

**Contested Representation: an historical
reassessment of the work of art filmmakers in
the PRC, 1989-2001**

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Declaration

This is to certify that the work contained within has been composed by me and is entirely my own work. No part of this thesis has been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Signed

Francesca Young Kaufman

Abstract & Lay Summary

This thesis reconsiders the work of art filmmakers in the People's Republic of China between 1989 and 2001. These dates bookend the decade of the 1990s, comprising two defining moments in the reform era: the Tiananmen Square political crisis in 1989, and the entry of China into the WTO and the global market economy in 2001. The 1990s is therefore approached in this research as a transitional decade, in which the future direction of China was being decided. The term 'art film' is used to identify a distinct mode of film practice, characterised by a peripheral position, a clear directorial voice, and an emphasis on aesthetics. This rubric therefore incorporates films made by a range of auteur directors, rather than solely the 'independent' or 'underground' works commonly assessed in studies of the decade. By examining the representational modes used by art filmmakers in the 1990s, filmic innovations can be seen to constitute an artistic response to the restrictions placed on representation by the State.

This thesis argues that historical reassessment was a key factor in the innovation of cinematic representation in the 1990s. Utilising a cultural history approach, the thesis engages in close textual analysis of seventeen films, identifying and contextualising the representational conventions drawn on by filmmakers. The thesis is structured around five thematic chapters, each dealing with a cluster of films focused on similar content. The first chapter examines filmic reassessments of China's socialist history, and concludes that the limitations of the official narrative provided opportunities for the assertion of alternative histories. The subsequent chapters develop on the concept of historical reassessment by looking at changing modes of cinematic representation in relation to rural populations, women and gender, urban regeneration, and youth culture. By engaging in a wide-ranging survey of how key themes were represented in art films in the 1990s, the thesis reveals the critical role which historical reassessment played in pushing directors to new levels of artistry and experimentation in their filmmaking. This thesis concludes that by questioning the cinematic forms used historically to represent these issues and social groups, Chinese art filmmakers achieved a new level of artistic independence in their work by the end of the decade.

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In memoriam
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Eph. 3: 20-21

Chapter One

Introduction

In this thesis I reconsider work produced by art filmmakers in the People's Republic of China [PRC] after 1989 through an assessment of the historical modes of representation appearing in their work. I conclude that the principle of historical reassessment is central, not only to coming to a deeper understanding of the evolution of film form in the 1990s, but also to the creative choices of the directors themselves as they sought to negotiate the boundaries of contested representation with the state. In this initial chapter, I will establish my conceptual and methodological framework, and position my thesis in relation to the wider literature in the field. I will conclude with a brief introduction to my research chapters and film texts.

Literature

Beginning in the late 1980s, English-language academic research on Chinese cinema became a recognised field of scholarship, initiated by Chris Berry's call for a multi-disciplinary approach to the study of Chinese films.¹ Scholars subsequently used and combined modes of analysis drawn from literature studies, cultural theory, film theory, linguistic studies, art history, film history, and geography to

¹ Chris Berry, *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema* (London, 1985).

² See for example, Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: visibility, sexuality, ethnography, and contemporary Chinese cinema* (New York NY, 1995); Zhang

produce a diverse collection of work. Until the mid-1990s, however, the dominant focus of most research was the so-called 'Fifth Generation', or New Wave, which had emerged in the early part of the previous decade.²

Sheldon Lu's 1997 edited volume, *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: identity, nationhood, gender*, prompted a necessary broadening of the field into new areas of debate.³ The national paradigm, which defined 'Chinese cinema' by political and geographical boundaries, was strongly questioned by scholarship which asserted an ethno-cultural or a linguistic framing instead, resulting in a spate of works which explored films from the 'three Chinas': the PRC, Taiwan and Hong Kong; and work in a Chinese language or about Chinese themes produced in the wider diaspora.⁴ The broader scope of a transnational focus naturally moved the field away from the political considerations that had tended to define western scholarship on PRC cinema in the 1980s and early 1990s, and towards analysis of market factors and the spread of globalising culture. At the same time, a discrete body of works concentrated on

² See for example, Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: visuality, sexuality, ethnography, and contemporary Chinese cinema* (New York NY, 1995); Zhang Xudong, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms: cultural fever, avant-garde fiction, and the new Chinese cinema* (Durham NC, 1997); Tam & Dissanayake, *New Chinese Cinema* (Oxford, 1998); Sheila Cornelius, *New Chinese Cinema: challenging representations* (London, 2002).

³ Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu (ed.) *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: identity, nationhood, gender* (Honolulu HI, 1997).

⁴ See Browne et al. (eds.) *New Chinese Cinemas: forms, identities, politics* (Cambridge, 1994); Sheldon Lu, *China, Transnational Visuality, Global Postmodernity* (Stanford CA, 2001); Lu & Yeh (eds.) *Chinese Language Film: historiography, poetics, politics* (Honolulu HI, 2005); Gary Xu, *Sinascapes: contemporary Chinese cinema* (Plymouth 2007); Michael Curtin, *Playing the World's Biggest Audience: the globalization of Chinese film and tv* (Berkeley CA, 2007); Tan et al. (eds.) *Chinese Connections: critical perspectives on film, identity and diaspora* (Philadelphia PA, 2009).

emerging young Chinese filmmakers on the mainland, and later on the DV and independent documentary scene.⁵ Led by Zhang Zhen, Zhang Yingjin, and Paul Pickowicz, these works remained a sub-genre in the wider field until more comprehensive overviews began to emerge in the second decade of the new millennium, which incorporated work on the 1990s into a broader narrative of Chinese cinematic development.⁶

At around the same time, the increasing availability of previously inaccessible archival materials both allowed and stimulated research into earlier periods of Chinese cinema history.⁷ Returning to the first decades of the twentieth century, scholars introduced new complexity to the field by challenging established ideas about nationalist and 'leftist' filmmaking. These works, in turn, reverberated in the contemporary scholarship by suggesting significant continuities across Chinese cinema throughout the whole of the twentieth century. The broadening of the field, from its first, limited and specialist incarnations, was also seen in increasing references to Chinese films within cultural and historical works,

⁵ In particular, Pickowicz & Zhang (eds.) *From Underground to Independent: alternative film culture in contemporary China* (Lanham MD, 2006); Zhang Zhen (ed.) *The Urban Generation: Chinese cinema and society at the turn of the twenty-first century* (Durham NC, 2007); Lin Xiaoping, *Children of Marx and Coca-Cola: Chinese avant-garde art and independent cinema* (Honolulu HI, 2010); Wang Qi, *Memory, Subjectivity and Independent Chinese Cinema* (Edinburgh, 2014).

⁶ For example, Zhu & Rosen (eds.) *Art, Politics, and Commerce in Chinese Cinema* (HK, 2010); Song & Ward (eds.) *The Chinese Cinema Book* (London, 2011); Zhang Yingjin (ed.) *A Companion to Chinese Cinema* (Chichester, 2012).

⁷ See for example, Pang Laikwan, *Building a New China in Cinema: the Chinese left-wing cinema movement, 1932-1937* (Lanham MD, 2002); Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai cinema, 1896-1937* (Chicago IL, 2005); Wang Yiman, *Remaking Chinese Cinema through the Prism of Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Hollywood* (Honolulu HI, 2013); Huang Xuelei, *Shanghai Filmmaking: crossing borders, connecting to the globe, 1922-1938* (Leiden, 2014).

exploring themes of which the cinematic texts were seen to be examples or useful documentary evidence.⁸ This thesis sits on the bridging point between these cultural-historical works, and the more specific scholarship focused on films from the last decade of the twentieth century.

Categorising Chinese Films

Studies of Chinese film in the 1990s have tended to reinforce unhelpful generational groupings. These categories of directors entered common parlance in the 1980s, prompted by the graduation of the class of 1982 from the Beijing Film Academy [BFA] and their subsequent, ground-breaking first features: *Yellow Earth* (黄土地, *Huang Tudi*, dir. Chen Kaige, 1984), and *On the Hunting Ground* (猎场扎撒, *Liechang Zha Sa*, dir. Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1985). The new filmmakers were classified as the 'Fifth Generation', and incorporated into a retrospective timeline that structured a history of Chinese filmmaking around generational groupings. The 'Fifth Generation' were considered to be the protégés of the older 'Fourth Generation', who had tutored them at the BFA and were advocates for the development of a radical new cinematic language in the post-

⁸ For example, Zhang Yingjin, *The City in Modern Chinese Literature and Film: configurations of space, time and gender* (Stanford CA, 1996); Ann Anagnost, *National Past-Times: narrative, representation, and power in modern China* (Durham NC, 1997); Geremie Barmé, *In the Red: on contemporary Chinese culture* (New York NY, 1999); Stephanie Hemelryk Donald, *Public Secrets, Public Spaces: cinema and civility in China* (Lanham MD, 2000); Jason McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese cinema, literature, and criticism in the market age* (Stanford CA, 2008); Zhang Xudong, *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics: China in the last decade of the twentieth century* (Durham NC, 2008); Yomi Braester, *Painting the City Red: Chinese cinema and the urban contract* (Durham NC, 2010).

Mao era.⁹ In the same way, the 'Sixth Generation' directors like Wang Xiaoshuai and Zhang Yuan emerged from their predecessors' shadow in the 1990s, and developed new realist film styles, which nonetheless built upon the foundation of the avant-garde cinema that had been produced in the previous decade.

The generational line-up simplified the narrative of Chinese cinematic development, at a time when the field of Chinese film studies as a taught subject was in its infancy.¹⁰ It remains a very limiting way to conceptualise the field of Chinese filmmaking in the late twentieth century. As Zhang Yingjin pointed out, "...problems in such a generational lineup abound because sweeping generalizations tend to gloss over the internal contradiction and disharmony that inevitably mark a generation and its representative directors."¹¹ The limitations inherent to the generation label became most evident when scholars attempted to address the work of the young filmmakers who began to direct in the mid-to-late-1990s. The 'sixth generation' rubric was quickly fractured into numerous codes and classifications, attempting to define a single system of artistic approach, of which 'independent', coined by Pickowicz and Zhang Yingjin, and 'urban', promoted by Zhang Zhen, seemed to have the most traction.

⁹ Zhang Yingjin, 'Chinese Postsocialist Cinema, 1979-2010', in Zhang (ed.) *A Companion to Chinese Cinema* (Chichester, 2012) p. 62.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 58-59.

¹¹ *Ibid.* Huang Xuelei recently made a similar argument regarding the artificial borders within which Chinese cinema of the 1920s and 1930s has traditionally been categorised. Huang Xuelei, *Shanghai Filmmaking*, p. 2.

As well as concealing the individuality of different directors' approaches by grouping them together, the generational model also prevents the identification of continuities across a wider spectrum of Chinese filmmaking.¹² For this reason I have chosen to use a different classification structure in this thesis. Art cinema has typically been defined with reference to its origins in post-war Europe. This Eurocentric model traces the phenomenon of art film to the Italian neorealist and French New Wave movements, and in so doing defines it against the dominance of Hollywood and classical narrative cinema. This framing is fraught with difficulties when applied to a non-western cinema in which Hollywood is not the main player. However, Bordwell's theorisation of art film as an aesthetic practice allows a move away from westernised interpretations towards a definition based on formal qualities.¹³ He identified two defining facets of art film: authorial expressivity, and realism or truthfulness.

Bordwell argued that the recognition of a director's personal touch and presence was an important aspect of art cinema: "What is essential is that the art film be read as the work of an expressive individual."¹⁴ He privileged the individual artistic intention of the director over audience reception or other interpretative frameworks. Secondly, Bordwell saw a drive to present life truthfully in art film. It

¹² This problem is clearly evidenced in the analysis of Zhang Yingjin, who saw each generational marker as a distinct wave of filmic innovation, subsequently subsiding into conventional forms whilst a new group of directors emerged. Zhang, 'Chinese Postsocialist Cinema, 1979-2010', p. 61.

¹³ David Bordwell, 'The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice', *Film Criticism*, 4/1 (1979).

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 59.

should be clarified that it was not realism as a film style that Bordwell was classifying as art film, although he saw the postwar neorealist movement as an important antecedent, but rather a commitment to a realistic approach in contrast with the formulaic narrative structures of classical cinema.¹⁵ The defining quality Bordwell identified in art films as 'truthful' was ambiguity: "...the art film reasserts that ambiguity is the dominant principle of intelligibility, that we are to watch less for the tale than the telling, that life lacks the neatness of art..."¹⁶ Bordwell's art film was realistic in its refusal to simplify complex subject matter, and its willingness to defy audience expectations by presenting open-ended narratives without obvious resolutions or moral outcomes.

The concept of art cinema is useful as a way to classify non-mainstream Chinese films in the 1990s, without resorting to the limiting generational model.¹⁷ If Bordwell's definition is repositioned against the background of state-led cinema production, it is possible to use it to identify art film in China as an alternative cinematic practice. In order to do this, I am identifying three interrelated facets of Chinese art film which together gave a distinct identity to the cinema: a peripheral position, allowing negotiation with the state as well as alternative avenues for funding and distribution; an authorial voice from the director, which functioned as part of both its branding

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 56.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 61.

¹⁷ For a similar approach see Zhang Zhen, *The Urban Generation*, who chose to group the essays in her edited volume around the central theme of 'urban', and so correlated the work of emerging film directors with the new documentary, photographic and art movements of the late 1990s and early millennium.

and its politics; and a clear emphasis on aesthetics, in which formal aspects of the filmmaking were given an equal or higher significance than the clarity of narration.

Galt and Schoonover described art cinema as, “feature length narrative films at the margins of mainstream cinema, located somewhere between fully experimental films and overtly commercial products.”¹⁸ This identification of art movies as occupying a peripheral industrial position, overlapping commercial cinema in some respects but not others, accords with Andrew’s concept of the three *optiques*. He proposed that three different forms of cinema coexisted within both local and global film cultures: national ‘folk’ films, global entertainment movies, and international art cinema.¹⁹ If we replace Andrew’s mildly patronising use of the term ‘folk’ when describing national cinemas, and utilise ‘state’ instead, this framework provides a fairly accurate depiction of the Chinese context.

The relative independence of art film directors from the state system in China, or their tenuous position as dissidents, has produced considerable scholarly and critical debate. In the immediate post-Tiananmen era, the visually stunning and allegorical style of the New Wave directors was widely read and celebrated by

¹⁸ Rosalind Galt & Karl Schoonover, ‘The Impurity of Art Cinema’, in Galt & Schoonover (eds.) *Global Art Cinema: new theories and histories* (Oxford, 2010) p. 6.

¹⁹ Dudley Andrew, ‘Foreword’, in Galt & Schoonover (eds.) *Global Art Cinema: new theories and histories* (Oxford, 2010) p. x.

western critics as a politicised statement.²⁰ Instances of sexual repression and gendered violence were interpreted as commentary on patriarchal state practices.²¹ As Pickowicz pointed out, “Because Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, and other young post-Mao directors sometimes got into trouble with state authorities in the early 1990s, they were often viewed by foreign critics as quasi-dissident filmmakers.”²² The ‘independent’ directors who emerged in the early 1990s were similarly lauded as representing a western ideal of free speech in a repressive political regime.

The reality was considerably more complex. The New Wave had been nurtured within the state studio sector. Their promoters included an established older generation of directors, and their early works benefited both from institutional support during production, and a stable distribution platform for release.²³ Tighter controls over marketisation and more limited funds in the 1990s by and large excluded younger directors from accessing these opportunities, pushing them to the fringes of recognised film practice.²⁴ Some also deliberately identified themselves as ‘independent’, financially and by association artistically, from the state-sponsored studio system.²⁵

²⁰ Paul Pickowicz, ‘Velvet Prisons and the Political Economy of Chinese Filmmaking in the Late 1980s and Early 1990s’, in Pickowicz (ed.) *China on Film: a century of exploration, confrontation, and controversy* (Lanham MA, 2012) pp. 315-6

²¹ Zhang, ‘Chinese Postsocialist Cinema, 1979-2010’, p. 60.

²² Pickowicz, ‘Velvet Prisons and the Political Economy of Chinese Filmmaking in the Late 1980s and Early 1990s’, p. 316.

²³ Zhang Zhen, ‘Introduction: Bearing Witness’, p. 10.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Zhang Yingjin, ‘Rebel Without a Cause? China’s New Urban Generation and Postsocialist Filmmaking’, in Zhang Zhen (ed.) *The Urban Generation: Chinese*

This self-identification did not make them radical outsiders, however, as filmmakers like Zhang Yuan, Wang Xiaoshuai, and Lou Ye, still began their careers in the Beijing Film Academy, worked with colleagues from their graduating cohort, and remained rooted in a community of privileged intellectuals in the capital.

Because of the widespread misunderstanding among western critics over the perceived dissident status of Chinese art directors in the 1990s, when the same filmmakers, who had been praised for radical departures from the leitmotif norm, later chose to work in or in collaboration with the national mainstream, they were widely critiqued as sell-outs.²⁶ Such criticisms failed to appreciate the complexities of the Chinese filmmaking system, because nomenclatures like 'independent' and 'underground' inaccurately represented production realities in the 1990s. Jason McGrath noted, "...such a practice, almost as a requirement of reaching any audience, will necessarily be drawn into cooperation with either the state studio system or the international production companies that supply the global art-cinema market."²⁷ Sheldon Lu's use of the word 'peripheral' provides a more accurate description of Chinese

cinema and society at the turn of the twenty-first century (Durham NC, 2007) p. 53.

²⁶ Paul Pickowicz noted one example of this from 2004 when a Hong Kong newspaper announced that Jia Zhangke, formerly an 'underground' filmmaker, was "joining the mainstream, with official approval." Pickowicz, 'Social and Political Dynamics of Underground Filmmaking in Early Twenty-First-Century China', p. 325.

²⁷ Jason McGrath, 'The Independent Cinema of Jia Zhangke: from postsocialist realism to a transnational aesthetic', in Zhang Zhen (ed.) *The Urban Generation: Chinese cinema and society at the turn of the twenty-first century* (Durham NC, 2007) p. 83.

art cinema's marginal position in the 1990s.²⁸ As a peripheral cinema, art film in China engaged in a complex negotiation with the dominant political system. As well as groundbreaking directors like Zhang Yimou and Zhang Yuan moving in from the periphery to work closer to the mainstream with films such as *Not One Less* (一个都不能少, *Yige dou Buneng Shao*, 1999) and *Seventeen Years* (过年回家, *Guo Nian Hui Jia*, 1999), establishment figures such as actor Jiang Wen moved out to the margins to make more experimental works like *In the Heat of the Sun* (阳光灿烂的日子, *Yangguang Canlan de Rizhi*, 1994).

The fluid way in which art directors engaged with the state and commercial cinema industries in China reflects the significance of the cultural space created by the nomenclature 'art film'. As both Jean Ma and Galt and Schoonover noted, the idea of a simple antagonistic binary between commercial and art cinema fails to accurately represent the dynamic nature of art film's engagement with the wider industry and culture.²⁹ However, defining art directors' work through the concept of a distinct cinema practice provided a way in which peripheral filmmakers could promote their output "as part of an already constituted cultural space."³⁰ Like Bordwell, Neale saw art cinema as characterised by its use of

²⁸ Sheldon H. Lu, 'Emerging from Underground and the Periphery: Chinese independent cinema at the turn of the twenty-first century', in Iordanova et al. (eds.) *Cinema at the Periphery* (Detroit MI, 2010) p. 108.

²⁹ See Jean Ma, 'Tsai Ming-Liang's Haunted Movie Theatre', in Galt & Schoonover (eds.) *Global Art Cinema: new theories and histories* (Oxford, 2010) p. 343.

³⁰ Galt & Schoonover, 'The Impurity of Art Cinema', p. 13.

innovative film language, but he also stressed that part of its unique identity centred on an appeal to elite audiences looking for an alternative to the mainstream.³¹ The differentiation of art film from either state or commercial cinema functioned in China as a form of branding, legitimising access to varied funding and distribution sources as well as defining an intended audience both at home and abroad. Chinese art directors' choice of marginalised subject matter can also be seen as both a result of and enabled by their peripheral position. The branding of art film as distinctive from the mainstream created an expectation that their films would deal with otherwise unrepresented subjects. Their marginalisation also provided a measure of creative and institutional space that made this engagement possible.

Secondly, art film has consistently been defined by its distinctive emphasis on the authorial presence of the director. Bordwell argued that art films could be considered, as with any other works of art, to form a corpus of work linked to a filmmaker.³² He identified two ways in which the authorial statement was identified: through industrial processes, by which a director's oeuvre was highlighted as a marketing tool; and through recognition of recurrent devices appearing from one film to the next.³³ So, for example, Chen Kaige's blending of melodrama and historical references, Zhang Yimou's use of saturated colour, and Ning Ying's

³¹ Steve Neale, 'Art Cinema as Institution', *Screen* 22/1 (1981) p. 12.

³² David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (London, 1985) p. 211.

³³ *Ibid.*

ethnographic focus on Beijing, all constituted a recognisable authorial stamp, which both defined them as art films and allowed them to be marketed as such. Neale traced the impulse to identify auteur directors to the differentiation of art films from the mainstream by their promoters: "In constructing and sustaining such differences, the films will almost certainly tend to coincide with and to become supported by discourses functioning to define and perpetuate art and culture."³⁴ The corollary of art film with high art therefore created an expectation of subjective artistic expression in the movies, which was to be identified and traced to the presence of the director.³⁵

An auteur approach to cinema has historically been criticised by scholars, not least because it appears to ignore the collaborative nature of film production. Betz noted that the association of art film with high art in the west resulted, in the politically charged decades after the 1960s, in a reading of that cinema as apolitical, elite, and irrelevant.³⁶ Third Cinema advocates saw the principle of authorial intent as reducing the impact of art cinemas' critiques of the mainstream. Drawing from socialist ideals, they attacked the 'modernist' aesthetics of art film and its reliance on the unifying figure of the director as failing to counter the underlying power structures that were responsible for the social issues the films

³⁴ Neale, 'Art Cinema as Institution', p. 15.

³⁵ Ibid. p. 14

³⁶ This approach was fuelled by the emergence of politically engaged filmmaking movements in west and central Europe and Cuba in the late 1960s. Mark Betz, *Beyond the Subtitle: remapping European art cinema* (Minneapolis MN, 2009) pp. 22-23.

attempted to highlight.³⁷ The narrow framing of this approach resulted from the left's support of realism as a more socially-conscious mode of filmmaking. As Betz observed, seeing creative modernism as apolitical resulted in "a set of historical and theoretical reading protocols that have held art cinema in a holding pattern..."³⁸

These critiques of auteurism reveal the importance of historical specificity when approaching the study of film. In the Chinese context of the late twentieth century, in which the state occupied the mainstream and at the same time declared itself the guardian of socialist culture, a leftist attack on art film as an elite indulgence inadvertently aligns itself with the dominant power holders. By contrast, asserting an authorial voice, as Corrigan noted, can be approached as a model of agency.³⁹ By branding themselves as auteurs, art film directors could assert a measure of creative and subjective autonomy from the Chinese state, whilst simultaneously accessing transnational financing and distribution. This access in turn reinforced their cultural capital within China, allowing them to maintain a peripheral, if uneasy, relationship with the state. As Galt and Schoonover put it, "Since art cinema authors often...locate themselves outside the mainstream of representational practices, it can be argued that authorship takes on a pressing significance for

³⁷ See Mike Wayne, *Political Film: the dialectics of third cinema* (London, 2001) p. 7; and Paul Willeman, 'The Third Cinema Question: notes and reflections', in Pines & Willeman (eds.) *Questions of Third Cinema* (London, 1989) pp. 5, 7.

³⁸ Betz, *Beyond the Subtitle*, p. 28.

³⁹ Timothy Corrigan, *A Cinema Without Walls: movies and culture after Vietnam* (New Brunswick NJ, 1991) p. 105.

thinking [about] the potential of art cinema as a platform for political agency.”⁴⁰

Staiger’s more recent work on authorship and film has reasserted the significance of the director in the face of criticisms of auteurism. She observed that, “[authorship] matters especially to those in non-dominant positions in which asserting even a partial agency may seem to be important...or where locating moments of alternative practice takes away the naturalized privileges of normativity.”⁴¹ Staiger highlighted the anti-auteurist position as particularly disadvantageous to peripheral social groups such as feminists, LGBT activists, and those picking apart racial conventions, for whom asserting a distinctive and personal voice is a political act.⁴² Similarly, she identified ideological readings of films, in which representational modes are assumed to be the product of unconscious material discourses rather than the conscious choices of the director, as a further denial of agency.⁴³ These scholarship practices are therefore incompatible with the study of Chinese art film within the context of the pressures exerted by the state towards cultural hegemony and conformity. As Staiger observed, “The point is that for many people in a nondominant situation, who is speaking does matter.”⁴⁴ It is also worth remembering the origins of auteurism within the French New Wave movement, where ‘*La*

⁴⁰ Galt & Schoonover, ‘The Impurity of Art Cinema’, p. 8.

⁴¹ Janet Staiger, ‘Authorship Approaches’, in Gerstner & Staiger (eds.) *Authorship and Film* (New York NY, 2003) p. 27.

⁴² *Ibid.* p. 29.

⁴³ *Ibid.* p. 46.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p. 49.

Politique des Auteurs' emerged specifically as a way for innovative directors to create a place for themselves in the conservative and hierarchical French studio system.⁴⁵

Intrinsically linked with the framing of art film as the product of auteurs is the practice's capacity for innovative creative expression. Betz called for the recognition of aesthetics as an organising principle in the categorisation of art film.⁴⁶ He countered approaches which focused on the situation of art cinema within international film distribution circuits by noting a disconnect between these arguments and the tendency of art directors to subvert formal industry norms.⁴⁷ In particular, Betz emphasised that local particularities in art film aesthetics could be overlooked in an approach which foregrounded discussions of global cultural flows.⁴⁸ Corrigan similarly recognised the importance of identifying art film primarily by its visuality. He argued that it was key "to read or to respond to it as an expressive organization that precedes and forecloses the historical fragmentations and subjective distortions that can take over the reception of even the most classically coded movie."⁴⁹

An aesthetic model of art cinema identifies it as a particular mode of thinking about the power of images. Tudor traced the

⁴⁵ Stam, *Film Theory*, p. 87.

⁴⁶ Mark Betz, 'Beyond Europe: on parametric transcendence', in Galt & Schoonover (eds.) *Global Art Cinema: new theories and histories* (Oxford, 2010) p. 31.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* p. 32.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Corrigan, *A Cinema Without Walls*, p. 102.

origins of this approach to the early years of classical cinema in the 1930s, during which artistically distinctive films were actively promoted as examples of the 'seventh art form'.⁵⁰ Neale also recognised that the institutionalisation of global art cinema required a deliberate emphasis on marking film imagery as images, to be noticed and appreciated in their own right not simply as conveyers of a narrative.⁵¹ Like Betz, Klinger attempted to form the basis of an aesthetic theory of art film, to counteract approaches that have tended to dismiss formal inventiveness as superficial or irrelevant to critical readings.⁵² Whilst acknowledging the importance of aesthetic invention to the construction of art films' cultural capital, she also proposed that formal expressiveness was part of the unique signature of art cinema: "The image radiates intentionality, an especially self-conscious intervention of the filmmaker's stylistic signature into the world he or she has created."⁵³ Klinger's recognition of the importance of aesthetics highlights the inadequacy of approaches that dismiss formal experimentation as a space for political self-assertion.

The identification of visual creativity as a hallmark of art film is particularly pertinent within the Chinese context. Since the 1930s, film in China has typically been assessed in terms of content rather than form. Emerging as it did in parallel with debates around

⁵⁰ Andrew Tudor, 'The Rise and Fall of the Art (House) Movie', in Inglis & Hughson (eds.) *The Sociology of Art: ways of seeing* (Hampshire, 2005) pp. 129-30.

⁵¹ Neale, 'Art Cinema as Institution', p. 13.

⁵² Barbara Klinger, 'The Art Film, Affect and the Female Viewer: *The Piano* revisited', *Screen* 47/1 (2006) pp. 19-41.

⁵³ *Ibid.* p. 30.

national development and self-determination, Chinese cinema was intrinsically bound up in the project of modernisation. Although the development of film as an aesthetic art form was debated by filmmakers at the time, as Pang Laikwan argued: 'Between art and politics, it was the latter that, to a larger extent, defined the relationship between the filmmakers and their films...[they] seldom expressed the artistic excellence of their works...' ⁵⁴ Huang Xuelei pointed out that, as far back as the nineteenth century, reformers calling for the enlightenment of the masses advocated the didactic use of the arts, including literary fiction, to promote this end, and 'shadowplay' was early recognised as a potentially significant art form for cultural education. ⁵⁵ Hu Jubin similarly argued that the film community in China in the 1920s and 1930s were primarily driven by the needs of nation, not the development of cinema per se. ⁵⁶ The voices calling for film to be used as an educative tool won out over more artistically minded filmmakers in the atmosphere of crisis occasioned by the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and the subsequent bombing of Shanghai in 1932. Thereafter, both nationalist and 'left-wing' filmmakers embraced the ideal of a cinema in which form was subject to the needs of the content.

This model was subsequently formalised into a cohesive artistic policy by Mao Zedong at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and

⁵⁴ Pang Laikwan, *Building a New China in Cinema: the Chinese left-wing cinema movement, 1932-1937* (Lanham MD, 2002) p. 7.

⁵⁵ Huang Xuelei, *Shanghai Filmmaking: crossing borders, connecting to the globe, 1922-1938* (Leiden, 2014) p. 5.

⁵⁶ Hu Jubin, *Projecting a Nation: Chinese national cinema before 1949* (HK, 2003) p. 17.

the Arts in 1942, where he stressed the pedagogical character of revolutionary arts.⁵⁷ After 1949 the concept of message intelligibility and mass education was gradually institutionalised into the PRC's early film industry practice.⁵⁸ However, Udden's recent work on Fei Mu's 1948 *Spring in a Small Town* (小城之春, *Xiaocheng zhi Chun*) suggested that the privileging of content over form might not have been inevitable in China.⁵⁹ Udden's research highlighted several facets of Fei Mu's formal filmmaking as evidence of modernist visual experimentation, in which the aesthetics superseded the narrative. *Spring in a Small Town* was made in the civil war period of 1945-49 during which the Chinese cinema industry existed on the edge of destruction and uncertainty. For this reason the film was largely overlooked at the time. Udden's work implied that art cinema might have been a viable possibility in post-war China. State control over filmmaking in the PRC after 1949, however, enforced a model of aesthetic development in service to the communication of an ideological message.

The politicisation of film form reached its zenith in the late 1960s and 1970s with the canonisation of the revolutionary model

⁵⁷ See Mao Zedong, 'Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art, 1942', https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_08.htm [accessed 12/01/17].

⁵⁸ Wang Zhuoyi noted that film was originally exempted from the strictures of the Yan'an formulation. The CCP instead attempted to co-opt the Shanghai film industry into a progressive model through gradual re-education and incentives, including, as time went on, critical campaigns against ambivalent or bourgeois characterisation. Wang Zhuoyi, *Revolutionary Cycles in Chinese Cinema, 1951-1976* (New York NY, 2014) p. 29.

⁵⁹ James Udden, 'Poetics of Two Springs: Fei Mu versus Tian Zhuangzhuang', in Bettinson & Udden (eds.) *The Poetics of Chinese Cinema* (New York NY, 2016) pp. 79-95.

works (革命样板戏, *geming yangbanxi*). These attempted to combine socialist realist film tropes, such as continuity editing and contemporary subjects, with elements drawn from traditional Chinese stage forms, and bring them together into a deeply affective cinema that would communicate an easily interpreted sociopolitical message to the viewer.⁶⁰ The model works used a highly stylised visual language to support the narrative, coded to ensure that virtuous characters were given prominence and their actions held up as behavioural examples.⁶¹ Although the model works were criticised in the aftermath of the arrest of the Gang of Four in 1976, Shen argued that the subjection of film aesthetics to ideology, which they exemplified, continued to dominate Chinese cinema into the mid-1980s. A key aspect of the revolutionary character of the New Wave directors who emerged from the BFA with films like *The One and the Eight* (一个和八个, *Yige he Bage*, dir. Zhang Junzhao, 1983) and *Yellow Earth* was the dynamic way in which they experimented with cinematic visuality, marking, in Neale's terms, film image as image, rather than as a prop to narrative intelligibility. It is worth noting that the rediscovery of

⁶⁰ For more on the affective power of the model works, see Chris Berry, 'Red Poetics: the films of the Chinese Cultural Revolution Revolutionary Model Operas', in Bettinson & Udden (eds.) *The Poetics of Chinese Cinema* (New York NY, 2016) pp. 29-49.

⁶¹ For example, a character of bad class background and evil intent was filmed from above and low lit so that they seemed small and malevolent; heroes were filmed from below and brightly lit so that they appeared to tower over and dominate the other characters. For more on the revolutionary model operas, see Jason McGrath, 'Cultural Revolution Model Opera Films and the Realist Tradition in Chinese Cinema', *The Opera Quarterly*, 26/2-3 (2010) pp. 343-376.

Spring in a Small Town happened concurrently with the emergence of this new art cinema.

Silbergeld, who has written prolifically about Chinese cinema from an art history perspective, also considered the emergence of the New Wave to mark a break-through moment in Chinese cinema, and the arts in China in general.⁶² Specifically, he grounded his argument, which he subsequently extended to include the young directors who began working in the 1990s, in the high priority given to aesthetics in their filmmaking: “In addition to their offerings of social commentary, these films are structured as visual art, and the visible artistry with which they meet us and by which their commentary is delivered...remains my deepest concern.”⁶³ His assertion that Chinese art filmmakers in the 1990s were consciously approaching their work as artistic in nature is born out by the encounter which took place between three directors and the state film bureau in 2002, in which Jia Zhangke, Wang Xiaoshuai, and Lou Ye called for support in the development of film as a creative visual practice. As both Klinger and Corrigan noted, to recognise the deliberate artistry involved in art film is to acknowledge the agency of the filmmaker as expressive creator. Furthermore, an aesthetic categorisation of Chinese film recognises visual experimentations and departures as significant developments in

⁶² He went so far as to include them as the final seminar on his introductory course on Chinese art history at Princeton University USA. Jerome Silbergeld, *China into Film: frames of reference in contemporary Chinese cinema* (London, 1999) p. 7.

⁶³ Jerome Silbergeld, *Hitchcock with a Chinese Face: cinematic doubles, oedipal triangles, and China's moral voice* (Seattle WA, 2004) p. 8.

their own right, not solely as a by-product of a confrontational or 'dissident' political stance.

Using art film as a classification term in the study of Chinese cinema therefore allows the identification of a distinct body of films, united by their peripheral status in relation to the state, their auterist directorial qualities, and their visual artistry. Viewing art cinema as an alternative cinematic practice frees analysis from the constraints of generational or political approaches to the films, and focuses instead on the construction of the works as cultural products. In this thesis I explore seventeen films in detail, all produced between 1989 and 2001, and all corresponding to the rubric of art film as I have presented it here. Each of the films was additionally selected because of its clear focus upon a particular area of historic change or contestation: the role of the state in determining orthodox interpretations of the past; the population shifts occasioned by the mass migration of rural migrants to urban centres; the depiction of women and femininity in the context of narratives of modernity; the transformation of indigenous city environments through mass demolition and reconstruction; and the emergence of youth subcultures. Finally, the films which I chose to write about are all part of a globalised art film culture, in that they were available to me in hard copy in the west.⁶⁴ Given my methodology of close textual analysis, it was essential that I was able to access the films for

⁶⁴ Of the seventeen films I have written about, around two thirds were easily accessed from 'world film' DVD distributors; several of the older films I found on second hand VHS cassettes, usually ex-rental; a significant handful I acquired as CDRs or digital files from personal sources in China and the US.

repeated viewings, rather than relying on a single screening or narrative summary. But they are all also films that have transitioned beyond the local borders of China and into a wider cinematic milieu, where they are consumed by non-Chinese viewers like myself, becoming part of the cultural economy of world film.

Periodisation

In seeking to define the specific qualities of Chinese art film in the 1990s, scholars have consistently turned to the concept of postsocialism. The term was originally coined by Dirlik in the 1980s as a way to describe the integration of market economics into the post-Mao political system.⁶⁵ As suggested by the prefix of 'post', early interpretations of China's age of marketisation assumed that the postsocialist phase indicated an end to the socialist stage of China's development. Pickowicz subsequently applied the term to Chinese cinema in his analysis of the work of filmmaker Huang Jianxin in the 1980s. Pickowicz identified qualities of anomie and alienation in the films, which, he argued, provided evidence of the cultural bankruptcy of communist ideals.⁶⁶ Berry developed the idea of a postsocialist mentality by exploring postsocialism as a specific, localised form of postmodernism. He suggested that the alienation

⁶⁵ Arif Dirlik, 'Post-socialism? Reflections on 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics'', in Dirlik & Meisner (eds.) *Marxism and the Chinese Experience* (Armonk NY, 1989) pp. 362-384.

⁶⁶ Paul Pickowicz, 'On the Eve of Tiananmen: Huang Jianxin and the notion of postsocialism', in Pickowicz (ed.) *China on Film: a century of exploration, confrontation, and controversy* (Lanham MA, 2012) p. 275. The article was originally published as, Paul Pickowicz, 'Huang Jianxin and the Notion of Postsocialism', in Browne et al. (eds.) *New Chinese Cinemas: forms, identities, politics* (Cambridge, 1994) pp. 57-86.

from the CCP's grand narratives that Pickowicz described, constituted a form of postmodernism, a characteristic of which is the disintegration of the metanarrative.⁶⁷ The notion of postsocialism, as applied to China, has therefore carried multiple meanings. It has been used to describe a political state, a cultural and aesthetic mentality, and a form of postmodernity.

In studies of Chinese cinema in the 1990s, the term postsocialism was consistently framed in terms of the market. McGrath, for example, correlated marketisation with cultural change, arguing that "In China as elsewhere, the ideology of global communist revolution has been replaced by that of capitalist economic growth (i.e., endless accumulation) and individual consumerism..."⁶⁸ McGrath based his argument on comparative politics, concluding, from analysis of other states in the former communist bloc, that postsocialism constituted not a unique, localised cultural phenomenon, but part of a global condition of late capitalist modernity.⁶⁹ He consequently saw Chinese art cinema as emerging from the intersection of socialist political decline, and the global art film economy.⁷⁰ In the same way, David Li used the phrase, "Capitalism's Second Coming", to argue that China in the late twentieth century was experiencing postsocialism as a second convergence with global capitalism, the first having taken place in

⁶⁷ Chris Berry, *Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China: the cultural revolution after the Cultural Revolution* (New York NY, 2004) p. 13.

⁶⁸ McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity*, p. 14.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* p. 131.

the nineteenth century.⁷¹ In his view cinema in the 1990s was defined by depictions of the emergence of bourgeois society, and the struggles engendered by engagement with global modernity.⁷² These interpretations therefore saw cultural and historical specificity as less important than China's incorporation into global flows of capital.

Market-based analyses displayed a tendency to assume that capitalism and socialism stood in direct opposition, and that the imperative trajectory of China in the 1990s was towards a totalising integration with globalised economic culture. The drawback of such frameworks was clearly illustrated in the work of Lin Xiaoping. Despite acknowledging the contradictions inherent to an overlapping of capitalist economic practices with a socialist-style government, nonetheless Lin defined China's postsocialist condition as the traumatic transition from socialism to capitalism.⁷³ Similarly, Zhang Zhen focused on new production methods and distribution platforms in her analysis of the emergence of younger filmmakers, situating these developments in the context of globalised culture, arguing that, "As China has become deeply implicated in the global arena of the post-cold war era, the young filmmakers...are readily cosmopolitan in their outlook and professional conduct."⁷⁴ The

⁷¹ David Leiwei Li, *Economy, Emotion, and Ethics in Chinese Cinema: globalization on speed* (Abingdon, 2016) p. 5.

⁷² *Ibid.* p. 4.

⁷³ Lin Xiaoping, *Children of Marx and Coca-Cola*, p. 23.

⁷⁴ Zhang Zhen, 'Introduction: Bearing Witness: Chinese urban cinema in the era of "Transformation" (*Zhuanxing*)' in Zhang Zhen (ed.) *The Urban Generation: Chinese cinema and society at the turn of the twenty-first century* (Durham NC, 2007) p. 23.

simplification of China's conflicted reform process into a linear trajectory defined by the market leaves little room for the consideration of other, potentially problematic, factors shaping Chinese film.

Wing Shan Ho critiqued the restricted framing of market-focused approaches for failing to consider the ways in which the Chinese state devoted resources to sustaining and reinvigorating its authority and values.⁷⁵ The CCP's programmes to reinforce its legitimacy as the party in power, such as the Spiritual Civilisation and Patriotic Education campaigns, described below, aimed to produce a unifying sense of cultural affinity with the values of socialism.⁷⁶ This repackaging of moral and ethical codes combined a recognisable value system with the new economic conditions. For example, Feuchtwang noted that the familiar rhetoric of emancipation by the state was reframed to position financial security, both personal and for the nation, as essential to achieving socialist freedom.⁷⁷ In the same way, Latham observed that capitalist consumption practices, as well as contributing to the emergence of new social divisions, also drew attention to them and raised widespread debates about moral and ethical behaviour in the new economy.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Wing Shan Ho, *Screening Post-1989 China: critical analysis of Chinese film and television* (New York NY, 2015) p. 15.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* p. 12.

⁷⁷ Stephen Feuchtwang, 'Remnants of Revolution in China', in Hann (ed.) *Postsocialism: ideals, ideologies and practices in Eurasia* (London, 2002) p. 201.

⁷⁸ Kevin Latham, 'Rethinking Chinese Consumption: social palliatives and the rhetorics of transition in postsocialist China', in Hann (ed.) *Postsocialism: ideals, ideologies and practices in Eurasia* (London, 2002) p. 237.

China in the 1990s was not simply defined by a transition into global capitalism, accompanied by the shaking-off of a retrograde and anachronistic socialist culture. The legacies of the Maoist period (1949-76) were still active and shaping political and social structures, albeit in often reconceptualised forms. I therefore find it inaccurate to describe China as being in a postsocialist political condition at the end of the twentieth century. The success of the CCP's new teleological historical narrative, in which economic growth was conceptualised in terms of a transition toward the socialist future, was demonstrated by the continuation, and indeed reinforcement, of the Party's control of power at the end of the century and into the new millennium. This in turn undermines the argument that postsocialist postmodernity saw a debunking of the power of metanarratives.⁷⁹

In considering periodisation, it is therefore vital, as Latham argued,

...to pay attention to both the radical breaks and the continuities that exist alongside each other and mutually inform one another. This means that one has to consider the contradictions, tensions and disjunctures that result from such awkward juxtapositions.⁸⁰

Zhang Xudong reiterated this approach, stressing that cultural analysis needed to take historical continuities into consideration, in

⁷⁹ I discuss the CCP's reframing of historical narratives in more detail in Chapter Two of this Thesis.

⁸⁰ Latham, 'Rethinking Chinese Consumption', p. 219.

order to highlight moments of discontinuity and identify their source.⁸¹ Wang Qi's recent work applied this formulation to produce a more nuanced account of Chinese cinema in the 1990s, in which the ambiguities of China's reform experience were acknowledged: "...as a temporal indicator, postsocialism is an open frame whose beginning indicates less a clean end of socialism than a conflict-ridden move away from it as an *absolute* [emphasis mine] organising principle of political, economic and social life."⁸² Nonetheless, I still find postsocialism to be a problematic term, and choose not to use it here.

In order to define the boundaries of my study, whilst acknowledging the deeply conflicted nature of socio-political realities in China in the 1990s, I have looked to mark the beginning and the end of the decade by moments which had significant impact on the subsequent course of national development. This approach echoes the work of Zhang Yingjin, in acknowledging the history of Chinese cinema as being one of fragmentation and rupture, rather than the streamlined teleology of socialist film histories.⁸³ Like Zhang Xudong, I see the Tiananmen Square crisis in 1989 as an appropriate marker for the transition to the 1990s.⁸⁴ The shock of violent repression, and the CCP's subsequent consolidation of power, terminated the relatively liberal atmosphere of debate and

⁸¹ Zhang Xudong, *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics*, p.2.

⁸² Wang Qi, *Memory, Subjectivity and Independent Chinese Cinema*, p. 5.

⁸³ Zhang Yingjin, 'National Cinema as Translocal Practice: reflections on Chinese film historiography', in Song & Ward (eds.) *The Chinese Cinema Book* (London, 2011) p. 19.

⁸⁴ Zhang Xudong, *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics*, p.1.

experimentation that had characterised the cultural milieu of the 1980s. 1989 therefore constituted a significant moment of rupture, which had lasting consequences for the development of Chinese film, both practical and artistic. Over the course of the subsequent decade, the future direction of China was decided. I choose to end my study in 2001, marked by the China's accession to the WTO, a moment encapsulating the consolidation of the post-Tiananmen system of government combining an autocratic one-party state with entry into the global market.

Cultural Control and Thought Work in the 1990s

Essential to the CCP's re-entrenchment after 1989 was its return to methods of cultural control originally formulated during the Yan'an decade (1936-1947), known as 'thought work'.⁸⁵ During this time the central concepts of where media and culture would sit in a communist state were established, and they remained largely unchanged for the remainder of the twentieth century.⁸⁶ Some scholars, such as Samuels, have incorrectly interpreted Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour of 1992 as the launch pad for a new era of openness and liberalisation, with the needs of political control

⁸⁵ The term 'thought work' was introduced to the literature by Lynch as appropriate to express the pedagogic nature of Chinese state propaganda, which focused on re-education through narrative and models rather than emphasising censorship. See Daniel C. Lynch, *After the Propaganda State: media, politics, and "thought work" in reformed China* (Stanford CA, 1999).

⁸⁶ Nicolai Volland, *The Control of the Media in the People's Republic of China* (Heidelberg, 2003) pp. 4-5.

being balanced against economic goals.⁸⁷ In reality, the enduring success of the Yan'an formulation was the ease with which cultural goals and methods of control could be transmuted as changing circumstances required.⁸⁸ As Volland argued,

Notwithstanding the frequent twists and turns since the CCP's assumption of power, the role and functions of the media have changed remarkably little over roughly half a century: the core features of the media concept are visible even through the veil created by commercialization and globalization.⁸⁹

Viewing thought work in China as an organic system, rather than a static formula, reveals the ebbs and flows of its implementation to be responses to changing political priorities, rather than a decline in state power.

Thought work, as a core component of Mao's 'continual revolution' theory, was largely discredited in the post-Mao and post-Hua Guofeng decade, though tensions remained between Maoist hardliners, who continued to assert the need for control over the media, and more reform-minded arms of the Party. In the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square protests, however, a new political consensus emerged which agreed upon the need for mass

⁸⁷ Marwyn S. Samuels, 'Banned in China: the vagaries of censorship', in Otmazgin & Ben-Ari (eds.), *Popular Culture and the State in East and Southeast Asia* (Abingdon, 2012) p. 163.

⁸⁸ Volland, *The Control of the Media*, p. 5.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

education and control of the press.⁹⁰ The liberalisation of the media and the failure of political education in the latter half of the 1980s, and its proponents, were blamed for the protesters' disaffection.⁹¹ The subsequent disintegration of the East European communist bloc, and the break up of the USSR in 1991, provided further warnings to the CCP of the consequences of following a model of loose ideological control in the manner of Mikhail Gorbachev.⁹²

In the early 1990s, the CCP's programme of social education aimed to promote economic reform whilst concurrently maintaining China's political system as a one-party state. To counteract any negative social impacts from marketisation, and as a response to the outpouring of political dissatisfaction seen in the previous decade, the CCP rebranded themselves, from the vanguard party of revolution, to the "party in power", maintaining stability by popular consent.⁹³ This emphasis on a stable society resonated with deeply held cultural preferences for avoiding chaos (乱, *luan*). It also acknowledged the increasing irrelevance of revolutionary rhetoric to

⁹⁰ The increase of importance given to the propaganda department in the years immediately following the Tiananmen crisis was reflected in the rise of Li Ruihuan, the senior Party Cadre overseeing media control, who was also a member of the Politburo Standing Committee. Subsequent heads of thought work were given a similar position of influence, where previously the management of the censorship system was entrusted to less highly placed officials. Anne-Marie Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: propaganda and thought work in contemporary China* (Lanham MD, 2008) p. 9.

⁹¹ The CCP Central Politburo Standing Committee met on 6 June 1989, two days after the crackdown. Deng Xiaoping argued the point which was to become the basis for renewed emphasis on thought work in the 1990s, that, "They [the more liberal reformers] haven't taken political thought work seriously..." He reiterated this position publicly on 9 June in a speech to the PLA forces stationed in the square. See Nathan & Link (eds.) *The Tiananmen Papers* (London, 2001) pp. 556, 559.

⁹² Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship*, p. 44.

⁹³ Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship*, p. 71.

a society undergoing fundamental structural changes. Through campaigns such as the promotion of 'Spiritual Civilisation' and 'Patriotic Education', thought work was reformulated to promote positive values such as national pride, civic responsibility, and ethical behavior.⁹⁴

The re-emphasis on thought work in the 1990s can be seen in the way in which its principles permeated all aspects of the cultural sphere throughout the decade. Institutional restructuring, such as the creation of specific bureaucratic bodies, including the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) in 1998, the publication of new guidelines for media, and the diversification of regulation from the centre to the peripheries, ensured that whilst very few officials had the role of censor as their job description, a wide range of the bureaucracy functioned at every level to enforce state policies over culture.⁹⁵ In addition, the massive campaigns for Spiritual Civilisation and Patriotic Education diffused the CCP's core value of social stability throughout cultural products. By the end of the decade, thought work had been thoroughly integrated into every aspect of the media institutions.

In order to understand how economic liberalisation could coexist with a system aiming at cultural hegemony, it is important to

⁹⁴ A National Program of Patriotic Education was introduced in 1994, and a 15 year plan for the development of Spiritual Civilisation was announced in 1996. See *ibid.* pp. 50-51.

⁹⁵ The Movie Management Regulations (1996) can be viewed here: <http://www.people.com.cn/zixun/ffgk/item/dwjf/falv/7/7-2-06.html> (Accessed 08/10/2015). SARFT was rebranded in 2013 to the SAPPRFT (State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of the People's Republic of China), with expanded powers of censorship and control.

appreciate that under the Yan'an formulation the role of the media was pedagogical. Cultural products were expected to contribute to the education of the masses. As such, they fell within the political space, part of the propaganda system (宣传系统, *xuanchuan xitong*), with a vital role to play in communicating the Party's direction to the populace.⁹⁶ As Keane noted, "The function of culture was one of strategic normalization, of adjustment according to a trajectory of political edification."⁹⁷ In being invested with an explicit function to educate, media was required to communicate certain social norms as set by the CCP, and those norms changed with the political climate. In the 1990s, control over culture focused on ensuring that the media contributed to maintaining a stable climate of public opinion, and avoided coverage of issues that might produce disharmony.⁹⁸ This subtle shift, from direct education of the masses to stability maintenance, nonetheless reflected continuity in the CCP's vision of culture's pedagogic capacity.

The increasing marketisation of Chinese culture during the course of the 1990s has been interpreted by scholars to indicate a progressive loss of control for the CCP. Both Lynch and Kraus pointed to the proliferation and success in the 1990s of 'vulgar' commercial products, such as entertainment films and TV soap operas, as evidence of the transfer of power from the Party to the

⁹⁶ In this system, filmmakers as cultural producers fell under the same central rubric of propaganda as news, publishing and, later, television.

⁹⁷ Michael Keane, 'Broadcasting Policy, Creative Compliance and the Myth of Civil Society in China', *Media, Culture & Society* 23/6 (2001) p. 789.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 46-47.

audience.⁹⁹ For Kraus, the replacement of politicised art with art-as-entertainment signified the market overcoming political control of cultural forms.¹⁰⁰ However, these arguments failed to consider the ideological aims of the CCP in the era of 'stability maintenance'. As Lynch himself pointed out, very few domestically produced films tackled sensitive or political issues, and those that did were generally not released in China.¹⁰¹ In reality, the mass appeal of politically-neutral forms such as domestic stories and melodramas benefited both the studios and the CCP. Volland observed that, "Mass culture is not an apolitical phenomenon...on a minimum level, it can transport and disseminate messages that are in tune with, or directly supportive of, values and ideologies of the establishment..."¹⁰² The growth in apolitical culture during the 1990s spoke to the success of the CCP in promoting positive domestic values in tune with the demands of the Spiritual Civilisation programme, and ensuring that the widespread cultural engagement with socio-historical issues seen in the 1980s was steadily eroded.

Structural reforms had begun to affect the media and culture sector from the late 1980s, in the form of reduced government subsidies. Television and radio stations, and publishing houses, were forced to diversify their sources of income, and were under pressure to increase their audience or readership.¹⁰³ Film studios

⁹⁹ Lynch, *After the Propaganda State*, p. 178; Kraus, *The Party and the Arts*, p. ix.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Lynch, *After the Propaganda State*, p. 95.

¹⁰² Volland, *The Control of the Media*, p. 517.

¹⁰³ Volland, *The Control of the Media*, p. 495.

were only nominally affected by these early shifts; however, in the mid-1990s, the rebranding of media units from institutions (事业单位, *shiyè dānwèi*), to enterprises (企业单位, *qīyè dānwèi*), firmly established the need for the whole cultural sector to become profitable. By utilising these financial pressures on producers, the state worked to ensure that content continued to reflect the hegemonic value system it was promoting.¹⁰⁴ For example, in the film sector, in order to promote the production of domestic movies that could compete with imported, and very popular, foreign blockbusters, 5% of all box-office sales and 3% of all television advertising were invested back into select Chinese studios.¹⁰⁵ In addition, approved production companies were exempted from taxation.¹⁰⁶ Being awarded these lucrative incentives was dependent on meeting the demands on film content set by the Ministry of Culture. A key guarantee of success was to win one of five prestigious film awards, which set the norms for other domestic film productions to follow.¹⁰⁷

The changing priorities of the CCP over the course of the 1990s produced politically and economically motivated swings in the

¹⁰⁴ Zhang Yingjin noted that the Chinese censorship system was consistently 'constructive' in nature: there was a preference throughout the twentieth century for saturating the media with positive messages and modeling over outright repression. Zhang Yingjin, *Screening China: critical interventions, cinematic reconfigurations, and the transnational imaginary in contemporary Chinese cinema* (Ann Arbor MI, 2002) p. 91.

¹⁰⁵ Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship*, p. 112.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. pp. 49, 116.

rigour with which restrictions were applied to filmmakers.¹⁰⁸ This resulted in, as Zhang Zhen noted, an “erratic trajectory” for art cinema, as directors negotiated the shifting conditions.¹⁰⁹ For example, in 1992 seven filmmakers working outside the state studio system, including Zhang Yuan, were issued with bans by the Film Bureau blocking their use of equipment rental, processing labs, and distribution venues.¹¹⁰ Between 1994 and 1996 filmmakers experienced some of the tightest restrictions since the late 1970s. However, in 1997 there was an easing of the system, which aimed to promote renewal in a stagnating domestic film industry that was failing to compete with international imports. Licenses for a ‘single feature production’, based on the submission of a script to the Film Bureau for approval, made production outside the state studio system a legitimate option, and a number of the previously banned directors moved toward the mainstream to make co-productions with the state.¹¹¹ A subsequent tightening occurred, however, around the turn of the Millennium, with a new round of bans on directors who had released films about politically sensitive subjects to international festivals, including Jiang Wen for his film about the Sino-Japanese war, *Devils on the Doorstep* (鬼子来了, *Guizi Laile*, 2000).¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Ying Zhu & Stanley Rosen, ‘Introduction’, in Zhu & Rosen (eds.) *Art, Politics, and Commerce in Chinese Cinema* (HK, 2010) p. 4

¹⁰⁹ Zhang Zhen, ‘Introduction: Bearing Witness’, p. 11.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid. p. 13.

¹¹² Zhu & Rosen, ‘Introduction’, p. 3.

Scholars have widely acknowledged that, in order to continue to function as artists in China in the 1990s, filmmakers were forced to engage in a process of self-censorship, or what Keane characterised as “creative compliance”.¹¹³ Both Pickowicz and Cui noted that the review system focused primarily on content, with the principal attention being paid to a film at script stage. The state’s concern was how certain issues were to be represented to a domestic audience, and, later in the 1990s, the presentation of China to the rest of the world.¹¹⁴ Scripts had to be submitted to the censorate, which until 1998 was housed in the Film Bureau at the Ministry of Culture, and subsequently in SARFT, fifty to sixty days before pre-production began.¹¹⁵ Any changes that needed to be made to the proposed script could therefore delay filming significantly and potentially endanger funding. Sudden political changes in the intervening three months might also affect the script, resulting in unexpected bans.¹¹⁶ At the other end of the process, a film might be summarily banned after release. This was particularly the case when movies provoked a strong popular reaction, especially on the international stage. Whilst a film may have passed through the review process innocuously at script level, a viral public reaction could result in an unfavourable reassessment by the

¹¹³ Keane, ‘Broadcasting Policy, Creative Compliance and the Myth of Civil Society in China’, p. 788.

¹¹⁴ Pickowicz, *China on Film*, p. 329; Cui Shuqin, ‘Working from the Margins: urban cinema and independent directors in contemporary China’, in Lu & Yeh (eds.) *Chinese-Language Film: historiography, poetics, politics* (Honolulu HI, 2005) p. 98.

¹¹⁵ Samuels, ‘Banned in China: the vagaries of censorship’, p. 169.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

state.¹¹⁷ However, as Samuels observed, the vaguaries of the system, as well as encouraging political caution, also provided creative opportunities.¹¹⁸ By avoiding the absolute taboo of outright criticism of the party-state, filmmakers were able to walk a delicate line in exploring subjects that had been consistently marginalised or unrepresented in mainstream productions.¹¹⁹

Contested Representation

What constituted an ideologically correct representation, and who was responsible for determining it, formed a consistent part of the CCP's approach to cinema. The original formulations on content and form in the arts, developed by Mao at the Yan'an forum, focused on class difference, and the need to ensure that culture served the broad masses rather than a restricted bourgeois audience of artists and intellectuals. Cultural workers were encouraged to learn from studying the indigenous art and language of the people, and to apply these to an ideological framework provided by the Party: "Our writings [and art] should help to unite, to make progress, to press ahead with one heart and one mind, to discard what is backward and develop what is revolutionary, and

¹¹⁷ Zhu & Rosen, 'Introduction', p. 5. However, Bertozzi noted that in the new millennium Chinese censors were becoming wise to the increase of publicity in the west which a 'banned in China' label on a film could generate, and were remaining silent over illicit screenings in order to avoid controversy. Eddie Bertozzi, 'The Uncertainty Principle: reframing independent film in twenty-first century Chinese cinema', in Chan & Willis (ed.) *Chinese Cinemas: international perspectives* (Abingdon, 2016) p. 74.

¹¹⁸ Samuels, 'Banned in China', p. 169.

¹¹⁹ Paul G. Pickowicz, 'Social and Political Dynamics of Underground Filmmaking in China', in Pickowicz & Zhang (eds.) *From Underground to Independent: alternative film culture in contemporary China* (Oxford, 2006) p. 6.

should certainly not do the opposite.”¹²⁰ Two key policies drawn from Mao’s writings were consistently applied to the arts in the subsequent decades: representation ought to be clear and unambiguous; and it should serve the national good as determined by the Party.

In the 1990s, the paramount aim of the CCP was to promote national stability, followed by concern about China’s image on the global stage. The 1996 Movie Management Regulations reflected these priorities in a typically vague listing of prohibited content for domestic features. The first four points related to national image and security.¹²¹ A subsequent two prohibitions focused on avoiding “obscenity, superstition or violence”, and slander. A final restriction covered “any other content prohibited by state regulations”, as a convenient catch-all.¹²² As these regulations show, the CCP was principally concerned with preventing negative representations, rather than prescribing specific cinematic forms. Wing Shan Ho noted that,

The state’s persistent belief in the propagandistic capacity of mass media, particularly TV and film, in mobilizing the masses and its assumption that the audience consists of naïve, passive recipients of the ideology...drives the state to painstakingly eliminate

¹²⁰ Mao Zedong, ‘Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art, 1942’.

¹²¹ Specifically prohibited were: harming national unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity; jeopardising or harming the security, honour and interests of the state; inciting ethnic separatism and undermining national unity; and disclosing state secrets. Movie Management Regulations (1996), <http://www.people.com.cn/zixun/flfgk/item/dwjff/falv/7/7-2-06.html>

¹²² Ibid.

potentially negative images of the Party-State or pessimistic portraits of society on the screen.”¹²³

The inherent capacity of art cinema for ambiguity, and the peripheral nature of art filmmakers’ preferred subject matter and production methods in the 1990s, therefore positioned art films to stand, if not necessarily in direct opposition, certainly in tension with the official stance on representation.

Only a limited body of literature exists which focuses on representation. It has been principally undertaken by art historians, whose discipline naturally inclined them toward a focus on visuality and signification in Chinese filmmaking. An edited volume, *Cinematic Landscapes: observations on the visual arts and cinema of China and Japan*, was one of the first collections to concentrate on representation.¹²⁴ Five chapters were dedicated to establishing the visual links between Chinese art and cinematic aesthetics. Several of those essays used the technique of close focus on a single film text, later exemplified by Berry’s *Chinese Films in Focus* series, allowing very detailed visual analysis.¹²⁵ The volume made a significant contribution to Chinese film studies by demonstrating that some of the distinctive visual qualities of China’s art cinema in the late 1980s and early 1990s could be traced to painterly aesthetics. As Zhang Yingjin pointed out, however, the volume’s

¹²³ Wing Shan Ho, *Screening Post-1989 China*, p. 166.

¹²⁴ Ehrlich & Desser (eds.) *Cinematic Landscapes: observations on the visual arts and cinema of China and Japan* (Austin TX, 1994).

¹²⁵ Berry (ed.) *Chinese Films in Focus: 25 new takes* (London, 2003); and Berry (ed.) *Chinese Films in Focus II* (London, 2008).

conclusions were hampered by a lack of contemporary political and cultural contextualisation.¹²⁶

Jerome Silbergeld's extensive body of work built on the association of fine art principles to Chinese cinematic form. In *China into Film: frames of reference in contemporary Chinese cinema*, Silbergeld specifically argued for Chinese film to be recognised as an art form, and to be analysed in a consciously historical way.¹²⁷ Without denigrating the significance of scholarship which focused on industry conditions and the market, or which used theoretical frameworks, he nonetheless asserted the pre-eminence of historical inquiry for understanding representation as, "...the complex and subtle strands of signification out of which such art works are creatively woven, by which these works are tied to both past and present, and through which they illuminate the ways in which the present is tied to the past."¹²⁸

Silbergeld's later work continued to assert the primacy of the visual and the importance of historical context, specifically in responding to censorship, of which he noted, "...the censorship of film scripts in their textual formulation shifts the filmmakers' primary negotiable space to the realm of unspoken images..."¹²⁹ His analysis of late 1990s art film emphasised its qualities of ambiguity, which he saw rooted as much in Chinese traditions of allegorical

¹²⁶ Zhang Yingjin, *Screening China*, p. 64.

¹²⁷ Jerome Silbergeld, *China into Film: frames of reference in contemporary Chinese cinema* (London, 1999).

¹²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 9.

¹²⁹ Jerome Silbergeld, *Hitchcock with a Chinese Face: cinematic doubles, oedipal triangles, and China's moral voice* (Seattle WA, 2004) p. 8.

representation as in opposition to the CCP's hegemonic control of culture.¹³⁰ Silbergeld's methodology demonstrated the value of looking at cinematic texts beyond the confines of the film studies discipline. As he observed,

...what Chinese film shares with other Chinese visual arts is a body of cultural reference, of content and context, both historical and contemporary. Such references, which often explain the filmmakers' stylistic and thematic choices, work best when specific and take us beyond homogenizing generalizations about style.¹³¹

Silbergeld's work displayed some of the key features on which this thesis draws: historical contextualisation, close textual analysis, and awareness of the negotiated space of Chinese art filmmaking.

The art historical accounts of representation focused exclusively on the development of a unique Chinese cinematic language. Other approaches have explored representation more specifically in terms of the filmmakers' engagement with social issues, and as sites of conformity with or resistance to the dominant representational form. In Anagnost's *National Past-Times: narrative, representation, and power in modern China*, film was examined as one cultural product in a range of texts looking at the

¹³⁰ Ibid. p. 7.

¹³¹ Jerome Silbergeld, 'Cinema and the Visual Arts of China', in Zhang Yingjin, *A Companion to Chinese Cinema* (Oxford, 2012) p. 413.

representation of the nation.¹³² Specifically, Anagnost explored cultural manifestations of social memories that dwelt on times in which the nation was imagined differently. By choosing to focus on a series of historical moments, rather than a straightforward chronology, she drew attention to the disjunctures that marked changing constructions of the nation. Anagnost's work revealed the continuous struggle over who had the right, and the agency, to 'speak for' history in determining how the nation was to be represented.¹³³ In so doing she highlighted the link between power and control over representation.

Another key body of work has been scholarship that combined studies of film with themes drawn from urban geography. In *Painting the City Red: Chinese cinema and the urban contract*, Braester, like Anagnost, was interested in multiple coexisting temporalities, and changing social 'maps' of urban time and space. He argued that physical sites became imbued with the ideology of certain eras in twentieth century Chinese history, and were then preserved on film. This cinematic record represented, both literally and figuratively, the shifting loci of power in urban China.¹³⁴ Zhang Yingjin used similar frames of reference for his work on *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China*.¹³⁵ He explored both the representation of 'space' on film, as well as the concept of late

¹³² Ann Anagnost, *National Past-Times: narrative, representation, and power in modern China* (Durham NC, 1997).

¹³³ Ibid. p. 5.

¹³⁴ Braester, *Painting the City Red*, p. 2.

¹³⁵ Zhang Yingjin, *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in Globalizing China* (Honolulu HI, 2010).

twentieth century art cinema itself constituting a unique site of discourse. He argued that the marginal/peripheral status of art film in fact represented a victory of culture over capital, marking the emergence of a broad space of alternative representation to the mainstream by the beginning of the millennium.¹³⁶

Methodology

Drawing on a cultural historical approach to representation in my analysis of Chinese art film will provide a useful new contribution to the body of literature outlined above. The question of representation has been central to cultural history research since Marc Bloch's call for a history of understanding and *mentalité*. However, the increasing influence upon cultural history practitioners of theories from other disciplines such as cultural studies, anthropology, and literary criticism, over the course of the twentieth century, widened the understanding of representation held by historians. As Chartier noted,

once emancipated from the traditional definition of the history of mentalities, [cultural history] came to pay more attention to ... processes for constructing meaning than to the unequal circulation of objects, and more to seeing connections among practices and representations than to inventorying mental tools.¹³⁷

¹³⁶ Ibid. p. 186.

¹³⁷ Roger Chartier (trans. Lydia G. Cochrane) *On the Edge of the Cliff: history, language, and practices* (Baltimore MA, 1997) p. 2.

Culture is now understood as the construction of meaning, and the study of representation to encompass a broad range of cultural forms and practices, including many which could be bracketed under the term 'visual culture'.¹³⁸

The historical study of representation therefore has an extensive legacy, but taking this approach to film is an underexplored area. In part this is due to the artificial division of culture into 'high' and 'low'. Traditional history identified 'high culture', such as painting and sculpture, as a specialised and separate area of study, best left to practitioners of other disciplines. 'Low culture', seen as less intellectually demanding due to its association with everyday life, was often excluded from historical study altogether. It was only in the post-war years, with the revival of 'history from below' and the increasing interest in sources that could reveal non-elite experience, that cultural material began to be reconsidered. Even then, film was often excluded, requiring, as Tosh noted, a level of specialised knowledge about the techniques of filmmaking that worried historians, as well as being wrongly understood to function exclusively as a medium of mass entertainment.¹³⁹ The professionalisation of film studies into a discrete specialisation in the 1970s further contributed to this gulf. Those historians who have attended to the possibilities of film for historical research have done so in the mindset of exploring what

¹³⁸ This widespread shift can be seen in the growing use of 'visual culture' to replace 'art' among scholars wishing to engage with artistic creative work without the value judgments implicit in traditional art history's canonisation of 'great works'. See Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice* (London, 2000) p. 81.

¹³⁹ John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History* (Oxford, 2013) p. 257.

cinema could tell them about the age in which it was made, or have focused exclusively on documentary material, incorrectly believing it to be a less problematic branch of the medium.¹⁴⁰

If the study of culture is ultimately an investigation into how meanings are constructed and communicated, then research into cinema as a medium of visual representation clearly has a place. This is particularly the case in the terms of this thesis as, has already been shown, the CCP historically sought to control the meanings communicated through film in China. In the context of the 1990s, the Party's interventions into culture centred on the recreation of the nation in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Crisis, and in concert with wide-ranging structural changes. The process of reimagining the nation through social campaigns, educational reforms, and attempts to mediate cultural outputs reflects the character of 'official nationalism' as Anderson described it: "...an anticipatory strategy adopted by dominant groups which are threatened with marginalization or exclusion from an emerging nationally-imagined community."¹⁴¹ In China the nationally-imagined community that began to emerge in the relatively liberal atmosphere of the 1980s was strongly and effectively countered by the CCP after 1989.¹⁴² Silbergeld consistently emphasised the

¹⁴⁰ See, for example, Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* (Harlow, 2006); and Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: the use of images as historical evidence* (London, 2006) pp. 157-168.

¹⁴¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism* (London, 1991) p. 101; see also Eric Hobsbawm, 'Inventing Traditions', in Hobsbawm & Ranger (eds.) *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983) p. 13.

¹⁴² For a more detailed discussion of this process see Chapter Two of this thesis.

significance of Chinese art film in this context, as a cultural form operating beyond the more easily censored confines of the spoken or written word.¹⁴³ The success or failure of cultural producers at resisting an imposed hegemony of representation by the state can therefore be assessed fruitfully through a consideration of art films.

Geertz's influential text, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, offered a methodology for the analysis of culture, which he termed "thick description".¹⁴⁴ As Howells pointed out, what Geertz was proposing was, in fact, the application of hermeneutics to the study of cultural forms and practices.¹⁴⁵ His interest was focused on understanding the meaning ascribed to a particular cultural expression, and why historically this would be the case.¹⁴⁶ Thick description was therefore a way of rooting interpretation in an historical basis, and has been widely espoused by cultural historians as a framework for the study of representation. The hermeneutical approach centres on language as the conveyer of meaning, a point similarly made about visual culture by Fry when he proposed that the forms used by artists communicated far more than their choice of subject.¹⁴⁷ An understanding of those forms is therefore an essential pre-requisite for an interpretation of their meanings. For this reason, whilst my analysis aims at being historical in tone and

¹⁴³ Silbergeld, *China into Film*, p. 8; Silbergeld, *Hitchcock with a Chinese Face*, p. 8.

¹⁴⁴ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York NY, 1973) p. 21.

¹⁴⁵ Richard Howells, *Visual Culture* (Cambridge, 2003) p. 117.

¹⁴⁶ Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, p. 5.

¹⁴⁷ Roger Fry, *Vision and Design* (First published 1920: unabridged republication Oxford, 1998) pp. 12-27.

outcome, in true Geertzian style I delve regularly into the work of film specialists in order to deepen my understanding of the specific qualities of the medium.

In approaching the study of Chinese art films, I draw on a film studies methodology that shares thick description's origins in hermeneutic exegesis, the practice of close textual analysis. This method is the logical corollary to an auteurist understanding of art film, as it emphasises the role of the filmmaker in constructing meaning through creative choices.¹⁴⁸ These choices are identified through repeated and sustained viewings by the researcher, focusing particularly on the formal qualities of the filmmaking such as framing, lighting, editing, movement, and sound. Close textual analysis demonstrates the same respect for the aesthetic qualities of cinema that art historians reserve for more established art forms, and is open to the same critique, namely that an excessive focus on structural elements can elide the significance of context, production, and reception. As Howells observed, "it is mostly concerned with where and how an image fits rather than how and what it communicates."¹⁴⁹ A similar criticism could be made of an associated film studies methodology, the practice of historical poetics, which, having been initially proposed by Bordwell in 1989,

¹⁴⁸ Robert Stam, *Film Theory: an introduction* (Oxford, 2000) p. 186.

¹⁴⁹ Howells, *Visual Culture*, p. 125.

has recently been rediscovered and applied in the realm of Chinese film studies.¹⁵⁰

Bordwell's method seeks to historicise film form within the specific context of film history. In this respect his approach bears some similarities to traditional art history practices and the canonisation of a chronology of artistic developments. Historical poetics was originally concerned with counteracting the prevailing trend toward theoretical interpretation, which in Bordwell's eyes had divorced 'reading' a film's meaning from close examination of its actual construction.¹⁵¹ Specifically, he saw purely theoretical enquiries into film as dangerously ahistorical, in that they applied general theories of culture and society without considering historical specificity.¹⁵² He argued that it was essential to understand the context of each film's production if the scholar was to avoid making every text mean the same thing.¹⁵³ Bordwell therefore advocated a two-fold approach: to identify the formal strategies utilised by the filmmaker, and then place them in historical context.¹⁵⁴

Bordwell's methodology was limited to discovering information about the development of film style, moving toward a

¹⁵⁰ See Bettinson & Udden (eds.) *The Poetics of Chinese Cinema* (New York NY, 2016); and for a related approach, Wendy Larson, *Zhang Yimou: globalization and the subject of culture* (Amherst NY, 2017).

¹⁵¹ David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: inference and rhetoric in the interpretation of cinema* (Cambridge MA, 1989) p. 263.

¹⁵² It should be noted that Bordwell was not prohibitively anti-theory, but he considered theory of greater value at a later stage in analysis, as a means to explain features previously identified in the films through close analysis. For this reason he also advocated drawing from multiple theoretical approaches. David Bordwell, 'Transcultural Spaces: toward a poetics of Chinese film', in Lu & Yeh (eds.) *Chinese-Language Film: historiography, poetics, politics* (Honolulu HI, 2005) p. 143.

¹⁵³ Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, p. 267.

¹⁵⁴ Bordwell, 'Transcultural Spaces', p. 143.

greater awareness of how cultural processes and production realities shaped formal techniques.¹⁵⁵ Stam critiqued this narrow framing, suggesting that as well as historicising film, film could in turn provide a key to understanding history: “A deeply historical poetics would examine not only the local institutional determinations of film style, but also the back-and-forth reverberations between history and style, the interplay of historical and artistic chronotopes, without reducing one to a mere backdrop for the other.”¹⁵⁶ This approach resonates with Sorlin’s belief that cinema could function as a document of social history, illuminating the ways in which people perceived their own time.¹⁵⁷ For Sorlin, film texts could be approached in the same way as any other historical source, revealing information in their construction and content about the socio-cultural context in which they were created.¹⁵⁸

Burke noted that, “The testimony of images is sometimes dismissed on the grounds that all they show are the conventions for representation current in a given culture.”¹⁵⁹ Such criticisms miss the fact that those very conventions can be eloquent sources for determining how people have understood and interacted with their world. As Marin argued, in order to assess how the form of a visual source has impacted its meaning, the scholar needs to identify the

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 142.

¹⁵⁶ Stam, *Film Theory*, p. 197.

¹⁵⁷ Pierre Sorlin, *The Film in History: restaging the past* (New York NY, 1980) p.3.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 208.

¹⁵⁹ Burke, *Eyewitnessing*, p. 184.

origins of the mode of representation.¹⁶⁰ These modes, or schema, are historically specific and contingent, developed from an array of pre-existing cultural tropes, and formatted into structures that communicate readily identifiable meanings.¹⁶¹ Cultural producers then draw upon different modes in their work, consciously or inadvertently reusing formal structures and visual symbols that communicate a legacy of culturally inherited meanings. White made a similar point when observing the literary structures into which historians typically emplot their narratives, suggesting that forms such as the myth or satire bring congruence and interpretive ease to an otherwise disparate assembly of sources, but ultimately also impact upon the reader's understanding of past events.¹⁶²

An analysis of film centred on the conventions governing how filmmakers communicated meaning in their work, or the modes from which they drew, therefore helps to identify the forces shaping cinematic representation. As Stam noted, "Film history is not just a *combinatoire* of formal possibilities. It also has to do with what issues (and style) are declared off-limits..."¹⁶³ When set against an awareness of the CCP's efforts to exert influence over culture in the 1990s, the extent to which art film form corresponded to or

¹⁶⁰ Louis Marin (trans. Catherine Porter) *On Representation* (Stanford CA, 2001) pp. 205-6.

¹⁶¹ This point was also made by Fry in 1920 when he proposed, scandalously at the time, that the meanings communicated by form were intelligible to anyone immersed in the culture of origin of the art work, not only those who had been educated to a level of art-literacy.

¹⁶² White's work is discussed in more detail in Chapter Two of this thesis. Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: narrative discourse and historical representation* (Baltimore MA, 1987) pp. 24-25.

¹⁶³ Stam, *Film Theory*, p. 198.

contravened established modes of representation reveals the position of the filmmakers in relation to the state. It can also help to draw conclusions about the discourses present in Chinese elite culture in the immediate post-Tiananmen era. My methodology therefore seeks to identify how the dominant representational modes for five main areas of concern for the CCP manifested or were challenged in the work of art filmmakers. Using close textual analysis in conjunction with historical commentary, I look to historicise my findings into a narrative demonstrating the emergence of Chinese art film as a recognisable and increasingly independent creative form by the end of the twentieth century.

Historical Reassessment and Chinese Art Films

Cultural history analysis of representation has the effect of highlighting significant continuities and discontinuities with the past. It can therefore draw attention to the operation of historical forces in the work of filmmakers. Previously, history as a lynchpin for artistic development has featured in only a small body of academic work on Chinese film. Wang Ban originally recognised the constructed nature of historical narratives in his work on aesthetics. He advanced the idea of Chinese history being peopled by a series of 'sublime', heroic figures, promoted by successive generations of ideological leaders seeking to advance their own idealised visions of

humanity and progress.¹⁶⁴ This concept of history as a totalising narrative underpinned his later work on film. In *Illuminations from the Past: trauma, memory, and history in modern China*, Wang Ban showed that Chinese art cinema in the post-Cultural Revolution era consistently incorporated random and traumatic events into the narrative progressions of the protagonists. He argued that this was a response to the official policy of concealing contradictory aspects of history under a rigid framework of moral certainty, intended to move society forward from a painful past toward a progressive future.¹⁶⁵ Wang Ban identified the use of first person narration, personal memory, and fragmented narratives as cinematic modes intended to undercut the ‘reassuring’ total history promoted by the CCP.¹⁶⁶

Berry similarly proposed that the contemporary history of China was defined by repeated incidents of violence. He argued that, “...modern China’s trajectory has been one of discontinuity, displacement, social unrest, and historical trauma.”¹⁶⁷ Berry’s focus was on how traumatic historical experiences had been imagined in Chinese fiction and film. He saw the repeated representation of certain historic moments of violence as constituting a core aspect of Chinese national identity, and from this extrapolated that changing imagery of these incidents signified shifts in how the nation was

¹⁶⁴ Wang Ban, *The Sublime Figure of History: aesthetics and politics in twentieth century China* (Stanford CA, 1997).

¹⁶⁵ Wang Ban, *Illuminations from the Past: trauma, memory, and history in modern China* (Stanford CA, 2005) p. 142.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.* p. 155.

¹⁶⁷ Michael Berry, *A History of Pain: trauma in modern Chinese literature and film* (New York NY, 2008) p. 1.

imagined.¹⁶⁸ Berry identified the official denial of events in Tiananmen Square in 1989 as a key to understanding tropes of disappearance, haunting, ambiguity, and temporal fracturing in Chinese art film of the 1990s.¹⁶⁹ These techniques, he argued, showed a breaking down of national memory into increasingly individualised and personal accounts of history.

More recently, Wang Qi argued that the work of the generational cohort that emerged in the 1990s was shaped by their experience of missing out on the legacy of socialism. Like Berry, she suggested that increasingly personal and subjective filming styles in the 1990s could be accounted for by considering them as responses to the failure of national rhetoric to accord with lived experience.¹⁷⁰ The assertion of the individual was a mark of the failure of official history to make China's socialist dream relevant to the generation born after the Cultural Revolution. Wang Qi's argument specifically delineated between generations of filmmakers. She saw the New Wave directors from the 1980s as using history in their work to innovate and challenge dominant aesthetic tropes. The 1990s filmmakers, however, she suggested, specifically rejected the dominance of history, due to its occupation by the ideology of socialism.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ Ibid. p. 3-4.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid. p. 304.

¹⁷⁰ Wang Qi, *Memory, Subjectivity and Independent Chinese Cinema*, p. 8.

¹⁷¹ Ibid. p. 15.

This idea of a problematic relationship with history was also raised by Braester.¹⁷² He suggested that intellectuals and artists throughout the twentieth century had engaged in a process of writing personal testimonies which were at odds with the official versions of history, a phenomenon he labelled, 'bearing witness against history'.¹⁷³ Like Wang Ban, he identified the application of overly simplified moral frameworks to the more complex realities of history as provoking a profound disconnect between rhetoric and personal memory. Braester highlighted the traumatic displacement of personal memory as one effect of the continual official rewriting of history.¹⁷⁴ He went on to argue that in the 1990s, filmmakers began to work in more self-conscious ways, "...skirting both nostalgic invocation and traumatic enactment in favor of regarding memory as a form of mythmaking."¹⁷⁵

This ironic response to the attempted control over history by the CCP suggests what Wertsch described as resistance to masternarratives.¹⁷⁶ Wertsch argued that engagement with cultural texts could take three forms: mastery, in which the texts were familiarised and used as a basis for reasoning; appropriation, in which texts were personalised and internalised into a meaningful form of identity construction; and resistance, the opposite to

¹⁷² Yomi Braester, *Witness Against History: literature, film, and public discourse in twentieth-century China* (Stanford CA, 2003) p. 1.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. p. 9.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid. p. 192.

¹⁷⁶ James V. Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 120.

appropriation, where texts were known but rejected.¹⁷⁷ Wertsch highlighted that resistance was sparked by sudden changes in the official narrative.¹⁷⁸ An example of such resistance can be seen among the *zhiqing*, China's 'sent down' urban youth who experienced rustication in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Having been encouraged to engage in political leadership and rebellion in the cities as Red Guards, once the chaos became too great the movement was closed down and the participants sent to isolated, impoverished villages for up to ten years. Wang Qi observed that a flowering of non-official literary productions, including underground poetry and personal narratives, appeared during this time, testament to the *zhiqing*'s resistance to the CCP's new narrative.¹⁷⁹

The CCP's thought work campaigns in the 1990s were aimed at producing both mastery and appropriation of core cultural texts among the population. The Spiritual Civilisation programme was intended to promote moral and civic behaviours, while the Patriotic Education campaign presented the Chinese people with an ideologically correct historical narrative. Braester's argument proposed a conscious effort by Chinese art directors in the 1990s to resist these narratives. For Li, this resistance stemmed from the rapid pace of economic expansion in the late twentieth century. He argued that,

¹⁷⁷ Ibid. pp. 119-121.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid. p. 125.

¹⁷⁹ Wang Qi, *Memory, Subjectivity and Independent Chinese Cinema*, p. 8.

...the characteristic speed with which Chinese capitalist compression is accomplished...cannot possibly smooth over the fissures of seismic social change that globalization has occasioned...its harried “annihilation of space” cannot but leave rough edges and gaping holes, remnants and residuals of history....¹⁸⁰

I argue, however, that these “rough edges and gaping holes” pre-date the hyper-modernisation of the 1990s, occasioned by the frequent shifts in policy, and narrative, made by the CCP throughout their history.

Chapter Two of my thesis addresses this question directly, by looking at examples of cinematic resistance to the official grand narrative. In this chapter I firstly establish how the CCP constructed a new historical framework in the 1990s, drawing on the recent work of Li Huaiyin to describe the replacement of a revolutionary grand narrative with an alternative Chinese history centred on the process of modernisation to suit the reform era.¹⁸¹ I then propose three examples of filmic resistance in which alternative historiographies emerge. Jiang Wen’s *In the Heat of the Sun* (阳光灿烂的日子, *Yangguang Canlan de Rizi*, 1994) directly counters an official history of the Cultural Revolution as ‘the ten years of chaos’, by using shared generational memories, and a dreamlike aesthetic. I then consider a more orthodox, linear historical recounting in Zhang

¹⁸⁰ Li, *Economy, Emotion, and Ethics in Chinese Cinema*, p. 10.

¹⁸¹ Li Huaiyin, *Reinventing Modern China: imagination and authenticity in Chinese historical writing* (Honolulu HI, 2013).

Yimou's *To Live* (活着, *Huozhe*, 1995), and demonstrate the ways in which the film subverts official history by focusing on the family, rather than the nation, as the central agent of history. Finally, I use Jia Zhangke's *Platform* (站台, *Zhantai*, 2000) as an example of a direct cinematic challenge to the progressive narrative of official historiography. I conclude that all three filmmakers chose to represent the history of the PRC using cinematic approaches that elided the official representational mode centred on modernisation.

This thesis is not, with the exception of Chapter Two, focused exclusively on history films. However, I draw from my conclusions in Chapter Two the principle of historical reassessment, and raise it as an active component in art filmmakers' negotiation of representation in the 1990s. I argue that forms of representation and modes of filmmaking at the beginning of the decade were deeply historic, in that they were steeped in long-running debates about the nature of the subject matter and the role of the filmmaker. These had given rise to particular models of cinematic expression. As much as filmmakers were negotiating the censorship system in the 1990s, they were also in negotiation with the legacies of past modes of representation, all of which had emerged out of particular socio-historic conditions. In being forced to navigate the CCP's hegemonic agenda, art filmmakers had to search for alternative representational strategies, which would assert a level of artistic independence and authenticity whilst remaining peripheral to the

system. The directors had, therefore, to confront the historically-conditioned nature of established modes of representation.

My first example of this confrontation, in Chapter Three, is the depiction of rural migrants to the cities. This phenomenon was one of the most visible outcomes of the reform process in China. The influx of migrants from the countryside into urban areas, to look for work after the decollectivisation of farming, had the effect both of revealing the vast disparity between the two populations, and of increasing the gulf. Furthermore, the establishment of migrant communities on the outskirts of larger towns and cities created a new, marginalised, sub-group in urban society. Chapter Three of this thesis explores four examples of films attempting to come to grips with this social phenomenon. Two films by Zhang Yimou, *The Story of Qiu Ju* (秋菊打官司, *Qiu Ju da Guansi*, 1992) and *Not One Less* (一个都不能少, *Yige dou Buneng Shao*, 1999), as well as Zhou Xiaowen's *Ermo* (二嫫, *Ermo*, 1994), and Wang Xiaoshuai's *So Close to Paradise* (越南來的姑娘, *Yuenan laide Guniang*, 1998), all focus on the experiences of rural migrants in cities, and the impact on their home communities in the countryside. My analysis reveals that these depictions were severely hampered by the historic legacy of representational modes in which the rural population was characterised as uneducated, naïve, and foolish. I conclude that a failure to adequately counter historic ways of seeing the rural population reveals the strongly urban bias of Chinese art filmmaking in the 1990s.

I move on to consider another historically contingent filmmaking practice, the representation of women in Chinese cinema. In Chapter Four, I initially explore the heritage of cinematic images of women on film, which had been used throughout the twentieth century to promote modernisation and represent the nation as the subject of history. I propose three constructed subjectivities as a framework for my analysis: *nüxing* (from the critical realism mode of the 1930s); *funü* (from the gender-neutral era of Maoism); and *nüren* (a feminist mode promoting female personhood). Using these models I examine how female subjects were depicted in three films from the 1990s. Looking firstly at *Women from the Lake of Scented Souls* (香魂女, *Xiang Hun Nü*, 1992), by Xie Fei, I demonstrate that the film undermines its representation of female subjectivity, by being unable to resist using its protagonist(s) as markers for social failings. I then examine Chen Kaige's *Temptress Moon* (风月, *Feng Yue*, 1996), and show that the occupation of both masculine and feminine by the male protagonist reduces the female characters to signs in the text. Finally, I demonstrate through an analysis of Ning Ying's *I Love Beijing* 夏日暖洋洋, *Xiari Nuan Yangyang*, 2001), that an inventive and experimental approach to film form liberated the representation of women from limiting historic modes. I conclude that in order to move toward a self-consciously feminist model of cinema, art directors needed to find new aesthetic styles that were not drawn from previous legacies of Chinese filmmaking.

In Chapter Five I give an illustration of an area in which art filmmakers were successfully challenging official representations. As part of the reform process, the CCP undertook an extensive regeneration of China's cities. In order to promote a modern aesthetic, and to create new infrastructure, ancient architecture was demolished and communities uprooted, moved out to new developments of high-rise apartment blocks. The transformation of the city landscape captured the attention of filmmakers and artists, arguably more than any other issue in the 1990s. This chapter assesses four films from the decade, which specifically respond to the process of demolition and reconstruction. Looking firstly at Zhou Xiaowen's *No Regrets About Youth* (青春无悔, *Qingchun Wu Hui*, 1992), I explore tropes of amnesia and memory loss as a critical conceptualising of the destruction of Beijing's *hutongs*. I then compare two films, *Shower* (洗澡, *Xizao*, 1999) by Zhang Yang and *Beautiful New World* (美丽新世界, *Meili Xin Shijie*, 1999) by Shi Runjiu, which depict the process of community breakdown in Beijing and Shanghai respectively. I demonstrate the use of localised identities as a form of resistance to the totalising official narrative of urban regeneration. Finally, I analyse Lou Ye's *Suzhou River* (苏州河, *Suzhou He*, 2000) and explore the use of historical references as a way to preserve an alternative history of the city on film. I conclude that films of urban change in China in the 1990s acted as a memory archive of the city, deliberately pulling on historical

reference points in defiance of the official representational mode celebrating urban transformation.

Finally, in Chapter Six, I engage with an under-researched area of cinematic representation by looking at the depiction of youth in Chinese films. I argue that China never had a definite concept of adolescence as a distinct, transitional life stage. At key historical moments in the twentieth century, the idea of youth was politicised. However, in the 1990s an identity linked to the state was held in tension with, rather than replacing, more traditional expectations from family, as well as increasing pressures from the demands of a globalised economy. As the conceptual underpinning of my analysis, I use the term multi-temporality, in which multiple defining histories exert influence simultaneously.¹⁸² Using this framework, I analyse the depiction of youth in three films. Looking firstly at Xie Fei's *Black Snow* (本命年, *Ben Ming Nian*, 1990), I discuss the paralleling of three distinct temporal fields, and the impact of the Tiananmen Square crisis, on its representation of youth. I then move on to analyse Zhang Yuan's film *Seventeen Years* (过年回家, *Guo Nian Hui Jia*, 1999) and explore the negotiation of censorship in its depiction of social attitudes towards youth. Finally, I describe Wang Xiaoshuai's *Beijing Bicycle* (十七岁的单车, *Shiqi Sui de Danche*, 2001) as an example of emergent adolescent culture, but also discuss the exclusion of marginalised social groups from

¹⁸² See Stephanie H. Donald, 'Beijing Time, *Black Snow*, and Magnificent Chaoyang: sociality, markets and temporal shift in China's capital', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 28/7-8 (2011), p. 328.

participation in this identity. I conclude that by the end of the 1990s, a depoliticised youth identity was dominating filmic representations of young people, emerging from the complexity surrounding definition of adolescence in China.

Chapter Two

Representing History

This chapter will consider the representation of China's socialist history in art films of the 1990s. Building on the work of Li Huaiyin, I establish the constructed nature of the CCP's official historical narratives, covering the shift from a revolutionary to a modernisation focus in the 1980s, and the creation of Patriotic Education in the 1990s.¹ I then consider three films as examples of resistance to the imposition of official history. Looking firstly at Jiang Wen's *In the Heat of the Sun*, I explore the film as a direct challenge to the CCP's designation of the Cultural Revolution as 'Ten Years of Chaos', by using the inconsistency of memory as a trope to both raise awareness of the process of rewriting history, and to counter it. I then consider a more traditional approach to history film in Zhang Yimou's *To Live*, and demonstrate that the valorisation of the family as the core unit of society creates an alternative historiography to the Patriotic Education narrative, which focused on the nation. Finally, I consider Jia Zhangke's epic *Platform*, and demonstrate how its unusual narrative structure and filming style effectively undercuts the simplified teleology of the CCP's modernity narrative.

¹ Li Huaiyin, *Reinventing Modern China: imagination and authenticity in Chinese historical writing* (Honolulu HI, 2013).

² It should be noted that Chinese histories were generally written by the scholarly

Introduction

In the early decades of the twentieth century, intellectual concern with national weakness and salvation shaped Chinese scholarly output. Intellectuals were searching for practical solutions to China's problems, and the majority found their answers in ideological and political standpoints.² These impinged upon the writing of history. Li Huaiyin observed, "As active participants in a revolutionary or reform movement, they [intellectuals] used their interpretations of the past to give the movement a teleological meaning, to shape its guideline and direction, and to inspire future actions of its participants."³ The telling of history became the process of fitting the past into a clearly defined narrative framework. This framework gave meaning and order to China's history, establishing how its contemporary weakness had come about, and identifying what corrective measures should be taken. This was a constructed history, built to promote transformation in the present, but rejecting many elements of the past which did not fit into its guiding ideological schema.⁴

² It should be noted that Chinese histories were generally written by the scholarly class of educated literati, rather than a body of academics working within a disciplined field of study with clearly defined methodological practises and agendas.

³ Li Huaiyin, *Reinventing Modern China*, p. 6.

⁴ For example, China's tradition of peasant rebellions was left out of histories written in the Republican era, but became a key facet of communist historiography. Unger has noted that this approach was not new to the twentieth century, but was rooted in Confucian doctrine, which encouraged its followers to search the past for moral and ethical lessons pertinent to the struggles of the day. See Jonathan Unger, 'Using the Past to Serve the Present', in Unger (ed.), *Using the Past to Serve the Present: historiography and politics in contemporary China* (Abingdon, 1993) p. 1.

Li Huaiyin has described how the frameworks into which successive generations of Chinese scholars wrote their histories formed grand narratives, providing interpretative structures to explain events according to a particular ideology. He identified two grand narratives shaping the history of China in the twentieth century: modernity and revolution.⁵ Both of these were teleological, interpreting history in terms of a defined end point. Before 1949 the modernity narrative prevailed in scholarly thought. The problem with China, in this interpretation, was a failure to modernise at the same pace as the rest of the world, and the solution was economic and technological regeneration. The revolutionary interpretation, which began to gain ground in the 1940s, instead saw the stratified structure of Chinese society as the root cause of national weakness, and interpreted history as the process of emerging from cultural stagnation through revolution.⁶ After 1949 revolutionary history was institutionalised. A formal interpretative framework was introduced through the academies to shape the telling of history, in which China's past was interpreted as a series of struggles between good and evil, culminating in the eventual victory of the people in 1949, and the leadership of society into utopia by the CCP.⁷ This mode of history prevailed until the late 1970s.

⁵ Ibid. p. 10.

⁶ CCP historian Fan Wenlan developed the revolutionary narrative whilst at Yan'an. Kirk A. Denton, *Exhibiting the Past: historical memory and the politics of museums in postsocialist China* (Honolulu HI, 2014) p. 52.

⁷ Ibid. p. 13.

The process of rewriting history to suit successive generations of power holders reflects the continued relevance of Febvre's oft quoted observation that, "every age mentally fabricates its representation of the historical past."⁸ Anderson noted that a shared national history was a powerful way to construct social harmony and a sense of collective purpose: "the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past, and, still more important, glide into a limitless future."⁹ Additionally, as Wortman observed, creating a sense of timelessness around a political regime was an effective way to hold on to power.¹⁰ This approach was, of course, greatly favoured by the successive dynasties of imperial China, who frequently rewrote national history in their favour. In the same way, after 1949 the CCP sought to initiate the Chinese population into new social and cultural norms through immersing them in the trappings of the socialist state, including a new doctrine of history. This model began to break down in the post-Mao era, as social inclusion in the community of socialism appeared far more fragile in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution that it had in 1949.

In 1981 the Central Committee of the CCP passed a resolution, "On Some Questions Regarding the History of the Party

⁸ Lucien Febvre (trans. Marian Rothstein), *Life in Renaissance France* (Originally published 1925: Cambridge MA, 1977).

⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism* (London, 1991) pp. 11-12.

¹⁰ Richard S. Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: myth and ceremony in Russian monarchy* (Princeton NJ, 1995) p. 4.

Since the Foundation of the People's Republic of China".¹¹ It was the first official statement on Chinese history since Mao's "Questions Concerning History" in 1945. The resolution opened up the possibility of writing a history in which the revolutionary line did not exclusively dominate the narrative. It subtly reduced the importance given to Mao Zedong as the ultimate shaping personality in the history of modern China, and gave institutional ballast to criticisms of the excesses of the high Maoist period.¹² More significantly, the resolution enabled a subtle shift in the official historical framework away from a revolutionary teleology, in which the 1949 revolution was the 'end' of history and the beginning of a communist future, and towards a reintroduction of the modernity theme.

As the CCP began the delicate process of opening China to the world again, the ideological support of a grand narrative which championed an ongoing process of modernisation as the key determining factor in Chinese history became increasingly valuable. This approach was further enhanced among scholars as, with increasing openness to the West, translations of unfamiliar theoretical models from Europe and America emerged in large numbers, providing the foundations for a revived modernity framework. The modernity narrative of the late 1980s emphasised

¹¹ 'Resolutions on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party Since the Founding of the People's Republic of China', <https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/documents/cpc/history/01.htm> [Accessed 4/4/17].

¹² This criticism suited both popular sentiment and the reforming arm of the CCP. Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, 'In Search of a Master Narrative for 20th-Century Chinese History', *China Quarterly*, 188 (2006) p. 1074.

continuity with China's late imperial and republican past, eschewing the concept of an historical break in 1949. The communist revolution appeared in the framework as an essential stage in the process of modernity, a much needed national movement rather than an end in itself.¹³

The narrative which shaped attitudes towards history in the 1990s therefore received its initial form in the early reform era, but was sharpened and solidified into official doctrine in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989. On June 9th 1989, Deng Xiaoping released his official verdict on the movement, which rooted the protests in a failure of education. If China's younger generation had accurately understood the past, he argued, they would not have become confused about the correct ideological direction which the nation should take.¹⁴ In 1991, a campaign to revive correct historical understanding was launched, which focused on the promotion of Patriotic Education. This new grand narrative centred on China's 'Century of National Humiliation', reinterpreting China's experience of modernity as a series of incidents of victimisation at the hands of foreign aggressors, beginning with the first Opium war in the 1840s and concluding in 1949 with the (re)establishment of an inviolable Chinese state. The Party's legitimacy was therefore reinforced in the aftermath of the

¹³ Li, *Reinventing Modern China*, p. 222. It is worth noting that the resurgence of the modernity narrative also marked a decline in the internationalist elements of Chinese communism, towards a nation-centric model of socialism.

¹⁴ Deng Xiaoping, 'Address to Officers at the Rank of General and Above in Command of the Troops Enforcing Martial Law in Beijing', 9th June 1989, <http://web.peopledaily.com.cn/english/dengxp/vol3/text/c1990.html> [accessed 9/9/15].

Tiananmen Square crackdown by the construction of a history in which it acted as guardian of China's precious, and potentially fragile, national sovereignty. As Hobsbawm observed, the invention of new histories to suit changing social realities rarely worked from entirely new material, but rather adapted pre-existing traditions and familiar conceptualisations of the national community.¹⁵

Li Huaiyin's analysis of the modernity and revolution schema into which twentieth century Chinese history was consistently structured, reflects the process of narrative emplotment described by White. Challenging the Rankian principle of 'history as it really was', White argued that the very action of selecting historical data and organising it into a coherent structure constituted the construction of a narrative.¹⁶ The only difference, in White's view, between a novelist and an historian was the nature of their data set: a writer drew from their imagination, whereas an historian collected real events and figures and then arranged (and rearranged) them.¹⁷ In White's argument, in order to make the past comprehensible, it was necessary to give a framework of meaning to the raw data. This required both applying a scale of significance, choosing what to include and what to leave out, and giving a structure to that

¹⁵ Eric Hobsbawm, 'Inventing Traditions', in Hobsbawm & Ranger (eds.) *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983) pp. 5, 12.

¹⁶ Hayden White, *Metahistory: the historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore MA, 1973) p. 12.

¹⁷ White even went as far as to point out that the very language chosen by the historian was itself embedded with meaning: that language was not neutral, but carried with it certain assumptions which shaped the interpretation of the data.

selection drawn from pre-existing cultural modes.¹⁸ For White, therefore, all histories were metahistories (or in Li Huaiyin's language, grand narratives), because all historical analysis relied upon the construction of a narrative to bring coherence, meaning, and significance to the past. Applying this approach to China's 'Century of National Humiliation' reveals the extent to which it was a new grand narrative, drawing together threads from both the modernity and revolution schools of history.

This emplotment constituted the creation of a new representational mode governing the depiction of China's recent history in cultural products. Inspired by the Soviet model, the CCP had consistently sought a national narrative that was unambiguous and clearly intelligible for the average Chinese citizen.¹⁹ The Patriotic Education movement attempted to forge a national collective subject – China had been victimised therefore all Chinese had been victimised.²⁰ This narrative was then disseminated through cultural forms such as literature, music, and film. Wortman described this method as an aspect of the symbolic sphere of power maintenance, utilising an array of artistic devices to communicate a

¹⁸ Keith Jenkins, *On 'What is History?' From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White* (London, 1995) p. 151.

¹⁹ Denton, *Exhibiting the Past*, pp. 53, 55.

²⁰ The construction of a collective identity relied upon creating a shared national memory. This was typified in the efforts to produce a cohesive national programme of history education. Denton pointed to the sudden flurry of museums commemorating the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), and more significantly the violent atrocities perpetrated by Japanese soldiers, which appeared in the 1990s as one of the key mechanisms by which the collective memory of trauma was memorialised and so internalised. Kirk A. Denton, 'Horror and Atrocity: memory of Japanese Imperialism in Chinese museums', in Lee & Yang (eds.) *Re-envisioning the Chinese Revolution: the politics and poetics of collective memories in reform China* (Washington DC, 2007) p. 248.

consistent representation of officially sanctioned culture.²¹ Routine controls over the depiction of socialist history on film were tightened in the 1990s. Leitmotif films presented the official historical narrative in a strictly didactic fashion. As Zhang Yingjin noted, “the...CCP investment in leitmotif films has constituted an intensified, prolonged ideological drive to instill patriotism and nationalism in the population, especially the younger generation.”²²

The censorate’s concern with maintaining control over filmic representations was evident in the case of Tian Zhuangzhuang’s film, *The Blue Kite* (蓝风筝, *Lan Fengzheng*, 1993), which was entered in the Tokyo Film Festival in 1993 without prior approval. Despite winning the Grand Prize and international acclaim, Tian Zhuangzhuang was banned from filmmaking for the remainder of the decade.²³ His depiction of the socialist revolution as a series of tragedies for the Chinese people constituted a failure to adhere to the official historical mode: his film was therefore considered to be a serious misrepresentation of Chinese history, and was banned in China.²⁴ Such events reveal the official efforts to determine how China’s history was represented in the artistic sphere.

In this chapter, the institutionalisation of a new representational mode for the depiction of China’s recent past

²¹ Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, pp. 6-7.

²² Zhang Yingjin, *Chinese National Cinema* (New York NY, 2004) p. 259.

²³ *Ibid.* p. 284.

²⁴ The fact that a film so critical of socialism was shown to an international audience may well have impacted on the severity of Tian Zhuangzhuang’s punishment. *The Blue Kite* is an early example of the process of negotiation that art filmmakers had to go through in the 1990s, weighing up the benefits and risks of exposing their work to an international festival without official approval.

provides a context against which to assess the work of art filmmakers in the 1990s. The successful dissemination of the official historical narrative will be questioned, with particular reference to Jiang Wen's *In the Heat of the Sun*, which uses a creative approach to the film structure to challenge orthodox accounts of the Cultural Revolution. By foregrounding the aesthetic qualities of film in relation to the depiction of time and memory, Jiang Wen makes the failure of official history to overwrite personal memory visible. Secondly, an analysis of Zhang Yimou's *To Live* will show how the centrality of the nation to Chinese history was represented as secondary to other communities, such as family, through a series of subtle but significant subversions of the official historical narrative. Finally, the streamlined teleology of progressive modernity introduced in the 1980s will be positioned against Jia Zhangke's approach to filming historical change over a decade in *Platform*, in which a heteroglossic soundtrack functions as a marker of discord between official and personal moments of memorialisation. This chapter will demonstrate that formal and narrative innovations in art cinema in China in the 1990s were shaped by the restrictions placed on the representation of history by the CCP.

In the Heat of the Sun

Set during the later years of the Cultural Revolution and in part modelled on his own experiences, Jiang Wen's directorial debut tells the story of Ma Xiaojun, an adolescent boy growing up in Beijing. The adults are mostly absent, sent to the countryside or for re-education, so the teenage children of army officers congregate and entertain themselves largely without restraint. Forming gangs, they engage in pitched battles with youth from other military compounds, and meet late at night to eat, drink, and play music. Ma Xiaojun has a lively imagination, shaped by his consumption of popular culture. He falls in love with an older girl, Mi Lan, whom he meets in a neighbouring compound, and introduces her to his friends. She starts to date an older boy, Yiku, which causes Ma Xiaojun to spiral out of control with jealousy. After attempting to rape Mi Lan, Ma Xiaojun is rejected by his gang. At the end of the film, the group of friends are seen together again as middle-aged men, reliving their memories of adolescence during the Cultural Revolution.

The official verdict on the Cultural Revolution was codified in 1981, after a protected period of Party infighting following the death of Mao and arrest of the Gang of Four. In keeping with the reformist nature of CCP policies in the 1980s, Mao's push for grassroots revolution and mass culture, and all of the violence it had engendered, was deemed to have constituted 'Ten Years of 'Chaos'

(十年动乱, *shi nian dongluan*).²⁵ As Denton observed, “The very legitimacy of the Deng regime...was built around an anti-Cultural Revolution platform: in contrast to the fanatical leftism of the Cultural Revolution, the new regime would be rational, scientific, pragmatic, humanist, tolerant, and upright.”²⁶ This historical mode was subsequently reinforced in cultural products. Melodramatic films made in the 1980s, like *Hibiscus Town* (芙蓉镇, *Furong Zhen*, dir. Xie Jin, 1986), drew on the legacy of the scar literature (伤痕文学, *shanghen wenxue*) movement of the late 1970s, a grassroots outpouring of grief after the losses of the Cultural Revolution. Writers and artists emphasised the impact of social turmoil on family life, and stressed the rectification efforts made by the Party after 1976.

By the 1990s, the decade of 1966-76 had been popularly enshrined into a very specific narrative. The nomenclature ‘Ten Years of Chaos’ was used to promote the notion of the Cultural Revolution as a mistake, a violent aberration in the linear forward progression of China’s socialist history. This labelling effectively cast a silence around discussion of the Cultural Revolution. It was not taught in school history classes, or covered in museums.²⁷ Films such as *The Blue Kite*, which presented the Cultural Revolution as the culmination of a rising tide of violence beginning

²⁵ ‘Resolutions on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party Since the Founding of the People’s Republic of China’.

²⁶ Kirk A. Denton, ‘China Dreams and the “Road to Revival”’, *Origins: current events in historical perspective* 8/3 (Dec. 2014). [Accessed: 29/11/17]

²⁷ Denton, *Exhibiting the Past*, p. 197.

with the CCP campaigns of the early 1950s, were quickly banned. This process was marked by, in Denton's words, a "selective forgetting of key facets of the Maoist past".²⁸ As part of the official historical mode, the Cultural Revolution was to be represented within only limited acceptable parameters.

In the Heat of the Sun, however, quickly disrupts audience expectations by describing the early 1970s as a time of 'bright, sunny days', and by focusing on a group of privileged teenagers (高干子弟, *gaogan zidi*, children of privilege) living in a military housing compound in Beijing, and their personal and sexual relationships. Unlike officially sanctioned cultural products, which represented youth experience of the Cultural Revolution exclusively in terms of the violence of the Red Guard movement, *In the Heat of the Sun* depicts an era of sexual freedom and self-expression. The film utilises an array of cinematic devices to reconstruct a nostalgic evocation of the era, such as costume, music, film references, and domestic memorabilia. Nostalgia has been critiqued for the way it can de-historicise the past, and make potentially conflicted historical periods palatable to a contemporary audience. Cook, however, argued that, "The nostalgic memory film conjures up a golden age, which is both celebrated and mourned, providing an opportunity to reflect upon and interrogate the present."²⁹ Cinematic nostalgia, when positioned against a contemporary framework in which the

²⁸ Denton, 'China Dreams and the "Road to Revival"'.
²⁹ Pam Cook, *Screening the Past: memory and nostalgia in cinema* (Oxford, 2005) p. 11.

action of memory has been elided by a pervasive historical narrative, can therefore provoke an active questioning of the limits of contemporary history representation.³⁰

Ma Xiaojun's fantasy life involves dressing in his father's army uniform and role playing scenes from films such as *Heroic Sons and Daughters* (英雄儿女, *Yingxiong Ernü*, dir. Wu Zhaodi, 1964), a film about self-sacrificing revolutionary soldiers.³¹ As a group, the teenagers consume Soviet culture, in the form of cinema, ballet, and popular songs like 'Moscow Nights'. Only a limited range of popular culture was available during the Cultural Revolution, much of it Soviet. Chinese outputs included revolutionary operas such as *The Red Detachment of Women* (红色娘子军, *Hongse Niangzijun*), and the fictitious diary of a young soldier called Lei Feng who had supposedly died in service to the PLA.³² Lei Feng's self-sacrificing life was intended to exemplify communal values for the Chinese youth. Ma Xiaojun and his friends, however, actively appropriate the cultural models they are presented with for their own purposes, reflecting Wertsch's observation that, "a text that is appropriated may serve as an identity resource – a means for anchoring or constructing one's sense of who one is."³³ For

³⁰ Ibid. p. 5.

³¹ The film starred art filmmaker Tian Zhuangzhuang's father, actor Tian Fang, who died in 1974 after eight years of persecution during the Cultural Revolution.

³² The campaign to 'Learn from Comrade Lei Feng' (像雷锋同志学习, *Xiang Lei Feng Tongzhi Xuexi*) was initially launched during the famine which followed the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962), and re-emerged regularly thereafter during periods of heightened social engineering by the Party, including as part of the 'Spiritual Civilisation' campaigns of the mid-1990s.

³³ James V. Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering* (Cambridge, 2002) p. 120.

example, Ma Xiaojun manically role-plays a scene from *Lenin in 1918* (dir. Mikhail Ilyich Romm, 1939) in order to impress the elusive older beauty Mi Lan. In another scene, his gang ride their bicycles through the *hutong* at night to an altercation with another group of teenagers, and inflict horrific damage on them to the soundtrack of 'The Internationale'. The visual and aural dissonance created through this layering of orthodox cultural forms with an apparently apolitical youth culture fractures the coherence of the official historical mode.

Further fractures manifest in the way in which the film dislocates its narrative from the quality of communality that was so central to the Cultural Revolution. Ma Xiaojun loves to break into empty apartments in the military compound. Here he tries on the owners' clothes, eats their food, even sleeps in their beds. Eventually he takes this solitary appropriation of empty spaces to the roofs, climbing out of a skylight and wandering over the buildings. The irony of his activities is, of course, that the apartments' legitimate occupants are engaged full-time in the political activities and re-education campaigns that dominated the Cultural Revolution decade. Instead of the relentless noise of official statements and revolutionary music popularly associated with the Cultural Revolution, Ma Xiaojun's detachment from politics is signalled by a soundscape of romantic sweeping strings, the *Intermezzo Sinfonico* from the romantic opera *Cavalliera Rusticana* by Mascagni, which plays almost in its entirety as he scales the

roofs. At every level *In the Heat of the Sun* presents a polar opposite to the bitterness of the 'Ten Years of Chaos' narrative: romantic, apolitical, and individualistic.

Zerubavel noted that, "Far from being a strictly spontaneous act, remembering is also governed by unmistakably social *norms of remembrance* that tell us what we should remember and what we should essentially forget."³⁴ The role of official historical modes is therefore to condition norms of remembrance according to an acceptable narrative, and the apparent success of such techniques attests to Halbwachs' belief that individuals rescript their memories according to collective social needs.³⁵ By applying Sturken's observation that, allowing personal memory to be 'inscribed' by a widely accepted narrative can be cathartic when the history invoked has a strongly traumatic element to it, it can be seen that this might be the case for many Chinese who experienced the Cultural Revolution.³⁶

Wertsch, however, drew a distinction between mastery of a narrative, which only implies knowing how to use and communicate a specific representational mode, and full appropriation of it, in which it is personalised and reutilised.³⁷ The process of constructing history, by its nature, leaves gaps and empty spaces surrounding aspects of the past that do not fit with the narrative.

³⁴ Eviatar Zerubavel, *Time Maps: collective memory and the social shape of the past* (Chicago IL, 2003) p. 5.

³⁵ Maurice Halbwachs (trans. Lewis A. Coser), *On Collective Memory* (Originally published 1952: Chicago IL, 1992) p. 48.

³⁶ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: the Vietnam war, the AIDS epidemic, and the politics of remembering* (London, 1997) pp. 6-7.

³⁷ Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering*, pp. 119-120.

This can be either a deliberate operation, or incidental, but it is impossible to impose such a framework on memory.³⁸ As Wertsch noted, sudden changes in official narratives can provoke crises for their recipients as they struggle to reframe their experience.³⁹ In such cases, remembering as an active process, one which Wertsch described as an “effort after meaning”, can become fraught with conflict.⁴⁰

Sturken observed that, “there are times when those distinctions [between official and personal memory] are important in understanding political intent, when memories are asserted specifically outside of or in response to historical narratives.”⁴¹ Davies recorded his impressions of a photography exhibition organised by *ex-zhiqing* (知青), youths ‘sent-down’ to the countryside after 1968, held in Shanghai late in the 1990s. He noted that their memories, stimulated by the images and nostalgic displays, provided a context for discussing conflicting interpretations of the past.⁴² Each individual brought their own associations and memories to the exhibition, and responded to the otherwise uncontextualised displays accordingly. Just as in the film *Ma Xiaojun* and his friends appropriate revolutionary culture and create

³⁸ See Lee Ching Kwan & Yang Guobin, ‘Memory, Power, and Culture’, in Lee & Yang (eds.) *Re-envisioning the Chinese Revolution: the politics and poetics of collective memories in reform China* (Washington DC, 2007) p. 3.

³⁹ Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering*, p.125.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p. 134.

⁴¹ Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, p. 5.

⁴² David J. Davies, ‘Visible *Zhiqing*: the visible culture of nostalgia among China’s *Zhiqing* generation’, in Lee & Yang (eds.) *Re-envisioning the Chinese Revolution: the politics and poetics of collective memories in reform China* (Washington DC, 2007) p. 189.

a new meaning that was not intended by the CCP, so conflicting memories of the Cultural Revolution expressed in response to an array of cultural products allowed an alternative narrative to develop in parallel with the official history. In the case of the *zhiqing*, the photographic exhibition was intended to recall their formative years, in the midst of a culture that had largely written the sent-down youth out of history as a lost generation. As Davies put it, at stake for the group was historical visibility.⁴³ Similarly, *In the Heat of the Sun* seeks to make visible a history of the Cultural Revolution, beyond the strictures of the 'Ten Years of Chaos' framework and the official representational mode.

Theories of prosthetic memory have advanced the idea that cinema can reprogram memory through visually imprinting new narratives.⁴⁴ Radstone pointed out, however, that this approach dissolves the difference between representation and experience, and ignores the complex relationship between film and spectator by citing the viewer as a passive recipient.⁴⁵ More significantly, in this context, the formal qualities of cinema can draw attention to the action of memory, by disrupting the linear teleology of imposed narratives.⁴⁶ As Doane noted, "The cinema presents us with a simulacrum of time."⁴⁷ Film is constructed from a series of still

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: the transformation of American remembrance in the age of mass culture* (New York NY, 2004).

⁴⁵ Susannah Radstone, 'Cinema and Memory', in Radstone & Schwartz (eds.) *Memory: histories, theories, debates* (New York NY, 2010) p. 335.

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 325.

⁴⁷ Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: modernity, contingency, the archive* (Cambridge MA, 2002) p. 172.

images, which, when spun through a projector at twenty-four frames a second, create the impression of movement and temporal consistency. However, the ability to pause, rewind, slow-down, or freeze any moment breaks this illusion, and mirrors the divergence of memory from a linear progression of events.⁴⁸ *In the Heat of the Sun* utilises these techniques to challenge the concept that it is possible to manage how the past is remembered.

At the very beginning of the film, whilst the screen is still black, the voiceover (a mature Ma Xiaojun, voiced by the director Jiang Wen) comments on the unreliability of his memories. Nonetheless, for the next one hundred minutes or so the film proceeds in an apparently straightforward manner, before shocking the viewer with a dramatic rending apart of the narrative cohesion. Ma Xiaojun and his friends are celebrating two birthdays, which fall on the same day. Both of the boys happen to be in love with the same girl, Mi Lan, and as the party progresses, Ma Xiaojun becomes increasingly irritable as he watches his rival, Yiku, flirting with her. Suddenly, Ma Xiaojun grabs a wine bottle and smashes it, and uses the broken glass to begin stabbing Yiku. Yiku initially reacts with pain; but as Ma Xiaojun continues to rhythmically stab him, Yiku straightens up, looking puzzled, and even turns to the other gang members in confusion (Fig. 2.1). The image begins to slow down, and then freezes, and the voiceover is reintroduced over the still frame. Jiang Wen jokes with the viewer that he cannot tell

⁴⁸ Radstone, 'Cinema and Memory', p. 325.

the truth, he has to keep reminding himself of what really happened, and begins to question even the existence of Mi Lan (Fig. 2.2). Then the scene rewinds, and begins again with the arrival at the party, and plays out entirely differently.

The party scene plays upon the visual qualities of film, manipulating cinematic techniques for changing the speed of the image. It is a moment of collusion with the audience, in which the director breaks the illusion of reality created in film by drawing attention to the physical process of filmmaking. This deliberate disruption of the continuous narrative, first by reducing the speed of the image below the usual twenty four frames a second, so that it no longer appears in synch with 'real time', and secondly by freezing the frame entirely, departs from the norms of editing which maintain temporal realism. Doane noted that, "Fast motion, slow motion, the freeze frame, and other distortions of time become...relegated to the marginal status of heavily coded – and rare – moments."⁴⁹ The heavy coding associated with disruptions to cinematic realism is significant when considering *In the Heat of the Sun* in terms of a response to a restrictive representational mode. As Turim observed, these techniques occur frequently in films which reference contested historical incidents.⁵⁰ Instead of "The smooth narrative of a successful and progressive rationalization...", described by Doane, the freezing and rewinding of time, and subsequent changes to the

⁴⁹ Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, p. 189.

⁵⁰ Maureen Turim, *Flashbacks in Film: memory and history* (New York NY, 1989) p. 235.

scene, produce a effect of discontinuity which disrupts the seamlessness of the cinematic experience.⁵¹ The scene can therefore be considered an example of resistance to the imposition of a filmic mode that ensured an homogenous and ideologically inflected representation.

In association with the elusive voiceover, the audience is encouraged to question the truthfulness of the film's narrative, rather than be carried along by it. Turim commented that disruptions to narrative chronology in films raise the viewer's awareness of the process of storytelling and narrative construction: "[These moments] have a potential for disturbing a participatory viewing of a film and encouraging a greater intellectual distance."⁵² *In the Heat of the Sun's* dramatic rending of narrative cohesion forces the audience to notice the process of filmic construction. Over the remainder of the movie, other moments of discontinuity prompt reflection on what has come before and a re-evaluation of the story. Viewers thus become complicit in constructing the narrative, drawing together the threads of Ma Xiaojun's storytelling for themselves. This aspect of the film is, like the *zhiqing* exhibition, in part designed to provoke a personal response. In the inevitable discussion that the fragmentation of

⁵¹ Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, p. 10. Doane's argument centred on the rationalisation of time during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as part of the project of modernity, in which an imposed centralised temporality, intended to increase industrial productivity, interacted with a lived experience of time which was continuous and unregulated. In this context the ability of cinema to capture and freeze time appeared to be linked to the increasingly fragmentary sense of memory experienced under rapid modernity. Doane's model is not directly relevant to the Chinese situation as it remains heavily inflected by a western industrial experience. Nonetheless, her ideas about rationalised time can certainly be applied to the CCP's official historical mode in the 1990s, in which history was reduced to a series of meaningful events connected by silences.

⁵² Turim, *Flashbacks in Film*, p. 17.

narrative congruency provokes, no two interpretations are necessarily the same. Like the memories of the *zhiqing*, this action immediately calls into question the possibility of constructing a single, overarching narrative of the past.

The film challenges the CCP's rewriting of China's history into a streamlined modernisation narrative, within which the aberrant 'Ten Years of Chaos' functioned as a justification for the reforming policies of subsequent leaders.⁵³ By designating the Cultural Revolution exclusively as a "most severe setback" in Chinese history, the CCP denied the generation for whom it was a formative decade any relevance in the reform era.⁵⁴ *In the Heat of the Sun's* ambiguous ending has been read as a critique of the Cultural Revolution generation for forgetting their brilliant sunny dreams. Larson suggested that the final scene, which is shot in black and white and brings the story up to date by showing all the boys as middle-aged businessmen, emphasises the disconnect between the dreams they had as teenagers and what they have become.⁵⁵ Wang Qi also viewed the film as critical of contemporary culture, although she identified this as an anxiety about the increasing pace of social change in 'postsocialist' China.⁵⁶ Both of these interpretations rooted the film in a tradition of criticism about contemporary society. In so doing they inadvertently mirrored the

⁵³ Li, *Reinventing Modern China*, p. 221.

⁵⁴ 'Resolutions on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party Since the Founding of the People's Republic of China'.

⁵⁵ Wendy Larson, *From Ah Q to Lei Feng: Freud and revolutionary spirit in 20th century China* (Stanford CA, 2009) p. 171.

⁵⁶ Wang Qi, *Memory, Subjectivity and Independent Chinese Cinema* (Edinburgh, 2014) pp. 2-3.

CCP's own narrative, by suggesting that the Cultural Revolution was completely irrelevant to the era which followed it.

By contrast, I argue that Jiang Wen's ending deliberately links the Cultural Revolution and modernisation. In the opening shot of the coda, the screen fades in from black to a black and white image, forming an abrupt contrast for the eyes after the brilliant blue of a swimming pool that closed the previous section. The camera focuses in extreme close-up on a painting of Mao Zedong in the style of Cultural Revolution art, but enclosed within a gaudy plastic scroll and hanging from the rear-view mirror of a car, swinging with the motion of the moving vehicle.⁵⁷ The focus then shifts out of the windscreen, where cars are speeding past on a four-lane highway, and as the vehicle continues forwards, the lens pans left to show the Gate of Heavenly Peace at Tiananmen Square, and its own giant Mao portrait. A harmonica plays a melancholy riff on a popular song from the 1970s, 'Wild Goose Flying High in the Distance' (远飞的大雁, *Yuanfei de Dayan*), which featured earlier in the film. The opening shot therefore simultaneously establishes a shift in time, and direct continuity. Within the car, the teenage gang, now grown-up, are laughing and drinking a bottle of imported liquor. All but Yiku appear to be successful businessmen wearing western suits, representing the archetypal reform era ideal. As they drive, Yiku

⁵⁷ The car scroll is an example of the pop-culture rebranding of Revolutionary art that occurred in the 1990s, partly as a response to the *huaijiu* movement (怀旧, reminiscence or cherishing the old), particularly the passion for collecting old photographs and memorabilia from the 1960s and 1970s, and partly due to the increased purchase power of the urban population.

spots Gulumu, a boy with learning difficulties who grew up in their compound, and they all call out to him. As the car pulls away into traffic he shows no signs of recognition, shouting abuse after them. Ma Xiaojun and his friends are unmoved, standing up to look out through the open sun roof and laughing as they drive away from Tiananmen Square and out to the ring road, thus ending the film.

The 'Ten Years of Chaos' narrative, as Wang Ban pointed out, fitted into a Chinese tradition of telling history from an ethical perspective.⁵⁸ Within a moral historical framework, praise and blame could be assigned. Historical events were not allowed to stand open to interpretation, but were given labels of 'correct' or 'incorrect'.⁵⁹ In China in the 1980s this approach produced a reassuringly cathartic history, rectifying the mistakes of the Cultural Revolution and allowing the nation to move forward from trauma into progress.⁶⁰ *In the Heat of the Sun*, however, reasserts the significance of the Cultural Revolution beyond the traumatic. The finalé of the film consistently evokes continuity with the past. The choice to depict the Cultural Revolution years in a pallet of saturated colour, and the present in black and white, further reinforces the role that Ma Xiaojun's youth has played in shaping him. Seeing Gulumu, for whom nothing has changed, is the final visual signifier of a past that continues to exist and be relevant.

⁵⁸ Wang Ban, *Illuminations from the Past: trauma, memory, and history in modern China* (Stanford CA, 2004) p. 142.

⁵⁹ The prime example of this being the posthumous assessment of Mao by the CCP, that he had been '70% correct and 30% incorrect' in his thinking.

⁶⁰ Li, *Reinventing Modern China*, p. 234.

Jiang Wen said of his film, that, "...the ashes [of that era] continue to smoulder, who says the passion has already passed away?"⁶¹ As Braester noted, "The very resistance to one-sided interpretations runs counter to Maoist rhetoric."⁶² In Hayden White's terms, Jiang Wen constructed in his film an alternative narrative to the modernity thesis endorsed by the CCP, by choosing to give significance to a period and events that had been written out of the chronology of official history as a mistake. The film challenges the streamlined modernity narrative of the 1990s by reinserting the Cultural Revolution as a formative experience for a generation who went on to build and live the reform era dream. Like the *zhiqing* exhibition, *In the Heat of the Sun* uses personal memories to create visibility. In so doing the film challenged the power of the Chinese state to arbitrate history.

To Live

To Live tells the story of Fugui and his wife Jiazhen over four decades of Chinese history, from the Civil War (1945-1949) to the early reform era of the 1970s. The narrative is structured chronologically, highlighting Fugui's experiences in the war, the early years of socialism, the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962), and the Cultural Revolution. After he loses his fortune to gambling debts, Fugui travels with a puppet troupe, putting on performances in rural

⁶¹ Jiang Wen (姜文), 'Burning Dreams of Youth' (燃烧的青春梦, *Ranshao de Qingchun Meng*), *Contemporary Cinema*(当代电影, *Dangdai Dianying*) 1 (1996) p. 59.

⁶² Braester, 'Memory at a Standstill', p. 360.

areas. He is captured, first by the Nationalist army, then by the PLA, and eventually repatriated in 1950 with a Certificate of Participation from the CCP, stating his contribution to the revolution. He and Jiazhen eke out a meagre living delivering hot water at night. During the Great Leap Forward, Fugui entertains townspeople engaged in the campaign to smelt steel in backyard furnaces with his puppets. Meanwhile, his son Youqing is killed when a wall collapses on him. The following decade, Fugui's daughter Fengxia also dies, when the Red Guards who have taken over the hospital lack the medical knowledge to deal with a serious complication in her pregnancy. At the end of the film, Fengxia's husband and son live with Fugui and Jiazhen, and they look forward to better times.

During the reform era the emphasis of official history shifted from the Party to the nation.⁶³ From the early 1990s, the Patriotic Education movement consolidated the position of the nation as the subject of history. Individual histories, which had previously been subsumed within a narrative of Party, formed part of the larger communality of Chinese national history. This communal positioning of memory reduced the historical mode to key moments and events, and the prescribed collective response to them: for example, celebration of the 'liberation' of China in 1949, or grief about the traumas experienced in the Cultural Revolution. *To Live* mimics this structure of significant moments. However, it counteracts the reductive tendencies of official history in two

⁶³ This shift was linked to the re-emergence of the modernity narrative in official histories. Li Huaiyin, *Reinventing Modern China*, p. 224.

significant ways. Firstly, the family, rather than the nation, is positioned as the core unit of history. Secondly, the quotidian, the everyday, and the humane, are valorised in the face of traumatic collective experience.

The film begins in the late 1940s. Fugui is a wealthy landowner, frittering his fortune away in a gambling den to the unscrupulous Long'er. Despite Jiazhen's entreaties, Fugui continues to gamble and eventually loses his entire fortune and the family home. On the very same evening, Jiazhen leaves him, taking their daughter Fengxia with her. Fugui is forced to sell the remains of his family's ancestral heirlooms in the market in order to raise enough money to provide a small home for his aging mother. This experience becomes the defining moment of Fugui and Jiazhen's lives. After losing his fortune and, temporarily, his family, Fugui comes to realise that his wife and children are the most important things, and that he must live and survive for them. It is the traumatic experience of their loss that restarts his life.

The significance of Fugui's redemption is shown through the frequency with which it re-emerges in the family's conversation. During the Cultural Revolution decade, for example, Fugui and Jiazhen refer to the hardship of Fengxia's early years and how little time her father spent with her. In response to the questions of Erxi, their son-in-law, Fugui waves his hands with embarrassment, exclaiming 'I was a good-for-nothing'. For Jiazhen, Fengxia's early years are defined by memories of separation from Fugui, reflected

in not having enough money to have photographs of the children taken. In a coda to the film, the family go to visit the graves of Fengxia, who died in the 1960s, and Youqing, the son who died in the 1950s. At the graveside Jiazhen lays down photographs of her grandson Xiao Mantou for Fengxia's spirit to look at, and dumplings for Youqing. Xiao Mantou is schooled in the family narrative about his mother and uncle: "Fengxia looks at pictures and Youqing eats dumplings". Their histories are memorialised not in terms of the historical circumstances of their deaths, which occurred during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution respectively, but as part of a family narrative.

This central positioning of the personal runs counter to the official historical mode, with its emphasis on a national collectivity. For example, the film begins in the 1940s, but the Second Sino-Japanese war (1937-45) is not mentioned. The small town where they live shows no signs of war damage, and Fugui and Jiazhen are living a comfortable life with no evidence of having experienced an occupation. In the 1990s, official histories focused on the anti-Japanese war as the defining event of the 1940s. In the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square protests, the historical (re)education of the young was a CCP priority. Beginning in 1991, and going full-scale in 1994 with the Patriotic Education campaign, 'Remember National Humiliation' (记得国耻, *Jide Guochi*) concentrated on China's external struggles with other powers, rather than its internal

problems.⁶⁴ Japan's occupation of China was presented as the zenith of China's experience of national humiliation. The anniversary of the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, September 18th 1931, became a national day of remembrance, and the Chinese were encouraged, 'never forget' (勿忘, *wuwang*).⁶⁵

One purpose of National Humiliation rhetoric was to foster social cohesion through patriotism. The official narrative emphasised the sufferings of *all* Chinese at the hands of the Japanese, locating the occupation of 1931-1945 as a 'defining trauma' in the national psyche. The 'defining trauma' of Fugui and Jiazhen's life in *To Live* is, however, not national but personal: Fugui's inability to control his gambling habit and its outcome. Further emphasising the personal, Fugui's recovery from gambling addiction is not influenced or brought about through a community, such as re-education by the Party. His personal loss drives him to

⁶⁴ This shift in emphasis towards national self-reliance in the face of external hostility was similar in many respects to the political climate of Republican China in the 1920s and 1930s. However, in one key aspect the 1990s variant differed, in the presentation of these traumas as completed historical experiences which came to an end with the Communist victory in 1949. Therefore, unlike in earlier forms, national humiliation rhetoric emphasised the patriotism of defending China in its contemporary state, rather than calling for potentially unsettling changes. By linking national humiliation and patriotism the CCP effectively undercut the Tiananmen protestors' claims to be acting in the legacy of May Fourth radicals. Public criticism of Chinese internal affairs became akin to supporting foreign aggressors, and the legitimacy of the CCP was shored up through emphasising its role in defeating the Japanese. Paul A. Cohen, 'Remembering and Forgetting National Humiliation in Twentieth-Century China', *Twentieth Century China*, 27/2 (April, 2002) p. 18; see also Louisa Lim, *The People's Republic of Amnesia: Tiananmen revisited* (Oxford 2014) p. 138.

⁶⁵ The concept of a day of national humiliation (国耻日, *guochi ri*) originated in the Republican era. The formal remembrance of these anniversaries, as Cohen pointed out, consistently provided opportunities for different social groups to rework the past to fit their contemporary purposes. Cohen, 'Remembering and Forgetting National Humiliation', p. 1. See also William A. Callahan, 'History, Identity, and Security: producing and consuming nationalism in China', *Critical Asian Studies*, 38:2 (2006) pp. 179-208.

reform, and the motivation is to redeem himself for his family. The defining moment for Fugui comes when he is fetched from the market by Fengxia, and they run home together to find Jiazhen returned to him with their new baby, Youqing. The long tracking shot focuses tightly on Fugui and a laughing Fengxia running, as she pulls him by the hand. The background is unfocused, drawing the eye in to Fugui and Fengxia and excluding the social world around them. The moment is a joyous reunion and marks the completion of Fugui's transformation into a devoted family man, highlighting the central theme of the film.

The insistence on the personal over the national is used by Zhang Yimou to subvert some of the myths of CCP history.⁶⁶ One of the defining 'myths' of official history concerned the early 1950s, which were considered to have constituted a golden age in Chinese socialist culture. These were the years in which the 'classic' mass campaigns, which came to dominate life in Maoist China, were introduced.⁶⁷ The purges which took place in the early 1950s, and the redistribution of wealth and land which accompanied them, were a crucial factor in legitimising the CCP as the ruling regime. In particular, the show trials of recalcitrant landowners and

⁶⁶ Wang Zheng identified what he termed the CMT Complex: the complex interactions of ideas about a nation's significance (chosenness), origin myths, and historical traumas, which together affect the shape nationalism will take. Wang Zheng, *Never Forget National Humiliation: historical memory in Chinese politics and foreign relations* (New York NY, 2012) p. 41.

⁶⁷ The mix of top-down state structure and bottom-up mass mobilization, and the tensions between the two, was one of the particularities of Maoism. See Julia Strauss, 'Morality, Coercion and State Building by Campaign in the Early PRC: regime consolidation and after, 1949-1956', *China Quarterly*, 188 (2006) pp. 891-912.

Kuomintang supporters as part of the ‘Campaign to Suppress Counter-Revolutionaries’ (1951) were used as a powerful tool for social re-education. They allowed past grievances to be acted upon in cathartic moments of mass violence, whilst carefully controlling the release of such sentiments through a formal structure of ‘accusation’ (控诉会, *kongsu hui*). Society was quickly educated about the aims and ideals of communism, whilst also being implicated in the bloodier side of its application.⁶⁸ The early years of the PRC were then eulogised within the official narrative as a time of righteous and judicious social re-education.

The show trial of Long’er in *To Live* questions the simplicity of this narrative. Long’er is convicted as a corrupt landlord, both for owning Fugui’s ancestral home, and for refusing to turn part of it over to the CCP to establish their local headquarters. At his trial crowds line the street to shout slogans as he is dragged from the stage to the execution ground. When he sees Fugui in the crowd he shouts at him, “I’m being killed for you”. Fugui rushes home, petrified by the echoing shots which are dispatching Long’er. “If I hadn’t lost my house to him, that would have been me”, he exclaims. The arbitrary nature of the purges is highlighted in the frequency with which accidents shape Fugui’s life. He only escapes being executed himself because he lost the house through his gambling debts. Because of this loss he is categorised as an

⁶⁸ As Strauss noted, the highly charged emotional atmosphere was carefully corralled by the state into a legitimisation of and complicity in a purge of troublesome elements from society: “...all present implicitly bloodying their hands in their collusion with the state’s violence.” *Ibid.* p. 907.

‘ordinary townspeople’, rather than a landlord. In the same way, Fugui only serves in the PLA during the civil war because he is captured by them. His family is only protected from political campaigns during the Cultural Revolution because Fengxia marries Erxi, who is a Red Guard at his factory. These serendipities dramatically undercut any claim to historical logic made in the official narrative.

Despite this, Rey Chow argued that *To Live* failed to interrogate critically one of the key motifs of official history, that of the enduring power of the Chinese people to survive.⁶⁹ She pointed out that after 1949, the People’s Republic of China was constituted as a state of the people (中国人民, *zhongguo renmin*), those people being the previously oppressed classes. The justification for CCP rule was based on their liberation of and provision for the Chinese people (民, *min*). Being a citizen of communist China was thereafter a social identity subject to the benevolent rule of the CCP. It also functioned, after the purges of the early 1950s, as a public space of anonymity – within ‘the people’ the individual was both protected and controlled: “The vigilance of ‘the public’ is wholly aimed at *conformity and* invisibility, not dissent and intervention. [italics in original]”⁷⁰ The crux of Rey Chow’s critique of Zhang Yimou was that by focusing on the family’s survival of traumatic moments in China’s socialist history, he had chosen to exemplify

⁶⁹ Chow, Rey, ‘We Endure, Therefore We Are: survival, governance, and Zhang Yimou’s *To Live*’, *South Atlantic Quarterly* (1997) via <https://chinese.wooster.edu/files/endure.pdf> [accessed 05/01/2016].

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* ¶26.

one of the defining myths used by the CCP for social control. Chow argued that the valorisation of the powers of Chinese endurance allowed its proponents, the CCP, to justify hardship and control using the language of patriotism. She therefore suggested that the central concept of *To Live*, survival, was an unfortunate prop to the Chinese state's domination of its own people.⁷¹

Rey Chow's argument can be slightly modified, if placed in the context of Thurston's framework of inclusion and isolation.⁷² Borrowing from Milan Kundera's famous imagery of the circle of socialism, and belonging to or being excluded from it, Thurston suggested that one of the most devastating impacts of the Maoist mass campaigns was the sense of isolation experienced by those who were struggled against. A primary goal of these campaigns, as explored above, was to create a new social structure, the *Zhongguo renmin* that Rey Chow referred to. In order to do this, it was necessary to identify those who did not belong, using as a guide the rubric of class. According to Thurston, at any point during the years of high Maoism, around 5 percent of the population could be identified as class enemies.⁷³ In the same way, the fear of isolation and exclusion pushed people into a desire to belong: "The series of political campaigns engineered by the Chinese government served to undermine the fabric of Chinese society...The result was often

⁷¹ Ibid. ¶39.

⁷² Anne Thurston, 'Community and Isolation: memory and forgetting – China in search of itself', in Gong (ed.) *Memory and History in East and Southeast Asia: issues of identity in International Relations* (Washington DC, 2001) pp. 149-172.

⁷³ Ibid. p. 156.

both a profound sense of isolation and a longing for a new community, for participation in a different, supportive group.”⁷⁴

The extent to which society was controlled by a fear of exclusion can be seen in *To Live*, in the ways in which Fugui ‘performs’ inclusion.⁷⁵ Even before the execution of Long’er, he begins to deny his family background. Speaking of the ancestral home, which Long’er set on fire to prevent the communists from taking it, Fugui declares, ‘They weren’t my family timbers, they were counter-revolutionary timbers!’ In the same way, when Youqing pours a bowlful of chilli-laced noodle soup over the head of the local bully, who has been tormenting Fengxia, in the community canteen, Fugui responds to the threat of social exclusion, ‘He’s wasting the commune’s food, what kind of family does he come from?’, by beating Youqing in public. The family is quickly brought back together by the intervention of Jiazhen, who explains Youqing’s motives to Fugui, and then helps her son to orchestrate a prank against his father as retribution for the beating. It is through these moments that Zhang Yimou deliberately positions the inhumanity of the communist system against a valorisation of the humanity of family.

⁷⁴ Ibid. p. 158.

⁷⁵ That Fugui and Jaizhen’s social conformity begins immediately after the execution of Long’er, is a very accurate representation of normative patterns in the early PRC. As Strauss’ research demonstrated, the mass campaigns of the 1950s paved the way for the institutionalisation and internalization of new behavioural norms. Subsequent campaigns followed the same pattern of propaganda, arrest, enforced self-criticism and mass struggle, but rarely concluded with violence and executions. Despite this, later mass movements encountered virtually no resistance, suggesting that the bloody indoctrinations of the 1950s had been successful. Strauss, ‘Morality, Coercion and State Building by Campaign in the Early PRC’, p. 908.

Central to the film is Jiazhen's poignant wish that their family could live a simple life together, a desire which Fugui comes to share. Rey Chow suggested that this instinct was at the heart of the way in which the CCP had forced Chinese society to internalise pure survival. However, it is important to note that Jiazhen expresses her wish at the very outset of the film, even before Fugui's gambling losses. The motif of living does not represent pure survival, as Chow suggested, but rather a state of being in which the family is the focal point of life. The value of life is in fact held very highly in the film. After Youqing's death, Jiazhen tells Chunsheng, Fugui's friend and the individual responsible for her son's accident, 'You owe us a life'. That phrase is then repeated years later when Chunsheng is facing persecution at the hands of the Red Guards. His wife has already committed suicide, and Chunsheng comes to make one last apology to Fugui and Jiazhen for the death of their son. Despite the political risk to themselves, Fugui and Jiazhen try to encourage him. As he walks away Jiazhen calls after him, 'Chunsheng, remember you owe us a life. You must value yours.'

The injunction to value life, and the life of every individual, directly contradicts Rey Chow's assertion that the film reduces humanity to pure survival. In fact, the film deliberately highlights those aspects of life that were silenced in the official history, such as the memorialisation of those who were lost in the mass campaigns. Thurston pointed to the spontaneous public outpouring of grief which marked the death of Zhou Enlai in 1976, suggesting it was in

fact an act of mass mourning for all those who had been lost in the previous decade, many of whom had not been mourned at the time.⁷⁶ The silence that surrounded the disappearance of friends and loved ones in the campaigns is reflected poignantly in *To Live*. Chunsheng's departure, for example, is filmed as a long shot in which he walks away from Jiazhen and Fugui down the street at night. When Jiazhen calls after him he stops, but his figure is indistinct and it is impossible to tell whether he has responded to her command to live. He remains silhouetted in the centre of the frame in extreme long shot for a moment before the camera cuts away. In a similar framing, Jiazhen and Fugui walk away from the smiling figure of the local CCP cadre, who has been their supporter and protector as well as an unambiguously positive representative of the Party since the 1950s but is now facing re-education, leaving him standing in his doorway looking after them. Neither he nor Chunsheng is seen again. These moments deliberately dwell on the silences in the official history, and in so doing resist its influence.

The all-encompassing noise of loud speakers, political rallies, and patriotic music, was the soundtrack to the era of mass movements. The choice to linger on or create moments of silence in films that focus on the socialist period, establishes an alternative narrative dynamic. As Lovatt highlighted, silence, or quiet, signifies a shift from a national, corporate narrative down to the personal.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Thurston, *Community and Isolation*, p. 159.

⁷⁷ Philippa Lovatt, 'The Spectral Soundscapes of Postsocialist China in the Films of Jia Zhangke', *Screen*, 53/4 (Winter 2010) p. 432.

In *To Live*, Zhang Yimou introduced moments of quiet at unusual times. During the civil war scenes, for example, Fugui and Chunsheng wake up the morning after a disastrous battle to find the camp deserted and silent. They walk among abandoned trucks and tanks, their footsteps echoing on the compacted snow, birdsong in the background. It is a curiously eerie scene in which they appear to be completely detached from all other human life.

Preceding this moment, a narrative ellipsis also occurs. In the first of two shots, Fugui observes preparations for a battle. The camera is static, placed high-up overlooking an expanse of ground filled with men, trucks and tanks (Fig. 2:3). The shot cuts abruptly to an exact replica of the previous framing, but the field of vision is now filled with a vast sea of injured and dying men (Fig. 2:4). The jump cut between the two shots functions as a visual silence. A battle has taken place but not been seen on screen. This omission is all the more significant when placed in the context of the official historical mode. To completely omit the war of liberation itself, and focus on two non-participating observers, immediately signifies Zhang Yimou's detachment from the agenda of official historiography.

A later example takes this narrowing of focus and personalisation of historical moments even further. The 1960s decade is defined for Fugui and Jiazhen by their daughter Fengxia's marriage to Erxi. At the height of the Cultural Revolution she becomes pregnant. Only a day or two after Chunsheng's last visit to

them, and on the very day in which they find that their friend, the local CCP cadre, is going to be struggled against, Fengxia goes into labour, and Jiazhen and Fugui rush to the hospital. The delivery goes well, but Fengxia develops complications and begins to haemorrhage. The hospital has been taken over by Red Guards, who are only medical students and lack the knowledge to deal with a complicated birth, and the doctor whom Erxi has found to help has collapsed from the effects of starvation in the struggle campaigns.

As chaos erupts around them, Jiazhen sits at Fengxia's side holding her hand. The camera zooms into medium close-up, framing Jiazhen's face in centre frame looking down at her daughter (Fig. 2:5). The surrounding sounds fade out, leaving only Jiazhen's voice as she calls to her daughter: 'Don't be afraid Fengxia, mama's here' (Fig. 2:6). It is a profoundly affecting moment owing to its parsed simplicity – the moment is Jiazhen's and the significance is her relationship with her dying daughter. The trauma of the Cultural Revolution becomes very much a background to the intimacy of the moment. This shot above all others in the film, harking back to the moving close-up of the young Fengxia running with Fugui when Jiazhen returns to him at the beginning of the movie, expresses the profound personalisation of history which Zhang Yimou was attempting in *To Live*.

In contrast to Rey Chow's assertion that *To Live* reveals the internalisation of survival at all costs into the Chinese psyche, I suggest that the film in fact positions a very clear alternative to the

CCP rhetoric of politicised belonging and exclusion. The scene in which Fengxia dies indicates this alternative, in the importance given to Jiazhen's telling her daughter, 'Mama's here'. Naming was one of the classic ways in which belonging was established in the Chinese communist state. As Vogel identified, the use of comrade (同志, *tongzhi*) as a term of identification spread quickly in the 1950s, as part of the state's solution to the need for social transformation.⁷⁸ Comrade indicated equality before the state, but also emphasised the primary importance of the political over the intimate. The aim was to ensure that, as citizens, the Chinese people put the goals of the state before personal concerns. Naming, therefore, as well as expressing belonging in the political collective, also de-signified other relationships.⁷⁹ The role of family was consequently much reduced.⁸⁰ In *To Live*, though, family is everything. It is particularly poignant that Zhang Yimou emphasised the deep bond of parental love in a scene set during the Cultural Revolution, a time in which the family relationships of many of the art directors were strained by the political demands placed upon them.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Ezra F. Vogel, 'From Friendship to Comradeship: the change in personal relations in communist China', *China Quarterly*, 21 (1965) p. 46.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* p. 55.

⁸⁰ In his reassessment of Vogel's classic 1965 article, Gold queried whether this transformation had been as complete as Vogel suggested. Given the fairly rapid return to traditional patterns of social relations in the 1980s, Gold suggested that the use of Comrade had been ritualised, rather than fully internalised, in Chinese society under Mao. See Thomas B. Gold, 'After Comradeship: personal relations in China since the Cultural Revolution', *China Quarterly*, 104 (1985) pp. 657-675.

⁸¹ See Ni Zhen (trans. Chris Berry) *Memoirs from the Beijing Film Academy: the genesis of China's Fifth Generation* (Durham NC, 2002) pp. 13-18.

The whole of *To Live* functions as an alternative history. Taking a structure familiar to Chinese viewers, of major historical moments, the narrative instead uses them as a backdrop to the main focus, which is the family's survival across the decades as a loving unit. As Sheldon Lu commented, "The socialist past becomes a matter of the private history of each and every individual who lived through those years. As a result, there is no one monolithic grand history of the socialist state but there exist countless small stories of individual Chinese citizens."⁸² Tian Zhuangzhuang used a similar structure for *The Blue Kite*; however, in that film the family functioned as a cypher for the devastating impacts of various CCP campaigns. In *To Live*, the right of individuals to own and assert their personal history is seen in the gravesite ritual of photographs and dumplings.⁸³ The traumatic backdrop to Youqing and Fengxia's deaths, as well as various other victims like Chunsheng, are reduced to a simple family narrative of remembrance which focuses on the quotidian and personal. The overarching structure given to history in the official narrative had the effect of flattening experience into a single linear discourse. In contrast, as *To Live* shows, what was ultimately remembered by individuals were the intimate details of everyday life and the memories they evoked, which occupied the gaps and spaces in the official narrative.

⁸² Lu, 'History, Memory, Nostalgia', p. 18.

⁸³ See Xiong Zhaohui, 'To Live: the survival philosophy of the traumatized', in Kaplan & Wang (eds.), *Trauma and Cinema: cross-cultural explorations* (HK, 2004) p. 213.

Platform

Platform is the story of a performing arts troupe from a northern provincial town called Fengyang, experiencing the dramatic social and cultural changes which took place in China in the 1980s.⁸⁴ At the heart of the story are Cui Mingliang and Yin Ruijian. Cui Mingliang is a social misfit with an eye for the latest cultural and musical trends. He stays with the troupe until the bitter end, as it gradually declines in the face of the challenges of privatisation and increased alternatives for leisure and entertainment. Yin Ruijian, however, despite being the most talented member of the troupe, decides to give up dancing in the mid-1980s and take a secure government job in order to support her ailing father. In the early 1990s, at the conclusion of the film, Cui Mingliang and Yin Ruijian are reunited, and end up settling in their hometown with an infant son. Despite the apparent simplicity of the core story, *Platform* chronicles over a decade of momentous social shifts with incredible detail. The film constructs an alternative history of reform, countering the reductive simplicity of the CCP's narrative. This final section will explore how Jia Zhangke used alternative sites of memorialisation to challenge the positivist history of accelerated modernity presented in official accounts of the 1980s.

Halbwachs observed that, "collective memory is embodied in mnemonic artifacts...what French historian Pierre Nora calls 'sites of

⁸⁴ In a sense, therefore, *Platform* takes up the story of Chinese history where *In the Heat of the Sun* and *To Live* come to an end.

memory”⁸⁵ For Winter, sites of memory were physical and spatial, places where groups of people engaged in collective commemorative activities.⁸⁶ Hodgkin and Radstone, however, argued that memory could also be channelled through artefacts and media.⁸⁷ This broader definition allows for the inclusion of visual and aural sites of memory, such as cinema. Rather than viewing sites of memory as channels for non-reflexive remembering, historians identify the process of memorialisation as a cultural practice. As Sturken observed, “Cultural memory is produced through objects, images, and representations. These are technologies of memory, not vessels of memory in which memory passively resides so much as objects through which memories are shared, produced, and given meaning.”⁸⁸ Memorialisation therefore epitomises the process of “effort after meaning” described above.⁸⁹ As White noted, “what is at issue here is not the facts of the matter regarding such events but the different possible meanings that such facts can be construed as bearing.”⁹⁰ The process of memorialisation consequently holds the potential to be fraught with contestation over the meaning ascribed to the past by different groups.

⁸⁵ Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, p. 69.

⁸⁶ Jay Winter, ‘Historians and Sites of Memory’, in Boyer & Wertsch (eds.) *Memory in Mind and Culture* (Cambridge, 2009) p. 252.

⁸⁷ Hodgkin & Radstone, ‘Contested Pasts’, in Hodgkin & Radstone (eds.), *Contested Pasts: the politics of memory* (London, 2003) p. 11.

⁸⁸ Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, p. 9.

⁸⁹ Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering*, p. 134.

⁹⁰ Hayden White, ‘The Modernist Event’, in Sobchack (ed.) *The Persistence of History: cinema, television, and the modern event* (New York NY, 1996) p. 21.

In *Platform*, Jia Zhangke's use of the long-shot and static camera, allowing the action to unfold without editorial intervention into the narrative, has the effect of emphasising the historical qualities of the film. By removing the viewer from the intimacy of shot-reverse shot filming styles, the filmmaker resists creating a strong emotional empathy for his characters. The audience are literally held at a distance and forced to observe the slow unfolding of events. Despite the fact that *Platform* is a purely fictional account of life in Fengyang in the 1980s, the use of long-shots gives a realist, documentary texture to the movie, intended to suggest historical authenticity to the viewer.⁹¹ The observational camera work therefore allows a focus on Chinese history as the primary subject of the film, rather than using it merely as a backdrop to the emotional drama of Cui Mingliang and Yin Ruijian's courtship.

Like *To Live*, *Platform* includes key historical markers in the text, although these are subtler than the structure of blocking the film into decades used by Zhang Yimou. Jia Zhangke uses loudspeaker announcements and news reports to give chronological integrity to his film, allowing the viewer to date the action on screen based on the historical event being referred to. Such public announcements were ubiquitous in China in the second half of the twentieth century. Loudspeakers were installed in the *danwei* (单位,

⁹¹'Movies can change your life – Dialogue with Jia Zhangke (5): evoking new understandings of space' (电影改变人生-与贾樟柯对话 (六) : 唤起对空间的新理解, *Dianying gaibian rensheng – yu Jia Zhangke daihua (liu): huanqi dui kongjian de xin lijie*) (November 2014) <http://edu.1905.com/archives/view/1598/> [Accessed 14/09/2016].

urban work units) and communes in the 1950s, in order to broadcast political announcements, slogans, and news items to the local community. In this way the CCP permeated everyday life with the constant presence of the state. The use of loudspeakers in *Platform* provides historical markers whilst maintaining and reinforcing the integrity of the documentary aesthetic. For example, the rehabilitation of Liu Shaoqi in 1980 is prominently announced through a loudspeaker, as is the 35th anniversary of the founding of the PRC in 1984. Less obviously, Michael Berry noted that an announcement about a police man-hunt whilst the troupe are in Ulan Bator relates to the search for missing protest leaders after the Tiananmen Square crisis in 1989.⁹²

Lovatt observed the way in which personal and intimate moments within the narrative are continually intersected by the presence of the state, in the form of official announcements: “long gaps in the film’s often laconic dialogue are frequently interrupted by extraneous sounds and voices flowing in to the diegetic acoustic space from overhead loud speaker systems, nearby television sets and radio broadcasts.”⁹³ This interpellation of daily life by official historical markers is undermined, however, by their apparent irrelevance to the characters on screen. The announcement of Liu Shaoqi’s rehabilitation, for example, comes immediately after a troupe meeting to discuss the addition of some pop music songs to

⁹² Michael Berry, *Jia Zhangke’s ‘Hometown Trilogy’: Xiao Wu, Platform, and Unknown Pleasures* (London, 2009) p. 64.

⁹³ Philippa Lovatt, *Cinema’s Spectral Sounds: history, memory and politics* (PhD Thesis: University of Glasgow, 2011). Referenced with kind permission of the author.

their repertoire. The camera is fixed at a high angle looking down in long-shot on a courtyard as the troupe leave the building. It is dusk and the figures are in semi-darkness. As the announcement is made, they mount bicycles and ride away, discussing relationships and going to the cinema. No-one even stops to listen to it. In the same way, a news item about the 35th anniversary of the PRC plays out in an empty hospital corridor where Zhong Ping, Yin Ruijian's friend from the troupe, has just reluctantly agreed to have an abortion.

The silences which surround state announcements create a marked disconnect between the official and the personal, suggesting the existence of multiple frames of memory. As Lovatt argued, by layering conflicting sounds and images, *Platform* disrupts the apparent seamlessness of the official narrative and suggests the "jarring coexistence" of multiple ways to understand and remember the past.⁹⁴ The film presents alternative sites of memorialisation, in contrast to the reductive structure of official history. These sites occur within the heteroglossic soundtrack, which layers the diegesis with contemporary pop music played on pirate radio or from cassettes. The dramatic contrast between Theresa Teng ballads and state announcements reflects the principle of heteroglossia proposed by Bakhtin, in which multiple distinct dialects or voices can be simultaneously present within a text. Heteroglossic material can

⁹⁴ Lovatt, 'The Spectral Soundscapes of Postsocialist China in the Films of Jia Zhangke', p. 419.

give voice to the subaltern position, but it also reveals the conflicts within society through discordant or contrasting linguistic modes.⁹⁵

In the same way, memorialisation exemplifies the contested space of memory. Cubitt observed that state-organised acts of commemoration tend to idealise an ordered past that has clear narrative links to the present.⁹⁶ As part of the Patriotic Education movement, in the 1990s the 'red tourism' initiative encouraged visits to sites representative of the official historical narrative, including Yan'an and Nanjing, and new national museums and exhibitions were established to create commemorative focal points. It was in this context that the independent *Zhiqing* exhibition, discussed earlier, was set up, to provide a memory site for a group silenced within the official history. It can therefore be seen, as Winter pointed out, that commemoration requires consensus, and where that consensus is lacking a site of memory or its meaning remains contested.⁹⁷ Cubitt argued that resistance to the flattening of history through a single hegemonic interpretation can take the form both of presenting counter-discourses, and of offering alternative sites of memory.⁹⁸

The official historical mode is disrupted in *Platform* through the use of pop music to provide alternative markers, mirroring, as

⁹⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', in Holquist (ed) (Trans. Emerson & Holquist) *The Dialogic Imagination: four essays by M.M. Bakhtin* (Austin TX, 1981) p. 275.

⁹⁶ Geoffrey Cubitt, *History and Memory* (Manchester, 2007) p. 218.

⁹⁷ Winter, 'Historians and Sites of Memory', pp. 253-4.

⁹⁸ Cubitt, *History and Memory*, p. 227. See also, Ian Johnson, 'The Presence of the Past – a coda', in Wasserstrom (ed.) *The Oxford Illustrated History of Modern China* (Oxford, 2016) pp. 301-323.

Lovatt noted, “the transforming soundscape of the era.”⁹⁹ Jia Zhangke described how the introduction of popular music to China in the late 1970s and early 1980s felt like an unprecedented phenomenon for a generation raised on the restricted soundscape of the Cultural Revolution, giving his teenage self his first dreams of life outside Fengyang.¹⁰⁰ The soundtrack therefore functions to memorialise a specific generational experience of the post-Mao years. For example, Jia Zhangke pointed to the song ‘Go with Your Feelings’ (跟着感觉做, *Genzhe ganjue zuo*) as representative of the beginning of free thought and expression in the mid-1980s, and Cui Jian’s ‘I have nothing to my name’ (一无所有, *yiwu suoyou*), as expressing a sentiment of marked disillusionment at the end of the decade.¹⁰¹

Platform has a three-part structure which, although subtle, shapes the text, and this alternative narrative corresponds to the transforming soundtrack. The first section, which begins with a pre-titles scene in which the troupe perform a revolutionary classic, ‘Train Heading to Shaoshan’ (火车向着韶山跑, *Huochē xiàngzhe Shaoshan Pao*), and tease Cui Mingliang for never having heard a train whistle, is marked by nostalgia. The section celebrates the pop music and cultural shifts of the early 1980s, and emphasises hope and possibility. The first part of the decade is depicted as a

⁹⁹ Lovatt, *Cinema’s Spectral Sounds*.

¹⁰⁰ Jia Zhangke in Michael Berry, *Speaking in Images: interviews with contemporary Chinese filmmakers* (New York NY, 2005) p. 190.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* p. 191.

time of idealism for young people. This section ends with Yin Ruijian's decision to leave the troupe. The closing shot of the sequence shows Cui Mingliang in the back of the truck with the rest of the troupe heading out on tour, but looking back towards Fengyang, cutting to a rare point-of-view shot in the film, showing the road behind them as they leave the town.

The second section of the film begins with the troupe's arrival in a deprived area of the countryside to perform. They remain there for some time, and the film focuses on the desperate poverty and backwardness being experienced by rural communities in the wake of privatisation and decollectivisation. The middle section is characterised by disappointment for the characters, as the idealism of the early part of the film confronts a limiting reality. The section ends with a poignant scene in which Yin Ruijian, working in a government office by herself, dances to a plaintive song on the radio. The final section focuses on the decline of the troupe in the face of increased commercialisation in the late 1980s, and ends with the film's closing scene of Yin Ruijian holding a baby whilst Cui Mingliang sleeps in an armchair.

The arc of the narrative, as revealed in this brief structural breakdown of the film, is the failure of the optimism of the early 1980s to live up to the reality of the later years of reform. Liu Jin has offered the critique that, "Jia's films extensively use the cheap

“wallpaper” of popular music to establish a period scene.”¹⁰² However, Drake emphasised the role of music in film in evoking memory and connecting it with a process of deliberate recall, the searching for meaning described above: “Through mediated memory historical events become memorialised through their media representation – remembered by their mediation and remediation - and this iterative process helps to construct a sense of the past...”¹⁰³ Similarly, Cook highlighted the reflexive role which historical memorabilia, such as music, within a film’s mise en scene can play in provoking reflection on the period being depicted.¹⁰⁴ The process of memorialisation through sound in *Platform* fragments, and therefore resists, the imposition of the official historical mode. It offers alternative sites of memory to viewers through the emotional resonance of popular songs. It also diverges from the teleology of progress offered by the narrative of modernity.

The middle section of the movie is particularly revealing in this respect. In depicting rural deprivation in the years after decollectivisation, Jia Zhangke’s restrained filming style feels even more like a documentary. In one scene, Cui Mingliang visits some relatives. His elderly aunt describes the hardships they are facing in the village. Cui Mingliang is off screen behind the camera for much of the scene; his aunt sits facing the camera whilst she talks, with

¹⁰² Jin Liu, ‘The Rhetoric of Local Languages as the Marginal: Chinese underground and independent films by Jia Zhangke and others’, *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 8/2 (2006) p. 174.

¹⁰³ Philip Drake, ‘Mortgaged to Music’: new retro movies in 1990s Hollywood cinema’, in Grainge (ed.) *Memory and Popular Film* (Manchester, 2003) p. 184.

¹⁰⁴ Cook, *Screening the Past*, p. 5.

only an occasional question from Cui Mingliang's disembodied voice, in a style reminiscent of a documentary interview. The particular horror of life in the former communes is seen graphically in his cousin, Sanming's, new job at a recently privatised mine. As he is unable to read, Cui Mingliang tells him what the contract of employment he is about to sign says. With great discomfort Cui Mingliang reads for him a refusal on the part of the management to take responsibility for any accidents which might affect Sanming, and an agreement that his daily wage will be just 10¥. Having explained the contract to him, Cui Mingliang stares at him for a minute, and then looks away whilst Sanming goes to sign up. Later, as the troupe are leaving the village, Sanming runs after the truck and asks Cui Mingliang to pass a 5¥ note to his sister who is studying in Fengyang: "Tell her to go to university", he says, "Never come back here." These events take place roughly half way through the film, in 1985, and yet the troupe's visit is timed to coincide with the arrival of electricity for the first time in the village.

This stark depiction of rural hardship and lack of development is in marked contrast to the flowering of pop culture seen in the previous section of the film. Similarly, the music which the troupe performs for the villagers is a return to the nationalistic revolutionary tunes of earlier years. At the switching on of the village's new electricity supply, Zhong Ping sings, "Our homeland is built on prosperous fields", and shortly after Sanming has signed on for his dangerous job in the mine, the troupe perform a patriotic piece for

the local miners: “My homeland is in my dreams...my Chinese heart”. The glorification of nationalism in these songs jars against images of poverty and corruption. The audience are confronted with a sharp disconnect between the official and the unofficial, which disrupts the narrative of progressive reform.

The title of the film is taken from a popular soft-rock hit of the mid-1980s, ‘Zhantai’ (站台), which features in the movie soundtrack twice, once when the troupe are stranded overnight beneath a train line, and once much later when Cui Mingliang performs the song on tour. A direct contrast can be drawn between the opening scene of the film, in which the troupe perform ‘Train Heading to Shaoshan’, and the later references to ‘Zhantai’. Unlike the revolutionary locomotive in the performance, forging towards Mao’s hometown to pay pilgrimage to China’s dawning future, the train in Liu Hong’s hit song never arrives. The protagonist is waiting on the platform dreaming of lost love, “The wait seems never ending, my heart waits for ever.” At the outset of the film, the image of a train seems to symbolise forward motion and the future.¹⁰⁵ As the screen cuts to black from the opening scene, the troupe’s imitation of train noises carries on over the titles. The train theme then threads through the film. Cui Mingliang’s playing of ‘Zhantai’ on the truck’s cassette player, when the troupe are stranded, is interrupted by the sight of a

¹⁰⁵ For both Jason McGrath and Wang Ban, the train represents the promise of modernity, and the failure of modernisation to adequately transform daily reality in China’s industrial hinterland. McGrath, ‘The Independent Cinema of Jia Zhangke’, p. 98; Wang Ban, ‘Epic Narrative, Authenticity, and the Memory of Realism: reflections on Jia Zhangke’s *Platform*’, in Lee & Yang (eds.), *Re-envisioning the Chinese Revolution: the politics and poetics of collective memories in reform China* (Washington DC, 2007) p. 203

real train approaching the bridge overhead. The entire troupe race to catch a glimpse of it, but the carriages have already passed by the time they reach the tracks. This missed opportunity, chiming with the lyrics of the song, perfectly sums up the ennui which overtakes optimism by the end of *Platform*.

In the concluding scene, a static camera watches for several minutes as Yin Ruijian dandles a baby and waits for the kettle to boil, whilst Cui Mingliang slumps on a sofa in the background napping. Jia Zhangke said of this conclusion, "They were once rebellious, they once pursued their ideals and dreams, but in the end they return to the pace of everyday life...No longer is there any possibility for miracles to happen. There is no hope for change."¹⁰⁶ As the kettle reaches boiling point, the shriek of the whistle crescendos to an all-encompassing final note. The screen fades to black and ends the film whilst the note is maintained, in a mirror of the title sequence. Interestingly, the only sound which the whistle does not drown out is the gurgling of Yin Ruijian's baby. The train as a metaphor for future promise therefore seems, in this closing scene, to suggest the rise of a new generation, as Cui Mingliang and his cohort fade into an everyday existence.

Platform implies then that, like the *zhiqing*, the 1980s generation became a 'lost' generation, missing their promised future. As Turim noted, "One of the ideological implications of this narration of history through a subjective focalization is to create history as an

¹⁰⁶ Jia Zhangke in Michael Berry, *Speaking in Images*, p. 204.

essentially individual and emotional experience.”¹⁰⁷ Through memorialisation *Platform* asserts a personal response to the era of the 1970s and 1980s, in itself a political act in the context of the dominant historical mode and its central focus on the nation. The raising of generational memory in place of official markers of history suggests the inadequacy of the CCP’s historiography to speak for all Chinese subjects, and proposes a diversification of experience. Sturken’s observation that, “Cultural memory is a field of cultural negotiation through which different stories vie for a place in history”, can be seen in *Platform*.¹⁰⁸ By offering alternative sites of memory in the soundtrack, the film itself becomes a mnemonic artifact for the process of commemoration and reflection.

As Li Huaiyin demonstrated, in the reform era the dominant historical narrative used by the CCP was one of teleological progress.¹⁰⁹ Looking back to the first half of the twentieth century, before revolutionary orthodoxy was established under Mao, the course of history was seen to have a linear trajectory towards modernity, and this approach was reasserted in the 1980s. After 1989, the progressive narrative dominated, as the state sought to make political stability and national values all pervasive in culture. In *Platform* the teleology of the modernity narrative is fractured. Jia Zhangke described how the optimism of the 1980s was undermined by events at the end of the decade: “Everyone believed that the

¹⁰⁷ Turim, *Flashbacks in Film*, p. 17.

¹⁰⁸ Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, p. 1.

¹⁰⁹ Li Huaiyin, *Reinventing Modern China*, p. 204.

future would be bright. People started to gain a newfound power, but all this met with a great setback in 1989...”¹¹⁰ Storey observed that the study of memory films was not a study of the past but of the present, contemporary to the film’s production.¹¹¹ As can be seen from the above quote from Jia Zhangke, the post-Tiananmen era profoundly affected the shape of *Platform*. As a direct response to the reinterpretation of history by the CCP in the 1990s, the film reflects the observation of Hodgkin and Radstone that, “The focus of contestation...is very often not conflicting accounts of what actually happened in the past so much as the question of who or what is entitled to speak for that past in the present.”

Conclusion

In this chapter I have sought to demonstrate that art film directors in the 1990s were actively engaged in questioning the official historical narrative in their films. As Cui Shuqin stated, the ‘memory wave’ among filmmakers was “...not so much a collective nostalgia about the past as a strong sense of reclaiming historical expression...”¹¹² In challenging the imposition by the CCP of a narrative orthodoxy of history, the filmmakers created a space for the articulation of alternative memories.

¹¹⁰ Jia Zhangke in Michael Berry, *Speaking in Images*, p. 195.

¹¹¹ John Storey, ‘The Articulation of Memory and Desire: from Vietnam to the war in the Persian Gulf’, in Grange (ed.) *Memory and Popular Film* (Manchester, 2003) p. 104.

¹¹² Cui Shuqin, ‘Negotiating In-Between: on new-generation filmmaking and Jia Zhangke’s films’, *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 18/2 (2006) p. 99.

In the Heat of the Sun used the breaking down of memory to challenge simplified interpretative frameworks. In questioning the possibility of recalling the past with accuracy, Jiang Wen highlighted the constructed nature of official history. He pointed to the dislocation of memory from official accounts, as experienced by the 1960s generation, and the CCP's practice of rewriting the narrative to fit new ideological conditions. He also challenged the idea of the 'ten years of chaos' by highlighting how the pioneers of reform had been shaped in the violence and youthful liberation of the Cultural Revolution.

To Live subverted the centrality of the nation in China's history by offering an alternative account centred on the family. By changing the lens through which history was viewed, Zhang Yimou was able to highlight the inadequacies of the official narrative. He demonstrated its reductive approach to human experience by asserting an alternative frame of memory, which valorised the personal and the particular. In the same way, *Platform* challenged the streamlined, progressive teleology of the modernity narrative by using pop culture from the 1980s as a focus for memorialisation. Jia Zhangke expressed a specific generational experience, one which was largely silenced after the Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989. Both of these films focused on the gaps and spaces in the official accounts, formed by the CCP's emphasis on grand narratives.

All three approaches have in common a refusal to engage with the simplistic orthodoxy of the official historical mode, as shaped by the Patriotic Education Movement. In bringing layers of complexity to the formal structures of their history films, the filmmakers counteracted and subverted the imposition of an official narrative onto the telling of history. In so doing, they opened up cinematic space for the articulation of alternative visions of the past.

Chapter Three

Representing Rural Subjects

This chapter examines the representation of rural migrants in Chinese art films. I initially give a brief history of the rural-urban divide in twentieth century China, and describe the specific challenges facing rural communities in the reform period, which drove many to migrate. I introduce the concept of the 'floating population', and the official responses to the phenomenon. In the first section, by comparing two Zhang Yimou films from the early and late 1990s, I demonstrate his reliance on the figure of the stubborn, ill-educated peasant as a trope through which to reveal troubling social issues to an urban audience. I then analyse two further examples. By looking at Zhou Xiaowen's *Ermo*, I highlight the ways in which an essentialist division between rural and urban is used to construct a critical discourse around modernity. Finally, I discuss Wang Xiaoshuai's *So Close to Paradise*, in which the director's reliance on historically-conditioned modes of filming rural migrants severely hampers his representation of a marginalised and peripheral social group. This chapter concludes that art films in the 1990s failed to adequately counter the legacies of past representational models drawn from a specifically urban culture, and so did not successfully engage with genuine migrant subjectivities on screen.

Introduction

A rural-urban divide in Chinese society became increasingly visible over the course of the 1990s. Conventional interpretations blamed the dismantling of socialist welfare institutions and a lack of investment in rural areas after 1978. However, recent scholarship has highlighted that the divide had its roots earlier in the twentieth century.¹ As Mote posited in his work on imperial Nanking (Nanjing), up until the nineteenth century China's cities developed in an integrated pattern with the surrounding rural villages in all intellectual and governmental dimensions.² There were few barriers to internal migration, except in war, allowing fluid population movement between towns and the surrounding rural areas.³ Furthermore, Lu Hanchao noted that as a result of economic links and a strong sense of lineage connecting officials and literati to their rural homes, there was no prevailing culture of urban superiority in China.⁴ On the contrary, cities often had a negative image as centres of commerce and taxation.⁵ Mann argued that the 'corrupting' qualities of capitalist industry associated with towns

¹ See for example Martin King Whyte, 'The Paradoxes of Rural-Urban Inequality in Contemporary China', in Whyte (ed.) *One Country, Two Societies: rural-urban inequality in contemporary China* (Cambridge MA, 2010) p. 3.

² F.W. Mote, 'The Transformation of Nanking, 1350-1400', in Skinner (ed.) *The City in Late Imperial China* (Stanford CA, 1977) p. 102.

³ Cheng Tiejun & Mark Selden, 'The Origins and Social Consequences of China's Hukou System', *China Quarterly* 139 (Sep. 1994) p. 646.

⁴ Lu Hanchao, 'Urban Superiority, Modernity and Local Identity – a Think Piece on the Case of Shanghai', in Faure & Liu (eds.) *Town and Country in China: identity and perception* (Hampshire, 2002) p. 127.

⁵ Ibid.

were typically set against an essentialist view of rural areas as preserves of traditional culture and morality.⁶

A significant shift occurred around the turn of the twentieth century. As China's coastal areas developed into global trading centres, the geographical equilibrium shifted. Rural migrants were drawn to the cities for the long-term economic opportunities they afforded, abandoning the increasingly impoverished countryside. According to Lu Hanchao, "The rural deterioration that paralleled the industrialization of the city in the early twentieth century accelerated rural-urban differentiation and sharpened the gap between city and country – the urban-rural continuum was gradually replaced by an urban-rural gulf."⁷

Concern about the future direction of China led reform-minded intellectuals to seek out and translate foreign texts on modernity, which were printed and distributed in urban centres.⁸ These introduced new words into the vernacular that had roots in classical Chinese, but were reworked to give expression to terms found in translated books from the West. Among these was *nongmin* (农民) for peasant, which carried connotations of backwardness not present in the previously used *nongfu* (农夫,

⁶ Susan Mann, 'Urbanization and Historical Change in China', *Modern China*, 10/1 (Jan. 1984) p. 87.

⁷ Lu Hanchao, 'Urban Superiority, Modernity and Local Identity', p. 128.

⁸ Zhang Yingjin, *The City in Modern Chinese Literature and Film: configurations of space, time and gender* (Stanford CA, 1996) p. 10.

farmer).⁹ Simultaneously, an ambitious younger generation, eager to form the vanguard for social and political change, gravitated toward the cities, creating congregations of urban educated elites increasingly disconnected from their home towns.¹⁰

The conceptual divide between rural and urban not only expanded, but also became increasingly problematic in the Republican period. Zhang Yingjing highlighted these complex discourses in *The City in Modern Chinese Literature and Film*. The city was imagined by many as a source of enlightenment, as well as new scientific and technological learning.¹¹ At the same time, the history of aggressive foreign encroachment in metropolitan centres like Shanghai resulted in negative associations, especially fears for the erosion of traditional Chinese values.¹² Vivian Shen agreed, arguing that the migration of rural populations into the cities was represented as a particular social ill arising from modernity. The corruption of 'innocents' from the countryside appeared as a regular theme in both films and literature in the 1920s and '30s, reinforcing stereotypes of ill-educated and vulnerable rural subjects.¹³ Both Zhang Yingjin and Vivian Shen demonstrated that the urban-rural dichotomy was a recurrent theme in the cultural imagination of

⁹ The terms 封建 (*fengjian*, feudal) and 迷信 (*mixin*, superstitious), often used to describe the peasantry, were also introduced. Tamara Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China: gender, migration, and social change* (Armonk NY, 2006) p. 33.

¹⁰ Liu Tao Tao, 'Perceptions of the City and Country in Modern Chinese Fiction in the Early Republican Era', in Faure & Liu (eds.) *Town and Country in China: identity and perception* (Hampshire, 2002) p. 205.

¹¹ Zhang Yingjin, *The City in Modern Chinese Literature and Film*, p. 10.

¹² *Ibid.* pp. 4-5.

¹³ Vivian Shen, *The Origins of Left-Wing Cinema in China, 1932-37* (New York NY, 2005) p. 30.

contemporary China, as it allowed an articulation of debates about modernity and tradition, played out through the bodies of rural characters in the city.¹⁴

One of Mao Zedong's principal stated aims was to end the rural-urban divide.¹⁵ However, after taking power in 1949 the CCP did not seek to reintegrate the cities and countryside.¹⁶ Whyte argued that, despite proclaiming a more egalitarian society, the policies instituted under Mao amounted to a form of serfdom for China's rural communities, tying them to the land.¹⁷ The background to this system was a long established fear for China's food security, which could be threatened by a mass exodus of the farming population. From the 1950s to the mid-1980s, Chinese officials regularly cited the statistic that China, home to one fifth of the world's population, had only 7% of global arable land.¹⁸ In addition, the CCP's economic policies were largely derived from the model of the USSR, looking to promote rapid industrial growth fuelled by cheap agricultural production.¹⁹ Finally, having come to power from successful and established bases in rural areas, the Chinese government was keen to limit the growth of potentially

¹⁴ Zhang Yingjin, *The City in Modern Chinese Literature and Film*, p. xvii.

¹⁵ See Jeremy Brown, *City Versus Countryside in Mao's China: negotiating the divide* (New York NY, 2012) pp. 1-2.

¹⁶ David Zweig, *Freeing China's Farmers: rural restructuring in the reform era* (Armonk NY, 1997) p. 185.

¹⁷ Whyte, 'The Paradoxes of Rural-Urban Inequality in Contemporary China', p. 1.

¹⁸ Lei Guang, 'Bringing the City Back In: the Chinese debate on rural problems', in Whyte (ed.) *One Country, Two Societies: rural-urban inequality in contemporary China* (Cambridge MA, 2010) p. 314.

¹⁹ Wu Jieh-Min, 'Rural Migrant Workers and China's Differential Citizenship: a comparative institutional analysis', in Whyte (ed.) *One Country, Two Societies: rural-urban inequality in contemporary China* (Cambridge MA, 2010) p. 61.

unruly conurbations whilst it consolidated its control. For these reasons, CCP policy sought to manage and constrain internal population transfer, by restricting movement out of the countryside and into urban centres, whilst at the same time encouraging migration in the opposite direction.²⁰

The mechanism of control, introduced in the 1950s, was the *Hukou* residence permit, which registered all Chinese citizens as either agricultural or urban, according to their mother's place of birth.²¹ The *Hukou* Registration Statute (1958) locked in place a dual system of social maintenance, by which state provision and benefits were tied to participation in either collectivised agriculture or nationalised industry.²² Wu Jieh-Min referred to this as "differential citizenship".²³ In order to support the growth of industry, and encourage agricultural self-sufficiency, considerable state benefits went with urban *Hukou*, which were not associated with rural registration.²⁴ Cheng and Seldon argued that there was an

²⁰ Wang Fei-Ling, 'Renovating the Great Floodgate: the reform of China's *Hukou* system', in Whyte (ed.) *One Country, Two Societies: rural-urban inequality in contemporary China* (Cambridge MA, 2010) p. 339.

²¹ The *Hukou*'s origins can be traced back to similar systems used under imperial dynasties from the Qin (300BC) onwards. As Wang Fei-ling notes, "...only in the PRC did the *hukou* system achieve an unprecedented level of uniformity, extensiveness, rural-urban duality, effectiveness, and rigidity." Ibid. p. 337.

²² The system completely collapsed during the Great Leap Forward (1958-60) as large numbers of agricultural workers migrated to join industrial production. However, they were repatriated to the countryside at the end of the movement. Wu Jieh-Min, 'Rural Migrant Workers and China's Differential Citizenship', p. 61.

²³ Ibid. p. 56.

²⁴ It should be noted that some scholar's research suggested, despite the *Hukou*, rural life improved under Mao, with significant advances made in the political status of peasants and their access to new opportunities. This view is supported by evidence of increasingly vocal discontent in the post-Mao period from rural communities who felt themselves to be shouldering unfair burdens in the reform period, whilst losing the political clout they had been afforded in the 1950s and '60s. See Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China*, p. 39; see also Azizur R. Khan & Carl Riskin, *Inequality and Poverty in China in the Age of Globalisation* (Oxford,

assumption underlying CCP policy that China's vast countryside could absorb a potentially unlimited influx of surplus labour.²⁵ Priority was therefore given to feeding and maintaining an urban population that was seen as vital to national economic growth.²⁶ Consequently, as Wang Feng demonstrated, the symbolic value of an urban *Hukou* was considerably greater than that associated with a rural residency.²⁷ Whyte argued that, under Mao, the rural-urban divide was both exacerbated and institutionalised:

...in multiple ways the social status, mobility opportunities, ways of life, and even basic citizenship claims of China's rural versus urban residents diverged sharply under the socialist system that Mao and his colleagues created, producing a caste-like division that did not exist before 1949.²⁸

As China entered the reform period, therefore, a distinction between rural and urban populations existed which was both spatial and conceptual.²⁹

After the de-collectivisation of agriculture began in 1978, there was a steady increase in rural to urban migration. Cuts to

2001) pp. 8, 125; John Knight & Song Lina, *The Rural-Urban Divide: economic disparities and interactions in China* (Oxford, 1999) p. 42.

²⁵ Cheng & Selden, 'The Origins and Social Consequences of China's Hukou System', p. 650.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 651.

²⁷ Wang Feng, 'Boundaries of Inequality: perceptions of distributive justice among urbanites, migrants, and peasants', in Whyte (ed.) *One Country, Two Societies: rural-urban inequality in contemporary China* (Cambridge MA, 2010) p. 223.

²⁸ Whyte, 'The Paradoxes of Rural-Urban Inequality in Contemporary China', p. 5.

²⁹ Cheng & Selden, 'The Origins and Social Consequences of China's Hukou System', p. 645; see also Brown, *City Versus Countryside*, p. 2.

state investment in agriculture, along with declining profitability, led to a growing difference in income between the two populations. A combination of low wages and surplus labour in the countryside, along with the prospect of better paid though low-level jobs in towns, resulted in a combination of push and pull factors which attracted between 80 and 130 million migrants to the cities from the countryside, beginning in the 1980s.³⁰ These communities lived outside the confines of the residency permit system, working in cities whilst still carrying agricultural *Hukou*. As the *Hukou* determined access to state benefits, including housing, education, and healthcare, rural migrants lived a precarious, peripheral existence. In Wu and Webster's terms, the *Hukou* system marginalised rural Chinese subjects by constraining their rights in the city.³¹ Living outside the institutionalised structures of residency left migrants vulnerable to arrest, detention, police corruption, and deportation.³² They were also subject to discrimination by urban residents, who blamed migrants for rising crime and congestion in cities, citing the stereotype of uncultured, unsophisticated, and ill-educated villagers.³³

³⁰ Whyte, 'The Paradoxes of Rural-Urban Inequality in Contemporary China', p. 14; and Dorothy Solinger, *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China: peasant migrants, the state, and the logic of the market* (Berkeley CA, 1999) p. 154.

³¹ Fulong Wu & Webster, 'What Has Been Marginalized? Marginalization as the Constrained "Right to the City" in Urban China', in Wu & Webster (eds.) *Marginalization in Urban China: comparative perspectives* (London, 2010) p. 303.

³² Whyte, 'The Paradoxes of Rural-Urban Inequality in Contemporary China', p. 16.

³³ Lei Guang noted that these stereotypes were often gendered, citing numerous cases of migrants being described as badly dressed young women, probably involved in prostitution. Lei Guang, 'Rural Taste, Urban Fashions: the cultural politics of rural/urban difference in contemporary China', *Positions: east Asia cultures critique*, 11/3 (Winter 2003) p. 619.

Migrants were consistently conceptualised as problematic in official rhetoric throughout the 1990s. They were referred to variously as the “floating population”; “blind floaters”; a “wave”, “tide”, or “flood”; a “threat”; and a “problem”.³⁴ The official response was shaped by fears of a collapse in social stability if more and more young people left the countryside.³⁵ Mallee’s research showed that stability fears focused not only on maintaining the rural labour force and ensuring China’s future food security, but also on the effect that an influx of young and predominantly unmarried migrants would have on urban social structures and morality.³⁶ These fears resulted in a continuing reliance on the *Hukou* system through the 1990s to maintain a semblance of order and social stability. It was not until the early millennium, after a series of very public cases involving deaths or ill treatment of migrants in the city, that the central government openly admitted the failures of the system to address the underlying inequalities of the dual citizenship system.³⁷ Even then, however, as a case discussed by Wu Jieh-Min demonstrates, popular conceptions of migrants as different from their urban counterparts continued to be operative. Wu described how the public outcry around the death of one particular rural migrant in 2001 centred on his being college educated, and

³⁴ See Wu Jieh-Min, ‘Rural Migrant Workers and China’s Differential Citizenship’, p. 57; Whyte, ‘The Paradoxes of Rural-Urban Inequality in Contemporary China’, pp. 8, 15; and Lei Guang, ‘Bringing the City Back In: the Chinese debate on rural problems’, p. 311.

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 315.

³⁶ Hein Mallee, ‘Rural Labour Mobility in China’, in Christiansen & Zhang (eds.) *Village Inc.: Chinese rural society in the 1990s* (Surrey, 1998) p. 216.

³⁷ Lei Guang, ‘Bringing the City Back In: the Chinese debate on rural problems’, p. 312.

therefore “not an ordinary migrant worker”.³⁸ This discourse, noted but not interrogated by Wu, suggests that stereotypes of rural migrants were entangled even in campaigns focused on securing them improved rights and treatment.

Under the continued use of the *Hukou* residency system to determine social identity, migrants to the cities in the 1990s occupied a marginalised position in their communities:

Migrants thus constitute a distinct category of subjects ruled by the state. They are caught in a predicament: they are neither rural nor urban, and neither peasants nor workers...The migrants are citizens (*gongmin*) of the PRC only when they stay in their native places, that is, the place of their *hukou* registration. Once they leave, they are transformed into “aliens”, or, more accurately, “alien nationals”.³⁹

This chapter focuses on depictions of rural-urban migration in four art films from the 1990s. Cinema that made the countryside-city divide visible, in the face of official denials, was occupying contested representational space. Given the institutionalisation of differential citizenship in late twentieth century China, the continued predominance of discriminatory prejudices against rural *Hukou* holders, and the peripheral status of migrants in the city, my analysis will explore the extent to which urban filmmakers engaged

³⁸ Wu Jieh-Min, ‘Rural Migrant Workers and China’s Differential Citizenship’, p. 55.

³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 65.

with and challenged the dominant representational paradigms surrounding the migrant experience.

The Story of Qiu Ju & Not One Less

The Story of Qiu Ju details the quest by a peasant woman, Qiu Ju, to gain clarity about a legal issue. Her husband, Qinglai, has been assaulted by the village chief, and she wants to ascertain what restrictions the law places on local officials. She travels firstly to the village, then to the county town, and finally to the provincial capital. At each stage she is offered financial compensation for the injury, but told she can take the complaint further if she is not satisfied. Qinglai is embarrassed by her persistence, but Qiu Ju remains obstinate. She goes into labour and, when the local midwife is unable to deal with an emergency, the chief helps to transport her to hospital, after which she drops the case. However, a month later the chief is arrested on new evidence about his assault on Qinglai. Qiu Ju is horrified by the outcome of her actions, having never truly understood how the legal system, through which she was pursuing clarity, would operate.

Not One Less, made seven years after *The Story of Qiu Ju*, focuses on a similarly stubborn peasant heroine, twelve year old Wei Mingzhi. When the only teacher in a small village needs a month off, he hires Wei Mingzhi as his replacement, promising her a cash reward if, when he returns, none of the children in his class have left school to migrate to the city in search of work. Wei Minzhi

proves to be a very poor teacher, and one boy, Zhang Huike, leaves the school. Undeterred, Wei Minzhi goes to the city in search of him. Eventually, when she has expended all of her resources, she manages to get a spot on a local news programme, where she makes an impassioned plea for Zhang Huike to return. The two children are reunited and returned to their village accompanied by a camera crew and resources for the school donated by the viewers of the television programme.

The Story of Qiu Ju is structured around the protagonist's repeated journeys from her village to visit officials from whom she might obtain clarity. A clear distinction is created between the rural and urban areas through filming styles. In the village, the colour tones are primarily warm reds and browns. Interior scenes are filmed in close-up in the cramped surroundings, with characters moving in and out of frame, often cut-off at waist height or partially obscured. Adding to the impression of bustle, Qiu Ju's dialogue is not privileged above the rest of the diegetic soundtrack, making it as hard for the audience to hear the conversation as it is for the characters in the scene. When Qiu Ju goes to visit Officer Li, the local PSB officer responsible for her district, the meeting takes place at the back of a busy room in which multiple cases are being discussed. Throughout their conversation, the noise in the background continues, including coughing, the outer door creaking, and people moving around. The claustrophobia of the scene is enhanced by the cramped filming style. Figures move across the

foreground of the screen, and cigarette smoke billows up regularly, partially obscuring the shot. The eye is drawn to Qiu Ju and Officer Li only because they are seated in front of a window that shines light on the table and their faces, and effectively highlights the area which the audience should be focusing on.

Silbergeld described the filming style used by Zhang Yimou as “pseudo-documentary”: a hyper-realist mode intended to create an illusion of seamless reality.⁴⁰ The opening shot of the film establishes this tone for the film. The shot is static, from a hidden position, slightly elevated above a wide boulevard on which people are walking, cycling, and shopping. The entire duration of the shot is one minute forty seconds, with Gong Li, playing Qiu Ju, only appearing clearly in the centre of the frame in the last five seconds. She emerges out of the crowd that the audience have been watching, fitting in so entirely with the men in Mao jackets and women on bicycles that it takes a moment to register that the film's protagonist has appeared.

Unlike the cramped filming style of the rural sections, scenes in the city are often filmed from a distance in the manner of the opening shot, using hidden cameras placed on market-place and bus-station roofs.⁴¹ The long-range lenses compress the figures to look short and squat, and fade the colours to metallic greys and blues. The dialogue is captured by microphones hidden in the

⁴⁰ Jerome Silbergeld, *China into Film: frames of reference in contemporary Chinese cinema* (London, 1999) p. 127.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* p. 128.

actors' clothing, so that their voices can be heard over the noise of a busy Shaanxi street.⁴² These shots are interspersed with close-ups of street life, such as women grinding chillies or vendors selling cut-paper designs. In the city scenes, it is often hard to tell which parts of the dialogue are scripted and which are spontaneous. Similarly, the actors seem to interact with the people around them, such as when Qiu Ju barter for a better price for her chillies. The lack of interest shown by passers-by, and the appropriate use of the Shaanxi dialect (so difficult for most Chinese to understand that the film was shown with subtitles when it was released in the PRC in 1992) contribute to the sense that the drama being filmed is totally in keeping with its surroundings.⁴³

Despite this, the use of local dialect raises some problematic issues for the representation of rural communities on screen. *Putonghua* (普通话), or standardised mandarin, usually inflected with a Beijing accent, was universalised after the establishment of the PRC, alongside a project to increase literacy levels through the creation of a simplified system of written characters.⁴⁴ In cinema, which was both aimed at a national audience and performed a key role in the construction of a new socialist community, *Putonghua*

⁴² Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, 'Of Gender, State Censorship and Overseas Capital: an interview with Chinese director Zhang Yimou', *Public Culture*, 5:2 (1993) pp. 308-9.

⁴³ Silbergeld, *China into Film*, p. 127.

⁴⁴ Gunn commented that this process had begun as far back as the Han Dynasty, when a standardised official language was first introduced, and the dominance of Mandarin for legal and mercantile transactions was ensured from the Eighteenth Century through the rigid linguistic requirements of the notorious civil service examination system. Edward Gunn, *Rendering the Regional: local language in contemporary Chinese media* (Honolulu HI, 2005) pp. 1-3.

mandarin was the norm and local languages the exception.⁴⁵ Drawing on Anderson, and his insistence on the centrality of language to the construction of a nation state, Lu and Yeh have consequently identified the use of dialect in Chinese art films in the 1990s as a form of resistance to the state imagined national community.⁴⁶ Similarly, Lovatt observed that, “Films that use dialect therefore by this very fact enact a critique of the dominant conception of a homogenous nation-state.”⁴⁷ In *The Story of Qiu Ju*, local dialect also performs the function of enhancing the mimetic realism, through absorbing the audience into a highly localised regional identity.

What can be missed in a focus on dialect as resistance, is the action of marginalisation which occurs when rural subjects are represented as outside the mainstream. Lu and Yeh noted that, “Both past history and contemporary cultural production have continually testified to the linguistic hierarchy and social discrimination embedded in Chinese cinema and society.”⁴⁸ As Gunn observed, local languages were consistently set in opposition to *Putonghua* mandarin as signifiers of tradition, backwardness, and

⁴⁵ For more on the CCP’s vision of cinema’s constructive properties, see the introduction to this thesis.

⁴⁶ Sheldon H. Lu & Emilie Yueh-Yu Yeh, ‘Mapping the Field of Chinese Language Cinema’, in Lu & Yeh (eds.) *Chinese Language Film: historiography, poetics, politics* (Honolulu HI, 2005) p. 4. This point could be made about Jia Zhangke’s hometown trilogy, including *Platform* (discussed in the previous chapter), although Liu Jie notes the inauthentic use of Fengyang dialect by non-local actors disrupts this effect. Jin Liu, ‘The Rhetoric of Local Languages as the Marginal’, p. 176.

⁴⁷ Philippa Lovatt, *Cinema’s Spectral Sounds: history, memory and politics* (PhD Thesis: University of Glasgow, 2011).

⁴⁸ Lu & Yeh, ‘Mapping the Field of Chinese Language Cinema’, p. 3.

primitive cultural associations.⁴⁹ The use of dialect therefore triggers a representational mode that identifies its rural characters through their separateness and distinctiveness. The primary association shifts from the nation to the characters' regional, significantly rural, identity.

The assertion of rural separateness through language is mirrored in the visual divide created between rural and urban landscape, and how the protagonists are situated within the different environments. Whilst still in the rural areas the screen is often divided horizontally into three sections, foreground, middle ground, and distance, with contrasting patches of snow and dark mountain slopes creating the distinct divisions. The sky is rarely seen. The figures moving through the landscape are small, filmed in long-shot or even extreme long-shot (Fig. 3:1). The colour palette is limited to greys, blues, and blacks, suggesting the inky qualities of a brush painted landscape. By contrast, as the characters near the urban areas, the footage contains more movement and increasing use of conventional close-ups and medium-shots, dwelling on Qiu Ju and Meizi's reactions to their surroundings. The palette lightens and the image becomes flatter and less carefully structured into distinct planes.

Using landscape in this way was an established filmic tradition before the 1990s. *Li Shizhen* (李时珍, dir. Shen Fu, 1956), for example, used cinematographic designs reminiscent of formal

⁴⁹ Gunn, *Rendering the Regional*, p. 4.

landscape aesthetics to express the protagonist's link with the land and the enlightenment he gained through observing nature.⁵⁰ In the 1980s this trope was revived in *Longing for Home* (乡情, *Xiang Qing*, dir. Hu Bingliu & Wang Jin, 1981), to depict a contrast between a pastoral countryside, which had much to do with the idealised compositions of traditional landscape painting, and busy and unattractive urban settings.⁵¹ The New Wave directors working in the 1980s also displayed a preference for northern landscapes and an influence from the visual arts in their work. *Yellow Earth* dwelt on seemingly endless rolling landscapes in a restricted palette, the ground often filling four-fifths of the screen with only a tiny strip of sky visible, or framing a tiny figure against an immense skyline. In a different way *Sacrificed Youth* (青春祭, *Qingchun Ji*, 1985, dir. Zhang Nuanxin) emphasised the link between rural areas and traditional aesthetics, for example juxtaposing the image of a flight of cranes, symbols of fidelity, soaring away from the Dai village when the protagonist returns from the city to find it destroyed by a landslide in her absence.

This mode of representation reflects the inflection of film landscapes with a layering of cultural associations drawn from other media.⁵² Catherine Woo suggested that the essence of Chinese painting and poetry was transformed into cinema in a vision of the

⁵⁰ Paul Clark, *Chinese Cinema: culture and politics since 1949* (Cambridge, 1987) p. 116.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* p. 164.

⁵² See Martin Lefebvre, 'Between Setting and Landscape in the Cinema', in Lefebvre (ed.) *Landscape and Film* (New York NY, 2006) pp. 19-60.

sympathetic relationship between human characters and the surrounding natural world, where their environment echoed their condition or emotions.⁵³ This concept was linked to the influence of the *Yi Jing* (易经), more commonly known as the *I Ching*, wherein the artist aimed to express the spirit or feeling encapsulated in a landscape, not solely its outer form.⁵⁴

Drawing on traditional art to depict the rural environment, however, produces a reductive way of seeing, in which rural and urban are presented in a dichotomy. As Lukinbeal observed, “Stereotypes about [landscape] in film can contribute to a sense of place, but also naturalize cultural politics about place and people.”⁵⁵ Significantly, he commented that these naturalised meanings only appeared natural to those doing the representing, not necessarily the represented subjects.⁵⁶ In *The Story of Qiu Ju*, the painterly qualities of the scenes in rural areas link them to the past and tradition; in the city scenes, the looser, less structured camera work highlights movement and bustle, suggesting a different pace of life and mentality. These distinctions are imposed by association upon the characters who inhabit each environment. This mode of filming, therefore, undercuts the impression of realism described by

⁵³ Catherine Yi-Yu Cho Woo, 'The Chinese Montage: from poetry and painting to the silver screen', in Berry (ed.) *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema* (New York NY, 1985) p. 22.

⁵⁴ Wang Yao-t'ing, *Looking at Chinese Painting* (Tokyo, 1996) p. 17.

⁵⁵ Chris Lukinbeal, 'Cinematic Landscapes', *Journal of Cultural Geography* 23/1 (2005) p. 14.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

Silbergeld, by encoding rural and urban communities differently and reinforcing a distinction between them.

The different mentalities associated with rural and urban are reflected in the ways that Qiu Ju's trips to the city affect her relationships within the village. Qiu Ju is emboldened by her experiences to persist in pursuing clarity about the limits of the chief's powers, even when she encounters opposition from her husband, Qinglai, who is embarrassed by her behaviour. He confronts her on her return from the city, disturbed by her rejection of the traditional values of loyalty and submission to authority figures. Qinglai is concerned that they are developing a reputation in the village for being 'difficult'. The division between the two characters' world-views is emphasised in their confrontation by tight framing that disrupts the viewer's eye-line into the scene. Qinglai and Qiu Ju are each positioned, in turn, in the centre of the frame, with their spouse partially obscured behind them by the edge of the shot (Fig. 3:2, 3:3). This blocking technique visually divides the two characters from each other as they talk. At the end of the scene Qinglai is left defeated by his wife's obstinacy, seated on their bed to the left of the frame with the entire right side left empty where Qiu Ju has walked out (Fig. 3:4).

The impact on a rural population of encountering reform through travelling to the city, and the resultant strains placed on relationships in the home village, had previously been depicted in *In the Wild Mountains* (野山, *Ye Shan*, dir. Yan Xueshu, 1986), in

which two couples end up swapping their respective partners based on their responses to the challenges of the new era. However, unlike *In the Wild Mountains*, *The Story of Qiu Ju* fails to reach a resolution to the conflict of rural-urban differentiation. This is primarily due to the fact that Zhang Yimou's main focus in the film is not Qiu Ju's encounter with urbanity, but the system within which she is pursuing a resolution. Administrative Litigation Law (ALL) was introduced in April 1989 as a mechanism of accountability, through which Chinese citizens could have a legal instrument of defence against the abuse of power by officials.⁵⁷ Previously, a complainant's only recourse had been to send written appeals to higher government agencies, the media, or prominent Party officials in Beijing, and the success rate of such actions was only about 5%.⁵⁸ The ALL provided a framework in which an administrative decision by an official or local government agency that had adversely affected the personal freedom or economic interests of an individual could be challenged.⁵⁹

Qiu Ju's quest is to obtain clarification about the remit of the local chief's authority. The word she uses is *shuofa* (说法), meaning a statement or explanation.⁶⁰ The narrative plays out against a

⁵⁷ Kevin J O'Brien & Li Lianjiang, 'The Politics of Lodging Complaints in Rural China' in *The China Quarterly*, 143 (Sep 1995) p. 766.

⁵⁸ Pei Minxin, 'Citizens v. Mandarins: administrative litigation in China' in *The China Quarterly*, 152 (Dec 1997) p. 833.

⁵⁹ David Zweig, 'To the Courts or to the Barricades: can new political institutions manage rural conflict?' in Perry & Selden (eds) *Chinese Society, 2nd Edition: change, conflict, resistance* (London 2000) p. 117.

⁶⁰ Zhang Xudong noted that English subtitles incorrectly render *shuofa* as 'justice' or 'apology', significantly changing the emphasis of the narrative. Zhang Xudong, 'Cinema of Postsocialism: Zhang Yimou's film production in the late 1990s', in

background of shifts in the power structure of rural China in the aftermath of the dissolution of the communes. The chief's attack on Qinglai was motivated by Qinglai's refusal to follow the chief's instructions about land allocation. The family had used some of their land to build a drying shed for their chilli pepper crop, which the chief insisted they tear down as the land was meant for growing chillies not drying them. In addition, the attack on Qinglai, which was provoked by his insults to the chief for fathering four girls, is considered particularly reprehensible by Qiu Ju because it damaged his genitalia, potentially affecting their ability to reproduce again if the baby Qiu Ju is carrying turns out to be a girl. Qiu Ju is therefore seeking an explanation of the new CCP policies, the Household Responsibility System and the One Child Policy, as much as she is pursuing redress from the chief.

Zhou Xiaowen observed of *The Story of Qiu Ju* that the film centred on the failure of its peasant protagonist to understand the legal procedures which she sets in motion: "...the ultimate message or the central conflict of *The Story of Qiu Ju* is that the concept of a law is alien to the Chinese peasants, who uphold a notion of justice (and equality) which, as unwritten law, governs their world of everyday life and informs their moral and political behavior."⁶¹ For this reason, whenever Qiu Ju is awarded financial compensation for her husband's injuries she is baffled, since what she expects to

Kong & Lent (eds.) *100 Years of Chinese Cinema: a generational dialogue* (Norwalk CT, 2006) p. 144.

⁶¹ Ibid. pp. 144, 149.

receive is an explanation. Similarly, Silbergeld described Qiu Ju as a Don Quixote figure tilting at the complex structures of officialdom: “She’s driven by intuition, not understanding; she’s innocent, not wise. She’s semi-literate, at best, and much of the time is given to grunts of assent and semi-understanding. She’s a naïve mark for all the knowing men around her.”⁶² Qiu Ju therefore functions in the narrative as a trope through which Zhang Yimou can highlight the inadequacies of China’s legal framework.⁶³

Qiu Ju’s heavily pregnant, bumbling figure, guided by an unshakeable expectation that the system will give her the clarity she seeks, encapsulates the socialist realist peasant heroines of films from the 1950s.⁶⁴ A distinction is created between rural simplicity and urban duplicity in order to highlight moral failings. In the same way, *Not One Less* focuses on a stubborn and uneducated peasant figure taking on the city in her quest to bring a lost child home. Marking the distinction between rural and urban even more sharply than in *The Story of Qiu Ju*, *Not One Less* is divided into two contrasting halves, separated by Wei Minzhi’s journey to the city, a one and a half minute sequence which occurs just over half way through the movie. In the first section, the daily life of the children and Wei Minzhi’s attempts to teach them at the village school are

⁶² Silbergeld, *China into Film*, pp. 120, 123.

⁶³ Ibid. p. 125. Silbergeld also highlighted the timing of *The Story of Qiu Ju*. It was produced and released in the midst of the show trials that followed the Tiananmen Square crisis of 1989. It is probable that *The Story of Qiu Ju* passed the censors in such a politically sensitive moment because the film depicts the new law working perfectly – at every stage Qiu Ju is treated with deference and encouraged to take her complaint higher. The irony lies in the fact that she never achieves the outcome she is looking for.

⁶⁴ This trope is discussed in more detail in Chapter Four of this thesis.

carefully recorded. The second half of the narrative focuses on her struggles to locate the missing student in the unfamiliar metropolis. Her walk to the city along almost empty roads is highlighted as a significant moment in the film by the use of long takes, soft lighting, and a crescendoing orchestral theme. Shots of Wei Minzhi walking determinedly towards the camera frame her against the low or setting sun. Tilting the frame upwards to look at her, she becomes the peasant heroine of the 1950s. A previous sequence similarly borrowed from the socialist realist mode, showing the school children and Wei Minzhi walking to the village together, framed against the golden light of a late afternoon sun, led by the figure of their teacher in red.

In constructing a narrative of rural-urban differentiation, Zhang Yimou also drew from the filmmaking tradition of the 1930s to display the dehumanising action of the city played out through the lives of the rural children who migrate there, in particular Zhang Huike, Wei Minzhi's lost student. In the film *Lost Lamb* (迷途的羔羊, *Mitu de Gaoyang*, dir. Cai Chusheng, 1935), for example, a rural child arrives in Shanghai and soon becomes lost. The story establishes his shock on arriving in the metropolis, his problems crossing the road when encountering cars, and his decline into sleeping rough, eating from the rubbish, and watching families happily spending time together.⁶⁵ In *Not One Less*, Zhang Huike is seen on three occasions wandering through the city streets in dirty,

⁶⁵ Shen, *The Origins of Left-Wing Cinema in China, 1932-1937*, p. 36.

torn clothing, obviously tired and hungry. Filmed from a distance with hidden cameras, the boy begs for food from market stalls. In one short scene he wanders between tables at an outdoor restaurant staring hopefully at the meals. The diners look embarrassed and studiously ignore him. Later he walks along a street at night, looking into the lit shop windows, and then falls asleep in a bus station. This behaviour is repeated by Wei Minzhi once she has been in the city for two days and has run out of money. She is shooed away from market stalls when she tries to beg for food, and ends up eating leftovers from an abandoned restaurant table. The failure of developing China to care for rural child migrants is eloquently expressed by Zhang Huike when, after praising the city for being beautiful and prosperous, he becomes serious and comments, 'I had to beg for food. I'll always remember that.'

The narrative peak of *Not One Less* is mediated through a TV screen. Wei Minzhi is invited to tell her story and make an appeal for information about her missing pupil on a current events programme dedicated to social interest stories. Seated in front of a neon backdrop showing an idealised pastoral landscape, itself a stereotyped parody of reality designed for an urban audience, the reporter describes the struggles facing rural schools and tries to encourage Minzhi to contribute (Fig. 3:5). What is initially cringingly embarrassing, as the girl freezes in the face of the observing camera lens, becomes a poignant epitaph to her journey as she

breaks down in tears describing her ordeal in the city trying to find the lost student (Fig. 3:6, 3:7). In the restaurant where he is working, Zhang Haike sees Wei Minzhi on the TV and stands gazing at it, mirroring her tears. The children are subsequently returned to their village with a truckload of goodies for the school, donated by the urban viewers of the TV show, and all of Wei Minzhi's pupils celebrate by writing characters on the blackboard with their new colourful chalk. The crux of the movie therefore pivots on the moment when Wei Minzhi's face is projected into urban homes through the TV screen, and the viewers respond by taking responsibility for righting a social wrong and returning the children to the village.

The positioning of the rural subject for urban consumption lies at the heart of both films' representation of peasant migrants. Lukinbeal noted that, "Landscape as spectacle encodes power relations within the gaze."⁶⁶ By positioning the migrant within the rural landscape as their natural place, the power imbalance between urban viewers and rural subjects is made visible. Sheldon Lu noted that Zhang Yimou repeatedly figured an obstinate, humble, rural character facing up to opposition in his films.⁶⁷ In his later account of a young couple's courtship during the 1957 anti-rightist movement, *The Road Home* (我的父亲母亲, *Wode Fuqin Muqin*,

⁶⁶ Lukinbeal, 'Cinematic Landscapes', p. 11.

⁶⁷ Sheldon H. Lu, 'Chinese Film Culture at the End of the Twentieth Century: the case of *Not One Less* by Zhang Yimou', in Lu & Yeh (eds.) *Chinese Language Film: historiography, poetics, politics* (Honolulu HI, 2005) p. 125. Zhang Yimou also won the best actor award at Tokyo Film Festival in 1987 for playing the same kind of role in Wu Tianming's *Old Well* (老井, *Lao Jing*, 1986).

1999), the protagonist narrates how his mother, an uneducated peasant girl, fell for a young teacher when he was sent to the village school. When the teacher was taken away for questioning and reeducation during the campaign, his mother waited by the roadside every day for him until she had made herself ill. Interestingly, the political campaign itself is never made explicit or seen on screen. The only scenes set in the urban space are the contemporary bookends to the film, in which the protagonist arranges for his father's body to be carried back to the village for burial. The focus of the narrative is exclusively on the romantic obstinacy of his mother, whose devotion is raised as a moral emblem against the faceless inhumanity of the political forces governing her lover's fate, communicated through her 'naturalised' position within the spectacular rural landscape.

The essentialisation of difference between rural and urban in Zhang Yimou's films is used as a narrative strategy to raise social issues: the inadequacies of the legal system, and the plight of rural child migrants respectively. It is through the alterity of his rural characters and landscapes that he makes these problems visible to the audience, fixing the peasant protagonists as tropes through which the conflict at the heart of each narrative is played out. Sheldon Lu argued that Zhang Yimou's "earthbound (*tu*) [土] approach" was a deliberate oppositional response to the official projection of modern, developed China.⁶⁸ However, positioning the

⁶⁸ Ibid.

rural subjects as 'other', and playing into the stereotypes of obstinate, uneducated, simple peasants, makes the urban focus of the films clear. As noted above, the rural-urban divide was typically used by filmmakers throughout China's twentieth century as a trope through which to explore social failings.⁶⁹ This cinematic mode did little to counteract the problematic representation of the rural population, but in fact reinforced differential citizenship.

Ermo

In *Ermo*, the protagonist lives in a small mountain village where she makes noodles to sell in the local town. Her husband is the former village chief, now ailing and infirm since his enforced retirement. Their young son is rarely at home, as he prefers to visit the neighbours' house to watch TV. After a trip to the city with her neighbour, Xiazi, where she finds that she can sell her noodles more lucratively, Ermo comes up with the idea of saving enough money to buy the largest colour television on sale. Xiazi finds her a job making noodles for a large restaurant in the city, and she moves into a women's dorm there. She also begins a clandestine sexual relationship with Xiazi, and starts to sell her blood in order to make more money. After discovering that Xiazi is not serious enough about her to leave his wife, she returns home to the village. Xiazi conceals their affair from the Chief and his wife, and once Ermo has

⁶⁹ See Zhang Yingjin, *The City in Modern Chinese Literature and Film*, p. xvii.

made enough money they all go together to buy the television. The whole village come to Ermo's house to watch TV, and the Chief is thrilled to be at the centre of local life again. But Ermo is emotionally and physically exhausted, and collapses.

In *Ermo*, like *The Story of Qiu Ju*, the protagonist travels from her village to both the local town and the larger district capital on several occasions. Her first journey to the city is the most detailed travelling sequence. The process of journeying away from the village on Xiazi's truck catalyses Ermo's participation in urban modernity from reluctant to enthusiastic, as she becomes captivated by the vitality of what she sees in the city. The scene is formally structured into a rhythmic sequence of brief shots, each lasting approximately four seconds. Every shot dissolves into the next, with an edit of the same duration each time. This deliberately repetitive structure creates the impression of viewing the landscape in short sections, mimicking the unrolling of a hand scroll.⁷⁰

The composition of the shots within the journey sequence also suggests a link to traditional landscape art. The camera is

⁷⁰ Hand scrolls, which became popular during the Song Dynasty (960-1279 AD), are detailed landscape compositions painted on long sheets designed to draw the eye from right to left. The scroll is slowly unrolled in short sections, revealing only part of the work at a time. Pictorial devices such as rivers, roads, waterfalls, and empty space, help to draw the eye onwards and maintain continuity between the sections of the scroll. The landscapes also incorporate a 'moving perspective' by layering different viewpoints within the same composition, transcending the limits of what the eye might see from a fixed position and recomposing the scene to approximate the experience of travelling through rather than sitting in an environment. For more on the use of repetition within the Chinese aesthetic tradition see Jerome Silbergeld, *Chinese Painting Style: media, methods, and principles of form* (Washington DC, 1997) p. 46. See also, Maxwell K. Hearn, *How to Read Chinese Paintings* (New York NY, 2008) p. 27; Woo, 'The Chinese Montage: from poetry and painting to the silver screen', p. 21; Wang, *Looking at Chinese Painting*, pp. 18, 21.

usually static, occasionally panning slightly to maintain focus on the vehicle as it travels around a corner or bend, and generally positioned at an angle elevated above the landscape through which Ermo is moving. The truck appears small in medium-long shot and long-shot. Distant mountains, with only a thin strip of sky showing above them, fill the top third of the screen in the classic composition 'deep distance', used in landscape painting to create a sense of the environment disappearing endlessly over the horizon (Fig. 3:8, 3:9).⁷¹ Sheila Cornelius pointed out that in the Chinese aesthetic tradition, a tiny figure held in a vast landscape reflects a character's identification with and purpose within their environment.⁷² Similarly, Lukinbeal proposed that the function of extreme long-shots, bird's-eye views, and high angles, such as those used in Ermo's journey sequence, was to ground the cinematic narrative to a strong sense of regional or local particularity.⁷³

As Lefebvre noted, however, "landscapes do not exist independently of human investment toward space...it is our (real and imaginary) interaction with nature and the environment that produces the landscape."⁷⁴ The use to which cinematic landscape is put therefore reveals the assumptions underpinning the formal choices of the director. In *Ermo*, landscape is used as a

⁷¹ Hearn, *How to Read Chinese Paintings*, p. 29.

⁷² Sheila Cornelius with Ian Haydn Smith, *New Chinese Cinema: challenging representations* (London, 2002) p. 56.

⁷³ Lukinbeal, 'Cinematic Landscapes', pp. 6, 8.

⁷⁴ Martin Lefebvre, 'Introduction', in Lefebvre (ed.) *Landscape and Film* (New York NY, 2006) p. xiii.

transitory trope, to move the protagonist between the countryside and city. The focus of the journey sequence is Ermo's arrival in one or other destination and, as with Zhang Yimou's films, the landscape functions to delineate between rural and urban. By applying Lukinbeal's argument that cinematic landscape can be read to reveal the underlying relations of power in a film, it can be seen that once again the rural area is positioned in dichotomic relation to the city.⁷⁵

The scenes in the city emphasise anonymity and dislocation from community. Ermo sleeps in a women's dorm for migrant workers. The room is full, but none of the migrants speak to each other. In a chilling indictment of urban living, the voice of a woman being attacked and calling for help is heard outside, but no one responds. The camera watches Ermo, who is captivated by the sight of one of the residents wearing a smart, white brassiere, and seems completely oblivious to the cries from outside. In a grotesque parody of what they imagine to be sophisticated urban behaviour, Xiazi and Ermo meet at a cheap hotel with rooms for rent by the hour. Xiazi has bought her a gift of cold cream, "guaranteed to keep her skin soft and subtle". He slaps it on to her with gusto, smearing her body in thick, white grease, oblivious to her discomfort. Ermo's face is reflected in a cracked mirror on the wall. The cracks distort her features, dividing her head vertically into two

⁷⁵ Lukinbeal, 'Cinematic Landscapes', p. 4.

disjointed halves, suggesting her increasingly warped sense of reality.

The conflict between rural and urban is played out in *Ermo* through the impact that migration has on interpersonal relationships and aspirations. In the early scenes, the village is clearly divided into two groups: those who see the opportunities afforded by migration, and those who do not. When Ermo and her husband learn that the village cooperative is not going to buy the baskets they spent the summer making, Xiazi suggests that they take the opportunity and sell them in town instead. Initially, the scene is filmed with Ermo and the Chief standing together on the right side of the frame, visually separated from Xiazi on the left by a vertical wooden strut from the outhouse which dissects the foreground of the shot from top to bottom. As Ermo is persuaded by Xiazi's progressive approach to the problem, the shot composition changes. Filming from behind Ermo and Xiazi, the camera looks straight at the Chief, who now appears to be confronting the other two united characters. This composition visualises the divisions present in a society facing the pressures of modernisation. The community is represented as being torn between enthusiastically embracing change, and sticking with established norms and values.

In the same way, the division is seen in the consumer items that the villagers purchase. Compared to the Chief's dowdy Mao jacket and cloth cap, Xiazi cuts a figure in the village in a leather jacket and brightly coloured jumper. Ermo's ambitions for her

husband are revealed when she buys him a white businessman's shirt in town. The display of clothing at the market stall has a disembodied cardboard Caucasian head attached to each item. The stiff, starched collar of the shirt puzzles the Chief who thoughtfully looks at the cardboard packaging and asks if it is a joke. Throughout the film the Chief is unable to relate to Ermo's passionate desire for consumer goods. When she makes extra income by selling her woven baskets in town she intends the money to go towards buying the colour television. However, her husband's immediate reaction is to call in builders to measure their house for redevelopment. Criticising her attitude he comments: "A TV is just an egg, a house is a hen. If you have extra money you build a bigger house, that's how it has always been". However, Ermo sees consumption as the root to participation in modern China, buying a gaudy brassiere in town and then asking Xiazi if it makes her look "like a city girl".

McGrath noted that, whilst most western reviewers read *Ermo* as a Marxist attack on capitalism, Chinese commentators tended to see it as a 'tragicomedy' highlighting the incompleteness of economic modernisation in rural China.⁷⁶ The comedic qualities of *Ermo* and the distance of its subject from urban culture are reinforced by the use of authentic Hebei dialect. As discussed above, although dialect can create distance from the dominant representational mode and its association with *Putonghua*

⁷⁶ Jason McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese cinema, literature, and criticism in the market age* (Stanford CA, 2008) p. 116.

mandarin, it can also express stereotypes of provincialism.⁷⁷ Gunn observed that dialect was primarily used by art filmmakers to depict characters outside the mainstream: “Local language thus served the representation of the unassimilated.”⁷⁸ The critique of Chinese viewers focused on the characters' lack of understanding. Ermo's unhealthy fascination with money, for example, is highlighted in no less than nine scenes of her fetishistically counting bank notes, including one incident when she holds out a sheaf of them to her husband and instructs him to smell them because they are new. As Ermo leans towards the Chief, seated out of sight behind the camera, a shaft of sunlight from a window illuminates her face and outstretched hand in a composition reminiscent of religious imagery when representing moments of personal revelation or divine inspiration.

The representation of the rural population as unassimilated and marginalised reflects their position within mainstream discourse in the 1990s. The division of Chinese citizens into socially included and excluded was a consistent educative strategy promoted by the CCP both before and after their accession to power in 1949 to encourage conformity, the most visible aspect of which was the citing of class background as a way to categorise the population. In the reform era, this distinction became focused instead on ‘backward’ (后进分子, *houjin fenzi*) and ‘advanced’ (先进分子,

⁷⁷ See Lu & Yeh, ‘Mapping the Field of Chinese Language Cinema’, p. 7.

⁷⁸ Gunn, *Rendering the Regional*, p. 158.

xianjin fenzi).⁷⁹ Social respectability was associated with exemplifying an 'advanced' understanding of modernity. One of the primary shifts in discourse in the 1990s was therefore the transformation of rural peasants from a mainstream representational subject, part of the triptych of worker peasant soldier (工农兵, *gong nong bing*), to a subaltern.

Anagnost highlighted the politicisation of the body as a key component of the state's Spiritual Civilisation campaigns in the 1990s, primarily focused on a gendering of inclusion and exclusion through the potentially unruly bodies of female migrants.⁸⁰ This dialogue between backward and advanced is played out visually in *Ermo*. As she pursues her ideal of modern luxury her physical self is gradually worn down. The process is made explicit by the early scenes in which she makes noodles. Filmed provocatively, in a manner which suggests her sexual frustration and pent-up energy, the scenes highlight her physical strength and health. By the end of the film, during the course of which she has travelled extensively between the village and town, engaged in an ultimately degrading relationship with Xiazi, and sold her blood to make extra income, she is physically and emotionally exhausted. The climax to her triumphant journey to the department store to buy the TV is her collapse at Xiazi's feet as she takes in the ultimate futility of her actions.

⁷⁹ Ann Anagnost, *National Past-Times: narrative, representation, and power in modern China* (Durham NC, 1997) p. 104.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* p. 101.

The gendering of Zhou Xiaowen's criticism, using the disintegration of Ermo's body as a site for displaying it, links the film to a mode of filmmaking in which female subjects were used to problematise crises in contemporary society. Throughout the left-wing cinema of the 1930s and 1940s, and into the socialist period, the bodies of women on screen were inscribed with a narrative of reform through their violation and redemption.⁸¹ The New Wave films of the 1980s and early 1990s raised the trope again, in order to display their criticism of past abuses of power by the state through the destruction of female bodies in films such as *Yellow Earth* and *Ju Dou* (菊豆, *Ju Dou*, dir. Zhang Yimou, 1990). Hershatter noted that intellectuals in the republican era consistently used the subaltern, in particular the gendered bodies of female sex workers, as metaphors for oppression: "Their sense of their own subordination [under foreign colonialism] shaped the rhetorical uses that intellectuals made of subaltern groups."⁸² After the establishment of the PRC, the state took the place of intellectuals in speaking for subalterns, providing the language through which marginalised groups could express their integration into the new society. As such, subalterns were consistently used as rhetorical devices in a discourse which both defined their marginal position and left them voiceless.

⁸¹ This mode is discussed in detail in Chapter Four of this Thesis.

⁸² Gail Hershatter, 'The Subaltern Talks Back: reflections on subaltern theory and Chinese history', *Positions* 1/1 (1993) p. 111.

What is particularly problematic in *Ermo*, is the restricted availability of the film to a rural Chinese audience. As Jin Liu noted, as an elite practice, art film, whilst depicting the lives of subaltern groups, was not readily accessible for them.⁸³ The positioning of the rural subject before an urban audience reflects a process described by Yan Hairong as “internal orientalism”.⁸⁴ Drawing from Said’s construction of the term, orientalism can be said to constitute the formation of a marginalised identity for a community, ethnicity, or geographical area that exists beyond the dominant mainstream. This identity is imbued with qualities of exoticism, timelessness, and an ‘authentic’ primitivism against which the hegemonic culture can identify itself.⁸⁵ This is expressed cinematically in *Ermo* through the framing device of the television screen. Tang Xiaobing highlighted the structure of shot-reverse shot filming in the TV watching scenes, which suggest that the screen is itself looking back at its audience.⁸⁶ The camera frames the television, showing a snippet of a programme about Chinese food in English, or a dubbed scene from *Dallas*, before a reverse shot reveals the crowd of peasants watching (Fig. 3:10). The frame is full of faces, many watching open mouthed or laughing (Fig. 3:11). The focus of the viewer is

⁸³ Jin Liu, ‘Rhetoric of Local Languages as the Marginal’, p. 193.

⁸⁴ Yan Hairong, ‘Self-Development of Migrant Women and the Production of *Suzhi* (quality) as Surplus Value’, in Dong & Goldstein (eds.) *Everyday Modernity in China* (Seattle WA, 2006) p. 230

⁸⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London, 2003) pp. 1-28.

⁸⁶ Tang Xiaobing, ‘Rural Women and Social Change in New China Cinema: from Li Shuangshuang to *Ermo*’, *Positions: east asia cultures critique*, 11/3 (2003) p. 667.

therefore fixed on the rural subjects, observing their reactions to the television shows. They are positioned for the viewer's critical gaze.

The televisions in *Ermo* are a symbol of the new modern China. Ownership of a TV set delineates the population. Early in the film the village is shown at night, filmed from high up above the houses. Only six buildings are lit up, with the others in complete darkness, and sounds of laughter and music can be heard coming from the buildings with TVs. The villagers who own a television feel able to cross the rural-urban divide through their consumption of a modern luxury item. Ermo's desperate quest to earn enough money to buy her own colour TV is initially motivated by the desire to match the success of her neighbours. However, this impression of crossing the frontier from country to city is only a fleeting illusion. At the end of the film Ermo's new 29" TV, which has been playing non-stop for the entire village during the New Year celebrations, cuts out to static. Ermo and her family are slumped against a wall fast asleep, their bed having been taken over by the gargantuan television set which is too big to go anywhere else. As the camera zooms in on the static, Ermo's eyes flick open and stare blankly, and uncomprehendingly, at the screen. All of her efforts seem to have achieved nothing, as she is back where she started.

In *Ermo*, Zhou Xiaowen creates a division between those engaging in reform positively and those whose 'backward' orientation makes them reckless. By figuring this distinction in the body of a female migrant, the film uses the rural-urban divide as a

trope for social criticism. As with *Not One Less*, positioning the rural population for visual consumption by an urban audience is inherently problematic. Instead of inviting the subaltern to speak, the representation of rural difference enhances their marginality from mainstream discourse, and presents them as an 'other' against which the urban viewers can identify themselves. The gendering of this discourse within Ermo's increasingly weakened body further links Zhou Xiaowen's film to an established mode of representation, in which the subaltern was used as a framework through which urban intellectuals could articulate their own views.

So Close to Paradise

So Close to Paradise focuses on three rural migrants to the city: Dongzi, a recent arrival who works at the docks; Gao Ping, an old hand who keeps an eye on Dongzi, but has become mixed up with a criminal gang; and Ruan Hong, a young girl who came to the city hoping to make a career as a singer, but ends up working in a seedy nightclub. Gao Ping is trying to trace another petty crook who conned him out of some money. In the process he kidnaps Ruan Hong. The three then play out a muddled love triangle, until Ruan Hong eventually leaves, though not without giving Gao Ping the details of where he can find the gangster who robbed him. Gao Ping tracks him down, but in the process is attacked and killed, and Ruan Hong's brothel is raided and the girls arrested. In the meantime, Dongzi remains in the small dockside apartment he

shared with Gao Ping, and takes over Gao Ping's original business selling knock-off electrical items. At the end of the film a re-educated Ruan Hong visits Dongzi before returning to her home in the village.

So Close to Paradise, like the second half of *Not One Less*, observes rural characters within an urban landscape, after their journey there has ended. Unlike the Zhang Yimou films, in which the rural protagonists are often seen in long shot so that the imposing urban architecture dwarfs them, *So Close to Paradise* utilises an edgy handheld style reminiscent of urban filmmakers like Hong Kong based contemporary Wong Karwai. Wang Xiaoshuai combines unstructured camera movement with jump-cuts which disorientate the viewer, elipsing time into fragmentary bursts of disjointed action. One of the most effective visual tropes in the work is the use of contrasting diegetic lighting sources combined with the reactive qualities of film-stock. In natural light this creates hazy tints of grey or green at dusk on the river bank, or brilliant sun and shadows during the day. At night, artificial lights cause flares of colour and halo effects, sometimes partially obscuring the screen, especially where neon lights and warmer bulbs conflict in the same frame.

Writing about Wong Karwai's work, Abbas observed that the dissolution of the Hong Kong cityscape into a series of disjointed, enclosed spaces reflected the increasing fragmentation of the contemporary Asian city: "[it] can no longer be *represented* through

a coherent image or set of images.”⁸⁷ He argued that an emphasis on liminal spaces and fragmented planes of vision was a representation of the affective state of the city’s inhabitants, as the urban environment expanded exponentially to encompass the hinterland around it. This observation resonates with the filming strategy in *So Close to Paradise*, in which an overview of the cityscape is never seen. Instead, the migrant community is pictured as constrained and restricted by the city. The area they occupy is depicted obliquely in cramped angles and cropped frames. Wang Xiaoshuai allows the camera to autofocus on the images in the immediate foreground, reducing the city to a hazy impression phasing in and out of the background. Much of the action takes place among a landscape of walled alleyways and market stalls, so that the sky rarely appears in shot. The characters appear shortened and squat due to a lack of perspective in the frame, thus they seem surrounded and buried by the cityscape.

Shots of the river are the only ones that show the sky. Filmed from above looking down and at a distance, they give a sense of the characters marginalised at the very edge of the city where it meets the waterfront. Braester and Tweedie argued that films of the city in East Asia since the 1990s have depicted, “an almost entirely urbanized environment, a world where the once-fundamental dichotomy between urban and rural has been

⁸⁷ Ackbar Abbas, ‘Affective Spaces in Hong Kong/Chinese Cinema’, in Braester & Tweedie (eds.) *Cinema at the City’s Edge* (HK, 2010) p. 25.

displaced.”⁸⁸ In focusing so exclusively on the architectural framing of the city, however, they neglected to observe the way in which marginalised populations within the city space function to preserve the rural-urban dichotomy. Although the migrants in *So Close to Paradise* have crossed the 'frontier' from the country to the city, to use Raymond Williams' terminology, they exist in a borderland, divided from the urban culture around them.⁸⁹ Their environment is hostile and unyielding, holding them in the liminal space at the edge of the city, where they remain ghettoised and unaccepted by the mainstream.

As with *Not One Less* and *Ermo*, the main story is regularly intercut with news reports related to migrants and criminal activity on both radio and TV. In one television report girls are seen being rounded up from a brothel and put into a police van whilst the voiceover describes how criminal gangs have seduced female migrants into the sex trade in the city. A crowd is gathered around a shop-front window to watch the report on a display of TVs. Whilst they watch, Su Wu, the pimp from Ruan Hong's club, positions himself in front of the video camera and monitor in the next display and begins to preen whilst watching himself on the grainy black and white screen. The camera zooms in on his features whilst the diegetic soundtrack continues the news-report, thus linking him

⁸⁸ Yomi Braester & James Tweedie, 'The City's Edge', in Braester & Tweedie, *Cinema at the City's Edge* (HK, 2010) p. 2.

⁸⁹ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London, 1973) p. 264.

directly to its commentary. Similarly, when Ruan Hong is later arrested at the nightclub for solicitation, the camera mimics the footage from the earlier news-item. The viewer thus watches the action from the perspective of an urban TV audience, dispassionately regarding the spectacle of a rural migrant's arrest. When Ruan Hong is subsequently interviewed in prison by a news-reporter and TV crew, the close-up of her face as she cries at their questions is again mediated through the lens of the news-camera (Fig. 3:12, 3:13, 3:14).

Using TV screens in this way brings an element of factual comment to the fictional narrative of *So Close to Paradise*; however, it also removes the viewer from the level of immediate engagement with the protagonists to a more distant observation. Viewed through a second camera lens, which additionally distorts the image into a grainy shadow of the vibrant intensity of Wang's earlier shots, the narrative withdraws from personal identification with the characters and positions them as simulacrum of the migrant experience. The filming of the city reinforces this conceptualising of the narrative. The urban villages into which migrant communities were concentrated in the 1990s were widely condemned in the Chinese media as crowded, chaotic, unhealthy, and unruly.⁹⁰ They were associated with intensified social disorder and a deterioration of the

⁹⁰ Liu Yuting & He Shenjing, 'Chinese Urban Villages as Marginalized Neighbourhoods under Rapid Urbanization', in Wu & Webster (eds.) *Marginalization in Urban China: comparative perspectives* (London, 2010) p. 177.

urban environment.⁹¹ Whilst the handheld cinematography in *So Close to Paradise* effectively communicates the marginalised experience of migrant communities, it also fails to counteract the limited framing of the official rhetoric, in effect reinforcing viewers' preconceptions about life in the urban villages.

Picturing rural migrants as 'other' to the viewers is affected once again through the motif of the naïve and simple protagonist. Just as in *The Story of Qiu Ju*, Qiu Ju's innocence and lack of wit provide the perfect means through which an educated audience can observe the operation of the state legal system and critique it, so Dongzi functions in the narrative of *So Close to Paradise* as a neutral observer against which the corruption of Gao Ping and the redemption of Ruan Hong can be observed. Such characters are the epitome of the 'poor and blank' peasants extolled by Mao Zedong. As a concept, this vision of the Chinese peasantry appeared first in Mao's early writings in 1919, but it emerged fully during the Great Leap Forward on the introduction of collective farming.⁹² Mao's belief in the intrinsic moral virtues of being simple and uneducated was derived from Nineteenth Century Russian anarchist and populist ideologies, which had become influential among Chinese intellectuals in the early years of the Twentieth

⁹¹ Ibid. p. 178.

⁹² Mao Zedong, 'Introducing a Co-operative', https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-8/mswv8_09.htm [Accessed 12/3/17].

Century.⁹³ He believed that the intellectual poverty of the Chinese peasantry insulated them against the moral corruption of capitalist ideologies, and so extolled being 'poor and blank' as an admirable quality: "On a blank sheet of paper free from any mark, the freshest and most beautiful characters can be written!"⁹⁴

Dongzi is a prime example of the model virtuous and unsophisticated peasant. His character is established primarily through the use of voiceovers, forming a past-tense narration during key moments of the story to give his perspective on events. When Gao Ping kidnaps and rapes Ruan Hong, and she subsequently becomes his mistress in the hope that he will protect her, Dongzi is filmed outside the hut playing childish games and admiring the sun on the river. His voiceover comments, "Gao Ping said, this is what's called love in the big city." Similarly, his judgement of Gao Ping's criminal activities is expressed in voiceover whilst he hides his earnings from working as a 'shoulder-pole' at the docks: "All I knew was that people should make money from their labour." Dongzi's otherworldly innocence contrasts starkly with Ruan Hong because of his determination not to be changed by encountering the city. At the conclusion of the narrative Ruan Hong, newly released from prison, comes to visit Dongzi. At first she is afraid that he has become a copy of Gao Ping, dressed in a blazer and surrounded by boxed VCR machines. However, in the closing scene he reveals

⁹³ Maurice Meisner, *Mao Zedong* (Cambridge, 2007) p. 148.

⁹⁴ Mao Zedong, 'Introducing a Co-operative'.

that he has not changed at all, bringing her a recording of her singing in the nightclub which he made before she was arrested.

Ruan Hong describes in this final scene how Dongzi's innocent and trustworthy friendship has inspired her to return to her village. Dressed in simple denim with a backpack, straight hair, and no makeup she looks like any unsophisticated young Chinese girl from the countryside. Her re-education reflects an idealised transformation. In the 1980s and 1990s, discourse around the term *suzhi* (素质) emerged in official rhetoric, primarily targeting rural women migrants in a reflection of the gendering of discourse described by Anagnost. *Suzhi* was a specific embodiment of the 'advanced' qualities that made up a model subject of a modern nation.⁹⁵ The press celebrated migrants, especially women, who had left behind the 'traditional consciousness' of the countryside and become repositories of 'urban' qualities, which they had subsequently taken back to their villages in the form of capital, market awareness, improved education and entrepreneurial ambition.⁹⁶

The implication of the doctrine of *suzhi* was that the value of migration to peasants was not the wages they earned but their own self-development. Those migrants who failed to succeed in the urban economy and became part of cliques or gangs of rural workers in the city, including those not actually involved in criminal

⁹⁵ Yan Hairong, 'Self-Development of Migrant Women and the Production of *Suzhi* (quality) as Surplus Value', p. 231.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 229.

activity, were condemned as lacking *suzhi* and threatening national social development.⁹⁷ Having or not having *suzhi* therefore categorised and differentiated individuals, creating powerful desires and motivations to attain higher levels of 'quality', and implicit social divisions between rural and urban, and among migrants and those who stayed in the village.⁹⁸ Hall noted the power imbalance that was integral to the diasporic identity. By being figured in the dominant discourse as, "the marginal, the underdeveloped, the periphery...the outer edge", migrant communities were pressured to appropriate mainstream culture or remain excluded.⁹⁹ Drawing on Castells, Abbas observed that as Asian cities became increasingly connected to global networks, they correspondingly disconnected from their regional hinterlands.¹⁰⁰ What he failed to note was that as the urban identity became progressively bound up with globalising culture, marginalised communities within the city such as rural migrants appeared increasingly foreign.

Hall similarly noted that part of the figuring of diasporic communities as the 'other' was the incorporation of multiple groups into an imaginary coherence, in which all migrants were collectively identified with a uniform set of values.¹⁰¹ *So Close to Paradise* plays into this discourse by featuring Ruan Hong as a migrant

⁹⁷ Ibid. p. 235.

⁹⁸ Tamara Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China: gender, migration, and social change* (Armonk NY, 2005) p. 41.

⁹⁹ Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', in Rutherford (ed.) *Identity: community, culture, difference* (London, 1990) p. 228.

¹⁰⁰ Abbas, 'Affective Spaces in Hong Kong/Chinese Cinema', p. 31.

¹⁰¹ Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' p. 224.

woman in a precarious situation, who is rescued and re-educated. The film presents the audience with a morality tale in which the rural population need to be protected in their poor and blank state from the threat of corruption implicit to the migration process. A similar trope is visible in *Not One Less*, when the rural children are safely returned to their village. Neither film addresses the complex push and pull factors driving rural migrants to the city, but concentrates instead on the cliché of innocents adrift in a threatening city.

Establishing the protagonists as stereotyped migrant figures demonstrates the enduring presence of certain rural-urban subject positions in Chinese film. Transforming individuals or groups of individuals into subjects has the action of reducing them to parts of a dominant discourse. As Tamara Jacka commented, the definition of a social group as different, marginal, or inferior creates an internal 'other' by which the majority can define themselves.¹⁰² The 'othering' of rural migrants in the 1990s intersected and contributed to the official discourse around modernity, and the direction in which the nation as a social entity needed to move. In *So Close to Paradise*, the focus on migrant communities as engaged in criminality, and living precariously on the fringes of society, reinforces the official representation of rural migrants as a threat to social order and stability.¹⁰³ The use of a 'poor and blank' protagonist to provide a moral exegesis similarly frames the

¹⁰² Idid. p. 31.

¹⁰³ Lei Guang, 'Bringing the City Back In: the Chinese debate on rural problems', p. 311.

narrative in terms of an ideological discourse focused on the problematic nature of uncontrolled migration. Despite Wang Xiaoshuai's innovative filming techniques, the film continues to operate in tandem with the dominant mode for representing rural subjects.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown, through analysis of four art films dealing with rural-urban migration in the 1990s, that representation of rural subjects was severely hampered by a tradition of filming rooted in urban perceptions and expectations. Both *The Story of Qiu Ju* and *Not One Less* revealed Zhang Yimou's dependence on a naïve and uneducated rural protagonist as a site for the presentation of a discourse of social criticism. Similarly, in *Ermo* Zhou Xiaowen presented his female lead as the embodiment of 'backward' tropes in order to highlight the dangers of encountering modernity, and exposed the rural community in his film to the critical gaze of the viewer. Wang Xiaoshuai's film of migrants in the city reinforced the dominant narrative of migration as a social problem, and depicted the rural community as a diasporic 'other'.

By positioning the migrant population on the screen as an alterity to the modernity associated with cities, the filmmakers reinforced an historic mode of representation in which rural China was presented in dichotomic relationship with urban China. Using

tropes such as dialect, traditional landscape forms, and marginal positioning within the cityscape, the filmmakers communicated a diasporic vision of rural communities, distinctly different from their urban counterparts. Unlike the films discussed in Chapter Two, in which filmmakers directly engaged with and countered official modes of representation in order to innovate the depiction of history, art directors failed to counter historically conditioned cinematic tropes that positioned rural subjects as the focus of an urban gaze. This failure links them to the tradition of elite intellectual discourse of the 1930s and 1940s in which subaltern communities were used as rhetorical devices within urban filmmaking. In the next chapter, a similarly inflected film mode, the representation of women as signifiers for the nation, will be considered in light of the emergence of feminist filmmaking in the 1990s.

Chapter 4

Representing Women

In this chapter I explore the depiction of female characters in Chinese art films from the 1990s. I argue that the dominant cinematic modes for representing women were constituted in specific historical moments, which limited their forms and outcomes. I firstly present a brief history of how femininity was subjugated to other narratives in the twentieth century, acting as a trope for the nation, and then for the Party's project of state building. From this discussion I propose three models for interpreting the representation of women in Chinese film in the 1990s: *nüxing* (女性, modern womanhood); *funü* (妇女, socialist womanhood); and *nüren* (女人, feminist personhood). I consider each of these filmic models in turn, with reference to Xie Fei's *Women from the Lake of Scented Souls*, Chen Kaige's *Temptress Moon*, and Ning Ying's *I Love Beijing*. I conclude that by the end of the 1990s, it appeared as though the preconditions for feminist consciousness were emerging in Chinese art movies, but that this depended upon continued innovation of film form to move away from the cinematic modes of the past.

Introduction

Prior to the twentieth century, there was no Chinese concept of distinctive female personhood. Everyone, male or female, was identified relationally by his or her position within the family grouping.¹ Although a tangentially spatial dichotomy between the genders did exist, the idea of a feminine 'inside', compared to a male 'outside', emerged from roles within the family.² Biological differences as a marker between the sexes only became influential with the appropriation of western scientific discourses in the late nineteenth century. This process was initiated by reformers' concerns about the future of the nation. After the disastrous sixty years of conflict that defined China's nineteenth century, elites and intellectuals saw the country as weak on the international stage. Concurrently, they looked to the successful remodelling of Japan as an example of how an ancient Asian civilisation could modernise.

It was in this context that modern concepts of women emerged. The use of a biologically-defined binary created a new gender model of diametrical oppositions: masculinity became associated with physicality, vitality, and dominance; femininity with gentleness, subservience, and passivity. This gender code was used by reformers to give expression to China's worrying global position. Ping Zhu has highlighted the discussion of China in feminine terms, as a weak and subservient 'other', to dominant,

¹ See Tani E. Barlow, 'Theorizing Woman: *funü*, *guojia*, *jiating* (Chinese woman, Chinese state, Chinese family)' in Zita & Barlow (eds.) *Body, Subject and Power*

² Lisa Rofel, 'Liberation Nostalgia and a Yearning for Modernity', in Gilmartin et al. (eds.) *Engendering China: women, culture, and the state* (Cambridge MA, 1994) pp. 235-6.

masculine, foreign powers.³ At the same time, ideas about reforming the nation and modernising the situation of women were linked. Although some of the older reformers continued to promote female roles within the family as their principal sphere, important for preserving social virtue and morality, an increasing groundswell of opinion called for the education and emancipation of women.⁴ Chinese women's educational backwardness, and their physical weakness and isolation within the home, given most visible expression through the phenomenon of foot binding, were used as potent symbols for the nation's need to modernise.

The emergence of socio-political concepts of women in twentieth century China, were inherently bound-up with debates about the nation. The framing of *nūxing*, modern woman, developed out of the May Fourth Movement's progressive and iconoclastic ethos. Building on the need for modern, educated, female participants in the construction of the nation-state, in the 1920s *nūxing* was a powerful signifier for a progressive, modernising agenda.⁵ In cinema, *nūxing* appeared on screen as a trope for reformist discourse. As Cui Shuqin observed,

³ Ping Zhu here draws on the model of orientalism by Said, discussed in Chapter Three of this thesis. Ping Zhu, 'The Phantasm of the Feminine: gender, race, and nationalist agency in early twentieth century China', *Gender and History*, 26/1 (April 2014) p. 149.

⁴ See Prasenjit Duara, 'The Regime of Authenticity: timelessness, gender and national history in modern China', *History and Theory*, 37/3 (October 1998) p. 298.

⁵ Barlow, 'Theorizing Woman', p. 265.

As a gendered category and narrative trope, woman is defined as the embodiment of sociocultural meanings: the female figure appears as the victim of tradition, the self-sacrificing paragon or virtue, and the fallen angel with a heart of gold.⁶

Images of women on screen, in films such as *The Goddess* (神女, *Shennü*, 1934, dir. Wu Yonggang) and *Street Angel* (马路天使, *Malu Tianshi*, 1937, dir. Yuan Muzhi), were used to represent the plight of the nation and the desirability of reform, bearing in their traumatised bodies and, usually, untimely deaths, a warning of the consequences for failure to modernise. Despite this, Judge has demonstrated that politically engaged women themselves adopted the identity of *nüxing*, invoking the needs of national salvation to legitimise their acquisition of education and a public presence outside the home.⁷

The CCP developed their gender politics within the same climate of nationalist discourse. Their response was to reframe the question of gender in terms of labour. Where feminine occupation had been traditionally defined by roles within the family, the communists constructed a model of working woman who would relate principally to the state.⁸ *Funü* was a term originally used to

⁶ Cui Shuqin, *Women through the Lens: gender and nation in a century of Chinese cinema* (Honolulu HI, 2003) p. 8.

⁷ Joan Judge, 'Talent, Virtue, and the Nation: Chinese nationalisms and female subjectivities in the early twentieth century', *American Historical Review*, 106/3 (June 2001) p. 767.

⁸ Lisa Rofel, 'Liberation Nostalgia and a Yearning for Modernity', in Gilmartin et al. (eds.) *Engendering China: women, culture, and the state* (Cambridge MA, 1994) p. 236.

signify women within the pattern of kinship relationships. Barlow has shown that the CCP reconstituted *funü* as a political identity, where the female gender would be identified by their situation within the party state as subjects and contributors.⁹ In effect, this reflected a return to the relational, role-based subjectivities of traditional Chinese social structures, except that these were now defined by their relation to the state.¹⁰ In an echo of Friedrich Engels, the CCP maintained that women's liberation would be attained through their economic freedom, and therefore that involvement in productive labour was the route to ending gender inequality.¹¹

After 1949, the gendered dichotomy of masculine and feminine, which had emerged in the first half of the century, was gradually replaced by a new ideal of the socialist working subject. Modes of address and styles of clothing became increasingly similar for men and women, to express the complete equality available to all in the PRC.¹² At the same time, the female form was utilised as a symbol for promoting national progress. The bodies of women engaged in active, healthy, and productive labour were presented through film, and other cultural forms, to both men and women as

⁹ Tani E. Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism* (Durham NC, 2004) pp. 37-38.

¹⁰ This reconstitution of relational subjectivities also had the effect of identifying who was 'within' the state and who was 'outside' it. See Rofel, 'Liberation Nostalgia and a Yearning for Modernity', pp. 237-8.

¹¹ Gail Hershatter, *Women in China's Long Twentieth Century* (Berkeley CA, 2007) p. 60.

¹² For more on this process, see Elizabeth Croll, *Changing Identities of Chinese Women: rhetoric, experience and self-perception in twentieth century China* (HK, 1995) pp. 70-71.

an ideal to emulate.¹³ As Duara demonstrated, by harking back to the tradition of virtuous womanhood, these model citizens represented an authentic communist self, significantly one who would sacrifice personal agendas for the sake of the nation.¹⁴ In the revolutionary model opera, *The White-Haired Girl* (白毛女, *Bai Mao Nü*, 1972, dir. Hu Sang), for example, the heroine recovers from a violent assault by a feudal landlord, and joins the local CCP brigade to bring him to revolutionary justice. Similarly, in *Li Shuangshaung* (李双双, *Li Shuangshuang*, 1962, dir. Lu Ren), an honest and straightforward peasant transforms her politically backward husband by demonstrating socialist virtues.¹⁵ Thus, as Anagnost argued, the female body was politicised into a site for the communication of the rhetoric of state building.¹⁶

Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang and Zheng Wang have discussed the generational shifts which occurred after 1949. For many, the 1950s and 1960s marked major achievements in the advancement of women, encouraging them out of the home and into the workforce, involving them in local political actions, and developing support

¹³ Meng Yue, 'Female Images and National Myth', in Barlow (ed.), *Gender Politics in Modern China: writing and feminism* (Durham NC, 1993) p. 132.

¹⁴ Duara, 'The Regime of Authenticity', p. 307.

¹⁵ It is worth noting that revolutionary heroines were consistently desexualised, despite their femininity. In *The White-Haired Girl*, for example, there is no hint of sexual tension or romantic love with the male leader of the CCP brigade, and the protagonist's violent assault by her landowner, which results in a child in earlier versions, is never shown and becomes almost irrelevant to the storyline. Similarly, Li Shuangshuang's education of her husband is aimed at producing a stronger partnership for the service of the nation, not for the sake of the marriage. In this way, gender was sublimated to politics, to produce a degendered laboring subject.

¹⁶ Ann Anagnost, 'The Politicized Body', in Zita & Barlow (eds.), *Body, Subject and Power in China* (Chicago II, 1994) p. 131.

networks such as community women's groups and childcare centres.¹⁷ However, the persistence of inequalities, particularly in the home, were left unaddressed by the state's use of rhetoric equating labour with equality.¹⁸ As Mayfair Yang highlighted, where gender as a concept was denied, it was impossible to assert a distinctive female experience.¹⁹ For this reason, after 1976, younger female intellectuals began to criticise the appropriation of femininity by the state for the representation of socialist subjects.²⁰ The re-emergence of a gendered discourse, asserting the existence of masculine and feminine in place of the gender-neutral state subject, allowed the social position of women to be discussed separately from an ideology of class struggle. In a paradigm shift, emerging feminist voices spoke out against discourses in which women were positioned as objects to be liberated, and highlighted the need for a specific women's movement to advance the concept of *nüren*, female personhood.²¹

The emergence of feminism in the late 1970s and 1980s was, however, heavily contested. Many men were resentful of the state's occupation of gender in the Maoist period, and looked to reassert

¹⁷ Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang, 'From Gender Erasure to Gender Difference: state feminism, consumer sexuality, and women's public sphere in China', in Yang (ed.) *Spaces of their Own: women's public sphere in transnational China* (Minneapolis MN, 1999) p. 38; and Zheng Wang, 'State Feminism? Gender and Socialist State Formation in Maoist China', *Feminist Studies*, 31/3 (Fall 2005) p. 526.

¹⁸ See Croll, *Changing Identities of Chinese Women*, pp. 73, 80.

¹⁹ Yang, 'From Gender Erasure to Gender Difference', p. 44.

²⁰ Meng Yue, 'Female Images and National Myth', p. 132.

²¹ Zhong Xueping, 'Who is a Feminist? Understanding the Ambivalence towards *Shanghai Baby*, 'Body Writing' and Feminism in Post-Women's Liberation China', *Gender and History*, 18/3 (November 2006) p. 640.

their traditional privileges in the post-Mao era.²² In this climate, a call for rights and political or legal recognition specifically for women often provoked negative reactions.²³ In addition, the idea of feminism was itself complicated by the complex emotions surrounding previous women's equality campaigns. Some women, particularly those who had lived through both pre- and post-liberation eras, considered further action on behalf of women unnecessary, and celebrated their politically-defined identity as *funü*.²⁴ Others reacted against the forced renunciation of femininity, which they had experienced during the Cultural Revolution, with anger and embarrassment. Such women saw the term 'feminist' as tarnished by association, and looked instead to the subjectivity of *nüxing* as a way to assert their gender positively.²⁵ By the 1990s, Chinese feminist debates were centred on the search for a culturally specific model of *nüren*, that could co-exist with both the desire to express femininity, and the need to promote women's rights.

This chapter will explore the manifestation of these concepts of womanhood in Chinese art films from the 1990s. Looking firstly at *Women from the Lake of Scented Souls*, I suggest that Xie Fei's depiction of Ersao and Huanhuan, his female protagonists, is restricted by the silence which surrounds their inner lives and

²² Dai Jinhua (trans. Ning & Yang), 'Rewriting Chinese Women: gender production and cultural space in the eighties and nineties', in Yang (ed.) *Spaces of their Own: women's public sphere in transnational China* (Minneapolis MN, 1999) pp. 202-3.

²³ These reactions are discussed by Chen Ya-Chen: Chen Ya-Chen, *The Many Dimensions of Chinese Feminism* (London, 2011) pp. 113, 117.

²⁴ Rofel, 'Liberation Nostalgia and a Yearning for Modernity', p. 233.

²⁵ Zhong, 'Who is a Feminist?', p. 650.

ambitions. Despite Xie Fei's sympathetic approach to female characters, the film remains, like his earlier work, an exposé of social problems and their roots in backward rural traditions. His representation of women is therefore enmeshed in the model of *nüxing*, in which women act as a site for discussing social ills. Moving on to *Temptress Moon*, I propose that Chen Kaige uses a direct gaze to camera by the female lead, Ruyi, to establish an idealised model of subjective development toward independent personhood. However, the ambivalent gender of his male lead, Zhongliang, has the effect of occupying both masculine and feminine subject positions. Moreover, a gendered dichotomy is established in which a normative masculinity is positioned against a weakened, feminised one. In this narrative, therefore, woman once again acts as a sign, positioned as the de-gendered *funü*, to model personhood to the troubled male character. Finally, with reference to Ning Ying's *I Love Beijing*, I demonstrate that a deliberately playful and innovative approach to narrative form liberates the film from restrictive models of representing women. In addition, by turning the camera on the male lead, Dezi, Ning Ying subverts models of normative masculinity. The film suggests the emergence of a feminist cinematic mode in its approach to gender relations, and its representation of women as *nüren*.

Women from the Lake of Scented Souls

Xie Fei's film tells a contemporary story of Xiang Ersao, a middle-aged businesswoman living in a small village in northern China on the shores of an attractive lake. Ersao makes sesame oil in the family workshop, employing one local boy, Jinhai, alongside family members, as well as selling basic commodities from her shopfront. At the start of the film she receives a visit from a Japanese investor, Ms. Sadako, impressed by the quality of her oil, and she quickly capitalises on the opportunity to expand the business and her own local cachet. Ersao's strong working persona, however, conceals a troubled home life and painful past. Her experience of marital abuse, and exhaustion from caring for a fully-grown son, Dunzi, who has learning difficulties, prompt her to manipulate local beauty Huanhuan into marrying Dunzi, thus securing a subservient daughter-in-law. Following the end of a romantic affair of twenty years with travelling salesman Mr Ren, Ersao is forced to confront her own culpability in tying Huanhuan to the same abusive life that she was herself forced into as a child.²⁶ Despite the contemporary setting, the presence of the past is woven through the text, and is particularly notable in the ways in which the director tries to evoke sympathy with his female protagonist.

Xie Fei expresses the feminine focus of his narrative through relating his character's inner life to the landscape, a technique derived from brush and ink art (水墨, *shui mo*). The film is set on

²⁶ Xie Fei had previously explored the issue of forced marriage and child brides in the 1980s with *The Girl from Hunan* (湘女萧萧, *Xiangnü Xiaoxiao*, 1987).

the shores of a picturesque lake, and the text is interspersed with lingering shots of lotus flowers, sesame reed beds, and the water. Zhou Zuyan noted that Ersao's family name was changed in the film, from Gao, in the original novella, to Xiang, a non-existent name in Chinese but one which forms a homonym with the lake itself.²⁷ This direct link between the protagonist and the lake reinforces the pre-existing associations of women and water. As Silbergeld observed, in Chinese tradition femininity and rivers or lakes were often linked. Spirits and goddesses of waterways were believed to be the souls of girls offered in ritual sacrifice, or who had used suicide to escape from unhappy or unjust situations.²⁸ The quality of *Yin* 阴 in the Daoist duality of *Yin-Yang* (阴阳) also encapsulates both female qualities and the elements of water, mist, air and vapour, all regularly depicted onscreen in Xie Fei's film as a backdrop to Ersao's narrative. Water even functions as the means by which Ersao came to be in the village to begin with, as the audience are informed that she was sold to her husband's family after a flood wiped out her own home. This connection thus links Ersao's story directly to the lake.

The watery landscape functions as a kind of pathetic fallacy in the text, mirroring Ersao's emotional and physical state. In the early scenes of harmony and possibility, as Ms Sadako from the Japanese investors meets Ersao, sun shines on the lake and on

²⁷ Zhou Zuyan, 'Gender Configurations in *Women from the Lake of Scented Souls*: male feminism and its limitation', *Tamkang Review*, 38/1 (2007) p. 194.

²⁸ Jerome Silbergeld, *China into Film: frames of reference in contemporary Chinese cinema* (London, 1999) p. 175.

large pink lotus flowers in full-bloom. The brilliant light and bright colours of the scene echo Ersao's optimism. By the conclusion of the film, as Ersao rows herself out to the sesame beds to mourn the end of her relationship with Mr Ren, the season has changed. The reeds are now brown and dry. The camera tracks slowly across an expanse of stubble where the sesame has already been harvested to show Ersao collapsing onto a pile of severed stems. Where previous shots of the lake's flora were in close-up, the camera here maintains distance from the protagonist, showing her in long shot, dwarfed by the towering brown sesame stems around her, almost fading into the environment as she lies back to cry. In an echo of Mr Ren's explanation for the ending of their relationship, that she is now past middle-age, the changing environment seems to highlight her new fragility and the close of a season.

As Ersao cries at the sesame beds, her voice is almost concealed by the sound of the wind in the dry reeds. This moment encapsulates the struggle to vocalise female subjectivity. Earlier efforts to write authentic feminine subjectivities into the text included *Army Nurse* (女兒樓, *Nüer Lou*, 1985, dir. Hu Mei), which experimented with first person voice over and lingering close-ups to depict a young woman's romantic and sexual awakening. Similarly, *Sacrificed Youth* also utilised non-diegetic narration by the protagonist to reflect on her experience of life in a Dai village as a 'sent-down youth' during the Cultural Revolution, and enhanced the effect by augmenting the narrative with recognisable visual symbols

in the landscape. In *Women from the Lake of Scented Souls*, the lake is infamous as having been the location of a double suicide during the Qing dynasty. Two young women from different classes drowned themselves there together over their plight as arranged brides. In keeping with similar legends, the girl's spirits were 'seen' the next day as a pair of beautiful birds flying away. This legend, which magnifies and recalls the suicide, testifies to the tacit acknowledgement of the local community that the young women killed themselves because of mistreatment, implying condemnation of the arranged marriage system. However, the story also acts as a means for the society to assuage its guilt, mediating between the event and the need to change social attitudes by offering a meaningful, semi-spiritual interpretation of the girl's deaths. In so doing, the legend perpetuates the silence surrounding women's suffering.

In the same way, although the film is centred almost exclusively on the lives of the two female protagonists, vocalisation of Ersao and Huanhuan's subjective lives is minimal. Not only are their voices silent, but the camera work also establishes separateness. Subjective shots, those which show either a character's emotional response to something, or their point of view, are used rarely in the text. Instead, the action is observed from a distance, often in middle shot or long shot. In effect, the filmmaking style mediates between the audience and the protagonist, like the legend of the suicide, to create a subject-observer relationship. Xie

Fei makes use of a subjective shot on just three occasions in the film: in the hotel room when Ersao observes Ms. Sadako and her translator together; the night of Huanhuan's wedding to Dunzi when Ersao watches her bathing in the lake; and the penultimate scene of the film in which Huanhuan expresses sympathy to Ersao. Each of these scenes unites subjectivity with a moment of silence.

Whilst in the city, Ersao is invited back to Ms. Sadako's hotel room to enjoy a rare moment of feminine intimacy. Having sent her assistant away, Ms Sadako gives Ersao gifts, in particular a beautiful silk scarf. As Ersao realises that the present is for her she is initially embarrassed, trying to refuse it and pushing the gifts away in a traditional show of humility. However, Ms Sadako persists, and actually wraps the scarf around Ersao's shoulders declaring in her limited Chinese, "Your husband will like it (你的丈夫会喜欢, *nide zhangfu hui xihuan*)". At the mention of her husband, Ersao becomes physically still. With the camera in medium close-up, framing her directly, she looks at the scarf, then at Ms Sadako, before beginning to speak. She explains that she has never been given such a beautiful gift, certainly not by her husband, and shares the story of her marriage as a child bride. The terrible poignancy of the moment is that receiving a gift of beauty and femininity has enabled Ersao to speak openly about her life and pain. However, she does so only into the silence of the other woman's incomprehension. Ms Sadako's Chinese is not good enough to

follow what Ersao is saying, and she can only offer vague sympathy and concern.

Their conversation is interrupted by the arrival of the interpreter with a message. The camera frames Ms Sadako and her assistant through a doorway to the left of the frame. Ersao moves into frame right as an indistinct presence, nevertheless clearly indicating her observation the conversation between the other two women. In the next shot, the focus has shifted so that the camera is behind and in-between Ms Sadako and her interpreter, framing on either side a long-shot of Ersao, now positioned in the centre beyond the door frame and looking back at their gaze. These two brief framing devices emphasise a return to the protagonist's distance from Ms. Sadako. Her observation of the conversation is mediated through both the dividing doorframe, and the language barrier. Ms. Sadako and her assistant speak in Japanese, and Ersao watches and listens with incomprehension. She subsequently asks the interpreter for an explanation, as Ms. Sadako prepares to leave, and discovers that her Japanese friend is the mistress of the company director. This information, too, requires translation, so the interpreter explains, "This is quite common in foreign countries. It's nothing."

After Ms. Sadako leaves, Ersao uses the hotel telephone to attempt to call Mr Ren. Her bold act is prompted by the information about Ms. Sadako's romantic life. Having already been inspired by her example of professional capability and prominence as a woman

manager, and now by the emotion of their brief intimate conversation, Ersao is also encouraged into a greater expression of personal sexual freedom whilst in the city. However, Mr Ren is unavailable, and Ersao hears with dismay that he has returned home to his wife to celebrate their son's birthday. The camera remains on Ersao's face and shoulders in close-up while she makes the call. As the conversation progresses, the frame inches inwards in a slow zoom, emphasising the significance of the moment for Ersao. Having put the phone down, she removes the beautiful silk scarf from around her shoulders in a gesture of resignation and defeat. In this shot, the subjective camera work highlights the continuing moment of silence. By isolating Ersao from her surroundings in the tight framing of the close-up, all of her emotional responses to the phone call can be closely observed. The conversation is narrated purely through Ersao herself, repeating back what she is being told over the phone as she processes the information. Another wall of linguistic silence is thus created, paralleling the earlier, un-subtitled Japanese conversation.

The trope of silent observation continues in the second instance of subjective camera work, as Ersao watches Huanhuan bathing in the lake on her wedding night. The focus moves between close-ups of Huanhuan crying and bathing her wounds from Dunzi's inept attempts at intercourse, and Ersao's watching face. Positioned looking down and from a distance at her daughter-in-law, Ersao is shown in medium shot which then zooms in to a tight close-

up, once again using this device to indicate a move to a subjective position. From the close-up of Ersao's face, the frame dissolves into images of the lake, lotus flowers and reed beds, overlaid with a song lamenting the hardships experienced by women in marriage. It is a moment which has the potential to create intimacy between the two women, as they now share the experience of being sold in marriage. Her rather callous reaction, however, telling Huanhuan not to show ingratitude by crying, reveals a failure to associate the memory of her own suffering with any culpability in her treatment of the next generation.

The final subjective moment occurs in the dénouement of the narrative. Having experienced rejection by Mr Ren, Ersao is more emotionally responsive to Huanhuan's pain when Jinhai visits them from the city. However, it is Huanhuan who initiates a moment of sympathy by consoling Ersao: "Mother, I know that you have been suffering as well." The wall of silence between the two women is partially breached in this moment, although not completely. Huanhuan shares her compassion from behind a sheet hung on the laundry-line. The fabric is backlit by a sunset, framing the character's head and shoulders in profile as she speaks, but the sheet forms a visual barrier preventing the two women's eyes meeting. Thus although the silence is audibly broken, a signifier of the divide still remains. The camera remains on Ersao in close-up, who sits listening to the distant sound of wedding music coming across the lake. The shot suddenly darkens, marking a cut between

different times of the evening. The implication is that Ersao has sat unmoving since Huanhuan's departure, listening to the wedding music and experiencing a catharsis or moment of clarity. In the subsequent and concluding scene, Ersao first reassumes the duties of caring for Dunzi, and then offers Huanhuan the opportunity to divorce him and return to her family. It is therefore suggested that the breaking of silence between the two women has finally allowed an interruption in the cycle of female pain.

Xie Fei's subtle evocation of female subjective experience owes much to the influence of pioneering films from the 1980s, for example his emphasis on close-ups (*Army Nurse*), allegorical depictions of the natural world (*Sacrificed Youth*), and use of music to express a character's inner life (*Yellow Earth*). However, *Women from the Lake of Scented Souls* remains problematic in its depiction of women. Particularly limiting in this regard is the lack of resolution to the narrative. Although Ersao experiences her revelation, and offers Huanhuan a divorce and a dowry for a future marriage, her daughter-in-law is unable to see freedom as a realistic possibility. Breaking down she weeps, "But who will want me now?", implying that despite Dunzi's failure to consummate the marriage she would still be, in society's eyes, a tarnished woman. The film concludes with a long shot of the two women together on a dock above the water, alluding both to the legend of the lake's double suicide, and the paralleling of Ersao and Huanhuan's lives. Then, in a reversal of the opening title sequence, where the camera slowly moved up a

tributary of the lake (presumably on the front of a boat) into the village and Ersao's story, the camera moves backwards along the river, withdrawing from both the location and the narrative. Ersao and Huanhuan are therefore left permanently on the dock in a state of immobility and hopelessness.

This ending can be fruitfully compared to Fei Mu's celebrated post-war film *Spring in a Small Town* (小城之春, *Xiaocheng Zhi Chun*, 1948). Part of the post-war flourishing of socially conscious cinema of the late 1940s, *Spring in a Small Town* deals sensitively with the lingering feudal constraints upon women's lives, especially the expression of their sexuality. In similar vein, *Women from the Lake of Scented Souls* can be said to be highly sympathetic to Ersao's plight, trapped in an abusive marriage and seeking emotional and sexual self-expression with Mr Ren. In *Spring in a Small Town*, however, after her husband's attempted suicide, the protagonist chooses to remain with him in the compound instead of leaving with her lover. Her young sister-in-law also remains rather than pursuing full liberation through education. The implication of Fei Mu's narrative is ultimately that women can find their fulfilment through the pursuit of duty. A similarly complex response to female emancipation can be seen in Xie Fei's work, as sympathy for his female protagonists is tempered with implicit criticism of their backwards outlook, and doubt regarding their capacity for self-actualisation.

The catharsis, or moment of revelation, at the end of *Women from the Lake of Scented Souls* encapsulates a transition from suffering, through acceptance, to humanistic conversion, which Guan Er described as “typical” of the art filmmakers who emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s.²⁹ Rooted strongly in neo-Confucian ideas about social progress, narratives from these directors often tended to emphasise the need for individuals to transform themselves in order for society as a whole to benefit.³⁰ As Zhang Yingjin noted, “A distinctive feature of New Chinese Cinema was the genuine pursuit of *humanism* – not as an abstract concept but as a *material* force affecting people’s daily life with all its emotional and political impact.”³¹ In *Women from the Lake of Scented Souls*, responsibility for change is placed in the hands of Ersao, particularly with regard to her culpability for Huanhuan’s entrapment.

A paralleling of Ersao and Huanhuan’s lives runs throughout the narrative. In an early scene Ersao is shown meeting Mr Ren and embracing him passionately in the sesame fields, whilst simultaneously Huanhuan and Jinhai are rowing together to another part of the lake to court. When Ersao returns to the village from the city, having failed in the previous scene to meet with the absent Mr Ren, Huanhuan secretly observes the returning truck and sees that

²⁹ Guan Er (关耳), ‘From *The Girl from Hunan* to *Women from the Lake of Scented Souls*: glimpsing the consciousness of fourth generation artistic director Xie Fei’, (从《湘女萧萧》到《香魂女》- 谢飞的导演艺术及其第四代意识管窥, *Cong Xiao Nu Xiaoxiao dao Xiang Hun Nu: Xie Fei de daoyan yishu ji qi di si dai yishi guankui*) *Movie Review* (电影评介, *Dianying Pingjie*) 8 (1993) p. 8.

³⁰ Paul A. Cohen, *China Unbound: evolving perspectives on the Chinese past* (London, 2003) p. 69.

³¹ Zhang Yingjin, *Chinese National Cinema* (New York NY, 2004) p. 228.

Jinhai has remained in the city, now also an absent lover. The scene in which Ersao confronts Mr Ren about his treatment of her as a concubine rather than a sexual equal is intercut with footage of Huanhuan and Dunzi on the flat roof, and the two stories merge when her daughter-in-law's screams rouse Ersao to run to the couple to find Dunzi strangling his bride whilst experiencing an epileptic fit. As Dunzi was attempting to make love to his wife when he became ill, the paralleling reinforces the tragedy of Ersao's own revelation that her relationship with Mr Ren was based on sexual use at her expense. Finally, Jinhai and Mr Ren's final visits to the sesame mill both involve offering gifts as a substitute for genuine intimacy. This paralleling emphasises Ersao's ultimate responsibility for perpetuating an abusive situation, and places the demand on her to change her responses. The male characters in the text are slimly written, and function purely as ciphers against which Ersao's character development can be played out.

The depiction of female characters in *Women from the Lake of Scented Souls* therefore remains enmeshed in a complex sublimation to humanist discourses typical of the *nüxing* framing. As in the realist tradition of Chinese leftist cinema in the 1930s, which aimed to highlight contemporary social problems and educate the audience in a way that would provoke change, Ersao and Huanhuan are presented to the audience as signs.³² Tang

³² See Xiao Zhiwei, 'The Myth about Chinese Leftist Cinema', in Cook et al. (eds.) *Visualizing Modern China: image, history, and memory, 1750-present* (London, 2014) pp. 150-151.

Xiaobing, for example, read the narrative of *Women from the Lake of Scented Souls* as Xie Fei's attempt to interrupt a cycle of historical inertia and repetition in Chinese society through the trope of a woman experiencing crisis and awakening.³³ It is worth noting that Huanhuan herself was drastically re-written from the original novella, in which she featured as the heroine.³⁴ Her character is reduced to passive responses to the abuses perpetuated against her, concluding with her failure to seize the opportunity of freedom from the cycle of oppression when it is offered to her. The result is that Ersao and Huanhuan appear in the film as a medium for exposing backward rural traditions, rather than as fully developed female characters.

Brown argued that Xie Fei had reinforced "...an ingrained culture of seeing" in *Women from the Lake of Scented Souls*.³⁵ In his view, the film presented a stereotypical vision of backward rural life for an urban audience. This observation links *Women from the Lake of Scented Souls* with the mode of representation I identified in Chapter Three, in which rural subjects as subalterns were depicted and spoken for by urban intellectuals. Xie Fei's dependence on landscape to represent the inner lives of the characters, his use of distant camera positions, and the silence surrounding female voices

³³ Tang Xiaobing, 'Rural Women and Social Change in New China Cinema: from *Li Shuangshuang* to *Ermo*', in Kong & Lent (eds.) *100 Years of Chinese Cinema: a generational dialogue* (Norwalk CT, 2006) p. 55.

³⁴ Zhou Daxin (周大新) (trans. Paul White) 'The Sesame Oil Mill' (香魂塘畔的香油坊, *Xiang hun tang pan de xiangyou fang*) *Chinese Literature* (Winter 1992) pp. 59-92.

³⁵ Jeremy Brown, 'Spatial Profiling: seeing rural and urban in Mao's China', in Cook et al. (eds.) *Visualizing Modern China: image, history, and memory, 1750-present* (London, 2014) p. 204.

reinforces this link. *Women from the Lake of Scented Souls* reveals that *nüxing*, as a mode of representation, continued to depend upon an historically constituted trope of utilising female characters as signifiers within the narrative.

Tempress Moon

Chen Kaige's *Tempress Moon* is an historical epic set in the 1920s. At the Pang Estate in the countryside, three children are introduced: Pang Ruyi, the sister of the family heir; her impoverished cousin and companion Duanwu; and the younger brother of the heir's wife Xiuxi, Zhongliang. After being sexually abused by Xiuyi and her husband, who is an opium addict, Zhongliang runs away and is taken to Shanghai by the Triad. Ten years later, Zhongliang is working for his gang master as a male gigolo to ensnare and blackmail lonely women. Meanwhile, Ruyi has become the Pang heir after her brother succumbs to a mystery illness. Owing to her gender, the family elders ask Duanwu to act as her advisor, hoping to control him. However, Duanwu is devoted to Ruyi and refuses to question her authority. Hearing that Ruyi is now very wealthy, Zhongliang's boss sends him back to the Pang Estate to seduce and entrap her. Unable to face his tormented past, however, Zhongliang suffers a breakdown and once again flees to Shanghai. Unknown to him, the Triad bring Ruyi and Duanwu to the city and install them in a flat. After witnessing the suicide of one of Zhongliang's victims, the 'Heavenly Lane Women'

Mrs Shen, Ruyi realises that she needs to take responsibility for her own fate. Rejecting both Duanwu and Zhongliang she returns home and chooses to marry the enlightened Young Master Jing. Zhongliang, however, having been driven further into madness by Mrs Shen's death, tries to prevent the marriage by giving Ruyi poisoned opium. At the end of the film, Ruyi is in a vegetative state, Zhongliang has been killed, and a newly authoritative Duanwu takes power in the Pang estate.

Like *Women from the Lake of Scented Souls*, *Temptress Moon* centres on a story of female subjective development, from concealed pain to enlightenment and catharsis. Of the three principal women in the film, Ruyi is the strongest in terms of characterisation. Unlike Xiuyi and Mrs Shen, who remain fairly static and one dimensional throughout the narrative, Ruyi undergoes a progressive transformation, from gauche naïveté to mature self-determination. As she begins to encounter the world outside the Pang family estate she experiences a desire for change. However, it is only once Ruyi has been completely removed from the family enclosure and transposed to Shanghai that she fully matures.

Her acquisition of personhood is marked in the film by the use of a technique which I term a 'gaze'. In a reversal of Mulvey's theory of audience spectatorship, in which the audience looks at the screen and voyeuristically see themselves, a gaze in this discussion refers to a shot in which a character looks directly at the camera,

and therefore at the viewer, usually for a sustained moment of time.³⁶ A gaze is separate from the shot-reverse shot dualism of one character responding to another, in that the protagonist is positioned outside the dynamics of inter-personal relationships when the gaze is used. Vernet described this technique as the evocation of the internal life of the character: “The look of reverie is the mute and iconic form of the soliloquy wherein one speaks of oneself.”³⁷ Vernet argued that, unlike cinematic techniques which directly broke the ‘fourth wall’ of film realism, the character’s look to camera was intended to enhance the illusion of reality by suggesting their internal life, existing beyond the direct diegesis of the *mise-en-scène*.³⁸ However, Dixon noted that this technique was nonetheless a reflexive film practice, making the viewer, through the character’s ‘look back’ at the screen, momentarily more aware of his or her own reactions to the scene than the film itself.³⁹

Chen Kaige uses this technique three times in *Tempress Moon* to chart Ruyi’s emotional trajectory. At the opening of the film, Ruyi’s potential for self-development is revealed by her behaviour as a child. In contrast with the young Zhongliang’s stately progress into the Pang estate by boat, and Duanwu’s hiding face peeking through a fret-work screen, Ruyi is first seen running disruptively through the

³⁶ See Laura Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, *Screen*, 16/3 (1975) pp. 6-18.

³⁷ Marc Vernet, ‘The Look at the Camera’, *Cinema Journal* 28/2 (1989) p. 55.

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 56.

³⁹ Wheeler W. Dixon, *It Looks at You: the returned gaze of the cinema* (Albany NY, 1995) pp. 2-3.

Old Master's pleasure barges, under the tables and between the feet of the assembled concubines, pulling the silk tablecloths from under their games of *majiang*. Chased by servants, she runs into the ancestral hall. The chief steward is incensed, less by Ruyi's naughty behaviour than by her transgression of forbidden space: "A girl in the ancestral hall! Even if the Emperor has abdicated, it's unthinkable! (不可以, 不可以, *Bu keyi, bu keyi*, "It cannot be.") As the children walk away, they turn and look back. Ruyi is in the centre of the frame and dominates it, with the two boys, Duanwu and Zhongliang, framing her on either side, and the image freeze-frames before fading to black. This is the first instance of Ruyi's gaze. Whilst the boys look past the camera back towards the hall, young Ruyi looks directly at the lens, and by association the viewer (Fig. 4:1). Significantly, this moment has been prompted by her transgression of gendered spheres, when she entered the male-only world of the ancestral hall.

Dixon proposed that a look beyond the camera by a female character was an act of feminist resistance to the patriarchal norms of classical cinema, in which the women in the film responded to the male characters.⁴⁰ Ruyi's gaze centres on moments of self-actualisation in which traditionally gendered discourses are subverted, suggesting the applicability of Dixon's theory. The second example occurs in Shanghai, once she has entirely left the

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p. 8.

confines of the Pang estate. Having just witnessed Zhongliang's betrayal of Mrs Shen and her suicide, Ruyi is walking back to her apartment through the streets of the Chinese quarter. As she walks, she is accosted by a number of prostitutes inviting her to join them. They quickly give up and leave her to walk on alone, but further up the street she pauses and turns back, her face framed by the camera in close-up (Fig. 4:2). The direction of her gaze is not to the prostitutes behind her, but at the lens and the watching audience. That this moment marks a crisis-point for Ruyi is seen as much in her location as her reaction. The space she inhabits, a dirty back alley in Puxi surrounded by brothels, is a complete reversal of her natural environment at the Pang estate. The prostitutes' occupation takes them further out of the normative boundaries of female chastity, and into the public space. This scene provides both a contrast to and a simulacrum of the previous one. The prostitutes reflect Zhongliang and his simulation of affection for women in order to obtain their money. Ruyi, with her pure intentions, becomes a parallel to Mrs Shen and her unsullied love. When Ruyi turns back to camera, she is experiencing a moment of cathartic realisation, as seen on her face as her tears become a smile.

In the final instance of Ruyi's gaze, she completes her transition to independent personhood by her rejection of Zhongliang. The scene cuts directly to an interview between the two characters, revealing by Zhongliang's face and words that Ruyi has turned him down. In the face of his increasingly frantic avowals that she must

love him, Ruyi remains resolute. His character has been revealed to her, and his return to the Pang Estate is “Too late”. Turning away from Zhongliang, Ruyi walks towards the camera, which tracks backwards with her, holding her gaze. As she walks, Ruyi says to herself “I can do whatever I want, and this is what I want.” This shot acts as an extended instance of a gaze (Fig. 4:3). Zhongliang is not relevant to Ruyi’s life any more, as witnessed by the camera framing in which his figure in the background fades out of focus and dwindles, next to her visually enlarged face in close-up. Her words indicate the assumption of agency. By determining her own future, and making an individual choice, this moment signifies Ruyi’s subjective development into full personhood.

Vernet observed, with reference to classical Hollywood cinema, that the use of a look to camera often marked a moment in which the star took over from the character they were playing. He referred to this process as the use of transdiegetic stardom, in which an actor’s relationship with the audience as a recognised star could be used to evoke a particular quality the director wanted to express.⁴¹ This technique seems relevant to Chen Kaige’s use of Gong Lee in *Temptress Moon*, as the actor who more than any other came to symbolise the New Wave’s preoccupation with the subjectivity and repression of the individual by an oppressive collective. The final instance of an extended gaze held in close-up reinforces this effect as, Doane noted, the close-up is strongly

⁴¹ Vernet, ‘The Look at the Camera’, p. 51.

associated with the vehicle of the star.⁴² However, close-ups also position the audience in a privileged position, seeing the character's face enlarged and isolated from contextualising details. As Doane observed, close-ups are considered "*the* instance of subjectivity", providing access to a character's inner world and intimate emotional responses.⁴³

Just as Ersao's transformation comes after Huanhuan's offer of support in *Women from the Lake of Scented Souls*, Ruyi is also influenced by the example of another woman. She is the unseen witness to Zhongliang's betrayal of Mrs Shen at Heavenly Lane, and is able to observe the dénouement in which the older woman refuses to be blackmailed and declares her love for Zhongliang. From a building opposite, Ruyi watches as Mrs Shen, realising that what she had believed to be a genuine relationship was a sham, turns towards the window and stares out of it. Both women are identically framed in medium close-up within the casements of their respective open windows, with the camera holding its position for several seconds in each case. Their eyes appear to meet, although Ruyi is seated and out of sight, emphasising the parallel (Fig. 4:4, 4:5). Mrs Shen is experiencing a revelation, and the camera positions her as the holder of the 'gaze' in this scene. As Ruyi watches, Mrs Shen smiles, then quickly leaves the room and throws herself to her death. The direct mirroring in the subsequent scene

⁴² Mary Ann Doane, 'The Close-Up: scale and detail in the cinema', *Differences* 14/3 (2003) p. 90.

⁴³ *Ibid.* p. 94.

in the alleyway, in which Ruyi's tears turn into a smile of clarity, indicates the importance of Mrs Shen in the text. Although she only appears twice in the film, her influence over the narrative is incredibly strong. This favourable impression is enhanced by the naturalistic acting of the performer Zhou Jie, which stands in marked contrast to the studied stylistics of both Gong Li and He Saifei (Xiuyi).

The moments that reveal Ruyi's inner life and development are part of a larger narrative structure in which characters engage in a complex negotiation of gender. The film bears some distinct similarities to Chen Kaige's previous movie, *Farewell My Concubine* (霸王别姬, *Bawang Bie Ji*, 1993), not least in the uncertain masculinity of lead actor Leslie Cheung's character in both films. At work in *Temptress Moon* is a repeated figuring of an orthodox gender balance, dominant masculine to passive feminine, and its transgression. Zhongliang's distress over his uncertain gender identity as a male prostitute, and victim of child abuse, is revealed by the manner in which he performs masculinity. In his relationships with the women who solicit his attention, he gives a performance of an idealised modern lover. However, when meeting women who offer genuine affection, as with Mrs Shen and Ruyi, his vulnerability is revealed.

Both Rofel and Ownby have pointed out that the compulsive social demands of normative heterosexuality create a cultural

definition of hegemonic masculinity.⁴⁴ The existence of this stereotype forces men to perform their gender in return for social recognition and inclusion.⁴⁵ In a reversal of Dieyi's gender uncertainties in *Farewell My Concubine*, in which he performs the perfect woman on stage whilst concealing his identity as a homosexual man, in *Temptress Moon* Zhongliang performs 'normative' masculinity when he seduces women, whilst concealing his own experience of abuse and violation.

The exploitation of Zhongliang by the Triad as a male prostitute takes place in Shanghai, a space culturally associated with 'feminine' qualities. As Zhang Yingjin highlighted,

...the 'body' of Shanghai is not only gendered but politicized as well, and its correspondingly gendered features are given an urgent political reading on the 'feminine' (i.e., 'negative') side – leisure, indulgence, desire, love, passion, sentimentality, sensuality, fantasy, frivolity, ennui, music, film, individuality, bourgeois or petit-bourgeois ideology, and the colonized mentality;...⁴⁶

⁴⁴ The concept of normative masculinity is made clear in the film by the Pang family elders' reproaches to Duanwu, Ruyi's cousin and faithful companion, that he fails to act like a man when he takes orders from a woman.

⁴⁵ David Ownby, 'Approximations of Chinese Bandits: perverse rebels, romantic heroes, or frustrated bachelors?' in Brownell & Wasserstrom (eds.) *Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities: a reader* (Berkeley CA, 2002) p. 246; Lisa Rofel *Desiring China: experiments in neoliberalism, sexuality, and public culture* (Durham NC, 2007) p. 80.

⁴⁶ Zhang Yingjin, *The City in Modern Chinese Literature and Film* (Stanford CA, 1996) p. 204.

Not only is Zhongliang embedded in the feminine through prostitution, he also chooses to conduct the majority of his liaisons in the colonial quarters of the city, linking, as Hershatter's work suggested, two subaltern statuses: both de-gendered male, and weakened colonial subject.⁴⁷

The Shanghai that Zhongliang occupies is a cultural construct, rather than an historical specificity, positioned against the 'masculine' city of Beijing in the north.⁴⁸ Zhongliang's internal condemnation of his imposed feminisation is indicated by his true desire to be in Beijing. Having moved to the Pang estate specifically in order to become a student, Zhongliang initially attempts to run away to Beijing to study. He only ends up in Shanghai through the intervention of the Triad, who meet him at the station and put him on the train south. Beijing is repeatedly mentioned in the narrative as the place where genuine social revolution is taking place. Zhongliang expounds fervently on the developments of modern civilisation to Ruyi, and offers to take her to the north with him. In this way the degeneracy and unnatural qualities of Shanghai and Zhongliang's feminine life there are emphasised through comparison.

Zhongliang's confused gender status, however, is as much to do with his liminal position in society as it is with his background. The social role of men in Chinese society was traditionally defined

⁴⁷ Gail Hershatter, 'Modernizing Sex, Sexing Modernity: prostitution in early-twentieth-century Shanghai', in Brownell & Wasserstrom (eds.) *Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities: a reader* (Berkeley CA, 2002) p. 210.

⁴⁸ See Zhang, *The City in Modern Chinese Literature and Film*, pp. 189, 258.

by their identification within the family as husbands and fathers. An unmarried man was considered neither truly masculine nor fully adult.⁴⁹ The formation of sworn brotherhoods and bandit societies, including organisations like the Triad, was a manifestation of the need for young unmarried men to assert their masculinity in a society which did not fully recognise them. Ownby commented that, “Such ambivalence drives these young men toward hypermasculine displays in order to demonstrate to others, as well as to themselves, that they are indeed ‘real’ men.”⁵⁰ The gendered construction of Zhongliang as a gigolo allows this tension between hegemonic and alternative masculinity to be revealed on screen. Operating outside the confines of normative male behaviour, as an unmarried man and male prostitute, Zhongliang is socially feminised. However, through his performance of aggressive oppression towards the sexually desiring, and therefore transgressive, women who solicit him, he asserts his identity as a gendered male.

This occupation of both gender roles by Zhongliang therefore leaves little room for the female characters in the text, and their participation in the narrative as active protagonists is similarly hampered by film style. Chen Kaige’s depictions of Ruyi and Mrs Shen are highly sensual and romanticised, dwelling on their physical presence. Chris Doyle’s cinematography lingers on close-ups of both women’s faces, through soft misty lighting and accompanied by romantic sweeping music, and sometimes focusing in extreme

⁴⁹ Ownby, ‘Approximations of Chinese Bandits’, p. 242.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

close-up on their lips, eyes, and profiles. This intense focus on a feminine ideal, combined with a narrative of growth into personhood, sees the women in *Temptress Moon* appearing as a sign, rather than as subjective characters. Despite the potential for feminist resistance identified by Dixon in the use of looks beyond the camera, both Ruyi and Mrs Shen act as de-gendered sites of discourse in the model of *funü*.

I Love Beijing

The final film under discussion in this chapter will be the third part of Ning Ying's 'Beijing trilogy', *I Love Beijing* (夏日暖洋洋, *Xiari Nuan Yangyang*, 2001). Feng Dezi owns what was once considered a luxury taxi cab, which he hires to private clients including mobsters. After being divorced by his wife at the beginning of the film, he goes in search of the ideal romantic relationship. The narrative is structured around Dezi's movement through the city in his taxi. Encounters with different women are interspersed among lengthy scenes of driving, accompanied by the cab radio. In turn, Dezi visits his mistress Xiaoxue, picks up an attractive librarian who takes him home, is introduced by the librarian to a young migrant woman who wants to get married, is called back to the home of Xiaoxue who has committed suicide, drives a middle-aged radio host who invites him to an exclusive club, and leaves the bar later with a very drunk party-girl. The film concludes with Dezi on the cusp of another romantic entanglement with a beautiful passenger in his taxi.

Whilst analysis of *Temptress Moon* and *Women from the Lake of Scented Souls* has demonstrated the continued use of historically-enmeshed representations of women by art filmmakers in the 1990s, in *I Love Beijing* the freeing of film form concurrently enables a freeing of female characters. Ning Ying's structure, by contrast with the straightforward narrative progression of my two previous texts, is fragmented and non-linear. Isolated incidents occur without geographical or temporal signposting to guide the viewer. The film begins with footage of a traffic jam developing at a Beijing intersection, with jump cuts and sharp zooms disrupting any smooth chronology of the event. This opening appears to be both a metaphor for life in the modern city, and a pattern for the film as a whole. Viewed from an aerial position, the audience have a privileged perspective on the pile-up to see how individual cyclists and drivers negotiate the tangle of traffic.

The film then dives straight into the middle of the protagonist, Dezi's, divorce proceedings. A series of interviews in which the couple are seen conducting increasingly frustrated and irate conversations with an off-camera voice gradually builds up a picture of the end of a relationship. However, the audience are forced to establish the significance of these events for themselves. Jump cuts are again used to create chronological syncopation, with the only indication that multiple interviews are taking place being the couple's changing clothes. For viewers used to the stable structures of genre cinema, this beginning is counter-intuitive,

particularly as the divorce does not act as a preamble to a new narrative, but is simply one in a series of vignettes loosely connected by the centrality of Dezi to each episode. Counteracting the tendency in leitmotif films to present clearly established and explained moral episodes, *I Love Beijing* appears to celebrate its own ambiguity.

Qualities of wandering, aimless movement, and lack of narrative progression became associated with emerging art filmmakers in the 1990s like Jia Zhangke. Ning Ying's approach, however, appears to be more ethnographic than deliberately subversive. As she said of her work: "My motivation to make films is to depict people I can identify with. You can say that every film of mine starts out from a relatively impersonal approach to history."⁵¹ Her 'impersonal' approach reveals a vision of life not as a single narrative, but many overlapping moments and stories in which none is privileged.⁵² Instead, Ning appeared to suggest that the modern condition can best be expressed by fragmented, and often contradictory, loosely-connected moments.

I Love Beijing has a complex, layered soundtrack, which enhances the discontinuous structure. Several tunes repeat throughout the film, but the radio and voices of passengers in the taxi also crosscut over each other, fading in and out, often to images

⁵¹ S. Louisa Wei, "My Motivation is to Depict People I Can Identify With": an interview with Ning Ying', *China Perspectives*, 1 (2010) p. 67.

⁵² This approach is in distinct contrast to the CCP's construction of clear and unambiguous narratives. See Chapter Two of this thesis. See also Sheldon H. Lu, *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics: studies in literature and visual culture* (Honolulu HI, 2007).

of the city filmed from within the car. The focus is on areas undergoing construction. As the taxi traverses further and further away from its starting point in Tiananmen Square, the film records new skyscrapers and transformed residential districts at all times of the day and night. The bewildering lack of landmarks to situate what is being seen within the geography of the city, and the strange uniformity of the construction sites, are enhanced by the multiple music tracks and intersecting conversations. This heteroglossic soundtrack further breaks down temporal logic within the film, defying a single interpretation, or even a clear authorial voice. Ning Ying's professed aim in the film was: "...to see the changes of the city through the eyes of a taxi driver, hoping to deliver a sense of alienation within a city we were all once familiar with..."⁵³ Thus, the structure of *I Love Beijing* communicates a vision of modern life concerned chiefly with dislocation and confusion.

The separation of film form from established narrative models has the result of freeing the depiction of women from historically-bound associations. An example of this is the way in which female suicide appears in the film. Dezi is summoned to the apartment of his mistress, Xiaoxue, by the police. He is escorted upstairs by a policeman to identify her body. Xiaoxue lies slumped against the wall surrounded by broken glass and pooling blood (Fig. 4:6). In a series of abrupt one second shots in extreme close-up the camera picks out a broken bottle top, Xiaoxue's feet with one sandal half-off,

⁵³ Wei, "My Motivation is to Depict People I Can Identify With", p. 67.

her knee with a fly on it, and then her lolling head. The effect is sordid rather than glorifying or romantic. The camera repeatedly returns to the policemen, two of whom are lighting cigarettes in the hall, whilst another spends the entire scene going through Xiaoxue's collection of cassette tapes (Fig. 4:7, 4:8). There is a banal mundanity to the proceedings, which highlights the insignificance of Xiaoxue's suicide to wider society.

Particular emphasis is given to this scene through the use of sound. In a filmic soundscape marked by the catatonic layering of multiple tracks, the sudden quiet in Xiaoxue's apartment signifies the intimate nature of her suicide scene. Instead of using music to pull the audience into the emotional drama of the narrative, here Ning Ying allows stillness to create contrast with the rest of the film. Throughout the scene a young police inspector interviews Dezi about Xiaoxue in a calm and straightforward manner. Meanwhile, the other diegetic sounds are muffled, apart from the amplified sound of the camera shutter as the police photographer records the scene, the repeating electronic whirr punctuating the stillness. Xiaoxue's suicide is depicted as the desperate act of a very unhappy young woman, with no 'virtue' attached to her death, as in the case of Mrs Shen in *Tempress Moon* or the Xiang Lake victims in *Women from the Lake of Scented Souls*. Dezi and the audience are forced to confront her death and consider its implications without the mediation of a meaningful interpretative framework.

The emphasis on silence, and the fractured editing, capturing briefly glimpsed moments of banality in the background to Dezi and the policeman's conversation, suggests the emergence of gestural tropes in the film. As Berry's recent work on gestural qualities in art films demonstrated, "...cinema's ability [is] to take us beyond language and rationality and into direct bodily experience."⁵⁴ He highlighted how emphasis on the body, physical movement, and gestural communication, resists narrative control over the audience by opening up space for meaning. Viewers are invited to interpret the film for themselves. In the context of contested representation, gestural cinema, by giving physical expression to that which is normally excluded from state controlled narratives, also counters the production of 'docile bodies'.⁵⁵ According to Sheldon Lu, the production of 'docile bodies' related to the CCP's desire to move the Chinese population strategically into a limited interpretation of progressive modernity.⁵⁶ The body became a focal point for cultural messages and enforced social shifts, seen, for example, in advertising and official state messages reinforcing key values, including capitalist consumption, and stable family values. 'Non-docile bodies', by contrast, were those which resisted categorisation and social control, such as prostitutes, homosexuals, and dissident artists. Berry referred to gestural filmmaking as an ethical process: "...the gestural is a politics, for it contests the social and cultural

⁵⁴ Berry, 'Gestural Cinema', p. 26.

⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 27.

⁵⁶ Lu, *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics*, p. 3.

processes of modernity that produce and naturalize the distinctions between the human and less-than-human.”⁵⁷

I Love Beijing becomes increasingly gestural as the film approaches its conclusion. After leaving Xiaoxue’s apartment, Dezi drives around in a daze, coming to an abrupt stop as he almost runs over a crowd of migrant workers crossing the road. The individuals drift out of a forested area beside the car and barely part to make room for the parked taxi. In the beams of the headlights they appear and disappear through a thick mist, moving silently and without explanation, expressing only intense weariness with their bodies. In the next scene, Dezi wakes up in the taxi and walks into the forest in search of the source of echoing calls and shouts. It is early morning, and in the dawn light the predominant colours are green and grey. For almost two minutes the camera cuts between shots of elderly Beijingers practising *Qigong* and taking exercise among the pine trees, watched silently by Dezi. Bookended by driving scenes in the taxi with only the radio playing, altogether this section of the film constitutes around five minutes without any dialogue.

The film subsequently becomes increasingly grotesque in its gestural qualities, leading up to the narrative climax. Invited by one of his clients, Dezi attends a party at a high-end club, mostly populated by foreigners talking in English about the horrors of Beijing. As Dezi drinks himself into a stupor, so too the behaviour of

⁵⁷ Berry, ‘Gestural Cinema’, p. 27.

the party guests appears progressively surreal. A number of them are fast asleep in chairs around the room. Music is playing but only a handful of guests are on the dance floor, dancing by themselves. As Dezi is removed from the club by the staff, a girl who has been sleeping on the stage at one end of the room totters after them and climbs into the taxi. They drive off in search of “another party”. Suddenly Dezi pulls up by the side of the road and climbs out to vomit. Having collapsed on the ground, the camera films from his point of view as the girl in the taxi screams with excitement and turns up a music station on the radio to top volume. Angled at ground level looking up, and through a wide-angle lens, the image appears curiously distorted, mirroring Dezi’s confused mental state as he watches the girl emerge from the taxi and begin to dance in the headlights of the car beside a busy, fast-moving motorway (Fig. 4:9, 4:10). Borrowing an editing technique pioneered in the work of Hong Kong director Wong Kar Wai, every second or third frame has been removed from the shot, whilst others have been duplicated. The result is a juddering rhythmic stutter, which slows down the image and highlights the protagonist’s experience of extreme discomfort.

Focusing the camera on Dezi’s gradual disintegration allows / *Love Beijing* to counter hegemonic representations of women. It is ironic that a film that has a male protagonist at its centre, and sees events through his eyes, consistently undermines his perspective on the women whom he meets. In an escort club, for example, the girls

on display are captured in a classic rendering of the male sexual gaze. Extreme close-ups and tight framing focus on disjointed body parts: breasts, shoulders, necks and profiles, thighs, a hand on a glass. Each shot lasts no more than two seconds, abruptly jump-cutting between images in a montage that suggests the roaming of Dezi's eyes around the room. However, the camera also returns to him, revealing in a series of low angle shots his position within the group of men he drove to the club in his taxi as clients. He sits slightly out of their circle, and lower, hunched in his seat, not speaking but laughing at their lewd jokes. Dezi is disregarded by all of them, and the audience see that his uneasy social position is as a tolerated outsider.

Rey Chow argued that the fetishising of female stars, positioning them for the consumption of the viewer within narratives of social oppression, became increasingly prevalent in the 1980s and 1990s.⁵⁸ This observation has been a commonly made criticism of art filmmaking, particularly of the New Wave directors such as Zhang Yimou. Ning Ying, however, reverses the 'norm' of the heterosexual male to female gaze by turning the camera ethnographically on a male subject and observing his interactions with women. She also challenges the assumptions of hegemonic masculine culture. By drawing attention to Dezi's latent patriarchal ambitions and attitude towards women, and frustrating them through a series of unsatisfying romantic entanglements, Ning forces a

⁵⁸ Rey Chow, "Woman", Fetish, Particularism: articulating Chinese cinema with a cross-cultural problematic', *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, 1/3 (2007) pp. 212, 214.

confrontation between her protagonist's masculine ideals and the reality of the women he encounters in the city. The fluid movement into and out of the text by female characters, for example, is antithetical to the linear narrative styles that dominated Chinese cinema in the twentieth century. These conventions required an ark of character development, as well as clearly defined 'heroes' and 'villains', in order to communicate a social message to the viewers.⁵⁹ The women whom Dezi encounters, however, are neither constrained within nor essential to the progress of his narrative as protagonist. He therefore has no opportunity to perform the role of rescuer/educator, or to be corrected and to develop socially himself. Effectively, Dezi is denied the position of hero in his own story.

The breaking down of patriarchal cinematic structures leads to, as Louisa Wei observed, "a suspicion of emerging feminist discourse in the text".⁶⁰ In Ning Ying's narrative, conflict between the male and female characters is used to reveal gendered discourses. This practice occurs most noticeably in the scenes between Dezi and his wife. At the divorce court they sit awkwardly side by side, avoiding eye contact with one another. Dezi slumps in his seat, looking away from his wife and the arbitrator at the floor, and remains silent through most of the exchanges. His body

⁵⁹ These conventions had already been challenged by the New Wave directors in the 1980s, however they remained the predominant form in mainstream Chinese cinema into the millenium. See Cui Shuqin, 'The Return of the Repressed: masculinity and sexuality reconsidered', in Zhang (ed.) *A Companion to Chinese Cinema* (Oxford, 2012) pp. 499-517.

⁶⁰ S. Louise Wei, 'The Encoding of Female Subjectivity: four films by China's fifth-generation women directors', in Wang (ed.), *Chinese Women's Cinema: transnational contexts* (Columbia NY, 2011) pp. 174-5.

language and behaviour are calculated to separate himself as far as possible from the proceedings. At home in their flat, however, he tries to initiate sexual intimacy, suggesting that they could still sleep together after the divorce is completed. His behaviour provokes an outpouring from his wife, who, it is then revealed, is leaving him for one of his friends. In the ensuing, very public, argument, she accuses Dezi of abandonment. He, in turn, declares that everything she possesses was purchased by him, and that all he has ever had in return was 'bitching and moaning'. Rey Chow noted that,

...in socialist Chinese cinema, the tendency was to downplay the gendered specifics of women's agency, so that differences and tensions between women and men became consistently invisible, or were at least made negligible, under a genderless collectivity.⁶¹

In *I Love Beijing*, by contrast, the conflicts between men and women are clearly depicted on screen, thus restoring gender to visibility.

In addition, Ning's film reveals multiple facets of female experience, through Dezi's encounters with very different women: rural migrants at varying stages of naturalisation to the city; urban intellectuals; the new wealthy elite, and their groupies. Many female writers in the 1990s, although not identifying with feminism, were "...challenging and redefining what it means to be female in

⁶¹ Chow, "'Woman', Fetish, Particularism', p. 211.

China.”⁶² Specifically, the search for an aesthetic that refused to conform to the boundaries defined by male-dominated practice is a rubric which can be applied across disciplines.⁶³ Ning Ying herself denied that she was aware of or influenced by feminist ideology until much later in her filmmaking career.⁶⁴ *I Love Beijing* presents, however, if not an avowedly feminist perspective, at least what Dai Jinhua has referred to as the ‘spectre’ of feminism, through the mechanism of presenting multiple and alternative visions of gender on the screen.⁶⁵ Through breaking down the dominance of linear film form, and engaging in a more experimental practice, Ning Ying was able to avoid the historically-constituted modes of representing women, such as *nüxing* and *fūnu*, and instead depict *nüren*, female people.

However, whilst the film hints at the possibility of a feminist vision in Ning Ying’s work, there do remain some limitations on the female characters. Unlike Ning’s later movie, *Perpetual Motion* (无穷动, *Wu Qiongdong*, 2005), *I Love Beijing* does not reveal its feminine character’s subjective experiences and reactions, concentrating instead on Dezi’s breakdown. It is interesting to note that all three of the Beijing Trilogy films focus on male protagonists and social groupings: the Beijing opera troupe in *For Fun* (找乐, *Zhao Le*, 1993), a group of policemen in *On the Beat* (民警故事,

⁶² Kay Schaffer & Song Xianlin, ‘Unruly Spaces: gender, women’s writing, and indigenous feminism in China’, *Journal of Gender Studies*, 16/1 (2007) p. 19.

⁶³ Ibid. p. 26.

⁶⁴ Wei, “My Motivation is to Depict People I Can Identify With”, p. 69.

⁶⁵ Dai Jinhua, (trans. Wang & Barlow) *Cinema and Desire: feminist marxism and cultural politics in the work of Dai Jinhua* (London, 2002) p. 100.

Minjing Gushi, 1995) and taxi drivers in *I Love Beijing*. As mentioned above, Ning's ethnographic aim with these films was to capture the city in the process of change. Each part of the Beijing triptych has an increased sense of motion, from the relatively static opera group, to the police chase, to Dezi's taxi and his journeys around the city.

By contrast, *Perpetual Motion* takes place in an interior environment. This distinction is significant. For a feminist portrayal of Chinese life to take place it would seem that there needs to be a return inwards, from the wide scope of the city to the enclosed feminine space. This suggests that the *nüxing* and *funü* identities superimposed over femininity in the twentieth century ultimately failed to counter the association of women and 'inside' (里, li). Film form at the turn of the century still appeared to be inflected by the associations of gender and space which had traditionally shaped the representation and social position of women in China. Nonetheless, this return inward also provided an opportunity for filmmakers to take advantage of a visual space associated historically with women, and use this to liberate female representation from its cinematic role as signifier.

Conclusion

In the 1990s, how to represent women on film remained a highly contested area of subtle cultural and filmic negotiations, reflecting the situation for women in Chinese society more generally. Through my analysis of *Women from the Lake of Scented Souls* and *Temptress Moon*, I have demonstrated the continuing power of historically-constituted models of womanhood to shape female representation. In *Women from the Lake of Scented Souls*, Xie Fei's sensitive evocation of his protagonist's inner life drew heavily on the tradition of landscape art, in which the environment expressed the artist's emotions. However, the use of both Ersao and Huanhuan as sites for discussing rural problems undermined Xie Fei's attempts to express female subjectivity. *Women from the Lake of Scented Souls* modelled women as *nüxing*, that is as a trope for a progressive discourse demonstrating the need for further modernisation. *Temptress Moon* also depended on using its female protagonists as a sign, against which to position the male lead Zhongliang. His uneasy gender status effectively monopolised both male and female genders in the text. Operating in the gender-neutral model of *funü*, Ruyi's gaze to the screen ultimately evoked an idealised model personhood for the audience.

Finally, using *I Love Beijing*, I demonstrated that an innovative and experimental approach to film form had the potential to liberate the representation of women in Chinese art cinema from restrictive historical models. Ning Ying's playful structure, turning

the cinematic gaze onto her male protagonist, and refusing to be constrained by a linear narrative, created greater flexibility in her characterisation of the women he encountered in the film. In Ning Ying's work I observed the emergence of a feminist approach to filming women, corresponding with the subjectivity of *nüren*.

Overall, the representational modes used to depict women in art films of the 1990s remained hampered by historically constituted structures, in which femininity was associated with its use as a signifier. As with the depiction of rural migrants discussed in Chapter Three, these films displayed ingrained ways of seeing, which affected the ability of art filmmakers to effectively innovate film form. By contrast, the next chapter in my thesis will explore a representational paradigm emerging specifically out of an historical circumstance of the 1990s, the urban regeneration programme, and demonstrate that direct engagement with a threatening social reality produced a reconsideration of how to use historical awareness as a tool for cinematic resistance.

Chapter Five

Representing Urban Change

In this chapter I analyse the representation of urban change in Chinese art cinema from the 1990s. I initially provide a brief history of the urban regeneration programme. I then discuss art filmmakers' claims to be presenting truth on film, in the context of challenges to the official narrative about urban reconstruction, before introducing the concepts of place and non-place as framing devices. I examine four texts as examples of films focused on the transformation of the cities. Firstly, I consider Zhou Xiaowen's *No Regrets About Youth*, in which tropes of amnesia and relationship breakdown are accompanied by footage of demolition. I then consider two films about the demise of traditional architecture and communities, Zhang Yang's *Shower*, and Shi Runjiu's *A Beautiful New World*. Through a comparison of different approaches to filming the city, one from Beijing and the other from Shanghai, I suggest that the assertion of local identities was a key facet of resistance to the official narrative about urban change. Finally, I discuss the significance of historical awareness in Lou Ye's *Suzhou River*, and suggest that his filming of the city amounted to the construction of an alternative memory archive. Using the concepts of place and non-place, I argue that films about urban reconstruction in the 1990s were actively contesting and offering alternatives to the official representational mode.

Introduction

In 1949 the CCP inherited an urban environment in China's cities that was dilapidated after years of war. With limited resources, the Party focused on infrastructure development as the main economic priority. Mains water supplies, electrification, and sewage systems were greatly improved in the first few years of the People's Republic, but there was no large-scale campaign of architectural redevelopment.¹ Urban reconstruction was focused on high profile districts that could serve as examples of the superiority of socialism over capitalism, such as renovating the notorious slum areas around Suzhou Creek in Shanghai.² The new socialist city, as a place of industry and order, was envisioned in cultural products through a visual celebration of wide streets, public squares, and well-kept factories.³ The CCP's focus on developing China's industrial superstructure, combined with a discourse of 'anti-waste' (反浪费, *fan langfei*) austerity, produced an economical, modernist urban aesthetic in the 1950s and 1960s.⁴ However, high-density

¹ Wu Fulong, Xu Jiang, and Anthony Gar-On Yeh, *Urban Development in Post-Reform China: state, market, and space* (Abingdon, 2007) p. 237.

² *Ibid.* p. 238.

³ For example, Lao She's play and the later film version, *Dragon Whisker Creek*, celebrated a Beijing municipal government project to clean up an ancient canal. The texts became useful propaganda tools when the reconstruction work caused local resistance by property owners whose homes had to be demolished or were flooded by the work. See Yomi Braester, *Painting the City Red: Chinese cinema and the urban contract* (Durham NC, 2010) pp. 29-40.

⁴ Large roofs and ornamentation were frowned upon as wasteful and extravagant, leading to the construction of simple, flat-fronted buildings made of economical materials. Lu Duanfong, *Remaking Chinese Urban Form: modernity, scarcity and space, 1949-2005* (Abingdon, 2006) p 9.

residential housing in urban centres resulted in a significant problem of overcrowding by the late 1970s.⁵

Beginning in 1990, the state promoted a nationwide project to renew city neighbourhoods by replacing dilapidated buildings with new apartment blocks.⁶ In part this choice was a result of the need for space. Large-scale high-rise architecture made the most of scarce urban land.⁷ The choice was also aesthetic. In the Mao era, the austere architectural choices of socialist urban planners were inspired by designs from other non-aligned countries.⁸ A change in style in the 1990s reflected a shift in how China conceived of itself in the reform era. As King noted, "The building houses (literally, embodies) the political, cultural or administrative institution...it symbolises the political presence and economic power of each level of spatial organisation."⁹ The remodelling of China's cities in the 1990s borrowed directly from the model of global financial districts, creating a visual connection between China and the economic powerhouses of East Asia like Singapore and Hong Kong.¹⁰ The spatial transformation of urban China was part of a project of national redefinition in the 1990s.

In order to remodel the cities, traditional constructions built laterally along the ground and in accordance with principles of

⁵ Wu et al. *Urban Development in Post-Reform China*, p. 238.

⁶ Ren Xuefei, *Building Globalization: transnational architecture production in urban China* (Chicago IL, 2011) p. 99.

⁷ Lu Duanfang, *Remaking Chinese Urban Form*, p. 161.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 10.

⁹ Anthony D. King, *Spaces of Global Cultures: architecture, urbanism, identity* (London, 2004) p. 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 17; see also, Lu Duanfang, *Remaking Chinese Urban Form*, p. 161.

harmony and balance were cleared and replaced with vertically reaching skyscrapers.¹¹ This process had the effect of wiping out much of China's urban visual history. In many areas nothing was left which had not been built in the last ten years. Lu Jie described the emergence of "spatial metropolarities", communities divided along architectural lines between areas that retained their traditional feel and those which had been remodeled.¹² The demolition and reconstruction projects also generated social inequalities. Demolition regulations issued in 1991 gave local government the power to issue relocation notices without residents' consent.¹³ Although compensation was offered when an area was demolished, it was calculated on the basis of the number of *Hukou* holders registered at an address, meaning that rural migrants and tenants were not eligible. Moreover, as clear definitions of what constituted "old and dangerous" housing were never issued, useful central districts were often claimed for renovation even if the building stock was of good quality.¹⁴ The social realities of the urban reconstruction projects were that low-income families were consistently relocated to accommodation on the margins of the city, whilst a new middle class of affluent Chinese moved into the increasingly gentrified city centres.¹⁵

¹¹ Wu Fulong et al. *Urban Development in Post-Reform China*, p. 258.

¹² Lu Jie, 'Metropolarities: *The Troubled Lot and Beijing Bicycle*', *Journal of Contemporary China*, 17/57 (2008) p. 728.

¹³ Ren Xuefei, *Building Globalization*, p. 125. These regulations were revised in 2001 due to widespread discontent and acts of resistance. *Ibid.* p. 126.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 104.

¹⁵ Wu Fulong et al. *Urban Development in Post-Reform China*, p. 257.

In *Painting the City Red*, Yomi Braester likened the wide-ranging architectural transformation of China's cities in the 1990s to scarring. He described the demolition sites, which became ubiquitous in urban areas, as analogous to wounds on the face of the city, giving visual expression to the psychological traumas being experienced by the population as established communities were torn away from places which had great meaning for them.¹⁶ Braester argued that films which chose to include footage of demolition were making a deliberate choice to become documents of record. This 'documentary impulse', in his view, was a mandate of preservation.¹⁷ Wang Ban similarly considered films about the cities made in the 1990s to constitute a form of historical witness. He argued that the documentary principle, meaning the inclusion of 'real' footage of the city within a fiction film, emerged as a response to the overwhelmingly positive representation of urban development in official narratives.¹⁸ However, whilst Braester believed that art film directors were aiming to affect public policy, Wang Ban saw their work as part of a more basic desire, to give expression to the complex and chaotic social reaction the filmmakers witnessed as the cities were being rebuilt.¹⁹

Scholarship that positioned film of urban change in opposition to official rhetoric drew on art directors' claims to be filming the

¹⁶ Braester, *Painting the City Red*, pp. 250, 257.

¹⁷ Ibid. pp. 225-7.

¹⁸ Ban Wang, *Illuminations from the Past: trauma, memory, and history in modern China* (Stanford CA, 2004) p. 249.

¹⁹ Ibid.

'truth'. An oft-quoted remark of the filmmaker Lou Ye, that, "My camera doesn't lie", became a maxim widely associated with art cinema in the 1990s.²⁰ These declarations of cinematic truth were not a radical departure from some previous modes of Chinese filmmaking. In the 1930s, writers and filmmakers collaborated to establish a tradition of socially conscious cinema, motivated by humanistic concerns to expose contemporary social ills.²¹ Scholars such as McGrath and Zhang Zhen considered there to be clear continuity between the aims and aesthetics of critical realist filmmaking of the 1930s and 1940s, and art filmmaking in the 1990s.²² Sun Shao-Yi additionally observed that the realist tradition had been intricately bound up with filmic depictions of the city before 1949.²³ Braester noted that it was also important not to ignore the

²⁰ See, for example, Zhang Yingjin, 'My Camera Doesn't Lie? Truth, Subjectivity, and Audience in Chinese Independent Film and Video', in Pickowicz & Zhang (eds.) *From Underground to Independent: alternative film culture in contemporary China* (Oxford, 2006) p. 23; and Gary Xu, *Sinascape: contemporary Chinese cinema* (Lanham MD, 2007) p. 67.

²¹ Lee dated the dominance of social realism to the years 1945-49. In the 1930s a broader spectrum of filmmaking existed, but after the socio-political upheavals of the war and in the face of the gradual disintegration of Kuomintang-style nationalist government, there emerged a style, considered by Lee to be comparable to Italian post-war neo-realism, that clearly expressed the cultural consciousness of the nation's intellectuals. Leo Ou-fan Lee, 'The Tradition of Modern Chinese Cinema: some preliminary explanations and hypotheses', in Berry (ed.) *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema* (Ithaca NY, 1985) pp. 4-5. Pang Laikwan agreed that the 1930s saw the formation of a progressive film culture, but argued that it remained a loosely constructed movement corresponding closely to the makeup of the left-wing community. Pan Laikwan, 'The Making of a National Cinema: Shanghai films of the 1930s' in Song & Ward (eds.) *The Chinese Cinema Book* (London, 2011) pp. 56, 58.

²² Jason McGrath, 'The Independent Cinema of Jia Zhangke: from postsocialist realism to a transnational aesthetic', in Zhang (ed.) *The Urban Generation: Chinese cinema and society at the turn of the twenty-first century* (Durham NC, 2007) p. 85; Zhang Zhen, 'Bearing Witness: Chinese urban cinema in the era of transformation (Zhuanxing)' in Zhang (ed.) *The Urban Generation: Chinese cinema and society at the turn of the twenty-first century* (Durham NC, 2007) p. 7.

²³ Sun Shao-Yi made a distinction between urban cinema of the 1930s and 1990s, by highlighting that critical realist filmmakers in the first half of the

impact of Socialist Realism.²⁴ He commented that Maoist standards for evaluating a film, which were carried over in critical discourse well into the 1980s, were based upon the extent to which a movie reflected “real life”.²⁵

Such claims to truthfulness can be explored through the conceptual framework of place and non-place. Williams originally posited that landscape had strong emotional resonances for communities. He believed that when locations were physically transformed, the individuals living in those places experienced a sense of loss and crisis in their own identity and patterns of daily life.²⁶ Following from Williams’ influential work, Tuan proposed that places are knowable locations, with an identity linked to past associations.²⁷ He observed that, “Place incarnates the experiences and aspirations of a people. Place is not only a fact to be explained in the broader frame of space, but it is also a reality to be clarified and understood from the perspectives of the people who have given it meaning.”²⁸ Tuan therefore highlighted that locations

twentieth century depicted the city as a negative space, against which to position their calls for national salvation. This discourse was not evident in films from the 1990s. Sun Shao-Yi, ‘In Search of the Erased Half: *Suzhou River, lunar Eclipse*, and the Sixth Generation filmmakers of China’, in Kong & Lent (eds.) *100 Years of Chinese Cinema: a generational dialogue* (Norwalk CT, 2006) p. 185.

²⁴Socialist Realism presented the viewer with a codified system of representation aimed at clearly communicating an ideologically correct message. This filming style can also be said, therefore, to be making truth claims. Braester, *Painting the City Red*, p. 9.

²⁵Yomi Braester, ‘From Urban Films to Urban Cinema: the emergence of a critical concept’, in Zhang (ed.) *A Companion to Chinese Cinema* (Chichester, 2012) p. 352.

²⁶Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London, 1973) pp. 297-8.

²⁷Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: the perspective of experience* (Minneapolis MN, 1977) p. 24.

²⁸Yi-Fu Tuan, ‘Space and Place: humanistic perspective’, in Gale & Olsson (eds.) *Philosophy in Geography* (Dordrecht, 1979) p. 387.

could become layered with historically constituted meanings. Similarly, Lippard proposed that the identity of a place was never absolute but always hybrid, meaning different things to different people.²⁹

Massey, however, argued that defining place as a meaningful location neglected the fluid geography of social change.³⁰ In terms of the late twentieth century, Massey suggested that increasing global interconnectedness resulted in an ever changing pattern of social relations, "...meeting and weaving together at a particular locus."³¹ Marc Augé, observing the emergence of these global networks, crafted the antithetical concept of non-place: "If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place."³² For Augé, non-places were those characterised by transience and mobility, such as shopping malls, train stations, and airports.³³ Augé argued that in these kinds of location, social relations were defined by individuality and separateness, with expediency creating the link between the user and location.³⁴ People came together in non-places in order to meet a shared goal, but without ascribing lasting meaning to either

²⁹ Lucy R Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: senses of place in a multcentred society* (New York NY, 1997) p. 49.

³⁰ Doreen Massey, 'A Global Sense of Place', in Barnes & Gregory (eds.) *Reading Human Geography: the poetics and politics of inquiry* (London, 1997) pp. 315-323.

³¹ *Ibid.* p. 322.

³² Marc Augé, *Non-Places: introduction to an anthology of supermodernity* (London, 1995) p. 77.

³³ *Ibid.* pp. 78-9.

³⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 87, 94.

their environment or their fellow travellers. Crucially, Augé's non-places were spaces with no historical memory.

The association of place and non-place with historically constituted meaning is significant for the work of art filmmakers in the 1990s. Ren Xuefei observed that, "Preservation requires an act of symbolic interpretation of the past."³⁵ Filmmakers engaging with the reconstruction of China's cities were therefore positioned in the midst of competing discourses around the meaning attached to the areas being demolished. The official rhetoric focused on modernisation, positioning the regeneration of the built landscape as a reflection of China's entry into a globalised economic community. The buildings that were chosen for demolition, primarily vernacular housing and socialist era constructions, were ascribed no historical value in this narrative. Intellectual preservationists, by contrast, saw the issue primarily in light of cultural associations and fear of a loss of heritage. For urban residents, however, their encounter with the CCP's vision of modernity was mediated through important social and economic factors, such as compensation, potential marginalisation, and loss of connection with the local community, as well as the possible positives of improved housing.

Both Braester and Wang Ban implicitly assumed a distinction between traditional neighbourhoods, as meaningful and historically significant places, and modern city structures, and therefore accepted art filmmakers' claims to truthful filmmaking. As Ren

³⁵ Ren Xuefei, *Building Globalization*, p. 103.

Xuefei pointed out, most scholarship on the urban renewal movement similarly failed to consider the possibility that different interest groups had applied a range of values to historical architecture.³⁶ The scale of disruption and population displacement during the 1990s provoked a widespread and popular criticism of the state's policies, including an emerging discourse of urban preservation.³⁷ The calls for conservation were not unilateral, and reflected different agendas.³⁸ Whilst a vocal group of intellectuals tended to stress the preservation of historical structures, and to emphasise the cultural capital associated with them, they often ignored the needs of local residents, who were more concerned with satisfactory relocation and compensation.³⁹

This chapter will consider the representation of urban change in art films from the 1990s, in light of these conflicting agendas. My analysis will explore how filmmakers approached the issue of demolition and the loss of traditional architecture, and assess the role which historicising the urban landscape played in constructing an oppositional response to official policy. The deliberate

³⁶ Ibid. p. 101.

³⁷ The reaction to urban renovation in the 1990s provoked a massive outpouring of creative work across media. Artists, photographers, and filmmakers all produced art which featured the symbol 拆 (*chai*), which was painted onto buildings and districts slated for demolition. See Sheldon H. Lu, 'Tear Down the City: reconstructing urban space in contemporary Chinese popular cinema and avant-garde art', in Zhang Zhen (ed.) *The Urban Generation: Chinese cinema and society at the turn of the twenty-first century* (Durham NC, 2007) pp. 137-160.

³⁸ For example, when the CCP began to incorporate preservationist policies into the urban regeneration scheme in the early years of the new millennium, they ignored socialist architecture but preserved areas from the Republican era. Their focus on these structures reflected a value system in which buildings from the 1920s and 1930s were useful as symbols of Chinese modernity. Ren Xuefei, *Building Globalization*, p. 103.

³⁹ Ibid. p. 101.

application of historical value judgments to the cityscape would therefore impact upon the reliability of art filmmakers 'truth claims', positioning them as part of an elite intellectual discourse.

No Regrets About Youth

Zhou Xiaowen's *No Regrets About Youth* is set in Beijing in the early 1990s. The action centres on the demolition of a *hutong* and the construction of a shopping mall in its place. The main protagonist is Mai Qun, an ex-army nurse who lives in the *hutong*. Her fiancé, Song Li, is an enthusiastic proponent of all things modern and commercial, however Mai Qun regrets the loss of her traditional home. She becomes a 'stuck nail tenant', refusing to leave her one roomed apartment even with the bulldozers at the door.⁴⁰ One of the demolition team, Jianong, is known to her. As a soldier he was badly wounded, and Mai Qun was his nurse. Jianong continues to suffer from the effects of his war wound: repeated seizures which are slowly destroying his ability to make and recall memories. As Mai Qun reconnects with him, and gets to know his young daughter Duoduo, she begins to question her relationship with Song Li. After learning about Jianong's medical condition she agrees to the demolition of her home, and then moves into his apartment and cares for him until his death.

⁴⁰ Refusing relocation was a widely used tactic of resistance by residents of buildings slated for demolition. Ibid. p. 126.

The trope of demolition is central to the narrative in *No Regrets About Youth*. From the opening scenes the sounds of construction are omnipresent. As the narrative progresses the bulldozers reach deeper and deeper into the old district, at the heart of which is Mai Qun's house. In one remarkable shot, the camera films from a low angle as a bulldozer crashes through an ancient stone wall, and the brickwork implodes in an arc toward the lens, filling the screen with the moment of destruction. Much of the first half of the narrative establishes a contrast between the *hutong* and the newly constructed apartment blocks that are taking its place. In an early scene Jianong is relaxing in his high-rise flat when a construction worker is lowered past his window clutching a drill. The action then cuts to ground level where Song Li is wheeling his bike through the giant supports of a new building going up next to Jianong's. Surrounding him are the half demolished walls of the *hutong* bearing the character *chai* (拆, 'demolish') (Fig. 5:1). Zhou Xiaowen initially intended for the film to be a straight-forward romance, but when scouting for locations he was deeply affected by the sight of the *hutongs* being demolished, and instead decided to use the narrative as a vehicle for highlighting the human cost of urban reconstruction.⁴¹

Tuan observed that, "A key to the meaning of place lies in the expressions that people use when they want to give it a sense carrying greater emotional charge than location...People talk of the

⁴¹ Braester, *Painting the City Red*, p. 259.

'spirit', the 'personality' and the 'sense' of place."⁴² *No Regrets About Youth* establishes a dichotomy between traditional architecture, and locations that lack historical resonance, in order to establish a distinct sense of place around the *hutong*. Mai Qun's home, for example, is given all the trappings of a place with historically constituted meaning. The contents and décor of the room reflect her attachment to the past and to memories. She decorates it with floral patterned fabric and mementos, and keeps boxes full of stored up treasures from her time in the army, including Jianong's wrist cast from the time of the accident. Mai Qun doesn't have a shower, and cooks outside on a single ringed stove, reflecting her preference for simplicity. Her life forms a sharp contrast to the other characters in the film. In Jianong's highrise apartment, for example, he has the best brand of colour TV and a cupboard full of imported soft drinks, but there are no pictures on the wall or other personalising details. When Mai Qun moves in to care for him at the film's denouement, Jianong decorates his apartment with her possessions in order to make her feel at home. However, Mai Qun and the audience know that this transformation will be temporary. The 'place' which these items represented has been bulldozed, and once Jianong is gone the modern apartment will revert to its former barren identity.

The significance of place and non-place in *No Regrets About Youth* is focused on the effect that the different locations have on

⁴² Tuan, 'Space and Place: humanistic perspective', p. 409.

human relationships. As Cresswell noted, places are meaningful because they provide a material setting for social relations.⁴³ By contrast, Augé observed of non-places that they were characterised by individuality and separateness.⁴⁴ This manifests in Mai Qun's relationship with Song Li. In a key scene the couple visit the furniture department of a store together to look for items for their future home. Here, Song Li's desire to have the best leather sofa and most elegant wardrobe become more important to him as his expression of marital planning than listening to Mai Qun, who wants to discuss her concerns about Jianong. The increasing division between the couple is twice visually represented through the blocking of one from another by an item of furniture. In the first instance, Mai Qun holds back from examining a bed with Song Li after he refuses to discuss Jianong's case, and at the same moment two people carrying a wardrobe walk between them. This interruption forces a pause in their conversation during which Song's ability to reach out to her is physically blocked (Fig. 5:2). In the second instance, Song is expressing his frustration at Mai Qun's attitude towards their shopping trip when a large mattress is carried past between them, completely blocking their view of each other and separating them at either end of an aisle (Fig 5:3).

Li Zeng argued that the choices made by art directors of how to film the city reveals much about their attitudes towards China's

⁴³ Tim Cresswell, *Place: a short introduction* (Oxford, 2004) p. 7.

⁴⁴ Augé, *Non-Places*, p. 87.

modernisation process.⁴⁵ In particular, she highlighted skyscrapers as a key visual trope. The highrise buildings that erupted in China's cities in the 1990s represented in a starkly visual way the process of socio-economic transformation that the country was undergoing. As a symbol of global commerce and the homogenisation of architectural design they literally took over the space formally occupied by indigenous Chinese buildings, transforming in the process the ways in which people lived their day to day lives. Li Zeng commented that montages of skyscrapers in leitmotif films were designed to reinforce the CCP's official narrative, affirming the modern city as a symbol of China's economic growth.⁴⁶ She suggested that, by contrast, a focus on everyday living space constructed a deliberately oppositional discourse, which questioned the official aesthetic message of a glittering modern cityscape.⁴⁷

In *No Regrets About Youth*, skyscrapers and *hutongs* are set against each other visually, in stark contrast, through the use of extreme long shots from very low angles or looking down from high up. In an early establishing shot, a residential area is seen in the foreground below the camera, backed in the upper half of the frame by looming highrise apartment blocks. Later in the film, the same

⁴⁵ Li Zeng, 'Living for the City: cinematic imaginary of the cityscape in China's transnational films', *Critical Arts*, 25/1 (2011) p. 104.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p. 105.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* p. 108. Palmer noted that using the skyscraper as a visual reference for socioeconomic conflict was not new to Chinese cinema in the 1990s. Leftist films from the 1930s, such as *Street Angel*, used the contrast between vertical high-rises and horizontal street scenes to emphasise social and economic divides in the modernising city. Augusta Palmer, 'Scaling the Skyscraper: images of cosmopolitan consumption in *Street Angel* (1937) and *Beautiful New World* (1998)' in Zhang (ed.) *The Urban Generation: Chinese cinema and society at the turn of the twenty-first century* (Durham NC, 2007) p. 187.

hutong is seen several times from the upper floors or roof of one of the skyscrapers, capturing the stages of its transformation from occupied housing to total rubble. Finally, the camera is placed at ground level in the centre of the flattened area and pivoted 360 degrees, tilting upwards at an acute angle. The area is now surrounded by modern apartment buildings, and the combination of the rapid swivel with the extraordinary impression of perspective which the angle gives to the shot is disorientating. The skyscrapers disappear into the sky, receding and narrowing to tapering spires which loom over the viewer (Fig. 5:4). Far from forming a glittering skyscape to pay homage to modernisation, the high-rises in *No Regrets* are threatening buildings which call into question the process of urban reconstruction.

The complete erasure of the *hutong* is paralleled by Jianong's declining mental state. Braester noted of this intertwining of the transformation of the physical environment and the destruction of memory, that, "By chronicling the process leading to the construction worker's demise and the death of the old city, Zhou's film resists the official policy, which in effect supports forgetting the city's past, repressing its traumas, and displacing its memory."⁴⁸ Jianong's original head wound occurred when a wall collapsed on him in the army hospital where he met Mai Qun. As the film progresses and the *hutong* is leveled, his amnesia worsens.

⁴⁸ Yomi Braester, 'Tracing the City's Scars: demolition and the limits of the documentary impulse in the new urban cinema', in Zhang (ed.) *The Urban Generation: Chinese cinema and society at the turn of the twenty-first century* (Durham NC, 2007) p. 168.

Jianong disappears from the narrative at the same time as the original landscape. Braester therefore saw *No Regrets About Youth* as a warning about the loss of urban memory, and a call to capture the city on film before it disappeared.⁴⁹

Braester failed to note the curious complicity with which the protagonists' accept and contribute to the act of forgetting, which adds complexity to this reading of the trope of demolition. Jianong works for the demolition team, and spends each day and some nights furiously demolishing the area marked for destruction. Erasing the physical past becomes the way in which he copes with his own synonymous condition of memory loss. Mai Qun initially refuses to forget. She clings to her courtyard home long after the other residents have left. She is effectively forced into a position of acceptance and forgetting by Jianong, who enforces her removal by demolishing the buildings up to her front door in the middle of the night, leaving only her house standing in a field of rubble. In a poignant scene the camera observes her strip her room of possessions, removing printed fabric from the walls to reveal damp and ancient plaster underneath, and burn her mementoes in a ritual bonfire. This moment becomes the turning point in the film, after which she no longer tries to help Jianong to fight his condition but accepts the role which he wants her to play. Joining him on the bulldozer they link hands to demolish her house.

⁴⁹ Ibid. p. 165.

The fact that Mai Qun is unable to prevent the demolition of her home, and even ends up becoming complicit in it, reflects the power imbalance experienced by many urban residents as their neighbourhoods were unilaterally destroyed and replaced. Bliss Cua Lim raised the motif of haunting to describe the coexistence of multiple temporalities, or ways of experiencing and understanding the progress of time.⁵⁰ She highlighted the inadequacy of homogenous, official time, shaped by an ideology of progress, to match the reality of the constant presence of memory.⁵¹ Zhou Xiaowen uses the demolition sites in *No Regrets About Youth* as just such haunting traces to provoke memory and highlight the overwriting of Beijing's history by the official rhetoric of progress. In this respect, the film's reference to amnesia points beyond the preservational impulse identified by Braester toward a recognition of the 'gaps and spaces' left in the CCP's flattening of historical narratives, as discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis.

However, Zhou Xiaowen also raises an element of criticism of urban residents for becoming complicit in the destruction of the city. At the conclusion of the film he once again utilises the dichotomy of place-non-place to reinforce a distinction between locations with historical meaning and those without. Initially, it appears that key relationships in the text have been restored and are moving forward positively: Liujie, Jianong's estranged wife, is seen shopping with her daughter Duoduo, previously kept away

⁵⁰ Bliss Cua Lim, *Translating Time: cinema, the fantastic, and temporal critique* (Durham NC, 2009) p. 2.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* pp. 12, 15.

from her, who now holds her hand and calls her Mama instead of Aunt. Then Song Li and a heavily pregnant Mai Qun appear, obviously reconciled. However, the positive gloss of these resolutions is quickly undermined. Liujie is walking through the shopping mall toy department with Duoduo trying to buy her the latest talking, crying dolls, but Duoduo doesn't want one, replying to each of her mother's queries with the words "Mama, I don't want it." It is then revealed that Liujie has not returned permanently but is visiting Beijing to settle Duoduo into a boarding school.

Similarly, Mai Qun initially appears to be adapting to life as Song Li's wife. It is implied that the shopping mall in which they are looking for baby bottles is the very one on which Jianong was working, and for which Mai Qun's house was demolished. Her presence therefore seems to suggest acceptance of the development. However, she appears regretful when saying goodbye to Duoduo, looking wistfully after her until Song Li physically turns her and leads her away. The sentiment of loss is subsequently emphasised in the closing shot of the film. The camera follows Mai Qun in closeup from behind as she walks after Song Li towards an escalator. At the foot of the stairs she pauses, and Song Li is slowly carried out of shot by the movement of the escalator, leaving Mai Qun behind. At this point she turns and gazes back towards where she met Duoduo. Her face fills the right side of the frame, with the escalator running upwards behind her filling the space on the left. Her movement is emphasised by the

soundtrack, which changes from the invasive electronic sounds of arcade games being played in the background, to the haunting refrain associated throughout the text with Jianong's narrative, raising the memory of everything that has been erased.

Locating the final scene of the film in a shopping centre, an archetypal non-place, and emphasising the essentially broken nature of the human relationships expressed in that space, reinforces Zhou Xiaowen's assignment of historical value to traditional architecture, and his rejection of the modern city. Furthermore, it situates his work as part of a critique of the urban reconstruction programme that expressed an elite, intellectual concern with preservation. Zhang Yingjin noted that art films depicting the demolition of the urban environment tended to have an underprivileged local as protagonist, struggling to come to terms with the changes in their city, rather than an enlightened viewer observing from outside.⁵² The filmmakers rarely considered the conflicted nature of the disputes surrounding reconstruction, however, but centred their discourse on the meanings they associated with traditional architecture. Art directors therefore assumed a privileged position in their films, limiting the representation of the transformation of the cityscape to a unilinear narrative in which urban residents were reduced to the position of voiceless subalterns.

⁵² Zhang Yingjin, *Cinema, Space and Polylocality in a Globalizing China* (Honolulu HI, 2010) p. 90.

Shower & Beautiful New World

Both *Shower* and *Beautiful New World* are examples of commercially orientated art films, made as co-productions, and balancing social criticism with a more light hearted tone. *Shower* is set in Beijing at the end of the 1990s. Old Liu runs a traditional bathhouse in the heart of a *hutong*, with the help of his younger son Erming, who has a learning disability. His older son, Daming, returns home from Shenzhen unexpectedly, but has a troubled relationship with his father. Daming learns that the bathhouse is due to be demolished as part of a reconstruction project. At first he is anxious to return to Shenzhen, but gradually he comes to recognise the important role which his father, and the bathhouse, play in the community. After Old Liu's sudden death, Daming chooses to take on the responsibility of caring for his brother, despite the objections of his fiancé. The film finishes with an affirming community concert held in the *hutong* park, before the area is demolished.

Beautiful New World is set in Shanghai. It follows the story of Baogen, a migrant worker who has won a penthouse apartment in a newly constructed skyscraper in a competition. When he arrives to collect the keys to his prize, he is told that the building has not yet been constructed. Rather than accepting cash compensation, he chooses to stay in Shanghai with a distant relation, Jinfeng, also originally from their village but who has been settled in the city for sometime, and considers herself Shanghainese. Jinfeng drifts from

one job to another, constantly in debt. Baogen, after initially working on the construction site of his own building, realises that there is a financial opportunity in cooking and selling boxed lunches to the city workers, and quickly becomes successful. *Beautiful New World* contrasts the aspirations and characters of its two protagonists in a typical 'odd-couple' narrative, but also reflects on the cultural and social particularity of Shanghai as a city returning to its past glory. Whilst *Shower* uses nostalgia to assert a specific local identity in response to urban reconstruction, *Beautiful New World* identifies both official and nostalgic evocations of Shanghai as selective processes of historical appropriation.

In the same way that Zhou Xiaowen invested traditional architecture with historical significance in *No Regrets About Youth*, Zhang Yang also imbues the urban environment in *Shower* with meaning for the community that lives and works there. In filming the *hutong*, Zhang Yang pictures a world under threat of oblivion. The camera lingers on ancient stone walls, activity in the community park, and in one shot a sea of gabled and tiled roofs stretching away from where the protagonists are seated looking down over the district. The film carefully nurtures and cultivates an identity for the area, set up in opposition to the faceless modern city which appears rather as a constantly referenced threat than directly on screen. The only footage of skyscrapers in the film takes place in the parodical opening sequence, which is then revealed to be a fantasy of one of the bathhouse patrons.

Even when Daming and Erming go to the central train station, there are no grandiose shots revealing the modern architecture around them. This lack of interest in the wider city is reinforced by Erming's behaviour during the trip. He delights in playing with a revolving door and admiring the immaculately cleaned plate glass windows, but is most enthusiastically drawn to a running hosepipe, which he picks up and plays with in a mimic of his behaviour in the bathhouse each night. By removing almost all visual references to the wider city, *Shower* effectively questions its relevance to the daily life of Beijing's inhabitants. The *hutong* where the bathhouse clients live is shown to be a self-sustaining community, thus opening up a broader debate around the necessity of the process of modernisation, as represented in the official mode by the image of the skyscraper.

The film begins with an extraordinary scene in which a businessman visits an automated shower cubicle outside his workplace. Opening onto a towering cityscape of modern high-rise architecture, the character walks briskly towards the 'shower-station', checking his watch for the time.⁵³ In a sequence which Donald and Sun have described as referencing transnational clichés of modernity, the businessman steps inside the individual cubicle and is washed by giant rollers and water jets whilst his clothes are

⁵³ The fact that he checks his watch, and then chooses the '5 minute' option on a computer display outside his shower cubical, emphasises this idea of engaging with accelerated modernity.

cleaned and pressed (Fig. 5:5).⁵⁴ The whole scene is edited with jump cuts to an accompanying soundtrack of rapid electronic beats expressing urgency. Cutting abruptly to the title screen, the narrative then shifts to the steamy interior of a traditional bathhouse. Here the same businessman is found to be a layabout, daydreaming about moneymaking possibilities whilst receiving a hot flannel wash. Around him, elderly gentlemen relax in communal tubs, a young boy is washed by his father, and locals do their laundry in the sinks (Fig 5:6, 5:7). The subsequent montage of life in the bathhouse is again accompanied by a soundtrack of rhythmic beats, but this time it comes from within the diegesis, formed by the sound of massage on patrons' backs, whilst the camera moves slowly and smoothly within shots like an unhurried observer.

Shower communicates a message of communal living contrasted with individualistic capitalism. The shower station scene, which opens the film, expresses what Augé termed the “solitary contractuality” of non-place.⁵⁵ In contrast to the communally expressed and mutually understood relationship of the bathhouse users to their space and to each other, in the shower station the user is isolated within a sealed-off pod. This stark visual metaphor expresses his relationship to space as functional and anonymous, having no social contract with those around him, even the other users of the shower station, also individually sealed-off in tiny pods.

⁵⁴ Stephanie Hemelryk Donald & Wanning Sun, 'Going Home: history, nation and the mournful landscapes of home', *Metro Magazine*, 129/130, pp. 142, 147. stephaniedonald.info/files/GoingHome.pdf [Accessed: 25/01/12].

⁵⁵ Augé, *Non-Places*, p. 94.

His only contractual relation to the shower unit is for the duration of the five minutes he uses it, based on a pre-determined agreement of use chosen from an automated menu when he arrives. Effectively, as Augé argued, the user of a non-place like the shower station agrees to become a partaker of anonymity for the purpose of achieving some basic life function, such as washing. He is relieved of his responsibility towards his environment or other people by entering a space without socially or historically defined meaning.⁵⁶

Fear of loss of connection is the prevalent emotion expressed through the narrative of *Shower*. The local residents are to be reassigned housing in new buildings after the *hutong* is demolished, scattered between high-rise blocks across the city. As they prepare for the move, their discussion centres on the ways in which they will have to adapt their established life practices to their changing urban environment. Communal bathing will be replaced by individual showers, which they critique as more isolating. They also comment on the need to give up traditional pastimes that the new architecture will not accommodate. Two characters have enjoyed a long-running rivalry over keeping crickets, but they plan to set them loose before they move, believing that the insects will die in the new buildings: “Crickets can’t survive in multi-storey buildings...I’m serious. I know someone who moved to live in a high-rise last year. Guess what. As soon as they left the ground floor, all his crickets died.” Tellingly,

⁵⁶ Ibid, pp. 101-2.

earlier in the film a patron's crickets are crushed to death by a wall, which falls on them during demolition.

The transforming urban environment thus becomes directly equated with the breakup of communities, and the elimination of qualities of local distinctiveness. These particularities are clearly nostalgic in nature, centred on traditional pastimes and a pace of life disconnected from the rush of modern living. In her analysis of nostalgia in post-socialist Russia, Svetlana Boym referred to "...a modern perception of a crisis of communality, a search for the lost community...", which manifested in a desire to return to nostalgic spaces and familiar architecture associated with collective experiences.⁵⁷ Hobsbawm similarly argued that an emphasis on preserving or esteeming the past often occurred in times of social transformation, when the assertion of common bonds became important.⁵⁸ His theory of invented tradition emphasised the desire of communities to express continuity with a shared history. In the same way, Davis suggested that in a dialogue between a 'good past' and 'bad present', the enjoyment of collective nostalgia always triumphed over lamentations for the future, bringing positive emotions into play which helped to soften the transition taking place.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: mythologies of everyday life in Russia* (Cambridge MA, 1994) pp. 11, 284.

⁵⁸ Eric Hobsbawm, 'Inventing Traditions', in Hobsbawm & Ranger (eds.) *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983) p. 1.

⁵⁹ Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: a sociology of nostalgia* (New York NY, 1979) p. 16.

Cook, however, noted that nostalgia required a suspension of belief, in the knowledge that the past could never truly be recaptured, but which nonetheless connected people through a process of storytelling to a comforting, potentially fantastical narrative.⁶⁰ Similarly, Kilbourne and Ty highlighted the memorialisation of an idealised past on film as indicative of a preoccupation with the inadequacy of memory to maintain relevance to contemporary history narratives.⁶¹ In *Shower*, nostalgic evocations of an 'authentic' Chinese past form a mythology around the bathhouse. The name of the building is 'Clear Water House', and Old Liu as the keeper of the baths acts as a kind of guru for the local community. In a series of encounters Liu provides clarity and solutions to the *hutong* residents' problems through the application of traditional medicine and quasi-spiritual wisdom. For example, in one scene he engineers a local couple experiencing marital difficulties into taking a bath together, and through this simple act the water acts as a conduit for washing away their hostilities.

Two cut-scenes connect the bathhouse to ancient traditions. In one, Old Liu recounts the story of his wife, who left her village as a child bride. Her impoverished parents sold the last of their grain stores in exchange for enough water from their neighbours to give their daughter a bath on the night before her wedding. In the other,

⁶⁰ Pam Cook, *Screening the Past: memory and nostalgia in cinema* (Oxford, 2005) p. 4.

⁶¹ Russell J.A. Kilbourn & Eleanor Ty, 'Developments in Memory Studies and Twenty and Twenty-First-Century Literature and Film', in Kilbourn & Ty (eds.) *The Memory Effect: the remediation of memory in literature and film* (Ontario, 2013) p. 4.

a Tibetan granny and her granddaughter prayer-walk through terrible opposition to reach a lake. Interestingly, both of these cut-scenes evoke New Wave films from the 1980s. Old Liu's wife is almost identical to Cuiqiao, the female protagonist and child bride in *Yellow Earth*, and her home in the loess plateau and the drought which the village are experiencing also reference the film (Fig. 5:8). The Tibetan scene recalls Tian Zhuangzhuang's second feature, *The Horse Thief* (盗马贼, *Dao Mazei*, 1986), which constructed a semi-mythological spiritual framework around the actions of its protagonists, a devout Buddhist Tibetan family (Fig. 5:9).

In *Shower* the communal act of bathing is elevated to a romanticised vision of corporate life. The preservation of a cultural ideal within its walls acts as an antithesis to the all-pervasive materialism and individualism supposedly existing outside. Daming's transformation in the film, as he comes to appreciate the values that his father protects, is an idealised narrative, in which new China is positively changed by re-encountering the old in a place of special meaning. This storyline was probably an outcome of the censorship process. In the film, Old Liu dies in his bath having been reconciled with Daming, who cares for him through his final illness, and who he sees taking over the running of the business with Erming. The act of donning the bathhouse uniform represents taking on his father's mantle, and showing respect for Old Liu's life's work. This ending amplifies the message of filial responsibility, and downplays the destruction of the bathhouse.

However, in the original version of the film, Old Liu's death was directly linked to the demolition of the bathhouse. Zhang Yang intended his character to die on learning that the neighbourhood would be demolished.⁶² Seeing the film in the context of this intervention by the censorate suggests that the director's intention was to produce a narrative of resistance to the urban reconstruction project.

The ending of *Shower*, in which some of the former residents return to try to make a film of the *hutong*, encapsulates the overwriting of local history by the official representational mode. By the time the elderly men get hold of a camera, they are too late to film the neighbourhood, and can only capture the rubble and demolition. The selective construction of history by the CCP, which failed to assign historical significance to the *hutong* and its residents, is directly highlighted in this footage. *Shower* therefore functions as an alternative urban history in its memorialisation of local Beijing life. It is as selective in its construction as the official narrative, but nonetheless creates a memory archive of shared pastimes, which were otherwise overlooked in the reconstruction of the city. Donald and Sun noted that, "Shower...shows what is at stake when people are forced out of their habitat – their relationships, their sense of self, and community."⁶³ *Shower* uses a narrative of local particularism to counter the CCP's modernisation narrative, which was centred on the nation. Like *No Regrets About*

⁶² Braester, *Painting the City Red*, p. 276.

⁶³ Donald & Sun, 'History, Nation and the Mournful Landscapes of Home', p. 148.

Youth, it asserts a preservationist response, raising the human cost of the demolition project at a local level.

In *Beautiful New World*, the selective appropriation of history is also active in asserting a local identity. In the opening scene of the film, and at subsequent moments throughout the narrative, three Ping opera singers are featured performing before an audience of elderly listeners. The primary story is commented on in song by the performers, turning the narrative of the protagonist, Baogen, into a story within a story.⁶⁴ In this way the film functions on two levels. It acts primarily as an amusing comedy about a mismatched couple, a genre immediately recognisable to most cinema audiences, and places its narrative in contemporary Shanghai, using contextualising markers such as Shanghainese phrases, shots of key landmarks, and a soundtrack from the fashionable Taiwanese pop-singer Wu Bai. At a second level, however, it roots the main narrative in an older tradition of Shanghai urban culture.

Ackbar Abbas highlighted the need to consider the development of Shanghai in the context of a discontinuous historical framework.⁶⁵ Unlike Beijing, which had a fairly static urban identity, architectural transformation in the pursuit of modernity was not something new to Shanghai in the 1990s. In the early 1930s, for example, Asian entrepreneur Victor Sassoon initiated a project to replace the colonial buildings on the Bund with thirty Manhattan-

⁶⁴ Palmer argued that this device was an implicit inter-textual reference to *Street Angel*. Palmer, 'Scaling the Skyscraper', p. 188.

⁶⁵ Ackbar Abbas, 'Play it Again Shanghai: urban preservation in the global era', in Gandelsonas (ed.) *Shanghai Reflections: architecture, urbanism, and the search for an alternative modernity* (Princeton NJ, 2002) p. 41.

style hotels and apartment blocks, including the Park Hotel, which, after its completion in 1934, remained the tallest building in Asia for thirty years.⁶⁶ However, whilst Beijing experienced a relatively smooth continuation of its identity as the site of centralised power in China across the Maoist era and into reform, Shanghai's importance in the national psyche declined in the socialist period.⁶⁷ Beginning in the 1950s, the city was remodeled into a centre of industrial production intended to finance the CCP's plan for economic growth.⁶⁸ Shanghai changed little visually, but it quickly lost the glamour formerly associated with an atmosphere of cosmopolitanism. As a consequence, where Beijing as a space of historical continuity was severely rocked by modernisation in the 1990s, for Shanghai the new priorities appeared to offer a welcome return to a globalised, outward-looking identity.⁶⁹

Abbas described Shanghai in the 1990s as "...the city as remake, a shot-by-shot reworking of a classic, with a different cast, addressed to a different audience..."⁷⁰ He noted elsewhere that the basis of this preservation was distinctly selective, directed by the

⁶⁶ King, *Spaces of Global Cultures*, p. 13.

⁶⁷ For more on Beijing's unchanging identity see Robin Visser, *Cities Surround the Countryside: urban aesthetics in postsocialist China* (Durham NC, 2010) p. 133; and Zhang Yingjin, *Cinema, Space and Polylocality in a Globalizing China* (Honolulu HI, 2010) p. 75.

⁶⁸ Mario Gandelsonas, 'Shanghai Reflections', in Gandelsonas (ed.) *Shanghai Reflections: architecture, urbanism, and the search for an alternative modernity* (Princeton NJ, 2002) p. 28.

⁶⁹ Shanghai was originally left out of plans for economic restructuring after 1979 due to its identity as an ultra-leftist city during the Cultural Revolution. In the conservative backlash after the Tiananmen crisis in 1989, however, Deng Xiaoping needed to look beyond Beijing in order to pursue reform and so turned to Shanghai. This delayed attention perhaps made the changes even more welcome to the Shanghainese. See Abbas, 'Play it Again Shanghai', p. 45.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* p. 38.

logic of global cultural capital rather than depth of meaning for local residents.⁷¹ *Beautiful New World* uses connection with just such a specific version of Shanghai's past to assert a recognisable identity for the city. The Ping singers are seated before a hazy sepia photograph of the Bund dating from the pre-war period. By intercutting the main narrative with the opera scenes the film suggests a structured comparison to the audience. Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s was China's boom city. During this period the nation began to push for a voice in global affairs, and the cosmopolitanism of Shanghai was seen to encapsulate this development.⁷² The visual signifier of the Bund photograph in *Beautiful New World* connects the architectural and cultural transformations taking place in Shanghai with a familiar historical narrative.

As Abbas noted, creating a sense of unproblematic continuity with Shanghai's past was only achievable by forgetting significant aspects of the history of the treaty-port period.⁷³ Given the centrality of the Japanese occupation to the CCP's national history narrative, this omission can be read as a deviation from the dominant historical model. Within the Patriotic Education framework, Shanghai occupied a position as a victimised city, first by the colonial powers, and subsequently by the Japanese army. Urban planners in the 1990s had to confront both this legacy, and the

⁷¹ Abbas, 'Affective Spaces in Hong Kong/Chinese Cinema', p. 26.

⁷² Dai Jinhua, 'Imagined Nostalgia', *Boundary 2*, 24/3 (Fall 1997) p. 158.

⁷³ Abbas, 'Play it Again Shanghai', pp. 49, 52. For more on Shanghai's history as a colonised city, and negative associations with this period, see Chapter Four of this Thesis, in my discussion of *Tempress Moon*.

desire of Shanghai's inhabitants, and its local government, to restore the city after decades of industrial depression.⁷⁴ Gandelsonas noted that the incorporation of monuments and preserved architectural features, such as the Bund, into the reconstruction of Shanghai's cityscape in the 1990s was indicative of the Shanghainese determination to articulate a specific interpretation of their own history.⁷⁵ This highly selective appropriation was reflected in the approach taken to demolition. Neither *lilong* vernacular housing nor socialist era constructions were ascribed cultural value within an historical narrative promoting an idea of modern Shanghai, and so were widely demolished. Despite being localised, this history was therefore as utilitarian in its practical outcomes as the official attitude toward the city.

Beautiful New World effectively parodies the desire of contemporary Shanghainese to amend their historical narrative. Mimicking the architectural transformations, in the 1990s there was a widespread desire to see the revival of *haipai* (海派, 'Shanghai style') culture.⁷⁶ Outwardly facing, with a global reputation, the 'chic' qualities of *haipai* related to the way that Shanghainese lived and thought about themselves. This was chiefly seen in their consumerism. As Gandelsonas noted, "The one constant of *haipai* culture is its pragmatic engagement in commerce, with

⁷⁴ Gandelsonas, 'Shanghai Reflections', p. 32.

⁷⁵ Ibid. p. 28. Gandelsonas also noted that developing the city as a living historical monument to the 1930s was shaped by the desire to attract tourism and financial development.

⁷⁶ Visser, *Cities Surround the Countryside*, p. 178.

consumerism providing the sociological link between old Shanghai and its postsocialist revival."⁷⁷ Through the savvy consumption of global commodities and luxury brands, the contemporary city hoped to (re)create its identity as globalised, trendy, and crucially as a leader in Chinese culture. The *haipai* identity was therefore both about supremacy in the local, and recognition in the global.

In *A Beautiful New World*, Jinfeng epitomises the *haipai* aspirational. She is obsessed with the new locations of Shanghai, regularly hoping to be taken to *the* restaurant of the moment, and speaking knowledgeably about the stock market and chic hotels. The poignancy of her desires, however, is encapsulated in her obvious lack of real knowledge about and access to the locations she talks about. Everything she has and does is a cheap parody of what she is aiming for. She visits the glamorous new hotels to sell luxury gift sets to them, but the toothbrush is so poorly made it snaps in half. She primps and preens in the mirror in a marble bathroom, but behind her the other occupants look disdainfully at her cheap clothes and lurid makeup.

Jinfeng tries to project an image of herself which isn't real. In tying her to Shanghai, and contrasting her with Baogen, *Beautiful New World* marks the remaking of the city as similarly illusionary. By repressing its history of humiliation at the hands of foreign occupiers, literally burying it in the demolition of old architecture, the city expressed a desire to move forwards without reference to the

⁷⁷ Ibid. p. 179.

uneasy elements of its past. In Dai Jinhua's words: "...the [selective] historical Shanghai succeeds in becoming a cultural springboard that allows us to leap unscathed across [humiliating] experiences and express new freedom."⁷⁸ In *A Beautiful New World*, however, the humiliation at the root of Jinfeng's pride is seen in her consistent failure to occupy the spaces of modernity that she dreams about. By contrast, Baogen is happy to occupy the construction sites on which new Shanghai will be raised up whilst he waits for the fulfilment of his dream in time. Daydreaming at lunchtime, he enjoys imagining his eventual ownership of a penthouse apartment. Until that hope can be fulfilled Baogen is very happy sleeping on a campbed, eating takeaway food, and selling boxed lunches on the street.

The newly emerging high-rise skyline of Pudong functions in *Beautiful New World* to delineate two histories. When Baogen arrives he travels on a bus into the city, gazing in wonder at the Bund and the Oriental Pearl TV Tower, before being suddenly whisked away across a bridge and into the narrow streets of *lilong* housing.⁷⁹ In the daylight it emerges that the area in which he is staying has quite literally been bypassed by the modern developments, as a series of motorway bridges has been built over it. These roads connect the world outside Shanghai with Pudong,

⁷⁸ Dai, 'Imagined Nostalgia', p. 158.

⁷⁹ Shanghai's colonial neighbourhoods are known as the *longtang* and are formed of terraced housing (*lilong*) linked by alleys. The architectural persona of the city is therefore different from the distinctive *hutong* (lanes and courtyard housing) of Beijing, perhaps also encapsulating an alternative attitude to communal living. See Visser, *Cities Surround the Countryside*, p. 211.

without reference to the neighbourhoods they pass over. Zhang Baogen is feted for having access to 'a beautiful new world' through the ownership of a luxury penthouse apartment. Since the apartment has not yet been built, however, he has to remain outside the bright lights of Pudong, on the other side of the river. Throughout the film the skyline appears in the distance as a tantalising reminder of its existence and unassailability. This paralleling of two distinct encounters with urban regeneration exemplifies the social inequalities which modernisation of the cities produced. It also makes visible the coexistence of different historical accounts of Shanghai's transformation in the 1990s.

Augusta Palmer argued that, despite the sharp polarity created between everyday Shanghainese life and the distant skyscrapers, *A Beautiful New World* does hold out the promise that Baogen and Jinfeng may reach the new Shanghai eventually.⁸⁰ This moment might be seen to be symbolised by the penultimate scene, in which they sit on Jinfeng's roof at night looking at photos. In the darkness the streets below them disappear and they seem to be floating on a level with the glittering distant skyline, able to reach it without difficulty. I argue, however, that the film resists this interpretation by its highlighting of the selective way in which Shanghai's history was being rewritten through urban reconstruction. The irrelevance of the *lilong* housing districts and their occupants to the project of modernising the city is emphasised

⁸⁰ Palmer, 'Scaling the Skyscraper', p. 198.

through architectural contrast, and the disadvantaging of populations trapped outside the new developments is subtly but persuasively raised. Unlike *Shower*, which uses a specific, local identity to counter the CCP's narrative of modernisation, *Beautiful New World* resists both the national and the local reconstructions of history, and instead highlights their inadequacies to meet the realities of Chinese experiences of urban transformation.

Suzhou River

Suzhou River tells the story of two couples: Mada and Mudan, and an unnamed videographer and Meimei. The videographer appears in the film only as a presence behind a hand-held camera, an off-screen voice, and occasionally a hand or arm. He narrates his own romance with Meimei, a nightclub dancer, as well as the myth-like tragedy of Mada and Mudan. After establishing his relationship with Meimei, the videographer begins to tell her the story of the other couple. Mada is a motorcycle courier who works for a local gangster in Shanghai. Whenever his boss needs teenage daughter Mudan out of the way, Mada is sent to transport her across the city to her aunt's. On one occasion, Mada gives in to an ex-girlfriend's request that he kidnap Mudan for a ransom. Mudan is devastated by this betrayal, and after escaping from him, throws herself from the Waibaidu Bridge into Suzhou Creek.

Moving to the present, the story-within-a-story collides with the videographer's own narrative, as Mada, recently released from

prison, encounters Meimei and mistakes her for Mudan. Meimei is slowly drawn into the fiction and begins to dress and act like Mudan. After the videographer intervenes, Mada withdraws, and then discovers the real Mudan working in a small grocery store. Reunited, they get drunk together, before dying in a motorcycle accident, once again at Waibaidu Bridge. When Meimei sees the bodies she is horrified, having thought that the story of Mudan was just a plot to romance her. At the end of the film she leaves the videographer, demanding he prove his love by searching for her as Mada pursued Mudan, but he chooses not to.

The film begins with footage of demolition. In the opening shot the image fades in from black onto the greasy, oil-slicked surface of Suzhou Creek. Seen through a greenish filter the camera pans left along the water, focusing on rubbish and debris floating in the river, then tilts upwards at an acute angle to the buildings on the banks. Rough handheld filming combines with jump cuts and abrupt changes in perspective to disorientate the viewer. The frame widens to show an entire building being demolished by hand by workmen, who appear tiny in the distance, then suddenly focuses in on two of them with a sickening tilt of the camera (Fig. 5:10, 5:11). A dramatic soundscape contributes to the surreal quality of the filming. The sounds of construction are eerily enhanced and lengthened, so that the rhythmic meeting of hammers and concrete become an essential part of the mournful violin solo which overlays them. Sounds appear to echo after the shot to which they are

related has ended. In going under a bridge, for example, we hear the shout of children playing. It is only a single shout, and yet it seems to resonate for several seconds.

This footage was recorded in 1998, corresponding to the official commencement of the Suzhou Creek Rehabilitation Project.⁸¹ The aim of the project was to promote economic and social regeneration of the area through cleaning up the heavily polluted waterway and the urban communities living on and around it.⁸² Lou Ye's decision to use his opening scene to record this area is significant. In so doing he was filming something on the cusp of disappearance. Although the footage of demolition is not so blatant as in *Shower* and *No Regrets About Youth*, nonetheless these scenes do capture an urban environment that was being removed and replaced.

The curious effect of the extended diegetic sounds is to enhance the motif of passing. Just as the boat from which the camera is filming continues to move continuously forward along the creek throughout the scene, the sounds from the riverbank linger and fade as things disappear. Despite this, however, there is no nostalgia or sentiment attached to the opening scene of *Suzhou River*. The loose camera work is deliberately focused on life on the creek, rather than the abandoned factories and crumbling buildings that line its banks. The scene is heavily peopled, from the construction workers in the first shots, to the boat people who live

⁸¹ Visser, *Cities Surround the Countryside*, p. 198.

⁸² *Ibid.* p. 193.

and work on the river itself, to those who are on the bridges and other crossing points under which the barge travels. Although the environment around the creek is being demolished, the scene points to the continuation of life and work on the water.

The music crescendos dramatically at the culmination of the videographer's monologue, which has overlaid the middle section of the scene. He takes in the environment on the banks, the boats and people working, and then the bridges and traffic as the area around the creek becomes more heavily populated. Coming to the Bund the camera glimpses the detailing on a colonial statue before cutting to the Pudong skyline now visible straight ahead (Fig. 5:12). It is at this point that the music swells to full orchestration, and the camera angle widens and flattens revealing the whole river scene stretched out ahead. There is a brief suggestion that after the crumbling and grimy architecture around Suzhou Creek the film has now reached developed Shanghai and will become a tribute to modernity. But the camera turns away from the image of the Oriental Pearl TV Tower on the horizon and tilts up instead to a bridge the barge is passing under, fading to black and cutting to the title screen (Fig. 5:13).

The bridge is the key focal point for what happens in the remainder of the film.⁸³ It is Waibaidu Bridge, built at the confluence of Suzhou Creek and the main Shanghai river, the Huangpu.⁸⁴ Ending the downstream journey at this point serves as a clear

⁸³ The videographer lives above it and films the travellers crossing it, Mudan jumps from it, and later she and Mada are hauled out of the water there for Meimei to see.

⁸⁴ Robin Visser noted that Suzhou River is more normally known as Suzhou Creek. Visser, *Cities Surround the Countryside*, p. 193.

indication that the focus of the film will be far from the glamorous redevelopments of Pudong. The camera does not return to the elusive skyline until the end of the movie. At the close of the story-within-a-story, the romance of Mada and Mudan, the couple sit on the bank of Suzhou Creek gazing dreamily towards the neon lights of the TV Tower and business district. Even in this shot the skyline is seen only obliquely, behind the silhouetted outline of their heads. As with *Beautiful New World*, the skyscraper architecture of modern Shanghai exists only on the fringes of the film's narrative. *Suzhou River* subverts the centrality of urban reconstruction to a contemporary account of Shanghai by focusing instead on life far away from Pudong, in the grimy streets of decaying Puxi.

By making Waibaidu Bridge central to the film's structure, Lou Ye also calls attention to its presence. Built in the colonial period in 1907, the bridge was subsequently used by the Japanese between 1937 and 1941 as a way to control Chinese movement across the city. In focusing on the bridge, Lou Ye reminds the viewer of the complexity of Shanghai's history, undermining the simplified rhetoric behind the city's regeneration in the 1990s. As noted in Chapter Three of this thesis, the formal strategies used to film landscape can evoke historical resonances for the viewer. The opening sequence of *Suzhou River* historicises the city by rooting it in multiple layers of lived experience: the migrant workers on boats, the demolition of the waterfront housing, and the colonial era bridge. As Wang Qi put it, "...the narrator contemplates the baggage of

history embodied in this landscape.”⁸⁵ The videographer describes, in monologue from behind the camera, “...a century’s worth of legends, stories, memories...are stacked here, making it the filthiest river...” None of these histories featured in the official rhetoric of developing Shanghai. Lou Ye reasserts their existence by using the landscape of the river as a space of memory. Nonetheless, his focus on the overwritten elements of Shanghai’s history still reflects a choice, implying the selective valuing inherent to preservation. As Tuan noted, “People demonstrate their sense of place when they apply their moral and aesthetic discernment to sites and locations.”⁸⁶

The question of value is central to the narrative of *Suzhou River*. Mada is searching for Mudan, and having confused Meimei for his lost love grown-up tries to persuade her to become complicit in his delusion. Meimei believes him to be genuinely interested in her and, captivated by a vision of fairy-story romance, takes on the characteristics of the Mudan he describes. The videographer wishes to keep Meimei for himself, but primarily so that he can watch her and position her, fetishistically, on film for his consumption. Despite the fact that she appears totally secondary to the dominant story-within-a-story of Mada and Mudan, Meimei is at the heart of *Suzhou River*. Jerome Silbergeld pointed out the similarity between Lou Ye's duplicate but different heroines and the

⁸⁵ Qi Wang, *Memory, Subjectivity and Independent Chinese Cinema* (Edinburgh, 2014) p. 115.

⁸⁶ Tuan, ‘Space and Place: humanistic perspective’, p. 410.

doppelgängers in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*.⁸⁷ In *Vertigo*, Judy, the substitute wife, becomes so subsumed within the identity of the woman she is imitating that she loses her life. In *Suzhou River*, however, Meimei is transformed through the example of Mudan and begins a new life.

It is interesting that Meimei is never seen in the film without the mediation of another character. She is viewed through the videographer's camera lens, in the fish tank at the bar, or watched by Mada in her changing room. At no point is Meimei's own perspective revealed. As such she is a character literally depersonalised and left without an authentic identity of her own. The fact that Meimei is primarily linked to spaces of commercial activity, the Happy Tavern bar and Huanghe Road, immediately resonates with the work of Augé. Augé argued that not only do subjects entering a non-place become individual and anonymous, they also take on a temporary alien identity:

...a person entering the space of non-place is relieved of his usual determinants... Subjected to a gentle form of possession, to which he surrenders himself with more or less talent or conviction, he tastes for a while - like anyone who is possessed - the passive joys of identity-loss and the more active pleasure of role-playing.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Jerome Silbergeld, *Hitchcock with a Chinese Face: cinematic doubles, oedipal triangles, and China's moral voice* (Seattle WA, 2004) p. 13.

⁸⁸ Augé, *Non-Places*, p. 103.

In both locations Meimei actively participates in becoming someone else for the pleasure of the viewer. In the bar she dresses as a mermaid and acts a role, smiling and waving at the punters, and at Huanghe Road she preens and performs for the videographer's camera to a soundtrack of 'Shanghai Nights' (夜上海, *Ye Shanghai*), a remastered jazz tune from the 1940s.⁸⁹

Whilst Meimei primarily occupies non-places, Mudan is linked to the crumbling and half-demolished colonial-era *longtangs* that line the waterfront. Through this contrast, the space of the river and its surrounding architecture appear to be imbued with qualities of authenticity. Mudan is totally uninhibited and genuine in her behaviour. Lou Ye described her as having purity and uncomplicated simplicity in the way she expresses her emotions.⁹⁰ This innocence and naivety are expressed through shots of her playing with the mermaid Barbie Mada buys for her, and her total absorption in the joy of riding his motorcycle fast along the deserted alleyways at night. Unlike Meimei she never plays a role. Thus, when she leaps into the river in a dramatic expression of rejected love, she is also expressing a refusal to accept the identity of a girl held hostage for money. She insists on maintaining that her relationship with Mada was defined by love not by a financial transaction. Lou Ye commented that at this moment Mudan's story

⁸⁹ The song was popularised by actress and singer Zhou Xuan in the late 1940s in a film by the same name, in which the protagonist tries to make a living singing in nightclubs.

⁹⁰ Cheng Qingsong (程青松) & Huang Ou (黄鸥), *My Camera Doesn't Lie: documents on pioneer filmmakers – born between 1961 and 1970* (我的摄影机不撒谎: 先锋电影人档案 – 生于 1961-1970, *Wode Sheyingji bu Sahuang: xianfeng dianying ren dang'an - shengyu 1961-1970*) (Beijing, 2002) p. 273.

and the message of the river footage become linked in an expression of truthfulness.⁹¹

Gary Xu considered that Lou Ye had undermined his own attempts to depict the city 'truthfully' by focusing on directionless individuals who failed to coalesce as part of wider Shanghainese society.⁹² I argue, however, that the pattern of doubling and mirroring in *Suzhou River* acts rather to reinforce the realism of Lou Ye's depiction. The audience are encouraged to question the nature of cinematic reality. Lou Ye achieves this by superimposing a narrative which deliberately plays with the viewers' sense of what is real against a background of shots which are determinedly documenting the city. The film originated as a documentary project to record life along Suzhou Creek, and the footage of the city retains this feel.⁹³ Subjects caught on camera stare back at the lens, figures peer down from bridges as the boat carrying the cameraman floats past, traffic streams under an apartment window, and a couple argues on a balcony unaware that they are being recorded (Fig. 5:14, 5:15).

Against this backdrop is placed a surreal narrative in which the same actress plays two identical girls, one of whom may be fictional but is perhaps real, in which blonde mermaids populate the

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Gary G. Xu, *Sinascape: contemporary Chinese cinema* (Lanham MD, 2007) p. 69.

⁹³ Cheng & Huang, *My Camera Doesn't Lie*, pp. 258, 265. *Suzhou River* was originally part of a series of made-for-TV shorts. The project lost funding but Lou Ye secured overseas investment from Germany to extend his into a full-length film. Zhang Yingjin, *Screening China: critical interventions, cinematic reconfigurations, and the transnational imaginary in contemporary Chinese cinema* (Ann Arbor MI, 2002) pp. 329-30.

river, and a story is told by a man whose face is always behind the camera rather than in front of it. These choices act to form a reflexive realist account of the city. The attention of the viewer is drawn to the passages of documentary-style filming precisely because they stand out against the absurdity of the narrative. Dixon observed that reflexive film practice incorporates the viewer into the work as an essential part of it.⁹⁴ This approach is predicated on the idea that a film audience are actively engaged in the viewing process, rather than passive receivers of the images, and that making the camera visible will enhance rather than reduce this effect. As Bazin noted, cinematic realism is only achieved through artifice, the selection of short sections of footage bound together by cuts and edits, which together create an impression of seamless reality.⁹⁵ By making the process of filming visible, the 'fourth wall' of cinematic illusion is broken down. The documentary footage therefore appears more real, or authentic, than the surrounding narrative.

In playing with multiple layers of filmic reality, Lou Ye asserts an identity for Shanghai that is far more complex than the official rhetoric. Central to this process is the interweaving of history and storytelling. In his opening monologue, the videographer tells the viewer, "Once I saw a baby born on a barge, I saw a girl jump from a bridge into Suzhou Creek, I saw the police haul the corpses of a young couple out of the river. As for love, I'd like to say I once saw

⁹⁴ Dixon, *It Looks at You*, p. 3.

⁹⁵ André Bazin, *What is Cinema? Vol 2*, (Berkeley CA, 1971) p.27.

a mermaid sitting on the riverbank combing her golden locks, but don't believe me, I'm lying." Later in the film, three of these four examples are seen, as Mudan jumps into the river, as Mada and Mudan's bodies are pulled from the water, and as Mudan appears as a mermaid to a local fisherman. The videographer's continual questioning of himself is reminiscent of Jiang Wen's deliberate undermining of the narrative in *In the Heat of the Sun*. The synchronicity of a narrated history is pulled apart in both films, forcing the audience to confront its constructed nature. In *Suzhou River*, this process involves a deliberate bringing to the surface of moments otherwise erased from the official history, declaring them also to have value.

The director's stated aim in constructing *Suzhou River* was to communicate *his* "true impression" of life along the creek.⁹⁶ The declaration, discussed in the introduction to this chapter, that his camera "doesn't lie" should perhaps be taken together with this statement. They point to a perspective on the city that is subjective rather than totalising. Lou Ye was interested in presenting what he saw as a truthful account of Shanghai in the late 1990s. Nonetheless, without implying that his film is a document of literal truth he still suggests that some cameras do lie in their depiction of the city. The cameras which lied were those which consistently communicated a single invariable ideological position. Taken in the context of the CCP's assertion of their right to control the

⁹⁶ Cheng & Huang, *My Camera Doesn't Lie*, p. 265.

representation of history and the preservation of memory in the 1990s, *Suzhou River* presents what Sun Shao-Yi called, the “erased city”, by concentrating on aspects of Shanghai’s contemporary and historical identity that had been left out of the official narrative.⁹⁷ Lou Ye’s cinematic truthfulness is about preserving on film what would otherwise disappear without record. As such, the preservation of the city in *Suzhou River* amounts to the construction of a cinematic archive, giving historical value to the urban histories disregarded by simplistic official accounts.

The link between archives and footage of urban demolition has been observed by Doane, who highlighted the indexicality of the film image as key to this process.⁹⁸ Film could preserve a record by asserting of something that had been destroyed, ‘this was here’. Fundamental to a discussion of filmic archives, therefore, is cinema’s ability to capture time and duration: “with the introduction of film as an archiving process, the task becomes that of preserving time, of preserving an experience of temporality.”⁹⁹ Doane rooted her analysis of film archives in the concept of the rationalisation of time implicit to narratives of progress, in which temporal constraints become increasingly urgent. As she observed, “The aim of this historiographic/archival impulse is to retrieve everything possible, driven by a temporal imperative (before it is “too late”)... The fear is

⁹⁷ Sun Shao-Yi, ‘In Search of the Erased Half’, p. 185.

⁹⁸ Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: modernity, contingency, the archive* ((Harvard MA, 2002) p. 208.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 223.

that of the destruction of an original object, its irretrievable loss...”¹⁰⁰ *Suzhou River* reflects this concern with the passage of time, seen in the vanishing of its protagonists Mudan, Mada, and eventually Meimei, leaving only the videographer. Archiving therefore raises the question of meaning again, and the implicit value judgements inherent in choosing what to preserve. As noted in reference to *No Regrets About Youth*, Lou Ye occupied a privileged position as a filmmaker, unlike his own subjects on the creek who are not offered the opportunity to speak for themselves.¹⁰¹ Art filmmakers can be situated within elite intellectual discourses of preservation current in the 1990s, producing one framing of urban regeneration in their work, but not necessarily the only one.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed approaches to filming the transformation of the city in the 1990s. I have sought to demonstrate that the historicisation of the architecture and landscape of the city was a critical strategy, used by art directors to oppose the imposition of a simplified narrative of urban regeneration by the CCP. In so doing, I have positioned art cinema as part of a discourse of preservation, and raised the possibility that art films could function as an alternative archive.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. p. 222.

¹⁰¹ It is worth noting the specific historical contextualisation of this observation, as with the increasing availability of video technology into the millennium, specifically camera phones, the ability to record and preserve has been extended beyond a privileged elite.

No Regrets About Youth exemplified, in Ren Xuefei's terms, the intellectual discourse on preservation. Zhou Xiaowen created a visual dichotomy between traditional and modern architecture, associating the latter with the destruction of personal relationships, and imbuing the former with history and authenticity. Through footage of demolition, he positioned the transformation of the city as a form of memory loss, showing how the overwriting of the familiar architecture of Beijing's vernacular housing by skyscrapers was indicative of the CCP's homogenising attitude toward history and culture. *Shower* also used a comparison between the environment of the *hutong* and the modernising city to suggest the need for preservation. Zhang Yang used a nostalgic evocation of traditional Beijing community life to resist the overwhelmingly positive depiction of urban regeneration promoted by the state. He highlighted the human cost of demolition and relocation in the face of opposition from the censorate.

By contrast, *Beautiful New World* highlighted the inadequacies of both the official discourse on modernisation, and a nostalgic valorisation of historical Shanghai, to match the realities of contemporary urban life. Shi Runjiu used the distant skyline of Pudong to delineate between different experiences of modernisation, exposing the socioeconomic divisions created in the city by regeneration. Finally, in *Suzhou River*, Lou Ye brought multiple histories of Shanghai to the surface. Using a complex layering of documentary and fiction, he played with the viewers'

sense of what was real, undermining the concept of a single, authoritative history of the city. Focusing on Suzhou Creek and Waibaidu Bridge, he used landscape to evoke histories that had been otherwise written out or overlooked in the official account of Shanghai. In so doing, he raised the possibility that Chinese art films of urban transformation in the 1990s could function as an archive.

As with Chapter Two of this thesis, my discussion of films of urban reconstruction from the 1990s highlights the key role which historicising played in the work of art filmmakers in the 1990s. By actively engaging with tropes of history and memory, the directors were able to construct narratives that resisted the imposition of a hegemonic model of representation. Nonetheless, the value judgments they displayed in choosing what to preserve on film position them as part of elite intellectual discourses. As with Chapters Two and Three, therefore, it can be said that art filmmakers continued to speak on behalf of their subjects and so limit their representation. In my final chapter, I will discuss an example of art film practice where the conflicted relationship between official, traditional, and contemporary temporality was made visible, and which forced directors to explore new modes of representation.

Chapter Six

Representing Youth

In this final chapter I explore the representation of youth in Chinese art films from the 1990s. I initially set-out the contextual underpinnings of my argument, establishing that there was no definitive definition of youth in Chinese history. I present the official, politicised, concept of youth in the PRC in the 1990s as existing in conflict with both more traditional attitudes, and an emerging, distinctive adolescent culture. Using the concept of multi-temporality, the idea of multiple forces concurrently exerting historical pressure on the construction of identity, I explore the representation of youth in three films from the decade. Looking firstly at Xie Fei's *Black Snow*, I consider the overlapping narratives as an example of multi-temporality, and analyse the impact of the Tiananmen Square crisis on the film. Secondly, I explore Zhang Yuan's *Seventeen Years* as an example of an attempt to hold a critical perspective in tension with the demands of the censors. Finally, through Wang Xiaoshuai's *Beijing Bicycle*, I consider the presentation of adolescence as a transitional life phase, and demonstrate the limited reach this model had into marginalised communities. I conclude that, whilst in the early part of the decade the contested representation of youth was appearing in art films as an unresolved state, by the turn of the millennium a distinct, depoliticised youth identity was emerging, in contrast with official rhetoric.

Introduction

Scholars have identified the 1990s as a moment of genesis in Chinese cinema. Zhang Zhen, Wang Qi, Zhang Yingjin, and others, all described the post-1989 decade as characterising a new era of filmmaking, one in which a fresh cohort of avant-garde, marginalised, and, crucially, young, directors emerged.¹ These studies tended to focus on the essential qualities of style, such as dependence on documentary methods, and urban subject matter. The scholars' characterisation of a visually distinctive, 'youthful' cinema, hinged primarily on the difference of these films from the 1980s New Wave, and their modes of production outside the state.² The extent to which such films revealed an emerging concept of 'youth' has not been widely addressed in English-language scholarship.³ Only recently has Zhou Xuelin compiled a survey of youth films in the PRC, as part of a wider-ranging study comparing

¹ Zhang Zhen, 'Bearing Witness: Chinese urban cinema in the era of "Transformation" (*Zhuanxing*)', in Zhang (ed.), *The Urban Generation: Chinese cinema and society at the turn of the twenty-first century* (Durham NC, 2007) pp. 1-45; Qi Wang, *Memory, Subjectivity and Independent Chinese Cinema* (Edinburgh, 2014); and Zhang Yingjin, 'Rebel Without a Cause? China's New Urban Generation and Postsocialist Filmmaking', in Zhang (ed.), *The Urban Generation: Chinese cinema and society at the turn of the twenty-first century* (Durham NC, 2007) pp. 49-80.

² Zhang Zhen, 'Bearing Witness', p. 2; Lin Xiaoping, 'New Chinese Cinema of the 'Sixth Generation': a distant cry of forsaken children', *Third Text* 16/3 (2002) p. 262; Cui Shuqin, 'Boundary Shifting: new generation filmmaking and Jia Zhangke's films', in Zhu & Rosen (eds.), *Art, Politics, and Commerce in Chinese Cinema* (Hong Kong, 2010) pp. 175-193.

³ Zhou Xuelin noted that there was a small body of work on the subject of 'youth film' (青春电影, *qingchun dianying*) produced by academics in the PRC, but that they tended to focus on how the films reflected wider trends in contemporary culture. Zhou Xuelin, *Youth Culture in Chinese Language Film* (Abingdon, 2017) ¶ 9.44.

teenage culture in the 'three Chinas' through cinema.⁴ She concluded that the 1990s and early millennium saw the emergence of a distinct concept of youth as adolescence, a discrete transitory life stage, for the first time, but did not explain in detail how this manifested in film.⁵ In addition, whilst Zhou noted that youth films needed to assert a conventional morality in order to pass the censors, she did not make clear how films about youth could be potentially contravening official representations.⁶

The concept of youth, and what constitutes its boundaries, has been a matter of contestation in Chinese history. The familiar western model of adolescence as a defined stage between childhood and adulthood is not mirrored in Confucianism, which sees development toward maturity as a lifelong process.⁷ From the pre-modern period, the years between infancy and full adulthood were periodised into 少年 (*shaonian*, juvenile), and 青年 (*qingnian*, young adulthood).⁸ In these ages, young people were conceptualised as experiencing a time of training, a process which came to an end with marriage, at which point they entered full adulthood.⁹ The concept of youth, as distinct from both childhood

⁴ The 'three Chinas' refers to the PRC, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, all of which had distinctive film industries. Ibid.

⁵ Ibid. ¶16.3.

⁶ Ibid. ¶16.6.

⁷ Tu Wei-Ming, 'The Confucian Perception of Adulthood', *Daedalus* 105/2 (Spring 1976) p. 109.

⁸ Lucien Miller, 'Children of the Dream: the adolescent world in Cao Xueqin's *Honglou Meng*', in Kinney (ed.) *Chinese Views of Childhood* (Honolulu HI, 1995) p. 219.

⁹ Tu noted that although ceremonial rites of passage took place during adolescence, for example the 'capping' ceremony for twenty-year old males,

and full social inclusion as an adult, was therefore linked to a normative life-path, one in which a successive series of roles was undertaken. Socialisation was rooted in taking on the responsibilities of adulthood inherent to marriage and childrearing. Young people who failed to marry were left in a permanent state of limbo, not fully adult but no longer a child.¹⁰ By extension, they also existed on the edge of mainstream, role-based, social structures.¹¹

This normative progress through life reflected Confucian attitudes to learning and maturity. Aging was ideally a process of ever-increasing self-knowledge and wisdom, growing to meet the different responsibilities that each life-stage brought.¹² The rationalisation of these stages into roles bears striking similarity to Van Gennep's model of the rites of passage: "...a man's life comes to be made up of a succession of stages with similar ends and beginnings: social puberty, marriage, fatherhood, advancement to a higher class, occupational specialization, and death."¹³ However, as James noted, breaking down the process of aging into a series of categorisations has very little to do with the actual process of physical maturity or intellectual capability: "Such representations constrain and order the process of aging through the imposition of bounded categories and it is the experience of socialisation which

marriage and parenthood had to be reached before an individual was considered fully participant in society. Tu, 'The Confucian Perception of Adulthood', p. 109.

¹⁰ David Ownby, 'Approximations of Chinese Bandits: perverse rebels, romantic heroes, or frustrated bachelors?', in Brownell & Wasserstrom (eds.) *Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities: a reader* (Berkeley CA, 2002) p. 242.

¹¹ This point has been explored in relation to gender, in Chapter Four of this Thesis.

¹² Tu, 'The Confucian Perception of Adulthood', p. 117.

¹³ Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago IL, 1960) p. 3.

gives these life-cycle terms concrete form in everyday life.”¹⁴ Youth as a transitional lifestage therefore defined an ambiguous, liminal social position, as it existed between the clearly bounded social categories of childhood and adulthood.¹⁵

In the twentieth century, however, ‘youth’ emerged at specific historical moments as a defining characteristic for a social grouping. In these instances, the concept of youthfulness was de-coupled from the traditional life-path and linked instead to a political identity. In the 1920s, for example, the term ‘new youth’ (新青年, *xin qingnian*), positioned youth as a dynamic force for social transformation.¹⁶ The New Culture Movement (新文化运动, *Xin Wenhua Yundong*), from which the concept sprang, was intrinsically antithetical to the continued dominance of traditional social structures. Maturity defined by social participation was therefore reconstituted in a politicised form, replacing the traditional emphasis on marriage and childrearing. Similarly, in the early stages of the Cultural Revolution (1966-69), Mao’s Red Guards represented a model of youth that was driven solely by the aim of mobilising political activism. Their counterparts in the late 1960s and 1970s, the ‘sent down’ youth (知青, *zhiqing*), also appeared in culture as a

¹⁴ Allison James, ‘Learning to Belong: the boundaries of adolescence’, in Cohen (ed.) *Symbolising Boundaries: identity and diversity in British cultures* (Manchester, 1986) p. 155.

¹⁵ James applied the term liminal as a mark of the adolescent social position. *Ibid.* p. 156.

¹⁶ Originally coined by Chen Duxiu in 1915, who described youth as “early spring”, *Xin Qingnian* was also the name of an influential journal aimed at the emerging generations. See Teng & Fairbank (eds.) *China's Response to the West: a documentary survey, 1839-1923* (1979) p. 240.

set-apart social group defined primarily by a political identity. These moments disrupted the positioning of youth as an ambiguous stage in maturation, by constructing adolescence around political participation rather than a normative model of socialisation.

With 'youth' defined in political rather than developmental terms, the direct application of the word lacks clarity. Borrowing from both Jonathan Noble and Zhou Xuelin, I use the Communist Youth League of China (宗国共产主义青年团, *Zhongguo Zhuyi Qingnian Tuan*) [CYLC] to contextualise the term.¹⁷ In the late Twentieth Century, this organisation admitted members between the ages of fourteen and twenty-eight. In incorporating such a wide age-range, fourteen years from puberty to the end of the twenties, the CCP appeared to conflate adolescence and emerging adulthood into a single bracket.¹⁸ Noble also drew from the CYLC the use of *qingnian* for the entire age spectrum. *Qingnian* as a categorisation therefore relates to a 'pre-adult' phase, with the moment of transition to full adulthood symbolised in this dialogue by membership in the CCP. In official culture, political affiliation took the place of family ties in indicating social acceptance and inclusion.

As this thesis has already shown, official and unofficial social narratives always engage in complex negotiation. Whilst the

¹⁷ Jonathan S. Noble, 'Youth Culture in China: idols, sex, and the internet', in Wesen & Jensen (eds.) *China in and Beyond the Headlines* (Plymouth, 2010), p. 51; Zhou Xuelin, *Youth Culture in Chinese Language Film*, ¶9.46.

¹⁸ Emerging adulthood refers to the years between adolescence and full adult responsibility, in which young people are commonly understood to gradually leave behind the dependence of their childhood years and attain self-reliance. See Larry J. Nelson et al., 'The influence of Culture on Emerging Adulthood: perspectives of Chinese college students', *International Journal of Behavioural Development* 28/1 (2004) p. 26.

politicisation of *qingnian* provided a surface-level reality for youth in China, other forces also affected their experience of identity formation. After 1976 the reform and opening up movement began to drastically re-shape the socio-cultural space occupied by China's younger generation. As China opened to the world, new cultural forms and consumerist possibilities flooded in, bringing with them rapidly changing social realities, which gradually undermined the official state rhetoric intended to maintain control over China's ideological framework. Xu Luo argued that, by the end of the 1980s, youth values were shifting dramatically towards increasing pluralism, relativism, and a utilitarian approach to orthodox Marxist ideology.¹⁹

This cultural pragmatism was exacerbated by the increasing complexity of daily economic realities. Before 1976, Chinese citizens existed within the 'iron rice-bowl' of state socialism: choice, in either professional or personal matters, was heavily curtailed, but the communist meta-structure ensured guaranteed income and social care for most. As part of the dismantling of the command economy, however, the state dissolved socialist welfare provisions in favour of individualist economics, requiring each individual to negotiate and compete independently in an increasingly globalised job market. This change took place without concurrent legal

¹⁹ Xu Luo, *Searching for Life's Meaning: changes and tensions in the worldviews of Chinese youth in the 1980s* (Michigan MI, 2002) p. 158.

reforms to guarantee certain rights and freedoms for the individual.²⁰ For young people, this meant the rise of a generation who saw themselves as solely responsible for their own success or failure in a competitive market economy.²¹

Zhang Zhen observed that in the 'going out to sea' (下海, *xiahai*) of the individualist economy, young people were given a quick escape from adolescence into full-adulthood by the opportunity to gain lucrative work early in life.²² Her comment suggests that by the mid-1990s, participation in the dominant culture of economics was the defining factor by which youth transitioned into adulthood. Based on Zhang's observation, socialisation in the marketplace replaced both familial and political definitions, despite the official rhetoric. However, research into emerging adulthood among Chinese youth in the 1990s, found that individual accountability and financial responsibility were held in tension by young people, with equally strongly felt drives to contribute to the state and honour the demands of family.²³ This accords with Peng's observations, that a conflict between individualist and collectivist goals was not a familiar dialectic in traditional Chinese thought. In both Daoist, and socialist, constructs, the individual was always viewed as existing within a communality, which would shape their

²⁰ Ulrich Beck & Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim, 'Varieties of Individualization', in Hanson & Svarverud (eds.) *iChina: the rise of the individual in modern Chinese society* (Oslo, 2010) p. xix.

²¹ Yan Yunxiang, 'The Chinese Path to Individualisation', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 61/3 (2010) pp. 504, 506.

²² Zhang Zhen, 'Mediating Time: the "Rice Bowl of Youth" in Fin de Siècle Urban China', *Public Culture*, 12/1 (Winter 2000) p. 95.

²³ Nelson et al., 'Facing Adulthood', pp. 28, 33.

decision making to a greater or lesser extent depending on the context.²⁴

In their work on the changing identity of Beijing, Dutton, Lo, and Wu proposed the idea of the city having multiple co-existing pasts, all seeking resolution with one another.²⁵ Donald also used the concept of 'multi-temporality'. She suggested that individuals occupy and are aware of different 'times' simultaneously, for example: the official time of the Party-State marked out by imposed policy and campaigns; the local time of family and community life in residential districts; and the hyper-real time of mobile communication.²⁶ These multiple strands of existence intersect at different points, but their coexistence can also cause conflict. Donald's framework provides a good starting point for considering the different forces exerting influence on the conceptualisation of youth in the 1990s. She argued that films reveal the cultural undercurrents of society through breaking down the complexity of multi-temporality, simplifying lived experience on screen into a distillation that is readily understandable by the viewer.²⁷ In the context of my discussion, this form of analysis can help to differentiate between the various layers of cultural association shaping the representation of youth in film.

²⁴ Peng et al., 'Naïve Dialecticism and the Tao of Chinese Thought', in Kim et al. (eds.) *Indigenous and Cultural Psychology: understanding people in context* (New York NY, 2006) p. 257.

²⁵ Michael Dutton et al., *Beijing Time* (Harvard MA, 2008).

²⁶ Stephanie H. Donald, 'Beijing Time, *Black Snow*, and Magnificent Chaoyang: sociality, markets and temporal shift in China's capital', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 28/7-8 (2011) p. 328.

²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 331.

I will use the context of multi-temporality to discuss the layering of different representations of youth in three films. Firstly, discussing Xie Fei's *Black Snow*, I use the conflict between structured official time, and the speeded-up time of modernity, to explore the identity crisis that the protagonist, Quanzi, experiences after he is released from prison in the late 1980s, as well as the influence of the past revealed through flashbacks. I position my discussion against a background of the Tiananmen Square crisis in 1989, which influenced Xie Fei's filming process. I then go on to consider *Seventeen Years*, Zhang Yuan's first film made in co-operation with the censorship system. I again outline three temporal modes which shape the film: the past, official time, and modernity, and expose the use of a shift in filming style to delineate the main body of the narrative from the ending, which I consider to be an outcome of the process of censorship. Finally, my discussion of *Beijing Bicycle* focuses on distinctions between marginalised adolescents, and highlights liminality as the defining feature of an emerging youth identity in the late 1990s.

Black Snow

The film begins with a young man, Quanzi, returning home after having been released from prison. His mother has died whilst he was incarcerated, so his neighbour, Auntie Luo, volunteers to keep an eye on him. He also has to report to a friendly PSB officer, Officer Zhao. Quanzi tries to rehabilitate himself, by running a

market stall, and pursuing a beautiful young singer, Yaqiu. However, local gangs are keen to suck him back in to a criminal smuggling racket, and his friend Chazi escapes from labour camp and hides with him for a few days. Yaqiu's singing talent also puts her on the fringes of the criminal world, but she manages to negotiate her way out of danger and becomes an accomplished performer. When Quanzi tries to reconnect with her, she rejects him. Disenchanted with life, he wanders through Beijing's streets, feeling alienated and out of touch, and is stabbed in an attempted robbery. Stumbling back through crowds towards a central square, he collapses and dies unnoticed.

In *Black Snow*, Xie Fei uses flashbacks to reveal the way Quanzi experiences multiple realities simultaneously. Flashbacks are a perfect example of multi-temporality. When the audience watch a protagonist on screen experience a flashback they are transported to that individual's past whilst remaining fully aware that the main narrative continues in the 'present' of the film. Turim noted that, "The flashback is a privileged moment in unfolding that juxtaposes different moments of temporal reference."²⁸ Flashbacks are not events actually recurring and repeating for the subject, they are a visualisation of the internal world for the audience's benefit. As Jean Ma put it, they 'literalise' the operation of memory through cinematic means.²⁹ These moments reveal the protagonist's inner

²⁸ Maureen Turim, *Flashbacks in Film: memory and history* (New York NY, 1989) p. 1.

²⁹ Jean Ma, *Melancholy Drift: marking time in Chinese cinema* (Hong Kong 2010) p. 29.

awareness of time, and the extent to which memory is shaping their actions. Flashbacks are used extensively in *Black Snow*, integrating Quanzi's back story into the narrative whilst emphasising his soul-searching as he encounters the changes which have taken place during his prison sentence. Xie Fei described the narrative structure of the film as, "...non-linear, with the structure tied to the character's psychology, it's a very new method for structuring drama."³⁰

So strongly does Quanzi experience the past in *Black Snow* that in the most significant flashback of the film the audience are initially unaware that they have been seamlessly transported to a memory. Soon after his return to Beijing, Quanzi goes to visit the family of Chazi, the friend with whom he was arrested as a teenager. As a customary gesture of respect he brings them gifts and offers to help them with any repairs their home might need. However, his offerings are rejected and he is sent away from the house as an unwelcome reminder of the son whom they have disowned. Disheartened, Quanzi goes to a restaurant alone and drinks heavily. Sinking his head onto the table, it appears to be only a few seconds before a hand enters the frame and taps him on the shoulder, calling his name. It is Chazi's little brother, whom he met in the previous scene. 'Quick my brother wants you' he says, and points a confused and bleary-eyed Quanzi towards the door where

³⁰ 'Interview: Xie Fei: creative work and teaching provide double happiness' (访谈: 谢飞: 创作与教学有双重快乐', *Fang Tan: Xie Fei: Chuangzuo yu jiaoxue you shuangchong kuaile*), *Popular Cinema* (大众电影, *Dazhong Dianying*) 4 (2006) p. 25 (via <http://www.cnki.net>) [Accessed 12/10/2015]

another figure waits. It is at this moment that the viewer realises that the temporal structure of the narrative has been distorted (Fig. 6:1, 6:2, 6:3). Stumbling out of the restaurant, the Quanzi of the present replays the night when Chazi attacked an ex-girlfriend and then fatally stabbed her companion. Since the audience know from the narrative that Chazi is incarcerated in a prison it is clear that this scene is a flashback. However, the film seems to have entered, in Zhang Xudong's words, "a different dimension of temporality"³¹ Turim observed that a direct cut to the past, "devoid of the usual filmic punctuation", suggested the emergence of involuntary memory.³² She described this technique as representing a "disruptive trace" of the past, simultaneously present in the narrative.³³

Three different layers of reality are therefore evident in *Black Snow*. The first of these is centred in the presence of Auntie Luo, Quanzi's neighbour and an old friend of his mother, and Officer Zhao, the local policeman responsible for his probation period. This is both an official and an informal mechanism of communal social control, monitoring and shaping Quanzi's daily reality towards a pattern approved by the state. By contrast, the second temporality encountered by Quanzi is that of modernity, exemplified in the transformation of Yaqiu, the bar singer with whom Quanzi falls in love. In his first meeting with her, Yaqiu is still a little girl in pink

³¹ Zhang Xudong, *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics: China in the last decade of the Twentieth Century* (Durham NC, 2008) p. 182.

³² Turim, *Flashbacks in Film*, pp. 211, 213.

³³ *Ibid.* p. 212.

singing innocent songs about romantic love. However, after falling under the influence of the corrupt, black-market smuggler Cui, she begins to change, her physical presence evolving at dizzying speed so that in each scene she has shed a little more of her original persona. This temporal frame is therefore presented as an experience of rapidly accelerating modernity. The tension between Auntie Luo and Officer Zhao's expectations of Quanzi, and his compulsive draw towards Yaqiu and her rapidly shifting world, highlights the failure of structured reality to provide a meaningful check on the social realities of accelerated modernity. The third temporality is the past, expressed through Quanzi's memories. The protagonist moves between these three temporal frames, trying to reconcile the received wisdom of official culture with the rapidity of modernisation and the overreaching power of his past.

In *Black Snow*, although the use of flashbacks is concentrated in the first third of the film, as Quanzi reorientates himself after his return from prison, they recur at the very end of the film after Quanzi has been stabbed by two young hooligans. Four voiceovers reverberate over the amplified sound of his feet walking heavily along the street. In a mirror of the opening credit sequence, which depicted Quanzi's return to Beijing, all other diegetic sound has been faded out to be replaced by the sound of echoing footsteps. The image is reduced to almost complete darkness, enhancing the dominance of the soundtrack (Fig. 6:4). Each voiceover links the scene into a key event in the narrative of

Quanzi's life: Yaqiu's innocent questions early in their courtship; his childhood friendship with his lost-love Xiaofen; Auntie Luo calling to him for help; and Chazi's shouts as they run from the scene of the murder. They therefore reflect what Drake has described as 'flashbulb memories', the particularly vivid memorialisation of past moments tied to a strong affective and emotional response. Drake noted that filmic sound could act as a sensory trigger for flashbulb memories, creating "a sense of *duration* that describes the connections between the memorialised past and present."³⁴ By darkening the image and amplifying the soundtrack, *Black Snow* emphasises the significance of these memories, which appear to be coming to the character as he slowly succumbs to the fatal stabbing, and which tie the conclusion of the narrative directly to the past. Quanzi, it seems, experiences his present exclusively through a lens of memory. He therefore remains trapped within and unable to escape from the defining power of his past, which becomes the dominant temporality over both official and capitalist time.

Black Snow also explores the rocky transition to adulthood, through contrasting Quanzi's failure to adapt to life after prison with Yaqiu's successful reinvention as a singer. Her transformation strongly reflects China's ongoing transition into an individualised society. When Yaqiu is first introduced she is still a naive young student. Dressed incongruously all in pink with a frilly bow in her hair she modestly apologises to the audience in the bar where she

³⁴ Philip Drake, 'Mortgaged to Music: new retro movies in 1990s Hollywood Cinema', in Grainge (ed.) *Memory and Popular Film* (Manchester, 2003) p. 185.

is singing for not being famous or successful (Fig. 6:5). The patrons' raucous response to her choice of romantic ballad scares and intimidates her. Quanzi subsequently escorts Yaqiu home on three occasions, and she describes her ambitions and traditional relationship with her father, pleased that Quanzi enjoys her singing and treating him as a close friend. Yaqiu's attitude to life in the early part of the film is likened to that of an innocent child through a flashback to Quanzi's memories of his simple affection for playfellow Xiaofen when they were children together, itself prompted by listening to Yaqiu's singing. It is this aspect of her character which draws Quanzi to Yaqiu as a romantic ideal, becoming the focus for his frustrated love toward Xiaofen and desire to recapture the innocence of his past.

Quanzi preserves an image of Yaqiu as a young girl in need of his protection; however, as she encounters more of the world she quickly develops into a highly competent individual at ease with herself and the opportunities open to her. In the last third of the film Yaqiu appears three times, and in each scene is dressing more maturely and behaving with greater professionalism (Fig. 6:6). In her final encounter with Quanzi she has graduated from the seedy bar to a smart hotel, where she sings in front of a band and male backup dancers (Fig. 6:7). Her appearance has been transformed from the shy young girl in pink into a mature woman in an elegant long gown with a sophisticated manner. Her gestures and behaviour off stage are controlled and professional, and whilst she

encourages Quanzi as a supporter she rejects his expensive gift with the explanation that she only accepts flowers. No longer eager to please and be liked, Yaqiu has learned from her experiences and chosen to reformulate her image and ambitions to match the opportunities presented by economic reform.

Yaqiu's transitions in *Black Snow* represent successful entrance into an adult world defined by commercial exchange. Her response to Quanzi's romantic efforts, however, leave him devastated. Xie Fei's depiction of his protagonist's downward spiral hinges in large part on Quanzi's sexual immaturity. He bulk buys soft-porn magazines and stares at girl's bottoms from his market stall, but plays silly games with the female underwear Cui gives to him to sell, and is ridiculed by Chazi for his failure to turn the walks home with Yaqiu into anything more than polite chats. Cui attempts to bribe Quanzi into helping him sell bootleg blue movies by offering him a night with one of the girls who works for him. When she displays her nude body provocatively, inviting him into the bed with her, he reacts with anger and storms out, though not before having a good look. His sexual innocence and virginity recur throughout the narrative as a key theme in his failure to adapt to the contemporary culture.

Quanzi's attitude to sex reflects much older Chinese norms of sexuality. Typically, those not yet married were not expected to engage in sexual activity at all. As Pan Suiming noted, until the 1980s sexual desire was downplayed in importance to other

components of the primary life-cycle: marriage, reproduction, and child-rearing.³⁵ It was only with the introduction of the one-child policy in 1979 and the associated normalisation of contraception and, indeed, abortion, that sexuality became a separate issue from the conception of children.³⁶ This new perception of sex as a healthy expression of mutual affection and pleasure-seeking particularly affected women. Lisa Rofel observed that in the 1990s young urban Chinese women recognised a need to be sexually 'savvy', displaying an openness to discussing sexual topics which was uncommon among older generations.³⁷ The de-linking of sex from reproduction challenged long-established norms of gendered sexuality, prompting a growing awareness among women in the 1980s and 1990s of their own sexual rights and identity.³⁸

In *Black Snow* Yaqiu undergoes a personal sexual evolution. In the course of the film she moves from singing for the male gaze in the bar, to singing with a male partner and band as their equal, and finally to a dominant role singing for a mixed-gender audience in a hotel with male backup. Similarly, her ever-changing outfits, from virginal to explicit to sophisticated, mark her transitions into understanding and controlling her own sexuality.³⁹ Even her choice of songs reflects this process. Initially she sings a romantic ballad

³⁵ Pan Suiming, 'Transformations in the Primary Life-Cycle: the origins and nature of China's sexual revolution', in Elaine Jeffreys (ed.) *Sex and Sexuality in China* (Abingdon, 2006) p. 24.

³⁶ Ibid. p. 29.

³⁷ Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: experiments in neoliberalism, sexuality, and public culture* (Durham NC, 2007) p. 121.

³⁸ Pan, 'Transformations in the Primary Life-Cycle', p. 36.

³⁹ Lisa Rofel noted the importance of fashion in emerging female sexual awareness in China in the 1990s. Rofel, *Desiring China*, p. 123.

of yearning in which the male character reacts strongly and protectively to a weeping female. Once she has gained wider life-experience, however, her songs change to express desire rather than love. In the final scene, she sings about inviting a man to kiss her, expressing her awareness of her right to control her own sexuality. By contrast, Quanzi's concern over her appearance becoming 'too old' for her reflects his continued understanding of sex as something which should only be expressed once full maturity, meaning marriage, has been reached. This attitude, for which Yaqiu laughs at him for sounding like her father, makes Quanzi appear sexually naive and unsophisticated.

Quanzi's approach to his relationship with Yaqiu could be read in two ways. The western concept of 'romantic love' was introduced to China in the late Nineteenth Century, and although it remained secondary to traditional Chinese marital values of 'favour and gratitude', *qing'ai* (情爱, romantic love) became a highly valued experience, more so than *xing'ai* (性爱, sexual love).⁴⁰ The idea of unrequited or unconsummated love was associated with purity. As late as the early 1990s significant value was still attached to female virginity, with women who refrained from sexual intercourse before marriage described as pure (纯洁, *chunjie*).⁴¹ Quanzi's respectful distance from Yaqiu on their early dates, and his fury at Cui when

⁴⁰ Pan, 'Transformations in the Primary Life-Cycle', pp. 32, 34.

⁴¹ James Farrer, *Opening Up: youth sex culture and market reform in Shanghai* (Chicago IL, 2002) pp. 223, 229.

he believes they have slept together, could be a protective reaction based on a romantic ideal of preserving her virtue.

However, as Farrer pointed out, there were still strongly gendered tensions in Chinese culture around the issue of female sexuality in the early 1990s.⁴² Quanzi reveals something of this attitude when he tells Chazi that the ex-girlfriend who prompted his violent attack and incarceration 'wasn't worth it'. Chazi attacked the girl and her new boyfriend because of jealousy, but Quanzi suggests that a girl who was prepared to sleep around was not worth the cost of going to prison. He also avoids visiting Yaqiu after he becomes aware that she and Cui were going to travel together to the south, but after Cui swears that they did not have intercourse, Quanzi buys an expensive gold necklace and takes it to Yaqiu as an attempt to restart the relationship. Quanzi's behaviour could be read as sexual naivety; he also displays traditional attitudes towards sex that were increasingly at odds with contemporary social dynamics among young people in the 1990s. This aspect of the narrative appears to be the hinge of his decline. Quanzi finds himself adrift after his return from prison. His reactions to Yaqiu are shaped by an understanding of relationships premised upon traditional institutions and gender roles, and he is unable to understand Yaqiu's transformation and her responses to him. Similarly, he struggles to accept the changing mores around

⁴² Ibid. p. 227.

sexuality, challenged by his own virginity, and his sense of the correctness of maintaining 'purity'.

Quanzi experiences some social pressures rooted very specifically in the process of modernisation. However, the core forces shaping *Black Snow's* narrative remain traditional. Quanzi's pursuit of Yaqiu is driven primarily by a subplot in which his childhood sweetheart Xiaofen marries, becomes pregnant, and has a child. Quanzi's life plays out on the periphery of this narrative. So literally is this the case that the audience are often introduced to the events in Xiaofen's life through the partially obscured screen of a window, watching with Quanzi as a distant observer. Aunt Luo's intrusive interference into Quanzi's life rapidly dies away as she occupies herself with supporting her daughter, and Officer Zhao also drifts away as he begins to date a young lady. Quanzi is therefore experiencing the liminal state of the non-adult, with no clearly defined social role.

A discussion of *Black Snow* is not complete without some consideration of the timing of the film's production. Filmed in the spring of 1989, as the events in Tiananmen Square were unfolding, and released in 1990, the film is set in the twelve months between Chinese New Year in 1988 and 1989, and the film's Chinese title 本命年 (*benming nian*) implies a year of significance and transformation rooted in the cyclical lunisolar calendar. The film also concludes with Quanzi's death in a square. Much of the context of the narrative suggests an element of commentary on the

Tiananmen crisis. This manifests most clearly in the closing scene of the film. As Quanzi staggers through the crowds towards the square, bleeding from the fatal stab wound, the lights in the public space are gradually turned off. In an earlier scene Quanzi had joined families watching a puppet show on stage at one side of the square. As he reaches the square again, the final lights are turned off, leaving only the stage illuminated. Quanzi stands in semi-darkness watching the two performers packing away their props and clearing the stage, then, as the last lights in the square go out, he collapses to the floor. In the split second of his fall, one of the performers glimpses him, but, having not seen any blood, assumes he is a drunk or a lunatic. The lights on the stage go out and the square is abandoned, leaving the camera to pan in silence from Quanzi's prone body, across leaves and rubbish blowing around the square, and finally to lift away into an aerial shot which fades to black. In his death, therefore, Quanzi is unnoticed, and has no meaning or identity (Fig. 6:8).

The silence which surrounds Quanzi's death mirrors the official memory of the events of June 4th 1989. In Deng Xiaoping's 9th June speech, which became the mandatory text for the official narrative, he denied that the event had been in any way significant.⁴³ The language used to describe the incident deliberately minimised it as a 'disturbance', and in a later speech emphasising the valour of the PLA in quashing the 'turmoil', the idea

⁴³ See Introduction to this Thesis for more on the impact of the 9th June speech.

of a massacre and mention of civilian deaths was denied.⁴⁴ The erasure of the events at Tiananmen Square from official memory is highlighted by a significant incident. During the crisis, a PLA soldier named Liu Guogeng was killed, and his body was displayed on the side of a bus next to the graffitied words “He killed four people”. Liu Guogeng was later used as an official symbol for the victimisation of PLA soldiers and the brutality of the ‘bad elements’ they were suppressing. The image of his mutilated corpse was widely publicised, but with the graffiti removed from the photo. Berry commented that, “The PRC image stands out for the significant absence of the words that contextualise and frame it.”⁴⁵ As Watson noted, unlike the PLA soldiers who died, the civilian victims of the Tiananmen Square massacre were never named, surrounding their deaths in silence.⁴⁶

The absence of 1989 from official discourse has been given visible representation by a number of Chinese artists and filmmakers. Song Dong’s 1996 performance art piece *Breathing Part 1* (哈汽, *Haqi*) depicted the transience of memory through lying on the freezing flagstones of Tiananmen Square for an hour at night until the artist’s breath formed a thin sheet of ice, which then melted leaving no trace of his presence. This work also reflects a more tangible aspect of the erasure of official memory, as after June

⁴⁴ Michael Berry, *A History of Pain: trauma in modern Chinese literature and film* (New York NY, 2008) p. 301.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* p. 303.

⁴⁶ Rubie S. Watson, ‘Making Secret Histories: memory and mourning in post-Mao China’, in Watson (ed.) *Memory, History, and Opposition Under State Socialism* (Santa Fe NM, 1994) p. 81.

4th brickwork from Tiananmen that had been irreparably stained with blood was removed and replaced, wiping away physical traces of the violence.⁴⁷ In film, both Wang Xiaoshuai's *Frozen* (极度寒冷, *Jidu Hanleng*, dir. under pseudonym Wang Meng, 1996) and Emily Tang's *Conjugation* (動詞變位, *Dongci Bianwei*, 2001) deal with the absence of individuals and ideas of haunting after a trauma. The breakdown of social relations in the aftermath of a traumatic death, or staged death in the case of *Frozen*, suggests the enduring trope of the 'restless ghosts' of Chinese tradition, in which the victims of violence need to be appeased through the act of memorialisation. As Watson pointed out, however, victims of state violence cannot be memorialised, raising the questions of how to remember in a culture of enforced amnesia.⁴⁸

Black Snow appears to criticise the rapid pace of modernisation and its affect upon young people. However, underneath the surface lies a deeper critique pointing to the events of 1989. The massacre at Tiananmen Square brought to an abrupt end the cultural fever (文化热, *wenhua re*) of the 1980s and its temperament of youthful idealism. Bordeleau wrote that, "*Frozen* congeals on film a moment of extreme disillusion. It constitutes a provocative and direct expression of post-Tiananmen despair."⁴⁹ The same quote could easily be applied to *Black Snow*. Quanzi is

⁴⁷ Berry, *A History of Pain*, p. 303.

⁴⁸ Watson, 'Making Secret Histories', p. 65.

⁴⁹ Erik Bordeleau, 'Surviving to Oneself after Tiananmen: Wang Xiaoshuai's *Frozen* (1996)' *Concentric: literary and cultural studies*, 40/2 (September 2014) pp. 105-124.

an idealistic character who tries to negotiate a shadowy world by living through a higher standard. Ultimately, not only are his ideals crushed, the support system around him also fails, and he dies alone and unnoticed. The connection to Tiananmen square was originally more direct, as Xie Fei planned that the film would open on Quanzi walking through the crowds there. However, “due to various reasons” the shot was later abandoned.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, in the view of veteran director Tian Zhuangzhuang, *Black Snow* remains the film which inaugurated an urban turn in the 1990s with its distinctive depiction of youth disillusionment.⁵¹

Seventeen Years

Seventeen Years begins in the 1980s. Teenager Tao Lan lives with her mother, step father, and step sister in a Beijing *hutong*. Relationships within the family are fraught. Tao Lan helps around the house and is a diligent but uninspired student, part of a group of lively friends making the most the new opportunities available to them in the reform era. Her step sister Xiaoqin, by contrast, is duplicitous but an excellent scholar, spoiled by her father. When the theft of a 5¥ note is discovered, Xiaoqin, who is the culprit, hides it in Tao Lan’s bed. Horrified by this dishonesty, Tao Lan runs down the street after Xiaoqin and, when she refuses to exonerate her, hits

⁵⁰ ‘Sina Chat Room Guests Full Interview: the famous director Xie Fei’ (著名导演谢飞作客新浪嘉宾聊天室访谈 1 全文, *Zhuming daoyan Xie Fei zuoke xinlang jiabin liaotian shi fangtan quanwen*), *Sina Entertainment* (新浪娱乐, *Xinlang Yule*), 27/02/2001 <http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/c/34384.html> [accessed 20/10/15].

⁵¹ Tian Zhuangzhuang considered the film to be “unsurpassed”. ‘Interview: Xie Fei: creative work and teaching provide double happiness’, p. 26.

her over the head. Xiaoqin dies, and Tao Lan is taken to prison. Seventeen years later, Tao Lan is a model prisoner shortly to be released. Having been awarded a home visit for New Year as a special dispensation, she is delivered to the central bus station in Beijing, but no one from home has arrived to meet her. At the same time, one of the prison officers, Officer Jie, is having trouble getting home as well. She decides to escort Tao Lan. Over the course of the journey the two young women become friends. When they eventually reach Tao Lan's parents' new home, Officer Jie effects a reconciliation, then slips away.

Like *Black Snow*, *Seventeen Years* displays an awareness of multi-temporality. The visual semiotics of the film communicate three different temporal frames: the past, official time, and modernity. The opening shot of the movie establishes the pace of the first temporality, that of the past. The camera follows a couple on a bicycle, tracking alongside them as they travel through a city, maintaining a consistent medium-close-up focus on them rather than the environment around them. For much of the journey the background is out of focus or difficult to distinguish. The entire shot lasts forty-eight seconds and shows only the couple on the bicycle. Very gradually the audience become aware that this slow beginning is a conscious effort on the part of the director to communicate something about the nature of time at work in his film. The viewer takes in the couple's clothing, the vegetables they are carrying home in an open basket, and the general quietness of their

environment. When, in the second shot of the scene, the bicycle is seen turning in to a *hutong* lane populated by other residents in similar clothing, the setting only confirms what had been suggested by the opening shot, that this narrative takes place in the past.

The effect is reinforced through the swelling orchestration of a musical theme that has been played quietly by a flute until this moment. Drake observed that music was a significant means through which the past could be invoked in film. Specifically, he identified music as a media representation, through which the past was mediated and reconstructed.⁵² In the same vein, Dika argued that the past could be metonymically re-experienced through music and *mise-en-scène*. She emphasised that nostalgic resonance in cinema was not so much the representation of a particular historical period, but the recreation of a sense of the past through the employment of cultural artefacts.⁵³ More importantly for my argument, Dika identified the reworking of stylistic tropes from earlier cinematic genres as a key technique for evoking a strong link to the past in film.⁵⁴ The crescendoing orchestral theme in *Seventeen Years* emphasises the nostalgic resonance of the setting principally because it has strong formal similarities to the emotional soundtracks of melodramas such as *Hibiscus Town* and *To Live*, and therefore triggers an aural link with other films concerned with the past.

⁵² Drake, 'Mortgaged to Music', p. 184.

⁵³ Vera Dika, *Recycled Culture in Contemporary Art and Film: the uses of nostalgia* (Berkeley CA, 2012) p. 10.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

Drawing on reference points from within cinema history to evoke the past can also be seen in the visual structures of the filming. As Dika noted,

while the period objects in the *mise-en-scene* create the “look and feel” of pastness, this quality is also emitting from the sensual surface of the images themselves...the lighting, the choice of colours, and the grain of the film, as well as its composition and framing, may be all manipulated to refer to past images.⁵⁵

In one shot, for example, the camera remains in a static position in the apartment, panning back and forth to follow the movements of the different characters round the room, for almost two minutes. The audience are able to reflect on the period details in the room, the furniture, the low level lighting, and position the drama historically within the early years of reform. At the same time, the emphasis on fractured social relations, observed by a dispassionate distant camera, provokes associations for a cinematically literate audience with the innovative cinema of the 1930s and 1940s. Zhang Yuan's portrayal of the past in *Seventeen Years* relies on shots of long duration to create an effect of suspended time. The leisurely pace of the twenty-three minute first section creates an effective contrast with the later parts of the film. It also manages to make a short set-piece family drama, which is in effect only the background to the main narrative, assume weighty significance by

⁵⁵ Ibid.

requiring the audience to invest conscious attention in the slow filmmaking at the very beginning of the movie.

The second temporality present in the film is that of prison time, the structured routine of a controlled environment in which Tao Lao has been living for the intervening seventeen years. From black the screen fades in on a visual echo of Tao Lan's walk away down the *hutong* lane that closed the previous section, showing the back of a prison guard pushing open an iron gate into a long enclosed corridor and then stepping to one side to allow the camera to move forward into the new environment. For four minutes the viewer is shown scenes of prison life without a glimpse of the protagonist or an indication of how the narrative is going to develop. In this way Zhang Yuan effectively communicates a new sense of time to the audience, one marked by order and structure.

One shot in particular reinforces the idea of different layers of time running in parallel (Fig. 6:9). The camera is placed high-up looking down on the prison yard where some prisoners are exercising. The screen is divided vertically into two-thirds and one-third by the wall of the prison, running down the length of the frame below the camera position. On the left of the wall a phalanx of women are jogging accompanied by a prison guard; on the right is the outside street scene with pedestrians walking past and cars in the road. The stark comparison between the environments could not be more pronounced. Behind the walls of the prison, time is structured and controlled in a way that bears no similarity to the

world outside. The soundscape of the scene reinforces the visual divide. In the prison the guard is calling out "yi, er, yi..." (one, two, one...) to set the pace for the runners, who respond in unison with repeated political slogans. Behind this layer of sound is a melange of noises from the road: car exhausts, voices chatting, and a radio playing somewhere. When contrasted with what is happening in the rest of the city, prison time is revealed to be an artificially structured reality.

Once Tao Lan leaves the prison she is plunged into the third temporality of the city transforming under modernity. As with Quanzi in *Black Snow*, the principal conflict in *Seventeen Years* occurs when the protagonist finds that her experience of structured time is not relevant to an encounter with the capitalist city. Zhang Yingjin, writing about manifestations of urban space in modernist Chinese literature, commented that "...urbanites no longer have an assurance in their past experience, because they have been plunged into the rapid flow of temporality that carries them toward an uncertain and unpredictable future."⁵⁶ Zhang also described the need for 'temporal reorientation' when living in the metropolis.⁵⁷ Tao Lan's sense of displacement, and her perception of city time as discordant and confusing, are emphasised by a change in filming style once she exits the prison environment. At the bus station a handheld camera films in close-up the tearful reunions of her fellow prisoners with their families, jump cutting between fragmentary

⁵⁶ Zhang Yingjin, *The City in Modern Chinese Literature and Film: configurations of space, time and gender* (Stanford CA, 1996) p. 178.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* p. 158.

images to create an abrupt montage of the process of separating out into individual family groups. Left alone in a world dramatically changed from that which she has known before, Tao Lan seeks to find a point of stability from which she can reorientate herself. As Berenice Reynaud commented: "...a dislocated subject, Tao Lan navigates between several moments of history and is anchored in none."⁵⁸ Officer Jie's arrival at the bus station provides the necessary safety-net of familiarity by providing a connection to prison life.

For Tao Lan it is official, structured time which remains dominant. Armed with a new address for her parents, Tao Lan and Officer Jie set off across the city to return Tao Lan home for New Year. Tao Lan holds back, and finally manages to express for herself what has been obvious to the viewer throughout the previous scenes: "I don't want to go home, I want to go back to the prison." This assertion of what Tao Lan actually wants is a powerful moment of self-actualisation, in a narrative otherwise characterised by her subdued and obedient responses to Jie as an authority figure from the prison. However, her request is immediately overruled. As Jie says, "This isn't about choice. You were rewarded by the state. Do you know what that means?" This moment is a classic example of 'going out to sea', and simultaneously, evidence of the enduring power of the socialist system to require compliance with social engineering programmes. Bakken's description of China in the

⁵⁸ Berenice Reynaud, 'Zhang Yuan's Imaginary Cities and the Theatricalization of the Chinese "Bastards"', in Zhang (ed.) *The Urban Generation: Chinese cinema and society at the turn of the Twenty-first Century* (Durham NC, 2007) p. 283.

1990s as the 'exemplary society' focused on the CCP's policies as a model of social engineering, in which the control of people's bodies and ideals was believed to be a way to avoid the descent into chaos which might be brought on through rapid modernisation.⁵⁹ The scene reveals the uneasy coexistence of two temporalities, each pulling the individual in different directions, both towards independence from collective social structures, and back into continued submission to the state.

Tao Lan is suitably impacted by the freedom of the modernising city to assert her own will. However, her desire is to return to the safety of communal, structured time, in which her identity and place in society are unquestioned. In fact, throughout the narrative Tao Lan displays a marked unwillingness to detach from collectivity. Her early ambitions, as revealed to her stepsister Xiaoqin in a rare moment of intimacy, are to work in a factory where she can live with the other employees in a dormitory. Thus, her hope is to replace the rather fraught home environment with an alternative community in which she is assured a valued and recognised identity.⁶⁰ Ironically, she achieves this goal with her incarceration. The prison environment enforces conformity to a clearly established set of values and communal behaviours, in

⁵⁹ Børge Bakken, *The Exemplary Society: human improvement, social control, and the dangers of modernity in China* (Oxford, 2000) p. 5.

⁶⁰ By contrast with Tao Lan's plans, Xiaoqin displays a desire to individualise by achieving high enough grades to enter university and escape the family entirely. Her fundamental dishonesty and self-serving abuse of her step sister, which provokes Tao Lan's outrage and violence, reflects the fear of negative social outcomes from modernity which were being expressed in the Spiritual Civilisation campaigns in the 1990s.

which she thrives. Tao Lan is awarded her visit home by being singled out as a model prisoner: she has adapted to the regime of prison life to an exemplary standard. That she is told that she must accept and take the New Years leave of absence regardless of her feelings, however, is simultaneously a continuation of social control, and a removal of the supportive communal identity that Tao Lan craves. She is forced to leave the collective environment of prison where she feels safe, and spends the intervening period until she reaches her home deeply unsettled by her experience of being an individual adrift in the city.

In *Seventeen Years*, the principal pressure exerted on Tao Lan is through her reunion with her family. Reaching her parent's new apartment, the two young women find a cold and cheerless environment, lit only by the eerie light of a TV, in which life seems to have stopped at the moment of Xiaoqin's death and Tao Lan's incarceration. For Xiaoqin's father, time beyond the demise of his daughter has ceased to have meaning, and his entire thought processes in the intervening years have been shaped by this reality. His reaction to Tao Lan's sudden return home reveals that for the previous seventeen years he has been simply marking time until the moment when he would need to leave the family home in order to stay preserved in a place of grief: "If you had warned me I would have been prepared...I always planned to leave before Tao Lan returned." However, when confronted by the sudden reappearance of his wife's daughter and through the intervention of Officer Jie, he

finds that he can accept Tao Lan's return to his home, and an emotional family reunion is effected.

The compromise that occurs is in Tao Lan's own reorientation. In the final shot of the family together, Tao Lan and her mother are kneeling at the father's feet, weeping over his acceptance of Tao Lan as his daughter. In this moment she tells him: "That five yuan, I stole it, I stole it." In the opening section of the film the crisis which precipitated Tao Lan's attack on Xiaoqin was being framed by her stepsister for the theft of a five yuan note. Seventeen years later, in order for Tao Lan to reintegrate to her family unit she has to accept a return to her youthful role as 'the problem child'. By owning up to a crime which was not her own, and indeed was the cause of the intervening seventeen years of separation, Tao Lan rejects the opportunity to assert her individuality, expressing instead a desire for communality and the safety of family even if this requires a compromise in her own identity.

The conclusion of the narrative reverses the relationship patterns established in the film's opening sequence, in which each individual lived for themselves and thought first about their own priorities. By the end of the film the parents have become a united couple, and, after his initial shock, the father finds that he is able to overcome the past and accept Tao Lan as his own child. This transformation reflects Confucian filial values, in which parents give up their own ambitions for the sake of the next generation. Tao

Lan's admission of guilt follows a similar pattern, one which Sinha and Tripathi noted is common in collectivist cultures, of shutting out personal consciousness for the sake of restoring communal harmony.⁶¹ In the closing lines of the film, as Officer Jie leaves the apartment, the father can be heard comforting Tao Lan and exclaiming, 'Those five Yuan, what have they done to us. Five Yuan!'

Zhang Yuan's previous work was characterised by a spirit of cynicism towards official discourses. The conclusion of *Seventeen Years* provoked controversy from its first domestic screening. After the rebellious intensity of Zhang Yuan's earlier movies, the clear social message of Tao Lan's reunion with her parents divided the audience, with some criticising Zhang Yuan for abandoning the 'underground' movement.⁶² The entire narrative in fact owes much to socialist realist filmmaking. Officer Jie takes the role of the model communist who educates the 'grey' characters, specifically Tao Lan's step-father, who transforms under her influence in the apartment from selfish grief to acceptance of his social duty in welcoming Tao Lan back. The film even has sub-characters such as the model worker, except that, no longer part of collective industry, he now takes the form of a financially successful taxi-

⁶¹ Sinha & Tripathi, 'Individualism in a Collectivist Culture: a case of coexistence of opposites', in Kim et al. (eds.), *Individualism and Collectivism: theory, method, and applications* (New Delhi, 1994) p. 128.

⁶² Li Hongyu (李宏宇), 'Dada's Dance: Restating Comrade Zhang Yuan's Directorial Qualifications' (达达: 恢复张元同志导演资格, *Dada: Huifu Zhang Yuan Tongzhi Daoyan Zige*), *Southern Weekend* (南方周末, *Nanfang Zhoumo*), <http://www.infzm.com/content/34423> [accessed 19/10/2015].

driver, who left his job at a declining state-owned factory to run his own enterprise.

McCaig noted that,

Chinese critics have derided much of Zhang's recent work as evidence of the rebellious promise of the 'urban generation' faltering... But to accost this later period as less worthy and more convivial than his earlier cinema is to misunderstand how his work continues to faithfully document change within Beijing.⁶³

McCaig actually failed to mention *Seventeen Years* in his analysis of Zhang Yuan's work. However, his point about Zhang's cinematic aims was well made. From his earliest films, the director has been conscious of his role as a documenter. In Both *Mama* (妈妈, *Mama*, 1990) and *Sons* (儿子, *Erzi*, 1996), he developed a technique of combining documentary camera with re-creation to create one seamless narrative. *Seventeen Years* continues this tradition, in his use of documentary footage from within the prison, and the reportage-style footage of Tao Lan and Officer Jie journeying through the city.

Zhang Yuan said of his own work, "Real life stories are a hundred times more exciting than those which have been

⁶³ Dave McCaig, 'Zhang Yuan's Urban Cinema: transitional cityscapes and peripheral lives', in Berra & Liu (eds.) *World Film Locations: Beijing* (Bristol, 2012) p. 107.

composed.”⁶⁴ To prepare the script for *Seventeen Years*, he visited seventeen prisons, and interviewed almost thirty women who had been convicted of murder, both those on parole like Tao Lan, and those incarcerated for life sentences.⁶⁵ This preparation method is the same as the one he used for *East Palace West Palace* (东宫西宫, *Donggong Xigong*, 1997), for which he met with “many gay men willing to stand up and tell their story.”⁶⁶ His desire to communicate something true to real life led Zhang to deliberately court an improved relationship with the Chinese Film Bureau after 1997. They had reacted poorly to the open depiction of homosexual encounters in Beijing in *East Palace West Palace*. As he noted in an interview with *China Youth Daily*,

This thing [paying fines and working with the Film Bureau] must be done...I wanted to film *Seventeen Years*, but I may not legally film. I wanted to film in a prison, they give an issued permit for all such places, they wouldn't let me make the film [without one]...In those days I made this great effort, and today I do not regret it.⁶⁷

In the final section of the film, beginning when Tao Lan and Officer Jie reach the apartment, there is a distinct change in filming style. In earlier scenes the cinematography and editing emphasise

⁶⁴ ‘Zhang Yuan: I treat everyone as a hero’ (张元：我把每个人都当做英雄来看待, *Zhang Yuan: wo ba meigeren dou dangzuo yingxiong lai kandai*), *China Youth Daily* (中国青年报, *Zhongguo Qingnian Bao*) 06/04/2010, <http://www.artsbj.com/html/interview/wyft/ysrw/588895029886.html> [accessed 19/10/2015].

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

fluidity of movement and deep focus (Fig. 6:10). After entering the cramped apartment, however, the style changes into static camera work and formulaic shot-reverse-shot editing. A formalised acting style also creeps in: the figures are grouped in tableaux, holding fixed poses that express undercurrents of tense emotion (Fig. 6:11). At the close of the film, for example, after the father has made his pronouncement of mercy, first Tao Lan's mother and then Tao Lan herself rise, pause, then move slowly across to his chair and kneel at his feet. The camera is placed at the height of the father's head so that he appears to dominate the foreground, and the two women look up at the lens from their lower position (Fig. 6:12). The dialogue is an exegesis of their maintaining a proper relationship from now on and in the next life. The static camera work, stylised physical positions, and emotional language are highly reminiscent of films from the height of the socialist filmmaking era, even down to the positioning of the two women gazing up at their hero, the forgiving father.

Zhang Yuan's desire to tell the story of recently released prisoners is part of an overarching project which defines his work as a documenter of Beijing. The effect of the stylistic shift at the end of *Seventeen Years*, along with the didactic message implicit in the restored relationship between Tao Lan and her step-father, can be jarring. However, the film was subject to seven months of rigorous censorship before being released, demonstrating the extent of Zhang's desire for a legitimate release to a domestic audience who

could engage with his work.⁶⁸ He also mentioned in an interview that *Seventeen Years* was made in the same year that his daughter was born, which was an additional encouragement to “recover ‘Comrade Zhang Yuan’s directorial qualifications’.”⁶⁹ The conclusion of Tao Lan’s journey might therefore be considered as a pragmatic outcome to the negotiation of the censorship process. Calling contemporary Chinese culture a “culture of compromise”, Zhang Yuan described having to make such choices as another form of realism, in which the reality of life is precisely revealed through the filming process.⁷⁰ The stylistic shift to formulaic structures in the last third of the film can therefore be read as a visual marker, delineating the negotiated ending from Zhang’s more radical, instinctive style.

In addition, the narrative is not without subtlety: a number of small incidents subvert the orthodox diegesis. Whilst the conclusion suggests a strongly anti-individualist message, running in parallel with Tao Lan’s family reunion is the more interesting, and easily overlooked, story of Officer Jie. At a surface level, Jie functions as an idealised communist hero. Clearly talented and excellent at her job, she is shown to be even-handed and responsive to the prisoners in her care. However, at key moments in the text it is revealed that her relationship with her own parents is strained.

⁶⁸ ‘*Dada’s Dance: Restating Comrade Zhang Yuan’s Directorial Qualifications*’.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Luo Chongchong(罗翀翀), , ‘Underground Film on the Table – Zhang Yuan Interview (把地下电影摆上桌面 – 张元访谈, *Ba Duxia Dianying Bai Shang Zhuomian – Zhang Yuan Fangtan*), *Souhu* (搜狐, *Souhu*) 01/09/2004, <http://gb.cri.cn/4221/2004/09/01/602@286302.htm> (accessed 11/11/15).

When Jie receives the news that she has been given New Year off, she excitedly calls home to tell them that she will be returning for dinner. At first, however, her mother actually fails to recognise her voice. Subsequently, she merely questions why Jie has been given the night off when there are married colleagues who should receive that privilege. Jie's posture slumps as she asks, "Don't you want me to come home?"

A later conversation with Tao Lan at a dumpling stall reveals more details. Jie's decision to leave home and serve in the prison service has caused a deep trauma. She describes the impact that her first New Year away from home had on her family as they contemplated her empty chair and missing presence around the table. A surface reading of the text might suggest the familiar socialist paradigm of a model character putting duty before personal interest. In these narratives there is usually resolution with the natal family, who come to understand and appreciate their relative's sacrifices for the nation. Jie's situation remains unresolved, however, as she ends up missing dinner with her family once again to help Tao Lan reach home.

As Jerome Silbergeld noted in his analysis of *The Story of Qiu Ju*, "a frank critique of Chinese justice could not be brought but perhaps a small, well-disguised cinematic jibe could be managed."⁷¹ In *Qiu Ju* this is achieved through the mechanism of genre pastiche: every time a moral and upstanding officer goes out of his way to

⁷¹ Jerome Silbergeld, *China into Film: frames of reference in contemporary Chinese cinema* (London, 1999) p. 125.

help Qiu Ju, a bumbling, partially illiterate, unworldly peasant, the urbane viewer is able to respond with sarcasm to the worn out cinematic convention.⁷² In similar fashion, Zhang Yuan punctuated *Seventeen Years* with moments of sublime irony. One such scene is Tao Lan and Officer Jie's arrival at what used to be the *hutong* where her parents lived. Unaware that the area has been demolished and the residents moved to a completely different part of the city several hours away, Tao Lan and Jie arrive to find a field of rubble. Climbing across the piles of bricks looking for something familiar, Tao Lan reaches the corner of what used to be her home. She is staring at it when Jie catches her up and remarks, "Oh, this is a toilet. I'll go first", and proceeds to use it whilst Tao Lan stands outside holding her coat and looking baffled at the intimate destruction of a poignant moment. Subsequently, whilst hunting for the local police office, they encounter a young officer standing by himself next to the one remaining structure in the otherwise demolished *hutong*. To all of Officer Jie's questions he replies, "I don't know". The senior officers have been given two days off to celebrate the holiday, and why is he standing by himself in the middle of nowhere? "Just following orders."

Seventeen Years, like *Black Snow*, presents the conflicting pressures on young people in the 1990s through an intersection of multiple temporal frames. Both Tao Lan and Officer Jie are caught between the demands of official time and belonging in the state, the

⁷² For more on *The Story of Qiu Ju*, see Chapter Three of this Thesis.

expectations of family and community, and the potential opportunities of modernity. The ending of the film suggests that negotiation with the censorate produced a narrative resolution supportive of the CCP's campaigns to promote stable nuclear families, and the virtue of placing communality first. Zhang Yuan's filming style and ironic gestures undermine the simplicity of this reading, and highlight the tensions inherent in the position of youth as occupying a liminal and contested social position.

Beijing Bicycle

Beijing Bicycle tells the story of two seventeen-year-old boys in Beijing at the turn of the new millennium. Guei is a rural migrant to the city who gets a job as a bicycle messenger. The job comes with a top-of-the-range mountain bike, which he has to pay off through deductions from his wages. Just as he has achieved this goal, the bike is stolen. Jian, a high-school student from an impoverished urban family, buys the bike at a second-hand market. He wants it so that he can fit in with his wealthier classmates, and to attract the attention of a beautiful girl from school. Guei, meanwhile, in order to keep his job, is desperately searching the city for his bike. By chance, he spots Jian with it, follows him, and steals it back. There then begins a tussle over the bike between the boys, with Jian's classmates pitching in to beat Guei up more than once. Eventually the truth is revealed, and the boys agree to share the bike. In the meantime, the object of Jian's affection has started going out with a

much older, cooler mountain biker from another gang. Incensed by rage and frustration, Jian attacks him. Guei gets caught up in the ensuing fight, and both boys are left badly injured, and the bike is destroyed. At the end of the film, Guei is seen carrying the mangled bike frame home through the traffic.

In their framing of the city as a space of coexisting histories, Dutton, Lo and Wu argued that,

The built environment helps to make concrete the way the state “thinks” about things. The dynastic city, the Maoist city, and the city of economic reform all offer spatial maps of very different modes of government and of power in very different times.⁷³

Their analysis suggests a means to identify the temporalities shaping and framing a city through the construction of a temporal map, in which multiple layers of history are seen, overlaid in the built environment. As the quote above implies, the past of tradition, the more recent past of high socialism, and the contemporary present of rapid modernisation all spatially coexisted in Beijing at the end of the twentieth century, and impinged upon the lives of the urban populace. In *Beijing Bicycle*, the recent socialist past is largely absent. Both Guei and Jian’s lives are lived in the traditional architecture of the *hutong*, but given meaning by the futuristic

⁷³ Dutton et al., *Beijing Time*, p. 49.

landscapes of modernity and capitalism in the developing city.⁷⁴ As Bagger-Peterson suggested, “In *Beijing Bicycle* the city itself becomes a protagonist conditioning the narrative, and the boys of the story are conditioned by the city.”⁷⁵ The bicycle represents the means for each of them to navigate the urban environment and move outside the *hutong*, economically for Guei and socially for Jian.

It is this distinction which highlights a key dynamic of multi-temporality in the film. One teenager, Guei, is a rural migrant. The other, Jian, is an urban adolescent. The protagonists, therefore, although occupying the same physical space, move through it with very different aims. The first third of the film concentrates exclusively on Guei. He is introduced as part of a group of migrants who are all interviewing for a bike messenger job. The style Wang Xiaoshuai uses for his opening scene is immediately resonant of documentary, filming different applicants identically in tight close-up, talking about themselves to someone off-screen (Fig. 6:13). The audience hear stories of rural homes, previous odd jobs, and what they have been doing since arriving in the city. It is a familiar trope, and immediately establishes the film as part of a genre exploring the rural migrant paradigm.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ See Jie Lu, ‘Metropoliarities: *The Troubled Lot* and *Beijing Bicycle*’, *Journal of Contemporary China* 17/57 (Nov 2008) pp. 717-732.

⁷⁵ Mai Corlin Bagger-Peterson, ‘*Beijing Bicycle*: stories from a transformative space’, in Gimpel et al., *Creative Spaces: seeking the dynamics of change in China* (Denmark, 2012) p. 165.

⁷⁶ See Chapter Three of this Thesis for discussion of films representing rural-urban migration.

The story of the maid is an interesting sub-plot to this aspect of the film. Watched first by Guei and his landlord through a hole in the wall at the back of their lodgings, a beautiful girl is seen trying on different outfits in front of a plate-glass window in a modern house (Fig. 3:14, 3:15, 3:16). Her rapid changes of clothes appear almost magical: the boys look briefly away, and when they look back seconds later she is wearing another outfit. Time appears to be speeded up for her. The unreality of this scene, which for the observing migrants suggests the wonder of urbanite life, contains a clue as to the girl's real identity. After a collision with Guei's bike that knocks her unconscious, she is discovered to be a migrant just like themselves, and is dismissed for wearing her employer's clothes. For the maid, clothing represents the ability to enter the time frame of urban life, in the same way that the bike allows access to different landscapes for Guei. In fact, it is Guei's theft of a silk scarf from the maid when she is unconscious which prompts her discovery by her employers and her expulsion from their world.

The film's depiction of migrant life in the city, although sympathetic, has many of the qualities associated with urban filmmaking about rural subjects which I discussed in Chapter Three. The cluelessness of Guei and his landlord, in particular, are pushed to an extreme, in much the same way that Wang Xiaoshuai positioned Dongzi in *So Close to Paradise* as a 'poor and blank' archetype. The landlord, for example, gives Guei sage advice such as not to let anyone from the city know that he is different from

them. However, this advice is given whilst squatting by the road brushing his teeth, and toothpaste streams from his mouth and over his clothes whilst he talks. Similarly, Guei, being chased by Jian, crashes the bike into the back of a truck carrying sacks of flour, and emerges with a completely white face and a white behind. The effect is clownish, and this impression is exacerbated by the fact that he spends the next few scenes still covered with flour. These heavy-handed moments of humour at the expense of the film's rural subjects undermine the film's other, more sensitive, points about the isolation and cultural confusion experienced by young teenage migrants when immersed in the city for the first time without any guidance or support.

The film also highlights internal tensions among the urban population, revealing the urbanite poor who exist on the fringes of modernity without being full partakers in it. Jian's family belong to this group. They are a composite family: Jian is the son of the father, and his step sister is the daughter of the mother. They live in a tiny two-room apartment in the upstairs of a cramped *hutong*, with no private space. Jian carefully conceals his home life from his wealthier school friends, going so far as to wear his school uniform on a Saturday rather than be seen in his own unfashionably cheap clothes. Jian has frequently been misread by film scholars, who, by focusing exclusively on the rural/urban divide in *Beijing Bicycle*, see

him as a privileged Beijinger.⁷⁷ In fact, Jian is as much an outsider as Guei. He frequently has to buy his way into the company of the local rich kids, paying for their video games at the arcade and buying them drinks. They are all obsessed with bike tricks, and it is this aspect of their sub-culture which prompts Jian's desperate desire to own a bike of his own. As Bagger-Peterson commented, "Through the bike Jian can leave the realm of the dysfunctional family and enter that of the equally dysfunctional group of friends; a group of friends at a liminal stage mimicking the world of the grown-ups."⁷⁸

As this quote suggests, another temporality present in *Beijing Bicycle* is that of the generational divide. Nelson et al. found an increasing chasm between the expectations and beliefs of parents and children developing in China from the late twentieth century onwards.⁷⁹ This gulf is very much in evidence in Jian's troubled relationship with his father. The root of the conflict over the bike in *Beijing Bicycle* is that Jian has bought it second hand with stolen money, not realising that the bike itself was in turn stolen from Guei. He has taken matters into his own hands after being repeatedly let down by his father's failure to come through on the promise of a bike legitimately purchased for him. He accuses his father in one scene, "First it was for when I got to high school, then for when I

⁷⁷ See, for example, Gong Haomin, *Uneven Modernity: literature, film, and intellectual discourse in postsocialist China* (Honolulu HI, 2012) p. 122; and Gary Xu, *Sinascape: contemporary Chinese cinema* (Lanham MD, 2007) p. 77.

⁷⁸ Bagger-Peterson, 'Beijing Bicycle', p. 168.

⁷⁹ Larry J Nelson et al., 'Facing Adulthood: comparing the criteria that Chinese emerging adults and their parents have for adulthood', *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 28/2 (2012) p. 192.

was in the top five of the class. I'm in the top five of the school now." His father has once again put off the purchase of a bike, this time because Jian's step sister has achieved entrance into a top school and they need the money for her fees.

The challenging social situation of the family and the generational divide therefore interact here. The scenes in which Jian and his father discuss the bike reveal their very different worldviews, and the way these construct their relative conceptions of what constitutes adulthood. Jian's father, for whom family responsibility is key, expects his son to accept the delay in purchasing a bike because he is grown-up enough to put the needs of the family first. For Jian, however, his vision of adulthood is shaped by internal factors such as the morality of keeping a promise. For his father to continually fail in this regard means that Jian no longer views him as an adult figure worthy of respect and chooses to find a way to meet his own needs rather than rely on him.

These different categorisations of adulthood, which in turn impact upon what constitutes youth, reveal the complexities of interacting temporal forces. What is particularly interesting is that, whilst Jian asserts his independence from his father, which therefore implies a move away from adolescence and towards adulthood, on a moral basis, Guei is operating as an adult by taking complete financial responsibility for himself. The film consistently parallels the two boys, revealing their similar desires and goals with

the aim of breaking down the rural/urban divide between them, and establishing that they are ultimately much the same. Despite linking them closer and closer together in the text, until eventually they are beaten up by the same hooligan gang, the distances between them cannot ultimately be bridged. Unlike Gong, I do not see a ritual of coming of age in the conclusion of *Beijing Bicycle*.⁸⁰ The final clash with the bullies is brought about by Jian's attack on their leader with a brick, a scene which bears striking similarities to the gang fight in *In The Heat of the Sun*.⁸¹ This petty act of hooliganism produces no changes for the boys, as Guei carries away his now mutilated bike to continue his quest for financial success in the city, and Jian presumably goes home and back to school. Therefore, although the narrative parallels and draws together the two boys' experiences to suggest a similar life-stage of adolescence, at the conclusion of the film they both still remain defined by the temporalities of rural migrant and urban poor respectively.

The protagonists in *Beijing Bicycle* occupy liminal social positions, but, more interestingly, engage with the occupation of transient and boundary spaces to create their own subcultures. James observed that, "...'adolescence' can be described as a liminal experience, but it is a rite of passage to adulthood which adolescents construct for themselves in the absence of any institutionally conducted transition to the adult world."⁸² The rites of

⁸⁰ Gong, *Uneven Modernity*, p. 121.

⁸¹ See Chapter 2 of this Thesis for more on *In the Heat of the Sun*.

⁸² James, 'Learning to Belong', p. 156.

passage which James described are liminal in the sense that they are unsanctioned by adult or other official ideologies. They belong to the specific social group of adolescents who are practising them, and they emerge out of the unique socio-cultural contexts in which they live. Environment is therefore key to how youth subcultures develop and operate.

This phenomenon can be clearly seen in *Beijing Bicycle* among the teenagers with whom Jian spends his time. Their primary social spaces are the sites of construction and demolition surrounding the *hutong* (Fig. 6:17, 6:18). The audience is first introduced to Jian and his gang with their bikes on one of the top floors of a partially constructed high-rise building. The vast echoing halls of its concrete skeleton, open on all sides and looming over the *hutong* below, provides a perfect location to practise bike tricks, smoke, and fight. From high above the city to below it, one of their other favoured haunts is a pedestrian underpass, where they corner and beat up Guei. The extended adolescent community also congregate in the pit left by a demolished building next to some defunct railway tracks, where the rival bike gang show off their tricks and separate groups of girls and boys eye each other up.

These scenes are interesting for two reasons. Firstly, the youths have colonised otherwise unused or temporary environments for their own use. They have taken spaces intended for other purposes and applied their own meanings to them. Bagger-Peterson, drawing on the work of Doreen Massey, observed that

space is conditioned by the stories its users tell about it. It therefore comes to embody change, as the meanings constructed around it transform.⁸³ The teenagers' use of space in *Beijing Bicycle* therefore suggests greater intentionality than is implied by the use of the word liminal. Although their environment is on a boundary in the sense that it is on the fringes of inhabited space, nonetheless they occupy it with purpose. By applying their own uses to it they deliberately create meaning and produce a defined subculture.

Secondly, the means by which the teenagers colonise and create meaning is through the medium of the mountain bike. It is the culture of doing bike tricks which provides the community with a shared focal point, and gives meaning to the spaces they inhabit. This must-have item defines inclusion or exclusion from the youth subculture. In order to avoid a liminal social position, such as that experienced by Tao Lan and Quanzi in the other two films, it is vital that Jian owns a bike. Identity and socialisation are therefore premised on a consumable item. This fusion of the commercial and the identity narratives which young people build around it, creates an ambiguous dichotomy, which is simultaneously independent from and yet still within the boundaries of dominant culture, supporting the idea of youth as a subculture in which individuals play with the trappings of adulthood in a responsibility-free environment.⁸⁴

⁸³ Bagger-Peterson, 'Beijing Bicycle', p. 158. For more on Massey's approach to space, see Chapter Five of this Thesis.

⁸⁴ See Song Weijie, 'Transgression, Submission, and the Fantasy of Youth Subculture: the nostalgic symptoms of *In the Heat of the Sun*', in Kong & Lent (eds.), *100 Years of Chinese Cinema: a generational dialogue* (Norwalk CT, 2006) p. 173.

By contrast with the undertones of social criticism in both *Black Snow* and *Seventeen Years*, *Beijing Bicycle* was shaped far more by commercial factors. Wang Xiaoshuai said of the development of the narrative, “[At] this time you must ‘by film support film’, [so] how to fight for the audience became a key component... to shoot the kind of film story which will attract an audience becomes very important.”⁸⁵ However, Wang Xiaoshuai’s failure to satisfy the censors was seen in an extensive delay in releasing the film domestically. Although it was critiqued by the state for its ‘negative portrayals’ of Beijing life, the tensions surrounding the release of the film suggest the continued focus of the censorate on representations of youth.⁸⁶ *Beijing Bicycle*’s implication that commercialism had a greater impact on the formation of adolescent culture than family or the state, and its depiction of the social exclusion of marginalised young people, indicates the emergence of a fully depoliticised youth identity in art films by the end of the 1990s, at odds with the official attempts to delineate youth within a concept defined by the CCP.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the representation of youth in three art films from the 1990s. I positioned my discussion against an

⁸⁵ ‘Wang Xiaoshuai: I want to adhere to my own approach (王小帅: 我要坚持自己的态度, *Wang Xiaoshuai: wo yao jianchi ziji de taidu*), *Contemporary Film* (当代电影, *Dangdai Dianying*) 5 (2006) pp. 35-36.

⁸⁶ ‘The Box Office does not Stimulate My Nerves – Wang Xiaoshuai Interview’ (票房刺激不了我的神经 – 王小帅专访, *Piaofang Ciji bule Wode Shenjing – Wang Xiaoshuai Zhuanfang*), *Art Review* (艺术评论, *Yishu Pinglun*) 06 (2005) p. 37.

historical framework within which the concept of youth was not definitively defined. I explored the conflicting pressures on young people that influenced their identity, using the concept of multi-temporality as a root to historicising those intersecting forces. My argument centred on the liminal position of young people in Chinese society in the 1990s, revealing the inadequacies of either a politicised or a traditional framework of *qingnian* to fully meet the challenges posed by emerging adults' experiences of accelerated modernity.

In my discussion of *Black Snow*, I explored Xie Fei's positioning of his protagonist at the threshold of three competing temporalities: the past, official time, and modernity. Similarly, in *Seventeen Years*, Zhang Yuan's characters also negotiate a contested space of intersecting expectations and desires shaped by family, the state's social engineering platforms, and the new opportunities afforded by reform. *Beijing Bicycle* developed from these themes in its depiction of a distinct urban youth culture, actively occupying and applying personal meanings to liminal physical spaces. All three films revealed the complex pressures placed on the representation of youth throughout the 1990s, demonstrating the continued efforts of the CCP to maintain hegemonic control over the depiction of adolescence in cultural products. Of the five topics surveyed in this thesis, films about youth most consistently experienced the challenge of direct intervention from the censorship system. This suggests that,

despite the increasing depoliticisation of representational forms in art cinema in the 1990s, directors wishing to make films about youth culture were still negotiating the boundaries of artistic expression under the CCP.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion

In this thesis I used a cultural history methodology to reassess the work of art filmmakers in the PRC after 1989. Taking as my starting point the CCP's pedagogical approach to cinema, and official attempts to control filmic representation, I explored the approach of art filmmakers to representing contemporary social themes whilst working on the margins of mainstream cinema practice. By focusing on narrative and audio-visual construction in historical context, I was able to form conclusions about the boundaries of filmic representation for art filmmakers in the 1990s. This approach highlighted the key role that historically constituted modes of filmmaking played in restraining representation. It also indicated the significance of historical reassessment in films that resisted the imposition of an official representational mode. By consciously innovating and experimenting with cinematic form, by the end of the decade art filmmakers were producing work that reflected a new artistic independence. In this chapter I will briefly restate the conclusions I reached in the body of the thesis, before making some final observations, and suggesting opportunities for further research.

In Chapter Two I considered three films depicting China's socialist past, in the light of the CCP's post-1989 reconstruction of the official historical narrative. An analysis of *In the Heat of the Sun* showed a deliberate countering of the 'Ten Years of Chaos' rhetoric

about the Cultural Revolution. By foregrounding cinematic techniques that resisted the imposition of a unilinear narrative, Jiang Wen created visibility for the role of memories to supplement and challenge official history. *To Live* also created a shared memory space through which to view Chinese history, by valorising the family at the heart of its narrative. This approach countered the official positioning of the nation as the unit of history, and highlighted the greater significance to memory of the mundane intimacies of everyday family life. In my discussion of *Platform*, I turned my attention to a history of the reform period, showing how Jia Zhangke's film presented a narrative of resistance to the dominant rhetoric of progress through a heteroglossic soundtrack, both by challenging the relevance of official markers of history to everyday life, and by memorialising alternatives. I concluded that the 'gaps and spaces' in the CCP's historical narrative provided opportunities for art filmmakers to assert alternative representational approaches.

Chapter Three explored the representation of rural migrants to the city in four films. In a comparison of *The Story of Qiu Ju* and *Not One Less*, I revealed a reliance on tropes drawn from earlier artistic and film traditions when depicting the rural environment. I discussed Zhang Yimou's reliance on the figure of a naïve and stubborn peasant to communicate a discourse of social criticism. In *Ermo*, I contrasted the filming of rural and urban to demonstrate the use of an essentialised divide. Through the tropes of the female body and the television screen, I suggested that the film positioned

its rural subjects for an urban gaze. Continuing this point with reference to *So Close to Paradise*, I demonstrated that art films about migrants in the 1990s reinforced an official discourse of representing migration as problematic, by failing to counter historic modes of filming rural subjects. I concluded that art filmmaking in the 1990s remained strongly inflected with a diasporic approach to representing rural communities which positioned the filmmakers as part of elite, urban discourses.

In Chapter Four I discussed the reductive representational approaches to depicting women that dominated Chinese culture in the twentieth century, outlining three different subjectivities which had been applied to women: *nüxing*, from the 1930s and 1940s, was concerned with displaying the need for modernisation and reform through female bodies; *funü*, from the socialist period, was a degendered subject intended to function as a sign of progressive ideology for the audience; and *nüren*, which emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s, was an attempt by Chinese feminists to establish a depoliticised model of female personhood. I explored each of these forms in relation to art film in the 1990s. My analysis of *Women from the Lake of Scented Souls* revealed that using the *nüxing* model silenced the depiction of female characters' inner lives, by positioning them as signs in films about the need for social reform. In *Temptress Moon*, the occupation of both genders by the male protagonist left the female characters operating in the text as idealised symbols, after the model of *funü*. *I Love Beijing's* non-

linear narrative form, however, moved away from restrictive historical modes of filming women towards the emergence of a feminist filmmaking style akin to the concept of *nüren*. I concluded that in order to break out of historically contingent representational modes, art directors needed to innovate film form and raised the potential for this to happen through a return inwards to a feminine space.

In Chapter Five I explored the ways in which art filmmakers used an awareness of history to counter the CCP's promotion of urban regeneration in the 1990s. Beginning with *No Regrets About Youth*, I demonstrated a connection between tropes of amnesia and demolition, and preservationist campaigns opposed to the destruction of vernacular housing. A comparison of *Shower* and *Beautiful New World* showed how regional particularism was used to obstruct the imposition of a national rhetoric of modernisation. In *Shower*, the loss of traditional pastimes and established communities were presented as a challenge to the positive official message associated with the relocation of urban residents from the *hutong* to new developments. In *Beautiful New World*, the streamlined narrative of Shanghai as a dynamic modern city was subverted by highlighting the inadequacies of the rewritten history to match socioeconomic realities. I then explored the historical references and the use of motifs of doubling in *Suzhou River*, to demonstrate that art filmmakers were self-consciously making history visible, in order to reveal the selective construction of

national modernisation rhetoric. I concluded that art films critical of urban redevelopment in the 1990s constituted the formation of a filmic archive, preserving a limited but alternative record of urban history on screen.

Finally, in Chapter Six, I used the concept of multi-temporality to explore the representation of youth in art films from the 1990s. Based on the lack of an absolute historical definition of what constituted youth in China, I discussed the interweaving of multiple concepts of identity in films about adolescence, to demonstrate the emergence of a distinct, non-politicised, youth culture by the end of the decade. Looking first at *Black Snow*, as a film made in the months surrounding the Tiananmen Square crisis in 1989, I revealed the tensions surrounding the politicisation of youth in the twentieth century, and the continuing social need to meet traditional expectations. In *Seventeen Years*, I continued to explore the conflicts emerging from multiple expectations placed on young people, as well as discussing the pressures on filmic representation emerging from the experience of censorship. In my final film, *Beijing Bicycle*, I contrasted the experience of adolescence of two teenagers from different backgrounds in turn of the century Beijing, demonstrating the emergence of a new youth identity based in liminal city spaces. I concluded that in the conflict surrounding multiple historical narratives of youth, art filmmakers chose to concentrate on the peripheral social experiences of emerging adults as a depoliticised concept of adolescence.

I would like to conclude this thesis by making four observations about the significance of historical reassessment to the study of Chinese art filmmakers in the 1990s. As Chapters Three and Four made clear, lack of awareness of the historically constituted nature of established filming modes limited art directors' artistic independence. Despite creative innovations, films such as *The Story of Qiu Ju* and *So Close to Paradise* reinforced rather than countered the rural-urban divide. In the same way, films about female subjects that drew from earlier filming models, despite attempting to depict feminine subjectivity, reduced gender to a means of engaging the viewer in narratives about wider social issues. The use of historical modes of representation without considering their socio-political origins hampered the filmmakers' construction of oppositional dialogues to official state narratives.

By contrast, an active engagement with history on screen made the presence of the State visible. As both Chapter Two and Chapter Five showed, by using film as an alternative memory space, the gaps and deficiencies in the CCP's representational modes were made apparent. The limitations placed on filmic representation in the mainstream, leitmotif culture, became more obvious when the work of art film directors' consciously asserted alternatives. In the context of the Patriotic Education campaign, and the official rhetoric on modernisation, memorialisation of familial, generational, or local memory, formed a space of resistance to the national, teleological interpretation of history.

Awareness of the historicity of filmic representation consequently produced innovation in the work of art directors. As they sought to negotiate a space for artistic authenticity within a culture of hegemonic control by the CCP, filmmakers were forced to experiment with new representational forms. *Platform*, *I Love Beijing*, and *Suzhou River* all used creative approaches to narrative structure and form to counteract the dominance of restrictive representational styles. The films in Chapter Six instead focused on depicting an underrepresented and marginalised social group. By innovating in these ways, art filmmakers embraced a peripheral position in the Chinese film industry.

At the close of the 1990s, art filmmakers in the PRC had negotiated key areas of contested representation towards the assertion of a new level of artistic independence. By moving away from historically contingent representational modes, and finding new topics and forms for cinematic expression, they had established themselves as a distinct artistic voice. In taking up a peripheral stance, they had also distinguished themselves from the pedagogical model of filmmaking that had dominated much of twentieth century Chinese cinema. Nonetheless, they had also revealed their continued dependence upon approaches that positioned them as part of an intellectual elite, producing work that left silent the subaltern voices within discourses surrounding China's contemporary social situation.

These conclusions offer the possibility of a number of avenues for further research. The process by which art filmmakers moved toward artistic independence within a hegemonic culture in the 1990s, and thereafter, might fruitfully be considered alongside similar developments in the field of Chinese art practice. Kraus has written of the professionalisation of artists into a defined body operating outside the patronage and control of the State in the reform era.¹ A comparison with art filmmakers might highlight similar processes at work in both fields. Utilising a cultural history approach could also reveal connections with China's history of a literati class, scholar artists practising at an elite level to communicate their responses to history and contemporary society through artistic media. The re-emergence of this phenomenon in the post-Mao era would be a significant intervention into historical understandings of Chinese culture in the late twentieth century.

A second research project arises from the concept, raised in Chapter Five, of the emergence of unofficial filmic archives. Ongoing research by Dryburgh into oral history accounts of the Japanese occupation of Manchuria (1931-1945) has revealed the construction in recent years of online, non-state archives, which memorialise complex personal memories of the occupation.² In the field of documentary filmmaking, Wu Wenguang's 'memory project' similarly aims to capture oral history accounts of the Great Leap

¹ Richard Curt Kraus, *The Party and the Arts in China: the new politics of culture* (Oxford, 2004).

² Marjorie Dryburgh, 'Visual Histories of a Northern City: in search of a people's past', seminar paper presented at University of Edinburgh Chinese Studies Seminar, 27/01/16.

Forward (1958-1962). Like the alternative histories discussed in this thesis, these projects constitute the collection and archiving of memories at odds with the highly reductive official accounts of these periods of Chinese history. Considering Chinese art films as a form of alternative historical archive would add to this growing body of research.

Finally, I believe this thesis has demonstrated the value of a cultural history approach to the study of cinema. In contextualising and historicising the representational modes used by art filmmakers, both a dependence upon established conventions, and true instances of innovation become apparent. Furthermore, this framing can reveal filmmakers' positions in relation to the State, and broader society and culture. Whilst as an historian I would hesitate to propose methodological approaches to colleagues in film studies, I nonetheless suggest that this method would have utility beyond the study of art cinema in the PRC. In an academic context in which transnational and global approaches, focused on the flows of cultural and commercial capital, have become pre-eminent, the national scale of analysis can be easily disregarded as retrograde. However, a study of cinema that recognises the strong and enduring influence of historically-conditioned conventions over representation can continue to offer new, and potentially surprising, innovations in our understanding, particularly within contexts of contested artistic practice.



Fig. 2:1 – Jiang Wen (1994) The image freezes in *In the Heat of the Sun*.



Fig. 2:2 – Jiang Wen (1994) The scene rewinds as Ma Xiaojun questions his own memories.



Fig. 2:3 – Zhang Yimou (1995) Preparations for battle.



Fig. 2:4 – Zhang Yimou (1995) The battle is over.



Fig. 2:5 – Zhang Yimou (1995) Jiazhen and Fengxia



Fig. 2:6 – Zhang Yimou (1995) A tight close-up on Jiazhen excludes political context from an intimate moment.



Fig. 3:1 – Zhang Yimou (1992) Qiu Ju and Meizi travel to the city.

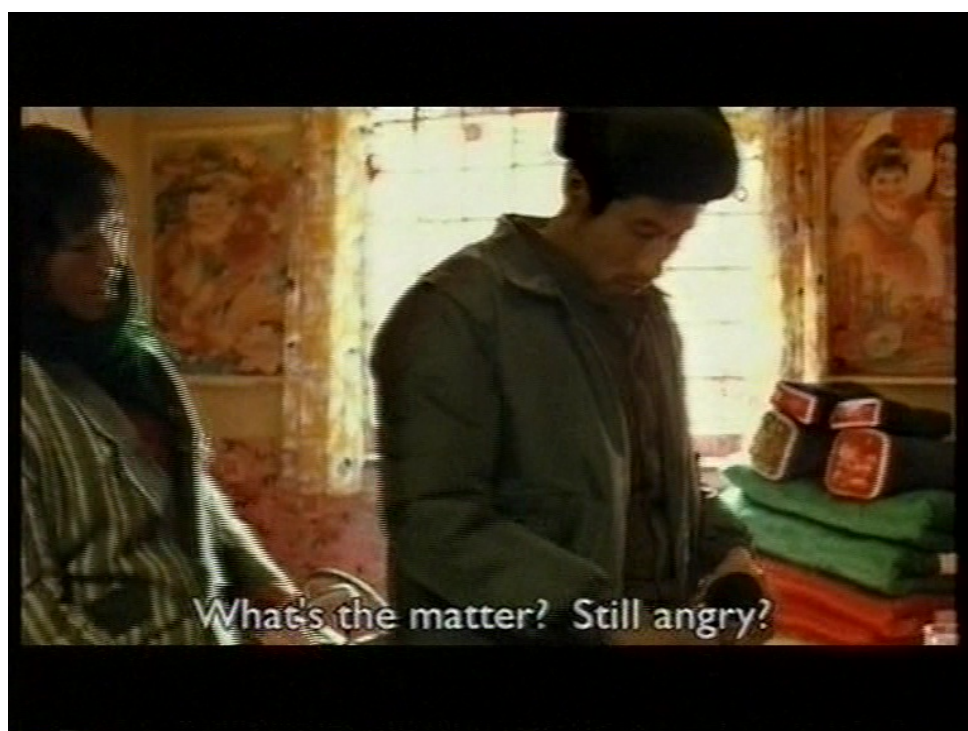


Fig. 3:2 – Zhang Yimou (1992) Qiu Ju confronts Qinglai.



Fig. 3:3 – Zhang Yimou (1992) Qiu Ju is insistent.



Fig. 3:4 – Zhang Yimou (1992) Qinglai is defeated.



Fig. 3:5 – Zhang Yimou (1999) – Wei Minzhi appears on a programme about rural affairs.



Fig. 3:6 – Zhang Yimou (1999) – Wei Minzhi faces the camera.



Fig. 3:7 – Zhang Yimou (1999) – Wei Minzhi appears in close-up, projected into urban homes.



Fig. 3:8 – Zhou Xiaowen (1994) Ermo travels to the town on Xiazi's truck.



Fig. 3:9 – Zhou Xiaowen (1994) – The truck reaches the main road and the filming style changes.



Fig. 3:10 – Zhou Xiaowen (1994) TV screens in the store show western subtitled shows.



Fig. 3:11 – Zhou Xiaowen (1994) In a reverse shot the camera reveals the watching crowd.



Fig. 3:12 – Wang Xiaoshuai (1998) Ruan Hong is interviewed at the prison.



Fig. 3:13 – Wang Xiaoshuai (1998) The camera focuses on Ruan Hong.



Fig. 3:14 – Wang Xiaoshuai (1998) Ruan Hong is filmed in extreme close-up.



Fig. 4:1 – Chen Kaige (1996) Ruyi's gaze as a child.



Fig. 4:2 – Chen Kaige (1996) Ruyi's gaze in the alleyway.



Fig. 4:3 – Chen Kaige (1996) Ruyi's gaze after rejecting Zhongliang.



Fig. 4:4 – Chen Kaige (1996) Mrs Shen holds the gaze.



Fig. 4:5 – Chen Kaige (1996) A watching Ruyi returns it.



Fig. 4:6 – Ning Ying (2001) Dezi is called to identify Xiaoxue's body.



Fig. 4:7 – Ning Ying (2001) Two policemen smoke whilst Xiaoxue's injuries are discussed.



Fig. 4:8 – Ning Ying (2001) A policeman pockets some of Xiaoxue's cassette collection.



Fig. 4:9 – Ning Ying (2001) The girl dances.



Fig. 4:10 – Ning Ying (2001) *Dezi* collapses.

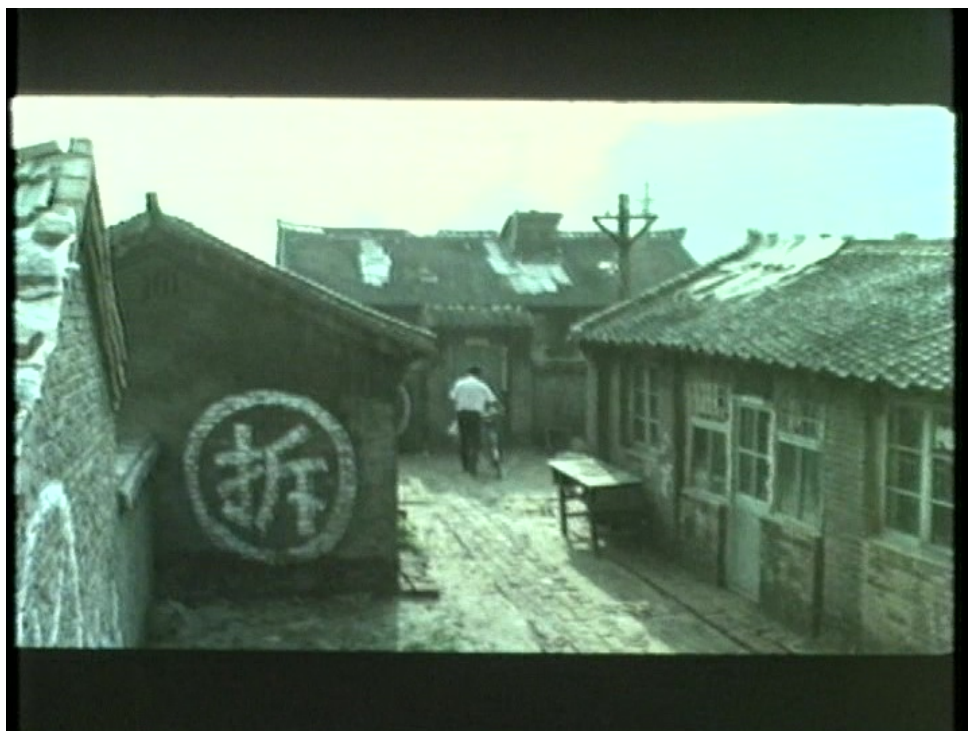


Fig. 5:1 – Zhou Xiaowen (1992) The *hutong* is marked for demolition.



Fig. 5:2 – Zhou Xiaowen (1992) Mai Qun and Song Li visit a furniture store.

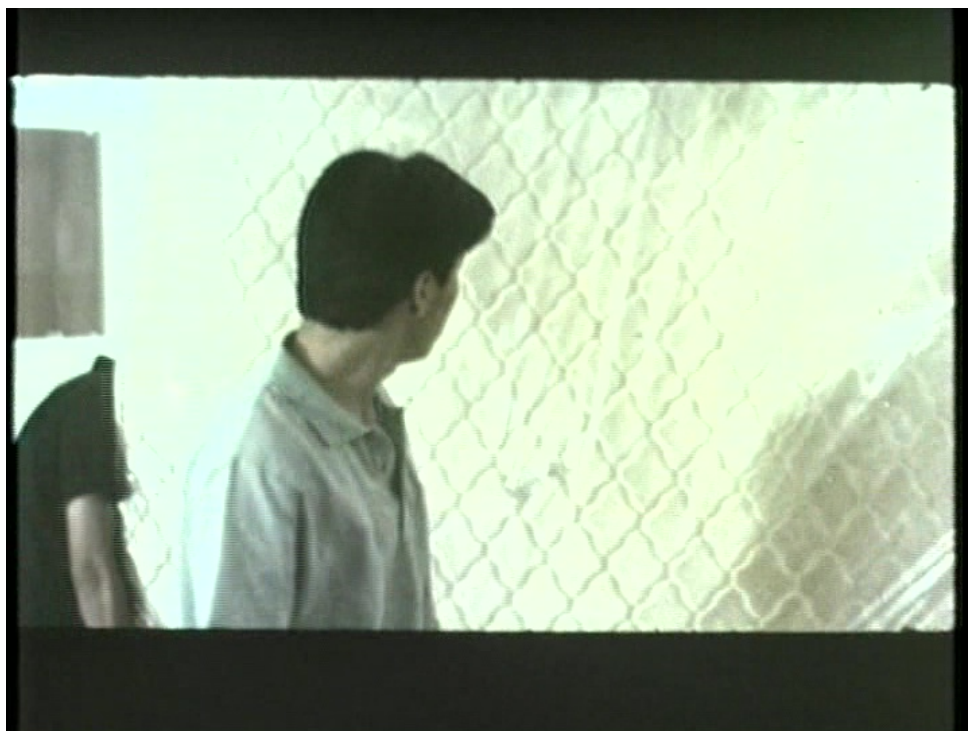


Fig. 5:3 – Zhou Xiaowen (1992) Song Li and Mai Qun are blocked from each other.



Fig. 5:4 – Zhou Xiaowen (1992) Skyscrapers at the end of the film.



Fig. 5:5 – Zhang Yang (1999) The shower station.



Fig. 5:6 – Zhang Yang (1999) *The bathhouse*.



Fig. 5:7 – Zhang Yang (1999) *Community in the bathhouse*.



Fig. 5:8 – Zhang Yang (1999) *Shower* references *Yellow Earth*.



Fig. 5:9 – Zhang Yang (1999) *Shower* references *The Horse Thief*.



Fig. 5:10 – Lou Ye (2000) Demolition along the banks of Suzhou Creek.



Fig. 5:11 – Lou Ye (2000) The camera angle tilts.



Fig. 5:12 – Lou Ye (2000) The Pudong skyline appears.



Fig. 5:13 – Lou Ye (2000) Waibaidu Bridge.



Fig. 5:14 – Lou Ye (2000) Breaking the 'fourth wall'.



Fig. 5:15 – Lou Ye (2000) The visible camera.



Fig. 6:1 – Xie Fei (1990) Quanzi experiences a flashback.



Fig. 6:2 – Xie Fei (1990) Quanzi's flashback.



Fig. 6:3 – Xie Fei (1990) Reality is broken by the flashback.

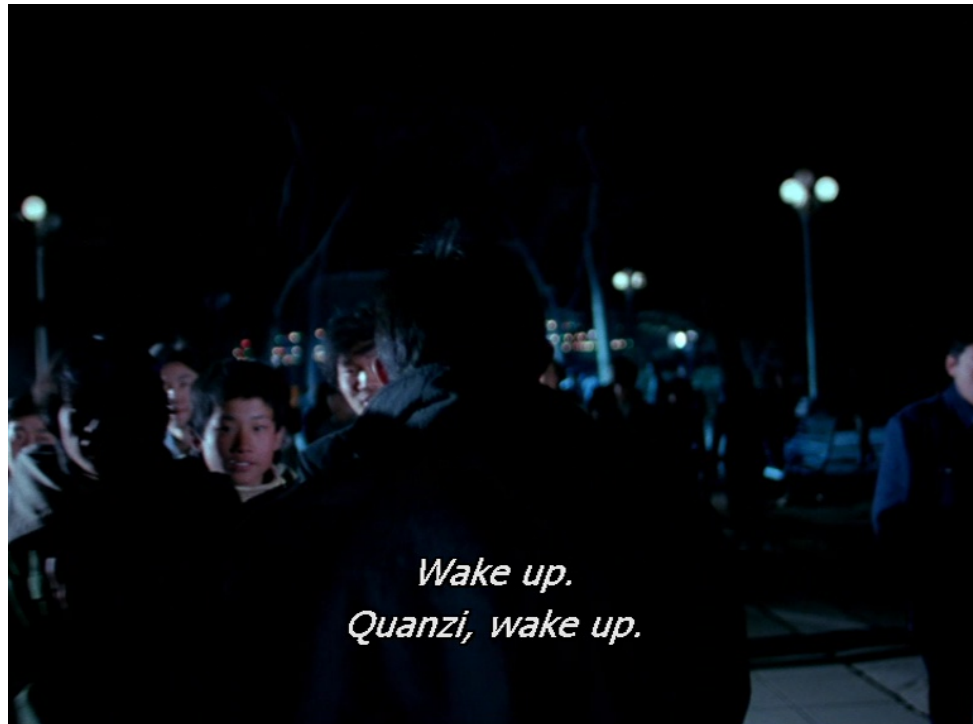


Fig. 6:4 – Xie Fei (1990) 'Flashbulb' memories coming to Quanzi as he succumbs to a stabbing.



Fig. 6:5 – Xie Fei (1990) Yaqiu's first iteration.



Fig. 6:6 – Xie Fei (1990) Yaqui's transformation.



Fig. 6:7 – Xie Fei (1990) Yaqui's transformation is complete.

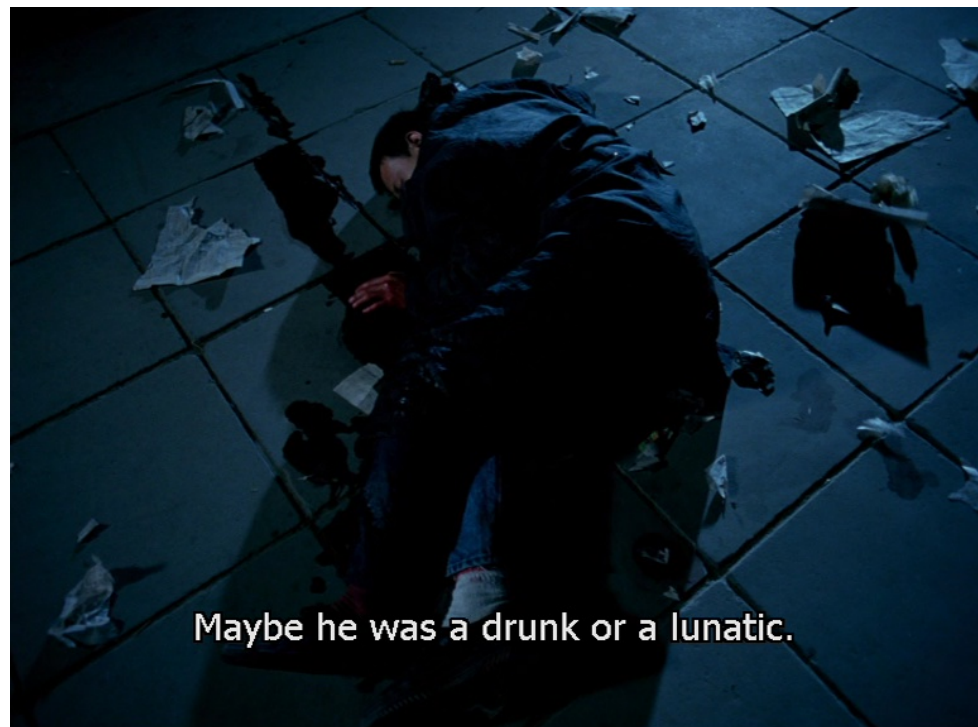


Fig. 6:8 – Xie Fei (1990) Quanzi's body in the square.



Fig. 6:9 – Zhang Yuan (1999) Prison time.



Fig. 6:10 – Zhang Yuan (1999) Long-shots in the city.



Fig. 6:11 – Zhang Yuan (1999) Stylised poses.



Fig. 6:12 – Zhang Yuan (1999) Filial piety.



Fig. 6:13 – Wang Xiaoshuai (2001) Filming migrants.



Fig. 6:14 – Wang Xiaoshuai (2001) Watching the maid.



Fig. 6:15 – Wang Xiaoshuai (2001) The maid tries on clothes.



Fig. 6:16 – Wang Xiaoshuai (2001) Becoming part of the city.



Fig. 6:17 – Wang Xiaoshuai (1999) Occupying liminal spaces.



Fig. 6:18 – Wang Xiaoshuai (1999) Youth culture.

Filmography

1930s-1940s

The Goddess (神女, *Shennü*) 1934, dir. Wu Yonggang.

Lost Lamb (迷途的羔羊, *Mitu de Gaoyang*) dir. Cai Chusheng, 1935.

Street Angel (马路天使, *Malu Tianshi*) 1937, dir. Yuan Muzhi.

Lenin in 1918 (USSR) dir. Mikhail Ilyich Romm, 1939.

Spring in a Small Town (小城之春, *Xiaocheng Zhi Chun*) dir. Fei Mu, 1948.

1950s-1970s

Li Shizhen (李时珍) dir. Shen Fu, 1956.

Li Shuangshaung (李双双, *Li Shuangshuang*) dir. Lu Ren, 1962.

Heroic Sons and Daughters (英雄儿女, *Yingxiong Ernü*) dir. Wu Zhaodi, 1964.

The White-Haired Girl (白毛女, *Bai Mao Nü*) dir. Hu Sang, 1972.

1980s

Longing for Home (乡情, *Xiang Qing*) dir. Hu Bingliu & Wang Jin, 1981.

Yellow Earth (黄土地, *Huang Tudi*) dir. Chen Kaige, 1984.

Army Nurse (女儿楼, *Nüer Lou*) dir. Hu Mei, 1985.

On the Hunting Ground (猎场扎撒, *Liechang Zha Sa*) dir. Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1985.

Sacrificed Youth (青春祭, *Qingchun Ji*) dir. Zhang Nuanxin, 1985.

Hibiscus Town (芙蓉镇, *Furong Zhen*) dir. Xie Jin, 1986.

In the Wild Mountains (野山, *Ye Shan*) dir. Yan Xueshu, 1986.

Old Well (老井, *Lao Jing*) dir. Wu Tianming, 1986.

The Horse Thief (盗马贼, *Dao Mazei*) dir. Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1986.

1990

Black Snow (本命年, *Ben Ming Nian*) dir. Xie Fei.

Ju Dou (菊豆, *Ju Dou*) dir. Zhang Yimou.

Mama (妈妈, *Mama*) dir. Zhang Yuan.

1992

No Regrets About Youth (青春无悔, *Qingchun Wu Hui*) dir. Zhou Xiaowen.

The Story of Qiu Ju (秋菊打官司, *Qiu Ju da Guansi*) dir. Zhang Yimou.

Women from the Lake of Scented Souls (香魂女, *Xiang Hun Nü*) dir. Xie Fei.

1993

Farewell My Concubine (霸王别姬, *Bawang Bie Ji*) dir. Chen Kaige.

For Fun (找了, *Zhao Le*) dir. Ning Ying.

The Blue Kite (蓝风筝, *Lan Fengzheng*) dir. Tian Zhuangzhuang.

1994

Ermo (二嫖, *Ermo*) dir. Zhou Xiaowen.

In the Heat of the Sun (阳光灿烂的日子, *Yangguang Canlan de Rizhi*) dir. Jiang Wen.

1995

On the Beat (民警故事, *Minjing Gushi*) dir. Ning Ying.

To Live (活着, *Huozhe*) dir. Zhang Yimou.

1996

Frozen (嫉度寒冷, *Jidu Hanleng*) dir. Wang Xiaoshuai under pseudonym Wang Meng.

Sons (儿子, *Erzi*) dir. Zhang Yuan.

Temptress Moon (风月, *Feng Yue*) dir. Chen Kaige.

1997

East Palace West Palace (东宫西宫, *Donggong Xigong*) dir. Zhang Yuan.

1998

So Close to Paradise (越南来的姑娘, *Yuenan laide Guniang*) dir. Wang Xiaoshuai.

1999

Beautiful New World (美丽新世界, *Meili Xin Shijie*) dir. Shi Runjiu.

Not One Less (一个都不能少, *Yige dou Buneng Shao*) dir. Zhang Yimou.

Seventeen Years (过年回家, *Guo Nian Hui Jia*) dir. Zhang Yuan.

Shower (洗澡, *Xizao*) dir. Zhang Yang, 1999.

The Road Home (我的父亲母亲, *Wode Fuqin Muqin*) dir. Zhang Yimou, 1999.

2000

Devils on the Doorstep (鬼子来了, *Guizi Laile*) dir. Jiang Wen.

Platform (站台, *Zhantai*) dir. Jia Zhangke.

Suzhou River (苏州河, *Suzhou He*) dir. Lou Ye.

2001

Beijing Bicycle (十七岁的单车, *Shiqi Sui de Danche*) dir. Wang Xiaoshuai.

Conjugation (動詞變位, *Dongci Bianwei*) dir. Emily Tang, 2001.

I Love Beijing 夏日暖洋洋, *Xiari Nuan Yangyang*) dir. Ning Ying.

After 2001

Perpetual Motion (无穷动, *Wu Qiongdong*) dir. Ning Ying, 2005.

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