

On the Road
Screening Chinese Cinema
through a Postmodern Lens

Onderweg
De Chinese Film
gezien door een Postmoderne Lens
(met een samenvatting in het Nederlands)

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Introduction

Let me begin by quoting a pointed argument from Alan Montefiore's contribution to a symposium on *The Political Responsibility of Intellectuals*. "It has by now become something of a commonplace," he writes, "that truth and reality are never delivered to human understanding as they are [...] in conceptually free independence of the forms of thought of each one's own particular language, culture, society."¹ Meanwhile, all the cultures have to directly or indirectly accept their own versions of truth and reality. Montefiore furthers this argument by saying that

No truth may be known as being absolute; but no-one is thereby dispensed from the responsibility for recognizing the distinction, within his or her own context, between relative truth and, relative to that truth [...] or from the further responsibility of testifying, where necessary, to it.²

Montefiore's statements point towards questions that arise when I recruit the Western term postmodernity in the service of a Chinese context. For strong resistances have gone along with the more widespread turn toward consensus-based doctrines whose effect is to deny precisely those distinctions that Montefiore thinks vital to the interest of truth. That postmodernity in its Chinese version is once again a contested ground is a clear sign that the issues involved are of more than mere narrow academic significance. For what is at stake here, as Montefiore argues, is that irreducible share

¹ Alan Montefiore, "The Political Responsibility of Intellectuals," Ian MacLean, Alan Montefiore and Peter Winch Ed. *The Political Responsibility of Intellectuals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, 201-28; 225-6).

² Ibid.

of intellectual commitment which is the ineliminable mark of the human being as such.

In linking Western postmodernity to the context of Chinese film, historical, cultural, and social backgrounds assume crucial importance. This, in turn, seems to lead to a basic distinction between two interrelated aspects of the postmodern. The first is ‘postmodernity’, which refers to a series of social-historical developments. It is a school of thought that rejects “classical notions of truth, reason, identity and objectivity, of single frameworks, grand narratives or ultimate grounds of explanation.”³ It sees the world as contingent, ungrounded, unstable, indeterminate; a set of disjointed interpretations that breed a degree of skepticism about the objectivity of truth, of history, norms and the coherence of identities. The second is ‘postmodernism’, which is a cultural style that reflects something of this “epochal change in a depthless, decentered, ungrounded, self-reflexive, derivative and pluralistic art” form that “blurs the boundaries between ‘high’ and ‘popular’ culture and between art and everyday experience.”⁴ The term ‘postmodernism’ has taken an influential stance in academic discourse as a designation of a series of theoretical and epistemological claims or positions. It is a contradictory phenomenon, as claimed by Linda Hutcheon, and “one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges.”⁵

In accordance with these theories, I take the term ‘postmodernism’ to refer to a

³ Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publisher’s Ltd, 1996, vii).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York & London: Routledge, 1988, 3).

series of epistemological, theoretical and structurally specific cultural conditions. I consider postmodernism in its Chinese variant to be a loose array of philosophical and theoretical attitudes, a mode of inquiry and representation and a movement, style and mood that reflects and parallels fundamental changes in the cultural conditions of Chinese society. Most of the texts pertaining to postmodernism in this dissertation should be viewed in light of specific references to the study of Chinese culture. Of course, no obvious postmodernist film movement exists in present-day China as it does in the West. There are only a handful of texts containing traces of postmodernism, partly influenced by Western postmodernism and partly due to a compromise between the director's creative impulses and official censorship. Even so, attempting a comparative study of these films, with Western postmodernism as my theoretical framework, will not only help us observe this phenomenon from an international viewpoint, but also enable us to reexamine the various notions of the postmodern from different cultural perspectives.

Postmodernism can now be found throughout the arts, humanities and social science disciplines. Yet in my own academic discipline, postmodernism must be examined with respect to the special circumstances surrounding cross-cultural applications. My dissertation is not a defense of postmodernism in the study of film, nor does it engage in the scholarly debate about whether postmodernism is inherently "good" or "bad". Instead, it provides an account of the theory and its application in film studies. It sidesteps the surrounding debate and controversy in favor of describing postmodernism as a connected series of methods and theories. It attempts

to reveal how postmodernism can aid film directors and how theory can be infused into our scholarly efforts. This dissertation hopes to convince the reader of the merits of postmodernism in film studies. The ‘postmodern’ can be best understood as a particular mode of temporality, though one characterized not (as the term itself has tended to suggest) by the coming into being of a new epoch beyond or after the ‘modern’, but by an experience of misapprehension, retroaction, anticipation and deferral that disrupts the forward march of the modern from within.

The aim of this dissertation is to help the reader understand how postmodernist techniques and perspectives apply to Chinese film studies. The structure of this dissertation is designed to achieve this aim. It condenses postmodern theories to six main themes: identity, nihilism, historiography, allegory, ‘Chineseness’ caught between the global and local zones, and morality. These are loosely arranged in a developmental progression from a subjective to a societal scale. Each chapter contains sections on the theoretical and practical application in film analysis. As the dissertation proceeds, the theory and application will be further developed, layer by layer, to reveal the development of how a postmodern director or scholar works. The elements of postmodern theory in these six chapters are linked by an overall philosophy of postmodernism, the core of which concerns specific ideas about signs and discourse.

Emergence and History of Postmodernism

If the postmodern condition, in its broadest sense, is characterized by a contradictory

and bewildering abundance of signs, meanings and identities, it is easy to see how this experience might instill an irresistible urge to unearth the origins of this confusion. I am unsure as to when or where the term ‘postmodernism’ was first conceived. What I do know is that the term was first used around 1870 by John Watkins Chapman, an English painter, to propose “a postmodern style of painting” as a way to stretch beyond French Impressionism.⁶ Over 40 years later, J.M. Thompson applied it to a shift in religious attitude:

The raison d’être of Post-Modernism is to escape from the double-mindedness of Modernism by being thorough in its criticism by extending it to religion as well as theology, to Catholic feeling as well as to Catholic tradition.⁷

After that, the term was applied to a great number of movements. But it is very difficult to define a postmodern art. It is generally said that postmodernism in art rises out of, and is contrary to, its modern predecessor, which is considered to be a high cultured artifact.

Since its emergence, it has been over-used and thus it has become difficult to still resort to it as a critical concept in Western contemporary society. It seems to appear suddenly everywhere in social activities such as television and radio programs, and in academic circles like art critiques. The term is also used in furniture picture pieces

⁶ Chapman quoted in Ihab Hassan’s *The Postmodern Turn, Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (Ohio University Press, 1987, 12). In his essays, Hassan points out a number of instances in which postmodernism was used, for example, by John Watkins Chapman to mean Post-impressionism, and by Arnold Toynbee in 1939 to mean the end of the modern, etc.

⁷ The editors of *The Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd edition) assign the first use of the term *post modern* in 1914: “1914 J.M. Thompson in *Hibbert Jnl.* July 744 The raison d’être of Post-Modernism is to escape from the double-mindedness of Modernism by being thorough in its criticism by extending it to religion as well as theology, to Catholic feeling as well as to Catholic tradition.”

and interior design editorials, which implies a change from the austere and functional modernist style. This term usually suggests characteristics such as bricolages, appropriation, the recycling of styles and themes of past in present-day context, most of which are known for their break-up of the boundary between high arts and low arts. However, blurring boundaries between high and low forms of art cannot be said to automatically signify postmodernism, because modernism also follows this idea. The difference lies in their respective approaches towards this very idea. Take cubist painting as an example: modernism usually presents a fragmented view of the world and depicts that fragmentation as something tragic to behold. Modernist artists try very hard to uphold the idea that their works can provide unity and meaning to the fragmented life. In contrast, postmodernism emphasizes also fragmentation but with enjoyment and loves its provisionality and incoherence.

The way that modernists' pursuit of unity and meaning leads to their efforts to creating order out of chaos. In Western culture, the disorder becomes the 'other' and has to be eliminated from modern society. This attempt demands the theorists' efforts to achieve totality, which are maintained through the means of some organizing principles. Its practice might be executed through globalization with the belief that this totality will lead to universal human happiness. Meanwhile, postmodernists want to offer some alternatives to joining this globalization. These alternatives focus on thinking of organizing principles as necessarily local limited and partial, thus rebel against globalization and focusing on specific local goals. This postmodern thinking offers a way to theorize local situations as constantly changing and unpredictable,

though influenced definitely by global trends. In the following paragraphs, this process will be explained with the examples of postmodernism in music, literature and visual art as they are main elements of a movie.

Different from art, postmodernism in music is not a distinct new style, but refers to music situated after the modern age, during the present period of late capitalism. Postmodern music is characterized by a focus on the cultural image surrounding the music rather than musical fundamentals and expression. On the other hand, it shares characteristics with postmodernist art. It favors combinations from different music forms and genre, employing many jump-cut sectionalizations. According to Fredric Jameson, postmodernism refers to “the cultural dominant of the logic of late capitalism”⁸, that is to say, through globalization, postmodernism is involved with capitalism. The music is designed to appeal to the consumer rather than the academic. There is no fundamental barrier between “high brow” and “low brow” in postmodern music, and it can borrow freely from different music forms and countries of origin. Drawing from Jameson, David Beard and Kenneth Gloag propose that postmodernism in music is not just an attitude but also an inevitability in the global cultural climate of fragmentation.⁹ It is more to do with functionality and the effect of globalization than it is with a specific reaction, movement, or attitude. Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), an American-Chinese-Hong Kong-Taiwanese co-production, for example, can prove this cross-cultural phenomenon: in

⁸ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991, 46).

⁹ David Beard and Kenneth Gloag, *Musicology: The Key Concepts* (New York: Routledge, 2005, 141-45).

the swordplay scene, the insistent drum beating on the music track is obviously borrowed from Japanese music.

As with postmodern art and music, no definite time exists for the rise of postmodern literature. Someone¹⁰ thinks that the year 1941, in which James Joyce and Virginia Woolf died, is a rough start for postmodernism in literature. There are other scholars¹¹ stating that postmodern literature begins with important literary events such as the first performance of *Waiting for Godot* in 1953, and the first publication of *Howl* in 1956. Brian McHale defines this shift differently. In *Postmodern Fiction*, he proposes that postmodernism begins when literature concerns itself more with questions of ontology instead of epistemology.¹² Postmodernist writers often resort to early novels and story collections as inspiration for their experiments with narrative and structure. But it is pretty hard to define and there is no consensus on the characteristics of postmodern literature. For practical reasons, postmodernism in literature is usually defined in relation to its modern precursor. Let me offer two examples. The first is that, take Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* as an example, instead of the modernist quest for meaning in a chaotic world, the postmodernist denies the possibility of meaning and even parodies this quest. The second, represented by the surrealistic works of André Breton, suggests that the postmodernist prefers chance to clever craft and further deploys metafiction implying

¹⁰ See, for example, John Fowels's *Anti Essays* (21 Sep. 2013). In his essay, Fowels thinks that "the beginning of postmodern literature should be the death of James Joyce and the start of postmodern architecture is the destruction of the Pruitt-Igor building."
(<http://www.antiessays.com/free-essays/150435.html>)

¹¹ See, for example, Dr. Mbanefo S. Ogene's "Postmodernism and Literature".
(http://www.academia.edu/2942027/Postmodernism_and_Literature)

¹² Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1987).

that the writer has no authority over his own work.

Because of its apparent omnipresence, postmodernism seems to be a widespread phenomenon, but what does the term really mean? For traditional scholars, this issue seems to be a central cause for irritation and controversy because there are no determined procedures to follow. Moreover, because of postmodernism's popularity it becomes a necessity for us to find the mechanisms that could define a good work of postmodernist art other than those consisting of established criteria. The link between postmodernism and popular culture is a very important aspect here, as it suggests dissatisfaction with dominant modern art and a tendency to try out new forms of art. In this way, modern concepts of a comprehensible and representational world are deconstructed, explored, questioned, subverted and played with through art, while at the same time the very language of art and the means of human emotional expression are also expanded. This periodization process also saw, as historian Callum G. Brown described, many confrontations with the traditional ethical codes:

Revolutions of all sorts were in the air, including first-wave feminism, gay defiance to the criminalization of homosexuality, and the emergence of jazz and blues music. These defied many Western social norms such as the institute of marriage, chastity before marriage, the monopoly of heterosexual relationships and the divide between serious and popular culture.¹³

Arguably, postmodernism did not enter the world of cinema until the 1960s with the

¹³ Callum G. Brown, *Postmodernism for Historians* (Great Britain: Pearson Education Limited, 2005, 5).

advent of the French New Wave¹⁴ and with regard to most Chinese films not until the 1980s and 1990s. By then, ‘postmodernism’ had become the term of choice for describing all those fields that endeavored to rebel against realism, received wisdom, hierarchy, imperialism and convention.

Having discussed the history of postmodernism and what the term means, it is also important to discuss what postmodernism is not. “Because it is contradictory and works within the very systems it attempts to subvert,” as Brown observes, “postmodernism can probably not be considered a new paradigm.”¹⁵ He also stated that “postmodernism is not an ideology”, although it does enable “a whole host of ideologies to exist, including feminism, post-colonialism, gay liberation and queer theory.”¹⁶ It is not a surprise, then, that Chen Xiaoming said in 1994 that nowadays

[P]eople can describe the current situation from multiple, interconnected levels. This is a space quite similar to that of a television screen on which the whole world can be represented and collaged. In China, the traditional or modern, Eastern or Western can all be piled up in this space.¹⁷

In this sense, postmodernism in its Chinese version refers not so much to the belief that modernism is over, but that something else is finally ready to begin along with

¹⁴ French New Wave is not a formally organized movement, but rather a group of young directors each with their unique style to express their own philosophical thinking. Although the term postmodernism was not used widespread at this time, the postmodernist filmmaking has resurged New Wave ideas and create new blood for the modern cinema. It is a response to the political, cultural and intellectual development that arose in the late 1960s, as well as to the preceding literary movements.

¹⁵ See Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988, 4).

¹⁶ Callum G. Brown, *Postmodernism for Historians* (Great Britain: Pearson Education Limited, 2005, 8).

¹⁷ Chen Xiaoming, “Postmodernity: the Expansion and dislocation of Culture,” *Shanghai Wenxue* (3, 1994, 66). All of the English translations of Chinese postmodern theories in my dissertation are made by Zhang Yingjin unless noted otherwise.

the breaking of all kinds of rigid epistemological paradigms, aesthetic canons, historical periodization, geographical hierarchies and institutional reifications. It is in this framework that my study is embedded.

Postmodernism in its Chinese Version

Since the early 1980s, with the translation and popularization of various Western trends of literary thought and critical theories, the term ‘postmodernism’ has become more and more popular among Chinese scholars. Meanwhile, its frequent appearance in Chinese culture and various academic domains has made it possible for Chinese scholars to make a careful study of this phenomenon. A Chinese version of postmodernism developed as a direct consequence of the influence of Western counterparts and includes certain elements that can be traced back to their own roots, based on their unique Chinese cultural background and their willingness to reveal their inherent Chineseness to the world.

Due to the complexity of power relationships on the global and local level, postmodernism in China is slightly different from its Western counterpart. As Chen Xiaoming stated in 1997:

[Postmodernism in China] emerges not so much as a cultural construct of the artists, critics, and theorists, as is the case in the West, but as an enormous social text produced by the historical process of Chinese modernity in the age of globalization.¹⁸

¹⁸ Chen Xiaoming, “The Mysterious Other: Postpolitics in Chinese Film,” *Boundary 2* 24.3 (Fall: 1997, 140).

In his argument, Chen is fully aware of the Western influence in the construction of Chinese postmodernism, but he stresses more the politically conditioned Chinese experience of the past and present. Three key notions, according to Yingjin Zhang, can be deduced from Chen's argument.¹⁹ The first is that the influence of postmodernism has gone beyond the boundaries of artistic texts and displayed itself in the fast-developing profit-driven society. Secondly, postmodernism can offer a new narrative strategy and new "conceptions of time and space" for Chinese artists who were tired of the dominant ideology. The third notion is that postmodernism in China finds it very difficult to decide which type of modernism it should respond to. Zhang lists a series of cultural dominants as an example: "high modernism of the 1980s; socialist modernity of the 1950s to 1970s; bourgeois modernity of 1930s Shanghai [sic]; May Fourth enlightenment or translated modernity; and repressed or incipient modernities of the late Qing period."²⁰ Chen continues by stating:

Now people can describe the current situation from multiple, interconnected levels. This is a space like the television screen, where everything from the world can be collaged. In China, things traditional or modern, hegemonic or plebeian, Eastern or Western can all be piled up in this space. This is a dislocated space.²¹

Obviously, Chen's statement indicates spatialization and dislocation, which are typical subjects of postmodernism and can help us understand the structure of

¹⁹ Zhang Yingjin, *Screening China: Critical Interventions, Cinematic Reconfigurations, and Transnational Imaginary in Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (Michigan: Ann Arbor, 2002, 332-3).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 66.

narrative strategy in a postmodern context.

Fredric Jameson first introduced postmodernism to modern China in 1985. His famous lecture series on postmodernism at Peking University and Shenzhen University did not immediately produce a postmodern fad in Chinese academic circles. It was not until the emergence of experimental or avant-garde fiction after 1987 that Chinese scholars had noticed the deficiency of their existing critical tools and methodologies.²² In some big cities like Beijing and Shanghai, young scholars did welcome the arrival of postmodernism, which may have created a pluralistic cultural atmosphere and help them escape from hegemonic discourse. As Wang Yichuan puts it, the rise of postmodernism in China has certainly helped decentralize the long-standing totalitarian cultural conventions:

The disintegration of Chinese modernity constructed since the Opium War and the May Fourth Movement coincided with the bankruptcy of modernity in the West, so the postmodern discourse as a sign has been transplanted to China.²³

Relevant to this context, Frederick Buell also offers a comment in his survey on national culture within the new global system:

Peripheral cultures either have used or could use postmodernism as a means of claiming new kinds of centrality by claiming that they have in some way been “always already” postmodern...Peripheral postmodernism is best

²² See Wang Jing, ed., *China's Avant-Garde Fiction* (N. C.: Duke University Press, 1998).

²³ Chen Xiaoming, “Postmodernity: the Expansion and dislocation of Culture,” *Shanghai Wenxue* (3, 1994: 63-5).

analyzed...from the perspective of globalization.²⁴

Thus postmodernism has provided a discursive means through which China can speak to the ‘center’ of Western capitalism in the global system. The urge to claim some kind of centrality is persuasively enunciated in Wang Ning’s 1997 remapping of eight forms of postmodernism in China:

1) a fundamental cultural phenomenon; 2) a kind of worldview privileging plurality, fragmentation, and decentralization; 3) a main current of literature and art after the fall of modernism; 4) a narrative style characterized by suspicion of the “master narrative”; 5) a strategy of reading earlier or non-Western texts from the perspective of postmodernity; 6) a philosophical trend contrary to the elite preoccupation with the Enlightenment; 7) a cultural strategy adopted by Asian and the Third World critics in the face of cultural colonialism and linguistic hegemony; and 8) a critical mode marked by poststructuralist approaches to literary texts.²⁵

Wang confesses then that he had “recently come to understand postmodernism in the current global context [...] as a sort of extended modernism, but one that needs to be distinguished from modernism.”²⁶

It is thus not difficult to see that China is juggling two projects: modernity and postmodernity, while modernization still remains an “incomplete project”.²⁷ Arif

²⁴ Frederick Buell, *National Culture and the New Global System* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1994, 327).

²⁵ Wang Ning, “The Mapping of Chinese Postmodernity,” *Boundary* (24 3, Fall: 1997, 23).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁷ Jürgen Habermas coined this term to describe the conservative tendency of postmodernism: a situation in which a set of unresolved problems that implied the eventual return of history, if not the return of modernism.

Dirlik and Xudong Zhang also confirm that the power of modernity still remains in place in China:

Having experienced modernity as colonialism from the outside and as a coercive state project from the inside, postmodernity may allow for the emergence of alternative social and cultural formations that do not so much signal the end of modernity as mark the beginning of imagining an alternative to it.²⁸

Different from its Western counterparts, it seems that postmodernism in its Chinese version has articulated its various voices while modernity still occupies an important position. This argument supports Jameson's remark that "the relations between universal and particular [...] must be conceived in an utterly different way from those that obtained in previous social formations."²⁹ Jameson continues to observe that, living in the present global system with different steps, "even the center is marginalized" and it is now "the marginally uneven and the unevenly developed" that articulate more powerful and expressive voices. This observation deserves a closer look. It seems that Jameson tends to endorse new expressions on postmodernism from the periphery such as a Chinese context.

However, in our 21st century world, the center in question is by no means "enfeebled" or "marginalized" as Jameson claims and through the communication of

See Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity: An Incomplete Project," *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. Ed. Hal Foster. (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983, 3-15).

²⁸ Arif Dirlik and Zhang Xudong, "Introduction: Postmodernism and China," *Boundary* (24. 3, Fall: 1997, 17).

²⁹ Fredric Jameson, *Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992, 155).

different voices, it is still premature to say that postmodernism in the West has reached its developed stage. Jameson states that the Third World always lags behind the First World, and therefore hobbles along toward postmodernism. In fact, his narrative provides an impoverished framework for a Chinese context. I am not alone in thinking like this. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam also argue that

Jameson [...] ignores the world systems theory that sees First and Third World as living the same historical moment although the Third World lives at that moment under the mode of oppression...A more adequate formulation would see time as scrambled and palimpsestic in all the Worlds with the premodern, the modern, the postmodern and the paramodern coexisting globally, although the “dominant” might vary from region to region.³⁰

As one might have expected, the coexistence of the premodern, the modern, the postmodern and the paramodern reveals the complexities and contradictions of postmodernism in its Chinese context. Here is where both the urgent necessity and the crucial importance of my tentative efforts to unearth the mechanism of how China is presented in the postmodern films can be found.

Exposing the Objects

It is my intention to navigate through the central debate about postmodernism as a cross-cultural study that can accurately recover and represent the content of the past and the present, of home and abroad. Or in Linda Hutcheon’s words, postmodernism

³⁰ Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London: Routledge, 1995, 293).

is engaging in a confrontation with

[...] any modernist discarding or recuperating of the past in the name of the future. It suggests no search for transcendent timeless meaning, but rather a re-evaluation of and a dialogue with the past in the light of the present.³¹

It is now ordinary for literary scholars to claim that we live in a postmodern age wherein traditional certainties of truth and objectivity, as applied by modernist scholars, are challenged principles. Few scholars today would insist that we reveal the truth about the past and present. It is generally accepted that our perspective is present-orientated to the extent that scholars not only occupy a platform in the here and now, but also hold positions on how we see the relationship between the past and its traces in the present, and the manner in which we extract meaning from them. I am fully aware that my stance is consistent with McHale's view that the changeover from modernism to postmodernism is not something new, but rather a shift of dominant: what was present but "backgrounded" in modernism becomes "foregrounded" in postmodernism and vice-versa.³² The dialogue of past and present, of old and new, is what inspires me to pursue my study of postmodernism in a Chinese context.

My approach to postmodernism is based on two fundamental principles of postmodernism proposed by Callum G. Brown.³³ The first is that postmodernism denies that it is possible to represent reality. The reality is too huge to be described.

³¹ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988, 4).

³² McHale's distinction between modernism and postmodernism (epistemology and ontology) can be found in his *Postmodernist Fiction*, in which he argues that if you pursue epistemological question to the extreme, you end up with ontological questions, and vice versa.

³³ Callum G. Brown, *Postmodernism for Historians* (Great Britain: Pearson Education Limited, 2005, 7).

And this process also involves subjective choice, thus destroying neutrality. The second principle is based on the first one: since reality cannot be represented, then no dominating version can exist of anything. This means that nobody can know everything about postmodernism and there is never a single authoritative version of postmodernism. My account of postmodernism in its Chinese version, therefore, is personal, conditional and restricted to a particular time and place. It will be proposed as fractional and without closure as I am constantly modifying my understanding of it. Just as there is no dominant theory of postmodernism, there is also no definite knowledge of what constitutes postmodern cinema in China. I expect my explanation here to raise questions and doubts in the reader's mind and leave room for further exploration.

From these starting points, my study of Chinese film will branch out in several directions: personal identification, postmodern nihilism, psychological injury, postmodern allegory, plurality of truths, and widespread social morality. My dissertation explores deep into human psyche and the society to reveal the formula of local susceptibility to cultural globalization, and the compromise required to pursue reasonable applications. There is a vast array of filmic text analysis based on elements from postmodern methods. These elements are diverse and used in different combinations by film directors and scholars alike. I choose those preferred bits of postmodernist theories and methods that might fit my immediate study or research needs. We tend to see ourselves as unique individuals, and our society and culture become extensions of our individuality. The analysis of individuality and society

expands the importance of critical theory that will be the point of departure for the re-evaluation of the entire Chinese film world. If we come to understand that we filter out a great deal of information in our daily lives, and we often believe what we prefer to believe, then I think this dissertation has provided a valuable service for film studies. This dissertation contains the conviction that the underlying chain of thought linking all of these chapters in my study is ‘postmodernism’. This is the point of my dissertation, and the dissertation mostly succeeded.

Taking *Farewell My Concubine* as an example, **Chapter I** demonstrates how the effects of social change influence the identification of an individual in a certain time period in China. In the film, I believe that the most conspicuous ontological confrontation is the one between the film’s ‘historical world’ and ‘opera world’. I argue that the ‘opera world’ and the ‘historical world’ in the film constantly confront each other via the character Dieyi, but the boundary between the two worlds remains what it is. The film does not intentionally blur these distinctions and the seam remains intact.

The first part of this chapter focuses on the two ontologically different worlds of Peking Opera and ‘historical world’ in the film. I will pay close attention to the film’s grounds of being, or ontologies. It is a description of the universe in which the seams between the two worlds are visible, not invisible as with modern artists seeking verisimilitude, but instead exacerbate the tension and expose the seam between them. I will examine the ‘otherness’ of the world of Peking Opera and relate it to the ‘historical world’ narrated in the film. Of course, the two worlds will necessarily

overlap to some extent, however, this overlap is one of asymmetrical accessibility --- the ‘opera world’ is accessible to the ‘historical world’, but the latter is not accessible to the world of opera. The second part will elaborate how Dieyi’s postmodern identity is formed and how it serves as a unique bridge connecting the two worlds.

The state of this postmodern identification is that the same subject with similar identities may exist in more than one possible world (with the actual world treated as one of the possible worlds). It is therefore positioned in a possible world framework that allows for an analysis of statements about what is possible or necessary. I assume that in the process of explaining the relationship between ‘opera world’ and ‘historical world’, emphasis should be placed on local cultures in the plural, the fact that they can be placed alongside each other without hierarchical distinction. Yet the dazzling images and sweeping narrative of *Farewell My Concubine* should not make the viewer blind for the more intimate associations of the film’s locations and themes, but reveal personal life with an ontological crossing as backdrop. The protagonist’s real and opera worlds will be explored to reveal how and why Dieyi’s postmodern identity comes into being. The performative process in the film exposes the identity struggle and can help us explore issues that are often roughly addressed in terms of a modern blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction.

In **Chapter II**, I reject and subvert some of the key social and moral principles of Enlightenment modernity. In relation to social principles, the film *Summer Palace* implies the abolition of social ideology and religious or equivalent vestiges of a modernist society. The modern epoch ushered in a world of widespread nihilistic

influence. It is enough to see how the humanism of reason produces, reproduces and even legitimizes conditions of alienation and oppression. In the postmodern situation, it is not possible to have trust in the modern vision of reason. It is increasingly difficult for man to live in the light of the traditional paradigm of knowledge, truth, and reality. Old-fashioned certainty of knowledge and morality has been undermined: everyone lives in a time of crisis. Since the traditional belief in truth no longer exists and no longer functions as foundation, there can be no way out of modernity through critical transcendence, for the latter is part of modernity itself. It thus becomes clear that an alternative must be sought: an alternative that could be considered the birth of postmodern nihilism in philosophy.

In **Chapter III**, I offer an analysis of Zhang Yimou's film *To Live* and suggest that fiction can often achieve a larger truth than facts alone, even if it fails to enumerate all of the specific details. As a result, artists often resort to fictionalization in order to imagine and resurrect the voices of victims of historical events, though their artistic license is constantly in danger of being abused at the hands of modernists. When fictionalizing witnesses to historical events, however, the subject faces the problem of the immediacy of personal experience, an important issue in postmodern theory but also relevant for trauma studies. After all, as we move further away from the actual historical events, any attempt to access the truths of the past is mediated by knowledge and understanding already cast in language. It is this awareness that must be brought to bear on Zhang's film. In this case, the actual events are recounted with some detachment as the film emphasizes the literary process of

our imagination and our need for literary models to comprehend the world. The entire narrative structure is governed by an unrelenting quest to find the underlying reasons, setting off a movement of infinite regress which, for all its aspirations to encompass aspects of reality, results in utter fragmentation. The desire to probe the true nature of things by framing and contextualizing with increasing precision leads to digression, the joint effect of which is to leave the audience utterly confused and at a complete loss.

To Live sheds a very interesting light on living within the postmodern condition. The characters in the film constantly discuss how bright their futures will be once the Nationalist Army (KMT) is gone. At the beginning of the movie, a man tells Fugui that “after the ox (KMT) is gone, communism comes.” As the movie progresses, however, it becomes harder to determine whether people really like and support communism or if they are just pretending out of fear. Fugui and his family are fearful of every move they make and worry that if they do something wrong, they will be punished severely. They also mention that “being poor is good.” They are clearly nervous about something and fearful of getting wealthy, for the communists catered only to poor peasants (until the late 1970s). Driven by a desire to gain access to the traumatic core of reality, *To Live* seeks to penetrate that which cannot be considered as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition. Though Fugui accepts his destiny, the film carries on contextualizing an undeterred passion for exhaustive search that can never be satisfied. In other words, Fugui “tries to make sense of the catastrophe

that has recently befallen him by tracing its origins back”³⁴ to personal misfortune. The three main historical events of the film’s intricate plot are thus positioned in “a causal chain” as Stef Craps argued in a different context.³⁵

In deliberately blurring the boundaries between history and his own experience, Zhang Yimou positions himself against the tradition and draws a categorical distinction between the two realms. He appears to agree with the postmodernist’s emphasis on the essential similarity of history and fiction as a discursive practice that requires deeper exploration. However, despite its obvious tendency for the critique of traditional history, *To Live* does not reflect the extreme skepticism in relation to the referentiality of language and narrative that is generally attributed to postmodernist historiography. The film insists on the possibility and necessity of maintaining some form of contact with the real. The protagonist therefore emerges as bearing witness to a traumatic reality. A reality that resists integration into familiar narrative is promoted as a precondition for a new, postmodern ethics that allows for a different, more benign future.

By analyzing the film *Let the Bullets Fly* in **Chapter IV**, I assess when and how allegory moves either toward abstraction or toward particulars between the past and the present. Allegory appears to represent the distance between the present and the irretrievable past. What interests me about postmodern allegory is less its accommodation to a trans-historical and trans-cultural idea of allegory than the way

³⁴ Stef Craps, *Trauma and Ethics in the novels of Graham Swift: No Short-Cuts to Salvation* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2005).

³⁵ *Ibid.*

its social, cultural and aesthetic differences interfere with the reiteration of traditional formulae. Craig Owens' definition of postmodern allegory as problematizing the certainty of predetermined referents will be used in my close reading of this film.

As my analysis will reveal, a historian of Chinese film may well prefer not to define the construction of 'postmodern allegory' in *Let the Bullets Fly* as 'Westernization'. It is by no means free of Western reference, but for the most part, it operates by Chinese rules. As the film indicates, Chinese postmodernity can perhaps only be built on a Chinese background. At this point, the postmodern survives in the past and the past survives well into the postmodern. In this film, and in reference to the allegorical phenomenon which surrounds it, Chinese postmodern devices and contents are couched in cultural analogue, captured in reflexive allegory and negotiated through Chinese film censorship. Despite its suppression by modern theory, or perhaps because of it, allegory has never completely disappeared from contemporary Chinese culture. On the contrary, it has renewed its alliance with popular art forms, where its appeal continues undiminished. Thus, postmodern allegory in China has demonstrated a capacity for widespread popular appeal, implying that its function is social as well as aesthetic.

In **Chapter V**, I examine issues of cultural authenticity and deconstruction in terms of 'truth'. The word 'truth', as the influential Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman defines it, represents a certain attitude we take but above all wish or expect others to believe. This theory of truth might invite the notion that there are degrees of truth in which one is more effective than the others. The grounds of truth thus

established should have “a trusted procedure” as Bauman described: which can be backed up and which can be trusted with in terms of superiority. Film, as a representation of the world, not only describes the world, but also relates to other representations that might lead to the degree of truth. Zhang Yimou, the director of *Red Sorghum*, is well known for his ability to create exotic rural folklores as they are very appealing, especially to Western film festival judges and critics. He would even go out of his way to invent fictional folkloric customs in place of real surviving traditions. That is why I prefer to utilize the term of truth to analyze an international-festival-going-film since it is involved in a global power system. My argument in this chapter does not refute any theories of truth, but reveals that it might give us a chance to find its way in constituting a national culture.

With this film, Zhang Yimou bespeaks the experience of a generation who grew up in the shadow of totalitarian culture --- that most radical and therefore most sinister embodiment of the modern dream of pure order and orderly purity. It was that culture, intolerant of all difference and all contingency, that saturated the fable of the film with emancipating the liberating power for the sole reason of its being contingent and portraying difference. On the other hand, Zhang also speaks for a generation that grew up in the increasingly deregulated, polyphonic world of postmodernity. The film can hardly add freedom to a world already bewildered by the boundlessness of possibilities in which it itself dangles. But it may, on the contrary, offer a foothold for legs seeking in vain support in the quicksand of changing fashions, of identities that do not survive their own construction and of stories with

no past and no consequence. It is in films that they seek the kind of certainty and intellectual security which the real world cannot offer. They watch films in order to locate a shape in the shapeless heap of worldly experiences; they play a game but they play it in order to instill a sense into the disorderly multitude of worldly phenomena; they seek shelter from the angst, that deep anxiety which haunts them whenever they wish to say something about the world with certainty.

Truth and reality can never be delivered to human understanding if peoples around the world are independent from each other in their own particular languages, cultures and societies. All cultures must come to terms with their own versions of these distinctions in one way or another. As no truth may be considered absolute, it is impossible to obtain by human means a ‘God’s-eye view’ from which one true meaning of a phenomenon can be derived. To take this claim even further, it seems that reaching out to trans-cultural individuals, as a way to extend and expand the Chinese presence in the world has become an essential part of China’s contemporary film project. Film-festival-goers should learn to be comfortable with a variety of different truths of ‘Chineseness’ and move towards a togetherness in which no one dreams of thinking that God, or the God-equivalent, is on their side.

In the final chapter, **Chapter VI**, I argue that from the start of modernity, regardless of culture, there has always been a universal effort to conjure up out of the chaos of otherness, things to be tamed and mastered. The public discourse, the site of order, was to be ruled by an ethical code dictating what one should hide, what one should not speak about and what one should be ashamed of. Nonetheless, every act of

spontaneity unplanned and uncontrolled has betrayed the thinness of civilized ethics and the wantonness of passions boiling underneath. In the West and traditionally in China, religion has been a useful resource for conceptualizing morality, but Communist China does not want religion to be a partner in constructing its morality. The modern morality of China only chooses its partner for its own convenience without drawing on religion as the reservoir of all principles, values and morality. All spontaneous impulses of its people are, therefore, destructive of the ethical code and for the sake of order had to be regulated out of existence.

A great deal of what postmodernism is doing is recovering the lost passages of a past condemned by modernism. The creation of totality, objectivity, truth and synthesis of the social morality is no longer broadly attempted. In other words, we privilege not the tree of morality, but its leaves. The postmodern moralist's position is, therefore, different from the modernist's. It argues that morality is divorced from universal prescriptions; it argues that there can be no logical recourse to the completed prescription to justify a moral position; and it argues that morality comes from a sense of the immoral. Immoralities are declared and performed; they are a not-yet-proved project. The decision as to what is acceptable behavior and what is not acceptable behavior has to be taken by each generation and by each individual within that generation. For this reason it makes perfect sense that only the future will reveal whether we stand a chance of acting morally, and sometimes acting good, in the present. Public sphere may therefore be structured within such discourses: many things vital to each of our lives are shared, and we may see each other as conditions,

rather than obstacles, to our collective as well as individual well-being.

In the **Afterword**, I offer an opposing viewpoint of the study of postmodernism in its Chinese variant. I attempt to introduce critiques of postmodernism from a political and theoretical perspective, rather than in the style of some banal common-sense reaction. However, precisely because of their debatable nature, I consider these critiques to be the most postmodern aspect of this entire dissertation. In short, due to an intricate interplay of foreign influence and Chinese context, postmodernism has been undergoing a metamorphosis in present-day Chinese culture: modernism is still under construction while postmodernism also visualizes its variable mood. Maybe this is the true ‘cultural logic’ of postmodernity: it is an experience of the end of modernism, rather than the appearance of a different or new stage of theoretical development. Any attempt to name the precise historical moment when modernity comes to an end is therefore destined to fail, for modernity and postmodernity must coexist in the same conceptual space, bound together in that peculiar relationship in which the latter does not, and cannot, entirely leave the former behind.

For scholars of Chinese studies, an analysis of Chinese film as an illustration of popular culture in Western critical terms may seem fresh but strange. This analogy implies a distance of both culture and interpretation, which may have the paradoxical consequence of disclosing an ‘other’ world under a familiar discourse. However, the critical space created by this crossing of perspectives allows one to come to terms with contemporary Chinese filmmaking and examine the place film occupies in the contested space between art, entertainment and nation-building. My dissertation is

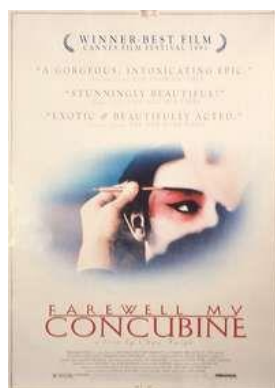
not an endorsement of postmodernism, but rather concerns the possibilities of deploying this Western concept in Chinese film studies. By using *On the Road* as the title of this dissertation, I suggest that postmodernity in Chinese film studies is open, unlimited, and ready for cooperation with the outside world.

I have contended that subtle challenges to official ideology are still present in certain films that possess rich and potentially disturbing subtexts, and that what makes them postmodern is that such challenges may not always come directly from a marginal space of confrontation or opposition, but may instead emerge from the very cracks and fissures in mainstream contemporary Chinese films. In this sense, Chinese postmodernism cannot mean progressing into a new historical phase after the end of modernity; it is rather an experience of the end of metaphysics and the end of history which accompanies the most advanced phases of modernity itself, up to, and including, the end of modernity. Postmodernism in its Chinese variant should be considered within its own cultural and political context, and it is in such a shared space that my dissertation rests.

My dissertation is only a rough outline of a complex and fraught history of China in the 20th century, but I have attempted to navigate personal identification, postmodern nihilism, psychological injury, postmodern allegory, plurality of truths, and widespread social morality, which have had a significant impact on Chinese filmmakers and which inform the narratives of their films. Screening Chinese cinema through a postmodern lens will not only help us observe Chinese society from an international viewpoint, but also enable us to reexamine the various notions of the

postmodernism from different cultural perspectives.

Chapter I Postmodern Identity: Farewell Ontological Boundary



Generally speaking, my generation (the early 1970s) in China grew up and gained our literary tastes before the flowering of postmodern art. We still felt right in the presence of high modern art, but we also felt the anachronism of it, when a new form of art followed. Young artists challenged the foundations of socialist realism, demanding freedom of expression. They rejected cultural convention, utilizing instead Western modern and postmodern styles. Some works of painting, for example, were influenced by Impressionism and Postimpressionism, while their subjects are traditional such as birds, flowers, landscapes of the countryside. As Brian McHale, an American literary theorist, proclaimed, “[m]oving through a hierarchical system, you can find yourself back where you started unexpectedly. This is ‘metalepsis’ and foregrounds the ‘ontological dimension of recursive bedding’.”¹ This variation will definitely set off the contesting quest of our sensibility of actual experience. There was no exception for me when I watched Chen Kaige’s film *Farewell My Concubine* (1993).

¹ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987, 120).

In a certain sense, *Farewell My Concubine* has been designed precisely for the purpose of staging a tense, prolonged face-off between fact and fiction. Traditional Chinese films generally told a complete story that consists of beginning, development, climax and ending, but the narrative structure of some postmodernist films incorporates several past or real or imagined stories. Where traditional films sought to ease the ontological tension between the seemingly normal historical world and fictional invention --- and to camouflage, if possible, the seam along which fiction and fact meet --- postmodernist films aim to exacerbate this tension and expose the seam. *Farewell My Concubine* does so by contradicting familiar identification processes, by mingling, within the diegesis, the modes of reality and of the stage and by flaunting anachronism. It is this last strategy in particular --- deliberate anachronism --- that director Chen Kaige exploits in *Farewell My Concubine*. Chen defended this anachronism by utilizing it with the character Dieyi's identification process, which generates what appears to be a postmodern identity and which is different from modern ones.

Since the late 1980s, there has been in China an active revival of traditional culture, but its developments has been hindered by the society's exposure to more Western cultural influences. Meanwhile, feeling its growing economic power, the Chinese government has intentionally nurtured a sense of patriotic pride among its people which may be seen as a resurrection of Chinese nationalism. China's culture thus becomes highly complex, embracing traditional and modern experiments, in what sometimes appears to be a rather dynamic way. Chen Kaige is only doing what

that complex culture in fact did, as the historical world and the opera world in the film confirm. This may be so, but it fails to account for the disorienting effect Chen's anachronism has on the Chinese viewer. In this film the traditional narrative is deconstructed by non-causal scenes, space strung together and the cause and effect of rational narrative abandoned. The film is famous for some sections which are actually quoting from a Peking Opera text. Do these texts authentically represent advanced modern thought, or have they been projected back to the fictional opera world from the historical world? The queasiness of the audience is an ontological queasiness, a symptom of our uncertainty in this text about the exact boundaries between a historical world and a fictional one.

Farewell My Concubine, in its narrative structure and visual style, is different from traditional Chinese films. The film's narrative structure is not arranged according to the traditional temporal sequence, but interspersed with numerous scenes of the main characters in the Peking Opera. These intercut scenes have a great impact on identity-formation, which implies a postmodern artistic quest to mix uncertain principles to embody life's absurdity. Taking *Farewell My Concubine* as an example, I propose a conceptual shift from traditional approaches that view identity in terms of collective phenomena toward a theoretical focus on the effects of social change on the identities of individuals in a particular period. I believe that the most conspicuous ontological confrontation in the film is the one between the film's 'historical world' and 'opera world'. I will argue that the opera world and the historical world in the film constantly confront each other via the character Dieyi

(Leslie Cheung), but the boundary between the two worlds remains what it is, that is, the film does not intentionally blur the distinctions and the seam remains intact. The first part of this chapter will focus on the two different worlds: Peking Opera and the historical world in the film. It will concentrate on the film's ground of being, or ontology, which is "a theoretical description of a universe".² It is a description of the universe in which the seams between the two worlds are visible, not invisible as with modern artists trying hard to seek verisimilitude, but aims to exacerbate the tension and expose the seam between them. As for this ontological confrontation, I will examine the 'otherness' of the world of Peking Opera and relate it to the 'historical' world narrated in the film. Of course, the two worlds will inevitably overlap to some extent; however, this overlap is one of asymmetrical accessibility: the world of Peking Opera is accessible to the 'historical' world, but the latter is not accessible to the world of the opera.

The second part of this chapter will describe how Dieyi's identity is formed as a postmodern one, and will consider his role as a unique link connecting the two worlds. His identity can be called postmodern because the same subject with similar identities exists in more than one possible world (with the historical world treated as one of the possible worlds). It therefore has its place in a possible-worlds framework for analyzing statements about what is possible or necessary to form this identity. The presence of fictional opera-world-characters in a film text (such as Concubine Yu in this film) looks like a case of what the Italian semiotician Umberto Eco has referred

² Ibid., 27.

to as “transworld identity”.³ Applying Eco’s term, McHale defines “transworld identity” as “a sign of the penetration of one world by another; the violation, in some sense, of an ontological boundary.”⁴ He continues:

Different languages, different registers of the same language and different discourses each construct the world differently; in effect, they each construct different worlds [...] If we accept this hypothesis, it follows that to juxtapose or superimpose different languages, registers or discourses is to place different, perhaps incommensurable worlds, in tense confrontation.⁵

I propose that a film such as *Farewell My Concubine* that stages such confrontations is most likely to arise in a culture or a period in which a plurality of discourses, and their associated world views, merge and mingle.

However, the concept of transworld identity has always been debatable, “even among philosophers who accept the legitimacy of possible worlds”:

Opinions range from the view that the notion of an identity between objects in distinct possible worlds is problematic and unacceptable, to the view that the notion is utterly innocuous and no more problematic than the uncontroversial claim that individuals could exist with somewhat different properties.⁶

More than that, David Lewis has attempted to provide a counterpart theory which

³ Umberto Eco, “Lector in Fabula: Pragmatic Strategy in a Metanarrative Text,” *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1979, 229).

⁴ Brian McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1992, 153).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 153, 154.

⁶ Penelope Mackie, “Transworld Identity,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2008 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL

claims that although “each individual exists in one world only, it has counterparts in other worlds, where the counterpart relation (based on similarity) does not have the logic of identity.”⁷ Thus, borrowing from Lewis and Eco, much of my discussion in this chapter “concerns the comparative merits of transworld identity and counterpart-theoretic accounts as interpretations, within a possible-worlds framework of statements of what is possible and necessary for particular individuals.”⁸

Problematization of Identification: Crossing between Two Ontologies

In Ernesto Laclau’s words, people’s identity designates an agent who is “discovering” or “recognizing” himself in a social structure. Identification, on the other hand, asserts “a lack at the root of any identity: one needs to identify with something because there is an originary and insurmountable lack of identity”.⁹ A central theme of Laclau’s concepts is the logic implicit in the Freudian category of “radical lack” and its consequences of understanding politics in a society. This provides a social-historical perspective for Robert G. Dunn, who proposes that

[T]he concept of identification raises critical questions about identity-forming processes, such as whether identity is self-constructed or externally imposed, an issue that in turn poses fundamental questions about the social and cultural relations of power.¹⁰

⁷ David Lewis, “Counterpart Theory and Quantified Modal Logic,” *The Journal of Philosophy* (1968, 65: 113–26). Reprinted in Loux 1979 and (with additional “Postscripts”) in Lewis 1983.

⁸ Penelope Mackie, “Transworld Identity,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2008 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL.

⁹ Ernesto Laclau, *The Making of Political Identities*, ed. Ernesto Laclau (London: Verso, 1994, 2-3).

¹⁰ Robert G. Dunn, *Identity Crises: a Social Critique of Postmodernism* (New York: University of Minnesota

By situating “the postmodern” within the larger context of social, political and cultural change shaping the movement over the past several decades, Dunn conceptualizes issues of identity and difference in the transition from modern to postmodern Western society. His argument reveals contemporary culture and criticism as part of a distinct historical moment that suggests new social relations as a consequence of new means of postmodern production. In this context, I will explore the historically situated conditions of *Farewell My Concubine* in which postmodern identities are formed. I believe that issues of identity in its Chinese context should be approached not only in terms of group histories and oppressions, but also in relation to broad changes in the socio-historical circumstances of individuals.

In traditional societies like China, identity is more or less fixed at birth and incorporated further into relatively stable structures of custom, belief and ritual passed down within a society. Nevertheless, with the cultural beginnings of modern society, the source of identity formation shifts to the inner life of the individual. As group ties weaken, individuals are distanced from collective beliefs and challenged to invent, change, or oppose society in accordance with their own ideas and interests, independently of ritualized frameworks of belief. Thus, as Dunn states:

[T]he assault on traditional social structures gave rise to an individual called on to forge his own identity independent of the ascribed characteristics inherent to one’s placement in tradition and nature. Through the resources of self, this individual was seen as destined to receive, acquire and fashion his

own identity in an increasingly unknown, uncertain and rapidly changing world.¹¹

This self-unity has been apparent in making one individual different from the other. It serves to maintain a balance between similarity and difference despite individual development and changing social conditions so that one can assimilate the self-demands of change or adjustment, but also fulfill an inner desire for constancy.

On the other hand, postmodern theory projects an image of a fluid self characterized by fragmentation, discontinuity and a discussion of boundaries between inner and outer worlds. This tendency toward fragmentation and dissolution is linked to the vast and rapidly changing landscape of contemporary society. These theories tend to obliterate social relations, and by implication the self, or to decenter social identities toward an unstable, fragile and fluid self dispersed by the representational processes of media and other technologies. This conjures a contrast between a modern form of identity anchored in the internal states of individuals but produced in multiple structures of social interaction and a postmodern form constituted directly in the effects of externally-mediated forms of signification.¹²

From this point of view, Dunn concludes that “the source of identity has historically shifted from the internalization and integration of social roles to the appropriation of

¹¹ Ibid., 53.

¹² Ibid., 3-4.

disposable images” which make “identities lose their interactional quality, becoming an extension of the performative functions of various cultural media.”¹³ Identity as both a psychological and socio-cultural entity has thus been seriously questioned, particularly in the context of a global society for which information has become a basic resource. This collapse of stable and continuous processes of identification implies a detached and adaptable “nomadic” subject endlessly negotiating different identities.¹⁴

Terry Eagleton also argues that “[if] the postmodern subject is determined, however, it is also strangely free-floating, contingent, aleatory, and so a kind of caricatured version of the negative liberty of the liberal self.”¹⁵ Eagleton rightly notes that “this picture is the fact that humans are determined precisely in a way which allows for a degree of self-determination.”¹⁶ The theoretical framework I am proposing thus attempts to recognize both the restraints and the formative potentials of culture, social structure, social process and the individual self. The articulation and negotiation of difference remains the fundamental theoretical and political problems of our time. A larger causative factor of this problem may be found in the category of postmodernity. This larger picture, as Dunn argues, can bridge “the gap between cultural inquiry and social analysis by grounding the problem of identity and

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ See Alberto Melucci, *The Playing Self: Person and Meaning in the Planetary Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1996) and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

¹⁵ Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996, 89).

¹⁶ Ibid.

difference in socio-historical change, social structure and social process.”¹⁷ This approach challenges us to think of the protagonist Dieyi in *Farewell My Concubine*, specifically questioning how this protagonist is both strategically and inadvertently generated within a particular society.

The story of the film is based on a novel of the same name by Li Bihua (aka Lilian Lee), who also helped to adapt the novel to the screen.¹⁸ Shitou and Douzi, who become famous actors under the stage names Duan Xiaolou (Zhang Fengyi) and Cheng Dieyi, are fellow apprentices of a Peking Opera troupe, where teachers regularly punish the children as a means of teaching them the discipline needed to master the complex physical and vocal techniques. As the two boys grow up, they develop complementary talents: Dieyi, with his fine, delicate features, takes on the female roles, while the heavily-built Xiaolou plays masculine kings. Their opera identities on the stage become real for Dieyi when he falls in love with Xiaolou. The determinedly heterosexual Xiaolou, however, marries a prostitute, Juxian (Gong Li), bringing into being a dangerous, jealous-envy-filled romantic love triangle. Covering a time span of half a century, from the early 20th century to the tumultuous Cultural Revolution, *Farewell My Concubine* captures the vast historical scope of a changing world and the mesmerizing pageantry of the opera world, while also providing the

¹⁷ Robert G. Dunn, *Identity Crises: a Social Critique of Postmodernism* (New York: University of Minnesota Press, 1998, 49).

¹⁸ Lilian Lee’s novel may take readers deep inside the Peking Opera world and Chinese culture henceforth, but the film version of *Farewell My Concubine* has left an impressive mark on both the domestic and overseas film markets for its theme of homosexual love and its voluptuous presentation of the theatricality of Peking Opera. Many audiences were deeply impressed by the theatrical masks and headdresses as well as the swirling yellow backdrop curtains against which performers glide elegantly. After leaving the cinema, the only picture branded in my heart was that of theatrical apprentices exercising half-naked in the freezing morning air while singing to the rising sun.

intimate and touching details of a unique, tender and heartrending love story. By paying homage to China's traditional Peking Opera and its realistic film tradition, this film engages in personal memories, contrasting and even conflicting with collective memory represented in two different ontological worlds: the world of Peking Opera and the historical world of the film. Peking Opera here is used to show how memories are fetishized and re-presented through intimate objects, bodily scars and perhaps most importantly, as the byproduct of postmodern identity, all of which resist the myths of the Chinese nation state.

Unlike the opera film that adapts classic excerpts for the screen, *Farewell My Concubine* consists of two worlds at the same time: a story spanning half a century of modern Chinese history and a melodrama about backstage life at the well-known Peking Opera. The opera world is deeply embedded in the historical world, which is in the process of political and social change. The reality of the film is marked by a new recognition of the possibilities and limitations of Western-style modernization, the cultural construction, and deconstruction of traditional Chinese culture. The idea of viewing modern China through the eyes of two opera stars would seem senseless at first: how could the birth pangs of a developing nation have anything in common with the death pangs of a traditional and ritualistic Peking Opera? Yet the story of the film flows with such urgency that all its connections seem reasonable, although the boundary between the historical world and the opera world still remains and further exaggerates its presence.

Farewell My Concubine tries to show the evolution of two artists in that particular

period of Chinese history. It not only says something about history and society, but also reflects the epic of two individuals in that society, Dieyi and Xiaolou. The film uses stage props to represent reality. Onstage and offstage serve as signifiers of the signified: Chinese living. Offstage is the signifier of the Chinese political context and history. With Dieyi quitting smoking, Chen Kaige uses his struggle on the bed and the golden fish fighting in the fish bowl to represent painful feelings. The sword in Eunuch Zhang's collection is the signifier of emotion. According to Chinese tradition, when Master Yuan gives the sword to Dieyi, this means Yuan devotes his emotion to Dieyi. Similarly, Dieyi gives the sword to Xiaolou, meaning Dieyi devotes his emotion to Xiaolou. In Chinese traditional belief, the sword represents emotion. The sword also cuts Dieyi's throat in reality, kills concubine Yu on stage and kills the Chinese dream, startling the audience that cannot escape the cruel reality. All those are representative of the unchanged fate of the Chinese. Chinese fate --- from the legendary kings in the ancient times and Warring Kingdoms to the Civil War, the anti-Japanese War, the Cultural Revolution and the 1989 political protest --- has never been stable. *Farewell My Concubine* reveals a reality which has no alternative but ruthlessness in human life. As the opera master Guan in the film said, "no matter how resourceful you are, you can't fight against fate."

The story starts in the Peking Opera world of the 1920's. The stage brothers, Douzi (young Dieyi) and Shitou (young Xiaolou) are in ironic contrast with one another. Douzi lives in his own world and keeps his own beliefs for a long time. In his mind, there is only one king and one concubine: himself and Shitou. He attaches

himself totally to Shitou and loves him very much. There is a kind of real beauty in it although that kind of relationship is unacceptable in the eyes of the traditional Chinese opera. Douzi's story is a sad one due to his inability to distinguish real life from stage life. Even after the Cultural Revolution, he still dreams of dying on stage. So, there are obviously two worlds in Douzi's mind: one takes place in the opera world and the other takes place in the real world.

In the historical world, the grown-up Dieyi goes backstage where the grown-up Xiaolou introduces him to Juxian, a prostitute. This is where Dieyi first meets his love competitor; he is in full conflict at that moment. Yet Xiaolou leaves with Juxian and Dieyi has failed to make him stay. Dieyi could never accept the fact that Xiaolou leaves with a real woman, not to mention that Juxian has a low position in society. In deep depression, he accepts Master Yuan's invitation to a private banquet, although he knows exactly that Yuan desires his body. Dieyi wants to avenge the betrayal of someone he loves and wants to spend his whole life with. The betrayal of love is both spiritual and emotional. In order to release his anger, Dieyi decides to give himself up to another person as retaliation. In the film, Xiaolou says that he is an actor playing a false king and that Dieyi is really Concubine Yu. This means Xiaolou knows he is living in a real world and he warns Dieyi that he is not. In one of the scenes, the appearance of Juxian backstage interrupts the intimate environment between Xiaolou and Dieyi. Dieyi slams the door in order to show his anger and thus creates a strong contrast between pleasure and displeasure. The door is a frame, so this montage within one shot expresses the function of the opposition. Such *mise-en-scène* also

occurs in Xiaolou and Dieyi's dressing room, with the two men reflected in the same mirror. The sharply changed mood is due to the revelation of the two men's real feelings. Film reveals human life, the mirror within the film reveals the actor and the mirror within the mirror aggravates the sense of reality.

The audience can sense the mood of reality as a result of *mise-en-scène* in the film. When representing the opera school, the long-takes and the tracking shots make us feel the reality of the situation. For example, there is an episode in which Dieyi is accused by the Nationalist Party (KMT) of being a traitor because he once sang for the Japanese, and he has to go to prison. Juxian has a miscarriage and wants Dieyi to stop seeing Xiaolou. But deep in her heart, she can't help but sympathize with Dieyi, so she makes Xiaolou write a letter to Dieyi and visit him in prison. The whole environment consists of two people sitting face-to-face and the whole prison consists of contradiction and opposition. This scene may make the viewers feel befuddled because in it they only see the destruction of self-esteem and self-identity. But I think director Chen has skillfully explored profound themes that resonate throughout the film: love, fate, betrayal, and loyalty, the parallels between the world of opera and the world of historical life.

Dieyi's own opera world is also affected by the Cultural Revolution. Xiaosi, abandoned as a child, was taken under Dieyi's wing. Xiaosi later becomes Dieyi's only apprentice, but he also betrays him at the end of the film. Xiaosi actually replaces Dieyi as Concubine Yu on stage. The reason for this is that under the Communist rule, Peking Opera is considered reactionary. In the historical world,

Xiaolou does not belong to Dieyi, but in Dieyi's mind, and in the opera world, there is only one king and one Concubine Yu. Dieyi cannot accept the fact that Xiaolou would agree to play opposite Xiaosi on stage. After that moment, Dieyi's opera world falls apart. Burning all his costumes is therefore a symbolic gesture of him quitting stage life, feeling that opera no longer holds meaning for him.

Yet Dieyi's belief in love does not wane. He waits for the right time to die for the king, a principle shared by most of the Chinese audience. In contrast, Xiaolou reinvents himself time and again to adapt to the changing social and political climate. He faces reality, betrays his closest friends and wears the mask of reality. It is ridiculous for Dieyi to live in this ruthless world, but he wears no mask at all. While Xiaolou lives in the historical world, he wears a mask for this world. This film reveals two Chinese archetypes during that period of chaos and finally shows how difficult it is for a person to accept his own fate at a time when politics is betraying people, society is betraying people and people are betraying each other.

Though the film reveals two ontological worlds, their relationship is one of asymmetrical accessibility. The opera world is accessible to the historical world in the film by training a boy in the male/female opera role, but the historical world is not accessible to the world of the opera. Even in the film, we can see that reality is a kind of collective relationship, or in McHale's words, "constructed and sustained by the processes of socialization, institutionalization, and everyday social interaction, especially through the medium of language."¹⁹ Actually, the embedding of the opera

¹⁹ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987, 37).

world in the historical world seems like a kind of recursive structure where characters in one ontological world can enter another “hypodiegetic world”²⁰ that violates the boundaries that defined one narrative level. In this sense, “hypodiegetic” privileges one over the other instead of banning it from the discussion entirely. This is a symptom of ontological stress. When the character refuses to accept “any of a plurality of ontological orders,”²¹ a tone of bitterness in postmodern expression can be sensed immediately. This is my own approach to the construction of the two worlds of *Farewell My Concubine*, and here I provisionally endorse the distinction between two narratives in different ontologies while admitting the existence of other readings.²² As mentioned above, the film has at least two worlds, one is the opera and the other one is reality. However, the two are not equal on the narrative level as one is embedded in the other. Dieyi has to enter into or move out of each world, which is reminiscent of a recursive structure. This character of Dieyi can be considered symptomatic of the epistemological crisis of the old narratives, and thus a new, postmodern identity emerges.

This film interests me above all, considering the conditions under which *Farewell My Concubine* was made, because of “the freedom and energy with which it plays. The story is almost unbelievably ambitious, using no less than the entire modern history of China as its backdrop, as the private lives of the characters reflect their

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² For example, Helen Hok-Sze Leung also places *Farewell My Concubine* in its historical and cultural context while analyzing the characters from the perspective of transgender and queer studies to make readers understand how sexuality and gender has developed and grown in China in the 20th century. See Helen Hok-Sze Leung, *Farewell my Concubine: A Queer Film Classic* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2010).

changing fortunes.”²³ In the film, the present and the past, the fictive and the factual exist alongside each other: the boundaries may frequently be transgressed in a postmodern context, but there is never any resolution of the ensuing contradictions. In other words, the boundaries remain in place, even if they are challenged and violated from time to time. The representation of this phenomenon could be considered a constructive movement. It is a manifestation of a desire for a new relationship between humanity and world and one that is different from the epistemologically dominant modernism. It provides a ground for a clearing and is thus constructively subversive, yet it also reveals a new light of attraction on the horizon.

Postmodern Identity: Violation of Ontological Boundaries

Identities, as Stuart Hall proposed, are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and through which we position ourselves in, the narratives of the past.²⁴ Hall offers two models of (cultural) identity: identity as “being” which offers a sense of unity and commonality and identity as “becoming”, which shows the discontinuity in our identity formation. He uses Caribbean identities, including his own, to explain how the first one is necessary but the second one is truer to their postcolonial conditions. Identity thus marks the conjuncture of our past with the social, cultural and economic constructs we live in. In light of this, Robert G. Dunn posits a more comprehensive definition of “identity politics” which

²³ Roger Ebert, *Four Star Reviews 1967-2007* (Kansas: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2007, 241).

²⁴ See Jonathan Rutherford, ed., *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990, 394).

[...] refers to a strategy whereby individuals define themselves through identification with or membership of groups or categories regarded as the source of distinct feelings and experiences of marginalization and subordination.²⁵

For Dunn, such a strategy is based on “suppositions of a singular identity established predominantly through a set of ascribed characteristics, including both natural (physical or biological) traits and cultural heritages.”²⁶ Identity formulated by means of group identification is also considered foundational. In Ilene Philipson’s words:

Such identity is seen as immutable, discrete, and clearly delineated. The boundaries of identity set the in-group apart from the rest of society, therefore making their determination a critical, if not the critical ingredient in defining identity.²⁷

In such a view, identity politics involves an implicit activity of inclusion and exclusion. Dunn thus concluded that “identity politics has simply reinforced existing political relations without challenging the underlying assumptions of the modern liberal state.”²⁸ Through its dependency on unitary and fixed conceptions, he continues, “[t]he politics of identity remains tied to a modernist model of liberal politics and selfhood, drawing its sustenance from the traditional discourses of

²⁵ Robert G. Dunn, *Identity Crises: a Social Critique of Postmodernism* (New York: University of Minnesota Press, 1998, 20).

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ilene Philipson, “What’s the Bid I. D.? The Politics of the Authentic Self,” *Tikkun* (1991, 6/6: 51).

²⁸ Robert G. Dunn, *Identity Crises: a Social Critique of Postmodernism* (New York: University of Minnesota Press, 1998, 27).

political liberalism.”²⁹ In contrast, a postmodern view describes identity as constructed by means of discourse or representation and therefore by nature as heterogeneous, shifting, and tenuous as signifying itself.

By ‘postmodern identity’ I mean that the identity formed in one ontological world enters another world; that the crossed identity cannot adapt itself to the reality of another world and remains the same or almost the same in two narrative worlds, thus destabilizing the crossed boundary and foregrounding the very process of world-construction. The individual self is constructed “socially through interaction with others and the normative influences by means of which the community controls the behavior of its members.”³⁰ That is to say, the self encompasses “the other”. Yet what makes the individual a self is his/her ability to make an object of the self, that is, the reflexive capacity of self-consciousness.

The self thus functions as both subject and object...[t]he social environment is continually changing as individuals, groups and communities adapt to evolving conditions of life and mutually adjust to each other’s behaviors within a collective framework of problem solving.³¹

In such a view, an identity is fluid, “exhibiting social continuity through normative patterning while simultaneously existing in a state of multiplicity and flux through situational adaptation.”³²

²⁹ Wendy Brown, “Wounded Attachments,” *Political Theory* (1993, 21/3: 390-410).

³⁰ Robert G. Dunn, *Identity Crises: a Social Critique of Postmodernism* (New York: University of Minnesota Press, 1998, 32).

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

Similar to Dunn's idea, Alberto Melucci also defines identity as "the continuity of a subject over and beyond variations in time and its adaptations to the environment; the delimitation of this subject with respect to others; the ability to recognize and be recognized".³³ Thus identity always suggests "an unresolved and unresolvable tension", a "gap" between self-definitions and how others describe us.³⁴ Individuals see themselves as they think others see them, and this always involves relations of power. Seeing in this a disturbing break up of politics and theory, Dunn claims:

The postmodern denunciation of universalizing thought, believed to be the defining feature of Enlightenment philosophy, is articulated suggestively with the separatist tendency in identity politics toward an enunciation of the particular. Postmodernists have invoked the principle of particularity as an epistemological strategy, a means of knowing based on recognition of the particular social location of the knower as a determinant or condition of what is known.³⁵

Farewell My Concubine successfully utilizes this particularity to form a postmodern identity to interweave the opera world and historical world. This postmodern identity is not what one *is* but something one *chooses*, a condition one enacts. An individual becomes a man or a woman by persistent acts that, as Jonathan Culler put it, "depend

³³ Alberto Melucci, *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 71).

³⁴ Alberto Melucci, *The Playing Self: Person and Meaning in the Planetary Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 32).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

on social conventions and habitual ways of doing something in a particular culture”.³⁶ This gender identity seems like a performative account of repeating the norms by which one is constituted.

It is a compulsory repetition of prior and subjectivating norms, ones which cannot be thrown off at will but which work, animate and constrain the gendered subject, and which are also the resources from which resistance, subversion, displacement are forged.³⁷

As Judith Butler proposes, this identity is “an assignment which is never quite carried out according to expectation, whose addressee never quite inhabits the ideal s/he is compelled to approximate.”³⁸ Thus, a gap exists between one’s experience and the expectation of what one is compelled to be. That gap contains the possibility to change this postmodern condition, which is the main space this chapter wants to explore.

The story of *Farewell My Concubine* opens with two former famous Peking Opera performers, dressed in lavish stage costumes with full makeup, walking towards the center of a deserted and poorly-lit stage. An elderly caretaker recognizes them for who they once were and, after a short conversation, agrees to switch on the spotlights for them. Along with the impeccably composed music, the audience is brought back half a century earlier when Peking Opera still dominated China as the

³⁶ Jonathan D. Culler, “Philosophy and Literature: The Fortunes of the Performative,” *Poetics Today* (Vol. 21, No. 3, Fall 2000, 503-519).

³⁷ Judith Butler, “Critically Queer,” *GLO* (1: 1993, 22).

³⁸ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993, 231).

most favored form of entertainment. In the early years of Peking Opera, the Dan is the only female role played by a man, so the issue of a man playing a female role gives rise to questions about how this identity is formed. Douzi is selected for the female role of the concubine in a famous traditional opera, and the more masculine Shitou, who will play the king. The physical and mental hardships are hardly endurable, but years later produce classical performers who are exquisitely trained in their roles. Throughout their lives the two boys are locked into these roles on stage, while their personal relationship somehow manages to survive the war of resistance against the Japanese invasion, the communist takeover of China and the Cultural Revolution.

Douzi is born a boy but has to be trained to be a Dan who then performs the natural features of the female sex, but also has a low social status in terms of traditional gender norms. With this gender transformation,

[T]here comes a kind of deconstruction of the notion of a gendered reality. If Douzi, a boy, can be a girl in the minds of his audience, then in his own mind he can become the very woman whose role he plays on stage; and if he can do this, then he can avoid compromise with the repeated intrusions of political tyranny, and his art can transcend the tyranny which politics holds over culture.³⁹

This female role identification is so successful that the adult Douzi (Dieyi) cannot go

³⁹ Jerome Silbergeld, "A Farewell to Arts: Allegory Goes to the Movies," *China into Film: Frames of Reference in Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (Reaktion Books, 1999, 97-8).

back to the historical world. Just like Concubine Yu in the Peking Opera, Douzi/Dieyi finally avails himself of Xiaolou's sword and commits suicide for his love. The sadness of the historical world and the sadness of the opera world overlap and are too beguiling and tragic to behold.

According to Marc Augé, a boy's identity is defined by the set of obligations he has to his father, his lineages and his generation.⁴⁰ In *Farewell My Concubine*, due to the mutation of the above obligations, three castrations come into being which induce Douzi's postmodern identity. The first castration is completed after Hong Yan (Jiang Wenli) cut Douzi's offending sixth finger. As can be seen in the beginning of the film, Hong Yan, knowing deep in heart that she could not raise her growing son in a brothel, decides to ask Master Guan, a harsh trainer of the Peking Opera, to take on Douzi as his disciple. Although Douzi has a pleasing and attractive appearance, Master Guan rejects Yan's pleas after discovering Douzi has a sixth finger, claiming the audience would be appalled by the sight of it. Desperate and downhearted, Yan drags her poor son to a small alley where knives are being sharpened and, without warning, chops off the offending finger. Master Guan eventually accepts Douzi but what Yan does not know is that the choice she made might have been the biggest mistake in her whole life and would trigger the little boy's sense of what I see as a postmodern identification.

⁴⁰Marc Augé, "Anthropology's Historical Space, History's Anthropological Time," *An Anthropology for Contemporaneous Worlds*, trans. Amy Jacobs, Stanford (Stanford University Press 1999, 5). His original statement is "A boy's identity, for example, is defined first and foremost by the set of obligations he has to his father and to the lineages of father, mother, and maternal uncle. There are also strong ties uniting him to those of his generation; these individual taken together make up a given age group within the society."

At that time, all Peking Opera performers were male, regardless of the gender of the characters they portrayed. All students of the opera were from poor family backgrounds, but little Douzi is ostracized for his mother's profession. Only one student dares to stand up for him. That boy is Shitou, a senior in the opera school, burly and quite unlike Douzi. From that time on, Shitou takes Douzi under his wing, acting as his protector and his best friend. Douzi attaches himself to Shitou and is disciplined to play the female characters in Peking Opera. He learns the monologue "Dreaming of the World outside the Nunnery," but when his stage speech requires him to say, "I am by nature a girl, not a boy," he unconsciously says, "I am by nature a boy, not a girl." When the famous theater agent Na Kun (Ying Da), visits the opera school, Douzi is called out to recite his stage speech, but he again says, "I am by nature a boy," which naturally disappoints the agent who turns to leave. With the future of the opera school at stake, Shitou twists a tobacco pipe into Douzi's mouth until he nearly drowns in his own blood. Suddenly there is a soft whisper, "I am by nature a girl, not a boy." With these words, the little boy's male identity is fading fast. His friend and protector Shitou thus performs the second castration.

The film jumps to Douzi and Shitou in beautiful costume on an elaborate stage in a private pavilion of the aging Eunuch Zhang, who admires Douzi and loves his talent. The two boys sing the famous duets and are warmly applauded by the audience. After their performance, they are ordered to meet Eunuch Zhang. In Zhang's reception room, Shitou admires a beautiful sword in the collection, saying that if he were king one day, Douzi would be his concubine. Douzi states that one day he will give Shitou

a sword like that. After a while, the boys are told that Douzi is to meet Zhang alone. Uneasy, Douzi walks in to see the old man in a lascivious embrace with a beautiful young girl. Douzi feels discomfort when the man eyes him up and down. He wishes to find Shitou with an excuse that he has to pee. But Eunuch Zhang refuses his begging to leave and brings a glass jar for Douzi to pee in. Staring in lusty amazement at the boy's delicate body, the old man reaches for Douzi. Frightened, Douzi tries to run away but Zhang presses him to the floor and the scene fades out. Hours later Douzi comes to and Shitou cannot get him to say anything. Eunuch Zhang, rich and powerful, represents the patriarchal society in public and the father role in private in terms of Chinese traditional culture.⁴¹ The rape by Eunuch Zhang solidifies Douzi's female role both in mind and in body. When this third castration is finished, Douzi is a female not only on stage, but also in the historical world. His fraternal love for Shitou is transformed into romantic love. The love between the King and Concubine occupies his mind so deeply that his jealousy of Shitou's love for others and his willingness to die for his love like Concubine Yu is not at all surprising.

Dieyi's transformation from a male-oriented identity to a female role and later to a postmodern identity reveals on the one hand the flexibility of the mind and on the other hand the ability of certain memories (of castration in this case) to become obstacles that prevent people from moving forward. One of the epistemological

⁴¹ Zhang is a eunuch, which makes him also a non-male man. It seems much more complicated with regard to gender roles discussed here. But in a patriarchal society like China, it seems reasonable to treat him as a father role since what I emphasize in this paragraph is this eunuch's high position in social stratum. To become a eunuch, men had to be castrated. Some of them were created as a means of punishment, but most of them were volunteers who wished to gain wealth and prosperity. Sometimes in Chinese history, eunuch's social position was believed very high even considering other normal government official posts.

implications of accepting and further integrating the present experience seems to be lacking in Dieyi's act of coming in and out of the two ontological worlds. His childhood friendship and stage-lover relationship make Dieyi more attached to Xiaolou, first in brotherly admiration, then as a kind of vague homosexual love. This changing love is no accident given that "personality is a human work of art: a construction made by human beings with the means at their disposal ... good, bad, incomplete, and imperfect."⁴² It is natural that the adult Dieyi is in love with Xiaolou not only in the opera world, but also in the historical world. However, the sexual aspects of his affection are not returned, which makes Dieyi's historical world confront his opera world, ultimately ending in his pitiable suicide. Dieyi's dedication to the female role of Peking Opera is seen as an obsession which, to an extent, blurs the line between art and reality. Xiaolou, on the other hand, regards his performance only as a job, a duty. He knows the ontological difference from the beginning. As a burly boy, when facing Dieyi's romantic love he can only return a fraternal love. Choosing beautiful Juxian as his wife, he drives Douzi into deep despair. As a real man performing male roles in the opera, Xiaolou has not experienced gender transformation and can come and go freely through the two worlds. He knows the ontological boundary and he is always careful to avoid violating it.

At Xiaolou's wedding ceremony, Dieyi shocks the guests by telling Xiaolou that they will not perform together again and that they should lead separate lives from now on. The emptiness in Dieyi's heart prompts him to start an affair with an

⁴² Janet, Pierre, *L'évolution de la personnalité* (Paris: Societe Pierre Janet, 1929 (1984), 282).

influential person in the old society, Yuan Shiqing (Ge You), who is a patron of Dieyi's performances as well as a great admirer of Dieyi's unparalleled beauty. By that time, the Japanese armies were already invading Beijing. While Dieyi performs a solo on stage as Lady Yang, Xiaolou offends a Japanese soldier backstage and is arrested immediately. But because of the Japanese general's obsession with Peking Opera and his admiration for Dieyi's performance, Xiaolou could be freed on the condition that Dieyi would perform for the Japanese. Without hesitation, Dieyi picks up his operatic role once again and agrees on the condition that Juxian should leave Xiaolou forever. His sacrifice is wasted and is met with disgust by Xiaolou. For Xiaolou and other Chinese at that time, it is considered an insult to perform for the Japanese; a mistake that Dieyi will pay dearly for during the Cultural Revolution. Meanwhile, their theater troupe is subjected to the successive waves of conquerors (Japanese, Nationalist Party, Communists and the Red Guards of the Cultural Revolution) that wash over the city one after another. It is during the Cultural Revolution that they suffer the most. Not only does it interrupt their art, it also forces them to denounce one another in public, betraying friends and lovers alike. The confrontation of these two worlds reaches its climax here, destabilizing the opera world and rendering it groundless. Their social identities are obliterated under political pressure and Dieyi's denouncement should be considered an act of loving desperation.

Switching from one's historical world to the world of enclosed opera not only implies the simultaneous existence of two utterly incompatible worlds, but also of an

ordinary and a yearning state of mind. Dieyi's identity is fixed at a certain point and he refuses further identification. He lives out his female identity in two different worlds: the wonderland of opera and the bleached harshness of reality. The concubine's fatal devotion to her doomed king on stage is echoed by Dieyi's love to Xiaolou in the historical world. "What characterizes the man of action", as French philosopher Henry Bergson explains, "is the promptness with which he can recall relevant memories and the insuperable barrier at the threshold of consciousness produced by unrelated memories."⁴³ Then it is reasonable that the audience hear Xiaolou snap to Dieyi in the film, "I'm just an actor playing a King. You really are Concubine Yu." Dieyi's personality development has stopped at this moment and cannot expand any more by the addition or assimilation of a new social element. Using the king's sword to slit his throat, Dieyi demonstrates his undying loyalty to his stage partner, to the King of Chu, and to the Peking Opera.

Deconstructive Attitude: Farewell Modern Boundary

Farewell My Concubine is often condemned as backsliding to the emphasis on national narratives and to the past dominant culture represented by Peking Opera as well as catering to an Orientalising overseas audience's taste for the exotic.⁴⁴ Yet such criticism does not fully take into account the politics of Chinese film. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the government has used specific

⁴³ Henry Bergson, *Matière et mémoire* (Paris: Alcan, 1896, 166).

⁴⁴ Zha Jianying, *China Pop: How Soap Operas, Tabloids, and Bestsellers are Transforming a Culture* (New York: The New Press, 1995, 98).

cultural genres to forge a collective national identity. Even these genres, such as Peking Opera, however, have often been re-appropriated for contending dominant meanings and the personal life re-presentation has largely resisted national myths. *Farewell My Concubine* uses political changes as a background for the story of a few individuals who are striving to maintain an identity free from the communist's ideological manipulations.

As such, Chen Kaige's film foreshows later postmodernism of Chinese film not so much in the sense that something is over, but that something is finally ready to begin. Assuming that texts repress, while simultaneously creating and supporting dominant structures, this deconstructive attitude resists the negative versions of the postmodern. It advocates pluralism and cultural diversity, but cautiously repudiates a laissez-faire attitude toward diversity, seeking instead a non-violent pluralism that represses no one and liberates all. The use of Peking Opera has become something of a marker for the dissatisfaction with hegemonic modernism and has become a means of deconstructing a cultural centrism of which Peking Opera, including its participants, is in fact a part. Different film languages, different discourses each construct the world differently; in effect, they each construct different worlds which can be seen as ontologies. The juxtaposition and superimposition place different, perhaps incommensurable worlds in tense confrontation, and *Farewell My Concubine* utilizes this vehicle so well that no other Chinese films can challenge this magnificent pattern.

In the process of explaining the relationship between the opera world and the historical, I have argued that emphasis should be placed on local cultures in the plural,

by reason of the fact that they can be placed alongside each other without hierarchical distinction. Yet the dazzling images and sweeping narrative of *Farewell My Concubine* should not blind the audience to the more intimate associations of the film's locations and themes, but to the personal life with the ontological crossing as a backdrop. Director Chen Kaige also insists that the film is "not an epic ... It's a personal story about a few individuals."⁴⁵ The protagonist's historical and opera worlds have been explored to show how and why Dieyi's postmodern identity comes into being. Dieyi cannot control the identity that he chooses to name himself. The performative process in the film creates the possibility to expose the identification struggle which can help us to explore in a sophisticated way the issues that are often roughly addressed in terms of the modern blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction. This process also implies that subtle challenges to modernism in China may not always come directly from a marginal space of confrontation or opposition, but may instead arise from the very cracks in mainstream contemporary arts. Thus we can say in summary that postmodernism cannot be confined to a specific historical era after the end of modernity; it is rather an experience of that end of history.

⁴⁵ See Jenny kwok Wah Lau, "Farewell My Concubine": History, Melodrama, and Ideology in Contemporary Pan-Chinese Cinema," *Film Quarterly* (49, No.1 (1995): 16-27); Liao Binghui, "Time and Space and Gender Disorder: On *Farewell My Concubine*," *Zhongwai Wenxue* (22, No.1 (1993): 6-18); Lin Wenji, "Drama, History, Life: National Identity in *Farewell My Concubine* and the Puppetmaster," *Zhongwai Wenxue* (23, No.1 (1994): 1139-1156).

Chapter II Postmodern Nihilism: Delineating a Time of Crisis



As we can see in Chapter I, the individuals cannot be what they actually are, but taking their inner force and through practice destroy the self and its surroundings: Dieyi's identity is fixed at a certain point and cannot be expanded any more by the addition of a new social element. The characters in *Farewell My Concubine* must face reality with all its pleasant and unpleasant consequences. It is their natural instinct to seek solutions to this angst. Otherwise, more and more individuals like Dieyi would disintegrate and fragment a certain society like China. No one can deprive anyone else of the ability to form their identities as they see fit and therefore individual identities adapt and evolve to survive better within a society.

Where does philosophy begin? English philosopher Simon Critchley believes that Philosophy might be said to begin with two problems: 1) religious disappointment provokes the problem of *meaning*, namely, what is the meaning of life in the absence of religious belief? and 2) political disappointment provokes the problem of *justice*, namely, "what is justice" and how might justice become effective in a violently unjust world?¹

¹ Simon Critchley, *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1997, 2).

Critchley's proposal seems reasonable as the problem of political disappointment might lead one to critically face the experience of injustice and domination, while religious disappointment might result in the problem of meaning, which will continually bring up ethical and political issues.² "Religious disappointment is born from the realization that religion is no longer capable of providing a meaning for human life", as Critchley rightly argues, the spiritual comfort of religion "resides in its claim that the meaning of human life lies outside of life and humanity, even if this outside is beyond our limited cognitive powers, we can still turn our faith in this direction."³ It seems that philosophizing begins from the recognition that "the possibility of a belief in God" or some God-equivalents "has decisively broken down".

This breakdown can be considered as modernity, the task of which is a contemplation of the death of God. Such contemplation does not only entail the death of the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition, but also the death of all those ideals, norms, principles, rules and values that are set above humanity in order to provide human beings with a meaning in life. This nihilistic view rejects any validity of words or meaning to exemplify the ultimate reality. With this in mind, it becomes reasonable for Korean scholar of Buddhism, Kwangsoo Park to argue that:

The main premise of the nihilistic view is that transcendental reality is beyond

² Critchley elaborates his view on ethical politics in 2007 by identifying a massive political disappointment at the heart of liberal democracy. He argues that what is called for is "an ethics of commitment" that can inform a radical politics, which may culminate in anarchism to re-motivate political organization. See Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (New York and London: Verso, 2007).

³ Ibid.

any finite reality. However, words, symbols and metaphors are the finite reality. In Christian theology, human beings are also living in finite reality bounded by time and space. Also, the knowledge of human beings is limited.⁴

Park conceives God as “transcendental reality” that human beings as finite realities could never fully understand. He continues to say that “knowledge about God is only possible through His divine revelation”, which “appears through symbols, people, events and nature.” In such a case, we can reach a conclusion that “ineffable reality” cannot be reached with any “definite words”.

As Martin Heidegger remarked in 1925, reflecting on Nietzsche, “philosophical research is and remains atheism, which is why philosophy can allow itself ‘the arrogance of thinking’”.⁵ However, according to Critchley, the cause of philosophical arrogance is “a disappointment that flows from the dissolution of any meaning, the frailty that accompanies the recognition of the all-too-human character of the human.”⁶ So, Critchley states that philosophy in its modern condition is atheism. In a different but somewhat parallel way, he further argues that atheism does not bring forth contentment, but rather unease. Critchley continues to say that it is from this feeling of unease that “philosophy begins its anxious and problematic dialectics, its tail-baiting paradoxes”⁷, “[n]ot to esteem what we know, and not to be allowed to

⁴ Kwangsoo Park, “An Analysis of the Buddha’s Paradoxical Silence,” *International Journal of Buddhist Thought & Culture* (February 2006, Vol. 6, 246).

⁵ Martin Heidegger, *The History of the Concept of Time*, trans. T. Kisiel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985, 80).

⁶ Simon Critchley, *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1997, 3).

⁷ Ibid.

esteem the lies we should like to tell ourselves.”⁸ This situation necessarily results and can be described as the thorny problem of nihilism, which will be the focus of this chapter.

Summer Palace (2006), the fourth feature film by director Lou Ye, uses the Tiananmen Square Protests between spring and summer in 1989 as a background, for an intimate story about young lovers.⁹ *Summer Palace*, the title of the film, as a former royal park of lakes, gardens and palaces in Beijing, evokes not only its famous natural views, but also its cultural interests: Chinese social structure that exists today and a place where freedom and happiness are tempered by individual experience. *Summer Palace* was a Chinese-French co-production, which leaves the director enough room to represent the political protests of young students and the eventual disillusionment of them after the crackdown. The movie takes Yu Hong (Hao Lei) and Zhou Wei (Guo Xiaodong) through the uprising at Tiananmen Square in 1989. The story follows them over the next eight years. Zhou Wei travels to Europe and then settles in Berlin. He continues to be a sexual lure for women. Meanwhile Yu Hong tries to match what she had with him but is unable to find his equal. She comes to see that sex is the only part of a relationship that enables her to express her gentle and caring nature. There are love affairs, a suicide, and an abortion. Yu’s body becomes a ground on which she creates new orders and new meanings, which, however, are not stable and undermine all her standpoints and viewpoints. Most of

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968, 10).

⁹ Although *Summer Palace* was officially banned in China due to its political subject of Tiananmen protests in 1989, many Chinese audiences can download it from the internet.

the time, she is depressed and disappointed with her life.

By analyzing *Summer Palace*, I will explore the experience of nihilism and the experience, therefore, of need, suffering and the production of suffering. I will attempt to articulate the film in a way that could perhaps open it up to another beginning: a practical understanding of Chinese political society in which the protagonists are living in the practices of their body politics. The Chinese government banned *Summer Palace* from commercial release even after it had been chosen as China's entry in the 2006 Cannes Film Festival. What does it take to get banned from one of the largest markets in the world? One answer, in my opinion, could be the issue of love and sex. Yu Hong, the protagonist, has sex with three or four men, and director Lou Ye does not look away. He does not examine it either, at least not in a romantic or clinical way. Lou just lets the camera run and the young lovers, usually in darkened surroundings, heave and sweat and lurch, looking objectively funny, and it would be doubtful whether anyone's prurient interests would be aroused. The other possible answer might be the issue of politics.

It is clear that, as a student, Yu Hong is a willing participant in her generation's stand against the armored divisions that represent the government's will. It is also clear that as a director, Lou Ye is a master of chaos. He is able to stage recreations of the famous political events that feel completely spontaneous in their capture of the fear, the drama and the adrenalin surge of such an event. It also seems doubtful that the film will inspire further agitation for change as it points out not how important politics are, but how unimportant they are. At this stage, a new belief provides

possible solutions for this chaotic movement. Nihilism is needed to typify this personal evolution: a free thinker will ever be the reminder by being open to all ideas, even the incorrect in politics and unpopular in a conservative culture of China.

Nihilism: Delineating *Summer Palace*

What is nihilism? According to Critchley, in its pre-Nietzschean phase, nihilism does not have any stable or single meaning, but rather follows a subtle and variegated history where the concept is periodically reinvented and re-described. “Nihilism receives its full philosophical statement and definitive articulation in Nietzsche’s posthumously assembled miscellany *The Will to Power*.”¹⁰ For Nietzsche, nihilism means “that the highest values devalue themselves. The aim is lacking; the question of ‘why’ finds no answer.”¹¹ Simon Critchley further defines nihilism as “the breakdown of the order of meaning, where all that was posited as a transcendent source of value becomes null and void, where there are no skyhooks upon which to hang meaning for life.”¹² Thus “all transcendent claims for a meaning to life have been reduced to mere values and those values have become incredible, standing in need of what Nietzsche calls ‘transvaluation’ or ‘revaluation’.”¹³

As Nietzsche sees it, the belief in God and any other transcendental claims is a representation of the fulfillment of certain human “psychological needs”, thus

¹⁰ See Simon Critchley, *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1997, 8).

¹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968, 9).

¹² Simon Critchley, *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1997, 8).

¹³ *Ibid.*

preventing despair. However, our wish that a belief is true could motivate us to decide whether it actually is true. “This very will to truth eventually turns against the Christian interpretation of the world by finding it untrue.”¹⁴ That is to say, in the context of the repeated failure of efforts to establish the truth of a belief, those certain “psychological needs” now appear to be the only reason we took it seriously. As Nietzsche writes:

But as soon as man finds out how that world is fabricated solely from psychological needs, and how he has absolutely no right to it, the last form of nihilism comes into being: it includes disbelief in any metaphysical world and forbids itself any belief in a true world. Having reached this standpoint, one grants the reality of becoming as the only reality, forbids oneself every kind of clandestine access to afterworlds and false divinities --- but cannot endure this world though one does not want to deny it.¹⁵

A simple paradox I want to cite from Critchley should illuminate this idea clearly: “that we are not to esteem what we know, and we are not allowed to esteem the lies we should like to tell ourselves.” We can no longer believe that God exists, and the very idea of God is a contrivance of “psychological needs”, thus the value of the belief in God lies in its ability to cater to these needs. This wishful fantasy results in what Nietzsche calls “a process of dissolution”¹⁶, meaning that the faith in God and an afterlife now express less a metaphysical view than a certain evaluative stance.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968, 13).

¹⁶ Ibid., 10.

Following Jean-François Lyotard, this recognition can be described as a “postmodern condition” which is “an incredulity toward metanarratives” wherein the grand interpretive theories of the last two centuries (the Enlightenment ideals of freedom and education, positivism, existentialism, and psychoanalysis) are dead and no longer serve as anchoring posts for the reading of history.¹⁷ The modern period, in contrast, was defined by its appeal to these grand narratives about science, society and truth. Modernity can be deconstructed, but not completely destroyed. Drawing on the insights of Nietzsche, American philosopher David Michael Levin argues that

[T]he discourse of postmodern thinking begins with a consciousness of deepening crisis, a consciousness that the nihilism which Nietzsche saw, in signs and symptoms, is now unmistakable, too pervasive to be ignored or interpreted away. It is this consciousness of the postmodern situation which separates one from modernity. But postmodern discourse is not only a discourse which takes as its problem the experience of a crisis; it is also a discourse which itself is in crisis; a discourse without ground, without a subject, without an origin, without any absolute center, without reason.¹⁸

Man can break with tradition; but the rupture can also be seen as continuity, as an affirmation of continuity. Man should release the question of being from its totalization, egocentrism and logocentrism. But this struggle will be never finished,

¹⁷ Jean-François Lyotard, *The postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, originally published in 1979, 164-5, 169, 175, 185, 202).

¹⁸ David Michael Levin, *The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Condition* (New York: Routledge, 1988, 5).

never be final. All man can do is “maintain the vigilance of a critical spirit repeatedly questioning itself.”¹⁹

As this way of seeing, knowing and representing the world is a typical Western notion, my concern towards nihilism will now turn to its Chinese version. It is well known that China has a long history of a highly centralized, authoritarian culture, which compels people’s obedience to official rules and regulations at all levels. Due to this traditional influence, almost every child at school in this culture is taught to obey authorities such as parents, sovereign, and government. However, the Chinese people remain somewhat self-centered, and as the flow of information leaks into their mind, new ideas are changing their attitudes. Chinese culture is thus ever evolving. One of the main factors for this development is cultural influence from its Western counterparts. With the rise of Western economic and military power in the mid-19th century, their cultures gained adherents in China. Some extremists of those would-be reformers totally reprobated China’s traditional culture, while moderates sought to combine the traditional and the Western for the purpose of a much stronger Chinese culture. Naturally, China in the early 20th-century saw much experimentation in which different cultures were confronted or cooperated with each other, the activity of which would allow for the reintegration of China’s culture in the wake of disastrous collapse. Even after the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the new communist government still assimilates ideas such as Marxism and Capitalism from Western sources, and then redefines them to drive its own cultural

¹⁹ Ibid., 7.

development.

Since reform and opening up began in the 1980s, more cultural confrontations have severely destabilized traditional Chinese culture. Things changed more rapidly after the first internet connection between ICA Beijing, China and Karlsruhe University, Germany in 1987. Ever since, the internet has emerged as a new cultural phenomenon, much as in the West. This means that Chinese authorities are very quick to usurp new technologies to maintain the country's economical and political development. Of course, some critical comments on the authorities appeared on the Internet, which severely challenged the foundations of the official system. This enraged the authorities and the first regulation of censorship was passed in 1996. After that, more regulations have been enforced, which make China's Internet environment one of the world's most restrictive ones. However, endless uncensored information still leaked through the shield of official censorship. The past official pretence has become unsustainable. The distance between the authoritative version of truth and the truth of existing reality is a fast widening split breaking/dividing Chinese culture. As a result, skepticism and pessimism become mainstream ideologies. All the old gods or the God-equivalents in China are dead or dying. Communism killed traditional culture and now communism is dying too. Consequently, nihilism rises in contemporary Chinese society, "which is an inevitable result of blatant social hypocrisy, notorious government repression, abuse and authority's attempts to control the minds and bodies of their subjects."²⁰ Romantic

²⁰ "The Decay of Chinese Culture: Nihilism Goes to China," *The Obverse Observer*.

love, as a phenomenon unique to human culture, is no exception in this intercultural phenomenon.

In traditional culture, especially after Communism took power, Chinese who express romantic love publicly are vulnerable to embarrassment in a way that most Westerners are not. Yet, we can still see romantic scenes in some films in the revolutionary period from 1949 to 1978. But what was developed between different sexes is not a romantic love, but implied the right cause of the revolution.²¹ Accordingly, the new romantic comradeship represented in film carried no sexual undertones; the traditional and communist power relationship between them is fully upheld. In the films released during this period, the union between man and woman should be seen in the name of revolution instead of the bliss of genital sexuality, thus could be named as sublimation, as such, repression of private subjectivity. Indeed, as Jason McGrath argues, the replacement of private desire with “the appeal of a revolutionary sublime Other, to which Communist protagonists directed their longing, has led to a conception of revolutionary narration as a process of sublimation or God-equivalent construction.”²²

This sublimation theme can be traced back to Sigmund Freud’s explanation that there is an emphasis on the social value of the activity that is a result of sublimation. In his *New Introductory Lectures*, Freud states that a “certain kind of modification of

(<http://www.counterorder.com/beyond.html>)

²¹ For the relationship between sex and Chinese revolution, see Chris Berry “The Sublimative Text: Sex and Revolution in *Big Road* (The Highway),” *East-West Film Journal* 2:2 June (1988: 79).

²² Jason McGrath, “Communists Have More Fun! The Dialectics of Fulfillment in Cinema of the People’s Republic of China,” *World Picture* 3 (Summer 2009).

the aim and a change of object, in which our social valuation is taken into account”, can be “described by us as ‘sublimation’”²³, thereby providing “the energy for a greater number of our cultural achievements”.²⁴ Chris Berry, when talking about Chinese revolutionary films, furthers Freud’s point by saying that sublimation “attempts to arouse revolutionary ardor by the arousal of libidinal drives and their redirection towards the object of revolution.”²⁵ In this light, romantic love in revolutionary films has meaning only when it successfully leads to a higher political achievement. Another film critic, Ban Wang, explains this feature more clearly:

Far from repressing the individual’s psychic and emotional energy in a puritanical fashion, Communism is quite inclined to display it --- with a political sleight of hand. It recycles the energy, as if it were waste products or superfluous material lying outside the purposive march of history by rechanneling it into transforming the old and making the new individual. This method launches individuals on the way to a more passionate and often ecstatic state of mind and experience.²⁶

Thus, Wang concludes that “it is in the recycling of the individual’s libidinal energy for revolutionary purposes...that we find politics working in close concert with aesthetics.”²⁷ This phenomenon can be seen as the main effect of

²³ Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols. ed. and trans. J. Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1961, 22: 97).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7: 50.

²⁵ Chris Berry, “The Sublimative Text: Sex and Revolution in *Big Road (The Highway)*,” *East-West Film Journal* (2:2 June 1988: 79).

²⁶ Wang Ban, “Desire and Pleasure in Revolutionary Cinema,” *The Sublime Figure of History: Aesthetics and Politics in Twentieth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997, 123).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 124.

revolutionary film.

“If revolutionary films often enacted the sublimation of sexual love to politics,” argues McGrath, “a striking feature of the current ‘reform-era’ stage of development of China is the extent to which the dynamic has been nearly reversed.”²⁸ Indeed, with the reemergence of romantic love shortly after the opening-up, the rapid rise of a consumer society enhanced individual sexual desire, thereby disconnecting love from any sort of political commitment. Whereas most of the revolutionary films stressed the proper link between passion and politics in the communist ethos, the reform era films depicted sexual love just for pleasure, sometimes even for a repressed aspect of contemporary China. While revolutionary films sought what is pragmatic, this shift at present prefers to seek what is real or meaningful. This new approach does not aim at political or social correctness, but at asserting subjective meaning in a new reform era. This also explains why in *Summer Palace*, the protagonist is continually involved in love affairs: because she is “yearning to be filled, craving connection, needing to adore and be adored...confirming our essential worth and making us interesting to ourselves.”²⁹ As such, we can say that there is no reason to view political status and moral values as ultimate goals, but as means to a path ranked by subjectively-derived importance.

In the 1980s, young people in China

did have a certain notion of romanticism. China was opening up to the larger

²⁸ Jason McGrath, “Communists Have More Fun! The Dialectics of Fulfillment in Cinema of the People’s Republic of China”, *World Picture* (3, Summer 2009).

²⁹ Laura Kipnis, *Against Love: A Polemic* (New York: Vintage, 2003, 3).

world after a long period of containment. Young people soaked up all kinds of new ideas all at once. It was the beginning of a period of reform” and university students felt “freer than their predecessors had been and that they could do anything.”³⁰

As *Summer Palace* reveals, all of the protagonists in the film feel and know that freedom is merely an illusion, but after having tasted it, they can never go back. That is the crux of their problem, and that of China as a whole. Once they started their march towards liberty, they could no longer turn back. Since the government gave only a bureaucratic explanation for the banning of this film, I can only guess whether it provoked offense because of its overt sex scenes or because of its political implications. Indeed, the protest scenes come in the middle of the film, which divides it completely into two parts. In my mind, however, there is a certain irony that the narration of this film does not support any of the versions of this event, no matter where they come from, Chinese officials or Western critics. As the film shows, the movement for political freedom is gaining ground. The young students’ understanding of their action also changes as things change. They realize that it is not something they can settle by breaking beer bottles and shouting anti-corruption slogans. Under those circumstances, all they could do is to go drinking or to have sex with each other. That is how things happen in *Summer Palace*, which makes this film strangely disconnected from the real political protest in 1989 and its overall mode of narration. In fact, as McGrath notes:

³⁰ Emanuel Levy, “Interview: Summer Palace with Director Lou Ye,” *Cinema* (24/7, 2007).

If the Chinese government's account of the students in Tiananmen Square is that they were impulsive, unreasonable, lacking in understanding of their own goals and spiritually polluted by Western influences, then it could hardly find a better illustration than in this film.³¹

As a result, we can say that when young students could not find a suitable place to release their private fantasies and desires after tasting the freedom long-contained by communism, the public sphere like the street or even Tiananmen Square is sure to become a dangerous place. This naturally leads to their narcissistic and hedonistic actions. That is why, I contend, some scenes of the real documentary protest in this film can never be perfectly incorporated within the story. Instead of thoroughly revealing the political unrest, *Summer Palace* unfolds itself through the narration of a suffering girl and hews closely to Yu Hong's private, self-indulgent libidinal trajectory.

In this light, director Lou Ye's *Summer Palace* breaks not one but two serious taboos which are rarely addressed in Chinese films. Not only does he depict passionate nude sex scenes, Lou also ventures to insert his story of ill-fated lovers amid the political protests of 1989, which culminated in the notorious Tiananmen Massacre. It probably comes as no surprise to learn that Lou Ye has been banned from making films by the authorities for five years. Officially, his transgression is that he premiered *Summer Palace* in the 2006 Cannes Film Festival without official

³¹ Jason McGrath, "Communists Have More Fun! The Dialectics of Fulfillment in Cinema of the People's Republic of China," *World Picture* (3, Summer 2009).

permission³²; however, the film's political undertone clearly had something to do with it. The irony is that by banning the director, the Chinese officialdom does more damage to its reputation than anything else in this film. In Lou Ye's case, it is truly painful, since with just two films he has established himself as one of China's most famous directors. His debut, *Suzhou River* (2000), is a dirty Shanghai variation on Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) but contains more emotional depth. It depicts a simplistic and immature protagonist trapped in a sickly, strange love fantasy, probably out of personal defect and a desire to escape from his dull life. *Purple Butterfly* (2003), Lou's follow-up to his pensive *Suzhou River*, is an impressionistic and surreal film revealing love and betrayal in 1930s Shanghai during the Japanese occupation. *Summer Palace* carries further the theme of his first two films, exploring how love can drift into destructive obsession, how desire can kindle uncontrollable emotions.

Lou Ye is quite a believer in the self-destructive power of love, or in other words, love's power to drive one insane. As the protagonist Yu Hong in the film describes it, "love is like a wound in the heart. When the wound heals, love disappears." These words respond perfectly to the voiceover via Yu's diary at the beginning of the film:

There is something that comes suddenly like a wind on a warm summer's evening. It takes you off guard, and leaves you without peace. It follows you like a shadow, and it's impossible to shake. I don't know what it is, so I can only call it love.

³² Although *Summer Palace* was made in association with France's Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères and Centre national de la Cinématographie, any participation in film festival abroad without reporting to The State Administration of Radio, Film and Television of China would be a violation of its provisions.

Clearly, this version of romantic love depicted in *Summer Palace* is a fundamentally abnormal one. Such descriptions of obsessive sexual attachment suggest that when the individual is so completely infatuated with a single, highly private object that it becomes the only imaginable source of happiness, happiness paradoxically becomes impossible. More generally, we can say that, due to its lack of proper gratification within a broader symbolic social order, the individual will inevitably be led to a self-negating narcissism. However, the self-negating process of this mechanism in *Summer Palace*, accidentally corresponds to the postmodern camp, which emphasizes that the impossible identification with any social order makes the self difficult to sustain.

Now, the discussion of “symbolic” and “romantic love” can be seen in the context of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of desire. The French philosophers refuse the necessity of repression or sublimation altogether. They label ‘desire’ the aspect of social life that can not fit into the paradigm of goal-ordered rationality of everyday life. Thus, any attempt to maintain a Freudian analysis of the individual subject in relation to a social structure will reach this point:

There is no such thing as the social production of reality on the one hand, and a desiring production that is mere fantasy on the other [...] The truth of the matter is that social production is purely and simply desiring-production itself under determinate conditions. We maintain that the social field is immediately invested by desire, that it is the historically determined product of desire, and that libido has no need of any mediation or sublimation, any psychic operation,

any transformation, in order to invade and invest the productive forces and the relations of production. There is desire and the social, and nothing else.³³

If the mechanism of sublimation of romantic love is immediately invested by desire, rather than investment being a by-product of a psychic process in which real dynamic is internal to the individual, then we cannot treat this mechanism independently from the desire that calls it to life. This seems to confirm that a broader social order built on the individual phantasm is “necessarily self-destructive; it cannot be stabilized; it cannot arrive at a minimum of homeostasis that would allow it to reproduce in a circuit of equilibrium. It is constantly shaken by convulsions.”³⁴ During the political protest of 1989, the impossible ideal of direct, unmediated libidinal investment in the political demands of the social field arguably led to, on the one hand, hopes for economic liberalization, political democracy, and freedom of speech, and on the other hand, quite possibly a crippling cynicism when the actual daily survival failed to live up to the impossibly heroic ideals espoused by young students. If such a direct and intense libidinal investment in the political protest proves to be both abnormal and eventually impossible, the extreme privatization of desire seen in *Summer Palace* raises a different, but equally troubling set of issues. It is to these issues that I will now turn.

³³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983, 29, 30). Emphases in original.

³⁴ Slavoj Žižek, “The Fetish of the Party,” Willy Apollon and Richard Feldstein, eds., *Lacan, Politics, Aesthetics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996, 28).

On Body Politics: Freedom from Standpoints

The first of these is what can be called ‘body politics’. By ‘body politics’ I mean the possibility of grounding political action in the depth of the moving, self-motivated body. With regard to the human body, according to Levin, most thinkers in social and political theory can see only the given, physical character of the body.

They see only two kinds, or two sources, of order: the order of their biology and the order imposed by society. They cannot see the role of the body in the creation of new order, or new kinds of order. And even the ‘givenness’ of the body is seen only as facticity, not potentiality; as a state, not a process.³⁵

I would also like to take up the issue of problematizing standpoints and viewpoints: a question that positions our thinking precariously on the boundary between modernity and the dawn of postmodernity. Problematizing standpoints and viewpoints, in Levin’s view, “is an essential part of the postmodern critique of humanism and its vision of rationality.”³⁶ He further explains that in its most extreme form, this interpretation “does not deconstruct dogmatic positions: it destroys them; it undermines all standpoints and calls all viewpoints blind. It becomes totally self-defeating; it offers no alternative to despair, to nihilism.”³⁷

This, of course, does not happen only today. Already in the 1790s, British romantic poet William Blake affirmed his belief that, “[i]f the doors of perception

³⁵ David Michael Levin, *The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation* (London: Routledge, 1988, 305).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern."³⁸ Though we live in the 21st century, it is still very difficult to believe in this possibility. We continue seeing things through this "narrow chinks". French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty also writes that, "[w]ith the first vision...there is initiation...the opening of a dimension that can never again be closed."³⁹ Here, then, we shall continue asking ourselves: if this dimension has been opened up, why does it seem to be closing? The notion of freedom-from-standpoints as explained by Martin Heidegger will help solve this dilemma. Heidegger emphasized:

This standpoint of freedom-from-standpoints is of the opinion that it has overcome the onesidedness and bias of prior philosophy, which always was, and is, defined by its standpoints. However, the standpoint of standpointlessness represents no overcoming. In truth it is the extreme consequence, affirmation, and final stage of that opinion concerning philosophy which locates all philosophy extrinsically in standpoints that are ultimately right in front of us, standpoints whose onesidedness we can try to bring into equilibrium.⁴⁰

Since we cannot avoid taking a stand and assuming a viewpoint, we must attempt to formulate a clear-sighted recognition of this fact. It is necessary to recognize that we

³⁸ William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975, 5).

³⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Intertwining-The Chiasm," *The Visible and the Invisible* ed. C. Lefort, Evanston (Northwestern University Press, 1968, 151).

⁴⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. 2: *The Eternal Recurrence of the Same* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984, 118).

cannot think from a position that is somehow not really a position. To be everywhere is to be nowhere. To be is to be somewhere: to be positioned. In this sense, we are indeed cornered; limited in regard to what we can know and understand of it. But, we can endeavor to familiarize ourselves with its contours and perimeters; we can develop our sense of what is not working, not right, not good; we can deepen, and render more articulate, our intuitive sense of what is most needful in our time, and of what needs to be changed. We can then commit ourselves to the project, the task, which seems most appropriate, always striving to maintain an open, experimental attitude. In the tradition of modernism, we have to recognize our limitations, but the limitations need to be understood, also, as opportunities for questioning, reinterpreting, experimenting and self-overcoming. We now understand, living with a postmodern consciousness, that our understanding of ourselves and our world is a historically situated, culturally relative understanding, and we have therefore turned what the tradition of humanism intolerantly thought of as universal into a thoroughly situated understanding.

German philosopher Jürgen Habermas has argued that universalization must take place in a situation where there is free and open communication among the different perspectives: that universality is a vision, the realization of which is to be debated instead of assumed or imposed.⁴¹ This vision must be one that makes us realize that our knowledge is finitude and our perspectives are particularly situated. This in turn

⁴¹ Jürgen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979). Habermas sees this kind of thinking as working towards a completion of the modern project, but the reason I quote Habermas words here is that his views also reveals that realization of universality has been undermined, and there can be no way out of modernity through a critical overcoming of it.

would make us to be more open to differences and criticisms and to see other points of view and consider other positions. *Summer Palace*, in my opinion, can explicate this open communication. It is named after the Summer Palace a popular tourist destination in Beijing. As mentioned above, this film is one of the first films from communist China to display full-frontal adult male and female nudity. *Summer Palace* reveals a portrait of a place and a generation --- China and liberated Chinese youth --- as never seen before in other Chinese films. By turns lyrical and brutal, elegiac and erotic, it depicts a passionate love story against the backdrop of political protest of 1989.

Lou Ye, the director, who was a university student himself in Beijing at that time, does the great job of representing the repressed energy and potential possibility of that period. The claustrophobic dorms with laundry hanging in the hallways, the drunken dance parties with their secretly imported pop music, the ubiquity of political posters and Sony Walkmans, everything evokes that period so very well for those who lived in. The film reveals a lost generation enraptured by sexual and political ardor that propels them, excitingly and fearfully, towards unknown futures. Take one scene as an example: Yu Hong and Zhou Wei running through an empty street after a rally, dizzy from the thrill of creating their possible political futures, only a sense of depression suddenly and hauntingly wash across their faces. Yet one still feels the pro-democracy demonstration is just a backdrop to the story. Perhaps Lou is saying that the protest breakdown in society is reflected on a personal level, with private lives and relationships remaining ruptured. After the bloody massacre, a grim, heavy

door closes. Silence settles in, and it seems that the door can never be opened again. As spectators today, we have to ask ourselves: what and how can we see things through “narrow chinks” if even the door seems to be closing? This surely involves the protagonists’ subjectivity, which refers to the subject and his/her perspective, feelings, beliefs and desires.⁴² Subjectively is the only way we experience and understand the world, whether personally, scientifically or otherwise. The particular perceptive interpretations of any aspect of experiences are unique to the subject experiencing them. When facing a new changing tide, that experience is only available to the person involved.

“We have to promote new forms of subjectivity.”⁴³ This familiar position, echoing earlier positions in the Frankfurt School, is one of the last thoughts from Michel Foucault. It recalls Marcuse, who asserted in *An Essay on Liberation*, that “radical change in consciousness is the beginning, the first step, in changing social existence: the emergence of the new Subject.”⁴⁴ In order to do that, I will concentrate on one of the dualisms of the Western tradition: the dualism which splits the modern form of subjectivity, the modern form of the self, into an inside and an outside, an inner life and an outer life. This is not only a metaphysical dualism; it is an ideology with political consequences of the utmost importance. Yet, from Levin’s perspective,

⁴² See Robert C. Solomon’s “Subjectivity,” *Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, 900).

⁴³ Michel Foucault, “Why Study Power? The Question of the Subject,” Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, 216).

⁴⁴ Herbert Marcuse, *An essay on Liberation* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1969, 53). In its extremity, Marcuse’s position may also lead to a Marxist-Leninist’s position (or Maoist’s in China, which culminated in Cultural Revolution). But I use Marcuse’s position here only to provide a lead to Levin’s emphasis of self-experiencing process without avoiding the problem of social domination.

even very astute thinkers such as Theodor W. Adorno and Foucault get into difficulties they could have avoided. Consider, for example, this statement by Adorno: “[n]ot only is the self entwined in society; it owes society its existence in the most literal sense. All its content comes from society or at any rate from its relation to the object.”⁴⁵ According to Levin, the first sentence is not problematic. He sees the “self as inherently social, as emergent only within social interactions.”⁴⁶ But the question is whether we should agree with the sentence that instantly follows. Is it true of the self that “all its content comes from society”? Is it true that the self enters the world entirely empty and that ‘inner life’ consists of nothing but external, that is to say, “socially derived ‘contents’”? As Levin argues, in order to emphasize a well-grounded point, Adorno actually writes himself into a groundless corner.

Adorno’s passage continues: “[i]t [the self] grows richer the more freely it develops and reflects this relation, while it is limited, impoverished and reduced by the separation and hardening that it lays claim to as an origin.”⁴⁷ With such a notion of self, Adorno seems to escape from the untenable corner, by saying that our most authentic response is to dwell in living experience rather than trying to claim it. Eva Geulen furthers Adorno’s argument by saying that

If individuals could achieve [...] [this] affirmative relation with society [...] the political and moral pitfalls of the discourse of authenticity could be

⁴⁵ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (London: New Left Books, 1974, Verso Edition, 1978, 154).

⁴⁶ David Michael Levin, *The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation* (London: Routledge, 1988, 299).

⁴⁷ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (London: New Left Books, 1974, Verso Edition, 1978, 154).

avoided and the presumed antagonism between self and society could turn into something like a love affair.⁴⁸

In this reflection, as Geulen suggests, romantic “love can serve as a model for the relationship between self and society”, or between the inner world and the outside world. Rather than claiming distance from the other in a society, love thrives on imitation of others. The individual thus no longer “claims a self but gaining itself as another by [...] laying claim to the other.”⁴⁹ When the self imitates those around it, it connects itself to social reality and counters social fragmentations by resisting the monadic isolation imposed on it as the narratives of modern idealism indicate. More specifically, as Levin argues, we should consider authenticity “as a self-experiencing process without the dualism of inner and...without avoiding the problem of social domination.”⁵⁰ Therefore, if we want to analyze the inner life of a subject, we have to take into account not only the development of the social domination, but also the experience of the individual itself.

The inner world and the outer world are two-way streets, but it is impossible to cross a clear line between them. In *Summer Palace*, two young lovers (based on the experience of the director as he finished college in 1989) play out their complicated, erotic, love/hate relationship against a volatile background of political unrest. The story begins in Tumen, a city in the northeast of China. This location was chosen not

⁴⁸ Eva Geulen, “‘No Happiness without Fetishism’: *Minima Moralia* as *Ars Amandi*,” *Feminist Interpretations of Theodor Adorno*, Renée Heberle ed. (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University, 2006, 101-2).

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ David Michael Levin, *The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation* (London: Routledge, 1988, 300).

for any whims but because it is a place near the border with North Korea, where Russia, North Korea and China meet. This geographic origin could have some influence on Yu Hong's character. The story progresses along a north-south direction, similar to the overall development in China. The film was even supposed to end in Shenzhen, China's first and one of the most successful special economic zones.

As it turned out in the film, the film begins in Beijing, stops briefly in Wuhan, and then continues slowly south, a progression linked to Yu Hong's story as she heads toward more open cities, where development is happening faster.⁵¹

Economically speaking, the south is freer than the north, especially in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the further from Beijing one went, the more freedom one had.

Once at university, Yu Hong is caught up in the commotion of her crowded dorm, and a whirlwind of change stimulated by philosophy, politics and sexual freedom. One year later, students begin to demonstrate, demanding freedom of speech and political democracy. As the protests are crushed, Yu and her lover Zhou lose each other amid the social chaos and frightened crowds. Being arrested, Zhou is sent to a summer military camp and moves to Berlin upon his release, running away from his country and love. In Germany, social unrest is mounting too. As the Berlin Wall falls down, Zhou, weary and still in love with Yu, returns to China and finds her living in a city far away from Beijing. While Zhou and Yu finally meet and embrace, they ask each other, "Now what?" When Yu leaves, seemingly to buy some drinks, Zhou

⁵¹ Oliver Weber, Interview-Lou Ye, May 5, Paris.
(<http://www.festival-cannes.fr/assets/Image/Direct/016459.pdf>)

understands that they can never be together and leaves as well. We could thus conclude, in A.O. Scott's words, that Lou Ye does not attempt to "reflect on the recent Chinese past so much as he is trying to convey its texture. He distills the inner confusion (the swirl of moods, whims and needs) that is the lived and living essence of human life."⁵²

Summer Palace is remarkable for its frankness about politics and sex. However, it does not tell the story of Chinese political upheaval, and the film describes a structure of a fictional female character that is a compelling composite of the passionate woman Yu Hong. This ardent, unsentimental embrace of youthful idealism is surely to "strike a chord with anyone who can recall or imagine such feelings overtaking his or her own life."⁵³ Director Lou sees the energy as being sexual in origin and challenging not only the Chinese state authority but also the Western version of liberation from despotism. The story evolves from two students who find the new emotional and sexual freedom exhilarating and dizzying. A love affair begins and their personal liberation coincides with the new democracy movements. This new physical self-realization spills out of the dorms and into the streets and is brutally suppressed at the end. Lou Ye tracks Yu and Zhou's long post-student, post-rebellion existences, a drawn-out, lifelong process of coming to terms with something in life.

Toward the end of *Summer Palace*, Yu Hong concludes that her college years were the "most confused" time in her life. But Yu, the beautiful and passionate heroine, is something of a special case. As a young girl, she shows a romantic,

⁵² A.O. Scott, "These Chaotic College Years in Beijing," *The New York Times* (January 18, 2008).

⁵³ *Ibid.*

sometimes reckless desire for experience, confiding in her diary a longing to live with maximum intensity. She satisfies this desire, in the film's heady, rashly first half part, through a series of friendships and flirtations, most of all her fierce, jealous on-and-off sexual relationship with Zhou Wei. But Yu, Zhou, and other friends are surely not ordinary university students. As for Zhou, he thinks of himself as very westernized, but he doesn't necessarily understand what those western ideas and ideologies mean. He interprets the West in his own way. But Yu Hong is apart from the others, living in her own world, on which more will be talked about in the next section.

Throughout *Summer Palace*, there is very little dialogue. The narration of the film instead relies on Yu Hong's confessional voiceover and forlorn diary readings. Watching the film, no audience can be sure whether there is one (or even two) moral correct ways to be a woman in China, a relatively conservative society. It quietly describes how Yu does not want to have so many sexual partners, but the audience just discovers her situation along with everyone else, and she is not particularly proud or ashamed of her situation. Most of these sexual relations involve Yu and Zhou, but some involve Zhou's later girlfriend or Yu's later lovers. In the latter case, Yu's voiceover narration makes clear that her preference for casual sex is a way of working out her lingering love feeling for Zhou. In one scene showing an explicit view of Yu having sex with her married lover, for example, her voiceover recites the following:

Looking through my photo album, I came across a picture of Zhou Wei. My heart raced wildly. One look, and the joy and pain flooded back. Staring at his

image, I asked myself how it was that on this serene face --- open, frank, and resolute --- I saw no trace, no shadow that could make me doubt. Why could nothing he'd said to me or done to me prevent my heart from going out to him? . . . The memories brought tears, and the resolve to endure.

A later sex scene with another man in a public toilet has this accompanying diary narration:

Zhou Wei, why am I always so anxious to make love with the men in my life? Because it's only when we make love that you understand that I'm good. I've tried countless ways. In the end, I've chosen this very special, very direct path.

Thus Yu Hong seems to try to learn, via sex, how to frankly face herself and the freedom she has, and learn how to listen to and follow herself instead of others. But nothing can be more certain than that her problems remain unsettled. Those sex scenes only reveal both the intensity of Yu's romantic passion as well as the self-destructive nature of her love. In an email exchange about the sex scenes, Lou Ye also describes this effect as "[i]t's something invisible...Although you seem to be free, there's something hanging over you, like air pollution".⁵⁴ In light of this, it seems that all the young students in the film are living a life designated to be without any certain consciousness. The human body, the physical character of the love, can be seen as a place to release uncontrollable desires and fantasies. Anything can happen at this place as if social conditions tend to inscribe to it a way of bearing one's body,

⁵⁴ Dennis Lim, "Parting Twin Curtains of Repression," *The New York Times* (July 30, 2010).

submitting it to others, which gives the body social features. It is a standpoint without fixed views.

As we follow the destiny of Yu and Zhou, we realize that their love is irrepressible, that is, it transcends the events and cannot be restrained. We cannot demand anything of love: not that it brings happiness, nor that it leads to marriage or to a long and happy life together. In *Summer Palace*, a new model of relationship emerges between body and politics, the private object of desire and the realm of collective consciousness, the imaginary and the symbolic. The film might be read in terms of a desublimation that happens in the turbulent pro-democracy period of China, in which the private sphere reasserts itself and is represented as outstripping the public and the political in the construction of human subjectivity and desire. Therefore, borrowing again McGrath's words, the film could be read as a "desublimation of politics itself, in that the political somehow becomes inarticulable as any kind of coherent, sustained collective commitment, and any urges in that direction are rechanneled into purely personal obsessions."⁵⁵

Nihilism in the Postmodern Situation

Although Lou Ye insists his film is a love story first and foremost, *Summer Palace* has an underlying political significance. The Tiananmen Square protests are also known officially as "the political turmoil between spring and summer 1989" in China which lends a particular signification to the international prestige of Lou's film.

⁵⁵ Jason McGrath, "Communists Have More Fun! The Dialectics of Fulfillment in Cinema of the People's Republic of China," *World Picture* (3, Summer 2009).

Summer Palace, as a historical site and a place where political protest happens, evokes both the magnificent Chinese social structure that still exists today in Beijing and the idea of a place of freedom and sadness, the cocoon of young idealism before it is tempered by experience. But, at least from my point of view, investigation of Lou's intention with this film is an inevitable task because our motives for understanding anything about *Summer Palace* cannot be entirely separated from how we go about investigating it.

The reason to choose the political protest of 1989 as backdrop of this film is very complicated. *Summer Palace* does not elucidate the mindset of those revolutionary youth during the demonstration, but an exquisite portrait of female confusion and passion that does not attempt to condemn or belittle any authorities. The politics is only secondary to the primary explorations of what it means for a young girl to live and love. This observation implies that the most important thing about this film is what is going on inside the characters. This is a journey of the soul of a female Chinese intellectual. Such a journey could only happen at that time and at that place. But when political change is impossible, people have only themselves, their bodies and their relationships. In the end, the voiceover states that “whether there is freedom and love or not, in death, everyone is equal. I hope that death is not your end. You adored the light, so you will never fear the darkness.”

Yu Hong is a participant in political protest, but only because it is the popular thing to do. She never articulates any of the political issues nor shows much interest in them. She is not that New Man of communist yore, pledged to equality, the

overthrow of the bourgeoisie, the triumph of the working class. She probably failed to notice these things altogether. Her interior life is far more interesting to her (and to us) than any speeches or pamphlets. Yu is a product of her time, but she also has a self-awareness that belies that time. The film takes the shape of her diary and cuts away time and again to her ruminations of the subject of that long malady, her life, spanning to the present day. Her problem is men, mainly Zhou Wei, whom she loves and hates simultaneously. Now and then the director gives the audience a lover's reverie, but that serves merely to sell them on the intensity of the emotion that Yu Hong is feeling. More often, the film has the crackle of everyday life, particularly college life, where hundreds are crammed into dorms suitable for dozens, where there is no privacy and where everyone is shabby, poor and smokes and drinks too much, in an attempt to live as intensely as possible.

Thus the film rejects and subverts some of the key social and moral principles of Chinese society. In relation to social principles, the film implies the abolition of social ideology, religious or equivalent vestiges of a modernist society. The modern epoch brought into being a world in which the effects of nihilism are spreading. It is enough to see how the humanism of reason produces, reproduces and even legitimates conditions of alienation and oppression. In the postmodern situation, it becomes impossible to trust the old vision of reason. It is more and more difficult for man to live in view of the traditional ideal of knowledge, truth and reality. Old-fashioned certainty over knowledge and morality has been undermined: everyone lives in a time of crisis. "Since the notion of truth no longer exists and its foundation

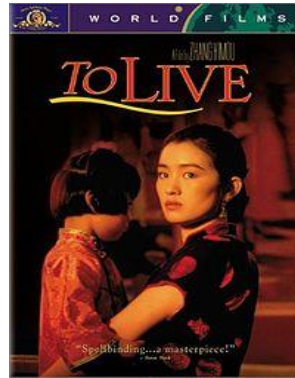
no longer functions, there can be no way out of modernity through a critical overcoming, for the latter is a part of modernity itself.”⁵⁶ It thus becomes clear that a different course must be sought, and this is the moment that could be specified as the configuration of postmodern nihilism in the history of Chinese cinema.

⁵⁶ Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, trans. Jon Snyder (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1988, 167).



Chapter III Trauma or Otherwise:

To Live under a Postmodern Condition



To Live (1994), Zhang Yimou's sixth feature, is an important film about the 20th century history of China. Rather than revealing the effects of China's political situation at that time on the whole of the Chinese people, the film simply shares that history through the story of a single family. I think that this has more of an impact on the audience than any other approach the film might have used. The film begins with a series of concrete historical events and then, moving toward the present, reveals how those historical crises between 1945 and 1976 have been renewed and re-created not in history, but through the lens of a film. In the eyes of a Chinese audience, while many of the historical events in the film actually happened in the past, the importance of such details lies not in their authenticity, but in their mode of signification.

The purpose of this chapter is, therefore, not to call into question traditional historiography, which plays an invaluable role in our understanding of the past, but rather to suggest that there are other ways to approach history and resurrect the past.

This point is driven home by the protagonist's fate, because it is a way of avoiding the facts while pretending to get near to them. Three historical events need to be reflected upon in relation to this film: the Civil War (during the period of 1945-1949), the Great Forward Leap (1958-1961) and the Cultural Revolution (1966 to 1976), which, for the Chinese audience, offer three important moments to consider occurrences that may not have been fully experienced in real history, and so be integrated into larger patterns. Only when we abandon or substantially revise the notion of official history as inherently negligent of subjectivity will we recognize what we see or fail to see in the film. What is remembered of these historical events relies upon how it is recollected, and how events are recollected depends in turn on the discourse now giving them form. Like Zhang's other films, *To Live* has become a spectacular and accessible form of imagination about a period in Chinese history that is supposedly past, but whose ideological power and traumatic effect still linger in the present. The film follows the life of Fugui (Ge You), whose gambling leads him to lose everything, including his wife, Jiazhen (Gong Li). From the gambling days in the 1940s to the political twists in the 1960s, Fugui struggles to live as a peasant, trying to join a theatre troupe, and then being forced to sing for the army. And yet, things are getting better, his wife and children return to him. But the Cultural Revolution comes and his family suffers. Despite those austere hardships, Fugui manages to live and never gives up hope.

Those historical events, in which the social disturbances generated by the conflict intersect and resonate, initiate my responses. By locating those events within Fugui's

personal life, *To Live* does not intend in any way to question their distinctiveness. Nor do I wish to diminish their significance, if only by the act of comparison. I would rather suggest that the sheer magnitude of those events may have partially obscured the radical intensification and expansion undergone by what can only be termed conventional forms of historical study. The prolonged aftermath of the Civil War and the advent of the Cultural Revolution in China have been central to attempts to theorize postmodernism in relation to historical catastrophes. The extensive ramifications in recent Chinese film studies, particularly concerning those campaigns in which civilians were routinely drawn into this sphere, have not yet been systematically traced, and it is to this area that I primarily direct my attention in this chapter.¹

By establishing emblematic connections between the characters and their historical backgrounds, *To Live* has forged a particular link between its text and the outside world: the characters become synecdoches of society. There is indeed a strong sense in the film that individual stories imitate the grand narrative of collective history in miniature, and that all private interest is subsumed by national interest. Parallels between individual and collective experience abound, especially in comparing the major events of China's history with the communist uprising, the film questioned the achievements of Communism's industrial and cultural policies. What Zhang accomplishes in his film is not the reflection of a China that was really like

¹ After the reform and opening up in China, open criticisms of certain past official policies were encouraged, and most of them depicted the emotional traumas left by those historical events. But enthusiasm for those "scar dramas" waned due to the official censorship for their sensitive subjects such as the Cultural Revolution, especially after the events of June 4, 1989 in Tiananmen Square.

that, but rather a new kind of construction that is typical of a postmodernist collection. Although Zhang attempted to make this film with seemingly contradictory qualities of questioning society while conforming to censorship requirements, its criticism of government policies resulted in strict censorship from the government. This film will therefore aid us in the understanding and appreciation of the many ways in which Chinese filmmakers have sought to challenge official representations of cultural and political practice and thus have presented challenging representations not seen before.

At a certain juncture in modernism, cultural facts accumulated “to a point at which they could no longer be considered solely as representations, and the whole problem of their proper materiality and hence character as representations had to be taken seriously.”² As a consequence, the factual events are inaccessible to the present audience and can be described only in terms of their aftermath. Following the interactionist tradition³, I argue that contemporary society should be understood as an interactional attainment shaped by preexisting and emergent political, economic, and moral structures of social experience. These structures adopt presupposed meanings of rightful authority, yet they restrain and control the individual and shape the assemblage of social relationships that the individual inhabits. The factual events, in terms of traditional modern scholars, happened and thus can be discovered, recorded and represented. For postmodernists, factual events also happened, but none of these can be accurately represented in any way. As Callum G. Brown explains,

² Scott Lash, “Discourse or Figure? Postmodernism as a ‘regime of signification’,” *Theory, Culture & Society* (5: 311-36).

³ Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969).

postmodernism denies the possibility of representing⁴ (versions of) reality:

There are three essential reasons for this failure. First, reality is huge and unrepresentable. Second, this process involves subjective choice, destroying neutrality and introducing subjectivity. Third, reality cannot be conveyed (repeated, transmitted or displayed) in its own format (however you describe that) but only in human-constructed words, sounds, pictures and images.⁵

Reflecting on this phenomenon, Rey Chow similarly says that “the chaotic, overabundant elements of the past are now (re)arranged in a special kind of order.”⁶

My own way to analyze some historical events represented in *To Live* will consist of demonstrating the imbrications of the events in the logic of modernity and to chart a course of cultural, social and philosophical renewal along lines divergent from those of the now-discredited modern project. The analysis of this film originates in, but at the same time subverts the modernist model of historical explanation by a systemic application of its aesthetic principles, carrying traditional narrative codes to an extreme and thus radicalizing the conventions of the modernist tradition. Again, it is the particular model of temporality around which the modern/postmodern axis is structured that primarily concerns me here. Such a model shelters tragic historical events from empirical concerns such as what happened in the dark years and what it

⁴ Brown seems to refer to a concept of representation as some sort of “accurate rendering”. Once one accepts that there are “representations”, each of which is a discursive construction, then speaking of “failure” is meaningless. The very term “failure” implies the possibility of a “non-failing” way of going about it. Yet what I want to emphasize here is that since representations of reality involve subjective choices, then what we get from this process are only discourses about this reality.

⁵ Callum G. Brown, *Postmodernism for Historians* (UK: Pearson Education Limited, 2005, 7).

⁶ Rey Chow, “The Force of surfaces,” *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995, 145).

would take to keep it from happening again. *To Live* is filled with powerful scenes that keep the audience on the edge of their seats, never knowing what will become of the protagonist and his wife. Since all representations of these historical events are reduced to tales of indefinite victimization accounting for the fragmentation and incoherence of each narrative, there is a great deal of repetition in the film that might show how the protagonist deals with trauma other than submitting to its pressure. As Andrew J. McKenna observes:

The question of the postmodern in its most far-reaching implications, which are nonetheless the most concrete, is the question of survival, of living on after the dead. A postmodern consciousness is indissociable, for demonstrable, concrete reasons bearing on the recent past as they affect the possibility of a future, from the consciousness of being a survivor, of living on.⁷

The formulation of this model of traumatic temporality acknowledges that concepts of time and memory within the theory of the postmodern are of central importance. It offers a convincing approximation for my own study of living under a postmodern condition.

Resisting Symbolization: the Use and Abuse of History

In her dissertation on postmodern and postcolonial literature, Sylviane Finck proposes the following:

⁷ Andrew J. McKenna, "Postmodernism: It's [sic] Future Perfect," *Postmodernism and Continental Philosophy*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman and Donn Welton (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988, 229).

The way contemporary culture engages in the present, and the ways it projects its future, may illuminate the way it reshapes the image of its past. Such cultural engagements with the past [...] necessarily involve works of remembrance, reflection and inscription. Remembering, reflecting and inscribing the past in consciousness and in the realm of present and future have been particularly resonant [...] in some postmodern discourses. Indeed, while [...] postmodern narratives have looked at some injustice of the past, they have engaged in discourses to awaken the desire for a just future.⁸

Based on this observation, she continues to say that reading postmodern texts has “motivated and initiated necessary acts of cultural crossings between what history has decided to remember and what our collective and private memory is prepared to acknowledge.”⁹ This seems to me a remarkably suitable entry into the tragic world of *To Live*.

At first sight, it appears that we must understand this film within the context of its historiographical structure and hopeful closure. But some audiences¹⁰ who are familiar with Chinese history have more complex observations; it is useful to discuss the most frequently-cited objection, namely, Zhang’s appropriation of historical events to create his own fictional world. After all, what frustrates many audiences

⁸ Sylviane Finck, *Reading Trauma in Postmodern and Postcolonial Literature: Charlotte Delbo, Toni Morrison and the Literary Imagination of the Aftermath* (Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, 2006, 1).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ For example, James Berardinell points out that “[i]nstead of viewing the cultural changes on an epic scale, *To Live* gives a far more intimate, and affecting, perspective.” *To Live*, A Movie Review, *Reelviews* (October 28, 2011) .

(http://www.reelviews.net/php_review_template.php?identifier=1619)

about Zhang's fictional depiction of those events is the film's postmodern approach to historical facts; events of which the brutal reality threatens to overwhelm and erase any attempt at fictionalization. Kristina Busse notes in a different context: "[a]s fiction meets fact, both are questioned and destabilized, but this ludic decentering is much more threatening to the historical account and the social and political beliefs it sustains."¹¹ The real challenge, in my view, is not to show that a subversive representation is to simply break down the boundary between facts and fiction, but to tell the difference of these discourses without conceptualizing their relation in terms of a negation of facts. After all, since official history in China is the comprehensive obliteration of the unofficial voice, scholars are often lacking vital data, facts and information, a particularly sensitive issue when considering the onset of revisionist historians. Recasting the relation between history and fiction could enable their interpretation and encourage new readings of historical events within a fictional representation.

On the other hand, Busse continues, postmodernism "suggests that fiction can often achieve a larger truth above and beyond the facts themselves, even as it may fail to recount all the particular details."¹² As a result, scholars or artists often resort to fictionalization to imagine and represent the voice of individual subjects, though their attempts are constantly in danger of being severely criticized by traditional historians. However, fictionalizing witnesses of real historical events will face the problem of

¹¹ Kristina Busse, *Imagining Auschwitz: Postmodern Representations of the Holocaust* (Ann Arbor: Tulane University, 2002, 6).

¹² *Ibid.*, 20.

the immediacy of individual experience, a main issue in postmodern theory but particularly relevant for trauma studies. In spite of that, as they move further away from the actual historical events, any attempt to access the truths of the past is interfered with by knowledge and understanding already cast in their language. It is this awareness that must be brought to bear on Zhang's film. In this case, the actual events are recounted several steps removed as the film emphasizes the literary process of our imagination and our need for literary models to comprehend the world.¹³

In deliberately blurring the boundaries between history and his own experience, Zhang Yimou positions himself against the tradition, which draws a categorical distinction between the two realms. He appears to side with the postmodernist's emphasis on the real as fundamentally non-narrative and non-representational. However, despite its obvious allegiance with the means of traditional historical representation, *To Live* does not certify the extreme relativism and the radical skepticism, which are commonly attributed to postmodernist historiography. The film insists on the possibility and necessity of maintaining some form of contact with the real. The protagonist therefore emerges to bear witness to a traumatic reality; a reality that resists integration into familiar narratives promoted as a precondition for a new ethics that opens up the prospect of a different, more benign future.

¹³ There is an extensive body of writings about the representation of historical events in fictional films, such as Marc Ferro's *Cinema and History* (Wayne State University Press, 1988, translated by Naomi Greene) and Pierre Sorlin's *The Film in History* (Totowa: Barnes & Noble Imports, 1980). Both Ferro and Sorlin argue that historical films tell us more about the time of the films' production than the represented diegetic past, and our understanding of the time of production will provide the historical films its cultural values and extend their meaning.

The story of *To Live* begins somewhere in the 1940s, with Fugui gambling away his family estate. His bad behavior also compels his long-suffering wife Jiazhen (Gong Li) to leave him, taking their daughter Fengxia and their unborn son Youqing with her. Only when Fugui has proven he has given up gambling, does Jiazhen return to him with their children. Borrowing a collection of shadow play puppets, Fugui organizes a shadow puppet troupe with a partner named Chunsheng (Guo Tao) to support his family. The Civil War is raging and both Fugui and Chunsheng are coercively enlisted into the Nationalist (KMT) army during one of their performances. After a fierce battle, Fugui and Chunsheng are caught by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and soon become entertainers for the troops. At the very end of the war, Fugui is able to return home only to discover that Fengxia has become mute and lost her hearing due to a fever.

During Fugui's absence, Jiazhen and their children had to use all means necessary to escape destitution. Though suffering the hardships of poverty, Fugui claims that in the current political climate, "it's good to be poor." His opinion is reinforced by the execution of Long'er, the man who tricked Fugui out of his family estate. After the communist's victory, Fugui attends a local public trial where the new government convicts Long'er of subverting the proletarian revolution. It turns out that Long'er does not want to donate any of his wealth to the people's government. When the communists try to pressure him to do so, they only enrage him further, prompting him to burn all of his property instead of giving it to the government. No one helps to put out the fire due to Long'er's bad reputation, and he is condemned as a reactionary. On

the day of the execution, Long'er sees Fugui and tries to break free from the executioners, but he is taken back and shot dead.

The story jumps to a decade later, to the Great Leap Forward. The local town chief persuades Fugui and Jiazhen to donate all scrap metal in their possession to the national drive to produce steel and make weaponry for liberating Taiwan. Afraid that his family will be seen as unpatriotic if any member fails to attend, Fugui forces tired Youqing to attend the smelting of the iron. Unfortunately, Youqing is killed in an accident involving the district chief's car. The smelting of iron, which supplied the military fighting for Taiwan, is linked to the death of Youqing. This link is increased not only by his death being caused by the reckless driving of the district chief of the Communist Party, but also by the fact that the chief happens to be Fugui's close friend Chunsheng. Thus, the personal experience and the historical events are inextricably linked, with the latter imposing an increasing strain on the lives of the former. Each period also shows an increasing sense of paranoia amongst the Chinese people. When Youqing plays a practical joke in the communal kitchen on a boy who was bullying his sister, the boy's father accuses him of sabotaging the Great Leap Forward. Fugui's irrational fear of official reprisals forces him to beat his son in front of the crowd. Similarly, it is his fear of the family not being seen as politically correct that begins the chain of events leading to Youqing's death.

This link continues throughout the film's closing scenes. The Cultural Revolution is suggested as improving the fate of the underprivileged in China, but does more harm than good. Fengxia is now grown up. Her parents arrange for her to meet Wan

Erxi (Jiang Wu), a local leader in the Red Guard. They fall in love and marry. During Fengxia's childbirth, the family accompanies her to the hospital where they discover that all doctors have been locked up for being an elite class, leaving only inexperienced nurses in charge. Out of fear for Fengxia's safety, Erxi and Fugui manage to secure the release of an old doctor to oversee the birth. As the doctor has not eaten for several days, Fugui buys several steamed buns (mantou in Chinese) for him. However, Fengxia begins to hemorrhage and the panic-stricken nurses admit that they have no idea what to do. They look for the doctor's help, but find that he has overeaten and is semiconscious. The family is helpless and unlucky Fengxia eventually dies from hypervolemia. Following Fengxia's death, the family decides to name the son Mantou after the buns.

In contrast with the official presentation of a new world following the communists' victory, Chinese society in the film is seen in its continuing suffering. The film questions the price at which each national target was reached. "Of all the atrocities that China witnessed during the twentieth century", as Michael Berry observed, the Cultural Revolution "is unique for its length, divergent forms of pain inflicted [...] and the complex ways 'culture' was both a target and a means to wage political warfare."¹⁴ In the film, Fugui is persuaded by the town chief to destroy his shadow play puppets for fear that they would be seen as anti-communist artifacts and deemed counter-revolutionary as they are traditional cultural dregs. As the chief states, "the older it is, the more anti-revolutionary." It is then unveiled that Chunsheng was

¹⁴ Michael Berry, *A History of Pain: Trauma in Modern Chinese Literature and Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008, 253).

condemned as a reactionary. He arrives very late one night to tell Fugui and Jiazhen that his wife has committed suicide and that he wishes to do the same. Jiazhen, who until that time had refused to talk to Chunsheng, tells him to keep on living because “you still owe us a life!”

The historical link of family and community also slackens off through each of the historical events following 1949. The film uses entertainment to reflect the changing political situation. Whereas the shadow plays are initially seen as representing scenes of traditional feudal strife, the stories gradually become more politicized. When Fugui and Chunsheng perform in front of the CCP’s Liberation Army during the Civil War, the stories are more traditional, but restructured to tell tales of honor and heroism amongst soldiers fighting for the communists. Later, after Fugui has been forced to destroy the puppets that had become symbols of China’s traditional past, the wedding party that attends his daughter’s marriage sings a traditional communist song praising CCP for being “dearer than mother and father”. Several years later, the family visits the graves of Youqing and Fengxia, where Jiazhen, as by tradition, leaves dumplings for her deceased children. The film ends with Fugui stating that “life will get better and better” as the whole family begins to eat.

The filmic text receiving close scrutiny is exemplary in that it explicitly displays an intention to engage with the events of national historic significance and their aftermath, while at the same time self-consciously foregrounding the recognition that such engagement, if it is to be effective, must somehow resist simply responding to the events in any direct or literal way. This departure from univocality is closely tied

to what I think to be this film's distinctively postmodern aesthetic, which I will elaborate in the following section.

I will draw on Fredric Jameson's influential reading of postmodernism and in particular his identification of the postmodern moment as the climatic stage in a long-term process. Jameson has identified his theorization of this process, elaborated incrementally in texts spanning several decades, as his most significant contribution to twentieth-century history.¹⁵ Its conceptual underpinnings can be found in his attempt to stake out a position on another key issue for cultural analysis: to affirm, in the face of what Linda Hutcheon terms the "semiotic idealism"¹⁶ of some forms of poststructuralism, that "history is not a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but [...] as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form."¹⁷ In his argument, Jameson aligns history with Jacques Lacan's notion of "the Real".¹⁸ As Jameson notes, Lacan famously observed of the Real that it is "what resists symbolization absolutely."¹⁹ Nonetheless, Jameson remarks that "it is not terribly difficult to say what is meant by the Real in Lacan. It is simply History itself."²⁰ History/the Real is "fundamentally non-narrative and non-representational"; it is the

¹⁵ See Fredric Jameson, "Culture and Finance Capital," *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 1998, 136-161).

¹⁶ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989, 78).

¹⁷ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981, 35).

¹⁸ Though in Lacan's writings the "real" is uncapitalized, I follow the widely used convention of capitalizing the word where a specifically Lacanian connotation is intended.

¹⁹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar I: Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953-54*, trans. John Forrester, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Norton, 1988, 66).

²⁰ Fredric Jameson, "Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan: Marxism, Psychoanalytic Criticism, and the Problem of the Subject," (1977) *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading: Otherwise*, ed. Shoshana Felman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1982, 384).

abyssal “realm of time and death”²¹, or, as Jameson pithily puts it in *The Political Unconscious*, “what hurts, [...] what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis.”²² He repeatedly cautions, though, that “in terms of language we must distinguish between our own narrative of history [...] and the Real itself, which our narratives can only approximate in asymptotic fashion and which resists symbolization absolutely.”²³ Jameson clearly takes Lacan’s notion of the Real to designate a purely material, objective ontological ground, that is to say, a fundamental level of ‘reality’ that persists outside of any psychological or symbolic projection. Hence Jameson’s association of the Real with the referent, the ‘real thing’ for which the Saussurean sign stands.

The identity of the Real and the referent that Jameson argues for is also evident in Lacan’s work. For example, Lacan argues that it is as an inhabitant of the Real that the referent always eludes the processes of signification.²⁴ One function of the concept of the Real in Lacan’s work, then, as Jameson suggests, is to gesture towards a realm of irreducible materiality, which neither this signification, nor any other, can fully capture. Jameson is not mistaken in aligning the Real with external, objective reality. But his model does overlook the way in which, for Lacan, the Real may also lodge internally, as an alien object within the sphere of subjectivity and the symbolic.

²¹ Ibid., 394.

²² Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981, 102).

²³ Fredric Jameson, “Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan: Marxism, Psychoanalytic Criticism, and the Problem of the Subject,” (1977) *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading: Otherwise*, ed. Shoshana Felman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1982, 388-389).

²⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar I: Freud’s Papers on Technique, 1953-54*, trans. John Forrester, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Norton, 1988, 20).

As Walter A. Davis remarks, “history is not just what hurts, and then conveniently proves unknowable to the conceptual, ‘symbolic’ order. It is what shatters and wounds us with traumatic force.”²⁵ If a certain separation between history, or the Real, on the one hand, and the symbolic, on the other, is built into Jameson’s model of “normative” signification, the literary and art historical trajectory is one in which this inherent disarticulation of sign and referent is steadily exacerbated.

Of all the various modes of literary narrative that have accompanied the processes of modernization, it is realism that, for Jameson, comes closest to an “open and explicit relation to history in the sense that realist narratives attempt to represent, at the limit, the movement of history itself.”²⁶ In an early intervention into the postmodernism debate, Jameson sketches a narrative of the progressive waning of the referential confidence of realism. This trajectory takes in two key moments (the shift, first, from realism to modernism, and then from modernism to postmodernism) and is directly ascribed to the processes of capitalist reification:

In a first moment, reification “liberated” the sign from its referent, but this is not a force to be released with impunity. Now, in a second moment, it continues its work of dissolution, penetrating the interior of the sign itself and liberating the signifier from the signified, or from meaning proper. This play, no longer of a realm of signs, but of pure or literal signifiers freed from the ballast of their signifieds, their former meanings, now generates a new kind of

²⁵ Walter A. Davis, *Deracination: Historicity, Hiroshima, and the Tragic Imperative* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001, 30).

²⁶ Michael Hardt and Kathi Weeks, introduction to *The Jameson Reader*, ed. Michael Hardt and Kathi Weeks (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, 14).

textuality in all the arts...and begins to project the mirage of some ultimate language of pure signifiers which is also frequently associated with schizophrenic discourse.²⁷

Jameson goes on to remark that, reality seems no longer to occupy a “mode of existence” separate from the sentimental and romantic cultural sphere. He continues:

Cultural impacts back on reality in ways that make any independent and, as it were, non-or extracultural form of it problematical [...] so that finally the theorists unite their voices in the new doxa that the “referent” no longer exists.²⁸

Indeed, postmodernist culture is here considered to confirm the poststructuralist position resisted so forcefully by Jameson in the *Political Unconscious*: “[i]n faithful conformity to poststructuralist linguistic theory, the past as ‘referent’ finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts.”²⁹

Jameson has continued to propound this position in subsequent work. In *Culture and Finance Capital*, for example, he speaks of a “stereotypical postmodern language,” which suggests:

[a] new culture realm or dimension which is independent of the former real world, not because, as in the modern period, culture withdrew into an autonomous space of art, but rather because the real world has already been suffused with it and colonized by it, so that it has no outside in terms of which

²⁷ Fredric Jameson, “Periodizing the 60s,” (1984) *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*, 3rd edn, ed. Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (London: Arnold, 1996, 313).

²⁸ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991, 277).

²⁹ *Ibid*, 18.

it could not be found lacking.³⁰

Jameson's narrative of relentless reification and derealization is undoubtedly compelling, but, as Hal Foster, discussing the Jamesonian 'myth' quoted above, observes, "there are always...other stories to consider."³¹ One such alternative, if perhaps yet more baleful, "story" might begin with the observation made by Slavoj Žižek in an essay written in response to the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001:

The ultimate and defining experience of the twentieth century was the direct experience of the Real as opposed to the everyday social reality --- the Real in its extreme violence as the price to be paid for peeling off the deceiving layers of reality.³²

At no time did the "experience of the Real" proliferate more widely than at national tragic events. In my analysis of traumatic effects, I want to explore what it is about these events that produces this immersion in the Real, and why, in turn, this experience carries an unusually potent traumatic charge.

Three turbulent national events in this film should be emphasized: the first is the Civil War between the CCP and the KMT, and the other two are the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. I chose the Civil War as my first area of interest because the two fighting parties both claimed as their revolutionary goal the

³⁰ Fredric Jameson, "Culture and Finance Capital," *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 1998, 161).

³¹ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996, 77).

³² Slavoj Žižek, "Welcome to the Desert of the Real," *The Symptom* (2, 2002). (par. 1) (<http://Lacan.com/desertsymf.htm>). Žižek draws on Alain Badiou's identification of "the passion for the real" as the key feature of the twentieth century in *The Century* (2005), trans. Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

modernization of a suffering China. To Fugui, there is no difference between KMT and CCP policies. At the beginning of the war between the two parties, Fugui and Chunsheng are captured by the KMT army and are treated well because they entertain the soldiers. In the army they find many sympathizers among the soldiers who are poor and powerless within the society. One of Fugui's friends intends to be captured by the CCP army because they treat prisoners of war very well and there will be no fear of hunger. Fugui and Chunsheng continue their shadow puppet play after their surrender to the CCP army, who also needs their performance to enhance the troop morale. After the CCP victory in the Civil War, Fugui returns home and continues his family life. The only result of the war is the reunion with Fugui's family, which is followed by one tragedy after another.

To Live does not explain the communists' reasons for the Great Leap Forward. Instead, as we see in the film, this event befalls the family as a force of nature, neither all good nor all bad. It is right that any serious assessment of the Great Leap Forward will be mixed in terms of its positive and negative accomplishments. However, the audience is left entirely without context: why the great social upheaval? What is at stake, and what is the goal? The failure to address these issues might be a result of Zhang's self-censoring action catering to the approval of commercial release. The early Great Leap Forward, in reality, was an attempt to use China's large population to rapidly transform the countryside from an agrarian economy into a modern communist society. Its economic model emphasizes rapid industrialization, social experiment, class struggle, collectivization of life, and communes as the basic unit of

society. However, various errors --- some human, some not --- led to “one of the most deadly mass killings of human history”.³³ Fact does meet fiction, but both of them are questioned in the film. *To Live* accurately portrays this ironic decentering. For example, the destruction of personal metal artifacts in clumsily-made-furnaces is correctly portrayed as wasteful. In one scene, a lump of obviously useless iron is paraded through the main street. A worker in the film boasts the success that the iron represents, because it can make “three cannon balls” to kill the reactionaries in Taiwan. There is this obvious sense that the worker is disconnected from reality. The backyard furnace program was short lived and was quietly abandoned in 1959. It should, however, be seen in a larger context: even though this campaign was destructive, some light industries and construction projects were really set up.

Missing from this portrayal are the depictions of extreme famine following the early Great Leap Forward. The exact number of famine deaths is difficult to determine, and guessing range from 16.5 million to 46 million people.³⁴ The film, however, even shows an abundance of food at that time. The communal kitchen is not shown in a negative light. On the contrary, the eating halls are shown as colorful and vibrant. Thus collectivization of life is not portrayed as some dreary, oppressive nightmare as is common in contemporary literature and films. Nonetheless, the people are portrayed as terribly overworked as the campaign progresses. On the day

³³ Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958-62* (Walker & Company, 2010, x, xi).

³⁴ For example, Peng Xizhe calculated 23 million deaths in 14 provinces (Peng Xizhe, “Demographic consequences of the Great Leap Forward in China's provinces,” *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (1987, 649). Ansley Coale came to the conclusion that 16.5 million people died, and Basil Ashton counted 30 million deaths and 30 missing births (Basil Ashton and Kenneth Hill, “Famine in China, 1958–1961,” *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (1984, 614).

of his death, Youqing is exhausted and falls asleep on the ceremony site and is hit by a jeep. The driver is equally overworked, asleep at the wheel when the accident happens. As it turns out, the person who hit Fugui's son is Fugui's old friend Chunsheng. These unlikely coincidences complicate the plot, infusing it with the feeling that mysterious forces are at work in the interweaving of Fugui's family --- representing every Chinese family --- and the birth of the nation. Thus, like China, Fugui's Family is severely damaged by those tragic events. But the source of suffering is not the memory of events that one might have directly experienced, but rather the awareness of some sort of carelessness to those events.

The above description corresponds well to the theory of trauma explained by Cathy Caruth. She is concerned with the question of how, in contemporary time, we can gain access to a traumatic historical event the force of which resides precisely in the failure of its understanding. In Caruth's articulation, a referential thinking should aim "not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting history to arise where immediate understanding may not."³⁵ In terms of Caruth, only a speech that "exceeds simple understanding [...] opens up the possibility of what could be called a truly historical transmission."³⁶ With this in mind, we can say that *To live* also takes up this challenge: the film aims to offer a history true to the impossible experience of nothing happening. It treads what can be called

³⁵ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, 11). See also Ernst van Alphen's theory of trauma and the possibility of detecting symptoms of it in discourse. "Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory, Trauma," *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, Leo Spitzer (eds.). Hanover NH 1999: University of New England Press, 24-3.

³⁶ Cathy Caruth, ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, 156).

the minefield of the past, mapping its many no-go areas in an attempt to respect their essential profundity and not to reduce the force of their provocation to our understanding.

The film moves quickly towards the Cultural Revolution, which was launched in May 1966. The Revolution paralyzed China politically and tremendously impacted the nation economically and socially. Its stated aim was to enforce socialism in China by removing bourgeois dregs from Chinese society, and to impose proletarian orthodoxy within the CCP. Like the Great Leap Forward, the Revolution in the film is depicted as mysterious and without any clear goal. It might as well be a natural force sweeping through people's lives. *To Live* shows many people outside Fugui's home marching down the streets, but there is no explanation given as to why this is happening. The audience cannot find posters and hear slogans, which were the very commonly used revolutionary symbols when Chinese people were marching down the streets in the Cultural Revolution. One of those accused by the crowds is Chunsheng, Fugui's old friend. Again, little context is provided. What is missing is the explanation that the masses are mobilizing against authorities in the party who are accused to restore capitalism. It resulted in widespread factional struggles in all walks of life.

The film does not look at these events through the lens of class struggle. The film is blind to the fact that a real life and death struggle was being waged over two futures for China: one aimed at a world without oppression, another is China of today with its sweatshops and massive inequalities and

injustices.³⁷

Rather, as Fire observes, the Cultural Revolution is simply described as “a collection of individual tragedies” to be encountered.

At the same time, the Cultural Revolution in the film is not portrayed in an entirely negative light. After the Cultural Revolution, many of its policies were accused as a violation of human rights. While a few others, like historian Mobo Gao, by contrast, criticized such attitudes by suggesting that

[F]rom the perspectives of the rural residents, the educated youth had a good life. They did not have to work as hard as the local farmers and they had state and family subsidies. They would frequently go back home to visit their parents in the cities, and they had money to spend and wore fashionable clothes.³⁸

This argument can also find support in the film. Fugui’s mute daughter Fengxia falls in love with a Red Guard leader Erxi who is also disabled. Their disabilities bring them together. To Fugui’s delight, Erxi and his followers repair his house and even paint a big portrait of Mao on the wall. Erxi is portrayed as the model son-in-law, even though he is involved in cruel actions against suspected capitalists. After Fengxia and Erxi married, she gets pregnant. In the hospital, they discover all the

³⁷ Prairie Fire, “*To Live* (also *Life Times*, directed by Zhang Yimou, 1994),” *Lico*, Jun 6, 2011. Fire’s point seems to be a modernist’s with two clear-cut struggling ideas: the first one is blind to the fact that a real life and death struggle was waged on many people who are living their lives; the second one is that the Cultural Revolution successfully discredited the ideal it said it stood for---and actually did prepare the ground for the China of today with its sweatshops, massive inequalities and injustices. But what I emphasize here is that the Cultural Revolution thus described is only a “collection of individual tragedies” instead of the official definition of preserving true communist ideology.

³⁸ Gao Mobo, *The Battle for China’s Past: Mao and the Cultural Revolution* (London: Pluto Press, 2008, 36).

doctors have been deposed by Red Guards. Fengxia dies during childbirth as a result of the inexperienced nurses. Although Fugui now has a healthy grandson, his daughter is lost, along with his son Youqing and close friend Chunsheng, to the storm of historical events that extend beyond Fugui's understanding.

The film ends in the late 1970s, as socialism is ending and capitalism beginning (though capitalism is not officially recognized by CCP but termed as "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics"). Fugui and his wife are depicted as happy with their life, playing with their grandson, who can be considered a symbol of a reformed China. The tragic event that brought him into life is painful, but that is already a past. The young grandson is here, that is what matters for the family. Even though the film makes no judgments, its narrative obviously embraces the revisionist outlook. All of those historical events, as it turns out in the film, were merely part of the birth pangs of today's China, the only thing that matters in those events are the characters' personal responses. Thus, one could argue that Zhang Yimou deconstructs a normative and conventional conception of the world and attempts to bring forth a more savage reality in the face of which only the force of a metaphorical film can maintain itself. What is more, as we are further away from those events, any attempt to reveal the truths of them is negotiated by official representation and private voices as revealed in this film.

When watching the film, the audience is continually caught and suspended between two forces that are both necessary and impossible. The uneasy feeling of watching tragic events may be but a footnote to the massive dynastic upheaval that

pervades those historical events in the film, but it also serves as a chilling foreshadowing of the body as a site of personal pain, national trauma, and voyeuristic pleasure as it would be further articulated by others. These two forces can be explained by Maurice Blanchot's definition of "two slopes" between which literature is said to be divided. If one side of literature is "turned toward the movement of negation by which things are separated from themselves and destroyed in order to be known, subjugated, communicated," the other side is "a concern for the reality of things, for their unknown, free, and silence [sic] existence."³⁹ Each slope inevitably veers away from itself to the other. Being always on the opposite slope is the only condition under which literature can hope to be truthful. The first slope, therefore, is unavoidably contaminated by the second and vice versa: "an art which purports to follow one slope is already on the other":

If you choose exactly where your place in it [literature] is, if you convince yourself that you really are where you wanted to be, you risk becoming very confused, because literature has already insidiously caused you to pass from one slope to the other and changed you into something you were not before.

This is its treachery; this is also its cunning version of the truth.⁴⁰

This approach can also be used to frame my analysis of *To Live*. My aim is to clarify the exact manner in which the film attempts to gain access to the ontological indeterminacy, which it takes to be at the core of the traumatic encounter with reality.

³⁹ Maurice Blanchot, "Literature and the Right to Death," trans. Lydia Davis, *The Work of Fire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995, 330).

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 332- 3.

The first slope in the film is realism, which seeks its realization through visual and verbal representations, designating things according to what they mean. The second slope, however, is concerned with things beyond our knowledge, that is to say, beyond the description of our language and frames of reference. Rather than ascertaining the meaning of reality, *To Live* repeatedly veers to an absence of meaning by carrying traditional narrative means to an extreme. Or, in other words, this movement can be said to move from a deconstruction of the first (realistic) slope to an embrace of the second (unknown existence). In this reflection, *To Live* can be viewed as a postmodern text which is treading on the minefield of the past and confirms that there is no way to understand the true meaning of historical events.

Traumatic Encounter: a Certain Ontological Indeterminacy

The correspondences between Fugui's fate and the course of the historical events surrounding him become very systematic. The artificiality and conventionality of these ties are revealed in such an arbitrary way that the mimesis, by wanting to be maximal, attains an almost negative threshold. This analogical system seems to support the representation, which borders on the unmotivated.⁴¹ The harmonious vision is definitively shattered in the film, hence the absence of any visible link whatsoever between the individual and the collective. The characters engage in matters little affected by the muffled noises of historical events. An excessive concern

⁴¹ Similar examples can be found in Jia Zhangke's films such as *Platform, Still Life and 24 Cities*. As film critic Liam Lacey claims, Jia is "noted for his poetic way through which stories that fill in the modern non-official history of his country". Liam Lacey, "Chinese Films Highlight Displacement, Memory," *The Globe and Mail* (Monday, May, 17, 2010).

with coherence, which eventually backfires, also motivates the film's adoption of the contextualist point of view, which seeks to explain events by setting them within the context of their occurrence. The plot of the film revolves around loosely interwoven themes and narratives, including Fugui's gambling, the resulting loss of home and land, the accidental death of his son and his daughter's unnecessary death while giving birth to her baby boy. This personal narrative is set in the context of a wider history, of the narrator's family, the people in general and the traumatic effect when facing a new future.

In the seminar on the *tuché*, Lacan argues that trauma constitutes a missed encounter with the Real.⁴² The encounter is missed partly because the Real is fundamentally inassimilable to the symbolic order that structures subjectivity, and partly because, as Malcolm Bowie comments, the Real's intrusion upon the subject cannot be anticipated or forestalled.⁴³ Attributing a comparable structure to human consciousness, Freud also suggests that "we may, I think, tentatively venture to regard the common traumatic neurosis as a consequence of an extensive breach being made in the protective shield against stimuli."⁴⁴ This protective shield is typical of the dominant logic of modernist art, which is to bracket the referent, in order to approach an autonomy of the sign. Modernist art, in all its forms, as Linda Hutcheon suggests,

⁴² Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar I: Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953-54*, trans. John Forrester, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Norton, 1988, 55).

⁴³ Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan* (London: Fontana Press, 1991, 110). Different from realist thought that reality in the everyday life is the ultimate truth, modernism focuses more on inner self-consciousness and the power of human efforts to challenge and consequently change reality.

⁴⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols, trans. James Strachey, ed. James Strachey and others (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974, XVIII (1955), 12).

functioned “to the detriment of the referent” by “emphasizing the opacity of the medium and the self-sufficiency of the signifying system.”⁴⁵ As I have indicated earlier, Fredric Jameson ascribes the “liberation” of the sign in modernism to the processes of capitalist reification. The modernist displacement of the referent has more often, however, been construed as a strategic response to historical conditions (revolution for instance) which were perceived to be so chaotic, horrifying and extreme that artists neither could, nor wished, to attempt their representation through the “transparent” codes of an earlier, modernist mode.

For Hal Foster, this task requires us to reflect critically on our two basic modes of representation: “that images are attached to referents, to iconographic themes or real things in the world, or, alternatively, what all images can do is represent other images, that all forms of representation are auto-referential codes.”⁴⁶ The latter, ‘simulacral’ position has held sway in Western intellectual circles since the 1970s, not only because of the dominance of poststructuralist thinkers who have been read as espousing it, but also because, as Jameson suggests, the innovative art of the period has appeared to confirm it. Dissatisfied with this binary opposition, Foster, like others, has attempted a bold synthesis that makes it possible to read a range of contemporary aesthetic artifacts as “referential and simulacral, connected and disconnected, affective and affectless, critical and complacent.”⁴⁷ He is by no means alone in proposing that the necessary mediator in this project is the notion of trauma. The

⁴⁵ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989, 32).

⁴⁶ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996, 128).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 130

pertinence of trauma in this regard is found, once more, in its Lacanian articulation as a missed encounter with the Real. That lends the encounter a certain ontological indeterminacy, as Slavoj Žižek explains:

[The] traumatic event [is] a point of failure of symbolization, but at the same time never given in its positivity --- it can be constructed only backwards, from its structural effects. All its effectivity lies in the distortions it produces in the symbolic universe of the subject [...] In a first approach, the Real is a shock of a contingent encounter which disrupts the automatic circulation of the symbolic mechanism; a grain of sand preventing its smooth functioning; a traumatic encounter which ruins the balance of the symbolic universe of the subject.⁴⁸

In this sense, “the traumatic event thus bears a striking similarity to the always absent signified/referent of poststructuralist discourse, an object that can by definition only be constructed retroactively.”⁴⁹ In her essay on trauma, Cathy Caruth also notes that:

It is here, in the [...] widespread and bewildering encounter with trauma --- both in its occurrence and in the attempt to understand it --- that we can begin to recognize the possibility of a history that is no longer straightforwardly referential. Through the notion of trauma [...] we can understand that a rethinking of reference is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting history to arise where

⁴⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989, 169, 171).

⁴⁹ Ana Douglass and Thomas A. Vogler, *Witness and Memory: The Discourse of Trauma* (London: Routledge, 2003, 5).

immediate understanding may not.⁵⁰

If, for modernism, the referent exists to be suppressed, it must be added that as such it nonetheless persists in its positivity. Its presence is evident in the very symbolic obliquities that obscure it, which is a key facet of the departure of much aesthetic production from modernist paradigms. This could be considered as the way in which the referent, as originating entity and ontological ground, is condemned to a still more extreme marginality and yet simultaneously perceived as possessing the potential to rupture the symbolic plane itself.

To Live is such an example. It is one manifestation of a series of convergences or collisions between the past, the present, and the future; between reference and simulation; between reality and representation; and between subject and world, which I have traced across a range of historical events. Those convergences follow varying trajectories, but nonetheless display a marked commonality, both in their implication of the catastrophes of some tragic historical events, and in their more or less explicit occupation of the modality of traumatic effect. Most of the postmodern period has been characterized in intellectual life by a suspicion of questions of reference and a flight from the links between discourse and the materiality of history.

From the 1940s to the early 1970s, we follow Fugui's family through good times and bad times. Zhang's skill is such that the film audience becomes less a detached observer than an involved witness. On the other hand, the subject created cannot make any conscious choices, playing no character other than an ambiguous one. In

⁵⁰ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, 11).

the social sciences, subjectivity is an effect of relations of power. Similar social configurations create similar perceptions, experiences and interpretations of the world. As the property of being a subject, subjectivity is closely related to the effect of the discursive processing of his/her experiences. The reason I introduce subjectivity in analyzing *To Live* is that in the current political situation, Chinese directors have to create in film a subjectivity that is always a mixture of personal experience and collective memory⁵¹, that is to say, a coordination of individual elements within a larger pattern or social tradition. The characters are powerfully developed and realized, representing some of the most typical men and women to populate any of the 1994s films. In order to understand subjectivity in the film, the audience has to scrape away the deceiving layer created by both the director and the film censorial system.

If the May Fourth period (late 1920s) was one in which modern Chinese artists began investing in subjective vision, what happened in the subsequent decades with the communist revolution was, as Rey Chow argues, the repression of such subjective vision as private property. Instead, vision, like property, was to become communal --- to be owned, used and disseminated by the party.⁵² Such background memories help the subject to survive in a community where the behaviors they perform are part of ‘normal’ life. It may have been toned down in the film *To Live*. Because Zhang and

⁵¹ For the theme that subjectivity is a mixture of personal experience and collective, there are many examples, one of which is Jia Zhangke’s films such as *Platform*, *Still Life* and *24 Cities*. As a film critic Liam Lacey claims, Jia is “noted for his poetic way through which stories that fill in the modern non-official history of his country”. Liam Lacey, “Chinese Films Highlight Displacement, Memory,” *The Globe and Mail* (Monday, May, 17, 2010).

⁵² Rey Chow, “Visuality, Modernity, and Primitive Passions,” *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995, 31).

his screenwriters might think they could thus avoid direct criticism of the authorities in order to ensure the film's release. But it proved wrong, for even this rather harmless version of the events of Chinese history earned them the wrath of the officials. Zhang has mentioned this in an interview:

Around the time Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* was released, there were a whole series of films about the Cultural Revolution in the works, including a film by Xie Jin. I heard that the Central Ministry of Propaganda suddenly got anxious, seeing all of these films, and sent down a directive stating that subsequent portrayals of the Cultural Revolution in film or television were not appropriate. My film *To Live* and Tian Zhuangzhuang's *The Blue Kite* were both victims of this directive. Even today, more than a decade later, it is still in effect.⁵³

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, writers and filmmakers made tentative inquiries, checking the limits of expression under the authority, exploring the potential of public discourse and assessing the inner resources needed for speaking up and bearing witness. From the mid-1980s onwards, films about the Cultural Revolution emerged in growing numbers. The political events of the middle decades of the 20th century, including the Civil War, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, represent productive ground for grand stories of combined tragedy and triumph. However, *To Live*, which is in turns funny and touching, takes a different approach from films such as *Farewell My Concubine*. Instead of viewing the cultural changes

⁵³ Michael Berry, "Zhang Yimou: Flying Colors," *Speaking in Images: Interview with Contemporary Chinese Filmmakers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005, 129).

on an epic scale, it gives us a far more intimate and affective perspective.

Unlike previous films glorifying CCP's policies, *To Live* re-presents subjective ideas but also relegated such opinions to a more private realm. By telling the story of a very ordinary Chinese family, Zhang believes it will be more accessible to a large audience. The film does not require much theoretical sophistication to see that memory and experience are increasingly attracting audiences. "In the past, the Cultural Revolution was portrayed in only one way --- with people shouting slogans. I think my depiction is a truer representation of how ordinary people saw it and lived through it."⁵⁴ Zhang expects that the emotions he found so stirring in his characters are what will attract audiences. The family tragedies in the film attest how China's historical events scarred individuals who were treated as pawns in the communist movement and its sentimentality shows that ideology is no comfort in the face of personal suffering. As such, *Fugui* carries the weight of history, evoking sympathy and pity as a man whose weakness compels him to bend like a reed in the changing storms of uncontrollable political events and whose strength allows him to bear any consequences. It is very obvious that Zhang has put his personal memory into the historical events he narrates, revealing his suspicion of official or other representations. In accordance with Zhang's claim that his experience is different from that of Chen Kaige, once the historical event happened, the experience was transposed to the realm of the subject. Hence the experience of the historical event is already a re-presentation of it through individual subjects and not the event itself.

⁵⁴ Thea Klapwald, "On the Set with Zhang Yimou," *New York Times* (Wednesday, April 27, 1994).

When asked in the same interview about several elements that depart from the original novel, Zhang explained that novelists don't understand that filmmakers face a lot more difficulties than they do. The directors do not have the freedom to adapt stories exactly as they might like to. He continues by stating:

Another difference was the introduction of a series of humorous elements into the film that were absent in the novel. The novel has a much heavier feeling, but I used Ge You to play the role of the protagonist, Fugui. Ge You is an actor known best for his comic roles, and that inspired me to add those more lighthearted elements to the film.⁵⁵

With the shifting of those humorous elements into the tragically loaded film, the official view of three historical events is displaced to subjective feelings. Such a displacement has the effect of satirizing the 'meaning' from its conventional space (where life is waiting to be seen and articulated) and reconstructing it in a new locus: the locus of the personal, which not only shines but glosses. The character in the event becomes both the subject and object of it. Thus we can say that Zhang's film is the seducers' snare (the humorous traps) set up in order to engage his audience in an infinite play and displacement of meanings, and most importantly, to catch them in their longings and desires, making them empathize with the vicissitude of the characters.

As soon as the audience's expectations and curiosity are aroused, a comic

⁵⁵ Michael Berry, "Zhang Yimou: Flying Colors," *Speaking in Images: Interview with Contemporary Chinese Filmmakers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005, 128).

reversal occurs. This has become a pattern that, in the end, fulfills expectations that nevertheless draw heavily on the narrative's peculiar situation --- the tragic comic ambience of the historical events.⁵⁶

The humorous elements should not be considered as lightening the burden of the traumatic effect but instead could be seen as a subversive way of engaging with political persecution.

This operation takes place primarily in a realm of projected and imagined memory. According to the influential theory of French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, memory comes from experience, which is based on two forms of legitimacy: collective and individual. These two have run parallel to each other until the loosening of social ideology. Halbwachs writes: “[t]he framework of collective memory confines and binds our most intimate remembrance” to the historical events and “to each other. It suffices that we cannot consider them except from the outside [...] by putting ourselves in the position of others.”⁵⁷ At present, as we can see in the film, the boundary between the two is blurring; following closely upon the successive unreliability of official history and awakening personal accounts, a new kind of history concerning important events has been born, which owes its prestige to the new relations it involves with the past and present, collective and individual. I argue that this version is a kind of ‘centrifugal force’, a term I borrow from Russian

⁵⁶ Chen Xiaoming, “The Mysterious Other: Postpolitics in Chinese Film,” trans. Liu Kang and Anbin Shi, *Boundary 2*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Autumn 1997, 134-5).

⁵⁷ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, Trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, 53).

philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin.⁵⁸ The cultural world, Bakhtin stated, consists of both ‘centripetal’ and ‘centrifugal’ forces. “The former seeks to impose order on an essentially heterogeneous and messy world; the latter either purposefully or for no particular reason continually disrupts that order.”⁵⁹ As we can see in the film, the individual is not always suffering from the traumatic effects of political events. The director, as a subject, has his own sensibility and reflection to unfurl. That is why, I think, Zhang sets up some humorous elements in his film. Everything seems to indicate that the past is not preserved but is re-constructed on the basis of the present. The spatial and topographical mappings of violence are actually in many ways superseded by imaginary mappings. In charting this process, the true negotiation of history takes place not in reality or fantasy, but in the contested site that lies between history and film, fact and fiction, reality and imagination. It is only, as Berry states, “when the phantoms of history and the ghosts of the imagination come together to contest and renegotiate the scars of the past that a new understanding of historical trauma begins to arise.”⁶⁰

This underlying central theme is revealed in the title *To Live*: through all the struggles, hardships, and moments of sadness and joy, the protagonists continue their lives. As Jiazhen in the film points out, “no matter how bleak circumstances appear, the only choice is to go on living.” After Fugui has lost the house, he takes over a

⁵⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1981).

⁵⁹ Gary Sual Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990, 30).

⁶⁰ Michael Berry, *A History of Pain: Trauma in Modern Chinese Literature and Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011, 15).

Chinese traveling shadow puppet show. While he and his friend Chunsheng are on the road with their puppet cart, they are caught by the KMT army on the brink of defeat. When Fugui returns to his hometown, he finds that his wife is delivering water from door to door to earn a living. On the surface, the film appears to be a hard-hitting, realistic treatment of a political struggle structure, built on ideological contradictions in upheaval socialism. However, contrary to appearance, the film resolves its ethical dilemmas in a traditional Chinese fashion. It aligns the forces of rugged individualism and family on the side of the protagonist who has capitulated to the ruthless political persecution. It turns Fugui's story into a moral fable and suggests that if your family stands behind you, and if you accept the forgiveness of the others, then all is well that ends well.

In his *L'évolution de la personnalité*, Pierre Janet, a French psychologist specialized in dissociation and influential for Freud, asserted that when people respond to new challenges with appropriate action, they automatically incorporate new information without paying much conscious attention to what is happening. He proposed that “[t]he personality is a human work of art: a construction made by human beings with the means at their disposal...good, bad, incomplete, and imperfect.”⁶¹ Concerning the film *To Live*, Fugui engages in creating schemes and trying to make all new experiences fit his preconceptions. At the same time, he is constantly looking for new ways of putting things together. His mental scheme can be explained by the following definition of J. M. Mandler:

⁶¹ Pierre Janet, *L'évolution de la personnalité* (Paris: Société Pierre Janet, 1929 (1984), 282).

[It] is formed on the basis of past experience with objects, scenes, or events and consists of set expectations about what things look and/or the order in which they occur. The parts or units of a schema consist of a set of variables, or slots, which can be filled or instantiated in any given instance by values that have greater or lesser degrees of probability of occurrence attached to them.⁶²

In other words, new experience can only be understood in terms of prior schemata which determine to what extent new information is absorbed and integrated. The traumatic effect of the Civil War, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution in the film have left un-erasable effects in Fugui's mind, but these overwhelming experiences have been integrated within existing mental schemata and have been transformed into a narrative pattern: "life will get better and better." "Once flexibility is introduced, the traumatic memory starts losing its power over current experience."⁶³ By imaging alternative scenarios, Fugui, representing many suffering Chinese, is able to soften the intrusive power of the original, unmitigated horror. But as Fugui puts his hope in the better life of his offspring, the wounds themselves cannot be healed. In light of this, we would not be surprised that Fugui is told by a good communist, "your family's timber was first-rate," describing how fast the house went up in flames. "That wasn't my family's timber," Fugui rebuts, "that was counterrevolutionary timber." By then Fugui has developed a sense of survival that is

⁶² J. M. Mandler, "Categorical and Schematic Organization of Memory," *Memory Organization and Structure*, ed. C. R. Puff (New York: Academic, 1979).

⁶³ Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, 178).

in turns funny and heartbreaking and that expresses the very soul of this tragicomic film.

The protagonist's dogged examination of the pursuit of meaning he brings to the fore, and the attempt to express reality in meaningful representation, can only be successful to the extent that it ends in failure. "If carried through to its ultimate conclusion," as Stef Craps puts it,

[R]ealist representation comes up against the materiality of language. Becoming opaque, it loses its capacity to communicate, and instead offers intimations of an incommunicable reality which precedes and exceeds language.⁶⁴

The seemingly coherent narrative breaks up in the presence of a referent that exceeds the limits of representation and defies language. This unnamable referent can only be approached through 'poetic language', a term I borrow from Paul de Man. For de Man, "all language is figural"; a "text" may release its "statement" in "an indirect, figural way that knows it will be misunderstood by being taken literally." In addition, the "fundamental ambiguity constitutive of all poetry" generates an "infinity of valid readings" --- the decisive cause being "the deep division of Being itself."⁶⁵ Thus by the end of the film, Fugui says that "after the oxen, Mantou will grow up and life will get better and better." This metaphor has constructed a meaning, conferring on the world a different coherence, which is derived from the source of the imaginary and

⁶⁴ Stef Craps, "'To Be Realistic': Close Encounters of a Traumatic Kind in *Waterland*," *Trauma and Ethics in the Novels of Graham Swift: No Short Cuts to Salvation* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2005, 81).

⁶⁵ Paul De Man, *Blindness and Insight* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983, 136, 232).

the vision which poeticizes the future.

Through the use of poetic language, Fugui has somehow managed to apprehend an elusive reality; indeed, his discourse incarnates the complexity of the world which realism failed to convey. Resorting to poetic language, Fugui is able to intimate the experience of an absence which is in excess of any act of negation. This clearly shows that the communists were not supported by all Chinese. Nevertheless, they had supreme influence in China, whether it is through true loyalty, fear or customary yielding to power. The movement from what is known to what is beyond knowledge can be regarded as emblematic of the film as a whole. One's obliviousness to historical events makes one incapable of grasping or making sense of the events as they occurred. It is precisely this unassimilability which accounts for their traumatic impact. It will come as no surprise, then, that Fugui ends the film with such talk. The poeticizing of the world ultimately becomes another way of complicating it, making it unable to fit into a human order of meaning with its unsettling force. The unavoidable contamination of one meaning by the other, which limits their ultimate accomplishment, is the uneasy condition of this postmodern film.

Bewildering Hope: to Live under a Postmodern Condition

To Live sheds a very interesting light on living under a postmodern condition. The characters in the film are consistently talking throughout the film about how great the future will be once the KMT is gone. At the beginning of the film, a man tells Fugui that "after the ox (KMT) is gone, communism comes." But, as the film continues, it

gets harder to tell if they really like and support communism or if they are just pretending out of fear. Fugui and his family bespeak fear after every event, worrying that if they do something wrong, they will be punished severely. They also state that “being poor is good.” It is made clear that they are nervous about something, and fearful of getting wealthy, for the communists only helped the poor peasants (up to the late 1970s). The entire narrative of the film is guided by an unceasing quest to find the reasons behind historical events, setting off a movement, as explained by Craps, “of infinite regress which, for all its ambition to encompass the whole of reality, results in utter fragmentation.”⁶⁶ The desire to probe the true nature of historical events by “framing and contextualizing them ever more precisely leads to all sorts of digression”⁶⁷, the only effect of which is to leave the audience utterly confused and at a complete loss.

Obviously enough, great historical events in the film expose the subject to the colossal power possessed by unknown forces, and demonstrates the horrifying fragility and permeability of the human body. Those historical events, beyond their capacity to channel sheer physical force, lend suffering subjects heightened potentials for inflicting psychic trauma. By intentionally staving off the interrogation of the inner political structures that produce personal sufferings, *To Live* leaves unexamined the ethical contradictions that lie at the heart of Chinese socialism. In doing so the film elaborates the fictional morality that underlies the socialistic age. It resorts to the

⁶⁶ Stef Craps, “‘To Be Realistic’: Close Encounters of a Traumatic Kind in *Waterland*,” *Trauma and Ethics in the Novels of Graham Swift: No Short Cuts to Salvation* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2005, 80).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

traditional Confucius logic of remaining modest, never going beyond the edge of the existing system, and resolves its tenuous ethical position through a nostalgia which returns hope to the next generation. It thus creates a sublimating fantasy structure which represses the ‘real’ destructive forces of a problematic society gone wild and out of control. Rather than elucidating the meaning of reality, *To Live* insistently points to a radical absence of meaning by carrying traditional narrative codes to an extreme. In particular, the film subverts contextualist models of historical explanation, by means of which traditional scholars have habitually attempted to make sense of the past. In the film, Zhang Yimou demonstrates how the narrative subverts the realist project by radicalizing the conventions of the realist tradition. Hence, it can be said that this subversion originates from the codes of the realist representation by a systematic application of its aesthetic principles and a continuous exploration of its structural implications.

This postmodern implication supports my sustained attempts to locate a Chinese film in relation to an oppressive past. As such, I have redressed a marked disparity between the pervasiveness of the past’s legacy within those realms of film production typically identified as ‘postmodernist’ and the relative lack of critical attention this relationship has received so far. More significantly, the integrality of the oppressive past to the postmodern field substantially strengthens the case for a thorough reassessment of the very structure and character of this cultural and aesthetic movement itself. My analytic methods for rethinking postmodernism are found in the modes of temporality and history that arise from theories of trauma. Trauma, as a

paradigm of the historical event, possesses an absolute materiality, and yet, as inevitably missed or incompletely experienced, remains absent and inaccessible. This formulation offers me a way to conceptualize postmodernist culture's obliteration of the original moment, while at the same time affirm its sensitivity to the reality of historical event.



Chapter IV Let the Allegory Fly: beyond the Activity of Reference¹



The idea of applying the concept of allegory to Chinese film is anything but new, because “Chinese philosophers from the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC) onward have often used extended metaphors”² (of which fable is a practical means) to effectively express their ideas. This is assumed to reflect the fact that, as ‘realistic’ thinkers, the Chinese usually did not favor more abstract argumentation. Thus simple allegory helped to stimulate the interest of audiences and helped to “increase the force of an argument.”³ In other words, “[i]f an allegory ‘says one thing in words and another in meaning’ [...] it is an open question whether the verbal analyst can avoid giving a one-sided view of it. But the one-sided view may, in and through its incompleteness”, lead us to “reimagine how much has been left out, and [...] in comparisons we can hardly ask for much more than that.”⁴ In the 1980s, allegorical readings as perceived in Western literary theory came to be the underlying mode of representation in most Chinese films due to political circumstances, at the same time those films, heavily

¹ This chapter has been published under the same title in *Literature, Aesthetics and History: Forum of Cultural Exchange between China and the Netherlands* (Beijing: China Social Sciences Publishing House, 2014, 75-104). Chief Editors are Lu Jiande and Ernst van Alphen.

² Quoted from *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. (<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1457283/fable-parable-and-allegory/50910/China?anchor=ref503555>).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Haun Saussy, *The Problem of a Chinese Aesthetic* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993, 13).

influenced by the West, became more technically sophisticated and complex. In this context it seems that a Western notion of allegory could be an appropriate tool for dealing with the vague sense of some undefined allegorical tenor, which is often evoked in interpretations of those films.

This chapter will therefore propose a reading of Jiang Wen's latest film *Let the Bullets Fly* (2010) from that perspective. Moving from last chapter's focus on fictionalization of the historical events, *Let the Bullets Fly*, "[a]s an allegory on power, corruption and rough justice"⁵, appears to represent the distance between the present and irretrievable past. The present cultural and aesthetic difference will certainly interfere with the reiteration of some particular historical context within the film. But let us first take a look at the travelling concept of allegory itself.⁶

Richard Blackmore, an English poet and physician, complained in 1695 that *Ariosto* and *Spencer* [...] are hurried on with a boundless, impetuous Fancy over Hill and Dale, till they are both lost in a Wood of Allegories, --- Allegories so *wild, unnatural, and extravagant*, as greatly displease the Reader. This way of writing mightily offends in this Age; and 'tis a wonder how it came to please in any.⁷

This complaint curtly explains what many readers have disliked about allegory. The

⁵ Maggie Lee, *Let the Bullets Fly*—Film Review. *The Hollywood Reporter* (November 1, 2011). (<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/bullets-fly-film-review-70498>)

⁶ On the idea that concepts travel, and that the resulting travelling concepts are the best methodological basis for interdisciplinary work, see Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto: the University of Toronto Press 2002).

⁷ Richard Blackmore, *Prince Arthur. An Heroic Poem. In Ten Books* (London: Awnsham and John Churchill, 1695, Preface).

literal sense of many allegories is very obscure for the reader and, that gives dissatisfaction if one cannot penetrate the matter any further. In his “From Allegories to Novels”, Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges also regards allegory as an obsolete, depleted device, “We feel that, besides being intolerable, it is stupid and frivolous.”⁸ Obviously self-made and self-reliant, allegory is a deliberate challenge to the realist, empiricist tendency of early modern culture from the end of the 16th century to the present. Many other similar objections became widespread by the late 17th century, which mark the end of allegory as a favorable rhetorical device. The reasons given for this disapproval, as Theresa M. Kelly states, include

the replacement of Platonic “realism” by the nominalist conviction that “Truth” and “Justice” are names, not ideal universals; a sharp decline in literary allusions to myth and biblical typology; the dissolution of the system of aristocratic patronage which had supplied learned readers who knew how to read arcane allegories and emblems; the Protestant and Puritan animus against complex or learned emblems and allegorical interpretations of the Bible; and arguments in favor of verisimilitude and a “plain style”.⁹

Taken together, it is clear that this hostile climate fundamentally forced allegory out of canonical literary criticism. As a result, allegory as a symbolic or rhetoric figure remained lusterless throughout much of the 20th century. The same ideas about

⁸ Quoted by Craig Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism,” *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, edited Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art in association with David R. Godine, Publisher, Inc., 1984, 235).

⁹ Theresa M. Kelly, *Reinventing Allegory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2).

allegory live on in mainstream culture.¹⁰

Yet reflecting on the story of Spenser and Ariosto lost in a “Wood of Allegories”, Kelly argues that it is very difficult not to suppose this “wild, unnatural, and extravagant” rhetorical manner as the implicit “co-conspirator of his complaint. Even if this allusion is supposed to be parodic, the resonances it sets in motion work for allegory, not against it.”¹¹ By picturing Spenser and Ariosto lost in a wood, Kelly reveals the reason why contemporary readers still need and read allegory. Kelly’s counterargument helps me to ask two related questions: why allegory survives modernist criticism and furthermore, how can a postmodernist utilize it in his/her works? To be sure, the concept of allegory is still discussed, sometimes even intensely, but the primary focus is on allegory as a narrative or poetic strategy, instead of the analysis of the ideas lying behind it.¹² To answer the second question, this chapter will focus on the allegorical impulse in postmodernity despite Blackmore’s efforts to write its epitaph and other similar objections from the early 20th century to the present.

Allegory thus has been substantially reconceived, which paved the way for its resurrection in the late 20th century. The traveling desire of allegory requires a lively, particular shape to compete for the reader’s attention. For, as Kelly puts it, “if we still read it [allegory], we do so because of this unexpected convergence between

¹⁰ See, for example David Collin’s poetic epitaph “The Death of Allegory,” *Poetry* 155 (January 1990, 276-77).

¹¹ Theresa M. Kelly, *Reinventing Allegory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1).

¹² Walter Benjamin, when talking about the baroque “mourning play”, also argues that allegory is not the conventional representation of some expression, but an expression of convention. That is to say, convention itself comes to be signified or expressed. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (Trans. John Osborn. London: Verso, 1998, 175).

particularity, strong feeling, and abstract ideas.”¹³ Hence it makes sense to say that allegory reminds us of that well-known debate between Plato and Aristotle about the relative importance of particulars and abstractions. Whereas Plato separates abstract principles from their particulars, and posits the former over the latter, Aristotle insists that the universal ideas or abstractions must reside in its singular members. In *The Fragility of Goodness*, American philosopher Martha Nussbaum leans towards Aristotle’s position. She does not offer a blueprint for resolving this kind of conflict, but dramatizes a conflict between public intention and individual factors. In a situation regarding Sophocles’ *Antigone*, Nussbaum argues that “it was one thing to ask Creon to describe his views about the family; it was another to confront him with the death of a son.”¹⁴ The conflict that Creon faces will tear down his ethical world of which he is a part, because both sides belong to what is right. True, Creon’s conflict may be forgotten or superseded by another one, but the ethical conflict between state lives and individual lives can never be resolved in itself, and it continues to exist despite any conscious efforts. Such an example confirms Aristotle’s claim that the adherence to abstraction must go through, not above, particulars. There is no exception for postmodern allegory, which also particularizes its abstractions, even when it tilts toward the opposite direction and away from representations that seem so real you could understand them immediately.

This argument apparently works in counterpoint to Paul de Man’s theory of allegory. In “Rhetoric of Romanticism”, De Man proposes a discussion between

¹³ Theresa M. Kelly, *Reinventing Allegory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 10).

¹⁴ Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge University Press, 1986, 116-17).

allegory and symbol. In terms of De Man, symbol attempts to transcend, or deny the inescapable fact of temporality in human existence; conversely, allegory does not attempt to avoid temporality, it emphasizes human finitude. However, while asserting that allegory is forged in time and subject to being-towards-death, de Man develops his argument this way:

Whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference.¹⁵

He thereby separates allegory from any particular cultural and historical events. Different from de Man's theory, Kelly considers allegory as being "capable of reifying its abstract or material referents, although it does so by wearing its factitiousness on its sleeve."¹⁶ Reflecting upon the arguments proposed by de Man and Kelly, I argue for an ethical and rational potential in postmodern allegory that de Man very nearly refuses when he views allegory as a self-enclosed system instead of a connection between "subject and object, self and non-self". Or, in the words of Craig Owens:

Postmodernism neither brackets nor suspends the referent but works instead to problematize the activity of reference. When the postmodernist work speaks of itself, it is no longer to proclaim its autonomy, its self-sufficiency,

¹⁵ Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971, 207).

¹⁶ Theresa M. Kelly, *Reinventing Allegory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 11).

its transcendence; rather, it is to narrate its own contingency, insufficiency, lack of transcendence.¹⁷

In the eyes of Owens, modernist theory postulates that “the adequation of an image to a referent can be bracketed or suspended”, and that the artwork itself can be replaced by its referent. Postmodernist art, on the other hand, is generally characterized by a deconstructive impulse, which is different from the self-critical tendency of modernism. The allegory under its postmodern condition therefore can assist in breaking open self-contained systems and thus break out of the habitus of culture, the patterns of received knowledge that would otherwise block off further inquiries. As such, I can argue that the key point of postmodern allegory is to problematize the certainty of predetermined referents.

What interests me about postmodern allegory is less its accommodation of a trans-historical and trans-cultural idea than the way its social, cultural and aesthetic differences interfere with the reiteration of traditional formulae. Taking *Let the Bullets Fly* as an example, this chapter assesses when and how allegory moves either toward abstraction or toward particulars between the past and the present. In this film, allegory seems to “represent the distance between the present and an irrecoverable past”.¹⁸ My approach to this topic is selective and textual, not encyclopedic, as my object of analysis limits its allegories to the space and time created by the director and the cast and crew. As an allegory on politics, corruption and rough justice, *Let the*

¹⁷ Craig Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism,” *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, edited Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art in association with David R. Godine, Publisher, Inc., 1984, 235).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 203.

Bullets Fly has flashes of intelligence and political wisdom, expressing the anarchy and ravenous opportunism of warlord-tangled-fighting China in the 1920s, which, “without allegorical reinterpretation, might have remained foreclosed.”¹⁹ Having no predetermined referent, allegory in this film leaves room for a possible reinvention of itself toward a theory of postmodernism.

Flying Allegory: Incrementally Different yet Strangely Familiar

Let the Bullets Fly, setting its story in early 20th century China, which was enduring a painful transformation in nation and society, has an inborn tendency of bringing on controversy.²⁰ Rich historical allusions made left many of the audience leave halfway through the film because they couldn't completely understand it. Audiences with different points of view could always exaggerate the plot to strengthen their belief, or quote something out of context to enlarge the flaws of others'. This confusion comes from the fact that appreciating the film requires a certain level of knowledge in Chinese history that exceeds official history books. However, no matter what these exaggerations are, they all offer valuable comments on the very core of this postmodern film. The film has seen a rare box-office success in the sensitive genre of Chinese political satire, but it accomplished much more by escaping strict censorship to criticize China's current politics. But Jiang's “method of esoteric expression [...]

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ The early 20th century China was a time when, as Ebrey observed, “[n]ationalism, patriotism, progress, science, democracy, and freedom were the goals; imperialism, feudalism, warlordism, autocracy, patriarchy, and blind adherence to tradition were the enemies. Intellectuals struggled with how to be strong and modern and yet Chinese, how to preserve China as a political entity in the world of competing nations.” Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *Cambridge Illustrated History of China* (Cambridge University Press, 1996, 271).

will inevitably distance himself from the public, making his films harder to understand.”²¹ Although Jiang says there is no political implication in his film, audiences are still, in light of their own experience, trying very hard to discover an underlying narrative. Insofar as audiences self-consciously preserve that implication which tends to disappear, that impulse becomes the subject of this allegorical film. The audiences’ interpretations are allegorical, but what they offer is only fragmentary, thus affirming their own contingency.²² The con man Tang in the film may symbolize an official committing corruption, while the bandit Zhang may be the brave crusader who dares to challenge the status quo. The scene of a horse pulling a train is widely interpreted as a metaphor of satirizing the nationalist government (KMT) that overthrew the Qing Dynasty as an equally corrupt authority. As the word “horse” (pronounced “ma” in Chinese) is also used as Chinese shorthand for Marxism, the horse-pulled train may also refer to a modern China driven by an outdated ideology.²³ Yet, audiences sensitive to ideologies may feel that this scene actually refers to ‘Marxism-Leninism’, since the abbreviation of Marx and Lenin in Chinese is pronounced ‘ma lie’ which corresponds to the Chinese pronunciation of ‘horse and train’. Although the interpretations mentioned above sound absurd, they actually reveal some real and delicate feelings of the Chinese people.

²¹ See Gao Wenbin, “The hide and Seek of Jiang Wen,” *The Huffington Post* (May 28, 2015). (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/china-hands/chinese-consumers-go-mobi_b_7250198.html)

²² Freelance writer Oliver Pfeiffer also points out that “with all the dynamic double-crossing and identity swapping it requires an acute eye and an ability to decode convoluted narrative details to completely fathom all the elaborate games at play here”. Oliver Pfeiffer, “Brisbane 2011 Review: *Let the Bullets Fly*,” *What Culture* (November 13, 2011). (<http://whatculture.com/film/brisbane-2011-review-let-the-bullets-fly.php>)

²³ See film review such as “Chinese Director Coy on *Let the Bullets Fly* message,” *Associated Press* (November 1, 2011).

For any audience wishing to propose an allegorical interpretation of a newly released Chinese film, another audience would be eager to show that talk of ‘Chinese allegory’ rests on a misunderstanding and that presuppositions of Chinese ‘allegorists’ do not just differ from those of Western counterparts but are incompatible with them. The task of defining allegory in a flexible enough way that talk of its national variants makes sense has become a touchstone for the issue of the cultural specificity of literary or rhetorical genres. “The [Western] allegorical method...is a particular, rather than universal, occurrence of the mode”²⁴; “like any other literary concept, metaphor is culture-specific and is always situated in a conceptual framework characteristic of a culture.”²⁵ Therefore, the question of Chinese allegory is not one which literary history or comparative study in the usual sense can solve. Finding the proper theoretical level at which to situate the matter is the business of the following passage.

If Western allegory springs from a “fundamental distinction” between two realms of being (abstract and particular), and if, as Andrew Plaks puts it, “the Chinese world-view simply does not utilize the two-level cosmology that we have found at the heart of Western allegory,”²⁶ the reading critics have called ‘allegorical’ should be seen as something else. Pauline R. Yu proposes that this ‘something else’ should be put under the heading of ‘contextualization’. That is to say, it is “not a metaphysical

²⁴ Andrew Plaks, *Archetype and Allegory in “Dream of the Red Chamber”* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976, 108).

²⁵ Michelle Yeh. “Metaphor and *Bi*: Western and Chinese Poetics,” *Comparative Literature* 39 (1987: 252).

²⁶ Andrew Plaks, *Archetype and Allegory in “Dream of the Red Chamber”* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976, 109).

truth [...] but the truth of this world, a historical context.”²⁷ Without another world to refer to, no Chinese allegorist can possibly produce Western allegories:

Each isolated element of the Chinese allegory, by virtue of the existential process of ebb and flow in which it is caught up, “stands for” or “partakes of” the sum total of all existence that remains invisible only in its extent, and not in its essence.²⁸

It is only under a postmodern condition, when the postmodernist work no longer proclaims its ‘autonomy’ and ‘self-sufficiency’, but narrates its own ‘contingency’ and ‘lack of transcendence’, that Western ideas about allegory can be applied to a Chinese context. The time has come for Chinese allegorists to hold a mirror up to their Western counterpart and engage in a critical dialogue with it. One way of plotting this new direction is to revisit allegory’s past and reflect on its historical developments from the position of the enlightened present. Chinese allegorists should approach the contemporary situation by examining a particular historical context with the aim of pushing it further.

Comparing and contrasting contemporary society and the past will definitely help us shape our present philosophical perspectives. The reason we still read allegory today is that each of us can experience indirectly the situations of the past and be enlightened by such experiences. The quest of an allegory resembles a journey for us in our conquest of knowledge, which will make us adapt to our immediate current

²⁷ Pauline R. Yu, *The Reading of Imagery in the Chinese Poetic Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987, 80-81).

²⁸ Andrew Plaks, *Archetype and Allegory in “Dream of the Red Chamber”* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976, 109-10).

surroundings. In *Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, Friedrich Nietzsche also says:

To be sure, we need history. But we need it in a manner different from the way in which the spoilt idler in the garden of knowledge uses it, no matter how elegantly he may look down on our coarse and graceless needs and distresses. That is, we need it for life and for action, not for a comfortable turning away from life and from action or for merely glossing over the egotistical life and the cowardly bad act. We wish to serve history only insofar as it serves living. But there is a degree of doing history and valuing it through which life atrophies and degenerates. To bring this phenomenon to light as a remarkable symptom of our time is every bit as necessary as it may be painful.²⁹

The simile Nietzsche uses to argue that “the past must be forgotten” implies that it may be worse not to use history. Indeed, it is “painful” but “necessary” for those who examine present culture from a vantage point in the past to eventually find nothing better. For Nietzsche, it would be better to “tie” our understanding to “the peg of the moment”, like a herd of animals mindlessly but contentedly “grazing beside you.”³⁰ If ever a simile could cut against the grain of an assertion, this one surely does. Reading the same figure, Francis Barker charges that it represents the disaster of postmodern theory and consumption.³¹ I argue rather that allegory in its postmodern variant is a

²⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* (Foreword, 17, 22, 20, 8-10, 28).

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Francis Barker, *The Culture of Violence: Tragedy and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, 97). Barker suggests that Nietzsche here obliquely critical of Hegelian history because it imposes a schema that cannot imagine a future except in terms of the past (*Metahistory* 336-37).

genre the survival of which in modernity conveys the cultural and literary interest of its earlier forms and historical moments. With each “return call” on its past, postmodern allegory makes one of many “uncertain and incremental return(s) to a starting point” that Marian Hobson uses to depict the poststructuralist understanding of history.³² As each return call builds incrementally on the last, it produces not one but several different sets of claims about the meaning of the game. So far, I can see the fate of allegory’s postmodern reinvention: by setting up overly simple correspondences, allegory is on its way to reveal much greater complexities than can be sustained and finally collapses on itself. However, when all is said and done, I will be the one to stand with the postmodern allegorist in pursuing this collapse and revealing its mechanism.

Having made clear what we can expect from allegory at this theoretical level, I can now introduce the story of *Let the Bullets Fly*, the main subject of this chapter. The film opens in a train, where Ma Bangde (Ge You) is singing and dining with his wife (Carina Lau) and his private advisor Tang (Feng Xiaogang). They are robbed by the bandit Zhang Mazi (Jiang Wen) and his gang, and Tang is killed. The frightened Ma, who is actually on his way to his new job as Goose Town mayor, steals Tang’s identity to avoid being killed, thereby giving up his post and wife to Zhang, who becomes the mayor. But their arrival is not welcomed by the native gentry Huang Silang (Chow Yun-fat), who truly runs the town, and feels the threat of the changes the new mayor will bring. Thus, with conflicting interests and hidden strife, the good

³² Marian Hobson, “History Traces,” *Post-Structuralism and the Question of History*, ed. Derek Attridge, Geoff Bennington, and Robert Young. (Cambridge University Press, 1987. 106-7).

(Zhang), the bad (Huang) and the ugly (Ma/ Tang) start a battle of intelligence and violence that soon tumbles into hilarity and absurdity.³³

Starting with a scene involving a horse-drawn train before settling down in Goose Town, *Let the Bullets Fly* manages to keep the audience guessing about its characters' true motives even while they are trying to outsmart and cheat each other. This also provides the actors Jiang, Ge and Chow the opportunity to immerse themselves into their roles. The first hour comes up with one scene after another that keeps the tone on a semi-fantastical level: a lively welcome at the town gates by female drummers, a game of football in the main street, and the gangsters communicating with each other by bird-whistles. Sticking to his surrealistic aesthetics, Jiang is determined to take those farces to the extreme, and they work efficiently for the most part. The settings seem illogical and the staged dialogue seems stylish and unnatural. But in Jiang's overexerted efforts, it all comes together as the film develops a logic of its own. At the end, it is the harsh sense of satire that makes the film an allegorical one. "Allegory occurs whenever one text is doubled by another." It is "an attitude as well as a technique, a perception as well as a procedure."³⁴ This can be seen as a primary aspect because, as Northrop Frye argues, "genuine allegory is a structural element [...] it has to be there, and cannot be added by critical interpretation alone."³⁵ *Let the Bullets Fly* becomes allegorical when it is read as a prefiguration of another meaning:

³³ The allusion is, of course, to Serge Leone's 1966 spaghetti western *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*.

³⁴ Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, edited Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art in association with David R. Godine, Publisher, Inc., 1984, 204).

³⁵ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957, 54).

the present political situation in the 21st century is embedded in a story happening in the early 20th century. In the film's allegorical structure, one text is read through another, however fragmentary, intermittent, or chaotic their relationship may be.

In the film, Jiang Wen teases almost everything and everyone, making a statement that can be interpreted in many different ways. He does not restore an original meaning of the past that may have been lost, but adds another meaning to it. In one scene, when Ma/Tang tells Zhang Mazi that a mayor has to cringe before the rich in order to make money, the bandit pulls out his gun and replies, "I can do it by simply standing straight." It looks like Jiang did it as well. Because the bandit says he wants to "earn money while standing upright" instead of kowtowing to the gentry, perhaps Jiang the director says he wants to make films without censoring himself. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, in order to preserve true communist ideology, the majority of Chinese films have insisted on instructing their audiences with overtly nationalistic sentiment. It has gotten to the point where an audience cannot spend two hours without being lectured that they should hate the Japanese and imperialists, or how indebted to the communists they should be for all that they are and all that they have. Therefore, it is rather refreshing to watch Jiang's film delivering smart dialogue without any obvious political propaganda. And yet, Chinese authorities may not be happy with this film³⁶, because they can take a hint from the scene where Tang says, "Crap, we're too late. The last mayor has pre-

³⁶ There are some themes in the film that should be uncomfortable to the authorities, such as corruption, suppression, bureaucracy, and revolution etc. Yet State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) passed the film, indicating just their tolerance or how hidden or embedded Jang Wen's plots are.

requisitioned taxes for 90 years.” One possible interpretation of this line may allude to the fact that overbearing officials and bureaucrats tax people too much. But another interpretation may suggest that over the past 90 years Chinese people have been living a miserable life since the 1920s, in which the story of the film takes place. From the audiences’ perspective, this line is in itself already a reproduction and therefore works to empty any authoritative claim to the interpretation of it. To find its true meaning requires a complex mental activity, the desire of which is to uncover its secret. But the result only makes the film more allegorical, it sets forever our distance from a past that produced this line. This tentative description, in terms of Owens’s words, “accounts for both the allegory’s origin in commentary and interpretation...as well as its continued affinity with them.”³⁷ That is to say, this line is now unable to give out any meaning of its own; it needs help from a knowledgeable critic or audience who will place allegory within it and stands behind it. This line solicits and frustrates the audience’s desire to directly capture its signification, therefore defers a promise of a specific meaning. As a consequence, it appears to be an incomplete fragment which must be decoded.

Jiang’s style of filmmaking, as Derek Elley argues,

has always been larger-than-life, but here, unlike in the episodic *The Sun Also Rises* or even in other recent Oriental Westerns like [...] *Wind Blast*, the setpieces and hearty performances are anchored to a script that is foremost

³⁷ Craig Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism,” *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, edited Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art in association with David R. Godine, Publisher, Inc., 1984, 317).

rooted in characters, not action.³⁸

As a matter of fact, despite its title, *Let the Bullets Fly* is heavier on allegorical wordplay than gunplay. Playing the confident bandit Zhang, Jiang himself is a moderate actor and content to share the screen with Ge (terrific as a smart-talking swindler) and Chow (at his best when playing outsized bad guys). Their performances remind me of Owens's description of the relationship between actor and character:

The actor is revealed as the substitute for character; his facial contortions, the emblem of grief, not its direct expression. Hence every image that participates in what photography criticism calls the directorial, as opposed to the documentary mode, is open to the intervention of obtuse meaning.³⁹

These actors and their performances have merged into a seamless whole in such a way that it seems impossible to separate the dancer from the dance. Yet, it is an urgent necessity of making such a distinction, because that is what is actually at stake.

Let the Bullets Fly is believed to be Jiang's most commercial work. But the reason why the film works so well is perhaps because of the three central performances which can be seen as a narrative of losing one's way in a labyrinth of allegories. Ge You plays ugly and repulsive Tang, the con man who has never spoken an honest word in his life and is ready even to give up his wife for his own life. When the audience first meets him, he is singing in a train carriage pulled along by half a dozen

³⁸ Derek Elley, "Let the Bullets Fly," *Film Business Asia* (January 3, 2011).

³⁹ Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, edited and with an Introduction by Brian Wallis. (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art in association with David R. Godine, Publisher, Inc., 1984, 232).

horses. This introduction reveals both his character and how temporarily assembled the affluence he enjoys really is. A few seconds later, Tang has been deprived of his dignity and his wife, has lost his next mayorship and his luxurious train carriage is utterly crushed, all by the calm and calculating bandit Zhang. Entirely different from the ugly Tang, Zhang is a man with an honorable past. The reason he became a bandit was to live an honest life in a putrefied political environment that failed him as an idealistic youth. His governance of Goose Town happens to be casual not only for him, but also for the others. But Zhang is barely given a moment to enjoy his mayor job as the town's gentry, Huang, instantly sees him as a threat and determines to get rid of him. The bad Huang, by secretly colluding with a greedy warlord, enjoys an exorbitant lifestyle and commands a gang of vicious outlaws and sociopaths to maintain his control of the town.

A clever allegory can be detected from the above passage if there were one. Zhang Mazi is like Mao Zedong with his Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and Huang is like Chiang Kai-shek with his Nationalist Party (KMT). Yet, Zhang destroys a train carriage and kills many people, most of them innocent with the exclusion of several soldiers. For an audience to get the allegorical significance of this film should acquire some knowledge of China's history in the last century. There is no secret as to why this film was problematic in the eyes of the authorities. It tells a different narrative from the one that the CCP has tried very hard to get accepted to justify their governing power. Chiang Kai-shek is described as lustful and evil (even the name Huang Silang sounds close to Lustful Dead Wolf in Chinese), outwitted and

outgunned by Mao Zedong. The CCP's army consisted of simple, determined peasants of unquestionable loyalty, while the Nationalist troops were imbeciles (a scholar-lackey of Huang's), psychopaths (a warrior-lackey of Huang's) and perverts (Aloys Chen as a torturer). The Chinese people (Goose Town's population) are satirized as brainless, coward fools, emphasized by Jiang's intentional use of Shanxi, Henan or Eastern-northern accents for all the town's residents.

An early sequence in which Chow's character Huang hosts an evening dinner at his home for the other two is one of the film's highlights, with double meanings underneath every smiling exchange. The allegorical impulse in this film that characterizes postmodernism is a direct consequence of its occupation with/emphasis on these men's performances. These actors transform themselves into a moving picture by implicating the medium of film as the false mirror, which promotes alienating identifications. When we bear in mind that these characters in turn evoke different allegories with readable inscriptions and so forth, we can measure the interweaving of presentations and the connections between the discernible features in their performances. The outcome of our adventures may be an ironic triumph, because those allegories lack coherence and homogeneity, which is the ground of modern intelligibility. Those allegories thus relapse into what modernists consciously deny, and this is what allows me to identify them as postmodern allegories.

As this description suggests, I situate postmodern allegorical differences from their modern predecessors within the domain of rhetoric in part because rhetoricians were among the first in the West to theorize allegory, but more importantly because

allegory's rhetorical nature persisted throughout its long history. Allegory is alien; its ancient rhetorical status as 'other speech' survives all other adjustments. In postmodernity, allegory looks even more alien and monstrous because the lack of a stable referent for its 'other speech' invites exaggeration of its extremes. At one extreme, as Kelly says, lie

the material agents --- whether texts or images or real referents or all of these --- on which allegory depends to convey what lies at its other extreme --- the provisional, transcendent idea to which those agents putatively refer.⁴⁰

As postmodern allegory, its relation to rhetoric shifts ground in two ways: its figures and visual imagery become identified as effective, material agents of allegorical meaning; and as its abstractions seem to become more material, they also become strategically linked to pathos, the rhetorical figure that accords human feelings to strong figures. Whereas the first way reworks an ancient rhetorical alliance between allegory and images, the second tempers its more emphatic and at times mechanical abstraction by returning to Longinus, who had argued that pathos justifies the use of hyperbolic figures, including allegory. Whether it is a personified figure, an emblematic scene or tableau, or a guiding figural impulse within a narrative, postmodern allegory re-imagines its ancient philosophical proximity to *phantasia*, illusion and fancy. Reflecting on Quintilian's advice that orators should become skilled in *phantasia* (image-making), Kelly further suggests that this advice also

⁴⁰Theresa M. Kelly, *Reinventing Allegory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 5).

“specifies the logic of allegory’s reliance on images, whether imagined or visual”.⁴¹

This rhetorical shift poses no problem for director Jiang Wen. All actors in the film are somewhat surrounded by such a host of supports: Carina Lau’s prostituted widow, Jiang Wu’s bearded ruffian, and Aloys Chen’s renegade companion. Even director Feng Xiaogang and actor Hu Jun pop up in cameos as a private advisor and a pock-faced imposter, respectively. Costumes in this film also suggest a play on encroaching western habits and traditional Chinese designs. The variety of “clothing (old-style for Ge, western for Chow, a mixture for Jiang) reflects the chaotic era in which the film is set: the so-called Warlord Period following the fall of the Qing dynasty”⁴² and preceding the founding of the Nationalist government. In this way, history is treated as wholly domesticated by visual images; the historical can be approached through its imagined visual representation. It is not surprising, then, that the film’s audience should encounter history on the threshold of postmodernism, which transforms our viewing experience from a visual one to a textual one, because the latter is already implicated in a system of visual values that assigns it a specific, determined position. In comparison with other action films, the visual conceptions in *Let the Bullets Fly* are more “exaggerated and cartoonish”.⁴³

For example, the film opens with a train robbery to rival “any Hollywood western in its stylized, balletic movements”.⁴⁴ But this analogy is subverted by a touch of

⁴¹ Ibid., 6.

⁴² For the analysis of costumes, see also Derek Elley, “Let the Bullets Fly,” *Film Business Asia* (January 3, 2011).

⁴³ See Maggie Lee, “Let the Bullets Fly,” *The Hollywood Reporter* (January 11, 2011).

⁴⁴ Ibid.

martial arts fantasy: the train is pulled by horses and the passengers are feasting on a chimney-sized hotpot that shoots off like a satellite when the train is jolted by a flying ax. In her review, Maggie Lee thinks that Japanese director Akira Kurosawa has the strongest influence on the motif of an outlaw who arrives in town to mete out rough justice to a despotic power. The film is also a variation of *The Seven Samurai* (1954), *Yojimbo* (1961) and *Tsubaki Sanjuro* (1962). The role of Aloy Chen is reminiscent of *Kagemusha* (1980). However, as Lee observes, “Jiang subverts these personas by making the protagonists anti-heroes with double-identities, dual personalities and multiple moral standards.”⁴⁵ In this sense, Zhang is a modern Robin Hood who robs the rich, but he is also Huang’s equal in conniving, in the way he manipulates the local residents to rise against Huang in a cynical revolution.

As a Western-style comedy, *Let the Bullets Fly* is well known for using the past to satirize the rampant corruption and social injustice of present China. But it might be even more effective in giving the audience a chance to express their emotions in this somewhat unharmonious period. However, we should take note that these emotions are transient, instilled in particular moments for a limited duration, their impermanence providing the measure of their circumstantialities. This fact is important, for it implies the allegorical potential of this film because, as Benjamin would have it, “[a]n appreciation of the transience of things, and the concern to rescue them for eternity, is one of the strongest impulses in allegory.”⁴⁶ In all of these

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, translated by John Osborne (London: Verso, 2003, 223).

instances analyzed above, appropriation, impermanence, accumulation, and hybridization may single out this film from its modern predecessors. It also suggests that by that impulse *Let the Bullets Fly* may be identified as a postmodern allegorical film, and that criticism should be capable of accounting for this feature.

Coincidentally, the debut of *Let the Bullets Fly* matched with the revelation by WikiLeaks of criticisms of Chinese films by Vice President Xi Jinping, the then-expected next top leader. In a secret US diplomatic memo, Xi said that he “particularly likes Hollywood movies about World War II” because they “have a clear outlook on values and clearly demarcate between good and evil.”⁴⁷ It was also reported in another memo that Xi criticized some Chinese film directors for neglecting “the values they should promote”. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), and *The Promise* (2005) were berated for “talking about bad things in imperial palaces. To some extent it can be said that such movies are not worth very much.”⁴⁸ Maybe like Xi, many Chinese cinema-goers are tired of films featuring court coups and intrigues of the imperial palaces, and find *Let the Bullets Fly* fresh and rich in allegorically satirizing contemporary political situations. As a result, the film flies like a bullet, striking a sympathetic chord among its audiences.

Toward Postmodernism: Problematizing the Activity of Reference

In the eyes of Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, “allegory is extravagant, an expenditure of surplus value; it is always in excess”. Hence, he condemns allegory as

⁴⁷ Robert Hartman, “Hit Chinese Film a Sharp-edged Satire,” *Asia Times Online* (Jan 20, 2011).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

“stupid and frivolous”.⁴⁹ However, this stupidity serves as a key to allegory’s possible truth. In his allegorical schema, Roland Barthes elaborates a three-fold level of meaning: literal, symbolic and obtuse meaning. The obtuse meaning is difficult to define. Barthes describes it as elusive and vague, “a signifier without a signified, hence the difficulty in naming it”. His reading therefore “remains suspended between the image and its description, between definition and approximation.”⁵⁰ In light of this, the obtuse meaning is exposed to have “no objective or independent existence; it depends on the literal and rhetorical, which it nevertheless undoes.”⁵¹ But, as Owen observes, the presence of an obtuse meaning is not the “free play” of the signifier; otherwise, Barthes is “reiterating aesthetic pleasure in the Kantian sense, delight in the form of a representation apart from the representation of any object whatsoever.”⁵² What interests me in “obtuse meaning” is its “undoing” power: to denounce the activity that is being denounced, which typically characterizes postmodernist art and can be differentiated from the self-critical tendency of modernism.

Modern allegory in the Western context “creates a hierarchical literary universe of two levels, each of which maintains its own coherence, but only one of which has ultimate primacy.”⁵³ Allegory is here described as a truer reality transcendent to the

⁴⁹ Jorge Luis Borges, “From Allegories to Novels,” *Other Inquisitions, 1937-1952*, trans. Ruth L. C. Simms (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964, 155-156).

⁵⁰ Roland Barthes, “The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills,” *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977, 61).

⁵¹ Craig Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism,” *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art in association with David R. Godine, Publisher, Inc., 1984, 232).

⁵² *Ibid.*, 233.

⁵³ Pauline R. Yu, *The Reading of Imagery in the Chinese Poetic Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University

concrete, historical realm in which we live. But “when the postmodernist allegory speaks of itself, it is no longer to proclaim its ‘autonomy’... [and] its ‘transcendence’.”⁵⁴ Thus the solidarity between ontology and literary theory has collapsed and translatability of Western allegory to a Chinese context becomes possible. This operative process can also be found in *Let the Bullets Fly*, where director Jiang Wen stimulates such discussions. Wrapped in the clothing of an Oriental Western, this film is said to be a partial tribute to the Italo-westerns of Sergio Leone (1929-1989), who is known for juxtaposing extreme close-up shots with extreme long shots. It is a mixture of tragicomic action, with dialogues rich in literary tropes and double-talk. Those looking for subtexts can interpret the film in a number of ways, which indicates its allegorical impulse as it suggests the remoteness of the past and a desire to redeem it for the present.

The obtuse meaning does appear extraneous to the film’s aesthetic, but I am interested in how the director inserts it into the slot left vacant by the allegorical in a modernist scheme. If Jiang Wen is trying to imply something, it is hidden within the ever-twisting whirlwind of character motivations, as one maneuver is constantly supplemented by another. These maneuvers, however, cannot be considered evasions, but theoretical necessities that expose the absence of any link between an utterance and its referent. If we take away any maneuver from the film, the communication and signification will still remain, still circulate and come through. The film thus becomes

Press, 1987, 19).

⁵⁴ Craig Owens, *Beyond Recognition, Representation, Power, and Culture*, ed. Scott Stewart Bryson (California: University of California Press, 1992, 85).

a stage:

Whose false limits multiply the signifier's permutational play, the vast trace which, by difference, compels [...] a vertical reading, that false order which permits the turning of the pure series, the aleatory combination and the attainment of a structuration which slips away from inside.⁵⁵

Therefore, in watching *Let the Bullets Fly*, the audience must fill in, add to and build upon suggestive elements in the film's extraneous historical, personal and social references, rather than, as in a modernist work, immersing themselves in the unique space and time of the artist's original production.

Engendered by this scheme, *Let the Bullets Fly* opens a stage where new mayor Ma and his private advisor Tang are on their way to take office in Goose Town. But they are robbed by the bandit Zhang and his gang. As I have mentioned above, Tang dies in the raid and the frightened Ma takes Tang's identity to avoid being killed. Zhang asks for money, but Tang/Ma tells Zhang that he has spent all his money to buy the mayor's post which should be worth a fortune. Chinese audiences are very familiar with this scene. It is no longer a 'state secret' that a number of official posts have been bought by money. For example, the former mayor of Shenzhen has been charged with abusing his official post in exchange for a total of 33.18 million Yuan in bribes (Xinhua News Agency, May 9, 2011). Another official, the former party chief of Suihua, is accused to have pocketed over 6 million Yuan by selling hundreds of municipal posts.

⁵⁵ Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills," *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977, 64).

In another scene, Zhang's son is accused of paying only one bowl of rice noodles while he ate two. The young man says it is unfair to pay what he did not eat and cuts into his belly to prove his innocence. Watching this bloody episode, the audience cannot help but think of those who sought fairness but experienced only tragedy in recent years. In 2009, a worker from Henan province had surgeons cut open his chest to prove his work-related lung disease. In another case, the chief of a village in Zhejiang province was killed by a heavy truck on Christmas Day in 2010, after a long-time fight against illegal land acquisition. Despite the local government saying it was a traffic accident, a photo of the chief, with his bloody body seen under truck wheels, was quickly posted online and stirred public anger. As we can see, these interpretations extend far beyond the limits of this film and are externally added to one another. They re-ignite the vehemence with which modern aesthetics rails against the allegorical supplement, for they challenge the security of the foundations upon which aesthetics is erected. The allegorical supplement, in its modern version, "is not only an addition, but also a replacement. It takes the place of an earlier meaning, which is thereby either effaced or obscured."⁵⁶ For the audience of *Let the Bullets Fly*, the world represented is a vast network of signs and as such, continually elicits interpretation. Thus the film creates the problem of uncertainty of those signified.

As an action-packed, fast-cut, visually compelling and overtly witty film filled

⁵⁶ Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, edited Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art in association with David R. Godine, Publisher, Inc., 1984, 220).

with allegories, *Let the Bullets Fly* perhaps can be fully appreciated only by sophisticated audiences in China. Indeed, many audiences have enjoyed the secret pleasure of finding its hidden political messages behind every fable. Actually, it is not a film; it is a performance piece and also a platform on which the director half-jokingly and half-angrily explained what he was really thinking about China in the past and present, about politics and economy. There are countless gunshots, horse-riding, muscle-wrestling, symbolic landscapes, bloody seppuku, obscenity and F-words which, if put in the context of a Western blockbuster, would look very strange, illogical and out of place. Yet, when they are put in the profit-driven contemporary Chinese context and set against a historical background when a young republican revolution and democratic ideals deteriorated into a power scramble among greedy warlords, it makes sense that Jiang was talking about something else. Unlike other films which might make the bandit a modern Robin Hood, or make the people grateful victims, Jiang puts his characters in an absurd light, full of visual and verbal ambiguities that seem to challenge the audience to find out the true signified: the overbearing rich, the fake bourgeois, or the cowardly intellectuals.

With such observations, Zhang's attitude is joking and nihilistic. When depicting the snobbish crowd that only wants to benefit from the revolution, but does not wish to take any risks, he shows neither disgust nor anger. Instead, he arranges a very clever ending for himself, liberating the people, smiling in triumph, yet seeing his men leave to run after their personal happiness and leaving nothing for himself. This might be taken to mean that the bandit Zhang is the true proletariat. Interestingly,

as one of the most popular films of the year, the film seems to be paradoxical in every way, earning and despising money, entertaining people while criticizing their political inertia. Jiang, who once played the role of a prosecuted intellectual in *Hibiscus Town* (1986), has produced several political parables with *In the Heat of the Sun* (1994), *Devils on the Doorstep* (2000) and *The Sun Also Rises* (2007). He may continue to succeed as a maverick director who can reveal an ugly part of China. And if we gradually come to the understanding that China itself is a big enough world to apprehend and live in, we will understand why he does this in such an allegorical way.

At the Hong Kong premiere, Jiang responded coyly when pressed about the hidden political messages in *Let the Bullets Fly*, “whatever interpretation is fine. You are welcome to think whatever you want to.”⁵⁷ He then jokingly criticized the reporter for lacking imagination. It is, however, precisely this opacity of reference that is what enables us to identify his film as a postmodern allegory. Whether or not we will ever acquire the ability to unlock its secret seems unimportant, and this gives Jiang’s work an undeniable pathos. Chow Keung, the producer of *Let the Bullets Fly*, also said that “Jiang Wen definitely put many of his personal beliefs in the movie. But he also managed a very successful balancing act between art and commerce.”⁵⁸ This statement shows that although China has a very severe censorship, some filmmakers still believe they can work within this restrictive system. Chow Keung is not a

⁵⁷ See Min Lee, “Chinese Director Coy on *Let the Bullets Fly*’s Message,” *Associated Press* (January 11, 2011).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

stranger to the Chinese censorship system. He has been a producer for Jia Zhangke, who spent years in the underground before his first film *The World* (2004) was allowed to be released in China.⁵⁹ Jiang is also familiar with this restrictive system because his film *Devils on the Doorstep* was banned in China for being unpatriotic. As many Chinese film censors are themselves film directors, critics and professors⁶⁰, it would not be very difficult for them to discover Jiang's underlying messages. But just as Chow said, they might turn a blind eye thinking these are too obscure for common theatergoers.

A closer study of the horse-drawn-train scene discussed already earlier will make this point clear. It is widely interpreted as a metaphor of satirizing the nationalist government that overthrew the Qing Dynasty as an equally corrupt authority. This scene, as I mentioned above, may also refer to 'Marxism-Leninism', since the abbreviation of Marx and Lenin in Chinese corresponds to the Chinese pronunciation of 'horse and train'. On the other hand, this scene can be interpreted literally, since the first train in China was actually pulled by horses in the late Qing Dynasty. It allegorizes the decay of imperial China at a time when "[t]he Chinese did not have a choice; they had to negate their cultural traditions to join global culture."⁶¹ After the fall of the Qing dynasty, China began the process of Westernization and the dynasty began to crumble. Western philosophies began to override the traditional Chinese

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ There are overall 36 members of the Board of Film Censor under The State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television. Besides a few public officials, most of them are experts from some ministries and universities, such as Ministry of Education and Beijing Film Academy, etc.

⁶¹ Wang Rujie, "Lu Xun's 'The True Story of Ah Q and Cross-Writing'," *East Asia: An International Quarterly* 16. 3/4 (1998, 9).

culture.

For each of Jiang's scenes, there is a natural interpretation, which does not require audiences to turn to history books to understand them. The implication of the horse-drawn train can also be seen as typical for the social system of present-day China. While riding on a market economy train, the society is walking the tracks of socialist ideology. Although Chinese economy surpasses Japan as the second biggest in the world, the true economic situation is not so bright. Once an unexpected bullet goes through the link between the horse and cart, before long the train will fall apart. We may encounter an echo of this interpretation in Robert Smithson's allegorical criticism that "[w]ords and rocks contain a language that follows a syntax of splits and ruptures. Look at any word long enough and you will see it open into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void."⁶² The bullet in the film is just like Jiang's tag line (let the bullets fly). Once the bullet reaches its target, its signification splits and falls apart. Through this filmic maneuver, Jiang is able to uncover the veil which had obscured the achievement of this allegorical film, and to appropriate its theoretical significance to imply something. It is here that Jiang's film doubles back on itself to provide its own commentary, which challenges both the film and its possible interpretation, because he does not know whether his intention should or should not be understood.

Jiang Wen does this cleverly, and the first impression of audiences of *Let the Bullets Fly* is that it has a discordant narrative with a complex maze that becomes all

⁶² Robert Smithson, "A Sedimentation of Mind: Earth Projects," *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979, 87).

but impossible to follow. Nonetheless, the whole film can be considered to be simply concerned with who gets the money, who gets the woman, and who gets the mayor job. It is not a complicated film, but the audience can see what they want to see. So many rebellious political messages have been found within the film, but they are very difficult to communicate. Does it signify corruption of the high officials? This is a state of being for all of contemporary Chinese culture, but also for the Qing Dynasty and the Republican period. Is it a modern Robin Hood figure? Surely, part of the story is borrowed directly from the classic fourteenth-century Chinese novel *The Water Margins* (also known as *Outlaws of the Marsh*). Those who would have us believe that the film contains complex narrative and its hidden political meanings are often in vain, because their justification often requires a deep understanding of Chinese culture to fully appreciate them, are also wrong. But all attempts to decrypt Jiang's film results in their own failure, for the fragmentary, broken combination of interpretations is also what blocks them and erects an impenetrable barrier to its course. The point is, *Let the Bullets Fly* thus confronts the modern attitude towards finding a predetermined referent of an allegory by problematizing the activity of its reference.

Those who are wary of modern theories will recognize the extent to which this argument posits such a discovery: postmodern allegory encourages forms and patterns that do not always resemble its traditional ways. Throughout its long history, allegory has been charged guilty of being found everywhere. Hence, in terms of

Longxi Zhang, it should be clarified about what is and what is not allegory.⁶³ Other objections go like this: those explanatory models meant to justify collections of evidence are “too much inclined toward watersheds and convulsive turning points” or impatient with enlivening particulars because they disturb a stable plot.⁶⁴ However, just because of its generic hybrids and mixed modes, allegory gains new strength by being impure, anomalous and monstrous.⁶⁵ In addition, poststructuralism proposes that literary history is practically impossible because it can never be complete, accurate or fully objective.⁶⁶ So what history describes is only bits and pieces that catch the eye of scholars who feather their nests with what lies at their hands. Yet precisely because any postmodern allegory is only partially reasonable, circumstanced by its own time and place, it offers a critical advantage:

It tells of a desire that must be perpetually frustrated, an ambition that must be perpetually deferred; as such, its deconstructive thrust is aimed not only against the contemporary myths that furnish its subject matter, but also against the symbolic, totalizing impulse which characterizes modernist art.⁶⁷

Like other postmodernist work, my argument gives access to details of a particular

⁶³ Zhang Longxi, “Historicizing the Postmodern Allegory,” *Texas Studies in Language and Literature* 36 (1994, 216-18).

⁶⁴ Garrett Stewart, *Reading Voices* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990, 12).

⁶⁵ Ralph Cohen argues that genre allows for a “receptive and productive continuity” despite historical and particular differences (Ralph Cohen, *The Future of Genre Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1989), and “Do Postmodern Genres Exist?” *Genre* (244-45).

⁶⁶ David Perkins reviews these objections in *Is Literary History Possible?* and “Some Prospects for Literary History.” Whereas traditional literary histories offer a comprehensive image of a literary history, recent literary histories such as *Columbia Literary History of the United States* and *A New History of French Literature* query their own overall designs read them for such a design.

⁶⁷ Craig Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism,” *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, edited and with an Introduction by Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art in association with David R. Godine, Publisher, Inc., 1984, 235).

explanation that might otherwise escape notice. From where we stand now, we can see how the work of redefining the concept of allegory is not alien, but intrinsic, to postmodernity.

On the level of film language, *Let the Bullets Fly* may not be far off this argument. The dialogue in this film is sharp, quick and witty, delivered in a somewhat poetic mode closer to classical Chinese than the dry and analytical Mandarin in which the audience is so often addressed in mainstream cinema. The lines of the characters are ironic and it should be remembered that irony itself is regularly regarded as a variant of the allegorical. Those lines can be used to imply their opposite literal meaning which is in itself an essential allegorical conception. Just as Craig Owens claimed the following:

In modernism, the allegory remains in potential and is realized only in the activity of reading, which suggests that the postmodern allegorical impulse that characterizes postmodernism is a direct consequence of its preoccupation with reading.⁶⁸

I have quoted Owens' statement in full not only because it illuminates the structure of Jiang's film and allows us to identify it as allegorical, but also because it demonstrates that a film text such as Jiang's contains within itself the seed of its own allegorization. Allegory can therefore no longer be condemned as something merely appended to *Let the Bullets Fly*, for it is revealed as a structural possibility inherent in this film. The postmodern allegory in this film blurs aesthetic boundaries: lines in this

⁶⁸ Ibid.

film are often processed as purely visual phenomena, while visual images are provided as a script to be decoded. This confusion in the film is but one example of postmodern allegory's confusion of aesthetic mediums and stylistic categories. It is not surprising, then, that we should transform our experience of watching this film from a visual to a textual encounter. Thus little recognition is as prescient of postmodern allegorical film, where putative distinctions between narrators, viewers or theorists, and allegorists tend to dissolve and merge into the filmic representation itself.

So what can we get from this analysis of *Let the Bullets Fly*? In his review of this film, Robin Peckham poses similar detailed questions:

That Jiang Wen has moved away from political and historical intervention and is now more concerned with fabricating an allegory of the film industry proper within the hollow shell of the former style? That no one, no matter how greedy, is ever actually in it for the money alone, and that there is always a measure of power and virtue hidden within both the most profoundly corrupt officials and the most alienated activist outside? That no mob boss is ever stronger than the sum of his minions and that the people are a righteous force compelled to action by the machinations of the powerful?⁶⁹

These questions suggest a postmodern shift from history to discourse, which is characterized by a breakdown of the arbitrary meaning of an allegory. The only agent who can decipher those referents is the film's audience, only they can hold together

⁶⁹ Robin Peckham, "Let the Bullets Fly," *World Wide Pop* (January 20, 2011).

all the traces by which the film is constituted. On October 10, 2011, China just commemorated its centennial anniversary of the *Xinhai* Revolution (1911) that overturned the Qing Dynasty and gave birth to the modern Republic. But, as Peckham rightly reminds us: the result of this revolution seems to be ironic with no winning part on either side.

Allegorical Impulse: the Dawning of Multi-level Representations

The dawning of postmodern allegory is the moment when we begin to realize that there are many conflicting interpretations. A historian of Chinese film may well prefer not to consider the construction of ‘postmodern allegory’ in *Let the Bullets Fly* as ‘Westernization’. It is by no means free of Western references, but for the most part, it operates by Chinese rules, one might say. As the film discussed here indicates, a Chinese postmodernity can be built and perhaps can only be built on a Chinese past. At this point, the postmodern remembers the past, and the past survives well in the postmodern. In this film, and in its reference to the allegorical phenomenon that surrounds it, Chinese postmodern devices and contents are couched in cultural analogue, captured in reflexive allegory, and negotiated through Chinese film censorship. Despite its suppression by modern theory, or perhaps because of it, allegory has never completely disappeared from contemporary Chinese culture. On the contrary, it has renewed its alliance with popular art forms, where its attraction continues undiminished. Thus postmodern allegory in China has manifested a capacity for widespread popular appeal, implicating that its function is social as well

as aesthetic.

That I have chosen film as my analytic vehicle for postmodern allegory may be explained not only with reference to its undisputed status as one of the most popular artistic forms, but also by its style of representation. Film is particularly suitable to allegory's inherent 'pictogrammatism', because in it "there is an autonomous 'art' (a 'text'), that of the pictogram ('anecdotalized' images, obtuse meanings placed in a diegetic space)." ⁷⁰ French cultural critic Roland Barthes attempts to locate and define the specifically "filmic", which he discovers not in the movement of images, but in the still. In order to describe the still, Barthes elaborates a three-fold schema of interpretation, which Craig Owens interpreted as follows:

This schema is necessitated by a description of the still in terms traditionally associated with allegory: it is fragment, a quotation, and the meaning it engenders is supplementary, excessive, "parodic and disseminatory." An arbitrary cut, the still suspends not only motion but also story, diegesis; engendered by the syntagmatic disjunction of images, it compels a vertical or paradigmatic reading. ⁷¹

This critical understanding rejects earlier assertions that the literal text of an allegory is merely a veil, which conceals its hidden, allegorical meaning from all but the initiated. Therefore, as we can see in *Let the Bullets Fly*, all of its interpretations have been stripped of their authority as textbook and handed over to the audience.

⁷⁰ Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, edited and with an Introduction by Brian Wallis. (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art in association with David R. Godine, Publisher, Inc., 1984, 230).

⁷¹ Ibid.

Although language is no longer the main feature of a film, with its black humor and double-talk, the audience of *Let the Bullets Fly* can still create subtexts that can be interpreted in many different ways. It has some brilliant lines, such as “I want to make money by standing straight” and “Are you Zhang Mazi (pockmarks on face)? There is no pockmark on your face. How about Huang Si-lang (meaning four in Chinese), there is no four on his face either.” The latter line means that “content and form is not the same thing, ridiculing the fact that China is socialist in name but capitalist in nature, or that what the authorities say and do are always different.”⁷² Those allegories in the film are extravagant; they are always in excess, encoding many contents within one form. In one scene cited earlier, Tang tells Zhang that “we are too late. The previous mayors have already collected taxes for the next 90 years, till the year 2010.” This line not only criticizes “state coffers outgrowing people’s incomes” as interpreted by Hartmann, but also implies that the country has pursued rapid economic growth at the expense of its future generations. Those two clearly defined but completely different readings are engaged in confrontation in such a way that it is difficult to choose between them. It is only under a postmodern situation that one and the same allegory can signify two different meanings and this works to problematize the activity of interpretation, which stays somehow suspended in its own uncertainty. So does the justice and fairness in the film. The new mayor Zhang, when accepting people’s petition, tells them loudly: “The emperor is dead. There is no emperor any more. Don’t go down on your knees. I came to Goose Town for three

⁷² Robert Hartmann, “Hit Chinese Film a Sharp-Edged Satire,” *Asia Times Online* (January 20, 2011).

purposes only: fairness, fairness, and fairness.” And the goal of fairness is not easy to achieve, then and now. Neither is the work of anyone trying hard to discover the predetermined referent of an allegory in the film.

This becomes even more evident in the line “let the bullets fly,” which occurs twice in the film. Once when Zhang and his gangsters are hijacking Tang and other train messengers, he takes a few shots at the horses but seems to have missed the target; and the other happens toward the end of the story. In both cases, the phrase “let the bullets fly” implies “just wait and see.” As Hartmann again observes,

We all live in a world where bullets do fly both literally on battlefields and figuratively in political arenas. Maybe these figurative bullets fly in our workplaces and at our homes as well. We all hope to see these bullets hit their intended target.⁷³

Let us go back to the first scene where Zhang takes his shots, apparently at the horses outside the train and seemingly misses. One of the gang members goes up to him and asks: “missed?” He replies slowly: “let the bullets fly for a while.” With that line, Zhang and his gang began their hijacking, which leads off both the film and the allegory. It is still too early to fully understand the phenomenon of this film. Perhaps we have to do as Zhang suggests at the very beginning of the story: “let the bullets fly for a while.” Just wait and see. Perhaps the results will exceed our expectations.

⁷³ Ibid.

Chapter V International-Festival-Going-Film¹: Caught between Global and Local Zones



American anthropologist James Clifford claims that “one cannot occupy [...] a bounded cultural world from which to journey out and analyze other cultures. Human ways of life increasingly influence, dominate [...] and subvert one another.”² In this view, one that I share, cultural analysis is always enmeshed in global movements of difference and power. Chinese film is no exception: it, too, pertains to transnational cultural politics. In 1984, Chen Kaige’s film *Yellow Earth* attracted critical attention from the West. Later at the 1988 Berlin International Film Festival, another Chinese film, *Red Sorghum*, won the first Golden Bear for China. Thereafter, more and more Chinese films have garnered international awards. However, its further international and commercial success was prevented by massive political turbulence in 1989. Despite this setback, China’s economy continued to grow at a rapid pace, and

¹ There is another aspect to those festival-going-films, that is, those films are developed as “cultured blockbuster” in order to sell well. Those films can be “both Chinese (not only having a Chinese story but more importantly carrying Chinese aesthetics and values) and a blockbuster.” In other words, they are “cultured blockbusters”. See Jenny Kwok Wah Lau, “Hero: China’s Response to Hollywood Globalization,” *Jump Cut: a Review of Contemporary Media*, No. 49 (Spring, 2007). (<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc49.2007/Lau-Hero/index.html>)

² James Clifford, “Introduction,” *Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

Chinese film is busy building its own brand at a global level.

In *New Chinese Cinema*, Klaus Eder, a program coordinator for the Munich International Film Festival, points out:

New Chinese Cinema has dominated many international festivals, most recently Venice in 1992 (*The Story of Qiuju*), Berlin in 1993 (*Women from the Lake of Scented Souls*) and Cannes in 1993 (*Farewell 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.³

In fact, since the early 1990s and progressively in the 2000s, Chinese cinema has enjoyed considerable commercial success in overseas markets. Films made by Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou, and Ang Lee were also nominated in the Best Foreign Film category at the Oscars during that period. Its international appeal went upward after the great international success of Lee's martial arts film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* in 2000, which earned Lee and transnational Chinese film massive commercial and critical acclaim abroad. The film attracted wide audiences to enjoy Chinese cinema and increased the popularity of many earlier films that might have been relatively unknown to a Western audience. Later in 2002, Zhang Yimou's *Hero* achieved international commercial success. Its cast presented many famous and internationally recognized Chinese actors such as Jet Li, Zhang Ziyi and Maggie Cheung. Other Chinese films including *Farewell My Concubine* (1993), *The Road*

³ Klaus Eder and Deac Rossell, eds., *New Chinese Cinema*. Dossier 11. London National Film Theatre (1993, 8).

Home (1999), *Suzhou River* (2000) and *House of Flying Daggers* (2004) have also been successfully screened around the world.

The success of those films at festivals around the world exerts a positive effect on Chinese film production. As a result, many directors have also felt rewarded by the increasing overseas demand for their films. It is no wonder that Dai Jinhua, a film critic in Beijing, observed that “winning such prizes has become a prerequisite for film making; Western culture, artistic tastes, and production standards related to international film festivals now determine our purely national films.”⁴ In light of this argument, we should be cautious in making hasty generalizations connecting film and national culture, for the study of national culture is not the same as the study of representations of that culture. But it will be enlightening, and even important, to try and see what films might reveal of the culture that produces them. In fact, films do have a cultural function: they “affirm and maintain the culture of that which they are part”⁵; they draw a portrait of their national culture.⁶ Films may directly or indirectly unveil something about national experience, identity, temperament, ideologies and aesthetic principles.⁷ As such, they can provide insights into the values and desires of that culture at a particular time and place, therefore revealing changes to a national culture in detail.

Through the festival-going film, different people in different countries can

⁴ Dai Jinhua, “Western Wonders and Chinese Film Myth,” *China Screen* (1994 2: 28-9).

⁵ Richard Maltby and Ian Craven, *Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* (Cambridge MA: Blackwell, 1995, 17).

⁶ Robert Burgoyne, “Modernism & the Narrative of Nation in JFK,” ed. Vivian Sobchack, *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Modern Event* (New York: Routledge, 1996, 121).

⁷ John Belton, *American Cinema/American Culture* (New York: McGraw Hill Text, 1994, 123).

exchange their views about the world. But during this communication, they have to find out why certain images and narratives have been considered important enough to pass along. Considering this, Dick Gollin stated that in Hollywood, “we want our fairy tales and bed-time stories and hymns of religious faith to speak about the ‘truths’ of this world.”⁸ Films are texts, documenting who we are, or who we think we are; they reflect changes over the years to self-image, both at home and abroad. Just like their Western counterparts, Chinese films are always trying to provide something. They also want to show their amazing places and cultural traditions to the outside world. In doing this, aspects of national identity are always coming into being, taking shape and changing through time.

In this chapter, through analyzing *Red Sorghum*, a typical international-festival-going-film pushing for market success home and abroad, I will examine the issues of ‘Chineseness’ and its deconstruction in terms of ‘truth’ (real and imagined). What is truth? As William James summarized in 1912, the truth is “only an expedient in our way of thinking.”⁹ As James suggested, this definition is a pragmatic “cash-value” of truth for it is all that we know in our experience. By this, truth is verifiable only when thoughts match up with actual things. However, another philosopher, Richard Rorty weighed in against James, stated that “what is better for us to believe” is interchangeable with “justified” rather with “true”. Only through and by “praise” can the beliefs be endorsed.¹⁰ With James and Rorty in mind, Zygmunt Bauman defines

⁸ Dick Gollin, “Re: The Illusion of Realism,” *H-Film*. <H-FILM@MSU.EDU> 17 Feb, 1997.

⁹ William James, *Pragmatism* (Indianapolis: Hachett, 1981, 100).

¹⁰ Richard Rorty, “Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth,” *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, 127-8).

‘truth’ as “a certain attitude we take, but above all one we wish or expect others to take regarding what is said or believed.”¹¹ Zygmunt Bauman further explains that truth is a relationship between ideas and the objects they represent, rather than between verbal and “non-verbal reality”. In his view, Rorty’s list of truth concept uses is still short of the disputational use. According to Bauman;

The idea of truth belongs to the rhetoric of power. It makes no sense unless in the context of opposition. It comes into its own only in disagreement, when different people hold different views and when it becomes a matter of dispute who is right and who is wrong, and when for certain reasons it is important to some or all adversaries to demonstrate or insinuate that the other side is in the wrong.¹²

This theory of truth might invite relativism, as its belief system is involving the relationship of power. It might also suggest that there are degrees of truth in which one is more effective than the others. The grounds of truth thus established should have “a trusted procedure” as Bauman described: who can be backed up and who can be trusted in terms of superiority.

Film, as a representation of the world, not only describes the world, but also relates to other representations that might lead to the degree of truth. Zhang Yimou, the director of *Red Sorghum*, is well known for his ability to create exotic rural folklore traditions, as they are very appealing, especially to Western film festival

¹¹ Zygmunt Bauman, “On Truth, Fiction and Uncertainty,” *Postmodernity and its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997, 113).

¹² Ibid.

judges and critics. Zhang once said, “I am now more interested in finding a way to make Chinese films significant to a worldwide audience.”¹³ Zhang’s statement indicated that filmmakers like him are intending to pander the uncritical or even international mass taste because they could gain international recognition and then go further than the small circle of film festivals. In order to move Chinese cinema into the center of world attention, he would even go out of his way to invent fictional folkloric customs in place of real surviving traditions. That is why I prefer to utilize the term of truth to analyze an international-festival-going-film since it is involved in a global power system. My argument in this chapter does not refute any theories of truth, but reveals that truth might give us a chance to find its way in constituting a national culture.

Nothing is Absolute: Watching Experiences

Though critically acclaimed around the world, *Red Sorghum* was not well received by the Chinese authorities and by moviegoers at home. For some Chinese audiences, as Yuejin Wang observed, watching *Red Sorghum* could almost be a “traumatic experience”, because it is “strikingly rough, rugged, bold and unrestrained” which directly confronted their conservative aesthetic tastes:

The film is a shocking affront to many cherished and received formulae of Chinese cultural praxis; to the deep-rooted Confucian ethical and moral codes of sobriety and decorum; to the ingrained artistic codes favoring strategies of

¹³ Huang Shixian, “Post-WTO Period and A Consideration of the Future of Chinese Cinema,” lecture in San Francisco State University (Spring, 2003).

concealment and restraint; and to the aesthetic taste which prioritizes emotional delicacy and refinement. Never before has the medium of Chinese cinema been so unquestionably given over to an unbridled and abandoned manner of life and visual wantonness and crudity.¹⁴

Hence the controversial aspect of Chinese audiences' response that amounted to a 'Red Sorghum Phenomenon'. Although it originally was meant to be a stylistic exercise, by over-shooting itself, *Red Sorghum* has been taken as critically as any other cultural catalysts for change of certain national images, both in socialist China and abroad. This film therefore has forcefully nudged people beyond the folklore genre and grew into an international cultural phenomenon.

Those who dislike *Red Sorghum* in China dismiss the film as "mindless sensationalism, a libidinal impulse" for "the ugly" --- a regressive effort at "the uncivilized and the savage" and a stylistic horror indulging in moral and visual "crudities."¹⁵ For Chinese films, as Wang argued,

[A] narrative blatantly addressing issues of desire, sexuality and transgression is itself already a transgression [...] The film transgresses a lot of boundaries and codes, moral and cinematic, in a Chinese context where the two are traditionally yoked intimately together. The charges brought against the film cluster around its indulgence in boorishness, forthrightness and a savage

¹⁴ Wang Yuejin, "Red Sorghum: Mixing Memory and Desire," *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema*, Ed. Chris Berry (London: British Film Institute, 1991, 80)

¹⁵ For negative critical response, see Zhu Shoutong, "The Increasingly Ugly 'Savage' Sensationalism," and Zhong Youxun, "They Lack Emotion," *Film Art*, No.192, Beijing (July 1988, 35-40).

lifestyle in defiance of refinement, inwardness and civility, all traditional Chinese virtues.¹⁶

But how is it that the film offends the public's taste in China, and that its viewers find it so hard to absorb and believe? By measuring the negative critical response towards this film, we will not only come to a better understanding of the true power of the film in terms of Wang's words, but also lay bare the way in which official ideology represses different voices and against which those voices seek to find themselves.

The story of the film takes place in a small town named Gaomi during the war against Japan. The use of voice-over narration now and then tells the story of the narrator's grandmother, Jiu'er, who was sent by her parents into a pre-arranged marriage with a leper in exchange for a mule. On her wedding day, the crude and muscular sedan bearers tease Jiu'er about her impending fate as the wife of a leprous old man. Jiu'er, too proud to reply to their mockery, remains silent. Wishing to break down her reserve, the bearers toss the wedding sedan and make fun of the pathetic bride. As the men sing and dance, Jiu'er struggles to control her sobs and retching, which is noticed by "my [the narrator's] grandpa-to-be" and the jolting and singing stop. The silent procession is interrupted by a bandit with a pistol. The sedan bearers, led by "my grandpa", kill the assailant and a series of subtly flirtatious looks are exchanged between him and Jiu'er. Three days later, "my grandpa" appears again when Jiu'er is returning from her own family in accordance with local custom. He

¹⁶ Wang Yuejin, "Red Sorghum: Mixing Memory and Desire," *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema*, Ed. Chris Berry (London: British Film Institute, 1991, 81)

kidnaps Jiu'er and carries her into the depth of the sorghum field. Jiu'er happily acquiesces and they make love. Later, the leper is mysteriously killed. The young widow takes over the winery and persuades the workers to stay and help her. "My grandpa" arrives drunk and tries to claim Jiu'er, telling the workers how he deflowered her. But she tosses him out and orders the workers to throw him into a liquor vat where he stays groaning for three days. Meanwhile the local bandits have kidnapped Jiu'er and ask for a large ransom, which the winery workers finally pay. "My grandpa" awakens and tries to take revenge on the bandits, but only to be disgraced himself. Later, he comes back again, and defies the winery workers by urinating into the wine vat. He means to anger Jiu'er by this, but somehow his urine makes the wine taste better than before. The longtime worker, Luohan, leaves in despair, perhaps because of Jiu'er's affair with "my grandpa". Nine years later, the Japanese troops invade the town and force people to trample down the sorghum fields. They order a butcher to flay Luohan alive because he is involved in the anti-Japanese activities. The narrator then elaborates on many Japanese war crimes during the war and reveals Luohan as a member of the communist guerrilla resistance. After the tragic event, Jiu'er urges the winery workers to avenge Luohan's death by ambushing a Japanese truck. They succeed in defeating the Japanese troops, but in the end, there is nothing left but scenes of death except "my grandpa" and "my father". Observing a red setting sun symbolic both of the blood and the wine, "my father", then a small boy, is left chanting for his mother to rise to heaven at the end of the film.

Director Zhang, who graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in the same class

as Chen Kaige, photographed Chen's *Yellow Earth* and *The Big Parade* (1985) before directing *Red Sorghum*. He layed claim to his role as director with this lyrical film, which not only won a Golden Bear in Berlin, but also became the first Fifth Generation feature to please domestic audiences. The leprous old man clearly symbolizes the corrupt Qing dynasty that was toppled in the Revolution of 1911. The emphasis on collective action against Japanese invasion suggests the nation's determination for the communism that would triumph five years after the surrender of the Japanese. But, as ever with Zhang, *Red Sorghum* is a film with visual and thematic contradictions. By setting the story in the barren wilderness in the northern part of China, Zhang departs from the lush southern landscapes that other Chinese filmmakers prefer to represent on screen. Containing comic elements, it is also a violent film: the villagers treat each other violently and the man treats the woman violently, but their violence pales compared to the atrocities committed by the Japanese troops. Zhang also is far from casting an idealizing light on his protagonists as he portrays them as people following their basic instincts, right down to urinating in the wine vats, which ironically improves the taste. Moreover, by allowing the only communist character (Luohan) to die at the hands of the invading Japanese, Zhang also suggests that the local people resisted Japanese cruelty through their own innate heroism, just as their own labor and ingenuity had revived the fortunes of the winery.

Red Sorghum is well known for its beautiful imagery and lush colors. Red, which is the color of fire, symbolizes good fortune and happiness, and is therefore the most common color for wedding gowns and gift-wrapping. In Chinese culture nowadays,

red remains a very popular color and also indicates a special meaning in Communist China as it is the color of socialism. But the color red, in this film, is a multidimensional symbol, representing life and death, birth and renewal, and the physicality and humanity of the villagers as well as the Communist Party. Red dominates Zhang's palette in this film: from the red gown that graces Jiu'er's body to the sun above, and from the wine that flows from distillery vats to the blood that runs from the flayed body of Luohan, hues of red permeate every inch of the screen. The most noticeable scene is one of the sequences in which Jiu'er's blood mingles with the red wine and trickles into the sorghum field as a lunar eclipse bathes the entire scene in intense color:

The red color of the landscape, introduced through the unforgettable image of a solar eclipse, is a searing reflection of the violence and bloodshed in the struggle against the Japanese. However, it is also a reminder of the characters' love of life, passion and spiritual freedom.¹⁷

Therefore, there are many possibilities for the meaning of the color red in this film. It would be misleading to say that it means good fortune and happiness, because this explanation does not fit every circumstance in the film. What is more, the red color most often seems to signify the force of life. Blood is red, as is the nourishment of the wine, the color of the sun's rays upon the land, the sensuousness of the silk wedding gown, and so forth.

Another symbol, the sorghum wine, according to Harry H. Kuoshu, is the "central

¹⁷ Yvonne Ng, "Imagery and Sound in Red Sorghum," *Kinema* (University of Waterloo: 2008),.

constituent” of the film’s color scheme:

The film is ritualistically motivated, with the power of wine as a central dynamic. The drinking of red wine derives its meaning from a network of red motifs: the red wine, red wedding dress and décor, the blood, the sun, and so forth. They combine to evoke a world of visualized passion; a topology of fertility; a cinematically articulated life force; an iconographic presence of creativity and destruction; and death and rebirth.¹⁸

This system challenges the “traditional moral dichotomy of defiance and debauchery attached to heavy drinking” in Chinese culture, which regards heavy drinking as betraying both the tradition and the ideology. But this scheme also makes itself pause in a “self-deluded state” and cannot lead the audience to firm ground. The consequence can be seen in the narrative structure of *Red Sorghum*. The entire first half of the film can be said to celebrate life and is infused with “passion and desire.”¹⁹ But the second half of the film is dominated by the Japanese invasion and the violence of onslaught and vengeance. In this light, the use of red could be viewed as a vehicle to compare the passionate nature of the human being with the emptiness felt after a great loss. But it can also be presumed that the eclipsed sun at the end of the film implies that the red sun flag of the Japanese being replaced by the red star flag of the communist party. It is hard to say exactly what is being represented and it is

¹⁸ Harry H. Kuoshu, *Celluloid China: Cinematic Encounters with Culture and Society* (Illinois: Southern Illinois University, 2002, 259).

¹⁹ The color red in this film has been warmly discussed in many film reviews, one of which can be found in Sara Halvorson’s “Zhang Yimou’s *Red Sorghum*: Setting Passion Free in a Restrained Society”. In Halvorson’s words, red can be found throughout the film to “echo the recurring theme of passion and desire”. (http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/16916/zhang_yimou_red_sorghum.html?cat=38)

difficult to give any specific commentary on the use of color.

Concerning the title of the film *Red Sorghum*, as Natasha Walter observes, “every culture has its symbolic equivalent to red sorghum: a Palestinian olive tree, a Canadian maple, a cotton bush in the American Deep South.”²⁰ But as Walter further argues, “none of them are quite like the Chinese sorghum” in Zhang Yimou’s film,

[W]hich is food, drink and shelter as well as an aesthetic end in itself. Vast stretches of red sorghum shimmered like a sea of blood. Tall and dense, it reeked of glory; cold and graceful, it promised enchantment. This sorghum is the one wholehearted linking device in a fragmented narrative riddled with chronological displacements and curtailed actions.²¹

Red Sorghum, used as the ingredient to make wine in the film, has been the focal point and metaphor of the narrator’s own family during peacetime. It forms a glittering sea then and is the traditional spirit of the local people. But in the war against the Japanese invasion, it becomes a metaphor for fight and loss, entwined with the struggle for life. Another very widely used symbolism is the number nine, which is a homophone of the Chinese word for “long-lasting”.²² The name of the narrator’s grandma is Jiu’er (nine in Chinese) because she is the ninth child of her family. There are 9999 Li on the road to Qingshakou, a place chanted at the beginning of the film. The brand of their winery product is named “Eighteen Li Red”,

²⁰ Natasha Walter, “Book Review: Shooting a Family in Glorious Technicolor,” *Red Sorghum*-Mo Yan, trans. Howard Goldblatt: Heinemann, *The Independent* (March 13, 1993).

²¹ Ibid.

²² A similar analysis of the number nine can be found in a film review written by Christopher B. Vogler on June 3, 2003. (<http://www.amazon.com/Red-Sorghum-VHS-Li-Gong/dp/6302263948>)

in which eighteen is two nines together. It is prepared and blessed on the 9th day of September, which is also Jiu'er's birthday. Moreover, the Japanese troops invade the town nine years after the beginning of the story. For Christopher Vogler, this number scheme has extended "beyond the Chinese traditional meaning associated with the number" and could simply be "a patriotic depiction of how Chinese civilizations will last forever, even in the face of adversity; but the root meaning is still unknown."²³ Additionally, any attempt to change the traditional meaning of those symbols to fit the circumstances of the film would be a tenacious stretch. In this light, "nothing is absolute in the film, neither negation nor affirmation"²⁴, in accordance with a certain Chinese culture.

Red Sorghum makes Zhang Yimou a visual artist simply because of the way he presents the story through his remarkable use of imagery and aural qualities. Until this film, the audience would have never thought that one could say so much about character, setting, and plot just through the use of metaphor and image composition. This unique style helps Zhang set a vibrant mood and mythical atmosphere that leads naturally to the theme of passion and freedom. Its popularity in China reflects not only a more tolerant political climate, but also the rediscovery of repressed passions such as sexual love, heavy drinking and the tentative rejection of rigid moral tenets promoted by the officials. On the other hand, the Chinese audiences are quickly alerted to Zhang's exquisite but irritating style to depict violence. The film describes

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Wang Yuejin, "Red Sorghum: A Chinese Version of Masculinity and Femininity," *Public Culture* (Fall, 1989, 2 (1): 31-53).

Gaomi, where the story happens, as the most beautiful and most repulsive, most exceptional and most common, most sacred and most corrupt town in the world. It is not surprising for the audience to find many contradictions²⁵ in *Red Sorghum*, especially in the cruel scenes of war between the local people and Japanese troops. The characters' deaths are prefigured at the beginning of the film, and in real death they become legendary heroes. Uncle Luohan, for example, dies for the first time when the narrator says: "Uncle Luohan had died the year before on Jiao-Ping highway [...] As the skin was being stripped from his body, his flesh jumped and quivered". In a later time, he elaborates the death in detail: "It was then that Uncle Luohan [...] was caught, and the next day the Japanese soldiers tied him to a tethering post, ordered a butcher to skin him alive". Other similar voiceovers also appear throughout the film. Zhang thus records the mythologizing process of death in a culture refusing to take war into its very heart, to reshape its suffering in the mind of the audience. In its first half, *Red Sorghum* can be seen as representing a culture founded on passionate love and basic instincts with a hint of murder. But little by little, the story develops into a series of brutal events although love and heroism still remain. Therefore, we can say that in his film, Zhang builds up a world of a peculiarly confusing culture full of contrasting images and actions. The world Zhang created in the film, furthermore, becomes an image of Chinese history as it grows out of Chinese society.

²⁵ For the contradictions in *Red Sorghum*, see, for example, Tina Gianoulis's "*Red Sorghum*," *Film Reference* (<http://www.filmreference.com/Films-Ra-Ro/Red-Sorghum.html>) and Yvonne Ng's "Imagery and Sound in *Red Sorghum*," *Kinema*, (University of Waterloo: 2008).

We may gather from what has been said that my interest in ‘truth’ and my associated interest in ‘belief’ have more than an accidental relation to blurring the distinction between ‘true’ and ‘false’. However, the distinction is always there, and it is only in the work of art, as Heidegger says, that “the truth of being has set itself to work.”²⁶ To simplify this argument: the truth of being is the cover-up, and it is up to art to tear up the cover and bring to light what has been hidden. Film, as a form of art, can break open an open space, in which everything you can see is other than usual. *Red Sorghum* seems much more unusual by complicating the construction of a true Chinese culture; therefore, it cannot be said to truly represent contemporary China, at least not the image of China but the ugly side of it in the eyes of Chinese audience. In the modern world, it is usually the fate of an artist to oppose reality and by this opposition to reveal what it has been deprived of. But things have changed: it is now left to the job of a postmodernist to uncover this particularly concealment, to find out the mechanism which blurs the boundary of truth and falsity.

For Whom the Film is Shot: Cultural Uncertainty

The year 1987 saw the release of *Red Sorghum*, Zhang Yimou’s first feature film. His second film *Ju Dou* (1990), acquired as much critical acclaim as had *Red Sorghum*, such as the 1990 Golden Bear Award at the Berlin Film Festival, the Golden Hugo Award at the Chicago International Film Festival and Best Film at the 1990 New York Film Festival. Today, one is hard-pressed to count all the awards won by

²⁶ Martin Heidegger, “The origin of the work of art,” *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1977, 164–81).

Chinese films at festivals around the world. This spectacular global success provides ample opportunities, but also creates thorny problems in Chinese film studies.

As a regular participant in festival screenings, Bill Nichols, a noted American film scholar specialized in documentary, discusses his own festival-going experience to explain the “festival phenomenon”:

Films from nations not previously regarded as prominent film-producing countries receive praise for their ability to transcend local issues and provincial tastes while simultaneously providing a window onto a different culture. We are invited to receive such films as evidence of artistic maturity -- the work of directors ready to take their place within an international fraternity of auteur --- and of a distinctive national culture --- work that remains distinct from Hollywood-based norms both in style and theme.²⁷

When watching foreign films, Nichols describes that experience as “a reverie in the fascination with the strange and abiding pleasure in the recognition of differences that persists beyond the moment.”²⁸ Reflecting on Nichols’s account, two features of those international-festival-going-films shall gain our attention. The first one is that the “artistic maturity” of those films will eventually place an emerging director in an international arena. The second one is that “a distinctive national culture” that distinguishes itself from its Western counterparts has been explored without ever setting foot on that soil. Yingjin Zhang, nonetheless, contends this argument by

²⁷ Bill Nichols, “Discovering Form, Inferring Meaning: New Cinemas and the Film Festival Circuit,” *Film Quarterly* 47.3 (Spring, 1994, 16).

²⁸ *Ibid.*,18.

saying that those festival-goers' search for "authenticity of an alien culture is only illusory", because the native filmmakers "are all too eager to supply evidence that will readily satisfy Western expectations".²⁹ However, this tendency to discover new cinemas at Western film festivals and interpret those new texts in terms of their familiar paradigms of knowledge seems to have become 'a reward' for most festival-goers.

Those festival-goers seem to position themselves in a contact zone between the global and the local. Driven by their aversion to any boundaries, they want a local cultural transmission to continue until it reaches at a somewhat 'global' level. They despise fixity and are happy to continue constructing ever new cultural bricolages. Just as Mike Featherstone says, they are "skilled at packaging and representing the exotica of other cultures and 'amazing places' and different traditions to audiences eager for experience".³⁰ Instead of searching for the 'real' culture from those films, Western festival-goers hope to find a cultural bricolage as they expect native informants to meet what they wish to see. In his essay "Screening China", Yingjin Zhang also concludes that Chinese filmmakers in the early 1990s have learned that:

[A] film most likely to satisfy Western expectations (or aesthetic taste) should include formulaic but nonetheless essential or magic ingredients: primitive landscape and its sheer visual beauty; repressed sexuality and its eruption in transgressive moments of eroticism; gender performance and sexual

²⁹ Zhang Yingjin, "Screening China: Critical Interventions, Cinematic Reconfigurations, and Transnational Imaginary," *Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (Michigan: Ann Arbor, 2002, 29).

³⁰ Mike Featherstone, *Undoing Culture: Globalization, Postmodernism and Identity* (London: Sage Publication Ltd, 1995, 98-9).

exhibition as seen in exotic operas, rituals, or other types of rural custom; and a mythical or cyclical time frame in which the protagonist's fate is predestined.³¹

Viewed from this angle, *Red Sorghum* is one such formulaic film that successfully returns the gaze of the West by presenting all that is expected of the ethnography of rural China and perhaps more than expected.

This formula can be found in several scenes of the film, which evoke “many of the ideas by Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the carnival.”³² According to Bakhtin, in the carnival social hierarchies of everyday life, such as pieties and etiquettes, are desecrated and subverted by usually suppressed voices and energies.³³ In *Red Sorghum*, mainstream themes such as love and heroism return to basic biological needs like dancing, drinking, defecating and making love. Through the carnival, ideas and truths are endlessly confronted, and all kinds of thoughts demand equal status. For Chinese audiences, only through carnival scenes within the film can they find a site of resistance to rigid ideology and a place where repressed feelings and emotions can be released. In the sedan-tossing scene, as David Neo observes, “the body and bodily functions are depicted in the unabashed shots of the sedan-bearers’ naked, sweat-soaked and dust-covered torsos as they teasingly, but vigorously, jostle the bridal sedan.”³⁴ As the bearers sing and dance, clouds of sand

³¹ Ibid, 32.

³² David Neo, “Red Sorghum: A Search for Roots,” *Chinese Culture and its History in Indonesian* (September, 2003).

³³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His world*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

³⁴ David Neo, “Red Sorghum: A Search for Roots,” *Chinese Culture and its History in Indonesian*

and dust rise around them and create a mythical image of passion, freedom and vitality. This teasing but vigorous scene carries implicit eroticism, implied by the naked torsos of the bearers, the curiosity of a beautiful bride, and the rhythmic movements made by the jolting of the wedding sedan.

In another scene, the winery workers sing and dance by tradition to consecrate the new red sorghum wine. Besides being cheerful and simple, this scene evokes good health and a hint of rebellion. The half-naked workers get drunk in the worship of the wine god and chant:

Good wine from our labor, good wine!
If you drink our wine,
You'll breathe well and you won't cough.
If you drink our wine,
You'll be well and your mouth won't smell bad...
If you drink our wine,
You won't kowtow to the emperor!

The implication of rebellion is not only found in the explicit lyrics, it is also hinted at by the very act of heavy drinking. In the traditional culture of China, heavy drinking is regarded as a transgression of etiquette and an act of resisting convention, or a way to release repressed feelings. Those carnivals described in *Red Sorghum* are in sharp contrast to the traditional refined and conservative Chinese culture. In this light, this film unintentionally sets up a search for primitive passions deeper and more genuine

than any other Chinese films, as the chant defiantly resonates: “if you drink our wine, you won’t kowtow to the emperor!”

In her *Primitive Passions*, film critic Rey Chow closely examines films made by Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou. Chow analyzes their cinematic reinvention of ethnic Chinese culture in “visual terms”, because they have displayed a culture that is seductive to the Western audience. The presentation of visuality, in this view, becomes “a production not of things but of relations”³⁵, not a Chinese culture, but an exchanged value between China and the West. Thus, by means of “to-be-looked-at-ness”, the ethnographized Chinese culture “becomes a predominant aspect of that cultures’ self-representation”.³⁶ Following this argument, this “ethnography” of those films will naturally build themselves into “autoethnography”. Yingjin Zhang, reflecting on the cultural politics of international film festivals, confronts Chow’s argument by saying that those films are actually “not so much a result of the automatic or voluntary consent from Chinese directors as that of transnational economic coercion or unequal power relations.”³⁷ According to Zhang, this situation

seems to have implicated contemporary Chinese cinema in a prefixed cycle of transnational commodity production and consumption: favorable reviews at international film festivals lead to production of more “ethnographic” films, and the wide distribution of such films is translated into their availability for

³⁵ Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995, 60).

³⁶ Ibid, 180. Chow takes the concept of “to-be-looked-at-ness” from Laura Mulvey’s seminal essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” in *Screen* 16, 3 (Autumn 1975, 6-18).

³⁷ Zhang Yingjin, “Screening China: Critical Interventions, Cinematic Reconfigurations, and Transnational Imaginary”, *Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (Michigan: Ann Arbor, 2002, 34).

classroom use and therefore influences the agenda of film studies, which in turn reinforces the status of these films as a dominant genre.³⁸

Given this well-established assumption, those popular Chinese films are the result of the festival-goers' habitual consumption of exotic images from China. Those images are welcome in the West because they are entertaining but harmless, thus can be incorporated into their own culture. Or, in the words of Bill Nichols again, the international film-festival phenomenon is "hovering, like a specter...that might restore a sense of the particular and local to what we have now recruited to the realm of the global."³⁹ By ethnographizing and packaging themselves, those films become popular products for consumption, ready to be recruited to a festival for exhibition.

Thus we have to ask ourselves: what is the intended audience for films like *Red Sorghum*? Who speaks for Chinese cinema in the West? Tracing the rise of Chinese film studies in the West around the mid-1980s, when Chinese directors had just begun attracting international attention, William Rothman identified a kind of political responsibility the West must assume:

We Americans studying Chinese cinema in those years around ourselves envisioning the events sweeping China as a grand historical melodrama" and therefore felt "called upon to play a role" in promoting new Chinese films in the international arena.⁴⁰

³⁸ Ibid, 34-5.

³⁹ Bill Nichols, "Discovering Form, Inferring Meaning: New Cinemas and the Film Festival Circuit," *Film Quarterly* 47.3 (Spring, 1994, 27).

⁴⁰ William Rothman, "Overview: what is American about Film Study in America?" *Melodrama and Asian Cinema*, ed. Wimal Dissanayake (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 259).

By assuming such an urgent moral and political responsibility, Western critics thus see their roles as direct participants in the advancement of freedom, democracy and human rights in contemporary China.

Indeed, political issues have informed much of Western interest in Chinese cinema. This is evident from the large number of press reports on the notorious cases of Communist censorship. For example, a 1996 report in the *New York Times* bore the title: “In China, Letting a Hundred Films Wither.”⁴¹ While the report criticized the communist party’s sponsorship of Xie Jin’s *The Opium War* (a film released at the same time as Hong Kong’s return to China in July 1997), it also exposed the government’s crackdown on Feng Xiaogang’s *An Awkward Life* (aka *A life under Pressure*), a film that had been financed by the popular but controversial writer Wang Shuo. Earlier, *The Wall Street Journal* ran an article on the Communist ban on Tian Zhuangzhuang and several defiant ‘Sixth Generation’ directors such as Zhang Yuan and Wu Wenguang.⁴² In reports like these, the Western press seems obsessed with which Chinese films are suspended in production, ordered for excessive cuts, or banned from domestic release, and which filmmakers are engaged in independent, underground or subversive filmmaking.

By such political standards, Zhang Yuan, with his independently-produced docudramas of social prejudice against an autistic child in *Mama* (1991), a group of disillusioned rock singers in *Beijing Bastards* (1993), a documentary of the contrasting official and non-official activities in Beijing in *The Square* (1995), a study

⁴¹ Patrick E. Tyler, “In China, Letting a Hundred Films Wither,” *New York Times*, Dec. 1, sec. H2 (1996, 26).

⁴² Linda Jaivin, “Defying a ban, Chinese cameras roll,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 18, sec. A (1995, 12).

of alcoholism in a dysfunctional family in *Sons* (1996), and a reenactment of the clandestine gay life in *East Palace, West Palace*, has emerged as the most daring and most controversial mainland director to date in the eyes of Western critics.⁴³ Indeed, film critic Chris Berry goes so far as to claim that:

Given the uneven quality of Zhang Yimou's recent work and Chen Kaige's lapse into the production *chinoiserie* that out-Bertoluccis Bertolucci, *East Palace, West Palace* stakes a serious claim for Zhang Yuan to be the mainland director who has produced the most consistently interesting body of work so far in the 1990s.⁴⁴

No wonder the majority of mainland directors have been judged by the Western media, and sometimes by Western academics, to be neither interesting nor newsworthy unless caught up in censorship issues.

On the other hand, as far as film audiences are concerned, Western fascination with Chinese film may also be explained in so-called 'poetic' or 'aesthetic' terms. This is evident from reviews in American newspapers and magazines. A *New York Times* review, for instance, piques curiosity with such phrases as "lushly pictorial" scenes, the "unleashed erotic energy" and "sexual ecstasy" to describe *Red Firecracker*.⁴⁵ Phrases like these direct Western audiences to a particular type of ethnic or ethnographic element in Chinese films. If we examine those Chinese films that have won major international awards in recent years, we can see a narrative

⁴³ See Chris Berry, "Zhang Yuan: Thriving in the Face of Adversity," *Cinemaya* 32 (Spring: 1996, 40-4).

⁴⁴ Chris Berry, "Staging gay Life in China: *East Palace, West Palace*," *Jump Cut* 42 (1998, 84).

⁴⁵ Stephen Holden, "Erotic Energy and Social Disorder," *New York Times* (1995, March 17).

pattern gradually taking shape. From Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou*, Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* and *Eat Drink Man Woman*, to Chen Kaige's *Farwell My Concubine* and *Tempress Moon*, oriental *ars erotica* as mystified entity is at the very center of Western fascination. The fact that such fascination is deliberately cultivated by the Western media is illustrated by one report from Taiwan: "A line in *The Wedding banquet*, '5,000 years of Chinese sexual repression', was played up by the British critic Tony Rayns, attracting the attention of people in and outside the film industry."⁴⁶ As a result, when the film "was first shown in Berlin, all 2,000 seats of the hall were occupied and when it was over, Ang Lee and the actors had to come out for curtain calls five times."⁴⁷

Festival-going-films are fascinating because they problematize the superficial notions of oppositional alterity --- particularly the notion of a distinct, unquestionable nationality --- that have for so long dominated the way we think about 'Chineseness' in relation to the Western world. Most of those films are trying very hard to make their way to foreign audiences primarily by means of visual beauty. As Chow elaborates:

From Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* (1984) to Tian Zhuangzhuang's *Horse Thief* (1986), to Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum*, *Judou*, and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), we see that contemporary Chinese directors are so fascinated by the possibilities of cinematic experimentation that even when their subject matter

⁴⁶ Teng Sue-feng, "The Wedding Banquet for Chinese films from both sides of Taiwan Strait?" *Sinorama* (May, 1993, 32-40).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

includes --- and it usually is [sic]/does? --- oppression, contamination, rural backwardness and the persistence of feudal values, such subject matter is presented with stunning sensuous qualities.⁴⁸

The serious subject matter with their sensuously visual pleasure can help us understand the attitude of Western festival-goers towards those films. In a sense, the festival-going films are like aboriginal exhibitions in a Western art market. The possible buyers are those who want to see exotic objects. If by chance they see only their own copied images, they will get upset and think the object is not worth their attention and money. In order to meet the demands of festival-goers, Chinese filmmakers have to subalternize their own works for a good foreign market. And by doing this, they could acquire financial support and critical acclaim abroad and then turning back towards the domestic market with a good price.⁴⁹

To this extent, it seems that those “sensuous qualities” is something additional which the film can do without. But as Chow argues,

What contemporary Chinese films demonstrate, however, is that packaging is now an inherent part of cultural production. Even the most gruesome story needs to be shot exquisitely to vie for attention in metropolitan markets.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Rey Chow, “Digging an Old Well: the Labor of Social Fantasy in a Contemporary Chinese film,” *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, 403).

⁴⁹ Chinese authorities only tighten the screws on dissenting political views held by independent or international-festival-going films by completely forbidding them in the cinema, such as *Summer Palace*, but you can still watch it on DVD or download it from or watch it on the internet. But for other dissenting themes, such as homosexuality, they can put up with them like a game of cat and mouse depending on the overall political situation.

⁵⁰ Rey Chow, “Digging an Old Well: the Labor of Social Fantasy in a Contemporary Chinese film,” *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (New York: Oxford University Press,

Following this argument, we need to redefine cultural identity such as ‘Chineseness’ to explain this phenomenon. My aim is to show how Chinese festival-going films operate within a global distribution system for the purpose of preserving its power over the identity of Chineseness and legitimizing and reinforcing themselves outside territorial terrain. I argue that Chinese film’s pliability to the flexible nature of the global cultural system signals a departure from its position as a single geographically-restricted entity. It employs a new type of ideology of ethnic nationalism to engage in a single but geographically dispersed project. The only result is that the traditional Chinese culture is trans-culturalized.⁵¹

But the process of modernization is inevitable because modernizing culture is more powerful than traditional culture. In order to maintain attention during this process, for most of the times, difference must be repressed, whether physically or spiritually. Representation of a particular culture can be seen as an encounter between thought and what forces it into action. Furthermore, since thought cannot activate itself as a representation, it must suffer coercion if it is to awaken and move. Art, science, and philosophy deploy such powerful coercions insofar as they are transformative and experimental. As long as the modern way of thinking continues, the modern practice does not seem to lose its bearings as long as it maintains order by repressing different voices. Yet there is something about the contemporary form of difference, it is thought of as a productive means rather than a rejection of identity,

2000, 403).

⁵¹ Here I use the term “trans-culturalized” rather than “self-orientalized” because those directors like Zhang Yimou only “trans-culturalized” some elements of traditional Chinese culture to cater for their Western critics or audiences, rather than utilized oriental views proposed by Western critics in his films.

which is an indication of postmodernism in philosophy. In this sense, difference is the only way of displaying a culture. As Zygmunt Bauman describes it, this new form of difference is characterized by its “weak, slack and underpowered institutionalization” and its “resulting elusiveness, pliability and short life-span.”⁵² Bauman further points out that the problem of a stable identity “arises mostly from the difficulty of holding on to any identity for long”, the only result of which is a state of fluidity. Following this argument, the defining feature of identity resembles that of art works and artistic representation as well. Borrowing Bauman’s words again, it is reasonable to say that:

The world ‘out there’ appears to the individual as a game, or rather a series of finite, episodic games, with no definite sequence and with consequences not necessarily binding the games that follow; and a game in which the world itself is one of the players rather than the ultimate law-giver or umpire; and a player who, just like the rest of the players, keeps his cards close to his chest and adores the surprise moves.⁵³

In addition, any move against this argument focuses upon the space and time in which the formal unity of subjective consciousness is established. Under the postmodern condition, difference re-distributes intuitions of past, present, and future, breaking consciousness into multiple states not predicable of a single lasting state. Every identity is not characteristic of a single self, but of a state forever dividing itself and changing its representation. Just like Bauman’s clever analogy, the world

⁵² Zygmunt Bauman, *On Truth, Fiction and Uncertainty* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1997, 123).

⁵³ *Ibid.*

thus represented has no instructor or ultimate judge. Every player has his own way to play, and the result depends on the power and will of those players in their endless competing process.

To illustrate this point, let us turn to *Red Sorghum* again. Rather than simply focusing on the content, I want to show how this film transforms our notion of ‘Chineseness’ in cultural production. This is revealed in the wine-making scene which shows a moment of carnivalesque passions that can be briefly explained as follows: at a time of cultural crisis, an interest in the carnival arises, as Chow defines her “primitive passions”,

[...] typically involving fantasies of origin. These fantasies are played out through a generic realm of association, often having to do with the animal, the savage, the countryside, the indigenous, the people, and so forth, which stand in for that ‘original’ something that has been lost.⁵⁴

According to Chow, the fantastical origin can be now assumed to be a common source of knowledge and reference that was there prior to an identity’s existing form and, even though it is a simulacrum of the real world, it appears to be a timeless feature itself. Art mediates nature and reality and this mediation bestows upon people the ability to probe beyond the boundary of human knowledge. Thus, by opposing reality, *Red Sorghum* captures the repressed part of Chinese culture which it is deprived of in its modernization, and so indirectly makes this culture livable,

⁵⁴ Rey Chow, “Digging an Old Well: the Labor of Social Fantasy in a Contemporary Chinese film,” *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, 414).

protecting it against the consequences of its self-destructing tendency. Although the visual perception obtained in this scene is not the truth itself, it already opens a different revelation, which naturally leads to a realistic or truthful aspect of life. In *Red Sorghum*, these aspects of life are not isolated units; rather, they are often linked to China's adaptability to the flexible nature of the global cultural system. With the wine-making scene comes the possibility of experimenting with colors as part of the visual language of the film, and it is in such visual aspects that the historical conditions of Chinese cultural production are most definitely truthful, not because it reveals 'China' as such, but because it implies that which is not absolutely 'Chinese'.

Postmodern Vision: Plurality of Truths

Red Sorghum breaks a lot of boundaries and principles, moral and cinematic, in a Chinese context where the two are usually bond closely together. It tells a story of the narrator's grandparents, whose bravery and lifestyle subvert traditional ethical codes such as virtuous morality and heroism. For a Chinese film, as Wang had it, a narrative directly addressing issues of violence, sexuality, and transgression is itself already a transgression, even in a period of opening up to the outside world. The film could be enjoyed for its beauty of visual representation without the need to fall into moral and political speculation, though the underlying messages are already buried within them. *Red Sorghum* is therefore a reconstruction of the repressed history of China. This observation seems to be supported by director Zhang Yimou's own statement in an interview, "My personality is quite the contrary to the mood of the film. I have long

been repressed, restrained, enclosed and introspective. Once I had a chance to make a film on my own, I wanted to make it liberated.”⁵⁵ Therefore it is no surprise to see that “my grandpa” and “my grandma” are rebellious to the traditional moral standards and change their lives in the winery factory into a world free of any repressions.

The expectation of Western-festival-goers is indeed fulfilled by *Red Sorghum*, where they can see repressed feelings behind a conservative culture. But the culture thus presented is not the objective representation of that original one, because the film only releases a repressed text long contained in its communication with others. Thus it is reasonable to say that

Red Sorghum and many other culturally specific texts do not reflect the appearance of a culture; they mirror what the actual landscape lacks. They reflect fantasies and imagined memories which society expels. Any attempt to picture the Chinese cultural scene from this film requires an imaginative approach in the same way one infers an image from a film negative.⁵⁶

With this film, Zhang Yimou bespeaks the experience of a generation who grew up in the shadow of a totalitarian culture --- that most radical and therefore the most sinister embodiment of the modern dream of pure order and orderly purity I mentioned in the Introduction. It was that culture, intolerant of all difference and all contingency, that saturated the fable of the film with emancipating liberating power for the sole reason of its being contingent and portraying a difference. On the other

⁵⁵ Li Xing, “Red Sorghum: A Journey to the West,” *People’s Daily*, overseas edition (14 March, 1988).

⁵⁶ Harry H. Kuoshu, *Celluloid China: Cinematic Encounters with Culture and Society* (Illinois: Southern Illinois University, 2002, 273).

hand, Zhang also speaks for a generation that grew up in the increasingly deregulated, polyphonic world of postmodernity. The film can hardly add freedom to a world already bewildered by the boundlessness of possibilities in which it itself dangles. But it may, on the contrary, offer a foothold for legs seeking in vain to find support in the quicksand of changing fashions, of identities that do not survive their own construction and of stories with no past and no consequence. It is in films that they seek the kind of certainty and intellectual security the real world cannot offer. They watch films in order to locate a shape in the shapeless heap of worldly experiences; they play a game but they play it in order to instill a sense into the disorderly multitude of worldly phenomena. They seek shelter from the angst, that deep anxiety which haunts them whenever they wish to say something about the world with certainty.

What we struggle with today, in Bauman's terms, is "not so much about the one and true (one because true) theory of truth, but about the true, and therefore one and only, theory of truths (in the plural)."⁵⁷ Truth and reality can never be delivered to human understanding if peoples around the world are independent from each other in their own particular languages, cultures and societies. All cultures must come to terms with their own versions of these distinctions in one way or another. As no truth may be considered absolute, it is impossible to obtain by human means a 'God's-eye view' from which one true meaning of a phenomenon can be derived. To take this claim even further, it seems that reaching out to trans-cultural individuals, as a way to

⁵⁷ Zygmunt Bauman, *On Truth, Fiction and Uncertainty* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1997, 116).

extend and expand the Chinese presence in the world has become an essential part of China's contemporary film project. Directors like Zhang Yimou intend to make a culturally sophisticated film that would appeal to both East and West. In this light, we can see the film *Red Sorghum* as an experiment in Zhang's trans-cultural strategy, a search to acquire a position in the highly competitive film world. Film-festival-goers should also learn to be comfortable with a variety of different truths of 'Chineseness' and move towards a togetherness in which no one dreams of thinking that God, or the God-equivalent, is on his/her side.



Chapter VI Behind the Screen: the Good is in the Future



In the early 1990s, American moralist and social critic Christopher Lasch observed: “[Western] society is no longer governed by a moral consensus.”¹ He also pointed out that the Western social order does not require “the informed consent of citizens” any more. According to Zygmunt Bauman, these two observations are intimately connected and the two phenomena they bring forward have common roots. There should be an immediate link between these two observations and a third phenomenon located on a seemingly different level of experience: “our impatience with anything that limits our sovereign freedom of choice; our preference for nonbinding commitments.”² Though operating on different soil, a new, dynamic and contemporary Chinese society greatly influenced by its Western counterparts, is catching up with the West. Although the influence of traditional beliefs is still deeply ingrained in Chinese morality, Western influences have been allowed to surface as long as they are not perceived to be a threat to the power of the Communist Party. In

¹ Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and its Critics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991, 30, 31, 34).

² *Ibid.*

agreement with Bauman, I argue that the study of postmodern morality (especially its constructing mechanism) should be “a study in the context of postmodern life and postmodern life strategies” in the East and the West. It is the guiding theme of this chapter that the roots of postmodern moral problems boil down to the fragmented nature of the social context and the contingency of life pursuits. I will choose *East Palace, West Palace* (1996) as my analyzing object as it reveals the scenario of how a marginalized gay man utilizes life strategy to quest his sexual freedom in the context of postmodern morality. But before elaborating the human psyche behind the characters’ action, let me first define what postmodern morality is.

“Well before we are taught and learn the socially constructed and socially promoted rules of proper behavior, and exhorted to follow certain patterns and to abstain from following others”, as Bauman argues, “we are already in the situation of moral choice.”³ He further explains that there is an inherent ambivalence in this moral situation, and “it would not be moral without a choice between good and evil.” So it would be safe to say that “before eating from the tree of knowledge, Adam and Eve were not moral beings, and the Garden of Eden was a place without morality.”⁴ However, living in this world, we are moral beings, whether we want to or not, reluctantly or not. We are faced with the challenge of the other, which is the challenge of responsibility for the other.

Rather than being an outcome of social arrangement and personal training,

³ Zygmunt Bauman, “Morality without Ethics,” *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1995, 1)

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

this “responsibility for” frames the primal scene from which social arrangements and personal instruction start, to which they refer and which they attempt to reframe and administer.⁵

“Responsibility for” choice, in this light, “rests fairly and squarely on the individual’s own shoulders, as do the consequences of choosing evil over good.”⁶

In pre-modern times, morality grew out of the community, within which it was a set of rules to define right and wrong behaviors. The community, its members and the rules of morality were all committed to divine God or God-equivalents. Every member occupied a fixed role in the community from which his rights and responsibility derived. The responsibility for choice rests on the member’s shoulders because it should be compatible with her or his role and rights in the community. On the other hand, moral codes derive from and are defined by this role within the community, and the responsibility for other members. The emergence of the modern world brought with it a major change that remakes the moral rules to the measure of human needs and capacities instead of being invested in God. The consequence is that morality came to be seen as belonging to the private area of the members. A new individual came into being as the outcome of the dissolution of an old community, and as an agent of that dissolution. Meanwhile, as a public discourse to prescribe the moral rules, politics became the language of individual and collective conduct. With this change, as Bauman argues, the focus of moral concern has been shifted from the

⁵ Ibid., 1.

⁶ Karyn Cooper and Robert E. White et al., *Qualitative Research in the Postmodern Era: Contexts of Qualitative Research* (New York/Heidelberg: Springer, 2011, 6).

self-scrutiny of the individual to the political undertaking of the prescriptions and proscriptions of an ethical code. The relationship between the individual and the community depended increasingly on politics rather than on moral fidelity to a God-given ethics. Thus the agony is largely gone out of the responsibility for choice, and the guilt felt for having sinned is now transformed to the forthright dilemma of obedience or disobedience to codes.

An age of post-duty comes with the dawn of postmodernism, which declines its absolute role in the field of ethics. This ethic claims that the moral subject has the right to autonomy, to happiness, and to personal fulfillment. However, this age does not suggest moral anarchy but rather redirects moral concerns through “a weak, ephemeral, painless commitment to values that do not interfere with individual freedom”:

This blend of duty and denial of duty in postmodern ethic becomes necessary because absolute individualism would destroy the conditions needed to facilitate the search for pleasure and individual fulfillment. An ethic is needed that prescribes some duties to control individualism without proscribing the same. The postmodern moral concern does not express values, but rather indignation against limitations on freedom.⁷

With imperative principles and absolute values dissipated from ethical codes, community seems to care no more what individual principles and private values one

⁷ Raúl Kerbs, “Ethics in Postmodernism,” *Dialogue: An International Journal of Faith, Thought and Action*, Universidad Adventista del Plata, Argentina, 2006.

embraces and follows. There is a tendency to forbid everything that could limit individual rights. As Steven Connor points out, however, “the lack of absolute values no more makes all other values interchangeable than the absence of an agreed gold standard makes all world currencies worth the same.”⁸ In this sense, postmodernism is an ultimate crowning of the modern dream of freedom because it disregards authoritative, unconditional values such as sacrifice to communities. Nevertheless, community does not exclude certain moral rules such as being against drugs, being good to your neighbors, protecting children, taking care of the sick, and the like.

But such a result leads us to an ambiguous morality. On the one hand, we have a moral choice without commanding ethic rules, manifested in a life of continuous uncertainty. But, on the other hand, there remains, inherent in communities a spirit of vigilance ready to denounce all attempts against human liberty and the right to individual autonomy. In this context, the new morality of postmodern life translates into demands that pull in opposite directions: “the responsibility for” choice rests again on the individual shoulders. For an individual, there are no universal ethic codes, but there is an obvious choice to take responsibilities. This moral situation, as Bauman observes,

[...] is one of inherent ambivalence, and it would not be moral without a choice between good and evil. What this new condition does make clear, however, is the prospect of a greater awareness of the moral character of our

⁸ Steven Connor, “The Necessity of Value,” *Principled Position: Postmodernism and the Rediscovery of Value*, ed. Judith Squires (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1993, 39-40).

choices; of our facing our choices more consciously and seeing their moral contents more clearly.⁹

Will this new condition make us do more good than bad? Will it make us better beings? Neither a 'yes' nor a 'no' answer can be responsibly given to such questions. At the end of our long modern march, we are returned, as far as the terms of our coexistence are concerned, to our old resources of moral sense and fellow feeling, guiding us in our daily moral choices.

If individual fulfillment is the search for autonomy, the satisfaction of immediate desire, and the control of excessive individual freedom without any moral codes, then this search is a continuation of things as they always have been: life and death, success and failure, happiness and sadness. But this search ignores what is behind individual fulfillment: the desire for something else, something different, and something that makes familiar explanations sound hollow while supplying new motifs and new futures. This chapter, through analyzing the film *East Palace, West Palace*, attempts to unravel this 'something else' in a particular time and particular part of China in its specific developmental phase. This 'something else' will be analyzed in terms of 'public discourse' by which I designate the crucial means, which individuals can utilize in a public sphere to discuss issues of mutual interest, and through that discussion influence each other's action. The public sphere can be seen as "a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through

⁹ Zygmunt Bauman, "Morality without Ethics," *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1995, 7)

the medium of talk”¹⁰ and a realm of performance in which a greater social visibility or power can “disseminate more widely than others”.¹¹ Living in this world, each of us is born into a certain public sphere that determines how we should think before we start thinking ourselves, what we are to see before we begin to look, what we are to say before we learn to speak, what we should deem important before we start weighing things against each other, and how we are to conduct ourselves before we start pondering our choices. Thus, in order to know what we are, we must understand and consciously study that culture to determine why it no longer keeps our moral identity intact and waterproof.

Access to Public Discourse

Hailed by Western critics¹² as the first Mainland Chinese film to deal openly with the subject of homosexuality, *East Palace, West Palace* angered official censors and provoked the authorities to ban the film and its director from that year’s Cannes Film Festival. Most critics¹³ abroad would say that the Chinese government made a mistake and that directors should determine a film’s subject. In the mainstream ideology of China in 1990s, it is immoral or wrong to talk about or describe homosexuality in literary works or films. It is also not politically right in the eyes of

¹⁰ Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text*, No. 25/26 (Duke University Press, 1990, 56–80).

¹¹ Chris Berry, “*East Palace, West Palace*: Staging Gay Life in China,” *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, No. 42 (December 1998, 87). By defining “the idea of public”, Berry “suggests that some spaces of performance have a greater social visibility and hence a greater power to disseminate more widely than others. Access to public performance may be limited or facilitated by social power structures.”

¹² See, for example, Kevin Lally’s “*East Palace, West Palace*,” *Film Journal International* (Nov. 2, 2004).

¹³ See, for example, Dennis Schwartz’s “The Chinese authorities were not pleased with this work, supposedly the first openly gay film to come out of Red China,” *Ozus’ World Movie Reviews*, June 28, 2008.

(<http://homepages.erver.net/~ozus/eastpalacewestpalace.htm>)

most Chinese audiences, at least this is what the authorities in China claim. So it is no surprise to see that A Lan is forced to squat in the police station, while the officer Shi is trying to cure him from his immoral wrong thinking and behavior. However, in many writings from the past and in some today, no clear distinction is made between the social, political and legal definitions of right and wrong. This is not only due to weak thinking patterns, the borders between these meanings are vague and some attempts to make sharp distinctions have slowed down the development of understanding. “Right in the sense of good”, as Donald M. Broom argues, “should not be confused with right in the sense of correct. It is correct to say that sugar will dissolve in water but the statement is not good or morally right.”¹⁴ But, as Broom further states, even after this difference is made clear, in a moral sense the terms right and good remain complicated.

When referring to the term ‘good’, we have to make sure whether it is good for an individual or a collective. Lawrence A. Blum, a moral philosopher, refers to good as universal if it is “something which everyone ought to perform, or which it would be wrong not to perform.”¹⁵ The good of an individual may coincide with this argument, but not always. This is the case because individual interests are usually placed at variance with the public good, and from their infancy, the Chinese are purposely instructed to sacrifice our well-being to the progress and prosperity of national interests. Such are the means by which traditional society seeks to obtain the desired

¹⁴ Donald M. Broom, *The Evolution of Morality and Religion* (Cambridge: The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 2003, 115).

¹⁵ Lawrence A. Blum, *Friendship, Altruism and Morality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980, 96).

effects of its individual subjects. As can be seen in the film, A Lan tells Shi that he was once taken to a hospital to be cured from being gay, as he was forced to watch morally right heterosexual films. But it has been a received opinion that an individual can provide something better for himself, and more advantageously for the public, when left to his own individual choices. This evaluation system clearly combines the quality of an individual and universal aspect together. It is clear that there are many different kinds of good, even if there are underlying principles that drive many of them. In order to understand this mechanism, I will focus on the performativity of good and bad, right and wrong in terms of morality in the following paragraphs.

Based on Wang Xiaobo's novel, primarily a psychological drama, *East Palace, West Palace* is a verbal cat-and-mouse game played between the gay writer A Lan (Shi Hui) and the straight policeman Shi (Hu Jun) who arrests and interrogates him. They spend a long, dark night together, during which each challenges the other's sexuality. The opening scene and tracking shots set up the atmosphere of a Chinese-style park, which is a favored spot for Beijing gays. Investigating on couples in the bushes one night, a group of police officers separate and question their targets. While being led away, A Lan brushes a quick kiss on Shi's cheek and later sends a book as a gift (inscribed "To my loved one: Shi") to the police station. More intrigued than disturbed, Shi enters the park one night to find A Lan in the arms of a nightly pickup. Dragging A Lan back to the police station, Shi starts playing psychological games with the unashamed young man, interrogating him about his sexual inclination like a cat pawing a wounded mouse. A Lan's homosexual history is revealed through

flashbacks as he recounts his formative encounters as a youth: a romantic infatuation with a schoolgirl that led nowhere (apart from his growing identification with women), and several homosexual experiences in which he always took a submissive role. Whether the events actually took place is left to interpretation, but it soon becomes clear that A Lan is deliberately provoking the officer to take on the role of the brutish lovers he describes by openly challenging his narrow-minded view of male sexuality. Shi is angered by A Lan's words and finally drags him to an abandoned building to "cure" his "sickness" by physical means.

East Palace, West Palace does not provide a full representation of the existence of homosexuals in the 1990s, nor does it give an account of gay life in China at that time. It is a film set in a particular location that concentrates on the two protagonists A Lan and Shi, along with the erotic tension and power play between them. There is none of the emotional indulgence that marked Zhang's earlier films such as the aimless youth drama *Beijing Bastards* (1993) and the dysfunctional-family portrait in *Sons* (1995). However, for Western audiences, the treatment of the subject of homosexuality recalls films like *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1967) directed by John Huston, in which gay emotions are associated with masochistic impulses and inner anguish. Though A Lan repeatedly denies the officer's description of his homosexuality as a disease or aberration, the film does not make a very convincing case for him; he finally resorts to women's clothing and lipstick to provoke Shi's machismo. This may well be an accurate description of the gay plight in contemporary China, but will likely leave more liberated Western observers feeling

uneasy. Officer Shi's heterosexuality is never doubted, thereby making A Lan's seduction little more than a hopeless attempt from the start. In fact, the film looks like "a psychological tennis match that ends in a draw, with each staying safely on his side of the net. Per the film's title, east is east and west is west, and never the twain shall meet."¹⁶

Compared to Zhang's previous work, what this film draws particular attention to is the immense difficulty in pressing the lives and lifestyles of Chinese homosexuals into the public discourse. In an interview with Zhang, Chris Berry remarked that in focusing on midnight cruising, bathroom sex, masochism, cross-gender identification and run-ins with the authority, *East Palace, West Palace* is completely different from cozy homosexual films like Ang Lee's *Wedding Banquet* (1993) and might be seen as portraying a negative image of homosexuality. Zhang responded as follows:

I believe this dramatic situation and these characters are a true expression of the current circumstances gays in China live under. I interviewed many, many people, including my own friends and also sociologists who have carried out investigations of gay life in China and AIDS researchers. All the stories I heard, including those from the gay community itself, were bound by circumstances of oppression, discrimination and control. In China today, there is no visible gay culture, and no one understands gay people. It is very hard to find any gay friends who are living a happy, well-adjusted life under these

¹⁶ Derek Elley, "Film Review: *East Palace, West Palace*," *Variety* (May 17, 1997).

circumstances, and in fact I cannot think of anyone I know like that.¹⁷

In Berry's assessment, this circumstance and Zhang's way of dealing with the topic in *East Palace, West Palace* highlight the fact that his film is not so much about myriad ways of depicting homosexual identities, but rather the question of how they can be depicted at all.

In light of this, I will analyze *East Palace, West Palace* and China's emergent homosexual culture by examining the connection between Zhang's interest in highlighting and blurring the boundary between private choice and public discourse. During the interrogation, we do not know who really holds the power in their relationship between A Lan and Officer Shi. A Lan integrates elements of authority, suffering and discipline into his recounting of his erotic past. It is A Lan who achieves victory at last, thus subverting the questioner's macho posturing and his role as an authority figure. We never know in advance the result of the goings-on between private choice and public discourse. Every individual has his own rights to create a private sphere in which he is safe and at ease. Unexpected consequences flow from the private choices and mediations of individuals as they wrestle with each other about moral codes or other philosophical questions in a public sphere. Considering this film, the public sphere can be seen as a performance space confined by what we know as normal in a mutually constitutive manner while private choice is acting abnormally within this space.

As Berry points out that "being is based on the kind of doing that acting is", and

¹⁷ Chris Berry, "East Palace, West Palace: Staging Gay Life in China," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, No. 42 (December 1998, 84-89).

that some existing social identities can be seen as performed or constructed on exceptional instances of their perversion “in order to construct different identities and undermine seemingly natural givens.”¹⁸ Berry’s idea goes beyond the field of performativity, and it seems to be matched with Judith Butler’s theory of “performance” which implies a “bounded act” consciously chosen by a human subject.¹⁹ To set up this theoretical framework, I take my cue from the theory of the performativity as interpreted by Derrida, and then to the theory of performance articulated by Berry and Butler. In what follows, I will use this theory of ‘performance’ to identify some of the features of *East Palace, West Palace* that emphasize the way that “being is based on the kind of doing that acting” encompasses.

In analyzing *East Palace, West Palace*, my emphasis will lie more on A Lan’s access to public discourse and his ability to find a way to perform himself in the public sphere. For Berry, this film not only represents the homosexual community and “other social minorities”, but also generalized contemporary social conditions in China as the product of the contradictions covering social-grouping mechanisms. Those repressed groups successfully constructed their own discourse after the relaxing of central control, which is different from the official and free-market discourses. The significance of those subaltern groups is their ability to open up symbolic contestation in the public sphere. Considered as cultural products, early

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Judith Butler, “Gender as Performance: An Interview with Judith Butler,” *Radical Philosophy* 67 (1994, 33).

independent films in China become the focus of the public sphere because they can reach a large audience and therefore make their voices more audible.²⁰ However, the dominant official ideology does not like their wide dissemination and tries very hard to set a limit to it. Consequently, independent films were only regarded as an avant-garde artistic form and circulated in a very small group. Some independent filmmakers such as Zhang Yuan have to return to the state-controlled studios to make a living and prepare themselves for their next movie.

As Berry states, ‘public discourse’ indicates that some spaces of performance have a greater power to exert themselves more widely than others. ‘Access to public discourse’ can be explained in terms of social power structures, because it is a property of relations between different social groups in a particular society. Originally written as a stage play, *East Palace, West Palace* maintains much of its dramatic feel and relies almost entirely on the performances of A Lan and Shi. Shi treats A Lan with unconcerned brutality earlier in the film, making him squat on the floor and scolding him harshly. But as time goes on, he becomes increasingly interested in A Lan and wants to know more about him. As a police officer, he questions A Lan about his sexual tendency in a professional way, but in reality there is something more behind it. As the film progresses, he addresses A Lan less as a criminal and more as a charming man, and then almost as a lover. Through this seductive and erotic verbal battle, the social role of A Lan has been shifted from the captive to the captor and

²⁰ Although those independent films are produced underground, they have risen to the ground later because the government also welcomed them to show its tolerance, and the audience hoped to watch their new style and daring themes in cinemas. Their widespread availability on DVD/VCD and in the internet also helped a lot in the circulation of those films.

vice versa for Shi.

A Lan goes on giving details about his relationship with his mother, and recalls the time when he was beaten up by a gang of mine workers right after having had sexual intercourse with their boss, who actually arranged the beating due to his own feelings of shame. A Lan puts his favorite lovers in his diary, which weaves throughout his narrative a traditional opera story about a female thief who falls in love with a prison guard. This fragment of opera implies not only A Lan's attraction to Shi but also his fate as a gay man in a society where homosexuality is regarded as immoral. In the imagined opera world, the captive falls in love with her captor even though she might die for this love. A Lan is also in love with Shi, even though he knows this love will cause great suffering. However, the longer the confession goes on, the more Shi falls under A Lan's spell. At times, A Lan's stories intrude into reality and vice versa, with Shi unconsciously feeding the illusions or acting out part of the story. Shi's attitude shifts from initial repulsion to fascination and, finally, to sexual attraction. He lets A Lan go free, but A Lan refuses to leave and tells Shi that he has loved him at first sight. To explain this cat-and-mouse relationship, I follow Berry's argument:

He [A Lan] uses these rare circumstances that allow gay Chinese men to achieve a certain public visibility to perform his role differently and perversely. He insists on using the confession not as a space to denigrate or incriminate himself, but as a mechanism to tell his story and state his case, insisting that his masochistic gay engagements are love and that the

policeman stop calling them disgusting.²¹

Confused by his own feelings and desperate to deny his homosexual inclination, Shi tries to re-gender A Lan by clothing him as a woman. When this doesn't work, Shi resorts to physical violence, thus becomes the prison guard himself. As Berry emphasizes, A Lan's performative perversity not only "reconstructs and re-signifies his own identity differently", but also reveals the mechanism of that attempt "to seek out and obtain access to public discourse."²² But this attempt seems not promising since A Lan's fantasies of love lead nowhere at the end of the film.

This mechanism is realized through an "enunciative system"²³ that allows a gay voice to obtain access to public discourse. Under the influence of structural linguistics, enunciation has come to signify the constitution of subject relations in film theory. It refers to "the ways in which the speaker or narrator inscribes him- or herself in the message, mainly through pronouns such as 'I' or 'me'...thus offering a certain mode of address to the spectator."²⁴ The example of Shi as interrogator and A Lan as interrogated suggests that an immediate exercise of power is about to occur. Within this scene, A Lan shifts the power order by situating himself as the first-person narrator. Nothing of Shi's sexual identity is revealed; and he recoils repeatedly from his own attraction to A Lan, shouting, "you're despicable", or, "you're sick".

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Cui Shuqin also discussed this enunciative system in terms of "I" speaker in her article about this film. For details, see Cui Shuqin, "Working from the Margins," *Chinese-Language Film: Historiography, Poetics, Politics*, ed. Sheldon H. Lu and Emilie Yuen-Yu Yeh (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005, 107).

²⁴ Robert Stam, Robert Burgoyne, and Sandy Fliterman-Lewis, *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics* (London: Routledge, 1992, 107).

But A Lan, who has known since childhood that he was gay, tells Shi that he has been sent away by the government for cures that never worked. “I am a gay,” A Lan intra-diegetically addresses himself directly and subjectively to Shi and extra-diegetically to the audience. The intra-diegetic address can be regarded as one addressed to someone within the film, and the extra-diegetic address can be regarded as the address of the director towards the audience. As a function of narration, an extra-diegetic address can mediate the psychological distance between the character and the audience, which will create an imaginary space for the audience to gain social signification and to associate the film text with social context. Forced to continue, A Lan expresses his anger at the official suppression: “we are forced to participate in the treatment”. By shifting his complicated relationship with the police officer from the governed to the governor, the first-person narrator successfully opens up a subversive force within the public sphere.

With the confession scene, the well-balanced power relationship between A Lan and Shi again twists. This far, Shi has denied A Lan’s gay identity, but he cannot resist his emotional involvement with him anymore. The film comes towards its highpoint, revealing that Shi’s mind is in turmoil. Nonetheless, this narrative movement entails a rethinking of exactly whose dilemma is being spread out across the film’s plot. At first, it seems that A Lan is the focus, yet when the interrogation goes on, Shi’s dilemma catches our attention. Shi has to face the question of whether or not he should accept A Lan’s gay identity. For Shi, A Lan’s identity is abnormal, as it cannot be socially accepted. At the same time, Shi cannot deny the attraction of this

homosexual identity because he feels love for A Lan. Before the end of his confession, A Lan interrogates Shi's true feeling; "you have asked me many things tonight. Why not ask yourself?" As the dominant power shifts from Shi to A Lan, it generates a chain of other changes: the interrogator into the interrogated and the unspeakable gay experience turns into public discourse.

The cinematic transgression also shows how much power changes a seemingly static scene can bring. When the camera moves up to the feminine A Lan, his passionate love flows on the screen, reaching the public sphere created in the film. This scene is very powerful because before that moment A Lan's imaginary love only happens in his private sphere. From that moment on, A Lan's love occurs not in his own private sphere, but in the public sphere with Shi as well. Thus the narrative of repressed homosexual love becomes a public discourse. As the boundary between private sphere and public sphere cannot exist anymore, the signification of both is subverted. In addition, because Zhang here utilizes a moderate cinematic style, as opposed to the previous bright lighting on A Lan, it can be said that although this shift to public discourse is unexpected, it elaborates very clearly how A Lan's gay love now emerges into the public sphere. To offer another example, the illusionary lighting of A Lan's flashback foregrounding a visionary atmosphere implies his private sphere, which is often displayed in over-exposed lighting with a symbolic voice-over. The obviously dramatic story of the Peking Opera often breaks into A Lan's narrative and helps blur the boundary between public sphere and his private sphere. When A Lan slowly settles into his own imaginary role as a passionate female prisoner with his

reminiscences, Shi warns him: “Have you forgotten where you are? You’re getting out of line.” Shi’s reminder clearly shows that, for him, the public sphere where he is in is a real world in which A Lan’s gay life is not permitted. In this respect, *East Palace, West Palace* cinematically reveals the confrontation and interaction between the gay voice and the real situation of homosexual life behind the screen in China.

According to Chris Berry, the question of access to, and utilization of public discourse is relevant in any society, but I think it is especially suitable in analyzing Chinese social-grouping mechanisms because there are few discursive spaces in China for marginalized groups to take part in. In the West, the significance of a repressed private sphere is often manifested through its relationship with the dominant public sphere, which will display their interaction publicly in the tolerant societies. However, China does not fit this model since, due to the strong control of the central government, there is no obvious in-between space between private and public sphere. As Berry points out, the most difficult question is whether the authorities allow those social minorities to “make themselves visible”:

Although there are many stories recorded about gays in Chinese culture, after the Liberation of 1949 and especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), the very word “homosexual” disappeared from all newspapers, books, and even public discussion.²⁵

As one of the most popular cultural forms, Chinese films hold a problematic status:

²⁵ Chris Berry, “*East Palace, West Palace: Staging Gay Life in China*,” *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, No. 42 (December 1998, 84-89).

they are illuminating, while at the same time there exists a power relation between the state and the people, between the rigid ideology and the emerging civil society.

Although the film industry began its commercial turn in the late 1980s, the central studio system continued its control of film content. Therefore, as Berry argues, “the problem of visibility is something that affects not only homosexuals but also many other social groups in China.”²⁶ Zhang Yuan, who graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in 1989, could not make his own films due to financial reasons. In addition, he wanted to make personalized films different from his predecessors. As a matter of necessity, independent filmmaking is a way out for him and his fellow filmmakers, as they can obtain funding and recognition through international channels. Although those young directors differ from each other in themes and styles, they have one thing in common: they want to tell their own story from their own perspectives, free from content regulations and official censorship. The worlds depicted in their films are no longer traumatic histories and national narratives, but a representation of contemporary urban life of those who live outside of mainstream society. Although they can publicly release their films, they can only gain low box office due to their avant-garde style and story lines.²⁷ Those film directors have been described by scholars as China’s ‘Sixth Generation’, although they would prefer to be treated separately.

Meanwhile, the government still wants to tightly control film contents through the

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ For the introduction of China’s Sixth Generation director, see “China Focus: China’s Sixth Generation” directors surface,” *People’s Daily Online* (June 12, 2005). (http://en.people.cn/200506/12/eng20050612_189841.html)

censorship system, which stipulates that all the scripts must pass censorship before they can be shot, and all the finished films, no matter where the funding comes from, must pass censorship again before their release. Independent films or banned films are those produced out of such a strict system. Ironically, the international distribution of those films depends on the official sanction, which will make them internationally well known. This twisted mechanism provides a living space for independent films: they can get access to public discourse, no matter where it is, domestic or abroad. Such a power competition reveals an ongoing contest: officially controlled discourse propagandizes patriotic films and forbids the dissemination of uncensored ones, while marginal discourse utters its own voice by gaining financial support from the West. The more international recognition independent films obtain, the more annoying they are for the officials. Consequently, film critics have to struggle with these two discourses and try to work out their own judgment about the quality of those films. However, those independent directors have their own problems: their films cannot reach the domestic audience in China at the moment when they are finished.²⁸ That explains why Zhang Yuan and a few other filmmakers return to the state-owned studios to make less marginalized films. This dilemma is also revealed in the last scene of the film. After A Lan cries out his love for Shi, the police officer forcefully clothes him as a transvestite. However, Shi cannot look directly into A Lan's eyes because he knows that is not what he desires. Lost in his thoughts, he walks away from the camera, leaving the scenery park, which was the emperor's park

²⁸ For a detailed discussion of the situation of independent films in China, see Zhang Weiyu, "Constructing and Disseminating Subaltern Public Discourse in China," *Javnost-The Public*, vol. 13 No. 2 (2006, 41-64).

in the past. Shi realizes at that moment that no one can leave this place wherever they are going, east or west.

‘Something’ behind Gay Discourse

East Palace, West Palace is a film that is immeasurably devalued, indeed misunderstood, if it is solely considered a gay film. Undoubtedly, the film explores issues relevant to gay experience, but that is the first and indeed the most superficial layer. There are many more layers to explore. In its political context, it reflects a society in transition and explores the constitutions of power, of state machinery and how institutions and ideologies dehumanize individuals including both victims and perpetrators. It has moments of lyrical and almost escapist beauty, leaving no room for the claustrophobia that a simple plot and closet could easily have provoked. As the story builds, the film undergoes sudden shifts, rising above comment on the politics of desire. Instead, it begins to highlight the politics of politics itself. The power relationships debated in that one night at the police station have much more to do with the power of self-expression and the power to identify oneself, than with the power to cruise in parks. In a lot of films depicting marginalization, all groups are affected because of their predetermined social roles in a community. But in *East Palace, West Palace*, there is no real distinction between the governing and the governed, the loving and the loved.

East Palace, West Palace frees the gay voice into the public sphere, but Zhang himself is not gay, though he has many homosexual friends, and in fact his wife

helped him a lot in writing the film script. So, in an interview with Chris Berry, when answering a question concerning his interest in the homosexual topic, Zhang noted:

[M]any of my films are concerned with minorities living on the margins of society. *Mama* (1990) looked at the disabled, *Beijing Bastards* (1992) examined the rock music subculture, and *Sons* (1995) focused on alcoholism and unemployment.²⁹

Since China's opening-up to the outside world, many people are marginalized because they lack choices and resources such as power and money. Many films of the Sixth Generation have told the stories of those people in order to stimulate society to acknowledge their existence and help them gain recognition. As a director whose film cannot be openly released, Zhang thinks of his situation as those of the marginalized groups. Although there is no legal discrimination against homosexuality, government tolerance in China has clear and strict limits. Homosexual publications and films are banned, and those who try to utter their own voices sometimes face harassment from the policemen, which can also be seen in the opening scene of *East Palace, West Palace*. When the story begins, A Lan and other gay men cruise in the park and public toilets near the Forbidden City. However, the local policemen regularly raid the park and arrest them for hooliganism. They charge the suspects with disrupting moral codes and usually beat them before letting them go.

Zhang builds his story around a gay discourse, which serves to display a sense of homosexuality, which at first is literal. But the film slowly develops into an

²⁹ Ibid.

increasingly elaborate manifestation of political power and control, which occurs in a tightly controlled and ideologically closed society. This transformation of a seemingly simple homosexual plot into a complex commentary about a changing society seems lost on most Chinese audiences. But it was certainly not lost on the Chinese authorities, which was the reason why they disliked it. They even confiscated Zhang's passport in 1994 with the purpose of preventing him from attending more Western film festivals. When asked by Berry why the authorities had not shunned him completely, Zhang joked, "That's quite natural. I love my country and I love the Party, just like A Lan in my film loves that policeman."³⁰ What kind of love does this statement reveal? There is an interpretive course through which we can relate Zhang's love for his country to A Lan's Love for the policeman. As Berry notes:

A Lan compares himself to a female thief in a Peking Opera. As the policeman naps, A Lan stands over him, saying, "The convict loves her executioner. The thief loves her jail keeper. We love you, we have no other choice." Toward the end of the film, A Lan repeats the same lines to the now conscious Shi, adding, "I love you. Why don't you love me?"³¹

Reflecting on this statement, the extent of independence that Zhang might achieve remains highly questionable. *East Palace, West Palace* was invited for the 1997 Cannes Film Festival, but Zhang cannot depend entirely on foreign acknowledgement. In fact, Zhang has tried very hard for survival both at home and abroad by seeking

³⁰ Chris Berry, "East Palace, West Palace: Staging Gay Life in China," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, No. 42 (December 1998, 84-89).

³¹ *Ibid.*

official permission and financing to finish his new films. In this sense, this film cannot serve as an absolute means of seeking artistic autonomy, but a strategic way of obtaining recognition in the public sphere of contemporary China.

As a pioneer of independent film directors, Zhang Yuan has become adept at dealing with official restrictions. By acquiring financing from the West, Zhang has been able to produce several films such as *Beijing Bastard* (1992) and *The Square* (1994, co-directed with Duan Jinchuan). The latter is a documentary film, recording a day in Tiananmen Square five years after the 1989 political protest. In another interview with Berry, Zhang noted that he saw Tiananmen Square as “one giant stage” which pushed him to “pick up my camera and record some of those more interesting people and attempt to capture the feeling of the square.”³² A few years later, when Berry reminded him of this documentary style in *East Palace, West Palace*, Zhang elaborated on this idea by saying the following:

If you want to say I strive for the authentic in my films, that authenticity has two aspects to it. One side is realism, and the other side is subjective truth. In *The Square* and *Beijing Bastards* I leaned more towards realism, but I think that in *Mama* and *Sons* I leaned more towards my own subjective truth. Actually, all of my films have a tension between the subjective and the objective, and in *East Palace, West Palace*, my subjectivity has been particularly strong.³³

³² Chris Berry, “Zhang Yuan: Thriving in the Face of Adversity,” *Cinemaya* 32 (Spring 1996, 40-43).

³³ Chris Berry, “*East Palace, West Palace*: Staging Gay Life in China,” *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 42 (December 1998, 84-89).

Of course, the authorities do not like his subjective truth. Zhang was officially banned from filmmaking in 1994 by the government for disseminating “spiritual pollution”.³⁴ Two years after the ban was implemented, Zhang produced his next controversial work *East Palace, West Palace*. But before returning to the function of its gay discourse, I want to shed some light on *Beijing Bastards* because it offers the first representation of the ‘hooligan’ culture in China.

In a documentary style, the film presents the subculture of seemingly aimless young people in Beijing, and the ways in which Western-style rock music fits into that subculture. As the market economy began its competition with the ideology of state control, the authorities realized that in order to maintain its power, they would have to adapt to the new situation. *Beijing Bastards* received funding from the Netherlands and the film’s producers included not only Chinese artists like Zhang Yuan and Cui Jian, but also Shu Kei from Hong Kong and Chris Doyle from Australia. As Paul Pickowicz argued at that time, this strategy indicated that

[t]he film’s creators took advantage of the policy allowing artists to seek overseas funding for projects that were either too expensive or too thematically audacious for the state’s cultural/industrial mechanism. In the case of *Beijing Bastards*, the impetus was definitely the latter, as the production budget was minimal. The film’s matter-of-fact, non-judgmental

³⁴ Michel Oksenberg, Lawrence R. Sullivan, and Marc Lambert, eds. *Beijing Spring, 1989: Confrontation and Conflict: The Basic Documents* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1990, 401).

portrayal of liumang [hooligan] culture definitely did not fit within the parameters of officially sanctioned moral or political correctness.³⁵

Actually, as Shanon May points out, by taking the name of *Beijing Bastards*, Zhang may imply that he himself as well as his work is “illegitimate but unwilling-to-be-denied offspring of Beijing”.³⁶ According to May, this title further suggests that Zhang and the narrative enclosed in his film are not only bastard sons of the nation, but of the rigid cultural policy as well. Zhang thus creates a fissure rending its way through the film censorship system, which reaches its climax four years later in *East Palace, West Palace*. In this film, Zhang not only broke the taboo against homosexuality, but also the official ban against his filmmaking.

In *East Palace, West Palace*, Shi cannot deny the reality of A Lan’s gay identity because he feels love for A Lan. Then how can Shi answer A Lan’s confronting question “You have asked me many things tonight. Why not ask yourself?” As the film’s director, Zhang has invested many personal experiences in the story. As such, he seems to have already given an answer on behalf of Shi, even though Zhang’s status in the film industry is closer to A Lan’s status than to Shi’s. In an interview with May, Zhang emphasizes the persecution and discrimination that gay men may face:

[W]hen I first began the script, there were a lot of characters: policemen,

³⁵ Paul Pickowicz, “Velvet Prisons and the Political Economy of Chinese filmmaking,” *Urban Spaces in Contemporary China: the Potential for Autonomy and Community in Post-Mao China*, ed. Deborah S. Davis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 193-220).

³⁶ Shanon May, “Power and Trauma in Chinese Film: Experiences of Zhang Yuan and the Sixth Generation,” *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society* 8, No. 1 (Spring 2003, 156-160).

sociologists, gay men. As I wrote, I found the key to all this was power, and the connection between sex and power. Why did the police have the power to make these people talk about their lives? Why would the gay men reveal their private lives to the police?³⁷

As we can see in the film, there are only two protagonists in the final script: the gay A Lan and the policeman Shi. Zhang made it clear during the interview that while on the surface the film presents the sexually charged verbal interplay between a gay man and a police officer, the signification of the film runs far deeper than that. When A Lan and other gay men are rounded up, all of them try to flee from submitting to the usual moralistic instruction, which is framed in a programmatic language stating what is right and wrong. The police officer Shi who arrests him has no idea of how to deal with a gay man since there is no law forbidding their activity. So he resorts to ethical codes to “cure” A Lan’s behavior. A Lan immediately resists, thinking of the situation as an intrusion upon his private sphere, and perhaps as an assault upon what he considers being an individual identity.

In China, at the time, homosexual behavior was considered by the authorities as a type of “hooliganism”³⁸ or “disturbing public order”, and therefore subjected to punishment by law even if the individuals charged were not involved in any actual criminal activities. It was believed that this strategy could help the official media to

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Generally speaking, “hooliganism” is a pejorative term denoting immoral and offensive behavior, conjuring images of gangsters and hooligans. But in contemporary China, many disillusioned youths appropriated this term as the fashion word for the alienated urban rebel who seeks to distance himself from the dominant culture. It implies new properties such as individualism, defiance, and independence.

avoid mentioning the term “homosexual” and thus kept the discussion of homosexuality out of the public sphere, while still keeping homosexuals under state surveillance. Besides holding homosexual discourse invisible, the use of the humiliating term “hooliganism” also suggests the “trivialization of homosexual conduct”,³⁹ because in traditional Chinese culture, non-reproductive sexual activities are presumed trivial and unimportant.⁴⁰ However, I argue that there should be a third reason why the Chinese authorities intentionally trivialize homosexual discourse: the global queerness perpetuated by Western values and ideologies. Since the 1990s, the Chinese cultural context meets its Western partners, and because of the need for international cooperation, the authorities cannot view homosexuality negatively, at least not openly. This tendency leads them to turn away from recognizing the complex nature of constructing Chinese homosexual identities to a simple act of trivialization, which creates a harmonious society on the surface, while somehow suppressing queerness in the private sphere. This intentional trivialization surely leads to resistance of the suppressed. If policeman Shi stands in for the Chinese authorities, then A Lan should be viewed as representing a very specific force of resistance, which might be destabilizing the established social order. A Lan seems to accept that future compromise may only arrive after present-day sacrifice, and not only does he accept this, he even manages to subvert it, in a manner that demonstrates

³⁹ Zhao Jin, “Imagining Queerness: Sexualities in Underground Films in the Contemporary P. R. China,” *Communication Theses* (2011, 38).

⁴⁰ Li Yinhe and Wang Xiaobo, “Their World: A Perspective on Male Homosexual Communities in China,” *East Palace, West Palace: Selected Research Reports and Unfinished Works*, ed. Zhou Hong (Xi’an: Shaanxi Normal University Press, 2006, 117-8).

power. In this, his seemingly submissive status becomes a mere cover for a mutinous, rebellious toughness. So does Zhang the film director. He and his fellow filmmakers “continued to make independent films throughout the 1990s despite knowing that such action was explicitly forbidden.”⁴¹

The trivialization of homosexual activities, as Jin Zhao observes, also explains the “freedom” Chinese sexual deviants have been given historically (and even today) by the authorities.⁴² For as long as their behaviors do not violate other more fundamental social orders such as that of politics and economy that construct the dominant society, and as long as they remain invisible, they are tolerated in the private sphere. This uncertainty in the authorities’ legal enforcement and the trivialization of sexual deviants can be seen both in the film and in the real world. In the early part of the film, when A Lan is coming out of a public toilet, Shi, who is washing his hands, stops him and interrogates him, asking questions such as “Where do you live?” “Where do you work?” After A Lan has answered all these questions, Shi notices the bike outside, and asks for his bike permit. A Lan hands it to him, and after a few moments of close scrutiny, Shi hands it back and says, “That’s all. You can go.” A Lan is let go, but as he is walking out, Shi’s doubtful gaze follows him all the way out. Reflecting on this scene, Jin Zhao states that Shi knows that gay men use the public toilet for cruising, but because there are no laws against homosexuals, he can only suggestively hint at what he is thinking of A Lan. Jin Zhao further points out that with

⁴¹ Shanon May, “Power and Trauma in Chinese Film: Experiences of Zhang Yuan and the Sixth Generation,” *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society* 8, No. 1 (Spring 2003, 158).

⁴² Zhao Jin, “Imagining Queerness: Sexualities in Underground Films in the Contemporary P. R. China,” *Communication Theses* (2011, 39).

his implicative investigating gaze and indirect but intimidating questions, Shi sends a clear message to A Lan that he is under police surveillance and should not perform any improper acts.

But A Lan wants to lay bare his thoughts and test the extent of his freedom. When Shi arrests A Lan, he leads him to the nearby park office to begin his interrogation. A Lan swiftly seizes this potentially threatening opportunity, turning his statements into a highly detailed autobiography, in which A Lan performs as much as he describes and which quickly becomes a show of how the governed and the governing shift their positions. Through this performance, Shi is confronted with the expressive eloquence and self-assurance of A Lan, and as a result, the old assumptions about the constructing mechanics of power and authority slowly erode into an eventual state of uncertainty.

This uncertainty sometimes could work to the advantage of homosexuals and other minority communities, since it is very hard to pin down who can get the dominant position in the public sphere. In *East Palace, West Palace*, for instance, policemen arrest gay men and after humiliating them, usually let them go with a warning. However, at other times, this uncertainty also puts gay people in a more positive position because there is no law to punish them. Thus they can enjoy a fascinating experience of a cat-chasing-mouse game, in which no one can leave the other behind. This phenomenon parallels the dialectical phrasing of A Lan's own attachment to Shi: "The convict loves the executioner. The thief loves the jail keeper. We [homosexuals] love you [policemen]. There is no other choice." However, this

uncertain in-between zone where gay men stand between crime and innocence may also result in administrative punishment of them. This is how Jin Zhao interprets this punishment:

“Informing the workplace” could cause very serious consequences to homosexuals if they are caught, because it could result in their losing jobs, a record in their files, or a ruined career if the people in question are government officials or if they occupied important positions in their workplace.⁴³

In the film, when a policeman threatens a gay that he will inform his workplace of homosexual behavior, the poor man implores him not to do so, because it will destroy his entire life. According to Zhao, this kind of punishment is “no less serious than legal prosecution”, and it was often used to make minority groups to behave well in the public sphere. This also means that the persecuted might be deprived of their right to work and their dignity in their own communities, which will make them more vulnerable.

That is what the authorities did to Zhang Yuan in the real world. They cannot tolerate Zhang’s non-authorized filmmaking and uncontrollable voices, and therefore cannot recognize Zhang as an integral part of Chinese society. At this point, May is absolute right to argue:

If the State were reflexively to share in Zhang’s cinematic fantasy by

⁴³ Ibid., 40-41.

endorsing the vision in his films, it would be unable to cling to its dominant position. It would no longer be able to perceive itself as both the enunciator and executor of China's moral and political imperatives. And so Zhang must still be repudiated.⁴⁴

The authorities have already viewed Zhang with disfavor due to some of his earlier works, so following the release of *East Palace, West Palace*, they took administrative measures against him by ordering other filmmakers not to cooperate with him and other institutionalized studios not to rent any film facilities to him. Zhang did not lay low, but rather filmed secretly on it after the Tiananmen Protest 1989 and made a true-to-life film on the madness and dysfunctioning of a Beijing family. In doing so, Zhang obviously provoked the state to punish him for his impudence. His continued cat-and-mouse game with the authorities culminating in his 1999 *Seventeen Years*, a family drama and also the first Chinese film shot inside a prison. After spending much of his career as an underground filmmaker, *Seventeen Years* was his first work that could be screened publicly in China. From the marginalized sphere, Zhang returned and confronted the authorities.⁴⁵

The Good is in the Future

East Palace, West Palace outlines a scenario of cruising and policing in the public

⁴⁴ Shanon May, "Power and Trauma in Chinese Film: Experiences of Zhang Yuan and the Sixth Generation," *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society* 8, No. 1 (Spring 2003, 159).

⁴⁵ Ironically, Zhang Yuan did get arrested by the police in 2008. But the actual charge had nothing to do with any political reasons, but with drug use. See "Chinese Film Director Accused of Drug Use," reporting by Chen Aizhu, ed. Roger Crabb, *Reuters* (Thu Jan 10, 2008).

sphere, and elaborates on marginalized gay men's quest for sexual freedom. It is a drama set in a certain time and space that closely concentrates on voice and image, the former (as flashbacks) revealing a personal gay history while the latter provides the words with illustrations. The film does not offer a complete representation of the existence of homosexuals in the 1990s, nor does it describe a specific gay life in China during that time. The creation of totality, objectivity, truth and synthesis of the social morality is no longer broadly attempted. In other words, we privilege not the tree of morality, but its leaves. The postmodern moralist's position is, therefore, different from the modernist's. It argues that morality is divorced from universal prescriptions; it argues that there can be no logical recourse to the completed prescription to justify a moral position; and it argues that morality comes from a sense of the immoral. Immoralities are declared and performed; they are a not-yet-proved project. The film presents homosexual visibility as directly linked to public discourse, which makes it a desirable strategy of resistance and a necessity for liberty. Its significance lays not so much in providing a gay image on the screen, but in the construction of a gay discourse that the authority considers subversive.

Meanwhile, the shift of power between the oppressor and the oppressed reveals the uncertainty of the marginalized about the relationship between them as rebels, and the dominant forces in culture and society. While resisting domination, the marginalized seem to keep a certain degree of attachment to that very same power, because both have to live together in the same public sphere. The narrative of the film focuses mainly on a gay man and a policeman who arrests and interrogates the

suspected hooligans. The expected exercise of powerful authority over the vulnerable marginalized, however, undergoes a subversive rewriting. The interrogation, for instance, begins with a display of power but ends with a homosexual encounter between the representative of authority and the interrogated offender. The possible construction of public discourse is the result of both the centralization of a gay voice and the cinematic process from a gay perspective.

This public discourse is rooted in a public sphere where an intriguing interplay of desire and power is rendered. It is realized through the performative, with the policeman Shi looming over his object of interrogation A Lan, who is submissive. When A Lan says, “The convict loves her executioner; the thief loves her jail keeper,” the interrogator/interrogated power relationship, played out in the film, symbolizes the many facets of marginalized groups existing in contemporary Chinese society. Framing A Lan’s confession through a film camera, *East Palace, West Palace* makes an insightful remark on “Chinese society’s forms of subordination and prohibition, particularly in relation to the silencing of discourses surrounding homosexuality.”⁴⁶ Zhang Yuan also says in an interview that “the lives of so-called ‘controversial’ minorities can reveal the dynamics of a society very clearly.”⁴⁷ Concerning society, I will clarify this in terms of “responsible for choice” as mentioned in the early part of this chapter. In terms of morality, society can be described as

[...] the sum of social relations, and among these relations we can distinguish

⁴⁶ Olivia Khoo, “The ‘Sixth Generation’: Sexuality, Censorship, and the New Chinese Cinema,” *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Contest*, Issue 4 (September 2000).

⁴⁷ Tony Rayns, “Provoking Desire,” *Sight and Sound*, 6, 7, (July 1996, 28).

two extreme types: relations of constraint, whose characteristic is to impose upon the individual from outself a system of rules with obligatory content, and relations of cooperation whose characteristic is to create within people's minds the consciousness of ideal norms at the back of all rules.⁴⁸

Each individual should have an inherent ability to help set up a moral system using information gained from the social environment. Each aspect of the moral code that an individual has would be a result of interactions between the potentiality to obtain information and the actual information obtained. In other words, "a society requires neither the disciplined subjects nor satisfaction-seeking consumers of socially-provided services, but rather, tenacious and sometimes obstinate, but always responsible, citizens."⁴⁹ To be responsible does not mean following the established moral codes. In fact, it may often require an individual to disregard the codes or act in a way that those codes do not warrant. According to Bauman, only such responsibility can transform the individuals into that basis on which a human community capable and thoughtful enough to cope with the immediate challenges can be conceivably built.

Regarding Chinese society, all major religions in ancient China have some sort of moral code that has traditionally been taken as being against homosexuality if it interferes with the continuation of family lineage.⁵⁰ In Confucianism, for example, it

⁴⁸ Jean Piaget, *The Moral Judgment of the Child* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1932, 402).

⁴⁹ Zygmunt Bauman, "Morality without Ethics," *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1995, 36).

⁵⁰ Ian Johnson, "China's Gays Quietly Work to Raise Profile Relative Freedom," *Queer Resource Directory*. (<http://www.qrd.org/QRD>).

is believed that sexual activity for begetting children (especially sons) is a very important obligation (getting married and having an heir), so a person who only has same-sex lovers is not respectable. Taoism stresses sustaining the balance between Yin and Yang, two opposing forces that maintain the world's harmony. An exclusively male relationship is thought to be imbalanced and destructive because the Taoist belief holds that males need the energies of females to bring about completion. Similarly, a female relationship would be read as Yin-Yin, and therefore unbalanced. For this reason, it is not fulfilled in relation to the other sex. On the other hand, none of the major Chinese religions consider homosexual acts as sinful, as many Western religions do. As long as people do their family duties and beget children, it is their private business to have same sex lovers. There are no laws claiming that homosexuality is illegal. After the communist takeover of China in 1949, homosexuals and anyone else engaging in anything other than a limited sphere of authority-sanctioned activities were persecuted. It is said that homosexuals were persecuted during the Cultural Revolution, a period of chaos and severe conformity that ended in 1976. Today, attitudes towards homosexuals are changing, but shame still keeps most of them in the closet.

From the start of modernity, regardless of culture, there has always been a universal effort to conjure up out of the chaos of otherness, things to be tamed and mastered. Public discourse, the site of order, was to be ruled by an ethical code dictating what one should hide, what one should not speak about and what one should be ashamed of. Nonetheless, every act of spontaneity unplanned and uncontrolled has

betrayed the thinness of civilized ethics and the wantonness of passions boiling underneath. In the West and traditionally in China, religion has been a useful resource for conceptualizing morality, but communist China does not want religion to be a partner in constructing its morality. The modern morality in China only chooses its partner for its own convenience without drawing on religion as the reservoir of all principles, values and morality. All spontaneous impulses of its people were, therefore, destructive of the ethical code and for the sake of order had to be shamed out of existence. The decision as to what is acceptable behavior and what is not acceptable behavior has to be taken by each generation and by each individual within that generation. For this reason, it makes perfect sense that only the future will reveal whether we stand a chance of acting morally, and sometimes acting good, in the present. The public sphere may therefore be structured within such discourses: many things vital to each of our lives are shared, and we may see each other as conditions, rather than obstacles, to our collective as well as individual well-being.

Afterword

In his poem “Mending Wall”, Robert Frost says, “Before I built a wall I’d ask to know / What I was walling in or walling out / And to whom I was likely to give offense.”¹ He also remarks, “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,” signifying the forces of nature for human convenience that bring a wall to decay and require it to be repaired. Obviously, Frost is talking about how we should maintain our boundaries while at the same time open up to others. And this will help me introduce some resistances towards postmodern discourse in China for the purpose of avoiding misunderstandings of this study.

Those resistances, according to Yingjin Zhang, come from three fronts: moral, ideological and historical.² As early as 1994, Xiaoming Chen has already evoked a moral resistance with a strategy of “post-critical attitude” to describe postmodern discourse in China.³ In Chen’s words, the emergence of postmodernism does not mean that we no longer adopt an authoritative attitude towards our “theoretical discourse” and other real problems. Contrary to our expectations, the reason he adopts this ambiguous postmodern method seems to shelter our contemporary discourse with “a protective coat”. He continues by stating:

For this era, we no longer issue biased refutations or condescending criticisms,

¹ Robert Frost, “Mending Wall,” *North of Boston* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1917, 11).

² Zhang Yingjin, *Screening China: Critical Interventions, Cinematic Reconfigurations, and Transnational Imaginary in Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (Michigan: University of Michigan Ann Arbor, 2002, 335).

³ Chen Xiaoming, “Postmodernity: the Expansion and dislocation of Culture,” *Shanghai Wenxue* 3 (1994: 65).

nor do we assume any judgmental posture on the prospects of civilization. Instead, we only interpret, and as interpreters, in the era of cultural expansion, we are able to do this alone: attempt to encode and label this era through our discourse.⁴

Yichuan Wang, who considers the rise of postmodernism in China as a historical necessity (and therefore states openly: “I refuse to talk about the sense of mission, for intellectuals have been professionalized by now.”) supports this argument.⁵ It seems that by resorting to a Western discourse, Wang intentionally resists the official discourse from a self-marginalized position.

However, their self-marginalization has been contended by Yuechuan Wang and Shui Shang, who point out that postmodernism is the product of a Western historical legacy and therefore, “we must face it and not blindly join it.”⁶ Examining the process of constructing contemporary Chinese culture, Wang detects several problems in Chinese postmodern discourse such as the absence of a critical object or thematic substance. He thinks that those postmodernists have gone beyond the rhetorical surface and the mode of random resistances by using ever-renewed labels such as ‘postmodern fiction’, ‘new realism’, ‘new wave fiction’, ‘post-new wave fiction’, ‘new situations’, ‘new experiences’, and the ‘the sixth generation directors’ and the like.⁷ Wang sees the necessity for a distance from self-marginalization

⁴ Ibid., 69.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Wang Yuechuan and Shang Shui, *Postmodernism and Cultural Studies* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 1992, 43).

⁷ Wang Ning, “The Mapping of Chinese Postmodernity,” *Boundary 2* 24 3 (Fall: 1997, 19-40).

because “[p]ostmodern criticism can only constitute a trend of ‘marginal criticism’ and never aspire to a mainstream status in cultural and literary criticism in China.”⁸ In saying this, he is in fact deploring the lack of courage in Chinese scholars to confront the dominant culture and ideology.

This position and strategy are shared by Henry Zhao, who prefers to define the rise of those overlapping labels and its various postmodern discourses as ‘neo-conservatism’, because he has recognized an awful alliance between Chinese postmodernism and multi-centered cultures that aims to “destroy elite culture”.⁹ For him, there seems to be “an apology for the degradation of contemporary culture” under the pretext of challenging elite culture, which clears a way for the encroaching Western mass culture. Moreover, Zhao insists that intellectuals should not give up their concerns for national culture building as it still lags behind its Western counterparts. Ben Xu, another critic, manages to supplement Zhao’s argument by stating that “nativist theory appropriates postmodern theory and the notion of postmodernism for a rather specific purpose, and that is to denigrate China’s attempt at modernity, especially democratization.”¹⁰ He continues to say that a premodern-modern differentiation is more urgent than an East-West opposition, and that the “chief form of oppression” in China is not the threatening West but the totalitarian authority at home. Xu thus immediately changes moral resistance into an ideological

⁸ Wang Yuechuan, “Postmodernism and Contemporary Chinese Culture,” *Zhongguo shehui kexue*, 3 (1996, 175-85).

⁹ Zhao Yiheng (Henry), “Post-isms” and Chinese New Conservatism,” *New Literary History* 28. 1 (Winter: 1997, 31-44).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 212.

resistance, criticizing that Chinese postmodernism for being out of touch with reality. However, Xu's denunciation of new conservatives' alleged self-marginalization exposes his own intolerance for intellectual freedom and democratic choice.

There seems to be a binary logic behind Xu's criticism: either you believe in the vision of modernization and democratization or you are involved in "the rivalry-complicity relationship" with official ideology.¹¹ Driven by such a binary logic, it comes as no surprise that Xu poses a political judgment like this:

Post-ist theorist in China, by positing the 1990s as post-New Era and by avoiding commenting on the post-New Era's relations to [...] June 4, 1989, acquiesce to the official definition of this event as "counter-revolutionary turmoil".¹²

However, in his "Contesting Memory", Xu appears to return to Zhao's neo-conservatism by concentrating his criticism on three groups in 1990s China: those influenced by a "parochial view of Chinese learning and values"; those employing "postmodern and postcolonial theory to defend Chinese identity and authenticity"; and those traditional intellectuals like Li Zehou and Wang Yuanhua who modified their more 'radical' propositions.¹³ According to Yingjin Zhang, by classifying those people in terms of their presumed denigration of modernity and democracy, Xu fails to enumerate what kind of modernity and democracy those scholars try to denigrate.

¹¹ Ibid., 184.

¹² Xu Ben, *Disenchanted Democracy: Chinese Cultural Criticism after 1989* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999, 129, 217).

¹³ Xu Ben, "Contesting Memory for Intellectual Self-Positioning: The 1990s' New Cultural Conservatism in China," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 11. 1 (Spring: 1999, 158-9).

Thus there is no obvious difference between Xu's discourse and the official discourse as they are both trying to denounce the voices they do not like.

Like Xu and Zhao, Wang Hui shares their view that the arrival of postmodernism in China is a political event, but his position is more helpful in pinpointing exactly what was missing in Chinese postmodern discourse:

While undertaking the deconstruction of all values, postmodernist critics have yet to come up with an analysis of the activities of capital that constitute an important feature of modern life, nor have they undertaken an appraisal of the relationship between this activity of capital and the Chinese reform movement.¹⁴

In this, Wang highlights the intellectual dilemma of contemporary China where "mass culture and ideology actually permeate one another and together occupy the dominant position in contemporary Chinese ideology."¹⁵ Wang continues to say that by "rejecting and denouncing elite culture, what is returned to the center is market 'socialism' with Chinese characteristics."¹⁶ We could thus argue that the dilemma of those scholars actually suggests the continued validity of modernity, especially its critical tradition in the face of the impatient move to go beyond the modern as an establishment.

Contrary to such views that advocate an implicit 'modern' position, Paul Pickowicz articulates his historical resistance that challenges postmodern discourse in

¹⁴ Wang Hui, "PRC Cultural Studies and Cultural Criticism in the 1990s," *Position* 6. 1 (Spring: 1998, 249).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 250.

China as well.¹⁷ As Pickowicz argues, China is also part of postmodern cultures as it now functions in a global context dominated by Western cultures. Therefore, young Chinese intellectuals know about postmodernism and apply it to their works. However, this postmodern discourse in China cannot be characterized by late capitalism, as it still contains “the vestiges of late imperial culture, the remnants of the modern or bourgeois culture of the Republican era, the residue of traditional socialist culture, and elements of both modernism and postmodernism.”¹⁸ From this perspective, the postmodernist framework is neither useful nor productive but simply a misleading study of post-socialist China.

However, there is a subtle difference in the homology of ‘postsocialism’ compared with ‘postmodernism’ in their Chinese context. Chris Berry and Mary Ann Farquhar rightly remind us of several unresolved questions:

What remains to be fully explored is the homology between this term [postsocialism] and “postmodernism”, from which it is clearly derived. Can postsocialism be seen as a complement to postmodernism? Is its pastiche of other styles, its ambiguity and play, part of an aesthetic parallel to postmodernism?¹⁹

Arif Dirlik will give a positive answer to these questions because he is the first to use

¹⁷ Paul G. Pickowicz, “Huang Jianxin and the Notion of Postsocialism,” *New Chinese Cinema: Forms, Identities, Politics*, ed. Nick Browne, Paul G. Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack, and Esther Yao (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 58-9).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁹ Chris Berry and Mary Ann Farquhar, “Post-Socialist Strategies: An Analysis of *Yellow Earth* and *Black Cannon Incident*,” in *Cinematic Landscapes: Observations on the Visual Arts and Cinema of China and Japan*, ed. Linda Erlich and David Desser (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994, 84).

the term ‘postsocialism’.²⁰ He and Xudong Zhang propose that “postmodernity is not just what comes after the modern but rather what comes after a particular manifestation of the modern in China’s historical circumstances,” therefore “the postmodern is also the postrevolutionary and the postsocialist.”²¹ They continue to argue that:

Coexistence of the precapitalist, the capitalist, and the postsocialist economic, political, and social forms represents a significant departure from the assumptions of the Chinese modernity, embodied above all in the socialist revolutionary project.²²

This argument seems only reasonable in a Chinese context and nowhere else. However, it is precisely such a situation of spatial fracturing and temporal desynchronization that characterizes postmodernism in its Chinese variant. Two years later, Xudong Zhang also wakes up and remarks that the “post” in Chinese postmodernism does not mean “that something is over, but that something is finally ready to begin along with the breaking of all kinds of rigid epistemological paradigms.”²³ As a result, the naming of Chinese postmodernism should be consulted within its own cultural and political context, and therefore creates a “shared space” where everything can be seen emerging and becoming.

²⁰ Arif Dirlik, “Post-socialism? Reflections on ‘Socialism with Chinese Characteristics,’” *Marxism and the Chinese Experience*, ed. Arif Dirlik and Maurice Meisner (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1989).

²¹ Arif Dirlik and Zhang Xudong, “Introduction: Postmodernism and China,” *Boundary 2* 24. 3 (Fall: 1997, 4).

²² *Ibid.*, 3.

²³ Zhang Xudong, “Postmodernism and Post-Socialism Society: Cultural Politics in China after the ‘New Era’,” *New Left Review* 237 (Sept.-Oct., 1999, 78).

Postmodernism is something that allows the aforementioned connections or oppositions to exist. Linda Hutcheon puts it in a similar way: “Postmodernism is both academic and popular, elitist and accessible.”²⁴ It is because of such contradictions that postmodernism attracts much attention from literary scholars. Let’s return to Frost’s poem again. The neighbor rebuilds the wall without any questions but quoting “Good fences make good neighbors”. However, neither the narrator’s apple trees nor his neighbor’s pine trees are likely to impinge on the other’s property. This poem may remind us: living in this world, for whatever reasons, we still need notable boundaries, even when we find it difficult to legitimize their existence. With this in mind, postmodernism can be considered as a way of understanding how humans gain knowledge from each other and from the world and nothing more.

As one of the most accessible forms of art, contemporary Chinese cinema doesn’t exist in an apolitical and cultureless vacuum. Rather, it taps into Chinese society by reflecting a unique cultural context that separates it from the rest of the world. Therefore, as a medium for communication, Chinese cinema represents an opportunity for the audience to learn about Chinese society and culture. With the popularization of various Western critical theories in China, postmodern theory has allowed Chinese film industry to make certain choices, which has, as I discussed in my dissertation, chosen a road of itself in postmodernism. But there is something different from its Western counterparts if we screen Chinese cinema through a postmodern lens. Postmodernism in its Chinese version can be traced back to its own

²⁴ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London & New York: Routledge: 1988, 44).

roots, based on its unique Chinese cultural background and its willingness to reveal its inherent Chineseness to the world.

Taking *Farewell My Concubine* as an example, I have proposed a conceptual shift from traditional approaches that view identity in terms of collective phenomena toward a theoretical focus on the effects of social change on the identities of individuals in a particular period. The protagonist's historical and opera worlds have been explored to show how and why the protagonist's postmodern identity comes into being. As we can see in the film, the individuals cannot be what they actually are, but taking their inner force and through practice destroy the self and its surroundings: the protagonist's identity is fixed at a certain point and cannot be expanded any more by the addition of a new social element. Different from *Farewell My Concubine*, the characters in *Summer Palace* try very hard to seek solutions to their dilemmas of identification when they face reality with all its pleasant and unpleasant consequences. By analyzing *Summer Palace*, I have explored the experience of nihilism and the experience, therefore, of need, suffering and the production of suffering. I have attempted to articulate the film in a way that could perhaps open it up to another beginning: a practical understanding of Chinese political society in which the protagonists are living in the practices of their body politics. No one can deprive anyone else of the ability to form their identities as they see fit and therefore individual identities adapt and evolve to survive better within a society.

Society is composed of individuals and each individual needs society for his very existence. But there may be occasions of conflict between the society and the

individuals. By establishing emblematic connections between the characters and their historical backgrounds, the film *To Live* has forged a particular link between its text and the outside world: the characters' lives become a synecdoche of society. There is indeed a strong sense in the film that individual stories imitate the grand narrative of collective history in miniature, and that all private interest is subsumed by national interest. The analysis of this film originates in, but at the same time subverts the modernist model of historical explanation by a systemic application of its aesthetic principles, carrying traditional narrative codes to an extreme and thus radicalizing the conventions of the modernist tradition. My analytical methods for rethinking postmodernism are rooted in the modes of temporality and history that arise from theories of trauma. Trauma, as a paradigm of the historical event, possesses an absolute materiality, and yet, as inevitably missed or incompletely experienced, remains absent and inaccessible. This formulation offers me a way to conceptualize postmodernist culture's obliteration of the original moment, while at the same time affirm its sensitivity to the reality of historical events.

It is known to all that society will change over time. Some practices that are common in one social formation will inevitably contradict that of the following ones. Taking *Let the Bullets Fly* as an example, my dissertation assesses when and how allegory moves either toward abstraction or toward particulars between the past and the present. My approach to this topic is selective and textual, not encyclopedic, as my object of analysis limits its allegories to the space and time created by the director and the cast and crew. As an allegory on politics, corruption and rough justice, *Let the*

Bullets Fly has flashes of intelligence and political wisdom, expressing the anarchy and ravenous opportunism of warlord-tangled-fighting China in the 1920s. Having no predetermined referent, allegory in this film leaves room for a possible reinvention of itself toward a theory of postmodernism.

Film, as a representation of the world, not only describes the world, but also relates to other representations that might lead to the degree of truth. As no truth may be considered absolute, it is impossible to obtain by human means a ‘God’s-eye view’ from which one true meaning of a phenomenon can be derived. To take this claim even further, it seems that reaching out to trans-cultural individuals, as a way to extend and expand the Chinese presence in the world has become an essential part of China’s contemporary film project. Many Chinese directors intend to make a culturally sophisticated film that would appeal to both East and West. In this light, we can see the film *Red Sorghum* as an experiment in the director’s trans-cultural strategy, a search to acquire a position in the highly competitive film world. Film-festival-goers should also learn to be comfortable with a variety of different truths of ‘Chineseness’ and move towards a togetherness in which no one dreams of thinking that God, or the God-equivalent, is on his/her side.

As social animals, we take actions and have consequences on our society and the others around us. In order not to injure ourselves and our society, there must be a universal effort to conjure up out of the chaos of otherness, things to be tamed and mastered. Taking *East Palace, West Palace* as an example, I argue that, in today’s Chinese society, the creation of totality, objectivity, truth and synthesis of the social

morality is no longer broadly attempted. In other words, we privilege not the tree of morality, but its leaves. The postmodern moralist's position is, therefore, different from the modernist's. It argues that morality is divorced from universal prescriptions; it argues that there can be no logical recourse to the completed prescription to justify a moral position; and it argues that morality comes from a sense of the immoral. Immoralities are declared and performed; they are a not-yet-proved project. The film presents homosexual visibility as directly linked to public discourse, which makes it a desirable strategy of resistance and a necessity for liberty. Its significance lays not so much in providing a gay image on the screen, but in the construction of a gay discourse that the authority considers subversive.

To sum it all up, my dissertation on postmodernist film attempts to articulate postmodernism (its ideas and methods) through the medium of film. I attempt to provide a critical reading of the films' narrative structure, characterization and to destroy the audiences' suspension of disbelief with the goal of creating something new from traditional narrative expression. My dissertation probes deep into human psyche and the society to reveal the formula of local susceptibility to cultural globalization, and the compromises required to pursue reasonable applications. I explore how these postmodern formulas presented in Chinese films have shaped the experiences of the Chinese people, and how different filmmakers have asked the question of what Chinese postmodernism means.

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Summary

On the Road: Screening Chinese Cinema through a Postmodern Lens questions the concept of postmodernism in the service of a Chinese context. That postmodernism in its Chinese variant is a contested ground is a clear sign that the issues involved are of more than narrow academic significance. In linking Western postmodernism to the context of Chinese films, historical and social backgrounds assume crucial importance. This, in turn, leads to a basic distinction between two interrelated aspects of the postmodern. The first is 'postmodernity,' which refers to a series of social-historical developments. It is a school of thought that rejects classical notions of truth, reason and objectivity, of single frameworks, grand narratives or ultimate grounds of explanation. It sees the world as contingent, unstable, indeterminate; a set of disjointed interpretations that breed a degree of skepticism about the objectivity of truth, history, norms and the coherence of identities. The second is 'postmodernism', which is a style of culture that reflects something of this epochal change, in a depthless, decentered, ungrounded, self-reflexive, derivative, eclectic, pluralistic art which blurs the boundaries between high and popular culture, as well as between art and everyday experience.

In my study, I have taken the term 'postmodernism' to refer to a set of epistemological, theoretical and structurally specific cultural conditions. I consider 'postmodernism' in its Chinese variant to be a loose array of philosophical and theoretical attitudes, a mode of inquiry and representation and a movement, style and mood that reflects and parallels fundamental changes in the cultural conditions of

Chinese society. Most of the texts pertaining to postmodernism in this dissertation should be viewed in light of specific references to the study of Chinese culture. Of course, no obvious postmodernist film movement exists in present-day China as it does in the West. Only a handful of texts contain traces of postmodernism, partly influenced by Western postmodernism and partly due to the director's creative impulses and official censorship. Even so, attempting a comparative study of these films, with Western postmodernism as my theoretical framework, will not only help us observe this phenomenon from an international viewpoint, it will also enable us to reexamine the various notions of the postmodern from different cultural perspectives. This dissertation should be viewed in light of specific references to the study of Chinese culture. Of course, no postmodernist film movement exists in present-day China as it does in the West. Only a handful of texts contain traces of postmodernism, partly influenced by Western postmodernism and partly due to the director's creative impulses and official censorship. Even so, attempting a comparative study of these films, with Western postmodernism as my theoretical framework, will not only help us observe this phenomenon from an international viewpoint, it will also enable us to reexamine the various notions of the postmodern from different cultural perspectives.

If the postmodern condition, in its broadest sense, is above all characterized by a contradictory and bewildering abundance of signs, meanings and identities, it is easy to see how this experience might instill an irresistible, if ultimately futile, urge to unearth the origins of this confusion, to locate the telltale instant in which it is no longer the same, even as this impulse is contrary to the anti-foundationalist

tendencies of a more strictly theoretical construal of the postmodern. The 'postmodern' can best be grasped as a particular mode of temporality, though one characterized not (as the term itself has tended to suggest) by the coming into being of a new epoch beyond or after the 'modern', but by an experience of misapprehension, retroaction, anticipation and deferral that disrupts the forward march of the modern from within.

In order to demonstrate this operation, postmodernism must be examined with respect to the special circumstances of studying cross-cultural applications. My dissertation is not a defense of postmodernism in film studies, nor does it engage in the scholarly debate about whether postmodernism is inherently a good or bad thing. Instead, it provides an account of the theory and its applications in film study. It sidesteps the surrounding debate and controversy in favor of describing postmodernism as a connected series of methods and theories. It attempts to reveal how postmodernism can aid Chinese film directors and how theory can be infused into our scholarly efforts. It hopes to convince the reader of the merits of postmodernism in film studies.

To that end, I follow two core principles of postmodernism. The first is that reality is un-representable in human culture (whether written, spoken, visual or dramatic) as postmodernism holds reality to be un-representable. The second fundamental principle of postmodernism follows from this: with an inability to represent reality, no authoritative account can exist of anything. Nobody can know everything about a subject or object and there is never one single authority on a given

subject. This means that any definition of postmodernism that I or anybody else might propose would never be complete or authoritative my account, therefore, is personal, contingent (upon new knowledge) and temporary. It will be offered incomplete and without closure, as I, like anybody else, am constantly revising my understanding of it. I expect my explanation here to raise questions and doubts in the reader's mind and leave room for further exploration.

Just as there is no central manifesto, plan or theory of postmodernism, there is also no singular definition of what constitutes postmodernist film. So, what I have provided in this dissertation is my understanding of postmodernism. The choice of theories to include and the examples from films, are my own. I choose those preferred bits of postmodernist theories and methods that might fit my immediate study or research needs. We tend to see ourselves as unique individuals, and our society and culture become extensions of our individuality. The analysis of individuality and society expands the importance of critical theory that will be the point of departure for the re-evaluation of the entire Chinese film world. This dissertation contains the conviction that the underlying chain of thought linking all of these chapters in my study is 'postmodernism'.

Taking *Farewell My Concubine* as an example, I have proposed a conceptual shift from traditional approaches that view identity in terms of collective phenomena toward a theoretical focus on the effects of social change on the identities of individuals in a particular period. The protagonist's historical and opera worlds have been explored to show how and why the protagonist's postmodern identity comes into

being. As we can see in the film, the individuals cannot be what they actually are, but taking their inner force and through practice destroy the self and its surroundings: the protagonist's identity is fixed at a certain point and cannot be expanded any more by the addition of a new social element.

Different from *Farewell My Concubine*, the characters in *Summer Palace* try very hard to seek solutions to their dilemmas of identification when they face reality with all its pleasant and unpleasant consequences. By analyzing *Summer Palace*, I have explored the experience of nihilism and the experience, therefore, of need, suffering and the production of suffering. I have attempted to articulate the film in a way that could perhaps open it up to another beginning: a practical understanding of Chinese political society in which the protagonists are living in the practices of their body politics. No one can deprive anyone else of the ability to form their identities as they see fit and therefore individual identities adapt and evolve to survive better within a society.

Society is composed of individuals and each individual needs society for his very existence. But there may be occasions of conflict between the society and the individuals. By establishing emblematic connections between the characters and their historical backgrounds, the film *To Live* has forged a particular link between its text and the outside world: the characters' lives become a synecdoche of society. There is indeed a strong sense in the film that individual stories imitate the grand narrative of collective history in miniature, and that all private interest is subsumed by national interest. The analysis of this film originates in, but at the same time subverts the

modernist model of historical explanation by a systemic application of its aesthetic principles, carrying traditional narrative codes to an extreme and thus radicalizing the conventions of the modernist tradition. My analytical methods for rethinking postmodernism are rooted in the modes of temporality and history that arise from theories of trauma. Trauma, as a paradigm of the historical event, possesses an absolute materiality, and yet, as inevitably missed or incompletely experienced, remains absent and inaccessible. This formulation offers me a way to conceptualize postmodernist culture's obliteration of the original moment, while at the same time affirm its sensitivity to the reality of historical events.

It is known to all that society will change over time. Some practices that are common in one social formation will inevitably contradict that of the following ones. Taking *Let the Bullets Fly* as an example, my dissertation assesses when and how allegory moves either toward abstraction or toward particulars between the past and the present. My approach to this topic is selective and textual, not encyclopedic, as my object of analysis limits its allegories to the space and time created by the director and the cast and crew. As an allegory on politics, corruption and rough justice, *Let the Bullets Fly* has flashes of intelligence and political wisdom, expressing the anarchy and ravenous opportunism of warlord-tangled-fighting China in the 1920s. Having no predetermined referent, allegory in this film leaves room for a possible reinvention of itself toward a theory of postmodernism.

Film, as a representation of the world, not only describes the world, but also relates to other representations that might lead to the degree of truth. As no truth may

be considered absolute, it is impossible to obtain by human means a ‘God’s-eye view’ from which one true meaning of a phenomenon can be derived. To take this claim even further, it seems that reaching out to trans-cultural individuals, as a way to extend and expand the Chinese presence in the world has become an essential part of China’s contemporary film project. Many Chinese directors intend to make a culturally sophisticated film that would appeal to both East and West. In this light, we can see the film *Red Sorghum* as an experiment in the director’s trans-cultural strategy, a search to acquire a position in the highly competitive film world. Film-festival-goers should also learn to be comfortable with a variety of different truths of ‘Chineseness’ and move towards a togetherness in which no one dreams of thinking that God, or the God-equivalent, is on his/her side.

As social animals, we take actions and have consequences on our society and the others around us. In order not to injure ourselves and our society, there must be a universal effort to conjure up out of the chaos of otherness, things to be tamed and mastered. Taking *East Palace, West Palace* as an example, I argue that, in today’s Chinese society, the creation of totality, objectivity, truth and synthesis of the social morality is no longer broadly attempted. In other words, we privilege not the tree of morality, but its leaves. The postmodern moralist’s position is, therefore, different from the modernist’s. It argues that morality is divorced from universal prescriptions; it argues that there can be no logical recourse to the completed prescription to justify a moral position; and it argues that morality comes from a sense of the immoral. Immoralities are declared and performed; they are a not-yet-proved project. The film

presents homosexual visibility as directly linked to public discourse, which makes it a desirable strategy of resistance and a necessity for liberty. Its significance lays not so much in providing a gay image on the screen, but in the construction of a gay discourse that the authority considers subversive.

To sum it all up, my dissertation on postmodernist film attempts to articulate postmodernism (its ideas and methods) through the medium of film. I attempt to provide a critical reading of the films' narrative structure, characterization and to destroy the audiences' suspension of disbelief with the goal of creating something new from traditional narrative expression. My dissertation probes deep into human psyche and the society to reveal the formula of local susceptibility to cultural globalization, and the compromises required to pursue reasonable applications. I explore how these postmodern formulas presented in Chinese films have shaped the experiences of the Chinese people, and how different filmmakers have asked the question of what Chinese postmodernism means.

Samenvatting

In *On the Road: Screening Chinese Cinema through a Postmodern Lens* wordt de functie van postmodernisme in de Chinese context aan de orde gesteld. Dat deze Chinese variant van postmodernisme veelbesproken is, is een duidelijk signaal dat de daarmee samenhangende onderwerpen een strikt academisch belang overstijgen. Bij het koppelen van westers postmodernisme aan de context van Chinese films worden historische en sociale achtergronden van cruciaal belang verondersteld. Dit leidt op haar beurt tot een basisonderscheid tussen twee samenhangende aspecten van het postmodernisme. Het eerste is ‘postmoderniteit’, dat verwijst naar een reeks sociaalhistorische ontwikkelingen. Het is een denkwijze die het klassieke concept van waarheid, rede en objectiviteit, van enkelvoudige kaders, grote verhalen of ultieme gronden voor verklaringen verwerpt. Men ziet de wereld als onzeker, instabiel, onbepaald, als een verzameling losse interpretaties die een mate van scepsis kweekt ten aanzien van de objectiviteit van waarheid, geschiedenis, normen en de samenhang van identiteiten. Het tweede aspect is ‘postmodernisme’, een cultuurstijl die dit belangrijke keerpunt ten dele weerspiegelt. Het zou verwijzen naar een oppervlakkige, gedecentraliseerde, ongegronde, zelfbeschouwende, afgeleide, eclecticische, pluralistische kunst die de grenzen tussen hoge en populaire cultuur, alsook tussen kunst en het dagelijkse leven, vervaagt.

In mijn studie heb ik de term ‘postmodernisme’ gebruikt om te verwijzen naar een reeks epistemologische, theoretische en structureel specifieke culturele condities.

Ik beschouw ‘postmodernisme’ in zijn Chinese variant als een losse verzameling filosofische en theoretische attitudes, een manier van onderzoek en representatie. Tevens is het een beweging, stijl en sfeer die fundamentele culturele veranderingen in de Chinese maatschappij weerspiegelen en op één lijn stellen. De meeste teksten in deze dissertatie die betrekking hebben op postmodernisme moeten worden gezien in het licht van specifieke verwijzingen naar de studie van Chinese cultuur. Er bestaat immers in het hedendaagse China geen duidelijke postmodernistische filmbeweging zoals in het Westen.

Slechts een handvol teksten bevat sporen van postmodernisme, gedeeltelijk beïnvloed door het westerse postmodernisme en gedeeltelijk te danken aan de creatieve impulsen van de regisseur en de officiële filmkeuring. Zelfs hiermee zal een poging tot een vergelijkende studie van deze films, met het westerse postmodernisme als theoretisch kader, ons niet alleen helpen dit fenomeen te observeren vanuit een internationaal oogpunt, het zal ons ook in staat stellen om de verschillende interpretaties van het postmoderne opnieuw te beoordelen vanuit verschillende culturele perspectieven.

Als de postmoderne conditie, in de breedste betekenis van het woord, vooral gekenmerkt wordt door een tegengestelde en verwarrende veelheid tekens, betekenissen en identiteiten, dan is het gemakkelijk te zien hoe deze ervaring een onweerstaanbare, maar uiteindelijke vergeefse, drang etaleert om de oorsprong van deze verwarring te onthullen. Zij beoogt het significante moment te lokaliseren waar die verandert, zelfs als deze impuls tegengesteld is aan de antifundamentalistische

tendensen van een meer strikt theoretische constructie van het postmoderne. Het ‘postmodernisme’ kan het beste worden begrepen als een bepaalde manier van tijdelijkheid, echter: wel als een die niet gekenmerkt wordt door (zoals de term zelf lijkt te suggereren) het arriveren in een nieuwe periode naast of na het ‘modernisme’. Postmodernisme duidt op een ervaring van verkeerd begrepen te zijn, van retroactie, anticipatie en uitstel die de opmars van het modernisme van binnenuit hindert.

Om deze operatie te demonstreren moet postmodernisme geëvalueerd worden, rekening houdend met de specifieke omstandigheden bij het bestuderen van cross-culturele toepassingen. Mijn dissertatie is geen verdediging van het postmodernisme in filmstudies, ik neem er ook geen standpunt mee in binnen het academisch debat of postmodernisme inherent een goede of slechte zaak is. In de plaats daarvan biedt de dissertatie een omschrijving van de theorie en haar toepassingen in de studie van de film. Ze gaat het omliggende debat en de controverse uit de weg en beschrijft postmodernisme in de plaats daarvan als een verbonden reeks van methodes en theorieën. Ze probeert te onthullen hoe postmodernisme de Chinese filmregisseurs kan helpen en hoe deze theorie onze academische inspanningen van een impuls kan voorzien. Ik hoop hiermee de lezer te overtuigen van de verdiensten van postmodernisme in filmstudies.

Voor dit doel stel ik twee kernprincipes van het postmodernisme voor. Het eerste is dat realiteit niet representeerbaar is in menselijke cultuur (of die nu geschreven is, gesproken, visueel of dramatisch), eenvoudigweg omdat postmodernisme realiteit als niet representeerbaar beschouwt. Het tweede fundamentele principe van

postmodernisme vloeit hieruit voort: door de onmogelijkheid om de realiteit te representeren kan geen enkel gezaghebbend verhaal ergens uit bestaan. Niemand kan alles weten over een onderwerp of object en er is nooit slechts één enkele autoriteit over een bepaald onderwerp. Dat betekent dat elke definitie van postmodernisme die ik of iemand anders zou voorstellen, nooit compleet kan zijn of mijn gezag kan bevestigen, en dat die daardoor persoonlijk, voorwaardelijk (tot er nieuwe kennis is) en tijdelijk is. Ze zal als onvolledig worden aangeboden zonder sluitend te zijn, aangezien ikzelf, net zoals iedereen, voortdurend mijn begrip ervan herzie. Ik verwacht dat mijn uitleg hier vragen en twijfels zal oproepen in de geest van de lezer en ruimte zal laten voor meer onderzoek. Net zoals er geen centraal manifest, plan of alomvattende theorie is van postmodernisme, is er ook geen eenduidige definitie van hetgeen bepaalt wat een postmoderne film is. Wat ik dus in deze dissertatie aanbied, is mijn eigen interpretatie van postmodernisme. De keuzes voor de behandelde theorieën en de voorbeelden uit de films, komen voor mijn rekening. Ze zullen waarschijnlijk niet overeenkomen met andermans keuze, maar volgens mij zijn dit de beste voorbeelden voor mijn onderwerp. Niettemin vormt het ‘postmodernisme’ de schakel in een onderliggende samenhang in het denken dat de zes hoofdstukken in deze dissertatie met elkaar verbindt.

Door *Farewell My Concubine* als voorbeeld te nemen, demonstreert hoofdstuk I hoe de effecten van sociale verandering de identificatie van een individu beïnvloeden in een bepaalde periode in China. De meest opmerkelijke ontologische confrontatie in de film is de botsing tussen de ‘echte wereld’ in de film en de ‘toneelwereld’. De

echte en de toneelwereld van de protagonisten heb ik onderzocht om te ontdekken hoe en waarom hun identiteiten op postmoderne wijze gestalte krijgen in die botsing. De personages kunnen niet worden of ‘zijn’ wie ze eigenlijk zijn, maar vernietigen hun zelf en hun omgeving door hun innerlijke kracht en in de praktijk: de identiteit van het hoofdpersonage strandt op een bepaald punt en kan niet meer worden verrijkt met een nieuw sociaal element.

Anders dan in *Farewell My Concubine* zoeken de personages in *Summer Palace* naarstig naar oplossingen voor hun identificatie-dilemma's als ze de werkelijkheid met al hun plezierige en onplezierige kanten onder ogen zien. Door *Summer Palace* te analyseren, onderzoek ik niet alleen de ervaring van nihilisme, maar ook hoe condities van behoefte en onderdrukking worden ge(re)produceerd. Ik heb geprobeerd de film zo te lezen dat die een opening biedt naar een ander begin: een praktisch begrip van een politieke samenleving in China waarin personages praktijken van hun lichaamspolitiek kunnen naleven. Niemand kan anderen beroven van de mogelijkheid hun identiteiten zodanig af te stemmen dat het hun kansen vergroot om in de samenleving het hoofd boven water te houden.

Elke individu heeft de samenleving nodig voor zijn bestaan. Maar er kunnen zich gereede conflicten voordoen tussen individuen en de samenleving. Door personages te midden van historische contexten te plaatsen, creëert de film *To Live* een specifiek verband tussen tekst en de wereld daarbuiten: de levens van de personages worden een synecdoche van de samenleving. Er is een onmiskenbare suggestie in de film dat de persoonlijke verhalen het grote verhaal van een collectieve geschiedenis schetsen

in miniatuur, en dat elk privébelang opgaat in een nationaal belang. Aan de ene kant is de analyse van de film geworteld in een modernistisch model van historische duiding, maar aan de andere kant ondermijnt de analyse dat model door een systematische toepassing van zijn esthetische principes. Traditionele narratieve codes worden zo extreem doorgevoerd dat ze de conventies van de modernistische tradities radicaliseren. Mijn analytische methodes om postmodernisme te heroverwegen zijn gegrond in noties van temporaliteit en geschiedenis die ontleend zijn aan theorieën over trauma. Als een paradigma van de historische gebeurtenis, bezit trauma enerzijds een absolute materialiteit, maar anderzijds blijft trauma structureel ontoegankelijk, omdat zij per definitie onvolledig wordt ervaren. Deze aanname biedt me de mogelijkheid om postmodernistische cultuur op te vatten als het permanent missen van het originele moment, terwijl postmodernisme niettemin vatbaar blijft voor het werkelijkheidsgehalte van historische gebeurtenissen.

Het is algemeen bekend dat samenlevingen na verloop van tijd veranderen. Sommige praktijken die gangbaar zijn in de ene sociale formatie botsen onvermijdelijk met die van een volgende. Door *Let the Bullets Fly* als casus te nemen, weeg ik af wanneer en hoe allegorie in de richting van abstractie schuift of in de richting van bijzonderheden tussen het verleden en het heden. Mijn benadering van dit onderwerp is selectief en tekstgericht, niet encyclopedisch, aangezien mijn object van studie zich toespitst op allegorieën van ruimte en tijd die door de regisseur en cast en crew zijn gecreëerd. Als een allegorie over politiek, corruptie en de ruwe randen van het recht, biedt *Let the Bullets Fly* flarden van intelligentie en politieke

wijsheid, in de wijze waarop de anarchie en het alles verslindende opportunisme worden belicht van de in gevechten verwickelde oorlogskrijgers in het China van de jaren 1920. Omdat allegorie de zekerheid van een vooraf bepaalde referent ontbeert, is er ruimte voor een conceptuele vernieuwing van het begrip allegorie vanuit een postmoderne invalshoek.

Als representatie van de wereld beschrijft film niet alleen de wereld, maar verhoudt hij zich ook tot andere representaties die mogelijk tot een zekere mate van waarheid aanleiding geven. Aangezien geen enkele waarheid als absoluut mag worden beschouwd, is het onmogelijk om via menselijke middelen een ‘zicht vanuit Gods oog’ te verkrijgen, van waaruit één ware betekenis van het fenomeen kan worden afgeleid. Om deze bewering nog verder te voeren, lijkt het erop dat het aanknopen van transculturele contacten, als een manier om de Chinese aanwezigheid in de wereld te versterken een cruciaal onderdeel is geworden van hedendaagse Chinese filmprojecten. Veel Chinese regisseurs proberen een cultureel fijnbesnaarde film te maken die zowel aanslaat in het Oosten als in het Westen. In dit belicht bezien kunnen we *Red Sorghum* zien als een experiment in Zhang Yimou’s transculturele strategie, een poging een positie te verwerven in een hoogst competitieve filmwereld. Bezoekers van filmfestivals kunnen op die manier vertrouwd raken met een variëteit aan verschillende waarheden omtrent ‘Chineesheid’ en zouden moeten neigen naar een houding waarin niemand moet pretenderen dat God, of een equivalent van God, aan zijn of haar zijde staat.

Als sociale wezens ondernemen we acties die gevolgen hebben voor de

samenleving en voor degenen die ons omringen. Om onszelf en de samenleving niet te benadelen, is verondersteld dat een chaos van andersheid via een gezamenlijke inspanning beteugeld zou moeten worden. Door *East Palace, West Palace* als uitgangspunt te nemen, betoog ik dat er in de hedendaagse Chinese samenleving niet langer een poging wordt ondernomen om tot objectiviteit, waarheid en een synthese omtrent sociale moraliteit te komen. In andere woorden, we geven niet langer de voorkeur aan de ‘boom’ van moraliteit maar enkel aan zijn bladeren. De postmodernist beargumenteert dat moraliteit gescheiden is van universele voorschriften. Hij beargumenteert dat er geen logische toevlucht bestaat tot het volledige voorschrift om een morele positie te rechtvaardigen. Hij beargumenteert dat moraliteit uit een gevoel voor het immorele voortkomt. Immoraliteiten zijn verklaard en uitgevoerd, als een nog niet bewezen project. De film presenteert homoseksuele zichtbaarheid als direct verbonden aan een openbaar vertoog, en daarmee verwordt zij tot een wenselijke strategie van weerstand en tot een noodzaak voor vrijheid. Zijn betekenis ligt nog niet zozeer in het verbeelden van homoseksualiteit op het scherm, maar in de constructie van een homoseksueel vertoog dat autoriteiten als subversief ervaren.

Samengevat probeert mijn dissertatie (de ideeën en methoden van) het postmodernisme te articuleren via het medium film. Ik heb gepoogd om mainstream conventies te ondergraven op het vlak van narratieve structuur en karakterisering van personages. Tevens heb ik getracht publieksverwachtingen op te schorten met als doel om iets nieuws te creëren ten opzichte van traditionele narratieve uitingsvormen. Ik

heb deze postmoderne films als objecten van analyse gekozen omdat ze zich in een ruimte ophouden die typisch genoeg, genegeerd wordt in meer modernistische en traditionele beschouwingen. Mijn dissertatie reflecteert zowel op de menselijke psyche als op de samenleving om de formules te onthullen omtrent lokale vatbaarheid voor culturele globalisering alsmede omtrent de vereiste compromissen om redelijke toepassingen na te volgen. Ik exploreer hoe deze in Chinese films gepresenteerde postmoderne formules de ervaringen van de Chinese bevolking hebben gevormd en hoe uiteenlopende filmmakers zich hebben afgevraagd wat Chinees postmodernisme betekent.



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Curriculum Vitae

Yanfeng Bian was born on January 10, 1974 in Henan, China. After finishing his secondary education at Luohe Normal School, he worked as a high school teacher. Then he continued his study at Xuchang Institute of Education and Henan Institute of Education. In 2009, he received his bachelor's degree from Henan Normal University. After that, he worked again as a high-school teacher. In 2002, he started his master study at Nankai University (Tianjin) and received a master degree in 2006. During his studies in Tianjin, he worked as a volunteer teacher in Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region for one year.

From 2004 to 2006, Yanfeng Bian also worked at the China Scholarship Council (CSC) as a project officer. In September 2006, he returned to Nankai University as a lecturer, meanwhile working as a program coordinator at the office for International Academic Exchanges. One year later, he received a scholarship from CSC and began his doctoral research in the Netherlands.

Over the past two decades, Yanfeng has been interested in the bewitching interplay of art, literature and philosophy. He has published several articles in the field of the comparative study of painting and poetry, he co-edited a book on American literature and he presented his work at international conferences.