to Lai's approach to the Chinese identity crisis in Taiwan is his belief that political currents are external manifestations of more internal and personal contradictions. He continues:

Political events always effect the way we work as well as with what we work. In many ways, I feel that in a given society, political events are often the gross-externalized manifestation of issues that have been internalized on an individual level. In Taiwan, the "independence movement" hasn't affected the way we work as much as the inner forces that this movement expresses. In my view, the movement is a struggle to be independent not from anyone else but from ourselves. This attempt to break away from ourselves constitutes another way of searching to redefine who we are. This is happening on gross and subtle levels, in all facets of life in Taiwan, not just politics.<sup>30</sup>

Given that even a mention of the Taiwan Independence Movement (Taidu) was once taboo in the controlled press of Taiwan, Lai's statement is certainly an indication of the political liberalization in process on the island today. Nevertheless, Lai's privileged position as a member of the Mainland elite gives him the license to do so with a minimum of controversy and to view the "independence movement" as an outgrowth of personal identity issues sidesteps the political ramifications of treating it as the outcome of historical forces and geopolitical events, which would seem more objective. It is clearly an intellectualized approach, one which harks back to Confucian notions of *neisheng waiwang* (an internal sage/an external king), which suggests either genuinely changing political climes or the ability to successfully "distance" oneself from the actualities of politics—an approach once a luxury for anyone on the island to adopt.

To conclude, then, it seems possible to say that although Allen Fong was the first, or one of the very first, directors to come to terms with changing perspectives on identity among the Chinese living on the periphery of the People's Republic of China, and did so with a degree of realism that has been thus far unequaled, Stan Lai has brought the debate onto another level by viewing the question from a postmodern perspective of personal past/

present and self/society interplay. He invents a comical historical “other,” which allows the audience to redefine the present by contrasting it with the past, but he eschews the Brechtian question of how to move from art to collective action. In the way that he employs the *Verfremdungseffekt* to demand both the actors and the audience come to terms with this as an existential dilemma, rather than just relating a story they may or may not personally “identify” with, he may in fact come closer to striking a more responsive chord in his Asian viewers than Allen Fong. Just as Fong’s dying character, Zhang Songbai, the ghost of Ge Wu, given to soliloquies on his days as a struggling graduate student in America, attempts to address an international as well as a Hong Kong predicament, Stan Lai, with his resurrected and parodied Chinese past, addresses the hopes and fears of the Taiwan and also the overseas Chinese audiences with his multilayered rereading of history. But in the end Lai insists: “Basically, we aspire to channel the Taiwan experience, and the Chinese experience as a whole, toward the goal of revealing the human condition on a universal level.”<sup>31</sup> Only time will be the judge of who speaks with greater immediacy in that regard. That is the ultimate paradox for all literature and film produced during a situation of flux which attempts to address that situation with timely and meaningful relevance.

## • Notes

Special thanks to Steve Horowitz, an unsung founder of Chinese film studies in the United States, for the stills from *Ah Ying*.

1. For a sample of articles, see *Newsweek*, February 29, 1988, 48; *Far Eastern Economic Review*, July 26, 1990, 20; *Los Angeles Times*, November 9, 1991, F1.

2. Stan Lai wrote and directed the film. It was produced by his wife, Ding Naizhu, with light and camera work by Christopher Doyle and original music composed by Fumio Itabashi and Kazutoki Umezu. The film opened in New York in 1993 as part of the New Directors/New Films series. It was reviewed (favorably) in the *New York Times* on March 25, 1993, C20, by Janet Maslin. A book on the making of the play and film has been published in Taiwan under the title *Wo anlian de Taohuayuan* [The peach-blossom spring I loved in secret] (Taipei: Yuanliu, 1992). The script and photos of the play were also published as a book, *Anlian Taohuayuan* [Secret love: The peach-blossom spring] (Taipei: Huangguan, 1986).

3. These resemble the Russian director Constantin Stanislavsky’s (1863–1938) technique of psychological realism.

4. As quoted in Dunbar H. Ogden, *Actor Training and Audience Response* (Berkeley, Calif.: Oak House, 1984), 25.

5. Roswitha Mueller, *Bertolt Brecht and the Theory of Media* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 67.

6. We assume that the Northeast is already occupied by the Communists, as “the land routes are all closed,” although this is never stated specifically.

7. In the original classical-language tale they are said to have “fled the chaos of Qin times” (*bi Qin shi luan*). See *Jianzhu Tao Yuanming ji* [An annotated collection of Tao Yuanming’s works] (Shanghai: Hanfenlou, 1922), *ce* 2, *juan* 5, 1b6. The authoritarian Qin Shi Huang (First Emperor of the Qin) is sometimes used as a stand-in for Mao Zedong or the Communist revolution. Certainly “chaos” can be a reference to the civil war of the 1940s between the Guomindang and the Communists.

8. Wuling, in the present-day province of Hunan, was the place of origin for the protagonist of Tao Yuanming’s *Taohuayuan ji* (lit., “Record/Tale of [a trip to] Peach Blossom [Stream’s] Source”).

9. Compare the perspective of the narrator in Maxine Hong Kingston’s novel, *China Men*, when her Chinese American brother is steaming toward Taiwan on a U.S. army troop carrier during the war in Vietnam and the voice of the narrator tells us: “He watched the real China pass by, the old planet his family had left light years ago. Taiwan was not China, a decoy China, a facsimile.” Maxine Hong Kingston, *China Men* (New York: Knopf, 1980), 294.

10. Stan Lai, *The Peach Blossom Land: A Synopsis* (Taipei: Performance Workshop, 1992).

11. *Na shi yige xin dalu* (that is a new mainland), I recall reading of America in the Chinese literature produced by exiled mainlanders in the 1970s on Taiwan when I studied there and first met Stan when he and his brother hosted the only St. Patrick’s Day party in Taipei, to which they naively but good-heartedly invited Americans from both the Stanford Center and the Mandarin Center, always the cordial ambassadors of a divided China to a divided America, refusing to notice the division of the latter, just as the American government refused to recognize the division of the former.

12. Lai even says at one point: “Almost from the beginning it is obvious that the story of the play may in fact be the Director’s (Ding Chung) own love story. [He is] subconsciously trying to re-enact his lost dream.” Lai, *The Peach Blossom Land: A Synopsis*.

13. *Banbian ren* (lit., “Persons from the space along the sidelines”) was distributed in the United States, beginning in 1983, with the title *Ah Ying*, the name of its female protagonist. Wang Zhengfang (Peter Wang) plays the male lead, and Xu Suying (Cantonese: Hui So-ying), the female. The film is linguistically quite sophisticated, using Mandarin, Cantonese, and Chaozhou dialects and English as well. Within the story, the Cantonese-speaking actors are moreover forced to struggle with learning Mandarin for the play performed within the film.

14. The close of the film hints that what he has taught her may ultimately help her get a career in acting, but this is only implied; we do not see it actually take place.

15. The narrator in "In the Wine Shop" exclaims: "I had become a complete stranger." Lü Weifu, who ends up a private tutor to the children of a wealthy family, where he teaches only the Confucian classics, tells the narrator: "I don't even teach mathematics; it's not that I don't want to teach it, but rather that they don't want it taught." See Lu Xun, *Lu Xun quanji* [Complete works of Lu Xun], vol. 2 (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1991), 33.

16. "You have to remember," said a boy whom Oskar would later save, "that Oskar had a German side but a Czech side too. He was the good soldier Schweik. He loved to foul up the system." See Thomas Keneally, *Schindler's List* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 233.

17. "[I'm] hardly a Russian . . . [I] come from Lithuania—pure German." From *The Waste Land* (1922), part I, "The Burial of the Dead," in T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1971), 37 (my translation).

18. I am using *Mensch* in the Yiddish sense of the word, meaning people who are decent human beings in that they treat others in a generous and understanding manner, regardless of personal stakes. *Qi* refers to life (lit., "life's breath").

19. For the text of the short story, see *Chen Yingzhen xiaoshuo xuan* [Selected stories of Chen Yingzhen] (Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 1983), 50–63. Chen Yingzhen was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment in Taiwan in 1968 for sedition. He was released as part of an amnesty following the death of Chiang Kai-shek in 1976. In an interview granted me in Jingmei in 1976, Chen Yingzhen stated: "One of the reasons I became a writer had to do with my reading Lu Xun when I was in my early teens. Although I did not really understand him, I read him over and over again. And this also eventually accounted for my imprisonment."

20. Lu Xun, *Lu Xun quanji*, vol. 4, 512.

21. Peter Brooker, *Bertolt Brecht: Dialectics, Poetry, Politics* (London: Croom Helm, 1988), 62–63. I prefer the translation "distancing" for *Verfremdung*. Regarding cinematic adaptations of Brecht, see the study by Soviet woman scholar M. I. Turovsakaia, *Na granitse iskusstv: Brekht i kino* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1985).

22. The first English translation of "Jiangjun zu" appeared in *Renditions* 19/20 (1983) under the title "A Couple of Generals." It was reprinted in a substantially different version in Lucien Miller, *Exiles at Home: Short Stories by Ch'en Ying-chen* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1986), 69–82.

23. Janet Maslin, review of *Ah Ying*, *New York Times*, March 30, 1984, C7.

24. Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 20.

25. Richard Springer notes: "Like Brocka, Fong is interested in the lives of the downtrodden who are trying to escape the poverty of the ghetto. Brocka slashes at his theme like an angry participant in the drama. Fong feels the oppression as much, but he sits back calmly and more objectively, painting his canvas with delicate

strokes. Both are bucking the power structure, but Brocka is living more dangerously this year." *East-West Journal* (San Francisco), April 18, 1984.

26. Rey Chow errs in saying "Hong Kong currently has a democracy" (*Writing Diaspora*, 23). Hong Kong, at the time of her writing, was a British crown colony with very little pretense of actual self-government.

27. Maslin, review of *Ah Ying*, C7.

28. Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) was himself quite accomplished in this as well (both on stage and off), slipping by persecution in Nazi Germany and the United States during the McCarthy period, when he was called to testify before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1948. Despite his support of the East German workers' strike in 1953, he managed to continue to operate his own theater ensemble for eight years in East Berlin, winning the Stalin Peace Prize in 1954.

29. Stan Lai, "Specifying the Universal," *The Drama Review* 38, no. 2 (1994): 33-34.

30. Lai, "Specifying the Universal," 37.

31. Lai, "Specifying the Universal," 37. Lai, as a creative artist, seems to be articulating precisely what Yingjin Zhang would term the "Liberal, Humanistic Position" on Chinese literature. See Yingjin Zhang, "Re-envisioning the Institution of Modern Chinese Literature Studies: Strategies of Positionality and Self-Reflexivity," *positions: east asia cultures critique* 1, no. 3 (1993): 826-827.

# 活着

Huó zhe (To Live) 1994

director: Zhang Yimou

starring: Gong Li, Ge You

film studios: (co-production) Era (Hong Kong); Shanghai Film (PRC)

This film is directly comparable to Lanse de fengzheng (The Blue Kite), directed by Tian Zhuangzhuang (1993) in that both films attempt to retell recent Chinese history through the eyes of their central characters. Whereas The Blue Kite begins with Stalin's death in 1953 and ends with the onset of the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" (1966), To Live starts just prior to the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) and ends after the Cultural Revolution is over (1978).

Fugui (prn. "Foo Gway"), a rich man with a gambling problem (his name is a homonym for "rich and illustrious") loses all his money, his mansion and his wife on a bad night at the gambling tables. His pregnant wife simply takes their daughter and leaves. The victor, taking pity on him, gives him a set of shadow puppets (pi ying), telling him that he himself was once a puppeteer and that if Fugui can learn the trade, he will never starve.

During World War II Fugui serves first with the Kuomintang National Army and later with the Communist forces during the Civil War. After Liberation (the Communist take-over in 1949), when the class origins of everyone are being determined and recorded, the cadre who interviews him discovers he was with the Communist troops during the revolution and therefore assigns him the class-identity of "poor urban dweller" instead of landlord (his original and actual legal class). Soon he witnesses the man who won his house and fortune at the gambling table being executed as a landlord by the Communists and exclaims to an acquaintance: "That man died in my place!"

Fugui initially is able to help his family survive in the new society, but during the Great Leap Forward (1957) their exhausted son is run over and killed by the car of a cadre. Life becomes even more arbitrary during the Cultural Revolution, when their daughter dies in childbirth because the one doctor who is qualified to help has been starved out of his wits by the young Red Guards now in charge of the hospital.

Despite all this, Fugui assures his infant grandson that things will get better for them as they leave the graves of Fugui's daughter and son.

questions for discussion

1. Are there elements of the absurd in the film? If so, where?
2. Judging from what we have seen in the film, what worldview is being projected?

3. Will things get better for these people, or is Fugui's optimism unjustified?

"A major contribution to contemporary critical thinking  
in literary, postcolonial, and cultural studies."

—Iain Chambers

In **Ethics after Idealism**, Rey Chow explores once again the issue of cultural otherness that has been central to her work. She argues that at a time when cultural identity has become imbricated with the way we read our many "others," what must be examined critically is no longer identity politics per se but the idealism—especially in the sense of idealizing otherness—that lies at the heart of identity politics. Recognizing the necessity for a critique of idealism constitutes for Chow an ethics in the postcolonial, postmodern age. In particular, she uses "ethics" to designate the act of making decisions—in this context, decisions of reading—that may not immediately conform with prevalent social mores of idealizing our others but that, nonetheless, enables such others to emerge in their full complexities.

Chow discusses an array of source materials whose affinities are as surprising as their appearances are heterologous. The readings she offers involve various cultural forms—fiction, film, popular music, poetry, and critical essays—and address a wide range of cultural topics, such as pedagogy, multiculturalism, fascism, sexuality, miscegenation, community, fantasy, governance, nostalgia, and postcoloniality.

Methodologically situated in the contentious spaces between critical theory and cultural studies, and always attending to the implications of ethnicity, this book constitutes a unique intervention in contemporary cultural politics.

**REY CHOW** is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Irvine. Her publications include *Woman and Chinese Modernity*, *Writing Diaspora*, *Xie zai jia guo yi wai*, and *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*, which was awarded the James Russell Lowell Prize by the Modern Language Association.

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Rey Chow

Ethics after Idealism

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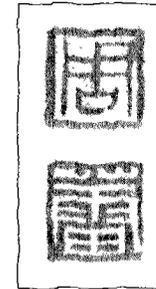
KATHLEEN WOODWARD  
GENERAL EDITOR

# ETHICS AFTER IDEALISM

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THEORY—CULTURE—ETHNICITY—READING

*Rey Chow*



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## SEVEN

### *We Endure, Therefore We Are: Survival, Governance, and Zhang Yimou's To Live*

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IF THERE IS A metanarrative that continues to thrive in these times of metanarrative bashing, it is that of "resistance." Seldom do we attend a conference or turn to an article in an academic journal of the humanities or the social sciences without encountering some call for "resistance" to some such metanarrativized power as "global capitalism," "Western imperialism," "patriarchy," "compulsory heterosexuality," and so forth. In many respects, "resistance" has become the rhetorical support of identitarian politics, the conceptualization that underwrites discourses of class, racial, and sexual identity.<sup>1</sup> As an imaginary appealing especially to intellectuals, "resistance" would have to come from somewhere. It follows that resistance is often lodged in something called "the people" or one of its variants, such as "the masses," "the folk," or, at times, "the subalterns." What is implicitly set up, then, is a dichotomy between the pernicious power on top and the innocent, suffering masses at the bottom, whose voices await being heard in what is imagined as a corrective to the abuses of political power.

What is often missing in such an imaginary of popular resistance is the crucial notion of a mediating apparatus, a specifically defined public space, that would serve to regulate the relationship between those who have political power and those who do not. The *absence* of such a mediating apparatus has vast implications for the conceptualization of political governance. In this chapter, I would like to explore some of these implications by discussing aspects of the ideological conditions in contemporary China, particularly as such conditions appear in Zhang

that once inspired political revolution. The continued fascination with “the people” suggests an attempt to cling to the beliefs that lay at the foundation of modern Chinese national identity. Yet precisely because the turn to “the people” is nostalgic as much as utopic—a desire for home as much as for change—it inevitably reencounters all the problems that are fundamental to that turn.

For instance, the invocation of “the people” has often gone hand in hand with another invocation—“the West.” During the Great Leap Forward, the rhetoric of *chao ying gan mei* (literally, overtaking England and catching up with the United States) was used to mobilize the entire country to labor hard for national self-strengthening.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, England and the United States stood for technological advancement, an area in which China needed to improve. Acknowledging the necessity of “Western technology,” however, undermined belief in “the Chinese people” as the ultimate source of national empowerment in a fundamental way. For if China did in fact need *external* input in order to attain the status of a world-class nation, then what did that make “the people,” the supposed mainstay of national identity? To solve the problem raised by this inconsistency, the Chinese Communists resorted—in spite of their claims of overthrowing tradition—to a formulation that has been used by Chinese politicians since the nineteenth century: “Let us adopt science and technology from the West, but let us preserve Chinese culture”; “let us modernize, but let us modernize with Chinese characteristics”; “let us adopt capitalism, but we will call it Chinese socialist capitalism.” Such variations on the nineteenth-century dictum *zhong xue wei ti, xi xue wei yong* (Chinese learning for fundamental principle, Western learning for practical use) point to an ambivalence that structures the conceptualizing of a political culture based on an unmediated notion of popular resistance.

In such conceptualizing, “the people” become a fantastical stand-in for national specificity—in this case, for what is “Chinese.” On the one hand, this thing that is “the Chinese”—their people, their culture, their value—is thought to be unique and self-sufficient; on the other hand, it is in need of preservation and protection from outside forces. “The Chinese”—people/culture/value—is what makes China China—that is, what no one can change or take away; at the same time, “the Chinese” is what “the West” can endanger—that is, what someone *can* change and take away. Caught between cultural pride and cultural necessity, the investment in national and cultural specificity as the basis of political identity is marked by an impossible rift from the beginning. To patch over this rift, a particular kind of essentialism has to be introduced, one which often takes stunningly provocative forms, demonstrating the logic of a well-lived, though tattered, ideology.

Consider the People’s Republic’s notorious manner of handling hu-

man rights. Here, China’s foremost problem of governance, overpopulation, is approached not as a problem that can and should be solved gradually, but rather as an immutable fact—an immutable fact that is, moreover, cast in the form of an *essential lack*, the (potential) lack of food. Such, then, is the attitude of the Chinese authorities: it is inconceivable that the West tell China what to do on the issue of human rights because *human rights in China* simply means having enough to eat. Since the People’s Republic has done more than any previous Chinese government to feed the Chinese people, it is already honoring human rights *in the Chinese way*. Human rights as insisted upon by Westerners—in the form of, say, freedom of speech and trial by law—amount to foreign interference in Chinese *internal* affairs. China—in the position of a victim—must resist such imposition, invasion, and so forth.

Instead of being used as an occasion to rethink the fraught relationship between the governing and the governed, the problem of overpopulation becomes a justification for the abuse of political power, an excuse to stop, rather than to begin, any consideration of alternative forms of governance. What is interesting is that such a justification for the abuse of political power must be aimed at an external target. In the world of postcolonial awareness, the intransigent attitude of the Chinese gerontocracy toward political governance conveniently finds its guise in the form of national self-determination against “the West.”

A number of important implications are revealed in this process, all following from the fantastical construct of a “self-sufficient” China/Chineseness that can and must govern itself. First, this need for self-governance is defined, paradoxically, by way of an essential lack—the lack of food—and thus as a matter of biological survival: the need for self-sustenance. Although China’s long periods of starvation in the past might have had much to do with government policy and with the unequal distribution of food among different classes, history is bypassed in favor of an essentialist survivalism. Second, as the reduction of human rights to a matter of having enough to eat indicates, issues of political representation can be likewise reduced to—and abstracted as—something potentially lacking/missing. Accordingly, while it is this potentially lacking/missing thing that defines China’s uniqueness, that makes China China, “the people” are in effect just a bunch of gaping mouths and, as such, are precluded from having political representation. In the vicious circle of “political rights”-cum-biological-needs, “the people” are literally held hostage by themselves—by their “essential need” to survive. Instead of being recognized as something done to or against “the people,” the denial of political rights will thus always be *condoned* in their best interests. Third, the continual abuse of power, secured as it is by the structure of this vicious circle, can legitimate and perpetuate itself on the grounds of “Chinese” internal affairs.

Cultural and national identity, which is the crux of the relationship between the governing and the governed, is then simply a matter of cumulation, compounded by acts of essentializing, acts of absorbing and assimilating every problem inward—into the entrails of the physical body, into the interior of the nation, into the systemic propriety of the culture—and redefining it as “Chinese.”

### The Story of *To Live*

The people, popular resistance, and the relationship between such resistance and political governance are among the issues Zhang Yimou examines in his film *To Live*. Based loosely on the novella of the same title by the contemporary mainland author Yu Hua, *To Live* is, on first reading and viewing, very much a story of its time.<sup>9</sup> Like many examples of fiction and film produced since the mid-1970s, *To Live* looks back to events of the past through a look at some ordinary people—the Xu family—whose saga runs from the late 1940s to the 1970s (the period after the peak of the Cultural Revolution).

The film begins in a gambling house. Xu Fugui, the only son of a well-off family, is already heavily in debt, as recorded in a log kept by the dealers. Refusing to pay heed to the advice of his parents and his pregnant wife, Fugui squanders the family fortune, including the ancestral home which is sheltering them. Having thus lost his house, his father (who dies after signing the house away), and his wife (Jiazhen, in despair, has left with their daughter and gone to her own family), Fugui is reduced to making ends meet by selling the few possessions he still owns. Many months pass before Jiazhen returns with their daughter, Fengxia, and a newborn son, Youqing. With the help of Long'er, the man who took over his ancestral home, Fugui begins a new career as a singer and player in a shadow-puppet theater, making his living by performing with a troupe. He and Jiazhen go through a series of epochal events—the Civil War between the Nationalists and the Communists, the Communist Liberation of China, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution—and lose both their children in the process. At the end, four members of the family survive—Fugui, Jiazhen, their son-in-law (Wan Erxi), and their grandson (Mantou/Little Bun).<sup>10</sup> By this point, conditions in China are seemingly improving.

At one level, the ability “to live” can undoubtedly be understood as the basic resistance of the common people to the random disasters befalling them under a political system that has failed in its mission. However modest, the plea for the condition of “living” serves in this instance as a metacriticism, a critique of the critical imperatives of the political regime, which was itself founded on the ideas and ideals of

resistance and struggle. Because this political regime has resorted time and again to violence and murder in order to realize its dreams, and has replicated the authoritarianism it once sought to resist, the film’s sympathetic portrayal of “living” is made in the spirit of a resistance to bureaucratized resistance, a struggle against the state-sponsored struggle of official rhetoric. To be able to live through—and *in spite of*—disasters should in this light be seen as a “back to basics” approach in what I have elsewhere called the post-catastrophic discourse of contemporary China.<sup>11</sup> After the grandiose messages of revolution, for which millions of lives have been lost in the name of salvation, it is as if the sheer possibility of simply living has become cause enough for celebration and respect. The commonplace “to live,” then, has the same nostalgic function as the figure of “the people” in that it, too, asserts the value of a return to something fundamental. Having lived through years of war, poverty, separation, illness, fatal accidents, and the loss of loved ones, ordinary people now prefer to occupy themselves with the mundane and the banal—such as eating, for instance. The film concludes with the survivors of the family’s three generations gathering for yet another meal.

### The Food That Does Not Go In

As in Zhang’s other films, the shift in the medium of representation—from literary writing to film—offers a significant clue to his reading of the “original” subject matter. The major change introduced by Zhang is, notably, the elimination of Yu Hua’s first-person narration.<sup>12</sup> Hence, while our understanding of the events in the novella relies on Fugui’s memory and narration, in the film Fugui becomes simply one among many characters. From the perspective of reception, the effect is that of a shift from a single voice which predominates and guides (the reading) to multiple characters, events, and discourses. This shift, though perhaps a technicality, is crucial nonetheless because it introduces a departure from the ideological implications of the novella. Yu Hua’s literary style, which uses simple, matter-of-fact prose, presents the past in the form of what is already past. With Fugui as the only survivor in (and of) his own tale, the feeling of closure, of a story and a history having been completed and come to an end, is put across with the certainty of a retrospective—“it all happened this way.” Zhang’s film, by contrast, forsakes the relative stability of a kind of writing based on the remembrance of things past. By abandoning the nostalgic perspective of a sole surviving narrator, Zhang opens up the narrative in terms of temporality—“it is still going on, it is to be continued.” What is perhaps foreclosed in the retrospective narration of Yu Hua’s novella

is conversely supplemented by the story's unfolding on the screen, the presentness of which transforms the significations of "living," of what it means "to live."

Moreover, by eliminating the story's monological narration, the film enables the interactions among the characters to surface much more readily, and it is through such interactions, which can no longer be attributed or confined to the understanding of a single character, that a very different kind of narrating unravels alongside the realistic one. To be sure, Zhang, like all good popular artists who understand the importance of popular appeal, does make ample use of the current interest in the lives of "common people" to tell a moving and entertaining story on the screen with the full coherence of illusionism.<sup>13</sup> But he has also done something more: by taking seriously the Chinese Communist dictum of paying attention to "the people," Zhang has produced a film which literally takes a long, hard look at "the people," one that reveals them as sentimental, loving, and filial, but also as petty, small-minded, and, above all, *ready to sacrifice others in order to protect themselves*. Unlike the Party officials and the many Chinese intellectuals who continue to idealize "the people" by invoking them poetically as the bearers of revolution, resistance, and hope, Zhang gives us an unglorified portrait of the people—not exactly as the embodiment of evil but, more disturbingly, as a host for the problems that have beset China's construction of its "national" identity through political governance. If Zhang's film is a critique of the ideology of the Chinese regime, as I believe it is, it is a critique that materializes by reinforcing the critical terms legitimized by that regime—"the people" and their "resistance"—to the hilt.

In a cultural context in which food occupies such a central physical and imaginary place, what better way is there to look hard at "the people" than through the event of eating, an event which is fully resonant with the theme "to live"? Zhang's handling of eating is, as I will argue, nothing less than extraordinary. In Yu Hua's novella, food is central to the narrative action in that it serves to propel the plot, deepen characterization, and intensify conflicts. Among the novella's most memorable scenes are those depicting starvation and the search for edible things in the countryside.<sup>14</sup> In Zhang's film, however, food takes on a drastically different set of connotations. While he never neglects the physical appeal of food—as what fills the stomach—Zhang also *desentimentalizes* the representation of food as a fundamental lack. Instead of using food—or its absence—as a means of mobilizing the narrative action, Zhang represents it as an indigestible detail—as what does not quite go "in," what does not get eaten with satisfaction. Remaining thus in a relation of *exteriority* to the human bodies that are supposedly its "end," food is decoupled from the essentialist survivalism to which it has always been attached and becomes an occasion

for the staging of another kind of consumption—the consumption of political oppression. In the following three examples, food assumes not so much the form of a substance to be ingested as the form of the leftover, the absurd, or the weapon.

*Jiaozi* (Meat-Filled Dumplings). One morning, Youqing is abruptly wakened from a deep sleep and forced to go to school—his classmates have come by on their way to remind his parents that all students are expected to show up early to learn about steel-smelting. Having just brought home their family's share of *jiaozi* from the town as a reward for their hard work, Jiazhen proceeds to prepare a lunchbox for her son, making sure that he has plenty of the mouth-watering dumplings. That same day, Youqing is killed in an accident. Still tired, he has fallen asleep against a wall; when a vehicle crashes into the other side of the wall, it collapses on the little boy. Youqing never has a chance to open his lunchbox. When we see the *jiaozi* again, they have been left cold and untouched, their culinary appeal completely superseded by the grief at Youqing's graveside, a place where food is traditionally displayed as a way of paying respects to the dead.

*Mantou* (Steamed Wheat Buns). Fengxia gives birth to her son in a hospital, the management of which has been assumed by the youthful Red Guards, who are as contemptuous of the older and more experienced medical doctors, whom they consider "reactionaries," as they are complacent about their own ability to handle medical emergencies. Such attitudes quickly change when Fengxia begins postpartum hemorrhaging. Earlier, hoping to ensure a safe delivery, the Xu family had gone against hospital rules and brought in a top gynecologist, Professor Wang, pulling him from a procession in which he and other intellectuals were being paraded as symbols of "feudalist corruption." But Professor Wang has not eaten for three days. When he is offered some *mantou*, he gorges himself so hastily that he becomes almost comatose—a condition aggravated by the water he is then given by those who are trying to help. In the absence of any medical intervention, Fengxia bleeds to death.

Already, in these two brief examples, the handling of food suggests that eating is something other than "filling the stomach." What is normally welcome is in both cases associated with the sacrifice of innocent children. Would Youqing have died if his parents had not forced him to go to school early in conformity with others? The meat-filled dumplings, a rare treat during the days of the Great Leap Forward, become in the end *leftovers*—the waste of ideological abuse, undoubtedly prepared with parental love and patriotic loyalty, which find their ultimate victim in the young child. The most familiar and familial items of consumption—*jiaozi* being best when homemade and always served during festivities—here take on a defamiliarized and defamiliarizing

relation to what they normally signify. Rather than being eaten and absorbed, the lumps of dough and meat now stand as reminders of a life that has been irrecoverably wasted.

Similarly, would Fengxia have died if intellectuals and skilled professionals such as Professor Wang had not been mindlessly abused during the madness of the Cultural Revolution? The *mantou*, meant to ease Professor Wang's hunger so that he can assist in the childbirth, rehydrate and expand within his starvation-shrunken stomach. Failing thus to be properly incorporated, the *mantou* indirectly kill Fengxia. However well-intentioned, "filling the stomach" in this case leads to death, with food emphatically marked by the errors and terrors of history. Toward the end of the film, as the Xu family visit the graves of both children, Fugui reflects on the past, lamenting the fact that he had given Professor Wang too many *mantou*—otherwise, he says, the professor could have saved Fengxia's life. Or else, he adds, it was the water that they should not have given him. Fugui even supplies a mathematical elaboration: "People say that once you drink water, one *mantou* in the stomach turns into seven. Professor Wang ate seven *mantou*. Seven times seven is forty-nine. That'd knock anyone out of action!" When they learn that Professor Wang has since then avoided anything made from wheat, eating instead only rice, which is more expensive, Jiazhen exclaims—in what comes across as an utterly bizarre conclusion to this tale of epochal crisis and sorrow—"What a food bill he must have every month!"

Statements such as Fugui's and Jiazhen's seem absurd not because they reduce "great" suffering to mathematics and economics, but because such reductions confront us with a stark discontinuity in emotional experience. From anticipating the birth of a grandchild with both anxiety and hope, to witnessing the death of one's child, then mourning, followed by a return to "normal" life, and finally the ritualized family visit to and conversation at the grave, the changes and reversals of emotional intensity that occur around food play off one another in such a way as to reveal what—for the lack of a better term—must be called a dialectic, whereby moments of poignancy swing between a tone of sentimental vulnerability, on the one hand, and of absurdist irony, on the other. There is no tragic moment, as a result, that does not simultaneously border on the comic and the ridiculous, or vice versa.

*Noodles.* Of all the moments related to eating, the most compelling one is a scene which features Youqing during the Great Leap Forward period. Fengxia, as we learn earlier in the film, became deaf and mute after a childhood fever. She is the object of ridicule among the town schoolboys, who mock her with malicious tricks such as shooting at her behind with a slingshot and then waiting in hiding for her response. Incensed by such abusive behavior, little Youqing has attempted to

protect his older sister. One day when the families in the town gather for a meal in the communal dining hall, Youqing gets himself a big bowl of noodles laced with hot chili sauce and walks up to the boy who leads his gang in abusing Fengxia. Climbing up on a chair behind the boy, who is busily eating, Youqing raises the bowl and, in a gesture that resembles the offering of a sacrament, pours the noodles and sauce over his enemy's head. Outraged, the boy bursts into tears, while his father quickly calls the crowd's attention to the Xu family. Fugui, greatly embarrassed by Youqing's incomprehensible behavior, scolds his son, demanding that he apologize. When Youqing refuses, Fugui grabs him, spanking him until Jiazhen and others separate them. Only later, when they are alone at home and Jiazhen has explained the background to Youqing's act, does Fugui realize that he has wronged his son.

This scene of collective food-sharing comments provocatively on two distinct forms of *political* behavior. What is the difference, it asks, between Youqing's act and Fugui's act? One is an attempt, albeit childish, to demand social justice for a person who cannot speak for herself. The other is a public punishment of a child by an adult who succumbs to crowd pressure. Because solidarity between father and son would threaten the father's status, he must distance himself from his son by punishing him. At the same time, though, this face-saving act of distancing also reestablishes and reaffirms the father's linkage with—his possession of and authority over—his child. In terms of food, we could say that whereas Youqing gives up eating his food in order to use it as a weapon of "disorderly conduct," Fugui attempts to restore order so that the group, including himself and his family, can resume eating.

Implicitly patriarchal, Fugui's act is typical of a certain attitude toward the community. The fear of ostracization means that the process of socialization—of learning to live with others—is one of punishment and discipline, and such punishment and discipline invariably entails sacrificing the minor, the innocent, the oppressed. The more unreasonable the community, the more relentless it will be in sacrificing such underclasses. Hence, the measures taken by Fugui against Youqing are intended less to discipline the child than to identify with the community—to demonstrate Fugui's own worth within the community. Sacrificing the minor, the innocent, or the oppressed in exchange for the acceptance of the community ultimately constitutes an act of *self-empowerment* and *self-governance*.

### The Space of "the Public"

The close links between sacrifice and socialization raise questions about the way "the public" is conceived and accordingly, the way

governance is practiced and mobilized. Like “the people,” “the public” is, theoretically, an empty space, a space to be manipulated. In the political culture of a nation such as China, which is governed by “strong men” rather than through the mediation of law, and where, as one critic puts it, the political machine “serves at the same time as a judicial apparatus,” “the public” becomes simply a space for the use of those who hold political power.<sup>15</sup> For the ordinary person afraid for his own life, then, “the public” functions much more as a space in which to submit to authority and to hide oneself than as an arena in which to speak out against injustice and to propose political alternatives. As modern Chinese history has demonstrated time and time again, those who dare to tell the truth are more often than not sacrificed.<sup>16</sup> The vigilance of “the public” is wholly aimed at *conformity and invisibility*, not dissent and intervention.

This requisite conformity and invisibility has prevailed to such an extent that even an event as revolutionary as the appearance of the Red Guards in the “public space” during the 1960s amounted to just another version of the oppression and persecution of the innocent. Conceived of as a groundbreaking intervention in China’s tradition, the Red Guards were supposedly the opposite of the patriarchal social order. Behind their mobilization was an uncompromised idealism: let our children, our oppressed classes speak up; let them overthrow corrupt forms of power; let them tell us what to do; let them create a new social space! And yet at the same time, the fundamental conceptualization of “the public” went unchallenged, so the fervor of the Red Guards simply degenerated into the very same self-righteous abuse of political power that had characterized their elders.

This conception of “the public” as a space in which to conform with the powerful is recognizably different from that to which those living in the West are accustomed. In the West, the public is arguably also a space of governance—but with a significant difference. With the mediation of law, “the public” functions in the latter context as a constraint on those who exercise power, subjecting them to scrutiny and holding them accountable. What this means is that the space of the public is no longer at the disposal of only those with political power; it is also where multiple discourses, reflecting vastly divergent, at times opposing, perspectives, achieve legitimacy solely through a continual competition for power. Any attempt to manipulate the public space in an authoritarian fashion will simply have too many hurdles to overcome and will thus be much less likely to achieve any extended dominance.<sup>17</sup>

Time and again, the West’s habituation to this legally bound “public” has blinded it to China’s alternative conception. During the Tiananmen Massacre of June 1989, for instance, even as the West was imagining that its intense gaze would check the Chinese authorities’ display of author-

itarianism, these authorities were reacting in exactly the opposite manner. They reacted as if they had been provoked into action in a public space where their authority had been challenged and needed to be reestablished. Thus it was precisely the West’s attention, aimed at discouraging militaristic violence, that helped to generate this violence. The Chinese authorities had to prove that they, proprietors of their own political power, were in control of the public space, and they did so by slaughtering their own “children.”<sup>18</sup>

In this regard, the scene in which the father publicly punishes the son in *To Live* can be read as a miniaturized rerendering of that dramatic punishing scene watched by the entire world in June 1989. In both situations, demands for social justice lead to protests and demonstrations, which in turn catch the attention of a crowd. Like Fugui under the pressure of public attention, the Chinese authorities reacted by striking out at the children who had embarrassed them—crushing them with tanks and gunfire. To this day, these acts of violence continue to be justified in terms of sustaining peace and prosperity—that is, of restoring “social” order.

These conflicting views of “the public” and of governance are replayed every time an outspoken person emerges to criticize the political regime in Beijing. Fang Lizhi, Wei Jingsheng, Martin Lee, Szeto Wah, Christine Loh, Emily Lau, and Harry Wu are just a few who come to mind.<sup>19</sup> In order to do what they seek to do, which is to bring about democracy in territories under (or soon to be under) Chinese rule, these radicals must act as though they were ignorant of the concept of “the public” that is implicit in that rule. In doing so, they have again and again provoked the Chinese authorities’ profound anger. What is maddening to these authorities is not merely what the radicals say in their speeches and writings about China’s various acts of social injustice, but also the defiant, “uncouth” manner in which they voice their criticisms in public. When that public is international, their “misbehavior” becomes unpardonable. In keeping with the circular reasoning of their essentialist governing ideology, the Chinese authorities typically handle such defiance by turning the radicals into outcasts, through criminalization and imprisonment or through deportation and ostracization. Often, such “outcasting” is put in explicitly nationalistic and ethnic terms, with trouble-makers accordingly labeled “traitors” who have betrayed China to the “foreigners,” the “Western imperialists.”<sup>20</sup>

With its overtones of absurdity and sentimentalism, the scene in which Fugui spans his son in submission to the pressuring public gaze is hence emblematic of the predicament of governance in Chinese political culture. Such governance is driven by a public sphere that, unable to serve as the site for a potentially autonomous opposition, readily collapses into a mechanism for coercion by brute force. Without

the effective intervention of a restraining legal apparatus, this public space requires the individual to assume a subordinate position vis-à-vis “public opinion,” a position enforced by discipline and punishment. The patriarchal implications of such subordination include the fact that its enforcement will always be aimed at the powerless, who must always be disciplined and punished regardless of the grounds on which their discontent is voiced. The governing-governed relationship in this context becomes tripartite: governance is enforced not only by soliciting the governed to serve the arbitrary and brutal interests of “the public,” but also by specifically manipulating them into willingly sacrificing those who are disadvantaged—in the name of the *public good*. In turn, these disadvantaged members of the public may internalize such governance as *self-governance*—by either becoming as violent as their governors (if they succeed in procuring power for themselves) or submissively enduring violence to themselves (if they remain “ordinary citizens”). Since the majority of society must remain “ordinary citizens,” governance means, ultimately, the dissemination of a political culture in which people are always prepared to tolerate violence and to accommodate further violence. It is under such patterns of governance and self-governance that “endurance” excels as the foremost moral virtue in the struggle “to live.” Perhaps nowhere is the violence that goes into the making of this moral virtue more evident than in the Chinese character for “endurance”—*ren*—which is composed of a “knife” above the “heart.”

### **We Endure, Therefore We Are**

Technically, how can a critique of an abstract quality such as “endurance” be made on the movie screen? With his usual penchant for understanding what works in the medium of film, Zhang added a series of events which are not found in Yu Hua’s novella. This “supplement” not only contributes to the spectacular cinematic visuality that is a hallmark of all of Zhang’s films, but also exemplarily allegorizes the contradictions inherent to the people’s “survival.”

Near the beginning of the film, after Fugui has reduced his family to poverty, he goes to Long’er for help. Having won the Xu family’s ancestral home that Fugui gambled away, Long’er refuses to lend him any money, but instead offers him the loan of a box containing some bric-a-brac from the past—a set of shadow-puppets.<sup>21</sup> From then on, Fugui, who, in an earlier scene, showed off his singing talent in the gambling house, will make his living by singing with a traveling troupe of puppeteers.

During one performance near the end of the Civil War, Fugui and his

fellow performers are conscripted into the Nationalist Army by force. Because the puppets are on loan from Long’er, Fugui insists on lugging them along in their heavy box. When the Nationalists are defeated by the Communists, Fugui, like many others, becomes a prisoner of war, only to discover that his burdensome puppets have suddenly become a treasure: accidentally picked up by the bayonet of a Communist soldier, the figures dazzling against the sun provide a means of entertainment for the troops. In performing for the soldiers and giving them some relief from the dull wartime conditions, Fugui becomes a minor hero and is awarded a certificate for having served the People’s Liberation Army. When he is finally able to return home, this certificate provides proof that he and his family are “exemplary” citizens at a time when others, especially landowners, are being hounded. (Long’er, for instance, is dragged off to be executed before Fugui’s eyes.)

Then, during the Great Leap Forward, when every household’s iron is confiscated for smelting as part of the national self-strengthening effort, Fugui’s puppets are, once again, threatened. But just as they are about to be confiscated, Jiazhen makes a suggestion to the town chief: Why not use the puppets to entertain the workers? Fugui’s livelihood is thus salvaged a second time. Finally, during the Cultural Revolution, when relics of the past become dangerous to own because of their association with a “corrupt” ideology, Fugui is advised to burn his puppets before they are discovered. Even then, the wooden box in which the puppets had been stored is transformed into something useful: a nest for the chicks to be raised by Fugui’s grandson. As he had once told Youqing, Fugui now tells Mantou: when the chicks grow big, they will turn into geese; when the geese get big enough, they will turn into sheep; when the sheep have grown, they will turn into oxen. . . . As life gets better and better, the little boy will no longer ride on the back of an ox but on trains and airplanes.<sup>22</sup>

As a means of making a living, the shadow-puppets are richly suggestive of the complex significance of “the people” and “popular resistance.” The puppet theater is, first and foremost, a practice of the past—an art form associated with premodern China. Yet in spite of its anachronicity, the puppet theater is a resilient cultural mode that continues to be performed in various regions where it is associated with local folk traditions. In terms of the pedagogical mission of the political regime, it is precisely such relics as the shadow-puppet theater that interest Chinese Communist historians, for they are part of the “popular material culture” that constitutes the new conceptualization of a revolutionary China. Furthermore, as a symbol of the people’s tradition, the puppets in *To Live* endure, surviving one disaster after another. Even after they are finally destroyed, the box which once held them survives and nurtures new life. Are these puppets not the best testa-

ment to the common people's will to live? Instead of merely affirming this, Zhang's film makes us reflect on the nature of "endurance" itself: what precisely is endurance, and what does it tell us about the way China is governed?

Like the puppets, the characters in the film show a remarkable ability to persist through trying circumstances. Not only do they adapt to the physical hardships of life, but they seem equally capable of accommodating themselves to the ideological manipulations of the state. Once wealthy landowners, the Xu family adjusts to the low status of "poor townfolk," settling in and deliberately conforming with every move they make. In an early episode, for instance, Fugui and Jiazhen learn from the town chief that Long'er, the new owner of their ancestral home, refused to surrender the house to the authorities and burned it down instead in an act of "counterrevolutionary sabotage." Fugui's first reaction is one of shock at the destruction—after all, all that "sturdy timber" used to belong to the Xus. But, remembering that he is in public, he quickly adds that it is not their timber but "counter-revolutionary timber." Jiazhen gets the message immediately: "Yes," she echoes, "it's counterrevolutionary timber." In another episode, as the family sits down for a meal, Erxi, the son-in-law, mentions that their old friend Chunsheng, who had been an important cadre member, has been arrested and is in the process of being purged, so they should keep their distance (*hua qing jie xian*—literally, "draw a clear line") from him. Once again, Fugui readily acquiesces, glancing anxiously at the picture of Chairman Mao that was Chunsheng's wedding present to his daughter.

Such small incidents, comments, and details, which pass almost unnoticed because they are such a "natural" part of the story, cumulatively amount to an alternative reading of "the common people." This reading does not celebrate the common people's ability to live—to adapt to and endure harsh circumstances—as an unequivocal virtue; rather, it problematizes it as China's most enduring ideology.<sup>23</sup> In Zhang's film, the conventional notion of endurance as a strength is not simply reproduced but consciously staged, and it is through such staging, such dramatization or melodramatization, that a crucial fantasy which props up "China"—whether as a culture, a nation, a family, or a common person—is revealed. "We, the Chinese, are the oldest culture, the oldest people in the world," this fantasy says. "The trick of our success is the ability to stick it out—to absorb every external difficulty into ourselves, to incorporate even our enemies into our culture. We endure, therefore we are."

Like the structure of all powerful ideologies, endurance-cum-identity works tautologically: the ability to endure is what enables one to live, but in order to endure, one must stay alive. "To endure" and "to

live" thus become two points of a circular pattern of thinking which reinforce each other by serving as each other's condition of possibility. In accordance with this circular, tautological reasoning, the imperative "to live" through endurance becomes what *essentially* defines and perpetuates "China." As such, it operates as a shield in two senses: "living" protects China from destruction at the same time that it prevents China from coming to terms with reality. That is, China—preoccupied exclusively with its own survival—is *in reality* its own worst enemy because that preoccupation is precisely what has led China's political history, with all its catastrophes, to be repeated ad infinitum.

The best demonstration of this self-perpetuating ideology of endurance and survival in *To Live* is none other than the shadow-puppets, whose capacity for survival becomes most evident, ironically, in their own destruction. For if, as the town chief points out, the stories performed by the puppet theater are all "classic feudal types"—all about *dihuang jiangxiang, caizi jiaren* ("emperors, kings, generals, ministers, scholars, and beauties")—and that is why the puppets must be burned, then isn't the fascination with such stories reproduced in the very act of burning, which is, after all, an act performed in filial worship of Mao Zedong as an emperor, and in mindless obedience to the Party and the Revolution? Although the puppets are destroyed on account of their feudalist ideological import, *feudalist ideology itself is kept alive in the very event that seeks to extinguish it*. Moreover, tradition, now an empty box, continues "to live" nonetheless by supporting new life—both the grandson and his chicks. And this new life is imagined in the form of a fantastic, progressive *telos*—from chickens to geese, to sheep, to oxen, to trains and airplanes—of a life that keeps getting "better and better" without ever getting any better at all.<sup>24</sup>

By abandoning the singular perspective of one character and by foregrounding interactions among different characters over such additional, apparently "technical" elements as the shadow-puppet theater, Zhang enables a radically nonconforming view of endurance and survival to emerge. His approach is, strictly speaking, an *ethical* one insofar as it is an approach to the *ethos*—the way of life—of a group of people, in this case "the Chinese." Ethics in this sense is not the abstract moral/philosophical sphere of Western modernity but the structure, dynamics, and values of social life in a specific community.<sup>25</sup> More than any of Zhang's other films, *To Live* focuses on practices in the context of the Chinese ethos, elaborating—as it exposes—China's "national" ideology. Through this most accessible, chronological narrative of the lives of "common people," Zhang raises the most profound political question: how is China governed, managed, and fantasized as a collective? The answer proposed by his film is equally profound, and remarkable: China is governed, managed, and fantasized as a collective by the self-

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fulfilling, self-perpetuating ideology of endurance and survival—by an ethical insistence on accommodating, on staying alive at all costs. And yet, such an insistence, despite its nobility, is not *ethical* enough, for it can be and frequently has been co-opted by precisely the forces it seeks to resist. The ideology of endurance and survival has been so thoroughly and “spontaneously” incorporated into “the imaginary relation” between the Chinese and their real living conditions<sup>26</sup> that the government can blatantly disregard human rights in the name of human rights, since, after all, “human rights” means “having enough to eat,” and China’s food supply is an essentially “internal affair.” When any intervention in China’s handling of this crucial issue can be successfully dismissed as “Western imperialism”—yet another external threat to be endured and survived by the Chinese—a time-honored form of governance remains in full force.

#### Refusing to Live: The Glimpse of an Alternative Political Culture

If my reading of this fundamental critique of Chinese society in Zhang’s film is at all tenable, then it should not be surprising that a saga of so many heart-rending episodes would also have many funny and farcical, indeed absurd, moments. If a film can be said to have an affect, that of *To Live* can only be described as the affect of excess. This excess stems from the crisscrossing of various modes of emotional intensity: melodrama and sentimentalism (with many tear-jerking interludes), comedy (with belly laughs at unexpected moments), and scenes that provoke other strong feelings (such as those generated by the wonderfully performed intimate relations among the various family members). But the affect of excess also points to the presence of an otherness, a chord of emotional dissonance struck from within the realistic narrative that neither tragedy, farce, nor familial bonding manages to muffle.

This emotional dissonance is the result of a narrative structure that alludes to the possibility of an alternative reading as it unfolds, so that the experience of “seeing” the film becomes one of virtually looking at a hologram. While there is undoubtedly a cohesive frame of reference, which allows us to follow the story, there is at the same time another configuration that is equally present on the surface, waiting to be seen. What is crucial is that the recognition of this other configuration inevitably disrupts, destabilizes, and distorts the more obvious one, although we can choose to “see” only that one and to ignore the other. Coming from a director who has lived for decades in a totalitarian state where the authorities continue to obstruct his work,<sup>27</sup> this holographic mode of storytelling is, we may surmise, a tactic of smuggling subversive messages past censors. As I have already mentioned, such

subversive smuggling is often achieved by means of passing incidents, comments, and details. As well, it is achieved by means of minor characters.

For instance, little Youqing, who disappears halfway through the film, subverts the predominant message of survivalist endurance more than once. After being wrongly punished in the communal dining hall, Youqing decides to play a practical joke on his father at the suggestion of his mother. During one of Fugui’s performances, Youqing serves his father a bowl of tea—laced with large amounts of vinegar and chili sauce. Drinking the tea unawares, Fugui chokes and spits it out, splashing the puppet theater screen and making everyone laugh. In a scene that is filled with the most infectious feelings of warmth and fun, thus, the son’s mischievous act—another spin-off of the idea of unincorporated food—provokes his father into a momentary “revolt.” A person who usually “swallows” everything, Fugui finally acts in a way that is, in terms of the ideological structure of the story, the opposite of endurance.

The other character in Zhang’s film besides Youqing who represents the possibility of an alternative behavioral code is Chunsheng. As Fugui’s sidekick in the gambling house and the traveling puppeteer troupe, then during the Civil War, Chunsheng is throughout the film kept in the role of a character on the side, a character who, unlike Fugui, is not central to the story. He sometimes strikes us as a bit crazy, such as when he claims—on a battlefield covered with corpses—that he wants to drive a car so much that he would gladly die for that experience. Years later, Chunsheng unexpectedly reappears as the district chief who has accidentally killed Youqing, and whom the Xu family (Jiazhen in particular) refuses to forgive. As a result, Chunsheng is relegated to the position of a suspect outsider. On important occasions, such as Fengxia’s wedding, he is neither formally invited to join the celebration nor served tea as a guest in the house.

During the Cultural Revolution, like many officials of standing, Chunsheng is tried and persecuted as a “capitalist” running dog. One night, after his wife has apparently committed suicide, he comes to see Fugui and confesses in despair, “I don’t want to live any more!” As Chunsheng bids him farewell, Fugui urges him to be strong and to go on living. For the first time since Youqing’s death, Jiazhen softens and asks Chunsheng to come into the house. She reminds him that he owes their family a life, a debt that endows his own life with value. Chunsheng, however, neither agrees nor disagrees. Although we hear the admonition “to live” loud and clear, Zhang’s film leaves it unclear as to whether Chunsheng will accede to this imperative. His disappearance into the dim light at the end of the street, an image of melancholic uncertainty, marks a departure from coerced survival at all costs.

## ETHICS AFTER IDEALISM

As someone who even considers refusing to endure, "to live," Chunsheng can be linked to some of Zhang's most defiant characters, such as the peasant woman, Judou, in *Judou* and the maid Yan'er in *Raise the Red Lantern*. In terms of the ideological structure of *To Live*, Chunsheng's walking away introduces a distance, a chasm, within the picture of a continuous collective "living" and offers a glimpse of the possibility of an alternative mode of self-governance and political culture. It is, however, no more than a glimpse. The working out of the implications of this barely glimpsed alternative would have to be a long-term intellectual, political, and ethical project.

## EIGHT

*A Souvenir of Love*


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*We don't know what love is. Sometimes people even think it is a "local custom."*

—Lee Bik-wa/Li Bihua, *Yinji kau/Yanzhi kou*

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ANY VISIT TO Hong Kong in recent years tells one that strong feelings of nostalgia are at work in the general consumer culture. As *wai gau/huaijiu*<sup>1</sup>—the most commonly used Chinese term for nostalgia—becomes a trend, the city culture of Hong Kong takes on the appeal of an ethnographic field. Architectural landmarks such as the Repulse Bay Hotel, the Peak Restaurant, and the Western Market have been rebuilt or renovated in such ways as to resurrect their former colonial "flavor." Exhibitions were held in 1992 of the postcards of Hong Kong from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, of Hong Kong film posters dating back to the 1950s, of Hong Kong cigarette and groceries posters dating back to the 1930s, as well as of various kinds of mass culture publications and daily wares from the 1950s and 1960s. Furniture, music, clothes, shoes, and cosmetics of the past decades are being revived, and it has become fashionable to collect "antiques" such as pocket and mechanical watches, records, old newspapers, old magazines, old photographs, old comic strips, and so forth, in addition to the more traditional collector's items such as coins, stamps, snuff bottles, utensils, paintings, calligraphy, and carpets. The nostalgic hold on history, tradition, and culture has made way for the endless production of commodities.

As a Hong Kong journalist writes, "For the nostalgic class and its rapidly expanding club membership, what is beautiful has to be in the past tense; to appreciate the beautiful is like entering a time tunnel in

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# JULIETIN

## CONCERNED ASIAN SCHOLARS



Making "orchid flags" for China's Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong (AFP photo/Robyn Beck)

**Hèunggóngyàhn—Hong Kong Identity Japanese Organic Farming**  
**Western Marxism in Post-Mao China Kerala People's Science Movement**  
**Transnational Networks and Hindu Nationalism**  
**Screening China Not Quite Han—China's Ethnic Minorities**

Volume 29, Number 3 / July-September 1997

## Review Essay

### Screening China: Recent Studies of Chinese Cinema in English

MELODRAMA AND ASIAN CINEMA. Ed. Wimal Dissanayake. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993. 291 pp.

FILM IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA: CRITICAL DEBATES, 1979-1989. Ed. George S. Semsel, Chen Xihe, and Xia Hong. New York: Praeger, 1993. 232 pp.

CINEMATIC LANDSCAPES: OBSERVATIONS ON THE VISUAL ARTS AND CINEMA OF CHINA AND JAPAN. Ed. Linda C. Ehrlich and David Desser. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994. 345 pp.

by Zhang Yingjin\*

Prior to the early 1980s, the study of Chinese cinema in academia was a rarity in the West.<sup>1</sup> This situation changed in the mid-1980s in the wake of a number of events that generated new interest in Chinese cinema.

Chinese films began to be shown and greeted with critical acclaim at international film festivals. In 1985, *Yellow Earth* (Huangtu di, directed by Chen Kaige, 1984) was shown at international film festivals in Hong Kong and Hawaii, becoming

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\*My gratitude to the Center for Chinese Studies at the University of Michigan for granting me a postdoctoral research fellowship in 1995-96, and to its faculty and staff for making that academic year my most productive one. This essay was first completed and presented at Michigan in December 1995; a Chinese version was presented at Beijing University, Nankai University, and Xiamen University in June 1996.

*Editor's note:* Titles of films are given first in English and then in Chinese following the style used by the author.

1. The pre-1980 publications, usually of informational rather than academic nature, supplied basic but much-needed materials on the cultural and political history of modern China, or on significant film events, figures, and studios; some of them also came with biographical entries on major directors and plot summaries of selected films. For samples, see Jay Leyda, *Dianying: An Account of Films and the Film Audience in China* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1972); Régis Bergeron, *Le cinéma chinois, 1905-1949* (Lausanne: Alfred Eibel, 1977); *Cinema e spettacolo in Cina oggi, XIV Mostra internazionale del nuovo cinema quaderno informativo, n. 75* (a cura dell'ufficio documentazione della Mostra, 1978).

NEW CHINESE CINEMAS: FORMS, IDENTITIES, POLITICS. Ed. Nick Browne, Paul G. Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack, and Esther Yau. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994. 255 pp.

PRIMITIVE PASSIONS: VISUALITY, SEXUALITY, ETHNOGRAPHY, AND CONTEMPORARY CHINESE CINEMA. Rey Chow. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995. 253 pp.

the first of a series of success stories from China's so-called Fifth Generation filmmakers (Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou, Tian Zhuang-zhuang, and others). Ground-breaking retrospectives of Chinese films had screened earlier: in Turin, Italy (Feb. 25-Mar. 8, 1982, more than 140 films), in Beijing (Sept. 1983, more than 40 pre-1949 films), and in Hong Kong (Jan. 1984, mostly films from the 1930s). Other Chinese film weeks and film seasons stimulated public interest in Chinese cinema in the West.<sup>2</sup>

In the fall of 1984 and the spring of 1986, Chinese film scholars Cheng Jihua and Chen Mei came to the United States to team-teach their "legendary" film seminars at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). Their seminars marked

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2. The phenomenal Turin retrospective, master-minded by Marco Müller, produced two fine Chinese film programs: *Ombre elettriche: Saggi e ricerche sul cinema cinese* (Milan: Regione Piemonte/Electa, 1982) and *Ombres électriques: Panorama du cinéma chinois 1925-1982* (Paris: Centre de Documentation sur le Cinéma Chinois, 1982). For a detailed report, see John Ellis, "Electric Shadows in Italy," *Screen* 23, no. 2 (1982): 79-83. For other retrospectives of Chinese films, see Paul Pickowicz, "Early Chinese Cinema—The Era of Exploration," *Modern Chinese Literature* 1, no. 1 (Sept. 1984): 135-38. For the *Eastern Horizons* retrospective, part of the September 1987 Toronto Festival of Festivals that exhibited films from Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Vietnam, see Pat Aufderheide, "Oriental Insurgents," *Film Comment* 23, no. 6 (1987): 73-76. The National Film Theater in London organized two small Chinese film seasons in 1976 and 1980. See Rosalind Delmar and Mark Nash, "Breaking with Old Ideas: Recent

the formal entry of Chinese cinema into regular university curricula in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Around this same time (the summers of 1984 to 1988) American film scholars were visiting Beijing and delivering lectures on Western film criticism and film theory through U.S.-China cultural exchange programs.<sup>4</sup>

As William Rothman observes, "We Americans studying Chinese cinema in those years found ourselves envisioning the events [of reform and democratization] sweeping China as a grand historical melodrama," and we felt "called upon to play a role" in this movement by championing new Chinese films.<sup>5</sup> Although efforts at reform and democratization ended in tragedy in the summer of 1989, Chinese cinema continued to capture public attention as one by one Chinese films won the top prizes at prestigious international film festivals (e.g., Berlin, Cannes, Locarno, Nantes, Pesaro, Tokyo, and Venice).<sup>6</sup>

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Chinese Films," *Screen* 17, no. 4 (1976-77): 67-84; Tony Rayns and Scott Meek, ed., *Electric Shadows: 45 Years of Chinese Cinema*, Dossier No. 3 (London: British Film Institute, 1980). A "China Film Week" that toured through the United States in 1981 is briefly discussed by Tom Allen in *Film Comment* 17, no. 6 (1981): 10. Growing public interest in the West was reflected later in a number of special sections or issues devoted to Chinese or Hong Kong films in journals such as *Film Comment* (1988), *Camera Obscura* (1989), *Jump Cut* (1989), *Wide Angle* (1989), *Cineaste* (1990), and *Modern Chinese Literature* (1993).

3. Rothman's phrase, in Wimal Dissanayake, ed., *Melodrama and Asian Cinema* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 258. In the subsequent years, Cheng and Chen team-taught at other institutions, including the University of Southern California, the University of Iowa, the University of Wisconsin at Madison, and the State University of New York at Stony Brook. For a sample list of institutions that have offered Chinese film courses recently, see Yingjin Zhang, "Rethinking Cross-Cultural Analysis: The Questions of Authority, Power, and Difference in Western Studies of Chinese Films," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 26, no. 4 (Oct.-Dec. 1994): 44, n. 1.

4. The visiting U.S. film scholars included Dudley Andrew, Nick Browne, David Bordwell, Brian Henderson, Beverle Houston, E. Ann Kaplan, Bill Nichols, Robert Rosen, Robert Sklar, Vivian Sobchack, and Janet Staiger, some of them making more than one trip. The topics of their lectures ranged from film historiography, film theory and practice, ideology, interpretation, melodrama, modernism and modernity, musical, narration, psychoanalysis, woman and film, and so on. For more details, see Nick Browne, Beverle Houston, and Robert Rosen, "China Is Near: A Visit to the People's Republic," *On Film* 14 (1985): 11-17; George S. Semsel, Chen Xihe, and Xia Hong, ed., *Film in Contemporary China* (New York: Praeger, 1993), pp. xxii-xxiii.

5. In Dissanayake, *Melodrama*, p. 259. Ni Zhen supplies an example of the dramatic impact of Western critical acclaim or the fate of *Yellow Earth*: when first released in 1984, the film attracted only a small audience at home, and a Beijing theater had to refund tickets and replace the film with another program; after the 1985 Hong Kong Film Festival, "when an attempt was made in Shanghai to devote two or three movie houses exclusively to experimental narratives, *Yellow Earth* ran to capacity audiences for a week and had a nationwide impact" (Semsel et al., *Film in Contemporary China*, p. 31).

6. Klaus Eder, a principal program organizer of the Munich International Film Festival, made this observation in 1993: "New Chinese cinema has dominated many international festivals, most recently Venice in 1992 (*The Story of Qiu Ju*), Berlin in 1993 (*Women from the Lake of Scented Souls*) and Cannes in 1993 (*Farewell to My Concubine*). That is a surprising and admirable series of successes, which no other cinema has ever duplicated, at least not within the last two or three decades." See

Chinese cinema is now firmly established as a blooming field of academic study, as evidenced by the number and quality of the books under review here.<sup>7</sup> This new field of study deserves a systematic examination of its accomplishments to date and an assessment of the needs for further research.<sup>8</sup>

### Chinese Cinema and Melodrama

*Melodrama and Asian Cinema* (Wimal Dissanayake, ed.) is based on a film symposium held at the East-West Center in Hawaii in 1989 and includes four chapters on Chinese cinema.

In the first of the four, "Melodrama / Subjectivity / Ideology: Western Melodrama Theories and Their Relevance to Recent Chinese Cinema," E. Ann Kaplan challenges cross-cultural film studies to avoid taking an essentialist position that China is China and has nothing to do with the West. Her essay demonstrates that a reading based on Western melodrama theory can actually illuminate our understanding of Chinese films. She believes, for example, that Xie Fei's *A Girl from Hunan* shares a "classically patriarchal ideology of a young women's sexual arousal dependent on male initiation" (p. 21), an ideological position commonly found in classic Hollywood films. Citing a distinction that feminists have observed between "women's melo-

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*New Chinese Cinema*, Dossier 11, ed. Klaus Eder and Deac Rossell (London: National Film Theatre, 1993), p. 8. Eder forgot to mention a Taiwan film, *The Wedding Banquet* (Xiyan, directed by Ang Lee [Li An], 1992), which was the co-winner—with *Women from the Lake of Scented Souls* (Xianghun nü, directed by Xie Fei, 1992)—at the 1993 Berlin Film Festival. Top prizes were awarded to *Red Sorghum* at Berlin in 1988 and to *City of Sadness* (Beiqing chengshi, directed by Hou Hsiao-hsien, 1989) at Venice in 1989. For a list of these and other prizes won by Chinese films from the mainland and Taiwan at major international film festivals since 1984, see *Sinorama* (Guanghua) 18, no. 5 (May 1993): 40.

7. See Chris Berry, ed., *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema* (Ithaca, N.Y.: China-Japan Program, Cornell University, 1985; East Asian papers, no. 39), which consists of six articles; a second and enlarged edition—with six new chapters as well as filmographies and appendices—was issued in 1991 (London: BFI Publishing). See also Paul Clark, *Chinese Cinema: Culture and Politics Since 1949* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987); George S. Semsel, ed., *Chinese Film: The State of the Art in the People's Republic* (New York: Praeger, 1987); and Wimal Dissanayake, ed., *Cinema and Cultural Identity: Reflections on Films from Japan, India, and China* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1988). Attempts at a political history of Chinese cinema similar to that of Paul Clark's were made earlier in Europe: Jörg Lösel, *Die politische Funktion des Spielfilms in der Volksrepublik China zwischen 1949 und 1965* (Munich: Minerva Publikation, 1980); Régis Bergeron, *Le Cinéma chinois, 1949-1983*, 3 vols. (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1984). Another European publication bearing a similar title is *Le Cinéma chinois*, ed. Marie-Claire Quiquémelle and Jean-Loup Passek (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1985). Like some previous dossiers mentioned in note 1 above, *Le Cinéma chinois* contains such essential reference features as biographical entries, film synopses, and an amazing number of quality pictures, but has managed at the same time to provide critical perspectives by including a dozen topical studies (by Chinese and European writers) and appending commentaries (gleaned from the original sources) to nearly all synopses.

8. A new book came out too late to be included in this review essay: Xudong Zhang, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms: Cultural Fever, Avant-garde Fiction, and the New Chinese Cinema* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997).

dramas" (i.e., stories of how "man comes to be man") and "women's films" (those that resist the dominant patriarchal ideology by raising "the question of what it means to be female" [p. 13]), Kaplan discusses various instances of female subjectivity, sexuality, desire, and transgression in *The Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (Tianyunshan chuanqi, directed by Xie Jin, 1980), *A Girl from Hunan* (Xiangnü Xiaoxiao, directed by Xie Fei, 1985), *A Good Woman* (Liangjia funü, directed by Huang Jianzhong, 1985), and *Army Nurse* (Nüer lou, directed by Hu Mei, 1985).

Ma Ning's article "Symbolic Representation and Symbolic Violence: Chinese Family Melodrama of the Early 1980s" begins with conceptions of the Chinese family in the popular mind and then focuses on the issues of family conflict, power-pleasure nexus, and sexual politics in *The In-Laws* (Xi yingmen, directed by Zhao Huanzhang, 1981), *In the Wild Mountains* (Yeshan, directed by Yan Xueshu, 1987), and *Country Couple* (Xiangyin, directed by Hu Bingliu, 1983). Ma Ning asserts that "family melodrama" of the early 1980s constitutes a site where symbolic violence is staged and where a "habitual mode of perception of the Chinese peasantry" persists (p. 34).

In "The Goddess: Reflections on Melodrama East and West," William Rothman analyzes an early Chinese masterpiece, *Goddess* (Shengnü, directed by Wu Yonggang, 1934), from a comparative, humanistic perspective and considers the ways in which virtue and purity are embodied in the actress Ruan Lingyu and are captured—rather than violated—by the camera.

Yuejin Wang presents a creative piece, "Melodrama as Historical Understanding: The Making and Unmaking of Communist History," in which he argues that melodrama is itself a mode of historical understanding because, as in 1989, "History presents itself as cinema" that commands our melodramatic "gaze" (p. 73); he supports his argument with a review of significant historical events in China and in Eastern Europe. The fall of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe, he points out, were melodramatic spectacles watched by the rest of the world.

The essays in Wimal Dissanayake's volume illustrate the importance of melodrama to Chinese film studies. Informed by multiple theoretical models, they offer many interesting—at times insightful—readings of Chinese films. At the same time the essays show the contributors' struggles to navigate through what Douglas Wilkerson calls, in a rather negative review, "the turbid theoretical verbiage."<sup>9</sup> An advocate of broad-based area studies, Wilkerson favors research that demonstrates thorough knowledge of other disciplines as opposed to research that is confined to one academic discipline.

### Chinese Cinema and Traditional Arts or Aesthetics

A good example of the area studies model that Douglas Wilkerson prefers is found in *Cinematic Landscapes: Observations on the Visual Arts and Cinema of China and Japan*, edited by Linda Erlich and David Desser. (Wilkerson translated the first two essays in the China section on *Cinematic Landscapes*; he provides introductions to each of the essays as well.) The five essays on film and visual arts in China cover a wide range of topics, including traditional aesthetics based on Taoist and Zen Buddhist principles, and the influence of traditional Chinese

painting, especially the Southern School of landscape (*nanzong*), "with its multiple perspectives, relative flatness, use of blank space, elastic framing, lack of chiaroscuro and sculptural shading, and emphasis on expressive, calligraphic contour lines" (Wilkerson, p. 41).

Hao Dazheng's "Chinese Visual Representation: Painting and Cinema" is a systematic study of outstanding features of Chinese visual representation, such as dominance of horizontal expanse over depth (hence the use of flat *mise-en-scène*), interest in communality and totality rather than individuality (hence no need for close-ups), or preference of imaginative over realistic portrayal (hence the use of flat lighting). Ni Zhen's "Classical Chinese Painting and Cinematographic Signification" discusses other features such as the ambulatory, panoramic point of view and freely expandable frame in Oriental painting, the manipulation of temporal "blanks" and "empty space" in Chen Kaige's and Hou Hsiao-hsien's (Hou Xiaoxian) films, and the link between the "lyrical" film and the Chinese literati tradition.

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**"Chinese film scholars in the West are now confronted with two choices: one is to follow the orientalist trend and perpetuate a myth that reduces China to rural China, to barren landscapes, to exotic rituals, to male impotence or castration, to repressed female sexuality—in brief, to all that may be termed 'primitive passions'; the other is to demythologize Western fantasies and redirect critical attention to other aspects of Chinese cinema."**

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Whereas Hao and Ni are thoroughly immersed in Chinese aesthetics, Chris Berry and Mary Ann Farquhar are more concerned with recent developments in the West and thus propose, at the beginning of their essay, "Post-Socialist Strategies: An Analysis of *Yellow Earth* and *Black Cannon Incident*," to conceptualize "the style and strategies of Fifth Generation films" as "post-socialist"—a concept awaiting further elaboration (p. 84). They then proceed to study Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* in terms of brushwork, ink, composition (drawing on the Chang'an school of painting in the mid-twentieth century, as well as on the concept of yin/yang permutation). They then analyze *Black Cannon Incident* (Heipao shijian, directed by Huang Jianxin, 1985) in terms of alienation, expressionism/abstractionism, and distanciation. They conclude that the departure of these two films from the "socialist-realist tradition" in the 1950s and 1960s points to "the opening up of [a] postsocialist space" in which tradition may be revived for contemporary intervention and Western modern art invoked for "very Chinese purposes" (p. 110).

As if to illustrate Berry and Farquhar's conclusion on the usefulness of tradition, An Jingfu's "The Pain of a Half Taoist: Taoist Principles, Chinese Landscape Painting, and *King of the Children*" argues that Chen Kaige's recourse to Taoist aesthetic is not completely successful and the main character in his *King of the Children* (Haizi wang, 1987) is at best a "half Taoist"—the other half being "Confucian" (p. 121).

Finally, Jenny Kwok Wah Lau's "*Judou: An Experiment in Color and Portraiture in Chinese Cinema*" takes note of a switch of artists' preoccupation from portraiture to landscape during the Tang dynasty (618-904) and redirects our attention to a neglected

9. See Wilkerson's review, *Journal of Asian Studies* 53, no. 2 (May 1994): 510.

genre, the "rich color painting" (*nongcai hua*). In terms of the four basic elements in classical Chinese portraiture, namely posture, facial expression, spacing, and environment (p. 134), she discusses the characterization and the manipulation of color in *Ju Dou* (Ju Dou, directed by Zhang Yimou, 1990). She concludes that the film creates meanings "new to traditional Chinese cinema" (p. 133), but falls short of specifying exactly what the new meanings are or why they are new in contemporary China.

Technically, *Cinematic Landscapes* is an impressive book, handsomely designed—with many colorplates and stills to illustrate the affinities between painting and cinema. It is also easy to use—with a filmography and a list of selected works (but regrettably without a character list). As an attempt to "identify some of the bridges that link both worlds" of film studies and art history and to investigate "how some films cite the visual arts as a reference point" (Erlich and Desser, pp. 3-4), the anthology is a great success. It not only helps fill a gap in Western scholarship but it also links Chinese and Western types of film studies.<sup>10</sup> However, due to its preoccupation with aesthetic, philosophical, and formal or compositional elements, the Chinese section in this anthology (except for Berry and Farquhar's essay) does not adequately explain how innovative film styles function in the cultural and political context of contemporary China. For such explanations, we turn to the next book.

#### Film Studies in Contemporary China

In his Foreword to *Film in Contemporary China: Critical Debates, 1979-1989* (George Semsel, Chen Xihe, and Xia Hong, eds.)—a book that covers the most exciting decade of Chinese film studies, 1979-1989—John Lent insists that the collection is "important primarily because it allows Chinese film personnel to speak for themselves in their own language, using their own cultural and scholarly traditions" (p. x). Introductory and concluding remarks from the three editors frame a collection of Chinese articles in English translation that are arranged under five major headings: "The Call for New Social Concepts," "The Issue of Culture," "Yingxi" (shadowplay theory), "The Entertainment Film," and "The Debate on New Chinese Film Theory." According to the editors, works advocating technological development prevailed in the early 1980s, as evident in the pursuits of film language, of the ontology of film, and of other new concepts of film, whereas from the mid-1980s on "Chinese film studies shifted from technological to ideological concerns" (p. xx) in an attempt to rethink issues of social function, ideological construction, and political implication of filmmaking and film criticism.

In an unambiguous manner, the editors attribute the achievements of Chinese film studies in the "New Era" to the "influence of the West," for Western film theories, made available for the first time by visiting American scholars and through Chinese translations published by China Film Press (*Zhongguo dianying chubanshe*) and in journals such as *Contemporary Cinema* (Dangdai dianying), *Film Art* (Dianying yishu), and *World Cinema*

10. Earlier discussions of the relationship between Chinese film and traditional Chinese arts or aesthetic are found in Lin Niantong, "A Study of the Theories of Chinese Cinema in their Relationship to Classical Aesthetics," *Modern Chinese Literature* 1, no. 2 (fall 1985): 185-200; Catherine Yi-Yu Cho Woo, "The Chinese Montage: From Poetry and Painting to the Silver Screen," in Berry, *Perspectives* (1991), pp. 21-29.

(Shijie dianying), provided the necessary discursive means by which Chinese film scholars departed from the official paradigm of monolithic political criticism and ventured into a new intellectual space.

Presented in a variety of forms—essay, commentary, critique, and roundtable discussion, the articles in *Film in Contemporary China* exemplify a type of scholarship that is markedly different from that practiced in the West. Whereas film studies, as Rothman laments, had become all but completely "academized" in the United States by the mid-1980s and had lost its valuable "human" dimension, in Chinese film criticism we still see a close human tie between filmmakers and critics, and the latter's genuine engagement in—rather than a presumably "disinterested" detachment from—ongoing film production in China.<sup>11</sup> It is in this sense, to say the least, that the collection will prove useful to anyone who cares about what film studies meant to Chinese scholars in the 1980s, especially when the collection is paired with its earlier, companion volume, *Chinese Film Theory* (Praeger, 1990), which deals with a number of important debates in the 1980s: the theatricality of film, the literary quality of film, the new concept of film, the nationalization of film, and tradition and innovation in film (e.g., the Xie Jin model).<sup>12</sup> The weaknesses of the 1993 collection are its inconsistencies and its presentation of bibliographic data that is frustratingly incomplete or even incorrect.<sup>13</sup>

Judged by the standards of quality research, comprehensive coverage, and rich supplementary materials (e.g., illustrations, chronologies, glossary, and bibliography),<sup>14</sup> *New Chinese Cinemas* (Nick Browne, Paul G. Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack, and Esther Yau, eds.) is undoubtedly the best single-volume publication on contemporary Chinese cinema in English to date. Based on a conference held at UCLA in January 1990, this collection represents the maturation of Chinese film studies in the United States—a remarkable achievement given that the field was barely ten years old at the time of the conference.<sup>15</sup>

In a succinct introduction, Nick Browne, who was among the first to introduce Chinese film studies in the United States, places this anthology in a "demanding cross-cultural frame,"

11. For Rothman's view, see Dissanayake, *Melodrama*, pp. 259, 267-68. Chinese filmmakers like Xie Fei, Wu Yigong, and Zhang Nuanxin also participated in film criticism, while film scholars sometimes joined in film production (e.g., Ni Zhen was the screenwriter of *Raise the Red Lantern*, among others).

12. See George S. Semsel, Xia Hong, and Hou Jianping, eds., *Chinese Film Theory: A Guide to the New Era* (New York: Praeger, 1990).

13. For instance, two references to note number 1 appear in the text (pp. 185 and 188) but only one note appears in print (p. 189). Inconsistencies and mistakes like these reduce the reliability of the collection as a primary information source.

14. The bibliography in the anthology, compiled by Li Huai and Paul Pickowicz, is impressive, but the reader may also consult H. C. Li, "Chinese Electric Shadows: A Selected Bibliography of Materials in English," *Modern Chinese Literature* 7, no. 2 (fall 1993): 117-53, and his "More Chinese Electric Shadows: A Supplementary List," *Modern Chinese Literature* 8, nos. 1-2 (spring/fall 1994): 237-50. Li's third and final bibliography is forthcoming from the same journal in 1997.

15. In 1984, Paul Pickowicz stated that "research on Chinese cinema is still in its infancy." This statement was meant to cover the field in China and elsewhere (see his "Early Chinese Cinema," p. 137).

characterizing it as an interdisciplinary venture "between film studies and Chinese studies" (p. 11). "The challenge," Brown states, "is to map the changes of aesthetic form and sensibility upon the resistances and incursions, displacements, and reinscriptions of political power as it seeks to shape the social body" (p. 2). To that end, he reminds the reader, "Western interpretations of these changes . . . must first be historical and cultural" (p. 11).

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*"For film study in America to accept Asian cinema only as an object to be studied in accordance with already established procedures and doctrines is for the field to deny to Asian films, and to Asians, the status of subjects, subjects capable of thinking for themselves."*

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The first two essays in the anthology deal with melodrama. In "Spatiality and Subjectivity in Xie Jin's Film Melodrama of the New Period," Ma Ning maps the manifestation of spatiality and subjectivity in Chinese film melodrama. Beginning with an examination of film director Xie Jin's narrative mode as a blending of "history with fiction or legend, the personal with political, in a narrative pattern characterized by a bipolar structure that is typically Chinese" (p. 15), Ma discusses spatial dislocation and female subjectivity in *The Legend of Tianyun Mountain* and the construction, in Xie Jin's other films, of a "coherent" social subject at a time of ideological crises. In the course of his explanation, Ma Ning makes observations such as these: the subject position of the Chinese narrative discourse is group-oriented (p. 19); the yin-yang cosmology has left its mark on the screen layout, so that the right-hand side is usually associated with yang/positive whereas the left-hand side with yin/negative (p. 20). Clearly influenced by structuralist poetics, several of Ma Ning's observations appear to be too neatly charted. They require further evidence to substantiate their validity.

In "Society and Subjectivity: On the Political Economy of Chinese Melodrama," Nick Browne summarizes Western theories of melodrama and, in a cautious way, suggests that Chinese "family melodrama" (as conceived by Ma Ning) is not truly analogous with its Western counterpart. Browne proposes instead a concept of "political melodrama" that he defines as "an expression of a mode of injustice whose *mise-en-scène* is precisely the nexus between public and private life, a mode in which gender as a mark of difference is a limited, mobile term activated by distinctive social powers and historical circumstances" (p. 43). Interestingly, he selects the same Xie Jin films that Ma analyzed, but he offers his own interpretations of the intricate link between political positions and sexual relations, the tension generated by the expectations of an ethical system (Confucianism) and those of a political system (socialism), a mode of subjectivity at the margin of official discourse, and a concept of the "person" apart from gender *per se*.

In comparison, Paul Pickowicz's "Huang Jianxin and the Notion of Postsocialism" is theoretically more daring in that it recommends the notion of "postsocialism" as a way to comprehend contemporary Chinese culture and society. He judges modernism to be an abused term and postmodernism to be largely irrelevant to Chinese film studies. Postsocialism, he argues, exists in "the domain of popular perception" (p. 61), if not on an explicit ideological level. Pickowicz claims that "an alienated post-socialist mode of thought and behavior began midway through

the Cultural Revolution" and that this "negative, dystopian cultural condition" is not restricted to the city alone (pp. 62-63). He views *Black Cannon Incident* as a postsocialist critique of the Leninist political system, *Dislocation* (Cuowei, directed Huang Jianxin, 1986) as a parody that links postsocialism to theater of the absurd, and *Transmigration* (Lunhui, directed Huang Jianxin, 1989) as a story of individual resignation and anomie in the postsocialist society.

In "Neither One Thing Nor Another: Toward a Study of the Viewing Subject and Chinese Cinema of the 1980s," Chris Berry continues a study he began in 1985, substantially modifying his earlier judgment that a "nonindividualized, communal subject" is typical of post-1949 "classical mainland Chinese cinema."<sup>16</sup> For films in the 1980s, Berry proposes "a series of more localized models" of the viewing subject—models that take into account "a matrix of distinguishing factors, among them gender, distanciation, identification, subjectivity, emulation, and rejection" (p. 109).

The second part of *New Chinese Cinemas* focuses on films from Taiwan and Hong Kong. It opens with Fredric Jameson's "Remapping Taipei," an essay on *Terrorizer* (Kongbu fenzi, directed by Edward Yang [Yang Dechang], 1986) and on the film's themes of urban alienation and disillusionment. In characteristically imaginative fashion, Jameson refers to a range of European modernist works and non-Western texts as he argues that *Terrorizer* attributes modernization more generally to urbanization than to Westernization as such (p. 120), that it explores three now-archaic modernist themes—"art versus life, the novel and reality, mimesis and irony" (p. 123)—and that it defines the situation of women as "fundamentally spatial" while developing the male figures in "their temporal destinies" (p. 146).

In "The Ideology of Initiation: The Films of Hou Hsiao-hsien," William Tay employs the notion of "initiation" in his study of the world-renowned director from Taiwan, Hou Hsiao-hsien. Tay regards Hou's *A Time to Live and a Time to Die* (Tongnian wangshi, 1985) and *Dust in the Wind* (Lianlian fengchen, 1987) "as cinematic analogues of the *Bildungsroman*," which concentrates on the maturing process of the film's protagonist (p. 152). "But besides the usual psychological inclination to romanticize childhood and to embellish the past," Tay writes, "Hou Hsiao-hsien's unstained and innocent countryside always remains in idealistic opposition to . . . the city, which is usually portrayed as the embodiment of deception, corruption, and exploitation" (p. 155).

Li Cheuk-to's (Li Zhuotao) essay, "The Return of the Father: Hong Kong New Wave and Its Chinese Context in the 1980s," is very informative. Conceding that Hong Kong has not produced directors of the caliber of Hou Hsiao-hsien, Edward Yang, Chen Kaige, or Tian Zhuangzhuang, he argues nevertheless that Hong Kong cinema is important in many ways (p. 160). First, all new wave directors have received formal training in film schools in the West, and their works are marked by technical sophistication, aesthetic stylization, and modern sensibility. Second, since they were born and grew up in the territory, they exhibit a new Hong Kong consciousness—one that was absent from earlier generations of Hong Kong filmmakers who were more concerned with nationalism and their Chinese identity. The reintegration of Hong Kong into China in 1997 was a shadow

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16. See Berry, "Sexual Difference and the Viewing Subject in Li Shuangshuang and *The In-laws*," in *Perspectives* (1985), pp. 32-46.

that loomed large in the minds of the new generation of Hong Kong directors, who sought to articulate a collective anxiety by probing into the China-Hong Kong relationship. According to Li, *Homecoming* (Sishui liunian, directed by Yim Ho [Yan Hao], 1984) and *Long Arm of the Law* (Shenggang qibing, directed by Johnny Mak [Mai Dangxiong], 1984) constitute "the positive and negative poles of people's perceptions of the mainland in Hong Kong" (p. 169).

Survival, self-interest, and a new heroism based on brotherhood are the themes developed in the gangster films that have long been popular in Hong Kong. By contrast, Hong Kong's new breed of directors (those who began filmmaking in the late 1980s) reject the myths of brotherhood and heroism and—in films like *Gangs* (Tongdang, directed by Lawrence Ah Mon [Liu Guochang], 1988)—refuse to acknowledge the return of the father (the symbol of Chinese tradition).

In "Border Crossing: Mainland China's Presence in Hong Kong Cinema," Esther Yau distinguishes five perspectives of "China"—imperial China, Republican China, socialist China, Taiwan after 1949, and Hong Kong ruled by the British since 1842 (p. 182). She sees Hong Kong as a place where Chinese and Western cultural values co-exist and, like Li Cheuk-to, treats *Homecoming* and *Long Arm of the Law* as polar expressions vis-à-vis the mainland, although both films are equally ambivalent "toward [Hong Kong's] postcolonial future" (p. 197).

The final essay in the anthology, Leo Ou-fan Lee's "Two Films from Hong Kong: Parody and Allegory," analyzes the larger issues of urban culture and postmodern sensibility through the study of two films that represent two popular Hong Kong subgenres—the "hardcore" *gongfu* movie and the "softcore" romantic comedy. Lee starts with actor/director Jackie Chan (Cheng Long), whose serious and comic sides in *gongfu*/action films such as *Project A* (A jihua, 1983) exhibit elements of parody and allegory. Lee then studies *Rouge* (Yanzhi kou, directed by Stanley Kwan [Guan Jinpeng], 1987) and *Peking Opera Blues* (Daoma dan, directed by Tsui Hark, 1987). Taking his interest in parody one step further—linking parody and "pastiche"—Lee points to "the inevitable theoretical query: can we regard Hong Kong films as in some way products of a Chinese postmodern culture?" (p. 212). For him, "postmodernity" is indeed already present in Hong Kong cinema and its presence may "have something to do with the infrastructure of Hong Kong's urban culture" (p. 212). Refraining from a thorough investigation of the question of postmodernity, Lee nonetheless urges the reader to think about how to situate Chinese cinema in the contemporary postcolonial, if not entirely post-modern, world system, an issue that is examined at great length in Rey Chow's most recent book.

### Chinese Cinema and Postcoloniality

The only single-authored book under review here, Rey Chow's *Primitive Passions* is the most impassioned study of Chinese cinema and modern Chinese culture. Rereading Lu Xun's well-known story of how he came to write fiction after watching a newsreel about the execution of a Chinese spy by the Japanese, Chow detects a sign of the beginning of a new kind of discourse—that of "technologized visibility"—in the "third world" (p. 5). What she sees as "paradoxical" in Lu Xun's case is that, while fully aware of the direct and crude power of the new visibility, he nonetheless returned to the "ancient, word-centered

culture" (p. 10) in his enlightenment project.<sup>17</sup> Drawing on postcolonial discourse, Chow further asserts that, though visibility has been largely marginalized, if not altogether repressed, by modern Chinese intellectuals, "the entry of film represents a moment of an epochal dislocation of the linguistic and literary sign" (p. 18). In her elaborate formulation of "primitive passions," she points to the fantasies of a lost origin and to the strategies of invention and exoticization that structure a way of seeing "China as simultaneously victim and empire" (pp. 22-23). After a discussion of "Mao-worship" during the Cultural Revolution as "the most enchanting film of the time" (p. 31), Chow studies China's Fifth Generation directors as "anthropologists and ethnographers" who create a "space where 'China' is exhibited in front of audiences overseas" (pp. 37-38). Their cinematic reinventions of "China," Chow insists, must be "seen ultimately as rejoinders to the aspirations of the communist state" (p. 43); to move beyond such "cultural centrism," she calls for decentering the sign of "China" (p. 48).

Part 2 of Chow's book consists of four chapters devoted to specific Chinese films. According to Chow, a film like *Old Well* (Laojing, directed by Wu Tianming, 1987) "demonstrates the fundamental nothingness of the labor of social fantasy" (p. 77); moreover, she claims, "A careful allegorical reading of *Old Well* would demonstrate that the allegory of the 'nation' is, paradoxically, the nation's otherness and nonpresence" (p. 66)—a nonpresence "signified by the barrenness of romantic love" (p. 72). In her reading of *Yellow Earth*, she critiques two positions in current critical thinking about "third world" cinema—one "leftist masculinist" (i.e., Jameson's "national allegory") and the other "liberal feminist" (i.e., E. Ann Kaplan's "heterosexual erotics")—and argues that, in Chen's film, "The image becomes a kind of alibi, with its full signifying power giving way to a significance that is musical in effect" (pp. 89-90). In a radical move, she locates in *King of the Children* a "conception of culture as violence and excrement" (p. 129) and a creation, in the elusive figure of a "mute" cowherd, of "a discourse which counters the institution of education" (p. 124). As a product of narcissistic male culture, she concludes, "Chen's film offers a fantastic kind of hope—the hope to rewrite culture without woman and all the limitations she embodies" (p. 141).

Finally, turning to Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* (Hong gaoliang, 1988), *Ju Dou*, and *Raise the Red Lantern* (Dahong denglong gaogao gua, 1991), she judges these films to be "inheritors of the popular Mandarin Duck and Butterfly fictional modes" (p. 146), a term used by critics to refer to a type of popular fiction in early twentieth-century China that dwells excessively on the emotional lives of young lovers. She admits, however, that Zhang betters his precursors in the "art of seduction," which involves a "self-subalternization" and a "fetishization of women" (p. 148). She then reviews recent studies of Zhang and objects to the interpretations based on the *xu/shi* (emptiness/fullness) conceptualization and on the "repressive hypothesis" (p. 158). For Rey Chow, "filmic images operate as images, as surfaces whose significance lies in their manner of

17. Even though it might be smart of Rey Chow to challenge Lu Xun's status as the "father" of modern Chinese literature on the grounds of visibility, the reader must remember that, historically, Lu Xun helped introduce new forms of visibility such as European and Japanese wood-block print and book cover design to early twentieth-century China.

undoing depth itself" (p. 159).<sup>18</sup> The power of surfaces in Zhang's films, she contends, comes from their confrontation, from their tactics of returning "the double gaze of the Chinese security state and the world's, especially the West's, orientalism" (p. 170, emphasis in the original).

In the final part of her book, Chow considers China's status as object of gaze and claims that "being-looked-at-ness, rather than the act of looking, constitutes the primary event in cross-cultural representation" (p. 180). Through the twist of looking at oneself being looked at by others (the West), she suggests, contemporary Chinese cinema seeks to ethnographize China (the self) and becomes, in the end, an "autoethnography" (p. 181). After a survey of Western translation theories, she reconstructs Chinese cinema as "cultural translation" (p. 182), or translation between cultures, and concludes: "If translation is a form of betrayal, then the translators pay their debt by bringing fame to the ethnic culture.... It is in translation's faithlessness that 'China' survives and thrives" (p. 202).

As "a rejoinder to some of the most urgent debates about cross-cultural studies, sexuality, ethnicity, identity, authenticity, and commodity fetishism" (a description that appears on the book's back-cover), *Primitive Passions* is a timely contribution to a new interdisciplinary study of anthropology, film, and literature. As "an attempt to produce a cultural history and anthropology of modern China through the technologized visual image" (p. x), however, Chow's book is far from satisfactory. For one thing, the project as she envisions it would not be complete without consideration of other genres and forms of visual representation, such as book illustrations, pictorial magazines, and comic strips, as well as photography, television, advertising, and architecture. Her restricted use of Chinese sources, which stands in striking contrast to her impressive command of Western critical literature, will inevitably reduce the persuasiveness of her major arguments. For instance, the concept of film as (auto)ethnography is illuminating in regard to Tian Zhuangzhuang's *Horse Thief* (Daoma zei, 1985) but inadequate to his *Rock 'n' Roll Kids* (Yaogun qingnian, 1988); similarly, "primitive passions" are fully present in Zhang Nuanxin's *Sacrificed Youth* (Qingchun ji, 1985) but noticeably absent from her *Good Morning, Beijing!* (Beijing nizao, 1990), or from other contemporary urban films, such as *The Trouble Shooters* (Wanzhu, directed by Mi Jiasan, 1988) and *After Separation* (Da saba, directed by Xia Gang, 1992). These remarks, nevertheless, are not meant to diminish the value of *Primitive Passions*, which lies in the provocative questions it poses, if not in the radical answers it proposes.<sup>19</sup>

### Unresolved Issues

In conclusion, I will comment on a set of interrelated issues that are raised but not fully resolved in the books under review and that are likely to generate further debates. The first issue

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18. It is highly ironic that Rey Chow herself could not but employ certain "depth models" (feminist, psychoanalytic, and postcolonial) to figure out the "depth of meaning" Zhang Yimou's films have supposedly acquired by showcasing "images as surfaces."

19. This is also the case with Rey Chow's earlier books: *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), and *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

concerns the politics of cross-cultural studies, or more precisely, the question of Western theory and Chinese texts. Presumably writing against the text-centered approach in the West, Li Tuo recommends that "attention should be paid not only to the [Chinese] film texts themselves, but also to the ways in which Chinese critics interpret these texts and how and in what context their theoretical discourse is produced."<sup>20</sup> Yet, throughout the 1980s, the Chinese theoretical discourse was heavily influenced by Western theory. "Translations of Bazin's *What Is Cinema?* and Kracauer's *Theory of Film*... were quickly followed by studies in semiotics, structuralism, formalism, psychoanalysis, ideological and feminist criticism.... The works... by Mityr, Roland Barthes, Claude Levi-Strauss, Jacobson, Metz, Foucault, Benjamin, Althusser, Fredric Jameson, Andrew, Bordwell, Nichols, Nick Browne, Mulvey, and Ann Kaplan, brought numerous new approaches into the field and, in contrast to the past, heavily influenced Chinese film studies."<sup>21</sup> In fact, gleaned from recent studies, more names can be added to this spectacular "hit parade"—Adorno, Bakhtin, Baudrillard, Bourdieu, Derrida, Freud, Heidegger, Lacan, Nietzsche, and Said. The list goes on and on.

We may take the presence of these Western theorists in Chinese film studies as a sign of the significance accorded to the field and of the level of sophistication the field has attained; but, from another point of view, it may be said that this Western presence is problematic—even to some Western film scholars. In his passionate overview at the end of *Melodrama and Asian Cinema*, Rothman questions the condition in which Asian cinema becomes accepted as an integral part of academic film study: "For film study in America to accept Asian cinema only as an object to be studied in accordance with already established procedures and doctrines is for the field to deny to Asian films, and to Asians, the status of subjects, subjects capable of thinking for themselves. It is to silence Asian voices, ... to suppress conversation between and among Americans and Asians."<sup>22</sup> The silencing and suppression of Asian films in Western studies have been criticized,<sup>23</sup> but more is at stake in cross-cultural studies, including such a practical thing as how to designate the term "contemporary Chinese cinema" for Western audiences.

This raises another issue, the notion of contemporary Chinese cinema as "ethnography and autoethnography."<sup>24</sup> As is clear from the review above, Rey Chow bases her analysis on a small number of recent films, most of them set in rural China or in a mythical or cyclical time frame.<sup>25</sup> It is true that—with the success of films of Zhang Yimou's such as *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou*—Western audiences will have no difficulty recognizing "oppress-

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20. See Semsel et al., *Film in Contemporary China*, p. xi.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 185.

22. Dissanayake, *Melodrama*, p. 262.

23. See Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, "The Difficulty of Being Radical: The Discipline of Film Studies and the Postcolonial World Order," *Boundary 2* 18, no. 3 (1991): 242-57; and Yingjin Zhang, "Rethinking Cross-Cultural Analysis."

24. To quote Rey Chow in context: "In studying contemporary Chinese films as ethnography and autoethnography, I am thus advocating nothing less than a radical deprofessionalization of anthropology and ethnography as 'intellectual disciplines'" (*Primitive Passions*, p. 181). The page numbers of her other quotations in this and the following paragraphs are given in the text.

sive feudal practices, ethnic details, myth making, magnificent cinematography, [and] female sexuality” as Zhang’s trademarks (p. 150). However, from a critical point of view, to theorize that these trademarks of one individual somehow constitute the essential features of contemporary Chinese cinema is, intentionally or not, to disregard its diversity and complexity, to deny its achievements in other categories (e.g., urban cinema), and ultimately to participate in a new kind of orientalism. Indeed, Zhang Yimou’s “exhibitionism”—which Chow calls “the Oriental’s orientalism” (p. 171)—is very much a product of orientalist surveillance exercised by the international film festivals in the West; as an immediate result, his model of “visual ethnography” (p. 149) may have become “infinitely reproducible” (p. 48).<sup>26</sup> It is not an exaggeration to state that Chinese film scholars in the West are now confronted with two choices: one is to follow the orientalist trend and perpetuate a myth that reduces China to rural China, to barren landscape, to exotic rituals, to male impotence or castration, to repressed female sexuality—in brief, to all that may be termed “primitive passions”; the other is to demythologize Western fantasies and redirect critical attention to other aspects of Chinese cinema.

This task of re-envisioning the directions of critical practice is the third issue I would like to address. As Chris Berry rightly observed in 1990, “we still lack reliable English-language histories of the Chinese cinema before 1949, the Taiwan cinema and the Hong Kong cinema... [And] individual genres of feature film, documentaries and newsreels remain largely uncharted.”<sup>27</sup> Seven years have passed since Berry made this observation in Melbourne, Australia, but the situation remains basically unchanged as far as film history is concerned. What is encouraging in the field, nevertheless, is an increasing number of critical studies of individual texts of early Chinese cinema, Taiwan cinema, and Hong Kong cinema in the early 1990s, although we still need more studies of auteurs, genres, and themes.<sup>28</sup>

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25. Among the eighteen films she lists in the index, more than half are merely mentioned in the book, and only one (*Goddess*, 1934) falls in the category of urban cinema.

26. Three recent films conform to Zhang Yimou’s paradigm of repressed female sexuality in rural China: *The Woodenman’s Bride* (Yanshen, directed by Huang Jianxin, 1993), a film that looks like a remake of *Red Sorghum*; *Red Firecrackers*, *Green Firecrackers* (Paoda shuangdeng, directed by He Ping, 1994), a winner at the 1994 Hawaii Film Festival and a crowd-pleaser at art theaters in the West; and *Ermo* (Ermo, directed by Zhou Xiaowen, 1994), an artistic, at times comic variation on the theme of repressed female sexuality set in contemporary China.

27. Berry, *Perspectives* (1991), p. 4.

28. For early Chinese cinema, see Kristine Harris, “The New Woman: Image, Subject, and Dissent in 1930s Shanghai Film Culture,” *Republican China* 20, no. 2 (April 1995): 55-79; Paul Pickowicz, “The Theme of Spiritual Pollution in Chinese Films of the 1930s,” *Modern China* 17, no. 1 (1991): 38-75; Yingjin Zhang, “Engendering Chinese Filmic Discourse of the 1930s: Configurations of Modern Women in Shanghai in Three Silent Films,” *positions* 2, no. 3 (winter 1994): 603-28. For Taiwan cinema, see Stephanie Hoare, “Innovation through Adaptation: The Use of Literature in New Taiwan Film and its Consequences,” *Modern Chinese Literature* 7, no. 2 (fall 1993): 33-58; Yingjin Zhang, “The Idyllic Country and the Modern City: Cinematic Configurations of Family in *Osmanthus Alley* and *The Terrorizer*,” *Tamkang Review* 25, no. 1 (autumn 1995): 81-99. For Hong Kong cinema, see Rey Chow, “A Souvenir of Love,” *Modern Chinese Literature* 7, no. 2 (fall 1993):

Finally, related to the re-envisioning of Chinese film studies is the question of “China” or “Chineseness.” In current postcolonial discourse, it is almost imperative to “deconstruct” the concepts of the nation and ethnicity.<sup>29</sup> According to Rey Chow, the ethnic marker “Chinese” connotes a “compliant attitude toward totalitarianism” in the Chinese intelligentsia, as well as an “indifference toward *China’s imperialism vis-à-vis* peoples who are peripheralized, dominated, or colonized by mainland Chinese culture, in places such as Tibet, Taiwan, and Hong Kong” (p. 51). Moreover, in the era of transnational capitalism, “the ‘ethnicity’ of contemporary Chinese cinema—‘Chineseness’—is already the sign of a *cross-cultural* commodity fetishism” (p. 59). Indeed, the questions of nationhood and ethnicity are of tremendous importance to Chinese film studies, and as such they require more serious and more systematic study.<sup>30</sup> Suffice it to say here that, however “China” or “Chineseness” may be presented in current critical discourse, we must not and cannot ignore China as a cultural and political entity, for this reality has had an enormous impact on Chinese cinema throughout the twentieth century. To follow Jameson’s distinction that “ethnicity is something one is condemned to; neoethnicity is something one decides to reaffirm about oneself,”<sup>31</sup> I would like to conclude by stating that Chinese cinema is something that exists. Whatever individual critics may theorize about that “Chineseness” is always after the fact and metadiscursive. With this as the basis of our historical understanding, we may “screen” (in both senses of “projecting” and “scrutinizing”) China in a more meaningful way—meaningful not exclusively in the Western theoretical context, nor merely in the context of “authentic” Chinese culture and history, but ultimately in the context of cross-cultural, multi-ethnic, and transnational aspects of filmmaking, film viewing, and film criticism in the contemporary world.

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59-78; Kwai-Cheung Lo, “Once upon a Time: Technology Comes to Presence in China,” *ibid.*, pp. 79-96. Two forthcoming collections of essays will greatly facilitate further research in this growing field: *Romance, Sexuality, Identity: Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1910s-1940s*, edited by Yingjin Zhang (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), is devoted entirely to early Chinese cinema; *Transnational Chinese Cinema: Identity, Nationhood, Gender*, edited by Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), contains many essays on Taiwan and Hong Kong films. For information regarding auteurs, genres, and themes, *Encyclopedia of Chinese Film*, co-authored by Yingjin Zhang and Zhiwei Xiao (London: Routledge, 1998), is a comprehensive reference work comprising three essays on film histories of mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, as well as hundreds of entries of varied lengths.

29. In addition to the writings by Chow and Yau reviewed here, see Chris Berry, “A Nation T(w/o)o: Chinese Cinema(s) and Nationhood(s),” in *Colonialism and Nationalism in Asian Cinema*, ed. Wimal Dissanayake (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 42-64. This collection is not reviewed here because it contains only two essays on Chinese cinema, both published previously in *East-West Film Journals*.

30. For a full-length discussion of these questions, see Yingjin Zhang, “From ‘Minority Film’ to ‘Minority Discourse’: Questions of Nationhood and Ethnicity in Chinese Film Studies,” *Cinema Journal* 36, no. 3 (spring 1997): 73-90.

31. In Browne et al., *New Chinese Cinemas*, p. 120.

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## Select Internet web sites on Chinese cinema

Jean J. Su

Web sites with substantial information are preceded by asterisks.

\* <http://razzle.Stanford.EDU/hk>

This site, 'Hong Kong Cinema', offers a comprehensive home page that includes box-office reports, news of the week, annual awards, relevant articles, editorial features and related links. Its movie database and people database are searchable by titles and names.

<http://ms418qzh.ms.u-tokyo.ac.jp/~utcsa/links/China/china06.html>

This site provides several links related to Asian movies.

<http://www.asahi.co.jp/asia/asia-movie/movie-listE.html>

This site contains a selected list of Asian movies with brief synopses.

\* <http://www.geocities.com/Tokyo/Towers/2038>

This site, 'Hong Kong Top Ten Box Office Home Page', contains 'Fluff of the Week', featuring updated news items drawn from leading Hong Kong newspapers. It also furnishes information regarding top ten box-office hits (including foreign titles), such as how many screens were signed on and how many weeks these films were shown, as well as these films' weekly gross and cumulative incomes. It provides colour pictures, extensive texts and some related links.

\* <http://www.movieworld.com.hk>

This site, 'Movie World H. K.', claims to provide all Hong Kong movies between 1960 and 1997. The best feature about this database is that its contents are searchable by titles, performers, directors, screen writers, crew, and all persons involved. The user can use English, pinyin, Cantonese or the quick method to search. The site has a search guide and invites users' participation.

\* <http://www.nanhai.com/video.html>

This site for Nan Hai Co., Inc., USA contains a partial listing of the company's large collection of Chinese film and TV programmes. It carries brief synopses of films arranged in genre categories.

<http://www.siff.com/main.html>

This site for the Shanghai International Film Festival contains the festival's history, activities, awards and other news.

\* <http://filmcritics.org.hk>

This site for Hong Kong Film Critics Society features events, current reviews, archival reviews since 1995, and some short essays.

Chinese Cinema (CHIN2302 / GENT 0421)

A Timeline of Modern Chinese History for Students of Chinese Film Studies  
-- Jon Eugene von Kowallis

1644 Manchu invasion of China begins the Qing (Ch'ing) Dynasty.

1839-1842 First Opium War. China attempts to suppress the illegal Opium trade conducted by foreign merchants. Britain defeats China, winning control of Hong Kong, the opening of five major ports and other trade and missionary concessions.

1852-1864 Taiping Rebellion – Taiping Tianguo (lit. “Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace”) a partly Christian-inspired rebellion led by Hong Xiuquan, a failed civil service exam candidate of Hakka origin engulfs much of southern China.

1894-5 Sino-Japanese War. China defeated by Japan. Taiwan ceded to Japan.

1896 – **First Western film screened in China** -- period of early film activities begins (1896-1921)

1898 Hundred Days Reform (aka the 1898 Reforms or Wuxu bianfa).

1900 Boxer Uprising. Anti-foreign and anti-Chinese-Christian riots in Shandong spread throughout much of north China, later with the tacit approval of Cixi Taihou, the Empress Dowager. Suppressed by an invasion of the Baguo Lianjun (Armies of the Eight Allied Nations).

1904-5 Russo-Japanese War (fought mainly on Chinese territory in Manchuria). Russia defeated, marking the first victory of an Asian nation over a European power.

1905 – **First Chinese film “Ding Jun Shan” (Conquering Martial Mountain)**, featuring Peking opera star Tan Xinpei (1847-1917) by Chinese photographer Ren Fengtai (1850-1932).

1911 Revolution breaks out in Wuchang. December 26 – Sun Yatsen (Sun Zhongshan) elected provisional president of the Republic of China (Zhonghua Minguo).

1912 Qing emperor Puyi abdicates. First year of the Republic. February 15 - Sun yields power to the former Qing general Yuan Shikai.

1914 Yuan suspends both houses of the National Assembly. Assumes dictatorial power.

1915 Dissatisfied with the title president, Yuan makes plans to proclaim himself Hongxian (“Great Constitutional”) emperor. Southern generals (Cai E, etc.) and Sun Yatsen revolt. September 15 – radical journal (Xin) qingnian (New Youth) begins publication, ed. by Chen Duxiu.

1916-1927 Warlord Era begins after June 6, 1916 when Yuan dies and his generals start to scramble for power. Xu Shichang and later Duan Qirui serve as president.

1917 China declares war on Germany and Austria (August 14). Monarchist "Pigtailed" general Zhang Xun attempts to restore the Qing dynasty (July 1) – fails in less than a month.

1919 May Fourth Movement. Anti-imperialist, anti-warlord demonstration by students in Peking followed by an anti-"feudal" cultural movement, it criticizes the weak-kneed position of the Warlord government toward Japan and advocates a new literature written in vernacular (modern spoken) Chinese with new content to awaken the masses. Lu Xun was the chief creative writer.

### **1920s period in film making:**

1921 – **first long feature film produced in Shanghai "Yan Ruisheng"** (based on a true-life murder story, dir. Ren Pengnian).

1922 Sun Yat-sen orders the launching of the Northern Expedition to defeat the warlords and unify China.

1925 March 12 – Sun Yatsen dies. May 30<sup>th</sup> Incident -- British colonial police fire on demonstrators in Shanghai, killing 9 people.

1926 Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi), a military leader in the Kuomintang, succeeds Sun Yatsen. Begins break with Communists (March 20 in "Zhongshan Gunboat Incident"). Chiang appointed Commander-in-Chief of National Revolutionary Army (June 5).

1927 Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek carries out anti-Communist purge in Shanghai (April 12) and Canton (December). Large-scale massacre of communists.

1927-1937 Nanjing (Nanking) Decade. Chiang re-unites China, defeating warlords and Communists, establishing the Kuomintang's Central Government in Nanjing.

1931 Japanese military invade and occupy Manchuria (China's three northeastern provinces – Dongbei).

1932 Japanese forces attack Shanghai (January 28). Repulsed by divisions of the Chinese National Army. March 9 – Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo established in Manchuria with its capital in Changchun (renamed Xinjing).

1937 **Film Malu Tianshi (Street Angel)** dir. and screenplay by Yuan Muzhi, starring male lead Zhao Dan and female singer Zhou Xuan – a realistic romance set in Shanghai reflects the lives of refugees from the Japanese occupied territories in Manchuria.

1937-1945 Japanese invasion and occupation. Chiang's govt. retreats to Chongqing (Chungking) capital of the mountainous inland province of Sichuan. Most of China occupied. Former Kuomintang leader Wang Jingwei heads puppet government for the Japanese in Nanjing. Communists fight guerilla-style war against the Japanese from Yan'an (a cave town in north-west China).

1945 Japan surrenders to Allies. Control of Taiwan given to Nationalist Government.

1947 February 28<sup>th</sup> Incident in Taiwan. Local protesters suppressed by Nationalist army.

1949 Communist forces defeat those of the Nationalist (Kuomintang) Government in the Chinese Civil War. Mao Zedong proclaims the People's Republic of China in Beijing on October 1. Chiang Kai-shek flees to Taiwan, continuing the Kuomintang regime there. In film, the period of the first 17 years of the PRC begins.

1949 **Film Wuya yu maque (Crows and Sparrows)**, dir. Zheng Junli, screenplay by Chen Baichen, starring Zhao Dan, reflects developments in the Chinese Civil War and the last months of Kuomintang rule on mainland China through the vehicle of a tenant vs. landlord conflict in an apartment building in Shanghai.

1950 Korean War begins (June 25). Chinese People's Volunteers enter Korea in support of the DPRK (North Korean Communist) forces fighting the UN (mostly US and its allies) and ROK (South Korean) forces.

1950 **Film Wu Xun zhuan (The Life of Wu Xun)** dir. / sc. Sun Yu, starring Zhao Dan and Wu Yin. Shanghai: Kunlun Film Studios. Film posits education as the way for poor people to empower themselves – heavily criticized by the Communist government media as Rightist.

1953 Korean War ends in armistice. US troops remain in South Korea until present day.

1955 Bandung Conference. Chinese writer Hu Feng arrested as a counter-revolutionary.

1956 **Film Zhufu (The New Year's Sacrifice)**, dir. Sang Hu, screenplay by Xia Yan, starring Bai Yang is a filmic adaptation of Lu Xun's 1924 story of the same title which seeks to incorporate native forms (such as operatic influence). Xia Yan was an old enemy of Lu Xun. Won prize at Karlovy Vary FF in 1957.

1956 Khrushchev criticizes Stalin's personality cult (February 25). Mao launches "Hundred Flowers Campaign" (May 2) calling for greater artistic and academic freedom.

1957 Anti-Rightist Campaign begins (June 8).

1958 Great Leap Forward (Da Yue Jin).

1959 The National People's Congress appoints Liu Shaoqi State Chairman (president) of the PRC in succession of Mao (April 27). Lushan Plenum (August 16). Serious drought (July-August).

1961 The play "Hai Rui Dismissed From Office" (Hai Rui baguan) published (January 9). Yanshan ye hua "Evening Talks at Yanshan" appear in three Beijing newspapers (March 1961 – September 1962) criticizing Mao.

1963 **Film Zaochun eryue (Early Spring in the Second Lunar Month)** dir. and screenplay by Xie Tieli. Based on the novella *Eryue* by martyred Communist writer Rou Shi (1902-1931), the film re-explores the role of intellectuals in the revolution. Denounced by secret police chief Kang Sheng as "a poisonous weed".

1964 **Filmic adaptation of the revolutionary model opera Dongfang Hong (The East is Red)** presages the beginning of the "Cultural Revolution" (Wenhua da geming). See the website [www.morningsun.org](http://www.morningsun.org) for information on this film and the culture of the era 1964-76.

1965 **Film Wutai jiemei (Stage Sisters)** dir. Xie Jin, sc. Lin Gu, Xu Jin, Xie Jin. Suggests a direction Chinese film could have gone in (realism), rather than the path it would end up taking during the next decade of the Cultural Revolution ("revolutionary romanticism").

1966 Politburo announces its decision to set up the Cultural Revolution Group – calls for attacks on "all representatives of the bourgeoisie who have infiltrated the Party, government, army and cultural world".

1966-1969 "**Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution**". Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping and other high CP leaders are purged as revisionists and capitalist roaders. Chairman Mao returns to power. Near civil war conditions eventuate, finally suppressed by the People's Liberation Army (PLA), led by Lin Biao, designated Mao's "closest comrade in arms".

1969-1976 "Gang of Four" Era. Mao Zedong's "leftist" ideology & PLA holds sway.

1968 **Taiwan**, still under martial law, produces **film Qiu jue (Execution in Autumn)** a costume-drama set in the past with implications for the present-day?

1972 new filmic version of the **Geming yangban xi** (Revolutionary Model Opera) **Baimao nu** produced under Jiang Qing (Chairman Mao's wife). Others in this genre include Hongse niangzi jun (Red Detachment of Women); Hong deng ji (The Red Lantern); Zhi qu weihu shan (Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy).

1975 **The film Juelie (Breaking With Old Ideas)** dir. Li Wenhua, set in the early 1960s, made to articulate the ideals of the Maoist faction within the Communist Party and to justify the Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s. Last hurrah of the "Gang of Four".

1975 Chiang Kai-shek dies (April 5) on Taiwan.

1976 Tangshan Earthquake (July 28). Mao dies (September 9). Four politburo members (Jiang Qing [Madame Mao], Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, and Wang Hongwen) known as the Gang of Four are arrested. October 7 – Hua Guofeng succeeds Mao as chairman of the CCPCC.

1978 Deng Xiaoping in power. Economic reforms and opening to outside world. The New Era in film begins.

1978-9 Democracy Wall in Beijing. The movement is later suppressed.

1982 Hu Yaobang elected General Secretary of the Communist Party (September 12). Rise of reformist premier Zhao Ziyang.

1983 **Hong Kong film *Banbian ren (Ah Ying)* dir. Fang Yuping (West. Allen Fong).** Based loosely on the life of the late aspiring director Ge Wu, the film explores issues of art, class, and the intellectual in the diaspora. See article by Jon Kowallis in course reader from *Transnational Chinese Cinemas*.

1984 **The film *Huang Tudi (Yellow Earth)* dir. by Chen Kaige** signals the emergence of the **Fifth Generation** of film makers.

1986 ***Furong zhen (Hibiscus Town)*** by veteran dir. Xie Jin, starring Liu Xiaoqing, questions the Cultural Revolution from a humanist perspective.

1987 ***Hong Gaoliang (Red Sorghum)* dir. Zhang Yimou, starring Gong Li**, marks the entry of the xungen (roots-seeking) movement in literature into film.

1987 In Taiwan -- martial law (dictatorship) lifted by ROC government. Democracy eventuates in Taiwan. Ban on Lu Xun's works (and those of other May Fourth writers) lifted.

1989 Mourning for Hu Yaobang (April 22). **Demonstrations at Tian-an-men Square** (May 13). Students occupy Square, joined by workers. Zhao Ziyang appears in Square to express sympathy with demonstrators. Zhao forced out of office. Government troops force students out of Square (June 3-4), some accounts testify to massacre. June 9 – Deng Xiaoping, Yang Shangkun, Li Peng, Qiao Shi, Wan Li, Yao Yilin, Wang Zhen, Peng Zhen and other leaders appear on television, praising the military actions which cleared the Square. Zhao Ziyang, Tian Jiyun and Hu Qili are notable by their absence. Deng resumes power, pledging to continue the economic reform and “open” policies initiated at the end of 1978. Official Chinese media announces “martial law troops” have arrested over 400 people in Beijing, Hebei, Tianjin and Shanghai. More arrests follow.

1989 **Film Ju Dou**, dir. Zhang Yimou, starring Gong Li, co-produced with Tokuma Shoten, Japan. Set in a north-China dye factory in the 1920s, the film was interpreted by some as an allegory to more recent events. Won Best Film award in Chicago FF 1991.

1989 **Taiwan film Beiqing chengshi (City of Sadness)** dir. Hou Hsiao-hsien, sc. Wu Nien-chen, Chu Tien-wen indirectly explores the then still seldom-broached topic of the 2/28/1947 massacre of Taiwanese civilians by Kuomintang troops. In some viewers' eyes, the film also had implications regarding more recent events in Beijing (June 1989).

1991- **Film Da hong denglong gaogao gua (Raise the Red Lantern)** dir. Zhang Yimou, starring Gong Li. Based on the novel *Qi qie chengqun (Wives and Concubines)* by Mo Yan, wins top prizes at film festivals in Belgium, China, Italy, the UK and US.

1992 US economic recession. Clinton defeats Bush (Senior). Large scale US imports of Chinese goods jump-start Chinese economy.

1992 **Taiwan film Xiyan (The Wedding Banquet)** dir. Li An (West. Ang Lee) broaches topic of gay people living in the Chinese diaspora. The good humour and moving plot line won the director international acclaim. His other films including *Yinshi nannu (Eat Drink Man Woman – 1994)*; *Sense and Sensibility (1995)*; *Ride with the Devil (1999)*; *Wo hu cang long (Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon -- 2000)*; and *Brokeback Mountain (2005)*.

1993 Deng Xiaoping's southern tour. Deng emphasizes importance of economic progress. US president Clinton calls China "a strategic partner" of the US.

1993 **Film Bawang bieji (Farewell My Concubine)** dir. Chen Kaige, with Leslie Cheung and Gong Li. Through the lives of two Beijing opera actors explores issues of gender, institutional child abuse, integrity and repression against the backdrop of recent Chinese history. Compare with the two films below.

1993 **Film Lan fengzheng (The Blue Kite)**, dir. Tian Zhuangzhuang. Retells Chinese history from the death of Stalin (1953) through the outset of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1969) from a child's perspective. Bears comparison with Gunter Grass' *The Tin Drum*.

1994 **Film Huo zhe (To Live)** dir. Zhang Yimou, with Gong Li and male lead Ge You. Retells modern Chinese history from the mid-1940s to the late 1970s through the vehicle of one family's struggle to survive. Compare with "The Blue Kite."

1997 Hong Kong is returned to China and declared a "Special Administrative Region".

1999 US bombers hit Chinese embassy building in Belgrade, (the former) Yugoslavia.

2000 Minjindang or Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidate Chen Shuibian, known to favor independence, elected president of Taiwan.

2001 US president Bush calls China a “strategic rival.” US navy spy-plane clashes with Chinese navy plane over Chinese airspace. Chinese plane crashes, killing pilot. US plane crash-lands in China without casualties. Chinese authorities return crew members, but disassemble and examine plane over US government protests, sending it back in crates.

2002 **Film Yingxiong (Hero)** dir. Zhang Yimou. Influenced by the success of Li An’s “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon,” Zhang Yimou abandoned contemporary topics for the gongfu (martial arts genre), with mixed reaction from the critical world.

2003 **Film Kala shi tiao gou (Cala, My Dog) – a black comedy dir. by Sixth Generation film-maker Lu Xuechang, starring Ge You** examines the 1995 Beijing municipal government’s policy to catch all unlicensed dogs in the city and force their owners to pay large fines from the perspective of a laid-off factory worker and his family.

2004 (September) Communist Party Plenum chaired by new leader Hu Jintao emphasizes the importance of strengthening the Party’s ruling capabilities and maintaining the “advanced nature of Party members” – more political study sessions required of cadres.

2005 (April) Chinese demonstrators in Beijing, Shanghai and other Chinese cities protest Japanese textbooks glossing over WWII atrocities in China at Japanese embassy and consulates over three weekends. South Korean protests erupt in Seoul. 26-27 April (Taiwan opposition) Kuomintang party leader Lian Zhan visits mainland China.

2006 (February) Taiwan DPP President Chen Shuibian dissolves the already defunct Taiwanese “Committee on Reunification with the Mainland,” provoking condemnation from mainland leaders, including Hu Jintao.