

Does Time Heal?:
Cinematic Reconstruction of Historical Trauma in Twenty-first Century China

By

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B.A., Jilin University, 2004

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Abstract

While the whole world is talking about China's rise in wealth and power, most focus has been placed on understanding China's present policies and future orientations. However, very little attention is devoted to examining how historical consciousness affects present China. People take for granted that the past—particularly the landmark traumas of the communist decades—is a far-reaching historical discontinuity, and that China's profound changes in every aspect of society have rendered the past increasingly irrelevant. However, this thesis argues that this assumption is wrong.

This thesis explores the ways that Chinese filmmakers rearticulate the historical traumas which continue to affect Chinese society in the post-WTO era. I will identify three historical traumas that feature prominently in the interplay between past and present. The first, revolution and modernization, occupies a hegemonic status in socialist history. The second historical trauma is the tradition and modernization entrenched in Chinese modern historiography. The third is the 1980s and post-1989 modernization that has found a voice in the period of reform and opening-up. I refer to and analyze a selection of films made by Chinese Fifth Generation filmmakers in the new century—*Coming Home* (*Guilai*, dir. Zhang Yimou, 2014), *Together* (*He ni zai yiqi*, dir. Chen Kaige, 2002), and *The Founding of a Republic* (*Jianguo daye*, dir.

Han Sanping and Huang Jianxin, 2009)—to understand these historical traumas. To situate traumatic history in a broader Asian context, I will also offer comparative study of memory of World War II in postwar Japan by undertaking a close reading of *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* (*Senjo no merii kurisumasu*, dir. Nagisa Oshima, 1983). Employing a combination of methods, including textual analysis of films and institutional analysis of film industries, I will demonstrate that cinema finds innovative ways to engage the significant parts of national history and to generate remembrance and interpretation.

Rather than reducing the Fifth Generation's filmmaking trends in the new millennium to simplified government-appeasing or commercialization, this thesis emphasizes an understanding of their recollection of history, memory and trauma in a broader sociopolitical, economic, and cultural context. It shows how various factors—including the government's cultural policy, economic transformation, and individual and generational sentiments—have influenced and shaped the historical discourses at specific historical moments. While affirming the significant role these films have played in keeping collective memories alive in the public sphere, this thesis also calls attention to their limitations, such as the problematic nostalgia for the Cultural Revolution, as well as the escapist imagination of cultural heritage and traditional values.

Table of Contents

Supervisory Committee	ii
Abstract	iii
Table of Contents	v
List of Figures	vii
Acknowledgements	viii
Introduction	1
1. A Conversation between Nagisa Oshima and Chen Kaige	1
2. Topic and Theoretical Foundation: Trauma Underlying Historical Narratives	5
2.1 Modernization and Revolution	7
2.2. Modernization and Tradition.....	9
2.3 The 1980s and post-1989 Modernization	10
3. The Cinematic Reconstruction of the Traumatic History	11
4. Literature Review.....	16
4.1 Self-Orientalization.....	17
4.2 National Allegory.....	18
4.3 From New Wave to Post-New Wave.....	19
4.4 Film Industry.....	21
5. Methodology and Chapter Summaries.....	23
Chapter 1 Amnesia and Reminiscence: The Recollection of the Cultural Revolution in <i>Coming Home</i>	28
1. The Cultural Revolution in Historical Amnesia.....	29
2. Modernity and Trauma.....	34
3. Chosen Memory, Chosen Nostalgia.....	39
Conclusion	45
Chapter 2 Memory in Simulacra: The Restoration of Tradition in <i>Together</i>	47
1. Father's Role as Patriarch	49
2. City Memory in Ultramodern Beijing.....	55
3. Escapist Cultural Imagination of Traditional Values	62
Conclusion	67
Chapter 3 Postsocialism Revisited: The Reworking of Revolutionary Legacies in <i>The Founding of a Republic</i>	69
1. <i>The Black Cannon Incident</i> : Fundamental Ambiguities of Postsocialism.....	71

2. <i>The Founding of a Republic: Rethinking the Future of Postsocialism</i>	79
3. From Avant-garde Auteur to Official Producer.....	88
Chapter 4 A Japanese Case Study: Reinventing War Subject in <i>Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence</i>	98
1. From Activist Intervention to Artificial Theatricality	99
2. The Power and Powerlessness of Homosexual Representations	105
3. Scrambling Identity in Transnational Production	111
Conclusion	116
Works Cited.....	118
Filmography.....	126

List of Figures

Fig. 1-1. <i>Coming Home</i> (2014). Dandan performs <i>The Red Detachment of Women</i> in order to penetrate her mother's memory loss.	44
Fig. 2-1, 2-2. <i>Together</i> (2002). Two scenes are shown with montage sequence. Liu Cheng found baby Xiaochun, who was abandoned by his biological parents in the train station (2-1); the teenaged Xiaochun chases his father in the train station (2-2).	54
Fig. 2-3, 2-4. The sharp contrast of new and old Beijing in <i>Together</i> (2002).	60
Fig. 3-1. <i>The Black Cannon Incident</i> (1986). The meeting room designed with stylistic settings and composition.	76
Fig. 3-2. <i>The Black Cannon Incident</i> (1986). The performance scene	78
Fig. 3-3. <i>The Founding of a Republic</i> (2009). Chiang Ching-kuo (right) is appointed to curb the corruption but is challenged by Du Yuesheng (left), a known gangster in the 1940s.	83
Fig. 3-4. <i>The Founding of a Republic</i> (2009). Mao complains he cannot buy cigarettes because all private shop-owners have fled the communists.	86
Fig. 3-5. A famous scene in 1989 Tiananmen Incident: a young protester tried to stop the advance of a column of tanks in Tiananmen Square.	93
Fig. 4-1. <i>Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence</i> (1983). Celliers's execution	104
Fig. 4-2. <i>Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence</i> (1983). The opening scene: Sergeant Hara interrogates the Korean soldier Kanemoto, who allegedly raped a Dutch POW.	108

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Introduction

The Japanese see themselves as victims of poverty, feudalism and war, but never ask what individual responsibility plays in participating in or even indirectly supporting all the damage. ... For this reason, when I started out making feature films at Shochiku Film Studio, my first concern was to repudiate this kind of story.

Nagisa Oshima (*Conversation Between Chen Kaige and Nagisa Oshima* 111)

Although being sent down to rural China against my will, I cherish my life experience as an educated youth in the Cultural Revolution. I believe when one is overwhelmed by frustrating circumstances, it is also the time you could gain strength and inspiration from it.... We expect more reflective expressions instead of self-indulgence in victimization, and hope to convey these thoughts by cinematic languages.

Chen Kaige (*Conversation Between Chen Kaige and Nagisa Oshima* 110)

1. A Conversation between Nagisa Oshima and Chen Kaige

These quotations suggest, I believe, a critical reflection on history—particularly at a time of crossroads and uncertainties, when future orientation is in doubt. Both quotations are cited from a conversation between Nagisa Oshima and Chen Kaige. Today, we might remember Oshima as the director who, forty years ago, made the sexually explicit film *In the Realm of the Senses* (*Ai no korida*, 1976), but earlier in his career, Oshima was a politically committed and driven filmmaker of 1960s Japanese New Wave Cinema. As for Chen Kaige, he is now acknowledged as a key Fifth Generation filmmaker who elevates Chinese cinema's profile on the world stage, best known for his Palme d'Or winner, *Farewell My Concubine* (*Bawang bieji*, 1993). At the time the above conversation was held, Chen was still an ambitious young filmmaker

whose directorial debut, *Yellow Earth* (*Huang tudi*, 1984), heralded the beginning of Chinese New Wave Cinema (though this itself is a problematic label) that followed the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-76).

The conversation between Chen and Oshima occurred in 1986, after *Yellow Earth* was released in a Tokyo theatre and drew wide attention in Japanese film circles. Oshima was deeply impressed by the film's stylistic elements, which in many ways recalled his own earlier filmic innovations. A meeting was thus organized for Oshima and Chen to discuss their ideas, and a full record of their discussion was later published in the Chinese magazine *Contemporary Cinema* (*Dangdai dianying*).¹

Both Chen and Oshima were survivors of national trauma, with erratic lived experiences that reflected the social and political upheavals of their respective countries. These traumatic memories have etched an indelible impression across their filmmaking careers. When looking back on Japan's defeat in World War II, one of the most significant traumas in modern Japanese history, Oshima clearly proclaimed his rejection of "victimization syndrome," a humanistic interpretation of the war which was prevalent in postwar Japanese society and filmmaking. As an example, Oshima cited the Chinese film *My Memories of Old Beijing* (*Chengnan jiushi*, dir. Wu Yigong, 1982), the top prize winner at the 1983 Manila Film Festival in which he headed the juries. While acknowledging the beauty of the film, he also pointed out its sentimentalism, which bore resemblance to that of the films produced by the leading Shochiku Film Studio, where he began his rise in the late 1950s. Not until the 1970s did Western critics learn how to appreciate the sentimentalist ambience in Japanese films, most notably the work of Yasujiro

¹ For the full record of the conversation between Chen Kaige and Nagisa Oshima, see "Conversation Between Chen Kaige and Nagisa Oshima" (Chen Kaige yu Dadao Zhu duitan), *Contemporary Cinema* (*Dangdai dianying*), Trans. Chora Karima 刘間文俊, 6 (1987), 109-16.

Ozu. Oshima, however, detested them all, for they exactly conveyed what he calls “victimization syndrome”—a cultural discourse that insists on placing all blame for the war on political leaders while largely ignoring individual responsibility. For this reason, Oshima’s early career was dedicated to battling against that tradition, sketching a history of Japan from the viewpoint of one of its original postwar artist rebels.

Chen Kaige agreed that *My Memories of Old Beijing* exemplified the victimization syndrome that had similarly characterized Chinese society and artistic works of the 1980s, during the initial years of the reform and opening-up (*gaige kaifang*) that followed the Cultural Revolution. The film exemplifies the work of the Fourth Generation directors who were trained in film schools in the 1950s only to have their careers sidelined by the Cultural Revolution, during which intellectuals were beaten and banished to do menial labour. In response to this disastrous experience, the Fourth Generation filmmakers told stories with unabashed sentimentalism. The Fifth Generation directors mostly came of age in the mid-1960s and were sent to the countryside for reeducation during the Cultural Revolution. Known as “educated youth” (*zhiqing*, an abbreviation of *zhishi qingnian*), they tended to hold rather different attitudes with respect to their past sufferings when compared with their predecessors. Although he was sent to live in the countryside against his will, Chen cherished his educated youth experience, which provided him a rare opportunity to understand the living conditions of rural China. Struck by both the kindness and the backwardness of the rural people, Chen felt obligated to portray their surviving cultural traits and realities—an objective which he later carried out in his debut *Yellow Earth*. Chen believed that, when one is overwhelmed by frustrating circumstances, this is also the time that one can gain strength and inspiration from them. Instead of indulging in victimization, the Fifth Generation directors expected more reflective, problem-oriented expressions, and conveyed these thoughts through innovative cinematic languages.

The conversation represents a memorable moment of filmography, not only because it is a conversation between two eminent Asian filmmakers, but also because it touches on a broad range of issues regarding the dialectic tension between past and present. First and foremost, the conversation is about how a nation looks back at its past after a time of violence, dislocation and suffering—a past from which it needs to rebuild its vision of the future. As the opening quotations suggest, the conversation is also about how intellectuals respond to historical trauma at a time when old social order is in rapid disintegration, and, through the power of artistic works, facilitate the transformation of a society already in transition. Oshima's unflinching critique of mainstream Japanese culture and ideology arose within massive left-wing protest that emerged from the turbulent economic and political conditions in the 1960s. A quarter century later, as Deng Xiaoping introduced the radical political and economic reforms that led to China's drastic transformations, Chen Kaige and his Fifth Generation contemporaries also took advantage of these new freedoms to use cinema as a means for historical and cultural reflection (*lishi wenhua fansi*).² The conversation is about the connections and divergences between the new and established generations of filmmakers. The historical disjuncture called forth iconoclasts like Oshima and Chen to shake the established narratives and aesthetics of a bygone era; their innovations informed the new narratives and aesthetics that emerged in their place. Finally, the conversation is also about the connections and divergences of an auteur's past achievement. In the 1980s, when the conversation took place, most of the Japanese New Wave directors had turned away from youthful avant-gardism—a topic I will elaborate on in a later chapter. Oshima's generous praise for Chen seems to be granting his legacy to a younger

² Nearly simultaneously with the implementation of reform and opening-up, a broad, nationwide intellectual movement self-styled as "historical reflection" and "cultural reflection" emerged in the 1980s. Their task is to reflect deeply on the entrenched patterns of history and society of Chinese nation and civilization. This critical insight into history is sustained by an ambivalent attitude toward China's past: an iconoclastic attack on tradition as backwardness in order to clear away the obstacles on the path to modernity, and, at the same time, a return to the root of Chinese culture, and recovery of a national identity obscured and distorted by authoritarian discourse.

generation. The 1980s also marks a significant point of historical disjuncture in Oshima's career—a time at which the aging filmmaker's former ideological propositions, narrative strategies and aesthetics had new urgency and required new reconfiguration.

2. Topic and Theoretical Foundation: Trauma Underlying Historical Narratives

The conversation between Chen and Oshima serves as an excellent entry point for my thesis, which investigates how visions of the past have been reshaped into various narratives and discourses in response to epochal change. I situate all the issues of present-past nexus mentioned above within the context of China's spectacular emergence as a global economic power—an ascent marked by milestones such as China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 and Beijing's successful bid to stage the 2008 Olympics. What prompts this study is a sense of epochal disruption at the turn of twentieth century that prompts the nation to disconnect from its past as deeply as it did in the 1980s, if not more so. The gradual dominance of marketization, urbanization, globalization and digitalization brought profound changes in every aspect of Chinese society, rendering the past increasingly irrelevant to the present. How would a modern-day Shanghai citizen, struggling to survive amid the skyrocketing living costs and housing prices of a Chinese metropolis, relate to a person like Gu Qing, the soldier in *Yellow Earth* who journeys to countryside to collect folk songs from peasants in order to boost the morale of the communist army? Is *Coming Home* (Guilai, 2014), Zhang Yimou's latest work of a traumatic memory in Cultural Revolution, no more than a nostalgic romance to the younger generation, a Chinese version of *50 First Dates*? In this sense, we view the representation of the past not as a source of historical event itself, but as a mediation of our present's relation with the past.

In the broader context, before the emergence of the historical disconnect that now characterizes

twenty-first century China, much critical discourse in Europe and America had revolved around the crisis of History. The conditions for this change had been laid down in the 1950s, but their consequences only became fully apparent from the 1970s onward. Early in the 1940s, Walter Benjamin had recognized that historical imaginations are conjured up in response to critical change. In his famous passage *On the Concept of History* (1942), Benjamin argues, “The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability, and is never seen again.” According to Benjamin, articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it “the way it really was”; rather, “it means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger” (390-91). What is significant in this passage is that historical imagination is a response to “a moment of danger,” usually a disruption of the old social order. Historical imagination thus aims to redefine reality and reconstruct experiences which are in danger of disruption.

Confronting historical trauma is an efficient way of saving the memory in the crisis of disruption, and hence a sobering way of better understanding history, the future, the world, and ourselves. From a psychoanalytic perspective, many who study trauma turn to Sigmund Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) to better make sense of people’s apparent desire to repeat unpleasant experiences, whether it be the trauma of war or of childhood abuse. According to Freud, this repetition of trauma is an attempt to master an experience that was originally too immediate, too intense, or simply too difficult to bear. On the one hand, a traumatic memory is a disrupted memory, riddled with gaps and inconsistencies people are unable to assimilate into their minds; at the same time, the traumatic memory experiences an “urge” to repeat itself. The instinctual “compulsion” of a traumatic memory is powerful enough to compel us to relive it (29-30). In the field of cultural studies, it is this repress-repeat complex that enables writers and filmmakers to revisit a historical trauma again and again, making sense of present

experience and enabling a sense of continuity with the past.

Modern Chinese history has been marked by a series of traumas stemming from the nation's relentless move toward modernization. Since the late Qing Dynasty, an era dominated by Western and Japanese imperialism, China has understood its future in terms of a need to modernize, referring often to the West to search for a proper model of modernization. The founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 was simultaneously a rejection of capitalist modernity and the establishment of "socialist modernization" as an alternative path, a model premised on revolution and class struggle—a path which later led many Chinese to tragedy and suffering. This situation did not change until 1978, when China once again embarked on a new journey—this time, the journey to modernization mobilized by the reform and opening-up, which fostered the following three decades of development in China. Whether as a culturally specific story or as a generic narrative, it would be impossible to understand China's historical trauma without understanding China's reaction to modernization and modernity. Here, I will identify three interrelated but distinct focal areas of historical trauma—modernization and revolution, modernization and tradition, and the 1980s- and post-1989 modernization—which still cast a long shadow over the present. Meanwhile, as generational memory begins to fade and new social and cultural realities are underway, imagination and representation of historical traumas also demands a new understanding and new frames of reference.

2.1 Modernization and Revolution

Socialist history is replete with revolutionary attempts to implement state-sponsored modernization projects. Scarred by the violence and suffering caused by campaigns such as the Anti-Rightist Movement (1957), the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960), and the Cultural

Revolution, among many others, postsocialist China has retreated from revolutionary ideology. Current studies on China have generally used the year 1978 as a watershed of China's transformation from the Mao era to Deng's economic reforms. This disjuncture between pre- and post-1978 China has dominated scholars' attention in their analyses of the role of political leadership in social and economic developments during these respective periods. For example, Li Zehou and Liu Zaifu, in their 1995 work *Farewell to Revolution*, explicitly calls for the abandonment of radicalism in favor of a less radical approach to historical-philosophical problems. Arif Dirlik terms Chinese contemporary historiography as "postrevolutionary," and draws on its twofold implications:

First, for all the repudiation of the revolution, the historical legacy of revolution continues to shape much of this work, for the simple reason that the revolution as an historical event was, and is, crucial to modern Chinese history. Second, much of this historiography is also antirevolutionary, not just in the sense that it is in opposition to the Chinese Communist Revolution, as we have understood it, but more fundamentally in opposition to revolution and revolutionary transformation as concepts in history. (132)

In other words, despite philosophical efforts to bid farewell to revolution, this historical closure is not a static one. The apparently bygone socialism is still an active construct in the theoretical concept, actual practice, and cultural identity of postsocialist society, as well as in the ongoing context of the globalization process. In the beginning of the twenty-first century, we witness partial revival of the Mao's legacy when China attempts to address a host of massive domestic challenges arising from economic reforms. In popular culture and public rhetoric, when confronted with the dire consequences of runaway marketization and development, people—especially those who found themselves marginalized by Deng's reforms—begin to reminisce about the "good old days" of socialism. With this in mind, a dual theme—change

versus continuity, Mao's China versus Deng's China—is adopted to assess the historical development since the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took power in 1949.

2.2. Modernization and Tradition

Throughout the twentieth-century historiography, China was by no means “friendly” to its tradition. This tendency became evident in the May Fourth Movement in the mid-1910s,³ regarded as a radical break with the Confucian ethical and political system in favor of Western values of democracy, liberalism and scientific advancement. The concerns of this movement are exemplified by the writer Lu Xun, one of the most prominent and influential writers to emerge from this period; Lu's criticism of traditional Confucian values and feudalistic society was harsh and relentless. China's attack on its cultural traditions reached their climax during the Cultural Revolution, in which cultural relics were destroyed and traditional belief systems discredited. In the initial years of the reform and opening-up, tradition was still a target of assault by radical reformers. Critics have described the whole trajectory of Chinese modernization as traumatic encounters with the May Fourth Movement, Mao's revolution, and, in the recent decades, the new powers of globalization, all of which render Chinese tradition into an obstacle blocking the nation's path to modernization (Wang B 18).

At the turn of the new century, while sweeping urbanization and consumerism still in some ways imply departure from tradition, the drastic pressures of social change also witnessed a reinvention of cultural and moral past. A case in point is the Confucius revival, which is

³ As a political event, the May Fourth Movement (*Wusi yundong*) was an anti-imperialist movement growing out of student participants in Beijing on 4th May 1919, protesting against the Chinese government's weak response to the Treaty of Versailles, especially allowing Japan to receive territories in Shandong which had been surrendered by Germany after the Siege of Tsingtao. But in a broader sense, the term “May Fourth Movement” often refers to the period during the mid-1910s and 1920s more often called the New Culture Movement. The movement's ideology sprang from the disillusionment with traditional Chinese culture in favor of a new Chinese culture based on western standards, especially democracy and science.

grounded in the notion that traditional Confucian values provide the foundation for an ethical and meaningful modern life. Two arguments can attest to the significance of this trend. First, it has much to do with the reconfiguration of identity under a new global capitalism. Having achieved economic success, China is now in a position to assert itself ideologically against a Euro-American hegemony. Second, modern Confucian philosophers also aim to provide a spiritual antidote to social maladies such as alienation and materialism, which they see as a side effect of the capitalistic glorification of competition and the single-minded pursuit of profit. Just like revolutionary legacies that never really end in China, the cyclical repudiation of and return to tradition are always informed by a teleology of modernity, resolving the tension between the past and the present.

2.3 The 1980s and post-1989 Modernization

While there is a significant disjuncture between Maoist and post-reform China, China's reform and opening-up period also intersected with a host of disruptions. Some commonly identified epochal disruptions include the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown and Deng Xiaoping's famous visit to southern China in 1992. The 1989 Tiananmen Incident became a spark for the breakdown of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, which in turn marked the end of Cold War, announcing that the great ideological battles between capitalism and communism were over. For a long time, the economic and political structures of global capitalism seemed triumphant. However, as the largest communist government in the world, the CCP did not undergo the same breakdown process as the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc did. In response to the economic sluggishness and ideological setbacks that followed the Tianamen crackdown, the eighty-eight-year-old former leader Deng Xiaoping embarked on a southern tour in 1992—the final large political act of his career. During his surprise visit to some of the key Special Economic Zones he had established in the early 1980s, Deng reaffirmed China's commitment to reforming the

economy and establishing a socialist market economy.

China's rise over the last two decades is founded on Deng's decisions and policies that stemmed from the 1989 Tiananmen Incident. If we understand China's social changes in the 1980s as a two-headed project continuing China's age-old intellectual struggle for modernization and democracy, the two decades that followed—from the post-1989 era through to the 2009 celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of the establishment of the PRC—represent “the absolute triumph of modernization over democracy”⁴. As Dai Jinhua points out, “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” (71-72). Since the onset of the accelerated market economy in 1992, the following situation—the combination of political control with a market economy and embrace of globalization—renders any effort to make sense of China's paradoxical prosperity particularly arduous. Although the violent repression in 1989 elicited numerous moral indictments in the West, Chinese's economic miracle in the post-Tiananmen era stands in contrast to the admonishments and predictions of the West.

3. The Cinematic Reconstruction of the Traumatic History

In the twenty-first century, it is the rapid growing visual culture—film, television, and emerging new forms of digital media—that reach the largest audiences and shape popular conceptions

⁴ In her preface written for Wang Hui's *The End of the Revolution: China and the Limits of Modernity*, Rebecca Karl argues that modernization and democracy are two important poles of political and intellectual struggle of the twentieth century. In this sense, revolutionary politics can be seen as the solution chosen in China's twentieth century to help resolve the contradiction between them. However, post-1989 era has seen the absolute triumph of modernization – now defined exclusively as economic developmentalism – over democracy. The historical struggle between them appears to have been abandoned, and along with it to revolutionary politics leading to both modernization and social order suffered.

(or misconceptions) of history. In this thesis, I use cinema as raw material to probe the three major historical traumas mentioned above. The case studies of my analysis will be a selection of three films—*Coming Home* (*Guilai*, dir. Zhang Yimou, 2014), *Together* (*He ni zai yiqi*, dir. Chen Kaige, 2002), and *The Founding of a Republic* (*Jianguo daye*, dir. Han Sanping and Huang Jianxin, 2009). To situate historical trauma within universal context, I will offer a sample study of Japanese New Wave Cinema, taking critical insight into historical memory of World War II in *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* (*Senjo no merii kurisumasu*, dir. Nagisa Oshima, 1983).

In developing hypotheses that account for the proliferation of memories of the Cultural Revolution in the 1990s, Yang Guobin emphasizes the role of social agents, the former educated youth members, in controlling or articulating collective memories of the Cultural Revolution.⁵ His theory would be equally significant to the Fifth Generation as the most active social agent for historical articulation. The majority of the Fifth Generation filmmakers belong to the generation that were born around the time of the founding of the PRC and grew up with the young nation; coming of age during the mid-1960s, they were just in time for the unleashing of the Cultural Revolution. Their education was interrupted as they responded to Mao's call to "learn from the peasants," which saw youths sent down to the countryside for reeducation (1968). Entering Beijing Film Academy in the late 1970s, its first reopening after the end of the Cultural Revolution, the maverick youngsters' most urgent concern was to reflect the hardships the nation had experienced and to catch up on tasks and fulfill the roles expected of them. The end of Mao's era witnessed a period of relatively lax ideological control,

⁵ Yang Guobin proposes three hypotheses that account for the proliferation of memories of the Cultural Revolution in the 1990s: first, that the mnemonic control by the government in the earlier periods bred its own resistance; second, that under the new economic system, memory products found a consumption market; and third, that the market created social discontent among the former educated youth members. See Yang Guobin, "Days of Old Are Not Puffs of Smoke: Three Hypotheses on Collective Memories of the Cultural Revolution," *China Review*, 5.2 (Fall 2005), 13-41.

coupled with generous opportunities offered to young directors from state-owned film studios. The uniqueness of their lived experiences constitutes the essential reason why the Fifth Generation stood out so dramatically from earlier groups of filmmakers. It is also the reason for the strong sense of historical consciousness they shared, which was later reflected in the films they made.

I should clarify that, in this thesis, the term “Fifth Generation” refers to a specific group of filmmakers and the works they created between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s, which, in spite of significant individual differences, shared a general representative trend of themes and cinematographic styles. Among the Fifth Generation filmmakers are Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, Tian Zhuangzhuang, and Wu Ziniu, graduates from 1982 class of Beijing Film Academy, as well as and Huang Jianxin, who graduated one year later. Soon after graduating, these filmmakers initiated China’s first New Wave movement through avant-garde films such as *One and Eight* (*Yige he bage*, dir. Zhang Junzhao, 1983), *Yellow Earth*, *The Black Cannon Incident* (*Heipao shijian*, dir. Huang Jianxin, 1986), and *Red Sorghum* (*Hong gaoliang*, dir. Zhang Yimou, 1988). In the 1990s, some major figures made historical melodramas more directly targeted at international film festivals and audiences. Chen Kaige’s *Farewell My Concubine* (1993), Zhang Yimou’s *To Live* (*Huozye*, 1994), and Tian Zhuangzhuang’s *The Blue Kite* (*Lan fengzheng*, 1994) appeared around at the same time at international film festivals and earned phenomenal success. At the turn of twenty-first century, the common bond among the Fifth Generation directors has gradually diminished, but some former high-profile art film directors such as Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige and Huang Jianxin are still actively making films, and have become the most energetic participants in China’s new commercial cinema. Zhang Yimou’s *Hero* (*Yingxiong*, 2002), Chen Kaige’s *The Promise* (*Wuji*, 2005), and Huang Jianxin’s *The Founding of a Republic* are listed among China’s top-

grossing homegrown films. As Paul Clark suggests, *Hero* could be the best evidence of the end of the Fifth Generation as a collective group of Chinese artists. Together with *House of Flying Daggers* (*Shimianmaifu*, 2004), another Zhang Yimou's blockbuster, these films "encapsulated the changes in Chinese public life in the twenty years since *Yellow Earth*" (Clark 186).

The historical narration has always occupied a prominent role in the Fifth Generation cinema, either in their early or "post-" phase of filmmaking. This is not only due to the historical consciousness endowed by their lived experiences, but is also to the Chinese intellectual tradition of using history reflect upon and critique current situations. As Corrado Neri argues, "Because of the socio-political commitment of Chinese artists," films such as these that narrate the past will always "deal with the nation itself, society and cultural identity" (212). Neri suggests that, in narrating the past, any Chinese historical or period film is inevitably involved in a process of constructing and deconstructing the notion of "nation"—nationhood, national identity, national culture, and national cinema.

Complementary to these observations, I will further suggest the notion of national and cultural identity does not tend to render a homogeneous categorization of representations; rather, it constantly changes in correspondence to China's complex and fast-changing social and cultural reality. In the 1980s, when China had just gone through the chaos of revolution, deconstructing the hegemony of official and mainstream discourse of history was an almost exclusive focus in the works of the Fifth Generation. Earlier historical representations—whether the mythical, timeless China in *Yellow Earth* and *Red Sorghum*, or the recurrent political catastrophe in *To Live*, *The Blue Kite*, and *Farewell My Concubine*—demonstrate these narrative strategies. As the twentieth century drew to a close, Chinese writers and

filmmakers confronted a completely new social reality and cultural environment: the ambiguity and decentralization of ideology; escalating commercialization in global and local markets; globalization that increasingly obscures the notion of nation; and the dominance of mass media and digitalization. China's literary and artistic production has largely lost its former totality, as well as the imposed role of social/moral engagement. For better or for worse, literature and visual creation has become a more individual activity and a commercial endeavor.

This change is particularly evident in the Fifth Generation's recent works, in which the grand narratives that governed their early filmmaking have become heterogeneous and diverse. To be sure, their particular historical period left an indelible impression on their filmmaking, and all the films I choose to discuss indeed serve as reminders of that diminished collective memory. I will contend that these films signal the renewed intellectual narrative of traumatic experience of the past or, more precisely, a visual reconstruction of the national memory within the context of the new globalized situation.

Since the arrival of the Fifth Generation filmmakers, the filmmakers' reconstruction of history has both animated domestic historical and cultural reflection while also interacting with the West's cultural imagination about China. Around the time China began enthusiastically embracing Western ideas in the 1980s, Western spectators were also eager to see the "China" whose culture was so little known to outside. The Fifth Generation's iconoclastic creation of Chinese modern history and eye-catching cinematography was groundbreakingly successful, bringing international attention to Chinese cinema and its profound implications in post-Mao China. For many Chinese critics, the international recognition of the Fifth Generation is dubious. As soon as *Red Sorghum* won the Golden Bear prize at the 1988 Berlin Film Festival,

the first such honor received by a Chinese film, the debate about its self-Orientalizing tendencies was underway. Praise aside, critics also condemned the Fifth Generation for intentionally catering to the first-world Western curiosities about the third-world Other.

However, Chinese national identity produced under the logic of “the West and the rest” has already changed. China’s rise in wealth and power is moving the country from its former marginal position to the centre of global power. Accordingly, the Chinese film industry is now no longer faltering under foreign competitors; on the contrary, it is burgeoning and becoming a force to reckon with in its own market. In 2013, after two decades of dominance by Hollywood imports, China’s homegrown films outperformed Hollywood blockbusters, with domestic films accounting for seven of China’s top 10 highest-grossing movies, amounting to 71% of the annual box office revenue.⁶ Recognizing this change, the Fifth Generation faced an urgent need to adapt new strategies in all production phases. They must link to both domestic and transnational networks and simultaneously profess Chinese national identity in a world in which China is both a superpower and the only exception to Western universalism.

4. Literature Review

In studies of contemporary Chinese or Asian cinema, the Fifth Generation is a term that no scholar can afford to miss. Starting in the mid-1980s, film scholarship on Chinese cinema exploded in Europe and the U.S. alongside the increasing international exposure of the Fifth Generation. The field quickly gained a certain level of sophistication, especially in historical, postcolonial, psychoanalytical, and feminist readings of film narratives and characterization of the Fifth Generation Cinema. Film scholars apply theories from Sigmund Freud, Jacques

⁶ According to official figures released by the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), the movie box office in 2013 earned annual revenues surpassing RMB 17.07 billion (USD 2.74 billion), surging 36% over 2012 and making the country the world’s second-largest film market.

Lacan, Edward Said, Walter Benjamin, Fredric Jameson, and Laura Mulvey for in-depth textual analysis. This expanding attention to the Fifth Generation also brings Chinese cultural scholarship to the forefront of new critical theory in the West. In this literature review, I will identify and evaluate the main issues of the Fifth Generation and the related research available in Chinese and English.

4.1 Self-Orientalization

How to interpret self-Orientalization in the Fifth Generation films perhaps has been the most hotly debated problem in film and cultural studies of the Fifth Generation. First published in 1978, Edward Said's *Orientalism* raised important criticisms toward academics who write in deliberately stereotyped and dehumanizing ways about the East. According to Said, the distinction such discourses drew between the "rational West" and the "irrational Other" paved the way for the construction of a European identity that is superior to non-European cultures and serves as a pretext for dominating, reconstructing, and exerting authority over the Orient (3). Therefore, the Fifth Generation's search for China's "root" not only implements domestic cultural and historical reflection in the 1980s, but also applies to Said's observation of self-Orientalization. The barren mountains in *Yellow Earth*, the irrational rituals in *Red Sorghum*, the desperate concubines in a hermetic courtyard in *Raise the Red Lantern* (*Dahong denglong gaogao gua*, dir. Zhang Yimou, 1991), are all examples of self-Orientalization that portray the image of China as the exotic/eroticized Other. One of the most representative of works that analyze the Fifth Generation's self-Orientalization tendency is Rey Chow's *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (1995). She suggests treating contemporary Chinese films—largely Fifth Generation films—as "ethnography" that reveals the national psyche of coping with repressed modernity in a postcolonial condition.

Said's theory inspires critics to further combine postcolonialism and feminism in debates surrounding the films of the Fifth Generation. Dai Jinhua, one of China's most prolific film and cultural studies academics, stands alone as a feminist and Marxist critic of the self-Orientalizing aspect of the work of the Fifth Generation. For example, in *Severed Bridge: The Art of the Sons' Generation* (2002), Dai examines the early films of the Fifth Generation in relation to the filmmakers' political and aesthetic coming of age during and after the Cultural Revolution. Referring to their films as "the art of the Sons," she emphasizes the Fifth Generation's double struggle between the tyrannical Father's discourse and the "onslaught of Western culture" in the 1980s (33). Eventually, this threat of the castrating power is played out in their films by suppressed female and female sexuality as a sacrificial subject that symbolically assuages the collective anxiety and shock.

4.2 National Allegory

Regarding the omnipresent political symbolism of Fifth Generation films, many critics also adopt Fredric Jameson's concept of "national allegory" to illustrate the Fifth Generation's reconstruction and reconfiguration of history. In his essay *Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism* (1986), Fredric Jameson posits a difference between "first-world" and "third-world" writing by arguing that "third-world literature" is seriously limited as a form of national allegory. Jameson defines "third-world national allegory" as a national allegory in which "the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society" (69). Although Jameson's investigation occurred well before the end of Cold War, it is common among scholars to argue the Fifth Generation's "going out into the world," a common phrase that refers to China's re-integration with the West after Deng's reform, is paradigmatic of the fate of third-world

development and culture under the postcolonial and transnational situation.

The 1990s saw a string of films from the Fifth Generation which deal with political history of Chinese revolution and socialist modernity. The most prominent among these award-winning films, shown at international festivals and circulated globally, are Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine*, Zhang Yimou's *To Live*, and Tian Zhuangzhuang's *The Blue Kite*. According to many critics, the recurrent political turmoil that juxtaposes individual or family misfortune in these films is a quintessential example of national allegory. Funded by Hong Kong or Japan and heavily censored in Mainland China, the Fifth Generation are also a standard image for the West to comment on current Chinese political censorship of art. For example, Sheldon Lu (1997) observes that Zhang Yimou's films in the 1990s explore the fate and predicament of third world culture under the hegemony of transnational capital. Zhang Xudong (2008), on the other hand, submits that the Fifth Generation works of the early 1990s pursued a "visual reconstruction of the national memory through a post-revolutionary catharsis of trauma" that enabled a new meaning of "personal, ordinary, or aesthetic life" to "fill the vacuum of a past without history" (269-70).

4.3 From New Wave to Post-New Wave

As Paul Clark points out, Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002) ended the Fifth Generation as a collective group of Chinese artists. One of the ways we can conceptualize the transformation from New Wave to post-New Wave is to understand it in relation to sociological and economic changes with the advent of the country's accession to the WTO in 2001. This climactic moment signaled not only China's official integration into the global economic system, but also a moment of significant financial and cultural rescaling. For more than a decade, the Fifth Generation's "self-Orientalization" and "national allegory" had served as a tactical narrative

intervention to break away from the socialist discourse and had attracted considerable attentions from the international film circles. However, those works, such as *Yellow Earth*, *Raise the Red Lantern* and *To Live*, were either banned in Mainland China or could only reach the American and European art houses. The Fifth Generation's engagement in blockbuster filmmaking at the turn of the century underscores the questions of how to analyze China's relationships with the West in the post-WTO era, as well as how to avoid oversimplifying these films to mere tokens of the pro-Chinese versus pro-Western dichotomy.

Despite its rich rhetorical capacity, the systematical study of post-New Wave Fifth Generation filmmakers lags far behind other thematic studies. This is mainly caused by the fact that the Fifth Generation filmmakers are no longer as easy to identify as a cohesive group sharing a collective spirit, as they were from mid-1980s to mid-1990s. On the other hand, the box-office boom motivates the former Fifth Generation auteurs to make commercially viable films. Scholarly interest in Chinese cinema has shifted to the Sixth Generation, as a more radical group of young rebels who took the art-house prestige the Fifth Generation once enjoyed.

In current research on the post-New Wave filmmaking of the Fifth Generation, Zhang Yimou's recent films continued to attract the most attention as a subject for discussions of their cultural and aesthetic transformations, as well as their commercial success. Chinese cultural critic Zhang Yiwu (1999) identifies two drives in Chinese filmmaking at the turn of twentieth century: there is the "outward-looking" drive (*waixiang hua*), which portrays an Orientalized China feeding overseas audiences, while the "inward-looking" drive (*neixiang hua*) presents Chinese contemporary society aimed at a booming domestic market (16). He particularly points out that Zhang Yimou's withdrawal of *Not One Less* (*Yige dou buneng shao*, 1999) from the Cannes Film Festival in 1999 is a symbol of the ambivalence of these

two drives that co-exists on the eve of China's WTO accession.⁷ Rey Chow's *Not One Less: A Fable of Migration* discusses Zhang's return to a more realist style in the late 1990s and early 2000s, centred on China's internal problems and aimed at a predominantly Chinese audience. More controversies focus on *Hero* in terms of the Fifth Generation's attempt to produce Chinese blockbusters. In her article *Hero: Dismantling the Myth of Cultural Power* (2008), Wendy Larson addresses widespread criticism that Zhang's *Hero* is a propaganda film supporting state ideology and totalitarianism. Larson argues that the film is an attempt to wield power and help nations gain recognition on the global stage. This article was then integrated into Larson's monograph, *Zhang Yimou: Globalization and the Subject of Culture* (2017). To date, this publication remains the only book-length treatment of Zhang Yimou's works.

4.4 Film Industry

The Fifth Generation's trajectory can also be perceived in relation to the structural overhaul of the Chinese film industry. This sweeping structural overhaul is propelled by the general trend of in-depth state-run enterprise reforms, ownership reforms, and marketization, all of which gained momentum after Deng Xiaoping's southern tour in 1992. The Fifth Generation filmmakers are arguably direct participants in these transitions, having both benefited and suffered from the demands of market reform, the rise of alternative entertainment options, and the popularity of Hollywood blockbusters.

While scholars on Chinese cinema have traditionally focused on textual analyses of film, they

⁷ *Not One Less*, which concerns teachers and students in rural China, is released in China in early 1999 to official and critical approval and audience enthusiasm, but hit a roadblock at the Cannes Film Festival later that year. Although the circumstances are not entirely clear, preselection comments by Cannes officials suggested that the film was seen as being insufficiently antigovernment, and too propagandistic. Zhang published a letter in the *Beijing Youth Daily* publicly withdrawing *Not One Less* (and his other new film, *The Road Home*) from the festival, and objecting to what he perceived to be a narrowly politicized attitude towards Chinese film, "It seems that in the West, there are always two 'political criteria' when interpreting Chinese films, [they are perceived as being either] 'anti-government' or 'propaganda.' This is unacceptable." For a related coverage, see <http://articles.latimes.com/1999/may/07/entertainment/ca-34715>.

have scarcely addressed the issue of institutional transitions. Zhu Ying's *Chinese Cinema during the Era of Reform: The Ingenuity of the System* (2003) was a breakthrough to these less-examined areas and perspectives. She traces the metamorphosis of the Chinese Fifth Generation from the mid-1980s to late 1990s in terms of the shifting political economic milieu that regulates the film industry and its market structure. She suggests the market economy has profoundly affected the Fifth Generation's film practice and its subsequent shift from art to entertainment. In the post-WTO era, the Chinese film industry has demanded academic attention more forcefully as it has undergone more drastic industrial restructuring and marketization. This new urgency is also addressed by Zhu Ying and Bruce Robinson in a chapter of *Art, Politics, and Commerce in Chinese Cinema* (2010). Titled *The Cinematic Transition of the Fifth Generation Auteurs*, this chapter explores economic and textual strategies that the Fifth Generation filmmakers, chiefly Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige and Tian Zhuangzhuang, employed to compete with Hollywood for both global and domestic market shares.

As elaborated on the works selected, although scholars studied the Fifth Generation from multiple angles, the key words summing up the focus of research around the Fifth Generation filmmakers are self-Orientalization, national allegory, art and commercial, postcolonial, and transnational. These concepts are premised upon a series of binaries—West and East, global and local, high art and popular culture—which have shaped political and cultural discourses and paradigms throughout the twentieth century. This approach apparently cannot encapsulate the diversified filmic activities of a group of filmmakers spanning three decades, nor can it enrich our understanding of the complexity and dynamics within a group of generational filmmakers of a given period—especially when binaries mentioned above became more obscure toward the end of the twentieth century. My thesis builds upon existing studies and

also raises new questions which I believe are crucial to our understanding of the Fifth Generation filmmakers, as well as the relationship between film and historical imagination in general. First, I analyze the Fifth Generation filmmaking at the turn and beyond the new century, an overlooked facet that has much resonance with China's recent development. Second, by focusing on less-discussed films such as *Coming Home*, *Together*, and *The Founding of a Republic*, I will examine the Fifth Generation's new engagement with and articulation of traumatic history. Over the past decade, China's most critically-acclaimed filmmakers have turned historical narrative into the pre-eminent genre in presenting the cultural identity of China. For the most part, they have concentrated on recounting the twentieth-century history, particularly the landmark traumas of the communist decades. But is there any "authentic" cultural identity of China? If so, does the abandonment of self-Orientalized or politicized portrayal of China enable a filmmaker to achieve genuine autonomy, or does it only lead to artistic decline and exhaustion? In this thesis, I hope to uncover some clues towards answering these questions.

5. Methodology and Chapter Summaries

After identifying *what* the major historical traumas are and *who* the social agents of historical narrative are, the next question follows: *how* do the Fifth Generation directors, the country's best-loved history-tellers, offer ways of rethinking and reimagining this history? My thesis addresses a major trauma in its own chapter, primarily through a close reading of three post-millennial Fifth Generation films: *Coming Home* (*Guilai*, dir. Zhang Yimou, 2014), *Together* (*He ni zai yiqi*, dir. Chen Kaige, 2002), and *The Founding of a Republic* (*Jianguo daye*, dir. Han Sanping and Huang Jianxin, 2009). These films demonstrate that cinema finds innovative ways to engage in the significant part of national history and to generate remembrance among the public.

A quick way to make sense of the topic of trauma is to situate it in a wider context. I will offer a comparative study of the trauma of World War II and its memorial work, *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* (*Senjo no merii kurisumasu*, dir. Nagisa Oshima, 1983). Ever since the 1960s, a number of New Wave movements have emerged in East Asian countries and regions, including Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, and Mainland China. These New Waves have often been treated as “after-waves” of their French predecessors, but they also arose as movements in their own right—intellectual responses to profound changes that marked their respective social and cultural specificities. Are twenty-first century China and its film industry standing at the same juncture as China’s economic superpower neighbour, Japan, did in the 1980s? How do the former New Wave iconoclasts like Nagisa Oshima reconstruct historical memory of World War II, which is once again in danger of disintegration? Although this comparison is secondary to the primary focus on China, one chapter of this thesis offers a paradigmatic example of the New Wave directors that emerged in many other major film-producing countries, seeking a dramatic reconfiguration through cross-cultural discursive formations at the post-New Wave juncture.

Close reading and textual analysis of films in each chapter is the primary method to analyze the cinematic reconstruction of historical trauma. By weaving historical and theoretical commentary, I will bring out the authorial concerns that both shape and are in turn reshaped by the socio-economic and political discourses. While mainly focused on a single film in each chapter, I am also aware that the influence of historical trauma has been long-lasting, ever-changing and complicated. In this process, filmmakers need to mobilize new and revised narratives to explain the turbulence, mourn the dead, redirect the blame, and recover from the damage. To incorporate this broader context in my analysis of the films I have selected, I will

refer to another work from each filmmaker's earlier career: Zhang Yimou's *To Live*, Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine*, Huang Jianxin's *The Black Cannon Incident*, and Nagisa Oshima's *The Catch (Shiiku, 1961)*. I address these early films as counterparts, teasing out many continuities and discontinuities when a subject matter of historical trauma is revisited years apart. How, for example, does Zhang Yimou's representation of the Cultural Revolution in his 2014 film *Coming Home* differ from that of *To Live*, produced 20 years earlier? What does the transformation of themes, images and characters tell about the filmmakers' trajectories, as well as China's understanding of its recent history? By tracing the transformations by which the filmmakers recount their traumatic memories, I argue that filmmaking is also the tool with which they help to heal a morally and spiritually broken society. Understanding this process is crucial for assessing how China addresses the national and international tensions it faces today.

Chapter 1 examines the recollection of the Cultural Revolution in Zhang Yimou's *Coming Home*. As the most prolific and versatile Fifth Generation director, Zhang Yimou has provided various explorations of a trauma-ridden history, culminating in exposing the loss and suffering of the Cultural Revolution in *To Live*. However, his latest work, *Coming Home*, is about a crisis of remembering the Cultural Revolution, in both the literal and metaphorical sense. This chapter will explore how *Coming Home* presents a dual image of the Cultural Revolution, simultaneously demonstrating both memory and amnesia, traumatic witness and nostalgic reminiscence. This duality reveals a society changing so fast that various currents of hybridization and ambivalence overlap.

Chapter 2 examines the revival of tradition in Chen Kaige's *Together*. Among the Fifth Generation filmmakers, Chen is distinguished by his strong attachment to Chinese tradition—not only through featuring Peking Opera in *Farewell My Concubine*, but also through

attempting to shed light on the contradiction between old and new temporalities. As Chen's first contemporary urban drama, *Together* presents the traumatic condition of twenty-first century China, a country torn between tradition and modernization. I focus on how Chen presents memories of his father, scenes of old Beijing, and traditional values as an antidote to the maladies of China's headlong race to urbanization and globalization. While Chen's utopian restoration of tradition is engaging, I contend his uncritical longing for the past and repudiation of the present is an escapist cultural imagination.

Chapter 3 examines the 1989 Tiananmen Incident, a recent trauma unspeakable at home and misunderstood abroad. Rather than directly portraying the violent repression of the Tiananmen Incident, I engage this issue through a crucial turning point that it brought about—the rapid market reform that took place after Deng's southern tour in 1992. I deal with revolutionary legacies, a subject that looms large both in Huang's directorial debut, *The Black Cannon Incident*, and in his later production, *The Founding of a Republic*. To be more specific, *The Black Cannon Incident* treated revolutionary legacies as entrenched pathology that plagues economic reform—a pessimistic, dystopian vision most pronounced on the eve of Tiananmen Incident. Twenty years later, *The Founding of a Republic* revisits revolutionary legacies as a storehouse of values, aspirations, and policies that are malleable in the formulation of present. Although Huang Jianxin is lesser-known than Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, a close examination of Huang's oeuvre may best illuminate China's development from the 1980s to the present.

Chapter 4 offers a comparative study of World War II historical memory in Japan through a close reading of Nagisa Oshima's *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*. Among Oshima's forays into international co-production, *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* marks his first and only

return to the war subject he once addressed in *The Catch*. Its textual and extra-textual manipulations also mark Oshima's most self-conscious entrance to an international artistic identity. For Japan, the question of how to treat the legacy of World War II—whether to deplore it, sanitize it, or even ignore it—has aroused passions revolving around ethics, nationality, and historical identity. I will discuss the validity and limitations of Oshima's strategy to reinvent war subjects from a more global perspective.

My thesis aims to call attention to the dialectical relationship between the present and the past, meanwhile enriching our understanding of the dynamism and complexity at play within the works of generational filmmakers during a given period. There has been a proliferation of work that views post-millennial Fifth Generation filmmaking as either commercial or politically submissive. I, however, do not accept such conclusions. It could be argued that the three films I use as case studies present a limited sample of the Fifth Generation's oeuvre, leaving out common subjects and categories such as rural landscapes, traditional culture, ethnic spectacles, grand historical epics, and martial art thrillers—in brief, convenient labels that make the Fifth Generation more recognizable. However, by examining differences among a limited sample, I hope to challenge the sweeping generalizations that gloss over the internal contradictions and heterogeneity within a generation of filmmakers and its representative directors. On the other hand, by highlighting the historical representations and innovative strategies present in these films, I argue for their continued significance—a significance which changes and grows with time as the filmmakers begin to see the subject matters historically and theoretically in new ways. In spite of a sea change in Chinese society over the past three decades, continuities are also observed from political, financial, social, and cultural perspectives. This hybridization and ambivalence urges us to open up the recovery of historical experience and to explore what they entailed in the past and continue to entail in present.

Chapter 1 Amnesia and Reminiscence: The Recollection of the Cultural Revolution in *Coming Home*

In China, literary and visual productions of the Cultural Revolution have always been preoccupied with historical narratives. Since the late 1970s, soon after the end of the Cultural Revolution, there has been a series of efforts to evoke the traumatic experience during the Cultural Revolution with tears, reflection, warmth, and even obsession. For the Fifth Generation, their somber historical consciousness, whether in their earlier or “post-” phase of filmmaking, also derived from the extraordinary upheavals they lived through during the Cultural Revolution. This would be never more evident than in the 1990s, which saw a golden age of the Fifth Generation and a string of their films—*To Live*, *Farewell My Concubine*, and *The Blue Kite*—shown around the same time at international festivals to phenomenal success. Dealing with the political turmoil that prevailed throughout the mid-twentieth century, these films are a quintessential example of an intellectual attempt to pursue historical narratives in post-1989 China. At a time when Chinese history and culture remained unfathomable to all but sinologists, it was also these accounts of modern Chinese history that drew general audiences to learn about the country and enrich the Western imagination of China.

As the most prolific and controversial Fifth Generation director, Zhang Yimou has provided various explorations of modern Chinese history, culminating in exposing the trauma of the Cultural Revolution in *To Live*. However, his latest work, *Coming Home*, is about a crisis of remembering the Cultural Revolution, in both the actual and metaphorical sense. It suggests Zhang’s artistic renewal, with little reference either to his early career, which launched Chinese cinema onto the world stage, or to his later filmmaking, which triggered China’s reclaiming of the domestic market by homegrown blockbusters. What could account for this shift of aesthetics and ideology marked by *Coming Home*? What would such a textual transformation

tell us both of Zhang's artistic practice and its social relevance? By examining the film's significant differences from both Yan Geling's original novel and Zhang's award-winner *To Live*, the first objective of this chapter is to undo the historical and cultural amnesia regarding China's Maoist past caused by the nation's sprint towards marketization. I will then further discuss how *Coming Home* signals a renewed intellectual pursuit of reconstructing historical trauma. It will reveal how historical trauma, which plays a central role in modern Chinese historiography, must now seek its new position in the new millennium. The last section of this chapter will situate *Coming Home* within Zhang's cinematic trajectory, unveiling Zhang's vacillation between two sometimes-conflicting projects since the late 1990s. In the light of Fredric Jameson's theory of the nostalgia film, I suggest Zhang's surging interest of making films about Maoist China indeed coincides with widespread postsocialist nostalgia for the "good old days" of socialism.

1. The Cultural Revolution in Historical Amnesia

Some Chinese scholars' criticisms of *Coming Home* focus on Zhang's return to one of his favorite historical narratives and to his artistic roots. Yin Hong, a professor at Tsinghua University, observes, "In this film, Zhang Yimou doesn't use magnificent scenery to impress audiences, rather he tries to evoke their emotions in an aesthetic way" (qtd. in Liu and Wang). However, some critics in Hong Kong and Taiwan have found fault with the love story's failure to provide anything resembling a historically accurate portrayal of the devastation wreaked by the Cultural Revolution (Chou). Loosely based on the last 30 pages of America-based Chinese writer Yan Geling's novel *The Criminal Lu Yanshi*, *Coming Home* tells how a former professor, Lu Yanshi (Chen Daoming) tries to meet his wife Feng Wanyu (Gong Li) after running away from the labor camp he was sent to as a "counter-revolutionary" in the early 1970s. His daughter Dandan (Zhang Huiwen), a teenager who was only a toddler when her father was

sent away, worries that her father's transgression will ruin her dance career. She reports her father's whereabouts to the revolution committee, and Lu's attempt to meet his wife consequently ends with him being arrested. Three years later, at the end of Mao's reign, Lu is rehabilitated and is finally allowed to return home, but his wife has developed amnesia and no longer remembers him. She knows that she has a husband who is in prison, but she does not recognize Lu Yanshi as that husband.

The divergent commentaries on the film largely stem from the way in which Zhang adapts Yan Geling's novel. Yan's original novel follows an intellectual's erratic life from the 1930s to the 1980s, paying special attention to Lu Yanshi's hardships in the labor camp during the Anti-Rightist Movement and Cultural Revolution. In contrast, Zhang cuts the first sections of the novel dealing with the reality of the labour camp, focusing narrowly on how Lu re-establishes intimacy with his wife in order to restore her memories, aided by his daughter Dandan. He pretends to be a kind neighbour coming to read her husband's letters, or a piano tuner coming to play their favorite song for her. Zhang is therefore criticized for softening the terrors of the Cultural Revolution by turning the original novel into a "twilight romance" version of *50 First Dates* (dir. Peter Segal, 2004).

Such treatment of the Cultural Revolution also marks a decisive departure from Zhang Yimou's first direct engagement with the same subject in *To Live*—also a literary adaptation, the film is based on Yu Hua's novel of the same name. In this historical epic, which won him the Jury's Grand Prix (second to the highest Palme d'Or) at the 1994 Cannes Film Festival, Zhang chronicles socialist history through the everyday life of a family. The protagonist Fugui's lifetime odyssey is shaped by political revolution, from his fighting in the Civil War (1945-49) to the challenges and changes he faces under the recurrent political campaigns

following the establishment of PRC, climaxing with the hardships and confusion of the Cultural Revolution. Two decades later, Zhang and his iconic muse Gong Li are back at Cannes again with the film *Coming Home*; however, this film does not try to pick over old wounds. Zhang states that what most intrigues him about the novel is the reunion of a family in the aftermath of political turmoil:

Coming Home and *To Live* are comparably set against a backdrop of momentous events in Chinese modern history. While confronting people's sufferings and survivals during a specific era directly in *To Live*, I wanted to explore another possibility in *Coming Home*, hiding the political issues and telling the story in a modest and restrained tone. I did it intentionally, because I don't want to produce another *To Live*. (Zhang XY)

Of course, it is unfair to discredit *Coming Home* for not depicting socialist history in the manner of *To Live*. But since literary adaption is a staple for Zhang's filmmaking, contrasting Zhang's rather significant modifications of the two film's original novels does present us with some of Zhang's apparent ideological transformation, highlighting the question of Zhang's intentional engagement with or detachment from politics. As Qin Liyan points out, there are three intertwined perspectives in Zhang Yimou's film adaptations: the cultural reflection he adds, the patriarchs and youthful lovers he denotes, and the communist history he attempts to engage or ignore (165). In *To Live*, Zhang makes efforts to engage with political elements, foregrounding the political backdrop of the story and portraying the protagonists' daily lives as more exposed to political campaigns and struggles. In doing so, Zhang implicitly links the catastrophes endured by the characters to the political movement during the Mao era. For example, Fugui's son is killed in an accident after succumbing to the exhaustion of participating in Mao's frenzied steel-making campaign during the Great Leap Forward; his daughter later dies during a difficult childbirth in a hospital where the doctors have been replaced with untrained Red

Guards. These are both Zhang's innovations—neither exist in Yu Hua's novel. *Coming Home*, by contrast, intentionally dilutes the pain inflicted upon a family by Mao's reckless campaign. For example, Feng Wanyu's sexual assault by the Party official Fang Shifu, which is explicit in Yan Geling's novel, is blurred in the film. The viewers can only guess at Feng's devastation from her panicked voice when she misrecognizes Lu as Fang Shifu, and from Dandan's fuzzy childhood memories of her mother's humiliation.

Considering that *To Live* was subject to heavy censorship—the film was banned in Mainland China, and Zhang Yimou was banned from making films for two years. Some critics see the obscuring of Feng's violation by a Party official in *Coming Home* as a compromise with China's censorship authorities—especially since Zhang Yimou enjoys official commissions shared by very few peers. “Zhang's sidestepping of sensitive topics seems consistent with the important commissions that he has received from the Chinese government, most notably the huge-scale opening and closing ceremonies of the 2008 Olympics in Beijing” (Chou). While literary and cultural productions in China must play in tune with government surveillance and monitoring, and while every Chinese filmmaker has developed certain strategies to cope with censorship, the statement that attributes Zhang's depoliticized strategy to political correctness is, to some extent, an oversimplification. With Chinese society becoming more and more decentralized, many films with sensitive subjects—with works referencing the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests excluded—manage to bypass censors. Despite the fact that Chinese artistic works presented on the world stage are more emphatically political and have national allegorical themes, Chinese artists have now in effect detached from political and ideological constraints and have become increasingly individualistic in their expression.

To borrow Ackbar Abbas's description of Hong Kong's culture on the eve of its handover to

China, the recollection of the Cultural Revolution in *Coming Home* “is posited on the imminence of its disappearance” (7). In other words, Zhang symbolizes the presence of the Cultural Revolution in the midst of its remarkable absence. Wanyu’s amnesia, though centered on her personal memory loss, is surely a reference to China’s broader amnesia about the past. China’s relentless push towards marketization, globalization, and urbanization, alongside the gradual dominance of digitalization, have fundamentally transformed society and everyday life. A sense of millennial disruption renders China’s socialist history increasingly irrelevant to younger generations. Many moviegoers in China today were born in the 1980s and the 1990s, so they have little memory or understanding of the Cultural Revolution. In this sense, the concept of “postmemory,” a term used by Marianne Hirsch in reference to the relationship of the generations that followed the Holocaust survivors, may be applied to the memory and amnesia that *Coming Home* portrays. As Hirsch explains, postmemory “describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (106). In the context of postmemory, narratives of the Cultural Revolution are not so much those of violence and oppression under a Maoist regime that stands to be accused, condemned and reckoned with; rather, the focus is on how to keep the memory alive within a generation that has no direct experience with these historical events. While the young viewers may find Zhang’s classical style and period backdrop too unfamiliar to engage with, the plot, rich in universal details of family life and romantic drama, touched an emotional chord with audiences. Zhang’s clever hand once again opened the floodgates for domestic audiences, grossing nearly RMB 295 million (USD 49.7 million)—an unprecedented record for an art house film in China.

“There is certainly a feeling that we are struggling to remember our past.” said Zhang Yimou

at a 2014 interview, after *Coming Home* was released at Toronto International Film Festival. “I believe that movies are the most potent, powerful form of art; I have this sense of responsibility to use my movies to influence other people’s lives, especially young people in today’s China, to let them know more about history” (Koepke). Although amnesia is one of the most clichéd devices in filmmaking, it still resonates with audiences, because memory signifies so much—history, identity, and what remains when time takes everything away. In *Coming Home*, the images of the past in Wanyu’s memory are often blurry, out of focus, fragmented, and hard to read. The obscurity actually reflects an uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture of time. The film is not really about the past itself, but rather about the present’s relationship with the past (*Coming Home Review I*). The past is close by, haunting the present, but remaining simultaneously elusive and imponderable.

2. Modernity and Trauma

Undoubtedly, *Coming Home* is consistent with an enduring effort to pursue literary and cinematic narrative of traumatic experiences of the past—or, more precisely, an intellectual reconstruction of the national memory in the relics of trauma. This effort recalls movements from the late 1970s, when hundreds of stories, poems and plays termed “scar literature” (*shanghen wenxue*) emerged soon after the end of the Cultural Revolution. This highly emotional genre consisted mainly of stories and individual accounts of the sufferings, persecutions, and denunciations people experienced during the heyday of Maoist China. It offered a temporary anxiety-ridden outlet for educated youths, marginalized Party cadres, and intellectuals to examine the political oppression that had been inflicted upon them. Popular films made by the Fourth Generation director Xie Jin, such as *Legend of the Tianyun Mountain* (*Tianyunshan chuanqi*, 1980), and *Hibiscus Town* (*Furongzhen*, 1987), both of which centre around themes of rewarding good and punishing evil, are associated with this narrative trend.

In heralding the new era of reform, these cultural productions invested historical trauma with moral sensibility and a judicial power, through which the legitimacy of the CCP could be re-established for the unfolded future.

Struggling to kick off the filmic innovation that would come to define Chinese New Wave cinema in the 1980s, the Fifth Generation were eager to rebel against the simplistic dichotomy of victim and victimizer typified by the scar literature and the Xie Jin model popular at the time. However, even when they do not deploy the Cultural Revolution as subject matter in their early works, the traumatic educated youth experience can clearly be seen in works such as Chen Kaige's *King of the Children* (*Haizi wang*, 1987). The 1990s witnessed the golden age of the Fifth Generation, with a string of films—Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine*, Zhang Yimou's *To Live*, Tian Zhuangzhuang's *The Blue Kite*—showing at international festivals and enjoying unprecedented success and critical acclaim. The traumatic experience of Mao's era, which filmmakers still dared approach only obliquely in the 1980s, became the compelling force in all three of these films.

To complicate the picture further, this narrative of Chinese modern history embodies the relationship between modernity and trauma, recognizing the Chinese twentieth century as a series of catastrophic failures rooted in the false progression towards modernization. In her analysis of Zhang Yimou's *To Live*, Wendy Larson interprets the film based on a more general field of a century-long trauma that characterizes many locales, societies, and cultures. Europe's Age of Enlightenment in the eighteenth century spread ideals of humanity's future, but the twentieth century showed these promises to be empty. The two most destructive world wars were waged under Enlightenment banners, and the strongest nations never stopped adding to their coffers by unfairly extracting resources from weaker nations. According to Larson,

“socialism and its Chinese version, Maoism, are here but extensions of Enlightenment philosophy, and have contributed to a century of suffering” (169). To frame *To Live* in this interpretative paradigm, the protagonist’s extraordinary endurance of misfortune becomes a main clue throughout the film. On one hand, it gives a full expression of existential philosophy of Chinese people, with sympathy or with appreciation—to live is good, even in inhuman conditions. On the other hand, it critiques the Maoist path called “socialist modernization,” which imposed revolution and class struggle only to bring tragic consequences upon the Chinese people.

Over a century, numerous scholarly investigations have been conducted on trauma studies. In psychoanalytical studies, Sigmund Freud points to its inherent nature of human psyche, which constitutes a paradox of the unconscious repression of traumatic memory coupled with the compulsion to repeat it over and over again. Regarding images of the genocide of European Jewry, Susan Sontag points out how Western culture is infused with “the pain of others”⁸ represented in mass media. They were constructed around a melodramatic conflict between innocence and evil, which was embodied in the dichotomized characters of victim and persecutor. According to the core story principle, the main character eventually overcomes victimization and undergoes a metamorphosis from the pariah figure of weak and helpless victim to that of heroic survivor. As part of this transformation process, the victim-survivor dynamic generates a witness testimony of the past traumatic experience. In the case of trauma and its representation in China, much of the literature and visual culture in the 1980s and the 1990s, despite variations in tone and content, generally supports the theories of Freud and Sontag. Noting that the Cultural Revolution has a significant role to play in Chinese filmic

⁸ *Regarding the Pain of Others* is a 2003 book-length essay by Susan Sontag. It reviews the wealth of photographs documenting military conflicts around the world since the mid-19th century, highlighting the relationships between photography and ideology, censorship, and the authorities.

narratives, Wang Ban points out that these narratives imply people and audiences must reckon with their own trauma-ridden history:

The repeated cinematic enactment of the Cultural Revolution implies a compulsion to return to the scene of injury and loss, to dwell on and re-experience the wounds. ... I invoke the notion of trauma not only to designate a psychic order, but a social and cultural situation and a collective pathology. ... It is not so much the original moment as it is the structure of its experience or reception, at a later time, of the traumatic event that is crucial to an analysis of its pathological manifestations in cultural and symbolic expression. (146-47)

Moving beyond the millennium and with it the end of the twentieth century, historical trauma now must seek its new dwelling in the postmemory environment. *Coming Home* may illustrate not only a historical reconstruction amid a general memory on the wane due to the passage of time, but also a new ideological position when looking back to socialist history and its trauma. As the film's melancholic ending indicates, after years of failed attempts to revive his wife's lost memory of him, Lu Yanshi accepts the role of a friendly neighbour, which allows him to remain near to her. It is only their daughter Dandan who really comes home, after earning her parents' forgiveness and coming to terms with the betrayal she committed that destroyed the whole family. As Zhang Yimou suggests, it is forgiveness that serves as the film's central motif, rather than the experience and memory of trauma:

When looking back on the sufferings of the Cultural Revolution, we would rather choose to forgive, because there were too many family betrayals and persecutions that were taken to extremes. I suppose we were just driven by the era, incapable of mastering our own destiny. Actually, it represents the majority's attitude towards the Cultural Revolution nowadays—try to forgive and understand. (“*Guilai*” *zhuchuang jiedu*

Zhang Yimou gaibian)

Zhang's inclination to forgive comes to the surface in the scene where Lu learns about his wife's humiliation by Fang Shifu. He is hellbent on revenge, but when he finds out that Fang Shifu has been apprehended for what he did in the Cultural Revolution, his anger evaporates; he leaves without telling Fang Shifu's wife who he is, but Fang's desperate wife keeps yelling, "When will Fang be released? He is a good man!" Just as Dandan's story suggests that selfishness is a perfectly normal reaction to a ruthless system, with Fang Shifu's story, Zhang once again suggests how the system can make a supposedly good man into an agent of its system's cruelty. With regard to what happened in the Cultural Revolution, there was no dichotomy of good and evil. Nearly everyone was implicated and involved in the scapegoating and victimization (Wang RJ). As it recalls the painful past, *Coming Home* is striking in that it does not treat trauma as something that is subject to endless comeback, and does not make hasty attempts to soothe the wound. Rather, it offers way of healing the trauma—not by rewarding the good and punishing the evil, but by exemplifying the redemptive power of forgiveness that allows people to get on with life.

For the Fifth Generation directors, most of whom were educated youths or Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution, being a victim or a persecuter was an unforgettable experience. To cite the most famous examples, in his 2001 memoir *Young Kaige (Shaonian Kaige)*, Chen Kaige shows his deepest guilt for denouncing his father Chen Huai'ai, who was also a celebrated filmmaker, when the Cultural Revolution broke out. Zhang Yimou was rejected twice by Beijing Film Academy for being an offspring of "counter-revolutionaries". Now, Zhang handles the historical trauma elegantly, dabbing on salve and comforting the afflicted. Perhaps recovering from trauma and forgetting about it amount to the same thing. Zhang's new film is

about a crisis of remembering the Cultural Revolution, in both the actual and metaphorical sense. It presents the Fifth Generation's attempt to reconcile, not with the censors or the authorities, but with the traumatizing past itself.

3. Chosen Memory, Chosen Nostalgia

Produced by the most prolific and controversial Fifth Generation director, *Coming Home* also demands an interpretation in terms of Zhang's cinematic trajectory, which has often matched the extraordinary upheavals the Fifth Generation directors have lived through. According to Gilles Deleuze, the various European cinemas became "modern" at different times, but always at the moment when they had to come up with new cinematic images in response to new historical situations, "The timing is something like: around 1948, Italy; about 1958, France; about 1968, Germany" (211). We might now arguably add "about 1992, China"—the year of Deng Xiaoping's inspection tour of southern China following the violent repression of the 1989 Tiananmen protests. The tour also marked the beginning of the market-oriented reform that set China on the path to its economic miracle (albeit at the cost of growing pains such as lopsided development and mass layoffs).

This market-oriented reform came as a mixed blessing for the film industry, in keeping with the Fifth Generation's aligning their career with a movement that moved away from cultural elitism toward a kind of cultural populism. As Zhu Ying remarks, the Fifth Generation's transition is a story of China's cinematic modernization, from modernizing film texts to modernizing the film industry itself (145). In the face of the reconstruction of the film industry and competition from imported films like Hollywood blockbusters, the Fifth Generation directors tried to demonstrate their considerable talent, but found they had to interact with the opportunities and limitations posed by marketization and commercialization. Zhu Ying further

points out:

[The] “economic restructuring of the Chinese film industry” did not become the catchphrase in film discourse until the early- to mid-1990s, when Chinese cinema encountered a challenge from Hollywood’s big blockbusters. Discussions on the economy of Chinese cinema went hand in hand with the reform measures in 1993, which targeted overhauling the infrastructure of Chinese cinema. (96)

What distinguishes Zhang Yimou from his peers is his prompt response to the “economic restructuring of the Chinese film industry,” facilitated by his longtime partnership with Zhang Weiping, a tycoon who had succeeded in the food industry and then followed Zhang Yimou into the film industry. From the 1997 urban movie *Keep Cool* (*Youhua haohao shuo*) to the 2011 wartime melodrama *The Flowers of War* (*Jinling shisan chai*), after which their relationship ended, Zhang Yimou and Zhang Weiping created an unprecedented box-office record. *Hero*, which took a global box office return of RMB 1.4 billion (USD 177.4 million) and ranks as one of China’s highest-grossing films ever, triggered China’s era of big budgets, all-star casting, and high-tech film production, ultimately winning the domestic market back from Hollywood competitors. During the following years, Zhang made a series of historical martial arts films with dazzling colors and scenes, including *House of Flying Daggers* (*Shimianmaifu*, 2004), *Curse of the Golden Flower* (*Mancheng jindai huangjinjia*, 2006) and *A Simple Noodle Story* (*Sanqiang pai’anjingqi*, 2009). Three years after *Hero*, *The Promise* expressed Chen Kaige’s ambition to engage in large-scale film production in the same manner as Zhang. Both, however, received mixed reviews from the critics and audiences. Ridiculous plots and extravagant CGI effects undermined the international fame the Fifth Generation directors had enjoyed in the preceding decade.

As the Fifth Generation filmmakers become more engaged in commercially viable blockbusters, a production like *Coming Home* is a rare work containing dual meanings behind its title. It refers on one hand to a former art-house auteur's eagerness to return to his early days of filmmaking, and it also speaks to a generational psyche to return to "the age of innocence" on the other. The pain and suffering of Lu Yanshi and Feng Wanyu is undoubtedly a family tragedy, as they can never live together again—in both real life and in their shared memories. However, these negative situations are transformed by Zhang Yimou into an opportunity for Lu Yanshi to regain Feng Wanyu's love for him. The accidental and exceptional condition of the love story between Lu and Feng coincidentally offers a rare site for the audience, living in a materialistic and pragmatic society, to relive the lost naïve and simplicity of the past. Indeed, before *Coming Home*, *The Road Home* (*Wo de fuqin muqin*, 1999), *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles* (*Qianli zou danji*, 2005), and *Love under the Hawthorn Tree* (*Shanzhashu zhi lian*, 2010) have revealed Zhang's obsession with collective memory of socialist history. Except for *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles*, all of these movies are set in rural villages in socialist China, again in line with Zhang's favorite theme: a love story in a chaotic period, marked with twists and turns. Even *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles* is a reminiscence of the collective past. Depicting a father-son relationship, the film was produced especially for the Japanese star Ken Takakura, one of the first foreign actors to come to prominence in China after Japanese movies were allowed into the country again following the end of the Cultural Revolution.

The recurring theme of socialist history in Zhang's film trajectory may best exemplify the widespread postsocialist nostalgia in an increasingly commercialized and materialized society. In his landmark article *Postmodernism and Consumer Society* (1983), Fredric Jameson offered two concepts that link postmodernism to late capitalism: pastiche and schizophrenia. A

prominent example of the pastiche is the “nostalgia film”—films that engage with the past and certain generational moments from the past, but which are considered distinct from older historical novels and films. In a discussion of subjects ranging from *American Graffiti* (dir. George Lucas, 1973) to *Chinatown* (dir. Roman Polanski, 1974), Jameson teases out the implications of the nostalgia film for American mass culture:

It seems to me exceedingly symptomatic to find the very style of nostalgia films invading and colonizing even those movies today which have contemporary settings: as though for some reason, we were unable today to focus our own present, as though we have become incapable of achieving aesthetic representations of our own current experience. But if that is so, then it is a terrible indictment of consumer capitalism itself – or at the very least, an alarming and pathological symptom of a society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history. (117)

In coincidence with Jameson’s observation, the reflection on socialist revolution in postsocialist China has also undergone a conversion from the denunciation of political persecution to bittersweet reminiscences. While most people in China agree that the Cultural Revolution was a catastrophe, revolutionary nostalgia has nonetheless been gaining influence. That nostalgia has grown beyond its usual supporters—laid-off elderly people who were adversely affected by market reforms—to include younger generations who had not yet been born when Mao was in power. Some scholars argue that the attraction mostly stems from dissatisfaction with today’s China, which many neo-Maoists describe as a state with a large wealth gap and economic pressure impacting everyday life. As David J. Davies points out, nostalgia for the Mao era happened at precisely the moment members of the educated youth generation were most vulnerable to lay-offs brought about by economic reform, “In the late 1990s, as economic reforms deepened and insecurity increased, for *zhiqing* who might have

felt that they had been left behind, the excesses of the Cultural Revolution made a critique of reform difficult” (117).

The burgeoning cinematic and televisual works of the socialist revolution thus take the place of scar literature and became a new genre. For example, Jiang Wen’s first foray into directing, *In the Heat of the Sun* (*Yangguang canlan de rizi*, 1994), is a revisionist picture of a group of army kids without explicit mention of any political event during the Cultural Revolution (Zhang YJ 284). Not only did it gain international popularity, the film also broke China’s box-office record instantly and won a deep, nostalgic sigh from its Chinese audience. There was also a boom in nostalgic TV serials such as *Crimson Romance* (*Xuese langman*, 2003) and *A Peaceful Sunny Day* (*Fengherili*, 2012), which sentimentalize the Cultural Revolution as a time filled with love stories and the simple dramas of everyday life. In relation to building China’s revolutionary shared recollections, this repackaging of the Mao era “unrealizes” identity and history. Cases in point are *In the Heat of the Sun* and Zhang Yimou’s *The Road Home*, which reverse cinematographic conventions by filming the past in color and the present in black and white. The contrast may imply nostalgia for a better, more vivid past, but it could also suggest the unreliability and reconstruction of memory (Li 248).

Jameson also points out another characteristic of the nostalgia film—that of seeking “the historical past through our own pop images and stereotypes about that past” (118). Such a device appears again in *Coming Home* when Lu Yanshi’s daughter, who was a biologist in the original novel, is replaced in the film by the ballerina Dandan, who denounces her father in exchange for the chance to perform the lead role in *The Red Detachment of Women* (*Hongse niangzijun*). As one of the Eight Model Operas (*yangban xi*) which dominated the national stage during the Cultural Revolution, episodes of *The Red Detachment of Women* are performed

three times in the film. In the opening scene, a troupe of muscular dancers leaps with wooden rifles as props, clearly setting the time and mood of the film. The third time possesses more significance, after Dandan has lost her chance in the dance academy because of her father's escape and becomes a worker in a textile factory. She dances again in one of Lu Yanshi's numerous ploys to penetrate Feng's amnesia (fig. 1-1).



Fig. 1-1. *Coming Home* (2014). Dandan performs *The Red Detachment of Women* in order to penetrate her mother's memory loss.

This is a heartbreaking scene of a family reunited—a family that has been broken by the Party, watching one of the Party's favorite propagandistic works. The mother does not know that her daughter cannot be a ballerina anymore, and she does not recognize her husband by her side. But it is also the most cinematically beautiful moment, showcasing Zhang's extraordinary sense of color and cinematography. The family's modest apartment is shot in muted, cozy gray tones; Dandan's ballet performance is more vibrantly colorful, though it suggests another failed effort to rekindle her mother's memory. The bright red costume and detailed depiction of the

turns, whirls, and poses performed by a gorgeous girl reflect this opera's vivid persistence in a generation's memory, despite its political overtones and the historical background from which it was created.

The nostalgia film paralleling Zhang's blockbuster production reveals a society changing so fast that various currents of hybridization and ambivalence overlap. Zhang's ambivalence needs to be understood against the acceleration and shocks of China's reform era, which, for all its excitement and miraculous economic gains, also brought new trauma and loss. Notwithstanding the clichéd ideological manipulation and self-Orientalism of their early years, the Fifth Generation directors are now searching for industrial and textual solutions in a context "where the social hierarchy of elite versus popular is subverted, the power structure of global versus local is reversed, and pent-up emotions are released safely so as to prevent a narcissistic regression into schizophrenia or hysteria" (Zhang YJ 22). The collective past which the former educated youths or Red Guards have experienced seems an effective retreat, yet at the same time a grand march among the postmodern and urban movies. Starting from the late 1970s, literary and visual productions provided intellectuals' retrospections of the nation's historical trauma and expectations that the reform would bring a better future. However, with the progressive deepening of the reforms over the past three decades and China's storming of the world market, the nostalgic past offers a psychological and social release—especially for those who have been otherwise marginalized in postsocialist China. Even Zhang Yimou, who has seldom had to worry about box-office receipts, can perhaps be counted among the marginalized—both a survivor and a winner of great social vicissitudes, vacillating between two sometimes conflicting aims.

Conclusion

Zhang Yimou's effort to make time stand still is much like what is depicted in the German film, *Good Bye, Lenin!* (dir. Wolfgang Becker, 2003). The film unfolds in the year following the collapse of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, as a young man attempts to reconstruct the German Democratic Republic in his family's apartment so he can protect his ailing mother from the fatal shock of epochal change. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent unification between East and West Germany "have had a paradoxical effect on Germans, instilling [...] a euphoric sense of pride but also triggering a deep crisis about precisely what it is that one ought to be proud of" (Gemünden 195). These polarized sentiments also imprint present-day China, a country that has been reborn, only to discover rebirth is not as simple a cause for celebration as what was previously believed. Using *Coming Home* as a case study, this chapter examines Zhang Yimou's recalling and engaging the memory of the Maoist regime in ways that serve to highlight the vast social and cultural changes inherent in our times. The paradox of *Coming Home* lies in the duality of socialist image as the bearer of both memory and amnesia, both traumatic witness and nostalgic reminiscence. It creates a problem which becomes prominent at the crossroad of a residual past and a new sociopolitical favor. There is terrible historical pain, but the main interest of the film is in how the protagonists respond to it, and what their response says about China's understanding of its recent history. By analyzing the layers of the film's reconstructing of China's national trauma, we can argue that this question is not so much the recollection of a bygone era, but the unsettled imagination of the future.

Chapter 2 Memory in Simulacra: The Restoration of Tradition in *Together*

In 2002, a film project was conceived as a rumination on the passage of time at the beginning of a new millennium. A group of the world leading directors, including Jean-Luc Godard, Bernardo Bertolucci, Jim Jarmusch, and Spike Lee, were given the same assignment: make a 10-minute film dealing with the theme of time in their own unique way. Their individual works were then combined together in two compilation films: *Ten Minutes Older: The Cello* and *Ten Minutes Older: The Trumpet*.

When Chen Kaige was invited to join this vast film project, he had not filmed a story set in Beijing since the release ten years earlier of his Palme d'Or winner, *Farewell My Concubine*. Thus, Chen chose to express his own vision of time through the fundamental changes that had taken place in his native city. Titled *100 Flowers Hidden Deep* (*Baihua shen chu*), the name of an ancient Beijing residential alley (*hutong*), this ten-minute film follows a man who hires some movers to relocate his belongings from his old house. As the movers drive through the city's modern high-rises and then through the partially-demolished alley to the man's traditional courtyard house (*siheyuan*), the destination is revealed to be rubble field of razed flats. Automatically presumed crazy by the movers, the man maintains that the house is there and insists that they must move his invisible "furniture" for him.

I choose to begin this chapter with the scene from *100 Flowers Hidden Deep* because it touches on a structure of feeling that distinctly marks Chen Kaige's oeuvre—that is, the clash of old and new temporalities, usually embodied by a figure who cannot cope with the rapid changes. As I mentioned in last chapter, *To Live*, *The Blue Kite*, and *Farewell* marked the Fifth Generation's pursuit of historical narratives in the 1990s. However, while reviewers can be quick to appreciate their historical and political representations, *Farewell* is differentiated by

its strong attachment to Chinese tradition, not only through the prominent role it gives to Peking Opera, but also through its attempt to shed light on the contrast of old and new societies. Numerous scenes show old arts, old institutions, and old values crumbling throughout the political upheavals. Cheng Dieyi, the Peking Opera star of the film, insists stubbornly on his artistic criteria; even contemporary China under the leadership of the Communist Party has proven to be greatly hostile to traditional opera. *Farewell* reminds us how socialist China caused the widespread attack on cultural heritage, highlighting not only the demolition of physical artifacts, but, more profoundly, the symbolic and psychological deconstruction of the past.

The clash of old and new temporalities is made more explicit in Chen Kaige's *Together*, a story of contemporary China set in Beijing. After the mixed success of his costume epic *The Emperor and the Assassin* (*Jingke ci qinwang*, 1999) and his sole foray into Hollywood, *Killing Me Softly* (2002), which was a critical and box-office failure, Chen returned to China and the safe waters of this modest, populist project. But more than a glossy, old-fashioned heartwarmer of father and son relationship, the film is also an allegory for twenty-first century China—a country, as Chen indicates, torn between tradition and modernity. Throughout the film, Chen demonstrates his longing for the past and dismissal of the present through three main themes, which I will elaborate in the next three sections of this chapter. The first is the reconciliation of patriarch. In *Together*, the Chinese father is rewritten as the ideal of love and sacrifice—a much-needed figure amid the rampant, mindless commercialization of today's China. Second is the landscape of old Beijing, the classic alleys and courtyards, which are juxtaposed against the desire and danger of ultramodern Beijing as an enclave of peace and tranquility. Third is the wholesomeness of traditional values reaffirms as a panacea that compensates for the social and cultural malaise taking place in present-day China. Although the film proclaims the

overwhelming triumph of the past, my aim is to disclose the director's dislocation in China's fundamentally altered social and cultural landscapes—a dislocation he shares with the figures he depicts in his films.

1. Father's Role as Patriarch

Together is a departure from the well-known historic epics Chen produced in the 1990s, most notably *Farewell My Concubine* and *The Emperor and the Assassin*. Instead of grand narratives of bygone eras, with *Together*, Chen tackles the subject of contemporary life with a more lighthearted narrative about the life and relationships of a teenage violin prodigy. Liu Cheng, the youth's disadvantaged single father, takes his son to Beijing to seek opportunities for the boy to develop his talent. Moving from a provincial town to the urban metropolis, Xiaochun, the shy, thirteen-year-old boy, thrills at the new experiences he had previously been missing. He takes violin lessons first with the eccentric tutor Professor Jiang and later with the star-making professor Yu Shifeng, played by Chen Kaige himself. Along the way, he is distracted by his pretty neighbour Lili, a materialistic girl who becomes both a fantasy figure and a surrogate mother to the boy.

Interestingly, Chen's departure from his previous format serves to highlight his continued fascination with the father-son relationship—a primary focus of the Fifth Generation filmmakers, both in the themes of their early works and in the early filmic innovations they made in order to rebel against their predecessors. The Cultural Revolution, during which most Fifth Generation filmmakers came of age, shattered the existing social order that dictated ties between sovereign and subject, parent and child, and husband and wife. As both victim of and participant in the Cultural Revolution, the Fifth Generation, as Dai Jinhua suggests, is like a fatherless son. The Cultural Revolution saw the Fifth Generation's "desperate spiritual

breakaway” from their fathers’ generation, achieved through acts of symbolic (and sometimes literal) “patricide”—carried out, paradoxically, in the name of “Father” Mao Zedong (Zhang YJ 60). In the post-Mao era, when an extensive movement of historical and cultural reflection spread to the whole country, the works of the Fifth Generation were also a patricidal complex, which is a political allegory for the filmmakers’ scathing attack on the Chinese mainstream culture, and specifically the party-state ideology and Confucian patriarchy. As Dai Jinhua points out, “The true motivation behind the cultural reflection unfolding in the Fifth Generation, and in all of 1980s Chinese culture, lies in revealing the deep structure of the tragedy of the Father-to- Son succession, as well as history’s circularity” (26).

The struggle between the father and son hierarchy is particularly illuminating in the case of Chen Kaige. As Chen revisits the early days of the Cultural Revolution in his 2001 memoir, *Young Kaige (Shaonian Kaige)*, his complex relationship with his father Chen Huai’ai, an established filmmaker whose influential works include *The Song of Youth (Qingchun zhi ge, 1959)*, is of major importance to his memory of the Cultural Revolution. Aged fourteen when the Cultural Revolution began, Chen was in a very uncomfortable position in a secondary school full of adolescent Red Guards. His father, who had joined the Nationalist KMT Party in 1939, became a heavy “family handicap” that made the boy begin to hate him. When his father was accused of being a KMT spy, Chen took part in publicly denouncing him, as everyone else did at that time. As an educated youth, Chen was later sent to rural Yunnan to work in the forests. During that time, his father was forced to clean bathrooms; he would not be restored to his former position in Beijing Film Studio until the end of the Cultural Revolution.

Partly because of his complex emotions toward his father and the role he had played in the mob persecution, Chen Kaige did not speak directly about his experiences during the Cultural

Revolution until the 1990s. In interviews conducted both before and after *Farewell*'s release, Chen drew attention to the theme of betrayal in the film, describing its autobiographic elements inspired by his betrayal of his father. Even without reference to his family history, the director's traumatic past can be inferred from the betrayal as recurrent pattern in the film. "Stage brothers" Cheng Dieyi and Duan Xiaolou turn against each other; Xiaolou repudiates his wife; Xiaosi'r, the adopted son of Dieyi, betrays his seniors and the traditional disciplines of Peking Opera. The chaotic relationships reveal the effects of the Communist Party's intervention, not only on the role of father, but also on the overall structure of society, thereby leaving society directionless and vulnerable to political enslavement. The removal of parental figures and their guidance leaves the son's generation, like Xiaosi'r, exposed to the turmoil of the world and at the mercy of their own unfettered instincts, with disastrous consequences. As Chen Kaige exposes all of his youthful transgressions, he confesses he was compelled by the fear being expelled from his peers, as well as a subtle "pleasure of violence":

With respect to my father's problem, I was selfish. My first and foremost concern was personal gain and loss. This fact seems so obvious now. But when my conscience was suppressed, I was blinded by so many brilliant-sounding reasons like, 'You can't choose your family, but you can choose your own path!' To be faithful to the revolution. I had to make a clean break to my 'counter-revolutionary' family ... (12)

When Chen Kaige returns to father-son narrative, it is more evident that *Together*'s protagonist is an *alter ego* for Chen's younger self and his transgressions during that time. Just as Chen came of age during the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, Xiaochun comes of age during the awkward transition from the countryside to the capital and ultimately to the international music stage; he is full of mixed feelings about a change that is as much spiritual as it is material. Chen sets up this tension by creating binary relations among three father figures. Liu Cheng, the

father who raised him, signifies both the backwardness of China's traditional rural culture and its nobility of spirit. In contrast, Professor Yu Shifeng, who later assumes a fatherly role, is a professional elite who can offer Xiaochun access to fame and fortune. Meanwhile, Xiaochun's two tutors, Professor Jiang and Professor Yu, demonstrate a similar binary—one tutor teaches Xiaochun to “play with heart” while the other teaches him to “play for success”. Much of the film revolves around Xiaochun's struggle to choose between the worlds of his rural father and urban mentors.

The abrupt change from rural to urban life also modifies the role of father, who is first made powerless over his son and is later physically removed from him. From the beginning, the film portrays a harmonious picture of the provincial town where Liu Cheng, Xiaochun, and all the other residents rely heavily on strong family bonds and traditional Confucian ethics. The rural social dynamic is established in scenes such as the one where Xiaochun gets a haircut at a street stall, then runs off without paying, assuring the barber that his father will pay for his haircut later. In the countryside, Xiaochun is childishly dependent on his father and incapable of dealing with even the smallest of transactions. However, after the family moves to Beijing, their roles are reversed; while Xiaochun adapts quickly to his new modern life, Liu Cheng struggles to adapt. Liu Cheng is as inept and dependent in the city as Xiaochun was in the countryside. A simple trip to the market turns disastrous when Liu Cheng loses all their money. At the same time, Xiaochun plays violin for Lili, earning a small amount of money to ease his father's financial burden. In one of the more explicit examples, Xiaochun gets some money from Professor Yu after he becomes one of the professor's live-in students. Now sporting an urban hairstyle and clothing, Xiaochun indicates Liu Cheng should buy himself some new clothes that would look more appropriate in the city. While Xiaochun thrives in the fast-paced urban world, his father lives his life as a social outcast.

Yet, in contrast to the family devastation that filial rebellion brought to the characters in *Farewell* and to Chen's own family, *Together* is intended to be a warm, passionate, and even old-fashioned film about fathers and sons. "Chinese people often ask, 'When will the muddy waters of the *Yellow Earth* finally clear?' I don't know neither. But my personal life genuinely feels as though the mist and clouds that have been enshrouding me for years have finally cleared." In a 2005 interview with Michael Berry, Chen explained why he made the very first happy ending in *Together* as compared to the somber mood and heavy quality of his early works. "After twenty-five years of development in China, something new is beginning to develop in the character and spirit of the Chinese people. I think that something is an emerging happiness" (Berry M 102). Xiaochun ultimately rejects the more sophisticated father figure and the ensuing chance to play in the international competition, and chases Liu Cheng to the train station where he is about to begin his homeward trek. This scene works with the only flashback shot revealing a long-buried family secret: Liu Cheng is not Xiaochun's biological father. When he was only a baby, Xiaochun's biological parents abandoned him at a train station, where Liu Cheng discovered him. As this montage sequence ends, Xiaochun finds his father in the train station. The son is symbolically adopted by his father again, reaffirming the father's role as patriarch (fig. 2-1, 2-2).

From the smothering patriarch in Chen Kaige's debut, *Yellow Earth*, to the Party's usurping of the paternal role in *Farewell*, and then on to the reaffirmation of father's patriarch in *Together*, the Fifth Generation's visual representations of the father figure bear witness to how much China has changed from the early days of reform to the twenty-first century. *Together* does not ignore the fact that a father from rural China sometimes behaves in buffoonish and ignorant



Fig. 2-1, 2-2. *Together* (2002). Two scenes are shown with montage sequence. Liu Cheng found baby Xiaochun, who was abandoned by his biological parents in the train station (2-1); the teenaged Xiaochun chases his father in the train station (2-2).

way—especially when Liu Cheng decides against his son’s wishes to replace Professor Jiang with Professor Yu, whom he believes can better advance his son’s success. However, under the protection of the good-natured patriarch, Liu Cheng’s blunders are ultimately offset by the extraordinary parental devotion he demonstrates in striving for the success of a son he in fact is not even biologically related to. No longer is the Chinese father dismissed as a backward

relic to be modernized, as was the case during the frenzied historical and cultural reflection of the 1980s; rather, in *Together*, the Chinese father represents the unconditional love, devotion, and self-sacrifice that is increasingly absent in twenty-first century urban China. In this sense, *Together* not only reconciles the director's own unresolved conflict with his father—it also rehabilitates the Chinese father figure by which the rebellious Fifth Generation filmmaker tries to come to terms with the patricide impulse.

2. City Memory in Ultramodern Beijing

Just like *Together*'s teenaged protagonist struggling to navigate the awkward space between old and new identities, Beijing is also in an awkward transition between past and future. It is worth mentioning that *Together* is Chen's first film to be set in Beijing since the release of *Farewell* 10 years earlier. The same year also saw the release of *Hundred Flowers Hidden Deep*, a 10-minute short piece for the international project, *Ten Minutes Older: The Trumpet*, as I detailed at the beginning of this chapter. This surging interest of stories about Beijing is not a coincidence. If it is possible for a city to express what can happen in ten short years, Beijing, motivated by China's 2001 accession to the WTO and anticipation leading up to the 2008 Olympics, sets an impressive example. Acutely aware of Beijing's ongoing transformation, Chen made his filmmaking into a historical record of his native city during its transitional stage at turn of the millennium.

Chen's concern with urban change can again be retraced in *Farewell*, which, as Yomi Braester points out, uses the urban setting to invoke local identity. In his study of the relationship between cities and their filmic representations, Yomi Braester cites *Farewell* as a salient example of the cinema's role in preserving the image and memory of the old city. Rather than depicting Beijing's famous landmarks and tourist sites, *Farewell* was shot mostly in the more

vernacular architecture of the residential alley and the courtyard house—the basic building block of Beijing’s residential architectural from the thirteenth century to the end of the twentieth. The courtyard house not only locates the opera school where Dieyi and Xiaolou grew up to become famous actors, it also offers an intimate theatrical space protecting the two protagonists from the political riots outside. In response to the criticism *Farewell* received for presenting “a patronizing national allegory,” Yomi Braester argues the film can also be viewed as the director’s tribute to his native city. Even though the film presents extravagant exotic and political spectacles, it retains an identity free from the State’s ideological manipulation through “a nostalgic reminiscence about Beijing before the social rapture of the Cultural Revolution and a cinematic monument to the courtyard house of old Beijing” (Braester 250).

The Cultural Revolution is undoubtedly the culmination of China’s attack on its cultural heritage, which is implicated in both the demolition of physical artifacts and, even more profoundly, the symbolic and psychological deconstruction of the past.⁹ Chen Kaige says that he can still recall how, after the denunciation of his father, he crept back home only to find his family’s house had been looted and their books burned by the frenzied revolutionary mob. “This method of search is not only to deprive the victim of part of his independent existence, but also to deprive him of his references and spiritual attachment points by the destruction of the past” (Chen 100). China has retreated from ultra-leftism, but its recent transformation, which illustrates the aggressive development of postsocialist China, still in some way cuts China off from its past as it looks toward the future. The approval of Beijing’s Master Plan for 1991-2010 accelerated new construction and emphasized “a modernized international city of the first rank”¹⁰; another construction surge was implemented in preparation for the 2008

⁹ The Cultural Revolution was looking for an enemy in the form of “Four Olds”: old culture, old customs, old ideas and old habits.

¹⁰ The Beijing City Master Plan of 1991-2010, ratified by the State Council in 1993 and fully published in 1996, specified that Beijing was to become an international city “open in all aspects,” ready for the Olympics and for the 55th anniversary of

Olympics, seeing Beijing populated with new sports facilities, extravagant architectural landmarks, and recreational spaces. On the one hand, many old dwellings must be demolished to make room for modern buildings as Beijing entered the global economy and absorbed a massive influx of migrant workers. On the other, the pride Beijing taken in its development is paralleled by the anxiety of vanishing local history, memory, and identity.

Together joins the cinematic interest to perverse images of the city in what Yomi Braester terms the “documentary impulse”—an impulse which cuts across genres and generations. For example, Ning Ying, the prominent female director among the Fifth Generation, documents urban changes taking place in Beijing in her trilogy *For Fun* (Zhaole, 1992), *On the Beat* (Minjing gushi, 1995), and *I Love Beijing* (Xiari nuanyangyang, 2000). The Sixth Generation director Jiang Zhangke’s documentary-realist films also capture the sense of an evolving city through their thematic and visual components. A sense of urban change can easily be found in films such as *Xiao Wu* (Xiaowu, 1997), *Still Life* (Sanxia haoren, 2006), and *24 City* (Ershisi cheng ji, 2008), which feature deconstruction in small towns as well as major cities like Chengdu. As such, Yomi Braester further argues *Farewell* marks a shift away from the rural landscapes typical of the Fifth Generation films and foreshadows the Sixth Generation filmmakers’ focus on urban settings as spaces of personal memory (255).

In *Together*, when the Liu family first arrives in Beijing, we can see how the city is portrayed as huge construction site, with no viable housing plans for those who cannot find a place in the new, booming economy. The words of Liu Cheng’s landlord that “it’s less difficult to find a girlfriend than to rent a house in Beijing nowadays,” clearly conveying the housing shortage

the People’s Republic (in 1999), and also declared that Beijing would become a “modernized international city of the first rank” in the period from 2010 to 2050. Thirty-three aspects of the framework of historical Beijing were listed as protected sites.

resulting from the massive influx of migrants. The traditional courtyard homes, many of which are decaying and falling apart, become ramshackle makeshift shelters for rural migrants like Liu, as well as urban citizens like Professor Jiang who are being left behind by the rapid change. Everyday life in the courtyard is presented through mundane and familiar scenes of family and neighbourhood relationships: Professor Jiang deftly lights a stove with a burning chunk of coal; the neighbours quarrel over where coal should be stored; a puddle accumulates at the entrance of the courtyard, and Professor Jiang and Xiaochun have to jump to get around it. It is this unusual mix of ancient aristocratic architecture populated with these ordinary, salt-of-the-earth locals that gives the courtyard its unique significance—this setting becomes “a special place where the past with its historical monuments combines with the everyday life of the inhabitants who often live in very modest conditions” (Krajewska 63).

Although present-day life in the courtyard is characterized by adversity and modest living conditions, *Together* employs cinematic techniques that beautify and idealize it. South Korean cinematographer Kim Hyljng-koo floods the mise-en-scene with warm light. The courtyard’s pitched, terracotta-tiled gray roofs are repeatedly fetishized through Lili’s view as she uses a telescope to overlook the city. The highly-stylized courtyard landscape is accompanied with a musical soundscape of pigeon whistles—a reference to the old-fashioned Beijing custom of raising pigeons and fitting them with whistles so the pigeons make music when they fly. The off-screen pigeon whistles in *Farewell*, heard beyond the confines of the secluded courtyard, accentuate the tragic ambience of the love triangle that is playing out in this harsh reality. In *Together*, the sound of the pigeon whistle stands out as conspicuously old-fashioned in ultramodern Beijing, an anachronism signaling the sad decline of a unique tradition along with the disappearing old Beijing landscape. The one-story dwelling is demolished and replaced by apartment complex, where it is difficult for people to keep pet pigeons. By making pigeons and

pigeon whistles into a symbolic icon of the city, *Together* pays homage to old Beijing, showing the city from a bird's eye view and suggesting a city in flight.

Throughout the film, the clean lines of Beijing's high-rise apartments and office buildings, modern concert hall, and luxury shopping malls are differentiated from the cluttered interior spaces. When Professor Yu suggests Xiaochun move out of the courtyard and live with him in a modern, Western-style apartment, he is essentially asking him to leave an older, more humanist China, and enter a world of coldness and materialism. The most salient contrast of old city and new city is a panoramic shot in which Liu Cheng takes on a construction job (one of many minimum-wage jobs he does to earn a living). The camera follows the father on a hanging construction lift shooting up beside a skyscraper, juxtaposing various layouts of the courtyard roofs that appear in Lili's telescope (fig. 2-3, 2-4). Like the symbolism of the courtyard in *Farewell* as intimate space impervious to outside interference, the courtyards in *Together* become enclaves of peace and tranquility against the desire and danger of the rapidly changing and modernizing outside world.

While visual representations seem to lament the vanishing of Beijing's old cityscape, many of the quaint warrens of narrow lanes that epitomized the city's idiosyncratic charm are now decayed beyond repair. An architectural study offers a completely un-sentimental picture of courtyard life, "The alleys are often too narrow for cars. Many inhabitants get around on bicycles; however, ambulances or fire engines have a problem getting to the patients through the labyrinth of narrow streets. The apartments often do not have bathrooms, the walls are thin, and the rooms have no heating" (Krajewska 64). Precisely because of Soviet influence on urban planning, crude industrial structure was inserted into traditional resident districts soon after the communists took power in 1949. Then the political and social havoc over the next fifty years

further wrecked an already damaged ancient city. Even in those areas where the authorities and urban planners have preserved some of the city's old look since the 1990s—especially in the north central part behind the Forbidden City—renovating an old house usually means reconstructing it from scratch.



Fig. 2-3, 2-4. The sharp contrast of new and old Beijing in *Together* (2002)

It is undeniable that Beijing is doing what many other metropolises around the world have done

in the past, but it is doing it in exceptionally complicated circumstance. Residual traditional culture, socialist ideology, and the sweeping current of the capitalist economy combine to complicate the dynamics of preservation and development, filling the process with negotiations, competitions, and contradictions. Zhou Dawei, the Chinese-American urban planner, argues the present preservation does not build an authentic continuation of history, but descends into gentrification or the fetishization of artifacts to temporarily soothe nostalgic longings. He recalls his youth living in the courtyard house, but does not claim to pine for the good old days frequently depicted in artistic works. On the contrary, claims Zhou, the alleys and courtyards were a place of poverty, quarreling, and even violence. He also mentioned a little anecdote about *Beijing Bicycle* (*Shiqi sui de danche*, dir. Wang Xiaoshuai, 2001). When Liu Jie, the cameraman of the film, first settled down in Beijing in 1995, he was intended to live in a courtyard house but was put off by the awkward living conditions. It was not until he worked as the cameraman of *Beijing Bicycle* and shot endless footage of these narrow alleys and lanes that he realized their charisma. “It is not hard to figure out Liu’s implication,” Zhou Dawei concludes, “that is, I will not move into an old house like that. I prefer such-and-such a quarter, in a new building with lift, etc. But these landscapes are really ‘beautiful’ in my camera.” (150)

Zhou Dawei’s anecdote about *Beijing Bicycle* unveils such a paradox: despite the text’s critique of the urban malaise brought about by urbanization and globalization, it follows the logic of globalization in packaging its images, by which the alleys and courtyards are made into another new icon of exotic and backward China. In the case of *Together*, Chen Kaige makes an effort to relocate the city memory in ultramodern Beijing, enriched with personal sentiment from his own youth years there. By consistently evoking local memories, affections, and life habits associated with old Beijing, *Together* forges a local identity against the articulation of urbanization and globalization. However, the film largely disregards the irrevocability of the

past and the change of temporality; conversely, it repaints the courtyards as an eternal homeland of warmth and humanism. The result is a film that aligns with the affected image of old Beijing, but ends up saying little to its actual condition.

3. Escapist Cultural Imagination of Traditional Values

The narrative return to the patriarch and city memory in *Together* is read as an allegory for the rebellious Fifth Generation's return to conventional filmic language after wandering and indulging in Oedipal rivalry. As I mentioned above, the early works of the Fifth Generation demonstrate a patricidal complex—a political allegory for the filmmakers' attack on mainstream Chinese culture, especially party-state ideology and Confucian patriarchy. Their initial breakaway from mainstream culture was expressed explicitly through Chen's commentaries on *My Memories of Old Beijing* in 1986. *My Memories of Old Beijing* depicts a little girl's observation of daily life in Beijing in the 1920s, subtly permeated with sentimentalism, melancholy and nostalgia for old Beijing before the advent of the Cultural Revolution. Its poetic representation of bygone memories establishes an exemplary work of the Fourth Generation directors, promoting humanism and Andre Bazin's realist theory in order to escape Maoist ideology. In his discussion with Nagisa Oshima in 1986 I choose to begin this thesis, Chen, a young maverick director at the time, refused to regress to simplistic self-victimization and sentimentalism, preferring to appeal to more reflective, problem-oriented expressions.

It is striking that twenty years after Chen made this claim, he produced a film that not only pays homage to the image of old Beijing as *My Memories of Old Beijing* does, but returns to a similar kind of longing for the "good old days"—that is, a mode of filmmaking that consciously deploys everyday phenomena as its means of signifying, and that reverts to traditional values

as a self-reaffirming panacea. Indeed, to trace Chen's transformation in *Together*, the most striking revelation is the fact that by the turn of the new millennium, the Fifth Generation, who once ventured into avant-garde filmmaking to break away from their predecessors, exhibited a sentimental desire to return to local and everyday concerns. Besides *Together*, Zhang Yimou's *Not One Less* and *Happy Times* (*Xingfu shiguang*, 2000) shows his concern for the current condition of the lives of ordinary people like out-of-school children and laid-off workers. In a study of Zhang Yimou's *Not One Less*, Rey Chow analyzes why the early films of the Fifth Generation, consistently presented an exotic, erotic, and patriarchally repressive China, have been replaced by more realistic representations:

In the 1980s, when cultural introspection took shape in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, film offered the Fifth Generation directors and their contemporaries the exciting possibility of experimenting with technological reproducibility and artful defamiliarization. As China becomes globalized at the turn of the twenty-first century, the anthropological impulses of the 1980s films have given way to a sociological one. From an investment in, or a fascination with, China's otherness, filmmaking at the hands of Zhang has shift to a seasoned and cautionary approach to visibility as social regimentation, discipline and surveillance, but above all as *benevolence-driven coercion*. (172)

From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige have dabbled primarily in the kind of ethnological or epic filmmaking that not only ushered in the New Wave movement of Mainland China, but also put Chinese film on the world art-house map. However, those works—such as Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* and Zhang Yimou's *Raise the Red Lantern* and *To Live*—could only reach the American and European arthouse audiences, while they were largely ignored or even banned in Mainland China. Before they began making the blockbusters that finally opened the floodgates of domestic box office success, the return to local and

everyday concerns, with “benevolence-driven coercion,” became a valid device for the two biggest stars of the Fifth Generation to capture the hearts of domestic audiences.

For Chen Kaige, *Together* follows the mixed success of his costume epic *The Emperor and the Assassin* and his first and only Hollywood production, *Killing Me Softly* (2002), which was a critical and box-office failure. Chen went to Hollywood to prepare for his English-language debut in 2000, with a budget of USD 25 million and a worldwide distribution deal with MGM. He deliberately chose all the elements that would put the movie on par with Hollywood standards—sex and suspense, a narrative adapted from the work of bestselling author Nicci French, and a cast that included Hollywood stars Heather Graham and Joseph Fiennes. In the end, however, all these promising components turned out to have a negative cumulative effect. The director’s uncertain hand when removed from his normal venue of filmmaking is painfully apparent in the film; audiences were more likely to laugh at it than with it. After the film flopped in both ticket sales and viewer ratings, Chen returned to the safer waters and familiar directorial territory in China. Praised as “[a] glossy, old-fashioned heartwarmer,” in *Variety* magazine, *Together* does not attempt to show any remarkable stylistic innovations or shocking revelation about culture and history. Rather, it is a conventional melodrama and moral tale from which audience can relate to the daily life and spiritual state of ordinary Chinese people.

While many ethnological and historical epic films have been criticized as self-Orientalizing, a return to realist films is generally considered as a return to more authentic subject matter of contemporary Chinese society. *Together* provides an opportunity for Chen to turn away from the self-Orientalization and politicization of China and join the fad of urban movies seeking to document the present. The film undoubtedly addresses many urgent issues as it follows the story of a rural laborer, driven by the dream of a better future for his son, as he advances from

the backwaters of the world market to active participation in modernization and globalization in its urban centres. The axes of rural-urban, East-West, and tradition-modernity are brought out through rich use of visual contrast and narrative anecdotes. These contrasts are articulated over and over throughout the movie: Xiaochun loses a small competition because the other contestants have bribed the judges, and he is rejected by musical school because the household registration system (*hukou*) bars migrant children from attending local public schools; a wealthy mother interrupts her son's violin lesson by talking loudly on her cell phone; Lin Yu, Professor Yu's another live-in student, scorns Xiaochun and calls him a "bumpkin". In an interview following the premiere of *Together* in the U.S., Chen elaborated that "China is in this sort of transitional period of time and it has caused a lot of social problems [...] I used to want to play a role as an observer. I'm just watching and I don't want to say things, but this time I feel like, 'OK, I want to be involved in this social change. I want to tell people what I feel about it'" (Chen. qtd in Tan).

Ironically, this rigid dichotomy of tradition and modernity, which is palpable through the film, reduces Chen's attempt to document the present to a longing for the past. Liu Cheng and Xiaochun, as the country bumpkins, are set up as symbols of wholesome tradition—they are the very personification of honesty, simplicity and generosity, while the wealthy urbanites are all selfish, backstabbing materialists. The entire logic of the movie, therefore, is mobilized by the idea that the city is dangerous and deceitful, and we have everything we need in our small town. While this conservative premise can be a convenient solution for urban malaise, especially given the pessimism that haunts many urban movies, it actually turns its back on the many complexities of social and cultural conflicts taking place in urban China. Xiaochun finally retreats into obscurity with his father, proving the line that is started when Professor Jiang said that he had no future because he was from the countryside. This emotional family

reunion is intended to affirm the overwhelming triumph of tradition, but ultimately it only exemplifies the director's presupposed antagonism towards modern values.

Chen's strategy of addressing urban themes also baffled Western critics. Although *Together* swept the audience awards at many mid-sized international film festivals such as Florida, Tribeca, Filmfest DC, and the San Francisco International Film Festival, its reception was much more modest, especially compared to the phenomenal success of *Farewell*. It seems that critics are comfortable or uncomfortable with the old-fashioned and sentimental modes of filmmaking. Roger Ebert, who reviewed the film in *Chicago Sun Times*, praised its strong, basic emotion recalling a more innocent age of film production: "*Together* is powerful in an old-fashioned, big-studio kind of way; Hollywood once had the knack of making audience-pleasers like this, before it got too clever for its own good."¹¹ Others, like Kevin Thomas, who reviewed the film in *L.A. Times*, doubted the film "is not ambitious enough to be disappointing, but it does seem beneath a filmmaker of the caliber of Chen Kaige."¹² Of course, the story's handling by veteran Chen Kaige is slick and professional, elegantly scored with old Chinese songs and Western classical music. But after earning his reputation with the avant-gardism of *Yellow Earth* and the masterful handling of historical epics like *Farewell*, Chen disappointed some critics with his production of a simple crowd-pleaser like *Together*, which seemed to be beneath his abilities. For at least a decade, the Orientalized and politicized presentation of China used to arouse unforgettable shock for the Western audience. Once the cross-cultural shock is removed, it is suddenly clear that Chen's new film feels like a Hollywood production shot in Mandarin, albeit one that says as much about Chinese society as *Farewell* did.

¹¹ For Roger Ebert's review, see <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/together-2003>

¹² For Kevin Thomas's review, see <http://articles.latimes.com/2003/may/30/entertainment/et-Together30>

On the other hand, directors who tackle the taboo aspects of urban life in contemporary China, often referred to as the “Sixth Generation,” invariably earn high praise among Western audiences. This group of urban filmmakers aims at critical and alienated interventions of urban life commonly associated with marginal social groups and experiences, such as sexual deviance and violence. Their production process, making underground films without official permits and shipping them overseas for exhibition, reveals that international audiences are their primary market. When it comes to the cinema of a country they love to distrust, Western critics generally are not satisfied with a father-son melodrama with a happy ending—they tend to regard the unflattering documentations of China from those outside the mainstream Chinese cinema as more impartial and trustworthy.

Conclusion

No matter what kind of reception the film receives, Chen Kaige remains an idealist. Recalling that, ten years ago, he identified most with *Farewell*'s Peking opera star Cheng Dieyi, Chen said, “He was quite a character; you could tell he didn't fit in with the modern world, despite his young age. But this is also what made him so charming.” His characters are always prepared to defend their beliefs, at whatever cost, against whatever changes. It is this uncompromising attitude towards social change, combined with pride and idealism within a backdrop of historical turmoil, that lends some of his early films their timeless charm. It is also this residual structure of feeling that becomes almost the side effect of the narrative of his first contemporary urban movie, *Together*. This chapter explores how *Together* uses modern urban themes as a disguise for focusing on the past, hinting at the haunting memory of the director's family history, old Beijing's architectural image, and traditional Chinese values. As a result, *Together* helps neither to document the present nor to build an authentic continuation of the past; it remains trapped somewhere in between, an escapist cultural imagination. Should we hold on to the

utopian view of tradition, however untimely and unrealistic, as part of the redemption of the ethical crises that accompany China's rapid rise? Or should we abandon the past as obsolete and merge with the global and transnational current of today's reality? In this light, *Together* may be the paradigmatic case of the predicament we face in these times, and its representation will demand some hard rethinking.

Chapter 3 Postsocialism Revisited: The Reworking of Revolutionary Legacies in *The Founding of a Republic*

The year 2009 was a historic one for China, as it marked the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the PRC, as well as the twentieth anniversary of the violent crackdown on the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989. Over the past two decades, China has undergone a tremendous transformation; no longer weak and isolated, it is now a strong nation-state with a dynamic and growing economy and the power to impact global affairs. While the whole world is talking about China's rise, what puzzles observers of post-1989 China is that unlike the communist regimes of Eastern Europe, the Chinese Communist Party not only survived but even thrived after the Tiananmen Square crackdown. What equally shocked the world is that, twenty years after the pro-democratic demonstrations in 1989, a new patriotism is gaining prevalence, especially among younger generations. It is true that these patriots are not the ultra-leftist Red Guards that prevailed forty years ago—many of these new patriots have higher education and attend elite schools in the U.S. and Europe—but neither are they like the “Tiananmen generation” of university students twenty years ago. In the place of the young Chinese man who tried to stop the advance of a column of tanks in Tiananmen Square on June 5, 1989, the CCP now has a huge supporting populace that many governments would envy. Through all kinds of trials and triumphs, from the tragedy of the 2008 Sichuan earthquakes to political unrest in Tibet, from the 2008 Beijing Olympic to the 2010 Shanghai Expo, young Chinese ranked among the most enthusiastic and patriotic of China's supporters. With this newly emergent social structure, China challenges the West to understand the nature of its liberalism and modernization.

Cinematic phenomena that highlight this unexpected tendency could be best exemplified by *The Founding of a Republic* (*Jianguo daye*, dir. Han Sanping and Huang Jianxin, 2009), a

filmic commemoration of the sixtieth anniversary of the PRC. *The Founding* is a propaganda film—a genre for which Mainland Chinese cinema discourse prefers the term “leitmotif film” (*zhu xuanlü dianying*).¹³ This label refers to Chinese government-sanctioned filmic productions, which usually reaffirm the official narrative of modern Chinese history and commemoration of communist revolutionary heroes. First introduced in the mid-1980s, leitmotif films were partly the Party’s anxious effort to re-establish nationalism and patriotism after the 1989 Tiananmen Incident. For a long time, they were regarded as a setback of the market force and neoliberal sensibility; they often suffer from poor production quality and low viewer ratings. As Chris Berry states, “This return to revolutionary history is an attempt to reunite precisely those fragments ... [that] the People’s Republic is shattered into by the shock of Tiananmen” (45). But what took place in the case of *The Founding* tells a totally different story: rather than being shown to captive audiences in schools and governmental departments, as a leitmotif film usually is, *The Founding* was a commercial success, the first such propaganda film to attract a flood of Chinese audiences. Indeed, at a historical moment when patriotism was enormously stirred, *The Founding* offered a timely venue to invite the public to join a carnivalesque celebration.

Does this mean China’s new accomplishments have patched up the trauma brought by the Tiananmen crackdown? All in all, what happened during the last twenty years? Was it just a process of economic prosperity as a compensation for dictatorship? Considering direct filmic representations and portrayals of 1989 Tiananmen event were all but impossible to access in Mainland China¹⁴, this chapter uses Huang Jianxin, a former Fifth Generation auteur and now

¹³ Borrowed from musical terminology, “leitmotif” means “main melody,” but in the Chinese social and cultural context it means “the theme of our times”. It was first used in the early 1980s to promote the ideas of economic reform as the “main melody” of the times. In the mid-1980s, the term came into use in the sector dealing with themes in films, theatre, radio and television. Soon after the Tiananmen Incident in 1989, leitmotif films were augmented to promote patriotism and nationalism. However, since the late 1990s, the total number of leitmotif films produced with state funding has sharply decreased.

¹⁴ The 1989 Tiananmen Incident did inspire a wave of literary and visual productions that directly portrayed the event or carried allegorical significance. However, it should be noted that much of the literature and visual works come from Hong

a leading director of *The Founding*, as a case study to better illuminate these issues. The examination begins with a brief review of Huang's directorial debut, *The Black Cannon Incident* (*Heipao shijian*, 1986), analyzing its pessimistic, dystopian vision of postsocialism most pronounced on the eve of Tiananmen Incident. Then I will scrutinize *The Founding* by decoding its unconventional approach to plot design and character building, and, in particular, how it is capable of absorbing ironic or parodic representations to shed light on the present. In the last section, I will trace Huang's transition from a Fifth Generation auteur to an official producer, where key issues pertinent to the recent transformation of the leitmotif films production can be examined. The discussion of these two films here will link to two theories. One is *postsocialism*, a term first employed by Arif Dirlik in the 1980s, the meanings and implications of which have been subject to constant exploration. Alongside these concerns about postsocialism, we may also refer to Tang Xiaobing's *dissidence hypothesis*, which addresses the differing emphases, disagreements, and even biases of Western film theory toward China's leitmotif film. My purpose, then, is not simply to make an either-or judgment. Rather, by tracing China's development over the past twenty years—development that refuses to conform to any conventional category or understanding—I can relate cinema as a form of communicative practice, a practice that builds bridges across the significant differences in ideologies and worldviews.

1. *The Black Cannon Incident*: Fundamental Ambiguities of Postsocialism

Huang Jianxin's early work belongs to the vaguely defined category of the Fifth Generation films made between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s. However, in contrast with his world-renowned contemporaries Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, whose films earned international acclaim and numerous awards at Berlin and Cannes, Huang remains the best kept secret of the

Kong, overseas, and underground domestic filmmakers, e.g. *Lan Yu* (dir, Stanley Kwan, 2001), *Summer Palace* (*Yiheyuan*, dir. Lou Ye, 2006).

Fifth Generation.

Why is Huang so widely ignored? Because his work does not conform to long-standing Euro-American views of the alien, exotic, and chaotic China. While the Fifth Generation were heralded for the Chinese New Wave cinema they created in the wake of the Cultural Revolution, whose ethnographic landscapes shaped Western perceptions of Chinese contemporary cinema, it remains a fact that their films are largely set in the past—mostly in pre-modern, Republican China, or far out in remote provinces among ethnic minorities. Even *Farewell My Concubine*, *To Live*, and *The Blue Kite*, three outstanding epics in the early 1990s that juxtapose historical events of contemporary China, merely provide a retrospective examination as far as the Cultural Revolution is concerned, while keeping curiously silent about the aftermath of this turbulent period. Huang Jianxin was the only Fifth Generation filmmaker brave enough to depict postsocialist China by addressing social problems in the initial years of the Party's reform and opening-up. Despite great euphoria and expectation towards the implementation of reform, 1980s China witnessed a series of drawbacks that baffled the previously impassioned public. Corruption and inflation intensified and grew rampant, triggering the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, which targeted corruption as a flawed marketization process that helped create bureaucratic-capitalist classes without democratic supervision. As Wang Jing points out, the 1980s in China is “a period of utopian vision on the one hand and an era of emergent crises on the other” (Wang J 1).

Likewise, in a global context, the 1980s were filled with uncertainty about the future of socialism. The end of Cold War seemed to announce socialism as a relic from a fading past, celebrated by the U.S. State Department official Francis Fukuyama as “the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the

final form of human government” (n. pag.). Arif Dirlik and other scholars had already begun to use the notion of postsocialism, aiming to capture the development that is coming or will come to China. On the one hand, Chinese society is postsocialist, because socialism has lost its coherence, and a response to the experience of capitalism is a necessary innovation within socialism. On the other, it is also socialist, because socialism, as its structural context, is an expediency to which it can return if circumstances so demand. “For this reason, and also to legitimize the structure of ‘actually existing socialism,’ it strives to keep alive a vague vision of future socialism as the common goal of humankind while denying to it any immanent role in the determination of present social policy” (Dirlik 265).

While the future of socialism was still problematic, Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Hu Yaobang, whose forced resignation in 1987 and death in 1989 triggered the Tiananmen Square protests, did offer China an era of unprecedented openness. The cultural practice, in Wang Jing’s terms, of “high culture fever,” strongly marked its agents not only for their instigating of new artistic paradigms, but also for their social intervention, thus “mark[ing] the cultural elite’s illusion that their enlightenment project could not only go hand in hand with, but also steer, the state’s project of modernization” (2). Huang Jianxin, like the majority of the Fifth Generation, came out of the Xi’an film studio during the bold leadership of Wu Tianming. In the peculiar postsocialist space in the mid-1980s, Huang’s directorial debut *The Black Cannon Incident* set Chinese film circles on fire. At the centre of the story is the mild-mannered Zhao Shuxin, a translator at a mining company, who attracts the attention of the company’s Party Committee when he sends a telegram asking for help in finding a missing chess piece—the black cannon. His telegram comes under suspicion of some kind of espionage code, and the Party Committee finds plenty to worry in his profile: raised as a Catholic, never married, and maintaining a dubious friendship with Hans, a visiting expert from Germany. Taking the

resulting absurdities as black humor, the film is generally read as a political satire of deeply-rooted bureaucratism. In the next few years, Huang Jianxin further developed this radical viewpoint in *Dislocation* (Cuowei, 1987) and *Transmigration* (Lunhui, 1989) until the Tiananmen Square protests, after which Huang was absent from filmmaking for five years.

Huang was in Australia as a visiting lecturer during those tumultuous weeks and was not involved in any street demonstrations, so it is hard to conclude whether his sudden halt was relevant to the cultural ambience which seemed to get chilly again after the protests. Some observers suggest that Huang was under a cloud for nearly five years because of the political activities of his mentor, Wu Tianming, who lived in exile in the U.S. for quite a long time after the Tiananmen crackdown (Pichowicz 78). However, when he resumed his cinematic career in the early 1990s, his political daring became modest, although an attempt to capture the absurdities of life in urban China was still discernable in *Stand Up, Don't Bend Down* (*Zhanzhilou, bie paxia*, 1992), *Back to Back, Face to Face* (*Bei kao bei, lian dui lian*, 1994). In an interview about his 1980s filmmaking, Huang admits his bitter satire benefits from a greater sense of political and cultural freedom, "I'm not sure if *The Black Cannon Incident* can survive current censorship, because it was produced under Hu Yaobang's leadership—an open era when authors could maintain literal autonomy (*wenze zifu*)" (Qin W).¹⁵ His 1980s films, thereby, exemplified the last relatively uncensored articulations of social critique in China by Fifth Generation filmmakers.

In a study of Huang's 1980s films, Paul G. Pickowicz, a prolific scholar of Chinese film, addresses the notion of postsocialism in a different way from Arif Dirlik—not as a theory, but

¹⁵ That "authors maintain literal autonomy" (*wenze zifu*) was first proposed by Hu Yaobang, who was then the Head of the Propaganda Department of the CCP Central Committee. In a speech to artistic workers in 1979, Hu advocated the abolition of the official institution of press censorship.

as a “structure of feeling” that continues to interact with everyday life in various concrete ways. Under such a premise, the unmistakable motif of Huang’s trilogy is the “failure of socialism” in China, as in other places like the Soviet Union, Poland, and Eastern Germany, whose socialist systems were on the edge of bankruptcy. Unlike the reformist films of Xie Jin, whose work exposes the problems of traditional socialist systems only to identify the heroic figures within the Party who can fix them, *The Black Cannon Incident* seems to assert that the remnants of socialist ideology are so entrenched that modern economic progress cannot occur naturally:

The pessimism conveyed by this film is heightened because its subject is not China at some point in its troubled Stalinist or Maoist past; rather it is China in the midst of the much-publicized era of reform and openness, a time when everyone was supposed to be confident and hopeful. Huang’s unwillingness to suggest how the socialist system might be saved gives rise to the feeling that it cannot be saved. If there are sources of hope, Huang gives us no information about where they might reside. (Pickowicz 63)

Without contradicting Pickowicz’s analysis on Huang’s hopelessness and alienation, I would like to suggest such pessimistic, dystopian moods arise not only from the remnants of the socialist legacy, but also from uncertainties brought by the westernization that followed the reform and opening policies. *The Black Cannon Incident* firmly situates itself with reference to the particular drive to reconnect with the West in the 1980s. The basic backdrop involves a Chinese company which hires Hans, an expert from Germany, to help with the installation of some imported equipment. The central figure Zhao Shuxin is an intellectual on the periphery of the Communist Party; his only affinity is for Hans, who speaks the same intellectual language as he does. In preparation for Zhao Shuxin’s meeting with Hans, his manager persuades him to put on Western suit, which he believes to be the appropriate clothing for receiving Western guests. Since the late Qing Dynasty, China has understood its future in terms

of a need to modernize, along with intellectual efforts to learn from the West to seek a proper model for its modernization. Here, the commodity economy and technological advancement imported from the West constitutes the ideas of modernization established by Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s, which had already generated strong social impact in China.

This renewal of interest in the West is made visually explicit in the film's modernist cinematography and mise-en-scene. Jason McGrath, for example, relates the film's stylistic elements, reflecting that "the aesthetic experimentation of the 1980s is widely attributed to the very different sort of education the young post-Mao film-makers received" (25). The most obviously stylistic settings and composition is the meeting room in a harsh white and dominated by a gigantic, stylized clock (fig. 3-1). As McGrath points out, the stifling sense of formality conveyed by the meeting room is the exact opposite of socialist realist representations of group



Fig. 3-1. *The Black Cannon Incident* (1986). The meeting room designed with stylistic settings and composition.

gathering, and makes its akin to modernist fantasy-scape; “in this way, the ideological underpinnings of authority are themselves denaturalized and revealed as consisting of a purely ritualistic performative operation rather than being a reflection of objective reality” (30). The oversized clock clearly emphasizes the time-consuming discussions of the Party bureaucrats about an espionage that would never take place, adding to the ambience of absurdity and pessimism noted by Pickowicz.

One example which is less discussed is when Zhao takes his girlfriend to a rock concert, but is apparently embarrassed by the sexually explicit performance. As two young audience members are arrested for reacting too fanatically, Zhao eventually leaves, telling his girlfriend that the noise gives him a headache, and saying he is too old for these new trends. This episode constitutes an essential subtext about Western lifestyles introduced in 1980s China. Ostensibly, this scenario embodies Zhao’s double dislocation, in which he is rejected by the traditional socialist system but at the same time feels uncomfortable in the modern world. However, the most powerful implication is conveyed through the inclusion of nearly three minutes of footage of the performance, with no apparent reference to the plot (fig. 3-2). The chorus line of hip-shaking dancers, the ebullient singer, and the feverish audiences represent the influence of Western individualism through the lens of youthful initiative and desire. Capitalism in the West may have learned to expect youthful rebellion and tolerate it as a source of innovation, but such behavior was loaded with more political and social controversy in 1980s China. These images contrast Western individualism to China’s collectivism by presenting a young generation that violates historical norms. The passionate red spotlight, reminiscent of Michelangelo Antonioni’s *The Red Desert* (1964), suggests not only an overheated revolutionary past, but also the overheated Westernized present. Even if an outdated socialism has held China back in its pursuit of economic prosperity, it is not clear that an indiscriminate embrace of the West

could bring it to success.



Fig. 3-2. *The Black Cannon Incident* (1986). The performance scene

In taking up all sorts of Western connotations as rejections of socialism, *The Black Cannon Incident* is no different from other forms of art, such as avant-garde fiction, made around this time. However, what differentiates it is that the preference for Western signifiers is deflected by Huang's profound suspicion of the wholesale Westernization. Jerome Silbergeld points out Zhao Shuxin's humiliation embodies "China's lingering fear of intellectuals and the confusion of public with private matters, in a land where little remains private and almost everyone is looking on" (243). The critical representation of the transgressive youngsters, on the other hand, highlights the unpredictable—and not always positive—effects of individualism. Huang Jianxin uses a modernist *mise-en-scène* and discordant music to visually symbolize China's rapid social transformation, paralleling many ambiguities and contradictions that were so pronounced in the 1980s. At the intersection where possibility proliferated, people know what they do not want—they do not return to the revolutionary path, but they may not know exactly what kind of society they want. In this sense, the work of the Fifth Generation during the 1980s,

whether a critical reflection on traditional culture like *Yellow Earth* or a critical appeal to the West like *The Black Cannon Incident*, exposes discursive and competing possibilities in the unfolding future.

2. *The Founding of a Republic: Rethinking the Future of Postsocialism*

In the new millennium, Huang re-emerged as the co-director of *The Founding of a Republic*, a filmic celebration the sixtieth anniversary of the PRC. The film was initially produced to commemorate the first Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), a political advisory body of multi-party cooperation and political consultation under the leadership of the CCP.¹⁶ As *The Founding* attracted more industry talent and media interest, it finally developed into a two-faceted project presented by the Chinese film industry to commemorate both historical moments. It is quite a jarring departure from Huang's early social satirical films—produced by Han Sanping, the titan of the Chinese film industry and chairman of China Film Group (*Zhongguo dianying jituan*), China's largest state-owned film studio, there is little doubt about the film's "state-funded" and "propagandistic" nature. When the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) assigned Han the task of producing "an all-encompassing, solid, documentary-colored film that positively represents the establishment of new China" (Kuai), after a sixteen-year absence from directorial work, Han was at first unsure whether he was capable of such a huge undertaking. He decided to play a role of an administrative organizer, and invited his good friend Huang Jianxin, who is now the Chairman of the Beijing Film Director's Association and China Film Co-production Company, to undertake most of the directorial work (Cai 43).

¹⁶ The CPPCC is an organization dedicated to upholding and improving the system of multi-party co-operation and political consultation under the leadership of the CCP. The National Committee of the CPPCC currently has over 170 members, who are selected from the finance, industry, business, trade, law, accounting, education, labour and social services, and political elite. These members, divided into four groups—political affairs, economy, agriculture and Mainland-Taiwan relations—submit advice and comments to the CPG. The First Plenary Session of the CPPCC was held on September 21, 1949. Starting from 1959, The members of the CPPCC also attend the session of the National People's Congress (NPC) held in Beijing every year, submitting advice and comments on a series of reports and legislative bills.

The fact that the only Fifth Generation director who boldly and directly satirized the bureaucratic system now makes his living in the departments that he once ridiculed carries obvious implications. Amid criticisms directed at Huang for abandoning his former courageous subversiveness arises a question: is the PRC still the dictatorship we once knew? After the Tiananmen crackdown, many scholars predicted that the regime in Beijing would not last long because the official socialist ideology has lost its credibility. Some twenty years after, however, what puzzles observers of post-1989 China is the Chinese Communist Party not only survived but even thrived as a formidable power. On the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the PRC, Arif Dirlik also addressed China's post-1989 development, contrasting it with the "capitalism in ruin" that followed the 2008 global financial crisis, "Any visitor to China is likely to be impressed by the social vitality and restlessness, against which older centres of capitalism appear quaint and sleepy—development gone dormant" (266). What has somewhat legitimized China's reform is not just its importance in the global economy, but also its efforts to formulate an alternative to the capitalist modernization. This experience "may account for some of the contradictions that puzzle, if not annoy, those who would wish socialism away" (268). As one of the first historians to raise the notion of postsocialism, Arif Dirlik calls for the rethinking of those claims made about socialism in the 1980s.

Another perspective about the 1980s that stands to be reconsidered, as stated in U.S. academic Tang Xiaobing's analysis of *The Founding*, is an entrenched hostility to China's leitmotif film that has long been relying on the "dissidence hypothesis". Since the 1980s, the majority of Chinese cinema has fallen under three main categories: leitmotif (propaganda) films, art-house films, and entertainment films. Western scholars and cinephiles often tend to focus on art-house films, in which the Fifth Generation films first established the exotic or politicized image of

China, after which came the marginalized urbanities depicted by the Sixth Generation. Commercial films, which draw the majority of Chinese audiences, rarely attract Western academic attention. On the other hand, Western critics appear to believe what the art-house films convey about China is true and realistic, and dismiss government-backed leitmotif films as misleading propaganda for brainwashing the masses. For quite a long time, leitmotif film appeared to be a frantic effort by the CCP to re-establish patriotism after the 1989 Tiananmen protests. Tang, taking issue with the Western media's hostility toward *The Founding*, points out such facile dismissal mirrors the logic of political paranoia, "It is part of the geopolitical legacy of the Cold War era, during which time the demonization of Red China as enemy and threat readily drew on and added to a long tradition of regarding the Chinese as a racial other, and of dismissing the Chinese political order, whatever form it may take, as peculiar and ill-founded" (199).

To dispute the dissidence hypothesis, Tang further points out *The Founding* is indeed a "bold experiment" that "devotes as much time to Mao as it does to his arch-rival," portraying both sides of the war "with sympathy and respect" (205). The film starts at the end of the Sino-Japanese War in 1945 and culminates with the founding of the People's Republic in October 1949, taking us through a series of negotiations and battles between the Nationalist KMT Party, who were in power at the time, and the nascent CCP, who gained the support of China's rural interior provinces. This is a common subject in the Chinese leitmotif repertoire, but the two directors hoped to make a groundbreaking and stylish product that stood out from the typically crude and old-fashioned films of this genre. Recalling the propaganda comic books he read as a child, in which KMT Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek was always portrayed as a buffoon, Huang Jianxin hoped to offer a fairer view of both protagonist and antagonist:

As time passes by, we can get rid of the stereotype and misunderstanding of history and

return to a more rational thinking. The film depicts the process of a victory of one party over another, but the defeated is no mere clod or villain; rather, it is a formidable political community under the leadership of a brilliant politician. [...] I mean, on either side of the conflict are brilliant politicians with their own noble beliefs. While the CCP was able to hold on to its beliefs, the KMT was impotent in the face of political infighting and corruption, which finally led to its collapse. (Huang. qtd. in Yu 38)

The humanistic portrait of Chiang Kai-shek may not be particularly innovative in terms of content alone. In *The Xi'an Incident* (*Xi'an shibian*, dir. Cheng Yin, 1981), amid a rising humanistic discourse that gradually eroded the revolutionary discourse during the 1980s, Chiang Kai-shek appeared for the first time as a human being rather than a symbolic evil figure, but never has history on Chinese film like *The Founding* been so sympathetic to the opponents of the winner. Zhang Guoli, a versatile Chinese film and TV actor, presents a somber portrait of a man of honor, increasingly defeated by rampant internal corruption, who is compelled to make choices that dash any real possibility of a democratic coalition government. Chiang is shown as being personally exempt from such corruption, and even as encouraging his son Chiang Ching-kuo to curb inflation and crack down on the black market in Shanghai. In Chiang Ching-kuo's confrontation with Du Yuesheng, the most notorious Shanghai gangster, Chiang Ching-kuo's lines create most dramatized moment in the film, "My mission in Shanghai is to hunt tigers, not swat flies" (fig. 3-3). Chiang Ching-kuo spent his youth in the Soviet Union and served in the Soviet Red Army. He even wrote an editorial that harshly criticized his father Chiang Kai-Shek's violent repression of the KMT leftists and communists in 1927, known as the Shanghai massacre. As Huang concludes, like many idealistic young radicals, Chiang Ching-kuo believed his commitment to "hunt tigers" could overcome widespread corruption accompanied with economic chaos

and ultimately save the KMT and the nation (Yu 38).



Fig. 3-3. *The Founding of a Republic* (2009). Chiang Ching-kuo (right) is appointed to curb the corruption but is challenged by Du Yuesheng (left), a known gangster in the 1940s.

Perhaps what is interesting is not so much that an officially historical narrative is capable of showing sympathy to the enemies, but that such sympathy serves only to confirm the present dilemma of the CCP itself, thereby emphasizing Huang Jianxin's trademark social satire. In spite of some early success, Ching-kuo's plan runs into roadblocks when he tries to investigate highly influential officials and their relatives. After the powerful Kung family is accused of hoarding supplies, Ching-kuo's stepmother Soong Mei-ling flies to Shanghai to protect her favorite nephew David Kung. The campaign to bring down corrupt "tigers" is then abandoned on the order of Chiang Kai-Shek, aware that the regime could not be saved by his son's radical actions. The film is notable in that it elevates Chiang to the level of tragic hero waging a hopeless war against corruption—a trope that extends to the CCP as well, as it "hunts tigers" in today's political jungle. There are many such messages which received a lot of attention from viewers. In one scene, for example, Chiang sighs to his son, "Corruption in the KMT is now bone-deep. If we fight it, we'll lose the Party. If we don't fight it, the nation will be lost. It's tough." It is reported that these words were received resounding applause and cheers by

Chinese audiences, which interpreted them as a veiled warning to the current CCP about its own endemic corruption.

Chiang Ching-kuo's phrase should also be singled out as a harbinger of the unprecedented "tiger hunt" launched shortly after the President Xi Jinping came to power in late 2012. Xi reclaimed Ching-kuo's phrase on the eighteenth National Congress of the CCP, vowing to crack down on both "tigers" and "flies"—powerful leaders and lowly bureaucrats—in his campaign against corruption. The symbolic image of "tigers and flies" thus crept into everyday vernacular, seventy years after it was first uttered. Although Xi's anti-corruption campaign has proven to be more intense and protracted than its predecessors, with tens of thousands of "flies" and "tiger" hunted down and bagged, it would seem that the campaign is now approaching a same critical juncture the KMT experienced. If corruption has become a near-ubiquitous pathology among officialdom, continuing to aggressively combat corruption could inflict significant damage on the institution of the CCP and even destabilize China's political superstructure.

In keeping with this revisionist theme, another memorable historical reinvention is exemplified in the figure of Mao Zedong. Mao is also portrayed as a humanist—a man sympathetic to ordinary people, self-effacing in discussion, and, most notably, favourable toward democratic reforms. As the peace negotiations between the KMT and the CCP failed and the Civil War continued, other monitory democratic parties, which lacked army forces and kept off the battlefield, choose to take the side of the military conflict. The KMT are depicted as out-and-out gangsters, hatching plots to assassinate the dissidents, though the film makes no effort to demonize Chiang himself. In perfect contrast with the KMT's political isolation, the CCP woos

assorted democratic parties to set up a coalition government and convene the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). The nation-founded role of the democratic parties seems to be a narrative strategy that caters to the film's commemoration of CPPCC, but its attempt to attribute the CCP's victory to its assiduous practice of consultative democracy is noteworthy. It revolves around a series of talks and negotiations between the CCP and democratic activists that later leads to the formation of the republic. The class struggle of the proletariat, as Sebastian Veg notes, is absent from the film; the rural reforms in Yan'an are only briefly mentioned in a theoretical sequence (46).

Mao is thus "de-revolutionized" as a central figure in a more "inclusive" narrative of modern Chinese history, using his invention of democracy to seize absolute power over the KMT and negotiate with the intellectuals absorbed by the CCP. In particular, the China Democratic League (CDL, *Zhongguo Minzhu Tongmeng*) and its Chairman Zhang Lan (1872-1955) receive Mao's triumphant personal welcome, highlighting how and why democratic reform in war-torn China takes a distinct path. Zhang Lan, who acts as a mediator of the negotiation between the CCP and the KMT, lends the historical continuity from the democratic movement of late Qing Dynasty through the May Fourth Movement to Republic politics. When Zhang suggests the dispute of army should give way to a successful negotiation, Mao argues the army is a pawn in this game, "Pardon me for saying this: If we didn't have a few hundred thousand second-hand guns, Mr. Chiang would never sit and talk to us." Then the KMT violates the peace treaty and closes the headquarters of the CDL in Shanghai. Zhang Lan, as well as other democratic activists like Soong Ching-ling, realize the necessity of "a few hundred thousand second-hand guns" and lend their support to the CCP.

Another salient example that encapsulates this reconfiguration of Mao takes place just before

Mao enters Beijing, in Zhou County, Hebei, where Mao finds he cannot buy cigarettes because all private shop-owners have fled the communists. This in turn triggers a serious discussion during which the communist leaders agree that economy is even more important than military battle. Mao stresses the CCP needs capitalists back, since market prosperity cannot be attained if one cannot even buy cigarettes. Zhou Enlai concludes that political consultation needs to include both capitalist and democratic advocates, and that all must be invited to run the country together with CCP (fig. 3-4). These words earned laughter from audiences at screenings all over China. Mao's ventriloquizing the market-driven logic of Deng Xiaoping, like Chiang's remark on corruption, is among the many unexpected moments that invites Chinese audiences to read between the lines.



Fig. 3-4. *The Founding of a Republic* (2009). Mao complains he cannot buy cigarettes because all private shop-owners have fled the communists.

Historical narratives, in this mode, begin with the disagreement between two parties and result in “an epic with a mobile and porous narrative structure” which “allow[s] for many anecdotal possibilities and imaginative retakes, from which the viewer derives the gratification of being able to witness or enter into imagined historical scenes in unexpected ways” (Tang 187). One may argue leitmotif film demonstrates the CCP’s reluctance to let go of its revolutionary legacies in order to sustain its rule at theoretical and tactical level. As a repackaging of revolutionary history, *The Founding* is the CCP’s bid to reformulate its claim of legitimacy.

Yet the film is not so much interested in what it says about revolutionary history and whether it says it accurately or not. Rather, in a narrative employing anecdote, invention, and substitution, the film appeals to the past as the primary vehicle to shed light on the present. In Huang's sharp wit, the foundation of the republic by a group of communists, which seems irrelevant and clichéd to twenty-first century, remains surprisingly relevant to many current political and social debates during this period of accelerated economic reform. On the other hand, Huang's parody and pastiche is able to present these highly contested and volatile issues both as a neat explanation of KMT's defeat and as scattered ironic representations of today's CCP. Rather than disparaging the "assignment" by the authority as mere brainwashing, Huang Jianxin implies that "modern Chinese audiences were too sophisticated to swallow a simplistic rendering of history" (Foster). Their familiarity with Party truisms would lead them to appreciate the film's recasting of the nation's foundation myth.

Huang's discontinuities and continuities in *The Founding* are thus far more complex than a classic case of an intellectual eating his words—a case which, more often than not, attracts moral condemnation that intellectuals become cowards under political pressure. *The Black Cannon Incident* intends to question the future of socialism on the eve of Tiananmen Incident, but its strategies seem to turn pessimistic and contradictory. Subjectivities in this film are dislocated in a rapidly changing society, so eventually neither side of the socialism versus Westernization dichotomy remains unproblematic. All the unsettled issues have nothing to do with the filmmaker's qualification, but derive from a state's modernization program addressing an uncertain future. Twenty years after *The Black Cannon Incident*, *The Founding* also questions China's current affairs closely related to two major problems—corruption and democracy—that haunted 1980s China. As today's China is far more robust than the country that first received Deng's reform and opening-up policies, the film addresses these problems

with apparently greater clarity regarding the status of revolutionary legacies in postsocialist China. While the landmark traumas brought about by the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution continue to shape Western perceptions of socialist history, *The Founding* suggests revolutionary legacies may be far more complex than the image of the mad ultra-leftist. *The Founding* also seems to imply that revolutionary legacies may not be simply pathological dogmatism that holds China back from economic progress, as suggested in *The Black Cannon Incident*. Rather, they are a storehouse of values, aspirations, and policies that are malleable for the formulation of present policies and ideals.

3. From Avant-garde Auteur to Official Producer

The dramatized shift from avant-gardism to mainstream filmmaking in Huang's oeuvre did not take place overnight. The Fifth Generation's early filmic innovation, like other artistic movements in 1980s, is the product of a specific postsocialist space, marked by the cultural elite's illusion that their enlightenment project could go along with the state's project of modernization. The uneasy coexistence of those two utopian projects did not last long. The time of the crackdown came in June 1989. China was then caught a transition from planned economy to "socialist market economy". The newly energized market reform became the catchphrase in the film industry after Deng Xiaoping's inspection of southern China in 1992. The reform then propelled a thorough structural overhaul in the film industry, eventually highlighting the low productivity and inefficiency of a state-run studio system. As Zhu Ying describes, the state implemented a series of reforms of state-owned film studios towards the general reform goal of marketization in early 1990s, while the SARFT "continued to maintain its control over film importation reform measures, chiefly, some forms of institutional restructuring, private investment, horizontal integration, and international coproduction. Different studios applied such measures to various extent, according to what they saw as the

most urgent internal problems” (78).

Together with Han Sanping, who later became the head of the Chinese Film Group at the helm of *The Founding*, Huang Jianxin was first appointed the chief director of Ermei Film studio, responsible for its own production investment; in 1998, he was later appointed to the China Film Co-production Company, a branch of the Chinese Film Group created to administrate, coordinate and provide services to all the affairs related to Chinese-foreign joint-produced films. China’s WTO accession in 2001 ushered in a new period of reduced barriers to foreign investment and market entry. Foreign investors, attracted by the growing Chinese cinema market, were encouraged to co-produce with Chinese companies in order to bypass China’s film quota system on imported films and gain access to the Mainland China market. Since a co-produced film in China can only be arranged through the China Film Co-production Company, Huang’s role as a transnational producer gradually grew to outweigh and supersede his former Fifth Generation label. Some of Huang’s notable productions include Feng Xiaogang’s first transnational filmmaking with Columbia Pictures’ *Big Shot’s Funeral* (Dawan, 2001), Hong Kong director Chan Ho-sun’s multiple award-winner *The Warlords* (Tou mingzhuang, 2007), and the Hollywood blockbuster *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor* (dir. Rob Cohen, 2008). Huang has also served as a consultant for several international co-productions, including Quentin Tarantino’s *Kill Bill: Volume 2* (2004).

If Zhang Yimou’s long-term partnership with Zhang Weiping signals that privatization has become sustainable in the Chinese film industry, Huang Jianxin’s changing role from an avant-garde auteur to an official producer is pertinent to the major transformation of state-run film studio for the past two decades. Benefiting from a relatively liberal political and cultural atmosphere, *The Black Cannon Incident* took a challenging path of political intervention, and

freely drew on the narrative and visual effects of modernist or avant-garde film that prevailed during China's reform and opening-up period in the 1980s. On the other hand, like many other avant-garde films of the Fifth Generation, the film was shielded from market competition by its state-run film studio, and was able to avoid the lukewarm box-office performance of experimental films (Zhu 165). Twenty years after *The Black Cannon Incident*, *The Founding* demonstrates the effort of an official production to catch up with the prevailing commercialization in the twenty-first century cultural-media sphere. The two leading directors boldly adopted every possible tactic to boost the film's box-office appeal, most notably the star-studded cast, which featured over 170 Chinese and sinophone actors around Asia—the largest celebrity cast in the history of Chinese film. Whether it is kungfu superstars Jackie Chan or Jet Lee, internationally acclaimed actress Zhang Ziyi, or even a renowned film director like Feng Xiaogang or Chen Kaige, *The Founding* has a star appearing onscreen every three minutes on average. Some A-list actors only play walk-on parts, and some stars only have one shot or one line in the film; many of the top-earning industry veterans who performed in this film did so without payment.

Although Huang Jianxin insists it is unfair to dismiss *The Founding* as a propaganda film, he also concedes that the galaxy of stars appearing in the film offset a subject matter that might otherwise have been shunned by Chinese audiences (Foster). It not only aims to recall the collective memory of the older generation, but to repackage that history for those who were born in the 1980s and 1990s. China's younger generations and newly-emerging middle class have made up the main force of the current Chinese cinema market. This audacious experiment and its bid to be a profitable product was ultimately validated as it became the first leitmotif film to attract young Chinese audiences. China's previous record for highest-grossing film was set by *Titanic* (dir. James Cameron) in 1998, which earned RMB 360

million. This eleven-year record was broken in 2009, with three films each grossing more than RMB 400 million (USD 62.5 million). Of these, *The Founding* was the only domestic film, competing alongside Hollywood productions *2012* (dir. Roland Emmerich) and *Transformer: Revenge of the Fallen* (dir. Michael Bay) (Table 3-1).

Ranking	Film Title	Origin	Release Date	Gross (RMB)	Distributor
1	2012	Imported	2009-11-13	466m	China Film/ Huaxia
2	Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen	Imported	2009-6-24	428m	China Film/ Huaxia
3	The Founding of a Republic	Domestic	2009-9-16	415m	China Film
4	Bodyguards and Assassins	Domestic	2009-12-17	273m	PolyBona
5	Red Cliff Part II	Domestic	2009-1-7	260m	China Film/ Maya Group
6	A Woman, a Gun and a Noodle Shop	Domestic	2009-12-10	256m	Beijing New Picture/ Huaxia
7	The Message	Domestic	2009-9-29	225m	Huayi Brothers Film
8	City of Life and Death	Domestic	2009-4-22	166m	China Film/ Stellar Megamedia
9	Ice Age 3	Imported	2009-7-8	157m	China Film Digital
10	Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince	Imported	2009-7-15	156m	China Film/ Huaxia

Table 3-1. 2009 Mainland China Top 10 Movies¹⁷

The blurring boundaries of leitmotif and entertainment film in *The Founding* thus gives rise to the notion of what Canadian film critic Shelly Kraicer terms “post-leitmotif film”. The traditional kind of leitmotif films, which were financially sponsored by the Party and usually shown to an assembled audience, are easy to identify by discerning Chinese audiences and have limited effectiveness. However, a sophisticated post-leitmotif movie “can be subtler, negotiating within the genre’s rules a more audience-appealing version of whatever party line

¹⁷ Data from China Film Industry Report 2009-2010 © Entgroup International Consulting (Beijing) Co. Ltd.

is being sold” (*A Matter of Life and Death*). Although Kraicer criticizes the post-leitmotif film for its disguise of ideological manipulation, he also indicates that leitmotif film in the new century has become diversified.

As the narrative and production strategies of leitmotif film became subtler and more flexible, the state’s intervention in filmmaking has diminished accordingly. State-owned film studios, with a market-oriented modern management system, represent government’s role via a more flexible power—a national identity—to carry out huge undertakings like *The Founding*. During *The Founding*’s initial production phase, the film was hampered by a tight budget of only RMB 30 million and did not initially attract many film stars, particularly those with a high profile. As media coverage gradually boosted public interest, more and more stars expressed their desire to perform in the film for free. As Huang Jianxin recalls, when he recognized the star effect in *The Founding*, it had become a nationwide “celebrated event”. He attributes the stars’ enthusiastic participation mainly to Han Sanping’s influence in the entertainment industry, the state identity of the Chinese Film Group, and the increasingly patriotic climate stirred up by events like 2008 Beijing Olympic (Yu 39). When a leitmotif film becomes an extravaganza on the scale of the Chinese New Year Gala, it also turns itself into a venue where both the artists and the audiences can participate in a carnivalesque celebration.

When thinking about the relationship between China’s authority and its people, many in the West tend to recall the image of the young Chinese man who tried to stop the advance of a column of tanks in Tiananmen Square on June 5, 1989, the day after the Chinese government began to crack down violently on the pro-democracy protests in Beijing (fig. 3-5). This famous picture no doubt depicts a hostile relationship between Chinese people and the

Communist regime. Many, in fact, gained the view from the 1989 student movement that



Fig. 3-5. A famous scene in 1989 Tiananmen Incident: a young protester tried to stop the advance of a column of tanks in Tiananmen Square.

the Chinese government was illegitimate, and that the Chinese people wanted it to be overthrown. However, what took place on *The Founding* tells a totally different story: the CCP now seems to enjoy a huge amount of public support and approval that many governments would be envious to have. Zhang Huiyu, a researcher of Chinese National Academy of Arts, points out the enthusiasm shared by stars and audiences alike for *The Founding* demonstrates that the traditional relationship between the party-state and the individuals in a socialist society, which is often regarded in simplistic dichotomy of oppressor and oppressed, is undergoing fundamental changes:

The public participation does not come from the pressure of top-down government mobilization, nor from the high remuneration of the performance. Instead, by taking on the persona of important historical figures in the film and contributing to the celebration of their nation, they are able to situate themselves in the grand narratives. The gap

between the party-state and individuals is narrowing, and the former is not always necessarily a repressive power to the latter. (86)

Another consequence of the convergence of commercialization also manifested in the art-house genre, which is now mainly represented by the Sixth Generation—an overly vague but still useful term that emphasizes the distinction from their better-known Fifth Generation predecessors. Whereas the Fifth Generation took advantage of the structural reform of the film industry, the Sixth Generation filmmakers, who emerged from the margins of the studio system and earned their reputations through underground or unofficial productions, remain mostly marginalized in the film market. Failing to gain generous domestic private investment and state funding, these filmmakers have developed unique strategies that may make them more accessible to international audiences, characterized by low-budget production and narratives that address potentially sensitive aspects of life in contemporary China. They largely mimicked the internationally-focused pattern established by their Fifth Generation predecessors, but with enough aesthetic innovation to qualify for their own generational brand. Most recently, some premier underground directors such as Jia Zhangke and Guan Hu, while continuing to attract international audiences, simultaneously became quite visible within China's prosperous domestic market by gaining licenses for domestic release. Despite this marketability, the "Chinese underground" label in the West is still predominantly associated with endless reports of China's political repression and terror. That they have received a warm welcome at international festivals, largely because of "the legitimating sense of anti-legitimacy" (Jaffee), may be itself a result of a variant of Orientalism that treasures the idea of Chinese intellectuals as oppressed fighters for whom every act of representation is political.

This does not mean that the uneasy relationship between citizens and the Party during the 1980s

has totally disappeared. As one of the world's most dynamic economies nowadays, the CCP is still accused of intolerance toward dissidence. One of the greatest compromises that led China to top-down political reform ended with the 1987 campaign against bourgeois liberalization, which directly resulted in Hu Yaobang's official resignation as Party General Secretary. For many liberals, Hu's resignation and death were a great loss; naturally, they wondered whether Chinese intellectuals would enjoy less freedom now than they did during Hu's tenure, despite enormous strides in economic development. No matter how one lines up Huang Jianxin's oeuvre, it is still hard to reconcile his profile as an official producer with his commitment to radical politics and the avant-gardism of his early films. In response to the accusation that he is not as daring as he used to be, Huang admits films dealing with sensitive subjects still risk being banned, but he stresses that the commercial film producer, which is still the weakest link in the Chinese film industry, should not be regarded as inherently inferior to avant-garde experimenters, "If I get a choice in the matter of improving this condition, it is my bounden duty to do it" (Qin W). Huang also implies he is planning to start a new directorial work whose subject matter draws from a historical event which the authorities recently declared unclassified.

Conclusion

Choosing what to remember and what to forget is never a simple physiological process. As Michel Foucault points out, memory is "a very important factor in struggle ... if one controls people's memory, one controls their dynamism" (92). Memory, in this context, is seen as a site of power struggle and is vulnerable to containment. When planning which anniversaries to celebrate, National Day generally serves to enhance national identity. Equally instructive are the "dark anniversaries" that reveal which stories a nation may wish to forget. In case of China, the commemoration of the Cultural Revolution is no longer a taboo in scholar and popular culture, but Tiananmen Square Incident in 1989 has been formally ignored by the Chinese

government. Although the violent repression has elicited much moral indictment in the West, China's success in the post-Tiananmen era remains an unprecedented anomaly that baffles any immediate historical configuration. As Jing Wang states, "it is now much more difficult to conclude which historical course would better empower the masses politically, culturally, and materially: the victory of enlightenment intellectuals, were the students to succeed in the revolt, and hence the continual monopoly of an elitist cultural agenda; or Deng Xiaoping's political survival, the ensuing economic boom, and the perpetuation of Chinese socialism as a challenge and alternative to Western liberalism and modernization" (3).

This chapter cannot offer a straightforward answer, but a study of Huang Jianxin's oeuvre may at least delineate what happened over the course of those two decades. In the 1980s, Huang's directorial debut *The Black Cannon Incident* captured many ambiguities and contradictions that were so pronounced in the initial years of the reform and opening-up. His later filmmaking in the new millennium, most notably his mainstream blockbuster *The Founding of a Republic*, breaks through the boundaries that traditionally separated orthodox revolutionary history and unconventional narrative strategies, propaganda apparatus and market device, and party-state power and individual appeal. All these vital forces, once regarded as contradicting and incompatible in the 1980s, come to terms with one another at an anniversary to be celebrated, critique, and reminisced about all at once. The film's bold experimentation in concept and execution mirrors a part of postsocialism—or, specifically, China's unique model of postsocialism, which is difficult for other countries to replicate. Such alternatives pose challenges not only to the capitalist system, but also to China's future development. Given China's rise in wealth and power, it seems unlikely that anyone could wholeheartedly say that China's post-1989 development produced a failure, but looking forward, how long can such a profit last? Is the current breakneck trajectory sustainable or not? Has the post-1989

development sacrificed long-term gains for short-term benefits?

The debate will no doubt continue.

Chapter 4 A Japanese Case Study: Reinventing War Subject in *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*

This chapter examines how one of the most significant traumas in modern Japanese history, the defeat in World War II, is represented by Nagisa Oshima, a politically committed and driven filmmaker of Japanese New Wave Cinema. Ever since the 1960s, several New Wave cinematic movements have emerged in East Asian countries and areas, including Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, and Mainland China. In film studies, these New Waves have often been routinely treated as “after-waves” of their French predecessors, but they also arose as an intellectual response to their own social and historical specificities. Is twenty-first century China standing at the same juncture that its economic superpower neighbour, Japan, did in the 1980s? How do the former New Wave iconoclasts like Nagisa Oshima reconstruct historical memory of World War II, which is once again in danger of disintegration?

At the 1983 Cannes Film Festival, a dramatic scene unfolded: two key figures of Japanese New Wave Cinema, Shohei Imamura and Nagisa Oshima competed for the festival’s most prestigious Palme d’Or award. While his fellow countryman Imamura took home the prize for *The Ballad of Narayama* (*Narayama bushiko*), Oshima’s *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* fell into obscurity, remembered only by a limited cult following—a surprise, given the global exposure it had received. Following his earlier success with controversial films *In the Realm of the Senses* (*Ai no korida*, 1976) and *Empire of Passion* (*Ai no borei*, 1978), Oshima took a five-year leave from filmmaking. When he returned with *Merry Christmas*, the crumbling edifices of Japanese cinema compelled him to follow the route of international co-production, which by that time was more a necessity than a privilege. Among Oshima’s forays into international market, *Merry Christmas* marks his first and only return to the contemporary political issues specific to Japan that so preoccupied Oshima and his Japanese New Wave

contemporaries in the 1960s. At the same time, its textual and extra-textual manipulations—setting a homosexual story in a wartime prison camp and featuring legendary rock stars David Bowie and Ryuichi Sakamoto—also mark Oshima’s most self-conscious entrance to an international artistic identity. The difficulty of coming to terms with national trauma is known to many societies and cultures that have been transformed by memories. For Japan, the question of how to treat the memories of World War II—whether to deplore it, sanitize it, or even ignore it—has aroused passions revolving around ethics, nationality, and historical identity. This chapter traces Oshima’s evolving, and often conflicting, understandings of World War II, as read through *The Catch* (*Shiiku*, 1961) to *Merry Christmas*. I argue that these works show how changing social and political environments have influenced Japan’s vision of war. Flavoured with equal amounts of triumph and idiosyncrasy, *Merry Christmas* serves as a characteristic example in which the former New Wave auteurs seek to execute a dramatic reconfiguration of historical memory at a transnational and global turn.

1. From Activist Intervention to Artificial Theatricality

Oshima spent the early part of his career exposing the distortions of postwar developments and the “lies” of his father’s generation (Tezuka 67). Twenty years before *Merry Christmas*, *Mr. Lawrence*, when Oshima and his young contemporaries started making auteurist films articulating the political culture of the 1960s, Oshima probed deeply into the war subject with *The Catch*. The film clearly conveys Oshima’s categorical rejection of humanistic interpretations of the war framed around a victim-persecutor dynamic that prevailed in postwar Japan—a phenomenon called “victimization syndrome”. Following Japan’s defeat in the war, with the exception of a brilliant few like Akira Kurosawa’s *No Regret for our Youth* (*Waga seishun ni kuinashi*, 1946), films representing World War II were rare—largely because of rigid censorship during the American Occupation (1945-52). As Maureen Turim observes, after

years of carefully monitored discourse, a question filmmakers needed to confront was how to react both to the history of the war and to the history of the occupation's control over the war issue. It was during the post-occupation period when this so-called victimization syndrome emerged—a narrative framework which insisted on placing all blame for the war exclusively on military leaders and ignoring the responsibility of individuals:

[W]hile this blame may have served an immediate postwar purpose in breaking traditional obedience to the military, it fed into an absence of individual morality that Japanese thinkers such as Oshima find an equally troubling, if not greater, problem. If the Japanese see themselves as victims of the past leaders, now eradicated, they may never ask what role each plays in participating in or even indirectly supporting wars of aggression. (158)

The “absence of individual morality” manifests in films such as *Towers of Lilies* (*Himeyuri no To*, dir. Tadashi Imai, 1953) and *Twenty-Four Eyes* (*Nijushi no hitomi*, dir. Keisuke Kinoshita, 1955), which stress the tremendous cost Japanese civilians paid for the atrocities. For this reason, immediately following his angry separation with Shochiku Film Studio over their suppression of *Night and Fog in Japan* (*Nihon no yoru to kiri*, 1960), Oshima turned to an adaptation of an unsettling and politically trenchant story by Nobel laureate Kenzaburo Oe as the departure of his long independent career. Oshima focuses on Japanese attitudes towards the Other in a narrative about a U.S. pilot who was captured and imprisoned in rural Japan near the end of World War II. The silent prisoner, a black man who is referred to as “the nigger” by the villagers, becomes a convenient scapegoat for denying responsibility for all manners of crimes, and ultimately for the war itself. Oshima's radical exposure of Japanese xenophobia, hypocrisy, and denial is fraught with historical and ideological resonance referencing immediate social conditions, again suggesting that his films held a clear ideological kinship with his French New Wave counterparts. Like the French auteurist critics, Oshima recognizes the films that he directs

as an extension of his personality and an opportunity for personal expression. As Maureen Turim states, “[a]uteurism construed itself as a remedy to the studio system and the industrialization and standardization of film production” (2). The alternate models for the anonymous and apolitical standards of studio production could also easily be read in this film.

Merry Christmas marks Oshima’s first and only return to contemporary political issues specific to Japan after his foray into international film production in the 1970s, making it akin to *The Catch*, in that both films aim to decode the national psyche towards difference and the Other. An already volatile atmosphere between captured and captors, oppressed and oppressors, is further underlined by the arrival of David Bowie’s character Jacques Celliers, a captured British Major who exerts a deep sexual fascination over the young camp commandant, Captain Yonoi (Ryuichi Sakamoto). Here, Oshima plays out again all the tensions and discordance in the hermetic milieu during the Pacific War, but the military antagonism is replaced by the notions of cultural, racial, and spiritual conflict. With an understanding of Japanese language and customs, British Lieutenant Colonel John Lawrence (Tom Conti) acts as an intermediary. His budding friendship with Sergeant Hara (Takeshi Kitano) forms the framework of story, providing a foil for the increasingly torturous emotion emerging between Yonoi and Celliers and the threat it poses to the order of prison camp.

Although *Merry Christmas* was ostensibly based on South African writer Laurens van der Post’s autobiographical novella *The Sower and the Seed*, which documents his days as a Japanese POW in Southeast Asia, the narrative was so extensively adapted by Oshima and screenwriter Paul Mayersberg that it bears little resemblance to the original. The complex narrative of the novella, comprising three interrelated stories entwined with Celliers’s background and war history, are condensed in the film to create a more hermetic narrative. For

example, in the novel, Celliers's life before the war is depicted through a diary entry detailing the man's experiences growing up and receiving a rigorous English education in South Africa, where he went on to become a lawyer defending the blacks from racial discrimination. In the film, however, Bowie's Celliers is a mysterious blonde man who fell to earth—the cross-cultural background suggested by the novel's sub-narrative is almost totally erased. Similarly, references to historical Japanese invasions of Southeast Asia are even more brief in the film than they are in the novel—the only remaining reference to Japan's military invasion during the Pacific War are in the scenes from Celliers' trial, when it is necessary to explain the charges against him.

These elisions seem to be the cost Oshima paid for narrative economy, but they do help strengthen the emphasis on the isolated geographic setting—a Japanese POW camp in Java—as *huis clos* theatre space. The space in *Merry Christmas* parallels the hermetic isolation of the village in *The Catch*, but it differs in other ways. Although the space in *The Catch* is almost completely cut off from the outside world, the apparent affinity between the cinematographic image and the visual reality creates a strong pressure on the viewer to accept the village as the real world. Oshima then adds the female refugee from Tokyo, raising awareness of the relationship between the events in this isolated village to those of the outside world—a world in which, at this point, the war was going badly for the Japanese. In *Merry Christmas*, however, Oshima rejects the docudrama scheme of war film and emphasizes the fictitious nature of the depicted events. From the opening sequence, Oshima introduces us to a stylized world, with the cinematographer taking advantage of the island's yellows and greens to create a mood of dreamlike tranquility—a tranquility which will only be broken by the coming violence. Moreover, the haunting synthesizer and gamelan score composed by Ryuichi Sakamoto—who was primarily known as a musician before starring as Yonoi in the film—further enhances

Oshima's play of distancing and theatrical space, creating a surrealistic atmosphere that facilitates a further remove from reality. This is indeed Oshima's appeal—a remote stage that centres Yonoi and Celliers' saga, in which the Japanese xenophobia towards the enemy in *The Catch* shifts to the binary antinomy of obsessional pleasure and its connection to fear.

Oshima aims to show both sides of World War II equally, claiming that he is the first Japanese director to do so (Pulvers). It does not confine the Western subjects to the monolithic heroic ground, which is why Lawrence repeatedly says, "we are all wrong," when he attempts to explain the bizarre behavior of the Japanese to his comrades but receives stubborn resistance from Captain Hicksley: "Understand them, do you, Lawrence? If I were you, I would commit hara-kiri." However, as Celliers bursts through the registration as "a born leader," he establishes his internal strength—a trait emphasized by rock-star bearing of David Bowie himself. Celliers goes on to exhibit moments of messianic glory in scenes from the one in the courtroom, in which Celliers is positioned at the centre of the judge's platform with the camera slowly zooming in on Yonoi as he looks onward, to the execution scene in which he survives being shot at close range by a whole squad of shooters. The execution scene features perfect symmetry; Cellier's arms are spread majestically by the manacles that hang from chains on the ceiling. His implausible survival of the shooting constitutes a complete rupture of realistic logic and also evokes the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian (fig. 4-1). The only interruption of Celliers' mysterious presence is a guilty childhood memory that haunts him—his boyhood betrayal of his brother, a hunchbacked boy with a beautiful singing voice. Celliers's memories emerge as flashbacks when he shares a cell with Lawrence awaiting execution. This flashback may be the film's strangest moment. The farmhouse and the British boy's school are depicted with caricature-like physical exaggeration, emphasizing their function as cultural artifacts. In the flashback, a grown-up Celliers stands side-by-side with his brother, who remains a ten-year-

old. It is more consistent with the film's code of the extremely artificial theatricality than with Celliers's authentic history, a saturated mise-en-scene that distorts mere realism into unsettling description of the event.



Fig. 4-1. *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* (1983). Celliers's execution

Cellier's guilt mirrors Yonoi's torment for not being able to stay with his comrades during the February 26 Incident (1936), in which a group young Imperial Japanese Army officers assassinated the government and military leadership of their factional rivals and ideological opponents.¹⁸ The incident is the most detailed historical background in the film, but also exposes the semiotic interpretation that relates Yonoi to Mishima Yukio and his public hara-kiri in 1970. The officers involved in the 1936 assassination were finally executed, but they

¹⁸ The incident was an attempted coup d'etat in which some Japanese troops took over the capital of Tokyo to express anger at the government. They criticized the government's supposedly passive foreign policy and lack of respect for the Emperor. It was led by a group of young army radicals, who mustered the support of over one thousand troops in their attack on government buildings in Tokyo. The rebels assassinated a number of several prominent politicians, including the Home and Finance Ministers Takashi Koreiyo, and were able to hold the Tokyo Police Department building. However, the rebels failed to gain the Emperor's backing. After the Emperor declared that he did not support their actions, the army was sent to destroy the rebel forces. Although the rebellion was promptly suppressed by February 29, it dramatized ideological clashes and factional strife within the Imperial Army and the tensions between civil and military authorities. For further information in English, see, for example, Ben-Ami Shillony, *Revolt in Japan: The Young Officer and the February 26, 1936 Incident*, Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973.

became heroes in the growing tide of ultra-nationalism, as well as objects of fascination for Japanese writers. Mishima was a great admirer of the young officers and created the short story *Patriotism*, which documents a young officer's hara-kiri following the February 26 Incident. He also directed and starred in his own film adaptation of the story in 1969, which turned out to be a rehearsal for his real ritual sacrifice a year later. Sakamoto even entitled his sound track to the film *Forbidden Colors*, the title of Mishima's most explicitly homosexual novel. The film also makes extra-textual and meta-textual manipulations by drawing on parallels between the characters and performers—David Bowie's bisexual stage persona paralleled the homosexuality of his character Celliers, while Mishima's image was associated with interlocking references to history, reestablishing him as a pop icon to Japanese viewers even as he complicated the samurai code with homoerotic mystification.

As leading American film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum points out, Oshima's cinema consists of particular interventions in Japan's internal political debates, and freely draws on forms as well as styles that seem to come from everywhere. Some would call this disconcertingly voracious trait "very Japanese," and it helps to account for the truism that no two Oshima films are alike (162). As such, any auteurist characterization of his work comes with serious complications. When returning to the themes of his past career, *Merry Christmas* vacillates between a matter-of-fact recounting of the war and a dreamlike immersion in weighty, tragic-romantic melodrama, heightening the overall dramatic impact of each. This tension between Oshima's belief in the director-as-auteur and his obvious desire to eradicate his learned experience foregrounds a series of ambivalences that haunt the narratives.

2. The Power and Powerlessness of Homosexual Representations

The pervasive homoeroticism in *Merry Christmas* is a serious psychoanalysis of the Japanese

actions in the war. Here, we can refer again to Oshima's adaptation from Oe's story in *The Catch*, in which he displaces the homoeroticism by a complex narrative of patriarchal power in the village. More specifically, Oe is insistent on the village boy's fascination with the U.S. prisoner. He locates the erotic in the defamiliarization of the ordinary experience that the black pilot's body is seen as exotic and therefore having erotic appeal. The film, on the contrary, adds a village elder who has affairs with his son's bride, and with a Tokyo female refugee. As Oshima ascribes the incestuous desire that portrays the central patriarchal authorities as a corrupt commune, we get a sense of the oppression that does not simply derive from reactions to the war.

It is noteworthy that between *The Catch* and *Merry Christmas*, there occurred a revolution of film theory closely related to feminist movements in Europe and the United States. This revolution was notable for its use of psychoanalysis and semiotics to rethink the politics of representation and the construction of subjectivity in the cinematic situation. One of the most influential essays is Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* in 1975. In this essay, Mulvey extrapolates on the motion picture industry as a privileged representation system that indulges in the "pleasure in looking," in which the determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female image:

The scopophilic instinct (pleasure in looking at another person as an erotic object), and, in contradictions, ego libido (forming identity processes) act as formations, mechanisms, which this cinema has played on. The image of women as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man takes the argument a step further into the structure of representation, adding a further layer demanded by the ideology of the patriarchal order as it is worked out in its favorite cinematic form—illusionistic narrative film. (843)

Mulvey's theory has been widely influential not only in feminist cinema, but also in discussions of marginal sexualities in general, including lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) identities, not mentioned in the text. The different treatments of homosexuality between *The Catch* and *Merry Christmas* implies Oshima became quite aware of the rhetorical capacity of sexual representations. Indeed, after the release of his controversial film *In the Realm of the Senses*, Oshima created all his works beyond the limitations of the Japanese film industry. This shift offered him access to the world market, and, more importantly, a perspective for rethinking the polemics of sexuality in those films. Oshima developed his critique by challenging the Japanese censorship and the restrictive practices in the film industry, as well as the symbolic structure of Japanese patriarchal authority. His films *In the Realm of the Senses*, *Empire of Passion* and *Max, Mon Amour* (1986) explicitly portray the female's venture into the limits of heterosexuality. Then, Oshima exploded into queer cinema with *Merry Christmas* and *Taboo* (*Gohatto*, 1999). The pervasive sexual signifiers from *In the Realm of the Senses* to *Taboo*, which Scott Nygren refers to "Oshima's vast historical project," comprise their psychoanalytic and historical contents. However, seldom are these films examined for their content directly relating to political and historic issues, which was Oshima's primary occupation between 1959 and 1972. As Nygren elaborates, "Oshima has consistently represented history as a complex intersection of conflicted sexualities and political institutions and discourses" (540).

The opening scene in *Merry Christmas* may best exemplify how marginal sexual representations function within wider social and political contexts. The film opens with the Sergeant Hara's resolution of a "shameful incident": a Korean military guard with the Japanese surname Kanemoto has allegedly raped a Dutch POW. Summoning Lawrence to witness the interrogation, Hara punctuates this story with taunts to the guard that expresses genuine curiosity, "How did you use your thing on his white ass?" Finally, he unties Kanemoto and

urges him to repeat the crime in front of them, promising that “if you screw him again now, I will permit you to commit hara-kiri.” Lawrence stops Hara and calls for Yonoi’s help, but Kanemoto, apparently having decided to accept Hara’s bargain, begins crawling toward the Dutchman. His motivation is difficult to interpret—death wish, sexual desire, or simple panic (fig. 4-2).



Fig. 4-2. *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* (1983). The opening scene: Sergeant Hara interrogates the Korean soldier Kanemoto, who allegedly raped a Dutch POW.

The Korean’s Japanese surname implies the consistency of *Zainichi* problem (Korean diaspora in Japan)¹⁹, another of Oshima’s primary cinematic preoccupations early in his career. Back then, Oshima felt himself being essentially oppressed in Japan, and thus “[felt] sympathy for

¹⁹ The Japanese term *Zainichi* means “staying in Japan,” but that is usually shorthand for Koreans who came here during Japan’s colonial rule, and their descendants. There were three major Korean migration streams to Japan. The first and second waves occurred in response to Japan’s colonial restructuring on the Korean peninsula. The third wave, which occurred between 1939 and 1945, was brought upon by war and was involuntary. Under the National Manpower Mobilization Act of 1939, Korean laborers and military draftees were brought to Japan as manpower to fuel the wartime economy. When Japan annexed Korea, there were only 790 Koreans in Japan, mostly students; by the end of World War II, the Korean population had surpassed 2,300,000. Immediately following the war, many of these Koreans returned to their homeland. However, due to economic difficulties in postwar Korea, about 600,000 Koreans decided to stay in Japan. The Koreans who stayed in Japan and their descendants came to be called *Zainichi* Koreans, one of the largest minority groups in Japan today and a source of considerable majority-minority tensions. In the first quarter-century following World War II, ethnic Koreans in Japan faced systematic exclusion and discrimination—in education, employment, housing, and marriage. See “Koreans in Japan Pre-war Japan and the Origins of the Korean Diaspora,” *Spice Stanford*, Fall (2010).

others who are similarly oppressed and want to make films about others who are oppressed” (qtd. in Pulvers). The delinquent youth and the resident Korean, therefore, were the motifs he chose to ally himself with Japanese social outcasts and outsiders whose harsh lives constitute a shadowy part of high economic growth. At the height of Korean-Japanese animosity in the 1960s, he shot the short documentary *Forgotten Imperial Soldiers* (*Wasurerareta Kougun*, 1963), exposing a taboo topic in postwar Japan as his camera followed a group of disabled Korean-Japanese veterans who received no compensation after the war. Shota T. Ogawa points out that Koreans figured not simply as characters, but as markers of the threshold of representability, “the utopian ‘other space’ opens up in ‘impossible’ narrative space and defies the panoptic sovereign gaze” (303).

The aggressive and straightforward didactic style in *Forgotten Imperial Soldiers*, however, becomes a kind of double psycho-political agent in *Merry Christmas*. Throughout the interrogation, Lawrence repeatedly asks Hara why he is showing him this scene, especially if it is a secret embarrassing to tell. His suspicion forms the interpretative meanings the film requires. On the one hand, Hara not only tells Lawrence of the rape but effectively restages it in order to show the Japanese ultranationalist subject’s confrontation, positioning the Western imperialist subject (Holland) as a sexual objectivization of the latter. On the other, since the homosexual encounter is a “shameful incident,” a Korean soldier with a Japanese surname carries out the rape with Hara in the director’s position, articulating the rape of the Western subject in the gaze of his target “audience” Lawrence.

For Mulvey, avant-garde movies provide a space to challenge the basic assumptions of the mainstream film; this, she asserts, is “not to reject the latter moralistically, but to highlight the ways in which its formal preoccupations reflect the psychological obsessions of the society which

produce it, and, further, to stress that the alternative cinema must start specifically by reacting to these obsessions and assumptions” (834). One reason that these marginal sexual practices, such as the homosexuality in *Merry Christmas*, might prove useful in reactions against illustrative narrative is their common ideological ground: their isolation as a deviation from the presumed “natural” default of heterosexuality. LGBT individuals’ deviation from the “naturalness” of dominant heterosexuality is one of those representations whose identity constructs deviation from normative forms of social life. However, if the mainstream cinemas are to be understood as the scopophilic products of a patriarchal paradigm, an aspect of paradoxes regarding the transgressive sexual practice that subverts this kind of scopophilia maybe its overemphasis on such transgression. In other words, the form of the representations of sexuality in those texts may outweigh the interpretive message.

This brings me back to the major issue which opens this thesis: how intellectuals mobilize new and revised narratives to explain the national past whose representations are subjectively constructed to fit the present. As we can see in the Korean subject in the opening scene, the statement of its performative meanings seems to be greater than its denotative meanings, as illustrated through Hara’s dirty jokes, which mix the abhorrence and scopophilic pleasure of homosexual acts. Oshima appeals to the psychoanalytic representations that function as a significant connector to wider social and cultural context, most obviously the homoeroticism between Cellier and Yonoi; however, sometimes homosexual desire serves not as the political imperative or conceptual content of the filmic utterance, but as a strategy of its representation. In other words, one must formulate the theoretical issues that the film addresses without succumbing to the film’s patterns of fascination. A homosexuality which deviates from the “natural” in the film thus obscures its further signifying potential: its meaning is exhausted in its “deviance.” It is difficult not to project such imbalance into Oshima’s European excursions

that seemed a world apart from his early works. Throughout the 1960s, Oshima was the Jean-Luc Godard of the East, one of the most important names in world cinema to offer a breakthrough for the avant-garde; today, however, he is remembered outside Japan mainly as a director, who, forty years ago, made the sexually explicit film, *In the Realm of the Senses*.

3. Scrambling Identity in Transnational Production

As I mentioned, from *In the Realm of the Senses* onward, Oshima had created all his works outside of the Japanese film industry. The apparent dominance of transnational over domestic production cannot plausibly be explained by theories of cultural imperialism alone; rather, they may be seen as another attempt by Oshima to transcend the constraint of social circumstance. If Oshima created *In the Realm of the Senses* as a transnational production mainly as a strategy to help him break taboos and circumvent censorship, when he returned with *Merry Christmas*, he did so possibly more as a necessity than as a privilege—during his five-year absence from filmmaking, Japan's studio production system had more or less collapsed. Throughout the postwar period up to the early 1980s, the number of foreign films (mainly American) imported into Japan annually hovered between 200 and 250. Meanwhile, the percentage of box office revenue generated by foreign films increased dramatically from around 30% in the 1960s to nearly 50% in the early 1980s.²⁰ As national cinemas were in decline, money was instead invested primarily in Japanese animation and in Hollywood studios—popular cultural products that guaranteed high returns. Donald Richie offers such an awkward picture of Japanese cinema in the 1980s:

Following the various innovations of the 1960s and the gradual accommodations of the New Wave directors, it would have been appropriate for another new generation of young directors to appear in the 1980s had the finances of the motion-picture industry made this

²⁰ Data from Motion Picture Producers Association of Japan (MPAJ)

possible.

But they did not. Cinema's missing audience, led astray by television, never returned. Japan's enormous film factories (Toho, Shochiku, Toei) could not adjust themselves to a minority audience, and continued to pine for the missing majority. (78)

In the face of such difficulties, most New Wave directors retreated to other genres (like Susumu Hani and Shohei Imamura) or, like Hiroshi Teshigahara to other artistic pursuits altogether; however, an iconoclast like Oshima was still able to make successful films through international coproduction. Shown out of competition at the Cannes Film Festival, *Death by Hanging* (*Koushikei*, 1968) earned Oshima international recognition for the first time, which allowed him the chance collaborate with French producers for the next few years on productions like *In the Realm of the Senses* and *Empire of Passion*. *Merry Christmas* marks Oshima's most self-conscious entrance to an international artistic identity. Cooperating with British producer Jeremy Thomas, who would later produce *The Last Emperor* (1988) for Bernardo Bertolucci, Oshima brought together British rock icon David Bowie, Japanese musician and composer Ryuichi Sakamoto, and the comedic actor and soon-to-be-famous director Takeshi Kitano. Working with a low budget, they shot the film in New Zealand to take advantage of the country's generous tax shelter fund. Promotional campaigns for the film emphasized the international achievements of Oshima and other talents involved in the project (Tezuka 88). In his essay *Perspectives on Japanese Film*, Oshima talks about the difficulties raising funds domestically in competition with foreign films, but also highlights the global marketplace as a doorway to new possibilities:

[E]ven if I cannot attract large audiences everywhere in the world, I can make films that are sure to attract audiences everywhere, even if they are small. Although the number in each country will be small, they will add up to a certain total worldwide. That is what

makes it possible for me to make my next film. This is how I would like to make the international films. (15)

Although Oshima had expressed his optimism about international production resisting the great difficulty of producing films domestically, *Merry Christmas* still failed to meet his expectation to attract worldwide audiences. The film competed with fellow Japanese New Wave director Shohei Imamura's *The Ballad of Narayama* for the Palme d'Or at the 1983 Cannes Film Festival, but it was Imamura who ultimately took home the prize. In spite of a global theatrical run, including wide release in American theatres, *Merry Christmas* became surprisingly obscure following the mixed reception it received upon its release. The 1980s had witnessed a great deal of transnational co-productions that reinvested commercial potential beyond Japan; however, Japan's vision of war seemed less topical in Europe, which permitted nothing that breaks with traditional Japanese aesthetics to be truly Japanese. This could in part explain the success of *The Ballad of Narayama* at Cannes—the story, founded on premodern society and Japanese traditional myths, was both exotic and captivating to Western audiences. Two years later, *Ran* (1985), Akira Kurosawa's version of *King Lear*, achieved greater recognition around the world. Kurosawa borrowed what he wanted from Shakespeare, but transposed it to the well-known legend of Motonari Mori, a sixteenth-century warlord whose three sons are regarded as examples of filial virtue in Japan. Of many connotative aesthetic identities, it is always the samurai film, set in feudal Japan, that popularized Japanese cinema in the West.

Even in Japan, the unsettling issues of war had gone out of focus in Japanese social and political life in the 1980s. Contrary to the common belief that the defeat in the war brought about long-term recession and consequently changed Japan's cultural values, the fundamentals of national identity were kept intact, if not enhanced, as the country's economic power grew. In the mid-

1980s, right before the economic bubble burst, Japan was the only non-Western country to achieve and even surpass the level of economic and technological development attained by industrialized Western countries (Sugimoto 85). The Japanese public's growing confidence and nationalism was reflected in the popularity of *Nihonjinron*²¹, what J. Hoberman defines as “the theory of Japaneseness,” narcissistically presenting Japanese culture as a unique model for Japan's road towards its economic miracle. Although the *Nihonjinron* that prevailed in the 1970s and the 1980s primarily focused on cultural domains, Harumi Befu argues it was deeply rooted in the propaganda of World War II imperial Japan. It indeed legitimated political authority of nationhood through an appeal to some transcendent context:

Both wartime *Nihonjinron* and postwar neo-*Nihonjinron* rely heavily on Japan's primordial sentiments inherent in the presumed “ethnic essence” of Japanese—blood, purity of race, language mystique, and so on. For example, the idea that the Japanese people are homogeneous and the Japanese culture is pure and unique, which formed the basis of the wartime nationalistic ideology, is repeated in postwar *Nihonjinron*. (Befu 102)

Along with most Japanese popular culture, Japanese cinema was an uneasy fit for the pursuit of *Nihonjinron*. Immensely popular works in this genre overwhelmingly portrayed the distinctive features of Japanese society and culture, taking the West as the main standard of comparison. “Whether these works put a positive or negative spin on their conclusion, they assert with numbing repetition the uniqueness of Japan” (Ivy 2). There is no doubt that the

²¹ *Nihonjinron*, also known as *Nihon bunkaron*, *Nihon shakairon*, *Nihonron*, etc., is a body of discourse that focus on issues of nationalism and cultural identity in varied fields as history, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, science, psychology, linguistics, music and the arts. It is characterized by the attempt to capture the essential character, personality, and behavior that mark a national population as distinct and different from other people. Many of its major themes of *Nihonjinron* can be traced back to the Tokugawa period of 1600 to 1868. The period of nation building in the advent of the Meiji restoration of 1868 forged an urgency in defining Japanese self-identity vis-à-vis the new Other- the West. After the end of World War II, discussions of Japanese identity were inobtrusive, but with the new-found economic prosperity in the 1960s attention again altered to the positive dimensions of *Nihonjinron*. As Japan's economy became stronger in the 1970s and 1980s *Nihonjinron* as the activity of intellectuals and cultural elites had its heyday. For an introduction to *Nihonjinron*, see Ando Shirley, “A Look at *Nihonjinron*: Theories of Japaneseness,” *大手前大学論集*, 10 (2009): 33–42.

prime message behind *Merry Christmas* was to repudiate such an assertion. With Captain Yonoi's obsessive love for Celliers, Oshima was questioning the bushido code of masculinity; with the portrayal of hara-kiri as brutal and botched, Oshima was questioning the notion of a noble death. Most of all, by providing a critical insight into Japaneseness, he was challenging the collective, selective amnesia that had settled on his nation in the 1980s. As Oshima states, "With *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*, the story may take place in the 1940s, but the film is about the 1980s. You see, we view the past through the prism of our own era. I don't make so-called period films. My films are about now" (qtd. in Pulvers). Moving forward, turning a new page, and making a clean break from the past call for the filmmaker's awareness of seeking chilling echoes of a history that is not too distant but already forgotten.

While being a truly internationally-minded film, with Oshima's attempt to deconstruct the mythology of Japaneseness, *Merry Christmas* maintains "a curiously dislocated quality," as Janet Masin pointed out in her *New York Times* review. The combination of all cross-cultural elements is—sometimes deliberately, sometimes unintentionally—compelling and strange. Oshima reinvented the war subject he had once addressed from a more global perspective, but the varying perspectives—political, cultural, psychological and homosexual—cause the film to trip over itself as these perspectives run in several directions at once, losing their totality. An overloaded expression leads to a disjointed production which, though a noble effort on Oshima's part, ultimately falls flat. Fortunately, the film's quiriness and moments of brilliance endeared it to a certain subset of viewers, and it earned a following among cult- and art-film fans as well as die-hard fans of David Bowie, Sakamoto and Kitano.

Looking back into how the national trauma and collective memory were reconstructed, postsocialist China seemed to go through a similar journey as Japan did from the 1960s to the

1980s—an emergence of remarkable speed and scale after such significant national trauma. This is why Oshima became increasingly interested in discussing young Chinese and Korean filmmakers such as Chen Kaige and Lee Jang Ho, whom he ostensibly saw as the best inheritors and carriers of his New Wave legacy. He generously praised China's Fifth Generation directors, who had just launched their New Wave movement in China in the mid-1980s, as if he were bestowing his legacy upon them to be carried into the future. In 1986, Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* made its Japanese premiere and a meeting was arranged with Oshima. The Fifth Generation's initial historical reflection that kicked off a filmic innovation adopted more or less the same strategies as Oshima had in his early career. Their later struggle of "going out into the world" offered a similarly interesting example of how Asian filmmakers sought to disembody their filmmaking practice from the national framework in the process of globalization, and how paradoxical it was.

Conclusion

Back in the most prolific days of Oshima and his contemporaries, when they were torn between the realms of auteur-driven art and studio-mandated product, Oshima saw a bleak phenomenon of "courage failing"—a circumstance in which the individual is overtaken by the omnipresent. Perhaps the faith in "courage" was the sign of a younger man who ultimately believed that personal commitment and strength of purpose could overcome ideological and institutional barriers. Twenty years have passed since Oshima made this claim, Oshima continued striving to overcome ideological and institutional barriers, but "an ambiguous Japan, where the instant anything is made it seems to be completely buried in reality" (Oshima 211)—a phenomenon we might now term postmodernism—makes his goal of reconstructing the memories of World War II extremely challenging. What Oshima describes in *Merry Christmas* is not only the crisis of war memories in postmodern Japan, but perhaps more importantly, it describes Oshima's

profound ambivalence about his personal position within his field of work—the crisis of his own art. It did not stop Oshima from producing films and from seeking to unlock the imagination we have explored in this chapter, but it clearly revealed a filmmaker who had reached a new juncture where exploitation was inevitable, negative influences were strongly felt, and the present threatened to dictate the past.

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Filmography

Chinese Films

Chan Ho-sun

2007 *The Warlords (Tou mingzhuang)*

Chen Huai'ai and Cui Wei

1959 *The Song of Youth (Qingchun zhi ge)*

Chen Kaige

1984 *Yellow Earth (Huang tudi)*

1987 *King of the Children (Haizi wang)*

1993 *Farewell My Concubine (Bawang bieji)*

1999 *The Emperor and the Assassin (Jingke ci qinwang)*

2002 *Together (He ni zai yiqi)*

2002 *Killing Me Softly*

2002 *100 Flowers Hidden Deep (Baihua shenchi, Segment in the anthology film Ten Minutes Older: The Trumpet)*

2005 *The Promise (Wuji)*

Cheng Yin

1981 *The Xi'an Incident (Xi'an shibian)*

Feng Xiaogang

2001 *Big Shot's Funeral (Dawan)*

Huang Jianxin

1986 *The Black Cannon Incident (Heipao shijian)*

1987 *Dislocation (Cuowei)*

1989 *Transmigration (Lunhui)*

1992 *Stand Up, Don't Bend Down (Zhanzhilou, bie paxia)*

1994 *Back to Back, Face to Face (Bei kao bei, lian dui lian)*

2009 *The Founding of a Republic (Jianguo daye)*

Jiang Wen

1994 *In the Heat of the Sun (Yangguangcanlan de rizi)*

Jiang Zhangke

1997 *Xiao Wu (Xiaowu)*

2006 *Still Life (Sanxia haoren)*

2008 *24 City (Ershisi cheng ji)*

Ning Ying

- 1992 *For Fun (Zhaole)*
 1995 *On the Beat (Minjing gushi)*
 2000 *I Love Beijing (Xiari nuanyangyang)*

Tian Zhuangzhuang

- 1994 *The Blue Kite (Lan fengzheng)*

Wang Xiaoshuai

- 2001 *Beijing Bicycle (Shiqi sui de danche)*

Wu Yigong

- 1982 *My Memories of Old Beijing (Chengnan jiushi)*

Xie Jin

- 1980 *Legend of the Tianyun Mountain (Tianyunshan chuanqi)*
 1987 *Hibiscus Town (Furongzhen)*

Zhang Junzhao

- 1983 *One and Eight (Yige he bage)*

Zhang Yimou

- 1988 *Red Sorghum (Hong gaoliang, dir. Zhang Yimou)*
 1991 *Raise the Red Lantern (Dahong Denglong Gaogaogua)*
 1994 *To Live (Huo zhe)*
 1997 *Keep Cool (Youhua haohao shuo)*
 1999 *Not One Less (Yige dou buneng shao)*
 1999 *The Road Home (Wo de fuqin muqin)*
 2000 *Happy Times (Xingfu shiguang)*
 2002 *Hero (Yingxiong)*
 2004 *House of Flying Daggers (Shimianmaifu)*
 2005 *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles (Qianli zou danji)*
 2006 *Curse of the Golden Flower (Mancheng jindai huangjinjia)*
 2009 *A Simple Noodle Story (Sanqiang pai 'anqingqi)*
 2010 *Love under the Hawthorn Tree (Shanzhashu zhi lian)*
 2011 *The Flowers of War (Jinling shisan chai)*
 2014 *Coming Home (Guilai)*

Japanese Films

Imai Tadashi

- 1953 *Towers of Lilies (Himeyuri no To)*

Imamura Shohei

1983 *The Ballad of Narayama (Narayama bushiko)*

Kinoshita Keisuke

1955 *Twenty-Four Eyes (Nijushi no hitomi)*

Kurosawa Akira

1946 *No Regret for our Youth (Waga seishun ni kuinashi)*

1985 *Ran*

Oshima Nagisa

1960 *Night and Fog in Japan (Nihon no yoru to kiri)*

1961 *The Catch (Shiiku)*

1963 *Forgotten Imperial Soldiers (Wasurerareta Kougun)*

1968 *Death by Hanging (Koushikei)*

1976 *In the Realm of the Senses (Ai no korida)*

1978 *Empire of Passion (Ai no borei)*

1983 *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence (Senjo no merii kurisumasu)*

1986 *Max, Mon Amour*

1999 *Taboo (Gohatto)*

Other Films Cited

1964 *The Red Desert* (dir. Michelangelo Antonioni)

1973 *American Graffiti* (dir. George Lucas)

1974 *Chinatown* (dir. Roman Polanski)

1988 *The Last Emperor* (dir. Bernardo Bertolucci)

1997 *Titanic* (dir. James Cameron)

2002 *Ten Minutes Older: The Cello* (dir. Bernardo Bertolucci, Mike Figgis, Jirí Menzel, István Szabó, Claire Denis, Volker Schlöndorff, Michael Radford)

2002 *Ten Minutes Older: The Trumpet* (dir. Jim Jarmusch, Wim Wenders, Aki Kaurismäki, Werner Herzog, Chen Kaige, Víctor Erice, Spike Lee)

2003 *Good Bye, Lenin!* (dir. Wolfgang Becker)

2004 *50 First Dates* (dir. Peter Segal)

2004 *Kill Bill: Volume 2* (dir. Quentin Tarantino)

2008 *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor* (dir. Rob Cohen)

2009 *2012* (dir. Roland Emmerich)

2009 *Transformer: Revenge of the Fallen* (dir. Michael Bay)