

**Above Ground or Under Ground:
The Emergence and Transformation of “Sixth Generation” Film-Makers in
Mainland China**

by

Wu Liu

B.A., Renmin University, 1990
M.A., Beijing Film Academy, 1996

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
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ABSTRACT

This thesis redefines the Sixth Generation of Chinese film by examining the characteristics of some young directors' films from the perspective of theme, form and production mode, essentially, from the perspective of the relationship between these directors and their times. I suggest that the most important condition in the construction of the concept of the Sixth Generation and the Sixth Generation film is the ideological rebellion against the government after the events of 1989. I hold the opinion that the Sixth Generation has adopted a more commercial outlook after the end of the 1990s, and explore reasons of this change from the perspectives of economy, culture and individual existence.

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Dedication

To my wife Chang Sun and my daughter Yuqian Liu with love

Introduction

1. The “Generation” in Chinese Film History

Having won a number of prestigious film awards, such as the Golden Bear of the Berlin Film Festival and the Golden Lion of the Venice Film Festival, a group of young film directors called the Sixth Generation have in recent years advanced to a leading position in contemporary Chinese film industry. Meanwhile, in the academy, the controversy over the questions “What does the label of the Sixth Generation really mean?” and “What is the best way to characterize its aesthetics?” continue to preoccupy scholars and have not yet been resolved. Other important questions such as “How and why did the Sixth Generation appear?”, “Has it changed much since it emerged in the early of 1990s?”, and “If it has changed, why has it changed?” have so far remained unanswered.

To base the discussion of the Sixth Generation on a solid ground, the concept of the “generation” itself should be clarified.

The concept of “generation” comes from the need to study the Fifth Generation. In the mid-1980s, films such as *One and Eight* (*Yige he bage*, dir. Zhang Junzhao, 1983) and *Yellow Earth* (*Huang tudi*, dir. Chen Kaige, 1984) shot by some young directors shook China’s film industry. These directors belonged to such a different style than their predecessors that the critics needed a way to distinguish them from other directors. Therefore, in the 1980s, the critics assessed the whole of Chinese film history and divided it into five generations.¹ The First Generation referred to the pioneers of Chinese film

¹ Yang Yuanying, “Bainian liudai zhongguo yingxiang: guanyu zhongguo daoyan de daiji puxi yanjiu” (Six Generations in Centennial Chinese Film: A Genealogical Study of Chinese Film Directors) *Dangdai dianying* (*Contemporary Cinema*), no.6 (2002).

who began working in the industry around 1905 when film was initially introduced into China. The Second Generation referred to filmmakers who began their careers during the 1930s when films with sound became popular and left-wing thoughts entered the film industry. Directors who made films in China mainly between 1949 when the People's Republic of China was founded and 1966 when the Cultural Revolution broke out, were classified as the Third Generation. Directors in the generation who began making films after the Cultural Revolution and preceding the Fifth Generation were classified as the Fourth Generation.² The Fifth Generation referred to the directors who graduated in 1982 from the Beijing Film Academy and began producing their films around the middle of the 1980s.

On the surface, “generation” refers to a specific group of directors and it is mainly defined by chronological order. However, there is a problem with the designation of “generation” if it only emphasizes the time period when given directors began producing their films. The directors who began producing films in the same time period may have different characteristics, and different generations³ may produce films in the same period³. Therefore, the word “generation” cannot be used to refer to all the directors active during the same time period if it is to be used to pick out an aesthetically significant phenomenon or groups of individuals; it should only refer to the directors who share similar characteristics of mode of film production, theme, film language and so on which

² During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) film production was halted except for a few “model opera” films, which were films created to celebrate the Maoist regime. The Fourth Generation only got their chance to produce films after Cultural Revolution and by that time they were already middle-aged. Although they had different aesthetic taste from that of the Fifth Generation, the works of the two generations overlapped.

³ Guo Yue, “Zhongguo dianyingshi yanjiu zhong daoyan daiji huafenfa de zhiyi” (Questioning the Idea of “The Generations” of Chinese Filmmakers), *Dangdai dianying (Contemporary Film)*, no.11(2006), 121-123.

can be called their “style”. In other words, besides the referring to chronological order, “generation” also indicates a specific style which is shared by specific directors at the same time period.⁴

Film style is strongly influenced by socio-cultural elements. This is especially true in China where different styles of different generations in cinema are connected with the different stages of history, polity, and culture. For example, most members of the Fifth Generation experienced the Cultural Revolution and as educated urban youth were resettled in rural areas. This experience shaped their world view and compelled them to join the cultural reflection movement in the 1980s⁵, which was initiated by intellectuals.⁶

As Xiao-peng Lu points out:

In the post-Mao era, a new wave of film production came forth in Chinese cinema and the most noticeable of it is the Fifth Generation in the 1980s (Most films of this generation were shot by the graduates who were admitted in 1978 to the Beijing Film Academy). During this period, intellectuals started up an extensive movement of “Cultural reflection” and “Historical reflection,” which spread to the whole country. The members of the “Fifth Generation” were important participants and explorers in this movement. In the fierce criticism of traditional culture, they created their own style: a kind of “autobiography of the nation”—the national film of China, as the nation’s self-reflection.⁷

⁴ Yang, “Bainian liudai zhongguo yingxiang”, 99.

⁵ The main characteristic of “cultural reflection movement” was to sort out the merits and demerits of traditional Chinese culture, and discuss its relevance to reforms in economy and polity. This movement was regarded as part of the new enlightenment of the 1980s which I will discuss later.

⁶ Chen Kaige’s autobiography *Shaonian Kaige (The Youth of Kaige)* and Ni Zhen’s *Diwudai qianshi—Dianying xueyuan de gushi (The Story of Beijing Film Academy—the Pre- History of the Fifth Generation)* describe the experience of the Fifth Generation in Cultural Revolution.

⁷ Lu Xiao-peng, “Zhongguo dianying yibainian (1896-1996)yu kuaguo dianying yanjiu: yige lishi daoyin” (One Hundred Years of Chinese Film and Study of Transnational Film: A Historical Introduction). http://www.usc.cuhk.edu.hk/wk_wzdetails

Similarly, the style of the Second Generation was shaped by Marxism and other left-wing thought; the liberation of 1949 stipulated the leading position of the socialist aesthetics in the films of the Third Generation. And humanist thought was a powerful influence on the Fourth Generation film⁸. Because the social culture elements are such a powerful influence on the process of formation, styles of different generations in Chinese film history, the essence of a generation should always be explained by the relationship between its aesthetic style and its historical context. The strength of the term of “generation” is that it can suggest these historical influences on film production in different time periods in China.

2. The Problems with Critical Studies of the Sixth Generation

In studying the Sixth Generation, people always meet these two questions: “Who is the Sixth Generation?” and “What is the Sixth Generation film?” The former refers to a group of directors; the latter refers to a style of film. Logically, the answer to “Who is the Sixth Generation?” should depend on the understanding of “What is the Sixth Generation film?” That is to say, there must be some characteristics in the films of one or a group of directors that allows one to distinguish them from other directors and to call them by the same name, that is, the Sixth Generation.

From the chronological perspective, the question “Who is the Sixth Generation?” has

⁸ In the 1980s' Chinese literature and film, works expressed mainly "humanitarianism" (*rendao zhuyi*) which advocates that human beings should be respected and deserve to be treated with dignity. However, in the study of Chinese literature, this "humanitarianism" has been conveniently translated as "humanism" (*renben zhuyi*). In my thesis, I use "humanism" to describe Chinese literature and film following this tradition. In fact, this "humanitarianism" (*rendao zhuyi*) "may have little to do with the 'humanism'(*renben zhuyi*) of the American-educated 'liberals', which is close to the conservative definition of "humanities" in Western academia. (Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Surfaces* Vol.207 (v.1.0A-23/11/1995) Moreover, in the 1980s' China, the discussion about the relationship between the humanism and Marxism also used term "humanism" close to the meaning in Western academia.

a clear answer. “After Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige graduated in 1982, the Beijing Film Academy (BFA) admitted a new class in 1985 that included Zhang Yuan and others, and another class was admitted in 1987. The two classes make up the so-called Sixth Generation.”⁹ However, by the end of the 1990s, with more and more young directors such as Zhang Yang and Lu Chuan being placed in the category of Sixth Generation, the impulse to stretch the number of names on the list of the Sixth Generation increased greatly. Finally, the Sixth Generation refers to the directors who began their film careers in the 1990s. It applies to both the graduates from classes of 1985 and 1987 and the newcomers at the end of 1990s. It is also equivalent to the terms “Newborn Generation” (xinshengdai), “Post Fifth Generation”(houwudai) or “Urban Generation” all of which were used in Chinese film study to refer to all the young directors who came after the Fifth Generation.

Despite this widening of the category, the answer to “What is the Sixth Generation film” has remained the same since the first article introducing the Sixth Generation was published in 1994.¹⁰ The emergence of the Sixth Generation has been considered a product of the radical economical reform after Deng Xiaoping’s “southern trip” in 1992. “The historicity of this particular ‘new’ or contemporary urban cinema is precisely anchored in the unprecedented large-scale urbanization and globalization of China on the

⁹ Zhang Zhen, “Introduction: Bearing Witness: Chinese Urban Cinema in the Era of ‘Transformation’ in *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty- First Century*, ed. Zhang Zhen (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 40.

¹⁰ So far, the first article introducing the Sixth Generation that can be found in the database of National Library of China is Zheng Xianghong’s “Duli dianyingren zai xingdong:suwei Beijing dixia dianying de zhenxiang” (Independent Film Maker in Action: the Truth of the So-called Beijing ‘Underground Film’), *Dianying Gushi (Film Story)* no. 2 (1994), 4-9.

threshold of a new century.”¹¹ Or it is as Huang Shixian says,

In the 1990s, urban China was shining with unprecedented vigor originating from the tide of the commercial economy. Especially in the spring of 1992, guided by Deng Xiaoping’s speech during his southern trip and other important decisions, the economic reform in China was pushed to a new level aggressively. But just as the Cultural Revolution fermented some evils, the evils of money and desire were inevitable negative side effects that arose from the urban economic reform. They were the cost of the historical change. The portrait of contemporary urban life by the Sixth Generation has some touch of ‘post-modernism.’¹² The design of their characters embodies the spiritual binary-opposition of ‘present/ultimate.’ The narratives of their texts are mostly developed in the urban space, which is filled with the contradictions of ‘the spirit and the flesh.’ Their works present the unavoidable anxiety that is consistent with their times.¹³

By this token, the Sixth Generation film from its birth was a spiritual reflection of the urbanization and commercialization in the background of the economic reform after Deng’s southern trip in China. This answer to “What is the Sixth Generation film?” makes all the terms such as the Sixth Generation, Newborn Generation, Post- Fifth

¹¹ Zhang, *The Urban Generation*, 2.

¹² In mainland China, the existence of post modernist culture is still a controversial issue. I will discuss the dispute about post modernism in China and its ideological meaning later in my thesis. Here, I only introduce the view point of some scholars who believe that the post modernist culture has arrived and taken root in mainland China. Yin Hong in his article "Houxiandai yujing yu zhongguo dianying wenhua" (Post Modernist Context and Chinese Film Culture) argues that although the concept of "post modern" comes from the West, and that the polity, economy and ideology in China are very different from those of the West, nonetheless the reform and open policy of the past twenty years have made China a part of the world community, so that China shares in some common features in society and culture with the West. After the end of the 1990s, with the development of commercial economy and popularity of TV sets and video records, cultural production gradually industrialized and cultural products entered into the market according to commercial logic. Film and other mass media are connected with commercial benefits more tightly. Meanwhile, the enthusiasm for politics has been ebbing since the end of the 1980s. Qualms about the humanist ideal and historical responsibility have emerged among intellectuals. Chinese culture has deviated from the enlightenment and realist critical tradition. Cultural products have become a kind of amusemen or a game for profit. This social-cultural condition has caused a heated discussion about "postmodernity" and what makes postmodernist culture possible in China.

¹³ Huang Shixian, “Diliudai: laizi bianyuan de chaoxun” (The Sixth Generation: the Tide from the Margin), *Dianying yishu*(*Film Art*), no.1 (2003), 46.

Generation, and Urban Generation strongly compatible so that an equal sign can almost be drawn between them. But I am afraid that this answer to “What is the Sixth Generation film?” may be a mistake from the beginning, and it produces the misunderstanding of “Who is the Sixth Generation?” This study of the Sixth Generation seems to emphasize the impact of historical elements, but some important historical information has been neglected so that it puts the Sixth Generation in a wrong historical category.

In its early stage, most members of the Sixth Generation were graduates of the Beijing Film Academy in 1989 and 1991 and experienced the Tiananmen Square Protest of 1989 as students. In 1998, Lü Xiaoming noticed the relationship between the Sixth Generation and the Tiananmen Square protest in 1989:

Another experience which makes a difference and should not be ignored is the political protest of 1989. This is a sensitive topic. What impact this protest had on Chinese film waits to be studied by historians. Most of the members of the Sixth Generation were students in Beijing Film Academy at that time. The involvement in and their attitude to the riot influenced their view of society and life, and also influenced their survival conditions and production modes.¹⁴

However, because of political reasons, the study of the Sixth Generation has never been explored in this way. To maintain social stability, any discussion about 1989 protest is banned in China, even when an opinion is consistent with government rhetoric. The government’s efforts to erase the events of 1989 from the nation’s collective memory have been quite effective. To slide over the political taboo of the Tiananmen Square protest, many mainland scholars have adopted a flexible strategy to explain the cultural

¹⁴ Lü Xiaoming, “Jiushi niandai zhongguo dianying jingguan zhiyi :diliudai daoyan jiqi zhiyi” (One Part of the Chinese Film Landscape in 1990s: the Sixth Generation and the Doubt about the Term), *Dianying yishu (Film Art)*, no.3 (1999), 28.

changes and films created after 1989. They argue that with the intensification of economic reform, elite culture was overthrown by popular culture. The discourses of enlightenment and freedom in the 1980s were supplanted by consumerism. Dai Jinhua describes the cultural background during the emergence of the Sixth Generation as follows:

Complex as eighties Chinese culture is, it is still subject to integration into ‘modernity,’ on the basis of a common desire for progress, social democracy, and national prosperity, and by virtue of its resistance to historical inertia and the stronghold of mainstream ideology. In the nineties, however, the following elements fed a different socio-cultural situation: the ambiguous ideology of the post-Cold War era; the implosion and diffusion of mainstream ideology; global capitalism’s tidal force and the resistance of nationalism and nativism; the penetration and impact of global capital on local cultural industries; cultures’ increasing commercialization in global and local culture markets; and the active role local intellectuals besieged by postmodern and postcolonial discourse, have undertaken in their writing.¹⁵

The process of cultural change has been divided into two discrete stages by Dai and some other scholars—the 1980s and the 1990s, and they have been labeled “modernity” and “post-modernity” respectively. These scholars argue that in China, coherent with the country’s pursuit of modernization, intellectuals initiated a movement in the 1980s of criticizing the defects of traditional culture and traditional socialism and advocating the value of freedom, democracy, science, etc. This culture was the revival of enlightenment of the May Fourth Movement.¹⁶ From the perspective of post-colonialism, some scholars

¹⁵Jing Wang and Tani E.Barlow, ed., *Cinema And Desire:Feminist Marxism and Culture Politics in Work of Dai Jinhua* (London and New York:Verso Press, 2002), 71-72.

¹⁶ Xu Jilin’, “Cong xiandaihua dao xiandaixing:xiezai zhongguo xiandaihuashi chuban shinian zhiji” (From Modernization to Modernity: for the 10th Anniversary of the Publishing of *The History of the Modernization of China*), <http://www.chinese-thought.org/shgc/002597.htm>.

such as Zhang Yiwu criticized the culture dominated by intellectuals in the 1980s as a pursuit of modernity. This modernity, including freedom, democracy, and human rights, was regarded as a western criterion, and the enlightenment of the 1980s was rejected on the grounds that it was a process of debasing or forsaking the Chinese nationality identity and becoming an “other” of the West. At the same time, they announced that with the urbanization, commercialization and globalization, the modernity of the 1980s had ended.¹⁷ In its place, it was said, that post-modernity had emerged in the culture of the 1990s. This post-modernity in culture was said to represent an abjuration of the discourses of the new enlightenment of the 1980s. It was claimed that it pursues the enjoyment of self and present and that it had given up the exploration to the depth of theme or thinking and emphasized the popularity and entertainment effect.¹⁸ In 1993, Wang Meng, the vice president of the Chinese Writers’ Association, published an article titled “Duobi Chonggao” (Escaping the Loftiness), which advocated enjoying material life and giving up idealism¹⁹. Subsequently, a line in the famous TV series “Stories of the Newspaper Office” became popular all over the country. It said, “Money may not be omnipotent, but without it people are as good as impotent.”

However, while it highlights cultural differences between the 1980s and 1990s, this strategy fails to analyze reasons for the rupture. An important political reason for the cultural changes between the 1980s and 1990s, from modernity to post-modernity has been obscured. Although some scholars assert that the post-modernity that appears in

¹⁷ Zhang Yiwu, “Xiandaixing de zhongjie— yige wufa huibi de keti” (The End of ‘Modernity’—An Unavoidable Problem) *Zhanlue yu guanli (Strategy and Management)*, no.3 (1994), 104-109.

¹⁸ Yin Hong, “Houxiandai yujing zhong de zhongguo dianying” (Chinese Film in Postmodernist Context) *Dangdai dianying (Contemporary Film)*, no.2 (1994), 61-67.

¹⁹ Wang Meng, “Duobi Chonggao” (Escaping the Loftiness), *Dushu (Reading)*, no.1 (1993).

Chinese culture today has its social and economic foundations in the influx of transnational capital, information technology, profound changes in social structure, and in the modes of production and consumption, the fact that the country experienced heavy ideological oppression after 1989 has been omitted.²⁰ The period before the rise of post-modernity and after the June Fourth events in 1989 has been overlooked. Omission of this period also conceals the fact that modernity in Chinese culture was terminated not only by economic development and post-modernity, but after 1989 also by political events and ideological autarchy.

When these scholars arbitrarily cut the history after the Cultural Revolution into two parts—a period of modernity and a period of post-modernity—they have also turned a blind eye to any ideological struggle between intellectuals and the government that might still exist in the 1990s. Thus, the emergence of the Sixth Generation has been regarded as maladjustment due to radical economic reform and cultural change, as if economic reform was not supported by the youth, including the Sixth Generation who devoted themselves to the Tiananmen Square protest. This implies that Chinese intellectuals were so naive that they did not know that with the rising market economy and the emergence of a “bourgeois” lifestyle, popular culture would supplant elite culture and take the dominant place in the social structure. The attack on modernity occurred in the west long before and could be predicted by Chinese intellectuals even in the 1980s when they advocated the rise of the bourgeoisie, along with a free market economy, social equality,

²⁰ Some scholars in the West also discuss the social condition of post-modernity in China. Their discussions can be found in *Postmodernism and China*, eds. Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang, (Durham, Durham, N.C.: Duck University Press, 2000). It seems that the role of events of 1989 in the emergence of the post-modernist culture has not yet been explored in this book.

law, and human rights. The basic fact is that intellectuals had already battled for popular culture and utilized rock music, fashion dress and etc., as weapon to attack the conservative socialist ideology.²¹ Even though it is true that when popular culture displaced elite culture, and intellectuals felt rejected by society in the 1990s, the reasons for this sense of maladjustment should be examined carefully. Xu Jilin indicated one of these reasons in his article “Qimeng de ziwo wajie” (The Collapse of the Enlightenment). He said, “The events of 1989 interrupted the new enlightenment movement and Chinese intellectuals had to experience a period of hibernation in the early 1990s.”²² What made them feel uncomfortable? Was it the rise of popular culture or the way they were supplanted by popular culture? In any case, this replacement is not a result of the rise of a true bourgeoisie but the result of the mixture of ideological control and economic reform after the military suppression. Actually, this maladjustment was a manifestation of the desperation that pervaded Chinese society in the early 1990s. Li Datong, the chief editor of the column “Ice Point” (Bing Dian) in *Chinese Youth Daily* (*Zhongguo Qingnianbao*) emphasizes the desperation that pervaded among the people:

The main function of the event on June Fourth was to make everyone despair. Before that, people still had some confidence in the Communist Party. But the shooting of the people caused a collapse of this confidence.²³

²¹ Chen Gang’s *Dazhong wenhua he wutuobang* (*Popular Culture and Eutptia*) (Beijing: Zuoqia Press, 1995) discusses the ideological struggle between popular culture and mainstream culture advocated by the government.

²² Xu Jilin, “Qimeng de ziwo wa jie” (The Collapse of the Enlightenment), <http://www.tecn.cn/data/detail.php?id=12665>.

²³ The interview with Li Datong in *Radio Free Asia* , <http://www.rfa.org/mandarin/shenrubaodao/2006/06/02/64-17/>

This desperation, which arose from the people's inability to change social reality when faced by the powerful state machine, explains the conditions and spirit of intellectuals in the early 1990s when the Sixth Generation directors began their filmmaking careers. However the peculiarity of the relationship between the members of the Sixth Generation and their times has not been widely explored.

If we neglect the real historical conditions under which the Sixth Generation films were produced, we will not be able to identify the primary characteristics of these films. Accordingly, we cannot hope to effectively distinguish the Sixth Generation from other young filmmakers. For example, filmmakers who shot urban film that feature themes and subject matter that coincide with official ideology do not belong to the Sixth Generation. When people put Hu Xueyang who shot *The Left Behind* (*Liushou nüshi*, 1993)²⁴ and Zhang Yuan who shot *Beijing Bastards* (*Beijing zazhong*, 1993)²⁵ into the same category and call them both the Sixth Generation only because they made the films in the same time period, the particular characteristics of this generation are lost to a sweeping generalization.

3. Aims of the Thesis

Until now, an accurate description of the Sixth Generation has not been presented.

The main reason for this is the incorrect answer to "What is the Sixth Generation

²⁴ *The Left Behind* (*liushou nüshi*) tells a love story of two urban middle aged people. Nai qing's husband and Jia Dong's wife both study abroad. Nai Qing and Jia Dong meet together occasionally. They fall in love, but traditional morals stop them from living together. Finally, to maintain each other's family, they part forever.

²⁵ *Beijing Bastards* (*Beijing Zazhong*) is some pieces of fragments of the urban youths' life. A rock band is banned from performing. A boy persuades his girl friend to abort. A writer drinks and quarrels with his friend all day... The film is filled with rock music and vulgar words.

film?”—some characteristics of this generation’s films that originate in the failure of the Tiananmen Square protest have been ignored. In my thesis, I will trace the origin of this generation of filmmakers to the period when its films first emerged, and show the relationship between film style and the social/cultural condition of the times. I believe this relationship embodies the true reason why this generation should be called the Sixth Generation and cannot be confused with others.

I hold the opinion that the Sixth Generation is mainly a child of the June Fourth of 1989 events, rather than the spiritual reflection of urbanization and economic reform that followed Deng’s southern trip of 1992. In order to understand them, the emergence of the Sixth Generation should also be placed into the historical context of the new enlightenment movement²⁶ that arose out of the Cultural Revolution and collapsed in 1989. In this movement, the ideological conflicts between intellectuals and the government intensified and reached their climax in the event of Tiananmen Square. Although the Sixth Generation films were shot in the 1990s, I prefer to treat them as an indication of the end of the new enlightenment movement of the 1980s rather than the beginning of the rapid urbanization and economic reform or the socialist market economy after 1992. I argue that the rebellion against official ideology was accompanied by a strong feeling of depression caused by the event in 1989 and that is the essence of the Sixth Generation film. Thus, the Sixth Generation film cannot be put into the same category as the so-called Urban Generation films or Newborn Generation films. Clearly,

²⁶ The new enlightenment movement is liberation of thinking in the 1980s. It is concerned with how to realize modernization in China from the perspectives of cultural and social reform. It continues the tradition of May Fourth Movement, which is regarded as an enlightenment movement in China and advocated the value of humanism, democracy and science (See Xu jilin and Xie Baogeng’s “Zhishenyu jinxiandai sixiangshi de zhishifenzi yanjiu” (The Intellectual Studies in the Perspective of Modern and Pre-modern History of Thinking), *Xueshuyuekan* (*Academic Study*), no.8 (2003), 105-112.

however, not all the young directors engaged in this ideological rebellion. In fact, up to the present time, only some of the graduates from the class in 1985 and 1987 have produced this type of film. The widening of the concept of the Sixth Generation or putting it into a larger basket such as that of Newborn Generation or the Urban Generation can only nullify the Sixth Generation.

To clarify “what is the Sixth Generation film?” , from the historical perspective, I will examine the reasons why the Sixth Generation films emerged after the protest of 1989, and indicate the influence of the new enlightenment movement and the conditions of film industry at that time; from the perspective of film production, I will discuss the characteristic of the Sixth Generation films as a kind of independent film; from the perspective of film content, I will explore the theme of ideological rebellion and analyze rock images that exist in many of the Sixth Generation films; from the perspective of form, I will probe the relationship between the new enlightenment movement and the film language of the Sixth Generation.

By rebuilding the connection between the Sixth Generation films and the new enlightenment movement in the 1980s and its failure in 1989, the essence of the Sixth Generation films will be understood more profoundly, and a new definition of the Sixth Generation will be made possible.

From the end of the 1990s, with the transformation of socio-cultural conditions, the government has emphasized the commercial aspects of film production more vigorously than ever before. Accordingly, the strategy of the government to control film production has also been adjusted. Against this background, increasing internal differentiation within young directors including the Sixth Generation also arose. On the one hand, the “Sixth

Generation” has largely become a popular commercial label to attract white collar workers and urban youths to a subdivided film market²⁷; on the other hand, some directors of the Sixth Generation have shifted their attention from personal life to a wider field of representation, especially the life of the lower classes. I will analyze this change from the social and industrial perspectives by treating directors, capital, and government as different “players” struggling to reconcile their goals. I will also examine the meaning of this change from the tradition of Chinese literature and film history. Finally, I will summarize the significance of the Sixth Generation film as a phenomenon from its birth to its withering away by looking at it as a stage in the endless ideological struggle of contemporary Chinese film history.

²⁷ In China, the awareness of film market has been awakened. Investors begin to produce different films to satisfy different aesthetic taste of different groups of people. These different groups of people comprise the “subdivided market”.

Chapter One: Burgeoning on the Margin

1. The Legacy of the 1980s

1.1 Humanism and Its Presentation in Films of the New Era

The Sixth Generation is not a film phenomenon arising suddenly in the 1990s in China. On the contrary, it is one of the links in the chain of the ideological struggles between intellectuals and the government which were triggered off by a series of social changes, especially the new enlightenment movement in the 1980s. In other words, the Sixth Generation is a bitter fruit of the June Fourth 1989, and the June Fourth of 1989 is a result of the social changes that began in 1978. Therefore, understanding the social conditions from 1978 to 1989 is extremely important in interpretation of the emergence of the Sixth Generation.

1978 is considered as a turning point of contemporary Chinese history. In this year the Chinese Communist Party held the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee. Deng Xiaoping's leadership was established at that meeting. The Chinese Communist Party moved its emphasis from class struggle to the development of the economy. The policy of "reform and opening to the outside world" has been carried out from that time onward. In the field of ideology, some important theories were brought forward in order to distinguish the "New Era"²⁸ from Mao's times. The most important event in the field of ideology in this period was the discussion concerning the "criterion of truth"²⁹. This discussion destroyed the worship of Maoism which had been thought of

²⁸ The time from 1978 to the present is called "New Era" by Chinese government and Chinese the academic institutes.

²⁹ The purpose of this discussion was to wipe off some of the doctrine of Maoism and legitimate the

as a self-evident truth and started up the new enlightenment movement of intellectuals. The new enlightenment movement, “as a counteraction to the feudalism of the Cultural Revolution, embraced rationalism as its principal element, hoisted the flag of science and humanism and launched a liberation in thinking. It was characterized by an openness in culture and self-reflection, and lasted throughout the 1980s.”³⁰ A significant part of the movement was the emergence of humanism on the horizon of new Chinese society.

At the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, humanism which had been criticized as a “hypocritical” bourgeois thought in the official ideology of Mao’s time, bloomed as a counteraction to the inhuman behavior of the Cultural Revolution, which is now deemed as a disaster, in contemporary China. During the Cultural Revolution, a series of political movements made many people suffer the ruin of family, torture, exile, and death. Qin Mu, a famous writer, comments on the Cultural Revolution like this:

It was a catastrophe. Millions of people became homeless; millions of lives were disrupted; millions of families fell to pieces; millions of children grew up to be rascals; millions of books were burned; millions of historic sites were destroyed; millions of wrongs were done in the name of revolution!³¹

Intellectuals of this period were convinced that the suppression of humanism in the

leadership of Deng. They held the proposition of “practice is only criterion of truth” to criticize the doctrine which advocated that all of Mao’s instruction were truth and should be abided unconditionally.

³⁰ Du Shuyig and Zhang Tingting. “Xing qimeng:lixing jingshen xia de wenlun huayu” (New Enlightenment: Literature Text under the Rationalism) *Wenyi lilun yanjiu* (*Literature Theory Study*) no.4 (1999), <http://www2.xcu.edu.cn/zhongwen/lunwen/10692.html> - 14k.

³¹ Ding Shu, “Wenge siwang renshu de yi jia zhiyan” (Personal Opinion on the Death Toll in the Cultural Revolution)*Supplement of Huaxia wenzhai zengkan wenge bowuguan tongxun* (*Hua Xia Digest, Correspondence of Cultural Revolution*) Volume 209, <http://www.edubridge.com/erxiantang/library/wengesiren.htm>.

name of revolution was one of the most important reasons behind those ferocities in the Cultural Revolution. They began to appeal for the respect of human beings for the liberation of the individual from the doctrines of the socialist revolution such as collectivism. They evaluated humanism as a progressive thought which could be consistent with Marxism.³² This idea spread to literary theory. In 1979, Zhu Guangqian took the lead in arguing that human nature was common to all human beings and that people of different times and different classes might share a common aesthetic that broke through the limitations of particular class consciousness and enable them to enjoy the same works of art. In literature then, humanism should not just belong to the bourgeois.³³ Liu Bingyan, a famous writer, gave the speech titled “Human Is the Purpose; Human Is the Center” (Ren shi zhongxin, ren shi mudi) at the Congress of Chinese Writers in 1979. He advocated that the ultimate purpose of working class was the liberation of human beings, so that a working class member should be thoroughly a humanist. In 1980, Ru Xin tried to argue for the legalization of humanism from the perspective of philosophy. He confessed that humanism in Marxism came from some kind of influence of Feuerbach during Marx’s youth, but he argued that Marxism had adopted Feuerbach’s theory and developed it further. Thus, Marxism should be a kind of humanism based on science.³⁴

³² The rise of humanism in China after Cultural Revolution and its struggle with the conservatives in Chinese Communist Party can be found in Wang Ruoshui’s *Rendaozhuyi zai zhongguo de mingyun (The Fate of Humanism in China)* (Hong Kong: Mirror Press, 1997).

³³ Zhu Guangqian, “Guanyu rengxing, rendaozhuyi, renqingwei he gongtongmei wenti” (Issues about Humanity, Humanism, the Milk of Human Kindness and Common Aesthetics), *Wenyi yanjiu (Art Study)*, no.3 (1979), 39-42.

³⁴ Ru Xin, “Rendao zhuyi jiushi xiuzhengzhuyi ma?—dui rendaozhuyi de zairenshi” (Is Humanism Really Revisionism?—the Rethinking about Humanism), *Renmin ribao (People’s Daily)*, August 15, 1980.

In social life, the benefits and interests of individualism entered the public discourse and were extensively discussed. In May 1980, *Zhongguo qingnian (Chinese Youth)* published a reader's letter entitled "Why Does the Road of Life Become Narrower and Narrower?" This article spoke of the author's miserable experiences during and after the Cultural Revolution and expressed strong suspicion about the collectivism and the communist ideal which was advocated by official ideology. It gave rise to a three year long dispute throughout the country and tried to establish the legitimacy of individualism. This kind of discussion stimulated people to try to answer questions such as the meaning of life, the value of relationships with others, the real meaning of freedom, the nature of a just society and how best to realize it. This surge made Western thought spread among young students. Jean-Paul Sartre's "Existentialism Is a Kind of Humanism" became many young men's first spiritual manual and passion.³⁵ Issues of socialism and alienation were hotly debated³⁶. Even recondite theories such as Ilya Prigogine's proposition about dissipative structure were popular because of their applicability to explaining the society of China. The humanism that arose in society at that time, and was reinforced by Western thought and finally influenced the contents of art works of that time period.

The trend of humanism in literary production gave birth to a style called "scar literature" which portrayed the sufferings of cadres and intellectuals during the tragic days of the Cultural Revolution. Trauma and the denial of humanity were the major

³⁵ The popularity of Sartre in Chinese young generation in the 1980s can be found in Cao Hongpei and Luan Jinglei's "Cuo'ai sate:80niandai xinyibe de jingshen chulian" (The Wrong Love to Sartre: the First Spiritual love of "the New generation" in the 1980s), <http://arts.tom.com/1002/2005620-21813.html>.

³⁶ According to the statistics obtained from Chinese Academy of Social Sciences almost all the main newspapers and magazines plunged into the discussion. And more than 20 academic books and around 750 papers published on the subject. <http://myy.cass.cn/file/2005122110007.html>.

themes of the “scar literature”. It also extolled love and faith in others. Another style which followed the “scar literature” was called the “reflection literature”. “Reflection literature” tried to explore the reasons for these tragedies in the Cultural Revolution from the perspective of the social political system. Corresponding to the “scar literature” and “reflection literature”, humanist thought was also presented in the Fourth Generation of Chinese film. As Xie Fei, one of the Fourth Generation directors remembered, “Actually, film followed on the heels of literature and cultural thought at that time. There was a process from ‘scar literature’ to ‘reflection literature’ to ‘root-seeking literature’ in the Chinese literature in the 1980s, and film works also followed this exploration.”³⁷ Dai Jinhua also comments:

That was an exoteric humanist social ideal. After the Cultural Revolution, an ‘inhuman, antihuman historical catastrophe’, after the devil’s dance of death and persecution, the flag of humanism became a piece of blurred but warm color, and the method and potential power for rescue of the society.³⁸

Moreover, the “root-seeking literature” mentioned by Xie Fei which was regarded as a development and deepening of the “scar literature” and “reflection literature” fostered the Fifth Generation of filmmaking. The root-seeking literature originated from some writers who began to discuss positive or negative influence of culture, especially traditional Chinese culture on the life of Chinese and the process of modernization. The desirability of modernization and the liberation of human nature were two sides of the

³⁷ Fang Zhou, “Interview with Xie Fei”, *Dazhong dianying (Popular Cinema)*, no.15 (2007), <http://qkzz.net/magazine/0492-0929/2007/15/1136264.htm>

³⁸ Dai Jinhua., “Xieta:chongdu disidai” (Leaning Tower : Rereading the Fourth Generation) in *Xietai liaowang: zhongguo dianying wenhua 1978—1998 (Survey on Leaning Tower: Chinese Film Culture 1978—1998)* (Taipei: Yuan Liu Press, 1999),19.

coin for “rooting-seeking literature”: on the one hand these writers blamed traditional culture for suppressing human nature; on the other hand they praised the vitality and primitive passions in traditional culture. The Fifth Generation got their themes from this literary style. Yang Yuanying puts it as follows:

Their narrative texts which were constructed by the polarized scenes (panorama and feature), gave an extremely powerful voice to the intellectuals’ observations on national spirit and the burning need for social change...The films of the Fifth Generation can be treated as an art of reflection. Its major themes are characterized by the examination of China: the symbols of ancient culture, the grief and indignation, by reference to the remnants of an old civilization. The narrative in their films presents a kind of searching and endless questing for something. The value of these films is that they help people think about current problems from the perspective of ancient sources.³⁹

Although some scholars advocated the independence of art from the ideological and political struggles of that time, the films of the Fourth Generation and the Fifth Generation were far from neutral. Their humanist appeal and the criticism of the traditional culture and social system categorize them as part of the new enlightenment movement. The new enlightenment movement and its representatives in film art, the Fourth and the Fifth Generation, thus left to their successors, the Sixth Generation, an important legacy—namely humanism, especially, the idea that the individual should be respected.

Directors of the Sixth Generation were influenced by these thoughts. Zhang Ming enjoyed reading the works of Martin Heidegger when he was a university student⁴⁰.

³⁹Yang, “Bainian liudai zhongguo yingxiang”, 99-105.

⁴⁰ See the interviews in Cheng Qingsong and Huang Ou’s *Wode sheyingji bu sahuang* (*My Camera Doesn’t*

Wang Chao preferred to study Herbert Marcuse⁴¹. Lou Ye's reading covered everybody from Prigogine to Freud⁴². The Western directors whose works dealt with the spiritual crisis of humanity such as Michelangelo Antonioni and Federico Fellini were favored enthusiastically by the young generation⁴³.

In the field of film, the liberation of human nature became an established and common theme in the 1980s. In either the dolorous intonation of the fate of the individual in the revolutionary era or the magnificent tales that retold the old history, the individual came to occupy the forefront of Chinese film. The theme of the liberation of the individual was also repeatedly presented in the films about urban youth which are first signs of the so called urban film in the new era. *Red Dress Girl (Hongyi shaonü, 1984)*, shot by Lu Xiaoya, a Fourth Generation director, praised a girl who kept her integrity under the stress of her environment namely, her school and family life. In this film, the girl's red dress which was very different from others' dresses in an era when all the people wore black or grey was a metaphor to individuality and also a rebellion against tradition. *Rock Youth (Yaogun qingnian, 1987)*, shot by Tian Zhuangzhuang, a Fifth Generation director, exalted the individual spirit of the youth who loved rock music and disco dancing which previously had been looked on as some kind of bourgeois life style. These films were welcomed by young people and became a subject of public discourse. They gave rise to heated public discussions and these discussions were always combined with the discussions of philosophy and other ideological matters. Finally, the bastion of

Lie (Beijing:Zhongguo youyi Press 2002), 22.

⁴¹ Ibid., 171.

⁴² Ibid , 247.

⁴³ Ibid., 249.

traditional official ideology, which demands that the people obey and dedicate themselves unconditionally to the communist party, began to be called into question.

With the retreat of traditional official ideology such as collectivism, “individualism” emerged in the history of communist China and began to grow bigger and bigger. This is the legacy that the new enlightenment movement of the 1980s left to the Sixth Generation. From the rising of humanism to the popularity of individualism, from *Girl in Red Dress* to *Rock Youth*, the changes in social life and film art prepared conditions for the appearance of the protagonists of another kind of rock youth in the films of the Sixth Generation that are described by critics as “egoist”, “personal”⁴⁴ and so on.

1.2 The Ideological Conflict with the Government

Another heritage from the 1980s is the ideological conflict between intellectuals and the government which was an important power shaping the film of the 1990s. After the Cultural Revolution, the effort to defect from the traditional socialist ideology had been fueled by the wretched experience of the country and ignited by the new enlightenment movement. The accusations of engaging in inhuman ferocities in contemporary China enveloped the Communist Party, the very agents of these ferocities; the reflection on the defects of social system demolished the belief in socialism; and the criticism of traditional culture deconstructed the myth of national civilization. Finally, the new enlightenment movement which began with humanism went so far as to demand reform of the political system and to limit or abolish the right of the Communist Party to rule. The Communist Party knew the new thought was a double-edged sword: it helped drawing a clear line between “New Era” and Mao’s times; but it could also shake the

⁴⁴ Many scholars such as Han Xiaolei, Yang Yuanying, Lin Shaoxiong deem “egoist” (ziwozhongxin) as one of the characteristics of the Sixth Generation.

authority of the government. Thus when Deng Xiaoping's "New Era" was secure, the campaigns of "anti bourgeois liberalization" and "anti bourgeois spiritual pollution" were started up and lasted the entire decade of 1980s⁴⁵. In the art field, in the aftermath of this ideological struggle, the forbidden films and literature were born. In 1979, the drama *What if I really were?* (Jiaru wo shi zhende, Sha Yexin) was accused by some high level officials of depicting the miserable condition of rusticated urban youth and the bureaucratism of the government. In 1981, the novel *Man Oh, Man* (Ren a, Ren, Dai Houying) was criticized for advocating humanism and attacking the faults of the Chinese Communist Party. In the same year, the screen script *Bitter Love* (*Ku lian*, by Bai Hua) and the film based on it, which told a story about an overseas Chinese painter who had returned to China after 1949 with enthusiasm and worked for his mother land only to be humiliated, and finally die as a criminal, were banned because they violated the "four cardinal principles" (Si xiang jiben yuanze)⁴⁶ and attacked the socialist system. *One and Eight* (*Yige he bage* dir. Zhang Junzhao, 1983), one of the Fifth Generation's films, which paid a tribute to mobsters that had died in the fighting against Japanese, was attacked as a sample of "bourgeois spiritual pollution". *Horse Thief* (*Dao ma zei*, dir. Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1985), another film of the Fifth Generation was banned for its describing of a virtuous herder who was driven by life to stealing horses, and died

⁴⁵ The process of the "anti bourgeois liberalization" and "anti bourgeois spiritual pollution" can be found in Bonnie S McDougall and Kam Louie's *The Literature Of China In The Twentieth Century*, (New York:Columbia University Press 1997), 336-344.

⁴⁶ The Four Cardinal Principles were started by Deng Xiaoping in 1979 and are the four issues for which debate was not allowed within the People's Republic of China. These are:the principle of upholding the socialist path; the principle of upholding the people's democratic dictatorship; the principle of upholding the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party;; and the principle of upholding Marxist-Leninist-Mao Zedong thought.

disillusioned in his belief in goodness. These criticized plays, novels and forbidden films exposed the split between the artists and the government. The government still wanted to use art as propaganda, but the artists yearned for the freedom to express their individuality to analyze the social problems and criticize the Chinese Communist Party. Ye Nan, a famous writer, summarized the situation and expressed the artists' determination:

In history, however, the art often came into conflict with political blocs in society (including the church). When such conflict was acute, political methods were used to resolve them—of example 'literary persecution' or even execution. People were killed, but the arts were not completely killed off. We cannot allow literature and art to become an ornament in the emperor's crown. There have been works that obey certain individuals or turned back on the people, but they definitely will not last.⁴⁷

This situation suggests that the two sides in this struggle acted out opposite roles: progressive/conservative, victim/persecutor, profound/vulgar, conscious/blind, freeman/autarchic... This opposition must have left influence on the future Sixth Generation when they were young students. But the protest in Tiananmen Square in 1989 magnified the split between intellectuals and the government, and made the intellectuals break with the government. The energy of the effort to defect from the traditional socialist ideology erupted and reached its apex in 1989. Also it spurred the Sixth Generation to take a definite stand.

The event of June Fourth 1989 at least had two (among other) seminal effects on Chinese youth: it destroyed their belief in the political propaganda; and the military

⁴⁷ Quote from Michael S. Duke's *Blooming And Contending*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 35.

crackdown shattered their faith in the government. As stated by Liu Bingyan:

Until June 4 they [Chinese people] believed in the communist Party as an abstraction, still hoped that a single man, Deng Xiaoping, could be relied on to reform China...The June 4 massacre put an end to all this...No longer will the Party's invocation of its right to speak for "the people" be believed as in the past...This ruling body has lost its legality and reason for its existence.⁴⁸

Other effects of the June Fourth massacre were the temporary interruption of economic reform and the long term stagnation of political reform. In post 1989 China, political conservatism based on Maoist doctrine reasserted itself.⁴⁹ Political and economic reform stopped and the country drifted aimlessly.

The significance of the effects of June Fourth is that they provide the major theme for the Sixth Generation—the feeling of desperation and loss. Essentially, the Sixth Generation is an outcome of the spiritual crisis among young intellectuals. It is a Lost Generation in 1990s China.

In sum, the new enlightenment movement in the 1980s in many ways incubated the Sixth Generation. It provided the humanism and individualism that the Sixth Generation values. The characters of the urban young shaped by the Fourth and the Fifth Generation directors blazed the path for the appearance of the protagonists in the films of the Sixth Generation. The ideological struggle between intellectuals and the government influenced the Sixth Generation's stand in film production. The event of June Fourth 1989 decided

⁴⁸ Liu Bingyan, Ruan Ming and Xu Gang, *Tell the World: What Happened In China And Why* (New York: Random House, 1989), 176-178.

⁴⁹ See Xiao Gongqin's "Xinzuopai he dangdai zhonggou zhishifenzi de fenhua" (New Left and the Polarization of Intellectuals in Contemporary China), <http://www.edubridge.com/erxiantang/library/xinzuopai.htm>.

the theme for the films of the Sixth Generation. At the same time, the literature and films of the 1980s provided aesthetic thought and skills to the Sixth Generation. I will discuss this point in chapter two.

2. Winter of the Film Industry

The emergence of the Sixth Generation is not merely attributable to the new enlightenment movement. The condition of the film industry in the early 1990s is a more immediate factor for the birth of this generation. When the directors of the Sixth Generation graduated from film schools, they had to face the coming winter of the film industry.

After 1978, the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party was held and the government-imposed economic reform drastically shook the film industry. The increasing availability of other popular entertainment forms, such as television, concerts and karaoke was attracting audiences away from movies. “In 1984, only 26 billion tickets were sold, down 10 percent from 1980. In the first quarter of 1985, the moviegoing audience was 30 percent smaller than during the same period of the previous year. The result was a loss of revenue of 9.36 million Yuan (US\$1.17 million).”⁵⁰ The situation became worse and worse. In 1989, 30 percent of the state-run studios, 23 percent of the provincial-level distribution companies, and 24 percent of provincial theaters were losing money. By the end of this year, Shanghai Film Studio had a debt of 20million Yuan (US\$2.5million), Beijing Film Studio 10million Yuan

⁵⁰ Zhu Ying, *Chinese Cinema during the Era of Reform: The Ingenuity of the System*. (New York: Praeger Publisher, 2003), 72.

(US\$1.25million), and Changchun Film Studio 30 million Yuan (US\$3.75 million) in debt.”⁵¹ In 1993, the Film Management Bureau of China changed its policy of purchase guarantee. Before that time, the Film Bureau gave 700,000 Yuan (US\$87,500) to every film regardless of its box-office taking. Now, studios would get their guaranteed benefits according to the projected sales⁵². This change made the studios produce only the films that could get benefits. The mode of financing that made the Fifth Generation a success, where ample government funding was available for film making, was destroyed. Before the reform of the film industry, cinema was regarded as a part of the government propaganda business. The money which was invested in film making came completely from the government. The Fifth Generation got the chance to produce their own films—*Yellow Earth* (*Huang tudi*, dir. Chen Kaige 1984), *Red Sorghum* (*Hong gaoliang*, dir. Zhang Yimou 1987) using the money that came from the government and did not need to worry about the market or about guaranteed benefit or subsidy. Although *Yellow Earth* only sold three copies in the whole country⁵³, its achievement in art ensured its creators including Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou could continue their film career, and the film studio could get the fixed investment from government. But with the reforms that era passed. Economic pressure pushed film studios to produce commercial films or as the critics in China called them, “entertainment films”. “In 1991 annual attendance stood at

⁵¹ Ibid., 77.

⁵² See the document of the Film Management Bureau no.3 1993, *Guanyu dangqian shenhua dianying hangye jizhi gaige de ruogan yijian jiqi shishi xize* (The Opinion about Deepening the Reform of Present Film Industry and the Detailed Rules), <http://www.filmsea.com.cn/document/law/200103190179.htm>.

⁵³ “Bashiniandai dianying shangyehua de bianqian xijie” (Details of the Commercialization of Chinese Cinema in the 1980s), *Sanlian shenghuo zhouban* (*Sanlian Life Weekly*), no.341 (2005), <http://www.ionly.com.cn/pro/8/88/20050819/005042.html>

14.4 billion, down 42.4 per cent from 25 billion in 1984, but in 1994 the number fell to 3 billion, down another 79.2 per cent from 1991.”⁵⁴ The decline in movie attendance caused most studios to lose money. Under these conditions, there was almost no chance for new directors to shoot a film in a state run studio.

When the new generation entered the film industry, they faced the shrinking of the film industry. This was called a winter of Chinese film and also a winter for the young directors. Only a few of the graduates got jobs in film studios. Most of them survived by making advertising or TV programs since it was hard to find a position in the studio system. “They began to roam around Beijing as marginal film artists burdened with unnameable anxieties.”⁵⁵ Even when some graduates got into a film studio, they found it hard to get a chance to direct a film. For example, Wang Xiaoshuai had worked as script writer in Fujian Film Studio for three years. During that time, he wrote five scripts but all of them were rejected. He wrote the Chinese characters “冷静(lengjing)” which means calmness on the wall of his apartment. Finally, he found he could not really be calm if he stayed in the state-run film studio, because he would never find a chance to produce a film⁵⁶. The rules of the game that had brought success to the Fifth Generation had been changed. If the Sixth Generation directors are characterized as “independent”, this character comes partly from the reform of the economic system of the film industry. The reform compelled the new generation to become “independent”.

⁵⁴ Zhang Yingjin, *Chinese National Cinema*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 282.

⁵⁵ Dai, *Cinema And Desire*, 81.

⁵⁶ Zheng, “Duli dianyingren zai xigdong”, 4-9.

Chapter Two: The Style of the Sixth Generation Film

In chapter one I have analyzed the main reasons for the emergence of the Sixth Generation—the influence of the new enlightenment movement and the changes in the conditions of film production. In this chapter I will discuss the characteristics or the style of the Sixth Generation film. I argue that the core characteristic of the Sixth Generation film is not the so called “urban film” in the 1990s but a rebellion against official ideology and the ideological control system after 1989. I will support this claim by discussing film production mode and film art. In China, until recently, film production has been monopolized by state-run studios. At the same time, a rigid censorship system exists in the process of film production, which mainly includes the approvals to produce, to distribute and project films, and to export or attend international film exchanges or competitions. As a system, this monopolistic and autocratic film production mode in mainland China effectively guarantees that the Chinese government has ideological control over the film industry. Therefore, the new film production mode used by these young directors may strike heavily at the ideological control of the government or become a way to escape this ideological control. If so, that means that an enemy may have emerged to the iron-fisted rule of the Chinese film industry. But to confirm whether it is really an “enemy” or not, we still need to check it from the perspective of film art itself including its theme, rock images (which are widely noticed by critics of these young directors’ films), and film language. These elements in the Sixth Generation films can testify about their tendencies in ideological matters more directly.

1. The Dependence of Independent Film on the International Market

In 1991, Zhang Yuan raised some money from his friends and produced his first work *Mama*. *Mama* tells a story of the difficulties faced by a single mother in feeding her mentally deficient son. As Zhang Yuan lacked money, all the actors were amateurs. The mother was acted by the screen play writer. The majority of the film was shot in black and white and the color portion of the film was shot by video tape. The story was told in a documentary style, but the director inserted some shots with abstract images, such as the son wrapped in white sheet cuddling up like an infant in a beam of light being emitted by an unknown source. This narrative and visual style gave the film a strong sense of experimentation. The content of the film did not violate the official ideology and it passed the government censor, but the publication of the film failed because only six copies were ordered by film theaters. This was a clear sign that the domestic market would reject such artistic films.

Zhang Yuan then turned his eyes to the international market. The success of the Fifth Generation was built on a model of how to enter the international market by way of the film festivals. With the help of Shu Qi, a Hong Kong film critic, *Mama* was sent to Nantes France. In the “Three Continents Film Festival in Nantes”, Zhang Yuan got the committee award. Then his film traveled all over the world appearing in more than 20 film festivals. Finally, in addition to winning the honor at Nantes, Zhang Yuan received funding for his next film from sources in France, Holland and Switzerland.⁵⁷

According to the official Chinese government policy, presenting a film at an international festival should have approval from the government. But Zhang Yuan's

⁵⁷ Cheng and Huang, *Wo de sheyingji bu sahuang*, 110.

actions had offended the government authorities so the Film Management Bureau of China deprived him of the right to shoot films. Strictly speaking, *Mama* is not a banned film but Zhang Yuan became a banned director.

Zhang Yuan took an advantage of a new film production mode namely self-financing; he raised money for film making on the international market. Before the reform of film production in 1997, the film production in mainland China was monopolized by sixteen state-run film studios. Every film must have a studio label. The label is equivalent to obtaining a license of film production, and self-financed production without a studio label is considered illegal. Zhang Yuan had to buy a label from Xian Film Studio under the table when he shot *Mama*; to attend an international film festival one also needs permit from the government. But after sneaking into the foreign market, Zhang Yuan found he could get rid of all these controls.

With the international investment in his purse, Zhang Yuan did not care about the punishment. He produced his second film *Beijing Bastards* (*Beijing zazhong* 1993) The film tells a story about how a rock band prepared to give a concert, but in the end failed to perform. This time Zhang Yuan cooperated with the famous rock singer Cui Jian. Cui Jian is a rebel figure both with his music and with his political stance toward June Fourth 1989. This cooperation suggested that Zhang Yuan had cast off the government control and had given up the possibility of producing his film in the domestic studio system. Zhang Yuan was credited with creating the so-called independent film mode of production. In fact, in the process of producing his first two works, Zhang Yuan provided two modes of independent film production. One can be called “half-independent” film production. Like the strategy adopted by Zhang Yuan when he produced *Mama*, directors

raised money from private sources, negotiated with the national studio system to buy studio labels and accepted the official censorship to keep legal status in film production. Films such as *Dirt* (*Zangren*, dir. Guan Hu, 1994), *Weekend Lovers* (*Zhoumo qingren* dir. Lou Ye, 1994), *Rain clouds Over Wushan* (*Wushan yunyu* dir. Zhang Ming, 1995) and *The Making of Steel* (*Zhangda chengren* dir. Lu Xuechang 1995) were produced in this mode. Almost all these films were rejected by the censorship or fell in to endless revision. These cases proved that in the film studio system and under the official censorship there was a slim chance for the young directors to express themselves and succeed in film reproduction. As a solution, some of the directors smuggled their films in to international film festivals, but as a consequence they were kicked out of the official film system and their films became underground films.

There was another type of independent film production that existed at the same time. Some directors preferred a completely independent film production. This was the mode that Zhang Yuan used when he shot *Beijing Batards* (*Beijing zazhong*, 1994). Films in this mode were produced in an illegal way because they had no licences and had not been censored by the government. In 1994, Wang Xiaoshuai received RMB100,000 Yuan (US\$12,500) to produce his first film *The Days* (*Dongchun de rizi*). It was a black and white film, telling a tale of the despairing life of two painters. With almost the same methods and the same amount of money, He Jianjun produced his first film *Red Beads* (*Xuanlian*, 1993) which earned him international recognition. After that he received funding from the Fund of European Culture and shot his second film *Postman* (*Youchai*, 1994). The production of independent film became a tide among young directors.

Because their films were produced by money outside the national studio system,

independent films were treated as a new economic phenomenon in the film industry of mainland China by scholars such as Zheng Dongtian and Han Xiaolei. This was only reasonable because in other economic sectors private companies had been established as a result of economic reform and reform of the film industry had been advocated for many years. When independent films appeared in China, these scholars hailed them as a breakthrough and a collapse of the monopoly of the state-run studio system. “This film phenomenon is inevitable when the economy of China turns to a market economy. It is a challenge to the old film system from production to distribution.”⁵⁸ Zheng Dongtian also expressed his appreciation of “Independent Film”, as he believed that “this is something new and will develop into something good in the future [...] Now, they exist in the form of small groups, but in the future they may establish independent production companies. What they do is accrue experience and train qualified personnel. Compared with the film studio, they have a lot of advantages when it comes to film production. They will become competitors of the state-run film studios. In a long term, the situation should be a mix of competition and cooperation among big film studios, moderate scale studios and independent production.”⁵⁹

Although the independent films provided a chance to start the new reform of the film industry, the government could not accept it. It would be better to say that the government’s worry about losing ideological control retarded its approval of independent film production, rather than to accuse the government of having a conservative tendency in economic reform. The independent film mode not only provides a solution to the

⁵⁸ Zheng, “Duli dianyingren zai xingdong”, 7.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

financing of the production of low budget art films but also gives these young directors a way to escape from ideological control. Further it provides them with a platform for a rebellion in ideology and makes their reproduction or spread possible. I will analyze these young directors' rebellion in ideology in the next section. Here I would like to emphasize the conflict between the production mode of independent films and the official ideology system.

For the reasons of censorship and the anticipation of a certain limited reception on the domestic market, almost all the independent filmmakers hope to recuperate their investment on the international market. Luckily when the works of these young directors were shown in the Western world, they aroused an international interest in the Sixth Generation of Chinese film makers. In 1992, When Zhang Yuan's *Mama* appeared in the London Film Festival, British film critic Tony Rayns said, "*Mama* is still an astounding film in today's film circles. Coming from the hand of very young film institute graduate, it is no less than a courageous achievement... If a Sixth Generation is on its way in China, it will definitely differ from the Fifth Generation in term of the interest and taste."⁶⁰ Dai Jinhua recalled her experience at an Asian film festival in America 1995: a blond American lady, one of the organizers, praised the *Postman* (*Youchai*, dir.He Jianjun,1993) with an exaggerated passion. She said that the presence of the most important film in mainland China at the film festival is the great honor. *New York Times* also gave *Postman* flamboyant praise⁶¹.

Some scholars suspect that the motivation for this praise is ideological rather than

⁶⁰ Tony Rayns, "Future Astonishing!" *Sight and Sound* (supplement 1992), quoted in *Dianying gushi* (*Film Story*), no.4 (1993), 11.

⁶¹ Dai, *Cinema and Desire*, 77-78.

artistic. They argue that the real reason that the Sixth Generation came to the attention of the Western world is because of an ideological confrontation between China and the Western world that followed June 4 1989. Moreover they say that Chinese films that were labeled as “independent” or “underground” and which reflected the life of the young were attractive to the Western world as a way of understanding the nature of internal struggles going on within China. “Perhaps the answer to this phenomenon [the praise of the Sixth Generation from the west] lies in the name ‘underground film,’ which referred to the Sixth Generation but bypassed its artistic reality...”⁶²

But it is interesting that the Chinese government also neglects the artistic value and the significance of these films, in its attempts to reform of the Chinese film industry. In 1993, the government published an ordinance saying that the official delegations should not attend any film festivals which screen independent Chinese films. The Tokyo International Film Festival invited *Blue Kite* (*Lan Fengzheng*, Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1993) and *Red Beads* (*Xuanlian*, He Hianjun, 1993) to attend the competition. To protest the invitation, the official Chinese film delegation cancelled all their activities in Tokyo and came back to Beijing. In the same year, the Film Management Bureau of China published a list in several film papers and journals declaring that seven films including *Beijing Bastards* (*Beijing zazhong* dir. Zhang Yuan, 1993), *Red Beads* (*Xuanlian* dir. He Jianjun, 1993) and *The Days* (*Dongchun de rizi*, dir. Wang Xiaoshuai, 1994) were banned. The government not only punished the mode of production for independent film but also their content. In fact, given the censorship of the government, independent film is the only way that a director can express his ideology if it contradicts that of the government. If the

⁶² Ibid., 90.

West misunderstood this generation, it is clear the Chinese Communist Party has not misunderstood them at all. Rebellion in film production mode is the only way to convey the rebellion in film content.

2. June 4th and Theme in the Films of the Sixth Generation

2.1 Analysis of Three Movies of the Sixth Generation

In 1992, Deng Xiaoping's visit to southern China gave the country a new impetus. Deng pushed for a market-oriented economy, but in the field of ideology he still kept strict control. This policy, called “Bu zhenglun” (do not dispute), which was adopted by the Fourteenth Party Congress in 1992, stated that all disputes on ideology should be stopped and that the government should concentrate on economic development. But suspending ideological disputes could not resolve the spiritual crisis that had arisen among people because of the Tiananmen Square event. Chen Ming said, “After the persecution, the Chinese intellectual class entered into the 1990s with a feeling of depression. This feeling needs to be expressed in a suitable way.”⁶³ When people asked Guan Hu, the director of *Dirt (Zangren, 1994)*, why he shot this film, he answered, “I feel depressed, very very depressed.”⁶⁴

Under the rule of strict censorship, any direct description of June Fourth 1989 is impossible. The connection between the feeling of depression which commonly exists in

⁶³ Chen Ming, “Xueshu guifan yu zhishilun zhongxin qingxiang—jiushi niandai xueshu chongdu zhiyi” (Academic Criterion and the Tendency of Epistemology Centralization—Rereading the Academic Study in the 1990s Part One), <http://www.artx.cn/artx/guoxue/5007.html>.

⁶⁴ Han Xiaolei, “Dui diwudai de wenhua tuwei: houwudai de geren dianying xianxiang” (Breaking out from the Cultural Influence of the Fifth Generation: the Phenomenon of Personal Film in the Post Fifth Generation Era) in Chen Xihe and Shi Chuan eds., *Duoyuan yujing zhong de xinshengdai dianying (New Generation Film in Multi-Culture Context)* (Shanghai: Xuelin Press, 2003), 116.

the films of the Sixth Generation and the events of June Fourth 1989 has been deliberately covered up partly by the cryptic narrative that the directors used in their works and partly by the ignorance of the critics. But this connection is important for understanding the style of the Sixth Generation film and the essence of the Sixth Generation. To prove the connection between their despairing feeling and June Fourth 1989, I will discuss some films shot in the early 1990s when the Sixth Generation was born. Although there are some debates on the criterion of the Sixth Generation, these films are always deemed by different critics as films belonging to the Sixth Generation. The discussion will help us to understand the particularity of the Sixth Generation.

The first film to be discussed here is *The Days (Dongchun de rizi)*. *The Days* is a 72 minute black and white film, shot by Wang Xiaoshuai in 1993. The protagonists of the film are Dong and Chun, a couple of painters. They were acted by Liu Xiaodong and Yu Hong, a couple who are real painters and Wang Xiaoshuai's friends. In the story, Dong and Chun live a depressed and trivial life. Except when making love, the couple have lost their passion. Time passes day by day. To escape the meaningless life, Chun decides to leave her husband and move to America with the help of a friend who might have fallen in love with her at one time. Dong accepts the decision imperturbably. After Chun's abortion, the couple go to Dong's hometown to spend time together before their separation. Finally, Chun goes to America and Dong stays in China and becomes insane.

If it were not for the Baoding film factory, the birth of *The Days* might not have been possible. In the early of 1990s, the film factory still produced black and white film and to attract clients, the factory provided the black and white film at very cheap prices. That is the reason why some of the most important films of the Sixth Generation

including *The Days* (*Dongchun de rizi*) were shot with black and white film. It might be a deliberate choice or due to the film quality, the old camera or the process of printing. For whatever reason the movie looks a little foggy, but the result is that the dramatic contrast between black and white or brightness and darkness does not appear in this film. Contrarily, its main tone is mild grey. This tone complements the mood of helpless desperation—there is no fierce rebellion in the film, but only silent endurance. This silent, helpless depression is also represented by the steady long shots. These long shots form a slow and tedious rhythm that reinforces the feeling of desperation. The feeling of desperation is also embodied in the space of the setting. The main body of the film is shot in a narrow room. The close space reflects the isolated life of the protagonists. The open space appears in the last part of the film when the protagonists go back to their home town. But the open space appears at the moment when the separation of the protagonists is inevitable. The bright tone and happiness in the open space in fact serve as a foil to the sadness. On the level of film language, the aim is to express purposefully and skillfully a pervasive despair. So on the level of theme, the connotation of this despair is the key to understanding the film.

The Days shows the deep despair about a life that the protagonists cannot change. Life is a black hole of emptiness which swallows their passion for society, and makes them feel “like an old couple, always silent and just passing time day by day”⁶⁵. The despair of life results in two outcomes: escape or insanity. In an interview Wang Xiaoshuai says: “Shooting *The Days* was just like writing in our diaries.”⁶⁶ “A “diary” is

⁶⁵ The aside in *The Days* (dir. Wang Xiaoshuai 1993).

⁶⁶ Dai, *Cinema and Desire*, 94.

a personal and authentic kind of writing; the plural pronoun “our” suggests that the feeling expressed in the writing belongs to his generation not only to him. So the mood of despair in the film becomes a key to understanding the film and this generation.

Some scholars claim that *The Days* presents “a tragedy produced by the insanity of a young artist who pursues his art individuality but fails both in his artistic ideals and his love for his wife.”⁶⁷ They say that *The Days* portrays the young artist’s anxiety which comes from his marginalized existence and the mental suffering results in the separation and his insanity.”⁶⁸ Thus the suffering of the protagonist has been attributed to his personal life: marginalized existence, pursuing art individuality, and conflict with his wife... The suffering is the protagonist’s own suffering as an artist. It seems that the most important contribution of *The Days* is its “personal style”⁶⁹. This style had not been explored before in mainland China—it portrays personal daily life, making love, quarreling with his wife, picking up hot water from the water house every day; it also describes the personal spiritual activities, such as annoyance about the loss of creativity, the losing of passion for life, the loss of the urge to plead with his wife to stay with him. This “personal style” is criticized by some scholars because “what it is concerned with is not the whole of social life but only the extreme margins,”⁷⁰ and some critics comment that this film is filled with narcissism and “this narcissism harms the presentation of the

⁶⁷ Li Yiming, “Dianying jingshen sumiao: cong ‘Dongchun de rizi’ dao ‘Qinghong’” (The Line Drawing of Film Spirit: from *The Days* to *Qing Hong*), *Yishu pinglun (Arts Criticism)*, no. 7 (2005), 20.

⁶⁸ Li Yiming, “Cong diwudai dao diliudai” (From the Fifth Generation to the Sixth Generation), *Dianying yishu (Film Art)*, no.1 (1998),19.

⁶⁹ Han, “Dui diwudai de wenhua tuwei”, 119.

⁷⁰ Li, “Cong diwudai dao diliudai”, 21.

filmmakers' cultural condition [...]”⁷¹ Such criticism reminds me of Friedrich Engels' remark about Realism—“Realism, to my mind, implies, besides truth of detail, the truthful reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances.”⁷² These criticisms of *The Days* attack it for limiting itself to “personal” events, “personal” feelings, and failure to portray typicality. In other words, it does not reflect the general social condition and social feeling. But putting aside the claim whether a work of art needs to reflect this kind of typicality, the problem here is whether this film is really just “personal” and has nothing to do with “society”.

Without fail, *The Days* presents a feeling of despair, but this despair does not only originate from his personal conditions, such as pursuing “art individuality”, “a marginalized existence”, and “the losing of love”. It also comes from the intellectuals' protest of June Fourth 1989.

In Dong and Chun's narrow existence, news from radio functions as sound from the environment and suggests the wider social political background. The news in the scene of the couple fixing the washing machine is Premier Li Peng's statement about education policy in the last eight years in the twentieth century. It reminds us that the story happens in 1992. In the film, the protagonists' isolation from society is mentioned after Chun's abortion—“They almost do not recognize Beijing any more, since they have not left their house for three years.” Connecting this with the news in 1992, we can deduce that since 1989 they have isolated themselves from society. They put themselves in a far corner of society and refuse communication with society after 1989. Their self

⁷¹ Dai, *Cinema and Desire*, 95.

⁷² Raman Selden eds., “Letter to Margaret Harkness in London (1888)” in *The Theory of Criticism from Plato to the Present: A Reader*, (London:Longman 1988), 458.

marginalization indicates an attitude of refusal to cooperate with society. In some sense, this marginalization is a voluntary choice of the protagonists, so it should be looked upon as a result and not the cause of their despair. And the true reason that makes the couple, especially Dong despair is what happened three years ago.

To emphasize what happened three years previously, a meeting of Dong with his friend in a bar is deliberately arranged in the story of the couple. The friend acted by Lou Ye, Wang Xiaoshuai's classmate, another Sixth Generation director, has just been released from prison. The friend tells Dong, "My family believes that I have died." This is not a common problem. Why does his family believe that he has died? The answer lies in the situation of 1989. The true number of casualties of June Fourth 1989 is still a secret. Some people that were shot and had no identity documents on them were buried or cremated quickly⁷³. At the same time, some people were arrested and thrown into jails without any legal procedure. When their families found out about their disappearance, sometimes, they believed that they had been killed by the army. In the film, to confirm this information, when the two characters say good bye in front of the bar, Dong's friend tells Dong that another friend of theirs is still in jail. He pleads with Dong not to forget to get in touch with him when he learns of the friend's release. At that moment, the alarm of police car is heard outside the picture and that makes the scene look like a scene out of classic revolutionary films which depicts the parting of two underground party members during the era of Kuomintang China. It's not hard to guess: it's 1992, three years after the Tiananmen Square protests; Dong, Chun and his friend are the kind of people who would

⁷³ See Ding Zilin's "Liusi sinanzhe mingdan" (Name List of the Death in June Fourth of 1989), <http://www.hkhkhk.com/64name/victimgb.html>.

have taken part in the protest.

Also, in this scene, Wang Xiaoshuai uses the lines of Dong's friend to point the origin of their despair. The friend says, "They believe I have been dead. In fact, it is better to die than to live like this." The deep spiritual trauma produced by the June Fourth 1989 is what really embitters them.

It is true that *The Days* depicts the couple suffering from separation, but there is still another kind of separation that happens in the film. This kind of separation arises from a much deeper suffering of the mind. This separation is the separation from their country which has been glorified as the sacred mother. In fact, the whole film is constructed around one action—leaving the country. The leaving is painful, but both of the couple regard it as inevitable and necessary. The bad life they live might be one of the reasons behind the separation of the couple, but it is definitely not all. The friend released from prison mentions that he will also leave the country. The repeated reference to the action strongly suggests the real reason which causes their separation from their country.

Wang Xiaoshuai confessed that the film is a diary of his generation, so we can trace the experience of his generation and identify the reason in their minds which separates them from their country. Most of this generation were born in the 1960s and were brought up to believe in the socialist ideology. In this ideology, "country" is equivalent to the Communist Party and is personified as a loving mother. The country, the party and mother form a divine trinity. But after the new enlightenment movement in the 1980s, especially after June Fourth 1989, the sacred trinity collapsed in a painful way. The myth of the holiness of country was eliminated. In the documentary *My Graduation (Wo biye le dir. Wang Guangli, 1992)*, a graduate of Tsinghua University, the same age as the

directors of the Sixth Generation, says, “What is a country? A country is just a political concept.” Belief in country vanished completely with the sounds of gunfire in 1989. In the film *Bitter Love* (*Kulian* dir. Peng Ning, 1982), shot by a Fourth Generation director, the protagonist, a painter, gives up his comfortable life in West, and comes back to serve his country; in *The Days*, the protagonist’s wife and friend all escape the despair of life by moving aboard. In *Bitter Love*, the protagonist’s daughter asks the painter, “You love your motherland, but does your motherland love you?” In the last scene of this film, the painter, who is fed up with the torment of jail, escapes to a wilderness that is covered with heavy snow. Finally, he dies in the wild and the sign which his crawling makes on the snow is a huge question mark. The question mark which was drawn by the Fourth Generation, now, has its answer in the Sixth Generation. But the belief in country, embracing with it the feeling for a mother, has been fostered for many years; the separation must give rise to endless pain. Dong becomes insane. His spiritual crisis represents the common spiritual condition of the young generation who experienced the events of 1989 and finally separated themselves from their country or the personified mother in their minds. This spiritual crisis is far from “personal”, but a “typical” portrait of the thoughts of a young generation in the early 1990s. In the last scene, Dong sitting in front of the mirror, stares at himself and becomes insane. But is what we see in the mirror only the screwy Dong? No, the mirror reflects the image of the whole generation whose hopes and ideals were crushed by tanks and guns.

The independent documentary film-maker Wu Wenguang said, “I felt a sudden silence on the Beijing stage after 1989. Then suddenly I felt elated. Perhaps I wanted to

achieve something while everyone else was doing nothing.”⁷⁴ This crisis of spirit as a popular phenomenon after 1989 also infected other directors of the Sixth Generation. If film can be used as a stage to express the author’s feeling, the Sixth Generation have expressed their feeling of spiritual crisis on their stage in various ways.

Compared to *The Days* which directly delineates the feeling of depression caused by events of 1989, some films of the Sixth Generation present this spiritual sequel in a sort of backstair way. In these films, the historical roots of this spiritual crisis are hinted at indirectly.

In 1994, Lu Xuechang directed his *The Making of Steel (Zhangdachengren)*. The name of the film comes from a famous communist novel, which was written by a Soviet writer Nikolai Alekseyevich Ostrovski.⁷⁵ The novel tells a story of a young man who with the help of the Communist Party overcomes various difficulties and becomes a communist fighter. This novel has been a spiritual bible for the youth of socialist China for many years. The process of “the making of steel” is a metaphor for the growth and development of youth in a socialist country. The most important part of this process is the remolding of their thinking. They discard their bourgeois ideology and accept a socialist world view. Only in this way, can a young man connect his limited individual life with the unlimited collective project-- the great communist movement. The novel *The Making of Steel* had been a ready answer to the youth looking for the true meaning of life in China. But in Lu Xuechang’s film, the communist ideology can no longer function as spiritual medicine

⁷⁴ Dai, *Cinema and Desire*, 86.

⁷⁵ After three years of revisions under the censorship of the Film Management Bureau of China, the Chinese title of the film finally was changed to *Zhangdachengren (grow up)*, so that its connection with the famous revolutionary novel was no longer evident.

for blank and impressionable minds.

Lu's film depicts the spiritual confusion of the young generation of his own age. The story is told in first person and structured chronologically from the earthquake and the collapse of the Gang of Four in 1976 to the chaotic 1990s. The film begins with a metaphorical scene. The father compels the protagonist to cut his hair. In an aside, the protagonist Zhou Qing says, his father was an excellent barber and his early works had some touches of punk. Along with this aside, the director shows some pictures of persons who were persecuted in the Cultural Revolution and had their hair cut in a punk like style as a punishment by the Red Guard. Zhou Qing, the son, flees. This hints at the fact that this generation abandoned the patriarchy of their fathers of the family and the nation. Lu also exposes his difference with the official concept of history in the beginning of film. Compared with the official version which emphasizes the exulting of broad masses, when the protagonist talks about the smashing of the Gang of Four, his tone is alien—"Unexpected things happened in the outside world. I heard that there were four people who wanted to hold a coup but failed." He only "heard about" the news. This suggests he could not guarantee the truth of the news and also suggests that he does not feel partial toward the news. This is the attitude of this generation toward the official history. This attitude shows that they have to answer the question about the meaning of life in their own way and not with reference to the official ideology. In his youth, Zhou Qing only got one volume of a series of picture books entitled "The Making of Steel", so he could not understand the meaning of the book. His time was spent in the curiosity about females and the behavior of delinquent youth that seduced girls and fought each other. The march music played by members of the Young Pioneer was foreign to Zhou Qing's life. This

also shows that the influence of traditional socialist ideology was weakening in this generation. Zhou Qing was forced to work in a railway station in order to support his family. In the railway station, he got the whole book *The Making of Steel* when he met a train driver. Zhou Qing called the driver Juhlai, the same name as the character in the novel *The Making of Steel* who was a Bolshevik and spiritual guide of Paul, the protagonist of the novel. Similarly, the train driver was also the spiritual guide for Zhou Qing. Obtaining of the book of *The Making of Steel* symbolizes the possibility of rescue of the spirit. It also symbolizes the transmission of intellectual treasure from one generation to another one. The train driver acted by Tian Zhuangzhuang, a director of the Fifth Generation and a supporter to the Sixth Generation, is described as a silent person who loves reading and thinking. He had been an educated urban youth who was settled in a rural area and experienced great suffering. He was strong both physically and mentally. The train driver, Juhlai, represents the common characteristics of his generation who spent their youth in the Cultural Revolution. What should be noticed is the skepticism toward traditional socialist ideology in the generation of Juhlai. Bei Dao, a poet of this generation, wrote these lines in his *Huida* (*Answer*, 1976) during the Cultural Revolution:

Debasement is the passport of the base,
Nobility is the epitaph of the noble.
Look at the gold-plated sky
Filled with the drifting rippled reflections of the dead
...
I tell you, world
I—do—not—believe!
If a thousand challengers lie trampled beneath your feet
Count me as number one thousand and one.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Bei Dao, *The August Sleepwalker*, trans. Bonnie S. McDougall (London: Anvil Press Poetry Ltd, 1988), 33.

This generation that began doubting the traditional socialist ideology is the main force in the new enlightenment movement of 1980s. In this film, Zhou Qing was seriously injured in an accident and Juhlai's bone was transplanted into Zhou Qing's body. This plot hints at the spiritual connection between the two generations. But this connection is weak. The film does not show any concrete relation between their minds. Zhou Qing regrets, "If I had more time then I might have been a man like him." But Juhlai suddenly disappears from Zhou Qing's life. The departure of Juhlai divides the whole story into two parts. Before this departure, the film could be regarded as a story of a young man seeking for the meaning of life and a heroic model. The character of Juhlai provides a solution to this seeking, but this solution is temporary and finally it disappears with his abrupt departure. What connects history and the film is that history and "New Era" are separated into two parts by the failure of the new enlightenment in 1989 and the film is also divided into two parts by the departure of Juhlai, the spiritual guide of the representative of the young generation. With a scenic shot of Tiananmen Square and an aside of "after the end of 1980s, I came back", the film turns to describe the protagonist's life in the 1990s.

The life in the 1990s is depressive and villainous. The protagonist falls into a condition of meaninglessness again. He plays rock music with his friends all day. His friends get drunk, use drugs and fight with others. He is an observer and tries to draw a clear line of demarcation between himself and them. He is different from those living a depraved life because there is a piece of bone transplanted from Juhlai into his body which would give him pain on a cold day. His mind is bitter and twisted. One day, he encounters Juhlai's girl friend, but in her room, he finds she is married to another man.

From a newspaper, he knows that when protecting strangers Juhlai was attacked by gangsters and lost his eye sight. Now, Juhlai had cut off his connection with everyone and has made sure that nobody knows his address. Zhou Qing finds one of the gangsters and kills him. It seems that the film would end here, but the scene of the revenge exists only in Zhou Qing's imagination. In the end, Zhou Qing finds some clues about Juhlai's whereabouts and decides to look for him. The protagonist runs to his spiritual guide after an experience of confusion and depression. It is a happy ending but the ending is the result of a censorship which lasted three years and compelled the director to revise the film eleven times⁷⁷. Lu Xuechang, the director believes that in the 1990s the protagonist's search for Juhlai is unauthentic. What is worse is changing the scene of revenge to a day dream because of the censorship. According to Lu, in the original edition the revenge really happened and the protagonist was thrown into jail.⁷⁸ That means Lu does not agree that the protagonist has a way to escape from his predicament. Not only that, the ruin of the protagonist suggests that Lu has a pessimistic view of the solution to the spiritual crisis of the 1990s. Because this spiritual crisis originates from a vacuum of values, unless new beliefs are found and spread through society, this crisis will be hard to cure. History it seems has come back to its starting point. The persons who take to life as a fish takes to water in this film are rascals and the gangsters. Debasement is still the passport of the base. Nobility is still the epitaph of the noble.

Some scholars point out that in the film Juhlai represents an ideal, but the ideal is not a Communist ideal. Compared with characters in the novel of *The Making of Steel*,

⁷⁷ Cheng and Huang, *Wo de sheyingji bu sahuang*, 209.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 206-208.

the Communist ideals have been supplanted by some common values such as justice and kindness.⁷⁹ And these common values belong to another Juhlai, a character who seems to be the avatar of the enlightenment in 1980s. The miserable fate of Juhlai and Zhou Qing symbolizes the collapse of the belief in these common values. In an interview, Lu says, the story of the film comes from the experience of some of his friends. “It [the film] embodies some lifelike emotions and sentiments. These feelings in fact belong to me. I cannot say that they are shared by a lot of people, but at least they are the feelings of people around me, people the same age as me. They are really direct and true feelings.”⁸⁰

Besides the autobiographical style works such as *The Days* (*Dongchun de rizi*) and *The Making of Steel* (*Zhangdachengren*) which directly or indirectly expose the spiritual crisis caused by the failure of new enlightenment movement in 1980s and the crash of June Fourth 1989, other films attack the political system of the country and treat the spiritual crisis in a symbolic and experimental style. He Jianjun’s *Red Beads* (*Xuanlian 1993*) is one of them.

On the surface *Red Beads* is a film discussing psychoanalysis. The large shadows cast in the madhouse, and the comparison between men and their environment shot with a wide-angle lens, remind the audience of the expressionist films of 1920s Europe, especially the German film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (dir. Robert Wiene, 1920). In film history, the madhouse and the doctor being portrayed as an oppressive power has become a tradition. This tradition is embodied in films such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligary* and

⁷⁹ Zhang Huiyu, “Zhuti shenfen yu yingxiang celue—diliudai de meixue yu zhengzhi chutan” (Subjective Identity and Image Strategy—the Primary Exploration about the Aesthetics and Politics of the Sixth Generation), *Jingri xianfeng* (*Vanguard Today*) no. 13(2005), 160.

⁸⁰ Cheng and Huang, *Wo de sheyingji bu sahuang*, 204.

One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest (dir. Milos Forman, 1975). *Red Beads* inherits this tradition and alludes to the idea that the country is a madhouse. From the patients' behaviors and their conversation, we know that the mental patients living in the madhouse are painters, writers and rock musicians. In other words, they were active in the new enlightenment movement of the 1980s. Now, they live in pain in the madhouse. As they say, in the madhouse "you don't hear anything even during the day!" "How terrible! Everyone is like a living corpse." In the madhouse, people cannot have thoughts. "Don't take things so seriously here. The more serious you are, the more painful it will be." The doctor as the governor of the madhouse has his own therapy—depriving people of dreams. If the protagonist is determined to keep on dreaming and refuses to compromise, then a part of her brain will be cut off. All these plots can be viewed as a condemnation of the severe ideological control that came after 1989. In this way, *Red Beads* has surpassed the form of a pure experimental film and become a political fable.

So far, I have discussed the feeling of depression as a theme in films of the Sixth Generation. It is presented in different ways: direct, indirect and symbolic. This feeling originates from the failure of the new enlightenment movement in 1989. Thus, it presents a point that is in contradiction with the official ideology and one that is banned by the government. In many films of the Sixth Generation, this point of view is reinforced and amplified by the use of rock music and rock musicians.

2.2 Rock Music as a Rebellion in Films of the Sixth Generation

Beijing Bastards (*Beijing zazhong*), shot by Zhang Yuan in 1993, tells a story about a rock band trying to find a stage to perform their concert, but after several efforts, they fail. The story is also mixed with some other stories: a girl gets pregnant and her boy

friend forces her to abort; a painter fails to sell his painting; a writer fails to help his friend collect a debt. Although these parallel stories have no connection, they all share the feature of ending in failure. The stage built by the band is finally destroyed by the government. The girl aborts in sadness. The painting is still unsold. The debt has not been paid back, but a quarrel breaks out between the writer and his friend. In this pessimistic film, the hoarse song and furious performance of the band become a kind of release of the protagonists' frustrated feeling. What is worthy of notice is that the film's main actors are the father of Chinese rock music, Cui Jian, and his band. The film was shot in 1993 and at that time Cui Jian was still banned by the government for his anti-government behavior during and after June Fourth 1989. This film gives us a chance to discuss the ideological meaning of the rock music and rock musicians in many films of the Sixth Generation.

When faced with so many subjects dealing with rock music in films of the Sixth Generation, some scholars ask:

In *Dirt* rock music is the anchor of Ye Tong and Peng Wei's spirit. In *Weekend Lover*, rock music is the protagonists' life style. Why do these directors love rock music so much and do not care about the endless repetition of subject matter and character? It is true that rock music is a kind of entertainment for youths [...] but today, is the young generation really so infatuated with rock music and do they go along with whatever is expressed in these films?⁸¹

The easiest way to answer this question is that as urban youth, the Sixth Generation's view of art is limited to their narrow life experience⁸². Some of the Sixth Generation directors are friends of rock music stars. For example, before shooting *Beijing*

⁸¹ Han, "Dui diwudai de wenhua tuwei", 123-124.

⁸² Li, "Cong diwudai dao diliudai", 19.

Bastards (Beijing zazhong 1993), Zhang Yuan had shot several music videos for Cui Jian. The intimate relationship with rock musicians influences these directors' works. But some important facts suggest that this is not an occasional friendship. In China, as Cui Jian says, "Rock is an ideology, not a musical form."⁸³ In the new enlightenment movement of the 1980s, Rock was not only an entertainment of youth, but also charged with carrying social and political messages. "Rock musicians, operating outside the strictures of 'mainstream' popular music, yoked their music to the service of an oppositional ideology of individualism, and anti-feudalism."⁸⁴ It is not strange that Cui Jian was banned in the campaign of the "anti bourgeois liberalization" in 1987 and that thousands of students beginning the hunger strike in Tiananmen Square in 1989 sang his song *Nothing To My Name* (*yiwusuoyou*). After 1989, rock music and rock musicians stayed in the margins of the society just like their counterparts of the Sixth Generation in the film industry. Zhang Yingjin compares the common points between the two groups of artists in the post-Tiananmen Square period: first, they all pursued "authentic self-expression" (*ziwo biaoqian*) and emotional release (*Xuanxie*) in the face of oppression (*yayi*). Second, both of them emphasized collective performance not simply as a common ritual and resistance, but more as a process of "self-discovery and moral self-redefinition". Third, the lack of state support for rock musicians and their subsequent reliance on private and foreign venues for performance are mirrored in the early practice of the Sixth Generation.⁸⁵⁸⁶ These comparisons indicate that the Sixth Generation and those rock

⁸³ Andrew F. Jones, *Like a Knife: Ideology and Genre in Contemporary Chinese Popular Music* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1992), 115.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁸⁵ Zhang Yingjin, "Rebellion without Causes? China's New Urban Generation and Postsocialist

musicians have the common social position, ideology and strategy of existence. It is better to say that repeated presentation of rock music and rock musicians in films of the Sixth Generation reflects their common ideology and a style which is suited to express this ideology, rather than accuse them of having limited social and artistic views.

The ideology in films of the Sixth Generation as well as in Chinese rock music is often attributed to a kind of subculture called “Youth Culture”.⁸⁷ Chen Xunguang points out that the so called “Youth Culture” is a kind of subculture or marginal culture which is mainly pursued by youth and expresses the ideology of youth. The main characteristic of this culture is an impulsive and somewhat exaggerated rebellion to the standards, order and values of adults’ society. According to Chen the rock music in Sixth Generation film is just a symbol of fashion. Essentially, it is an imitation to American culture.⁸⁸

For Chen Xunguang, rock music “inherently” belongs to youth including the Sixth Generation, and the rock music in films of the Sixth Generation is mainly a fashionable aspect designed to attract the young audience. Also, its rebellion is “exaggerated”. It comes from a universal subculture or youth culture in the world and it is a kind of imitation of its American counterpart. This kind of explanation of the rock music and musicians in films of the Sixth Generation films is common in the academic field and mass media both in China and outside. B er enice Reynaud analyzes the rock music in

Filmmaking” in *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society and the Turn of the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Zhang Zhen (Durham and London: University Press 2007), 61-62.

⁸⁷ Subculture can be broadly defined as “[...]meaning systems, modes of expression or lifestyles developed by groups in subordinated structural position in response to dominant meaning systems... which reflect their attempt to solve structural contradictions arising from the wider societal context.” Michael Brake, *Comparative Youth Culture: The Sociology of Youth Culture and Youth Subcultures in America, Britain and Canada* (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 8.

⁸⁸ Chen Xunguang, “Dianying zhong yaogun de xingxiang jiqi wenhua hanyi” (Rock Images in Films and their Culture Signification), *Yishu guangjiao*, no.3 (2004), 26-27.

“Beijing Bastards” like this:

Chinese rock has to strike an uneasy balance between a desire to be simultaneously young, Chinese, and cool and the increasingly commodified production of transnational rock culture—a dilemma that Cui Jian poignantly, if somehow cryptically, articulates in the song he performs toward the end of *Beijing Bastards*:

I’m walking straight into the wind, anger in my soul...
 I don’t care how far I go.
 Dunno where this rage comes from
 But it inspires me.
 Don’t wanna think about the past.
 Year after year the wind blows,
 changing form but never going away.
 I want to find the source of that rage,
 but I can only walk into the wind.

The bitterly cold, sweeping wind maybe is a metaphor for the brutal changes of Chinese history (“revolution after revolution... how much pain to how many people”) or for the advent of the global [...] Times are, indeed, changing and globalization threatens the indigenous space of creativity, which, in turn, has to be renegotiated within rock culture itself.⁸⁹

In the analysis of the anxiety in *Beijing Bastards*, Reynaud’s emphasis is put on the influence of globalization. I doubt this point, as well as Chen’s opinion of the rock images in the films of the Sixth Generation, because they neglect some important details of the historic context in which Chinese rock grew up.

In the 1980s, when rock music was on the rise in China, it was a means for the expression of rebellion of young people. This rebellion was not an abstract youth culture or an imitation of its American counterpart. Although the Chinese rock music is similar in many ways to youth subcultures in industrialized nations, it has its own concrete historical content—it was politicalized by its father, Cui Jian. Right from the beginning, it

⁸⁹ Bérénice Reynaud, “Zhang Yuan’s Imaginary Cities and the Theatricalization of the Chinese ‘Bastards’” in *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society and the Turn of the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Zhang Zhen (Durham and London: University Press 2007), 269-270.

was a collaborator of the new enlightenment movement. As Cui Jian sang in his song, “This guitar in my hands is like a knife...I want to cut at your hypocrisy till I see some truth.”⁹⁰ Rock music committed to attacking what it called “feudalism” in traditional culture and socialist ideology. Moreover, youth culture in 1980s in China was filled with ideological struggle. Most of the “fashions”, such as music from the West and Hong Kong and Taiwan, jeans, hair styles, sun glasses, disco dancing, have been classified as some kinds of “bourgeois spiritual pollution”, and deemed a part of the process of the “peaceful evolution” toward capitalism. Rock music in China in 1980s was far from just a fashion. It played an active role in the ideological struggle. “Indeed, the sensibilities of rock musicians and student activists involved in the Tiananmen democracy movement not only dovetail considerably, but are expressed themselves through an almost identical rhetoric; one that focuses on the critique of feudalism in Chinese culture.” Wu’er Kaixi, one of the leaders of the student movement in 1989 said, “The people who are most influential among young people are not [the prominent dissidents] Fang Lizhi and Wei Jingsheng, but...singers such as Cui Jian.”⁹¹

The rock music and the rebellious spirit embodied in that music did not disappear with the crackdown of 1989. In the wake of the Tiananmen crackdown, direct political action was prohibitively dangerous. The indirect cultural defiance that occurs at rock parties may be less a safety-valve than a relatively safe way to keep the spirit of 1989 alive. In explaining the significance of the rapid growth of the rock subculture since the

⁹⁰ Cui Jian, *Like a Knife (Xiang yi ba daozi)*, music and lyrics by Cui Jian, in his album *Solution zhongguo wencai shengxiang chuban gongsi* 1991.

⁹¹ Wu’er Kaixi, transcript of panel discussion, “Chinese Writers under Fire: The Struggle for Human Rights in China, in Pen American Center Newsletter, #70 December (1989), 19.

crackdown, one rock musician comments:

We're suffering from oppression. When the oppression comes down too hard on people, they have to find a way to escape it. That's why the movement broke out last year[1989]. But now, if you want to express your dissatisfaction, you can't go out and demonstrate, or make a speech. You would be arrested right then and there. So, we've had to change our means of expression. That's what rock is all about.⁹²

This statement provides a rational explanation why rock music is popular in the films of the Sixth Generation who experienced the events of 1989 and began their film careers just after the events. It also shows the causal connection between the events of 1989 and the rock music in their films.

This connection has been represented time after time by the image of Tiananmen Square as a background in *Beijing Bastards*, *Dirt* and other films of the Sixth Generation of the early 1990s. Zhan Yuan even helped Duan Jianchuan shoot a documentary film openly called *Square* (1991). In an interview, Zhang Yuan says, "We went there [Tiananmen Square] quite a lot in 1989 when I was in my senior year at film school—actually, countless stories played out right there in that square."⁹³ It is not necessary for Tiananmen Square to be directly involved in the plot of the Sixth Generation films, but it is enough to suggest the historical context for the actions of the protagonists in these films. Tiananmen Square served as a referent to show the meaning of the so called "youth culture". Zhang Yingjin analyses the function of the images of Tiananmen Square in *Dirt*, in which the images of Tiananmen are picked up from official documentary films

⁹² Jones. *Like a Knife*, 112-113.

⁹³ Michael Berry, *Speaking in Images: Interviews with Contemporary Chinese filmmakers* (New York:Columbia University Press 2004) ,148.

recording the activity of mourning for the death of Premier Zhou in 1976. He points out that “Indeed, back in the early 1990s, the images of public mourning in Tiananmen Square could not help but to evoke the publicly unspeakable moments of the idealism and crisis of the 1989 Tiananmen”⁹⁴. In the films of the Sixth Generation, the juxtaposition of rock music and Tiananmen Square suggests the signification of the rock music in these films—it is not concerned with anxiety about globalization and it can not be reduced to only entertainment or fashion. This juxtaposition also provides an answer to the censure that the young generation is limited and narrow in their art, and lacks a common social concern. Rock music might only be loved by a minority in China, but the emotion which it embodies--the rebellion and the depression in this music, is experienced by the majority. At the very least, it can be understood by most people who experienced the events of 1989.

In March of 1990, Cui Jian held his last concert before he was banned. “He sang a forbidden song when the audience encouraged him with passionate applause. He tied a red cloth over his eyes, and his guitarist gagged himself with a red cloth as well. What did this mean? Of course, everyone in Beijing knew exactly what it meant! Most of the audience of 15,000 people rose to their feet. It was so exciting, just like that *other* unbelievable day and night...”⁹⁵ This is the rock music of China and the rock music of the films of the Sixth Generation. It is political; it is living history.

In contemporary Chinese film, rock music has historical content. Similarly, in different periods, the rebellion of youth is different. In *Rock Youth (Yaogun qingnian* dir.

⁹⁴Zhang, “Rebellion without Causes?”, 58.

⁹⁵Jones, *Like a Knife*, 143.

Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1987), the youth are participants in the new enlightenment movement whether they were aware it or not. They demolished the old rules and destroyed the traditional doctrines, and they knew they were fighting for new ones.

Zhang Ren comments on the protagonist in *Rock Youth* as follows:

He gives up fame and good future position in the state-run symphony orchestra, and plays his favorite rock music and dances on the street and in pubs. Is he crazy to be addicted to Western music? In fact rock music is the only art form which he can use to exalt his ego and freedom. He said, “singing is just like looking for a new life...I use my heart to sing, to look for myself, to look for the value and meaning of life”... In the frantic music and dance, what they want to do is to prove their existence and the value of the individual.⁹⁶

In the period of the new enlightenment movement, people believed that society could and would be progressive through reforms in the economy, culture and the political system. The rock youth in the films of the Fifth Generation are optimistic. But now, in the films of the Sixth Generation, the optimism has come crashing down because of the events of Tiananmen Square.

3. The Ideology in the Language of the Sixth Generation Film

It is often generalized that the films of the Sixth Generation possess a special kind of “objectivity”. Han Xiaolei generalizes that these films have “personalized reality (gerenhua de zhenshi)”⁹⁷. Yang Yuanying claims that they have “objectivity about

⁹⁶ Zhang Ren, “Ping Liu yiran xiaoshuo: jiazhiguan de miwang yu chongjian” (The Comments on Liu Yiran’s novels: the Confusion and Reconstructio of Value), *Xiaoshuolin*, no.5 (1990), <http://www.xinludi.com/bencandy.php?id=514-49k>

⁹⁷ Han, “Dui diwudai de wenhua tuwei”, 120.

personal and present life (zhezong keguan shi geren de, cishicike de shenghuo)”⁹⁸

Seemingly, the objectivity of the Sixth Generation comes from their documentary style. Natural light effects, long shots and hand held camera shots are widely used in their films, and directors of the Sixth Generation prefer to use unprofessional actors. Also their films have no dramatic contradictions to help develop the plot of the films. These factors make their films look like they are recording real life.

Film language is a result of many factors. For example, the amount of financial investment can decide the extent of the lighting effects, whether to use amateurs or professional actors and sometime the movement of the camera. With low budget,

‘Beijing Bastards’ was shot in real locations, so that the camera’s lens is often blocked by unmovable obstacles (walls, the narrowness of the room, traffic in the street), thereby opening a limited field of vision. As such there are no grand vistas or master gazes; because the camera is mostly hand held and many locations allowed only one or two angles, the focus is on intimate details. Shooting was done on the run while dodging the police, and thus some of the footage, underexposed or out of focus, was not usable...⁹⁹

This kind of difficult financial condition exists in the process of film production for the rest of the Sixth Generation as well. In this sense, the “objectivity” of the Sixth Generation is a result of their low budgets.

But on the other hand, film language is also partly a deliberate choice which suggests the subjectivity of these directors. Their choice is not only influenced by the difficulties of finance, or even the individuals’ aesthetic preferences, but it is also a result of the development of the Chinese film history and the ideological struggles behind it.

⁹⁸ Yang, “Bainian liudai zhongguo yingxiang”, 105.

⁹⁹ Reynaud, “Zhang Yuan’s Imaginary Cities”, 268.

The Sixth Generation's pursuit of reality continues the conflict between art and politics which has long existed in the People's Republic of China. Concretely, it is the continuity of the efforts of literature and film to rid themselves of official ideological control and to reflect or express the truth of life after the Cultural Revolution.

In 1980, in the response to a wave of suspicion about the falsity of films of the Cultural Revolution which were created according to the rules of combination of revolutionary realism and romanticism, Li Tuo and his wife, a Fourth Generation director, Zhang Nuanxin, provided a solution. They attributed the falsity of the films of Cultural Revolution to "theatricality." That refers to the films' dependence on stage style performance, mendacious conflict, got-up light effects, and a lofty hero. By citing the examples of the Italian neorealists and the French "new wave" as models, they advocated that film language should be modernized. They suggested the following:

Although in our art we imagine many things, we need to lay these imaginings deep under the outward appearances which make the audience see nothing but the ordinary without traces of elaborate conceptions, and thus make a film natural, flowing...It is possible for a film to make a complex artistic conception manifest in a way extremely true to life.¹⁰⁰

"Maintaining the atmosphere of life, manifesting the aesthetic feeling of life itself"¹⁰¹ was seen as one of the characteristics of modern film art which shoots everything in accordance with true aspects of life itself.

In film production, this proposition evoked a strong response. *Sha Ou*(*Sha Ou* dir.

¹⁰⁰ Xia Hong, "Film Theory in the People's Republic of China: The New Era" in *Chinese Film: The state of the Art in the People's Republic*, eds. George Stephen Semsel, (New York, Praeger 1987), 48.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

Zhang Nuanxing, 1981), *Neighbor* (Lingju dir.Zheng Dongtian, 1981) *Lawyer on Probation* (Jianxi Lüshi dir.Han Xiaolei, 1982) and so on flourished in this period. These films had some common points: a story of ordinary people, an instinctive performance, a natural light effect, real location, and absence of dramatic conflict to push plot development.

This change in film language disturbed some theorists. They worried that the new theory was incompatible with Marxist aesthetic principles. “It’s the wrong road and it’s dangerous to vent anger on drama and to draw close unconsciously to the non-dramatization of the modernists in order to oppose falsity, formalism and conceptualism.”¹⁰² Their worry is reasonable, because this aesthetic proposition and practice to pursue reality have gone beyond the modernization of the film language when it tries to make film like real life.

This pursuit has become a part of many debates which took place in the 1980s in China concerning the nature of literary realism and the relation of literature to life. These debates criticize the literature and films “proceeding from the Party’s line instead of strictly from life”,¹⁰³ and appeal to stop the narrowly dogmatic interpretation of politics to literature and film. As the famous writer Li Zhun expresses:

If they [government] don’t give me the right to think independently, then I certainly won’t be a writer. The lesson we’ve learned was too painful. If

¹⁰² Shao Mujun, “Xiandaihua yu xiandaipai” (Modernization and Modernists) *Film Art* 5 1979. Quoted in *Chinese Film: The State of the Art in the People’s Republic*, eds., George Stephen Semsel (New York: Praeger, 1987), 42.

¹⁰³ Xia Hong, “Film Theory in the People’s Republic of China: The New Era” in *Chinese Film: The State of the Art in the People’s Republic*, ed. George Stephen Semsel (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1987), 38.

they let me write what I have seen for myself and believe to be true, even if I make mistake, I'd be happy to criticize myself...¹⁰⁴

Thus, the pursuit of reality “is the most significant factor in the struggle for artistic freedom, and it comes into perennial conflict with political power of the CCP.”¹⁰⁵ That is to say, in China, pursuit of reality and its means and techniques embody the struggles with official ideology.

The Sixth Generation embraced this aesthetic proposition warmly. They applauded the Fourth Generation’s view that Chinese film language should be modernized and stress attitudes, means and techniques that “make everything on the screen as real as life.”¹⁰⁶ They regretted that the symbolic style of the Fifth Generation broke off development in order to pursue the splendid ancient legends. Then, they decided to continue the “good tendency” initiated by the Fourth Generation¹⁰⁷. “My camera does not lie” was a line in the film *Suzhou River* (*Shuzhouhe* 2000), which was directed by Lou Ye and became the manifesto of the Sixth Generation. Zhang Yuan said, “History fables belong to the Fifth Generation. It is great to write history as a fable and greater still is that they describe it so brightly. But to me, I only care about objectivity. Objectivity is so important for me. I can

¹⁰⁴ Qtd. in Michael S. Duke, *Blooming and Contending: Chinese Literature in the Post-Mao Era* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 33.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁰⁶ Zhang Nuanxin, “Striving to Make a Pursuable Film”, *Film Culture*, March 1981. Qtd.in George Stephen Semsel, eds., *Chinese Film: The State of the Art in the People’s Republic* (New York:Praeger Press, 1987), 39.

¹⁰⁷ See “Zhongguo dianying de hou huangtudi xianxiang—guanyu yici zhongguo dianying de tanhua” (The Phenomenon of Post ‘Yellow Earth’ in Chinese Film: A Forum about Chinese Film), *Shanghai yishujia* (*Shanghai Artists*), no. 4 (1993), 24-25.

only notice what happens around me and I can't see farther.”¹⁰⁸ Objectivity for the Sixth Generation is the standpoint when they face the life that they want to describe, but there is an ideological strategy hidden behind the exterior of objectivity. When the objectivity of the Sixth Generation is connected with the first person point of view that they often adopt in their films, that represents a personal guarantee: what I see is true, what I am saying is true. I am only responding with my own narrative: what I see, what I tell. As a result, the films of the Sixth Generation are filled with an air of biography. But that is in contradiction with so-called objectivity. How can we say that a person telling his own story is being objective? So the objectivity actually becomes a moral guarantee—we are honest. This statement implies another statement--someone is dishonest. Who is dishonest in art or in film? This is a question artists have been asking since the 1980s and when the Sixth Generation claims that “my camera does not lie”, and when the writers in the 1980s such as Li Zhun say “let me write what I have seen for myself and believe to be true,” both of them point the finger at socialist realism. It is clear that the aesthetic issue is also an ideological issue. This pursuit of reality in Chinese film can be regarded as a kind of continuity of the effort of the Fourth Generation who advocated breaking through the limitation of socialist realism. This pursuit, as Michael S. Duke comments, “must inevitably come into conflict with the values of the Communist Party of China.”¹⁰⁹

Through the two chapters above I have tried to clarify the question “What is Sixth Generation film?” If we look at Sixth Generation film as an outcome of contemporary

¹⁰⁸ Zheng Xianghong, “Zhang Yuan fangtanlu” (The interview of Zhang Yuan), *Dianying Gushi (Film Story)*, no. 5 (1994), 9.

¹⁰⁹ Duke, *Blooming and Contending*, 56.

Chinese history, we can say that it is a film style that emerged at the beginning of the 1990s, and that it has a close connection with the socio-cultural conditions of the 1980s. The essence or the core of Sixth Generation film is an ideological rebellion against official ideology. From the perspective of film production, it can be described as independent film. From the perspective of theme, it represents the feeling of desperation and confusion. From the perspective of aesthetic form, it boasts objectivity despite its elements of narrative subjectivity. All these characteristics—e.g. the production mode, the theme, and the aesthetic form make the Sixth Generation different from other directors of the same age. Thus, the Sixth Generation can be described as a group of young directors who were born in the Cultural Revolution. They share the same historical experience—the new enlightenment movement and events of 1989, and a specific film style which was shaped by this historical experience.

Chapter Three: Variation in the Post New Era

Deng Xiaoping's trip to Southern China in 1992 was widely regarded as one of the turning points in contemporary Chinese history. In his speech, Deng promoted the view that in the field of economy, the country should put aside the disputes about socialism and capitalism and concentrate on productivity and the development of the economy. In the same year, at the Fourteenth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, the building of the "socialist market economy" was put forward as the country's strategy of economic development. The policy of "persistence in taking economic construction as the central task" was heavily emphasized, and people's attention was largely drawn to various changes in the field of economy. At the same time, the new enlightenment culture which pursues the liberation of individuals and democracy was still suppressed with a heavy hand and gradually faded out from the center of the cultural field. The resultant forces of economic reform and suppression of ideology made the transformation of culture inevitable. The rise of consumerism and popular culture was regarded as the most important phenomenon of this cultural change. "Since the 1990s, with the reform and policy of openness, with the accelerated change from the planned economy to the market economy, the social culture has also experienced a historical transformation."¹¹⁰ Some critics have coined the term "post new era" to describe the period when the market economy, consumerism and popular culture replaced the new enlightenment culture and

¹¹⁰ Zhu Liyuan, "Yashu jiexian quyue mohu—Jiushi niandai 'quanqiuhua yujing zhong de zhongguo shenmei wenhua" (The Blurring of the Division between the Serious Culture and the Popular Culture—A Survey of Chinese Aesthetic Culture in Modern Globalization Context.), *Journal of Changde Teacher University* 25, no.6 (2000),36.

occupied the governing position in social life.¹¹¹ This cultural transformation has been widely used to explain the changes in artistic fields such as literature, drama, painting, music in the 1990s, and made Chinese cinema “change from a political, new enlightenment culture to an entertainment culture.”¹¹²

In this part of my thesis I will argue that by the end of the 1990s the Sixth Generation experienced an important change and then fell apart. From the macro perspective, the cultural transformation in the 1990s rooted in the economic change of the country can be used as the main reason to explain the change of the Sixth Generation. And this point has been widely adopted for the study of this generation. But as I claimed earlier, the social and economic changes of the 1990s need not be seen as an all-important reason of the emergence of the Sixth Generation, and therefore, for me “the change of the Sixth Generation in the 1990s” has a different meaning than some other critics. For them the change means a diversification of film subject matter or content, but for me, this change pushed the Sixth Generation forward to its disintegration. In other words, the Sixth Generation at the turn of the new century does not show continuity of culture with the 1990s, rather it represents a transitory rupture from cultures of the 1980s and the 1990s. To clarify this point, I want to look more closely at and analyze the roles that capital, directors and the government played in the transformation of the Sixth Generation.

¹¹¹ See Zhang Yiwu’s “Hou xinshiqi: Xinde wenhua kongjian” (Post New Era: A New Culture Space), *Wenyi zhengming*, no.6 (1992), 9-12.

¹¹² Yin Hong, “Zhuanxing shiqi de zhongguo yingshi wenhua” (The Culture of Chinese Film and Television in the Transformation Period), [http:// www.filmsea.com.cn/zhuanjia/article/200112072362.htm](http://www.filmsea.com.cn/zhuanjia/article/200112072362.htm).

1. Changes in Chinese Film Industry at the End of the 1990s

In the middle of the 1990s, while the Sixth Generation were shooting their underground films, some important changes occurred in the film industry of mainland China. These changes were triggered by the crisis in the domestic film industry which was produced by a serious decline in the film market and the increasing threat of the Hollywood films.

To save the film market which had become depressed, the Film Management Bureau of China in 1994 approved the China Film Group Corporation's application to import ten movies every year which "reflect the outstanding culture of the world and represent an achievement of contemporary film."¹¹³ People called these imported movies "Big Movies"(dapian), because most of these movies were high budget Hollywood films. On November 12th, 1994, *The Fugitive* (dir. Andrew Davis 1993) was shown in Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Chongqing, Zhengzhou and Guangzhou and earned 25 million Yuan (3 million US\$) at the box office. It was seen as magic at the box office at that time¹¹⁴.

"Big Movies" attracted the audiences back to theaters, but at the same time, put an unprecedented stress on the domestic film industry. With more than 70% of box office occupied by imported "Big Movies", people began to worry about the fate of domestic film. The government's decision to join the World Trade Organization (WTO) increased this worry. According to the promises made by the Chinese government to WTO, China

¹¹³ See the Documentary from Film Management Bureau of China. Cite from Wu Yifan's "Dapian" yinjin shinian ji" (The Memories of the Import of "Big Film), *Nanfangdushibao* (*Southern Urban Daily*), December 31, 2004.

¹¹⁴ The box office achievement of *The Fugitive* can be found on "The *Fugitive* Started the Revel of 'Big Film' ", *Xin Hingbao* (*New Beijing News*), November 1, 1995, <http://www.china.com.cn/chinese/2005/dybn/1016605.htm>.

would gradually open its film industry to foreign capital. Foreign investment would be allowed to enter the field of film production, distribution and projection after 2001 and every year, the number of imported films should not be less than 20¹¹⁵. The Chinese film industry felt the threat of Hollywood at this moment. “The wolf is coming; what shall we do?”¹¹⁶This issue was heatedly discussed in the film industry. Finally, local films which can reflect local people’s experiences and aesthetic tastes were deemed as one way to resist the invasion of Hollywood’s “Big Movies”. “We have our own traditional culture which penetrates to all levels of our modern life. Our life styles and values are different from those of America and other Western countries. The intense understanding of the local culture, the tight connection with local realities and the common experiences of local people’s lives are our advantages, which Hollywood does not have.”¹¹⁷

To rescue the domestic film industry from the threat of Hollywood, the government also changed its film management policy. The most prominent change to occur during this period was that film industry including production, distribution and projection which had been monopolized by the state-run companies, was opened to a variety of investors. In 1995, the Ministry of Broadcast, Television and Film of China promulgated the “Regulation of the Reform in the Management of Feature Film Production” (Guanyu gaige gushi yingpian shezhi guanli gongzuo de guiding). According to this regulation, the

¹¹⁵ See Wang Dian’s “Haolaiwu wei zhongguo shichang fengkuang” (Hollywood is Crazy for China Market), <http://www.southcn.com/NEWS/ZTBD/WTO/zhaole/200111070631.htm>.

¹¹⁶ Dai Jinhua, “Kuanghuanjie de zhixie—1995nian zhongguodianying beiwanglu” (The Scrapes of a Carnival—the Memo of 1995’s Chinese Film) in *Xieta liaowang:zhongguo dianyingwenhua 1978-1998*(*Overview on the Declining Tower: Chinese Film Culture 1978--1998*) (Taipei:Yuanliu Press 1999),408.

¹¹⁷ “Rushi hou zhongguo dianying zenme pai”(How to Boost Chinese Film Production after Join in the WTO) <http://www.filmsea.com.cn/geren/article/200209260094.htm>.

permission to make feature films would not be limited to the state-run companies; provincial run companies were allowed to shoot feature films independently. In 1997 permission for film production became more open. All organizations, enterprises and private investors were allowed to undertake film production jointly with state or provincial run film companies. And some private companies could also get temporary permission to distribute their films. For example, to shoot the film *Opium War (Yapian zhanzheng, 1997)*, director Xie Jin founded the Opium War Film Production Company. This company was given the right to distribute *Opium War (Yapian zhanzheng)* independently, without need to consign the film to a distribution company run by the state or province.

The open policies in film production and the success of “Big Movies” persuaded many private investors to plunge into the film industry. Private film companies such as Huayi Brothers, Xinhuanian, Juxing, Hairen and others emerged.

At the same time, some Chinese films became successful at the box office. In 1995, *In the Heat of the Sun (Yangguang canlan de riz, dir. Jiangwen)*, a film telling a story about the growth of some youth in the period of the Cultural Revolution, earned 50 million Yuan RMB. It beat imported Hollywood films including *Die Hard: With a Vengeance* (dir. John Mctiernan 1995) and won the box office championship.¹¹⁸ In 1997, *The Dream Factory (Jiafang yifang, dir. Feng Xiaogang)*, a comedy movie, earned 30 million Yuan RMB and won the box office championship in that year. This movie was shown during the holidays of Spring Festival, thus it created a film style which was called

¹¹⁸ The data comes from the interview with Yu Dong, one of Jiang Wen’s producers. See *Shenzhengshangbao (Shenzheng Commercial Daily)*, August 24, 2007.

“hesui pian” (greeting New Year film) and this kind of film was so successful that it occupied the top box office position in the Spring Festivals of the following years.¹¹⁹

2. The Transformation of the Sixth Generation

2.1 New Members of the Sixth Generation

The success of some domestic films strongly attracted more investment from various sources to the film industry. These investments relieved the scarcity of capital in domestic film production, but the nature of capital to pursue profit also greatly reshaped the domestic film.

In 1996, Rock Records Co. Ltd entered the Chinese film industry and established Imar Film Co. Ltd. Different from those companies which had invested in the famed Fifth Generation directors or their coeval such as Feng Xiaogang, Imar preferred to cooperate with young directors. Its president Luo Yi believed that “the main audience of Chinese film would be youth; the middle aged prefer to watch TV at home, so our films would be better to be shot by young directors.”¹²⁰ He noted these films “could not be shot by Hollywood.”¹²¹ What these films described was modern urban China. “There is no ancient history, remote villages or visionary future. The environment and people are what we are familiar with. Meanwhile, the structures and styles of these films are fresh and

¹¹⁹ Liu Zheng, “Jiafang yifang kaichuang zhongguo shangye dianying chenggong moshi” (“The Dream Factory” Created a Successful Model of Chinese Commercial Film), *Xin Jingbao (New Capital News)*, November 22, 2004. <http://ent.sina.com.cn/2004-11-22/1145575086.html>

¹²⁰ See the interview with Luo Yi in “Yima’s Present Luo Yi: Do Best for Chinese Film”(Yima laoban LuoYi: Wei zhongguo dianying “zoudaodi”), *Yangchengwanbao (Yangcheng Evening Paper)*, March 5, 2001. <http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/c/35065.html>

¹²¹ Interview with Luo Yi in Zhang Liwei’s “Yima gongsi: tashang zhongguo dianying de menghuan zhilu” (Imar: On the Dream Journey of Chinese Film) [http:// www.cyyy.com.cn/ff002.htm](http://www.cyyy.com.cn/ff002.htm) - 9k

interesting.”¹²² Most importantly, these films should be “good movies which can be shown in China”¹²³ Here, “can be shown in China” means that these films should be consistent with the standards of government censorship--“The script should be passed by the censor.”¹²⁴ To achieve the purpose of producing “good movies which can be shown in China,” Imar Film Co.Ltd chose some young directors that were different from those that had connections with underground film or forbidden film experience. These young directors “agreed with commercialization and agreed with the mainstream films of Hollywood. They hold the opinion that film should be shot for audiences, be loved by audiences, move them and attract them to buy tickets. In a tide of cooperation with capital, they would want to hide their individuality. Some of their works did achieve a correlation between the demands of commercialization and standards of individuality in art. These films are easy to understand and suitable for most audiences. Zhang Yang is a representative of this kind of director.”¹²⁵

Zhang Yang graduated from the Central Drama Academy (CDA) in 1992 and cooperated with Imar Film Co.Ltd in 1997 in producing his first film *Spicy Love Soup* (*Aiqing malatang*). This movie has a delicate structure. Its main plot revolves around two youths preparing their wedding ceremony. In the process, four other stories are inserted.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ See the interview with Luo Yi in “Yima’s Present Luo Yi: Do Best for Chinese Film” (Yima laoban LuoYi: Wei zhongguo dianying “zoudaodi”), *Yangcheng Wanbao*, March 5, 2001, <http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/c/35065.html>

¹²⁴ Luo Yi’s point. Quoted in Zhang Xianmin’s “Jiulinghou jinpian shi” (The History of Forbidden Film after 1990s), http://www.filmagazine.org/lanmu/post.php?postId=46&cur_page=2.

¹²⁵ Chen Xuguang, “Wenhua zhuanxing zhong de diliudai daoyan” (The Sixth Generation in the Cultural Transformation), http://reading.cersp.com/Scholastic/PkuClassroom/200601/762_2.html.

By this structure the movie presents different forms of love and marriage at different stages of human life: the airy first love of teen-ages, the passionate love of the youth in their twenties, the marriage crisis in the middle-aged and the warm love of twilight of the old man and woman. Compared with the films of the Sixth Generation, in the *Spicy Love Soup* (*Aiqing malatang*) “the author escapes from the meta-narrative and the humanist thinking which focuses on depth and [social critical] responsibility. It tells ordinary people’s love stories by means of a popular, succinct, fragmented structure. These stories about different ages’ feelings, either romantic or sentimental, are filled with warmth, so that every person when he or she leaves the film theater will agree with the opinion that love is powerful and life is beautiful. This is a Chinese story. Its method of expression is acceptable to Chinese, but at the same time, it is also a Hollywood love fairy tale—a dreamy journey of escape from all the sharp conflicts of reality and the depressive feeling of no way out.”¹²⁶ This film was a commercial success. It made 3.1 million Yuan RMB in Beijing and beat import Hollywood film *Mulan*’s 1.6 million and *Gorgeous*’ 2.8 million.¹²⁷

In addition to Zhang Yang, some other young directors also got a chance to shoot their first film at that time. Shi Runjiu directed *A Beautiful New World* (*Meili xingshijie* 1998), a comedic love story. Li Hong directed *Company You Flying* (*Banni gaofei* 1998), a story about how a self-contemptuous boy, with the help of friends and teachers, grew up. Jin Chen directed *Love in the Internet Age* (*Wangluo shidai de aiqing* 1998). This

¹²⁶ Hao Jian, “‘diliudai’: mingmingshi zhong de siwang he jiafeng zhong de huayu shengming” (The Sixth Generation: the Death in the Denomination and the Life in the Crack) *Dingying xinshang* (*Film Appreciation*) Summer (2003), <http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/2007-05-08/ba1545095.shtml>

¹²⁷ The data comes from Gao Li’s “Piaobo yu huigui:diliudai de zhuti bianzou” (Vagrancy and Return: the Variation of the Theme in the Sixth Generation Films), *Journal of Southwest Jiaotong University*, no.2 (2002), <http://www.chuanboxue.net/list.asp?unid=2530>

film is also a love story about a boy who picked up a photo of girl, meets her some years later and falls in love with her, but finally leaves her disconsolate. Apparently, all these young directors' films are about urban youth life and have the same atmosphere as *Spicy Love Soup (Aiqing malaitang)*.

These newcomers to the Chinese film industry at the end of the 1990s—Zhang Yang and other young directors—were quickly labeled as the Sixth Generation by mass media. The category of the Sixth Generation was abruptly given to some new members, but these new members were so different from the old ones that a dispute arose.

As some critics comment, “Different from other Sixth Generation directors, Zhang Yang’s status has never been ‘underground’. His films have never been regarded as ‘independent’. This obvious difference suggests Zhang Yuan’s cultural standpoint: he embraces the social reality, rather than being suspicious towards it, not to mention criticize it...The theme or motifs of Zhang Yang’s films are ‘sunshine’ not ‘shadow of the sun’. The theme in his works is positive; the characters in his films are ‘normal’. This style shows an apparent contrast with that of other Sixth Generation directors whose subject matter is oppressive and the characters are the marginalized of society.”¹²⁸ These scholars believed that compared with the old Sixth Generation members, these young directors “1.) emphasize the narration of a story and are not addicted to symbolic and metaphorical meaning; 2.) emphasize the market effect and the dialogue with the audience; 3.) do not so strongly pursue independence in art.”¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Shi Keyang, "Linglei he chuantong-Zhang Yang de dianying meixue fenxi" (Distinctness and Tradition-An Analysis of Zhang Yang's Film Aesthetics), *Journal of Hangzhou Normal College*, no.4(2007), 73.

¹²⁹ Hao Jian, "' Diliudai': mingmingshi zhong de siwang he jiafeng zhong de huayu shengming" (The Sixth Generation: the Death in the Denomination and the Life in the Crack), *Shanhua*, no.3(2005),

Besides these characteristics of the new members of the Sixth Generation which can be openly discussed in mainland China, the most important difference between films of the new and old Sixth Generation comes from the different ideologies—the depression which had permeated the films of the Sixth Generation has disappeared. Instead, these new members' films are sweet and fashionable. Essentially, political safeness is a precondition of commercial success in China. In order to be labeled “can be shown in China”, the films of the new members of the Sixth Generation have filtered out the rebel spirit and try to be congruent with the main stream ideology.

2.2 Back Home: the Change of the Old Members of the Sixth Generation

The attraction of the market was so powerful that the old members also changed. In 1994, the government published an injunction ordering a stop to any support and assistance to Zhang Yuan and other Sixth Generation directors in film production and film printing. This injunction was rescinded in 1997 when Zhang Yuan was preparing his new film *Seventeen Years (Guonian huijia)*. “I established a goal for this film—it should pass the government censorship.”¹³⁰ Zhang Yuan recalled. This film was regarded as the turning point and Zhang Yuan and the Sixth Generation began to accept censorship and to cooperate with the government.

Seventeen Years (Guonian huijia) tells a story about how a family in crisis and suffering from distrust is reunited with the help of a warmhearted police woman. Seventeen years ago, with a remarriage of her mother, Tao Lan came into a new family. Her stepfather had a daughter named Xiao Qing. One day, Tao Lan stole 5 Yuan RMB

<http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/2007-05-08/ba1545095.shtml>

¹³⁰ See interview with Zhang Yuan in the “Yi xianfeng de mingyi fasheng”(Yelling in Name of Avant-garde), *Xinjingbao (New Capital Daily)*, October 28,2005.

from her stepfather. To escape the punishment, she put the money under Xiao Qing's pillow. In the quarrel that followed, Tao Lan beat Xiao Qing to death. Seventeen years later, on the morning of the last day of the lunar year, the officer announces that according to the Jail Management Law, some prisoners who have earned merit in jail will get a chance to spend New Year holidays with their families and Tao Lan is one of them. Tao Lan waits in a room, but nobody comes to pick her up. It seems that she is not welcome by her family. The official Chen Jie decides to sacrifice the most important family dinner which signifies reunion and happiness in the Chinese tradition, to accompany Tao Lan back home. Tao Lan's parents have become very old. Their silence embodies their cold attitude to Tao Lan. To break the ice, Chan Jie informs Tao Lan's parents of their daughter's penitence for her guilt and her determination to be a new citizen in the future. The parents remain silent. Her stepfather enters his bedroom and lies on the bed. Tao Lan kneels in front of the bed, but her stepfather does not forgive her immediately. He wants to be alone. Li Jie, Tao Lan and her mother wait in the living room. Finally, Tao Lan's stepfather comes out, and the three family members embrace together.

The Chinese title of *Seventeen Years* is "Guonian huijia". That literarily means "back home to spend the New Year." Some media used the words such as "back home" to celebrate Zhang Yuan's film passing the censorship and its permission to be shown in China.¹³¹ However, not all the critics hailed this change. Some critics chose a Chinese

¹³¹ In Peng Li's article "Guonian huijia qiangxian bainian" ("Seventeen Years Leading up to Greet New Year") the author described the shown of *Guonian huijia* (*Seventeen Years*) as an "uneasy back home". *Beijing Daily*, January 19, 2000.

phrase “bei zhaoan” to refer to this transformation.¹³² In Chinese “bei zhaoan” refers to rebels that are bought off by government and then serve the government. These critics condemned *Seventeen Years* (*Guonian huijia*) bitinglly because “its values are consistent with mainstream discourse and the narrative, and sweeten up the reality.”¹³³ They accused Zhang Yuan of having “completely lost the standpoint which he should hold in facing life.”¹³⁴

Zhang Yuan himself was also not satisfied with this film. He said, “*Seventeen Years* was not much advertised, but I thought all the people that wanted to watch it had watched it, some in the movie theaters and some from the illegal DVDs. From this perspective, I am satisfied with it. I’m not satisfied with its style, its content or its form, but satisfied with its fate.”¹³⁵

At the end of the 1990s, back home, back in the mainstream became a popular phenomenon among the young directors who had been active in shooting underground films. “At the turn of the century, this group of young directors who had been lingering on the margins for a long time seems to be on the road headed back home, back to the mainstream, back to the center. Just like the title of Zhang Yuan’s new film, they are longing for ‘home and to celebrate the new year holidays with their families’”¹³⁶ In 1999,

¹³² For example in Dai Jingting’s “Diliudai jiejin weibi shi zhongguo dianying de chuntian” (Lifting of the Ban to the Sixth Generation Will Not Bring the Spring of Chinese Film Necessarily), *Zhongguo xinwen zhoukan* (*China News Week*), No.194, August 30, (2004), 56-58.

¹³³ See “Zhuan zhi Kan Guonian huijia” (Zhuan’s Opinion about “Seventeen Years”), <http://www.filmsea.com.cn/focus/article/200112280071.htm>.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Cheng and Huang, *Wode sheyingji bu sahuang*, 124.

¹³⁶ Yin Hong. “Cong Beijing zazhong dao Guonian huijia—Guancha zhongguo xinshengdai dianying” (An Observation of the Newborn Generation of Chinese Film),

Wang Xiaoshuai directed *The House (Menghuan tianyuan)*, and Lu Xuechang directed *A Lingering Face (Feichang Xiari)*. All of these films respected the government censorship standards with a tangible purpose to enter the domestic market.

The connotation of the concept Sixth Generation had changed by the end of the 1990s. On the one hand, many newcomers were put into the category; on the other hand, the old members of the Sixth Generation had given up their struggle against the official ideology. Both of the changes reshaped the concept of the Sixth Generation during this period. In a manner of speaking, it became younger because a lot of new members joined it; it became popular because their films were shown all over the country and occupied an important place in the entertainment news; but most importantly, the main characteristic of the Sixth Generation film—the depressive feeling and the contradiction with the government in ideology—disappeared.

3. Three Forces in the Transformation of the Sixth Generation

The Sixth Generation experienced an important change at the end of the 1990s and different forces had contributed to this change. These forces were related to capital, directors and government in film production.

The nature of capital is to earn profits, so the domestic market became the main target of the capital in Chinese film industry. Although the Fifth Generation and some middle-aged directors such as Feng Xiaogang occupied the most important position in domestic film production, the young directors were needed by capital in order to explore the potential of the market. Luo Yi's Imar Film Company was such an instance. In fact,

this film company received investment from Rock Stone, a music record company. Rock Stone was able to benefit from investing in film in two ways: one from the film box office; the other from the byproducts of these films, especially the music of these films. At the same time, these films serve as big advertisements for the promotion of their music products. The company has a clear marketing target. They know that their music products are mainly consumed by urban youth. Accordingly, their films are shot by “young directors for urban youth”. These films are filled with popular music and songs produced by Rock Stone. For example, in *Spicy Love Soup (Aiqing malatang)* there are 17 songs played by 16 singers of Rock Stone. The stories of these films are delightful, although sometimes they feature the sadness of love. The images of the main characters are healthy, handsome or beautiful, and are acted by the singers of Rock Stone, so that they can easily become popular idols. These films produce and reproduce the desire for consumption of the products of Rock Stone. The company wishes to establish a profitable circle between the urban youth film and its record industry. The market strategy of the company shapes the style of these young directors’ films: it should not be offensive to the government, so that it will be safe; it should be acceptable to most people’s taste, so that it can earn money. Also, it should have something different from other films, because young people always pursue new things. The new young directors and new stars are not enough. The term Sixth Generation which is connected with the meaning of exploration, avant-garde and forbidden also has some attraction to a young audience. It is clear that these new young directors, such as Zhang Yang, were labeled the ‘Sixth Generation’ purposely.

The capital of the Chinese film market influenced some of the new young directors

that were catalogued into the Sixth Generation. It also successfully reformed some old members of the Sixth Generation. As a result of marketing segmentation, the Sixth Generation whose films had been around in the form of illegal DVDs among white-collar workers, intellectuals and young students, came to be regarded as having a kind of box office appeal. “What makes the Sixth Generation worth seeing is related to ‘what to express.’ They provide new subject matter for Chinese film and with regard to ‘how to express’ they provide new artistic methods and new experiences both in visual and intellectual realms.”¹³⁷ Thus “in the construction of consumerist ideology at the intersection of the two centuries, the works of the Sixth Generation have not only become a film phenomenon and entered into the field of cultural capital and symbolic consumption. They have become some kind badge of identity and significance for the petty bourgeoisie.”¹³⁸ The Sixth Generation had been known as underground film and had an attraction for a specific audience, but to turn this artistic attraction into money in the domestic film market, it need to be reformed and become a safe film style. That is to say, in the form of their films they needed to keep their artistic appearance, but in content they needed to be consistent with the official ideology. The goal of capital to reform the Sixth Generation was successful by the end of the 1990s, because most of the members of the Sixth Generation had begun shooting films which “can be shown in China.”

However, it is still hard to say that the capital is the only power that forced the Sixth Generation to change. After all, the power of capital can only work its witchcraft and

¹³⁷ Jia Leilei, “Guanyu zhongguo ‘diliudai daoyan’ lishi yanjin de zhutibaogao” (A Report about the Historical Change of Sixth Generation), *Dangdai dianying (Contemporary Film)*, no.5 (2006), 36.

¹³⁸ Li Yan’s MA Thesis *Zhongguo dangdai dianying de diliudai xianxiang yanjiu (The Study of the Phenomenon of the Sixth Generation in Chinese Film)* Beijing University 2005.

transform the Sixth Generation if those directors are willing. This means that the change of the Sixth Generation is a result both of the external environment and those directors' deliberate decision. When talking about their moving from underground to the surface and above ground, Zhang Yuan said, "I hate people that put me into a category. I have shot Music Videos, advertisements, and documentaries. I want to try different subject matter. In fact, I am only an employee of the film industry. Shooting film is my job. I will not spend too much time on just one subject matter." More interestingly, this quotation comes from an article in mass media entitled "'Underground Director' Zhang Yuan Gives up Evil Ways and Returns to Shoot 'Sister Jiang'" ("Dixia daoyan" Zhang Yuan gaixieguizheng pai *Jiangjie*).¹³⁹ The title clearly shows his change was not only concerned with the pursuit of different subject matter, but also concerned with a shift in ideology. In opposition to the "evil" which Zhang Yuan had given up, Sister Jiang was a hero of the Chinese Communist Party. She sacrificed her life for the party in the civil war with Kuomintang. In 2001, Zhang Yuan shot the Beijing opera film *Jiang Jie* as a gift to the Chinese Communist Party on its eightieth anniversary. Zhang Yuan alleged that he has the same ideals as Jiang Jie and that he was a thorough socialist. He was really moved by revolutionary passion.¹⁴⁰

A critic sneered at the change in Zhang Yuan's standpoint, "When you want to pick up the money on the road, you have to bow and lower your head, is that right?"¹⁴¹ This

¹³⁹ This article was published on *Beijing Yule Xin Bao* (*Beijing Entertainment Xin Daily*), December 17, 2001, <http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/c/2001-12-17/67257.html>

¹⁴⁰ See the interview with Zhang Yuan on *Xin Zhoukan* (*New Weekly*), April 15, (2002), http://culture.163.com/partner/weekly/editor/020523/020523_61968.html

¹⁴¹ See "Zhuan zhi Kan Guonian Huijia" (Zhuan's Opinion about "Seventeen Years"), <http://www.filmsea.com.cn/focus/article/200112280071.htm>

comment might be too acid-tongued. For those old members of the Sixth Generation, this transformation is a dilemma. They have to give up the ideological standpoint of their films, and thus they get a chance to produce relatively high budget films and have a large audience. Zhang Yuan said, "I have shot eleven films. The number is big enough, but I lack the communion with the audience...I have to be willing to dialogue with them. That's what I really need. I cannot be satisfied with only shooting a film...I had a good feeling when *Seventeen Years* was shown. At least, in the darkness of the film theater, I know the reaction of the audience."¹⁴² In the underground, most of the Sixth Generation directors can only get a little money from private sources or European funds, but as directors, to shoot high budget films is always an attraction for them. In 2000, in an interview Zhang Yuan said, "I will not shoot low budget film from now on. I just mentioned the space for creative freedom. You know, only a good economic condition can support a free imagination. In addition, I hope those guys who work with me will have more opportunities and better work conditions."¹⁴³ Zhang Yuan's goal was soon achieved. After *Seventeen Years* and *Jiang Jie* he got 10 million Yuan RMB (approximate US\$1.25 million) to shoot an urban love story *Green Tea* (*Lücha*, 2002). This time, he could use big stars such as Jiang Wen and Zhao Wei in his film.

The transformation of the Sixth Generation is a result of different forces. Besides capital and the willingness of the directors, in the process of the Sixth Generation's change the government has acted as a most important propellant.

In Mao's era, film was a propaganda apparatus financed by the government. In the

¹⁴² Cheng and Huang, "WodeSheyingji Bu Sahuang", 110-111.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

post-Mao era, the role of film has been changed. Apparently, the policy of film management is to follow the country's economic reform strategies and policies. In the process of economic reform, film has been increasingly regarded as a kind of industry which should obey the market rules and make a profit. This tendency strongly intensified in the 1990s when domestic film was faced with the threat of Hollywood. At that moment, "reforming the system of film industry to fight international competition became the most important political issue of Chinese cinema."¹⁴⁴ Such a claim also resonates with the Government's argument that "economic development is the biggest political issue in China."¹⁴⁵ Thus, the goal of making profit and the goal of imposing ideological control on the Chinese film industry overlapped. To achieve its economic goals, the government changed its film management policy. Private domestic investment was allowed to enter film production, distribution and projection. To ensure profit in the domestic film market, these investors tended to make films which would not contradict government censorship. Therefore, admission of private capital into filmmaking in fact might have decreased the amount of money available for investment in the underground films. At the same time, the government negotiated with the underground film directors, and lured them to give up their anti-government standpoint and allied with them in the effort to save the national film industry. The government and the state-run studios also provided financial aid to young directors to produce domestic art films to compete with Hollywood films. For

¹⁴⁴ Yin Hong and Xiao Zhiwei, "Hailaiwu de quanqiu hua celue he zhongguo dianying de fazhan" (The Globalization of Hollywood and the Development of Chinese Film), *Contemporary Film*, no.4 (2001), <http://media.people.com.cn/GB/5258901.html>

¹⁴⁵ This point was first put forward by Premier Li Peng in 1994 when he visited Germany. This point was also confirmed by the spokesman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. See Zhang Yijun's "Economy is the Biggest Issue—Premier Li's visit to Europe", *Economy World*, no.1, September (1994), <http://ch.shvoong.com/social-sciences/business-management>.

instance, in 1998, Beijing Film Studio initiated a project called “Youth Film Project” and invested 15 million Yuan RMB in seven young directors including Wang Xiaoshuai, Lu Xuechang, helping them shoot domestic art films. In the same year, Shanghai film studio started the “New Mainstream Film Project”. In 2003, jointly with the Junshi Film Company, a private film company, China Film Group Corporation started the “New Film Project” and financed 10 young directors every year. All these projects aimed to “help young directors produce comparatively low budget films that are close to local people’s lives, close to reality and would be appreciated by the same people,”¹⁴⁶ so that “Chinese film could resist the impact of the imported ‘Big Movies’. Meanwhile, with the help of these young directors, it became possible to explore new film elements that embody national culture¹⁴⁷ and are attractive to the people all over the world. These films were not only shown to a domestic audience, but also had a chance to enter the overseas market.”¹⁴⁸

As a sign of the reconciliation, in 1999, the Film Artists Association of China, China Film Group Corporation, Beijing Film Studio and *Film Art (Dianying yishu)* Journal held a “Youth Film Forum”. This forum was extolled as “a meeting that was filled with a harmonious atmosphere between the policy makers who represent the main stream ideology and the new generation that has avant-garde cultural tastes.”¹⁴⁹ In the statement

¹⁴⁶ Miao Chun, “Tuo qi zhongguo dianying de zhaoyang” (Raising the Morning Sun of Chinese Film), *People’s Daily* (overseas edition), October 28, 2003.

¹⁴⁷ According to the Chinese government’s explanation, the Chinese ‘national culture’ is a socialist culture with Chinese characteristics. It is based on a rich cultural traditions and it has been supplemented with only the best cultural achievements from abroad.
http://www.gov.cn/jrzg/2008-01/02/content_848649.htm.

¹⁴⁸ Miao, “Tuo qi zhongguo dianying de zhaoyang”, October 28, 2003.

¹⁴⁹ Huang Shixian, “Diliudai: laizi bianyuan de chaoxun” (The Sixth Generation: the Tide from the

of the meeting's purpose, the organizers said, "Although there are some problems or faults that exist in the works of these young directors, from the point of historical development, this force in film production will inevitably be the main force of the Chinese film industry in the twenty first century. Paying attention to their growth, encouraging their film production, and studying their works is very timely, important and significant." In the opening ceremony of the forum, Zhao Shi, the chief of Film Management Bureau of China, gave a speech. She said, "The film production of young directors represents the hope and the future of Chinese film; it is urgently needed in today's circumstance and we should give them warm and effective support."¹⁵⁰ Directors attending the forum included Wang Xiaoshuai, Guan Hu, Lu Xuechang and other younger directors. During the meeting, twelve films shot by these young directors were shown and highly praised by government officials and scholars. This kind of forum was also held in 2003 and 2005. Issues such as what subject matter is suitable for Chinese films, the standard of censorship, the revision of those banned films and financial support were discussed between the government, film studio companies and young directors. "These face to face discussions indicate a change from being opposite to dialogue."¹⁵¹ Jia Leilei commented, "The important function of these young directors in the process of commercialization of Chinese national film has been recognized by the high level officials of Chinese film industry. Thus, as a group of film directors, the Sixth Generation has deviated from their independent stance and gradually entered the mainstream of film

Margin), *Dianying yishu(Film Art)*, no.10, (2003), 44-45.

¹⁵⁰ Jia , "Guanyu zhongguo 'diliudai daoyan'", 26-50.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

production. Different from other film art forums, this meeting is a ceremony to celebrate the Sixth Generation's giving up their underground films. It is a symbol that indicates that the Sixth Generation has left the road of underground film."¹⁵²

After the forum of 1999, the Sixth Generation was publicly discussed and some scholars hailed the fact that the "Sixth Generation" could be named. At this moment, the Sixth Generation was finally given an official or a legitimate identity. In his article "The Sixth Generation' Is Named", Huang Shixian emotionally claimed that the acknowledgement of the Sixth Generation in the new millennium had a happy bouncy sound. He analyzed the films shown during the forum of 1999 and summarized the new tendency of this generation—"in cooperation with the mainstream and acceptance of new culture, their attention is moving from the margin to the center of the social order, and at the same time they still can keep their individuality in art." But the Sixth Generation of his article is equivalent to the "Newborn Generation." In his words, the "Newborn Generation (or the nickname of the Sixth Generation) is aggressive. The essence of their works exists in overthrowing the Fifth Generation." Apparently, this Sixth Generation, which equals the "Newborn Generation", has expanded its connotation to include those new comers. About the forum of 1999, the official sponsors used a more judicious term "Young directors" to "distance if not dissolve the rebellious connotation of the 'Sixth Generation'"¹⁵³ Now, this enlarged Sixth Generation has the function of dispelling the ideological meaning with means such as the general term "young directors". This supports Zhang Yingjin's claim that "the government was ready to promote a newly

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Zhang, "Rebel without a Cause?", 65.

‘reformed’ Sixth Generation.”¹⁵⁴

4. The “Sixth Generation” as a Commercial Label

Since the end of the 1990s, a relationship of mutual exploitation has formed between capital, young directors and the government. At this point I would like to offer one reminder. The underground film has not died away with the formation of this compromise. As a production model, the underground is still utilized by some young directors even today. Why? First, underground films provide the freedom of expression which directors needed. Although after 2003 the censorship on the detailed screenplay was replaced by the censorship on the 1000 word outline and the right of censorship has been given to the local government by the central government. The underground film is still the best way to convey some sensitive subject matter. Secondly, the success of the underground films at international film festivals brings directors fame which helps them to enter the domestic market and adds to their power when they negotiate with the government. The three phrases of “underground film—win prizes in the West—enter the domestic market” have been adopted by some directors as a development strategy.

In 1997, financed by a Hong Kong fund, Jia Zhangke shot an underground film *Xiao Wu* (*Xiaowu*). This film won some prizes in Berlin, Nantes and Vancouver and brought Jia Zhangke world-wide fame. Financed by Kitano Takeshi, a well-known Japanese film producer, Jia Zhangke then shot *Platform* (*Zhantai* 2000), *Unknown Pleasures* (*Ren Xiaoyao* 2002) and *The World* (*Shijie* 2004). These films promoted Jia Zhangke as an important young director in mainland China. Although his films were seldom watched by

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

Chinese, his name has become well known. In 2006, when he cooperated with Shanghai Film Studio in shooting the film *Still Life (Sanxia Haoren)*, the investment reached 8 million Yuan RMB (approximately 1.1 million US\$) which is much higher than the average investment of 3.5 million Yuan RMB (approximately 0.46 million US\$) on each film in mainland China.

Some young directors shoot underground films, some prefer a commercial operation, and some are moving from underground to commercial or mainstream. The film production of young directors exhibits an apparent diversity at the turn of the twenty first century. Nevertheless, this diversity is referred to the term “the Sixth Generation”.

Since the end of the 1990s, the Sixth Generation has been stretched into a term which can almost cover all young directors. Chen Xuguang lists four kinds of Sixth Generation films that existed at the same time: the first expresses the anxiety of being, and self-awareness; the second has a modernist look; the third hides social criticism behind an objective documentary style; and the fourth agrees with the commercialization and patterns itself after successful Hollywood films.¹⁵⁵ The criteria of definition are quite vague. The first one is about the films’ contents; the second and the third concern their forms and styles; the fourth is about directors’ attitude toward commercialization and the market effect. But who can say whether an objective or documentary film is definitely not commercial? Or whether the anxiety can or cannot be expressed by a postmodern style or an objective style? These confusing standards lack academic precision but they

¹⁵⁵ Chen Xuguang. “Wudaihou xinshengdai daoyan: Xianshi jingkuang, jingshen licheng yudianyingce” (Post Fifth Generation Newborn Directors: Real Situation, Spiritual Experience and Film Strategy) in *Duoyuan yujing zhong de xinshengdai dianying (Newborn Generation in Multi-context)* eds. Chen Xihe and Shi Chuan (Shanghai, Xuelin Press 2002), 162-189.

weave a basket that can well accommodate all young directors in the concept of the Sixth Generation.

In recent years some scholars have begun to criticize the confusion in the criterion of the Sixth Generation. The differences in the works of these young directors have been more and more noticed. “If Jia Zhangke and Wang Chao can barely be classified as belonging to the Sixth Generation, these younger directors such as Lu Chuan, Xu Jinglei and Ma Liwen cannot be justifiably included in the Sixth Generation.”¹⁵⁶ Zhang Yingjin also points out, “there is no uniform program in this generation as far as their strategies are concerned. In their early phase, the rebellious spirit embodied in rock music—seemed to rule the scene. Alternatively, they have chosen a more subdued version of protest—as exemplified in *The Days* and *Postman*—to express their alienation from and disillusionment with the new political-economic regime and their adolescent male subjectivity in crisis. Or more recently, as in *Shower*, they use nostalgia as an engaging method to communicate their visions to a larger audience. By the late 1990s, the development of the new market economy had compelled almost all of those marginal or self-marginalized directors to reenter or at least to reconnect with the mainstream.”¹⁵⁷

When the “Sixth Generation” becomes a cover-all concept, in fact it loses concrete connotation. Thus Zheng Dongtian announced that due to the plurality of film production, the young generation of Chinese film directors cannot be divided by “generation” any more. The only possible definition of this generation is “Generation-X.”¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ Guo, “Zhongguo dianyingshi yanjiu zhong daoyan hua dai de zhiyi”, 121-123.

¹⁵⁷ Zhang, “Rebel without a Cause?”, 67.

¹⁵⁸ Zeng Dongtian, “X dai daoyan qingming zhongguo yingtian” (X-Generations Directors Blooming in Chinese Film Industry), http://news.xinhuanet.com/ent/2005-12/11/content_3908012.htm.

Today, the “Sixth Generation” is popularly used in the mass media as a guaranteed artistic taste to a potential audience. It is “needed for market promotion. Concretely, film producers need this label in advertisement. For example, in 2001 when Zhang Yuan shot *I Love You (Wo aini)*, the news papers frequently advertised that Zhang Yuan was a “leading character of the Sixth Generation.”¹⁵⁹

The conjoined efforts of the capital, government, young directors, some critics and mass media reconstructed a new Sixth Generation. This Sixth Generation no longer means rebellion against the official ideology. It has been reformed to be a commercial advertising stunt. In other words, the Sixth Generation has disintegrated in the process of the unlimited inflation of its connotation.

¹⁵⁹ Hao, ““diliudai””, <http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/2007-05-08/ba1545095.shtml>.

Chapter Four: Return to Realism

Since the end of the 1990s, the concept of the Sixth Generation has become somewhat fragmented and vague. The “Sixth Generation” film can refer to the underground film, urban film, and sometimes all the films shot by the young directors who began their film careers in the 1990s. However, in this chaos, a new tendency of these young directors, whether they were called the Sixth Generation or the Newborn Generation, has been noticed by critics. In mainland China, this tendency is called the “return of realism”¹⁶⁰; in the west, it is regarded as “postsocialist realism.”¹⁶¹

1. Attention to Lower Classes

In the first place, the new tendency is expressed in the change of the subject matter and protagonists in the films. “The newborn generation’s attention to reality and their choice of subject matter have moved away from autobiographical themes such as ‘rock youth’ to the lower class on the margin of society and to cover social reality.”¹⁶² The protagonists in *So Close to Paradise* (*Biandan.Guniang*, dir. Wang Xiaoshuai,1997) are laborers and prostitutes. The main character in *Xiao Wu* (*Xiaowu*, dir. Jia Zhangke,1997) is a thief. The *Orphan of Anyang* (*Anyang yinger*, dir. Wang Chao,2001) describes a story of unemployed man and a prostitute. *Cala My Dog* (*Kala shi tiao gou*, dir Lu Xuechang,

¹⁶⁰ See Zhu Jie’s “Chengji yu beili:zhongguo diliudai dianying de wenhua xuanze” (Inheritance and Deviation: The Cultural Choice of the Sixth Generation Film), *Journal of Xinjiang Art University* 3, no.1(2005), 49-53.

¹⁶¹ The discussion about postsocialist realism in China can be found in Jason Mcgrath’s “The Independent Cinema of Jia Zhangke:From Postsocialist Realism to a Transantional Aesthetic” in *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century*, eds. Zhang Zhen (Durham and London:Duke University Press 2007),81-115.

¹⁶² Chen, “Wudaihou xinshengdai daoyan”, 178.

2003) is concerned with the life of the poor urban residents. *Beijing Bicycle* (*Shiqisui de danche*, dir. Wang Xiaoshuai, 2001) pays attention to youth growing up in working class family. The protagonists in these films are of low social position and have to struggle for their survival in an era of rapid economic changing. They are the humiliated and the damaged of contemporary China.

It is not only the subject matter and protagonists of these films that remind audiences and critics of the term of “realism”, but more importantly, it is these films’ attitude toward the protagonists who are regarded as the weak of Chinese society. In film style, these directors still advocate objectivity in observation of the reality, but this tendency has inevitably been exposed in their films by their sympathy for their protagonists.

One of the methods used by these directors to suggest their sympathy is the prettification of the protagonists that live at the bottom of the society and are disdained by the mainstream of the society. For example, in *Xiao Wu*, the thief, Xiao Wu is far from being a villain in accordance with the moral judgment. In the film, when the thief’s life is amplified, what we see is not a villainous thief. He yearns for friendship although his friend wants to get rid of him; the prostitute arouses his fantasy of true love which finally proved to be false; he is a filial son although the gold ring he gives to his mother has been stolen from another person. Apparently, such a thief, who is personally loyal, pure and filial, has been made more appealing by the director.

The other way these directors hint at their attitude to their protagonists is comparing these characters to their environment and showing their helplessness. These films always begin with protagonists whose desires are tiny and humble and end with the failure of these desires to be realized. In *Beijing Bicycle* (*Shiqisui de danche*, dir. Wang Xiaoshuai,

2001), Jian, one of the protagonists, longs for a bicycle so that he can be equal to his classmates and can have the confidence to love a girl; the other protagonist, Gui, dreams of earning some money by working as a mail carrier. Jian's poor family cannot satisfy his will. One day, Gui loses his bicycle which he uses to earn his livelihood. He searches for his bicycle all over Beijing and finally finds that Jian is riding it. Jian stole his father's money and bought Gui's bicycle on the black market. Neither of the two boys wants to give it up, so the only solution is for them to share the bicycle. Jian's girl friend falls in love with another boy, Huan, who dresses fashionably and is rich. To get revenge, Jian attacks Huan. In the fighting, the bicycle which bears Jian and Gui's hope of a better life is wrecked. Superficially, what the film expresses is the antagonism between the adolescents. In fact, this antagonism is rooted in the environment of the big city. The urban environment in which the protagonists live carries a strong social meaning in contemporary China: the increasingly deep gap between different social classes caused by the economic take-off.

In *Cala My Dog* (*Kala shi tiao gou*, dir. Lu Xuechang, 2002), Lao Er, a middle aged worker in a factory, has a dog named Cala. The dog is not only his pet but almost the only pleasure of the poor life he lives. One day, the dog is taken away from him by the government officials for the reason that Cala lacks a dog licence. To redeem Cala, Lao Er has to spend 5000 Yuan RMB (approximately 700 US\$) to buy a licence, but as an ordinary worker who has to support the whole family, he cannot afford to spend this money. He tries to get help from his friends and the friends of his friends; he rushes through the streets to meet various kinds of people, but he fails. His wife complains about his inability and his son also scorns him. His son says to Lao Er, "I hate that you're my

father!” In this film, what is compared with the puny and powerless Lao Er, is the ice-cold government. When the working class individual faces the powerful state machinery, the result is loss of his dignity.

During this period and in these films, a popular logic prevails: the poor people are kind; these kind people are oppressed by their social environment. Thus, these films push audiences to deduce or conclude—there are problems in the society. This logic which advocates social criticism by describing the distressing experiences of lower classes is not new to Chinese film history.

2. Neorealism: Italy and China

Some critics have noticed that there is a relationship between these realist films of China and the neo-realist films in Italy. Hu Po points out that Lu Xuechang’s *Cala My Dog* (*Kala shi tiao gou*, 2002) reminds us of the rules and conventions of Italian neo-realist film: Both Lu’s work and Italian neo-realist films refuse to describe heroic characters and to idealize ordinary people; they pay attention to ordinary people’s lives and reflect social problems the ordinary people experience; they both weaken the dramatic plot development and prefer open endings; moreover, they both make films that look like a piece cut from the real life.¹⁶³ Yu Yuanwei lists the points common to the Newborn Generation films and Italian neorealist films. These common points are: an avoidance of neatly plotted stories; a documentary visual style; the use of actual locations; the use of nonprofessional actors; an avoidance of artifice in editing, camerawork, and

¹⁶³ Hu Po. “The Resonance of Italy Neo-Realism—a criticism about *Cala My Dog*” (*Yidali xinxiangshi zhuyi de huixiang—ping Kala shi tiao gou*) *Xiezu* (*Writing*), no.3 (2004), 31.

lighting in favor of a simple “styleless” style.¹⁶⁴

Critics have successfully shown the similarities between some recent works of these young directors and the Italian neo-realists, but from the perspective of film language, some elements of this new tendency had already existed in works of the Sixth Generation since its emergence in the early 1990s. These directors have continued to claim for their films “objectivity” and have used a documentary style since the early 1990s, but critics only crowned them “realists” in recent years because their “attention to reality and their choice of subject matters have moved away from autobiographical themes such as ‘rock youth’ to the lower classes on the margin of society and to social reality.”¹⁶⁵ This fact suggests that the similarity in the ideology between the realist films of these young directors and the Italian neorealist film might be more important than the similarity in their film languages.

Megan Ratner in her *Italian Neo-Realism* quotes Cesare Zavattini’s statement and summarises the movement as follow: “ ‘This powerful desire of the [neo-realist] cinema to see and to analyze, this hunger for reality, for truth, is a kind of concrete homage to other people, that is, to all who exist.’ The aim, method and philosophy were fundamentally humanist: to show Italian life without embellishment and without artifice.”¹⁶⁶

By comparison, it is safe to say that some young directors’ films in China at the end

¹⁶⁴ Yu Yuanwei, “The Underlining Rules: the Comparison between the Newborn Generation’s documentary style and the Italy neorealist film” (Qianxing de guize: zhongguo xinshengdai daoyan jishifenggedianying yu yidali xin xianshizhuyi chuanguozuo shoufa de bijiao) *Dianying pingjie (Film Review)*, no.14 (2006), 32.

¹⁶⁵ Chen, “Wudaihou xinshengdai daoya”, 178.

¹⁶⁶ Megan Ratner, “Italian Neo-Realism”, <http://www.greencine.com/static/primers/neorealism1.jsp>.

of the 1990s and the neorealist film of Italy share common points in ideology such as the “new democratic spirit, with emphasis on the value of ordinary people”, “a compassionate point of view and a refusal to make facile (easy) moral judgments.” More important, they share “humanism”, although this “humanism” might have different sources. Regarding these early young directors’ educational background, their “humanism” might come from Marxist humanism which had been heatedly discussed in the 1980s.

Andre Bazin also discussed Italian neo-realism as a film movement: “this revolution was concerned more about the theme rather than the style; concerned more about the content rather than the form. Is it not right that ‘neo-realism’ be a kind of humanism first, and then a film directing style?”¹⁶⁷ Similarly, the documentary style in the films of these young directors in recent years in China also embodied the humanist ideology. This humanism reflects these directors’ compassion for the lower classes of contemporary China. From the 1990s, with the process of the modernization of the country, the polarization between the rich and the poor has become increasingly serious. The officials and the capitalists that get most of the wealth and have the power are at the center of the social stage. The cruel exploitation that Marxism criticized in the nineteenth century Europe is happening in socialist China right now. This social condition has awakened the class consciousness which had been covered over by the official government and urged the young directors to take their stand-point when facing with such social conditions. Up to now, some of them have given a humanist and socially critical answer.

What is worth noticing is that this answer and its social context in the post new era

¹⁶⁷ Quoted in Hao, ““ diliudai””, <http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/2007-05-08/ba1545095.shtml>

is almost a repetition of the left wing films of the 1930s in Chinese film history. In the 1930s, capitalism rapidly developed in Shanghai. The bureaucrats, compradors and capitalists composed a class of vested interests and a classical contradiction developed between this class and the proletariat and peasant classes. This social condition forged a left wing film which was influenced by Marxism. “The left wing film carries the flag of realism”¹⁶⁸ to exhibit “the deep gap between the rich and the poor in the cities and expose the suffering of the lower classes.”¹⁶⁹ These films also paid attention to prostitutes¹⁷⁰, insolvent peasants,¹⁷¹ the jobless¹⁷², small intellectuals¹⁷³ etc. In ideology, it observed Chinese society from the perspective of class struggle and sympathized with the lower classes. Although in the 1930s, the stage theater style still imposed strong influence on Chinese films, Georges Sadoul believes that some of the left wing films of that era have common points with the Italian neorealist film in truthfully recording urban life and the attitudes of lower class people. “Many film critics in the world, including Georges Sadoul and Tadao Sato, had previously held that Italy was the birthplace of new realistic films. After watching the films from this period in China, they pointed out that Chinese also made new realistic films and that at the time of their making these films were several

¹⁶⁸ See “Zuoyi dianying dui xianshi zhuyi zhudao diwei de queli”(Left Wing Film in the Process of Establishing the leading Position of Realism), <http://share.jxlib.gov.cn:8088/datalib/2003/Phylogeny/DL/DL-169405/>

¹⁶⁹ Jiao Su'e and Wang Qin, “Zuoyi dianying yundong yu zhonggyo dianyin de xianshi zhuyi zhi lu” (Left Wing Film and the Road of Realism in Chinese Film), *Academic Forum of Nan Du*, no.2 (1998), 42.

¹⁷⁰ For example, *Goddess* (*Shen Nü*, dir. Wu Yonggang 1934).

¹⁷¹ For example, *Spring Silkworm* (*Chun Can*, dir. Cheng Bugao, 1933).

¹⁷² For example, *Road Angel* (*Malu Tianshi*, dir. Yuan Muzhi 1937).

¹⁷³ For example, *Crossroad* (*Shizi jietou*, dir. Shen Xiling 1937).

years earlier than Italy.”¹⁷⁴ Georges Sadoul in his *World Film History* comments, “After watching the film *Road Angel*, if you don’t know it was shot by a young director who never touched French film, you must believe that this young man was influenced by Jean Renoir or Italian neo-realism. This film using a comedic, sympathetic, passionate touch, presents the miserable life of the lower class in a Chinese city in the 1930s through the experiences of several small people. The film extols their kindness and criticizes the cruelty of those capitalists.”¹⁷⁵

If Georges Sadoul’s comment is right, then we can safely conclude that the realist style films of the young directors which have similarities with Italy neo-realism in fact is also a resonance of native film tradition of China—the left wing film. In other words, after the Sixth Generation became polarized at the end of the 1990s, some of the young directors moved their attention from their own lives to the life of lower class and returned to the realist tradition of Chinese filmmaking which emphasized social criticism.

¹⁷⁴ Zhang Baiqing, *Zhongguo Dianying Dianshi (Chinese Film and TV)*, (Beijing: Wenhua Yishu Press, 1999). <http://www.ccnt.com.cn/show/chwindow/culture/dyds/dshyqb/rshywn.htm>.

¹⁷⁵ Georges Sadoul, *Hisroire généralé du cinema mondial*, Chinese edition, trans, Xuzhao and Hu Chengwei. (Beijing:Zhongguo dianying Press, 1982), <http://www.millionbook.net/lzsl/s/saduer/sjdy/027.htm>

Conclusion

In 1992, when Hu Xueyang, a graduate of the class admitted in 1985 to Beijing Film Academy, finished his maiden work *The Left Behind* (*Liushou nüshi*) he declared that, “the five classes admitted in 1985 are the Sixth Generation of filmmakers.”¹⁷⁶ Guan Hu, a graduate from the class admitted in 1987 in Beijing Film Academy, printed a calligraphic “87” in the title of film *Dirty* (*Zangren*, 1994). Some of the students also published their aesthetic manifesto “The Phenomenon of post *Yellow Earth* in Chinese Film” using in the name of “all graduates of the class of 1985.” These actions suggest that they had a clear awareness that they would be a “generation” in Chinese film after the well known Fifth Generation.

However, what happened later proved that except for the time they entered the film industry, these young directors produced very different films. For instance, Hu Xueyang, who was lucky enough to be employed by the state-run Shanghai Film Studio and began to shoot commercial films, was different from his classmates such as Zhang Yuan, Wang Xiaoshuai and Lu Xuechang when it came to film creation. Although Hu took the lead in declaring that he and his classmates were the Sixth Generation, he was mainly used by some scholars as a counterexample to prove the non-existence of the Sixth Generation. That is to say, his works made some scholars believe that the directors who were cataloged in the Sixth Generation had no common characteristics in their films. It is true that if “beginning their film career in the 1990s”¹⁷⁷ is the main criteria in defining the Sixth Generation there will be no common features among these directors in film

¹⁷⁶ Zheng, “Duli dianyingren zai xingdong”, 5.

¹⁷⁷ Yang, “Liudai bainian zhongguo yingxiang”, 99.

production, but what will happen when we impose some other limitations on the definition of the Sixth Generation? Basically, I distinguish the Sixth Generation from other young directors “beginning their film career in the 1990s” by examining the characteristics of their films from the perspective of theme, form and production mode, essentially, from the perspective of the relationship between these directors and their times and the relationship between these directors and the official ideology. These criteria distinguish at least some of the young directors in the 1990s that created a film style that quite properly earned them the name of Sixth Generation. I suggest that the most important condition in the construction of the concept of the Sixth Generation and the Sixth Generation film is ideological rebellion against the government. In the early 1990s when these young directors began their film career, they all expressed the spiritual suffering caused by the failure of the new enlightenment movement in the 1980s and especially, the repression after the event of Tiananmen Square. Not all of the young directors who had hardly begun their film career in the 1990s expressed this theme, but only a part did. These directors have a common theme—to expose the effects of suppression and frustration; they have common aesthetic features—advocating objectivity, the pursuit of documentary style, although there are a few examples of their mimicry of the expressionism; they have a similar film production mode—which was known as underground or independent film production. From a political point of view, their films reflect the serious contradictions between themselves as directors and the official ideology. The films also reflect the crisis of legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party after June Fourth 1989. I hope this narrower and more specific definition of the Sixth Generation can better explain the phenomenon of “underground” film and

differentiate this film practice from the film production of those commercialized young directors who have been inappropriately labeled the “Sixth Generation”.

The Sixth Generation existed, but lasted a very short time. By the end of the 1990s, most Sixth Generation directors had adopted a flexible stance in their relationship with the government. They accepted censorship from the government and as a payback the government provided them with a subsidy in order to help them shoot national art films and ensure the survival of the domestic film industry.

The reasons behind this change of the Sixth Generation are extremely complex. From the perspective of the social conditions, the Chinese Communist Party gradually shifted its focus from political and ideological struggle to building a market economy with “Chinese characteristics”. This move led the culture in the direction of consumerism. From the perspective of the film industry itself, joining the WTO brought about a crisis in the national film industry, and it in turn urged the government to adopt pragmatic policies to deal with the crisis. These policies include opening up the film industry to private capital, simplifying the process of censorship, and a dialogue with the Sixth Generation directors. From the perspective of the individual, Sixth-Generation film directors, who had been the marginalized for a long time and could not be recognized in the cultural life of their country, existence had become increasingly unbearable. Therefore, they were willing to accept an opportunity to leave the underground. Their compromise with the government was the often-called “bei zhaoan”(being bought off). Why did they accept “zhaoan” (buying off)? The answers I have given in my thesis are the need for self development and the desire for an audience, but the inner feelings that motivated them as individuals or a group may have been more complex. My thesis, does not fully address

these issues. That requires a further study of the directors in an environment which does not impose any social or political pressure and in which they can show their real selves, but now, obviously the time is not ripe.

Due to these internal and external reasons, the Sixth Generation changed its basic characteristics. In fact, it ceased to exist after the end of the 1990s, but the term of the Sixth Generation continued to be used as a business strategy to attract students and young white-collar audiences to films carrying their label. At the same time, with more and more young directors entering the film industry, the Sixth Generation has been assimilated into a large group of filmmakers that goes by a new term such as the “Newborn Generation”, and it has thereby completely lost all independence.

As a group of directors bound by a similar film style, the Sixth Generation no longer exists, but its influence is still a powerful force and is worth a lot of careful study.

After the late 1990s, in film creation some members of the Sixth Generation shifted their attention from individual lives to the life of Chinese society. They began to pay attention to class difference in the economic development of China and other social problems that exacerbated the suffering of the population at the bottom of the society. Their desire to represent society combined with the aesthetics of objectivity and documentary style yielded a new tendency which was praised by some Chinese scholars as a return to realism and by Western scholars as a post-socialist realism. Their works remind us of Italian neorealist film, and especially of the Chinese left-wing film in the 1930s which had a clear purpose of the social criticism. In opposition to the business ethos of that time, the pioneer of left wing film strongly opposed the argument that the main function of film was entertainment, or “ice cream for the eyes” and demanded that

the film show the dark face of society and act as an instrument of social progress. Whether this new trend among some young directors becomes a new film movement remains to be seen. But no matter what, from the perspective of the Chinese literary tradition this new trend illustrates what “Wen Yi Zai Dao” means when he says that literature should function as a vehicle for righteous thought.¹⁷⁸ This is an idea that has had a powerful effect on this generation. And the development of Chinese literature after the May Fourth Movement has absorbed modern ideas such as humanism and democracy as the new essence of the “Dao” (righteous thoughts). The rapid market economic reform initiated in the 1990s has brought in its wake serious social problems such as corruption, unfair distribution in social wealth, violations of human rights and so on. The concern for humanism and democracy, which were regarded as modernity in the 1980s, has become urgent again. Thus, the tradition of “Wen Yi Zai Dao” which was endowed with new contents by the new enlightenment movement, requires that artists work as the conscience of the society. Art can not be treated purely as entertainment, but must exhibit a kind of a social responsibility. This responsibility may require artists to explore the truth of history, show the reality of the society, criticize social injustice and so on.

The Sixth Generation has never deviated from this Chinese literature tradition. Even though their works in the early stages of the 1990s were described as “personal”, such an individual approach absolutely does not mean that they are only self-absorbed. I think that a personal story can represent much about the general social mood. It is a method of keeping alive the memory of the truth that was covered over by history, and a protest against injustice. Although the Sixth-Generation directors have been transferred from the

¹⁷⁸ “Wen Yi Zai Dao” is a basic requirement to literature by Confucian. It was put forward by Han Yu (768—824) and clarified by Zhou Dunyi (1017-1073) in his *Tong Shu. Wenci*.

“underground” force to an “above ground” phenomenon, this does not mean that they completely agree with the official ideology. Their compromise with the government is built on the basis of mutual benefit which may be temporary and unstable. Wang Xiaoshuai confesses, if subject matter becomes restricted and can not be expressed, he may go back underground again.¹⁷⁹ Essentially, these directors are still shaped by the legacy of Chinese literature and are trying to become a critical power in society. This is the main reason for the return of realism in some of the Sixth Generation directors after the late 1990s. And artists with such a character to speak for society will inevitably arouse conflicts with the government. As long as the truth of history is still covered up, as long as social injustice still runs amok, as long as the power to suppress free expression still rules, the conflicts between the directors and the government will exist, the forbidden film will exist and the distinction between the “above ground” and the “under ground” will exist. Recently, the ban of Lou Ye’s *Summer Palace* (*Yiheyuan*, 2006) shows that these directors may go back underground at any time.¹⁸⁰ In my opinion, such an endless struggle shows a deep yearning for the modernity of the 1980s. These young directors as a film group were born in modernity and still pursue modernity, because the tasks of the new enlightenment movement of China remain unfinished.

¹⁷⁹ See the interview with Wang Xiaoshuai in “Underground Film Director Wang Xiaoshuai Comments his Thaw: I know My Way in My Mind” (Dixia daoyan Wang Xiaoshuai tan jiejin: Wo Xinli Zhidao wo de lu gai zenmezou), *WaiTan Huabao*, no.2 (2004).
[http:// www.southcn.com/ent/celeb/wangxiaoshuai/news/200607110788.htm](http://www.southcn.com/ent/celeb/wangxiaoshuai/news/200607110788.htm)

¹⁸⁰ The content of *Summer Palace* (*Yiheyuan*) is concerned with June Fourth 1989. Without the permission from the government, Lou Ye sent this film to Cannes to take part in the film festival. As a punishment, the film was banned and Lou Ye was not allowed to shoot film for five years. When I finished my thesis I had no chance to watch this film. The content of this film is gotten from the friend of the film’s producer and some websites. Although it might be important to show the return to underground and the return to modernity of some of the Sixth Generation, the detailed study of this film is impossible for me now. But this difficult situation itself suggests the struggle between these directors and the government today is similar to that in the 1990s when they began their film careers.

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