

5-1-2010

The Evolution of Revolution: The Dilemma of Censorship and Fifth Generation Filmmakers

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Pace University
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The Evolution of Revolution: The Dilemma of Censorship and the Fifth Generation Filmmakers

**“The people may be allowed to act, but may not be allowed to know.”
- Confucius-**



**Thesis Presented for the Partial Fulfillment of the Degree of BACHELOR OF ARTS in
HISTORY**

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April 26, 2010

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Table of Contents

Précis.....	1
Bibliographical Essay.....	2
Introduction.....	9
Ancient Antecedents.....	9
Censorship Discovers Cinema.....	10
Censorship Serves the State.....	13
Censorship for the Masses.....	16
Revolutionary Arts.....	17
End of an Era.....	19
Filmmakers of the Urbling Generation.....	21
Innovative Ambiguity.....	24
Modes of Resistance.....	27
Changing Worlds: Post-socialist Cinemas.....	33
Captives of Censorship.....	34
Appendix of Images.....	38
Bibliography.....	39

Table of Images

Image 1.....24

Image 2.....28

Image 3.....30

Précis

China's Fifth Generation Filmmakers¹ brought forth a burst of transformative cinema, but it could not be done without the strong historical antecedents of cultural turmoil and official censorship steered by the singular political course of the Chinese Communist Party. This group of filmmakers, particularly Chen Kaige (b. 1952), Tian Zhuangzhuang (b. 1952), and Zhang Yimou (b. 1951), produced a national cinema that was defined by censorship. It became their dilemma to define a course within the confines of censorship that not only absorbed the duality of censorship, which serves to both condemn and to promote, but also defied and altered that course to serve their own purposes. Their films became experiments at resolving this dilemma. Each filmmaker focused on his own unique way of recanting censorship boundaries, but together they brought Chinese cinema to the forefront of world attention. Unfortunately, this legacy served to entrap them in a self-censorship of expectations. They have found it difficult to progress beyond their own achievements as they continue to face a double standard of censorship both by their government and by national critics who decry their work as biased by Orientalism and Westernization. Their circumscription by censorship is complete and unprecedented.

¹ The phrase "Fifth Generation Filmmakers" refers to the group of filmmakers who all graduated from Beijing Film Academy in 1982. They were the first group of filmmakers to graduate since the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 and are noted for their ability to challenge traditional ways of producing narratives on the big screen.

Bibliographical Essay

China's Fifth Generation filmmakers have achieved an iconic stature in their own nation as well as in the West based upon their initial 1990s offerings as purveyors of a new form of dissent against their closed society. Initially their "emergence" was captured in journal articles centering on film criticism as the relative novelty of their type of quality film opened the international vision to Chinese film and its associated historiography. However, the "New Cinema" of the Fifth Generation filmmakers, particularly Chen Kaige, Tian Zhuangzhuang, and Zhang Yimou, has become the focus of intensive study as a direct result of films, banned in their own country, attaining major success in the international film festivals. Add the post-socialist "opening" of China in recent decades to the mix, and these works of the Fifth Generation filmmakers have become virtual icons. Their vision of China has become accepted as mainstream representations of the period, and actual texts centering specifically on this handful of films are studied in universities. The volume of university press books and specific film/history books has grown exponentially over time as both East Asian studies and film studies have exploded as fields of formal study. The enormous amount of material available now on the Fifth Generation filmmakers has served as a double-edged sword—the ordeal of becoming a living legend is that the artist must constantly work against an often inflated image of self.

A basic understanding of the history of the span of the Maoist years (pre- and post-) is provided in the textbook, **Revolution and Its Past** by **R. Keith Schoppa (Pearson Prentice Hall, 2006)**. Schoppa covers a great deal of ground in a compressed space in his treatment of the People's Republic of China, providing a strong introduction to the central facts that propelled modern Chinese history forward. The compressed format of this textbook does not prevent it from giving full scope to the timeframes it describes. Honing in on the distinct nature of Chinese

Communism, **Franz Michael's Mao and the Perpetual Revolution (Barron's, 1977)** is also a fundamental read as it gives a detailed comparison of the Marxist-Leninist brand of communism with what would come to be known as Maoism. Although it is more limited in its scope, a timeline playing the rise of Soviet communism contrasted against Chinese communism is a good reference tool as well as some primary source documents contained in the appendix.

In order to fully understand the impact of censorship on the Fifth Generation filmmakers, it is critical to understand how the Chinese have viewed media in the past. In **A History of the Press and Public Opinion in China by Lin Yutang (Greenwood Press, 1968)** censorship is traced from Ancient China to contemporary times. While the focus of this book is on literary and journalistic censorship, it is an invaluable resource as it provides excellent details and statistics pertinent to its topic. **Geremie R. Barmé and John Minford's Seeds of Fire: Chinese Voices of Conscience (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988)** is structured much like a scrapbook in that each chapter consists of selections from various Chinese voices, such as novelists, political prisoners, poets, organized around a particular subject. The section on *Yellow Earth* was particularly excellent. After a brief synopsis of the plot, the chapter presented quotes as arguments for and against the new art form. This lively cogent exchange was extremely readable and provided a thorough and thoughtful examination of some of the reasons why critics disapproved of the Fifth Generation filmmakers. Further chapters include discussions revolving around dissent and the Cultural Revolution. Each element makes careful use of popular selections, such as the use of the invented word "Urbling" that defined the "educated youth" who were to become the Fifth Generation filmmakers.

In order to understand more fully how the arts were viewed during the formative years of the Fifth Generation filmmakers, it is necessary to understand what role the arts were supposed

to play in Maoist society. **Problems of Art and Literature by Mao Tse-Tong (International Publishers, 1950)** is the primary document that encapsulates Mao's direct words on the matter. Mao instructs artists regarding the four categories of the masses that art should serve. The importance of the role of Mao's wife in suppressing the arts, specifically film, during the Cultural Revolution, as well as her creation of the revolutionary ballets, is thoroughly revealed in **Comrade Chiang Ch'ing by Roxanne Witke (Little, Brown and Company, 1977).**

Having laid out the foundation for study of the background against which the Fifth Generation filmmakers arose, a similar groundwork is laid for Chinese cinema studies with two books that both are dated but contain unique perspectives on narrow time bands of motion picture history. The first of these books is **Dianying: An Account of Films and the Film Audience in China by Jay Leyda (The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1972).** This volume follows the history of cinema in China from the first showing of a Lumiere film in Shanghai in 1896 through to 1967. The value of reviewing this book is the depiction of the pre-Cultural Revolution film industry and a chilling report by a Soviet observer on the complete shut-down of the movie studios in 1966. Another intriguing aspect that this early book provides is the notion of films about minority nationalities in China, something that the Fifth Generation filmmakers centered on in their dissent. **Chinese Film: The State of the Art in the People's Republic, edited by George Stephen Semsel (Praeger, 1987)** is a classic work that provides a detailed report on how the Chinese film studios and distribution channels were set up. It also firmly placed Chinese film strongly in the field of political activism well before the People's Republic of China. A solid discussion of the early films of the Fifth Generation filmmakers, centering particularly on *The Yellow Earth*, serves as a solid introduction to the characteristics to be found within these films. It is interesting that in both of these books, both authors note that

they are restricted in their ability to grasp the depth of the field due to their inability to read and/or speak not only Mandarin but Cantonese and the many other languages of mainland China. This basic language barrier remains a restriction on research and self-censorship since only translated materials can be used.

Parallels to Soviet communist cinema are worth noting, especially in light of the concept of censorship. In **Cinema & Soviet Society, 1917-1953 by Peter Kenez (Cambridge University Press, 1992)**, the notion that communism alone imposes censorship is dispelled. A full section devoted to censorship also recounts the personality idolatry around Stalin akin to that around Mao. The aspects of how national cinema was handled during major transitions within the Soviet Communist Party can also be gleaned.

The roots of the Fifth Generation filmmakers are captured not only in the interviews that have been given by each of the directors involved since the 1990s but also in **Memoirs from the Beijing Film Academy: The Genesis of China's Fifth Generation by Ni Zhen (Duke University Press, 2002)**. This critical resource, written by their teacher, provides the ultimate “insider” look at how the Chinese film industry operated showcasing the background and specific philosophies and talents of each director. It changed the state of the field by affording non-Chinese researchers the opportunity to hear directly from someone so deeply connected not only professionally to the Chinese film industry himself but also personally as teacher of this group, providing unparalleled accessibility into their origins. It also offers a look at other Fifth Generation filmmakers who have not “translated” to international recognition. The postscript of this book addresses the controversial comments that have come to be hurled against the Fifth Generation filmmakers including accusations of both post-colonialism and Eurocentrism entering into their works. It is the author’s viewpoint that neither of these issues informs the

“classic” films of the Fifth Generation filmmakers. In fact, controversy has followed the footsteps of the Fifth Generation directors as and the “opening” of the Chinese economy and society, seems to have diminished the power of their current work—film that does not seem to incorporate the aspects of dissent seen earlier. While it must be remembered that the “classic” films such as *The Blue Kite* have never even been seen in China, could it be that censorship actually served to promote their films? Has the spirit of non-cooperation died due to commercial success abroad? Did the filmmakers cave in to Westernization, enjoying commercialization and international horizons more than catering to national interests?

Addressing all criticisms directly, Zhang Yimou in **Zhang Yimou: Interviews edited by Frances Gateward (University of Mississippi, 2001)** speaks directly to the central debates surrounding the early works of his generation of filmmakers, specifically censorship and Orientalism. **King of the Children & The New Chinese Cinema by Chen Kaige, Wan Zhi, and Tony Rayns (Faber and Faber, 1989)** also provides an opportunity to hear directly from the director about one of his films.

There are many actual film critiques of the Fifth Generation classic films of the late 80s/early 90s. An excellent primary source, **Speaking in Images by Michael Berry (Columbia University Press, 2005)** presents interviews with modern Chinese filmmakers. This volume focuses on the distinction among the three bases of Chinese cinema—Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Discussions of the controversies that each director has had to deal with provide solid information. Hearing directly the frustration of Zhang Yimou on the subject of his critics verified the dilemma of the Fifth Generation filmmakers. The pre-eminent authority on Chinese cinema, Chris Berry, has written several penetrating collections of essays on various topics such as **Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China: The Cultural Revolution after the Cultural**

Revolution (Routledge, 2004) and with **Mary Farquhar, China on Screen: Cinema and Nation (Columbia University Press, 2006)**. In this latter volume, an excellent timeline is

presented with side-by-side columns comparing general history versus cinema history.

However, the real value here is in a chapter titled “Time and the National” wherein the whole concept of historiography is defined and shown against the context of Fifth Generation films such as *The Yellow Earth* and *Red Sorghum*. Another excellent recent book is **Reinventing China:**

A Generation and Its Films by Paul Clark (The Chinese University Press, 2005) which devotes its whole content to the Fifth Generation, concentrating on descriptions of the people behind the art and the films themselves, including some of the little-known Fifth Generation directors. It does not discuss audience reaction to the films in any detail. **New Chinese**

Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics edited by Nick Browne, Paul G. Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack, and Esther Yau. (Cambridge University Press, 1994) brings together seasoned Chinese film authorities to explore the interplay of Communist ideology with their national cinema. The impact of the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre on the Chinese film industry and its subsequent effect on the perception of the Fifth Generation filmmakers provided an important perspective.

Criticism of Chinese film by the Chinese themselves has started to make its way to the West. Some of this criticism is startling to Western readers who have definitely acquired a certain socio-political acceptance of their own perspective on another nation’s history by accepting such films as *To Live* and *The Blue Kite* as accurate depictions of Chinese life. **China Pop: How Soap Operas, Tabloids, and Bestsellers Are Transforming a Culture by Jianying Zha (The New Press, 1995)** affords another intimate look at Chen Kaige but adds some refreshingly new context in terms of a perceived competition with Zhang Yimou. The fickle role

of the censorship of Chen Kaige's film, *Farewell My Concubine*, and the lack of respect shown by current Chinese media for such pre-eminent directors are elements presented in the book.

Introduction

This paper will examine the influence of censorship on a specific group of Chinese filmmakers known as the Fifth Generation, and the dilemma it has created for these artists. Media in China has always been subject to censorship as it has always been recognized as a powerful influence. By surveying the role of censorship over a historical timeline from ancient times to the present, it can be seen how each political unit handled their authority over this tool. Focusing on the modern era, the evolution of censorship has caused many changes to literature and the arts. A detailed analysis is made of modes of resistance—aesthetic, historical, and cultural—used within three prominent Fifth Generation films to demonstrate their manipulation of censorship.

Ancient Antecedents

“Chinese cinema has always had a strong political orientation.”² This path was the direct result of the traditions of Chinese history which have long included censorship as an integral part of political culture. As early as the reign of the first Emperor of Qin in the second century B.C., the government permitted the burning of books that it found objectionable and allowed the persecution of authors.³ Yet, “Chinese political theory admitted the necessity of someone responsible for the criticism of the government and even of the Emperor himself...”⁴ Therefore, in a government system unique to China, there were official imperial censors who served in a

² Ma Ning quoted in *Chinese Film: The State of the Art in the People's Republic*, ed. George Stephen Semsel (New York, Connecticut, & London: Praeger, 1987), 63.

³ In 213 B.C., the Chancellor of the state of Qin, Li Si, ordered the burning of historical records and literature that were not written by Qin historians. He also mandated that only the state should produce political books. When scholars, many of whom were Confucian, protested, 460 of them were ordered buried alive. In 1772, the Manchu Emperor Qianlong commenced the compilation of the *Siku Quanshu* (Complete Library of Four Treasurers) with the ambition of cataloging and preserving the best manuscripts in his empire. Instead, Qianlong ended up becoming increasingly focused on eradicating anti-Manchuism from the literary record and ordered the destruction of over 150,000 volumes. This was a completely different mission than he had intended at the onset. Yutang Lin, *A History of the Press and Public Opinion in China* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), 167.

⁴ *ibid*, 6 & 7.

symbiotic relationship with the emperor—a type of moral compass that could be a source of good or evil depending on the political climate and personalities of the day.⁵ And while “...the common people thought very little about current politics...” there was a rich tradition of unofficial public censorship wherein scholars took on a very visible and active role in “beating the drum” in front of palace gates as powerful and successful mass movements.⁶ Overall, the attitude towards censorship could be summed up in a quote by Confucius: “The people may be allowed to act, but may not be allowed to know.”⁷

Censorship Discovers Cinema

Early Chinese cinema of the 1920s followed the Hollywood formula of using popular themes and storylines that had become internationally pervasive. These were the heady days of pre-Hays Code U. S. cinema.⁸ Changes that swept post WWI Western societies created a whole new standard of social freedom and sexual mores where everything was “modernized.” Chinese cinema and society, in general, followed this lead. The influence of film brought about the idea that “[a]nything foreign is modern, whether it be a social usage or a style of dress.”⁹

The Nationalist state was cognizant of the popular power that cinema possessed. The Nanjing government began to wage its censorship campaign when the first Chinese sound film was made in 1931.¹⁰ As a central component of their official policy, Mandarin Chinese (*guoyu*—the “national language”), became the spoken language used in film. Use of dialects was restricted. The central Nanjing government believed that the use of local dialect promoted

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*, 7 & 8.

⁷ Originally in *The Analects* by Confucius, Book 8, Verse 9. *ibid.*, 3.

⁸ The Hays Code took effect in the United States in 1934, but was originally thought up in 1930. It was abandoned in 1968 with the birth of the rating system we presently in the United States.

⁹ B. Y. Lee, “Modernists and Anti-Modernists in China,” *China Weekly Review*, May 26, 1934: 498.

¹⁰ The first Chinese sound film was entitled *Sing-Song Red Peony* and was directed by Zhang Shichuan. Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar, *China On Screen: Cinema and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 52.

regional separatism.¹¹ This was a prominent factor in the political split between the central government authority in Nanjing and the opposing separatist government in Canton. Not only did the southern and Cantonese studios not want to lose their economic markets in Hong Kong and in overseas Chinese communities, but neither did their local government want to lose its “...claim of ‘regional uniqueness.’”¹² When the Canton regime lost one of its key leaders, Hu Hanmin in 1935, the National Film Censorship Committee (NFCC), a central government organization, put their restrictions on dialects firmly into place. However, enforcement of their limitations was not possible and Cantonese studios often just ignored them.¹³

By the mid-1930s censorship was burgeoning under the Nationalist government across all areas. Edgar Snow presented statistics that there were “2,500 political prisoners in the great prison at Nanking.”¹⁴ He further catalogued the repression North China: 110 suspensions of publications of various types, with over “...230 political prisoners, including many students, artists, teachers and writers...[In] 1934 arrests in this category...totaled over 800.”¹⁵ Beyond this, the *Peiping Chronicle* “...records that 149 books were banned on a list issued on December 29, 1934.”¹⁶ Among these were “...many of the best works of contemporary Chinese writers...including 11 books by Lu Hsun, ‘father of the modern Chinese story’.”¹⁷ Communist writers were the targets of even more extreme censorship. In 1931 five communist writers were executed as the Nationalists battled the increasing popularity that communism held for the young, and viciously sought to eradicate it.¹⁸

¹¹ *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai*, ed. Yingjin Zhang (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 184.

¹² *ibid.*, 184 & 185.

¹³ *ibid.*, 187.

¹⁴ Lin, *History of Press and Public Opinion*, 172.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 173.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*

The Nationalist government “...wanted modernity in China, but rejected its inherent foreignness.”¹⁹ So it attempted to suppress the rising liberalism with respect to social mores promoted by the film industry, censoring portrayals of progressive lifestyles that involved sensual clothing, kissing, or pre-marital cohabitation.²⁰ The government was so intent on bringing scientific modernity to China that they waged an Anti-superstition Campaign. This campaign censored any film dealing with religious subjects. But it further extended the definition of “superstitious films” (*shenguai dianying*) to include anything “unscientific” such as martial art films (*wuxia shenguai pian*) or “strange” (*guai*) such as *Alice in Wonderland* or horror films like *Frankenstein*.²¹ The notion of banning such films was fortified by scholarly critics such as Mao Dun (1896-1981), who believed that they “...perpetuat[ed] feudal ideology and induc[ed] audiences to escape into a fantasy world rather than face their problems in reality.”²² They warned against such “soft” films, claiming they “...anaesthetized the public instead of rousing its awareness, and...spread reactionary views under the pretext of entertainment.”²³ On a more pragmatic basis, the banning of these magic/ghost movies was welcomed by the major studios because it diminished their competition with the smaller studios that produced such films.²⁴

Another institution arose at this time that served to re-channel the direction of Chinese cinema. Luo Mingyou²⁵ built an entirely new film company, Lianhua, in 1929 that was dedicated to “...the choice of contemporary themes, handled in a realistic fashion, which deeply

¹⁹ *Cinema in Shanghai*, ed. Zhang, 193.

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ *ibid.*, 190.

²² *ibid.*, 191.

²³ “Kwok & M.C. Quiquemelle – Chinese Cinema and Realism,” in *Film & Politics in the Third World*, ed. John D.H. Downing (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1987), 182.

²⁴ *Cinema in Shanghai*, ed. Zhang, 191.

²⁵ According to Kwok & Quiquemelle, in 1929 Luo Mingyou was a twenty-seven year old theater chain owner for the provinces of North China and Shanghai.

moved the public at the time, alert to subjects close to its own experience.”²⁶ The fact that these realistic Chinese films “...could now rival foreign films on an artistic plane” provided the film industry with a new audience of young intellectuals who had hitherto dismissed their national cinema.²⁷ Unfortunately, occupation of Manchuria and the many heavy Japanese attacks on such cities as Shenyang (1931) and Shanghai (1932) took a heavy toll on the film industry. In Shanghai, “...where fighting raged for several weeks, part of the city was razed.”²⁸ “[T]hirty studios were destroyed and many small companies forced to close. Out of a total of thirty-nine theaters, sixteen were in ruins, including most of the theaters specializing in Chinese films.”²⁹

Censorship Serves the State

It was during this tumultuous time that the League of Left Writers reached out to the Communist Party to interest them in participating in the arts. They reacted swiftly and strongly to this open invitation into the film arts in particular, seeing that “...the realistic current...sat perfectly with their program of struggle against feudalism and imperialism, via the denunciation of social ills and the awakening of national feelings.”³⁰ With the advent of the Communist Party’s entrance into filmmaking, studios fell under the influence of the Soviet Union, and their film industry’s portrayal of social realism became the norm. Many went to the USSR for training. Here they saw the effects of the Stalinist view of the film industry, about which a conference in 1928 had proclaimed: “The feature film should become an instrument of communist education and agitation and weapon of the Party in the education and organization of the masses around the basic tasks in the period of building socialism...”³¹

²⁶ “Chinese Cinema,” in *Film & Politics*, ed. Downing, 182 & 183.

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ *ibid.*, 184.

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ Peter Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society 1917-1953* (Santa Cruz, CA: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 104.

In the infancy of the Chinese Communist Party's formation, Mao Zedong took the example of Soviet Communism seriously with respect to the issue of how the arts were to be handled. Mao concurred with the Soviet Communist viewpoint and stated that "In order to overthrow a political power, it is always necessary to create public opinion, to do work in the ideological sphere."³² The work of the Nationalists had pushed China towards the new and scientific by molding Chinese society into a pasteurized homogeneity through censorship of the arts, and this aligned with Mao's own ideas. Among Mao's early influences was the work of Chen Duxiu, a dean at Peking University, who endorsed "...a total break with China's traditional past...and complete westernization..."³³ Mao's study of Chen Duxiu led him to the essays of Hu Shi who put forward the idea that Chinese writing should be broadened to break the "...monopoly of a scholarly elite, and to replace it by *pai hua*, the actual spoken language used by the people."³⁴ These views became the central basis for those of the Chinese Communist Party.

But Mao further defined his own vision of the *Problems of Art and Literature* in his conference with writers and artists from across China in May 1942, in Yan'an. Here he expounded his unique contribution to communism that unequivocally set the revolutionary purpose to "...first and foremost...get to know the people and to understand their ways."³⁵ This emphasis on the people as exemplars of richness and wisdom was a strong departure from the Leninists who "...assumed that there was nothing worthwhile in the peasant way of life and that their task was to persuade the peasants to change it."³⁶ In one brilliant, deft stroke, Mao exploits

³² Franz Michael, *An Illuminating Study of Mao Tse-tung's Role in China and World Communism: Mao and the Perpetual Revolution*, ed. I.E. Cadenhead Jr. (Woodbury, NY: Barron's, 1977), 149.

³³ *ibid*, 5.

³⁴ *ibid*.

³⁵ Mao Tse-tung, *Problems of Art and Literature* (New York: International Publishers, 1950), 11.

³⁶ Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society*, 90.

the duality of censorship by saying that "...literature and art...must...serve..." the working class, peasantry, and armed forces.³⁷ Furthermore, "...the masses are not able to appreciate theories if they are abstract."³⁸ The confluence of these two statements effectively "...conflate[s] author and audience, requiring that writers should always express the will of the masses. Since the opinion of the masses would be ventriloquized by the state ideologues, the Party would thus be able to maintain absolute control."³⁹ Mao "...instated the Party as the only organ regulating the transmission of ideology..."⁴⁰ He did this emphatically and yet injected the element of what he would later deem "revolutionary romanticism."⁴¹ He would later state that "[n]ature provides the only source material for literature and art in their finished form."⁴² In short, the use of cinema became "...a powerful cultural means for the legitimization of the new sociopolitical order established in 1949."⁴³

With the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese film industry was nationalized and government film came to a virtual standstill, producing just one film in 1951 and only four in 1952.⁴⁴ The film industry was changing to incorporate the ideology of the Yan'an conference, superseding socialist realism with a "realism tinged with reformist ideas....in Chinese, called revolutionary realism."⁴⁵ The period of the 1950s and 1960s was "...a relatively

³⁷ Mao, *Problems of Art and Literature*, 18.

³⁸ *ibid.*, 12.

³⁹ Yomi Braester, *Witness Against History: Literature, Film, and Public Discourse in Twentieth Century China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 115.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 22.

⁴¹ "Chinese Cinema," in *Film & Politics*, ed. Downing, 191.

⁴² Mao, *Problems of Art and Literature*, 25.

⁴³ *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics*, ed. Nick Browne, Paul G. Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack, and Esther Yau (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 21.

⁴⁴ "Chinese Cinema," in *Film & Politics*, ed. Downing, 189.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 189 & 190.

flexible, less doctrinaire period...” in a film industry that was striving to attain the correct level of realism.⁴⁶

Censorship for the Masses

Towards the end of 1963, Chinese censorship of the arts took on a whole new face—that of Jiang Qing. Mao’s third wife, Jiang Qing (1914-1991) was a former minor actress who, in her own words, “...was not a brilliant actress,”⁴⁷ but who had risen in the highly charged political and artistic center that was pre-revolutionary Shanghai. She worked hard for her roles and reached the pinnacle of her acting career playing the leading role of Nora in Ibsen’s feminist drama, *A Doll’s House*.⁴⁸ The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) did not approve of Mao’s interest in an actress but had permitted their marriage as inevitable. However, it is commonly believed that they also added a proviso that restricted her from becoming involved in politics. Prior to the Cultural Revolution, little was publicly known of her.

Jiang became fiercely resentful of the roles played by the wives of other top Party officials, such as Wang Guangmei and Deng Yingchao, who received recognition and public acknowledgement as their husbands’ partners.⁴⁹ Seeking to establish a role for herself, in the mid-1960’s Jiang revived her interest in the arts and began a thorough study of the current film and theater offerings. She proudly brought to Mao’s attention the fact that many films contained anti-Party sentiments, earning his attention. Mao began to recognize that Jiang could be of use to him in the next chapter of history he wanted to write. So he provided her with his support, approving her pronouncements, which were instrumental in dismissing many leading writers, actors, and film directors. Total censorship reigned supreme:

⁴⁶ *ibid*, 192.

⁴⁷ Roxane Witke, “Comrade Chiang Ch’ing Tells Her Story” *Time Magazine*, March 12, 1977, 47.

⁴⁸ Roxane Witke, *Comrade Chiang Ch’ing* (Boston & Toronto: Little, Brown & Co., 1977), 101 & 102.

⁴⁹ Wang Guangmei is the spouse of the Liu Shaoqi, the second Chairman of the People’s Republic of China. Deng Yingchao is the wife of Zhou Enlai, the first Premier of the People’s Republic of China.

In other countries a play or novel or story continues its public life long after its film adaptation has been condemned, preached against, or shelved, but in China official adverse criticism affects, retroactively, everyone and everything attached to the quarantined film. An attack on a director or a film writer results in the withdrawal of all films and books signed by the offenders, from circulation and from history.⁵⁰

Mao had himself signaled the beginning of the Cultural Revolution with his famous swim in the Yangzi River in 1966. Later Mao galvanized the start of the Cultural Revolution when he wrote a big-character poster with instructions to “Bombard the Headquarters.” He authorized the Red Guard to be his “...vanguard in the class struggle.” The youth of the Red Guard were electrified by the mission Mao had given them to undertake, and took up his call to destroy the four olds—ideas, habits, customs, and culture. Jiang was an iconoclast and was proud of the work of “her” Red Guard as they destroyed books, temples, museums, and scholarly works. The Red Guard also persecuted and tortured (often to death) intellectuals, scientists, and teachers. Both Mao and Jiang took the opportunity to rid themselves of enemies. Mao concentrated on purging the Party leadership. Both Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping were disposed of—one by death; the other by exile.⁵¹ Jiang also used the Cultural Revolution to take her revenge on personal enemies in her life and had no qualms about doing so.

Revolutionary Arts

Mao’s proclamation was her guidepost: “Revolutionary literature and art should create a variety of characters out of real life and help the masses to propel history forward.”⁵² Jiang’s quest was to instill all art forms with a social role. “Make it revolutionary or ban it” was her

⁵⁰ Jay Leyda, *Dianying: An Account of Films and the Film Audience in China* (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England, 1972), 223.

⁵¹ Deng Xiaoping was then general secretary of the Central Committee and a supporter of Liu Shaoqi. Witke, *Chiang Ch’ing*, 362.

⁵² Jerome Silbergeld, *China into Film: Frames of Reference in Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (London, England: Reaktion Books Ltd., 1999), 202.

slogan.⁵³ Cinema effectively stopped in China during the period of 1966 through 1970. Instead, Jiang began to personally rewrite several major ballets, such as the *Red Detachment of Women* and *White-Haired Girl*, casting them in modern time, forming the basis for her “model operas”. These ballets were carefully modernized to remove non-revolutionary topics. In doing so, Jiang reformed dance by instructing ballerinas to perform men’s steps, breaking down the division in ballet over what gender did what type of dance. Her model plays also provided strong leading roles for women. Furthermore, Jiang required all artistic productions to adhere to the “Principle of the Three Stresses”—“Of all the characters, stress the positive ones. Of the positive characters, stress the heroic ones. Of the main [heroic] characters, stress the central one.”⁵⁴ There were to be no “middle characters here to blur the lines, no irresolute endings to confuse and depress the audience.”⁵⁵ This was totally in line with Mao’s proclamation in Yan’an against ambiguity. By the mid-1970s, the eight model operas began to appear as feature film productions.⁵⁶

Critics thought that Jiang had gone too far in suppressing movies and considered the revolutionary operas boring in their dogmatism. Jiang Qing’s former Shanghai art community was particularly critical of her actions and claimed that her political art for the masses was second-rate. Some have even come to defend her work, such as Yang Chunxia, the main female actor in the opera *The Azalea Mountain*, who claims that these “...are still unsurpassed as monumental productions.”⁵⁷

⁵³ Ross Terrill, *The White-Boned Demon* (New York: William Morrow and Company Inc., 1984), 243.

⁵⁴ Silbergeld, *China into Film*, 203.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁶ Ni Zhen, *Memoirs from the Beijing Film Academy*, trans. Chris Berry (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2002), 99.

⁵⁷ Mobo Gao, *The Battle for China’s Past: Mao and the Cultural Revolution* (London & Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2008), 150.

The next two years found the violence of the Red Guard factions intensifying beyond the control of the Party. Finally the People's Liberation Army (PLA) was called in to restrain the violence and the majority of the Red Guard youth were sent to the countryside to be re-educated by the peasants. Society found itself joining in the violence of the times, and families were destroyed, often forever, as members were variously sent to labor or re-education camps. Jiang Qing was extremely active in gathering power to herself throughout the 10-year period of the Cultural Revolution. She had associated herself with Wang Hongwen, Zhang Chunqiao, and Yao Wenyan, and they had become the "Gang of Four."⁵⁸ The four were called "the helicopters" by Deng Xiaoping because their rise was so abrupt from obscurity.⁵⁹ Jiang Qing had finally earned her place at the pinnacle of power within the Party. She truly believed that she would be capable of running the country as Mao's successor. However, while Mao continued to support Jiang, and it was certain that he did not want Deng Xiaoping take power, he appointed Hua Guofeng as acting premier. This led to fierce infighting among the political factions.

End of an Era

When Mao died in 1976, Jiang Qing took her part in the mourning, leaving a wreath "from your student" for her husband. Shortly afterwards, Hua Guofeng had the Gang of Four arrested. This was relatively easy to do, because while the Gang of Four "dominated media and education,"⁶⁰ they did not have good military support. Although Mao was behind her, Jiang Qing had little support within the Party, and she had made many enemies during the purges of

⁵⁸ Wang Hongwen was a Shanghai textile worker who became a vice chairman of the Party. At age 40, he was the youngest member of the Gang of Four. Zhang Chunqiao was a propaganda leader, vice-premier, and major of the Shanghai Party. Yao Wenyan was a literary critic who authored press releases for Jiang Qing. Witke, *Chiang Ch'ing*, 491 & 483 & 492.

⁵⁹ Leslie Evans, *China After Mao* (New York: Monad Press, 1978), 38.

⁶⁰ Immanuel C.Y. Hsü, *China Without Mao: The Search for a New Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 14.

the Cultural Revolution. During their trial, all were found guilty and confessed, with the sole exception of Jiang Qing.⁶¹ The death sentences that were handed out were commuted to prison terms. In 1991 Jiang was found dead, hanged in what authorities deemed to be a suicide.

Most commentaries on the Gang of Four seem to agree that “there was no separate ‘radical’ faction while Mao was alive; there was only Mao’s ‘high command.’”⁶² Jiang Qing acted in perfect alignment with Mao’s thoughts and was used by Mao as a shield to further his own ideologies. Perhaps, in the end, she was “purer” in her belief in those philosophies than even Mao, since she did not hesitate to act upon them. New literature has attempted to position Jiang Qing differently in history, pointing out that she had to contend with “...slander piled on...[her character]...and deep-seated gender discrimination among Mao’s revolutionary comrades.”⁶³ Those who came into power after Mao were more than willing to make her the whipping post for everything that occurred in the Cultural Revolution, and it has suited Western and current CCP interests to seek any diminution of Maoism. As Jiang said at her trial, “What I did followed Mao’s line and the Party’s line.”⁶⁴ The names of many officials in the then-current Deng Xiaoping government could be found on Party documents authorizing the acts of the Cultural Revolution, even that of the beloved Zhou Enlai. Jiang put her role in history into perspective with her statement that “Everything I did, Mao told me to do. I was his dog: what he said to bite, I bit.”⁶⁵ However, the irretrievable loss of so many lives and the misery endured by so many under her name during the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution has rendered any further defense impossible.

⁶¹ Keith R. Schoppa, *Revolution and Its Past: Identities and Change in Modern Chinese History* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2006), 363.

⁶² Evans, *China After Mao*, 38.

⁶³ Gao, *Battle for China’s Past*, 149.

⁶⁴ Terrill, *White-Boned Demon*, 389.

⁶⁵ *ibid*, 15.

Filmmakers of the Urbling Generation

The Beijing Film Institute reopened in 1978. “At the beginning, no one knew very well how the political situation would develop, and the reorganization of the studio took time.”⁶⁶ During this time, it is noted that two types of film genre came into play: films inspired by the “literature of scars” (*shan hen wenxue*) and basic entertainment films. The latter was important as “this type of film answered a real need in the public, wearied by the political rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution.”⁶⁷

The distinctive concept of using the term “generations” has been coined to distinguish the waves of Chinese filmmakers. This term denotes not only a historical time table of filmmakers but something far more profound, “...the mission of an era[,]...their moral concerns and their real effects on the future...”⁶⁸ The strengths of these generations of Chinese filmmakers derive from the fact that they are basic socio-political units that share a common context but with individual creative responses and styles. In 1978 the Fourth Generation, who had been denied an outlet for their art throughout the ten years of the Cultural Revolution, came back to the studios, not only to take up where they left off with their own artistic pursuits, but also to train a new generation of filmmakers. Their students, the class of 1982, became known as the Fifth Generation filmmakers.

One of the chief characteristics of the Fifth Generation filmmakers is that they originated from what has been called the “Urbling” generation. This invented word refers to the educated youth who grew up during the Cultural Revolution and took part in the often draconian

⁶⁶ “Chinese Cinema,” in *Film & Politics*, ed. Downing, 195.

⁶⁷ *ibid*, 196.

⁶⁸ Zehou Li, *On the history of Chinese modern thought* (Beijing: Dongfang Chubanshe, 1987) cited in Zhen, *Memoirs*, trans. Chris Berry, 189.

“up into the mountains and down to the countryside” program.⁶⁹ This thoroughly novel plan shifted some four million youth from urban centers to be “re-educated” by the peasants in the rural wilderness of China in an effort not only to uphold Maoist ideology but to physically maintain control over an entire generation of youth.⁷⁰ This experience served to disillusion many as they saw firsthand what national Chinese realities were, positioning their generation to become disenchanted with the distorted CCP line.⁷¹

Born in 1952, Chen Kaige and Tian Zhuangzhuang were childhood friends and shared a common background in that their parents were involved in the arts and grew up in Beijing Film Studio housing, providing them with a basic creative environment.⁷² But, more importantly, they shared the trauma of having their homes and possessions ruthlessly ransacked and had to withstand seeing their parents subjected to public punishment as “members of the Black gang in literature and the arts” and forced to do supervised labor.⁷³ Tian Zhuangzhuang’s parents were artists in the Communist base in Yan’an, but Chen Kaige’s father was less fortunate, coming from the Nationalist-controlled area. In the ugliness of the times, Chen Kaige found himself pushing and denouncing his own father at a struggle session.^{74 75} While Chen found himself sent to the forests of Xishuangbanna in Yunnan Province, Tian Zhuangzhuang went to a small village in northeast China on the Nen River. These specific experiences in the rural areas helped to mold their future cinematic vision prompting “...[t]heir ambivalence toward the land and

⁶⁹ *Seeds of Fire*, ed. Geremie Barmé, and John Minford (New York: Hill and Wang, 1988), 102.

⁷⁰ Schoppa, *Revolution and Its Past*, 356.

⁷¹ *Seeds of Fire*, ed. Geremie Barmé, and John Minford, 252.

⁷² Chen Huai’ai was a film director; his mother, Yu Lan, starred in such films as *The Lin Family Shop* (1959). Michael Berry, *Speaking in Images: Interviews with Contemporary Chinese Filmmakers* (New York: Columbia University Press), 83

⁷³ Zhen, *Memoirs*, ed. Chris Berry, 16-17.

⁷⁴ *ibid*, 19.

⁷⁵ Chen Kaige wrote a memoir of that time entitled *Young Kaige*. Michael Berry, *Speaking in Images*, 83.

primordial nature, and their determination to express it, [which] created a special visual style in Chinese cinema.⁷⁶

As the son of a former Nationalist army officer and a doctor, Zhang Yimou came from an entirely different background. Growing up under the duress of his family's classification, Zhang was sent down to the countryside in Shaanxi Province where he did hard labor hauling bales of cotton at the local mill. However, he also found a niche for his artistic abilities in painting images of Chairman Mao on all the houses and offices in Beini Village and thus earning the respect of the local leadership. Zhang realized that he wanted a life beyond the village, however, and scrupulously saved over several years to buy a Chinese Seagull brand camera, determined to teach himself landscape photography in the nearby mountains.⁷⁷ When he finally submitted his photos in 1978 to the Beijing Film Academy, Zhang was already five years above the age threshold and could not take the enrollment exam. A special letter from the Minister of Culture, Huang Zen, worked for and against Zhang as the Beijing Film Academy weighed their decision to accept this student.⁷⁸ Zhang's acceptance into the program sealed the promise of the class of 1982.

The ambitions of this film class were definitive, and all the members joined together to further their particular philosophy. As Chen Kaige stated:

When we were at the Academy, we all shared the desire to develop film language. That was a responsibility that our generation had to accept. Our film language had to be different from previous Chinese cinema. We had to completely eliminate falseness in film...We had to use a transformed language to tell history anew.⁷⁹

This moment in time, poised between the death of Mao in 1976 and the 1989 massacre at Tiananmen Square, was also serendipitous for their experimentation because the government

⁷⁶ Zhen, *Memoirs*, ed. Chris Berry, 199.

⁷⁷ *ibid*, 44-48.

⁷⁸ *ibid*, 48 & 49.

⁷⁹ *ibid*, 105.

subsidized their filmmaking, allowing them to focus on turning their philosophical concepts into film.⁸⁰ Even the threat of censorship, always present, did not dim their enthusiasm to create a new course for the Chinese cinema that they envisioned. Censorship actually worked in the opposite role as the Fifth Generation filmmakers used censorship as an element in their work, constructing their work carefully to expose the contradictions of the political state within the confines of severe restrictions. “...these filmmakers re-examined their own histories and that of their culture and station. They in effect set out to reinvent China.”⁸¹

Innovative Ambiguity

Tony Rayns, an English film critic, dates the term “New Chinese Cinema” from April 12th, 1985, when *Yellow Earth* opened at a Hong Kong Film Festival.⁸² *Yellow Earth*, directed



Image 1. Scene from *Yellow Earth*.
Cuiqiao waiting to ask Gu Qing
if she can accompany him.

by Chen Kaige, was the introductory calling card of the Fifth Generation filmmakers, boldly serving as the template for their unique style. Here is the first example of the most critical facet of the Fifth Generation’s philosophy—its use of ambiguity. “Ambiguity was precisely

the element most strenuously outlawed by Mao’s ‘Yan’an line’ on the arts.”⁸³ Furthermore, in the films of the Fifth Generation, “The heroes of the model plays give way to fallible human

⁸⁰ Bert Cardullo, “Beyond the Fifth Generation: An Interview with Zhang Yimou,” *Bright Lights Film Journal*, Issue 58 (2007), <http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/58/58zhanggiv.html>.

⁸¹ Paul Clark, *Reinventing China: A Generation and Its Film*, (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2005), 1.

⁸² Zhen, *Memoirs*, trans. Chris Berry, vii.

⁸³ Tony Rayns, *Chinese Vocabulary an Introduction to King of the Children and the New Chinese Cinema* (London & Boston: farber and farber, 1989), 30.

beings. Presenting a non-hero is perhaps the most radical divergence from the aesthetics of the Cultural Revolution.”⁸⁴

In order to make *Yellow Earth*, Chen Kaige took his company to the Loess Plateau in northwest China, an area of severe rock terrain and caves. This environment served a dual purpose—the vast harsh landscape served as a symbol of the unyielding feudalism that dominated the lives of the peasants who worked that land, as well as infusing a subtle hint of Mao, who ended his Long March in this geographic region. The ruthless inflexibility of nature was captured by Director Chen’s cinematographer and fellow film student, Zhang Yimou, who began his visual fascination with the device of rich color characterizations to highlight the supreme hopelessness of the peasant struggle against the stark background.

Above all other characteristics in *Yellow Earth*, the almost anthropological naturalness of vantage point first makes its appearance as a basis for Fifth Generation narration. Director Chen approaches his characters much like in a documentary style. Ingeniously, the voice of the film is contained in the plaintive and winsome folksongs that are sung by the main characters, Cuiqiao and Hanhan, and enhance the plotline around which the whole story centers. Not only do these songs fulfill the soldier’s quest, but they bridge and carry the plot of the movie forward. The haunting songs reveal the inner thoughts and awakening desires for change in Cuiqiao. As a matter of fact, Cuiqiao’s last dialogue is a song cut short, symbolizing her demise. The final all-male chant for rain around the primal totem figure recalls the timeless dominance of the past.

The critical politics within *Yellow Earth* are purposefully wrapped in ambiguity. Gu Qing, the young soldier, is an idealized figure. He could almost be a caricature taken from the model revolutionary ballets in his zestful energy to learn from and assist the most impoverished peasants and teach them the value of his new thinking. His uniform is crisp and clean, and he is

⁸⁴ Braester, *Witness Against History*, 143.

tall and young—all in direct contrast to the peasants, old before their time, and dressed in rags. However, even with all his new revolutionary thoughts, Gu Qing is not truly independent; he is, in fact, an anti-hero. He is constrained by Party rules and cannot help Cuiqiao achieve “liberation” from the old ways. In fact, Gu Qing himself has no real freedom or capability to act on his own and is just a cog of the Party, doing its bidding. This leaves the audience with an uncomfortable feeling, a vague unease that things are not quite right, as the director intended, while maintaining overall political neutrality. It also serves to “...deconstruct...one of the Communist Party’s most cherished myths, which holds that Communist ideology spread like wildfire through China’s peasant communities in the 1930s—as celebrated in countless propaganda movies of the 1950s and 1960s.”⁸⁵

In *Yellow Earth*, Director Chen achieved the perfect rebuttal of censorship that his Fifth Generation of filmmakers held as their goal. He realized this by utilizing specific aesthetic means to express a new path for Chinese cinema to follow and develop along. In doing so, “...the Fifth Generation both broke with tradition and maintained it, because they skipped the fifties to pick up the humanist philosophy of classical China...”⁸⁶

The reception of *Yellow Earth* by Chinese critics was comparable to that of the Impressionists at the Exposition 1874 in Paris. The new art form they were presenting was immediately the target of a barrage of harsh criticism. Critics “...found the perspective of the director, Chen Kaige, and Zhang Yimou, his cinematographer, to be politically suspect, condemning the film for using mass art as a vehicle to “display the backward and ignorant aspect of the Chinese peasantry.”⁸⁷ Director Chen was “...regarded as being too young to understand

⁸⁵ Rayns, *The New Chinese Cinema*, 28.

⁸⁶ Zhen, *Memoirs*, 97.

⁸⁷ *Seeds of Fire*, ed. Geremie Barmé, and John Minford, 252.

what Yan'an was all about, and he was accused of distorting the Communist spirit.”⁸⁸ Even the very real peasants that the Fifth Generation filmmakers used in their films were criticized for being too realistic:

The peasant who sings the folk songs in the film is very ugly. Why did they have to go and choose such an actor? The duty of film is to reflect life as realistically as possible, and to retain its true face. But we must not encourage naturalism, nor let our film-makers waste their energies by indulging in voyeurism and the depiction of the remnants of the primitive past...”⁸⁹

All in all, the criticism and subsequent banning of the film in China was based on the fact that no one could quite comprehend the new Chinese cinema. “What are you supposed to do if you’ve got a mass art form that the masses don’t understand?”⁹⁰

Modes of Resistance

If, in making *Yellow Earth*, Chen Kaige utilized an aesthetic mode of resistance against the censorship of the Chinese Communist Party, with his use of landscape and folklore, it can be argued that his classmates, Tian Zhuangzhuang and Zhang Yimou, employed their own unique modes of resistance in developing their film work. In the case of Director Tian, he chose a historical mode of resistance to censorship as exemplified in *The Blue Kite*. As he stated “Just think about how many historical changes China has undergone in the fifty years I have been alive. The changing environment forces us to continually readjust ourselves. These changes in society and our environment bring out what a person really is, and allow us to have a new understanding of human nature.”⁹¹

Director Tian’s first films, *On the Hunting Ground* (1985) and *Horse Thief* (1986), had highlighted his interest in non-Han Chinese minorities, which had been part of his down-to-the-

⁸⁸ *ibid.*

⁸⁹ Quote by Chen Huangmei, critic and cultural bureaucrat. *ibid.*, 264.

⁹⁰ Quote by Yu Min, screenwriter. *ibid.*, 266.

⁹¹ Michael Berry, *Speaking in Images*, 77 & 78.

countryside experience. He attempted to introduce dialects in these films, testing the 1930s edict banning dialects, using Tibetan exclusively, but the Chinese censors rejected it and Tian “...had a Mandarin audio track dubbed specifically for the purpose of getting the film past the censors.”⁹² This focus on the “...linguistic violence...” that denied the differences within the Chinese nation⁹³ is a recurring theme in his mode of resistance to censorship that Director Tian brought as his contribution to the Fifth Generation filmmakers’s philosophy. In these films, Tian followed his cultural resistance to the broadest limits:

The exoticized and even romanticized images of the harsh Tibetan landscape serve as vehicles for widening the gulf between the audience and the subjects of the film. Few in China could relate to the open territory, uncrowdedness, lawlessness, and isolation of Tibet or Mongolia as they are portrayed in Tian’s films. ...[T]he absence of the Han in the films, and anything to which they can relate, makes the film alien, and alienating, to the viewer. This is deliberate.⁹⁴

With *The Blue Kite*, Director Tian utilized an epic format to follow the lives of a family throughout the Maoist era.

Like *Yellow Earth*, the story is told in simple, straightforward lines. The drama happens to the family; the characters are not dramatic in themselves.



Image 2. Scene from *The Blue Kite*. Child, Tietou with Mother.

Rather they are real people swept up in the political madness that surrounds them. The power of

⁹² *ibid*, 64.

⁹³ *Colonialism and Nationalism in Asian Cinema*, Edited by Wimal Dissanayake (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 49.

⁹⁴ Dru C. Gladney, “Tian Zhuangzhuang, the Fifth Generation and Minorities Film in China” *Public Culture*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1995): 161-175.

The Blue Kite lies in this very lack of melodrama, in the omission of reaction. The criticism of the gap between Communist ideology and society is brought into focus by simply recounting the everyday struggles to survive of one family. The film draws great power from its use of staging set within the confines of the family's home. This serves as an unspoken rebuke in its complete antithesis to the mandated revolutionary paradigms put forward by Jiang Qing. History has very real consequences for even the most mundane aspects of human existence. The historical events it depicts, such as the Great Leap Forward (1958-1961) and the Four No's campaign (1958-1962)⁹⁵ are handled with quiet yet powerful realism. For, although *The Blue Kite* is far more open in its political criticism due to its storyline, its protest still is not overt, using only the tool of ambiguity that is the capstone of the early Fifth Generation films.

Again the cinematic device of color is richly used against the everyday texture of the storyline. The central image of the beautiful free blue kite makes its appearance at critical stages in the central character's life and helps tie the plotline together. The use of a child's song mirrors the melancholic refrains of *Yellow Earth*. Director Tian was not looking to create pathos. As he noted, "...I always despised scar literature, I always felt that, to some degree, it was simply a new propaganda tool for the post-Cultural Revolution incarnation of the Chinese Communist Party."⁹⁶

Tian had to complete post-production of *The Blue Kite* in Japan. It was subsequently presented at the Cannes Film Festival in 1993 to great international acclaim and simultaneously banned by the Chinese Film Bureau. The Chinese censors were even more stringent, however,

⁹⁵ Two environmentally disastrous campaigns initiated by Mao. The Great Leap Forward was a push to make China a major steel producer causing the countryside to be stripped of trees to feed thousands of homemade furnaces. The Four No's campaign targeted rats, sparrows, flies, and mosquitoes. With sparrows gone, caterpillars ravaged crops. Howard W. French, "Billions of Trees Planted, and Nary a Dent in the Desert," *The New York Times*, April 11, 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/04/11/world/billions-of-trees-planted-and-nary-a-dent-in-the-desert.html?pagewanted=1>.

⁹⁶ Michael Berry, *Speaking in Images*, 61.

and actually issued a decree “...that Tian...should not be allowed to make any more films. Nor was he to be allowed access to filmmaking equipment and premises. Two years later his production office in the Beijing Film Studio was decorated with a framed copy of the official statement revoking the earlier ban, now that Tian...had shown necessary contrition. Tian’s response to being asked about contrition is unprintable.”⁹⁷

In *Raise the Red Lantern*, Zhang Yimou presented his cultural mode of resistance to Chinese censorship. His focus in this film is not to present a particular historical timeframe but rather to examine tradition and its associated social mores in the context of the repression of authority. Director Zhang’s films generally focus around a female protagonist. He claims that while this “...fits in with my own sensibilities,” it came about due to the fact that all his films were adaptations of novels that happen to use a female perspective.^{98 99} Of course, his personal



Image 3. Scene from *Raise the Red Lantern*, showing the courtyard house where Songlian finds herself trapped forever.

and professional relationship with the leading lady of most of his major films, Gong Li, has been a major influence on his choice of viewpoint.

Through the lens of sheer cinematic opulence, gender politics is made palpable and exaggerated in every aspect in *Raise the Red Lantern*. Set

vaguely sometime in the 1920s, Director Zhang opens his work by focusing in on the young university student, Songlian, who speaks to her unseen stepmother and directly faces the camera.

⁹⁷ Clark, *Reinventing China*, 120.

⁹⁸ Zhang Yimou Interviews: Conversations with Filmmakers Series, Edited by Frances Gateward (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001) 38.

⁹⁹ *Raise the Red Lantern* is based on a short story, published in 1990, *Wives and Concubines* by Su Tong.

Songlian's father has died and although she has had one year at university, she feels that she might as well marry a rich man because "such is a woman's fate." So, although she shows her initial bravado and independence from tradition by walking to her new household rather than taking the customary bridal sedan, she conforms to her perceived social providence. Once she enters her husband's household, Songlian is quite literally trapped in a maze as the very grid of the exquisite mansion physically foreshadows the labyrinthine emotional relationships she will encounter. This depicts the culture of the *sanheyuan* or Chinese courtyard house, an example of classical Chinese architecture. Confucian ideology is at the heart of its design in which the space is defined in accordance with intricate social rules as "...it is believed that only when families are well run, will the state also be well governed."¹⁰⁰ Here Songlian starts to learn that nothing is what it seems on the surface; her initial impressions of the wives and concubines she must share the rest of her life with are shallow and premature. Her house and courtyard are exquisite in their perfection, and the colors are rich, bold, and sumptuous--in keeping with Zhang Yimou's renowned cinematographic style. However, the beauty is so flawless and stylized that it is almost sterile. The camera shots too are somehow remote in that they are very formally arranged, like painterly compositions rather than real life. The psychology of this backdrop is purposeful. As the director reveals, "When tragedy is 'made aesthetic' ..., it is all the more overpowering."¹⁰¹

Songlian quickly realizes that the rules and traditional customs followed in the household are degrading. For all the richness that surrounds them, the women are mere tokens, totally subservient to the male. Time has stopped in this place, and the social structure binds the women together in unity and jealousy with no escape. Even the sky is glimpsed only sparingly, as the

¹⁰⁰ Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 107-108.

¹⁰¹ *Zhang Yimou Interviews*, ed. Gateward, 40.

camera is kept level with the characters, furthering the sense of claustrophobia in the compound.¹⁰² However, it is the red lanterns and the significance of their relentless daily positioning that serves as the central symbol of this film. Zhang Yimou made the story and its theme his own by creating and adding the image of the red lanterns into the plot.¹⁰³ The whole world within the repressive walls of the mansion revolves around the daily determination of who will be honored by their lord and master by the mounting of the red lanterns. They are a symbol of power and feudal domination, "...at once an image of beauty and a symbol of the patriarchal oppressiveness of the system."¹⁰⁴

Songlian becomes enmeshed in the customs of the place and succumbs to its sensual pleasures such as the exotic foot massage. However, the in-fighting among the wives and concubines reveals the ugliness and deep hatreds that all the richness of the surroundings cannot hide. Unraveling the physical maze takes Songlian to the pavilion where women were killed for their disobedience to the males who control their very lives, and leads to the realization that she is trapped in the inescapable psychological maze that society has cast her into. Because she is naïve in many respects, this culminates in her lying to her husband that she is pregnant. It is the beginning of her breakdown and her tragedy. The casting out of the lanterns upon the unfurling of her lie is horrifically graphic, with all the color and light sucked out of her life. It is symbolic death and every bit as profound. When she sees that she is directly responsible for the death of her maid as well as her fellow concubine, her mind collapses. And yet the ritual of the red lanterns continues inexorably as a new concubine takes the place vacated by the murdered

¹⁰² Brian McFarlane, "Women Beware Women: Zhang Yimou's 'Raise the Red Lantern'," *Screen Education*, no. 42 (2006): 114.

¹⁰³ *Zhang Yimou Interviews*, ed. Gateward, 40.

¹⁰⁴ McFarlane, "Women Beware," 113.

concubine, and Songlian drifts madly through the rest of her days. The juggernaut of culture has crushed free will and independence.

While the screenplay of *Raise the Red Lantern* had been approved by the Chinese censors, the actual film was banned from Chinese cinemas and only released to an international audience. However, it has served as a lightning rod around which Chinese critics have brought together all their charges against the Fifth Generation filmmakers. This negative reaction had its origin in the fact that Director Zhang's previous film, *Judou*, won an Academy Award nomination in 1991, and "...fifth-generation filmmaking seemed to have achieved a signal honor."¹⁰⁵ But senior film censors had been extremely distressed as they understood this nomination quite differently, seeing such an award uprooting their ban on releasing the film in China. "The Chinese authorities' ignorance of the effect that their interference might have in galvanizing foreign opinion in defence of the film was a product of their long practice of ignoring public opinion in their own country...."¹⁰⁶ This began the discrediting of the Fifth Generation films within their own country, an attack quite distinct from mere censorship.

Changing Worlds: Post-socialist Cinemas

The particular period that produced the signature films that introduced the Fifth Generation filmmakers was a mirror of the political changes occurring within post-Mao China. As a Communist nation "...after forty years of socialism, the people of mainland China ...[had] more in common with the people in the former Soviet Union, Bulgaria, and Hungary than they ...[had] with the people in Taiwan."¹⁰⁷ Other Communist countries were also in the throes of experiencing a new path due to shifting political values with the fall of the Iron Curtain and *glasnost*. As a result, the failure of socialism has become increasingly the subject of modern

¹⁰⁵ Clark, *Reinventing China*, 175.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *New Chinese Cinemas*, ed. Browne, Pickowicz, Sobchack, and Yau, 83.

cinema in all Communist countries. Films such as Polish film director Andrzej Wajda's *Man of Marble* (1977) and *Man of Iron* (1981) exemplify the tone of Eastern European cinema of the period.¹⁰⁸ "Their purpose is not to salvage socialism by advocating reform, but rather to demonstrate that traditional socialist societies are afflicted with various and deeply rooted terminal infirmities."¹⁰⁹

Captives of Censorship

For the Fifth Generation filmmakers, the initial disapproval of their new cinema style by Chinese critics had been counterbalanced by their acclaim in international circles. "It is worth noting that at no stage in its history has Fifth Generation cinema ever been positively endorsed in China. In terms of both cultural position and film style, it has always been marginalized and never recognized as a legitimate discourse or admitted to mainstream culture."¹¹⁰ Their rise to fame in the West led to increasing rumblings against their work by national critics. In speaking of their films, such phrases would be applied to them as: "...the 'superficial pretense' consciously pursued by directors like Zhang Yimou,"¹¹¹ with Director Zhang "...humorously given the nickname *dejiangzhuanyehu*, or 'the awards expert.'¹¹² Even more searing critiques indicted their films, pointing to the "...self-Orientalizing male elite narrative...gory, cruel, and charming stories about women...[that] win them a ticket 'to the world.' Or the attention of the West."¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ *Man of Iron* received an Academy Award nomination; altogether he has received four nominations for *The Promised Land* (1974), *The Maids of Wilko* (1979), *Man of Iron* (1981), and *Katyń* (2007).

¹⁰⁹ *New Chinese Cinemas*, ed. Browne, Pickowicz, Sobchack, and Yau, 58.

¹¹⁰ Zhen, *Memoirs*, 198.

¹¹¹ Gina Marchetti, "Chinese feminist film criticism," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* (2003), <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc46.2003/marchetti.dai/index.html>.

¹¹² Jianying Zha, *China Pop: How Soap Operas, Tabloids, and Bestsellers Are Transforming a Culture* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 80.

¹¹³ Marchetti, "Chinese feminist," <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc46.2003/marchetti.dai/index.html>.

History was rapidly changing against the backdrop of their new Chinese cinema. The 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre had profoundly altered the course of Chinese history. Teng Jinxian became the new head of the Film Bureau under the Ministry of Radio, Film and Television in mid-1990, heralding a return to the 1950's style of political propaganda films.¹¹⁴ "Teng charged that filmmakers are guilty of "national nihilism" and "blindly worship Western film theory and artistic genres....[condemning] filmmakers ...interested in the subject of human nature."¹¹⁵

Economic changes came into play as well. Unions used to buy large blocks of movie tickets for their workers, basically subsidizing both good and bad films by ensuring an audience. But when the economy declined, these sales declined from 70 percent in the 1980s to 20 percent in 1998.¹¹⁶

This was also the time in which the state film industry crumpled like the proverbial paper tiger. When Chen and his colleagues started their careers, money was not something to be worried about. Their films, made with extravagant sets, often in remote locations, were solidly backed by the official studios, however unsuccessful they were financially. The situation could not last. Trapped in a vicious cycle of bad films, bad politics, and bad management, the big studios were going bankrupt in all but name. By the time the state monopoly started to loosen its grip over film markets, the audience for local movies had dropped off.¹¹⁷

Consumerism was providing the people with expanded media choices. Cable TV and special shows featuring the latest releases from Hong Kong and Hollywood became the public's choice. "On those occasions when only mainland-made movies were available, some exhibitors took to shutting down the theater completely, since they could only expect to lose money."¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ *New Chinese Cinemas*, ed. Browne, Pickowicz, Sobchack, and Yau, 79.

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Richard Kraus and Jihong Wan, "Hollywood and China as Adversaries and Allies," *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 75, no. 3 (2002): 422.

¹¹⁷ Ja, *China Pop*, 93.

¹¹⁸ *ibid.*

The international awards that had propelled the Fifth Generation filmmakers to recognition now caused them to be caught up in a vortex. They had the advantage of their reputations to obtain foreign funding for their films. However, "...the situation added new pressures to win international prizes: on top of what they did for the national psyche, they provided calculable marketing advantages, a seal of commercial viability."¹¹⁹ Yet when the directors brought forward films, such as Director Zhang's *Hero* or Director Chen's *The Promise*, using the scale and equaling the caliber of Hollywood commercial ventures, "The Fifth Generation, once heralded as brilliant *enfants terribles*, were now to be unmasked as a group of overrated, callow, and pretentious self-promoters."¹²⁰ Caught up in a dual dilemma, even the issue of censorship has come under scrutiny, creating a situation in which "...some overseas distributors...ask if they could claim a given film is 'banned' in mainland China as a promotion strategy even though the film has obtained permits from censors."^{121 122}

The response of the Fifth Generation filmmakers is to continue their experiments with films. Director Zhang "...has consistently insisted since the 1980s that, despite his international success, his target audience in all his films is Chinese" and, in fact, he has never learned English and retains his home in Beijing.¹²³ The Fifth Generation filmmakers earned their reputations by their manipulation of censorship, taking bold steps forward to advance Chinese cinema, and establishing a unique position in cinema. Yet, when they should have been able to experiment further, the Fifth Generation filmmakers find themselves trapped in their own renown, subject as

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*

¹²⁰ *ibid.*, 94.

¹²¹ Ran Ma, "New Chinese Cinema and Western Film Festivals," *Cina Oggi China-Underground* (2006), <http://www.china-underground.com/cinema/the-fifth-generation-cinema-and-its-cross-cultural-interpretation.html>.

¹²² "Peter Loehr, the found of Imar (Yima) Productions, a joint venture dedicating to commercial films reflecting urban lifestyles, sarcastically states in an interview that three peculiar aspects of Chinese films fascinate the Western film festival the most: the impoverished village, gorgeous ancient costumes and banned moves." Marchetti, "Chinese feminist," <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc46.2003/marchetti.dai/index.html>

¹²³ Clark, *Reinventing China*, 183.

“...prophet[s]...[who are] not without honor save in...[their] own country and in ...[their] own house” to national criticism disavowing their accomplishments.¹²⁴

¹²⁴ Originally from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, King James Version, 13:57. *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, Edited by Emily Morison Beck (Boston & Toronto: Little, Brown, and Company 1968), 42b.

Appendix of Images

Image 1. of *Yellow Earth*, found through Google in an online blog by Francis Cruz. *Lessons from the School of Inattention: Oggs' Movie Thoughts*, November 11, 2007.
<http://oggsmoggs.blogspot.com/2007/11/yellow-earth-1984.html>.

Image 2. of *Raise the Red Lantern*, found through Google in an online blog by mkp. *The Film Sufi: Devoted to Discussion of Film Expression*, November 5, 2009.
<http://filmsufi.blogspot.com/2009/11/raise-red-lantern-zhang-yimou-1991.html>.

Image 3. of *The Blue Kite*, found through Google in an online blog by Ike Cinecult. February 17, 2010.
<http://cinemaurum.wordpress.com/2010/02/17/%e8%93%9d%e9%a3%8e%e7%ad%9d-1993/>.

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