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**MASCULINITY ON THE RUN: HISTORY, NATION AND  
SUBJECTIVITY IN CONTEMPORARY MAINLAND CHINESE  
CINEMA**

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of Ph.D.

The University of Leeds, Department of East Asian Studies

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## ABSTRACT

The study investigates representations of masculinities in modern Mainland Chinese cinema from the early reform period to the year 2000. It argues that masculinities from this era are 'on the run'; that is, male protagonists' ambiguous relationships with dominant discourses of nation, history and new formulations of subjectivity cause them either to flee from Maoist collective identity categories or more actively to move towards discourses of the sovereignty of the individual brought into China with the 'opening up' policies enacted after the Chairman's death. The social and cultural upheavals represented in these films create an atmosphere of uncertainty in which little is solid or settled: for example, although filmmakers may represent their male protagonists rushing from ideas of Maoist manhood, these ambitions and identity figurations, active in the public imagination for so long, still structure male identity, and even male rebellion, acting as reins pulling at the individual agency male filmmakers may try so hard to trace on screen. The result is a recent history of representation in which male characters stand as symbols for their nation's central dilemma, as it wavers between a collective past and an unknown (both exciting and threatening) future.

Whereas images of women have been analysed (especially those in the Fifth Generation cinema of the 1980s and 1990s), their male counterparts on the Chinese cinema screen have been largely ignored. This study redresses this imbalance and interprets the representation of men on screen through gender theory, cultural studies, and sources on Chinese society. The main chapters of the study concentrate on versions or expressions of masculinities, reflecting a society that has expressed its revolutionary aims through human models. The introduction to each chapter provides a contextualisation of the manner in which masculinities have been configured in other contemporary representational fields and will explain the relevance of the discussed ideas of masculinity in China's recent past. This study contributes both to conceptions of film and gender in China, and will widen the scope of cross-cultural theorisations of masculinities.

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## **NOTE ON ROMANISATION AND NAMES**

All Chinese romanisation is given in pinyin transcription, except for authors who choose to romanise their names in Wade Giles, and for names that are best known in the Wade Giles transcription (such as Chiang Kai-shek).

Where Chinese authors chose to be known by their given name followed by their surname, they are referred to as such in the text (for example, Xueping ZHONG), but are listed by surname in the bibliography (that is to say, ZHONG Xueping).

## CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

This thesis analyses representations of masculinities in Mainland Chinese cinema in the late twentieth century. It argues that male protagonists are ‘on the run’; that is, they do not display settled, certain gender identities, but instead masculinities in the films discussed are in a state of oscillation between the pull of the dominant, gendered state discourses formulated in the Maoist past and the tempting but as yet undefined conceptions of individuality and subjective choice brought with Deng Xiaoping’s economic reform policies. However, whilst collective models of stoic masculinity seemed to be left behind when China jumped into the sea of the international market, the filmic representations in this study display that these identity categories are still present in many male lives, whether they live on in protagonists’ attempts to structure their own histories against this ‘dominant (national) fiction’ or whether they are welcomed as a knowable story with which to combat the aggressive individualism that appeared to be assaulting a Chinese sense of self in the late twentieth century. Complicating a hypothesis of a stable transition from collective male gender identities to confident individual ones, this uncertainty leads to little being settled as male protagonists find themselves caught between acting in spheres delineated by a revolutionary history of machismo and the lure of an ambiguous future that, while economic openness does not exist alongside similar political and cultural toleration, leaves little certainty to run towards.

The study aims both to engage with past gender theorisations on Chinese cinema that have interpreted directors’ varying representations of women, and to add to the small but growing body of literature about men and masculinities in East Asia. Whereas (male) filmmakers’ apparent interest in ‘women’s issues’ has been a focus for scholars and cineastes, much of the output of male directors articulates its concerns through representations of men and rewrites filmmakers’ place in a decidedly masculine history.<sup>1</sup> The project takes its sources from the mid-1980s to the year 2000;

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<sup>1</sup> While women directors (such as Zhang Nuanxin of the Fourth Generation, Hu Mei and Li Shaohong of the Fifth Generation, and Li Yu and Li Hong in the Sixth Generation) are active in making films in Mainland China, this study has chosen to focus upon male directors. Not only do men make up the majority of directors in Mainland China, but the extent to which their male characters represent (arguably) their own intellectual anxiety and the ambiguities of male roles in a shifting society makes their work particularly relevant to this study. This decision does not, of course, deny the validity of a

that is, it concentrates upon the work of the group of directors classified in China as coming from the Fifth and Sixth Generations of filmmakers.

This chapter introduces the issues that are crucial to the analysis of the films that is to follow. Firstly, it will give a short account of what is meant by 'Chinese cinema', and it will explain the chronology through which many critics come to view the contemporary films upon which the study concentrates. For example, critics both inside and outside China classify directors in terms of 'generations'. What is meant by these groupings, and what implications do they have for an appreciation of modern Chinese cinema, if they are valid at all? Moreover, studying cinema does not only involve an appreciation of the cinematic 'text' in isolation, but knowledge of how films are produced, and the limits that are placed upon them. The international discourses in which Chinese films are implicated reveal the manner in which representation extends out of a solely 'cultural' arena into political, social and gendered worlds.

Secondly, this chapter introduces the main terms used in this study's analysis: 'masculinities' and 'representations.' The complexities and ambiguities of such vocabulary do not limit, but rather extend, the possibilities for interpretation. Moreover, the interaction between the two terms delineates to what extent representation is a gendered, political and cultural act, and the manner in which masculinities are conveyed through processes of representation. Thirdly, a section of this chapter will outline the manner in which the study will contribute to current scholarship on gender and film in Mainland China through a brief discussion of the literature that has particularly contributed to my understanding of the study's main 'texts'. While it will review the scholarship that has directly influenced the findings of this study, literature that is pertinent to issues of film in China, gender, and representation is reviewed throughout this chapter. To conclude, this brief

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further study concentrating upon or incorporating the work of female directors. Male intellectuals also found themselves confronted with particularly 'gendered' dilemmas in the shape of their country's past. Not only were the masculine proletarian models of the Maoist era waning, but China also found itself coming to terms with a new place in the wider world following the cultural isolationism of Maoism. Did these changes bring back echoes of the debates about China's feminisation before foreign powers from the early twentieth century? Male directors confront these historical legacies, particularly those based on the machismo of revolutionary history, in their reform era films.

introduction will present an outline of the main body of the thesis and will introduce the filmic sources that are analysed therein.

### **1: Issues in the analysis of Chinese cinema**

In a study dealing with representations, it is very difficult to discuss the presence of characters on screen without taking account of the social, political and cultural forces that are involved in their production. Representation does not solely involve the portrayal of a two-dimensional figure on screen, but rather interacts with other political and cultural concerns. For example, as the discussion below will demonstrate, representation does not only encompass the mirroring of someone or something, but also includes the complexities of standing *for* and the possible *burdens* of visualising an under-represented nation and 'self' before national and international audiences. When dealing with the production of any artistic work, the question of 'authorship', or 'agency', is a key one. Questions of agency and responsibility take on a complex edge in China, a country with a relatively recent history of Communist state control. To complicate matters further, state relaxations of economic controls whilst attempting to oversee similar cultural entrepreneurship have led to confusion, as artists seem to negotiate the control that the Party attempts to exert in political campaigns that can often appear to oscillate between guarded toleration and political repression. However, a tale of politically and culturally totalitarian Party apparatchiks strangling the creativity of 'independent' artists (although possibly true in many senses) can mask the constant processes of negotiation that occur between some filmmakers and the system that they attempt either to acquiesce to or to work. Although it cannot be doubted that Chinese filmmakers and studios do not have the freedom that their counterparts elsewhere may enjoy<sup>2</sup>, recent scholarship has re-examined the relationship between cultural producers and the socialist system under which they work.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, issues involving who is seen to be responsible for the final form of films, at whom they are aimed and even who ends up watching them can be seen in a very different light in a Chinese context, where such terms as 'popular', 'elite' or 'official' need further clarification. This section introduces some issues

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<sup>2</sup> Filmmakers in the West are also subject to restrictions. For example, see Ruth Petrie (ed.), *Film and censorship: the Index reader* (London: Cassell, 1997), or Tom Dewe Mathews, *Censored* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> See, as an introduction, Barmé 1999, Chen 1997.

involved with film production in China, and gives a brief chronology of the industry and the state bodies that watch over it.

### **a) A short history of film in China**

Although China first encountered moving pictures in the 1896 visit of the Lumière brothers to Shanghai, the first feature-length film was not made in the country until 1921, and the first studio, Mingxing, was opened in 1922. The beginning of film production in China also coincided with the founding of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and from the first Party members began to infiltrate studios in an attempt to generate more productions dealing with problems in contemporary society. However, the Japanese invasion called a temporary halt to filmmaking in the cosmopolitan centre of Shanghai, and forced directors into working in new areas, one of which was the Communist base of Yan'an. Mao Zedong's famous 1942 'Talks on Art and Literature' redefined the aims of film for Communist purposes<sup>4</sup>, in that the arts were to primarily serve workers, peasants and soldiers. Moreover, the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 brought a new challenge to seasoned directors and scenarists as they were compelled to adjust their works to the new political realities.

The first Communist-run film studio was set up in 1946, but once in power, the CCP set about nationalising all existing film studios, a task that was completed in the mid-1950s. In order to make film serve the people, regulatory bodies had to be set up to monitor film production. The first of these, the Central Film Management Bureau, was set up as early as 1949, eventually reverting to the control of the Ministry of Culture. The Film Management Committee (founded in 1950) had the job of raising the 'artistic standards' of films produced (Clark 1987: 35). The films that it monitored mostly dealt with stock characters, main themes being the recent revolution, minority dramas or literary adaptations.

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<sup>4</sup> Mao's theories on the role of art and literature are translated in Bonnie McDougall, *Mao Zedong's 'Talks at the Yan'an Conference of Literature and Art': A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1980). An alternative translation with commentary can be found in Stuart Schram, *The Political Thought of Mao Tse-tung* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1963), pp. 222-226. A full translation (without commentary) is published in Mao Tse-tung, *Mao Tse-tung on Literature and Art* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1967), pp. 1-43.

The Cultural Revolution brought an end to films that did not fit in with strict political guidelines. The education of up and coming directors was also cut short by the policy of 'sending down' urban students to work in the countryside. When film production eventually resumed, some filmmakers who had been active before 1966 had difficulty adjusting to the new conditions, ten years later. In 1982, the directors known as the Fifth Generation were the first class to graduate from the Beijing Film Academy since the Cultural Revolution began.<sup>5</sup>

The classification of Chinese filmmakers in terms of 'generations' may seem incongruous. Many Chinese cinema scholars note the variation in styles of directors grouped loosely inside these categories, which generally refer to the time in which directors entered the film industry. The First and Second Generations have been defined as the early pioneers from the 1890s, culminating with the filmmakers of the 1930s. The Third Generation was active from the 1940s to the early 1960s, while the Fourth Generation suffered an interruption to their careers in the 1960s, but worked through the 1970s (some, such as Xie Jin, Wu Tianming and Zhang Nuanxin, still making major features into the 1990s). The Fifth Generation started their careers in the early 1980s. These directors were the first filmmakers to become known on the international film circuit, and include Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, Tian Zhuangzhuang and Huang Jianxin. More recent filmmakers, such as Zhang Yuan and Jia Zhangke, are labelled as the Sixth Generation. Marking directors as belonging to a 'generation' is an imposed rather than consensual grouping to many modern filmmakers.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the grouping together of the Fifth and Sixth Generations may be due to the challenges that they posed to their predecessors rather than to pointed similarities in the content or style of their productions (Zhang 1997: 216).<sup>7</sup> In this study, the term 'generation' is

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<sup>5</sup> The Cultural Revolution marked the apotheosis of Mao's power, and was an attempt to smash the 'revisionism' that Mao saw entrenched in the Party machinery that once promised revolution. Among its effects was the closing of schools and universities, one of which was the Beijing Film Academy, which closed its doors in 1966, only reopening to new students in 1978. For an excellent account of Cultural Revolution art and culture, see the documentary film *Morning Sun* (dir. Carma Hinton, Geremie Barmé, Richard Gordon, 2003) and its website (<http://www.morningsun.org/index.html>, accessed 20/09/2003).

<sup>6</sup> See Tan Ye 1999, for Zhang Yimou's reaction to the labelling of films as belonging to a particular generation. For an explanation of the theory of 'generations', see Ni Zhen (2002: 188-190), and Donald (2000: 4-8).

<sup>7</sup> For example, whereas many members of the Fifth Generation, such as Zhang Yimou and Tian Zhuangzhuang, have challenged the revolutionary realism of the earlier period in filmmaking, the Sixth

used to describe *directors*, rather than to label the *films* that they make. For example, although the Fifth Generation have made a variety of films set in both urban and rural areas, I contend that their experiences of history lead them to approach their subjects with a very different attitude from that of the Sixth Generation of filmmakers who learned their craft later in the reform era. On account of the prevalence and convenience of these classifications that are used in film criticism inside and outside China, these basic categorisations are still employed here, although it is important to be aware that they are contested.

### **b) Themes in Fifth and Sixth Generation cinema**

While censorship is a reality for film releases in most nations, the campaigns that are particular to a socialist state such as China may do more to dictate the output and contents of productions than elsewhere. For example, after the events of June 4<sup>th</sup> 1989 in Tiananmen Square, a large number of revolutionary history films were produced, as greater Party control was ushered in (Berry 1994: 44).<sup>8</sup> In times of uncertainty, the Party has also used retroactive censorship to ban or exclude earlier films that do not comply with current political agendas (Donald 2000: 13). It can be argued that whereas the processes of history can have a detrimental effect upon film production, artists also work to negotiate the events of revolutionary and pre-revolutionary history to their advantage, as demonstrated by the work of the early Fifth Generation. However, directors who emerged in the early 1990s (the Sixth Generation) sought to avoid the negotiations with revolutionary history that had characterised their predecessors, and tended to concentrate upon urban narratives with individuals at their centres. The following section will discuss debates surrounding the Fifth and Sixth Generations of directors who produced the films that are analysed in this study.

### **i) Situating Fifth and Sixth Generation directors**

The films engaged by this study are often unpopular or simply unseen inside Mainland China. Sometimes, it is because films have been ‘banned’ by the censorship authorities or have been smuggled out of China for editing, initially unseen by a home audience. In other cases, Fifth and Sixth Generation directors are perceived to produce

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Generation artists are often identified by their rejection of the themes and methods of the Fifth Generation.

<sup>8</sup> For more on the effect of June 4<sup>th</sup> on filmmakers, see Barmé (1999: Chapter Two).



elitist 'art films', or are shunned for their apparently unfavourable presentation of China. The term 'elite' also takes on extra interpretations in a Chinese context: when cultural elites come from both inside and outside the Party, critically endorsed filmmakers may be seen as a privileged group in academic discourse, or a (perhaps unpalatable) fringe minority, depending upon the context in which they are discussed. The most popular (that is, most frequently consumed) films among Mainland Chinese audiences are those produced in Hong Kong, with familiar, well-established stars, and exploring commonly held beliefs or assumptions.<sup>9</sup> Along with categories of cinema that are familiar (in whatever guise) to critics outside China, film scholars have also pointed to a state 'guiding culture' in cinema. These 'main melody' films, tacitly or otherwise, try to promote a benevolent Party, or publicise Party approved subject matter.<sup>10</sup>

The sources investigated in this study have been selected on the basis of the range of masculinities that they represent, and the manner in which their male protagonists are employed to articulate the anxieties and hopes of reform era cultural producers. Whilst it is important to recognise that the films investigated in this study may not be mainstream ones, the aim of this study is not to cite a 'popular' or 'universal' image of masculinities in China (if that can be found in film at all), but to examine the manner in which male protagonists operate in a certain 'genre'<sup>11</sup> of Chinese cinema, both within and across national borders.

## ii) Directors in the public eye

The first Fifth Generation film from the 1982 graduates of the Beijing Film Academy is seen as *One and Eight* (*Yige he bage*, dir. Zhang Junzhao, 1983). A story of a chain-gang being supervised by People's Liberation Army (PLA) forces in the Anti-Japanese War, the film questions ideas of loyalty and nationalism, and re-visualises Chinese Communist war heroes of Maoist representations. Dealing with previous

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with Hao Jian, Beijing Film Academy, 9<sup>th</sup> May 2001.

<sup>10</sup> For example, Zhang Yimou's *Not One Less* (*Yige duo buneng shao*, 1999) has been seen as acquiescing to the state by presenting the catalyst to the film's happy conclusion as the director of a state television station. However, it is possible that Zhang presents officials in the same vein as those in his earlier *The Story of Qiu Ju* (*Qiu Ju da guansi*, 1992) in which the political system is satirised by the inclusion of unusually co-operative officials.

<sup>11</sup> Whilst I am aware of the dangers of grouping these diverse films together into an artificial category, I make this distinction here on account of the non-mainstream qualities of the films investigated in this study.

representation that was believed to be both 'feminine' and weak was a priority in Fifth Generation filmmaking from the first. Ni Zhen, a professor at the Beijing Film Academy, describes his pupils as being attracted to the script of *One and Eight* since it was filled with 'masculine vigour' (2002: 157).<sup>12</sup> However, Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* (*Huang tudi*, 1984) marked the true arrival of the new Chinese cinema upon the international scene, pairing Zhang Yimou as cinematographer with Chen as director for the first time. Widely acclaimed, the film centres upon a Red Army soldier as he travels in the unforgiving Chinese interior in order to collect local folksongs to use in propaganda. Rather than being a homage to the connection between the CCP and 'the masses', this landmark production questions the strength of the relationship between the Party and the people with whom it was supposed to be entwined, exemplifying the themes of male ambiguity and uncertainty that are at the centre of this thesis. Chen made a number of films in the late eighties following *Yellow Earth*, including *The Big Parade* (*Da yuebing*, 1985) and *King of the Children* (*Haizi wang*, 1987). Fifth Generation films were often set in the remote Chinese countryside, and intended to make the national landscape unfamiliar to their urban audiences, thus interrogating ideas of 'China' and 'Chineseness'. However, in 1987, Chen's first cinematographer began a career as a director in his own right, changing the face of Fifth Generation cinema.

The arrival of *Red Sorghum* (*Hong gaoliang*, dir. Zhang Yimou, 1987) marked a new stage in the development and style of Fifth Generation directors.<sup>13</sup> Zhang Yimou's visually vibrant tale of a man who won a woman and found community in a distillery, only to have his utopia shattered in 1937 with the arrival of invading Japanese forces, proved popular at home and abroad, and abandoned the deliberately obtuse imagery

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<sup>12</sup> Ni Zhen's recent publication *Memoirs from the Beijing Film Academy: The genesis of China's Fifth Generation* (translated by the Asian cinema scholar Chris Berry) outlining the training of the class of 1978 that was to evolve into the Fifth Generation is an overdue account of the early days of directors such as Chen Kaige, Zhang Junzhao, Zhang Yimou and Tian Zhuangzhuang. The book reveals the content of the Film Academy's degree programme and, crucially for this study and in common with critical orthodoxy, traces the motivations of these directors, cinematographers and scenarists as stemming from their experiences in the Cultural Revolution (see Ni 2002).

<sup>13</sup> The emergence of *Red Sorghum* is sometimes seen as the end of Fifth Generation films' original spirit and style. The cerebral and contemplative nature of such films as Chen Kaige's *King of the Children* (*Haizi wang*, 1987), believed to be the last film made in a 'Fifth Generation style', was replaced by a more direct and accessible emotional message, attractive to foreign audiences. Ni Zhen believes the classic period of Fifth Generation cinema to date from 1983 to 1989, whilst its 'transitional period' began from 1989, notably the date of Zhang Yimou's attractive and exotic *Raise the Red Lantern* (*Da hong denglong gaogao gua*) (Ni: 2002: 192-193).

of earlier Fifth Generation works. Zhang followed up on his success with two other internationally successful films, *Raise the Red Lantern* (*Da hong denglong gaogao gua*, 1989) and *Judou* (1990). Although Zhang has attempted to eschew any notions of a signature style in his varied career, these early, ostentatious creations of a ritualised Chinese past won him controversy at home and funding from abroad, but also a reputation for 'orientalising' his own nation that he has since struggled to shake off, despite the documentary style of *The Story of Qiu Ju* (*Qiu Ju da guansi*, 1992), or the urban chic of *Keep Cool* (*You hua haohao shuo*, 1997).

After the visual richness and uncomplicated narrative of *Red Sorghum*, Fifth Generation cinema changed. For example, Chen Kaige gave up the intellectual musings of *King of the Children* and *Life on a String* (*Bian zou bian chang*, 1991) for the historical melodrama (and international commercial success) of *Farewell My Concubine* (*Bawang bieji*, 1993). Tian Zhuangzhuang left behind the vast wildernesses of Mongolia (*On the Hunting Ground* or *Liechang zhasa*, 1985) and Tibet (*Horse Thief* or *Daoma zei*, 1986) for a Beijing-based criticism of the impact of Party campaigns upon family life in *The Blue Kite* (*Lan fengzheng*, 1993). However, the political censure following *The Blue Kite*<sup>14</sup>, some of Chen's more questionable projects after *Farewell My Concubine*<sup>15</sup>, and Huang Jianxin's relative anonymity outside China despite his merits as a filmmaker leave Zhang Yimou as the success story of the Fifth Generation, and even of Mainland Chinese cinema itself.

Sixth Generation directors seek to distance themselves from the concerns of their predecessors. Emerging from their college education in the late 1980s and early 1990s, this group of filmmakers are mostly children of the reform era, and this cultural schism is reflected in their films. Whereas Fifth Generation directors can be said to explore the effects of historical discourses in search of an indeterminate

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<sup>14</sup> The government censors banned *The Blue Kite* on account of its unfavourable portrayal of political campaigns, and the rushes had to be smuggled from China to Holland. For example, the film mentions the food shortages following the disasters of the Great Leap Forward, a political no-go area, and finishes in the complete destruction of the bond between mother and son in the Cultural Revolution, with no redemptive light from the reform era shining through. Following *The Blue Kite*, Tian concentrated upon promoting new directors, only making a new film in 2002 (*Springtime in a Small Town*, or *Xiaocheng zhi chun*), a remake of a Fei Mu 1948 classic.

<sup>15</sup> Most recently, Chen made the elaborate yet unsuccessful *The Emperor and the Assassin* (*Jing Ke ci Qinwang*) in 1999, followed by a critically disastrous (English language) American project, *Killing Me Softly* (2002). His latest film, *Together* (*He ni zai yiqi*, 2003) returns to China, although it has not received a favourable critical response in the West (see Philip Kemp, 'Together', *Sight and Sound*, December 2003, p. 57).

concept of the 'individual' toward which to 'run', in Sixth Generation cinema, this individual is alive and well, and has no time to ponder a place for himself in his country's collective past. Where many early Fifth Generation directors searched for origins of the nation in a remote, rural China, many films from Sixth Generation directors are concentrated upon the urban, industrialised east coast.<sup>16</sup> Works from Sixth Generation directors paint a picture of 'the city in transformation' (Dai 2002: 93). When Sixth Generation directors look at history, it is through the lens of mundane everyday life, as in Jia Zhangke's *Platform* (*Zhantai*, 2000), shrinking the national narratives envisioned by the Party (and, to an extent, by the Fifth Generation) to the level of the local. Work from Sixth Generation directors will be discussed in this study, since their themes of alienation and negotiations with modernity are closely tied to the gender identity of their male characters. Zhang Yuan, Lou Ye, Liu Bingjian and Jiang Wen join Jia Zhangke as directors classified as belonging to this 'underground' generation.<sup>17</sup>

### **c) From studio to screen: The state as censor**

In the 1980s, Semsel described the role of the China Film Bureau as formulating studios' policies for film quotas, censoring films, devising long term plans for the film industry and negotiating the relationship between Chinese cinema and the world (1987: 2). The China Film Corporation, responsible for distribution and exhibition, would send prints of films to local areas whose officials would decide whether or not a film would be shown. Depending on a film's popularity, the studio would receive a proportionate amount of revenue, although this system acted in favour of large film producers (ibid: 4).

In terms of finance, all studios were heavily subsidized by the China Film, Broadcasting and Television Bureau until 1994 (Donald 2000: 11). The Bureau would be presented with an idea for a film by studios and, if it had been approved and after it had been produced, the finished product would be resubmitted for permission to be

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<sup>16</sup> A notable exception is the work of Jia Zhangke that is based in his hometown of Fenyang, on the Inner-Mongolian border.

<sup>17</sup> However, the inclusion of some directors featured in this study as belonging to the Sixth Generation is contested by some critics. For example, Yingjin Zhang classifies directors such as Zhang Yuan and Jiang Wen as 'post-Fifth Generation' (1998: 114), despite the fact that Zhang Yuan's first low-budget production, *Mother* (*Mama*, 1990) has been named elsewhere as the first Sixth Generation film (Dai 2002: 81).

released. The extent of state involvement documented by Donald's description of the processes in getting a proposal to the screen implies a strictly controlled film industry. Indeed, as Silbergeld observes, the potential of cinema to spread unpalatable ideas to the masses was more than clear to cultural apparatchiks (1999: 54).

During the period of this study, the processes of getting a film from page to shoot to screen altered with the gradual withdrawal of state funding from some film studios as part of the process of economic reform.<sup>18</sup> Firstly, a state withdrawal from financing many film studios did not necessarily guarantee any more 'artistic freedom' than had been granted in the days of government subsidies. Instead of receiving generous government help, studios found that, in order to survive in a newly recognised competitive and potentially lucrative market, films had to be made for the purpose of guaranteeing extra revenue for the studio. Some studios could survive by varying their outputs. For example, the Xi'an studio under Wu Tianming financed publicly less well-received films like Tian Zhuangzhuang's *The Horse Thief* with the revenues from popular, well-attended (and less 'highbrow') pictures (Barmé 1999: 17). As time went on, succeeding at the box office and winning over international film festivals became two separate aims (Semsel, Xia, Hou 1990: 191). New regulations for 2004 have promised more leeway for filmmakers, although 'sensitive' subjects will still require authorities to view a full script prior to shooting.<sup>19</sup> Whether these regulations will entice filmmakers back into the fold of state studios remains to be seen.

The question of state censorship of artists is also less straightforward than it may first appear, and is particularly relevant to this study since the films to be discussed are implicated in an international film market in which the promotion of an exotic China has played a large part in film publicity. Whilst outlining the attempts of the state to police cultural activities, some recent scholars have also pointed out the complications in accepting a view of the state's relationship to filmmakers as a one-way struggle of totalitarianism against individuality. For example, Chen Xiaoming contends that the Fifth Generation of directors only 'reluctantly took on the role of rebels on the

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<sup>18</sup> In *Chinese Cinema During the Era of Reform*, Ying Zhu traces the impact of post-Mao economic reforms on the output of studios. In a concise account of the manner in which film interacts with finance, she outlines the key policies and cultural mood shifts that have led to what she hypothesises as an emphasis on Hollywood-style formulas in the late 1990s from an art-led cinema in the mid-1980s.

<sup>19</sup> For details, see [http://www1chinadaily.com.cn/en/doc/2004-01/08/content\\_296693.htm](http://www1chinadaily.com.cn/en/doc/2004-01/08/content_296693.htm), accessed 30/01/04.

periphery of dominant ideology' (1997: 126). Chen states that it was only when an early 1980s consensus between the post-Cultural Revolution aims of cultural apparatchiks and filmmakers had broken down that artists began to turn to modernism to express alienation at state socialism, implying that filmmakers had been *compelled* into showing (calculated) dissent

Silbergeld asserts that the state's concept of its role in regulating cultural production is less of a strictly repressive than a 'benign' one, the goal of state monitoring being 'to create compliance and thereby to avoid forcible intervention' (1999: 54). Emphasising the sugar coating on the pill of state control is not to deny the efforts of the Party to assert authority over cultural activities (even though officials may have few concrete methods in the era of reform to enforce the level of cultural control that they may wish for), but it does bring to light the subtleties in the relationship between the state and its cultural artists/ambassadors. However, he goes on to state that a measure of *self-censorship* exists in the filmmaking sphere. He argues that, since the products of filmmakers are less numerous and less easy to produce than books or painting, filmmakers are forced to work inside state controls simply to get their works into the public arena (1999: 55).

The cultural commentator Geremie Barmé speculates that modern filmmakers on the Mainland even exploit ambiguities inherent in the post-Mao cultural scene. He applies the satirical observations of Miklos Haraszti, commenting on the East European post-Stalinist era, and argues that censorship in an age of somewhat 'softer' socialism in China is less of a one-sided tool of restriction than a partnership between state artists and officials. In order to prosper in the new realities, artists (brought up under harsher realities of state intervention), now engage in acts of (self) repression (Barmé 1999: 2). However, Barmé's analysis, whilst well argued, ignores the fact that there are real limits placed upon China's cultural producers. Filmmakers may be attractive to Western distributors on account of the controversy that their productions may inspire, but, as discussed below, how far this publicity is actively courted or the product of international film production companies hungry for poster tag-lines is near impossible to measure. Moreover, arguing that the cultural policies of the CCP have become more liberal and that the Party's socialism is somehow 'softer' (at least in the area of self expression) ignores the huge number of productions that are either made without

the knowledge of state bodies or are simply banned (for the adage of being 'banned in China' is so frequently employed that it no longer bears any stamp of exoticism). These varying interpretations indicate that the relationship between the state and cultural producers, especially filmmakers, is not as rigid as can be supposed. Whether the Party can sustain what Barmé satirically refers to as 'reform-period doublethink' (Barmé 1999: 14) into the twenty-first century remains to be seen.

#### **d) Chinese cinema and the international market**

The opening up of China to international influences in the 1980s and 1990s brought Chinese cinema to new audiences around the world. The issue of whether directors, particularly from the Fifth Generation, aimed their productions at a Western market is still a debated one. With the exception of Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum*, winner of the Golden Bear at the 1988 Berlin Film Festival, few Fifth Generation films won acclaim and popularity with *both* domestic and foreign audiences, since domestic audiences argued against the exoticism with which the 'dirty linen' of their country's history seemed to be aired. As Rey Chow has noted, the vast landscapes in early films by Fifth Generation directors such as Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* and Tian Zhuangzhuang's *On the Hunting Ground* probably looked as alien to Chinese audiences as they did to foreign viewers (1995: 81). However, Chow goes further, insisting that later films such as *Judou* and *Farewell My Concubine* present a 'package' of China for the consumption of viewers at European and American film festivals (ibid: 35, 57). She argues that it is more than possible that many Chinese productions present nothing more than 'the sign of a *cross cultural* commodity fetishism' (ibid: 59, emphasis in original). The emergence of the Sixth Generation has added an extra dimension to cross-cultural debates around Chinese cinema, as productions labelled as 'underground' gain cultural currency and foreign endorsement primarily as political protests against the Communist state (Zhang 1998: 115). Such debates implicate cinema in the complex cultural relationship between China and the West, raising issues of nationalism, identity, Otherness, authenticity and the feminisation of China before Western voyeurs.

These discussions are relevant to this study because they are couched in gendered terms. Popular accusations that a feminised China is being paraded in front of

Western cinemagoers in order to reinforce a sense of occidental superiority<sup>20</sup> harks back to the self-strengthening debates of the nineteenth century and to the calls for an end to the idea of the 'sick man of Asia' in the May Fourth Movement.<sup>21</sup> Yingjin Zhang goes so far as to produce a list of themes that will almost guarantee a film festival slot (1998: 118). For example, the marketability of a Fifth Generation style lies in its ethnography (that translates into 'autoethnography' according to Chow).<sup>22</sup> This appeal becomes a cycle: as Zhang cites, in order to ensure revenue and guarantee popularity, directors are encouraged to give audiences what they want (the 'brand style' of directors such as Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou) (ibid: 120). The Sixth Generation of directors has different problems. Famous for the circumstances of the production of their films rather than for their content, they may be the subjects of 'certain post-Cold War projects regarding Western cultural needs' (Dai 2002: 75).<sup>23</sup> At least officially, the government is planning to increase joint investment in film production.<sup>24</sup>

#### **i) Critical responses to cinematic 'Chineseness'**

The foreign financing of many films perceived to be directed towards a Western 'art house' audience often serves as evidence for charges of undue 'autoethnography'. For example, Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* was financed between Taiwan, China and Hong Kong, and (perhaps more controversially) Zhang Yimou's *Judou* was partly funded by Japanese backers. As Yingjin Zhang wryly observes, the complex financing of many productions questions the legitimacy of the term 'Chinese cinema', since not only does finance come from outside Mainland China, but also cast and crew members may have diverse nationalities (1998: 111). For example, the recent production, *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* (*Balzac et la Petite Tailleuse Chinoise*, dir. Dai Sijie, 2002) is directed by a Chinese exile in France, and is financed by a French production company, which owns the copyright on the film. Is this

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<sup>20</sup> See, for example, the examples cited in Chow 1995: 176.

<sup>21</sup> For more on the idea of the male self in the work of May Fourth writers, and its relevance to this study, see Zhong (2000: 17-21).

<sup>22</sup> Chow unpacks this 'autoethnography' in her criticism of the disciplines of ethnography and anthropology which she believes have had a reductive influence on critiques of Chinese cinema (1995: 176-77).

<sup>23</sup> For example, witness the final words of Richard Corliss' article in *Time Asia* on new directors in China: '..if it is hard to find heroes in these movies, it is easy to see the heroes behind them' (<http://www.time.com/time/asia/arts/printout/0,9788,103002,00.html>, accessed 29/01/04).

<sup>24</sup> For details, see [http://www1chinadaily.com.cn/en/doc/2004-01/08/content\\_296693.htm](http://www1chinadaily.com.cn/en/doc/2004-01/08/content_296693.htm), accessed 30/01/04.



production, therefore, a 'Chinese film' because it portrays China and claims to speak for a 'Chinese experience'? And does its financing and the exile status of its director impact upon the Cultural Revolution China that it portrays?<sup>25</sup>

Yingjin Zhang's acknowledgement of the global capital and influence involved in film production is a reminder of the manner in which China's social and cultural borders are becoming more porous in an age of globalisation. Moreover, joint financing and production is hardly unique to China, yet China's status as a developing nation and its political heritage often means that it is placed as the disenfranchised partner in this cultural exchange. Therefore, issues of nationalism and integrity become more pertinent in a Chinese context. Whether these are legitimate concerns or part of a discourse that polarises cultural production from non-Western nations is a continuing theme of scholarly debate. For example, is 'Chinese cinema' expected to be an anthropological postcard from the Far East? Stressing the negative effects of hybridity in the cinema industry in China may also be a defence of national values in the face of foreign incursion, a sort of cinematic 'May Fourth'. In other words, are Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige (and now the directors of productions labelled as 'underground') the 'sick men' of Chinese cinema? These questions of national integrity in cinema production may be less important than the cultural assumptions that are the precursors for such a debate.

The historical settings of some films from Fifth Generation directors have been perceived as methods to offer a critique of post-Mao China through allegories of monolithic state power obstructing the private desires of individual men and women (but mostly men). However, Xiaoming Chen offers a different view. Despite an earlier critical view that many Fifth Generation directors attempted to evade political themes, Chen contends that politics became an essential ingredient of many productions in the 1990s (1997: 130). In order to satisfy an international market, Chen states that China has been exhibited through the traumatic events of its history in order to satisfy Western curiosity. Many 1990s films present a China that is both beautiful and cruel, forming 'an unprecedented spectacle characterised by recurrent political persecutions and omnipresent totalitarianism' (ibid: 133). It is hard to deny

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<sup>25</sup> These questions can also be asked in relation to other modern exiled cultural producers, including writers Bei Dao and (Nobel Prize-winning) Gao Xingjian.

that many films have been structured by the political campaigns of Mao's rule. However, the style of films in the 1990s was very different from the exotic surfaces of earlier films, such as Zhang Yimou's *Judou*. Indeed, it can be argued that political events structured people's memories of their country's past, and are less exotic than reflections of the manner in which personal histories are structured around national ones. However, Chen's arguments are really centred on the motives for presenting history in terms of tragedy, which involves the relationships between films made in China and their potential audiences abroad.

Despite criticisms faced by directors such as (Fifth Generation) Zhang Yimou and (Sixth Generation) Zhang Yuan for turning away from the Mainland for funding and production, it can be argued that many films simply would not be made if it were not for the finance of backers outside China, and for the approval of Western critics. One notable example is the 1993 feature by Zhang Yuan, *Beijing Bastards* (*Beijing zazhong*). The film is a story of the exploits and troubles of a group of Beijing *liumang*<sup>26</sup> set against a 'rockumentary' starring the ubiquitous musician Cui Jian. The film received attention in the West and in Chinese critical circles through its sheer notoriety<sup>27</sup>. However, considering its content, the question can be asked, in the light of state censorship, how it managed to be made in the first place. Indeed, Zhang Yuan himself admitted that he only 'sort of got' permission for the film to be shot (Schell 1999: 289). Money came from the Hubert Bals Fund<sup>28</sup> and from Hong Kong financiers. Zhang Yuan escaped from immediate political clampdown through a lack of a formal script, and ensured that local policemen were bribed to turn a blind eye (ibid: 290). Despite its eventual ban, *Beijing Bastards* had an almost guaranteed audience, if not for its content, then definitely due to its status as a forbidden cultural product.<sup>29</sup> In such cases, Western viewers may feel morally justified in watching a 'worthy' cultural product that appears to challenge the supposed hegemony of the Chinese Communist state (Barmé 1999: 191). On a less cynical note, this international support also gives less approved artists more muscle with which to challenge official

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<sup>26</sup> *Liumang* loosely means 'hooligan'. A wider explanation of the term and its usage in modern Chinese culture can be found in Chapter Two.

<sup>27</sup> The film and career of Zhang Yuan has been discussed in Barmé (1999: Chapter Seven).

<sup>28</sup> The Hubert Bals Fund, attached to the International Film Festival Rotterdam, is a body awarding grants to filmmakers from southern and developing countries.

<sup>29</sup> Stephanie Hemelryk Donald discusses the possible motives for watching the film when it first aired on British television, for example (2000: 106).

sanction. Nevertheless, Barmé has argued that this carefully managed, 'packaged dissent' has ironically brought into being a new kind of orthodox path for modern filmmakers to negotiate - the lucrative lure of the controversial (Barmé 1999: 193).

## ii) Finding a balance

The reality probably lies between Barmé's negative judgement upon the temptation of artists and filmmakers to court international arthouse distribution, and portraits of oppressed artists operating undercover in a police state. International finance, whatever its motive, can aid in the process of simply getting films made outside a demanding studio system, but also may make certain demands upon filmmakers in return for this investment.<sup>30</sup> The China that is portrayed may be expected to fit into certain expectations of a film-going public, or to 'titillate' the interest of new viewers unfamiliar with non-European / 'Third World' cinema. Despite her critique of the 'primitive passions' excited by films from Mainland Chinese directors often dismissed as destined for the eyes of foreigners, Rey Chow recognises that essentialist, gendered assumptions are inherent in debates on the production methods of many films. Chow astutely argues that Chinese films are material goods in a growing world market. Discourses that denigrate films from the Fifth Generation of directors for their orientalism (for she concentrates her critique on these productions) ironically reinforce the dichotomy of an Eastern 'Other' against a culturally omnipotent West by ignoring the power structures at work inside these supposedly powerless partners in this contested cultural exchange. Indeed, the disputes around the representation of a certain national identity are not unique to Chinese cinema, or even to 'Third World' representations.<sup>31</sup> For Chow, Chinese directors may even be 'translators of the violence with which the Chinese culture is "originally" put together', shattering any idea of an unadulterated essence of a Chinese nation that has

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<sup>30</sup> For example, Richard James Havis points out that marketing of Zhang Yimou's films in the US was undertaken with elements of an 'exotic' China brought to the fore. He cites Barbara Robinson of Era International, producers of *Raise the Red Lantern*, who remembered that 'the film had a storyline that played up to the Western vision of what China's like, both sexually and visually. The hook line in the marketing was: "China 1920s. One master; Four wives; One fate." We brought the exotic elements to the fore.' However, it can be argued that Era emphasised elements in the film that its marketing department saw as already present, which Havis has perhaps overlooked. Havis' article can be found on <http://www.asianfilms.org/china/zhang-selling.html>, accessed 15/01/2004.

<sup>31</sup> For example, in the UK, criticisms of Richard Curtis' *Love Actually* (2003) questioned the representation of Britain, since it was believed to cater to American box-office tastes (see Ben Walters, 'Love Actually', *Sight and Sound*, December 2003, pp. 44-45). I would contend that this criticism not only echoes discourses of British identity in the face of American political and cultural power, but also displays the relative weakness of the 'British film industry'.

been somehow corrupted and revealing the constructed nature of the 'Chineseness' that critics of the Fifth Generation seek vainly to preserve (1995: 202).

I am in agreement with Chow in that the current debate surrounding the representation of China before audiences *outside* China makes grand claims for the truthfulness of the medium of film and the actions of representation, and does not take into account the countless mediations that occur before a (fictional) narrative is translated into images on screen. The 'orientalism' to which filmmakers are supposed to pander may be one way into a film marketplace (and artistic legitimacy) from which filmmakers in China have previously been excluded. If such representation is a strategy to win the approval of Western audiences, or a method to deconstruct the origins of personal and national identities, it has been superseded by the urban-based dramas of the Sixth Generation, whose marketability seems not to lie in China's exotic surfaces, but inside its seedy underbelly.

Sixth Generation directors have also been accused of playing on the dissident status placed on their shoulders by 'first world' cinema audiences.<sup>32</sup> Such demands for 'authenticity' paradoxically reify a dichotomy between a 'real' and a 'fake' China, extending the argument that films from another (in some cases ethnically different) community should be unmediated spectacles, emotional and educational travelogues, serving as evidence for the relevance of Chow's astute arguments. While active Mainland Chinese directors may take on the burden of representing their nation abroad, their films should not be expected to provide access to an 'authentic' China (not to mention the assumptions of superiority behind, in effect, asking for an anthropological picture of the 'Chinese people'), since a single authentic China simply does not exist. Moreover, implying that directors should not 'play the system' of international acclaim (implying a betrayal of those who may have once championed them) also insinuates that filmmakers themselves should also be dependable artefacts, spiritually immune from the global market (in culture as well as in hard cash) into which the government insists that its people should jump. As long as Chinese film is still part of an international cultural marketplace, and as long as Euro-American arthouse audiences bring their visual expectations of China and

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<sup>32</sup> For example, see the case of Barmé's comments on Zhang Yuan, cited above.

'Chineseness' with them to the cinema screen, these debates carry on and are part of continuing discourses surrounding the direction of cultural production in the changeable atmosphere of post-Mao China. The strength of opinion behind these debates on the portrayal of China (still, unfortunately, perceived to be the obligation of Chinese filmmakers) demonstrates the (cross-border) cultural sensitivities involved in any act of representation.

## **2: Theoretical terms**

Since this study employs terminology and methodology involved in analyses of gender representation, it is important that it should engage with these shifting theoretical concepts and not disavow the importance and difficulty of this challenge through omission. Therefore, this section will present a brief introduction to the manner in which the central concepts of masculinities and representations are used throughout the study, and explain the complexities and contestations involved in employing such terms. The implications of these terms in the analysis of Chinese cinema will be explained in the next section.

### **a) Masculinities**

Although the analysis of masculinities in China is an opening and slowly expanding field, critical enquiry into the definition of masculinities in Europe and America has grown steadily from initial interest in the 1970s. Some academic studies concentrated on 'changing men' (Kimmell 1987) or finding a place for 'men in feminism' (Jardine & Smith 1987), others focussed upon case studies in an attempt to theorise versions of masculinities. Moving from attempts to alter a masculinity that was perceived to be patriarchal and oppressive, or to rehabilitate men who were seen to be harmed by their place in a patriarchal order, studies of masculinities have developed to recognise issues of history, sexuality, otherness, ethnicity and class. 'Masculinity studies' has evolved as a separate yet complementary field to the analysis of femininities and to the questions of 'queer theory'.

This study has taken a cue from such multi-faceted approaches. I define masculinities as the various ideas and practices that combine to form a conception of how males behave or should behave, from which are formed subject positions that individual males are expected to strive to inhabit. The choice to adopt 'masculinities' as a plural

term has been a deliberate one. As Michael Uebel states in his introduction to the collection, *Race and the Subject of Masculinities*, ‘the term brings into play the recognition of profound multiplicity and conditional status of the historical experience of male subjects’ (1997: 4). I am in agreement with Uebel’s approach, influenced by the pioneer of masculinities research, Bob Connell (1987, 1995) and also articulated in the work of masculinities scholar Paul Smith (1996), that there are many expressions of male gender identities not only across cultures, but also within them.

My study recognises that male gender identity cannot be compartmentalised into an uncomplicated formula in any society, and that these masculinities are not only defined through their relationships with femininities, but also interact with other male identities, sexualities and histories. For example, the films discussed in the main body of my study often challenge, struggle against, or struggle to assimilate what Bob Connell has termed ‘hegemonic masculinities’; that is, versions of being a man that embody ‘the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy’ (1995: 77).<sup>33</sup> In these films, hooligan youths wandering the streets of Beijing, fathers proposing their own form of masculinity against an oppressive state paternity, and soldiers finding a new place in an old revolutionary narrative are all embroiled in negotiations with versions of masculinities that compete for their allegiance.

Therefore, the aim of this study is not to identify one, unequivocally ‘Chinese’ idea of masculinity. Its sources are too few to form paradigms and generalisations, and they are generated by an intellectual group of privileged males who have emerged from a specialist, urban-based higher education.<sup>34</sup> These directors may seek to bear the burden of representation for the nation at large, but form only a small part of its population. The masculinities expressed are not, for example, mirror images of reform era *gongnongbing* or ‘authentic’ Chinese fathers, but are *symbols* that articulate the anxieties of a budding male intellectual class. Whilst certain masculinities may engage with macrocosmic issues such as national identity and the relationship between culture and the masses, they are far from definitive expressions of Chinese

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<sup>33</sup> However, there are problems with Connell’s definition, since different groups can be hegemonic in different settings. For example, whereas one group may hold monetary and policy-making power, another ideal of masculinity could be aspired to by a majority of young men.

<sup>34</sup> From the featured directors, only two did not attend the Beijing Film Academy. Zhang Yang studied direction at the Central Drama Academy in Beijing (graduating in 1992), and Jiang Wen studied acting in the same institution (graduating in 1984).

maleness. Rather, this study argues that any unified, singular idea of masculinity simply does not exist. The interesting question is *why* certain masculinities are so often employed to express the negotiations and anxieties around which the study is based, and why certain traits are accorded to *masculine* gender identities.

### **b) Representations**

In this study, representation is far from a neutral term that symbolises straightforward mimesis. Representations are vital to any culture, in that their shared interpretation defines groups and societies. As Stuart Hall contends, representation can have many meanings, encompassing depiction, standing for, symbolising, or substituting for someone or something (1997: 16). My study recognises that the concept of representation does not only include visual depiction, but also has social, political and gendered dimensions. Feminist theorists such as Teresa de Lauretis (1987) and Judith Butler (1992, 1999) have stated that 'gender' is not an essential core, but is (in the words of de Lauretis) 'both the product and process of representation' (1987: 5). Butler has theorised that gender identities are a product of 'performativity'; that is, our gendered selves result from a repetition of coded gestures that may not have an original. Once gender is theorised *as* representation and is, as Butler argues, 'constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylised repetition of acts' (1999: 179), it becomes apparent that filmic representations may be mimetic of this *process* of gender construction; that is, the gestures that combine to reinforce and create aspects of (desired) masculinities may literally appear before our very eyes.

Another aspect of representation is standing *for*, in the sense of acting on behalf of someone or something. In the atmosphere of post-Mao China, cinematic representations are not culturally or politically neutral. For example, Dai Jinhua contends that the filmic experimentation of the Fifth Generation following the Cultural Revolution was a gendered act, an 'indictment of the father and their struggle to replace him and his culture' (1999: 192). That is, male Fifth Generation filmmakers were struggling for control over history and narrative in a representational system presided over by aging personal and symbolic patriarchs. In his biographical account of the genesis of China's new filmic pioneers, Ni Zhen points to his old pupils' desire to construct 'masculine narratives'. Perhaps subconsciously, he links this male quest for innovation to a sense of national pride: - as he cautiously admits, 'the legend of

the Fifth Generation is a male one.... It is also a highly patriotic narrative' (2002: ix). Therefore, representation is not only a gendered concept, but also the *control over* past and future representations of Chinese nation and self is revealed to be a decidedly masculine project.

Sixth Generation filmmakers, many of whom consciously choose to represent the fringes of their nation's society,<sup>35</sup> face different problems in opting to shoulder the *burden* of representing social groups that have not previously been seen as *subjects* for the screen. As Bramston states in her analysis of the relationship between cinema and concepts of 'modernity', 'the early stages of such groups becoming visible in films, in more than derisory or painful ways, is often when the political weight of "representing", "standing in for" the invisible truths of a group's experiences is felt more keenly' (2000: 171). Do the films that represent marginal masculinities in this study make their male protagonists *subjects* of their filmic destinies, or are they merely *objects* for the curious camera-lens? And how far are the experiences of male protagonists represented as 'true'?

### 3: Current scholarship

This project hopes to contribute both to the theorising of representations of gender, and to the slowly expanding field of masculinities research centring upon East Asia. There have been tentative explorations of the idea of what 'being a man' means in China, and how it has been represented, since the mid-1990s. Whilst Geremie Barm  has explored the idea of the *liumang*, or hooligan, as it is expressed in the literature of Wang Shuo (1992, 1999), W.J.F. Jenner (1996) and David Ownby (2002) have traced such ideals back to conceptions of *haohan* (literally, 'good man / fellow') and knight errant masculinity in the *Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan*) cycle of literature. The collection *Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities* (2002), edited by Susan Brownell and Jeffrey Wasserstrom, devotes half of its collected essays to expressions of masculinities through China's past and present, although its historical/sociological approach means that gender as a concept is not theorised. However, *Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities* is a groundbreaking volume in that its exploration of masculinities is on equal terms with the representations and histories of women that

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<sup>35</sup> For example, see the productions of Liu Bingjian, Zhang Yuan, Jia Zhangke and Le You explored in the remaining chapters of this study.



are explored by its contributors. Masculinities from across China's history are analysed, from the regulation of masculinities in Qing times to male workers in the Cultural Revolution and *qigong* masters in the reform era.<sup>36</sup>

In terms of full-length studies of representations of masculinities, the field is led by Xueping Zhong and Kam Louie. Xueping Zhong's book, *Masculinity Besieged* (2000) hypothesises that intellectuals in 1980s China attempted to write their way out of cultural marginalisation into a position of academic centrality that they believed to be theirs by right. Her work is of particular relevance to my project since she examines the masculinities reflected by many of the literary sources of Fifth Generation films. Zhong's writing combines literary criticism with gender theory and a solid knowledge of China's representational history, and I have benefited from her recognition that masculinities interact with culture, history, sexualities and class to produce very specific responses to anxiety and identity. Zhong explores previous representations of men in China, from discourses of national strength in the early twentieth century to the popular psychology of Sun Longji in the reform era.<sup>37</sup> Whilst arguing for human beings' active part in the construction of their identities, Zhong explores the desire of 1980s male intellectuals for sexual and mental potency after the 'emasculatation' of the Cultural Revolution. Her ideas are discussed and engaged throughout this study.

Kam Louie has been writing about representation of masculinities across different media in China since the early 1990s (see Louie 1991, 1994, 1998, 2002). In 2002, Louie combined his previous essays, along with new material, in a volume entitled *Theorising Chinese Masculinity*. Whilst certain of Louie's writings stand well as separate pieces, I cannot totally endorse his theory that the attributes of *wen* and *wu* (which he defines as 'cultural attainment' and 'martial valour' respectively) are present in the entirety of expressions of masculinity in Chinese representational history. From this hypothesis, Louie forms, and argues for the validity of, a general

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<sup>36</sup> See Matthew H. Sommer, 'Dangerous males, vulnerable males, and polluted males: The regulation of masculinity in Qing Dynasty law', Elizabeth Perry & Nora Dillon, "'Little brothers" in the Cultural Revolution: The worker rebels of Shanghai' and Nancy N. Chen, 'Embodying *qi* and masculinities in post-Mao China', all in *Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities: A Reader*, ed. by Susan Brownell & Jeffrey Wasserstrom (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>37</sup> In an article in the journal *Women (Nüxingren)*, Sun argues that the Chinese male's failure to adequately separate emotionally from his mother (his 'wombisation') accounts for his 'weakness'. For a discussion, see Zhong 2000: 30-32.

paradigm of what it means to be a Chinese male. Despite his recognition of the need to 'problematise the notion of masculinity' (2002: 5), *wen* and *wu* remain the central axis in Louie's analysis, even when they are conspicuous by their absence. I argue that this oscillation between a reduction of masculinities to a single set of archetypes and an opposite call for the need to recognise a plurality of male identities has led to an underestimation of the complexities of masculinities. For example, his argument that masculinities have been generated by patriarchies (ibid.) ignores the obvious implication that patriarchies are expressions of masculinities themselves; that is, rather than being omnipotent and godlike, patriarchies are *also* constructions, formed from individual men following 'rules' of manhood. In common with Louie's work, this study has a central hypothesis through which it interprets a variety of male identities. However, unlike Louie's critique, it recognises that inside this argument there are multiple expressions of masculinities rather than a dualistic reduction that skirts close to essentialism.

Mainland Chinese cinema has inspired a great deal of criticism since the mid-1980s: an inspection of this study's bibliography testifies to the volume of scholarly analysis devoted to it, even without the frequent coverage of films from China in the popular and electronic press compared to the attention given to other 'Third World' cinemas.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> A few examples of full-length studies include: Chris Berry (ed.), *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema*, (London: bfi Publishing, 1991); Nick Browne, Paul G Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack, Esther Yau (eds.), *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Chen Kaige & Tony Rayns, *King of the Children & The New Chinese Cinema* (London: Faber & Faber, 1989); Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); Paul Clark, *Chinese Cinema: Culture and Politics Since 1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Shelia Cornelius with Ian Hadyn Smith, *New Chinese Cinema: Challenging Representations* (London: Wallflower, 2002); Stephanie Hemelryk Donald, *Public Secrets, Public Spaces: Cinema and Civility in China* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000); Harry Kuoshu, *Celluloid China: Cinematic Encounters with Culture and Society* (Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002); Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu (ed.), *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997); Ni Zhen (trans. Chris Berry), *Memoirs from the Beijing Film Academy: The Genesis of China's Fifth Generation* (London: Duke University Press, 2002); George Stephen Semsel (ed.), *Chinese Film: The State of the Art in the People's Republic* (New York: Praeger, 1987); George S. Semsel, Xia Hong, Hou Jianping (eds.), *Chinese Film Theory: A Guide to the New Era* (New York: Praeger, 1990); Jerome Silbergeld, *China into Film: Frames of Reference in Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (London: Reaktion Press, 1999); Kwok-Kan Tam & Wimal Dissanyke, *New Chinese Cinema* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press: 1998); Yingjin Zhang, *Screening China: critical interventions, cinematic reconfigurations, and the transnational imaginary in contemporary Chinese cinema* (Ann Arbor, MI : Center for Chinese Studies, 2002). Mainland film has also been discussed in volumes dealing with literature and culture, such as Claire Huot, *China's New Cultural Scene: A Handbook of Changes* (London: Duke University Press, 2000); Harry H. Kuoshu, *Lightness of Being in China: Adaptation and Discursive Figuration in Cinema and Theater* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999); Dai Jinhua (trans. by Wang, Jing & Tani S. Barlow), *Cinema and Desire: Feminist*

Interpretations of post-Cultural Revolution film have long used gender theory as a framework for analysis. For example, the work of Rey Chow (1995) and Stephanie Donald (1995, 2000) examines the representation of women in films by Fifth (and Sixth) Generation directors in terms of the level of agency accorded to female protagonists and their position within narratives of patriarchal oppression. However, along with these texts, there has also run a slow current of analysis of the representation of males. Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* (*Hong gaoliang*, 1987) directly addressed issues of masculinity in China. Not only did 'My Grandpa' represent an earthy male role model, but *Red Sorghum* also tackled issues of Chinese masculine resistance against an alien Japanese occupier. In 1991, Yuejin Wang analysed *Red Sorghum* in terms of its representation of a 'Chinese version of masculinity' in the shape of the film's bumptious hero (1991: 85). Wang argues that Zhang's film reverses a previous emphasis upon femininity and passivity in Chinese literature and art, instead concentrating on My Grandpa's drunken antics, portrayed in a style that would be more suitable in the knight-errant literature of the past than in a 'high-brow' cinematic work. Wang reads *Red Sorghum* as part of a post-Cultural Revolution, male-centred intellectual movement to replace a masculine cultural psyche that was both suffering and diseased (ibid: 90). Yingjin Zhang has also analysed Zhang Yimou's breakthrough production in terms its primitive celebration of masculinity. He argues that social norms are turned on their heads in a Bakhtinian celebration of masculine potency (1994: 37).

Other films by Zhang Yimou have also been interpreted in terms of expressions of masculinities, specifically in terms of their representation of individual male relationships with state patriarchy. For example, William Callahan has interpreted Zhang Yimou's *Judou* in terms of a struggle for the assertion of patriarchy and its symbolic rights (1994). Hanna Bøje Nielsen (1999) has added to this work on paternities, writing on fatherhood as it is represented in Tian Zhuangzhuang's *The Blue Kite*. However, Chinese critic Dai Jinhua has perhaps been the most vocal in her analysis of the issues of masculinity articulated in Fifth Generation cinema; she

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*Marxism and Cultural Politics in the Work of Dai Jinhua* (London: Verso, 2002); Xudong Zhang, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms: - Cultural Fever, Avant-Garde Fiction and the New Chinese Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

directly addresses the theme of filmmakers coming to terms with dominant historical discourses that is key to this study's theme of the uncertainty inherent in representations of masculinities.

Dai Jinhua interprets the work of Fifth Generation directors as a highly personal quest to replace fathers that are represented in dominant histories through their attempts to rewrite past historical narratives. In 'Severed bridge: The art of the Son's generation',<sup>39</sup> she traces the difficulty of male filmmakers in exorcising themselves from the representational codes of their creative and political forefathers, as they attempted to forge a new style that surpassed previous narratives of revolution. Concluding that this attempt was doomed to failure, she hypothesises that filmmakers were bound to become tangled in the contradictions of their attempts to escape the burdens of representation in yet another system of signs (Dai 2002: 28). Dai identifies Fifth Generation filmmakers such as Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou as deeply affected by their country's history, out of which they seek to forge an intelligible future as a new generation of male intellectuals. This project is a strictly masculine one, implicated with the dominance of an older political class of men over their cultural and social descendants. However, rather than waiting patiently for their inheritance, Dai contends that Fifth Generation male directors attempted either to claim narrative authority for themselves or (in an unconscious imitation of Red Guard actions in the Cultural Revolution) to smash this relic of patriarchal rule. These and other critical responses to gendered representations in Chinese cinema will be engaged in the main body of this study.

In terms of Sixth Generation sources, few critics have approached recent Chinese cinema in terms of its representations of gender. In *Public Secrets, Public Spaces: Cinema and Civility in China*, Stephanie Hemelryk Donald has analysed Zhang Yuan's *Beijing Bastards* and Wang Xiaoshuai's *The Days* (*Dongchun de rizi*, 1993) in terms of their emphasis on male loss and alienation in a rapidly urbanising China, and the manner in which this outsider status is coded as a strongly masculine attitude (2000: 108). In these outsider manifestos, Donald notes the marginalisation of women and their bodies' status as props to bolster the masculinities of young male heroes

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<sup>39</sup> This article is translated in Dai Jinhua, *Cinema and Desire: Feminist Marxism and Cultural Politics in the Work of Dai Jinhua*, ed. Jing Wang and Tani S Barlow (London: Verso, 2002) pp 13-48.

(ibid: 109). Other studies have concentrated on the Sixth Generation's 'representation of a special urban youth culture' (Kuoshu 1999: 27) or the manner in which the 'city' is presented. This study hopes to add to the analysis of recent cinema on the Mainland by analysing directors' works in terms of their representation of masculinities, rather than solely for the controversy that their works generate as cultural products.

However, to date there has been no comprehensive study of masculinities as they are represented in contemporary Chinese film. My study intends to fill such a gap, and to challenge a range of representations that have so far been left largely unquestioned. I combine my observations with a recognition of the plurality of masculinities, which are socially, culturally and historically contingent constructions. Only by questioning the universality of masculinities can an examination of gendered selfhood in any society take place. This study is intended to further such research in a Chinese context, and to see how male protagonists have articulated the hopes and fears of Chinese filmmakers as their nation negotiates the vagaries of its past and comes to terms with its place in a global future.

#### **4: Chapter outline**

The main body of the study will be structured around four chapters, each focussing on particular expressions of masculinities. At the beginning of each chapter, I provide a contextualisation of the manner in which these masculinities have been represented in China's recent past. Part One (Chapter Two and Chapter Three) centres on modern reworkings of Communist categories of masculinity. Chapter Two is based on representations of youth, among whom Mao intended to groom a new generation of revolutionary successors. The two films that I focus upon, however, present protagonists who either have difficulty negotiating this revolutionary legacy, or reject it altogether. In Jiang Wen's *In the Heat of the Sun* (*Yangguang canlan de rizi*, 1994), adolescent Xiaojun attempts to come to terms with Cultural Revolution archetypes of masculine heroism. Zhang Yuan sets his 1993 film, *Beijing Bastards* (*Beijing zazhong*) in the smog of post-Mao Beijing, where the twenty something bohemian, Kazi, is forced to question his masculinity after his rejection by his pregnant girlfriend. Zhang's film outlines masculinity in terms of the individualism of the reform era, when men are defined by their personal relationships and their distance from, rather than obedience to, dominant social discourse.

Chapter Three focuses upon the hallowed triumvirate of Maoist systems of representation - workers, peasants and soldiers - as well as considering the representation of intellectuals, a group walking a tightrope between revolutionary legitimacy and disgrace. Although I recognise that males do not only inhabit these categories, their representation as males in the films discussed reflects the changes that have occurred in the years after Mao's death. Mi Jiashan's 1988 film, *The Troubleshooters (Wanzhu)*, traces the day-to-day lives of three fast-talking young men as they try to make a living in the more profit-orientated working environment of the reform era. Early Fifth Generation films were famous for their portrayal of a literally and metaphorically oppressed peasantry. However, I choose instead to analyse Jiang Wen's more recent portrayal of male peasants in *Devils on the Doorstep (Guizi laile, 1999)*, a story that both satirises Maoist portrayals of a fearless revolutionary peasantry, and mocks the earthy rustics drawn by the Fifth Generation. In Chen Kaige's *Big Parade (Da yuebing, 1985)*, soldiers undergo gruelling and humiliating selection in order to prove their worth to act in a piece of post-Mao revolutionary theatre. Huang Jianxin's satirical comedy, *The Black Cannon Incident (Heipao shijian, 1985)*, articulates its director's anxiety concerning his country's emergence from Mao's cultural and ideological legacy through the persecution of a hapless, childlike male intellectual.

Part Two (Chapter Four and Chapter Five) examines representations of male relationships. Chapter Four looks at portrayals of male protagonists as friends and lovers. *Suzhou River (Suzhou he, dir. Lou Ye 1999)* is narrated by a Shanghainese, street-smart videographer, whose masculinity is compromised through his struggle to master the images that he does not create, especially when those are in the mind of his lover. Jia Zhangke's *Platform (Zhantai, 2000)* focuses upon a group of friends as they struggle to grasp the excitement of the early reform era from a northern border town. This anxiety is chiefly articulated through the film's main male protagonist, who can never truly make a connection with the world around him. Liu Bingjian's *Men and Women (Nannan, nǚnǚ, 1999)* is a rarity in that it is a Mainland Chinese film featuring male homosexual protagonists. It focuses upon young migrant Xiao Bo, and his impact upon the relationships, both gay and straight, of the city dwellers whom he encounters.

Chapter Five is based on images of fathers. The majority of this section is made up of an examination of the chronological presentation of fathers in the work of Zhang Yimou, as he moves from portrayals of oppressive personal and state patriarchy at the beginning of his career (in *Judou*, 1990 and *To Live or Huozhe*, 1994) to the condemnation of an individualistic society in need of a caring fatherhood in one of his latest films (*The Road Home* or *Wode fuqin muqin*, 1999). This analysis is complemented by comparisons with Tian Zhuangzhuang's *The Blue Kite* (*Lan fengzheng*, 1993), in which individual males are doomed to fail against an aggressive state paternity, and Zhang Yang's *Shower* (*Xizao*, 1999), another film that, like Zhang Yimou's *Happy Times* (*Xingfu shiguang*, 2000), praises a wise, though unthreatening, fatherhood.

My concluding chapter will offer some reflections upon the representations that have been discussed in the main body of the study. It will engage the central hypothesis of the thesis, determining to what extent the male protagonists in the films discussed are 'on the run' from past and present dominant discourses, and will question what they are running towards. That is, whilst male protagonists definitely have complex relationships towards official concepts of gender identity, they are also uncertain of the form of subjectivity that many of them appear to be seeking. There is a tension between the aspirations of many protagonists and the 'reality' that they find facing them, further confusing their search for a coherent male identity. Do these films represent 'masculinities in crisis' (in the Western critical understanding), or are they simply confused and destabilised? For example, while filmmakers may represent masculinities that differ from state sanctioned ideals of being a man, it must be remembered that social and cultural power in China is still very much in the hands of males. As Paul Smith warns, too sharp a focus upon masculinities that are presented as marginalized may obscure male power's complicity in the formation of patriarchies (1996: 4). This study takes account of the variety of masculinities that are represented on the Chinese screen, and engages the gendered discourses with which they negotiate as articulations of a culture also in the process of transition from the age of Maoist models.

## CHAPTER TWO – YOUTH

This chapter will concentrate upon the cinematic representation of young men and ideas of youth. To this end, two films will be examined. The first, Jiang Wen's *In the Heat of the Sun* (*Yangguang canlan de rizi*, 1994), concentrates upon the events of one hot summer in the Cultural Revolution and its impact on the life of the film's main protagonist, the teenage Xiaojun. The second, *Beijing Bastards* (*Beijing zazhong*, 1993) by Zhang Yuan, is set in the present-day hustle of 1990s Beijing, its plot strands loosely held together by the male protagonist's search for his pregnant girlfriend. As is suggested from these short summaries, Jiang and Zhang made very different films centred upon the experiences of young manhood. However, a closer examination shows that *In the Heat of the Sun* and *Beijing Bastards* may have more in common than their backdrop of China's capital. Their disparities also can shed light upon ideas of youth and the way in which this very distinct stage of life is negotiated by Jiang and Zhang's male protagonists before and after the death of Mao.

### 1: Youth in Chinese Culture

#### a) Youth in the construction of Communist manhood

Before beginning an analysis of the films themselves, it is worth analysing the idea of youth, and its possible meanings in a Chinese context. As in the West, youth in China is a relatively modern concept that marks the transition from dependence upon familial and social elders to adult independence. Youth was perceived as the stage through which one passed from childhood to adulthood and productive work. In China, youth also signalled dependence upon older relatives. A student, an unmarried individual or unemployed graduate could still be defined as a youth well into his or her twenties on account of being dependent upon elders. However, a conception of youth tied to Euro-American visions of adolescent subcultures, rebellion and freedom from responsibility may not be applicable in the very different social environment of China.<sup>1</sup> In fact, it may be reasonable to ask whether youth in China was, and is, marked as a separate stage in moving towards adulthood. As Gold recognises, 'youth' as a distinct stage in life was enjoyed 'only in

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<sup>1</sup> Dick Hebdige outlines the defining features of subcultures, and discusses the case study of the British Punk movement, in his influential *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979).



elite families' prior to the Communist takeover (1997: 597). Although elite males had the luxury of an education inside the traditional education system, girls from wealthy families could also extend their learning through mission schools. Therefore, rather than being a given, natural stage of development, youth can be seen as part of a socially constructed life course, 'recognisable as a social and cultural phenomenon influenced by historical features' (Cherrington 1997: 40). After 1949, however, the organisations of the new government recognised the potential of the young in transmitting their values. In this section, youth will be considered as an interpellated concept in the light of its construction by the new Communist government in 1949. Youth as a stage of development for males will be considered in an urban context, since the passage toward adulthood that the term implies was only enjoyed by the few who had the status to pass through a Communist social education.

From the late nineteenth century, the national strength of China was linked to the vitality of the young to transform the decay and degeneration of the past. As the demonstrations of the May Fourth period<sup>2</sup> in the early twentieth century showed, young people were active in pro-nationalist activities as aspirations opened up by participation in education or in newly opened factories (at least for some) outweighed conditions in China: witness the title of the movement's main publication, *New Youth (Xin qingnian)*, for evidence of a belief in the power of the young to transform. While the New Culture movement of 1915<sup>3</sup> 'gave youth little chance to find a new identity' (Fairbank 1997: 276) through national concerns, study groups formed at the end of the decade gave the dedicated young an opportunity to serve society.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The May Fourth movement was 'an attempt to redefine China's culture as a valid part of the modern world' (Spence 1991: 312) in the wake of demonstrations surrounding China's international position. The May 4<sup>th</sup> 1919 demonstration was directly prompted by the granting of German rights in Shandong to Japan in the 1919 Versailles settlement following the First World War.

<sup>3</sup> The New Culture Movement began in 1915 when Chen Duxiu's founded the journal *New Youth (Xin qingnian)*. In the journal, Chen urged educated Chinese to throw off old traditions and ideology in favour of the formation of a new culture. The May Fourth Movement, directly in response to the injustices perceived in the Versailles treaty, occurred four years later, and served as a catalyst to further interrogation of China's traditions.

<sup>4</sup> For more on the ideals of the New Culture and May Fourth movements, see Chow Tse-tung, *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), Schwartz, B (ed.), *Reflections on the May Fourth Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972).

The newly formed Chinese Communist Party (founded in July 1921 in cosmopolitan Shanghai) was a small part of this student modernisation fever, and sought to attract young people to their ranks, with a belief in the necessity of educating youth in their new ways of life to guarantee loyalty in the future. In a society dominated by the power of older men, the CCP sought to break gerontocracy in favour of a younger generation of activists. Mao saw young people's activism as the hope for the future of the Party (Hickrod & Hickrod 1965: 172), telling the young that 'the world is yours, as well as ours, but in the last analysis it is yours' (Mao 1966: 288). In fact, the CCP formulated its own definition of youth in order to create a strong base for Party loyalty (Cherrington 1997: 45). Once in power, it created organisations for young people, such as the Young Pioneers for schoolchildren, and the Communist Youth League for older adolescents. One official definition declared that 'youth' occurred between the ages of fourteen and twenty-five, whilst Youth League membership was open to applicants aged fourteen to twenty eight (ibid: 41). At least in the cities, education in state schools meant that a certain measure of control over the life of young people was taken by the Party. As research has shown, placing children in classes created strong peer groups, sometimes cementing alliances, sometimes fostering strong competition (see Chan 1985, Jiang & Ashley 2000).

Young people growing up in Communist China had their future roles outlined by the Party: they were to aim to be the revolutionary successors of the 'Long March generation' who fought and struggled to create a new political reality in China. Most young children in cities were members of the Young Pioneers. Membership of the Communist Youth League, however, was a more coveted prize. Higher echelons were dominated by the children of prominent Party officials. In the classroom, emulation of officially approved role models was especially encouraged through stories of heroic young people dying gloriously for Communism to the more mundane good deeds of Lei Feng (Hickrod & Hickrod 1965: 172).<sup>5</sup> Chan displays the extent to which young people competed to emulate these models, ever seeking for more 'anonymous' ways to do good

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<sup>5</sup> Lei Feng, a soldier in the PLA, was held up for emulation for young people. A discussion of Lei's role as model soldier is found in Chapter Three of this thesis.

deeds in the classroom (1985: 60-63). Time after school could be taken up with work towards campaigns, as officials promoted a policy of combining work with labour. Children had little free time and minimal spending power, preventing many of the characteristics of adolescents in Europe or America, such as the formation of subcultures, from developing.

If the Party sought to create an official 'youth culture', it succeeded, in the cities at least. Many commentators see the ultimate expression of CCP ideals about youth taking place in the Cultural Revolution, with young people's relationship to the state being determined by their associations (or lack of) with this time. While students were taught the importance of emphasising the 'class line' and emulating the heroes of the past in order to become revolutionary successors in the early 1960s, they were offered the chance to take part in another 'liberation' and to prove their worth politically in the activities of Red Guard factions from 1966-68. The idea of young people as bearers of the revolution was emphasised in the 'up to the mountains and down to the villages' (*shangshan, xiaxiang*) movement, beginning in the late 1960s. 'Educated youth' were to learn from the peasants in the countryside, and their experiences coloured reactions towards the regime. Whilst some young people saw the Cultural Revolution as the best time of their lives due to the freedoms from parents and teachers that overthrowing the established order represented, others were disillusioned by the poverty of the peasants, the suffering of their families and friends and their continued exile in the countryside as the Chairman's actions diverted more and more from their aspirations.<sup>6</sup>

#### **b) Post-Mao manhood: *Liumang, haohan* and *yingxiong***

After Mao's death, officials found it more and more difficult to promote the moulding of youth that it had practised prior to the Cultural Revolution. After being disbanded, the Youth League re-emerged after 1978, but members were confused as to how to motivate young people in the atmosphere of the economic reforms in the late 1970s and 1980s

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<sup>6</sup> Notably, the ten years of disruption led to intense competition with ex-students seeking to renew their academic careers. As Gold states, disillusioned members of this Cultural Revolution generation of 'sent down youth' were key participants in the 1976 incident in Tiananmen Square and the 1987-9 Democracy Movement (1991: 604).

(Gold 1991: 605). Whereas Party policy had once been to promote the selfless devotion to comrades encapsulated by the actions of Lei Feng, officials in the era of reform were encouraging more economic independence and apparent individualism. Urban youth were once guided through life by the Party, from school to higher education to an assigned job; in the reform era, state withdrawal from many aspects of economic life was making life less and less secure for the graduates. The end of the system of assigning jobs to young people meant an increase in youth awaiting employment (*dai ye*), and many saw the only way ahead in becoming a private entrepreneur. Whereas Hickrod & Hickrod explore the presence of juvenile delinquency even in 1965 (1965: 175), youth crime was a real worry in the reform era, with almost three quarters of crime in 1990 being committed by offenders under twenty five (Hooper 1991: 268). Much of the frustration that led to crimes may be explained by the gap between aspirations and the reality of day-to-day life in China experienced by many youths.

The authorities often described young male criminals as *liumang*. *Liumang* is a difficult term to translate. Literally, a *liumang* is a rogue or hoodlum, or is used as a term to describe immoral behaviour. Scholars such as John Minford and Geremie Barmé prefer the English term 'hooligan' (see Minford 1985, Barmé 1992). The expression can be traced back to the 1870s, when it was employed in the description of 'the rootless rowdies and petty criminals who plagued the growing port city of Shanghai' (Barmé 1999: 64). In official documents and criticisms, being a *liumang* is not a desirable quality, describing those antisocial individuals outside the boundaries of productive citizenship, who may have been involved in anything from petty offences such as loitering or drunkenness to more violent crimes. However, in the 1980s and 1990s, being labelled a *liumang* took on a positive aspect for many urban young people. Minford describes the emergence of a wider, nonchalant '*liumang* generation', a member of which might be found 'on his Flying Pigeon bicycle, looking (somewhat lethargically) for the action' (1985: 30). As Minford's description and official condemnations suggest, a *liumang* was likely to be male, a particular expression of masculinity. Barmé cites further evidence for *liumang* activity being conceived of as male in his observation that 'playing the *liumang*' is used in common speech to describe sexual harassment, specifically of a woman by a

man (1999: 64). Jenner also points out that Qing codes included a term similar in meaning to describe those disrupting Imperial order: '*guanggun*', or bare sticks (1996: 3). In common speech, *guanggun* signifies a bachelor, indicating the conflagration of unmarried young men with social disorder.

However, being a *liumang* in post-Mao China did not so much stand for the disrupting of official order, but for alienation from it altogether. Modern urban youth, whether educated or not, may not necessarily be a worry to officials on account of their potential for mobilisation. Instead, authorities are concerned about a generation apparently unconcerned with political priorities, opting out of the moral and social responsibilities expected of their parents and grandparents. While Kuoshu sees this cohort as China's version of 'generation x' (1999: 25), Barmé believes that modern urban youth may better be described as generation 'grey' (1999: 99-144). In this atmosphere of apparent apathy to the priorities of the regime, are there any common values uniting urban male youth?

Loosening of economic control led to a new emphasis on individualism among the young, who had not been brought up with Maoist ideals of collectivism and altruism. With more access to influences from outside China, many young people wished for a more affluent or more 'westernised' existence. Kwong highlights a gap between Dengist portrayals of ideal youth (note the reappearance of Lei Feng in the wake of the Tiananmen Square protests) and the policy that the government itself promoted, insisting on 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' with the maxim that 'to get rich is glorious' (1994: 250). While youth may have been dispassionate towards Communism, many were more and more proud to be Chinese. Nevertheless, older generations were baffled by young people's adoption of the individualistic ideals and aspirations that had been condemned as bourgeois and capitalist in their own youth. Was the 'youth culture' deliberately fostered by the CCP replaced by subcultures more familiar to the Western culture that influenced so many young people? Certainly, young people in the reform era had more access to what Hooper calls a 'leisure culture' than their parents, listening to 'gang-tai'<sup>7</sup> or Western pop music and watching films (1991: 267).

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<sup>7</sup> An abbreviation for Hong Kong (*Xianggang*) and Taiwan.

However, scholars have observed the persuasiveness of a particular expression of masculinity dating from as far back as the Tang dynasty that has re-emerged in the reform era. A set of values known as *haohan* seems to be a component of post-Mao masculinity. Although difficult to translate exactly since the term is shorthand for both attitudes and behaviour, an individual who is described as a *haohan* could also be seen as the equivalent in European common speech as a 'real man.' However, the values that *haohan* individuals are said to possess come from very Chinese traditions. As Jenner observes, probably the best examples of *haohan* are to be found in the *Water Margin* (*Shui Hu*) cycles published in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (1996: 8). Popularised through oral traditions and popular drama as well as the written word, the male code of honour exemplified by the *Water Margin* novels was widely known and disseminated. Ownby also points to popular legends of banditry loosely resembling English tales of Robin Hood, in which rebel groups of young men outside Confucian norms (driven by poverty into an unmarried life of exile) redistributed their purloined wealth (2002: 231). A *haohan* as portrayed in the *Water Margin* cycles would follow a strict code of *yiqi* (brotherhood / loyalty), towards the fellow members of his gang, putting loyalty before other priorities (especially those involving women). While he would meet death bravely for his compatriots, he would equally be unafraid to meet out violence to those around him, often whether they were deserving of it or not. Moved by neither money nor sex, a *haohan* would treat a stranger with honour and be prepared to face death for a friend.<sup>8</sup>

As this study will show, cinematic representations are not simply mimetic of an objective reality, but are constantly active in the creation of identities and in individuals' conceptions of the world surrounding them. Similarly, *haohan* notions permeated non-fictional attitudes towards being a man. Ownby points out how many bandit groups aped the values that were presented by the *haohan* heroes of popular stories, whilst Jenner observes that the stories surrounding the failed Boxer Rebellion were framed by *haohan* notions (Ownby 2002: 235, Jenner 1996: 17). Mao perceived himself as a leader in the

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<sup>8</sup> See Jenner 1996 for a more detailed exploration of *haohan* values as exemplified by *Water Margin*.

vein of peasant rebels of the past. Even later in his career, he described himself as ‘a graduate of the university of the greenwoods’ (Ownby 2002: 238).<sup>9</sup> However, whilst Communists paid lip service to *haohan* ideals in order to gain support, once in power *haohan* values appeared more as threats to social order than an honour code. For example, the CCP preferred to promote their own idea of heroism in the support of Communist ideals. The Communist hero (described by the term *yingxiong*) was modest and disciplined, countering the flamboyance and individualism of the *haohan*. Nevertheless, values associated with *haohan* heroes prevailed, as Perry and Dillon’s investigation of the male dominated Workers General Headquarters in the Cultural Revolution shows (2002: 277).

The *yingxiong* brand of selfless masculine hero could not withstand the new priorities of the reform era, perhaps better suited to the individual acts of heroism exemplified by the *haohan*, loyal only to his own gang rather than to the revolution. As Barmé observes, martial arts’ novels containing *haohan* type heroes enjoyed a craze of popularity in 1980s China, especially among students (1999: 84). *Yiqi*-type bonds of brotherhood also became important for some urban group of young men. Like the heroes of *Water Margin*, the modern *liumang* in reform era China recognised the importance of standing up for their ‘brothers’. The authorities noted the rise of *gemen’r* with distaste, a term denoting (in the official definition) ‘an expression used by disreputable persons to express affinity for one another’ (ibid: 86). The slang language of the children of high level cadres staying in Beijing in the 1950s and 1960s generated the term (Barmé 1999: 87), and *gemen’r* gangs of young men live on into the reform era.<sup>10</sup> These ‘brotherhoods’ more than superficially resemble the *haohan* of legend: modern *liumang* in *gemen’r* gangs will ‘forget about the demands of the family and the state (including the Party) in order to stand by a mate in trouble’ (Jenner 1996: 29). Like the bandits of popular folklore, these modern brothers are situated firmly outside the dominant order; unlike their predecessors, though, they do not claim ultimate loyalty to any higher power to justify their rebellion (Ownby 2002: 235). *Gemen’r* is reluctantly cited into existence by the authorities in their

<sup>9</sup> Ownby observes that *haohan* were said to inhabit ‘greenwoods’ (*lǔlin*) (2002: 232)

<sup>10</sup> The ‘ge’ element in *gemen’r* means ‘older brother.’

analysis of youth delinquency, blaming the feudal values of *yiqi* for spurring many young men on to breaking the law in the name of loyalty and honour before their 'mates' (Jenner 1996: 30-31).

### c) Youth in context

This chapter will investigate expressions of masculinities in *Beijing Bastards* and *In the Heat of the Sun* with conceptions of youth in China in mind. For example, it is notable that the two films to be investigated are set in the capital. It may therefore be appropriate to ask whether such bias in films indicates that youth is a stage in life that is relevant to, and created by the conditions of, urban China. If youth and 'youth culture' (both in Mao's time and in the new priorities of the reform era) exist as concepts, it may be thanks to the atmosphere of the city, whether that exists in the tight organisation of ideological education in the 1950s and 1960s or in access to music, films and economic opportunities in the 1980s and 1990s. Youth as a time of dependency for men will also be explored. For example, how does Xiaojun deal with the absence of his father in *In the Heat of the Sun*, and does his new-found 'independence' extend beyond mere freedom of movement? The young men of *Beijing Bastards* are youth in the sense that they never seem to actually *do* anything. While they are inside the eligible age range for the Youth League, they superficially do not appear to be dependent upon anyone - they make their own money (somehow) and their own rules, with or without the *danwei* (work unit). The idea of dependence is inevitably linked with the concept of gerontocracy in China. How do the protagonists in the films deal with the physical and moral authority assigned to older men, if the older generation is presented as an issue at all? Do the films represent young men as powerful?

In the Maoist era, official textbooks held up heroic socialist models for emulation by young people. Most of these examples were men. With one film set in the Cultural Revolution, and another with the majority of its protagonists arguably oblivious to China's past, this chapter will examine the models and heroes whom the protagonists admire. Whilst Xiaojun in Jiang Wen's film lives surrounded by tales and images of heroic CCP endorsed heroes, the loyalties of Zhang Yuan's Beijingers seem more



difficult to pin down. One aspect of youth that unites the protagonists of both films is their *liumang* slant. Although this section may appear to have given a disproportional emphasis to values that originated centuries before the settings of the films discussed, the relevance of such notions of masculinity to *In the Heat of the Sun* and *Beijing Bastards* cannot be understated. Xiaojun is the product of a *liumang* imagination: while the urban school kids of Jiang's 1970s Beijing may have expressed many of the traits of the *liumang*, is their behaviour merely a product of the reform era? How do the members of the loose circle of friends in *Beijing Bastards* define themselves in relation to the *liumang* ideal? Moreover, is there a distinction between *liumang* posturing, *haohan* bravado and the deeds of Party endorsed *yingxiong* expressed in the films?

## 2: Synopses

*In the Heat of the Sun* was directed in 1994 by Jiang Wen, probably the most famous contemporary male actor in China, previously known for his roles in such films as Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* (*Hong gaoliang*, 1987) and Xie Jin's *Hibiscus Town* (*Furong zhen*, 1986). The film is set in Beijing in the 1970s in the middle of China's Cultural Revolution, and records the memories of its narrator, Ma Xiaojun, of 'that summer' in adolescence when he met the infamous Mi Lan, whose reputation as a dangerous heartbreaker preceded her. Since his father is rarely at home on account of his postings as an army officer in far corners of the country, Ma Xiaojun spends most of his time in the company of his gang of friends, and as little time at home with his irascible mother as possible. His gang is made up of his old school friends Big Ant, Liu Sitian, and Yang Gao. They are later joined by Liu Yiku, Liu Sitian's older stepbrother, who is home from the army and has brought a girlfriend with him, Yu Beipei.

Xiaojun's hobby of picking the locks and breaking into other Beijing residents' homes also keeps him busy. One of the apartments that he ventures into belongs to Mi Lan. His days then become a question of passing time until he can get a chance to introduce himself to her. At the conclusion of the film, Xiaojun is seen to jeopardise his own relationship with Mi Lan by attempting to rape her. The credits roll over a black and white sequence of the gang in the film's present, the director himself playing Xiaojun.

Instead of biking around deserted Cultural Revolution streets, the gang ride around the centre of Beijing in a limousine. However, the story is not merely a tale of 'young love', or a formulaic, hazy exercise in nostalgia. It is complicated by the older Xiaojun's role as first person narrator, placing into doubt the faithfulness of his memory, and showing the various ways in which images, sounds and accounts of personal and collective pasts can play tricks. Jiang's vision of the past stands in sharp contrast to other productions that portray China's history, such as the near 'epic' frameworks used in Zhang Yimou's *To Live* (*Huo zhe*, 1994) or Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* (*Bawang bie ji*, 1993). Not only placing the conventional accounts of Cultural Revolution vices and injuries into relief, in his film Jiang also deals with the difficult territory of how personal histories are formed through a series of negotiations with the past, whether that involves denying it, fabricating it, or coming to terms with the possibility of never knowing its truth at all.

Jiang Wen's script was adapted from a novella, *Wild Beasts* (*Dongwu xiongmeng*, 1991), by the popular author and screenwriter Wang Shuo. Wang's works centring on urban youth indifferent to political life had contributed to the post-Mao figure of the *liumang*. Jiang describes there being two main influences to his production, the first being his own experiences of growing up in the 1970s, many of which, such as the 'black' class background ascribed to his mother<sup>11</sup>, are reflected in the on-screen portrayal of Xiaojun. Another influence was catalysts to memory; that is, the way that certain images, sounds, and objects can be evocative of a past time (Chiao 1998: 143). Wang Shuo and Jiang Wen belong to the Beijing *liumang* generation discussed above, shaped by new encounters with urban culture in the Cultural Revolution decade.<sup>12</sup>

Zhang Yuan's protagonists in *Beijing Bastards* appear to have been formed through no such monumental political events. Growing up in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the young Beijingers place themselves firmly in the *liumang* generation observed by Minford

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<sup>11</sup> In Maoist China, those with a less than 'revolutionary' background (an individual may have worked for, or be a relation of someone who worked for, the previous Guomindang regime, or may have been punished in a previous political campaign) were ascribed as being 'black' (as opposed to the 'redness' of the true communist). This 'bloodline theory' came to prominence just before and during the Cultural Revolution, as Anita Chan describes (1985).

<sup>12</sup> According to his fiction, Wang's father described him as a *liumang*. See Barmé 1992: 31.

in the mid-1980s (1985: 30). While a number of young men in the film seem to get by through petty extortion and settling old scores in the vein of old fashioned disturbers of the peace, Zhang's portrait of the life of a dissatisfied and disorientated generation also includes the artists and skilled musicians through which Minford rehabilitates *liumang* values (ibid). Although set two decades later than *In the Heat of the Sun*, *Beijing Bastards* shares many of the points of reference in Jiang's film. Located firmly in the capital, even using similar cityscapes as orientation points, *Beijing Bastards* is also centred on the trials and tribulations of a gang of male friends.<sup>13</sup> The film's twisting narrative begins with Kazi arguing with his girlfriend, Maomao, about her unplanned pregnancy. Angered by Kazi's apparent indifference and readiness to countenance (and finance) an abortion, Maomao disappears into the pouring rain and grey blur of Beijing's system of underpasses. This loss prefigures and shapes the remainder of the narrative, as the loosely connected network of acquaintances play out their everyday setbacks and hopes. Kazi's quest for the pregnant Maomao puts the dilemmas of his gang into relief. In his search, the audience comes into contact with a local band whose members are trying desperately to find an alternative rehearsal space after they have been sold out by their promoter/manager. Led by the Beijing rock musician Cui Jian, the band's music opens the film, and their songs act as a chorus both to define the Beijing that Zhang wishes to convey to his audience and to put Kazi's increasing desperate search for Maomao into emotional perspective.

We also meet the band's keyboardist, Yuan Huang. His acquaintance Daqing calls him in as a commissioned bailiff on behalf of a friend who is owed money by an unnamed gang. The relationship between Yuan Huang, Daqing, and his friend Huang Yelu adds another strand to Zhang's narrative: in the style of the typical urban tough, Yuan Huang (who is definitely a *haohan*) brings in an old friend called Zhou Ming to rob his promised cut of the retrieved money from a recalcitrant Daqing. In the meantime, we see a more domestic life in the day-to-day grind of Kazi's platonic female friend, Li Ying. Li Ying lives with her husband in a Beijing flat along with her ailing grandmother. Always seen inside the

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<sup>13</sup> While both films have female protagonists, their significance is either put in relief by or functions in the development of male (anti) heroes.

home, or travelling towards it, Li Ying seems to represent the frustrations and obligations of life for the young in the city.

As days pass into weeks, Kazi becomes increasingly desperate to find Maomao, despite his calculated attempt at nonchalance. In this limbo, he fruitlessly attempts to strike up relationships, or even casual sexual encounters, with other women. The art student and friend of Li Ying, Jin Ling, is seduced, attacked and rejected by Kazi in one such moment of frustration. Through Jin Ling, an artist's studio is introduced, to which Kazi and Daqing also appear to be attached. As Kazi ambles through *Beijing Bastards'* converging plotlines, he eventually (and out of nowhere) tracks Maomao down to an apartment in the city. We have seen Maomao previously in brief flashes lying in a hospital bed apparently in preparation for an abortion. The Maomao in the corridor of the apartment block is definitely not heavily pregnant, and we see baby clothes hanging in the shared hallway. A baby's cry is also heard. In the following scene, we follow a shaven headed Kazi making his way through Beijing crowds towards the camera.

The preceding account of *Beijing Bastards'* plotline may seem incongruous to a feature that is often described as a 'semi-documentary', or an essentially eventless production in which 'nobody is in a hurry to go anywhere or to do anything' (Kuoshu 1999: 18). However, the film *does* have a strong structuring element in Kazi's quest to find his girl (one of the oldest narrative devices in the book), although this search is interspersed with other vignettes that tell other stories. The intersection of the protagonists makes relating a linear narrative difficult, which may have been Zhang's intention. Charges of the film's semi-documentary style (possibly made in the light of Zhang's 1994 Tiananmen documentary, *The Square / Guangchang*) can be disputed by the slick presentation of Cui's band, and the style of many scenes in which protagonists walk into already established shots.

### **3: Youth, Models and Performance**

#### **a) *In the Heat of the Sun* and heroes**

In the previous section, we have seen that encouraging the emulation of models was a **key** element used by the Party in its attempt to shape an obedient 'youth culture.' Coming **of** age in the midst of the ten Cultural Revolution years, *In the Heat of the Sun's* protagonist, Ma Xiaojun, is surrounded by notions of heroism. These images of Party heroes are to **be** found in the posters that adorn the walls of public places, in effigies around him, in **the** living form of his PLA Commissar father and, none the least, in Xiaojun's own head. However, rather than presenting these images as mere backdrop to place his film in **a** clear historical setting, I will argue that Jiang measures Xiaojun's responses as **he** negotiates his way through the heroic (*yingxiong*) versions of masculinity that **are** endorsed by the Party. Xiaojun's encounters with those in political authority (a rookie policeman and, with hindsight, his own father) can be perceived as elements of **his** attempt to form a coherent masculine identity that will be acceptable to both himself **and** his peers.

#### **i) Men in the mirror: Xiaojun's performance of masculinity**

Jiang explores the construction of Xiaojun's masculinity through the act of performance. Xiaojun lives a fantasy life in front of the mirror. Probably the first indication of **his** performance of alternative identities comes after he has broken into his father's drawer. Also the beginning of his breaking and entering, Xiaojun removes his father's medals **and** proceeds to put them on, saluting in front of the mirror, imagining himself as a valiant People's Liberation Army war hero. Acting out an imaginary offensive, Xiaojun **even** looks into his father's private book, blowing up what he takes to be a balloon (but what he later realises to be a condom) and turning it into a Zeppelin. When the condom deflates, so does his engagement with the game. One interpretation is that he realises the invasion of his father's privacy that his investigations represent, as shown by his **half** recognition of what the 'balloon' he plays with actually is. The camera's focus on his parents' posed photograph seen through his new toy as it floats through the air serves to make the imaginative link between Xiaojun's 'heroic' martial father and the less idealised

sexual life for which the condom is a symbol.<sup>14</sup> Commissar Ma's masculinity is more complicated than the image of a saintly war veteran, and another archetype of socialist manhood is slowly chiselled away. Xiaojun's later performances are full of such reticence, as though he suddenly comes to a point of realisation and is aware of the impossibility of the characters that he is acting out.

After Xiaojun has been picked up by the local police for loitering (the typical activity of the *liumang*) outside a concert held in honour of a visiting ambassador, he fakes a breakdown in front of a nonchalant, tobacco chewing policeman in order to be allowed to go on his way. When he arrives home from his ticking off, he immediately places himself in the position of a larger than life version of himself chastising such a foolish official who would dare to challenge his authority. He acts out the threats that a detective would have at his disposal - for a brief moment, he takes on the mannerisms of a tough, cool gangster who can point out his jurisdiction over the space that the police and small teen gangs like Xiaojun's like to call their turf. However, his vision collapses as soon as he finishes his monologue. In *In the Heat of the Sun*, all male authority figures are faintly ridiculous. Xiaojun's teacher Mr Hu is the most obvious example. Tricked in class, and spied on by Xiaojun, he is not seen as worthy of obeying. The policeman, although outwardly tough, has the formulaic nature of his diatribe exposed by Xiaojun's performance. The only reasonable, honourable authority is seen to be the main gang leader who prevents a rumble. However, we learn that he is killed by 'teenage punks' who envy his position in Beijing. Notably, the gang leader is said to have 'soft hands', not a characteristic of the tough, rugged Party heroes that Xiaojun appears to admire. The local tough is played by Wang Shuo himself, whose head overshadows the likeness of Mao that is painted on the walls of the restaurant where a celebration of peace between the rival gangs is held (Huot 2000: 59). This extension of reality into film is typical of Jiang's filmic extension of Wang Shuo's metafiction. However, it also signifies the ascent of a new dominant masculinity, albeit a subversive one, which is prepared literally to write history for the Chinese people after the stars of the Maoist era have waned. In

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<sup>14</sup> This burst condom also proves to be responsible for the conception of Xiaojun's younger brother, only serving to decentre him from his family further.

Xiaojun's world, male heroes are being redefined, and are no longer the rugged farmers or the factory workers with rough blistered hands that feature in CCP images and stories of struggle. The new power holders are the leaders of the criminal underground who are never foolish enough to get their hands dirty, and who win their respect as men through other means.

At fifteen, Xiaojun seems far too old to be playing soldiers or cops and robbers. In fact, as the film progresses, he appears less emotionally mature than his contemporaries in the gang. But Xiaojun's acting out may have another function apart from showing his relative immaturity. In terms of the construction of gender, Judith Butler points out how gender is constituted and institutionalised through unconscious performativity. Unlike performance, which is conscious play-acting, where the performer is aware of a real self to which s/he presents an alternative, performativity is a repetition that actually brings into being the formations that it acts out, when 'words, acts, gestures and desire produce the effect of an internal core' (Butler 1999: 173). Sarah Chinn explains that performativity is a form of language that activates something when it is spoken, such as a marriage vow (1997: 295). Performative language is also essential in interpellating expectations of gender into being. Gender is therefore the result of institutionalised performance of a dichotomy, between the actions defined as appropriate to 'male' and 'female', where the repetition is all there is. Therefore, Xiaojun's acting in front of the mirror may be a visualised form of this gendered identity formation, showing the processes through which various versions of masculinities are tried on and rejected or accepted. Despite the fact that Xiaojun's impersonations begin as conscious games, they soon become unconscious as he loses his everyday life in his reflection. Nevertheless, there also comes a point when he steps out of himself and realizes the futility of these pretensions. As Butler states, it is in these moments of exposure that gender identities reveal their potential fragility, for 'it is the instabilities...that call into question that very regulatory law' (1993: 2).

We rarely observe Xiaojun looking at his reflection unless he is presenting an alternative version of himself. Not only is this obvious in the above examples, but it is also apparent

when he visits Mi Lan. While she washes her hair in the communal bathroom, for example, Xiaojun steals a sneaky glance at a nearby shaving mirror, trying out a *liumang* grin. Xiaojun's alternative selves resemble the reflection of the young child famously described by Jacques Lacan, fooled by misrecognition of its reflection into an over inflated opinion of its abilities (Lacan 1977: 1). Later, just as Lacan's child comes to seek this recognition through the gaze of other individuals, Xiaojun craves attention and verification from his peers. It is this search for a reflection of his identity that pushes him to acts in which he continually misreads masculine codes.

In her seminal essay, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Laura Mulvey likens the cinema screen to this Lacanian mirror, in that stronger, fictional versions of ourselves are projected in front of us (1987: 63). In *In the Heat of the Sun*, I contend that this relationship is turned on its head: - for Xiaojun, the mirror is like a cinema screen, he projects himself into fictional worlds. This is taken literally when he acts out battles in Korea when the history of his father's exploits and a popular cinematic version of the past merge.<sup>15</sup> Mulvey also points out that a large part of Hollywood cinema's appeal is its encouragement of the audience to identify with the main male character. Xiaojun's playacting can be seen as an attempt towards this identification, only to be thwarted by its impossibility. However, models are always around him, from the heroism that he believes of his father, to the characters in the Soviet films that were shown in the Cultural Revolution: they are 'the more perfect, more complete, more ideal ego conceived in the original moment of recognition in front of the mirror' (ibid.). Xiaojun's story as a whole is also a larger mirror, in which he wishes to identify with a more perfect, more controllable version of his past. As with the experiences of the younger Xiaojun, this imaginative vision is impossible to sustain, not to the audience, but to himself.

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<sup>15</sup> Xiaojun actually mimics a scene from the 1964 film, *Heroic Sons and Daughters* (*Yingxiong ernü*, dir. Wu Zhaoti). The film's patriotic overtones and themes of recovering fatherhood and the patriotic spirit from Korea and Yan'an adds resonance to Xiaojun's mimicry, in which he is also attempting to act out *yingxiong* forms of heroism, but ends up as a rough *haohan*. Moreover, this search for heroism is intertwined with the Long March generation of CCP heroes in Wu's film, to whom Commissar Ma fails to match up. For more on *Heroic Sons and Daughters*, see Pickowicz 1991.



## ii) Model Masculinity

Butler's theory of performativity can be applied to the political posturing in the background of Xiaojun's adolescence. That is, the roles of model soldier, policeman, teacher, even tough street gang member, may be nothing more than (in Butler's words) a 'stylised repetition of acts' institutionalised into types (1999: 179). Even the martial masculinity that Commissar Ma represents, the mainstay of CCP legend, is undermined. The older Xiaojun as narrator points out that his mother doubted his father's version of his involvement of the Korean War, attributing his survival to desertion.<sup>16</sup> In these asides, Jiang constantly modifies the narrative, providing alternative versions of history. However, Xiaojun's mother's doubts question the authenticity of heroic versions of masculinity as much as her son's imitation of them. In another sense, her comments may be an indication of a female voice interrupting a male narcissistic narrative in order to point out its fictionality. Even the 'ambassador' we see on screen is not what he seems, but merely an imitator. In fact, we rarely see real political authority, but merely representations of it.

While Xiaojun tries on different forms of masculine identity, the ultimate expression of male political authority and power present in the film is the focus of this Cultural Revolution, Mao himself. Mao is present as another example of adult male authority. Although never designated as a model for emulation by the Party, the image of Mao on posters and ephemera presides over Xiaojun's youth. Mao can be seen as the 'red sun' of the film's title, under the influence of which his devotees are dazzled and become metaphorically (does Jiang suggest morally?) blind.<sup>17</sup> While the title of Jiang's film may refer to the illusory factors of being young and heady on the freedom of summer, it may also refer to the intensity of youth itself. For the 'sun', in what has come to be known as 'Maospeak' (Braester 2001: 51), not only refers to the Chairman, but to the exuberance of

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<sup>16</sup> Whether Jiang presents this interruption in a charitable light is debatable. *In the Heat of the Sun's* representation of its female characters (two of whom are so transparent as to be narrated out of existence, the other of whom is presented as permanently angry) is beyond the scope of this study, although the manner in which women are portrayed is undoubtedly a part of the larger themes of masculine identity present in the film.

<sup>17</sup> Yomi Braester suggests that the sun of the title may be meant in a more literal sense, referring to the Cultural Revolution punishment of being forced to stare into the sun for long periods of time, causing black spots to appear in front of the victim's eyes (2001: 59).

youth, who are (in Mao's words) 'in the bloom of life, like the sun at eight or nine in the morning' (Mao 1966: 288). However, Xiaojun's vigour and vitality, so emphasised in Mao's works, are directed in a very different direction from being content to be a 'bolt' in a revolutionary machine. More *liumang* than *yingxiong*, Xiaojun's actions not only make him realise the impossibility of his fifteen-year-old body inhabiting the identities of war heroes or tough city gang bosses, but also show how fragile these versions of masculinities really are, in gendered and political senses. Although only referred to once or twice, Mao's presence is implicit throughout in representations and effigies. Mao is also present in the black and white sequence at the conclusion of the film, which also begins with his image. However, this time Mao is present as a mass-produced, tacky good luck charm hanging from a limousine driver's windscreen. From being an all-seeing arbiter of the fate of his people in the days of Xiaojun's youth, Mao is now a figure of reminiscence at best and a cult icon at worst, a small picture of no account.

Nevertheless, Xiaojun's mimicry also shows the extent to which these models of heroism have been institutionalised by the Party and are internalised, or at the very least emulated, by some in their pursuit of a masculine identity. Jiang satirises notions of heroism in the revenge attack that Xiaojun's gang launches against rivals who have beaten their friend Yang Gao. Taking their weapons, the gang corners their rivals to the soundtrack of *The Internationale*, the anthem of Communism. This symbolises the extent to which models of heroism are transferred onto everyday life, and highlights the incongruity with which this heroic anthem sounds against Xiaojun's cowardly action of allowing the others in the gang to corner the supposed perpetrator, then knocking the boy unconscious with a brick. Not only does Xiaojun wait until his victim has no means of retaliation, but he also carries on beating him after he has passed out. He cannot live up to the heroic soldiers he sees in the posters around him, hoping that brutality will mask his lack of integrity. It also seems, though, that Xiaojun is both scared and unsure of the protocol that he should follow when the rhetoric of masculine violence and struggle is transferred to the scale of most people's lives. In the world outside ideology, Jiang seems to say, attempts to re-create a heroic past which is in itself myth is fatally flawed.

### iii) *Beijing Bastards*: Masculinity rocks

The protagonists of *Beijing Bastards* live in the reform era capital from where, presumably, the older Xiaojun tells his story. As has been suggested above, young men growing up after the Cultural Revolution years of disruption had very different opportunities and priorities from their older brothers. The youth of *Beijing Bastards* live in a world without political models. While the only reference to China as a socialist country comes with muffled television reports (tellingly, these are calls from the Russian Premier to curb corruption as the Socialist motherland falls apart), the presence of an individual or symbol exerting moral authority is hard to find. Politics leaves its mark only through the glass of the television screen, to which only Li Jing and her grandmother are seen to pay any passing heed. Otherwise, political reports are heard as background as friends discuss rock music, dance parties, and earning their next wage packet. However, there is a figure acting as a focus to the disparate action that Zhang presents: the rock musician and band-frontman, Cui Jian.

Although Cui's character is not given a name, he is central to the narrative. As has been outlined, his search for a venue provides a parallel to Kazi's search for Maomao. Without becoming a part of the fast deals and boredom of the remaining protagonists, Cui is awarded the privileged position of interpreter, interlocutor between the yearnings of the fictional protagonists and the audience through his ambiguous status. Through his songs, which are consistently highlighted, Cui links the protagonists together by providing an emotional framework through which we can interpret their ennui. Cui is also marked out through his presentation. On account of his nameless status (he is not identified in the narrative), we not only have more freedom to interpret his motives, but he is also significant in both an intra and extra digetic sense: he is not Cui Jian playing just another *liumang*, but Cui Jian playing Cui Jian.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> When the film was being shot in 1992, Cui was once again on the underground Beijing rock circuit. A classical trumpeter by training, Cui came to public recognition with a television appearance in 1986. Playing with his band, ADO, Cui enjoyed success among the city young. Although he never claimed that his lyrics were political, he played to the Tiananmen demonstrators in spring 1989, playing his song,

Anyone with even a small knowledge of rock music in China would recognise the face and name of Cui Jian. He therefore stands out in a film with unknown actors and actresses, drawing our attention to his role inside the digesis. While the camera remains either static or in a blur when recording the conversations and movements of Kazi and his *liumang* friends, Cui Jian is presented with vivid attention in perfect focus. Zhang Yuan's experience in video direction shows through, as the band is presented as animated and colourful in direct contrast to the drab tones and relative lethargy through which the protagonists appear. The first scene of the film features Cui and his band. In an otherwise empty hall, the camera focuses upon a bare-chested musician, playing a traditional set of skin drums. Next to him are revealed the rest of the band, playing a selection of Western and Chinese instruments: - for example, the band includes a saxophonist, guitarists, a zither player, and a trumpeter (Cui himself). Notably, the band is made up of men placing music as a masculine pursuit. The variety of players and influences in the band not only reflect the atmosphere of the Beijing rock scene, but the initial focus on the traditional drummer places the film as a whole into the context of a Chinese past.<sup>19</sup>

The first words we hear in the context of the film are Cui's song lyrics:- 'My eyes are shut I lean on you/ Holding myself in my hands.' These words of vulnerability colour our perception of the next scene, in which Kazi is attempting to persuade Maomao to have an abortion. That is, the masculinity that these lyrics express is one of vulnerability and fragility: while Kazi's pleas to Maomao may seem insensitive (ill-judged at best), Cui

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'Nothing To My Name' (*Yi wu suoyou*), which had become an anthem to the protesting students. Wearing a red blindfold, Cui hit a nerve with his lyrics ('But all you ever do is laugh at me, 'cause/ I've got nothing to my name'), and the singer went underground until the authorities bizarrely asked him to perform a series of gigs in a fundraiser for the impending Asian Games. Perhaps predictably, the performances were called short when Cui and his band staged a re enactment of his 1989 performance of *Yi wu suoyou*. When *Beijing Bastards* was produced, therefore, Cui had placed himself on the musical map of Beijing, had aligned himself with dissidence (despite his many assertions to the contrary), and, arguably, he had passed his peak of popularity (his 1991 album, *Resolution*, sold relatively poorly). For more on Cui, see Jones 1992, 1994, Schell 1999, Huot 2000 and Efirid 2001.

<sup>19</sup> See Jones (1992) for a comprehensive account of popular music (*tongsu yinyue*) and underground rock (*yaogun yinyue*) in reform era culture.

highlights the dilemmas that are to come. Events such as Maomao's pregnancy are reconceived in a personal light, not a question of doing the best thing for the country, but a private dilemma between two people. The *liumang* male subject is conceived as both exposed and without direction, whose eyes, in Cui's words, 'shine like a victim's'. That is, Cui presents himself and those like him as unable to fulfil either his own or his loved one's hopes, expressing not only an individualism alien to Maoist dictums of solidarity, but also an enforced self reliance - there is no embrace of the Party to gather up this new generation of men, however ambivalently it may feel towards the socialist past. Cui's role as a mouthpiece for the emotions that his circle of acquaintances is too disaffected to show also links him to a more traditional male role in China's past: that of the intellectual. In the pre-Communist times, the role of an intellectual was a coveted one, and intellectuals were assigned the role of commentator on the ills of society that were in need of correction (Cheek 1994: 185). Cui's lyrics not only comment on Kazi's feelings as he searches for Maomao, but also interpret the emotional landscape of underground Beijing.

Cui is not only set apart from the remaining band members and protagonists through his near celebrity status, but his music also increases his authority. Ruth Padel has commented that rock music in the West has been assigned as a 'male' pursuit, claiming an integrity above and beyond its popular rivals. In contrast, popular music is perceived as ephemeral compared to rock's 'authenticity' (2000: 3). Andrew Jones makes similar observations when commenting on the underground rock scene of Beijing (1992: 91). While Chinese rock artists are usually male, musicians in the rock scene are also perceived to be the bearers of a certain kind of authenticity. Their expressions of alienation are aided by official condemnation, with rock singers taking on the role of spokesmen for the unexpressed emotions of their fans. As Jones states, 'rock lyricists self-consciously concern themselves with the emancipation of the individual in the face of oppression' (ibid: 101). Notably, Cui never seems to smile apart from when he is performing, indicating that the stage is a site for the self-conscious construction of his masculinity, as he seeks to express an 'authentic' self. His performance is overlaid with a strong physicality. Sweat pours from his brow even in rehearsal: in Cui, intellectual and

bodily versions of masculinity fuse. Unlike the other protagonists, his sincerity is not overlaid by the sarcasm characteristic of the fast-talking *liumang* (see Barmé 1992: 45). He looks directly into the camera, addressing the audience with his lyrics.

Rock performances also create a space for dissent against dominant cultural norms. Significantly for this study, the overwhelmingly male composition of many rock bands marks out this space as masculine: whereas women may dance along in the audience, the terms of alienation against established authority invariably express the concerns of men. In the outdoor dance party that takes place about half way into the film, Zhang defines this space further. The scene takes on a reddish glow, as Cui's band and local youth gather to listen to the jam sessions of local musicians. With (goat) meat bubbling away in what Schell tellingly calls 'cauldrons' (1992: 289), the bands take their turn while listeners dance, waving their arms in the night air and swigging beer from bottles. Obviously, the audience witnesses a scene far beyond what the authorities expect of youth behaviour. The 'cauldrons', red tinged light and terracotta earth paint a primitive picture: that is, it is as though rock music is seen as so authentic that it cuts through the artificiality of Party endorsed civility, bringing a 'primal' sort of expression that breaks through dominant discourses. Stripping away such trappings also gives the idea of new beginnings and a world turned on its head, the Beijing underground's version of a Bacchanalian, Bakhtinian carnival.

#### **4: Youth and dependence**

##### **a) Control**

As indicated above, a defining feature of urban youth in Communist rule was young people's position of dependence upon their parents and the Party. *In the Heat of the Sun* and *Beijing Bastards* both address the issue of the independence of their male protagonists. Although Xiaojun is only fifteen throughout most of the film, his father's authoritarian gaze is largely absent, leaving him to patrol Beijing's deserted streets with his gang, beyond the control of his increasingly exasperated mother. Despite this appearance of independence, however, Xiaojun finds his attempts to forge an adult identity thwarted. The teenage Xiaojun finds it increasingly difficult to exert control over

the competing elements of his life. To compensate for this confusion, he engages in voyeurism and the invasion of other's space, but this power proves both temporary and illusory. As Xiaojun fears that his fantasy of intimacy with Mi Lan will not be fulfilled, he takes extreme action both to attempt to claw back control of his previous relationship with her and to punish her for her transgression of striking up a relationship with Liu Yiku. The film as a whole is an exercise on the part of the adult Xiaojun to retain a measure of control over the narration of his own past. This desire is frustrated, however, as he reveals the impossibility of expressing faithful versions of identity and history.

Although the protagonists of *Beijing Bastards* are considerably older than the adolescents of Jiang Wen's film, they are also attempting to carve out a measure of control over their own lives and masculine identities. Kazi's search for Maomao is just one example of the search for such order. While Cui's lyrics express individuality, they also reveal a vulnerability and a necessity for the male singer to face and master the troubles that await him. This search for control, though, is not obviously against any dominant individual, but against the apparent vagaries of the city and, in Kazi's case, over Maomao. Notably, Cui is not seen to seek such security. In fact, the band provides a space for deliberate disorder, as the outside jam session demonstrates. The threat of displacement always hangs over the protagonists in *Beijing Bastards*. Not only is this manifest in the physical environment of the city around the protagonists, but also in their own lives.

### **i) *In the Heat of the Sun*: Breaking and entering**

It is notable that Xiaojun's main hobby is house breaking (he is careful not to steal anything, as he rather too hastily divulges to the audience). I will argue that this subversion of space is constituent of an attempt to negotiate a masculine identity. The physical (and mental) mastery involved in breaking down physical barriers stands in sharp contrast to his attitudes before more flesh and blood symbols of authority. Xiaojun's behaviour also reveals that both control and power are important characteristics of the 'authentic' masculine character promoted by the Party and ridiculed by the film at large. This crime thus does not stem from greed, but curiosity and a joy in the secret violation of others' space. His thrill at the prospect of discovery is measured by

the beads of sweat upon his face, deliberately emphasised by close-ups. Xiaojun's trespassing can be seen as a method of reducing the very real powerlessness that lies behind many of his performances of bravado. While Xiaojun unintentionally subverts identity categories by physical intrusion, he also gains a feeling of mastery over others through moments of visual superiority. For Xiaojun seeks to appropriate the power of a *gaze*, not a mere ocular look, but a more transcendental 'mode of desire' (Grosz 1992: 449). In a time of surveillance over the population by political power holders, Xiaojun also interrupts this (masculine) Party prerogative, putting it to use to strengthen the *liumang* version of manhood that worries official visions of ordered masculinities, one of which is represented in Commissioner Ma, Xiaojun's father.

Despite his undoubted privilege given by his father's occupation compared to many of his generation, Xiaojun remains subject to parental authority. Nor is the power that Xiaojun's intrusions lend to him reflected in his life with others in his gang. The older, handsome new arrival Liu Yiku steals the spotlight, the position of leader and, as it turns out, the girl. Xiaojun is always in part an outsider and an observer, even before he is ostracised for his treatment of Mi Lan. In several scenes, he is seen apart from the main gang, and he is always the one who goes too far, both in his violence and in his showing off. Later, Yiku and Mi Lan's relationship also places him on the boundaries of his peer group. He is excluded (and his youth is emphasised) by their mutual gaze. In this case, the power that Xiaojun enjoyed as a voyeur has been neutralised.

Xiaojun spends a lot of the time in *In the Heat of the Sun* watching people. From looking on at the pageantry that precedes his father's initial departure, he is seen spying on girls his own age performing a ballet to Mao. In fact, the film can be seen as Xiaojun's quest to find a good vantage point, from minor acts of spying, to his prowling on Beijing's rooftops to get a good view of Mi Lan, through to the attempt of the older Xiaojun as narrator to gain perspective over his past. But the lenses through which Xiaojun attempts to see all seem to be distorted. *In the Heat of the Sun* is full of lenses and mirrors that fool Xiaojun into thinking he has mastery over himself. His initial act of spying is frustrated by the interruption of other members of his gang, and his final illusion that his friendships



can survive his assault of Mi Lan is shattered when his vision of the gang holding out their hands to pull him out of a swimming pool is merely a trick of both light on the water and memory: - they are really trying to push him under. Attempts to mediate vision are all proven to be illusory, just as Xiaojun as narrator cannot present a comfortable reflection of his own past to the audience.

On the first occasion that he breaks into Mi Lan's room, for example, he uses a telescope to spy on his teacher, Mr Hu, in the school grounds below. Xiaojun even creates his own soundtrack to his imagined reconnaissance mission, the same heroic anthem to Mao Zedong from the farewell parade at the beginning of the film. Xiaojun's exaggerated surprise at Hu's actions is outweighed by their actual mundanity. Mr Hu is nothing to get excited about. In fact, his excitement seems to stem as much from using the telescope (an obvious symbol for the action of the film at large) as from his spying on Hu's lunchtime trip to the lavatory. Xiaojun, rather than his teacher, has the advantage of surveillance normally reserved for those in authority, whilst Hu has been, literally, caught with his trousers unzipped. With the advantage of his (phallic) telescope, Xiaojun confirms his opinion of Hu as less than 'a man'. In looking, Xiaojun becomes, in psychoanalytic terms, a spectator, the owner of a gaze that implies power and domination over its object. He is a voyeur, and according to John Ellis (1989: 47), is thus distanced from involvement in the events that are played out in front of him. This space gives Xiaojun power over the object of his gaze.

Notably, Xiaojun's hobby of making keys allows him agency that he does not have to earn through approval of the gang. These keys represent both power and violation. Mi Lan wears a small key around her ankle (too small for a door key), which has its significance inscribed by repeated close-ups. In a sense, this key represents what Xiaojun can never know, but perhaps suspects, about Mi Lan and her sexuality. It could also tease Xiaojun of the possibility of happiness with her that will turn out to be unattainable. However, when Xiaojun attacks Mi Lan, he deliberately yanks the key from her ankle. Yomi Braester interprets this action as a measure to regain control over the narrative that Xiaojun inhabits (2001: 361); that is, the narrator attempts to control the end of his own

story (and perhaps the past itself). At first, Xiaojun's activities offer knowledge. It is only later that he realizes that (in Braester's words) 'the key brings him face to face with more mysteries which he cannot resolve' (ibid: 360). In *In the Heat of the Sun*, further knowledge does not bring truth, for there is no truth to be had.

Braester's account is a historically sensitive reading of the film's negotiation with the narratives that constitute China's past. The author successfully demonstrates the manner in which Jiang's cinematic methods serve to undermine dominant accounts of the Maoist past, whether these stem from official government sources or those found in the proliferation of Cultural Revolution memoirs published in the West. However, while Jiang's film chronicles the difficulties of controlling the past, it also deals with struggles over the identities (political, gendered and cultural) of those who re-enact that history. *In the Heat of the Sun* emphasizes that these disparate individual personalities, and the processes that form them, are an integral part of national memories. Therefore, the attack may demonstrate more than the younger Xiaojun's attempt to wrestle control of his own story. Wrenching the key from Mi Lan's ankle also represents an attempt at an assertive masculinity for Xiaojun; that is, his dispensing with the key is tantamount to an assertion of property rights - if he cannot enter this particular door, he will deny the mystery's existence altogether. Ironically, Xiaojun has spent the most part of the film negotiating doors that have no keys. A key without a door is a different prospect altogether. With this desperation, for Xiaojun, trespass has transformed into bodily violation, as the metaphor of breaking and entering gains a new resonance. Previously, he admitted that picking locks was a 'thrill'. When Mi Lan asks whether he now gets his kicks through attempted rape, he answers 'you bet'. If this is an endeavour to extend his power over Mi Lan to something beyond that of the distanced voyeur or peeping tom, however, it fails. Breaking off the key from Mi Lan's ankle can be seen as a destruction of her idealization - it is metaphorically the key to her sexuality, her availability. Nevertheless, as with his breaking and entering, once this particular lock is broken, he does not find answers, but further frustration. Once more, Xiaojun finds that his situation is out of his control, and that the domination involved in his voyeurism does not extend into 'real' life.

Xiaojun never gets right any of the codes of masculinity that he attempts to enact. In this case, he goes beyond the unspoken rules of his male peers, violating a member of the group and, perhaps more importantly, Liu Yiku's girl. Following the attack, he ascends alone to the top diving board at the swimming pool where the gang often spend their days. While the others splash around in the shallow end, he jumps, without pretension of skill, into the water below. Xiaojun attempts to regain ties with and attention from the rest of the group: - he solicits the return of the gaze of the gang that gave him validation and a niche. However, he only gains further derision. His attempts to take his relationship with Mi Lan from voyeurism to action and thus to turn the film in his head into 'reality' have failed.

## ii) Constructing the past

Towards the end of *In the Heat of the Sun*, Mi Lan and Xiaojun's gang meet at the Moscow Restaurant to celebrate the birthdays of Liu Yiku and Xiaojun. A fight begins between Yiku and Xiaojun after Xiaojun insults Mi Lan. Xiaojun stabs Yiku in the chest repeatedly with a broken bottle, the film-speed slows down as Xiaojun looks down to see Yiku without a scratch. At this point, the narrator intervenes and the film stops and rewinds - he is editing his own scene. 'Don't believe any of it', he says, 'I never did anything so heroic in my life.' In reality, he conjectures, they all probably went out and got happily drunk. Looking back, he doubts whether he knew Mi Lan, the catalyst to his own story, at all - she might have actually been Yu Beipei. The audience is stunned - so far, we have had no reason to doubt the narrative.

As a director, Jiang is constantly tricking his audience, building up our expectations in order to displace them. However, these tricks prolong his film in our memories, as we feel compelled to decode it in our heads. We are pulled into the games of unravelling rules, and are involved in the search for knowledge that Xiaojun undertakes inside the digesis. In one sense, though, Jiang insists that this subterfuge does not matter: truth is only what we wanted it to be, a flawed representation of an already subjective version of events. In fact, *In the Heat of the Sun* is a film about representation, representations that individuals (including the narrator himself) find it difficult to live up to. An element of

representation is standing in or standing for someone or something. *In the Heat of the Sun* is concerned with the problems of standing in and standing for: the older Xiaojun as narrator exposes the impossibility of standing for even his own past, and the film at large complicates the representation of Cultural Revolution China as a time of misery for everyone all of the time (a brave move); that is, standing for the nation in any coherent sense is proved impossible. As Yomi Braester argues, *In the Heat of the Sun* is undoubtedly 'a film about the power of cinema to reconfigure the past' (2001: 350). This questioning and unravelling is of a particularly Chinese history. Although the film shies away from presenting a codified version of its era, its resonance comes from our conception of its events *as* history, both personal and imaginative.

The first image that Jiang sets before us is another device to mask the distrust of linear accounts to which his narrator will succumb. The camera pans down from an impossibly blue sky to the uplifted hand of an enormous statue of Mao, saluting his revolutionary followers as they perform a pageant to the soldiers that will be departing for the Cultural Revolution 'front'. The picture is one of order: the leader in effigy stands as the central figure and everyone takes his or her proper place in the farewell ceremony. The first scene of *Beijing Bastards* is very different. While we begin in the blue sky of *In the Heat of the Sun*, in *Beijing Bastards* we find ourselves very much down to earth: in the grey murk of a Beijing underpass. While the sun shines 'relentlessly' on Xiaojun, Kazi and Maomao argue, alone, in the rain.

### **iii) *Beijing Bastards*: Crumbling masculinities**

The apparent order at the start of *In the Heat of the Sun* cannot be further from *Beijing Bastards*. That the latter film begins, essentially, with an argument sets the tone for the remainder of the drama: we are presented with a conflict that is not easily resolved, and one between two individuals. Kazi is immediately faced with a situation that he cannot control, and thus with the responsibility that goes with it. He is left on his own, as the camera that lingers on him long after he has allowed Maomao to leave emphasises. The passing cars that we see driving through the rain on their way underscore this isolation in the city. Instead of an interactive unit, the city with which Kazi is faced is peopled by

anonymous others enclosed in the cocoons of their vehicles. Masculinity is defined as the degree of success with which individual young men can define themselves against this mass of faces.

Kazi responds to the announcement that he is about to be a father with reticence, and by trying to persuade Maomao to have an abortion. It is unclear whether the audience is meant to respond sympathetically to Kazi's dilemma. His attempts to put himself in charge of the situation are thwarted by Maomao's lack of co-operation. However, he is unaware that having attempted to control Maomao's course of action, the search for her will come to take him over. If Zhang attempts to use Kazi's situation as evidence of the troubles that face urban (male) youth however, he fails. His main protagonist's inept handling of the conversation and his sympathy for Maomao is contrived at best. However, Kazi's emotional clumsiness may stand as an example of the alienation of *Beijing Bastards'* young male protagonists. Notably, the camera does not follow Maomao, but stays with Kazi; that is, Maomao's pregnancy is to be presented in terms of its effects on the potential father.

In *Beijing Bastards*, dissolution is everywhere. This uncertainty manifests itself in physical breakage. Kazi breaks bottles in frustration, Cui's windows are broken, space is not sacred as Yuan Huang readily breaks into Daqing's home and Li Yin's door is left unlocked. Midway through the film, Cui demolishes his own stage set, tellingly swathed with ripped, red pieces of cloth. Zhang also conveys a sense of restlessness among his main protagonists. The artists and musicians of *Beijing Bastards* seem forever on the move. Kazi's search for Maomao is the obvious expression of this agitation. However, Cui's band is also denied a settled venue in which to rehearse and play, importantly putting stable space for Cui's form of *liumang* dissent into flux. Home is a place that is also thrown into doubt. Kazi is seen to sleep on the floor of his local bar, while Li Ying and her husband have little independent space on account of their family and friends. Paintings are moved around, as the building that houses them is being modernised or demolished, the sound of a pickaxe on the stone walls amplifying Kazi's despondency at his fruitless search as he laughs at his own desperation. In the next scene, Kazi is seen in

the main bar featured in the film, naked, carrying a demolition hammer. In this fantasy, Kazi attains a bodily freedom unthinkable in his actual life. Carrying the hammer, the metaphor of the demolition heard throughout the film reaches its conclusion. Kazi's vulnerability is displayed as his flesh is juxtaposed with the blunt brutality of the metal. Literally and metaphorically, Kazi has been laid bare by his search for Maomao, uncovering his own need for the emotional certainty that his one time girlfriend represented. The destruction that Kazi seems to be about to reap is symptomatic of the film at large - at the end of his tether, with no reserves left, Kazi's only action is to destroy the space with which he once identified.

## **b) Dependence**

### **i) *In the Heat of the Sun***

A characteristic of the youth stage in China is dependence upon older relatives. This seniority accorded to age is particularly prominent in the relationship between fathers and their sons. In *In the Heat of the Sun*, the absence of Commissar Ma does not necessarily mean that Xiaojun is contemptuous of adult authority. In fact, as we have seen, there is obedience to his elders behind his bravado. For example, he may use his *liumang* guile to get out of being arrested by the city policeman, but he does not go so far as to be openly contemptuous of him. Similarly, while he may boast of his prestige in knocking out rival gang members, he flees from his pregnant mother, begging her not to hit him with a ladle, and passively listens to her character assassination.

Xiaojun's father's real activities in the army can be perceived in a similar way to his son's exaggerated performance. The War of Liberation and Korean War that Xiaojun acts out and that his father may have actually participated in are over. Xiaojun's admiration for his father has not totally worn off from his almost hero worship at the start of the film - notably, his performances fall down in front of his father, who is more difficult to fool than a mirror. The Commissar knows straight away when his son is lying, seeing through Xiaojun's bragging and bravado. Xiaojun once brings Mi Lan to his home - not only is his father angry at his lies that Mi Lan is a teacher, but he seems keen to protect Xiaojun from the adulthood that having a girlfriend represents. Commissar Ma is not annoyed that

Xiaojun is showing signs of emerging sexuality, but that he has shattered the male complicity that they once shared. He is also angry with Xiaojun for wearing fashionable army surplus. Whilst Xiaojun questions such uniformed models as heroic soldiers, his father is still of an age to take these signifiers seriously. That is, he does not perceive these heroes as attitudes to be struck in front of a mirror, but as moral targets to be achieved. Xiaojun states that even after the Korean War, his father came home without a scratch, proving a certain sense of invulnerability in Xiaojun's eyes, not compromised by wounds or blood. In the Cultural Revolution, though, things have changed and it seems less possible for heroes to exist. Now, when his father leaves the family home, it is not to a great heroic battle, but to quell factional fighting or to play 'war games'. Jiang appears to undermine both the authority of fathers and the myth of heroic PLA soldiers. Ironically, it is Xiaojun (whose name means little army) and his cohort who will fight a very real war in Vietnam that will send the most admired member of the group, Liu Yiku, mad.

## ii) *Beijing Bastards*

In Zhang Yuan's film, gender identity for young men is not linked to the expectations of male elders, but to the independence of his fictional artistic community from such old-fashioned constraints. Moreover, Zhang removes the pressure and expectations of father figures through presenting the young artists in juxtaposition with another group of relatively disenfranchised urbanites: - older women. *Beijing Bastards* is marked by its lack of emphasis on the family life of its protagonists. In the crowded city of Beijing, where extended families are often compelled to live in the same apartment, the audience sees few relationships between the protagonists apart from those of casual friendship among peers. Kazi appears to live with his mother, but spends most of his time in his local bar, or roaming the streets in his detective work to find Maomao. Kazi's mother's first words are those of a reprimand for her son's lifestyle. While she is scolding him, she cooks and is concerned with Kazi's health; that is, she is presented in typical attitudes that may be expected of an older generation, particularly an older generation of women. Kazi's mother cannot understand his jobless existence and wishes to compensate by feeding him. The only other older people are seen at Li Ying's home. Li Ying's

grandmother has a similar concern over her granddaughter's health to Kazi's mother's worries about her son. She, too, tries to make Li Ying eat and responds to Li Ying's smoking and social life with quiet resignation. Watching a television programme in tribute to Mao's achievements, she is linked to a past time. Notably, as we shall see later, the domestic space is linked to women: it is Li Ying, not her husband, who is seen as an outsider to the group of artists, and it is also Li Ying who stares into the mirror in regret, looking for lines on her face.

The fact that the older characters in *Beijing Bastards* are female is significant. Their approbation marks the young protagonists' lifestyles as subversive, and youth, vitality and rebellion are positioned as male. The absence of older men may be a utopian fantasy of a life without family duty or oppressive expectations, or Zhang may wish to make a statement about the society that he is outlining. Unlike *In the Heat of the Sun*, there are no older, conforming males to remind the male protagonists of their possible futures. While the title of the film refers to both a Chinese term of abuse (meaning 'the marginals', according to Zhang) and Maomao's illegitimate unborn child, the 'Beijing Bastards' may also be the young protagonists. Kazi and his friends are illegitimate in the sense that their lives do not follow the trajectory approved of by both the Party and by traditional family structures. However, the protagonists are also 'bastards' in the sense that they are fatherless. Literally, we do not see any of the fathers of the characters, which may either be linked to their perceived lack of importance, or the breakdown of the family. Zhang's title indicates that the young protagonists are acting without the direction of elders, for good or bad, as exemplified by Cui's lyrics ('But I can only brave the wind and face the future').

### **5: Young masculinity and women**

*In the Heat of the Sun* and *Beijing Bastards* both centre on the search of their main male protagonists for women. While Xiaojun prowls Beijing's rooftops for a glimpse of Mi Lan, Kazi searches the underbelly of the reform era capital in search of Maomao. The trajectories of both films are shaped by the quests of their protagonists, with masculine fulfilment at the end of these pursuits being prioritised above the characteristics of the



actual women whom they are searching for. Xiaojun's obsession with Mi Lan leads him towards self-questioning and a realisation of his youthful powerlessness that concludes with a symbolic cleansing in the local swimming pool. Kazi, too, can be interpreted as coming out of his situation cleansed of his past. As he makes his way through the Beijing crowds, his shaved head indicates that his hunt for Maomao has reached its conclusion.

*In the Heat of the Sun's* Mi Lan is a mystery to Xiaojun and, indeed, to the rest of the audience. The adult Xiaojun's recollection of his birthday party at the Moscow Restaurant shocks the audience into a realisation of the possibility that the central catalyst to his rite of passage story may not exist. In retrospect, it may actually make sense - there have been so many inconsistencies about Mi Lan. The initial colour photograph of her is followed by a close up of Yu Beipei's face in a similar expression. Mi Lan is seen in a series of fragments - feet, legs, back - which not only points out Xiaojun's fetishism of her (a psychoanalyst might link Mi Lan's fragmentation to Xiaojun's sexual anxiety), but also hints at her status as a construction; that is, as the narration goes on, with hindsight she may be gradually pieced together like a jigsaw puzzle. Mi Lan is uncovered as a possible fabrication (in fact, as Jiang has demonstrated, the very act of performing the past is inherently unfaithful), or at least only what we are permitted to experience by Xiaojun. Even the light coming through Milan's thin curtains gives her room a sepia quality: - both literally and metaphorically, harsh edges are softened.

Mi Lan is only important as far as Xiaojun narrates her into existence. The final monochrome scenes of the film notably do not feature Mi Lan, which may be a testament to her status as a figment of Xiaojun's imagination, but is also symptomatic of her purpose as a device to explain his feelings in the past. Despite their ruptures and diverse experiences through the years, the old gang is reaffirmed in the back of the limousine while Mi Lan is left as a product of memory. In common with Maomao in *Beijing Bastards*, Mi Lan is presented as clearly sexual. From the first minute she is mentioned, we learn that she inspires violent feelings in men, dividing friendships to the point of physical injury and death. When Xiaojun finally meets her, she admits that she has been on 'sick leave' without looking ill, and his later jibes that she looks as though she has

'just had a baby' visibly affect her. We are therefore invited to perceive Mi Lan in terms of an erotic spectacle through Yang Gao's taunts that her shape is a product of 'too much fucking.' Mi Lan is also hardly seen to express any opinion: her stock reply to Xiaojun's routine boasting is a disinterested '*shi ma?*' ('*Really?*'). This reticence may merely be due to the fact that Xiaojun cannot remember her clearly, or simply that she may not exist. However, her lack of opinion may also represent what Xiaojun wishes her to be: totally accepting of his performances and his initiation into a more adult world. This sexuality goes as far as to be an attempt by the older Xiaojun to reduce the impact of his attack: he may reason that, if Mi Lan is far from a virgin, then his attempt at rape may be seen as less of a violation.

In *Beijing Bastards*, Maomao is also a catalyst to the male protagonist's journey towards a stronger self-awareness. Just as Xiaojun's obsession with Mi Lan leads him to lose mastery over himself, Kazi cannot easily function without Maomao. While she represents the pull of responsibility when she first appears, Kazi finds himself unable to manage without Maomao. However, whether his relentless search is prompted by love of her or the powerlessness that her absence represents is debatable. As Donald observes, female suffering is a measure of male anxiety in *Beijing Bastards*, with Kazi finding it difficult to function in the day-to-day world without knowing the outcome of Maomao's pregnancy (2000: 113). However, Kazi employs various devices in order to hide his growing anxiety, as the gradually decaying city comes to parallel his own mental breakdown. Kazi's concern may stem from his realisation that Maomao's gaze acts in confirmation of his identity, just as Xiaojun seeks recognition from both his *gemen'r* and Mi Lan. If his quest is successful, Kazi will be a father among the fatherless inhabitants of Zhang's film. His search (that will come to define his masculinity) stands in parallel to the impending fatherhood of Zhou Ming, who is clearly presented as a henpecked husband to his pregnant wife.

In the initial stage of Maomao's disappearance, Kazi attempts denial. While wandering around the city, he meanders into Cui's band rehearsing for their gig. Sitting before Cui and his saxophonist, he declares that 'I'm on a search'. Nevertheless, he insists that

Maomao has not affected his emotions to such an extent that he actually misses her: 'It's taking the piss, but I'm fine on my own.' When telling himself that he can function alone no longer works, he falls back on attempting to strike up an alternative relationship. Around half way into his search for Maomao, we see Kazi sitting on a makeshift mattress conveniently placed on the floor of his local bar. He is attempting to persuade a young girl, whom the audience will later know as the art student Jin Ling, to ease his loneliness by staying to talk through the night. Jin Ling stands in the doorway, the camera closing in on her long, curled hair that covers her face. A woman of few words, except for half-hearted protests that she should leave, Jin Ling is presented as naïve, frivolous and coy. She is finally coaxed over to Kazi as he takes her hand, pulls her into an embrace and attempts clumsily to remove her clothes. The pair falls onto the mattress, with Kazi physically overpowering the struggling Jin Ling. Kuoshu takes Kazi's fumbling attempt at seduction as finishing in 'two troubled souls' who 'wrestle violently on the floor', being representative of the moral dilemmas he perceives to be showcased in the film at large (1999: 24). This description of youthful existential despair, however, romanticises Kazi who, like Xiaojun, has readily projected his frustrations into (sexual) violence. Whether Kazi rapes Jin Ling is unclear. Her objections to his sexual advances are more apparent, as she calls out '*bu*' / '*bu xing*' ('no'). Jin Ling's reluctant leave-taking may suggest that she has not minded Kazi's advances. Saying 'no' when she may mean 'yes', Jin Ling is presented as contrary and frivolous, playing to an age-old stereotype in order to highlight male alienation.

The camera, too, functions in the expression of this agitation. The couple are presented in rare close-up in blurred shots, as we attempt to follow Kazi and Jin Ling. Zhang Yuan's camera places us in the position of unwilling voyeurs - the camera lingers too long upon the couple's struggle to intensify our discomfort. Does Zhang intend to convey Kazi's despair and mental confusion in these scenes, or are we presented with Kazi's violence towards another woman as an irrational punishment for his rejection by Maomao? This sense of imprisonment is intensified in the shadows cast from the windows, resembling prison bars, which fall upon the pair as they sleep. Kazi, then, is seen to be helpless before circumstance, as we recall the soundtrack of hammers demolishing the building as

he first attempted to seduce Jin Ling. Her apparent acquiescence is, therefore, presented as another step in his self-destruction. As he wakes up and swears at her to leave, which Jin Ling does with calculated indifference, Kazi pushes the glasses and bottles from the surrounding tables to the floor in frustration.

Throughout his search for Maomao, Kazi insists that he can function without the emotional certainties that his previous relationship represented. As Kazi attempts to cajole another woman not to leave him alone, his protests of self-sufficiency become more transparent. This second, anonymous female is wiser than Jin Ling, recognising his ploy and leaving him at an underground station. As Kazi walks away from the departing train, he addresses the audience directly, claiming 'that sort of girl pisses me off'. Finding it easier to place the blame on a stranger whom he insists has missed an opportunity by having the gall to turn him down, he confesses to the camera:

'If she's dead or with someone else I can bear it. What I can't bear is her just vanishing. It makes you feel that life is really pointless: - all alone in a big space.'

While his monologue may superficially display that he misses Maomao, in fact he is merely concerned with his own helplessness. In not knowing whether Maomao is dead or alive, he is not so much worried about her personal safety, but about his own lack of knowledge. By 'just vanishing' Maomao has robbed him of his certainty and has highlighted his vulnerability in an impersonal world. Despite this admission, however, he still insists that he has mastery over himself: 'It's a real pain. I can handle it, but I don't like it.' By now, Kazi has begun to protest too much. In Cui's words, Kazi may believe that 'any weakness means the hurt gets worse.'

Kazi's quest does have a conclusion, however. When he locates Maomao in an anonymous apartment block, the audience is unsure of her decision. Are the baby's cries that Kazi hears in his imagination, or do they belong to a neighbour's child?<sup>20</sup> The

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<sup>20</sup> The scenes of Maomao having an abortion may be products of Kazi's imagination, as could be the baby's cries, as Donald insists (2000: 114). Alternatively, Maomao may have actually gone through with the termination. This uncertainty is characteristic of the emphasis upon Maomao's pregnancy through Kazi's

audience never knows what has become of Maomao, for Zhang cuts to a crowded side street. Among the shoppers and businesspeople, Kazi walks towards the camera. However, his hair has been cut into a skinhead style. It may be that Kazi's change of image symbolises the passing of time. If Maomao has had a child, he may be a father. It is possible that Kazi is intentionally portrayed as a baby. In other words, he is either emotionally reborn, or his shaved head represents his immaturity. As Donald hypothesises, he could be compensating for his loss in a visible form (2000: 114). Kazi's hair is also symbolic of a loss of strength, in that he has been broken apart by his surprise response to Maomao's disappearance. Whatever the interpretation, Kazi's shaved head sets him apart from the rest of the moving crowd and marks a point from which his awareness is altered forever. If he walks away from Maomao, he does so in the knowledge of her situation. He has completed his quest with the certainty that he requires for his sense of self.

## 6: Youth and Peers

As discussed above, the CCP education system in the cities created age cohorts that helped to cement Communist ideals. The new economic policies of the reform period, however, pushed economic individualism to the top of the national agenda, leaving many of the old values of comradeship and self-sacrifice in flux. *In the Heat of the Sun* and *Beijing Bastards* represent both these extremes. The bonds of male friendship in *In the Heat of the Sun* are severely tested by Xiaojun's attack on Mi Lan and by the changing fortunes of the gang through time. Nevertheless, after a border war with Vietnam and the gradual distancing from the Maoist past, the gang comes together again. The protagonists of *Beijing Bastards* live in a very different world. Whereas Xiaojun defines himself through his relationship with his peers and is lost without the recognition of his gang, Kazi maintains a position of calculated apathy before his male friends in Cui's band, and instead looks to his relationship with Maomao for a secure identity. *Beijing Bastards* avows an individualism absent from *In the Heat of the Sun*, as expressed by Cui's song

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experience. The fact that Maomao has gone through a traumatic operation is less important than Kazi's reaction to it.

lyrics. In contrast, even when he has obviously made good in the new economic climate, Xiaojun (played by director Jiang Wen), is still a *gemen'r*.

Xiaojun's peers matter a great deal to him. Despite the fact that he often stands apart from his friends, he attempts to earn their respect through his tales of bravado. For example, after the fight with the rival gang, the group discuss the substance behind Xiaojun's tall tales whilst taking a shower. While the group wash, the light from a torch, held by Yu Beipei, startles them. The self-styled practical joker, Xiaojun, is quick to respond by drenching her with a hose while the rest of the gang struggle to hide. Why Jiang chooses to include a shower scene may be questioned. Again, of course, it shows Xiaojun going too far: even after the excesses of the fight, he is not happy just to scare Yu Beipei, he has to drench her to prove that he is a '*nanzihan*' (a 'real man'). In one view, soaking her with a hosepipe, with its phallic overtones, can be seen as another attempt to assert a form of crude masculinity. In fact, Yu Beipei's joke on the gang may have been a response to Yiku's assertion that gang fights are no place for women. However, Jiang may present the shower scene as another form of the older Xiaojun's nostalgia at gang life; that is to say, the camaraderie in washing off the blood of another gang in the shower is another expression of group identity, as much as the actual battle. This masculinity, however, is clearly homoerotic, in comparison to the *liumang* poses that the gang professes to strike. In 'Masculinity as Spectacle', Steve Neale proposes that classic Hollywood cinema applies various strategies in order to displace and minimise the homoeroticism that occurs between male characters on screen (1993: 18). For example, violence and sadism may mask homoerotic desire in certain films, whilst communities without women are presented as bastions of masculine toughness rather than sites for the expression of same-sex desire (ibid: 13, 15). In a similar way, Yu Beipei's intrusion may be an analogous effect of displacement. Her female stare interrupts the joking in the shower, and adds a level of awareness of the gang's nakedness, making them more conscious of their own (desiring) looks. When Yu Beipei leaves, Yiku discovers that Yang Gao has an erection, which he gruffly covers with a towel. Ostensibly, this excitement is due to Yu Beipei. Her presence saves the situation, and thus the potential of Yang Gao's erection stemming from anything other than heterosexual desire is

minimised. However, not only has the possibility of homoeroticism been displaced, but also any vision of gang camaraderie has been shattered. Notably, each member of the gang is careful not to meet another's eyes.

The final narration in *In the Heat of the Sun* frankly informs the audience that the male group of friends gradually fell out of touch. This ending is typical of what we have come to expect of the adult Xiaojun. Instead of providing a form of closure to his tale, perhaps involving drama and reconciliation, the narrator informs us that he simply drifted away from his friends of the past. At first, Xiaojun does not seem to be much of a *haohan*: instead of sacrificing all for his mates, he is prepared to let them drift away. He exhibits much more of a *liumang* attitude: friends fall away, that is just how things happen. Nevertheless, he has broken an unspoken code by attacking Mi Lan, and his desperate attempts to both make his old comrades notice him, and to wash his actions away by jumping from the top diving board have failed. Despite this initial rupture, however, Jiang shows the four friends at the conclusion of the film. As they drive around in the limousine, we see that Xiaojun has done well for himself. Holding a bottle of expensive brandy, the older Xiaojun smiles at his friends Yang Gao, Liu Sitian and Liu Yiku, now mumbling and scarred from his war experience. The once dashing Yiku hides his face behind dark glasses and a scarf. For Yiku, doing his duty to his country and the Party has ended in mental and physical disfigurement. Jiang seems to say that if self-sacrifice for the Party was not all that it seemed in Xiaojun's father's time, now it has lost any sense of purpose.

Wang Shuo's novella, *Wild Beasts*, does not include such a coda, but concludes in the past of the Cultural Revolution years. Xueping Zhong suggests that, in sympathy with her hypothesis of intellectual masculinity, Jiang may wish to demonstrate that his generation has taken over the capital and, indeed, China itself. Whilst uniformed servants of Chairman Mao once passed under Tiananmen gate, the men of the reform era have found a new way to success (2000: 118). In other words, the adult Xiaojun is representative of the new (inevitably) male power holders in Deng's China. The young Xiaojun with his glib asides and crocodile tears has grown up and attained a position of moral and

economic authority. This generation's values have come to triumph over the ethics of their fathers, who have, instead, come to occupy a marginal position (ibid: 118). Arguably, Zhong equates Wang's novella too readily with Jiang's film. In *In the Heat of the Sun*, Xiaojun does not seem to resent his father. As discussed above, Commissar Ma holds a firm authority over his son, and Xiaojun does not appear to be angry at his extended absences.

Instead, Jiang may be demonstrating his own empathy with his main protagonist in including this coda, in which he plays a leading role. By portraying the Beijing of the present, Jiang adds another layer to his examination of the narration of history - after the twists and turns of the narrative, we see that the gang, at least, exists. Jiang does not only confirm the bonds of male friendship, but he also legitimises the wisecracking, *liumang* masculinity that developed in the army compounds of Mao's Beijing. Xiaojun once wore army surplus, a parody of the values held unquestioningly by his own father. Now, Xiaojun wears a uniform of another sort. In the regulation Western attire of the successful entrepreneur, Jiang proves that Xiaojun's initiative literally pays off in the competitive economic atmosphere of the post-Mao years. The *liumang* triumphs over the authorities that once greeted him with approbation. Nevertheless, this reform era capital is noticeably less animated than the Beijing of Xiaojun's memory. Whilst Jiang may comment on the vivacity of youth or the power of memory to embellish, the monochrome sequence also emphasises a lack of vitality in the present. Reversing the conventional way of coding the past and present in film, Jiang sees a changed landscape in the grey modern day Beijing, and not necessarily for the better.

Xiaojun in *In the Heat of the Sun* has done well for himself. The (seemingly) rebellious young man of the past has made good. Significantly, though, he has played on his wits, but also by the new rules of the market economy. Xiaojun has found that the system has changed, and he is, economically at least, well and truly inside it. The Beijing of Zhang Yuan's imagination is also grey, but his protagonists far from play by the reform era regime's rules. The male protagonists of *Beijing Bastards* are also very different from the generation before them (represented in *In the Heat of the Sun*). Although Xiaojun's gang



may have drifted apart over the years, they are reunited in the reform era. In contrast, the male protagonists in *Beijing Bastards* do not appear to be bound by strong bonds of friendship. The exceptions to this rule are Huang Yelu and his friend Daqing. However, their friendship is portrayed in a very different way from the idealised manner in which Jiang presents male ties.

Daqing goes out of his way to secure Yuan Huang's support in order to return his friend's money. When the three meet in a side street café to discuss the arrangements, Yelu is already drunk. While they discuss the situation, more alcohol is consumed. A real *haohan* can hold his drink, a task at which Yelu is woefully inadequate. When a brawl ensues outside the café, it is Daqing who tries to get his friend out of trouble with Yuan Huang. While Kazi is the brooding face of *Beijing Bastard's liumang* version of manhood, Daqing and Yelu seem to provide comic relief. Presented as more distant from the rock scene than Kazi, they get into fights, urinate in the street and cannot hold onto money. Daqing also looks after Yelu, playing the straight man to his comic inadequacies with alcohol. Daqing and Yelu's exploits puncture the extremely earnest tone with which Zhang presents the remainder of his film. For example, the morning after the night before, the two friends bicker and exchange insults, addressing each other as a 'wimp' or a 'loser', or a 'drunken bastard.' To resolve their playacted animosity they decide on a show of athletic prowess: - 'Well, if you aren't the greatest! Let's race / What's the point?' Despite Daqing's attempt at Kazi's romantic indifference, they race anyway, a refreshingly uncool incident in Zhang's stage-managed dissent.

In the reform era, the self-sacrificing ideals of Communist models were rejected by young people in favour of ethics of individualism inspired by new economic policies. Although the youth of *Beijing Bastards* cannot be described as being in step with either Party ideals or the priorities of the new economic age, they express themselves in terms of individual desires that would not have been conceived of in the days of Xiaojun's adolescence. Firstly, Cui's lyrics are in sympathy with the aspirations of the protagonists. Cui sings of personal conflicts and problems in love, only obliquely relating to the 'political' which, as a Chinese artist, he might be expected to focus upon. Even when Cui

speaks of a 'mass movement' (itself deliberately ambivalent), he does so in terms of its effect on the individual ('Changing my life like a revolution'). Cui also expresses a sense of vulnerability, as discussed above, although he is determined to master this sense of personal injury through his own mental and moral resources:

'I don't know when I was hurt  
But I'm inspired by the pain  
To brave the wind and face the future.'

The lives Cui sings about, therefore, are those that have been shattered but must be pieced together again and redeemed. While the beginning of *Beijing Bastards* focuses upon an intimate dilemma, the lyrics with which it finishes reaffirm this very personal space. It turns out that the wind and rain which Cui sings of in 'The Last Complaint' is not a pain inspired by the political past, but by a turbulent love affair, a concern very much of the reform era: - 'A girl brings her love to me, and it's like wind and rain in my face.'

While Kazi and his male acquaintances perceive themselves as individuals, they paradoxically set themselves as a group outside mainstream society. As Daqing protests at the conclusion of the film, 'we're all outsiders'. Kazi, for example, is clearly defined apart from other Beijingers. While he roams the streets in search of Maomao, life for the majority of city dwellers goes on as normal. While he makes yet another abortive phone call, a concierge sits quietly in the background, or the camera focuses upon a couple with their arms wrapped around each other, highlighting Kazi's isolation. Unlike the old man, he has no set niche in mainstream society. Unlike the couple, he has little emotional security. In another scene, we see a group of grandmothers watching over their grandchildren as they play in the street. The scene is overlaid with music, presenting a nostalgic vision of childhood. Against this domestic harmony, the camera focuses upon Kazi's face as he walks down the street away from the bar into the night. While the protagonists are presented as apart from mainstream society, Zhang also presents this

alienation with a small dose of regret - Kazi and his acquaintances still have an affection for the community around them, despite their self-exile on its fringes.

## 7: Conclusions

Both *Beijing Bastards* and *In the Heat of the Sun* present a counter-narrative to the accepted Party ideals of youth. Nevertheless, the two films express very different portrayals of life as young men, both on account of the positioning of their directors and the setting of their productions. Although the films were made at a similar time, their differing attitudes reflect less a conflict in male ideas of adolescence and youth in the early nineties than the age and histories of their directors. The following sections will summarise these commonalities and differences, and will come to some conclusions on the manner in which both directors represent young manhood.

### a) Two generations of *liumang*

*In the Heat of the Sun* and *Beijing Bastards* reinvent young masculinity in terms of an unofficial *liumang* narrative that acts as an alternative to CCP ideals of model manhood. While both films employ the notion of the *liumang* in order to interpellate their own version of a male 'youth culture', the expressions of 'hooliganism' expose the differences in the outlooks of their directors. Jiang Wen, a product of his Cultural Revolution education, chooses to present the original generation of Beijing *liumang*:- fast-talking, idolatrous, yet inescapably connected to the Maoist representations against which they attempted to rebel. Xiaojun and his gang know better than to take their dissent to obvious extremes; they survive on their wits and a *gemen'r* code, until Xiaojun's desires shatter his own narrative. Jiang also challenges accepted versions of masculinity, showing their construction in Xiaojun's inability to live up to them. Rather than being a model soldier, or even a successful gang leader, Xiaojun finds the masculine role of a *getihu* (entrepreneur) easier to play, involving as it does conspicuous shows of consumption, where fast-talking is a positive virtue. In contrast, Zhang Yuan's 1990s *liumang* are located firmly in the artistic community identified by Minford (1985), whose relationships with the Mao era are tenuous at best, and whose discontent is not expressed through sarcasm and bravado, but through apathy.

*Beijing Bastards* presents a reform era, marginalized masculinity with deadly earnestness. Devoid of the playful debunking of ideals of *masculinities* present in *In the Heat of the Sun*, Kazi and his very modern *gemen'r* present a marginalized *masculinity*, in which the collective ideas of the past have been replaced by individualism. However, this individualism is far from the *economic* individualism that has allowed Xiaojun to get so far. Rather than the tough worker, peasant or soldier *yingxiong* of the past, the male protagonists in Zhang's film seem ready and positively willing to display vulnerability. Cui avows emotional authenticity that uses rock music as its conduit and carves out a space for further male expression. This vanguard allows women along as spectators (perhaps seeking their approving gaze), but is remarkably devoid of female participants. Women clap along in the crowd to Cui's tunes, Jin Ling brings food to the artists but cannot get a permanent position in the studio and Li Ying is rarely seen outside the space of the home. Women are emotional and domestic support: Maomao is only important in her absence and through her pregnancy that may make Kazi a father in an essentially fatherless capital.

#### **b) Performing gender identity**

As in *In the Heat of the Sun*, masculinity in *Beijing Bastards* is performed. However, whilst Xiaojun's performances may fail, they expose the emptiness of male political and gendered identities. If Xiaojun's trickery is exemplified by a sly *liumang* wink into a hand mirror, male performances in *Beijing Bastards* are much more earnest. Mirrors are not used to question identities, but to show hard self-recognition. Performance is also highlighted in Cui's songs, but while Xiaojun's playacting is presented as just that, Cui's performance of masculinity is put before the audience in earnest. Throughout the film, young men sing out their vulnerability and loneliness in all sincerity, or eschew lyrics altogether in favour of more 'primal' cries and shouts. Whilst the outsiders to whom Daqing refers presumably include Li Ying, Jin Ling and the young women who clap along to performances in the bar, the *liumang/grey* generation is firmly pioneered by men. In Zhang's film, gender identity seems to have lost its sense of humour.

### c) Growing up with history

In the opening pages of *Stiffed*, an observation of masculinities in late twentieth century America, Susan Faludi highlights the lack of purpose felt by the baby boom generation of men who had not experienced the trials and sacrifices of the Second World War that canonised their fathers into manhood (1999: 39). In China, the years following the 1949 Revolution and activity in the war in Korea were full of such legacies of an era where masculinities were tested and proved. Faludi's conclusions on the post-war generation of American boys could equally be true of Xiaojun's cohort in the 1970s: 'this was to be the era of manhood *after* victory, when the pilgrimage to masculinity would be guided not by the god of war Mars, but by the dream of a pioneering trip to the planet Mars' (ibid: 5, emphasis in original). Xiaojun's youth is filled with the aftermath of such momentous events, although the glory of the CCP may have been waning. The gang's Cultural Revolution experiences shape their identities and allow them to participate in the monetary rewards of economic reform, China's 'pioneering trip to the planet Mars.' Even sitting out the days of the Cultural Revolution seems to have given these friends legitimacy and a relative ease with themselves that *Beijing Bastards'* protagonists, Kazi in particular, lack. While Xiaojun and his friends have left their trials behind them and drive around Beijing together, Kazi walks away alone. Whether he has grown up is another question.

### d) Striving to become a man

Being a young man in *In the Heat of the Sun* and *Beijing Bastards* is not easy for their main male protagonists. Masculinity in both films is configured as a rite of passage, a prize to be attained. In other words, masculinity is not conceived of as a static, ingrained identity, but as a product of personal and historical processes (Connell 1995: 71). In *In the Heat of the Sun* and *Beijing Bastards*, these processes are intimately linked to relationships with women, although women are characterised only as far as they interact with male identity, the central concern of both films. For example, Maomao is only important as far as her unborn child (and, by implication, the idiosyncrasies of her body) contributes to Kazi's crisis of identity. Her predicament is glamorised into an example of the 'sophisticated' moral dilemmas that these male bohemians face. The stories of

Xiaojun and Kazi are presented as quests towards a more mature gendered identity, for which Mi Lan and Maomao act as catalysts. Notably, both women are marked by their sexuality. Mi Lan's promiscuity and possible motherhood is continually hinted at, while Maomao represents the unglamorous results of the bohemian attitudes to sexuality that youth are warned against by CCP educational literature. Masculinity in these two films is intertwined with the approval of and recognition by women. Significantly, in the final scenes of the films, the male protagonists return to their fantasies of an ideal masculine identity. Xiaojun finally can rule over his peer group through conspicuous consumption, whilst Kazi seeks refuge in a misanthropic masculinity against the sea of faces on Beijing's streets.

Jiang Wen and Zhang Yuan do not present triumphal versions of youthful masculinity. Instead, both directors are careful to draw the audience's attention to the vulnerability and fragility of gender identity. Xiaojun's fated attempts to emulate the heroic masculinities of Maoist propaganda leave him friendless. In *Beijing Bastards*, Cui Jian articulates male helplessness and the dilemmas of forging an identity, revelling in the dissidence of his masculinity. Along with this recognition of the shaky foundations of CCP masculinities, *In the Heat of the Sun* is also concerned with the links between history and concepts of 'truth' within the formation of gender identities. Whilst Xiaojun struggles to hold authority as narrator of his own past, his attempts at control and emotional authenticity collapse. *Beijing Bastards* shares no such ambiguous relationship with concepts of male identity and reality. Zhang Yuan's concern with authenticity and an unquestionable 'reality' extends into his portrayal of masculinities; he rejects finding the source of his male protagonists' identities in history, but seeks to produce masculinities independent of the past. This denial of the variety of influences that contribute towards gender identity paradoxically makes Zhang's 'semi-documentary' picture of post-Mao dissident masculinity less honest than Jiang Wen's portrayal of Ma Xiaojun, the serial liar.

### CHAPTER THREE - SUPPLANTING *GONGNONGBING*<sup>1</sup>: NEW REPRESENTATIONS OF WORKERS, PEASANTS, SOLDIERS AND INTELLECTUALS.

This chapter considers four versions of masculinities through which the Communist Party has and does define male roles in society. It will focus upon the manner in which these categories worked to bolster nationalism, and the way in which this juxtaposition is questioned in four reform era films. Mao's 1942 'Talks' at the Yan'an Conference of Literature and Art delineated the desired subject matter of literary and visual representation in a future Communist state, and therefore became the basis of cultural policy. Mao declared that all artistic endeavours should serve the workers, peasants and soldiers, urging artists and writers to 'study the correct relationship between work in literature and art and regular revolutionary work' (Holm 1991: 92). The Yan'an school of filmmaking, for example, eschewed the styles of both Hollywood and previous films made in Shanghai (despite their progressive social commentary), preferring to portray life as they believed it was lived by typical cinemagoers, whether they worked in factories, on the front line or in the fields. The first seventeen years of the People's Republic were dominated by images of workers, peasants and soldiers, until the Cultural Revolution further circumscribed the limits of acceptable representation. Intellectuals also had a place in the Communist vision of society when they took power in 1949. However, intellectuals sat uncomfortably in a revolutionary future relying on the loyalty and resources of the masses and based on their productive work, and were often the first to be singled out in ideological campaigns. In times when being 'red' held sway over the knowledge of an 'expert', intellectuals were especially vulnerable.

As the nature of Chinese society was transformed by the economic reforms announced at the end of the 1970s, the model worker, peasant, soldier representations moved further and further away from the realities of the Chinese society that they were once designed to mirror. This chapter examines how male workers, peasants, soldiers and intellectuals

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<sup>1</sup> *Gong* means worker, *nong* means peasant, and *bing* means soldier.

were portrayed by filmmakers in the reform era. As well as examining how reform era images of masculinities reinvent these categories, this chapter will also focus upon the manner in which later films comment upon the masculinities of Maoist times.

## **WORKERS**

### **1: Men at work - Male workers in China's recent history**

#### **a) Who is a worker?**

The idea of work is intimately linked to conceptions of masculinities. For men across the world, work is rarely simply a matter of earning money. Employment can be a path to respectability for men, can provide an alternative community, a way to contribute to family and society, and can be a key to the definition of selfhood / gender identity. The effects of unemployment upon 'downsized' men is a frequent theme in literature that confronts the possibility of a Western 'crisis of masculinity.'<sup>2</sup> In China, the Communist Party claimed to represent the interests of urban workers, and entry into production was perceived as a path to liberation in the new society. Although women and men were both urged to enter into building the People's Republic, men were prioritised in times of job scarcity, and the model worker represented in Maoist propaganda was usually male.<sup>3</sup> This section will introduce the manner in which male workers have been represented in China's recent history. It will explore how the image of the male worker has altered through time, and how changing economic conditions necessitate modifications to the Maoist idea of the model worker. Following this short introduction, Mi Jiashan's 1988 film *The Troubleshooters (Wanzhu)* will be examined as a representation of urban male working men in the ideologically confusing atmosphere of Deng's China.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, see Faludi (1999), Segal (1997).

<sup>3</sup> In times of unemployment, the Party launched 'Back to the Home' campaigns aimed at working women in order to free their jobs for men. Women were also the first to be laid off in the economic reforms after Mao's death, whilst freedom from state supervision subjects women to regulation (see Woo, 'Chinese women workers: The delicate balance between protection and equality', in *Engendering China: Women Culture and the State*, ed. by C Gilmartin, G Hershatter, L Rofel, T White, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1994) and Bauer, J et. al 'Gender inequality in urban China; Education and employment' *Modern China*, 18:3 (July 1992)). On posters, see Landsberger (1995). On representations of female workers in propaganda posters, see Evans & Donald (1999).



In the framework of the visual propaganda and popular imagination of the Mao years, a 'worker' was inextricably linked with the Marxist concept of the urban proletariat, and could be visualised as toiling in state-owned heavy industry for the glory of the motherland. However, after Mao's death, the reform of China's economic policies led to a change in the nature of work, and the concept of 'the worker' was devalued, gradually losing its heroic connotations. Whereas working for a state-owned industry or business was the norm in cities before 1978, in the 1980s controls over entrepreneurship were relaxed and private industry began to flourish. Therefore, the image of the stalwart male worker in a state-owned factory did not match the aspirations of reform era young men, who were keen to try their luck in the opportunities of a more open economic environment.

This section reflects this change in economic priorities following Mao's death. That is, rather than interpreting the term 'worker' from the standpoint of models in Mao's China, I recognise that the conditions of employment and ideas of 'work' for the urban proletariat have shifted. It is important to note the disparity between representations of the heroic male worker and the realities for working men, to whom the reform era offered opportunities of making a living outside model roles.<sup>4</sup> Instead of investigating reform era representations of the male 'worker' as he appeared in propaganda posters of the past, it may be more appropriate to examine images of 'men who work.' The 'men who work' in Mi Jiashan's film are young businessmen, and unwittingly uncover the differentials between ideas of productive work for men in the ages of Mao and Deng that will be outlined in the remainder of this section.

### **b) Changing worlds of work**

Although Mao's revolution was won from China's countryside, the CCP greeted the urban workers with a claim to be their party of liberation. Workers (*gong*) were first in the symbolic hierarchy over their peasant and soldier comrades. Although these claims

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<sup>4</sup> This gap between models promoted by the state in the reform era and new, capitalist heroes is revealed in a recent survey of Beijing teachers, who placed scientist as the most desirable occupation for their pupils, but being an entrepreneur as their own preferred career path (<http://www.china.org.cn/english/2002/Sep/44589.htm>, accessed 5/11/03).

mystified many poor workers who had not encountered Communism, Mao's promises of better living standards and an end to exploitation were cautiously welcomed. Under the Communist regime, city life was to change forever. The exploitative working practices that characterised many city factories came to an end, but in return the CCP developed unprecedented control over workers' lives. The new government attempted to co-opt urban workers with mass campaigns, transmitted through the organisational unit of neighbourhood and street committees. Life in the factory was dominated by the *danwei*, or work unit, which regulated both work and private time.<sup>5</sup> However, this interference was repaid by a measure of security for skilled workers who benefited from state subsidised food, housing and healthcare.<sup>6</sup>

The years after Mao's death brought a redefinition of the working world. To recoup the economy after the years of neglect in the Cultural Revolution, Deng Xiaoping embarked upon a course of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' in which the old controls over the economy and state ownership were gradually dismantled. Foreign joint investments were encouraged, as was private entrepreneurship. As China opened up more of a window on the (Western) world, the maxim that 'to get rich is glorious' replaced old calls for self-sacrifice to build a socialist state. Indeed, coastal special economic zones were set up where state controls were suspended completely and foreign money was courted. Joint investment businesses thrived. This lessening of control over the economy led to new economic, geographical and mental attitudes towards labour, which will be the focus of the representation of urban ideas of work and masculinity that will be discussed in this section.

Workers were changing. With the gradual withdrawal of state owned businesses and factories, the primacy and security of the state employee was coming under attack. Unemployment, previously controlled by state job allocation, became a social reality. As Dai Jinhua comments, those workers used to the 'iron rice bowl' of state provision were

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<sup>5</sup> See Lü Xiaobo & Elizabeth J. Perry (eds.), *Danwei: The changing Chinese workplace in historical and comparative perspective* (London: M E Sharpe, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> However, there were divisions between relatively well-off skilled workers, unskilled employees who had fewer benefits and lower pay, and temporary workers who enjoyed little job security and poor wages.

psychologically unprepared for the uncertainty of unemployment. Consequently, she concludes that 'unemployment is .. the most severe problem of the nineties and the most likely source of potential social unrest' (Dai 2002: 227). The new privately owned companies did not offer security of employment, or welfare benefits, and reports of poor living and working conditions, often in the factories producing the expensive products of large multinationals, reached journalists and academics. In another sense, the introduction of foreign products and technology changed city-dwellers' expectations. While the old class rhetoric of Maoist days was on the way out, the newly rich middle class reigned. The working class, in turn, changed in composition, as it absorbed young men and women from the countryside who journeyed to urban areas in search of a higher wage, often undertaking dangerous and low paid work that city-dwellers were not prepared to perform. To the workers were also added a new breed of small-scale entrepreneur, the *getihu*, who sought to take advantage of the new economic climate. The gap between rich and poor widened, as entrepreneurs thrived and the poor, without welfare provisions, became worse and worse off.

### c) Representing workers

How have male urban workers been represented since Liberation? In the 'Seventeen Years' of Maoist representational orthodoxy from 1949 to 1966, the urban worker was portrayed in sympathy with plans for state aggrandisement. In fiction, male labour heroes emerged who fitted formulaic criteria. The model worker had to be of proletarian origin, be a member of the Party, and have been oppressed in the 'old society.' In addition to these social proscriptions, he must have carried out a difficult or unusual task and have broken a production target (Yang 1963: 214). As Xueping Zhong observes, the dominant symbol in the formation of heroic proletarian models was steel, itself representative of China's bids for international strength and supremacy. A true Communist was made of 'special material' (in Stalin's words) and was bodily a 'man of steel'. Influenced by the Soviet novel, *How Steel was Tempered*,<sup>7</sup> the CCP promoted an ideal working man who

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<sup>7</sup> N Ostrovsky, (trans. R Prokofieva), *How Steel Was Tempered: A Novel in Two Parts* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1959) is the story of Ukrainian manual worker Pavel Korchagin and his conversion to the Bolshevik Party from the final days of the Tsar. The original was first published in Moscow in 1935. It is generally believed to have been translated into Chinese in 1942 by Mei Yi, although

sublimated and controlled his own body by subjecting it to the same moulding as a piece of metal. Individualism was also tempered, since workers were expected to become cogs in the state project of socialist expansion (Zhong 2000: 45). In her exploration of blue-collar masculinities in the United States, Susan Faludi recognises that male workers were powered by a utilitarian desire to 'wrest something out of the physical world' (1999: 85). Working masculinities in China sought not only to wrest steel from raw materials, but also to forge (and so to become the author of) their own bodies. The state vision of working class masculinities was therefore intimately linked to nationalism and ideas of national potency.

In posters of the Mao era, workers appeared alongside their peasant and soldier comrades in blue peaked caps. Industrial production was seen as a battle to be fought. In contrast, the posters of the reform era replaced these proletarian symbols with hard hats in sympathy with the period's technological priorities and working men's role in building a new urban social and physical landscape (Landsberger 1995: 117). New types of economic models were promoted, who did not have to sacrifice body and soul to industrial construction (ibid: 122). However, in numerical terms, working men were represented in fewer posters than their female comrades in the reform era. When male workers were represented, it was often in a negative light in posters warning against sexual harassment or corruption. The image of a brawny worker, fist in the air, striving to break the latest target was replaced by men following the less glamorous daily factory routine of obeying clocking on procedures or adhering to health and safety regulations

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later dates of 1943 and 1946 have been put forward, and an alternative translation may have existed in Shanghai as early as 1937. The novel was widely read and used in CCP education. Two films were imported in the 1950s that were based on the novel, which were extremely influential in the popular imagination (*How Steel Was Tempered* or *Gantie she zenyao lanchengde*, imported 1950, and *Pavel Korchagin* or *Bao'er Kechajin*, dubbed and imported in 1957). Like many male model heroes of Maoist times, Pavel Korchagin has returned to the classroom and TV screen to promote socialist values in an increasingly consumerist China. He has been assessed as a model for Chinese youth, alongside Bill Gates (<http://www.china.org.cn/english/2002/Sep/44589.htm>, accessed 5/11/03). A *Time Asia* article also assesses the ambiguities of the presence of socialist heroes on the urban cultural scene (<http://www.time.com/time/asia/features/youngchina/t.s.viewpoint.html>, accessed 5/11/03). A Chinese-financed TV serialisation of the novel was made in the Ukraine in 2000, and its Ukrainian star, Andrei Saminin, became an instant heart-throb. In typically schizophrenic style, the story of a gutsy railway worker was promoted on Chinese television with glitzy, showbiz swank, 'against a backdrop of flashing lights, eruptions of dry-ice fog, and a massive billboard urging viewers to drink Huishan Milk' (<http://amsterdam.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0006/msg00054.html>, accessed 5/11/03).

(ibid: 117, 141, 154). This shift coincided with a change in the style and purpose of posters themselves, which were used less to present strident political slogans, and concentrated instead on persuasive messages aimed at a populace acquainted with the methods of commercial advertisements. The tone of these posters emphasised the restriction of male power inside regulation and time, repudiating the images of the Mao era, when model workers transgressed limits and broke targets through sheer physical prowess and mental strength. This prioritisation of 'feminine' characteristics of cultivation and control, and the repudiation of a strong, active masculinity not only resembles the Qing rejection of 'dangerous', visceral male behaviour described by Yuejin Wang (1991) and Van Gulik (1974), but also can be compared to shifts to strongly service-orientated economies in the West.<sup>8</sup>

Old style labour heroes did not fare well in the reform era. Dai Jinhua points out that state discourse surrounding unemployed urban workers moved from vague sympathy to Social Darwinist hostility. She documents several situations that highlight the uncertain status of working masculinities in a time when pressing forward in search of foreign contracts triumphed over the brute muscle of the old heroes of heavy industry. In spite of the apparent embrace of foreign economic influence by the state, Chinese workers were still represented in the service of the upsurge in nationalism of the late 1990s. For example, Dai notes the media emphasis upon a Chinese factory worker who was dismissed for refusing to bow to his Korean, female boss. Machismo and nationalism fused in the widespread praise for the worker who stood his ground (Dai 2002: 205). In another case, the rugged masculinity of Maoist labour heroes seemed worthless in a period when money made a man. One male worker (appropriately enough, in a steel factory) complained against an advertisement for a clothing company, which boasted at the high price of their suits. When real men were now sporting tailored jackets instead of overalls, the harsh nature of the young man's labour counted for nothing. He deliberately

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<sup>8</sup> For example, Susan Faludi charts the implications of a more service orientated economy upon representations of masculinities in America (1999: 38-39), whilst Sean Nixon (1996) and Timothy Edwards (1997) investigate male roles as consumers in modern European and American societies, and the more 'feminised' concentration on the male body. However, whilst the representation of men may have altered from the Maoist past, male representations involving women did not hesitate to place women in a position of obliging service (see Ling: 1999).

juxtaposed an old archetype of socialist masculinity (the physical trials and bodily strength of his work, in which he ‘sweats alongside a furnace’), with its low material rewards (and, therefore in the new economic climate, low social status) (ibid: 224). This decline in the status of the physically defined masculinity of the Maoist model worker is raised in Mi Jiashan’s film.

In the 1980s, films began to express the incongruities and contradictions of life in modernising urban China. Harry Kuoshu lists thirteen notable city films from 1986 to 1989 alone (1999: 123). In these films, a new type of urban male hero emerged, who was dislocated and portrayed in more ‘individual’ terms. However, these films also explored the psychological wrench of this new individual out of the Maoist collective (ibid: 127). For example, the female director, Zhang Nuanxin, portrayed the confusion and moral dilemmas of modern city life for one of her male protagonists in *Good Morning Beijing* (*Beijing, Ni zao*, 1991). In the film, the female bus conductress, Ai Hong, is romantically torn between the bus driver, Zou Yang, and the unemployed Keke, who wins her heart whilst masquerading as a Singaporean overseas student. Whilst Zou Yang represents a solid, predictable masculinity, Keke charms Ai Hong with a Walkman and a foreign tape. The film charts a city in transition, but also a shift in urban ideas of masculinity and desirability, with which the reliable Zou Yang cannot keep up. Notably, Zou Yang loses out because he is a local boy. In China’s ‘march toward the West’, Keke is not only ahead of him, but appears to be the very model of foreign sophistication.

## **2: Synopsis - *The Troubleshooters* (Wanzhu, 1988 dir. Mi Jiashan)**

The following analysis of Mi Jiashan’s *The Troubleshooters* takes into account the changing nature of work for men in reform era China. Mi’s film is directly concerned with male workers in reform era Beijing. The film deals with a changing capital, in which young entrepreneurs try to take advantage of the tide of economic growth. Whilst the main characters are very different from Maoist model workers (and even from the model entrepreneurs of the reform era), they represent the *reductio ad absurdum* of China’s embrace of the market. Therefore, how is the masculinity of modern workers expressed? Is it in bodily strength, or in the verbal dexterity of the cunning entrepreneur?

Is masculinity solely measured in money, and how far do Maoist ideas of labour live on after the Chairman's death? Whilst workers in the Maoist sense are firmly located labouring for socialist construction on the factory floor, state employment is not the only option for the protagonists of *The Troubleshooters*. Yu Guan, Yuan Zhong and Ma Qing question ideas of productive labour for young men in a reforming China, and carve out their own masculinity against their detractors, 'their' women, and the old moral authorities of the all-too-recent Maoist past.

*The Troubleshooters* is an adaptation of the Wang Shuo novel of the same title, and is one of many films capitalising on the 'Wang Shuo' fever of the late 1980s.<sup>9</sup> Unlike the stalwarts of propaganda posters of the past, the heroes of *The Troubleshooters* do not sweat in factories for the construction of the motherland. The three young men in Mi's film run the 'Three T Company.' However, this small street enterprise is far from a simple business, but is used to comment on the paradoxes of reform era China. Punning on the Chinese character with the same sound,<sup>10</sup> the 'Three T Company' advertises that it 'tackles depression, troubleshoots problems' and 'takes on responsibilities.' That is, if someone is in an awkward situation, Yu Guan (the manager), Yuan Zhong (the second in command) and Ma Qing (the office junior) will get them out of it, usually by carrying out their responsibilities for them. Essentially, Yu Guan's effort to make a fast fortune works in the short term because everyone else, too, wants quick, pre-packaged, disposable solutions. The Three T Company is a metaphor for the wider changes in attitudes that have been ushered in with economic reforms; it makes money because the Confucian and Communist virtues of duty and responsibility towards fellow human beings do not pay in Deng's age of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics.'

The film is presented as a series of sketch-like vignettes (a structure fitting the fragmentary and unpredictable nature of city-life that the film as a whole wishes to parody), each featuring clients that visit the office in search of a 'quick-fix' answer to their problems. The story begins when Yuan Zhong is employed to keep an appointment

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<sup>9</sup> For more on Wang Shuo, see Barmé (1992, 1999) and Zhuo Shula in Barmé & Jaivin (eds.), *New Ghosts, Old Dreams: Chinese Rebel Voices* (New York: Times Books, 1992), pp. 217-226.

<sup>10</sup> The character *ti* means to substitute for or to replace someone or something.

with the young Liu Meiping on behalf of her 'boyfriend', Dr Wang. Meiping, who works selling handkerchiefs from a department store, is a compulsive amateur philosopher, and wears Yuan Zhong out with her 'Modernist' leanings. Later, however, Dr Wang employs the Company again to break off his relationship with her. Another important client is the writer Baokang, who is frustrated at his lack of recognition in the literary world (and his lack of publishing progress), and who wants the Company to stage a fake awards ceremony in his honour. After the ceremony, Baokang introduces Yuan Zhong, Yu Guan and Ma Qing to his college teacher, Professor Zhao. Zhao effectively uses the three young men as source material for his proselytising to his university students about the degeneration of the youth of today. Zhao pops up throughout the action as the critical (official) voice to the Company's antics.

The job that causes the company's downfall is the care of an octogenarian former revolutionary. Her son cannot cope with her incontinence any longer, and begs Yu Guan to take over her care. However, when the old lady dies in the hospital where Yu, Yuan and Ma perform guard duty (with the aid of rubber aprons, endless supplies of toilet paper and gloves), her son sues them for medical costs. The neighbourhood committee decides to shut them down when the fickle Baokang also files a suit for profiteering from the literary awards. In desperation, the three try their hand at film stunt work (an echo of the transfer of Wang's novel to screen). However, when Yu Guan finds out that the stunt will put him in real danger, Yuan and Ma demand more money and the film closes down. (In a reversal of the film's previous themes, apparently fake glass turns out to be real). Regardless of this setback, they seem keen to carry on in this line of work, and search for a new name. When they wake the next morning, they find a queue stretching from their office door as far as the camera can see. Despite the neighbourhood committee's decision, it seems that Beijing residents are in desperate need of a set of scapegoats for their worries and responsibilities.



The film is a picture of an uncertain city and its inhabitants, who negotiate new rules of morality.<sup>11</sup> The film begins with a pop song about the ambiguities of the singer's yearnings for modern life ('I once longed for a modern city life, But now I don't know what I long for'). The male singer has a gruff voice, giving the themes that are expressed in the song (and will be explored through the film) a decisive masculine stance. That is, the problems of fitting into a changing city are decoded as exclusively male ones, perhaps in sympathy with Wang Shuo's general literary machismo. The following sections will explore the manner in which director Mi Jishan employs his three main protagonists in criticism of a changing and dissembling city society, and the manner in which their masculinity is an active source of this criticism. Firstly, Yu, Yuan and Ma appear far from the ideal Communist city workers of the past. Secondly, their outward appearances are functional in the pointed comparisons that Mi makes between the Three T Company and those surrounding them, whose satirisation legitimises the 'unproductive' gender identity of the three men. Thirdly, Yu, Yuan and Ma challenge previous ideals of what work *is*, and what is and is not considered to be productive (an issue that is seen as an exclusively male one). The final section will focus upon Yu Guan as the main male character, and will question the extent to which his gender identity reflects upon the main themes of the plot.

### **3: Male workers in *The Troubleshooters***

#### **a) Workers with new bodies**

Whereas workers from the propaganda posters of socialist construction could be expected to be sturdy and solid, *The Troubleshooters'* three main protagonists are physically slight. In fact, they do not seem to be hero material at all. The straightforward, highly bodily expression of masculinity for male workers that prevailed in the Mao era has given way to different forms of maleness. In a sense, their slim builds work to suggest that they instead make their livings from quick thinking: whereas in the past, skilled workers progressed through a straight political line and a strong body, the new builders of China can take any physical shape, and will make their livings from a sharp (and cunning)

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<sup>11</sup> When the film is discussed at all, critics most commonly focus upon the opening scenes that juxtapose images of the modernising Chinese city of the late 1980s (see, for example, Tang 2000: 246, Kuoshu 1999: 147).

mind. Yuan himself acknowledges their relative physical weakness compared to many of their peers, saying (to the cherub-faced Liu Meiping) that they are 'too thin to drink tea.' Unlike the male workers represented in the past, they do not gaze ahead in a focused way, but are characterised by sly winks and evasive glances. The three wear T-shirts advertising their company, both a sign of modernity and a symbol of the youth culture that they represent - they are a different type of businessmen than the Western suited older men that they see around them.

#### **b) New urban masculinities**

Secondly, Mi comments on the gender identity of his protagonists through the comparison of Yu, Yuan and Ma with other men around them. Mi bolsters the street-smart identities of his protagonists by suggesting that their male elders are over-concerned with money and sex, and are not the 'models' that they would like to be. In effect, he 'demasculinises' the male gender identities approved of in the Mao era through satire and crude jokes at the expense of the older citizens who are held in esteem by 'conventional' society. However, this mockery also reveals an insecurity at the centre of the Three T Company's wisecracking ethos.

#### **i) A new kind of 'mental worker'**

In *The Troubleshooters*, working class masculinity is affirmed at the expense of the pretensions of the seemingly more 'respectable' figures in the new, post-Mao regime. Mi links the figures whom he ridicules (Liu Meiping, Baokang and Professor Zhao) with pretension and foreign symbols of modernisation, such as luxury hotels and coffee-house philosophy. In other words, the model working class male of the *Maoist* era may be waning, but Yu, Yuan and Ma are fiercely proud of their ability to see through slavish adherence to foreign fads, linking a new style of urban masculinity to national pride that shows through their apparent nihilism.

The 'feminisation' of intellectuals works to highlight the sharp-talking masculinity of our slight heroes, compensating for their lack of physical brawn. In comparison to the three main protagonists, the film's intellectual figures wear glasses (a symbol for physical

weakness and age as well as an intellectual bent) and Western suits. The writer, Baokang, for example, is full of smiles and sycophantic laughter, and wants the Three T Company to stage a literary ceremony for him. That is, public recognition and the material rewards of fame are seen to be more important to Baokang than any joy in writing. Director Mi Jiashan is, ironically, satirising the culture business of which he is intimately involved, which he sees dominated by cowardly, 'unmasculine' men. The old revolutionary's son also begins as a figure of fun. Compared to the cool poses of the three young men, he appears totally ineffectual: he flusters around the Company's makeshift office with a feminised gait, his hands gesticulating, and frets in a high pitched voice about the state of his mother. He is a camp caricature to the firmly heterosexual masculinity exuded by a new kind of mental worker, Yu Guan.

## **ii) Dirty old men (and women)**

Another comparison is made through the figure of Dr Wang. A balding man with, again, oversized glasses, the doctor confesses to a liaison with the young salesgirl Liu Meiping. Dr Wang also becomes the butt (literally, as it turns out) of the Company's lewd sense of humour as he is an 'ass doctor'. In the first minutes of the film, Yu Guan informs Liu Meiping that the doctor cannot come to meet her since he has to attend to a leader 'whose ass keeps bleeding.' This swipe at officialdom is continued in the case of the old female revolutionary who suffers from incontinence and whose son employs the Company to clean and change her. Not only are the old authorities infantilised through this old lady (who is never seen), but they are also brought down to the lowest common denominator and rendered helpless before such fast-talkers as Yu, Yuan and Ma.

Elders are also singled out for their hypocritical attitudes towards sexuality. The magazines in which Baokang's existing work has appeared are all shown to feature portraits of women in various states of undress, at which Yu Guan noticeably raises an eyebrow. Dr Wang sleeps with Liu Meiping, then withdraws his proposal of marriage. Even the high-minded Professor Zhao is not immune to the immorality about which he lectures his students. Ma tricks the married Zhao into thinking that he has a rendezvous with a pretty young girl whom the professor has been watching in the street. From a self-

proclaimed mentor for modern Chinese youth, Zhao reveals himself to be as interested in illicit sex (if not more so) as the students to whom he lectures, as he waits outside the Holiday Inn (yet another symbol of the luxury foreign sector of Beijing) for a pretty young girl who will never arrive.

The 'writer' Baokang ends in suing the Company for profiteering in a final twist of irony. By the end of the film, Mi unmasks all the elder male figures in his film as being as interested in money as the young entrepreneurs whom Yu represents. However, whereas Yu, Yuan and Ma are honest about their desire to make money, their elders are seen to hide their ambitions behind a veil of morality that renders enterprise into avarice. The son of the old revolutionary is also revealed to be interested in material gain, as he begins the Company's downfall by placing the blame on them for the death of his frail mother. In comparison with the virtues of frugality of the past, it seems that now everyone is happy to blame others for accidental misfortunes, in keeping with the theme of lack of personal responsibility that runs through the film at large.

### **c) Changing ideas of work**

The director Mi Jishan bolsters the masculinities of his protagonists as a new generation of workers in a third way by satirising ideas of productive labour. His three main characters are used to comment upon the decreasing relevance of the masculinities of older male workers and the values for which they worked. From an old-style, Communist viewpoint, Yu, Yuan, and Ma do not count as workers at all. They do not manufacture a concrete product or 'serve the people' and the motherland, but act as a counselling and problem solving service for those who are negotiating their way through rapidly modernising city life. Indeed, it may be said that the three do not seem to actually work at all, but get paid to talk in coffee shops, or wax lyrical on stage about modern literature. Professor Zhao still believes in the responsibility of a wider 'society' to care for its children ('Society should give you more chances... society should care for you'), when the very existence of the Three T Company indicates that old responsibilities seem an obligatory burden at best.

Zhao is the voice of opposition to the alternative lifestyle (rapidly becoming mainstream) to which the three young men aspire. The Professor invites Yu, Yuan and Ma for a free lunch precisely in order to study them and to take note of their attitudes. While Zhao tries repeatedly to offer the advice of an elder and better on the correct path through life, the young men throw him off kilter with their *laissez faire* replies ('we do nothing but play cards, watch kung-fu videos and sleep'). In return for their dismissals, the three find themselves subject to a television debate on the degenerative aspects of modern Chinese youth chaired, of course, by Zhao himself.

Zhao attempts to rouse the three from their apparent inertia, warning them that 'you're apathetic, you're degenerating.' He repeatedly uses the word 'degenerate' to talk about his new case-studies: 'students, I want you to realise what serious degeneration has occurred' / 'You're apathetic. You're degenerating.' Without what he perceives as a productive plan for life, Yu, Yuan and Ma are morally disintegrating before his very eyes. In presenting the main protagonists as the epitome of decay, Zhao sets up a dramatic irony between his viewpoint and the youthful modernity that the three young men must present to the film's audience. The theme of decay and waste reappears throughout the film: even Yu sarcastically refers to himself as a 'parasite.'

Yu's father also presents a similar case to Professor Zhao. Despite the worry for his son presented behind his tough exterior, he longs for the day when Yu will begin a productive life: 'You're not a child and you're drifting. Think of your future and serve the people.' As well as revealing Yu Guan's vulnerabilities, Mr Yu is also a caricature of a typical old-guard Communist worker. Where Yu Guan sits behind a desk, Mr Yu actively nurtures his bodily strength by practising handstands. Mr Yu measures his masculinity and defines his identity through his physique, whereas his son expresses his power in more verbal activities. He literally marches into the Three T Company offices in search of his son, a newspaper under his arm instead of a rifle, then proceeds to dress-down Ma Qing about his insolence. In keeping with *The Troubleshooter's* satirical edge, old man Yu serves as a vehicle to lampoon the CCP, whilst inadvertently hitting on one of the central themes of the film: 'You solve problems for others. What does that leave the

Communist Party to do?' In Deng's age, the new generation of workers can see through such labour heroes and revolutionary rhetoric. Even if young workers believed in the images of the past, they have little physical and mental space to re-enact the physical and mental trials of model workers. With no state work to mould them into productive citizens, modern male workers are far from models, and have little to fall back upon but their wit.

The conflict really comes when Mr Yu confronts his son about his apparently directionless life. Yu Guan has the courage to rally to his father's version of concerned parenting ('I'm a bastard? A parasite?'), although his protests carry a ring of exasperation and a desire for recognition ('Why aren't you pleased with me?'). When Yu Guan attempts to turn his father's revolutionary rhetoric against him ('You were paid to raise a revolutionary son')<sup>12</sup>, old Mr Yu has a perfect retaliation ('Don't forget I helped you piss'). That is, Yu Guan knows that ties between people cannot be dismissed so readily with cross talk - for all his jibes, he sheepishly and silently admits that his father may be right. Unlike his clients, he cannot pass the responsibility that he feels towards his father onto somebody else. Whilst Barmé describes a Wang Shuo novel in which these budding entrepreneurs are 'little more than windy Chinese slackers' (1999: 75), Mi Jiashan's focus upon Yu Guan's emotional troubles changes the emphasis in the film, implying that there is more to these apparent drifters than empty verbal duels.

Mi's film reveals that a portrayal of Yu, Yuan and Ma as indolent layabouts could not be further from the truth. Being a slacker in modern Beijing seems extremely hard work. The fake literary awards seem to age Yu visibly and send Ma through the city in search of cheap prizes. Looking after the incontinent revolutionary involves long vigils and is, needless to say, extremely messy work. Even chatting with Meiping is mentally draining for Yuan Zhong as he gradually begins to exhaust all his knowledge about the West. Ironically, this generation have their own troubles and appear to be working harder than

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<sup>12</sup> This exchange is similar to actual arguments between Wang Shuo and his authoritarian father. See Zhuo Shula in Barmé & Jaivin (eds.), *New Ghosts, Old Dreams: Chinese Rebel Voices* (New York: Times Books, 1992) pp 217-226.

the responsible members of society that Zhao hopes that they will become. Bearing others' problems is an extremely astute business idea, but only serves to reveal the extent of personal responsibility towards others that their clients are happy and willing to give up. Despite what elder men may perceive as the unproductive nature of their enterprise, Yu, Yuan and Ma turn out to be the most honest of the characters. Moreover, they are faithful to their ideals: they may be hooligans, but they do not pretend to be anything but employable stand-ins. They may be fakes, Mi seems to say, but they are *real* fakes.

#### **d) Yu Guan**

Finally, Mi comments upon the life of young, male entrepreneurs through his insights into Yu Guan's character. Yu Guan is more heavily built than his friends, with a square jaw. Perhaps in sympathy with his role as a vehicle for the melancholy that can accompany a confusing city existence, he is presented as the most conventionally handsome of the three. In an apartment scene, he is appears in his underwear, indicating that he is also meant to be perceived in a physical way as a sexual being. Notably, his body is not being exposed in the heat of the factory, but in a more private arena. Yu's physical strength and bravery (he is prepared to perform a stunt towards the end of the film by jumping through real glass into a moving car) is at sharp variance with the male clients who are featured in the plot, whose mental and physical cowardice is consistently highlighted. In other words, Yu Guan's body is a decisive aspect of his masculinity, and his physical representation as a handsome male lead acts as a vehicle to articulate the doubts about male identity among modern workers.

Whereas we know little about the background of Yuan and Ma, Yu is portrayed in terms of his personal relationships, both with his father and with his girlfriend, Xiaolu. While Kuoshu argues that the protagonists of *The Trouleshooters* refuse pain in their own lives (1999: 151), Yu Guan seems both unable to rid himself of responsibility and has an almost masochistic desire to refuse Xiaolu's offers of help and happiness. However, these responsibilities become an uncomfortable burden for Yu Guan as the film goes on. Near the conclusion of the film, Xiaolu calls Yu Guan about attending classes at the night university, which he shrugs off. Obviously perturbed by his girlfriend's suggestion, there

seems to be more to Yu Guan's objections than a sheer dislike of school. Yu Guan calls off the relationship, since Xiaolu's ambitions for him prove too stifling: 'You want me to have a career, dress decently, act dignified. I'd better get a pair of glasses.' With his reference to the outward tokens of intellectualism, Yu Guan refuses to become one of the bespectacled clients that the film goes out of its way to ridicule. The strength of Yu Guan's objections to Xiaolu suggests a hint of fear. Mi Jiashan intends his audience to feel that there are more complicated emotions behind the motives of these young workers, who are negotiating their financial and emotional way through the changed priorities of a post-Mao (pre-Tiananmen) China. This relative vulnerability prevents the audience from seeing the antics of the Three T Company as completely frivolous, instead portraying Yu Guan as being more authentically scarred by modern city life than his spurious clients.

Yu Guan sees Xiaolu as a threat in that she has the power to 'demasculinise' him. In Xiaolu's attempts to give a 'direction' to his career, Yu Guan's way of life is challenged. Her encouragements to 'better' his life through officially acceptable channels only serve as a rebuke to Yu Guan's form of masculinity. Since Xiaolu is the only strong female character in the narrative, her frequent blasts of common sense are a direct and significant antidote to the drifting of Yu Guan. Whilst the previous (male) detractors of the Three T Company have been easily dismissed through feminisation, Yu Guan cannot feminise Xiaolu, for she is female to begin with. Nor can she be easily infantilised, like Liu Meiping, since she is perceived as a grown, sexually active, woman.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, when Yu Guan realises that Xiaolu may not be able to tolerate his role as a professional fast-talker, he finds no alternative but to sever ties with her. Alternatively, her insistence that Yu Guan settle down to a measure of sensible reality has another, more misogynistic meaning; that is, women are dangerous since they inevitably will want to 'domesticate'

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<sup>13</sup> Liu Meiping is seen as impressionable and girlish - she is easily taken in by Yuan Zhong's blatant bar-room philosophising, fixing him with her wide-eyed, admiring gaze. Moreover, she is associated with food, adding to her childlike qualities, and particularly with comforting children's sweets such as ice cream and yoghurt. Lin Pei, too, is seen as frivolous, tricked by Baokang's promises of fame and fortune, and failing to see through to his probable intentions. Moreover, she too is seen as a child, as she licks a stick of candied crab apples while she skips alongside the conceited Baokang. These childlike women seek out and are preyed upon by older, apparently respectable men, and are devices to shatter such displays of rectitude.



their men, endangering a male role in a working world in which they may feel lost without secure identity categories.

*The Troubleshooters* is a film about the difficulties of living life in a rapidly modernising capital. This readjustment is not only a physical matter of high-rise blocks replacing ancient *hutongs*, but one of mental remapping to changing relationships and responsibilities. The rewards of modernisation are presented as falling to the quick-witted entrepreneurs like Yu Guan. The smart-talking attitude that permits their business to thrive (and that allows Yu to come up with the idea of its inception in the first place) comes from a *liumang* attitude that is specific to urban disaffected males. Nevertheless, the blows of the new society also fall on the three young men. While the company as a whole falls victim to the avarice of its disaffected clients (from a litigation culture that simply would not have occurred in Mao's time), Yu's relationships with those closest to him display the emotional costs of living and working in a changing society. Yu, Yuan and Ma are from a new generation of urban proletariat. Perhaps Yu Guan puts it best in a tirade to his strict father: 'I didn't kill, demonstrate. What I do is legal.'<sup>14</sup> The Three T Company is a legitimate enterprise, but an unproductive one (in a Marxist sense), run by young men who are disengaged politically (although wise to the system and its anomalies), yet at the same time scornful of the mistakes of the past. These men are creations of the Wang Shuo generation, who, like Yu, are scathing of the official paths to respectability, yet also release their bile against those taking the reform-era society to mean the abandonment of the Communist virtues of responsibility. Mi Jiashan produces a film about men *not* working (which highlights the theme of masculinities' ties with the idea of labour), who will do anything to avoid the old idea of productive work and serving the people. Ironically, in a time when style matters more than substance, serving the people is exactly what these young men do.

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<sup>14</sup> Here, Yu Guan probably refers to the demonstrations that occurred in the late 1970s and 1980s, such as the Democracy Wall Movement in 1979 and the student protests against state interference in lists of candidates in university elections in 1986. By 'kill', Yuan could refer to the excesses of the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution, or even to the 1979 border war with Vietnam.

## PEASANTS

This section will investigate Jiang Wen's 1999 film, *Devils on the Doorstep* (*Guizi laile*) in order to assess the importance of peasant masculinity to a narrative of national glory. In particular, it will concentrate upon the link between Chinese peasant masculinity and sexuality and national strength. To this end, it will begin with a short introduction concentrating on the significance of and changes in the status of peasants in China's recent history. Following this, recent representations of male peasants will be discussed in order that the images of peasant masculinities presented in *Devils on the Doorstep* may be placed into context.

### 1: Peasants in China's recent history

Winning the support of China's rural population was a vital element of Mao's victory in 1949. His adoption of a malleable Marxism based upon rural base areas allowed him to swallow up the city based tactics of Chiang Kai-shek. The initial gains for peasants were great. The violence of the final land reform campaigns of the early 1950s ousted powerful landlords and seemed to fulfil the socialist promise of giving land to the tiller, whilst further campaigns in the mid-1950s created co-operatives, and ended small, individual land holdings. The collective movement reached its height in the communes formed to carry out Mao's Great Leap Forward. However, the campaign left peasants the victims of unrealistic production targets, and disillusioned at their leaders' grip on rural realities. The famine following poor harvests and high state grain procurements claimed at least thirty million lives (Spence 1991: 583).<sup>15</sup>

The countryside absorbed the impact of the Cultural Revolution through the arrival of sent-down youth and opponents of the government, and some CR initiatives (for example, the arrival of 'barefoot doctors'<sup>16</sup>) even benefited rural people. Following Mao's death, the enactment of the Four Modernisation policies, announced by Zhou Enlai

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<sup>15</sup> For a summary of Great Leap Forward policies, see Meisner (1983), Spence (1991). A number of books have been written on the famine in the aftermath of the Leap, including Jasper Becker, *Hungry Ghosts: China's Secret Famine* (London: M E Sharpe, 1997).

<sup>16</sup> Peasant 'barefoot doctors', who underwent a shorter than average duration of medical training, were sent to raise the standard of medical care in villages.

in 1975, led a second revolution in the villages. Agricultural modernisation gave private plots to peasants, and encouraged individual enterprise and local markets, allowing many villages to become prosperous. However, as CCP economic holds loosened, so did social regulation, and many old traditions once denounced as feudal reappeared, such as lower marriage ages and gender equalities in the home and at work. The demography of many villages also changed, as young people took advantage of new freedoms in order to migrate to the cities, keen to send money back to their home areas and make their own fortunes.

## **2: Past images of the peasantry**

The following section concentrates on recent representations of male peasants in literature and film. It will focus on representations of male peasants and their link to narratives of national strength, the representation of the sexuality of male peasants, and the extent to which male peasants are seen as symbols of a Chinese 'everyman.' This review will be followed by an analysis of *Devils on the Doorstep* and its theme of Chinese masculinity faced with the challenge of the invasion of foreign 'devils', a state of affairs in which gender identity and national identity become increasingly difficult to separate.

### **a) Mao era peasants**

In the representations of the Mao era, peasants were often portrayed in endorsements of state economic policies. For example, fiction in the early 1950s attempted to persuade peasants of the benefits of joining co-operatives. Stories generally centred on the Maoist voluntarism of triumphing over the limits of the physical environment, with tales of great human effort resulting in bumper crops (Shih 1963: 197, 208). Peasants in films set in the Anti-Japanese war were presented as supporters of the CCP against their oppressors, the Japanese and Guomindang troops and officials. For example, in *Landmine Warfare (Dilei zhan*, dir. Tang Yingqi, 1962), villagers aid the Communist fight against the Japanese by mass-producing landmines. The male peasant guerrillas are steely eyed and determined, staring into the distance in standard poses of Communist, resolved masculinity. The villagers are happy and jolly, situated in a benevolent natural landscape, and the

moustachioed Japanese obligingly die by the ingenuity of the peasant fighters. The action is introduced by a male voiceover, interpreting the events to come in the light of the Communist liberation of the peasant population. Any independent resistance outside CCP codes of representation and heroism is rendered impossible.

## **b) Male peasants in reform era literature**

### **i) Peasants and male sexuality**

In the literature of the reform era, rural areas assumed a new prominence. The *xungen* ('search-for-roots') group of writers set their stories in remote, rural China. In the confusing cultural atmosphere of the reform era, roots-searching writers such as Mo Yan, Jia Pingwa, Han Shaogong and A Cheng sought to examine Chinese identity by returning to what they saw as the nation's essence. This idea of national identity was intimately linked to a strongly sexualised masculinity. For example, Kam Louie discusses Jia Pingwa's *Human Extremities* (*Renji*, 1985) in the context of debates surrounding masculine identity that occurred in the 1980s. Louie places Jia's tale in the category of literature that sought for 'real men' in the harsh landscape of the northwest, as an intellectual 'response by young Chinese male writers to the accusation that they are pseudo men' (1991: 167). Louie focuses on Jia's sexual imagery, particularly that surrounding male genitalia (*ibid*: 171-172). Huot also points to the emphasis that roots searching writers placed on the sexuality of their peasant heroes. For example, in her discussion of Liu Heng's *The Obsessed* (*Fuxi Fuxi*, 1988)<sup>17</sup>, Huot insists that the novel 'downgrades all males to their sexual organ' (2000: 107).

### **ii) Male peasants inside a national narrative**

While Louie perceives roots-seeking literature as stemming from a Cultural Revolution generation's quest for legitimacy of its past experience (1991: 182), Xueping Zhong identifies roots-seeking writers' concern with peasant protagonists as subordinate to an enquiry into their own 'subjective feelings' (2000: 157). Zhong further suggests that the portrayal of potent male characters may be sublimated to the search for a potent China

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<sup>17</sup> The novella was adapted into the film *Judou* (1990, dir. Zhang Yimou), discussed at length in Chapter Five.

(ibid: 169). Therefore, apparent concern with the potency and sexuality of male peasants reflects more on the writers of this fiction than peasants themselves. It can be questioned how far male peasants are *used* as examples of a primitive, uncomplicated sexual essence of the nation by their fellow male intellectuals. If male intellectuals were anxious about their 'feminisation' (as Xueping Zhong contends) and lack of potency, the roughness of male peasants may have represented an idealised, raw manhood, which was (sexually) desirable as an image but was equally unfeasible for male intellectuals to act out in reality. Therefore, male peasants are effectively the vehicles for the sublimated desires and anxieties of male intellectuals.

### **c) Reformed rural masculinities on screen**

This section will place Jiang Wen's 1999 film into context with previous screen representations. A positive representation of the male peasantry will be discussed in the shape of Zhang Yimou's first film as director, the hugely influential *Red Sorghum*. This film shares themes that will structure the analysis of *Devils On the Doorstep*, since it underlines the links between male peasantry and nationalism that identify male peasants with sexuality and potency. Although *Red Sorghum*'s appearance marks the end of the first stage of experimental Fifth Generation cinema, it shares the theme of rewriting Communist history with both its more avant-garde predecessors and with Jiang Wen's 1999 film. Moreover, it questions how far male peasants are represented as victims of emasculating discourses that affect this sexual assertiveness.

#### **i) National heroes: *Red Sorghum* (Hong gaoliang, dir. Zhang Yimou, 1987)**

The very first films seen as belonging to the Fifth Generation are mostly set in rural China. The remote, inhospitable landscape provided an environment that could be made strange to Chinese viewers themselves, resisting the unambiguous codes of representation in the socialist realism of the Mao era. Peasants as examples of the 'primitive', untouched by urban Communism, were employed to demonstrate the relative alienation of the Party from the people (*Yellow Earth* or *Huang Tudi*, dir. Chen Kaige, 1984), male heroism unfettered by social rules and conventions (*Red Sorghum*) and the emptiness of China's literary culture (*King Of The Children* or *Haizi Wang*, dir. Chen Kaige, 1987).

Chen Kaige portrayed a highly ritualised, restrictive peasant community in *Yellow Earth*. Three years later, as the initial enthusiasm of the reform era turned into doubts about the dilution of a Chinese national identity, Zhang Yimou provided a home-grown *nanzihan*. For this Chinese champion, he chose a brash male peasant. In his well-known article, Yuejin Wang claims that the masculinity expressed by the peasant hero of *Red Sorghum* is symptomatic of a wider search for potency and transgression against hierarchies (1991: 90, 87). The section of the 'roots searching' Mo Yan novel from which the film is adapted (*The Red Sorghum Family / Hong gaoliang jiazu*, 1987) emphasises the masculine qualities of its hero, My Grandpa, by means of his physical strength and mastery over women (Lu 1995: 51-73). In Zhang's film, this peasant sexuality is unrestrained by Confucian propriety, contained in a temporary utopia that is shattered by Japanese invaders. Wang's influential article contends that *Red Sorghum* represents a 'Chinese version of masculinity' (1991: 85) as a direct response to both the imitation of Japanese and American male action heroes on screen, and to the 'negative' and feminised portrayals of men popularised in Qing culture. The author places both original novel and film as an assertion of the value of a positive, active masculinity that could respond directly to the discourse that placed both nation and Chinese male self as the 'sick man of Asia' (ibid: 84).

Therefore, Wang describes a film in which aspects of being a man that were previously seen as rough and undignified are elevated to play a lead role in a nationalistic narrative that ends in pitting a group of motley peasant fighters against a modern, mechanised Japanese army. The film complicates this masculinity by drawing a strong and sexually assertive female protagonist, although her exact role in a seemingly masculine narrative has been the subject of critical enquiry.<sup>18</sup> Zhang Yimou chooses to adapt a section of Mo Yan's novel that deals with the conflict of national identities and masculinities as China found itself invaded by 'foreign devils', whose own rise to dominance in East Asia was a reminder of the depth of the middle kingdom's fall. Twelve years later, Jiang Wen

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<sup>18</sup> For more on the female character of Jiu'er in the film *Red Sorghum*, see Chow (1995), Silbergeld (1999), Wang (1991).

negotiates this same narrative in *Devils on the Doorstep*. Once again, a male peasant is a symbol of the nation, although Jiang Wen's protagonist's bravery is more circumscribed than that of Zhang Yimou's 'My Grandpa'. Jiang Wen also sets his film in times of national confusion, inside which a racial narrative pits a Chinese masculinity against its Japanese counterpart. However, Jiang goes further in questioning these versions of masculinities than Zhang Yimou's iconic visual celebration of masculine strength and potency, in a war story that breaks certainties of identity apart when an ordinary man finds himself on the end of a barrel of a gun.

### **3: Synopsis *Devils on the Doorstep* (*Guizi laile*, dir. Jiang Wen, 1999)**

The following section will consider *Devils on the Doorstep* with the above summary of representations of male peasants in mind. Jiang Wen's film is a late twentieth century reflection on Maoist visual representations of the Anti-Japanese War that are part of the Party's claim to be the legitimate voice of the Chinese people. *Devils* is an important film because it recognises the potency of such patriotic narratives in the formation of China's modern history, and acknowledges the power of the past in shaping personal and national psyches. However, the tour de force of this representation of twentieth century China's 'standing up' is its decentring of the voice of the Communist Party. Instead, we see the final months of the Japanese occupation through the bewildered eyes of the film's hero, Ma Dasan. Through Ma, *Devils* challenges visual and oral histories that pair nationalism with ordered revolutionary machismo.

*Devils on the Doorstep* is set in the final stages of the Second World War in northeastern China, and is filmed mostly in black and white. The film is based on the novella, *Shengcun*, by You Fengwai. Jiang himself plays Ma Dasan, a member of the small village named Rack-Armour Terrace. The inhabitants of the village do their best to carry on life during the Japanese occupation, with the children even stopping to welcome the local Japanese commander on his daily rounds in hope of a gift of a sweet. When a mysterious stranger arrives at Ma's door in the middle of the night, however, life changes irreversibly. Never seeing the stranger, who identifies himself only as 'me' ('Wo'), Ma finds himself with a gun to his head and two sacks to guard until the eve of the New

Year, when the stranger instructs that he will return. The sacks turn out to contain a captured Japanese soldier (named Hanaya Kosaburo) and his Chinese interpreter (Dong Hanchen), whom Ma has been told to interrogate. With little choice but to comply for fear of the mysterious gunman, Ma installs the prisoners in his cellar with the help of his girlfriend, Yu'er.

The remainder of the action is concerned with the fate of these unconventional prisoners of war. Since the anonymous gunman does not return for his hostages who are eating the villagers out of supplies (for Ma cannot bring himself to kill them), Hanaya and Hanchen are returned to the Japanese barracks in return for sacks of grain. Following this 'Sino-Japanese understanding', the barracks organise a feast, which turns sour when the Japanese commander's sensibilities are tested. The troops begin to massacre the assembled villagers, and are only halted by a telegram announcing the Japanese surrender. Ma and the pregnant Yu'er escape the massacre, but arrive in time to see their home burnt to the ground. A few days later, Ma himself meets a grisly end. He is sentenced to death after he has killed Japanese soldiers in revenge for his misfortunes. In this time of peace, a Guomindang chief orders the deed to be done by a member of the surrendered Japanese troops. Ironically, Hanaya is chosen to behead Ma. As Ma's head rolls across the town square, his eyes blink, and the scene finally appears in colour.

Whilst Dai Jinhua insists that Fifth Generation filmmakers rewrote the narratives of revolutionary history, it can be argued that Jiang's film directs its derision at not only the Communist vision of the past, but also at the re-visualisations of earlier reform-era filmmakers and authors. Dennis Lim is correct on more than one level when he states that 'this is a Chinese period piece more inclined to burn barns than raise red lanterns' (*Village Voice*, December 18th 2002).<sup>19</sup> Iconoclastic satire and a refusal to portray even the Japanese soldiers in unequivocal terms complicate histories of struggle and stories of the conquest of the 'Chinese people' against an alien invader. Narrative and

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<sup>19</sup> Lim refers to Zhang Yimou's 1991 film *Raise the Red Lantern*, in which an elaborate and repressive China is constructed in measured, controlled shots. Instead, Jiang Wen's film presents less of an orientalist, hierarchical world than an iconoclastic attack on the formulations of his country's history with frantic camera-work. Lim also hints at the controversy that Jiang's portrayal of the war would generate.



representational codes are used that cannot be accepted in the CCP's formulas of social realism, challenging ideas of heroic masculinity. However, heroic male peasants are not the only models of masculinity unmasked by Jiang. *Devils on the Doorstep* (like Jiang's earlier film, *In the Heat of the Sun*) examines the consequences of such ideals when placed into the 'real' world, in which saving your own family's skin often comes before sacrificing yourself for the revolution, and life threatening situations often transgress into the absurd.

The cinematography in Jiang's film adds to its unpacking of the myths and half-truths of the past. The beginning of the film conditions our expectations of the remaining action. Its deliberate shooting in monochrome suggests films of the past, and their representational codes. As Dennis Lim states, Jiang's direction is robust, 'with a camera that charges into the thick of the frequently erupting commotions' (ibid). This frenetic camerawork challenges the cinematography of previous films dealing with the effects of the anti-Japanese war. Instead of ordered action and balance within the frame, constant movement puts the viewer off his/her guard, disrupting the Party's linear view of history. The narrative, like the animals that barge in to key scenes in the film, circles around and around, and sometimes seems as headless as Ma will be by the end of the film. Moreover, the intimacy of many scenes, in which darkness hinders perspective, both suggests the personal register in which the war is presented, and is visually different from Fifth Generation visions of the past. The sweeping, dramatic landscapes of Chen Kaige's Yan'an in *Yellow Earth* could not be further from Rack Armour Terrace. Frequent close-ups banish the visual indulgence of panoramas, as though they are a luxury little afforded in wartime.

Viewing the film in black and white also reflects the main themes in the narrative. For example, the literal darkness in which key scenes take place reflects the state of moral confusion in which the villagers find themselves. Moreover, lack of colour may satirise the notion of simple, black and white choices that the narrative at large insists are impossible. *Devils on the Doorstep's* cinematography suggests the 'unreality' of the past, while Ma's final moments of understanding appear in colour. It is as though the pastiche

of representational history suddenly dissolves; Ma realises the absurdity of his situation only when silence is imposed by death, and he finally has the space and peace to look back over the final months of his life. Jiang Wen's use of colour is a reversal of his previous cinematography in *In the Heat of the Sun*. Whilst Ma Xiaojun remembers the past in vibrant colour (*In the Heat of the Sun*), memory is visualised as monochrome in Jiang's later production.

Visually, the film as a whole moves towards a veil of red that engulfs the final image of Ma's contended severed head. Not only does this dissolve represent a theatrical curtain that is to be closed on both the drama of the story and Ma Dasan's own life, but in the context of previous Mainland Chinese films, it is also highly significant. Previous Fifth Generation films also closed on the effect of a red screen. For example, Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* concludes on an image of the narrator as a child, mourning his mother's sacrifice under a red sun. Chen Kaige's *Big Parade* (*Da yuebing*, 1985) closes with an anonymous PLA soldier in front of a setting sun. In these two films, red conjures up passion and emotion (*Red Sorghum*) and an ambivalence towards the legends and rule of the CCP (in both films). However, in *Devils on the Doorstep*, the final red screen leaves only a bloodstain, and if it conveys any political ambiguity at all, it is towards the very absence of the Party in this re-telling of its supposedly finest hour. Notably, the black, white and red motifs more controversially call to mind the colours of the Japanese flag, which is a red sun of a very different sort.

*Devils on the Doorstep* challenges the centrality of the narrative of the rise of the Communist Party through the deconstruction of national and gendered identities. Moreover, director Jiang Wen insists that both concepts are linked in the national psyche: national pride is twinned with the concept of presenting 'masculine' resistance to an enemy rather than the feminised acquiescence to 'foreign devils' that plagued China's reputation before 1949. Jiang Wen explores the nation's relationship with narratives of its past through the representation of his peasant anti-hero, Ma Dasan, in three main ways. Firstly, as a seemingly unremarkable peasant, Ma Dasan comments upon the role of ordinary men in the formation of Chinese national identity and their positions inside

narratives of history and power. Secondly, Ma Dasan's interaction with the invading 'foreign devils' reveals the interdependency between nationalism and gendered ideas of masculine potency for both the occupier and the occupied. In the final section, I will question to what extent Ma can be a hero of this anti-war film. Is he an earthy peasant rebel, like 'My Grandpa' in Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum*, or is he a confused victim of war?

#### **4: Ma Dasan and Chinese identity**

*Devils on the Doorstep* deals with rewriting the place of Chinese male peasants inside a narrative of war. As the main protagonist in this tale, Ma Dasan's characterisation as a peasant is critical. As a villager, he partly stands as a Chinese 'everyman'. Moreover, on account of past filmic codes, his status implies that he stands for something that is 'authentically Chinese', the origins of the nation that lie in the countryside. Making a living from the land also hints that his masculinity is a strong and unaffected one - he works with his body, which connects him physically to the earth and to China itself. However, these assumptions of national character will be unravelled in the course of the narrative.

The film also negotiates other portraits of the peasantry. In *Devils on the Doorstep*, the figure of the male peasant is 'deritualised' from the hallowed representations of the Mao era and from previous interpretations by Fifth Generation directors. Unlike in many Fifth Generation films such as those by Chen Kaige or Zhang Yimou, there is no primitive version of the past constructed in Rack Armour Terrace village: there are no exotic rituals, no crimes of passion, and no nationalistic, organised resistance against the Japanese occupiers. Ma himself is presented as a very ordinary man who is tested by circumstances, thus becoming extraordinary. He lives in a simple and honest way. This truthfulness serves to ironise the image of a ruthless guerrilla that the prisoners Hanaya and Hanchen carry in their heads. Ma is also very different from portrayals of virtuous peasants in the Mao era. His large frame and round face suggest a soft, vulnerable physicality, and could not be more different from images of lean, efficient heroic peasants such as those in *Landmine Warfare*, for example. Moreover, his very

uncertainty, reflected in his eyes and gestures, is metaphorically miles away from the fixed, determined glances of stalwart revolutionary filmic peasant heroes.

In Jiang's film, being a man is not measured by carrying out a prescribed role, but by the capacity for truly independent action. Ma Dasan does not follow the linear path that he should to ensure a happy ending in the stock versions of war history. He will *not* wait to be liberated by the CCP (the role of the peasants in the trajectory of the Red Army conquest of China), since the Party (founded in the city, which rose to power promising wealth and wives to the young Chinese male peasants who fought for it) is simply nowhere to be seen. For example, the Japanese are humbled, but only through American atomic bombs falling on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, writing out the resistance of the 'Chinese people' from the narrative of the Japanese defeat. In fact, the 'unwarlike' nature of the locals is repeatedly emphasised. The villagers live in Rack Armour Terrace, named after a general who chose the spot to return to the virtue of making a living from the land. Peasant life is thus presented as the complete opposite to the martial masculinity involved in warfare, far from CCP tales of peasant guerrilla fighters. If Ma does aid in the war effort, he only interrogates his prisoners to ensure his own community's survival, and manages to muddle through on his wits rather than through revolutionary courage.

When Ma finally acts against the enemy, he loses his life. Through Ma's show trial and execution, *Devils on the Doorstep* reveals heroic masculinity to be circumscribed at best. When the codes of war once stated that the Japanese soldiers were invading 'devils', after the surrender they are prisoners of war. Therefore, when Ma's frustration against the Japanese reaches boiling point, his violence against the former occupiers is no longer legitimate resistance against an enemy, but is now translated into a crime. China 'standing up' to foreign aggression may imply unrestrained action against aggressors, but once official protocols change, ordinary men are expected to serve another national narrative. That is, gendered identities are employed by the authorities in their own service, and can be disavowed just as easily. When Ma acts assertively against the enemy, he is put to death on the orders of one of his own countrymen. The spectre of the 'sick man of Asia', whose *passive* people cannot respond to foreign incursion is thus

ironised, for when Ma does spill blood in the frustration at the harm done to home and nation, his *active* version of masculinity is punishable by death. Therefore, the ordinary peasant male is not only subject to the aggression of foreign rulers, but to limits set by those of a higher social status such as the Guomindang officer, who wears his (non-combative) war wound as a symbol of patriotic integrity.

Ma Dasan's execution is a comment on individual men who are caught within transfers of power. Braying like a donkey, he perhaps responds in one of the only means that he believes that his judges will understand - if he used words, he may somehow get himself into a worse situation than the one in which he finds himself. If Ma sees himself as a donkey, he may be justified in doing so, being one of the ordinary citizens who metaphorically, morally and economically bear the burden of decisions over which they have no control, whether these choices are made by an invading army or their own countrymen.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, this braying echoes a previous episode, in which his donkey attempted to mate with one of the mares in the Japanese barracks, comically pointing out the relationship between the two nations that have been 'bastardised' in years of acrimony and conflict. Previously seen as another absurdist puncture in a potentially catastrophic situation, the donkey's misbehaviour can be seen as a prequel to Ma's braying. Ma's physically headless state is mimetic of the moral state of China, and it is only in this final irony that he becomes a true representative of his nation. The Chinese themselves are thus betrayed by the very powers that were supposed to protect them, making a mockery of tales of 'liberation.'

Looking through Ma's half-open eyes in his final moments, we see Hanaya going through the ceremony of re-sheathing his sword, and returning to the ranks. In the context of the

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<sup>20</sup> Animals are forever disrupting the action in the film. A stray chicken causes chaos and threatens to give the presence of Ma's captives away, Ma's donkey attempts to mate with the Japanese commander's horse, and a pig escapes and barges onto Ma's final execution ground. Not only is this animal behaviour a measure of the absurd situations in which Ma Dasan finds himself, but it may also be a satire of previous Fifth Generation films that employed voiceless animals to indicate both a passivity and 'Other', unofficial representational codes. In *Devils On The Doorstep*, Jiang's animals are not voiceless but crow and bray and snort. They are also an answer to Ma's final cry to heaven, a reminder of the continuation of life, putting the actions of the humans in the film into perspective, and questioning whose behaviour is, in fact, animalistic.

story we have witnessed so far, it appears as though we are given a glimpse of actors on a film-set. In a meta-narrative reference, we see the actors 'playing' the Guomindang troops and Japanese prisoners, both intra and extra diegetically. This juncture is also reality for Ma, his 'release' gained after his donkey-like 'cry to heaven'. His final moments of life finally allow him to see clearly, albeit through a haze of blood, and finally to be a peaceful, silent spectator instead of an unwilling actor in the cruel satire of warfare.

## **5: Ma Dasan and national potency**

### **a) China and 'foreign devils'**

This section examines Jiang's portrayal of the Japanese invaders (one of the reasons cited for the film's unequivocal condemnation by government censors) and the extent to which their characterisation complicates previous formulations of Chinese patriotic gendered histories. The 'foreign devils' are not stereotypes, moustachioed, camp dupes, but invested with psychological motives; the Chinese peasant hero does not rise up against the occupiers, but faces the reality of living cheek by jowl with Japanese soldiers, who begin the film by handing out sweets to local children. In the film, related yet antagonistic Chinese and Japanese identities collide. While the Japanese are *guizi* (devils) to the Chinese, the Chinese are *bakayaro* (bastards) to the Japanese soldiers. National narratives are pitted against each other in a series of misrecognitions that even ends in the questioning of a single 'China'.

The relationship between China and Japan has been intertwined with issues of national strength and potency. The rise of Japan on the international arena following the Meiji restoration in the mid-nineteenth century changed the balance of power between the two nations. From being popularly perceived by the Chinese as a cultural vassal, Japan and her political reforms came to influence the 'hundred days reforms' carried out in the dying days of the Qing at the end of the nineteenth century. The victory of Japan in the Sino-Japanese war in 1895 seemed to represent the low point of China's international standing: its earlier cultural isolation appeared to have paid few dividends. In the early twentieth century, Japan became a model for Chinese intellectuals, as many students

flocked there for a 'progressive' education that would aid the nation in her advancement into a new republic. However, following Japan's territorial gains in the 1919 Versailles treaty, the Japanese military extended further into China, eventually invading Manchuria in 1931, causing national hostility and anti-Japanese boycotts. The growing Japanese presence forced Chiang Kai-shek into war in 1937. Ensuing Japanese atrocities, including medical experiments upon captives and a 'burn all, loot all, kill all' policy, have affected the relationship between China and Japan to the present day.<sup>21</sup>

Masculine weakness was also linked to a perceived Chinese national deficiency. Chinese representations described their nation as the 'sick man of Asia', where a lack of national potency equated to weak male individuals. For example, Xueping Zhong has analysed the shame and humiliation expressed by the hero of Yu Dafu's 1921 short story, 'Sinking' ('*Chenlun*') in terms of his relationship to China's weakness before Japanese expansion (2000: 124-126). Lu Xun, the prominent author whose works were later appropriated by the CCP, studied in Japan as a medical student. His observation surrounding a slide of a group of Chinese men being summoned to watch the execution of a 'Chinese spy' during the Russo-Japanese war displays the extent to which ideals of masculine national strength were integral to the complex relationship between Japan and China. Rey Chow analyses Lu Xun's observations in terms of a spectacle of China's difficult transition into a modern, strongly visual world (1995: 4-11). The incursion of the Japanese co-occurred with the questioning and promotion of modernity in the May Fourth Movement in 1919 prompted by the conditions of the Versailles settlement. Therefore, concerns about national weakness were coupled with intellectual attempts to form a modern male 'self.'

### **b) Japanese masculinities**

In *Devils*, instead of heroic anthems acting as background to the opening titles, the action begins with the unfurling of the Japanese flag and the naval songs of the occupying forces as they ride past the village. While the film *Letter with a Feather* (*Jimao xin*, dir.

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<sup>21</sup> Several books (of varying credibility) have been written on the Japanese occupation of China, especially the infamous Nanjing massacre, including Chang, Iris *The Rape of Nanking: The forgotten holocaust of World War II* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1997), and edited by Wickert, Erwin, trans. by Woods, John E., *The good German of Nanking: the diaries of John Rabe* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1998).

Shi Hui, 1954) for example, emphasises a heroic, Communist version of masculinity through its opening anthem, the initial scenes of *Devils on the Doorstep* place the Japanese in charge; that is to say, we do not automatically know at the beginning of the film that justice will prevail through a Chinese triumph. Despite the hilarity caused by Hanaya's ignorance of the Chinese language,<sup>22</sup> Japanese soldiers who speak in their native tongue do not give complete narrative power to a Chinese storyteller, and complicate the Japanese role beyond anonymous villains. That is, the Japanese are allowed to present themselves without 'translation', and thus need to be interpreted for the audience (as well as for the protagonists intra-digetically), adding to the theme of misrecognition and identity confusion.

*Devils on the Doorstep* explores the motives behind the Japanese soldier's machismo and investigates the conditions and psychology that foster their particular form of masculinity. For example, the contrast between the idea of the heroism of an Imperial Army soldier and the perceived passivity of the Chinese male peasant is highlighted by means of the conflicting impressions of the two communities. Hanaya, the Japanese prisoner, professes to real masculinity being won and lost on the battlefield, in comparison to which 'to die at the hands of these peasants is so unheroic.' In a telling moment of the film, Hanaya visualises Ma Dasan and Yu'er as they approach his 'cell'. However, instead of fearless Chinese warriors, he imagines them as samurai, wielding their swords aloft as they fight for vengeance. When his door opens, it is the mild Ma who greets him. This conflation of archetypes of masculinity displays the extent to which identities are malleable postures. The juxtaposition also points out the links between the two nations, now torn apart in war. However, this is also a comment on an outside view of Chinese masculinity. Instead of imagining a strong, Chinese swordsman charging towards him, Hanaya can only configure martial toughness in the shape of Japanese traditions. Significantly, the first Chinese male peasant we see in the film is the hapless yet well-meaning Er Bozi, who bows and scrapes to the naval commander as he rides into the village. Although Er Bozi undoubtedly satirises peasant attitudes, Jiang Wen's film is

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<sup>22</sup> For example, instead of teaching Hanaya curses to spit at his captors, the wily Dong Hanchen drills him in New Year greetings (which Hanaya proceeds to deliver with vituperative glee, much to the confusion of Ma Dasan and Yu'er).



equally unafraid to present fear in its male protagonists, insisting that it is not a measure of 'unmanliness', but a human reaction to intruders who kill with impunity.

### c) Deconstructing Japanese masculinities

The panic-stricken responses of Er Bozi play on the sensitivities of writers of Chinese visual histories, desperate to shake off the feminised image with which their nation had been apparently sullied. However, Japanese versions of masculinities are also deconstructed. When he first finds himself in Ma's home, Hanaya conforms to every stereotype of a Japanese soldier, avowing a strict code of honour, detesting the villagers and determined to commit suicide rather than surrender. He comes out with hackneyed phrases, urging his captors (whom he imagines to be ruthless Chinese resistance fighters) to do their worst. He shouts at the top of his voice, refuses to take food and carries out a botched, bathetic attempt at suicide by hitting his head against a post. Although Hanaya performs the expected gestures of Japanese martial masculinity, he is completely inept at carrying out his masculine role. This gendered performance falls apart when placed under pressure, even under the confinement of a humane man such as Ma Dasan. Hanaya's attempts to escape are foiled when his screams for help are not heard and sending out a rescue message attached to a chicken are found out.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, he is rewarded for his suicide attempt by being wrapped in layers of blankets, thus looking like a disgruntled doll. As his days of imprisonment in a sack draw on, he is less and less keen to opt for death rather than disgrace. Nationalistic archetypes of heroism are proved to be at best *conditional* gestures that are forgotten in favour of self-preservation.

When Hanaya finally returns to his fellow soldiers, however, he does not receive the triumphant welcome that he may have expected. He is beaten and interrogated by his commander, who is obliged to honour the hostage exchange through the same Japanese military code of honour with which Hanaya has failed to comply. The Japanese army commander routinely parades around the blockhouse without his shirt, and this threatening display of physicality draws an instant comparison to the benign untrained

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<sup>23</sup> The inclusion of a chicken (with a message for the Japanese) may be a pun on a Mao era film set in the Second World War when a chicken feather is sent with a young boy to the Communist guerrillas (*Letter with a Feather*).

bodies of the Chinese male villagers. By showing the conditions and mentality inside the Japanese HQ, Jiang's film explains that Hanaya's initial behaviour is not the product of some innate evil, but the culture of national honour tied to a strong sense of masculinity that has been passed down by means of military training. However, if we expect a happy reconciliation between the villagers and the Japanese, we are mistaken. By exposing the gathering as an excuse for the commander to take his revenge upon Hanaya, the ensuing massacre destabilises our previous assessment of the Japanese as victims of an uncompromising version of masculinity. *Devils on the Doorstep* refuses to allow its audience to make any solid assessment of the Japanese, by highlighting the devastating consequences when their military principles are acted out. The massacre is carried out to the soundtrack of the Japanese naval anthem. As in *In the Heat of the Sun*, Jiang as director lays over his portrayal of violence with music. The naval anthem playing in the background serves to both put us at an ironic distance from the massacre, and emphasises the gulf between such parade anthems and the bloody reality of invasion.

## **6: Ma Dasan as masculine hero**

### **a) Ma and My Grandpa**

Is Ma Dasan, therefore, a Chinese war hero? As well as commenting upon Maoist representations of the heroic, *Devils on the Doorstep* also negotiates more recent portraits. For example, Ma Dasan can be compared to the bumptious My Grandpa (played by Jiang Wen himself early in his acting career) in Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum*, another film set in the Anti-Japanese war dealing with the strong, uncomplicated masculinity of its male hero. While the physical masculinity of My Grandpa and Ma obviously correspond, the two films are also similar in their presentation of a situation in which the political cannot but impact onto the personal, and in their attempts to negotiate the effects of larger discourses on masculine identities. Unlike My Grandpa, however, Ma Dasan does not stand at the head of a peasant army. In fact, Ma's *personal* resistance, when it occurs, is very individual and proves to be too little, too late. Ma also lacks My Grandpa's decisiveness: where My Grandpa rushes into situations, Ma considers; where My Grandpa is prepared to kill, Ma Dasan weeps. As explained above, critics have interpreted My Grandpa's role as Zhang's version of a Chinese national hero (see Wang

1991). If Ma Dasan is a hero, he is a more ambiguous one, for Jiang's film questions ideas of heroism and valour, maintaining that they are, at best, circumscribed rather than universal poses.

Ma's manliness is defined by a strong potency, just as My Grandpa's sexual assertion defined his status as a hero. Ma's masculinity is simple, earthy and sexual. He is first seen naked, in bed with his girlfriend Yu'er (who is also a local widow). He is not bound by the Confucian propriety that would forbid this union (out of wedlock), although the possible scandal is hinted at. Ma's characterisation subverts narratives that try to make judgements about Chinese lack of masculine potency and national strength, yet any triumphalism is modified with a recognition that working peasant men will always be caught up in someone else's power struggles, whether the victors are Japanese soldiers or 'patriotic' national leaders. Although Ma may sometimes be represented as a jester (especially when he acts out his despair to his fellow villagers), in his death he gains the wisdom to see the ironies of his situation, in which an ordinary Chinese man stands no chance of winning against international and nationalist discourses that challenge the realities of everyday life.

*Devils* also deconstructs more personal ideas of manliness and heroism, maintaining that being a 'man' does not always involve taking the most bloody way out of a threatening situation. If Ma initially refuses to kill, he does not represent a weak China, but he vacillates because he cannot take another life. When Er Bozi's mother asks what kind of 'man' Ma Dasan is to allow his captives to live, Yu'er retorts on his behalf that it is up to her to measure Ma's masculinity. Yu'er voices a central message to Jiang Wen's film; that is to say, she insists that being a 'good man' is not proven by public deeds, but by private feeling. Ma Dasan is a remarkable man in his village - he must take the responsibility for the captives that have been foisted onto him, he must bear the secret of not killing them, and he must broker the deal with the Japanese to bring Hanaya back to his regiment. Nevertheless, he cries when he feels overwhelmed, and then drinks water as though he must replenish that which he has lost through his tears. Ma represents a nation

pushed to its limits, or at least a populace which, literally, cannot do right for **doing** wrong.

Ideas of masculinity are constantly in flux, just as principles are interpreted differently **in** times of war. There is no such thing as unequivocal personal heroism, as it is **always** circumscribed by events. The devils who are on the doorstep may not only be **the** Japanese - the invaders are also American soldiers, and even Chinese troops themselves, whose contradictory actions throw such political labels as 'collaborator' and 'enemy' **into** doubt. *Devils on the Doorstep* interrogates the revolutionary meaning of resistance, insisting that merely staying alive in the face of an unpredictable and untranslatable invader is resistance in itself.

## **SOLDIERS**

This section will examine the representation of soldiers in Chen Kaige's 1985 film, *The Big Parade (Da yuebing)*. It argues that the film visualises masculine identities negotiating new historical realities. The fact that its protagonists are soldiers places them inside a system of masculine mental and bodily toughness that is not only concerned with individual expressions of machismo, but also with ideas of national potency. The film explores archetypes of martial heroism from the Mao era, whilst questioning the manner in which these ideals can fit into a post-revolutionary narrative, when past victories appear unattainable legends. After a short discussion of soldiers' role in history, the representation of male soldiers will be examined, with particular emphasis upon their role as heroic, revolutionary models. The final section will investigate the way in which Chen's film negotiates past patterns of male heroism, whilst representing alternative masculinities that are forged from the National Day parade that is the catalyst for the gathering of a disparate collection of People's Liberation Army soldiers.

### **1: Soldiers and history**

Once the heroes of the 1949 revolution, soldiers faced uncertain times in the era after Mao's death. Mao's victory over the Guomindang was based on the allegiance of the

peasant civilian population, but it would have been impossible without the victories of his (peasant) army. The Korean War saw the internal and external prestige of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) soar, as the Chinese forces under Peng Dehuai moved in across the Yalu river and held American forces fighting under the UN flag to a humiliating stalemate. Citizens at home rallied to government urges to 'resist America, aid Korea', and gave wages to assist the boys at the front. The PLA once more came to prominence in the early 1960s, and began to be involved in cultural policy. Under the charge of Lin Biao, the 'little red book' of quotations from Mao's works was distributed to troops and became the vanguard of activists in the Cultural Revolution. Mao's fourth wife, Jiang Qing, stepped out of the political shadows, and took charge of culture for the PLA. In the movement that followed, soldiers were both involved in political skirmishes and formed an integral part of the representations that passed Jiang Qing's rigorous insistence on truly proletarian art.

In the art of Cultural Revolution, soldiers were portrayed as vanguards of Mao's socialist vision. Cultural production was severely limited, and new 'revolutionary' art forms were upheld, such as Jiang Qing's attempts to promote model operas and ballets. In the years after Mao's death, the army began to feature less in visual propaganda, in favour of the considerably less revolutionary work of economic modernisation. The disastrous 1979 border war with Vietnam ended in a humiliating retreat for the Chinese forces, questioning the wisdom of the cultural isolation of much of the Mao years, and casting doubt on legends of the invincibility of the PLA, untested in effect since the Korean War. Nevertheless, the events of June 1989 proved that military muscle was still an integral part of exercising state control in China, and the man who controlled the army still held a decisive measure of power.

## **2: Representing soldiers**

### **a) Decoding *wen* and *wu***

Martial might has not always been a mainstay of culturally dominant masculinities in China. In his book *Theorising Chinese Masculinity* (2002), Kam Louie argues that attributes of masculinities in Chinese history and culture can be divided into those

expressing *wen* ('cultural attainment'), or *wu* ('martial valour').<sup>24</sup> If these traits made up a man in traditional Chinese literature, learning was perceived as the higher virtue (Louie and Edwards 1994: 145). Its opposite, soldiery, characterised non-elite masculinity. A Song phrase insisted that 'a good piece of metal does not become nails and a good man does not become a soldier' (*hao tie bu da ding, hao nan bu dang bing*), a theme still all too evident in Chinese popular memory into the 1980s (ibid: 146). The military hero was bound to a more restrictive sexuality than his learned compatriots, since 'a *wu* hero must contain his sexual and romantic desires', a theme also emphasised in the studies of *haohan* masculinity discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis (Louie and Edwards 1994: 146, Jenner 1996, Ownby 2000).<sup>25</sup> Louie and Edwards maintain that the Mao era saw a partial reversal of this traditional hierarchy, in that valiant acts associated with *wu* masculinity prevailed over the expertise of traditional *wen* ideals in representational codes (1994: 146).

#### **b) Soldiers in the Mao era**

In the representation of the Mao era, codes of revolutionary romanticism and revolutionary realism dominated (Galikowski 1994: 100). Only the most heroic characters were to be praised, acting as models to their urban viewers on the virtues of the revolutionary past and the better life in the present. The 'three emphases' prevailed in representational codes: an emphasis on positive characters, on the band of heroes around them and, most of all, on the most inspiring hero (Clark 1987: 134). As Birch states, whether literary works concerned themselves with workers, peasants or soldiers, tales were couched in military rhetoric (1963: 11). T A Hsia maintains that heroism was not an abstract quality, but could be clearly defined and listed (1963: 131). For example, the heroic soldier would exude a 'disciplined manliness', would be loyal to friends, fierce against the enemy, selfless and, importantly, 'he seldom falls into the clutches of a *bad*

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<sup>24</sup> For a critique of Louie's hypotheses, see Chapter One.

<sup>25</sup> Notably, soldiers in Mao's Red Army were directly ordered not to rape in areas that were newly conquered, and representations of soldiers focussed on their comradeship rather than their sexuality, perhaps enforcing the *wu* masculinity that valued homosocial bonds above ties with the opposite sex. It was also a practical device to distance the Communist forces from the violence of their Japanese and Guomindang enemies.

*woman*' (ibid: 120, italics mine). Significantly, this disciplined sexuality correlates with the images of *wu* heroes from dynastic times described by Louie.

In terms of film, military pictures were produced centring on key events of the anti-Japanese and Civil War campaigns of the 1930s and 1940s. Yingjin Zhang discusses the significance of war films from Mao's time, and compares them with the portrayals of warfare formulated in the reform era. Although initial war films praised the sacrifices made by women on the battlefield, representations of male red army soldiers soon became a tool with which to consolidate the victories of revolution and were turned to as ideologically safe subjects in times of political upheaval (Zhang 2002: 182). Martyrs and war heroes were emphasised, in order to stress Communist strength and wisdom, with the exploits of soldiers becoming 'an indispensable stage on which to celebrate the Communist victory and to re-enact heroic human sacrifices, both "performances" readily incorporated into the project of nation-building launched by the government' (ibid: 183).

Films featuring soldiers often depicted actual battles, or centred on the virtues of legendary figures, whilst others were aimed at children (for example, *Letter with a Feather*). If films did not centre on the 1930s and 1940s, they concentrated upon the qualities needed to become 'revolutionary successors.' *Heroic Sons and Daughters* (*Yingxiong ernü*, dir. Wu Zhaoti, 1964), for example, was set in the Korean War, and was intent on rekindling the patriotism of the anti-Japanese and Civil wars. Featuring revolutionary soldiers and workers, the film can be seen as an attempt to inspire a new 'long march generation' in an attempt to come to terms with the revolutionary legacy of the heroes of the past (Pickowicz 1985: 140). Soldierly, therefore, was a link to the pre-1949 past, a time when heroes could prove their revolutionary credentials in the service of a revolutionary narrative. This theme is reflected in *The Big Parade*, in which the protagonists consciously attempt to come to terms with the heroic legends of the past in a post-Mao era that no longer values revolutionary models.

### c) Model Soldiers: Learning from Lei Feng

Soldiers were used in mass campaigns as models, as ‘someone who is recognizable and in whom everyone can see elements of his or her own life or experience, made larger than life’ (Landsberger 1995: 27). Perhaps the most famous model of the Mao era was a soldier, Lei Feng, whose role as an example for youth has already been discussed in Chapter Two. Unlike the models of Communist soldiers in the Civil War, Lei Feng was a different kind of martial hero designed to inspire a different age. In the economic pragmatism that followed the failures of the Great Leap Forward, Lei was a sensible hero who was content to be a bolt in the revolutionary machine. Never facing an enemy in battle, he selflessly gave to his comrades, religiously studied the works of Chairman Mao, and was fired by the bitterness of his past and the stories of the Long March to serve in the army. Apparently killed in an accident in 1962, his story was first published in 1963, with a biography appearing in 1968. Now widely believed to be a fabrication of the propaganda department of the PLA, Lei, as Hu Yaobang insisted in 1963, taught that ‘in our socialist construction, the bulk of our work is ordinary, routine work’ (Gittings 1967: 253).

Learning from Lei Feng did not die out with the arrival of the reform era; his image continues to be used in times when the CCP wishes to emphasise revolutionary virtues. It has been pointed out that he appears periodically at times of crackdowns, especially after 1989 (Landsberger 1995: 208, Barmé 1999: 106). While Lei was a target for the irreverent pop art scene of the 1990s (Barmé 1999: 246), he also features on commercial advertisements, quite sincerely, since ‘many people feel comfortable with the images’ of Party martyrs (ibid: 250). Moreover, even in the cynical twenty-first century, some young people still appear to be following the Lei Feng spirit. While a new biography updates the image (and sexuality) of Lei, official media revamps Lei’s image by concentrating on his ‘girlfriends’ and ‘gold fountain pen’, and Beijing middle-school students give up their time to direct confused bus passengers instead of wandering the aisles of shopping malls.<sup>26</sup> In the moral maze of modern Chinese life, Lei Feng is being appropriated from

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<sup>26</sup> The nineteen year old Zhang Tiantian has written a new biography of Lei, according to the *People’s Daily* (2<sup>nd</sup> February, 2003). The article insists that the legacy of Lei lives on: ‘Encouraged by the Lei Feng



the relics of planned-economy China in service of a variety of state discourses in new, more capitalist realities.

#### **d) Reform era masculinities**

##### **i) Posters**

In official government posters, however, pictures of more anonymous members of the PLA declined considerably in the reform era. The PLA did feature in popular pictures that also included historical leaders, but soldiers at large were no longer shown in a cheek-by-jowl revolutionary partnership with the 'people.' Where soldiers were portrayed, Landsberger insists that revolutionary spirit was sacrificed and replaced by calls for professionalisation of the military, ending past emphasis on political steadfastness as the sure route to success (1995: 128-129). Landsberger goes so far as to state that soldiers in general lost their model status among the population, and that they largely disappeared from posters: 'the PLA was depicted no longer as the Great Iron Wall defending the mother country and the revolution, even though that aspect of its activities remained' (ibid: 156). In line with the focus on social behaviour and order of the 1980s, representations of soldiers waned in favour of the crime-busting activities of the police.

##### **ii) Cinematic representations**

The films of the reform era still featured soldiers in lead roles. These productions can be divided into those seen as complying with official discourse on the revolutionary past, and other works seeking to question it. Firstly, films endorsed by the state perpetuated images of martial heroes. As Yingjin Zhang states, the war film received heavy official endorsements in the early 1990s, where notable film series epically re-enacted classic battles (2002: 191). Films produced for state anniversaries were also subsidised, and tickets given away free, in an attempt to inspire youth after the public relations disaster of Tiananmen Square. However, heroes and villains seem to have changed little from the days when sinister music would herald the 'baddies' over film titles (Leyda 1972: 184).

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spirit, many people do voluntary work, helping the needy by donating money, body organs and blood, or applying to work in the poverty stricken western areas.'

According to the *China Daily* (28<sup>th</sup> February 2003), Yang Yuhe spends his weekends at Dongzhimen bus station directing confused passengers, and is a modern 'living Lei Feng'.

For example, Zhang cites the case of *Grief Over The Yellow River* (*Huanghe juejian*, dir. Feng Xiaoning, 1999), produced in response to the fiftieth anniversary of the People's Republic (2002: 197-201). In often-bloody detail, the film presents virtuous, self-sacrificing Chinese military against a Japanese enemy who are (unnecessarily) seen to murder villagers, and crush babies under millstones.

The second group of filmic representations of soldiers questions the themes of revolutionary military history and discourse. For example, the first films produced by Fifth Generation directors challenged accepted CCP formulations of the past. The first of these films was, according to Dai Jinhua, 'a re-narration of the classic hero myth' (2002: 19). Using unfamiliar cinematography in order to defamiliarise iconography, *One and Eight* (*Yige he bage*, dir. Zhang Junzhao, 1983) tells of a chain gang's attempts to escape from their Japanese captors. If patriotism can be detected in *One and Eight*, it begins to dissolve in *Yellow Earth* (*Huang tudi*, 1984), Chen Kaige's first, groundbreaking feature as director. The film deconstructs the myth of the closeness between the Eighth Route Army and peasants during the anti-Japanese war. Using visually destabilising imagery, the cinematographer of *One and Eight*, Zhang Yimou, renders the familiar revolutionary heritage of the CCP 'remote and the stuff of dreams' (Clark 1987: 181). The soldier protagonist of *Yellow Earth*, Gu Qing, is helpless to intervene in the plight of the heroine, Cuiqiao, and his gestures parody the poses struck in propaganda posters of the past. Other Fifth Generation directors were equally critical of revolutionary representations. In his analysis of the war films of Wu Ziniu, Yingjin Zhang emphasises Wu's graphic portrayals of violence, not as ends in themselves or as evidence of the wrongdoings of an enemy, but as protests against warfare (2002: 186-190).

### **3: The Big Parade (*Da Yuebing*, dir. Chen Kaige, 1985)**

The following section considers one such Fifth Generation film that rewrites established CCP codes of representation of soldiers. Chen Kaige's *The Big Parade* depicts the hopes and dreams of a group of soldiers as they prepare for the National Day parade. It will consider the film in the light of the codes of representation outlined above. For example, how is a modern soldier represented? Is he a modern Lei Feng, or concerned with more

contemporary problems? Furthermore, how do these soldiers on the thirty-fifth anniversary of the People's Republic situate themselves in relation to the martial rhetoric of the past? Do they see themselves as revolutionary successors, or do they see the army as a career path away from failure in a wider society?<sup>27</sup> Do the protagonists resemble the *wu* formulation of masculinity described above? And how does life in the ranks impact upon their sexuality and gender identity?

*The Big Parade* paired the direction of Chen Kaige with the cinematography of Zhang Yimou for the last time. In individualising soldiers and their motives for wanting to be chosen for the parade, Chen breaks with both notions of a mass, disciplined People's Liberation Army, concerned only with loyalty to the People's Republic, and possible conceptions of an impersonal, automated Chinese state. However, *The Big Parade* is far from a litany to a life in service of the motherland. Perhaps on account of his own personal experiences as a PLA soldier<sup>28</sup>, Chen employs the setting of the tough parade ground to offer his own comment on a strongly paternalistic state and individual ideas of identity and masculinity that both work at odds with and may not be expected within a rapidly changing China.

#### a) Synopsis

The story centres on the progress of trainees Lü Chun, Jiang Junbao, Liu Guoqing and Hao Xiaoyuan, who are trained and supervised in their squad by Instructor Sun and Squad Leader Li Weicheng. There is no single narrative voice, but events are commented upon by one of these six voices, whose dilemmas and misgivings are expressed in their personal monologues. The film, like the fictional parade selection process, culminates in the National Day celebrations in Tiananmen. The key events in this process are not necessarily shaped by the physical events of training, but by the changes in the protagonists' outlook and their motives for involving themselves in the parade as October 1<sup>st</sup> draws closer and closer.

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<sup>27</sup> The recent BBC / ARTE France documentary by filmmaker Wu Gong, *Xiao's Long March*, traces the progress of a young man who joins the People's Liberation Army to escape uninspiring opportunities at home. Televised BBC4 (UK), 1/02/03.

<sup>28</sup> Chen served four years in the army to escape the Yunnan land-clearing project to which he had been 'sent down' during the Cultural Revolution (Rayns 1994: 47).

Lü Chun is a young man whose ambitions clearly stretch beyond the life of a regular army soldier. Singling himself out as the intellectual of his squad, he hopes (with the help of the connections of an old friend) to apply to military school to train to be an officer. However, after waiting for most of the film for an acceptance letter from the school, he is finally rejected. Lü Chun is the voice of dissent in the ranks, questioning the respect that soldiers receive in the world outside the army, and the internal command structure under which he must undergo his training. Nevertheless, by the end of training he comes to realise that his motives for entering the parade and the bonds created by army conditions are more complex than they seem. Hao Xiaoyuan is a plump young recruit who does not seem to be a promising candidate for the parade. In fact, Instructor Sun finds a convenient way to eliminate him when Hao's mother dies unexpectedly. Hao is sent home on compassionate leave with a collection of provisions contributed by his squad. A few days later, however, Hao returns. He runs back to the barracks through the rain, determined to carry out his mother's final wish that he should march in Tiananmen Square. Liu Guoqing is the youngest member of the squad. Forever joking with the other members of the group, his endurance is put to the test when training takes its toll and he begins to hallucinate, culminating in an almost unconscious desertion from the ranks. Liu looks up to Li Weicheng, the thirty five year old squad leader, who earns respect from his men by sharing their quarters and living conditions. As with the rest of Chen's protagonists, the fatherly Li is not all that he seems. While he is a father figure to Liu, this admiration is a catalyst for Li to admit to having a medical condition that prevented him from fighting in the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese war, and to reveal that his stripes were earned on the home front in (ironically) a tug of war match.

The Sino-Vietnamese war is a constant presence in Chen's film. Although Chen had to omit more obvious references to the conflict in order to pass the censors, the war is still an influential context through which to read peacetime relations between soldiers. Not only are they celebrating their country's martial prowess when the last war that China was involved in ended disastrously, but ties forged on the battlefield also lead to obligations that are not easily forgotten. For example, Jiang Junbiao does not seem to be

a promising candidate for a position in the parade. His bow legs make it difficult for him to both endure the intense training process, and to march with the precision demanded by his commanding officers. Nevertheless, he progresses to the final stages of selection despite his deteriorating health. This special treatment stems from the legacy of the 1979 war, for barrack room gossip reveals that Jiang saved the life of Drill Instructor Sun in the heat of battle. This obligation weighs heavily on Sun's conscience, whose stern exterior cracks when he meets his old comrade, and promises him a place in the parade. As it turns out, Sun does not have to make an exception of Jiang, for Jiang himself resigns before his squad.

The film ends with Li Weicheng's final address to the troops who have made it through the selection process, and his insistence that good men *do* become soldiers. When the sun sets on the parade ground, Chen cuts to the parade day itself. Squads from the armed forces drill in front of the gate, their movements almost balletic, although the audience cannot make out the faces with which we have become familiar. The final scene shows a soldier silhouetted in front of the sun. Whether this solitary figure represents a generic member of the PLA, Li Weicheng (who has decided not to take part in the parade), or even Chen himself, is unclear.

Chen's film has been interpreted as part of his 1980s body of work that acts in criticism of an oppressive Communist state, or as an example of an 'exploratory film' that sees Chen 'feeling (his) way into (his) *métier*', by which he arrives at a more eloquent criticism of Chinese society (Rayns 1989: 32). Chen insists that *The Big Parade* is a film 'not about the army but about life in China today' (ibid: 30). Therefore, critics have read *The Big Parade* as a comment upon the repressive actions of the Communist Party in curtailing its people's individuality. In this formula, the PLA becomes an extended metaphor for the nation itself with the harsh and often demeaning training regimes representing the trials of everyday life for ordinary citizens. For example, Jianying Zha follows this 'national allegory' reading. She insists that the training for National Day threatens to turn the PLA soldiers into automatons, interpreting the army as an always-repressive force (1995: 85). In a similar assessment of *The Big Parade* as an indictment

of an overpowering CCP state, Rey Chow interprets Chen as criticising a ‘modern culture implicated in senseless repetition’ (1995: 102). This constant order does not come to represent discipline, but a repression, in which all ‘natural’ functions of the body are eliminated and human beings exhibit the momentum of a machine (ibid: 123).

Jerome Silbergeld, too, believes that Chen allegorises the nation into a military training camp (1999: 257). However, he is more ambivalent in his conclusions about the film. In his final analysis, he relates *The Big Parade* to the nation’s relationship with the Communist Party, which has allowed a degree of individualism, but in the end demands uniformity in order for society to function. In this sense, Silbergeld perceives Chen’s central question to be whether individuals end in working with the Communist state and expressing their own aims inside it, or whether they are oppressed by it. Although Silbergeld recognises the ambiguities in Chen’s film, his interpretation of the protagonists as examples of men who have no choice but to work within a repressive system does not completely explain the nuances of Chen’s film. Lü, Liu, Jiang, Li, Hao and Sun allow the system to work for them, but their individual trials are presented as beyond that system. If Chen’s film as a whole is a ‘national allegory’, its moments of humour and human intimacy prevent it from being a fatalistic view of an Orwellian state in which the Big Brother of the CCP is always watching. Instead, I contend that *The Big Parade* portrays the individual drives and wishes behind the parade, and that CCP history is not necessarily represented as a universally hostile force, but as a past within which the recruits seek to forge a place for themselves.

In this section I will focus upon the manner in which Chen critiques propaganda portraits of modern masculinities and expresses those that, instead, are generated by PLA experiences in the ‘real’ world of the parade ground. *The Big Parade* questions official versions of martial masculinity, but ends in an insistence that the masculinity of individual soldiers and their personal heroism are more than a match for the Communist legends of daring-do in the past. The six protagonists consciously or unconsciously face this legacy through their individual dilemmas and come out with pride rather than shame in their masculine selves.

## **b) Analysis**

As Morgan argues, 'of all the sites where masculinities are constructed, reproduced and deployed, those associated with war and the military are the most direct' (1994: 165). The following analysis identifies five main ways in which masculinities are expressed in *The Big Parade*, not only highlighting official notions of heroic sacrifice, but also the soldiers' own personal obstacles which they negotiate as the day of the parade draws closer. Firstly, *The Big Parade* examines the manner in which masculinities are formed both through moral and bodily uniformity, and through the exposure of weaknesses that do not correlate with this model. Secondly, the presence of images and ideals of soldierly masculinity influence the troops, as they struggle against negative stereotypes and attempt to assimilate more 'positive' ideals. Thirdly, the protagonists' individual monologues articulate anxieties in their gender identities. Fourthly, physical pain and sacrifice bonds soldiers together, and forms a strong homosocial community in the barracks. Finally, Chen exposes how his protagonists re-write past codes, not only of gender, but also of politics and nation, in order to situate themselves as soldiers (the backbone of a revolution being questioned) in a rapidly changing world.

### **i) Masculinity and uniformity**

Firstly, Chen insists that martial masculinity is grounded upon uniformity. The film employs visual devices in order to suggest the strict discipline for men in the army. These bodily trials serve to foster an exclusive masculinity that physically marks off the trainees from civilian life (ibid: 168). The opening scenes feature the sight and sound of boots on the tarmac of the parade ground. Zhang Yimou's camera follows the multiple sets of feet as they perform their exercises, disorientating the audience. Instead of a military soundtrack, threatening monotone chords set the atmosphere, invoking tedium and conformity. Initially, the camera pans along the groups and lines of soldiers. As the scene progresses, though, the camera begins to jolt, creating a sense of instability, hinting that this vision of order is not all that it seems. While the first scenes of the film take place in silence, the first words spoken are 'Fall in!'. Moreover, in a rare visual joke, even the trucks bringing the new trainees to the camp are made to line up in exact formation by the

prompting of Instructor Sun. This uniformity extends to the regulation of the **physical** bodies of the recruits. The new arrivals have their hair shaved, further curtailing **their** individuality and they are measured and weighed in a single line. Zhang Yimou's cinematography suggests the themes to be unpacked later in the narrative, as his camera moves down the bodies of prospective recruits, pointing out both the uniformity **that** martial masculinity requires, and the physicality and physical closeness that is **involved** in army culture.

The later narrative and cinematography work to dismantle these expectations; they **appear** to confirm Tonglin Lu's assessment of the parade as only a 'futile' attempt to convey 'a symbolic image of people's unity' (2002: 38). For example, the atmosphere of the opening shots is punctured when the scene moves inside to the barrack room selection process. Whilst not denying the strength of an ideology of heroic masculinity, the camera comes to rest on individual figures through which we will watch the progress to the **final** parade. Although still no words are spoken, we watch Liu Gouqing desperately trying to look taller, and Jiang Junbiao is connected to Sun through shot reverse shot, foregrounding the drill instructor's obligation to his former comrade. Later, the protagonists' voice-overs act as confessionals through which their emotions are conveyed to the audience, further dismantling the stereotype of steely PLA soldiers. However, this questioning does not lead to nihilistic disillusionment. Instead, *The Big Parade* ends in the negotiation of the Communist military past for a reinterpretation of martial masculinity in a post-revolutionary age.

## **ii) Images and ideals of masculinity**

The second way that Chen's film explores ideas of masculinities is through his recognition that they are formed through images and ideals. This theme is dominant in the parade itself, which seems far from the expected duty of a soldier on the battlefield. The recruits are not preparing for war, but for a peacetime display of national power. Themes of performance are highlighted. By allegorising the soldiers as 'performative subject(s)' (Zhang 2002: 173), *The Big Parade* both points out the artificiality of the gendered identities created through the army (in a Butlerian sense), and emphasises the



tenuous hold this narrative of national glory has on its people. Chen's film also questions military values by stating the protagonists' motives for involvement in the parade. Only Hao Xiaoyuan cites patriotic values as his driving force for taking part. However, his own mother may rank as high on his list of loyalties as the motherland, since he acts consistently in a filial way, carrying out his dead mother's wishes that he should appear on television. Li Weicheng sees the anniversary as his last chance to redeem his flagging army career, and Lü Chun never expects to be in the parade anyway, since he is hoping for a quick transfer to officer training school. Ironically, Jiang Junbiao, the only real, decorated hero in the squad, cannot realistically take part in the parade because his appearance is not sufficiently flawless to present an image of an efficient army. Jiang's expression of loyalty to the army and his commanding officers in the Sino-Vietnamese War does not earn him a glimpse of his country's leader in a republic founded on legends of such heroism.

Throughout the film, there is a recognition that the recruits are concerned with the impression that their behaviour creates. It seeks to challenge a notion that 'good men do not become soldiers.' The army as a rite of passage into manhood has been called into question, possibly by the military failures of Vietnam, and definitely by the new economic priorities of the reform period that praise the entrepreneur. Being a soldier is not merely a matter of serving your country, but is a way of life, and one that is commanding less and less respect. As Lü Chun (the voice of scepticism) states: -

'Girls always go on about real men. But where are they? They're all here.

If we had a day off and could do what we like, what would we do?'

Even the cynical Lü Chun has to admit that the army is the vestige of a traditional manly ideal, yet along with this admission comes a recognition that this apparently longed for masculinity is redundant. Lü Chun implies that the reform era measures manly virtues in a different way from the models of the Mao era. Whilst manhood used to be estimated in the patriotic, mental and bodily submission to socialism, now a more conventionally assertive manhood is stressed, based in personal relationships with the opposite sex. In her psychoanalytic reading of *The Big Parade*, critic Tonglin Lu contends that the soldier protagonists are 'often as *impotent* as the dominant fiction' linking powerlessness in

society with an ailing sense of sexuality (2002: 42, emphasis mine). The remainder of the film does not necessarily support this assumption of the lack of power of the 'dominant fiction' in the individual soldier's lives. However, Lu makes an important connection between issues of masculinity and ideas of sexual assertiveness. Lü Chun argues that heterosexual masculinity is subsumed in the rigours of army life. Whilst the *nanzihan* about whom women may dream have the bodies and mental toughness of soldiers (bodies that refute negative stereotypes of 'weak' Chinese men), these qualities are not interpreted as necessarily sexual. Lü Chun implies that 'tough guy' masculinity linked to sexuality (that is, 'what to do' with girls) is a 'modern' concept, displaying the historical contingency of dominant and desirable masculinities.

In a diatribe to Sun, Lü Chun feels that the parade is meaningless to the population anyway, and that the hardships endured by soldiers are ignored. This lack of public recognition seems to bother him: 'Do people think the parade will inspire? Do people know what we go through?' However, the personal and physical trials that the soldiers have endured banish any notion that the military is not a honourable profession. As Tonglin Lu insists in her reading of *The Big Parade* as a challenge to CCP ideological hegemony, the recruits have to contend with soldiers' reputation as *nanzihan* ('real men') (ibid: 39). Although the Chinese army has been defeated in its last war, there is a sense that the last few months of drilling and personal anguish have forged the men's identities and, in their way, were as emotionally intense as actual conflict: - 'Once it was said that good men don't become soldiers... How could we take this if we weren't good men?' In this rewriting of the famous proverb, Li insists that *real* men (tough *nanzihan*) can become *good* men. Ironically, a parade designed for the simple display of China's national strength has forced its participants (for there could be thousands with questions like Lü Chun, or those with scores to be settled like Jiang Junbiao) to reassess their individual motives inside a superficially impersonal army.

### iii) Individual representations of soldiers

The main way in which Chen deconstructs the image of an army of oppressive, almost robotic soldiers is through the exposure of the vulnerability of each of his main

characters. Each of Chen's six protagonists undergoes a moral test, after which he becomes more certain of his future and of his past motives for being in the parade. A chain of personal decisions, acting against the stereotype of an impersonal army, determines the eventual fate of each protagonist. The main way that the protagonists' vulnerabilities are expressed is through confession to other comrades. Each of the protagonists has a similar moment of catharsis: Li Weicheng confesses his fainting spells to Lü Chun, Jiang admits that he will never be admitted to the parade, and Liu Guoqing tells Li Weicheng the details of his disappearance. This section will examine this personal questioning of masculinities through the experiences of two of the main protagonists: Squad Leader Li Weicheng and Lü Chun.

*Li Weicheng: The end of Lei Feng masculinity*

The apparently perfect Squad Leader Li Weicheng is not all that he seems. From his first entrance into the barrack room, he expresses a Lei Feng style of soldierly altruism. He will sleep alongside his men and accept no extra comfort, insisting that he will 'bathe with sawdust and sleep on boards.' Even when showering, Li refuses to accept a higher quality soap from Liu Guoqing, rejecting it on the grounds that he is 'not used to' such luxury. However, just like Lei Feng, Li Weicheng has never fought in a battle, as he admits to Liu frankly at the beginning of the film. While Lei Feng was content to be a bolt in the revolutionary machine, Li does not seem as comfortable with his past behind the lines. As the elimination process goes on, he becomes more and more sensitive to sending recruits back to their regiments. Ostensibly, his reservations seem to be a taunt to Sun and his blatant favouring of Jiang Junbiao. Nevertheless, as time goes on, it becomes clear that Li's caution over eliminating men from the parade inspires guilt concerning his continued participation. As Tonglin Lu observes, Li Weicheng is the only deliberate cheater in the ranks (2002: 44). He feels compelled to show his hand when Lü Chun finds him collapsed in the shower. Li is well aware that he has served (and set himself up) as a model of soldierly masculinity to the recruits - now they must realise that models (the very lynchpin of CCP propaganda) are very rare in the real world, where disappointments and missed opportunities occur. In an emotional last address to his men, Li Weicheng praises their own endurance in passing both the army's tests and overcoming their private

misgivings. He says a silent goodbye to Sun, recognising the vulnerability that both share behind their positions of relative power.

*Lü Chun: Challenging individualism in the reform era*

Perhaps the most significant tests that the soldiers must endure are represented in the experiences of Lü Chun. Lü initially represents the sceptical voice of the audience. He puts the opposite case to army veterans such as Jiang Junbiao, who advocate discipline and adherence to orders. He is first to voice (though not necessarily to act out) issues of individualism and ambition beyond the army. Lü is also first to use a confessional style speech when addressing his fellows. Both in his monologues and in challenging his superiors he doubts the wisdom of ‘from morning till night, marching turning our heads’, insisting on a separate occasion to Sun that ‘people want their individuality today.’ Lü Chun insists that men are not made through the collective rituals of army life, but through more private expressions of gender identity. Morgan contends that, although the army may seem to be ‘the ideal site for the construction of abstracted masculinities’, modernising economies foster a ‘growing identification with individualism and a stress on the self’ that directly challenges this subordination of male bodies and minds (1994: 174). Life in the service of the motherland before Mao’s death carried status and a place in a revolutionary narrative. This apparently dominant example of what Bob Connell has termed ‘hegemonic masculinity’<sup>29</sup> does not carry the same symbolic authority in the reform era, when images of model soldiers no longer match the aspirations of energetic young men. Far from being the enthusiastic patriot of propaganda, Lü Chun shows his impatience to leave and progress in the new economy, from his self-learning of English to his constant enquiries at the post office for news from the military school. However, his attitudes begin to be tested as soon as he receives a rejection letter.

Lü’s experiences parallel the trajectory of the narrative of the film at large: from an apparent criticism of blind adherence to patriotic values, *The Big Parade* portrays

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<sup>29</sup> Connell describes ‘hegemonic masculinities’ as versions of being a man that embody ‘the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy’, thus being complicit in the structures of state power (1995: 77). Criticisms of Connell’s hypothesis and their implications for this study are discussed in Chapter One.

soldiers as individuals who fight and obey orders for very different reasons. Hao's return makes him realise that there are more motives for taking part in the parade than blind patriotism. However, Lü admits that he pities his friend, whose sincerity is undoubted but who appears to have placed the army above home and family, confessing to the audience that 'we all have but one mother, I only understood that today.' Lü realises the sacrifices that Hao has made, but he also suggests that Hao has lost his only mother, whose place cannot be usurped by any loyalty to the 'motherland.' In another encounter, Lü learns that Sun's experiences in war make him far from the authoritarian *nanzihan* of barrack-room gossip. In the final phase of Lü Chun's education, Jiang's gift of his old wartime squad leader's medal demonstrates that the army is not a bastion for wasting the vibrancy of young manhood, but is made up of individuals with different ideals and senses of loyalty, who are prepared to risk their lives for one another in war. Although the institution of the PLA is far from praised, the individuals who lay down their lives while serving in it *are*, and the masculinities that are expressed are assessed as admirable ones, even though these identities may not be inspired by Lei Feng-style loyalty to the state.

#### iv) Bodily masculinity

##### *Sensory masculinities: the military and 'the body'*

In *The Big Parade*, masculinities are defined by physical closeness in three main ways. Firstly, on the parade ground, the whole process of training is a physical test. As Jiang can testify, inclusion into the parade requires conformity to a fixed physical ideal. To even have a chance of getting into the parade, the recruits must perform an exacting parade march, stand in the blazing sun for hour after hour, and perform gruelling cross-country runs. Many of these tests seem futile, as Chen's film conveys in moments of irony, when Sun (quite sincerely) shouts as the vomiting and fainting soldiers standing in the sun, 'remember you're a soldier.' This training involves not only mental toughness, but also 'the disciplining, controlling and occasional mortification of the body' (Morgan 1994: 167). These soldiers must submit their physical selves to an ideal of masculine toughness and stoicism.

Secondly, bodily closeness is also an important aspect of the relationships between the off-duty soldiers, unsurprising in their cramped living conditions, and comes to measure the intimacy shared by the men. The relationships between the recruits are measured and dictated by their physical proximity. For example, Liu Guoqing talks about the bonds brought with shared experience by stating that, in the test of standing to attention, 'I could almost hear their heart-beats; they could probably hear mine.' Moreover, Lü Chun states that he has become so used to the nightly routine of Jiang Junbiao's snoring that he 'cannot sleep' without hearing it. Intimacy is also expressed through the gaze of the troops. Notably, truth is measured by whether or not men can look into each other's eyes. For example, when Sun lies to Jiang that he will definitely be able to take part in the parade, he cannot look into his eyes, and Sun's silence and averted gaze finally tell Jiang that he will be eliminated.

Thirdly, physical intimacy on the battlefield is discussed as a measure of the men's comradeship towards one another. For example, when Li tells Lü Chun of Jiang's heroism in the 1979 war, he emphasises the community that the men formed on the battlefield through sharing everyday routines: 'these young men who laughed and chatted, who shared a cigarette and a biscuit.. and now are buried, gone forever.' Stories are told in vivid detail, and friendships and obligations are formed through (literally) the taste of blood. For example, Jiang tells of the day that he saved Sun's life in terms of the blood and sweat that rolled down his neck. Not only showing the humanity of the soldiers, these descriptions of physicality also draw attention to their vulnerability and status as men who express multiple *masculinities* and not a model, indestructible *masculinity*. Such experiences display the intensity with which old war comrades are bound to one another through the sheer intimacy of their experiences in which 'physicality may become finality in the remains enclosed in a body bag' (ibid: 167). Martial masculinity is a quality fuelled, literally, by the bodies of fellow soldiers.

*Cleansing and masculinity*

As Chen himself responded to Tony Rayns' interpretation of the film solely as political allegory, *The Big Parade* confronts issues of sexuality.<sup>30</sup> This sexuality is couched in issues of the masculine *potency* of the nation, and also in the relationships between men in the digesis. For example, many key confessions take place in the shower room. Mentally and physically, it is the place where weaknesses are revealed. The concept of emotional confession is linked with the physical cleansing of washing. Without a uniform, the physical reminder of the reserved masculinity that they are required to enact on the parade ground, the soldiers can metaphorically let their guard down. Since their uniforms 'absorb individualities into a generalized and timeless *masculinity* whilst also connoting a control of emotion and a subordination to a larger rationality' (Morgan 1994: 166, emphasis mine), free time away from the regulated life on the parade ground and barrack room allow emotions and individual *masculinities* to show through. In the intimacy of the shower room, Hao calls attention to his uneven cheekbones, Liu (cruelly) points out Jiang's bow legs (which, significantly, he does not uncover to the other men) and Li also confesses that he has not won any medals in war.

In an extension of the theme of bodily cleansing, Jiang visits instructor Sun to check on his progress towards taking part in the parade. In what at first appears to be a bizarre reversal of rank, Sun washes Jiang's back. At this stage in the narrative, the audience is unaware of the history between the two men. We have seen Liu whispering about Sun and Jiang - are they romantically involved? While Sun washes Jiang, Zhang Yimou's camera, which has moved horizontally across previous shots, begins to pan down Jiang's body, emphasising both Jiang's individual flaws and the nobility in the body that has made sacrifices for his comrades. With hindsight, this incongruous turn of events is an expression of Jiang's portrayal as a martyr, underlined in Sun's service to him. Jiang appears Christ-like in his ultimate sacrifice on the battlefield for his comrade and in the pity bestowed upon him for his obvious physical flaws. Despite his heroism in saving Sun's life, and being witness to a superior's physical and moral weakness, Jiang cannot

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<sup>30</sup> As Chen stated in the interview, 'I think my first three films were very sexual, especially *Yellow Earth* and *The Big Parade*' (Rayns 1994: 55).

be publicly recognised as a hero since he may reveal the bodily vulnerability underneath Sun's uniform. In a later visit, Jiang has his feet washed by the drill instructor. While Sun reassures Jiang, his hand comes to rest on Jiang's thigh, his eyes gazing up at him. When Jiang becomes aware of this contact, Sun swiftly moves his hand away. Whilst Sun may desire Jiang, he also owes him a sacred debt of honour for saving his life. His gesture is also a simple expression of closeness, expressed with an intimacy forbidden whilst on duty, displaying the manner in which a homosocial community can conceal the homoerotic bonds between men.

#### v) Rewriting heroism

*The Big Parade* rewrites existing codes of martial masculinity. The film reformulates both negative stereotypes about those who serve in the PLA, and official codes of martial masculinity. The final scene shows the silhouette of an anonymous soldier against a vivid red sunset. This evocative image highlights the individual experiences of every soldier within the film. The soldier's image against a red sun also represents a new Chinese type of hero, and superficially prefigures the silhouette of 'My Grandpa' in Zhang Yimou's later film, *Red Sorghum* (1987). The figure also represents the voiceless future of China in the same manner as the image of the silent Hanhan in *Yellow Earth*. Like Hanhan, the anonymous soldier appears in sharp contrast to the crowds of people that have appeared in previous scenes. The voiceless silhouette stands as an image to bear witness to events, and offers a way out of the 'crisis of repetition' that Chow insists that the marching soldiers represent (1995: 102). The red sun in front of which he stands invites multiple interpretations: that of China itself, or the beginning or end of an age. Earlier in the film, a sunset is cut between sequences. In this final scene, this space has been filled by the silhouette of the anonymous soldier. Previous imagery of anonymous, ant-like soldiers marching on a parade ground has come full circle. Once again we are faced with thousands marching in front of Tiananmen gate. But instead of leaving us with this vision of anonymity, Chen reminds us of the individual men (and women) who march in the parade, mirroring the progress of the narrative itself.



Nevertheless, the film does not express a total lack of national pride. Communist ideas of masculinity are reworked by the narrative and by the experiences of the protagonists. For example, the military legends of official CCP history were shaped by those army men who survived the gruelling Long March across China and through this baptism of fire went on to win the Civil War. The legacy of this heroism stood as an example to later generations, as many sought to become spiritual inheritors of the 'Long March generation.'<sup>31</sup> However, rather than feel inferior in the face of such masculine stories of heroism, as many before them have done, Li Weicheng insists that the soldiers' training regime of physical and mental hardship makes them at least as heroic: -

'That's like marching across China, from north to south, and back again....

Well, wasn't this a Long March?'

Li's rhetorical question implies that the hardships of his squad make them at least worthy to be revolutionary successors, and that they should no longer be beholden to models of male martial heroism. They have burst the bubble that their generation will be forever fighting for a goal set firmly in the past that they can never achieve. In this way, Li Weicheng's troops have reworked ideals of 'the nation', and what it means to be fighting in its army. Li later states that they have realised the words of China's national anthem, which instructs them to 'build a Great Wall with our flesh and blood.' Therefore, the recruits have finally proved that good men do become soldiers.

In *The Big Parade*, true masculinity is forged through physical hardship and community with other men, but it is also tempered by the emotional honesty that reveals the sacrifices made by individuals to reach this ideal. As Li Weicheng confesses about his illness, 'only by facing up to it can I say I've taken part in all this.' The film hypothesises that 'all this' is not the process of physical training, nor is it marching in front of Tiananmen Gate, but the changes that have affected each of the soldiers' lives. Tonglin Lu contends that the protagonists have effectively been emasculated by their final participation in the parade, that 'their anger partly expresses the frustration caused by their unwanted tie with a defective patriarchal order' (2002: 42). However, anger does

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<sup>31</sup> For example, Red Guards in the Cultural Revolution sought to inherit this mantle, and many undertook their own treks across the Chinese countryside.

not rule all the protagonists' lives. Lu (psychoanalytically) reads the film as an allegory of negation of self against castrating state demands. She presents a detailed analysis of the film as an allegory of a dying, overpowering narrative suffocating (and castrating) the individual desires of the troops (who have learnt to perceive themselves as individuals through the experiences of the Cultural Revolution and the early reform era). Whilst Lu's reading is initially a convincing one, it requires a presupposition of a monolithic, always-repressive Party and its people as necessarily its victims. While the soldiers on the parade ground struggle on, the film is not a nihilistic portrayal of the individual man against the system. I contend that Chen's film skilfully outlines the contradictions of living within a once-unified national ideology, towards which the protagonists have an ambiguous (rather than hostile) relationship. This relationship is closely connected to the gender identity of the soldiers as 'good men' worthy to demonstrate the masculine potency of that nation (itself in doubt in the opening up policies of Deng Xiaoping). If the film is an allegory at all, it is an allegory of existing within a state system that may demand obedience, but one within which individual aspirations (and gender identities) are also intimately structured.

## INTELLECTUALS

This section will examine the cinematic representation of male intellectuals. Following a short introduction to the history and representation of intellectuals in China's recent history, I will focus upon Huang Jianxin's 1985 film *The Black Cannon Incident* (*Heipao shijian*). The film visualises China's situation in the wider world in the reform era through the figure of a meek, male intellectual, Zhao Shuqin. The film 'emasculates' Zhao and genders the Party in order to present a nation that is once more faced with their uncertainty of the world outside China. Taking into account underlining (intellectual) debates about Chinese national strength, the portrayal of Zhao emphasises submission and passivity among people used to being obedient servants of the Party throughout its contentious hold on power.

### **1: Male intellectuals and history**

As Timothy Cheek points out in his study of intellectuals in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre, the educated had a close relationship to state power from Imperial times (1994: 184). Cheek emphasises the 'social contract' between intellectuals and the state, wherein intellectuals had the unspoken right to act as critics to national policy (ibid: 187). This advisory role finds clear historical examples in Confucius' advice to rulers, and later in the reform attempts suggested by Liang Qichao and Kang Youwei (both admired by Mao). In the twentieth century, male intellectuals rose to prominence in the discussions of the May Fourth movement, when they 'constituted a formidable force instrumental in challenging... the existing cultural structure based on traditional culture' (Zhong 2000: 152). Intellectuals were a key component of the movements coming out of this iconoclasm, and were the founders of the Chinese Communist Party inaugurated in 1921 in the cosmopolitan centre of Shanghai. However, the Communism that was to emerge in the base areas and through rural guerrilla warfare advocated by Mao (the frustrated intellectual and rural Hunanese who was to come out on top in the Party's internal power struggles) became suspicious of the traditional intellectual critical role. The Rectification Campaigns of 1942-3 in the Yan'an base area were an important indication of the Maoist stress on thought reform, of which the writers Wang Shiwei and Ding Ling were notable victims. Notably, Mao's Yan'an talks of 1942 set the tone for representation, in which intellectuals themselves were not selected as suitable subjects of art and literature.

In post-1949 China, the government co-opted most intellectuals into the organs of the new state out of both necessity and a Maoist belief in reforming the population, which was enacted in the mass campaigns of the early 1950s. However, in 1951 the film *The Story of Wu Xun* (*Wu Xun zhuan*, dir. Sun Yu) was criticised for its focus on an intellectual whose charity was interpreted as being in the service of perpetuating feudal values (Clark 1985: 68, Leyda 1972: 197-198). According to the *Literary and Art Gazette*, the film 'produced feelings of respect among petty bourgeois intellectuals' (Galikowski 1998: 43). The Hundred Flowers Campaign, announced by Central Committee propaganda chief in 1956, witnessed intellectual discontent at the Party's

previous limits on representation, even to the extent of criticising the all-powerful triumvirate of *gongnongbing*. In this movement, intellectuals even became the subjects of some films, although many of these productions were later condemned in the Anti-Rightist campaign that followed (Clark 1985: 76). In this movement that curtailed the relative freedoms of representation allowed under the Hundred Flowers and censured the denigration of CCP policy, many intellectuals were 'sent down' to the countryside or required to submit humiliating self-criticisms. While many intellectuals and experts were physically removed from the centres of political influence, those remaining learned to censor any words or gestures that could be conceived as critical of the regime. The brief relaxation of cultural controls in the economic retrenchment policies following the disasters of Mao's Great Leap Forward provided little respite from political persecution, since the guarded satires that were published in the early 1960s proved to be fuel for attacks from Cultural Revolution ideologues.<sup>32</sup> The fates of intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution campaigns have been widely represented.<sup>33</sup> The undesirability of the class label of intellectuals was to persist throughout the rest of the Maoist period, despite the initial acknowledgement that technical expertise was needed for socialist construction.<sup>34</sup> However, the necessities of the reform era drive for economic modernisation meant that the status of intellectuals was to improve, and they were reinstated in socialist representation.

In the field of the 'hundred flowers', it seemed that freedoms were to be more forthcoming following Mao's death. However, as Bonnie McDougall and Kam Louie illustrate, the hopes of reformers in the post-Mao literary field were to be dashed following government conservatism in campaigns following the 'Democracy Wall' movement of 1979, to the anti-spiritual pollution and anti-bourgeois liberalisation mass campaigns of the 1980s, to the crackdown in the aftermath of the 1989 massacre (1997: 333-344). The status of intellectuals in the Mao era and beyond has been well-documented, with works stressing the activities of intellectuals and their relationship to

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<sup>32</sup> For more on the initial attacks of the Cultural Revolution, see Meisner, 1983.

<sup>33</sup> For example, see Anne F Thurston, *Enemies of the People: The ordeal of the intellectuals in China's Great Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1988).

<sup>34</sup> Scientists were not classified in terms of class during the Hundred Flowers Movement, and the 'sixteen points' that announced the start of the Cultural Revolution urged caution in the treatment of scientists.

the Communist state. While some views emphasise intellectuals' continuing social contract with state power and the new economic policies (Cheek 1994, Barmé 1999: 1-19), others concentrate on their relationship to and figurations of 'China' and 'Chineseness' in a very different social and cultural landscape from the earlier musings of the May Fourth Era (Chow 1995, Zhong 2000).

## **2: Representations**

### **a) Posters**

In the service of science and technology (notably the fourth of the Four Modernisations), intellectuals were a vital component of the productive forces in post-Mao China. In order to make the leaders' high-tech, utopian visions of space age cities possible, intellectuals were seen as lynchpins to modernisation's success and were pictured alongside 'soothing visual representations' of China's future (Landsberger 1995: 78). In his survey of the domestic propaganda posters of the Four Modernisations era, Landsberger observes that intellectuals were now pictured alongside workers, peasants and soldiers for the first time, and were even depicted on banknotes, an honour once reserved for workers and peasants (ibid: 79). In these posters, intellectuals were mostly represented as scientists or technicians, building the new China, marked by thick spectacles and white coats. Intellectuals were given the class-based label of 'mental workers', also employed during the Cultural Revolution, and no longer seen as threatening to the continuation of a proletarian China. For the first time, intellectuals were portrayed as 'models' for emulation, and examples of famous scientists were portrayed to encourage hard work and dedication among the young. Landsberger draws attention to intellectuals represented in pairs in one run of posters, resembling traditional door gods (ibid: 152). However, there were few posters designed to prevent the continued victimisation of intellectuals.

### **b) Literature**

In the Mao era and its aftermath, it appeared that the traditional veneration of learning, or *wen*, in Chinese culture had been reversed in favour of *wu*, or martial prowess, which leant itself better to the emphasis on 'redness' in Mao's last decade. In 'Chinese masculinity, theorizing *wen* and *wu*', Louie and Edwards posit that the values of *wen* and

*wu* have formed an integral part of Chinese perceptions and representations of masculinity. Despite the emphasis on literary representations in dynastic China, Louie and Edwards make the valuable point that 'a scholar is considered no less masculine than a soldier' (1994: 138). Indeed, although a combination of the virtues of both *wen* and *wu* is ideal, they contend that *wen* has been considered to be more desirable than martial valour, especially in Confucian texts (ibid: 143.) In classical literature, scholars were presented as successful lovers, whilst more martial figures had to restrain their sexuality (Louie & Hodge 1998: 124).

Despite this emphasis on the 'hegemonic masculinity' of the scholar elite in classical writings, authors of representations of post-Mao intellectuals appear to seek to inject a little more *wu* into their (self) portraits. Xueping Zhong devotes her entire study into the subjectivity of male intellectuals in the post-Mao era, and speculates upon their role in the future. She contends that Chinese male subjectivity is a 'psyche predominantly manifested through (male) intellectuals' preoccupation with the weakness of the country, the culture, and Chinese men.... The complex is also a male desire, a desire to overcome marginality and to search for (masculine) identity' (2000: 37). Zhong perceives writers as struggling towards a meaningful masculinity, having been disenfranchised and disabused by the Maoist past.

Zhong's earlier discussion of Zhang Xianliang's novel *Half of Man is Woman* (*Nanren de yiban shi nüren*, 1985) exposes the aggressive nature of this intellectual desire to regain sexual potency and societal recognition. Zhang Xianliang's (autobiographical) anti-hero Zhang Yonglin progresses from creative and sexual impotency in prison to liberty and sexual proclivity in the outside world. In Zhang Yonglin's vision, women are objects through which he may regain his selfhood in the face of a dehumanising and desexualising political authority. Women's bodies are a space through which he may regain his manhood/personhood/subjectivity (Zhong 1994: 185). Xueping Zhong points out that women serve as conduits through which Zhang must negotiate his more 'meaningful' relationships, which are towards the dominance of the fatherly CCP and towards 'manly' heroes of the past, with whom he favourably compares himself.

Cultural commentator Jianying Zha finds another tale of intellectual sexual adventure in her observations on Jia Pingwa's *Abandoned Capital* (Feidu, 1993). The story centres upon a middle-aged writer, Zhuang Zhidie, and the less famous author who arrives to write his biography. As the story unravels, the reader comes across sexual seduction, venereal disease, prostitutes, con artists, and revenge plots. Zhuang's seductions form a central part of the novel, with over sixty sex scenes contained in the plot (Zha 1995: 133). Zha interprets this sensationalist (and commercially successful) work as tale of a member of the disenfranchised intellectual class, escaping from his troubles through sexual contacts (ibid: 150). However, Zha's interpretation correlates with Xueping Zhong's observations on the critical reception of Zhang Xianliang's *Half of Man is Woman*, which glossed over the masculinist priorities of the work, since Zha praises Jia Pingwa's novel as a celebration of renewed intellectual freedom after the Mao era (1994: 176).

### **3: *The Black Cannon Incident***

The following section will consider Huang Jianxin's *Black Cannon Incident* in the light of the summary of representations of intellectuals presented above. For example, considering the bad class labels once attached to intellectuals, how is the hero, Zhao Shuxin, portrayed in a film very firmly set in the reform era's emphasis on technical excellence? Is Zhao seen as a stereotypical, bespectacled intellectual, or does he betray the machismo with which writers such as Zhang Xianliang and Jia Pingwa endow the heroes of *Half of Man is Woman* and *The Abandoned Capital*?<sup>35</sup> The cinematography of the film seems to present a futuristic world of high technology (although this is belied by the eventual failure of this same technology). How does Zhao, a seemingly innocuous scientist, relate to this state in transition?

#### **a) Synopsis**

*The Black Cannon Incident* is a satire on misinterpretation of past categories in an ever-shifting modern world. Its 'hero' is an engineer, Zhao Shuxin, working in a busy city

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<sup>35</sup> Huang's screenplay is based on a story by Zhang Xianliang, although the final script turned out to be significantly different from Zhang's work (Rayns 1989: 37).

mine. A loyal employee, he has been working at the mine for nearly thirty years, and is a respected technical translator, fluent in German. However, events take a surreal turn when a telegram that he sends to his chess partner is intercepted, then misinterpreted by the mine's Party committee. The Party committee believes that telegram, asking for a black cannon chess piece, is a code for some more sinister objective. After all, why would Zhao go to the expense of sending a telegram over a worthless chess piece that could be bought anywhere? Since a representative from the German engineering company that is supplying new machinery to the mine is coming to supervise its installation, the newly suspect Zhao is under even more surveillance.

Zhao begins to act as translator for Hans Schmidt, the German technician overseeing the assembly of the mine's new machinery (a 'WD' machine). The pair have worked together before, and Hans seems to hold Zhao in high esteem, until the pair have an argument over the calculations involved in the WD machine, in which Zhao insists that Hans' German firm has committed an error. However, Zhao's company's suspicions are fuelled by this row, about which they know nothing, and it is agreed to remove Zhao from translation duties and replace him with a colleague from the company's tourism department, Mr Feng. This change proves disastrous, for Feng has no idea about the technical terms that are an essential part of making sure that the WD functions properly. Zhao, seen as having a mysterious connection with the 'foreign expert' (who, like other foreigners, is difficult to interpret at the best of times), is transferred to a different department.

In the final part of the film, the doubts of the Party Committee are finally unravelled. Zhao finally gets a chance to prove to Hans that the German calculations were incorrect, and the pair resumes their friendship. The mine security chief, Chen, asks Hans what the disagreement with Zhao was about, and, when a parcel arrives for Zhao, the Vice Party Secretary opens it and finds it is actually a black cannon chess piece. A few weeks later, the new machinery breaks down. Zhao, now back in favour again, is called for and works out that a key section of the instruction manual has been incorrectly translated from the German. The instigator of the suspicions against Zhao is Vice Party Secretary Zhou, and in the final scenes, she asks why Zhao is so keen to retrieve one particular chess piece.



Zhao explains that losing a piece from a good set is upsetting, and finally states apologetically that he will never play chess again.

## **b) Analysis**

Huang's film is a comedy at the expense of the paranoia of Party bureaucracy. It is also firmly set in the mid-1980s, in a time of increasing foreign influence into Chinese life. *The Black Cannon Incident* reflects the ambiguities of this change, from the point of view of those who embrace the consequences of the reform policies and those who resist them: either way, the result for all seems to be confusion. Its cinematography reflects this cultural seasickness. The film is visually at an opposite pole from the work of other Fifth Generation directors. Apart from being set firmly in the city, it reflects the urban drive for modernity through its focus upon angular structures and artificial materials. In the city, nothing seems organic: only its parks and gardens are scenes of contemplation and escape.

This section will examine the manner in which *The Black Cannon Incident* comments on the status of Zhao Shuxin as an intellectual. I contend that director Huang Jianxin not only comments on Zhao as an intellectual, but the fact that he has chosen this *particular* figure as his main character also reveals the manner in which this status impacts upon male gender identity. *The Black Cannon Incident* employs Zhao's masculinity as a criticism of the Party's treatment of intellectuals in four main ways: firstly, in Zhao's appearance and mannerisms, which set him apart from other protagonists; secondly, in his mindset and relationships with others; thirdly, through a comparison between his behaviour and that of the mine's Party committee; and lastly, through his relative 'feminisation'.

### **i) Zhao Shuxin's physical expression of masculinity**

From the opening moments of the film, Zhao is characterised by his physical actions. When Zhao first enters the post office on the opening stormy night of the film, he bumps into two men who are in the process of leaving. Zhao is a small man. His hair is combed haphazardly, and he is flustered from the rain. When he enters the post office, it is with

his head down, clutching his briefcase, a sure symbol of the 'intellectual' of which **he** appears to be an archetype. Furthermore, the first thing to which Huang Jianxin draws **his** audience's eyes is Zhao's oversized glasses, through the thick lenses of which **he** constantly squints. In his hurry, Zhao does not notice the two men who are walking out **of** the door. Squinting up at the men, he sheepishly apologises and bustles to a writing desk, knocking over a female customer's umbrella on the way, after which he stutters profuse apologies.

In this initial scene, Zhao's muddled physical appearance and stumbling actions have **set** up two key themes. Firstly, the two men could not be more physically opposite to **his** short, bedraggled figure. Both are young and extremely tall, smartly dressed in immaculately pressed casual shirts and jeans. Their presence and attitude point to everything that Zhao is not: young, confident, and modern, and they seem a little disgusted by the rain-drenched middle-aged man. They hold his gaze for a second, implying that they are contemplating taking the matter further, but decide that Zhao is just not worth bothering with. The encounter implies that Zhao is physically miles apart from the current masculine ideal, and that he is mentally from another era. Zhao's physical inability to dissemble reflects his emotional honesty, which proves to be a quality that cannot be hidden, even when it works against him. Secondly, the fact that he is weighed down by his briefcase also points to the moral burdens that he has to carry. The physical obstacles that Zhao faces, even in the near-deserted post-office, suggest the barriers of understanding to which he will fall victim later in the film. Moreover, he stands in contrast to the other customers in the building who are paired off (the two male friends who disappear into the rain and a female customer meeting with her boyfriend), thus foregrounding the more isolated figure that he will become by the end of the film.

Throughout the film, Zhao retains a fixed set of gestures that signal his attitudes to given situations and define his masculinity. For example, he holds his hands across his chest, either clasping one elbow or folding his arms, indicating that he is guarded (understandably, on account of past persecution of intellectuals), wishing to protect himself. Moreover, he almost constantly stoops, and his squinting is mimetic of his more

metaphorical blindness to the Party's later investigation of him. When he prepares to greet his friend Hans (the German 'foreign expert'), he is dressed up like a doll in a Western suit that mine employee Lao Wang has borrowed as a symbol of the mine's modernity. He is clearly uncomfortable in his new outfit, and cannot tie his tie; he is far from an ambassador for China's leap into the twenty-first century. Zhao's obvious bewilderment in his new clothes reflects Huang's comment on China's situation at the beginning of the reform era, ill-at-ease with the symbols of Western modernity, even when these signifiers are second-hand and shabby from the first.

In *The Black Cannon Incident*, Zhao's appearance is a significant measure of his masculinity since it is such a diametric opposite to that of Hans. By means of the physical contrast between the two men, Huang highlights male gender identity as a both a theme of the film and a metaphor for his other concerns. Zhao's physical difference from his German counterpart reflects more global issues of China's position in a modern (arguably masculine) world economy. Hans is a stereotypical German; he is literally larger than life. Fitting in with the impression held by some Chinese that all foreigners are fat, Hans appears as though he has eaten one too many frankfurters. He has a thick moustache and curly hair, and towers above the stooping figure of Zhao, making the latter look like a schoolboy. Moreover, Hans (literally) finds the Achilles' heel of the mine's attempt to disguise Zhao as a slick, westernised technocrat when he notices that Zhao is still wearing his own ragged shoes. Hans' attempts to replace the offending footwear with blindingly white Western trainers only make Zhao look more comically incongruous. The sequence foreshadows Zhao's eventual position as a toy to be played with (in this case, to be dressed up) by the Party committee.

## **ii) Zhao's relationships**

Although Zhao has a 'girlfriend', his closest relationship (and the one that matters most to him) is with Hans. The two men have worked together before; they are old friends and seem to respect each other's intellectual abilities. As soon as Zhao first walks into Hans' hotel room, he is grasped firmly by the hand. In fact, physical displays of friendship seem to be a feature of the two men's normal relationship. Hans touches Zhao on the shoulder

to show his affection and respect, and Zhao reciprocates by patting the German on the chest. Their comparative physical statures make Hans' gestures into those of an older brother, whilst Zhao looks diminutive. However, as the film goes on, there appears to be more invested in this relationship than the pride of their respective companies.

In their initial and only fundamental disagreement, the pair sits in silence in a modern coffee bar, throwing reproachful glances at each another. The scene is heavy with the atmosphere of an argument between a married couple, complete with petty bickering, name-calling and accusatory looks. Zhao is even pushed to violence, calling Hans a 'pig' and shattering a beer bottle, breaking the bohemian atmosphere that the owner of the establishment has obviously tried so hard to create. When it is time to leave, Hans brusquely tells Zhao to follow him, as though talking to a disobedient spouse. The intimacy of Zhao and Hans' relationship is difficult to fathom. They seem to invest so much into what should be a simple technical exchange of ideas. However, the bond serves both to show the childlike nature of Zhao's attitude to relationships and to display the extent of his earnestness.

When Hans discovers that his company has, in fact, made a potentially disastrous mistake in their calculations, the two men renew their friendship. Huang's use of shot-reverse-shot conveys the tension between the two men at this crucial moment, revealing the intimacy that they share. There seems to be more involved in Hans' admission of error than a victory for Chinese engineering efficiency. As Hans admits that he is wrong, he holds out his hand, and the tension is palpable. Unexpectedly, Hans' climb-down from the pedestal of Western omnipotence inspires an extraordinary display of emotion in Zhao. As Hans holds out his hand, Zhao literally jumps into the German's arms. To all intents and purposes, Zhao is like a child. His leap into the arms of his German friend reflects his genuine relief that the disruption that he hates so much is over. It is also an authentic expression of affection. Although Zhao's fondness for Hans is barely hidden, I contend that the scene is only unconsciously homoerotic. Instead, it reveals Zhao's mental attitude towards adult relationships.

### iii) The Party as parent

While Pickowicz reads Zhao as 'pathetic.. for whom Huang Jianxin seems to have almost no compassion or respect' (1994: 64), the engineer seems far from a hopelessly pitiable figure. Even though he lacks confidence, he is normally consistently cheerful and (perhaps misguidedly) optimistic. He has a stable relationship and is ready to share a joke with the rest of his colleagues, as shown by his banter with the maintenance department staff. Despite his status as an intellectual, Zhao is never aloof. Nevertheless, he is ordered around by his younger inferiors in the mine, as graduate Miss Liu demonstrates when she practically herds him towards his reunion with Hans.

The Party committee plays more than a small part in the way that Zhao behaves both within the company and outside it. The discovery of the committee's amateur attempts at espionage pushes Zhao toward near crisis, and yet he returns to his work, his trust shaken but continuing to 'serve the people'. From the beginning of the film, the Party is present. The narration is presented through a police officer's dictation to his stenographer, causing us to doubt its credentials from the first. Even the clerk at the post office eyes Zhao with suspicion when he hands over his message. Through a tape recording (part of the larger theme of interpretation and authenticity in the film at large), Vice Party Secretary Zhou introduces Zhao in terms of his qualifications, which are impeccable, and informs us of the fact that he has stayed out of political trouble. Zhao has the intellectual's virtue of keeping his head down. As Zhao's political résumé is sketched out for us, we see him walking alone, further outlining the comparison between him as a single human being against the information-gathering machine of the Party.

However, Huang's film has a strong sense of irony. If the Committee, as Big Brother, is watching you, this particular sibling is hopelessly incompetent at it. Throughout the film, the Party's apparent determination to implicate the gentle Zhao in international industrial espionage is ludicrous. Unaware of the machinations inside the Party committee meeting room, Zhao trusts the Party, and is convinced of the importance of his work within the company. This wide-eyed faith and his exclusion from any decisions about his work reinforce his childlike status. For example, when he is transferred to the maintenance

department to reduce his contact with Hans, he is given gifts by Secretary Wu to ensure his continued passivity. A packet of high-quality cigarettes is purloined by a grateful workmate since the pure Zhao, of course, does not smoke, and he is also given a huge bag of sweets. Zhao boasts to his girlfriend about this second gift, citing it as evidence of his importance within the company. He is an obedient son, who is given a treat for good behaviour. Indeed, Vice Party Secretary Zhou even insists that her scheming against Zhao is all for his own good. He must be protected from the foreign evils that Hans represents, even if that deprives the company of a first-class technical interpreter: 'Keep him away from the foreign expert for a bit. For his own good.' The Party, it is decided, knows best.

In order to express this powerlessness, Zhao is directly compared with children. After his discovery of the suspicions against him, he visits a nearby Catholic church. Zhao's parents were practising Catholics, and it is possible that he is attempting to find comfort after his betrayal. However, he does not enter and participate in the service, but lingers outside alongside a little girl whose mother has entered to take communion. Zhao cannot bring himself to rekindle the faith that he once had, since any religion may be too similar to the devotion required by the Party, and so he excludes himself from the service, believing that he has more in common with the child standing at the door. Similarly, in the final scene of the film, Zhao is in a park, a welcome contrast and escape from the industrialisation and technology that the mine represents. Two boys are playing with some abandoned bricks, making a snake from them in order to see them tumbling down like dominoes. The two boys play innocently as Zhao watches. The time that they take in painstakingly constructing their game, only to watch it fall in seconds can be seen as mimetic of the action of Huang's film at large: the WD machine takes weeks to construct, only to break almost instantly. The boys' game also resembles Zhao's role, since he works tirelessly for the company, only to find his faith in it crashing down. Zhao waves at the boys, throws them one of his precious sweets from the Committee (in a recognition that sweets are gifts for *children*), and then turns away.

#### iv) Intellectual masculinity?

Huang Jianxin comments upon Zhao's masculinity through his relative feminisation. In many ways, Zhao is a parody of a Confucian intellectual, who once had the privilege of submitting advice to the emperor (Silbergeld 1999: 249). However, the role of the intellectual as a critic of the state is denied to Zhao in the claustrophobic atmosphere of the mine. When a straightforward masculinity is valued above Zhao's learning, the *wen* masculinity described by Kam Louie is far from dominant. If any character can be said to be the villain of Huang's pseudo-thriller, it is Zhou Yuzhen, the Vice Party Secretary. She is constantly finding excuses in order to justify Zhao's ostracism, and her stubbornness and self-assurance prolongs the succession of misunderstandings that make up the film. When Manager Li questions her approach to Zhao, she confesses that she cannot understand the new priorities of China in the reform era. Instead, she maintains that 'one must have principles', preferring the complex to the simple truth that Zhao really did want a chess piece back. On her own admission, she is a 'Marxist granny', the product of another more radical age. In fact, she seems positively dejected when she cannot apportion blame to Hans for the breakdown of the WD machine. There is, in fact, no elaborate anti-communist plot. In Party Secretary Zhou, the Party is feminised as a nagging, spiteful matriarch, underlining Zhao's helplessness. In fact, the film relies on a set of assumptions as to what is 'feminine' and what is 'masculine', for a ship headed by a woman is bound to run off course, and the mild mannered man who will not stand up to this matriarch is lacking in masculinity. Reading the film as a reflection on the effects of Cultural Revolution mentalities in post-Mao China, Silbergeld points out that Vice Party Secretary Zhou might remind a Chinese audience of Jiang Qing, blamed after Mao's death for the excesses of the Cultural Revolution, in her fanaticism and her determination to find culpability in all misfortunes (1999: 251).

#### 4: Conclusions

This chapter has explored the representation of workers, peasants, soldiers and intellectuals in four post-Mao films. *The Troubleshooters* investigates the transformations in the mental and physical nature of work for men in reform era China. *Devils on the Doorstep*, although set in 1940s China, reveals very different attitude toward its male

protagonists than the peasant heroes created either by the CCP or by Fifth Generation directors. In *The Big Parade*, Chen Kaige deconstructs traditional ideals of martial heroism, and observes their effects on his protagonists, who are living in a world where established Party routes to success and respect are waning. *The Black Cannon Incident* satirically outlines the effects of Maoist attitudes to intellectuals in an age when knowledge was sorely needed, yet still partly reviled by the authorities. All four films reveal Maoist attitudes of manliness and identity failing in the years following the Chairman's death. They also demonstrate the extent to which masculine identities are embroiled within national identity, in that a weak masculinity is often taken as evidence of a weak China. While the straightforward Ma Dasan in *Devils* places ideas of national gender identities and heroism into doubt in the Anti-Japanese War, Zhao Shuxin's masculinity is employed to satirise China's uneasy relationship with the West in the early reform era (*The Black Cannon Incident*). They also point out the constructed nature of gendered identities, whether they are represented in the ideal of soldierly heroism, conceptions of productive work, pictures of a noble, self-sacrificing peasantry or stereotypes of conniving male intellectuals. However, the larger gerontocracy of the state seems to persist, represented in the big parade, in the attitudes that paralysed the WD machine and in the street committee that shuts the Three T Company down. Yu Guan, Ma Dasan, the parade squad and Zhao Shuxin all find themselves at odds with larger narratives of authority that they must negotiate. Only in *Devils on the Doorstep* is the orderly presence of the Party not evident at all, perhaps making the most poignant criticism of Communist ideas of male identity.



## CHAPTER FOUR – LOVERS AND FRIENDS

This chapter concentrates on images of men as lovers and friends; that is, men will be considered in terms of their close personal relationships, rather than in terms of their social and political roles. The reform era brought economic change, but it also ushered in new conceptions of relationships and individuals' roles within them. Whereas the Party had been instrumental in advising and approving partners, to the extent that people concentrated on choosing spouses of a suitable class background in the Cultural Revolution (Honig & Hershatter 1988: 97), the gradual withdrawal of the CCP from daily life and private relationships heralded new, if not total, freedoms and generated fresh representations. However, where society may be more tolerant of public displays of affection between heterosexual partners (holding hands in public, once frowned upon, is now a common occurrence, for example), homosexuality has a more ambiguous legal and social status (see Cui 2002; Lusby 2002). Friendships, too, have altered in the years after Mao's death, with economic changes placing new demands on close relationships.

The following section will introduce issues involved in representations of relationships during the reform era. It will then go on to discuss three films that centre on men's role as friends and lovers. *Suzhou River* (*Suzhou he*, dir. Le You, 1999) features the relationship between a young motorcycle courier and the daughter of a rich businessman whom he is hired to kidnap in the changing city of Shanghai. *Men and Women* (*Nannan Nünü*, dir. Liu Bingjian, 1999) records the impact of the young and attractive Xiao Bo upon those he encounters as a young migrant in the varied social and sexual atmosphere of Beijing. Lastly, Jia Zhangke's *Platform* (*Zhantai*, 2000) focuses upon a group of friends in the eleven year period from 1979 to 1990, and interlinks the ups and downs of their cultural performance troupe with the changes of the reform era.

### 1: Love and Relationships

One of the most striking changes that occurred in Chinese social life in the post-Mao era was a difference in attitudes towards relationships, now partially freed from political

considerations.<sup>1</sup> After the dearth of representations of love and romance in the Cultural Revolution (Chen 2002: 108; Evans 1995: 358), themes surrounding sex and relationships began to appear in magazines, literature, popular media and film (see Honig & Hershatter 1988; Evans 1995; Farrer 2002). These representations not only addressed women, but were also aimed towards and addressed the concerns of men. In addition, homosexuality featured in representations of love and romance. While representation in fiction and film on the Mainland added to an increasing number of portrayals in Taiwan and Hong Kong, medical discourses appeared alongside more unofficial media discussion of homosexuality.

#### a) Representations of heterosexual romance in post-Mao China

From the early 1980s, love began to dominate the pages of literature, displacing the chaste worker, peasant and soldier heroes of earlier representations (McDougall & Louie 1997: 370). Following the rigid emphasis on continuing revolutionary class struggle in the Mao years, gender issues began to be discussed in the work of female authors such as Wang Anyi and Zhang Jie. Sexuality was also featured in the pages of male novelists, as writers designated as from the 'roots-searching' (*xungen*) group of artists explored manhood and sexuality in China's hinterland or through stories of Cultural Revolution experience.<sup>2</sup> In the words of Xueping Zhong, in reform era novels that centre on gendered themes, 'what it means to be a woman is addressed through examination of issues of love and marriage, whereas the question of what it means to be a man is linked to sexuality' (2000: 53). Zhang Xianliang wrote of an emasculating party machine that rendered his semi-autobiographical hero impotent in *Half of Man is Woman* (*Nanren de yiban shi nǚren*, 1985), in which male desire is prioritised, tested and regained through the conquest of the female body (Zhong 1994: 186). Male potency also became a key theme

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<sup>1</sup> Whilst people may no longer have felt the need to consider the political background of potential partners, the state was still present in domestic relationships, as the single child family policy demonstrated. For example, see E Croll, D Davin, P Kane, (eds.) *China's One Child Family Policy* (London: Macmillan, 1985), S Greenhalgh, 'The evolution of the one child family policy in Shaanxi 1979-1983', *China Quarterly* 122 (1990), A Saith, 'China's new population policies: Rationale and some implications', in Saith (ed.) *The Reemergence of the Chinese Peasantry* (London: Croom Helm, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> The 'roots searching' group of male authors are explored in more detail in Chapter Three and in Chapter Five.

in the work of Liu Heng<sup>3</sup>, Jia Pingwa (see Louie 1991) and Mo Yan (see Lu 1995; Huot 2000: 109-111). Rural China was reified as a site of 'remasculination' (where men could become 'manly' again) after the desexualised, punitive discourse of revolution based in the 'civility' of the cultivated city.

Popular culture also concerned itself with love and romance following the release of some state censorship on previously taboo topics (McDougall and Louie 1997: 370). In the popular media, 'courtship, love and marriage...were probably talked about more, and agreed about less, than at any time since the May Fourth Movement' (Honig & Hershatter 1988: 81). In his analysis of Western attitudes to love and romance, Giddens suggests that the idea of a 'relationship' is a very modern concept, involving personal decisions that may exclude the social and economic concerns of other parties (1992: 58). Whilst one should be cautious about applying such observations unconditionally to China<sup>4</sup>, many urban images were concerned with individual choice in partnerships. Magazine articles discussed the problems of young men and women, who were negotiating the world of dating and courtship.

Shifts in dominant forms of masculinity had consequences for actual men in choosing a partner. For example, whilst PLA soldiers or workers from good revolutionary stock may have been ideal partners in the Cultural Revolution era, the rehabilitation of intellectuals and new monetary priorities meant that many urban women were looking for 'more than a worker', preferably with a university degree and earning potential (Honig & Hershatter: 98). Men also expected to be paid considerably more than their partners. In Higgins' recent survey of Chinese students, more than half of her respondents implied that 'women are inferior in the marriage relationship', with expectations that married men should hold higher status occupations than their wives (2003: 16).

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of Zhang Yimou's film, *Judou*, an adaptation of the 1988 Liu Heng novel, *The Obsessed (Fuxi Fuxi)*, see Chapter Five.

<sup>4</sup> For example, marriages in the countryside are still concerned with the social and economic standing of one or both partners, and commentators on women in rural areas point to the return of arranged marriages in the reform era. As the remainder of this section will show, economic prospects are important qualities sought by many upwardly mobile urban men and women in their choice of a partner.

These preconceptions of male roles in a shifting moral and economic climate appear to have placed extra pressures upon men to fulfil the expectations of their male peers and female partners. In his study of young, heterosexual urbanites' attitudes towards sexuality in Shanghai, James Farrer observes that masculinity (in the eyes of eligible females) combined both 'economic and sexual potency' (2002: 16). Despite the low pay and increasing unemployment that hit women workers harder than their male counterparts, Farrer describes the representation of a 'crisis of masculinity' in Shanghainese popular culture. Since the horizons of many young urban women were changing on account of growing access to discourses of consumerism, cultural Westernisation and ideas of self-development, men found that women were looking for more 'upwardly mobile' mates. The gradual privatisation of the state sector dismantled the tropes of tough masculinity that once made so many men desirable partners, giving rise to a tangible insecurity (ibid: 98).

Such anxieties were partly addressed in a magazine culture aimed specifically at men. Although publications ostensibly aimed at women self-consciously pitched for an additional male readership (ibid: 118), magazines appeared that addressed men specifically. As well as expensive Hong Kong or Taiwan issues of male 'lifestyle' publications such as *Esquire* or *GQ*, less glossy Mainland titles appeared with a more 'masculine' emphasis. As can be said of many Western publications aimed at men as a *gender group*, the fact that these magazines appeared at all, giving advice on how to conduct oneself through life *as a male*, signals a change in the conception of gendered roles within society in a more consumer age. The monthly *Nanyou* professed to be 'man's friend and woman's friend', but addressed male themes and boosted men's image as desirable. Literally, the title means 'male friend', although the cover bears the English subtitle 'Power' ('*li*'). Therefore, an ostensibly 'gentle' cover motto gives way to what may be a more substantial concern surrounding the status of men. Another such publication was titled, less subtly, *Nanli* (literally, 'male power'). One issue contained articles on the follies of vain men, stories of male career success and 'new men.'<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Nanli*, May 2001.

Sex and sexuality also were discussed in the media and in official discourse. Shanghai authors Wei Hui and Mian Mian<sup>6</sup> scandalised officials and entertained young city dwellers with their explicit novels set in the clubs and bars on the Shanghai and Shenzhen underground scenes. A concern for the provision of (heterosexual) sex education also appeared in the media. Wei Lan's late night discussion radio show in Shanghai helped male and female listeners with matters of love and sex, previously kept very much out of the spotlight, but now aired to thousands of curious listeners. Dr Chen's sexual health clinic in the same city gave advice and 'treatment' to worried residents and sex education lessons in schools (*The Guardian*, May 18 2000). However, Joanna MacMillan notes the clinical approach to public discussion about sex and sexuality in China, with sexual problems being ascribed to scientific rather than emotional causes, for 'in the de-eroticised world of Chinese sexual education, it is body parts and not people that have sex' (2003: 18).

The relatively large volume of discussion about sex and sexuality (in both official and popular discourse) in the reform era may imply that China in Mao's time was a prudish, prurient state that discouraged expressions of sexuality. On the contrary, Harriet Evans' research reveals the extent of pronouncements and advice on love, sexual matters and marriage in official publications in the 1950s and 1960s, which influenced reform era discourse after the emphasis on erasing sexual difference in the Cultural Revolution (see Evans 1995). However, these discussions were firmly placed in the context of sexuality within established heterosexual relationships.

### **b) Representations of homosexuality**

Whilst male homosexuality was not legislated against in law from 1949, 'the exclusion of peripheral sexualities from public mention implicitly constructed them as biological abnormalities, illnesses, or signs of moral degeneracy' (Evans 1995: 370). Representations of homosexuality in official publications treated sexualities outside

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<sup>6</sup> The works of Wei Hui and Mian Mian have now been translated into English, although their reputations as the 'bad girls' of popular Chinese literature went before the publication of any actual work in the Western media: Wei Hui (trans. Bruce Humes), *Shanghai Baby* (London: Robinson, 2001), Mian Mian (trans. Andrea Lingenfelter), *Candy* (Back Bay 2003).

reproductive heterosexuality as a crime or as a physical or psychological problem. Until the provision was removed in 1997, active homosexuals could be prosecuted by police under the charge of 'hooliganism' (Lusby 2002), and police attention was prohibitive of any open expression of sexuality outside the heterosexual norm. However, from the late 1990s, representations of homosexualities in China's cities increased in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and even on the Mainland itself.<sup>7</sup>

Whilst official research acknowledges the existence of a homosexual culture, its unsympathetic tone undercuts any affirmation.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, Cui Zi'en (an author, actor, teacher and scriptwriter of *Men and Women*) notes the increase in more positive representations of homosexuality on the Mainland (2002: 13). In 2001, homosexuality was no longer codified as a mental illness (Lusby 2002: 1), and Mainland representations were already beginning to present a more sympathetic picture of sexuality.<sup>9</sup> Printed media representations of gay men (and lesbians) were few but significant: in the mid 1990s, the journal *Life Weekly* (*Shenghuo Zhoubao*) produced a gay guide to Beijing, the magazine *Hope* devoted a special issue to homosexuality and in 2002 *Modern Civilisation Pictorial* (an official publication) devoted its January title to an exploration of the Chinese gay scene (see Rayns 1996, Cui 2002, Lusby 2002). Homosexuality became part of the television agenda when Cui Zi'en and Shi Tou (a female painter from Beijing) became the first to 'come out' on national television.<sup>10</sup> However, in a more private arena, everyday hostility is still evident towards gay men (and lesbians), who face stereotyping and the particular problems of 'coming out' to parents, when they may represent the only hope of grandchildren due to the effects of the one child family policy

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<sup>7</sup> For more on the appearance of and discourse around filmic representations of homosexualities in Chinese cinemas, see Berry (1996), Lim (2002).

<sup>8</sup> Evans notes aversion therapies used on suspected homosexuals and penal sentences handed down in mid-1990s China (1995: 384).

<sup>9</sup> For example, Li Yinhe and Wang Xiaobo published *Their World* (*Tamen de shijie*) in 1992, a defence of male homosexual rights (Evans 1995: 384).

<sup>10</sup> For more on this discussion show aired by Hunan Satellite TV network, see Li 2001. Homosexuality even hit the headlines in *Renmin Ribao* (*People's Daily*) with the well-publicised case of a farmer who injured his male lover, under the banner 'Homosexuals in China: More Tolerance, Less Prejudice' (*Renmin Ribao*, 3/4/03). However, despite assertions to the contrary, homosexuality in the article was still linked with crime, divorced from 'Chinese tradition' (for an interpretation of homosexual tradition in China, see Hinsch 1990) and linked to the spread of HIV.

in cities.<sup>11</sup> General public perceptions of homosexuality also discourage individuals from 'coming out'. In the sample of a 2001 survey, eighty percent of students (a progressive group in Chinese society) believed that homosexuality was 'abnormal', with half even arguing for its 'immorality' (Higgins 2003: 15).

Representations of homosexual men also increased in fiction and film. Cui Zi'en published his first novel *Scarlet Lips* (*Taose zuichun*) in a pre-handover Hong Kong (although banned on the Mainland) in 1997. Following *Men and Women*, Cui Zi'en wrote and directed *Enter The Clowns* (*Choujue dengchang*, 2001) and *The Old Testament* (*Jiuyue*, 2002), both invited to international film festivals. Also published in Hong Kong, *Good Man Rogo* (*Haonan Luoge*) by the Tianjin writer Tong Ge appeared in 1998 (Cui 2002: 13). However, the first Mainland Chinese 'gay' novel was published on the internet, and authored by an anonymous writer under the name 'Beijing Comrade' ('*Beijing Tongzhi*').<sup>12</sup> *Beijing Story* (*Beijing gushi*) is set in 1980s China, and is the story of the businessman Chen Handong and the young migrant, Lan Yu, who falls in love with him. The novel was adapted into a film (*Lanyu*) by Hong Kong based director Stanley Kwan in 2001.<sup>13</sup>

In Mainland film, representations of homosexual masculinities came to widespread attention through Chen Kaige's 1993 epic, *Farewell My Concubine* (*Bawang bieji*). Despite Chen's protestations that he was not representing an explicitly homosexual relationship between his two male protagonists (Rayns 1992: 12), this central partnership has been interpreted by critics and cinema scholars as a homoerotic one, and the film's

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<sup>11</sup> These observations are from an anonymous article from a gay Shanghai musician, writing in *Time Asia* (October 23, 2000, vol. 156, no. 16) <http://www.time.com/time/asia/features/youngchina/s.gay.author.html>, accessed 15/09/03).

<sup>12</sup> While the word *tongzhi* literally means comrade and was the polite form of address employed under Mao (although now falling out of use), it has been adopted by the homosexual community, and is equivalent to the English term 'gay'. *Tongzhi* is also the title of a recent book chronicling gay culture in Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong by Wah-shan Chou (*Tongzhi: politics of same-sex eroticism in Chinese societies* (New York ; London : Harrington Park, 2001)).

<sup>13</sup> The original story can be found (in Mandarin) on Huzhao.com. Alternative web sources include:- <http://gd.cnread.net/cnread1/net/cp/b/beijingguishi/index.html>, accessed 18/06/2003 or <http://www.yitan.net/yihe/novels/beijing/beijing.html>, accessed 18/06/2003. More can be found about the original novel and Stanley Kwan's film on the official website of *Lanyu* (<http://lanyu.gstage.com/english/>, accessed 15/09/03).

portrayal of gay sexualities has been contested.<sup>14</sup> However, the first Mainland ‘gay film’ is seen as Zhang Yuan’s *East Palace West Palace* (*Donggong, xigong* 1996). Zhang Yuan pursued his interest in representing China’s marginal social groups by adapting Wang Xiaobo’s novel for the screen. A young gay man, A Lan, becomes obsessed with a Beijing cop, Xiao Shi, who patrols a Beijing park that doubles as a nighttime cruising ground. Uncovering ‘how sexuality can often function as a vehicle for illuminating social, cultural, and political spheres of power’ (Lim 2002: 85), A Lan progressively seduces Xiao Shi to realise his (often masochistic) desires.<sup>15</sup>

## 2: Male Friendships

Friendship in China is an important social bond. However, friendships are little researched and, being based on an emotional bond, are notoriously difficult to tie to historical evidence. Rather than being solely emotional relationships, bonds of friendship in China can include informal ties of obligation towards those in a social circle, which might involve extending and reciprocating favours. The existence of inter-sex friendships is not as frequent in China as in Western societies. Higgins notes the taboos on friendships between the sexes in Chinese universities. Inter-sex friendship is believed inevitably to lead to distracting romance. Sexual and romantic relationships between students are frowned upon, with those transgressing these boundaries in dormitories severely punished (Higgins 2003: 16). Higgins’ observations may explain the close relationships that are expressed publicly between friends of the same sex. Male friends can be seen linking arms, for example, an intimate display of friendship that might be interpreted as an expression of homosexuality in the West.

In the films investigated in this study, friendship is an important bond for many male protagonists. For example, in *In the Heat of the Sun* (*Yangguang canlan de rizi*, dir. Jiang Wen, 1994) bonds of male friendship (*gemen’r*) survive down the years, and come to be privileged over the hero’s bond with the lead female protagonist, who may well be merely a shadow. Also a film about young friendship, *Beijing Bastards* (*Beijing zazhong*,

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<sup>14</sup> For example, see Kaplan 1997, Larson 1997, Lu 1997, Lim 2002.

<sup>15</sup> For more on *East Palace, West Palace*, see Rayns 1996, Berry 1998, and Lim 2002.



dir. Zhang Yuan, 1993) traces a community of young male artists circling around the capital's underground music scene. The most touching relationship in this film is not between the heterosexual couple around whom the film is loosely structured, but between two male friends, Daqing and Huang Yelu.<sup>16</sup> In Chen Kaige's *The Big Parade* (*Da yuebing*, 1985), enforced comradeship slides into friendship as weeks of gruelling physical trials take their toll on soldiers preparing for the National Day parade. Zhang Yang's *Shower* (*Xizao*, 1999) is also a tribute to the bonds forged between men, reflected in the bickering yet devoted relationship between two elderly bathhouse users.

Male friendships on the Chinese screen are often prioritised above heterosexual relationships. For example, Zhang Yimou's 1997 feature, *Keep Cool* (*You hua haohao shuo*) centres upon the relationship between a bookstall owner and a businessman. As the film draws on, the action becomes centred upon the relationship between the pair, forgetting the attractive girl to whom the bookstall owner is initially attracted. *Keep Cool*'s emphasis on the strength of male friendship bonds resembles the social dynamics of the 'buddy movies' analysed by Cynthia Fuchs (1993), in which the heterosexual love story is displaced in favour of the intensity of the attachment between two male leads.

Two recent films (beyond the timeframe of this study's main analysis) have centred upon friendships between male protagonists. Tian Zhuangzhuang's 2002 film *Springtime in a Small Town* (*Xiaocheng zhi chun*) is a remake of Fei Mu's 1948 classic, and observes the tensions that arise when a love triangle threatens to break the marriage of the ailing Dai Liyan and his wife Yuwen.<sup>17</sup> However, passion loses out to pragmatism, male friendship is left intact, and the day-to-day life of the traditional family (albeit sterile) goes on.<sup>18</sup> *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* (*Balzac et la Petite Tailleuse Chinoise*, dir. Dai

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<sup>16</sup> For more on *Beijing Bastards* and *In the Heat of the Sun*, see Chapter Two of this study.

<sup>17</sup> The manner in which Fei Mu's original film influenced the fifth generation of filmmakers is discussed in Ni Zhen (2002: 28, 102).

<sup>18</sup> For critical reception of the film, see Phillip Kemp in *Sight and Sound* (July 2003, p. 57), Peter Bradshaw in *The Guardian* (13<sup>th</sup> June, 2003, no page reference available), or Mark Kermode in *The Observer* (15<sup>th</sup> June 2003, no page reference available).

Sijie, 2002)<sup>19</sup> centres around the experiences of two male friends, Ma and Luo, when they are sent for re-education in a remote rural area alongside the Yangtze in the Cultural Revolution. They begin to read Western texts to a seamstress, who eventually falls in love with Luo. By the end of the film, male friendship survives the troubled throws of history into a more settled middle age. However, the film's representation of the Little Seamstress (who is never given a name, thus undercutting the project of 'education' that Ma and Luo undertake) reflects the narrative's emphasis on male experience of emotion and history and their role as carriers of oral culture. After Mao's death, the seamstress is reported to be lost in Shenzhen or Hong Kong, one among many in an army of unskilled, poorly paid female workers, while the two male friends drink wine and reminisce in the cosmopolitan centre of Shanghai, living privileged lives that turned out to be merely interrupted by the social upheavals of the Cultural Revolution.

In the following sections, I will discuss three films in terms of their directors' attitudes towards the personal relationships of their male protagonists. For example, how do the films discussed respond to the discourses of friendship, love and sexuality described above? Does the fragile masculinity expressed by the narrator of *Suzhou River* fit into the representation of the Shanghai of underground bars, dating and anxiety over gendered identity that James Farrer describes? What are the implications of Liu Bingjian's representation of male sexualities in *Men and Women*, particularly homosexuality, in the knowledge that any filmic portrayal of homosexualities is bound to be critiqued in terms of its representational politics (Hanson 1999: 11)? And how does Jia Zhangke represent the pressures of economic change upon male friendships as China comes to terms with life after Mao?

### **3: Lou Ye, *Suzhou River* (*Suzhou he*, 1999)**

This section will discuss Lou Ye's 1999 take on *film noir*, *Suzhou River*, in terms of the relationships between its anonymous videographer narrator and the protagonists of his story of love and mistaken identity in Shanghai. Firstly, I will highlight the relationship

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<sup>19</sup> The original title is given in French since the film is a collaboration between French and Chinese studios. The copyright to the film is also entirely owned by French production companies. See Chapter One for questions surrounding the film's presentation of its subject matter.

between the videographer and Mardar, the second main male protagonist. Although *Suzhou River* is ostensibly concerned with the juxtaposition of two heterosexual love stories, I argue that the main relationship represented in the film is between these two men. Secondly, I will discuss the manner in which the female protagonists Mei Mei and Moudan are sidelined by means of the videographer's presentation of a strong male gaze. Finally, I will demonstrate that the anonymous videographer consciously chooses to forgo relationships in order to extend the mechanisms of control which he employs in his role as narrator and which bolster his gender identity/ies.

### a) Synopsis

*Suzhou River* is an anti-love story set on the banks of the river running through Shanghai. It is narrated by a videographer, the alter ego of the director,<sup>20</sup> as he travels through the city, stencilling his details upon the walls of the city in the hope of attracting clients. He is a professional cameraman, who offers to film anything from weddings to bar shows. The videographer meets Mei Mei one day when he is hired to make a publicity video for a local bar, the Happy Tavern, which tries to attract custom through a 'mermaid' show. While he is shooting the film, the videographer falls for Mei Mei, who plays the 'mermaid' swimming in the oversized tank in the centre of the bar. The couple then embark upon a relationship, in which the videographer delights in filming Mei Mei.

The videographer then introduces Mardar, a motorcycle courier from the city, who is reliable and trusted by clients. One of these clients is Xiao Ho, a middle aged female gangster. Another equally important client for the progress of the narrative is the father of a teenage girl named Moudan. Having retired from a career in crime, this man's only loves are alcohol (chiefly the bison brand Polish vodka that he imports) and women, who are frequent visitors to his flat. He employs Mardar to deliver Moudan to her aunt's home during these visits, and it is in the course of these errands that Moudan and Mardar fall in love.

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<sup>20</sup> Whilst he is making a call to a pager, the unseen narrator leaves his name as Lou Ye.

However, Mardar is embroiled in a kidnapping plot with Xiao Ho, in which Moudan will be taken hostage. Mardar gets Moudan drunk on her father's vodka, and then carries her to an abandoned building. When the time finally comes to free her, she runs from Mardar, and when he catches up to her, she faces him on a bridge with the churning river behind her. Before she dives backwards into the water, she promises that she will return to haunt Mardar as a mermaid. As Moudan falls, she clutches the mermaid doll that Mardar bought for her as a birthday gift.

Mardar is detained by the police and sent to prison. Years later, he returns to Shanghai in the hope of finding Moudan. The story of Moudan and Mardar has become a source of legend across the city, with fishermen claiming to see Moudan emerge from the river as a mermaid. While Mardar resumes his cycle courier work, he stumbles into Mei Mei at the Happy Tavern. Convinced that she is Moudan, he follows her. Despite the fact that Mardar comes to realise that Mei Mei is a stranger, he tells his love story to her, over and over again. However, the videographer becomes jealous of this attachment, and admits that he sends guards from the Happy Tavern to beat Mardar. After this beating, Mardar calmly confronts the videographer, insisting that he means to leave the area in order to find the real Moudan.

Mardar comes across Moudan by chance in a twenty-four hour shop where she is working, one of the only places in the city to sell her father's once infamous bison brand vodka. Later, the police contact the videographer in order for him to identify the bodies of Moudan and Mardar, which are found in the Suzhou River. For a short while, the relationship between the videographer and Mei Mei regains its vitality. The next time the videographer visits Mei Mei's houseboat, however, she is gone, leaving a note that asks him to look for her. In response, the videographer sits at the prow of Mei Mei's houseboat and floats down the river, deciding that he could look for her, but he will not, because there will be other stories to tell.

*Suzhou River* is a story about stories, structured through seemingly random connections and coincidences that turn out to be anything but. The first portion of the film is

perceived through the videographer's camera / his eyes as camera, from the perspective of which we can never see his face. An exception to this 'narrator's eye view' is the portrayal of Mardar's relationship with Moudan, which is shot in a conventional manner, reflecting the clarity of the imaginative construction of the couple's past. Lou Ye's film has also been described as adopting the narrative devices of *film noir* (especially Hitchcock's 1958 film, *Vertigo*), the character presentation of Wong Kar-wai and Christopher Doyle's signature style of cinematography (Francke 2000: 38-39).

### **b)The videographer and Mardar**

The videographer is the mediator through whom we relate to the sound and images on screen. This section will compare the videographer with Mardar, in order to come to a closer understanding of their relationship and the challenge that Mardar poses to the videographer's gender identity. Whilst traditional Hollywood cinema often presents women as the main disruption to the resolution of the narrative and to an idealised male community (see Ellis 1982: 67; Neale 1993: 15), Mardar becomes the main threat to the videographer's sense of masculinity. The narrator and Mardar are defined through competing physical and expressive differences. Firstly, Mardar possesses a physical and mental solidity far from the videographer's deliberate obscurity. Secondly, Mardar is reticent and expresses himself in a straightforward way whilst the videographer cannot help but be a verbose, self-confessed 'liar'.

### **i) The shadowy male narrator**

In contrast to the deliberate mystery of the videographer, Mardar is altogether more solid and predictable. We first see him in close up, as he rides on his motorcycle. We are aware of his features from the first, as he is pictured without the hand-held camera effects of earlier in the narrative. The solidity of his face is in direct comparison with the shadowy features of the videographer. The videographer relates himself to the motorcyclist, but in his storytelling he clearly puts Mardar in an inferior position that places his own experiences as central ('Maybe he drove past my window'); that is, the videographer selects a superior literal and metaphorical vantage point for himself. Moreover, he takes it

upon himself to construct Mardar's past, whereas he believes delineating his own history to be irrelevant.

The videographer retains a detachment that is dependent upon his possession of a 'second eye' in his camera, which acts as both a screen and a filter. It is a screen to retain his editorial power over the stories that he relates and a filter that blocks out the 'reality' with which he is uncomfortable. For example, we never actually see the videographer's face. Even when he clearly cannot be holding the camera, we glimpse the scene through his eyes. This anonymity not only reveals the videographer's wish to retain a resistance to interpretation (ironic for a man whom professes to show no-holes-barred episodes in others' lives), but also displays his vulnerability. However, the videographer is seen in shadow once in the film. This visibility co-incides with a key moment in the digesis when Mardar tracks Mei Mei (whom he believes to be 'his' Moudan) to the videographer's apartment. When Mardar appears, the videographer is revealed, if only in shadow, since the presence of the motorcycle courier is a direct challenge to his possession of Mei Mei. The shot coincides with Mardar's point of view, which will come to dominate the narrative. Not only is Mardar on the videographer's 'territory', but he also has the superior vantage point in that he is able to 'spectate' without the videographer's knowledge. This act of transgression slowly brings our previously anonymous narrator into view.

In their final meeting of the film, Mardar announces that he will leave Shanghai and that he recognises that Moudan is still lost. Infuriatingly for the videographer, Mardar refuses to satisfy him with the anger and overreaction that he expects from a man whom he has had ambushed by local toughs; that is, he refuses his expected role in the videographer's narrative. The scene is filmed in shot-reverse-shot, with the camera falling from Mardar's calm face to the videographer's rapidly mounting ashtray. The sequence highlights the relative literal and moral substance of Mardar compared to his story's narrator, who can only create a smoky barrier between himself and the newly self-assured Mardar.

## ii) Verbal masculinity

Mardar lacks skill in expression, in direct contrast to the stream-of-consciousness monologues voiced by the videographer. The courier is often monosyllabic and appears aloof, yet vulnerable through his emotional reticence. For example, he sits silently in his flat with Moudan, feet away from her, whilst watching his pirate videos. In contrast, the videographer actively produces (rather than passively consumes) images. Mardar's personality reflects his physical solidity. Although he is silent much of the time, Mardar does not share the mystery that the videographer lends to himself. When Moudan embraces him, for example, he stares ahead, and slowly puts his arms around her. When he takes her hostage, he behaves with strained detachment, standing inert as she throws her arms around him.

Mardar's quest to find Moudan works because he is persistent and he is honest. He is willing to lay open his past life (in his confessions to Mei Mei) and to face physical danger until he achieves his objective. Mardar's constancy is in direct contrast to the videographer's deception. As Mei Mei says of Mardar towards the end of the film, 'he never lied.' In contrast, the anonymous videographer is self-conscious in his deceptions, as he often admits to his audience. From the opening seconds of the film, we gain a sense not of a trusted, reliable voice, but a 'liar.' Mei Mei's words from the conclusion of the narrative are brought forward to give an impression of the coming themes of the film. The anonymous male answers his girlfriend's questions with a series of wearied, monosyllabic responses, until the female voice can no longer suspend her disbelief.

## c) Heterosexual relationships in *Suzhou River*

The plot twists of *Suzhou River* come together in the intertwining (and subsequent final separation) of the four main characters in the videographer's story. This section will examine the male protagonists' role within the plot as lovers through the representation of the two main female protagonists, Mei Mei and Moudan. Both women are marginalized by the narrative, and their existence as separate characters is deliberately placed into doubt. This doubling represents the extent to which individual women are dispensable inside a male narrative (since only men are represented as bearers of

authenticity). Firstly, women are subordinated and objectified through the action of a gaze that is unequivocally male. Secondly, women in *Suzhou River* are trivialised and infantile in comparison to the complex emotional journey undertaken by their male partners.

### **i) A very male gaze: Mei Mei**

The videographer situates himself as a kind of visual detective (literally, a private *eye*). Just as the protagonists of 1940s crime thrillers embarked on a 'crime related quest' to build a masculine identity (Krutnik 1991: 86), the videographer will prove his masculinity and potency by building and knocking down a hierarchy of images in order to rest upon the outcome of the story of Mardar and Moudan. The videographer admits that he will 'shoot anything' if he is paid to, but he delivers one warning: 'don't blame me if you don't like what you see.' He implies that the camera acts as a mirror (which may account for their notable presence in the film at large), in that his films reveal an unmediated representation of reality. This assumption is incongruous, since it is clearly undermined by the subsequent narrative and cinematography.<sup>21</sup> His service extends to the presentation of intimate acts ('I'll even shoot you pissing or making love'), in an attempt to present himself as a disinterested conduit. However, his admissions expose the extent to which this watching is linked to sexuality and desire.

The videographer's quest for control through the creation of images is stressed in his treatment of Mei Mei. The videographer's camera is an extension of his desiring gaze, through which he objectifies and re-produces Mei Mei for his control on tape. For example, the first time Mei Mei is seen, it is with her back to the camera, getting ready to perform. She is shot through the dividing curtains to her dressing room, giving the impression that she is on stage. That is, from the start, both in her work and to the videographer, she is an object on display. Her representation through the curtain calls attention to the fact that her appearance is literally a 'curtain raiser' to the story that the

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<sup>21</sup> For example, when he firsts visits the Happy Tavern, the shots of the owner attempting to place a veil of dignity over his request for footage of the scantily dressed Mei Mei are cut together. These speeded up frames highlight the owner's embarrassment, and specifically place it in comparison to the narrator's studied masculine nonchalance.



videographer will relate. The scene also conveys that Mei Mei is very much 'to-be-looked-at', in Mulvey's critical terms (1987: 67). Mulvey's psychoanalytic criticism of the way that gender operates through control of the gaze has been criticised and modified since its initial appearance on account of its assumption of solely heterosexual spectatorship and the lack of agency that she accords to women on screen and in the cinema audience.<sup>22</sup> Although previous critiques of Chinese cinema have provided examples that challenge this system of male-dominated spectatorship (see, for example, Chow 1995, Cui 2003), I contend that Lou Ye's film reinforces a male position as a desiring, heterosexual spectator. There is not a single shot from a female point of view in the film. When the scene is not being perceived through the 'camera' of the videographer, the story is interpreted through the experiences of Mardar.

The first impression of Mei Mei shows her performing, swimming in the tank in the Happy Tavern. As with other aspects of his character, it is with this image of a seductive myth that the videographer falls in love. Mulvey argues that women in classic Hollywood cinema are often presented as 'show girls' in order to alleviate tension between the audience's gaze and the spectatorship of the male protagonists (1987: 62). The mirror with Hollywood-style lights around its frame links Mei Mei to a female tradition of performance. So that Mei Mei will not 'freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation' (ibid), her very desirability is presented as a key aspect in the videographer's story. For example, he admits that he 'just liked to look at her, and video her': her physical presence serves to allay his anxiety. The videographer admits that he has to *see* Mei Mei in order to feel secure, and is worried every time that she leaves him. In his video library, Mei Mei is an artefact. She is firstly distanced from us on account of her presentation on a tape. Secondly, we are watching this tape through the videographer's perspective. Finally, the tape itself is presented to us through Lou Ye's own camera.

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<sup>22</sup> Mulvey's assessment that male protagonists are bearers of a desiring gaze that objectifies female characters into a state of 'to-be-looked-at-ness' has been critiqued by Steve Neale (1993), Evans and Gamman (1995).

As Krutnik observes of American *film noir* thrillers, 'the problematic representation of women... is intricately bound up with - indeed, is precisely dependent upon - the representation of problems within and between men' (1991: 112). In *Suzhou River*, Mei Mei's character does not expand from an intriguing focus for one of the narrator's films until she comes into contact with Mardar. Mardar first sets eyes on Mei Mei in exactly the same way as the videographer had done. In a repeated shot, she is perceived through the 'eye' that is the camera (although this time the eye belongs to Mardar) through her dressing room curtains. Again, this view represents another 'opening' of an act in the narrative. This point-of-view shot firmly positions Mei Mei as an object of Mardar's desiring gaze, just as she is subject to the videographer's camera. She is an *aide memoir* through whom Mardar can redeem the misdemeanours of his past. The shot also positions Mardar as the bearer of a gaze, which implies power over the object of his desire (Ellis 1982: 45). In an extended sequence, Mei Mei is seen to undress and put on her mermaid costume, and Mardar lingers on this unintended performance. This prolonged act of voyeurism draws unintentional attention to Mei Mei's status as an object to be viewed by the cinema audience. When Mei Mei steps out of her dressing room, Mardar walks into the makeshift room, transgressing her space, stepping beyond the screen represented by the curtains. His trespassing represents the extent to which his narrative will come to affect Mei Mei's life. Unlike the videographer, who perceives her through the screen of the camera lens, Mardar's relationship with Mei Mei will be more direct.

After her initial *sang froid*, Mei Mei becomes caught up in the details of Mardar's romantic story (she does not question or disapprove of the fact that Mardar has kidnapped his own lover), and becomes his confessional. Mei Mei is firmly positioned as a receiver of male fables; that is, just as she is the passive recipient of the videographer's cinematic gaze, she is a compliant audience to Mardar's verbal image-making. While Mardar verbally exposes his role in the kidnapping to Mei Mei, she gradually exposes her *body*, until she lifts her skirt as evidence of her temporary rose tattoo. This role heightens, to the extent that she begins to transform herself into Moudan, placing the stencilled tattoo further and further up her thigh for Mardar to inspect; that is, she consciously makes herself look 'like a little girl.' Just as Jimmy Stewart's Scottie in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*

(1958) transforms Judy into the image of his mysterious dead lover 'Madeline', Mei Mei's image begins to blur with that of the alluring ingénue Moudan.<sup>23</sup> However, where Scottie takes the initiative in formulating an ideal female image in *Vertigo*, in *Suzhou River* Mei Mei obligingly transforms herself. Mei Mei does not have to be prompted to act in complicity with a male fantasy. When the narrator tells her that Mardar and Moudan have been dredged from the bottom of the river, her first reaction is stunned silence, and she confesses to him that 'I thought it was me he wanted.' Mei Mei has fallen in love with a love story.

Mei Mei's disbelief is understandable, since she and Moudan are almost interchangeable. In fact, the actress, Zhou Xun, portrays both women. The confusion between the two characters, from the perspectives of Mei Mei herself, Mardar and the audience, serves to interrupt the narcissism of the videographer, problematising his narrative search for a coherent masculinity. The audience is encouraged to make visual connections between the two women. With hindsight, a shot of Mei Mei walking to work, her hair in pigtails and a backpack on her shoulders, is closely followed by a similarly dressed Moudan. However, Lou Ye does not provide the expected consequence to his tale: Moudan and Mei Mei are intra-digetically completely different women. Lou Ye goes so far as to represent Mei Mei and Moudan (as a partially seen body by the riverside) in the same frame to reinforce the truth of Mardar's story. In *Suzhou River*, women do not have the power to question masculinity or pose a threat to it, as in the devices of traditional film noir (Krutnik 1991: 95). The questions over the identities of Mei Mei and Moudan are

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<sup>23</sup> Lou Ye's film has been described as a homage to the film noir devices used by Hitchcock in *Vertigo*, although the director denies having seen the film at the point that he was making *Suzhou River* (Andrew Chan <http://www.filmwritten.org/reviews/2000/capsules/suzhouriver.html>, accessed 20/09/03). Nevertheless, there are numerous similarities. The story hinges on the identity of two female protagonists, played by the same actress (as Kim Novak played 'Madeline' and Judy in Hitchcock's film), the plot centres upon a 'suicidal' leap (from a bridge instead of a church tower) and Mardar (like Scottie) searches for his one true love, and fixes on a look-a-like. However, where Scottie in *Vertigo* finds that the two women he has fallen in love with are, in fact, one and the same, the twist in Lou Ye's tale is that Moudan and Mei Mei are separate individuals. These differences will be discussed briefly in the following section. The reporting of similarities between *Vertigo* and *Suzhou River* may be on account of the iconic impact of Hitchcock's film on a number of later productions, from Kieslowski's *La Double Vie de Veronique* (*The Double Life of Veronique*, 1991) to Verhoeven's *Basic Instinct* (1992) and Marker's *La Jetée* (1962).

extended to the male characters in the narrative. Mei Mei is seen sleeping next to a man, who has short black hair. Since he is sleeping with the back of head to the camera, his identity is indeterminate. Is the man the videographer or Mardar? As she stares at the ceiling, her question ('Am I the girl you are looking for?') could be directed to either man. Indeed, she could also be either girl.

## **ii) Women as children: Moudan**

Moudan takes control of her own narrative by turning her betrayal into legend. However, this assertiveness is undercut by her presentation in childlike terms. Moudan is first seen skipping down the street. The gift of a doll from Mardar further infantilises her. While the blonde-haired mermaid doll is a mental catalyst for her future promise to Mardar on the bridge, it may also be a Disney 'Little Mermaid' doll. This American toy does not only comment upon the commercial side of such legends (and so tarnishes them), but it is also now firmly a child's toy. Mardar imagines Moudan, sitting in the bathroom, soaking her feet, playing with this doll whilst painting her nails. She sits in her underwear and a short top, both playing innocently and subversively sexualised - she is, after all, a girl who has to be sent to her aunt's apartment to be 'baby sat.'

In her imprisonment, Mardar draws clear lines of power and control between himself and Moudan. She is minimised by high angled shots, while Mardar stares down at her from the top of a high ladder, like a swimming pool lifeguard (a similarity that may or may not be intentional). Moudan has not only lost her physical freedom to Mardar, but also her moral dignity. She is forced to use the roof as a toilet, and Mardar watches her as she pulls down her trousers and urinates, a shot-reverse-shot highlighting this act of enforced intimacy, souring their previous closeness. Whereas the male gaze has previously symbolised power, or desire, it now signals oppression and humiliation. However, Moudan is at least strong enough to return Mardar's gaze.

## **d) Solitary masculinity: the videographer's rejection of relationships**

In *Suzhou River*, the videographer maintains a firm control over the narrative. Essentially, the film is about making and mastering verbal and visual images. The videographer's

power (that is, his masculinity) stems from his editorial authority over other people's images and stories. As long as he is the conduit between his characters and the audience, he holds power over our freedom of imagination and creates a veil under which he need not reveal his own identity. This section argues that the videographer rejects relationships and romance in order to assert the control over reality upon which his gender identity is based. This control manifests itself in his role as narrator, which he can only perform if he does not see himself as part of a story; that is, he cannot submit himself to close relationships with others, since he would reduce himself to being a passive character in somebody else's narrative. Therefore, the videographer pours scorn on romantic narratives, which (he infers by the denouement of his tale) can only work in fiction. However, against this desire to manage narratives, the instability of modern life undermines any sense of a stable masculinity, and indicates that the videographer's desire for control will be a victim to the schizophrenic cityscape of Shanghai.

#### **i) The solitary narrator**

The videographer's role as narrator gives him power over interpretation and creation since he voices characters and situations into being. In contrast, his vulnerability is exposed when Mei Mei writes herself into Mardar's narrative. When Mardar begins his confession to her, the role of storyteller passes away from the videographer. In response to the hold that Mardar's life story has upon Mei Mei, the videographer decides to have Mardar attacked. In fact, Mei Mei has become property for both men through their storytelling. The videographer grates at Mardar's 'gracious' gesture of 'giving Mei Mei back' once he has finished his confessions to her, revealing women's status as the property of male narrators. The knife is twisted further when Mardar confesses that he knows Mei Mei's feelings, challenging the videographer's previous monopoly on knowledge. In *Suzhou River*, male visual and oral narratives escalate to control female lives.

Mei Mei and the videographer resume their relationship after Mardar's death. Notably, the videographer marks the occasion by watching old videos of Mei Mei that he made in happier times. A shot of Mei Mei dressing and leaving her houseboat is repeated in order

to suggest a return to the original state of mind that sustained their relationship. Mei Mei leaves, however, with an open invitation for the narrator to follow a romantic quest in order to find her. That is, instead of telling others' stories, she wishes him to formulate his own in order that she may fall in love with it. However, he weighs up his options and decides against it:

'I could run after her, look for her like Mardar. I could go back to the balcony and wait for her to appear on the bridge with her hands crossed, and then this love story of mine might go on. But I won't because nothing lasts forever. So I'll just take another drink and close my eyes and wait for the next story to start.'

The videographer makes a conscious decision to terminate his own love story in order to hold onto his position of power as interpreter. If he were to follow Mei Mei and continue their relationship, he would merely be an imitator of Mardar's story, instead of the innovator whom he wishes to be. While critics have read *Suzhou River* as a Shanghai remake of Hitchcock's *Vertigo*<sup>24</sup>, the fragility of Scottie's masculinity (represented by his role as protector of the mysterious Madeline) and Hitchcock's visualisation of manic obsession is absent from Lou Ye's film, which does not consciously problematise (or psychoanalyse) male gender identity.

## ii) Undermining male narratives

*Suzhou River* takes place with the backdrop of Shanghai playing an essential part in the narrative. The rhythms and swell of the river are symbolic of the movement of the videographer's tale. The first visuals of the film constitute hand held camera footage of the sights of the Suzhou River running through Shanghai. The shaky images create a sense of instability, which is intensified by means of our narrator's laid-back voice-over. The videographer associates Shanghai life with transience on account of the multiple dramas he perceives playing themselves out in the city. Buildings are in the process of being either constructed or torn down, a reminder of a city in which both the environment

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<sup>24</sup> For example, Chan (<http://www.filmwritten.org/reviews/2000/capsules/suzhouriver.html>, accessed 20/09/03), Monder (<http://www.filmjournal.com/Article.cfm/PageID/65102693>, accessed 20/09/03) and Francke (2000:38), all point to *Vertigo* references in the film.

and identities are in a period of transition. Mardar spends his days on his motorcycle and Mei Mei lives on a houseboat - even homes are not stable and set. He defines his masculine identity in terms of this impermanence, against which he creates his own small bits of indelible history in terms of his videotapes. However, he is all too aware that footage can be erased, as quickly as love stories are forgotten.

**4: *Men and Women (Nannan nünü)*, dir. Liu Bingjian, 1999**

Liu Bingjian was born in October 1963 in Anhui. After graduating from the Beijing film Academy, he made a full-length film, *Inkstone (Yanchuang, 1996)*, the first Chinese film to be bought by the United States since the establishment of the People's Republic, although the Chinese authorities forbade public showings. *Men and Women* was filmed independently in only a week, with non-professional actors (Cornelius & Searl, 2000: 29). The film has enjoyed festival success, winning the FIPRESCI award at Locarno in 1999 (Cui 2002: 13). However, perhaps unsurprisingly, *Men and Women* was also banned. His latest film, *Cry Woman (Kuqi de nüren)* was released in 2002.

This section examines *Men and Women* in terms of its presentation of homosexual and heterosexual relationships. Although the lead character, Xiao Bo, is tacitly assumed to be gay, his sexuality is never explicitly revealed. This indeterminacy reflects the theme of impermanence inside the film at large, inside which very little is settled and few relationships seem to last. Firstly, Xiao Bo's position inside his two substitute families will be analysed. Although we gain few insights into his character, his physical presence and malleable gender identity / masculinity impact upon the relationships that he encounters. Through his involvement, a sterile heterosexual relationship will be broken apart when a wife leaves her husband for another woman, and a homosexual partnership will be dissolved when the boyish, attractive Xiao Bo becomes impossible to resist for one member of the couple. Secondly, this section will analyse the manner in which Xiao Bo's representation as a sexual object subverts traditional politics of spectatorship. Thirdly, the implications of the homosexual masculinities that are represented inside Liu's film will be examined. The couple, Chong Chong and Gui Gui, represent the underground gay scene in Beijing. Their magazine and radio show bring together a

disparate cottaging community. However, how are these homosexual masculinities expressed? How does the young and attractive Xiao Bo fit into a homosexual relationship? And how does Liu Bingjian represent the little-represented, and what implications follow from this portrait of a marginal male community? Finally, for a film dealing with sexuality, desire and their implications, sex itself is a destructive force in *Men and Women*. This section will conclude with an examination of the manner in which sex is portrayed, and analyse the representation of a sexless marriage, in which a husband attempts to rape his young male houseguest.

*Men and Women* begins when its main male protagonist, Xiao Bo, walks into a small clothes boutique in a busy shopping district of Beijing looking for his contact in the city and a job. Although his connections let him down, in that he never finds the mysterious Mr Li for whom he is looking, the owner of the boutique, Qing (a smart woman in her thirties) gives him a job and a spare room in her tiny apartment, which she shares with her husband, Kang. Qing takes her new charge under her wing, and eventually arranges a blind date for him with her best friend, Ah Meng. However, Ah Meng tells Qing that she suspects that Xiao Bo may be gay. Qing confides her worries about Xiao Bo's sexuality to her husband, who tells her not to worry unduly. Nevertheless, when Xiao Bo is alone in the house with Kang, Kang attempts to rape him, only to insult Xiao Bo when the young man proves able to defend himself.

As a result of Kang's advances, Xiao Bo leaves Qing's apartment and walks out on his job. Bereft of a place to stay, he calls Chong Chong, a new friend who publishes a magazine called 'Lavatory Literature' that collects lavatory graffiti and 'fables' and, presumably (though left unsaid), is a lifeline for the cottaging community of Beijing's gay scene. Unknown to Xiao Bo, he lives with Gui Gui, his partner who records a programme called 'Lavatory Time', the audio equivalent to Chong Chong's magazine. However, the arrival of the good-looking Xiao Bo puts a strain on the relationship between the pair, and leads Gui Gui to walk out when he discovers Chong Chong's indiscreet infidelity with their houseguest. Meanwhile, Qing's relationship with Ah Meng deepens, until Qing announces to her husband that she is leaving him for her friend. As a



final gesture, Gui Gui delivers his final edition of 'Lavatory Time' into Chong Chong's answer phone, and declares his intention to leave Beijing.

#### **a) Xiao Bo's two families**

On the surface, the young Xiao Bo is an obvious main protagonist. He is attractive and young, with chiselled features and a civil manner. However, this surface beauty and amiability does not so much serve to define his role in the dramas to come, but obscures it. Essentially, Xiao Bo is all things to all men (and women). He is in possession of a malleable masculinity that serves to impact upon the various relationships that he encounters. For example, he first appears in Qing's shop as a shy young man. He enters almost unnoticed, appearing at the side of the frame with arms crossed, shifting repeatedly from foot to foot. Xiao Bo appears to be a typical country bumpkin lost in a threatening and anonymous city. In this sense, then, he is not only to be taken advantage of in a physical and sexual way, but his sexual indeterminacy is also accompanied by economic marginality, further displacing his personality from importance (although the physical fact of his presence is central to the denouement of the plot). The contradictory nature of Xiao Bo's (non) presence is further emphasised by the narrative links that he makes possible. His status as a connecting circuit is made clear when he simply falls into situations - past histories and motives need not be explained. Xiao Bo miraculously stumbles upon a steady job in which he is trusted (no mean feat for an unknown from the country: city prejudice towards migrant workers is conspicuous by its absence in this film) and lands a nice room in a clean flat in which he is waited upon hand and foot. Xiao Bo's ambiguous role in the narrative allows him to fit into two substitute families: - one heterosexual and one homosexual.

Qing runs a fairly successful business in downtown Beijing. She is a member of a new generation of female entrepreneurs, making her way in a business world previously dominated by men. Nonetheless, when she brings Xiao Bo home, her need for something outside her job and immediate home circumstances is revealed. Kang and Qing are a rarity for a middle-aged couple in that they are childless, leaving a gap that Xiao Bo is flexible enough to fit into. Berry points out that East Asian cinematic representations of

homosexualities often focus on finding a place for a gay protagonist inside a family setting, whereas homosexual characters in Western film are blatantly excluded from, or operate without, such domestic structure (1996: 172). Notably, Xiao Bo's actual parents are not featured (since he is emotionally and geographically far from home), but he spends the film fitting into alternative families.

As soon as Xiao Bo enters her home, Qing selects a towel for him, insists on making his bed and tells him which toiletries to use. Moreover, Xiao Bo's new room is clearly meant for a child in the original plan of the apartment block; Xiao Bo even has a kite on his wall. The presence of Xiao Bo allows Qing to play a mothering role that she previously has not had the opportunity to act. She even assumes the role of a mother in Xiao Bo's love life. Much as a parent would, she attempts to find a suitable match for her substitute son. Unconsciously, Qing indicates the parameters of their relationship through her order to Xiao Bo that he should accompany her out to dinner: - 'Xiao Bo, I'll bring you to meet a friend of mine tonight.' Qing is the active partner in the mother / child relationship, whilst Xiao Bo is passive, the recipient of Qing's attentions and object to her wishes.<sup>25</sup> The French title of the film, *Le Protégé de Mme Qing*, perhaps more accurately conveys the nature of Qing and Xiao Bo's relationship. That is to say, Xiao Bo is Qing's protégé, her 'didi'<sup>26</sup>, whom she nurtures and protects. Qing also reacts like a worried parent when faced with Ah Meng's shock revelation about Xiao Bo's presumed homosexuality. Despite Kang's attempts to silence her, Qing contemplates the future with a 'gay' member of the 'family': 'It's going to be very hard, him being like this.'

When Xiao Bo is in trouble, he turns to Chong Chong, and joins his second family of the narrative. Xiao Bo and Chong Chong first meet in an anonymous public lavatory, where Chong Chong courteously hands Xiao Bo his business card, whilst making careful notes of the graffiti on the walls. However, this mysterious editor is the first person to whom the destitute Xiao Bo, out of a job and a substitute family, runs for help. On the

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<sup>25</sup> Earlier, Qing bestows Xiao Bo's job upon him in much the same tone: - 'You can work for me here then.'

<sup>26</sup> *Didi* means 'younger brother'. Qing uses this title to address Xiao Bo throughout the film. To Xiao Bo, Qing herself is addressed as 'older sister' ('jie'), and Kang is an 'older brother' ('ge').

telephone, Xiao Bo sheepishly announces, 'It's me, Xiao Bo', suggesting that the pair have a previous connection. Did the pair meet after Chong Chong handed out his card? Did Xiao Bo, the geographical and sexual tourist, decide to take an interest in Chong Chong beyond literary matters? When Xiao Bo finally arrives at Chong Chong's tiny apartment, Chong Chong reassures his friend that 'the folding bed is still there', confirming their acquaintance, and maybe a possible flirtation. Xiao Bo's naivety is revealed when a confused Gui Gui enters, after which Xiao Bo asks, with unguarded hostility, 'what's *he* doing here?' Once more, Xiao Bo has wandered into another narrative, which has occurred behind our backs. Such secrecy may be in sympathy with the lives of Gui Gui and Chong Chong, and the community which their journalistic activities suggest; connections are made and friendships forged away from a dominant heterosexual narrative.

Xiao Bo's relationship with Chong Chong shares characteristics with that of his bond with Qing:- in both narrative strands, his presence is random and unexplained (yet is a catalyst to upheavals in the protagonists' relationships). However, the similarities with Xiao Bo's earlier friendship with Qing go beyond Xiao Bo's role as a narrative link. For example, Xiao Bo is looked after by Chong Chong (and reluctantly by Gui Gui). On his way to deliver issues of 'Lavatory Literature' in local bars, Chong Chong puts Xiao Bo on a bus. Xiao Bo is, literally, a lost paper boy who is being sent off on his round. Xiao Bo's childlike qualities are reinforced when he is asked what sort of food he would like to eat one evening. When given a choice of restaurant, he answers that he wants to eat at McDonalds. His choice may be understandable for a young migrant new to the city and its cosmopolitan (Western) taste of an affluent lifestyle, but he also chooses the place where parents take their indulged offspring for a weekend treat. Chong Chong's actions towards Xiao Bo are consistently protective. He takes off his guest's coat tenderly as he returns from his 'paper-round', he tucks him up in bed at night, and kisses him. However, this kiss is not merely substitute 'paternal' affection, it is also sexual, as Chong Chong reveals when he revisits Xiao Bo's bed the following night.

### **b) Xiao Bo as object of desire**

When Chong Chong next walks in on his sleeping houseguest, he is naked. He climbs into bed and begins to kiss Xiao Bo passionately. Is this sexual experience (implied but unshown) an affirmation of Xiao Bo's previously ambiguous sexuality? However, this 'coming out' experience has serious (and destructive) ramifications for Chong Chong's relationship with Gui Gui. Just as Kang assumes Xiao Bo's passivity, Chong Chong takes it for granted that Xiao Bo is sexually available. Once more, Xiao Bo has affected another relationship. Chong Chong's indiscreet infidelity has sent Gui Gui noisily packing his bags, revealing Chong Chong's naïve idea of the boundaries of their partnership. As Chong Chong hears Gui Gui's recorded voice on the answering machine, Xiao Bo is nowhere to be seen. While Chong Chong realises the consequences of his actions, it is as though Xiao Bo's role is over, having propelled another narrative into crisis. Any details of a future for Chong Chong and Xiao Bo are left to speculation. In Chong Chong's cowardly refusal to answer his telephone, he hands Gui Gui the power to deliver the couple's epitaph.

Xiao Bo's position as an object upon which the desires of the other protagonists may be projected is foregrounded in an earlier sequence. When he first arrives at Qing's apartment, he takes a shower. However, instead of stopping at the door, the camera lingers as Xiao Bo undresses and puts his head under the water, and the bathroom mirror lends us an alternative view of his face. A cut to Qing chopping vegetables is short lived, as we once more return to the bathroom while Xiao Bo shampoos his hair. Such a focus not only (literally and metaphorically) exposes Xiao Bo as sexual object, but also highlights his vulnerability and corporeality: he is a blank canvas upon which the protagonists may project their gaze. His malleability is extended out of the digesis in order that (in Mulvey's critical terms) his 'to-be-looked-at-ness' may be emphasised further. Steve Neale offers a counterpoint to Mulvey's influential arguments, since he observes that men in Hollywood cinema may rather be the ones 'to be looked at' by male spectators, although the success of mainstream cinema depends on this same sex desire being displaced / masked (1993: 19). In Liu's film, this homo (and, indeed, hetero) sexual looking (both inside and outside the digesis) is not concealed. Xiao Bo's objectification

puts categories of gendered gaze into doubt by displacing 'conventional' politics of looking. In comparison, we see relatively little of the female body during the film. Qing does not reveal herself to us to the same extent, and undresses under her bedcover in the shadows. In *Men and Women*, men (Xiao Bo in particular) are placed firmly as objects of sexual desire.

### c) Representing a gay community

*Men and Women* shares with Zhang Yuan's *East Palace, West Palace* (*Donggong xigong* 1996) the rare distinction of presenting openly gay male Mainland Chinese protagonists. Chong Chong and Gui Gui are clearly in a relationship, and Chong Chong's magazine links together its subscribers into a porous community. However, how are Chong Chong and Gui Gui presented in terms of a 'gay masculinity'? Is Xiao Bo represented differently once he joins Chong Chong's household? Does Liu's portrayal of a section of the gay community work to banish stereotypes, sidestep them, or create new ones?

Firstly, Xiao Bo's sexuality is never made explicit. To the end of the film, Xiao Bo never makes an open statement concerning his sexuality, and the only discussion of the topic is carried out by Ah Meng and Qing. It is almost as though Xiao Bo's sexuality is speculated into existence by Ah Meng's observations - if Xiao Bo shows no interest in her (and is not even attracted to Gong Li, the famous Chinese actress) he *has* to be gay. From this remark, Qing's reactions to Xiao Bo visibly change. In a comic scene, perhaps poking fun at the stereotypes of 'feminisation' that are placed on homosexual men, Qing eyes Xiao Bo quizzically, as he rearranges a mannequin in the window of the shop, as though seeing him for the first time. Qing's scrutiny confirms what she has decided already - Xiao Bo (who works in a clothes store on her own initiative) is showing an 'unhealthy' interest in fashion, and any heterosexual masculinity that Qing has formulated for Xiao Bo is compromised. For Qing, Xiao Bo's actions are transformed into a *performance* of what she represents as *typical* gay identity.

Nonetheless, Liu is careful not to present Xiao Bo in terms of a series of camp stereotypes. Xiao Bo accompanies Kang on a mission to extract money from Yang, a

recalcitrant debtor, and he does not hesitate to join his 'elder brother' in using his fists to persuade Yang to honour his debt. Later, Qing questions Xiao Bo, and he admits that he has been boxing since he was a child. While the press-ups that Xiao Bo performs before bed arouse Kang, they also modify his masculinity, in that they are a symbol of bodily strength and negate stereotypes of 'weak' or 'unmanly' homosexual men; that is, Xiao Bo fails to perform the new (imagined) role expected of him, he fails to 'conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined' (Butler 1999: 23).

In part, Xiao Bo seems to resemble what Richard Dyer has described as the 'sad young man' in the context of novels of the 1950s and 1960s. Like Xiao Bo, these melancholy protagonists served in representing urbanism as a process of alienation (Dyer 1995: 77). He is the vehicle for the anxieties of a society in the process of social, cultural and moral transformation. Xiao Bo's youth and vulnerability (like Dyer's 'sad young man') contributes to his sexual and sympathetic appeal, both inside and outside the plot. That Liu places this responsibility for representing the concerns of an uncertain community (in a sexual sense and in the context of increasing abandonment of old social priorities) on such a sexually ambiguous figure as Xiao Bo is significant. If Xiao Bo does represent a homosexual life, this choice demonstrates how far representations of masculinities and male desires have come from the worker, peasant, soldier tropes of the past.

However, the formulation of the characters of Chong Chong and Gui Gui seems to reinforce many stereotypes that Liu seems to have been busy dismantling through the character of Xiao Bo. For example, Gui Gui is a loveable queen / diva figure, whose 'femininity' is repeatedly inferred. He does not seek to conceal his sexuality, but takes delight in the possibilities that it offers, as he deliberately collides with a then unknown Xiao Bo on a Beijing street. Walking away, he swings his hips and holds out his hands, in a gesture intimating young Xiao Bo's attractive appearance. Gui Gui has a soft, cultivated voice. His recording of his 'broadcast' at the beginning of the film could almost be taken for an everyday public service announcement, read by a suitably well-heeled female presenter.

Chong Chong also appears to reinforce stereotypes. His promiscuity inside his relationship with Gui Gui only acts out popular myths about gay sexuality. Moreover, if Gui Gui performs a 'feminine' role within the relationship, Chong Chong expresses a more masculine persona. Chong Chong is in charge within the flat, and takes an active, outside role in promoting his magazine, whilst Gui Gui stays within the home and performs his radio broadcasts. Chong Chong, despite his later infidelity, is also portrayed as the 'reasonable' partner in the relationship, whilst Gui Gui reacts to situations in a more emotional, stereotypically 'feminine' way. However, Chong Chong also has something of a 'camp' persona. For example, he teaches the gauche Xiao Bo to ballroom dance. Chong Chong's counting of steps immediately calls to mind an earlier scene where Xiao Bo counts his press-ups before Kang attempts to rape him. The insinuation is that Xiao Bo's malleable masculinity has, once more, been modified.

If Liu colludes with accepted notions of homosexuality, he may do so to mask the subversiveness of the appearance of gay men in a Mainland film. Since representations employ 'the codes and conventions of the available cultural forms of presentation' (Dyer 1995: 2), the lack of representations of male homosexuality in recent times may impact on the types that Liu chooses to be embodied on screen. Lim also comments on the pitfalls of the critical disparagement of 'negative' representations of homosexualities, couched as they are in the dichotomies and assumptions that many critics apparently sensitive to issues of sexuality and identity seek to avoid (2002: 61). That is, while Chong Chong and Gui Gui express 'effeminate' traits that may be perceived as 'negative' in one cultural milieu, these expressions may not have the same connotations in the Beijing gay underground scene that Liu Bingjian portrays.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> The comments of Cui Zi'en (the screenwriter of and a protagonist in *Men and Women*) and Ye Guangwei (a worker at an advice centre for Beijing homosexuals) suggest that effeminacy and a 'feminine' persona are often equated with homosexuality on the Mainland. Considering prejudice from the heterosexual majority, Cui comments that 'I can understand a heterosexual being startled at seeing a very effeminate man', while Ye states that 'a man who isn't masculine is disdained. And for him to take on a female role during a sexual act is unthinkable and a disgrace in people's eyes.' Interviews from [http://www.unesco.org/courier/2001\\_07/uk/doss24.htm](http://www.unesco.org/courier/2001_07/uk/doss24.htm), accessed 22/09/03.

Indeed, overall it is difficult to label Chong Chong and Gui Gui in terms of 'conventional' heterosexual gender roles. The ambiguities that Liu Bingjian's main protagonists articulate is part of a deliberate project to dismantle preconceptions surrounding the expression of sexualities.<sup>28</sup> If Chong Chong and Gui Gui have traits that are perceived to be effeminate it may simply be one expression among many homosexual masculinities rather than a negative comment on their characters or a clue to their 'essential selves'. For example, when Gui Gui noisily walks out on Chong Chong, he does so not because he is a temperamental 'queen', but because his partner has cheated on him and assumed his passivity. If Chong Chong has slept with Xiao Bo, this promiscuity is not linked with his sexuality, but with the fact that he is the type of man who finds it easy to be unfaithful.

In freeing character traits from the common determinant of sexuality, *Men and Women* works to dismantle expectations centring on homosexual masculinities. Whether or not *Men and Women* is a 'gay film'<sup>29</sup>, the representation of homosexual characters on screen can often be linked with a perceived responsibility to create positive images, or to respond to a cultural / political agenda (Hanson 1999: 11). Richard Dyer discusses the role of stereotypes and types used in representation in *The Matter of Images* (1995). Dyer makes the distinction between stereotypes (which critique those outside a particular society) and social types (groups inside a society) (ibid: 15). Liu presents a series of social types, which present multiple narrative possibilities, and which make visible the homosexuality that has previously been designated invisible in recent Chinese cinematic history. He creates a liberal environment in which male homosexuality can be acknowledged in everyday discourse. The possibility of homosexuality is discussed as an option by Qing and Ah Meng. It is implied that homosexuality per se is not a problem, but rather that the possibility of Xiao Bo, the substitute son, actually being gay may cause concrete problems for the 'family' in the future. A gay community is implied to be

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<sup>28</sup> Liu Bingjian states that 'people have an increasingly fluid conception of sexual roles. My film is an independent look at this issue. In *Nannan nünü*, the casting doesn't conform to the usual sexual distinctions; the characters' sexual identities are undefined, unstable, changeable.' Cited in <http://www.pardo.ch/1999/htm/press/art/filmSUR/eng.htm>, accessed 24/09/03.

<sup>29</sup> Lim discusses the implications of such labels for representations of homosexualities in the Chinese context (Lim 2002, 81-85).



visible. The magazine clearly sells, Gui Gui reads out personal ads on his broadcasts, and Chong Chong meets with a transsexual who is a regular contributor to his journal, the first of its kind in Beijing. However, this 'community' beyond Chong Chong and Gui Gui is largely unseen, perhaps commenting upon its condemnation by the state. Gui Gui hints on several occasions about official derision to his way of life ('the political climate is always changeable'). In fact, he is the only character to refer to events and influences outside the immediate denouement of the plot. The ironic title of his 'radio station' is comically juxtaposed with its subject matter ('International Red Star radio station...wish you a smooth defecation.') However, he is also aware of the limits imposed by the same authorities that he ridicules. Nonetheless, at the conclusion of the film, he sends to Chong Chong a private affirmation of the homosexual community that his radio broadcasts have attempted to coalesce.

#### **d) *Men and Women and sex***

The heterosexual relationship between Qing and Kang is the weakest partnership in the film. The couple share a sterile life, in which each acts out their expected obligations towards one another. Kang is non-expressive, and is the least likeable (and least physically attractive) of the characters. However, he does what is expected of a good husband and appears to have fixed ideas about appropriate gender roles. He beats moneylender Yang because he has tried to 'cheat a woman', for example. Nevertheless, the obligations that he requires of Qing remain unfulfilled - the couple have a non-existent sex life, with Qing viewing sex with Kang as a 'bother'. In this platonic relationship, Kang seeks fulfilment by attempting to rape Xiao Bo. Kang appears to have shown no previous homosexual behaviour. However, with hindsight, his desire for Xiao Bo may have a precedent. After Xiao Bo's initial, disastrous date with Ah Meng, Kang takes Xiao Bo along with him to play pool. On the way out of the pool hall, Kang decides to go to the lavatory, and Xiao Bo briskly follows him in. Do the pair exchange looks as they stand at the urinal? In the context of the film, lavatories are not merely amenities, but meeting places for the gay community, where connections are forged and previously unsaid meanings articulated. Xiao Bo's (mundane) conversation with Kang prequels the manner in which homosocial ties between men (formed in the competition involved in

the pool game) can extend into the homoerotic and how supposedly neutral spaces can be transformed into sites for the expression of subversive desires.

Kang's rape attempt is prefigured by his desiring looks as Xiao Bo performs his press-ups. When Xiao Bo declares that it is too hot, he takes off his shirt. The camera responds to Kang's gaze and rests on Xiao Bo's body, although Kang is still seen within the frame. Kang visibly fidgets, and does not only watch Xiao Bo, but also physically looks him up and down. Kang *thinks* about his desire for Xiao Bo, and considers before he grabs the young man and forces him down on the bed. However, he does not reckon on Xiao Bo's strength. As he is pushed away, Kang feels betrayed when Xiao Bo does not act out his fantasies of a gay sexuality. In his aggressive reaction after he has been rejected, Kang gives voice to conventional views of homosexuality as somehow separate to masculinity, which he claims to embody: 'You stink, *looking like a man.*' As Kang's explanations quickly turn to hostility ('I just wanted to try something new...What a shame for men'), he reveals the sexual curiosity inside his own, uninspiring relationship.

When Xiao Bo steps out of his role of compliance, Kang feels that he has to defend his own masculinity. On account of Xiao Bo's status in the household, this attack is arguably virtual incest, with a father-figure taking advantage of his subordinate substitute son. However, Kang is not only hostile, he is also *afraid*. Xiao Bo threatens to kill him if he repeats his accusations, and Kang cowers behind the wall, as he demands a coat back in a final attempt to salvage some face. While Kang has decided that he will act out a masculine role, Xiao Bo's reaction has confirmed that he is unwilling to act as a compliant 'female' / androgynous figure. Xiao Bo is a *man*, and Kang's certainties about gender roles, particularly his own, have been shattered. His tirade against the moral evils of homosexuality is an attempt to convince himself of the sexual boundaries that he once set. Through his protest, Xiao Bo has exposed the desires inside this apparently heterosexual relationship, and his ambiguous sexuality has thrown words like 'men' and 'women' into free-fall.

Whilst censorship limits what is shown on screen (although Liu must have hardly expected the state censors to embrace his second film), sex in the film is invariably destructive, even in the homosexual relationships towards which it is sympathetic. Although both 'Lavatory Literature' and 'Lavatory Time' undoubtedly address Beijing's cottaging scene (Gui Gui includes advertisements for men seeking well endowed partners in his programme), no overt cruising is shown, nor is the magazine revealed to concentrate on it. At the end of the film, Chong Chong's impulsive infidelity destroys his relationship with the sensitive (though well meaning) Gui Gui. In fact, the only relationship left at the end of the film is a lesbian one (between Qing and Ah Meng), although, again, the relationship develops away from our eyes.<sup>30</sup> In *Men and Women*, women seem to survive as a self-sufficient community. In contrast, men end up devastating their relationships, and seem on a path to self-destruction. Liu presents masculinities that are on the margins, fragmentary, and solitary.

**5: *Platform*, dir. Jia Zhangke, 2000.**

*Platform* (*Zhantai*, dir. Jia Zhangke, 2000) tells the story of a group of friends from the village of Fenyang, in Shanxi, in the eleven years following 1979. The film, set in Jia's own birthplace, is a conscious effort on the part of the director to convey the momentous cultural changes that shook his youth: 'We experienced a great deal in the past ten years, during which much has been secularised from the loss of revolutionary ideals to the coming of the consumer age'.<sup>31</sup> In fact, the film's title is taken from a popular song of the 1980s, featured repeatedly in the plot, that Jia links to the growing individual consciousness of youth in the early days of reform and to the constantly changing experiences that accompanied these new emotions.<sup>32</sup> Self-consciously situating himself within new currents in mainland filmmaking, Jia founded the Youth Experimental Film Group in 1995. Jia first received public attention for his film *Pickpocket* (*Xiao wu*) that followed his graduation from the Beijing Film Academy in 1997. *Platform* features Wang

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<sup>30</sup> However, in sympathy with the themes of *Men and Women*, the relationship does not begin auspiciously, since the taxi that is supposed to carry Qing away to her new life with Ah Meng breaks down, and the women are forced to get out and push.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Jia Zhangke, by Tony Rayns, Paris/London 2000. Taken from UK DVD release of *Platform*.

<sup>32</sup> 'Pop music subculture stimulated a wider awakening of individual consciousness' *ibid*.

Hongwei, the star of *Pickpocket*, but otherwise does not feature professional actors. His latest feature, *Unknown Pleasures* (*Ren xiaoyao*, 2002), is also set in Fenyang, completing what many see as a trilogy of films.

*Platform* centres upon a provincial cultural troupe as they adapt to the changing tastes of the reform era. Its story closes in on four friends, Cui Mingliang (a singer, guitar player and budding intellectual), Zhang Jun (the lover of all things modern as signified by south China), Zhong Ping (his girlfriend) and Yin Ruijuan (the daughter of the village police chief and 'love interest' of Mingliang). Among these four, Mingliang acts as the measure of social and cultural change and is the mediator through whom the narrative unravels. The story begins in 1979 as Fenyang Cultural Troupe performs 'Train heading for Shaoshan' to assembled villagers. With lines praising the 'bright sun' of Chairman Mao and the model community of Dazhai,<sup>33</sup> the play is the symbol of loyalty to the memory of the Communist past. The troupe continues to perform plays praising Maoist orthodoxy, until its chief, Mr Xu, suggests a change of direction into pop music after considering the surrounding political implications. In the private life of the troupe, Cui Mingliang and Yin Ruijuan are uncertainly circling each other. Ruijuan's father is worried about the harmful influence that Mingliang may exert, therefore they meet secretly. After a while, however, Yin Ruijuan decides that Mingliang does not represent a suitable match and the 'couple' part.

In line with the privatisation drive of the era, the troupe begins to consider their options as an independent venture. A member, Song, decides to raise the money and buys the rights to the group, becoming its new leader. Meanwhile, Zhong Ping discovers that she is pregnant, and despite a deal between Mr Xu and a local doctor to arrange a quick abortion, she decides that she will keep her baby. The group decides to leave Fenyang in 1984 on a short tour, leaving Yin Ruijuan behind with her ailing father. The group arrives at the village of Jinjiazhuang, the home of Cui's cousin Sanming. Sanming is illiterate and works in a low-paid, dangerous job at the local mine. His family members complain

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<sup>33</sup> Dazhai was a model commune reporting record grain yields that rose to prominence in the early 1960s. However, its successes were reported to be exaggerated and obtained by inflation of yields, denial of food shortages among Dazhai peasants, and underreporting of available land (Spence 1991: 594).

of the difficulties of getting by on Sanming's low wages while they have to support Sanming's sister, Wenyuan, in her high school studies. After a brief break (perhaps to have an abortion) Zhong Ping rejoins the group, and stays with Zhang Jun in the hope of privacy. However, they are discovered by local police officers, who send them away. Back in Fenyang, Zhong Ping has disappeared, much to the consternation of Zhang Jun, and Yin Ruijuan has graduated to an uninspiring job in the local police department.

On a second tour to Jia county, the troupe undergoes another facelift. In line with the craze for modern music and dancing, the group becomes the 'All Star Rock and Breakdance Electric Band', recruits two young female members, and claims to be from Shenzhen (the symbol of ultra modernity, and one of Deng's first Special Economic Zones). On returning to Fenyang, Cui finds that the town has also moved on. His father, Cui Wanlin, has moved out, living in his shop that he has opened by the highway. Yin Ruijuan is still living in Fenyang, however, and still working for the police. In the final scene, Mingliang is now settled into domesticity, slumped into a chair next to Yin Ruijuan as she plays with their child, the radio blaring out the news.

*Platform* is about the effects of the passage of time on relationships between lovers and friends. Not only does the progress of the years alter personal outlooks, but the changing access to and relationships with non-Communist culture in the confusing days of the early reform era also prompt the friends to perceive themselves as individuals to a greater extent than ever before. That is, just as the troupe is privatised from a form of cultural State Owned Enterprise, conceptions of the self are effectively privatised too. Jia measures the passing years almost entirely in terms of cultural change. There are references to the Four Modernisations, the rehabilitation of Liu Shaoqi and the thirty fifth anniversary of the People's Republic, but these political / historical events seem to serve only as a measure of the passing of physical, rather than emotional, time. The film is far from a political polemic, but an exploration of how time alters individuals and friendships, especially when different times seem to demand different personalities. Jia admits to not presenting the changes of the Deng era in a totally positive light, even

describing their negative effects upon human relationships among those who have been pushed aside in the period's often contradictory values.<sup>34</sup>

This section will concentrate upon *Platform*'s theme of time's effects upon relationships and friendships. It contends that Jia Zhangke explores friendships and relationships in three main ways. Firstly, Cui Mingliang is the main barometer of cultural changes; his reactions display the effects of the reform era's changes on his friends and his community. Although Jia chooses a male character to relay the message of his film to the audience, Mingliang is hardly a dashing hero. Instead he is a budding intellectual who never quite makes it out of Fenyang's narrow streets. Secondly, this section will examine the manner in which *Platform*'s main male protagonists negotiate discourses of individuality (a new emphasis in the reform era). Thirdly, Mingliang reveals a growing sense of a concept of 'private' lives through his relationship with Yin Ruijuan. Notably, it is the reticent Mingliang who settles into a family life rather than the more 'romantic' Zhang Jun. Do friendships and romantic relationships survive through, or despite, time?

#### **a) The reform era's effect on male gender identity - Cui Mingliang**

Mingliang's reactions measure the progress of time, and his emotions define the complications of growing into a more responsible / resigned masculinity. Mingliang begins the film as a minor dissenter. He is first seen (or rather, heard) engaging in a battle of wits with the ever-serious Chief Xu, the director of the cultural team, who pedantically criticises Mingliang's performance. Mingliang wishes to cultivate an image of himself as the intellectual of his small, walled community. His oversized glasses are indicators of his pretensions, but also act as a shield behind which he can hide. In moments of emotional pressure, Mingliang seems visibly to shrink behind them.

Mingliang also deliberately sets up juxtapositions between himself and the Communist rhetoric of the all too recent past. For example, he bickers with his mother, as they exchange Maoist clichés ('Mum, you should liberate your thoughts' 'You should try self-criticism!'). However, despite this tongue-in-cheek bravado, Mingliang is insecure about

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<sup>34</sup> URL: [http://sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/15/zhangke\\_interview.html](http://sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/15/zhangke_interview.html), accessed 01/05/2003.

the role that he has chosen for himself. Whilst he walks, eyes down, head cocked to one side in his usual distracted pose, he is clearly conscious of his lack of economic credentials (he is, after all, only an 'art worker'). When Ruijuan reveals to him that her father has arranged for her to marry a dentist, Mingliang reacts with scorn: 'Great! A university graduate.' That is, Mingliang perceives university qualifications as signs of a desirable intellectual masculinity which is attractive to women and which he is in no financial position to obtain. Ruijuan's father's choice represents the changing demands that were placed on male suitors in the economic reform period that are described by Honig and Hershatter (1988: 98). While a professional might have been an ideologically questionable character in the Mao years, working class men have little to offer for Ruijuan's father who looks for earning potential, rather than revolutionary credentials, in a future son-in-law.

Cui Mingliang, in common with most of the protagonists of *Platform*, is difficult to define. On account of the film's lengthy time frame, it seems impossible to come away with a solid impression of Mingliang's personality. In many scenes, Mingliang is physically present, although an audience is not immediately aware of it. For example, in the scene surrounding Zhong Ping's visit to the hospital, we are not aware that Mingliang has accompanied her until he literally walks into the frame, asking Chief Xu about the privatisation of the troupe. Mingliang's persona is consistent with the theme of the film at large, in which a sense of 'real' time is achieved by avoiding an artificially 'filmic' focus on the reactions and speech of a main character. However, it is possible to see changes in Mingliang as time goes on.

Before he leaves Fenyang, Mingliang lacks the Communist virtue of 'discipline', as is repeatedly pointed out to him by Chief Xu and his old-school Maoist father. Mingliang is continually mocking the values that the earnest Chief Xu holds dear. He is awkward in his encounters with Yin Ruijuan, and longs to leave the constricting streets of his hometown, as he enviously reads a postcard from Zhang Jun who has managed a

temporary flight to Guangzhou.<sup>35</sup> Although his awkwardness remains almost throughout the film, Mingliang gradually loses his 'undisciplined' nature. On returning to Fenyang, Mingliang takes responsibility for his mother, who is visibly different from the feisty matriarch of the beginning of the film. Her husband has disappeared and she stares transfixed by the (most probably) Hong Kong soap operas on her new television (a modern addition to the family home, and a familiar symbol for loneliness). Mingliang goes to his father's empty new shop, and leaves a message for him to come home. He now must face up to a new responsibility in trying to keep his parents together. After trying to leave Fenyang for somewhere more cosmopolitan, it seems he cannot escape his connections with his hometown. The domesticated Cui Mingliang we see slumping on Yin Ruijuan's armchair seems a million miles away from his agitated counterpart ten years ago, who rode around Fenyang's streets pretending to fly.

#### **b) Finding individuality in (reform era) friendships**

This section investigates the manner in which the main male protagonists of *Platform* attempt to express their individual masculinities inside the relationships that defined their identities in the lean Mao years. I argue that the protagonists formulate their identities in two main ways. Firstly, the main protagonists attempt to define themselves through their relationship to new cultural trends. Secondly, men negotiate their relationship to their native place, the determinedly unfashionable Fenyang, from which the young men flee, but end in finding no other home.

#### **i) Fashionable (and modern) masculinities**

Although the cut of a pair of trousers or a change of hairstyle may not seem momentous compared to many of the more political campaigns of China's past, in the small border town of Fenyang, it is such subtle (or not so subtle) symbols that signify episodes in individuals' lives. Through fashion and music, Jia describes a particular kind of masculinity that is attractive to the youth of Fenyang. This masculinity is inextricably linked with the cultural modernity represented by south China and that is graspable

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<sup>35</sup> According to Jia, this scene is one of only two close-up shots in the film, departing from his usual insistence on more 'realistic' camerawork and indicating its relative importance ([http://sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/15/zhangke\\_interview.html](http://sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/15/zhangke_interview.html), accessed 01/05/2003).



through trends and hearsay, although frustratingly beyond the friends' reach. It is primarily concerned with image and reputation, and with an emotional and geographical distance from the Communist past. The cultural capital involved in being seen to disseminate these trends is essential in carving out an individual identity.

The first symbols of a departure from the opening songs in praise of Dazhai are implicitly linked with men. Mingliang's mother is pictured, beneath a portrait of Zhou Enlai, sewing a new pair of trousers for her son. These are not ergonomically sound clothes in which to work for socialism, however, but a fashion statement. Mingliang wishes to copy the latest fashion from south China, in which bell-bottoms have been well and truly 'in' for some time. Mingliang's mother unconsciously hits the nail on the head when she remarks disapprovingly that she could 'sweep the streets with them.' Rather than being just a passing fad, this new style is symptomatic of a sea-change in Chinese attitudes. Whilst unadorned clothes were once a compulsory statement of utilitarian socialist values (as opposed to the impractical bourgeois fashions of the West), widening the bottoms of trousers may now attract attention, but does not lead to political persecution. Mingliang's mother's comment reveals the transitory era that *Platform* portrays; she highlights the incongruity between socialist ideals of productive work (sweeping the streets) and the distinctly unproductive interest in fashion. Cui Wanlin (Mingliang's father) also comments more explicitly on his son's departure from socialist practicalities, when Mingliang is unable to squat down in his new trousers. Mingliang comments that, since he is an art worker, he performs 'no manual work.' That is, the unfunctional nature of Mingliang's clothes is mimetic of the changes in his own life - he uses fashion as a positive indicator of the private identity to which he aspires.

When Mingliang, Zhang Jun and Eryong arrive to meet Zhong Ping and Yin Ruijuan in order to see an imported Indian film, the young men find themselves mocked for 'imitating others like a kid.' In *Platform*, fashion is seen largely as a male pursuit. Zhang Jun persuades Zhong Ping to have a perm because it is the fashionable thing to do, as modelled by Han, a pretty girl at Zhang's workplace. When fashion is not worn *by* men, it is worn *for* men. For example, Zhong Ping paints her eyes in an attempt to look modern

and sophisticated in front of Zhang Jun, and whilst she protests that she is 'not thinking of him', she cannot hide her affection. Fashion comes to announce different eras, and it is through the clothes of men that these changes are more clearly visible. For example, Zhang Jun appears from a visit to his auntie in Guangzhou, and stands out in the dull streets of Fenyang in his grey pleat-fronted trousers and orange, (English) sloganed T-shirt. While his ghetto blaster may announce his presence before his clothes, his new purchases are the symbols for a modernity that has not yet reached the northern town of Fenyang.

Music is also a key marker of the passing of time and of the emotions of its protagonists. Non-CCP produced music first enters as the exotic sound of the soundtrack to the subtitled Indian film, but it soon becomes linked to definitions of maleness through Zhang Jun's imported Canto-pop cassette tapes. As Zhang returns from Guangzhou, he plays a song by the singer, Zhang Di, whose lyrics link the Chinese diaspora with conceptions of sexual and emotional freedom: 'I am always asked whether Taiwan girls are better than Singapore girls.' Ironically, the other main song on the cassette is a selling of northeast Asian masculinity to its southern neighbours, singing to the memory of Genghis Khan in a synthesised folk style.

Jia links music to masculine self-expression. For example, when the friends dance to Zhang Jun's tape in the early days in Fenyang, Mingliang does so with almost comic seriousness, as he attempts to get to grips with this new type of leisure. Towards the end of the film, in a discotheque (this time presumably set up by a canny local) the friends bop to late-1980s dance, with the male members of the troupe taking the activity much more seriously. For Mingliang, the title song, 'Platform', seems especially poignant. Mingliang first plays the song (about emotional transience), appropriately enough, when the troupe's truck breaks down in a dusty wilderness. As he listens to it on the truck's tinny cassette recorder, he stares through the windscreen into the landscape beyond. The group gather round, and listen to the lyrics of the song that they most probably have not heard before. As the central character, Mingliang takes control over the expression contained in the song, going so far as to perform it himself.

In his role as a performer, Mingliang is the mouthpiece for the cultural changes that mark the group's coming of age. His songs express both the public's desire to be 'up to date' and the loosening of official restrictions upon private tastes, but Mingliang also has to deal with the themes of his performances in his personal life. For example, his rock rendition of the title song, 'Platform', can be seen as a personal act of empathy with its description of loneliness and emotional stasis ('We are waiting... our whole hearts are waiting forever...'). In this performance, Mingliang forms an unlikely rock star. He is incongruous in his pale jeans and spiky hair, and as he jumps into the bemused (male) audience, shaking hands with his public, we are unsure whether to feel pathos or to laugh. However, when he starts a fight amongst these same audience members, Mingliang's frustration shows through. While it appears that Mingliang has pretensions to exercising 'traditional' masculine toughness, he cannot live up to his promises (as shown by the new members of his troupe pulling him away from a subsequent fight in a clothes market). However, he seems to undertake in these doomed fights deliberately, perhaps a more accurate reflection of Mingliang's self-esteem.

## **ii) Escape from Fenyang**

In this coming of age story, personalities are forged by the friends' native place. While the allure of privatisation and a better life are offered as the rewards of economic reform, they seem physically and metaphorically a hundred miles away from Fenyang. There is a scene towards the beginning of the film in which Yao Eryong asks where Ulan Bator is, after which he then goes on to ask which places are progressively northwards. After the trio establish that ocean is probably the most northerly point on the earth, Mingliang answers facetiously that the northern-most point is, in fact, Fenyang, highlighting his frustration and isolation at small-town life. The exotic appeal of the south is highlighted when the cultural troupe emerges in its final incarnation as 'The All-Star Rock and Breakdance Electronic Band' (an exotic concoction of clashing musical postures and styles) from Shenzhen. By associating the troupe with this first special economic zone, just over the border from Hong Kong, they are transformed into emblems of modernity, fashion and commercialisation, carriers of (itself manufactured) big-city ideology into the

backwaters of small-town China. However, while the troupe has travelled physically from Fenyang, they do not seem to have escaped emotionally. This section will focus upon the impact of this restrictive environment upon the friendships amongst the troupe.

Whilst new hair salons offer perms to the town's fashion conscious women, and families save up to put a washing machine in their courtyard, the town promises little future to young and ambitious men. In *Platform*, there is certainly a sense of siege mentality, demonstrated through both narrative and cinematography. Yao Eryong, Zhang Jun and Mingliang ride around the streets of Fenyang, with Mingliang imitating flying, a gesture that literally signals longing for escape. Jia's camera points out that Fenyang is a walled city. Not only does his focus upon the walls serve as a visual emphasis of entry to and exit from Fenyang, but it also highlights the town as a fortress. Although a resident can physically walk through the gates, the walls also seem to represent emotional barriers that somehow tie the friends to their hometown. Important events are played out around the edge of the town. Mingliang and Ruijuan meet both under the wall's arches and on its ramparts, and Mingliang often looks out from here into the world beyond. In another key scene, the male friends sit atop the walls, singing along to Mingliang's new guitar. When a bus leaves through the gates, the friends immediately grab clumps of sand to throw at its roof, indicating their resentment at those who have the resources to leave.

If Fenyang is a symbol for native place ties, and native place ties figuratively stand for identity, then it is Mingliang and Zhang Jun who seem to have most trouble with the concepts of home and self. In contrast, women are less troubled by their place of birth. Yin Ruijuan decides to be loyal to her father, preferring the security of a sensible career in the police service. On discovering that she is pregnant, Zhong Ping suggests that she and Zhang Jun be honest with their parents and then find a solution, a notion that Zhang Jun hastily rejects as unrealistic. Later, in Hanyang, when Zhang Jun wistfully asks Zhong Ping whether they could leave Fenyang forever and never go back, Zhong Ping answers that she could not possibly abandon all her ties at home. However, in the end, Zhong Ping will disappear without a trace, leaving Zhang Jun to fend for himself. Whilst it appears that men are the utopian dreamers, it turns out that it will be a woman who

finally breaks away from Fenyang, although not in the happiest of circumstances. The problem of feeling trapped is presented solely as a male one: feelings of frustration do not seem to trouble Zhong Ping and Yin Ruijuan to the same extent as they affect Zhang Jun and Mingliang.

### **iii) Reform era relationships**

Although Mingliang's relationship with Ruijuan is never truly settled until the last scene, it proves to be the lasting one of the film. When Mingliang and Ruijuan meet at the foot of the town walls, they are reticent with each other. Both pace and look at the ground, fidgeting with their hands. Their gestures reveal their vulnerabilities, helping along our empathy with the couple. However, Jia is careful not to engage his audience too far beyond the parameters of his cinematic realism. He deliberately avoids presenting the couple's exchange in shot-reverse-shot. Through such techniques, Jia is consistent with his own manner of presenting cinematic time, but he is also careful to preserve the sense of precariousness involved in Mingliang's relationship towards Ruijuan, in which each holds on to a veneer of emotional invulnerability.

When Mingliang meets Ruijuan on the ramparts again, Jia's camera angle conveys the graspable tension in their (near) relationship. The position of the camera allows only one of them to be seen: they are positioned on opposite sidewalls of the ramparts, and repeatedly swap positions during the conversation. Therefore, one (sometimes both) of the pair is out of shot, demonstrating their awkwardness with each other. An emotional, confessional scene between Mingliang and Ruijuan would not be in keeping with the atmosphere of the rest of the film (so would not be seen as 'true'). Shot-reverse-shot is not only avoided, but camera positioning makes the use of such a device impossible. Moreover, their conversation is interspersed with background noise, which is symbolic of the society around them that still circumscribes their decisions. Notably, when Mingliang asks Ruijuan to clarify her relationship towards him, he appears to look directly into her eyes, an incongruous action for the normally evasive Mingliang. When Ruijuan informs Mingliang that she cannot be a girlfriend to him, he responds with his usual *laissez-faire* exterior, hiding his obvious emotional frustration. In fact, Mingliang's awkwardness

towards Ruijuan does not decrease as the years go on. Mingliang deliberately does not enter a room where she is, and she has to make a point of initiating a conversation ('How's the big wide world?'), at which he delivers a characteristically face saving reply ('I keep moving' - which is ironic, since he has returned to just where he started from).

Nevertheless, Mingliang and Ruijuan have presumably started a family by the conclusion of the film. To the best of our knowledge, theirs is the only 'conventional' relationship left. They appear to be settled into a reticent domesticity (as symbolised by his mid morning nap), with Ruijuan playing with their baby boy without acknowledging the presence of the camera. They are an exception in the broken or widowed families that are the norm in *Platform*. Ruijuan's own father had brought her up alone, while we see no sign of Zhong Ping's mother. Her father, in turn, is resigned to what he perceives as his daughter's capriciousness, and barely turns his eyes away from the cinema screen in order to inform a frantic Zhang Jun that he has no idea where Zhong Ping is. Zhang Jun's parents are never seen, although Zhang Jun makes it clear that coming clean about Zhong Ping's pregnancy will not be an option. Mingliang's own parents are estranged, emotionally and physically, by the time that Cui Wanlin opens his shop on the highway. Jia seems to imply that the state organised work and home life held people's emotional lives together, since few independent alternatives existed. The personal and financial privatisations of the reform era replace the life of struggle that kept families, friendships and relationships together out of necessity.

## **6: Conclusion - Masculinities in friendship and love**

In *Suzhou River*, *Men and Women* and *Platform*, masculinities in love and friendship are drawn as fragile and marginal. The three films were made at roughly the same time, and reflect their directors' preoccupations surrounding individual identity. For example, the three films present masculinities that have difficulty relating to the world around them. The anonymous videographer, Xiao Bo and Cui Mingliang are placed (or place themselves) on the margins of their respective societies. Moreover, the masculinities that they present are deliberately ambiguous: we cannot see the videographer's face and must accept his uncertain version of 'truth', Xiao Bo presents a malleable masculinity (which

is adapted to the desires of the other protagonists and to the audience), and Cui Mingliang is (often frustratingly) difficult to interpret and insights into his psychology have to be gradually pieced together. This focus on indefinite masculinities may represent an era in which other social, cultural and economic certainties are collapsing: just as love and women cannot be counted upon in the videographer's eyes, Shanghai seems to be continually being knocked down and rebuilt, Xiao Bo's sexual ambiguity reflects an uncertain moral landscape for the expression of diverse sexualities on the Mainland, and Mingliang's reticence displays the effects of reforms that herald outward signs of 'modernity', but also bring personal loneliness and confusion. These attitudes are notably expressed through men. They surface in the performance of their masculinities and desires, in their personal relationships, and in friendship and in love, acting as metaphors for wider uncertainties.

## CHAPTER FIVE – FATHERS

In 1994, Chinese cultural critic Dai Jinhua stated that most of the activity of male Mainland intellectuals in the 1980s constituted an ‘indictment of the father and their struggle to replace him and his culture’ (Dai 1999: 192). Rather than being merely a familial concept, Dai understands that, for the young male, intellectual elite of the reform era, fatherhood was a national as well as a personal concept. She argues that the institution of fatherhood became shorthand for the gerontocracy that had governed Chinese political and social relationships for centuries, out of which the reform era’s ‘angry young men’ were attempting to carve out their own niche (ibid: 193). However, China’s new intellectual producers were also intricately involved in the culture of their fathers, as they sought to negotiate the past, make sense of the present and outline a more utopian future; that is, Dai contends that they hovered between cultural patricide and finding reconciliation with the wise old fathers of the past.

This chapter seeks to investigate the representation of fathers and the masculinities that they express. Dai was not the only critic to comment on a cultural situation in the 1980s that reflected searches for both subjectivity and origins on the part of (overwhelmingly male) writers, artists and filmmakers.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, much of this criticism was couched in familial language, particularly concerning fathers and sons. Accordingly, the following section will outline the key features of this post-Mao cultural production, and comment on a selection of its interpretations in relation to the discussion of individual films that constitutes the remainder of this chapter. I will contextualise the discussion of film in terms of its relationship to the ‘father seeking’ and ‘roots searching’ that occurred in literature and the visual arts.

### 1: The intellectual search for fathers

Fathers may seem to have little to do with the searches for subjectivity and for an essence of the Chinese nation that have been described above. However, fathers take on many forms, from individual heads of families to social paternalism. I argue that post-Mao cultural production directly questioned the authority and legitimacy of fathers, who became symbols for the wrong-headedness of ‘tradition’ in times of scepticism, although a benevolent paternalism was yearned for in more uncertain

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see Chow (1995), Huot (2000), Wang (1994) and Zhong (2000).



times. From the 'sons' generation' of filmmakers described by Dai Jinhua to the roots-seeking writers engaged by Xueping Zhong, intellectual production in the 1980s seemed preoccupied with both seeking and escaping from fathers (Dai 2002: 14, Zhong 2000: 150). More often than not, this questioning of the nature of fatherhood presented itself as a rebellion against master narratives, whether they were legitimised by the weight of 'tradition' or Maoist versions of history as a progression towards a true Communist state. Male intellectuals sought to displace the centrality previously accorded to older males, and to assert a subjectivity beyond the epic, linear history of their nation presented in the Maoist past. Younger men took on the fatherly responsibility of dispensing their own meanings to rework old iconography.

Searches for subjectivity in intellectual production were significant in a society traditionally structured by the authority of senior males. I contend that this concern with selfhood was an invariably male interest on the part of young intellectuals whose birth at the beginning of the People's Republic shaped their attitudes towards the values of the Chinese nation. These young men negotiated their place in the New Era in a society with a tradition of gerontocracy. From the hierarchies involved in the Confucian precepts ordering family and society<sup>2</sup>, to the alternative male dominated power structures that ensued out of an ostensible Communist opposition to such feudal thought, father figures had held sway over the Chinese state. The 'son of heaven' was in turn father to his subjects and Mao followed this precedent with a paternalistic order after 1949. Although the Party brought women into the workforce in both urban and rural work teams, recent historians have evaluated the actual lives of women from 1949 against the Party's promises and found only a limited liberation, with authority dominated by older men (see, for example, Stacey 1983). Mao's death did not bring an end to the domination of the Party by older male leaders (perhaps enshrined in the lineage of Party members, with the founding 'long march generation' holding moral and symbolic power), but it arguably brought about an end to the concentration of power in the hands of one supreme national founding father.

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<sup>2</sup> Confucian orthodoxy was based upon hierarchies of obedience and duty. While sons were obedient to their fathers, fathers were obedient to their ancestors and the emperor, who in turn was responsible before his own forefathers.

While Mao's immediate successor, Hua Guofeng, attempted to perpetuate the representational practices that bolstered the Helmsman's position at the pinnacle of power, he was to find that he possessed neither the enigmatic persona nor the revolutionary credentials of his predecessor. Furthermore, the experiences of the Cultural Revolution and its social and economic consequences prompted a reassessment of Mao's achievements. The outpouring of popular grief at Zhou Enlai's death proved to be an expression of dissent against the master narrative of the first twenty-seven years of Communist rule. Although Deng Xiaoping wished to present himself as a legitimate successor to Mao in his actions and theories, he recognised the dangers of encouraging the cult of personality through iconography favoured by the Chairman (Wang 1993: 245). The socialist fatherhood perpetuated by Mao was, in effect, over, and with the death of the Chairman came an uncertainty in the post-Cultural Revolution era in the absence of a paternal hand to steer China through the dangerous ideological waters brought with economic liberalisation.

## **2: Intellectual responses to a fatherless era**

### **a) Art**

In this 'vacuum' of ideology and in the historical reassessment brought by Mao's death, one image caught the public imagination - it was an image of a father. The painting in question portrayed neither a Communist hero of the past nor a Party chief in the present, but the gnarled, weather beaten face of a peasant holding out a bowl of water to perplexed observers. Originally titled 'My Father', but retitled to simply 'Father' when it was exhibited, Luo Zhongli's 1980 portrait caused a sensation, becoming a 'national monument' (Wang 1993: 250). In his analysis of the subsequent popular and critical reactions to the painting, Yuejin Wang pinpoints the main 'cultural anxiety' in 1980s China as 'the questioning of the father' by cultural producers who negotiated their identities in terms of being 'sons and grandsons' to their elders who, in turn, represented China's past: - 'call it father when scepticism sets in, call it mother when nostalgia overwhelms' (ibid: 268). The emotions inspired by the painting had an influence across the visual arts. Chen Kaige and his cinematographer Zhang Yimou cited the influence of 'Father' upon their representation of an old peasant in their 1984 film, *Yellow Earth (Huang tudi)* (Ni 2002: 93). While observers openly wept before Luo's work in galleries, critics questioned the meaning of this representation, which reworked the realist portraiture

of the Mao era. However, instead of the Chairman gazing authoritatively at his people, Mao's place was usurped by the representation of an elderly man who spent his days guarding manure in his family's latrine. Was Luo making a statement about the true origins of the Chinese nation? Was he praising the endurance of ordinary people, or is his portrait merely a whim of an artist claiming rights over the image of an individual who is not allowed to speak for himself?

Whatever the true meaning of 'Father', the effects of its exhibition prompted aftershocks in the artistic community. Bringing to mind both representations of Mao and ancestral portraits, Luo's old peasant came to be seen as a nostalgic symbol of the past, and of a time that was itself soon to become history. In Cai Feng's 1989 work, 'A Window With A Mirror', a receding corridor is papered with Luo's 'Father' portrait, seeing the past as a series of fathers to be negotiated, standing as a conscience. The viewer stands as Walter Benjamin's angel of history, surveying the past, which is receding and piling up, as we are blown forward, helpless to make sense of this one recurring image.<sup>3</sup> As though a response to Cai's comment on Luo's work, fathers appeared again and again in post-Mao unofficial culture as pasts to be reinterpreted, dominant histories to be demolished and roots to be sought.

#### **b) Searching for cultural roots**

In 1984, the writer Han Shaogong published an essay entitled 'The Roots of Literature' ('*Wenxue de gen*'). This statement of intent that 'the roots of literature must be deeply planted in the earth of national culture' was taken to be the founding manifesto of a literary style known as 'searching for roots' ('*xungen*'). Roots-searching literature was not concerned to narrate wide political problems, nor did it concern itself with commenting on them. Influenced by writers outside China, including the 'magic realism' of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, roots searching writers such as Han, Li Hangyu, and Jia Pingwa primarily sought to look to their own traditions to present alternative literary subjects to the Chinese (elite) reading public. Roots-searchers looked to tradition for origins and identity, with stories about rural

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<sup>3</sup> In 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', Walter Benjamin (in his critique of historical materialism) likens attempts to make sense of past events to a Paul Klee painting, 'Angelus Novus', whose subject 'sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.' The angel is helpless to 'make whole what has been smashed', since a 'storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. Benjamin hypothesises that 'this storm is what we call progress' (1992: 249).

inhabitants and aspects of the past that they felt to have been neglected by the master narratives of China's dominant social systems. Admirers of roots-searching literature speak of it in sweeping terms, written as a tool for shaping an essential 'Chinese' identity out of fertile soil, with writers entering a kind of 'sublime' (Zhong 2000: 158), 'extricating themselves from the existing categories of politics, economics, morality, and law, and gradually entering the categories of nature, history, culture, and humankind' (Li 2000: 111). Less effusive critics pointed to writers' lack of interest in social reform, and younger authors protested since they doubted that China had essential cultural roots (Zhang 1997: 139).

As Xueping Zhong points out, roots-searching writers were almost exclusively male (2000: 150). Whereas many critics, such as Li cited above, praise these writers for their concern with objectivity in comparison with the clear subjectivity of earlier genres (such as the 'literature of the wounded' written in the wake of the Cultural Revolution), Xueping Zhong argues that this apparently sweeping concern to explore 'roots' and origins hid a preoccupation with a (masculine) subjectivity admitted to by the authors themselves (ibid: 157). What they were looking for may be more adequately described as a 'male self' which 'is ultimately conflated with a search for cultural roots' (ibid: 154, 151). Cultural critic Jing Wang describes *xungen* literature as containing a similar male intellectual desire for cultural acceptance, 'a *besieged* embryonic modern consciousness that struggles to come to terms with itself' (1996: 214, italics mine).<sup>4</sup>

In a detailed analysis of the etymology of the term *gen* (roots), Xueping Zhong comes to the conclusion that *xungen* writers' marginalized male subjects represent a desire to return to the cultural centre, and to re-masculinise Chinese culture for the future by seeking strong, truly masculine men, unrestricted by the demands of mainstream ideologies. Claire Huot also explores etymology in order to argue that *xungen* is a strongly masculinist literary form. In observing the sexual nature of the term<sup>5</sup>, Huot argues that male genitalia feature repeatedly in *xungen* literature. She also hints at a

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<sup>4</sup> Xueping Zhong's full-length study of male subjectivity in reform era Chinese literature is entitled *Masculinity Besieged*. Zhong concurs with Wang that male writers in the 1980s were plagued by a besieged consciousness, a 'particularly strong concern over a male lack of "masculine" identity, and the concern suggested a sense of siege and a desire to break out' (2000: 15).

<sup>5</sup> The term *gen* literally means root, cause, source or origin.

generational conflict, where one-time symbols of authority are degraded, and stories present 'upside-down totems, where the ancestors are groping creatures, incestuously copulating and inbreeding' (2000: 107).

In fact, ancestors and fathers feature in a number of roots-searching stories, and the authors' alternative narratives repeatedly challenge their authority. The writer Liu Zaifu insisted that the movement specifically aimed to 'move out of the shadows' of fathers (Wang 1996: 198). Liu Heng's 1988 story *The Obsessed (Fuxi Fuxi)*, later adapted into the film *Judou* by Zhang Yimou in 1990, features the demands of a strict Confucian family hierarchy that delegitimises the claims of a blood father to the extent that he hangs himself. Jia Pingwa's tale, *The Heavenly Hound (Tiangou, 1985)* features a father who is physically disabled and is eventually killed off. As Dai Jinhua has stated, father-son narratives dominated late 1980s China, portraying a traditional culture where fathers and sons devoured each other (1999: 193). However, there were stories that followed a less cannibalistic vein. In Yu Hua's short story, 'On the Road at Age Eighteen' ('Shibasui chumen yuanxing', 1987), fatherly ideology is less murderous than disappointing, a 'beautiful lie', since 'idealisation of the father proved false by violence of the hero's direct experience' (Tang 2000: 203). Mo Yan's novel, *The Red Sorghum Family (Hong gaoliang jiazu, 1987)*, portrayed 'a muscular and heroic grandfather and a timid and pallid father', distancing masculine strength from an immediate father figure and placing masculine bravado in the legendary past (Dai 1999: 194).

### **c) Fathers in film**

The Fifth Generation of Mainland Chinese filmmakers had similar experiences of the history of their nation as *xungen* writers. Born in the same era as many roots-searching authors, their childhood saw the Anti-Rightist movement, they experienced the campaigns and consequences of the Great Leap Forward, and they were adolescents during the Cultural Revolution. Reaching adulthood in the post-Mao reform era, these filmmakers and writers were profoundly affected by their diverse experiences of the Cultural Revolution, feeling that 'the ground beneath their feet had caved in completely' (Wang 1996: 188). Consequently, many of their films and novels had similar themes, with *xungen* literature frequently being adapted into film

scripts.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, their films can be described as containing similar negotiations with father figures and dominant forms of representation as the authors whose protagonists they brought to life on screen. Perhaps most importantly, most Fifth Generation filmmakers were also male.

As already stated, Dai Jinhua links this historical experience to a preoccupation with fathers. However, her assertion that 1980s male intellectuals expressed an ‘indictment of the father’ does not insist on the father slaying mentality that it may imply. Dai traces Fifth Generation filmmakers’ antipathy towards fathers back to the experiences of the Cultural Revolution. While the ideologies of the Cultural Revolution seemed to rebel against everything that fathers stood for - old thinking, old culture, old customs, and old habits - Dai points out that this iconoclastic, youthful rebellion was initiated, sanctioned and ultimately curtailed by the most powerful father of them all - Mao himself. According to Dai, the tension between the patricides encouraged in the activities of the Red Guards and the paternalism of its initiator structured Fifth Generation filmmakers’ ambivalent attitudes towards fathers (2002: 15). Watching the Red Guard activities from the outside, Dai insists that filmmakers could not help having sympathy with the fathers whom they saw being destroyed.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, rather than happily stepping into the shoes of the old patriarchal order or arguing for a nihilistic destruction of all authority, Dai insists that ‘the art of the Fifth Generation is the art of the Sons [sic.]’, who wish to engage with the meanings of fatherhood (ibid: 14).

Fifth Generation filmmakers’ works in the 1980s represented a distinctly male struggle over subjectivity and control over representation. These debates were sited on the thorny ground of the Chinese past. Like the writers of the *xungen* school, filmmakers of the early eighties sought to question epic narratives. However, films set

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<sup>6</sup> For example, Chen Kaige’s *King of the Children* was adapted from an A Cheng novel of the same name.

<sup>7</sup> Whilst Chen Kaige famously denounced his intellectual father during the Cultural Revolution, this memory exerts its influence on his filmmaking as an adult. The denunciation scene in 1993’s *Farewell My Concubine* shows the harrowing effects of campaigns that caused families and friends to betray one another. Chen has admitted that his latest film, *Together*, contains scenes between a father and his son that act out the filial duties that he neglected in the Cultural Revolution (hear this BBC 8/12/03 interview with Chen at [www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/arts/frontrow/frontrow\\_20031208.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/arts/frontrow/frontrow_20031208.shtml), accessed 16/4/04).

in the wartime past focussed upon *reclaiming* the revolutionary legends of the People's Republic's founding fathers. The *retelling* of the Party's battles for control over China were formulated in styles that de-familiarised familiar themes for cineastes. For example, works such as *One And Eight* and *Yellow Earth* presented uncertain male protagonists, on the margins of communities and physically on the margins of the screen, refusing to occupy a central space in either.

In the early years of Fifth Generation filmmakers, directors were attempting to carve their own space in relation to the past and their 'individual experience of shock as legitimate historical experience' (Dai 2002: 22). Chen Kaige's *King Of The Children* (*Haizi wang* 1987), based on a novel by the roots-searching writer A Cheng, marked the culmination of such cinematic roots-seeking. *King Of The Children* strongly resisted dominant forms of representation, and sought a form of individual male subjectivity beyond the texts and codes of the past. However, Dai also marks 1987 as a critical year for film production in China, for not only did this year see consumerism's increasing incursion into China's previously predictable state-managed economy, but Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* (*Hong Gaoliang* 1987) was released. The stylistic assertiveness and lack of introspection on the part of the film's hero was new. While previous works had attempted to establish a legitimate place for the 'Son's generation', attempting to avoid codes of representation in an artistic medium that relied on this very same concept had failed them. Falling into the father's representational trap, filmmakers had no choice but to recognise themselves as sons. *Red Sorghum* was truly a story of the son: of rebellion, and the unrepresented murder of fathers, only for its ultra-masculine protagonist to submit to a larger, more symbolic fatherhood. It is the story of the narrator's grandparents ('My Grandpa' and 'Jiu'er'), and their lives running a remote distillery, until this utopia is shattered by the invasion of the Japanese in 1937. While not all critics may agree on Dai Jinhua's interpretation of *Red Sorghum* as a tale of a virile Chinese hero submitting himself to an all powerful father figure in the shape of the Communist Party (Dai 2002: 43), the film introduced a new type of masculine subject to China's screens.

If *My Grandpa* is a father figure in Zhang Yimou's first film as director, he is distanced from the audience as such by his title and the voice of the outside narrator. This storyteller makes it clear that his actual father is, at the conclusion of the film, a crying child. However, as the following sections show, fathers occur repeatedly in Zhang's subsequent films, with the director particularly highlighting the relationship between men and their sons. Therefore, if Zhang's heroes seek subjectivity, they can be said to situate their endeavours within a patrilineal sphere. Zhang exemplifies Dai Jinhua's comments on male intellectuals' need to '*replace*' father figures (1999: 192), reflecting the implication in Dai's words that fathers were not to be destroyed completely, but their place was to be filled by a more effective alternative.

Writing on Zhang Yimou's *Judou*, William Callahan insists that Tianqing (the film's main male protagonist) does not so much wish to dismantle the ideological apparatus that sustains his adopted uncle's power over him, but to inherit that status (1994: 168). That is, if young intellectuals' empathise with Tianqing's predicament, they may not wish to '*replace*' the authority of the father, but to pass that agency to their own generation. Xueping Zhong expresses a similar opinion on male intellectuals' quest to move towards the central position of their fathers in order to move away from their marginality and assert a strong, Chinese masculine selfhood. That is, the 1980s artist, once marginalized, has a fantasy of '*now seeing himself at center stage taking the place of the father...identifying himself, almost unabashedly, with the power position of the father that he aspires to replace*' (Zhong 2000: 116-117).

In this section, I have outlined the cultural atmosphere in which fatherhood was reassessed by artists, writers and filmmakers in the post-Mao era. The relationship between male intellectuals and their cultural fathers was intimately involved in their search for a strong male selfhood that occurred in the wake of the Cultural Revolution following Mao's death. In the remainder of this chapter, I will examine four films in detail. The first three films to be discussed are directed by Zhang Yimou:- *Judou*, (1990), *To Live (Houzhe)*, (1994), and *The Road Home (Wode fuqin muqin)*, (1999). Although many films in recent years have centred on actual or symbolic fatherhood,



Zhang's long career and consistent interest in the relationship between fathers and their sons reveal his changing attitudes over time. The final section of this chapter will discuss *Shower* (Xizao 1999) by Zhang Yang. Zhang Yang's work expresses an apparently unambiguous attitude towards fathers and tradition, far from the anguished questioning so often attributed to members of the Fifth Generation. However, its slick portrayal of life in a traditional Beijing bathhouse may reveal more than a light-hearted appraisal of the virtues of a vanishing urban existence. All four films were produced in the 1990s, in very different historical circumstances than early Fifth Generation cinema. This time progression provides a comparative context in which to discuss the issues surrounding fatherhood that were consciously or unconsciously raised by 1980s' male intellectuals.

### **3: Analysis**

#### **a) Issues and methods**

From the above discussion, it is clear that two issues are pertinent to the representation of fathers in the post-Mao cultural arena. Firstly, it is necessary to look at the representation of fathers themselves, both in terms of individual men and the masculinities that they express, and the structures that stand for dominant male power in society at large, such as the presence of master narratives or gerontocracies such as 'Confucianism' or 'Communism.' For example, how are fathers physically portrayed? Do they express their position by their appearance? Fathers' relationship to time and history is also an important aspect to their representation. Fathers may be seen as symbols of the past, impacting on the presentation of younger male characters (and the narrators/filmmakers themselves) or as symbols of the future. Moreover, if they are living metaphors for China's past history, how is this past seen? If fathers are physically and morally degenerate, devouring the bodies of young women and denying the sexual potency of their sons, what implications does this have for filmmaker's vision of the 'nation'? And how do these unswervingly masculine terms of criticism pair with charges of presenting a feminised China to an international audience?

Secondly, the representation of fathers often coincides with a search for subjectivity on the part of artists, a quest for a male self. Therefore, it is necessary to discover how filmmakers position themselves towards physical and symbolic fathers (that is, whether they are rebellious or filial sons, and whether they wish to usurp the place of their elders), and how they respond to dominant narrative and social structures. For example, if filmmakers are concerned with replacing fathers, whom do they suggest should stand in their place? Can a fantasy of younger men replacing fathers ever be fulfilled, and do filmmakers end in supporting an (albeit more benevolent) alternative gerontocracy?

In this section, my aim is to demonstrate that Zhang Yimou juxtaposes his vision of a patriarchal, oppressive fatherhood, which is essentially socially constructed, with his own notions of a more consensual relationship between fathers and their sons. Through his role as director, Zhang Yimou, when acting out the role of a rebellious son, challenges fathers' role in the dissemination of discourse by taking mastery over the narrative and displaces patriarchs' power to write personal and national histories. I contend that, whilst films made in the beginning of his career set in the pre-Communist era exhibit the hostility to traditional ideas of personal and cultural fatherhood, his later works, with scenarios after 1949, question and complicate the notion of fatherhood further. Zhang Yimou moves from a vision of fathers as physically degenerate and morally bankrupt to the portrayal of a compassionate father worthy of respect by a younger generation of men. This evolution coincides with the temporal settings of the films discussed: dominant fathers in the Republic are seen as old and malicious whilst his latest film is narrated from the standpoint of a son in late 1990s China. I will examine three different types of fatherhood represented in each film by looking at an oppressive father, a marginalized father, and a father redeemed.

#### **4: The Oppressive Father: *Judou* (dir. Zhang Yimou, 1990)**

*Judou* is a family saga set in a Chinese village in the 1920s. It centres on the consequences of a marriage between an ageing dye mill owner, Yang Jinshan, and the beautiful, young Wang Judou. Jinshan lives with his nephew Yang Tianqing, who helps his uncle with the day-to-day management of the business. However, Tianqing

becomes more involved with his aunt when he hears her screams as Jinshan beats her during the night. More and more curious about Judou, Tianqing, already over forty and without a wife of his own, begins to spy on her as she washes. Physically and morally exhausted, Judou sees a way out of her predicament by alerting Tianqing to her distress in exposing her bruised body to him. Tianqing and Judou begin an affair, which results in her pregnancy. Believing the baby to be his, Jinshan stops the brutal treatment of his wife, and is rewarded by the son and heir that he has longed for.

The baby is named Tianbai; he is also, of course, not fathered by the impotent Jinshan, but by his nephew. When Jinshan is paralysed through an accidental fall, he can do nothing but watch Tianqing and Judou's affair play itself out in front of him in the knowledge that Tianbai is not his son. Judou and Tianqing lose no time in exploiting Jinshan's incapacity, aware of his need to save face in the Yang clan, whose male elders would be horrified to witness Jinshan being foolish enough to allow himself to be cuckolded. When Tianbai is playing by the dye vat, the desperate Jinshan (who has already attempted to kill Tianbai twice) sees his chance to exact revenge on his nephew's unorthodox family unit. However, as a wheelchair-bound Jinshan rolls towards Tianbai with the intention of drowning him, the child utters his first word:- 'Daddy.'

Naming Jinshan as father has important consequences for life in the dye mill. By interpellating Jinshan as patriarch, Tianbai legitimises the once dysfunctional family system. Tianqing holds tradition too highly to let the truth slip, nor are any viable routes of escape available in the exaggerated Confucian model Zhang has created.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, events turn further against Tianqing and Judou when Jinshan dies. Significantly, he is accidentally pushed into a dye vat by Tianbai. Forced to prostrate themselves in front of the coffin upon which Tianbai rides, Judou and Tianqing are then compelled to separate by the Yang clan, whose laws enforce the chastity of widows. As the years go by, the lovers find it more and more difficult to meet.

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<sup>8</sup> In *Judou*, Zhang Yimou presents an exaggerated version of Confucian doctrine as a visualisation of his central criticism of a highly oppressive patriarchy crushing the hopes and ambitions of the young. However, just as he presented a utopia with few boundaries and restrictions in *Red Sorghum*, *Judou* is at the opposite extreme, and presents a community ruled by exaggerated doctrine. As Zhang himself explains:- '*Red Sorghum* is about unaffected and unrestrained humanity: there are no rules, no imperial laws. *Judou* is about the opposite side of Chinese humanity, which is oppressed by rules and imperial laws' (Tan Ye 1999: 9).

Meanwhile, Tianbai has turned into a feared, frowning adolescent, fiercely suspicious of his mother and 'elder brother'. At the end of their moral resources, Tianqing and Judou decide to end their lives together by suffocating in a cellar. However their plans are foiled by Tianbai, now aware of his true parentage, who intervenes to save his mother and Tianqing, only to drown his mother's lover in a dye vat. In despair, Judou sets fire to the dye mill, and the credits roll after the screen is filled with flames.

As a member of the Fifth Generation of Mainland Chinese filmmakers, Zhang has been criticised for the presentation of a beautiful but cruel China ruled by evil patriarchs who victimise and destroy their spirited wives and daughters. In this context, then, fatherhood would seem to be a negative concept, symbolising both personal and national patriarchies denying the individualism and vibrancy of the young who might create a new social order. There are three father figures portrayed in *Judou*: the old and cruel Jinshan, the younger, ineffectual Tianqing and Zhang's version of 'Confucianism', which is directly represented in human form in the shape of the young Tianbai, and which is the only fatherhood in *Judou* that is stronger than the fire that is unleashed upon the dye mill at the end of the film.

#### **a) Jinshan: the personal patriarch**

Essentially, Jinshan represents the ills of a tradition that places young men at the mercy of their elders and subjugates women. Fathers such as Jinshan are family heads, wrinkled and impotent, yet covet rights over beautiful women that is implied should belong to their much younger (and sexually able) sons. Jinshan is presented as a Confucian pantomime villain. He is eventually physically disabled, always old and impotent, yet holds sway over his physically more able adopted nephew and has considerable standing in the community. The audience first sets eyes on him on a raised platform, counting his earnings, marking him out as both solitary and mercenary, and also linking him, in Lau's view, to the strong ancestral traditions in Yang village (1994: 134). Having dispatched two previous wives, he now turns his attention to his new bride, Wang Judou, in the hope of beating her into producing the guarantor of honour before his ancestors: a male heir.<sup>9</sup> In unusually graphic scenes, Jinshan saddles and whips Judou as though she were a mule, when he ironically

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<sup>9</sup> In Liu Heng's original novella, Yang Jinshan was not a murderer. On the contrary, his first wife was rumoured to have been killed in her activities as a CCP guerrilla (Silbergeld 1999: 285).

shows exaggerated compassion to his actual donkey. Jinshan is fixed in his status as a villain; it is impossible to imagine him as a young man, subject to the same set of taboos for which he stands as a living symbol in his old age.

In *Judou*, family fatherhood leads to reputation in the village and honour before ancestors. Jinshan himself is merely part of a larger village hierarchy in that he is only one of many successors to the Yang ancestral tablet, ‘one among countless Sons who form the family chain’ (Dai 2002: 54), and must submit to the authority of the heads of the lineage. Just as filial piety prevents Tianqing from acting against his uncle, Jinshan acts in the name of his ancestors (towards whom he too must act as a filial son). Despite the fact that Jinshan is blood father of neither Tianqing nor Tianbai, he is interpellated into authority through the strict conventions of Zhang’s Confucianism. In this case, the actuality of patrilineal inheritance based on blood ties has been displaced by the importance of preserving a patriarch’s place in history and discourse. Yang Jinshan’s individual acts of oppression have been superceded by a higher, more elusive symbolic order, for ‘when the power of the Father becomes the *empty* Name of the Father, its authenticity and terror increase’ (ibid: 55, emphasis mine). Through a tragic narrative of murder, suicide and betrayal, Zhang sees the traditional family as a severely dysfunctional one, destructive of ‘natural’ human relations.

#### **b) Tianqing: patriarch in waiting**

In this early work, Zhang perceives neither a benevolent socially constructed fatherhood nor an adequate ‘natural’ one. While Jinshan shows his age in his gnarled face and beard, the moral incapacity of the family hierarchies that he represents is suggested by his eventual confinement in the same vessel that once served as pushchair for Tianbai. Jinshan appears at first to be the antithesis to his adopted nephew, Tianqing. As blood father of Tianbai, Tianqing is the second father that Zhang portrays in *Judou*, and would seem to represent a younger generation that can overthrow the gerontocracy that Jinshan embodies. However, Tianqing proves to be less a match for Confucian patriarchy than its victim. Never being able to meet others’ eyes, Tianqing is on the boundaries of acceptable masculinity in the village, for he is neither the officially adopted son of Jinshan, nor has he agency as head of his own household.

Tianqing, too, ends up being caught in the generational cycle that governs existence in Yang village. Already over forty, he seems inextricably caught in a position of dependence. His inability to stand up to the (male) gossips of the village and admit Tianbai's true parenthood is portrayed as grounded in the system of ancestor worship that is as constricting as the enclosed courtyards of the dye mill in which the film is set. Tianqing's masculinity is further undermined by Tianbai. Following the child's birth, Ming-bao Yue points out that the camera no longer corresponds to Tianqing's desiring gaze (1994: 61). Even though Tianqing continually resists Judou's suggestions to escape from the village, Zhang presents little space for alternatives. Tianqing's marginal position is aggravated by his initiation of Tianbai into the village community by naming him 'brother', ironically reinforcing the family system. For example, Shuqin Cui notes that Tianqing's internal desire is stifled by the pressure to uphold a public male identity compared to his immediate kin and to other males in the village (1997: 317). Tianqing (mentally, and generally physically, confined within the mill walls) is constantly concerned about the public perception of his behaviour. His refusal to escape with his lover and child is based upon the fear of the likely reaction of the village ('They'll kill us'), and the recognition that his son will not have an identity outside the boundary of the locality and its patriarchal community. Tianqing harbours an enduring hope that life will become easier, an illusion that the male community surrounding him cannot be all that bad after all. However, this dream is repeatedly shattered when events prove to be more powerful than his hopes. If Jinshan is physically paralysed, Tianqing is mentally so.

Tianqing's repeated refusals to stand up to the village elders lead to a questioning of his motives for such obedience. Is he caught in an inescapable trap, or does his vacillation have more complex motives? As Callahan suggests, Tianqing may hope against hope to inherit the position of family head that Jinshan once enjoyed (1994: 164). For example, as soon as Jinshan is paralysed, Tianqing's first action is to dress up in traditional robes and to toast Judou. Tianqing is at heart a conformist (Zhang 2002: 226). Even following Jinshan's death, he cannot help but inherit the actions and solutions of his uncle, for whom he is not even a blood relation. By hitting Judou, he vents his frustration at the passing of the order that at least granted him a modicum of happiness. Using Xueping Zhong's terms, Tianqing may wish to escape from his marginality to a more central position in home and village life. Like the male

intellectuals of the 1980s whom Zhong describes, he does not wish to storm the bastion of male privilege completely, but to replace those who held power in the past.

Tianqing meets his end on account of the fatherhood that he has failed to represent. Within the limits set by the community, Tianqing attempts to be a loving father to Tianbai. However, Tianqing presents this love in terms of a filial brotherhood, acceding to dictates of propriety and augmenting Tianbai's role as head of the family. For example, whereas low-angle shots are used consistently to highlight Tianbai's dominance in the Yang family (by his position atop Jinshan's coffin, for example), high angle shots stare down at the ageing Tianqing. Tianqing's status is finally made clear by his position sprawled on the dye mill floor with a bloody nose, after selflessly attempting to suck out infection from Tianbai's cut finger. The power relationships played out inside *Judou* are, therefore, seen to be artificial constructs, in which an adolescent is sanctioned not only to hold authority over his (living) biological father, but may also physically abuse him with impunity.

### **c) Embodying patriarchal law**

#### **i) The clan system**

The final father figures in *Judou* eclipse even the near tyrannical power held by Jinshan. Despite determining the events in the village, we do not even hear their names (re-enforcing the claustrophobic atmosphere of the village that Zhang brings into being), for if they were given names, their power would be at least accessible. The clan elders watch over the lives of the Yang family (including Jinshan), and represent the interests of the family's ancestors, in whose name all living men of the lineage must act. These old men represent the world outside the mill, which is also regulated by strict hierarchies. While they are selecting a name for the newest arrival in the Yang family, they are presented in a symmetrical relationship via a low angle shot to emphasise their standing within the village. In her stylistic analysis of the film, Lau notes that quietness in the frame contributes to an impression of the elders as living ancestral portraits, whose presence deliberately highlights the *absence* of the parents of Tianbai in the negotiations over his identity (1994: 135). However, the portrait of these fathers is very different from the humanity presented in Luo Zhongli's earlier take on ancestral iconography described above.

In *Judou*, the environment is a direct reflection of the strictly regulated life inside the village. In the opening scenes of the film, Tianqing draws his mule back towards the family home. As he nears the village, the landscape seems to close in upon him, from the panoramic establishing shots of mountains, dissolving to the high walls of the village, and through the alleys to the heavy doors of the dye mill. Jinshan's mill itself seems to be in collusion with the proper mores of life in the village. Every movement that Tianqing and Judou make threatens to be given away by the creaking of gates and footsteps echoing through the mill. Its slow, mechanical action corresponds with Zhang's vision of the regulating, persistent action of Yang family law, and its very structure suggests the artificiality of the Confucianism acted out in the village (through its use of uprooted 'natural' materials) with its relentless yet cumbersome progress (in the laboured efforts of the mule to pull the winding wheel). Even the surrounding countryside provides little escape. Neither Tianqing nor Judou are seen to leave the confines of the mill except on errands for Jinshan. The 'family' only venture out to the open space of the countryside under the cover of Jinshan's paralysis, and the second time that Tianqing and Judou wander beyond the confines of the mill, they miss the first words of their child that name Jinshan as father.

## ii) Tianbai - the next generation

In the person of young Tianbai, this gerontocracy has produced an automaton in its own service. He has virtually no skill in expression. His deliberate, automatic gait reinforces the extent to which he represents the mechanical reproduction of patriarchal law; his only speech is the repetition of the regulating set of relationships in Confucian family structure: 'father', 'mother' and 'brother'. His insistence on calling the aging and impotent Jinshan 'Daddy' perpetuates the hierarchies of seniority and gender that lead to the stifling of individual desire. The fact of the paternity of Tianbai in terms of blood is less important than his vocal acceptance of the aged Jinshan as his father. Jinshan's words to his 'son' are as much his own recognition of the implications of Tianbai's first words as reassurance to a child: 'Of course I'm your daddy'. Such confirmation of the relationship between individuals perpetuates and supports the dominance of male elders. William Callahan observes that the act of naming generates and structures patriarchal power relations in *Judou* (1994: 165). Speech calls into being the gender hierarchies of ancient clan law, and the repetition of kinship titles thus guarantees and naturalises social order. It is clear



that Jinshan, as a power holder on the grounds of seniority and with the sanction of clan elders, can choose to allow Tianqing's lack of blood ties to govern his relationship to him. Tianbai is accepted on account of the community's public act of repetition in naming him heir of the family, despite biological imperatives. The importance of symbolic rather than blood kinship relations is underlined by Jinshan's position as patriarch; despite his physical disability, he renders the relationship between Tianqing and Judou less visible by the order that his presence implies.

In contrast to the novel by Liu Heng upon which the film is based, Tianbai commits double patricide in Zhang's film. Significantly, Tianbai's first laughter occurs on Jinshan's drowning, and his reflection is seen for the first time on the murder of Tianqing. He experiences two defining moments of 'selfhood' in the destruction of fathers. However, this recognition is very different from the selfhood that Xueping Zhong describes in her study of male intellectuals. The young boy does not experience any sort of subjectivity, but a realisation of his initiation into the patriarchal order. Tianbai may see the reflection of the patriarch he has come to represent in the red dye vat, more 'perfect' than the adolescent who maliciously drowns an injured man, just as Lacan's child misrecognises a more attractive version of itself in the mirror (Grosz 1990: 32). Tianbai's final act of defiance against Tianqing may be perceived as insurance that the symbolic role of patriarch that he has inherited from Jinshan remains pure, taking his role as successor custodian to Judou to be the prevention of any further sexual transgression on the part of his mother, whatever the cost.

In *Judou*, Zhang Yimou has produced a Freudian questioning of desire and prescribed social identities. While cinema scholars' interpretations of this narrative vary, many employ Liu Heng's novella in their analysis.<sup>10</sup> This focus is on account of the number of disparities between the story of Liu's source and Zhang's finished film, as Silbergeld clearly demonstrates in his list of these alterations from page to screen (1999: 285-287). Zhang's filmic license transforms the novella's main characters into mechanical victims of patriarchy, and lends the film strong Oedipal themes of patricide and identity formation through a voyeuristic gaze. These changes emphasise

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<sup>10</sup> For example, see Chow (1995: 148), Dai (2002: 55), Silbergeld (1999: 285-287).

the dilemmas of young men living in a *modern* China with which Zhang Yimou as filmmaker is preoccupied.

### **5: The Marginalized Father: *To Live* (*Huozhe*, dir. Zhang Yimou, 1994)**

*To Live* is a story of a family in the thirty years from the 1940s, covering the impact of the Civil War, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Zhang's 1994 film seems less an indictment of the father than an account of a man's attempts to provide for his family through the vagaries of history. Its story of a family gradually destroyed by the political and social experiments of the Mao era can be compared to another film made by a classmate of Zhang Yimou from the Beijing Film Academy, Tian Zhuangzhuang. *The Blue Kite* (*Lan fengzheng*, 1993) covers the aftermath of the 1957 Anti-Rightist Campaign and the chaos of the Cultural Revolution through the eyes of the child Tietou, who grows up behind national and family tragedy. The film is structured through three fathers, Tietou's natural father and the two 'step fathers', who share his mother's life. However, while *The Blue Kite* and *To Live* share similar preoccupations with male relationships to patriarchies, Tian Zhuangzhuang's 'son-centred' impressions of individual men destroyed by Mao's fatherhood are far more pessimistic than the hope that Zhang Yimou's ('father-centred') film can still find in family fathers.

#### **a) *The Blue Kite***

*The Blue Kite* chronicles the effects of Mao's rule upon family and emotional life. Tietou's parents, Chen Shujuan and Lin Shaolong, marry and move into their courtyard house in Beijing. However, from the beginning of the film, political events have grave ramifications for the family's private life. Shaolong and Shujuan are forced to delay their wedding for ten days out of respect for Joseph Stalin, whose death is announced days before the planned ceremony.<sup>11</sup> On account of this delay, Tietou (in voice-over narrative) announces that his birth was therefore also delayed. Although this aside may be taken as a jocular comment, it is one among many ways in which the Party determines the life-courses of Tian's protagonists. The film is filled

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<sup>11</sup> The original date of the marriage was to be March 8<sup>th</sup>, International Women's Day. This date could have been chosen on account of its political nature. However, that their marriage was supposed to take place on a day celebrating women, but was rearranged due to the death of Stalin, the father of the Communist world, may comment upon the invasive nature of political patriarchies that the film at large sets out to critique.

with visual and musical omens of the disasters that will tear Chen Shujuan's family apart. For example, when guests sing a song in praise of Mao at the couple's wedding, a gift of a ceramic horse from their friend Li Guodong shatters at a crucial phrase that promises that 'on our motherland's peaceful soil, life gets better and better everyday.' Shujuan and her family will find out that internal peace is hard to find in an era dogged by punitive campaigns, and that China is less of a nurturing motherland than an unforgiving political and emotional landscape, ruled by all-powerful (yet invisible) fathers. Like the small figurine, China will appear to be 'headless' in a succession of food shortages, political surveillance and 'struggles' against its own people.

In her article, 'The Three Fathers in Tian Zhuangzhuang's Film *The Blue Kite*', Hanna Bøje Nielsen argues that Tian's three father figures are each undermined (and killed) as victims of successive political campaigns (1999: 82). Nielsen's subtitle is in itself telling ('The emasculation of males by the Communist Party'). The Party itself is the strongest masculine, fatherly presence, as represented in political announcements and portraits of Mao. From the Anti-Rightist campaign to the first Red Guard attacks of the Cultural Revolution, Tietou grows up under the shadow of Party rule. Just as his parents' marriage was eclipsed by the death of an unknown figure thousands of miles away, Tietou's freedoms are curtailed by the political realities of the times in which he lives. His father, Shaolong, is killed in an accident whilst undergoing labour reform, his indulgent uncle and first stepfather (Li Guodong, whose letter to his bosses in the late 1950s implies that Shaolong may be a Rightist<sup>12</sup>) feels so much guilt for Shaolong's death that he spoils Tietou and Shujuan to the extent that he dies of 'overwork and under-nourishment', and his second stepfather (a prominent Party figure and an 'old comrade' from Shujuan's sister's days in Yan'an) is effectively beaten to death by vengeful Red Guards. Shujuan is finally sent to a labour reform camp. Therefore, the adolescent Tietou is left without both a mother and a father at the conclusion of the film. The destruction of a whole generation on the whims of a remote, paternalistic political authority resembles the human wreckage that Zhang Yimou leaves at the end of *To Live*. However, Tian Zhuangzhuang's film

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<sup>12</sup> Those who were condemned for criticisms of the Party given in the Hundred Flowers Movement (when the Party invited frank criticism of its policies) were labelled Rightists. The pressure to 'deliver' a quota of Rightists to the authorities, often regardless of any political crime, is depicted in *The Blue Kite* when Shaolong's boss at the library protests, wringing his hands, that 'it's not as though we need to find a set number' of employees to assign for punishment, whilst frantically scouring the room for potential scapegoats.

lacks the hope for a better future<sup>13</sup> onto which Fugui in *To Live* determinedly holds despite his family's suffering.

Tian's severity is due to the fact that Tietou is not only Shaolong's son, but he is also a son of the Party. Shujuan wonders privately why, since herself and Shaolong are so unassuming, she has managed to raise such a 'rebel'. Tietou is often seen at a distance from the other children in his courtyard. He is set apart by his younger age, and is picked on or used as the butt of neighbourhood jokes. When an adult arrives, Tietou rushes straight to the security of a grown-up protector. Since his personal fathers prove to be transient, he is most closely related to the development of the regime under which he was raised. *The Blue Kite* implies that an innocent child has been brutalised and scarred by the political events that prevent his family from acting as adequate emotional support. Nevertheless, Tietou's relationship with this power is an ambiguous one. From the beginning of the film, the blue kite of the title acts as a symbol of uncomplicated, undirected liberty that stands in direct comparison with the man-made disasters of the Maoist regime. At the end of this film, the symbol of this freedom lies caught in the branches of a tree, prevented from flying further. Since Shaolong first introduces Tietou to kite flying, the kite is also a symbol of an emotional inheritance passed on from father to son, in which both glimpse a liberty away from their earth-bound troubles. When Tietou is a toddler, Shaolong offers to make another kite each time one flies out of reach. An adolescent Tietou also offers to build a new kite for his stepsister, Niuniu, when his old one lodges itself on a branch. This rebuilding is a symbol of human endeavour, the same endeavour that rules Zhang Yimou's protagonists in *To Live*. However, hope has run out at the end of *The Blue Kite*: is there a future beyond the disasters of the Cultural Revolution, and *can* the ensuing ten years be represented at all? In *The Blue Kite*, individual attempts to hold

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<sup>13</sup> Whilst Chow has criticised *To Live* for its assignment of the characteristic of endurance to the Chinese people, Fugui's perseverance leads the audience to look into the future that lies beyond the injustices of the Maoist past. This emphasis on hope for the future (that 'when you grow up, life will be better') is a theme in the drama from the Mao era (depicting the struggles before 1949) that is represented in *The Blue Kite*. Is Zhang Yimou, so often described as an iconoclast in his early career, ironically in sympathy with such Maoist (retrospective) faith in the future in the ending of *To Live* (for Fugui's hope is far from ridiculed)? At the end of *The Blue Kite*, Shujuan is arrested along with her husband, and Tietou, after attacking one Red Guard with a brick, is badly beaten and is left bleeding on the ground with no symbol of hope except for a tattered blue kite left fluttering in a tree.

onto hopes and ideals fly away, and there is a tension between human efforts to capture the elusive and the refusal of freedom to be captured.<sup>14</sup>

The central motif in *The Blue Kite* is a children's song that Shujuan teaches to Tietou. It is about a baby crow that waits patiently for his mother, knowing that he will always be provided for, since his mother will always feed him. A distorted version of the tune accompanies the final frames of the film. Tietou is the baby who expects care from his mother, but who is deprived of the certainty that, as a child, he will always be nurtured. In a larger sense, the baby crow is emblematic of the Chinese people, who expect love and protection from the Motherland, but who are left to perish (in effect, to fall out of the nest).

## b) *To Live*

### i) Living with history

In *To Live*, Zhang Yimou portrays a fatherhood that is interrupted by the necessities of getting by in political rhetoric, and dramatises the consequences of allowing this 'outside' discourse into the sanctity of the family home. Fugui, *To Live's* father figure, is not strong - in fact, he is determinedly ordinary. Brought to his lowest by his own folly in losing the family property playing dice, he undergoes a process of redemption after which he realises the simple rewards of home and family. From his self-rehabilitation from gambling, Fugui declares that 'there's nothing like my family', yet in the years following 1949, heading a family is presented less as managing individual personalities than surviving by keeping out of political trouble. From the birth of the new system, Fugui quickly changes his litany to 'it's good to be poor. Nothing like it' since his economic losses in the 1940s have saved him from a public execution in the new priorities of the regime. Despite his reassurances to his son that 'if Youqing does as Daddy says, life will get better and better', Fugui cannot win. As a father, his tactics of adherence to the whims of day-to-day politics leaves his family as vulnerable as if he had rebelled against Party dictates. Fugui's actions when faced with decisions about his family in the throws of political campaigns leave

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<sup>14</sup> This tension is illustrated in a scene set in the campaign to eradicate the 'Four Pests' (sparrows, mice, flies and mosquitoes) in 1958. This campaign ended disastrously when a lack of sparrows to eat pests led to crop devastation by insects. Tietou joins in the neighbourhood drive to kill sparrows, in the midst of which the bird he holds in his hand flies away. Tietou insists that 'I didn't let it go, it flew away', encapsulating the tension between human interference and the possibility of independent freedoms that Tian's film at large attempts to portray.

him childless. His son, Youqing, is killed whilst smelting steel during the Great Leap Forward. Although the boy is exhausted, Fugui, for fear of political recriminations, sends him to work. His daughter, Fengxia, dies in childbirth during the Cultural Revolution, since the student rebels staffing the hospital cannot cope with her haemorrhage. Fugui feeds the starving doctor brought out of the punishment sheds to care for Fengxia so many steamed buns that he collapses. In effect, his fatherhood has been taken away from him, since individual decisions have fatal consequences in the weighted atmosphere of political campaigns.

Zhang's film does not blame Fugui for the tragic events of his family, but portrays him as nothing but a flawed man trying to get by in times so fraught they border on, and occasionally transgress into, the ludicrous. At first, Zhang seems to present the same fatalistic attitude to the inevitability of fathers passing on their degeneracy to their sons as he demonstrated in *Judou*. Old Man Xu, Fugui's own father, did his best in his younger days to gamble away the family money. Indeed, Fugui's own rebukes to his father's nagging seem to encapsulate Zhang's own attitude to the gerontocracy governing Chinese society: 'Little bastards from big bastards grow.' Fugui is forced away from his old life by necessity, and seems to break this line of inheritance. Rigid domestic hierarchies are banished from *To Live* after Fugui has gambled away the family home, thus dismantling the economic power partly upon which such institutions are implied to rest. However, an invasive patriarchal authority lives on in the shape of effigies of Mao Zedong.

## **ii) An alternative father**

From the tattered certificate that testifies to Fugui's 'revolutionary activity' in the War of Liberation to the giant sized murals painted on the walls by Fengxia's future husband, Wan Erxi, the display of the Chairman marks political survival, but is also a direct invasion of the family home. The extent to which Communism dominates family ritual is exemplified in Fengxia's wedding, where the highest male authority is Mao himself who displaces Fugui as the head of the family. Mao is, according to the words of the song that is sung at the ceremony, 'dearer than father and mother.' While Zhang suggested that family heads such as Jinshan in *Judou* perpetuated their power through a symbolic order that acted in their interest, it is clear in *To Live* that fathers

in the Mao era have lost such agency to the ever-present yet intangible authority of the Chairman.

For the country's leaders, it is implied, adults and the young alike are children of the Party. The CCP reproduces an oppressive fatherhood that marginalizes individual males, and compromises their abilities to act as fathers in more private spheres. The protagonists of *To Live* clearly live out their lives under the shadow of the narrative of CCP history. As Xiaoming Chen states, key events in Chinese history are often used in Fifth Generation cinema in order to structure the development of the plot and to present China as a despotic society before international audiences (1997: 132). Fugui is clearly overwhelmed by the events of successive political campaigns, each of which has an effect on the well being of his family. Although the Xu family does not meet a series of disasters in their day-to-day lives comparable to those suffered by Tietou's family in Tian Zhuangzhuang's *The Blue Kite*, Zhang portrays Fugui's fatherhood as similarly compromised by the paternalistic (even murderous) force of the Party. Reading *To Live* as an against-the-grain transformation of 'an overly politicised past into an acceptable human story' (Larson 1999: 192) denies the overriding political character of history as it is presented in Zhang's film. Time itself is structured around the disasters of Mao's rule: even Fugui's past in the 1940s is portrayed as a prequel to the Communist takeover.

*To Live* itself has been accused of obedience to the same paternalistic narrative that Fugui and his family endure in an intra-digetic sense. For example, the political campaigns of *The Blue Kite* destroy three successive fathers, and brutalise a son, 'emasculating' individual men whose roles are usurped (albeit in an impersonal sense) by the Party. In a direct contrast, Zhang's film has been described as doing 'little to court controversy' and merely 'gently mocking the naivety of the Mao personality cult', shying away from presenting utter disaster and destruction in favour of a picture of a father who bears his burdens without direct complaint (Rayns 1994: 46). Indeed, Fugui does not rail against the Party, but finds it best to keep his head down, just as *Judou's* Tianqing dares not question the system that keeps him socially and sexually disenfranchised. Perceiving *To Live* as a missed opportunity to articulate opposition against the Communist past (Zhang 2002: 226) denies the deep criticism of the CCP that lies beyond a reading of the film as a tribute to the 'Chinese characteristics' of

endurance and forbearance. In effect, if Fugui and his family are representative of the larger 'family' of the nation, the excesses of Party campaigns have wiped out a whole generation.

Zhang emphasises the fatherly qualities of his main protagonist that are absent from Yu Hua's work (Larson 1999: 189),<sup>15</sup> indicating that Fugui's status as a family father is essential in the interpretation of the events that come to over-shadow his day-to-day existence. Fugui's wife, Jiazhen, fits the trope of the suffering wife and mother (ibid: 188); she is also more rebellious against the regime than her husband. Although she recognises the importance of obedience to the Party authorities in order to live a trouble-free life, she voices her opposition when she believes that her family suffers for this acquiescence. Jiazhen's uncomplicated and filial devotion to her family leaves the narrative free to explore the complications in Fugui's character, and the manner in which history affects his position *as a man*. In Zhang's film, Fugui is presented as more acquiescent to the Party directly on account of his maleness; that is to say, the Party as a masculine force crushes fathers since its role challenges their traditional authority.

### iii) The (grand)son and the future

Only in the final scenes of the film does Fugui hint that the actions of the Party may have been to blame for the misfortunes that his family has suffered. Years earlier, he tells a fable to Youqing, allegorising the ideology of the Great Leap Forward that even small contributions can help the progress of the nation. Fugui tells Youqing that chickens grow into ducks, those ducks turn into sheep, the sheep will grow into oxen and following this prosperity Communism will appear. When Little Bun is a young child, Fugui passes down this same tale to him. However, Fugui does not see the Communist Party as the pinnacle of development in his new tale, but boats and aeroplanes, upon which the young boy will ride into the future. Fugui realises that both his personal fatherhood and the father Mao have failed - sons of the future should not put their hopes in a political paternalism that promises to save. Claire Huot

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<sup>15</sup> For example, the gambling den that Fugui frequents in the early 1940s is also a brothel in Yu Hua's novel, and Fugui boasts openly about sexual conquests with other women. Larson notes the extent to which Zhang erases this less familial side of Fugui's character in order that the audience might more easily empathise with him. For example, Fugui does not beat Jiazhen as he does at the beginning of Yu Hua's work (1999: 189).



points out that, in the original novella by Yu Hua, Fugui's family is destroyed completely and he is left with an ox (2000: 123). While the ox is more eternal, its presence implies that the benevolent fatherhood (in the shape of Communism) promised to the people never arrived.

In her explanation of the relationship between the CCP, 'the intellectual' and 'the masses', Rey Chow points to a 1942 speech by Mao, in which he adapted a Lu Xun couplet into a political allegory that 'all Communists...should learn from the example of (Lu Xun) and be "oxen" for the proletariat and the masses' (1995: 113).<sup>16</sup> The ox that Fugui refers to in *To Live* is superficially a symbol for the good Communist who makes sacrifices in order that true socialism might appear in China. However, Chow points out that oxen also bring to mind a traditional game between parents and children, in which parents kneel down and act as 'oxen' upon which their children ride (ibid: 114). In this sense, the Party is also a *father*, the ox upon whose strong back his children (that is, the masses, represented in Fugui and his family) are supported. Since Mao presents the Chinese 'masses' as children to be guided by the good Communist's fatherly hand, it is fitting that this analogy is reformulated into a children's story in Yu Hua's novella and in Zhang's film. The children in *To Live* are both forever scarred by the fatherly political master narrative that was supposed to save them. Youqing is crushed to death in the sacrifice of his childhood in the service of a political campaign, and Little Bun has been robbed of a mother through the sheer incompetence of the student doctors who claimed to be the representatives of the Chairman. In *To Live*, Mao's interpretation of Lu Xun's couplet has been reversed: instead of the children being carried and protected by the strong, capable Party, Youqing and Little Bun have been let down in the worst possible ways. Notably, Little Bun is not offered an ox upon which to ride into a socialist utopia, but to *ride* upon boats and aeroplanes. The lumbering, fatherly figure of the ox upon whose back the children play has been replaced by a more mechanised journey towards progress, in which the father of the Party is nowhere to be seen. Instead, *To Live* 'recreates the *family* as a site of strength and personal fulfilment' (Larson 1999: 187) in placing the

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<sup>16</sup> Lu Xun (1881-1936, the pen name of Zhou Shuren) is regarded as twentieth century China's greatest writer. He was a critic of traditional Chinese society in his short stories, and was admired by Mao Zedong. Mao uses this quotation, from Lu Xun's *In Mockery of Myself (Zizhao)*, in the Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art in May 1942. The actual couplet reads: 'Fierce-browed, I coolly defy a thousand pointing fingers / Head-bowed, like a willing ox I serve the children.'

final judgement upon the troubles that have beset his family's life in the mouth of Fugui.

**6: The Father Redeemed: *The Road Home* (*Wode fuqin muqin*, dir. Zhang Yimou, 1999)**

While Zhang's 1999 film *The Road Home* apparently tells a love story set in the recent rural past, it in fact centres on a relationship between a father and his only son. However, the film has one significant difference from Zhang's other works portraying similar relationships in that the father, the catalyst for the action of the film, is dead before the opening titles have finished rolling. The story begins in black and white, as two identical four-wheel drive cars make their way across a frozen landscape. The vehicles carry Luo Yusheng, the son of the village schoolteacher Luo Changyu, back home for his father's funeral. When he arrives in his village, he finds his elderly mother, Zhao Di, inconsolable at the loss of her husband. She insists that Changyu's funeral be organised in the traditional way, with his coffin being carried by bearers all the way from the hospital to the remote village, whilst the mourners call out to Changyu on the way, reminding him that he is on 'the road home' to his final resting place. Yusheng finds it difficult to accede to his mother's wishes: Zhao Di insists on weaving a ceremonial cloth for the ceremony herself, and the wintry conditions seem set against such a procession taking place. As narrator, Yusheng explains the determination of his mother in terms of her intense love for his father.

Yusheng begins to tell the story of his parents in flashback, and the action is presented in vivid colour. As an eighteen-year-old girl, Zhao Di lives with her blind mother. When the arrival of a new teacher is announced for the new schoolhouse, the whole village turns out to meet him, curious to set eyes on this new arrival from the city. Di is fascinated by Luo Changyu, the new teacher, and takes part in the village women's work making food for the men busy building the school, cooking her best dishes in the hope that Changyu will choose to eat them. Changyu eats at a different house in the village every evening until the schoolhouse is built, and when he eats at Di's home, he finally responds to her, agreeing to return the next day so that Di can cook his favourite dish.

However, when Changyu visits the house next day, he announces to Di that he will be departing for the city. When Changyu does not return on the date that he had promised, Di becomes worried. She rushes to the schoolhouse over freezing ground on the mistaken assumption that she has heard his voice, after which she becomes ill. Despite her weak health, she insists on walking to the city, but collapses and is carried back to the village by the local mayor. Di is gravely ill, and her mother sends for Changyu, thinking that only the object of her daughter's affections (which she has always considered to be misplaced) can save her. Di awakens to the news that Changyu has appeared, only for him to tell her that he has to return to the city since he left without permission. It is another two years until Changyu comes home and the couple finally marry.

After narrating this love story, which has been transferred into local legend, Yusheng looks at his mother's request for the funeral in a new light, paying for enough men to carry the coffin from the hospital to the village. However, the bearers refuse to take any money, and old pupils come from all over the country to pay their respects. Yusheng and his mother donate their savings to the fund for a new schoolhouse in the village, and Yusheng finally teaches a lesson in the old building, honouring his parents' wishes that he too should become a teacher.

#### **a) Luo Changyu**

In *The Road Home*, Zhang seems to have found a fatherhood worth emulating: one that eschews outside moral doctrines and follows its own path, and is neither imprisoned by discourse nor manipulative of doctrine for personal power. He creates an environment in which respect for an older generation can thrive, combining traditional ethics of deference with a very modern concept of love freely chosen between individuals. In this late work, Zhang portrays a father who ensures a space for his own agency.

Luo Changyu's death frees him to become a symbol for the unblemished idea of cultural and personal fatherhood that Zhang Yimou wishes to convey. We only see a young and strong Changyu as he arrives in the village as a twenty year old, fixing him in our imaginations as a vital young man rather than the ailing figure he must have presented before his death. Tall and broad shouldered, striding across fields and with

a voice that rings over the village from the classroom, Mr Luo is a world away from Tianqing or Fugui. Moreover, whereas convention curtails the actions of Zhang's previous fathers, in the form of traditional gerontocracy, political obedience, or concern over village gossip, Changyu goes out of his way to prevent the involvement of Di and the village in the 'political trouble' over which he is called back to the city for questioning.<sup>17</sup> Any political criticism in *The Road Home* has to be carefully pieced together. The propaganda posters on the walls of the schoolhouse only hint at the themes that are expected to govern Mr Luo's lessons.

The love story of Yusheng's parents is presented in vivid, almost blinding, colour in *The Road Home*, in contrast to the monochrome, frozen world of the present. Yusheng's appreciation for his parents' love story and its transference into local legend is remarkable. However, it is worth questioning the motives behind this painstaking recreation. It is possible that this loving father may be as much of a construction of Yusheng's imagination as is the brutal, interpellated fatherhood that Zhang depicts in *Judou*. That is, Yusheng's need to perpetuate this image of his father may reflect both his need for a male role model and Zhang's own tendencies towards the father seeking that Dai describes in her essay. Zhang combines a very modern (Western) belief in a loving nuclear family with the values that he wishes to preserve in the China before the reform era - a China, of course that is untouched by what he perceives as the ideological excesses of the past.

However, is Changyu as distanced from the fatherly narrative of the Party as he appears? Although he may have been rusticated from the city, he appears as potentially dissident from Party discourse from the beginning of the film. Nevertheless, he accepts his 'punishment' of exile to the countryside, telling Di's mother quietly that he has 'got used to' rural life, and that he signed up to the countryside voluntarily.<sup>18</sup> Changyu has submitted to Party rule, to the extent that he

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<sup>17</sup> The Anti-Rightist campaign began in 1957, following the Hundred Flowers Movement, which encouraged intellectuals to criticise the policies of the regime. *The Road Home* is set during this period, when intellectuals were punished and 'rusticated' for their earlier criticisms of the regime. Only a brief shot of a calendar indicates a date of 1958 for the film's flashback sequences.

<sup>18</sup> It is possible that Changyu has been sent to work as a country teacher as a punishment for speaking out in the Hundred Flowers movement. If he is truthful in his claim that he came to the countryside voluntarily, Changyu may stand for Zhang Yimou's belief in the simplicity and honesty of the Chinese rural landscape, which he formulates as a site for Luo Changyu's fatherly wisdom, far from the corrupt city.

does not rail against his circumstances, returning to the city for questioning over the charges that have been levelled against him. To this extent, he resembles Fugui and Tianqing in that his life course is determined by a paternalistic system that claims to know what is best for him. Conversely, unlike Tianqing or Fugui, he manages to keep those close to him safe from harm.

#### **b) A patrilineal oral culture**

Mr Luo probably is detained on account of the text through which he conducts his lessons which is, as we hear at the end of the film, not the official curriculum. Mr Luo teaches his own values and, importantly, controls his own text, in that he does not serve a political or social master narrative. Zhao Di confesses that she is ‘in love with’ Changyu’s voice, and visits the schoolhouse everyday to hear Changyu recite his lessons. This emphasis on Changyu’s voice is important. His words replace the verbal intercessions into everyday life expected of China in the 1950s - there is no didactic Party Secretary in *The Road Home*, nor do loudspeakers announce the latest campaign. Changyu’s vocal strength also indicates his authority within the film, and it provides a counterpoint to Yusheng’s own narrative voice when he relays his parents’ love story. In this case, the voice of the son is counterpoised by the measured lessons of the father, whose voice, it is implied, never truly fades away. The educational text written by Changyu does not speak of the virtues of Communism, but respect for fellow human beings. One of its maxims is that pupils must ‘have respect for your elders’, a phrase picked out by the narrative and repeated by Yusheng in his own teaching of the class at the end of the film. Such a nod to the old-fashioned virtue of the young knowing their place appears to be a reversal for Zhang, almost unimaginable in the context of the disdain for male elders he had shown in *Judou*, for example.

In *The Road Home*, cultural reproduction is left firmly in the hands of men. Mr Luo is the sole disseminator of knowledge until his dying day, and this legacy is passed on to Yusheng. Although Yusheng’s teaching is also prompted by the requests of his mother, these requests are in sympathy with the legacy passed on from father to son. As his father did before him, Yusheng now has the power to write history. Hope is placed in Yusheng’s hands, even though this future is implied to depend upon a healthy respect for the past. Even the schoolhouse, the site for the acculturation of the

next generation, is built solely by men. The only contributions left to the females of the village are formed through cooking (nurturing) and weaving. Zhao Di herself is illiterate into her old age, despite the educated background of her husband. The cloth that she weaves for the main beam of the schoolhouse is bright red, a colour favoured by Zhang to represent passion, sexuality and individuality. Where Luo Changyu contributes cerebral intelligence to the film, Zhao Di is symbolised by this redness, this emotion and impetuosity. Despite the fact that Luo Changyu is clearly the object of Zhao Di's desiring gaze (once more, Zhang reverses Mulvey's formula of 'to-be-looked-at-ness'<sup>19</sup>), she remains the bearer of the emotion that her son seeks to rationalise through the extended flashback that constitutes the majority of the film.

The title of Zhang's film has a meaning beyond the physical route upon which Luo Changyu's coffin travels: it symbolises a larger male inheritance. In *Primitive Passions*, Rey Chow engages Lu Xun's 1921 observation on the arbitrary nature of human history, that 'when many men pass one way, a road is made' (1995: 110).<sup>20</sup> Mr Luo certainly makes his own road. He claims that he has volunteered for teaching service in the countryside, and although he is torn away from the schoolhouse and from Zhao Di by the call of the Party, he returns twice by the same road upon which he was dragged away. While Chow convincingly reflects the ambiguous and arbitrary intentions of Lu Xun's original text, in 1999 Zhang Yimou presents a more positive appraisal. While the CCP may have forced people down a road (as demonstrated by Changyu's compulsory removal by the Party), Luo Changyu encourages a more gentle approach. In what can be read as a blueprint for the relationship between the male intellectual and the peasant 'masses' (the centre of male intellectual dilemmas both at the turn of the century and in 1980s China), Luo Changyu's lessons in human relations have influenced generations of pupils. His funeral procession literalises the 'road' that he has made by means of the education of his pupils. Like his father before him, Yusheng has taken the road from the city to Di's village and is richer for it.

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<sup>19</sup> In the opening scenes of *Red Sorghum*, the muscular backs of the sedan carriers, including that of the character 'My Grandpa', are perceived through Jiu'er's desiring gaze. Cui and Chow contend that Judou's act of exposure to Tianqing undercuts his voyeurism and disputes her status as an object of the male gaze (Cui 1997, Chow 1995). These instances reverse the gendered dichotomy of looking in Laura Mulvey's influential article (1987).

<sup>20</sup> This quotation is taken from Lu Xun's 1921 story, *Hometown (Guxiang)*. The story is translated into English in Lu Xun (trans. William A Lyell) *Dairy of a Madman and Other Stories* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1990).

While roads symbolised outside intrusion in Zhang's first film, *Red Sorghum*, they are now seen as a way of remaking connections that tie individuals to their past and, therefore, to their fathers. In *The Road Home*, roads are certainly made by men.

### c) Fathers and pedagogy: Luo Changyu as a social father

Luo Changyu is not only a personal father to Yusheng, he is also a father figure inside his community through his role as teacher. *The Road Home* does not question the institution of pedagogy. The arrival of a new teacher is equally perceived to be the arrival of progress. In contrast, an earlier film by Zhang's 1980s collaborator, Chen Kaige, critiques 'what it means to base culture on the kind of repetition that is copying' through a story of a young teacher based in a village in the Cultural Revolution (Chow 1995: 120). In *King of the Children* (*Haizi wang*, 1987), Chen Kaige challenges the efficacy of an education system that merely interpellates its students into a limiting written culture, against which is juxtaposed the authenticity, violence and vulgarity of the natural world. The schoolhouse in *The Road Home* is no such 'ideological state apparatus' (Althusser 1971: 136).<sup>21</sup> The later production of *The Road Home* may account for its difference from Chen Kaige's iconoclastic attack on the repetition that he saw reaching its apotheosis in the adherence to doctrine of the Cultural Revolution. Instead, in *The Road Home*, Zhang Yimou does not attack Mr Luo's traditional educational *methods*: in fact, he ensures their survival for the future by means of Yusheng's symbolic inheritance that is played out at the conclusion of the film.

## 7: Conclusions: Zhang Yimou's changing attitude to fatherhood

How has Zhang Yimou's portrayal of personal and social fathers changed since the iconoclastic attack upon patriarchies that he articulated in *Judou*? This section summarises the main observations of this chapter, and lists several key characteristics in Zhang Yimou's attitude to fatherhood.

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<sup>21</sup> According to the theories of Louis Althusser, an ideological state apparatus (ISA) is an institution that works by persuasive means in order to maintain a dominant ideological position, such as schools, the family, or the written and visual media (1971).

### a) Personal versus political fatherhood

Zhang Yimou characterises fatherhood as going beyond individual parentage to a wider gerontocracy endemic in Chinese society, from the strict regulations of his version of Confucian ritual orthodoxy to the paternalistic Maoist state. Nevertheless, in the chronological course of the films discussed, Zhang may present an ‘indictment’ of the larger social fatherhood enforced by belief systems, but rather than rejecting the seniority of older men over their sons in its entirety, he offers a more benevolent replacement. Zhang’s ideal conception of fatherhood is a personal one. While he disdains fathers who allow apparently ‘outside’ doctrines to invade the family home, Mr Luo in *The Road Home* has refused the construction of his role either by village tradition or the state. In this clear partition between the personal and political (new for Zhang), Mr Luo is active in his own destiny, whereas Jinshan, Tianqing and Fugui have all surrendered their agency in the face of, or act in complicity with, dominant social discourses. Although Zhang’s ideal fatherhood is undoubtedly ‘natural’ and personal, this authority can extend into the social, as Changyu’s role as respected local intellectual shows. However, fatherhood as a social function rarely extends into the personal, as Jinshan aptly demonstrates in *Judou*.

All the fathers discussed have their life courses determined by overriding paternalistic discourses. Tianqing is relegated to a marginal position in his family and in the village, and even the patriarch Jinshan is obsequious to the clan elders who hold his respectability in their hands. Fugui obeys the Party’s rules and finds himself punished for it, whilst Changyu (despite his agency in escaping the Party’s initial hold on him) still accepts his sentence as a rightist like an obedient son. Essentially, both ‘Confucianism’ and Communism turn fathers into sons, and treat old men like boys. In Zhang’s films, mothers offer the resistance to the forces that oppress their husbands. Although *Judou* may not seek to destroy the male dominated family, she protests against the social system that positions her beholden to an impotent old man rather than to a younger, virile one. Similarly, Jiazhen voices her objections to Fugui’s vacillations, and Zhao Di transgresses against both tradition (in expressing her feelings so openly) and the new ideas of Communism (in her determination to seek out Changyu in the city). Indeed, Changyu’s funeral rites may equally testify to the strength of the relationship between Di and Yusheng as the ties between father and son. Di’s determination ensures that her husband is carried on the road home, and her



strength secures Changyu's love in the first place. Is the story really about the bond between mother and son? However, mothers directly challenge larger social paternalism in their interruption of patriarchal narratives, but they do not ask for personal liberation from male dominated family life. The assumption of the authority of fathers is left unchallenged, for women are on the side of one more personal father against a larger, more authoritarian *patriarchy*.

#### b) Sons as witnesses

While fathers have the ritual and social power to write history in all three films, their sons remain as witnesses as the titles roll. Zhang Yimou's narratives commonly 'place the gesture towards the future on the male protagonist' (Larson 1999: 193). In *Judou*, Tianbai is left to continue the Yang family line and its traditions. In his menacing appearance, the silent young man stands as the pattern for China's future (which is already the past in an extra-digetic sense). The implication of Tianbai's survival at the end of the film implies that the future will be in the hands of such hollow, slavish adherents to doctrine. Conversely, in *To Live*, no son survives to carry on any patriarchal narrative into the future. Whilst the dominant CCP system leaves more survivors than does Zhang's Confucianism in *Judou*, Fugui and Jiazhen are weakened and old. Although Little Bun seems too young to take on the responsibility of the family's continuation, let alone to understand its misfortunes in the past, Zhang implies that his innocence offers a shred of hope for the future. Conversely, Yusheng in *The Road Home* is clearly marked out as a symbol of hope against the power of a rapidly modernising world. He successfully carries out the wishes of his father, taking on the responsibility for writing his family narrative.

This growing freedom that can be attained by following the paths of wise fathers is illustrated in the physical settings of the three films. Whereas *Judou* is set in enclosed courtyards, with light only being filtered by the mill's heavy beams, themselves emblematic of post-Tiananmen cultural claustrophobia (Dai 1999: 197), the atmosphere is more open in *To Live*. However, most of the action is physically confined within city streets and narratively determined by the structure of CCP history. In *The Road Home*, the audience is faced with panoramic views and endless countryside, implying that freedom resides away from the city and from the bureaucratic power bases of a paternalistic Party.

### c) The Son's generation: Zhang Yimou becomes an obedient son

Does Zhang achieve the subjectivity as filmmaker for which Xueping Zhong insists that male intellectuals were searching, or is he firmly rooted in the 'Son's generation' that Dai describes? Mary Farquar notes Zhang's resistance to the interpretation of his films as being dominated by a 'son's gaze' that challenges patriarchies and spurs female characters to action.<sup>22</sup> I would argue that his films to date represent a negotiation of the very paternal dilemma that Farquar describes, as his standpoint towards history and its master narratives alters. Visually, Zhang's very style as filmmaker distances him from past representational codes. However, although *The Road Home's* use of close up goes some way to defamiliarise familiar cinematic terrain, he can be said to be returning to more conventional patterns of representation. Zhang appears to be a more filial than rebellious son, insisting on the dangers of dominant paternal narratives' power to disrupt individual subjectivity (which he appears to believe in). In *The Road Home*, the tension that Dai observed in the 1980s between male intellectuals' leanings towards destroying fathers and their need to seek them out is resolved in contrast with the double patricide enacted in *Judou*. In teaching the morals of his father at the conclusion of the film, Yusheng's action carries more symbolic weight than a consent to his parents' wishes. The son now becomes the mouthpiece for his father's views and is initiated into a position from which he can write the history over which Zhang himself struggles in an extra digetic sense. This vision is a remarkable change from the grim spectre of Tianbai in *Judou*, who also is left with the power to write his family's history. I contend that Zhang perceives this history, so often cited as the crux of his films to date, in part as a set of negotiations between sons and their social and personal fathers, and their claims to knowledge. He does not wish to destroy the influence of older men, but to criticise the way in which this authority has been manipulated and abused.

### 8: Benign paternalism: Zhang Yang's *Shower*

In 2000, Zhang Yimou released *Happy Times (Xingfu shiguang)*, the Cinderella story of a blind teenaged girl, who is cared for by a substitute father figure, Old Zhao, the middle-aged fiancé of her materialistic stepmother. In this film, in which a thin,

<sup>22</sup> Farquar's article is reproduced on the website *Senses of Cinema* (<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/02/zhang.html>, accessed 5/10/2002).

attractive young actress is employed as a metaphor for the fate of the vulnerable in a consumer-orientated society, the virtues of a family fatherhood are unambiguous. In *Happy Times*, the oppressive discourse is not the Party (which is benignly represented as the abandoned state owned machine workshop in which Old Zhao was once employed), but rather the indifference of a society moving further and further away from family values. Zhang once more selects what he finds worthwhile in the China of the past (in this case, the socialist emphasis on mutual help), and pits this against a time when youth and avarice seem to rule. However, this story does not end happily: the blind teenaged Wu Ying sets off on a search to find her inadequate and ineffectual real father when she realises the extent of Zhao's sacrifices for her happiness, and Zhao himself ends unconscious in a hospital bed after a road accident. The substitute father Zhao cannot solve the problems of his substitute daughter, and Wu Ying faces the indifference of the bustling crowd, literalising the lack of moral sight of those around her. The heroes in *Happy Times* are the older generation of workers, ordinary Beijingers from state-owned factories that have closed down, leaving them without a niche in a society concerned with jumping into the much more glamorous sea of entrepreneurship. Instead of an emphasis on the relationship between fathers and their sons, Zhang now breaks this tie, in effect depersonalising *Happy Times* from the issues of creative independence and authorship that lay behind his previous films concerned with fatherhood. The overriding threat now is not oppressive fathers, but unchecked (and feminised) Western consumerism, a very different 'master narrative' from the aggressive paternalism that once ruled Zhang's cinematic vision.

Another recent film also emphasises a benevolent fatherhood against the incursion of impersonal consumerism, this time directed by Zhang Yang. *Shower* (*Xizao*, 1999) is the story of Mr Liu, a proprietor of a bathhouse in an old district of Beijing, and his relationship with his two sons.<sup>23</sup> His youngest son, Erming, lives with him in the bathhouse and helps him to run the family business. Erming also is mentally handicapped. Daming, Mr Liu's eldest son, works far from Beijing in the Special Economic Zone in Shenzhen and is a successful entrepreneur in China's post-Mao economic climate. The story begins when Daming returns from the south after

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<sup>23</sup> Although the film has the English-language title of *Shower*, *xizao* can be translated as to wash, or to take a bath, as well as to shower. It is possible that the film's English title may refer to showering as a symbol of the modernisation that is one of the film's central themes.

receiving a postcard with a drawing by his brother that appears to portray his father lying dead. When Daming realises that there is no family crisis, he phones his wife in Shenzhen to say that he will soon be back home. However, he spends a couple of days at home with his family before he leaves. He also helps in the bathhouse, which is an essential community service for the men of the neighbourhood, who congregate to relax and share the local gossip. Zhang Yang presents several of these colourful locals, from two old men who fight their crickets against each other (but more often bicker among themselves), to the failing yet always hopeful local entrepreneur, and the neighbour who fights constantly with his nagging wife. Mr Liu is familiar with all his regulars and acts as a local problem solver-cum-counsellor, arbitrating in the disputes of the old men, advising the budding entrepreneur when he is chased by moneylenders and getting the argumentative couple back together.

Cracks begin to show in the Liu family relationship, however, when Daming inadvertently loses his younger brother on an outing. In his anger and despair at losing his youngest son, Mr Liu accuses Daming of not caring for his family in Beijing, only coming home for the promise of an inheritance. Daming and his father eventually reconcile when Daming begins to see the virtues of the old community. However, just as he is beginning to get to know his father and brother once more, his father becomes ill, and the family discover that their area is to be demolished to make way for a modern shopping mall. Mr Liu dies in the bathhouse shortly afterwards, and Daming is left with the responsibility of caring for his younger brother, who is in despair. In order to explain the situation to his wife who is unaware of Erming's condition, Daming plans to return home and leave Erming in the care of a residential institution. Despite Daming's initial intentions, Mr Liu's family values seem to have rubbed off, for he cannot shirk his responsibilities and returns to collect the distressed Erming almost as soon as he has left him in the bleak care home. Daming phones his wife, informing her of his decision not to part from Erming, news that she receives with a stunned silence. Meanwhile, the bulldozers move in on the old district, as residents pile their belongings up to move to more modern housing, and the bathhouse sign is finally taken down.

### a) Generational changes in the Liu family

Essentially, the film is about the virtues of tradition whilst accepting 'progress' with the quiet equanimity brought by the forbearance learned from the past. The Liu family is deliberately presented without a matriarch in order to highlight the masculine prerogatives and responsibilities upon which the narrative is based; that is, the virtues of filial piety and guardianship of a national heritage are presented through the Liu family unit as exclusively *male* concerns. Mr Liu is a perfect example of this tradition in action. Living within the *hutongs* of an ancient capital, he not only runs a business but also a community centre for the men of the district, offering a fatherly hand to his younger customers and friendly advice to his own generation. Mr Liu seems to offer knowledge without prejudice or outside agendas. He acts as a social father to the community, not only providing moxibustion treatments and massages, but also giving advice that keeps his patrons' lives on the right track. Living with Erming, Mr Liu has had to carry on his personal fatherly responsibility well into his old age, when parents of other sons might well be expecting to be cared for themselves.

However, the Liu family unit is jolted by the arrival of Daming. In a buttoned up, fitted suit, he immediately stands in contrast to his father and Erming, who have no need to dress so formally. Daming, the superficial model of Deng Xiaoping's 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' in action, has a faraway look in his eyes, and appears physically and mentally divorced from his old home. Daming also confesses that he prefers showers to bathing, since this express form of personal hygiene is nothing strange in his new home. In the south, Zhang Yang implies, washing is simply washing, unencumbered by the traditions represented in the Liu family bathhouse (necessitated, of course, by the lack of bathing facilities in traditional housing). His arrival is deliberately foregrounded by the opening scenes of the film. The futuristic dreams of the bathhouse's failed entrepreneur are juxtaposed with the regulated rhythms of the massages performed by Erming and his father. Daming is also connected to the fast paced life mentioned in the film's very first words ('Look at the pace of our lives') by his mobile phone, which he uses to keep in contact with his new wife. Indeed, Daming seems to have 'made it' in the new China represented by Shenzhen, the very symbol of economic growth (in a more positive sense) but which is also, as the morality of Zhang Yang's film insists, one of the 'free-market fleshpots' of the south (Rayns 2001: 58).

Zhang Yang, therefore, sets up a deliberate contrast between Daming and his father, with Mr Liu standing for the virtues of a simple, distinctly (northern) Chinese life. While Daming begins as an embodiment of the fast-paced existence parodied in the futuristic shower demonstrated in the title sequence of the film, Mr Liu presents fatherly comfort and stability for both Chinese and international audiences. He is a symbol for tradition as a benevolent force, helping to create a whimsical, unthreatening idea of China for a foreign audience. For Chinese viewers, he enforces a strong sense of national identity in an uncertain social and economic future. As a strong father figure, Mr Liu also underlines Beijing as a centre of 'Chineseness' in his role as the bearer of tradition. Whereas Mr Liu loves his son, his disappointment at his abandonment of the parental home is blatantly clear, even before Erming goes missing. As an exasperated Mr Liu confesses to Daming, 'I know you don't respect what I do... you want to do big things.' Erming, too, acts as a foil to the modernity represented by his brother. Erming is seen as a harmless child who delights in simplicity - his handicap seems to render any complexity in his character impossible. When he plays with a sprinkler used for watering flowers, his joy in making this prosaic object into a fountain is underlined for the audience by the inclusion of a Disney-esque soundtrack. It is clear that Erming is to be cared for - he is the catalyst for Daming's education in the virtues of his father's way of living and the spur to Daming's conscience that makes him into a more filial son. By adhering to every representational cliché in the book, Erming is a sponge for the sentiment of his brother and the audience.

#### **b) *Shower* and women**

The exclusively male unit of the Liu family neatly corresponds to the nature of the bathhouse, for Mr Liu provides an exclusively male space, shut off from the public street by doors and curtains, in which men are able to escape the pressures of modern life, and perhaps to find space away from their wives. Women do not feature prominently in *Shower*. Customer Zhang's wife is presented as nagging and shrill, until her husband's impotence is revealed to the audience. More significantly, Daming's wife is only present on the end of a telephone line. We do not hear her voice, being free to imagine her responses to Daming's repeated promises that he will be on the next available flight home. In this silence, the audience is conditioned to

fear the worst of Daming's new wife, situated as she is in Shenzhen, morally and geographically miles away from the traditional virtues of northern life that the film sets out to praise. Moreover, Mr Liu has never met his daughter-in-law, surely an unfilial omission on Daming's part, further demonising her in the audiences' eyes. Daming's spouse is positioned as the representative of all that Zhang Yang sees as having gone too far in China's thirst for modernisation; she is an emblem of the fast life that is satirised in the opening scenes of the film.<sup>24</sup> Her telephone call not only leads Daming away from his father at the moment of his death, but her silence at Daming's announcement that he will be taking over the care of Erming in his father's absence damns her as unfeeling and unfilial. Daming is not beyond redemption, acting upon his responsibility to his father (the ideology behind which is never questioned by the film), while his wife is given the responsibility for this family rupture, interrupting an unquestionably male narrative, however blithely it disguises itself.

Daming's wife (notably never given a name) stands in contrast to his mother. While Daming's wife represents the inhospitable present and the dangers of the future in her apparent disregard for Chinese family values, Mr Liu's deceased wife, like her husband, is a symbol for the authenticity of the past. While Mr Liu is firmly positioned in the narrow *hutongs* of his native district (which he insists that he has never left), his wife apparently comes from the remote northwest. In two flashback sequences, Zhang visualises anecdotes of her youth. The first involves her family's sacrifices in order to procure enough water for her to bathe before her wedding night in their drought-afflicted village. The second tale, presented at the conclusion of the film, features a pilgrimage that Mr Liu's wife makes as a child with her Buddhist grandmother to a holy lake. The sequences seem incongruous in the extremely local setting of *Shower*. Therefore it is necessary to question their function in the film and their relevance to its narrative of fathers and sons.

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<sup>24</sup> These initial scenes are a fantasy sequence, imagined by the bathhouse's failed entrepreneur, Hezheng. He sees himself entering a street booth, which offers a completely automated washing experience. Clothes are removed from his body by robotic arms, and a shower is automatically triggered. These scenes are followed by shots of life in the bathhouse, inferring both that this automated vision of the future is far from reality (although its emphasis on speed and efficiency is part of the society that Zhang criticises), and that the Liu family bathhouse (with its emphasis on community) is a far superior alternative.

Firstly, Mr Liu's wife is not portrayed as a mother, fixing her in a kind of legendary past. The scenes themselves are hard to take seriously in the light of Fifth Generation narratives that portray the parched landscaped of north west China and its 'primitive' people, a similarity that has not escaped the attention of critics familiar with Chinese cinema (Rayns 2001: 58). In fact, the story of the wedding preparations seems to fit the conditions for success for Chinese films described by Yingjin Zhang (1998: 118)<sup>25</sup>, with the young, beautiful and sad Chinese girl removing her clothes to step into the bath prepared by her mother before she must be carried, red-veiled, to her wedding. However, the husband turns out not to be a malicious old patriarch, but the father of Daming and Erming. The inconsistency of presenting a husband who has never left his native Beijing being married to a girl living thousands of miles away is not explained, since these scenes are less significant for their narrative function than for their representational power.

### c) A fatherly China

I contend that Mr Liu's wife acts as an illustration of the value of the morality that her husband and his business represent. Her background explains the value of water as a giver of both life and dignity, qualities that her husband's bathhouse passes on even to busy city inhabitants. The film as a whole insists on the importance of heritage through which nations and individuals can move on into the future. Although the scenes of Mrs Liu's past in the northwest may appear incoherent inside the essentially linear narrative of the film, they tie Beijing to China's periphery, insisting that these geographically and culturally divided peoples can share a common history. This outlook diverges from earlier Fifth Generation representations that portrayed China's northwest as an alien landscape, far from the reaches of dominant narratives. However, Zhang Yang uses this same scenery in the service of the same master narrative that his predecessors were trying to unravel, that of a single, fatherly China with uncomplicated, common values.

In *Shower*, there is clearly an implication that the legacies of fathers to their sons are to be valued; the film does not overtly present an oppressive, fatherly / paternalistic

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<sup>25</sup> For Yingjin Zhang, films believed to be successful with Western audiences displayed a 'primitive landscape and its sheer visual beauty..repressed sexuality and its eruption in transgressive moments of eroticism..gender performance and sexual exhibition..and a mythical or cyclical time frame in which the protagonist's fate is predestined' (1998: 118).



narrative that determines the actions of individual protagonists. Mr Liu is presented as a symbol for what is good in past family tradition, showing none of its faults, as singularly portrayed by Jinshan in *Judou*, for example. The Communist Party (the other source of master narratives in Zhang Yimou's earlier work) is equally as benign, and, paradoxically, not seen in an overtly political light. We are reminded that the film is set in Communist China by the efficient voice of the radio announcer, who calls out callisthenic exercises over the loud speaker, and, of course, by the notice that the district is to be torn down. However, there is another dominant narrative, which is represented in modernisation. West is not always best, Zhang Yang insists, if its values strangle the long-held traditions of home and family. In fact, the progress brought in by the Party (in the shape of the bulldozers) is seen as distinctly more trustworthy than that represented by (unregulated) Shenzhen. Rapid modernisation is *feminised* and unfamilial, (dis)embodied in the mysterious silence on the end of the mobile telephone that stands for Daming's wife. Pitted against this unconsidered modernisation is the *masculine* family unit, as represented by Mr Liu and Erming.

At the conclusion of the film, Mr Liu's death has brought Daming to a greater level of awareness. His unfilial abandonment of his family cannot be repeated when he is now its head. For example, Zhang Yang deliberately presents the institution in which Daming temporarily abandons his brother (in its very existence contrary to the 'Confucian' value of caring for family members in the home) as a stark, unwelcoming place. Zhang's deliberate juxtaposition of the warm-hearted Erming's presence in such an emotionally cold environment further encourages the audience to react in sympathy with the deceased Mr Liu's outlook. *Shower's* portrayal of a world bereft of Chinese family codes as a barren place leaves Daming no alternative but to care for his brother. Only Erming resists the change that is brought by the bulldozers, refusing to allow the movers inside his father's old business. Despite his handicap (and in an old theatrical conceit), Erming is portrayed as the wisest of the neighbourhood, a 'holy fool' (Rayns 2001: 58) who recognises the human loss that will ensue following the physical destruction of the bathhouse building. The other members of the neighbourhood accept the change without resistance but with a measure of regret. One old regular even records the event on his video camera, presenting a visual symbol of the contradictions of modern China. Mr Liu's neighbourhood dies with him as though it could not survive without its symbol of community.

*Shower* is a predictable film with familiar themes for both Chinese and international audiences. Despite the film's setting in an all male bathhouse, the direct view provided by the camera precludes any suggestion of homoeroticism. Instead, nakedness comes to represent the emotional honesty of the bathhouse, and the equality that can be found for men within its walls, unlike the status-driven, conspicuous consumption in the 'outside', modern world. The film also deliberately eschews 'masculinity' as any kind of muscular bravado. The old men (a Chinese 'odd couple') bicker like a married pair, and their sport of cricket fighting mocks notions of martial heroism. Customer Zhang appears to be chauvinistic, spending all his days at the bathhouse, ignoring his wife's demands that he should return home. When he announces that his wife 'needs a good whipping', he promptly drops his bath towel, revealing himself to the whole room and deflating any threat of violence. Moreover, his bravado melts as soon as he rows with her, confessing his impotence to Mr Liu. Emotional intelligence and measured fatherhood are seen as more acceptable versions of manhood. However, is Zhang Yang providing an alternative, intelligent masculinity, or does he portray (sexually) unthreatening, gentle Chinese men to lull international viewers? Undoubtedly, the triumph of traditional Chinese virtues in a close Beijing community appeals to foreign sentiment, presenting an ideal (notably, slightly *antiquated*) expression of human relations. The male gender identities that *Shower* espouses are founded upon the obedience to hierarchies and order that the youthful films of the Fifth Generation attempted to shatter. Instead, Zhang Yang turns orientalism on its head and represents the worst of 'Western' modernisation as *feminine* (that is, a growing emphasis on consumerism and individualism) by means of Daming's anonymous wife.

#### **d) West is not best**

Zhang Yang's message is that father often does know best, a message that he insists that China as a whole should carry with them into the dangerous territory of economic change. Whilst Zhang Yimou made *The Road Home* as a response to the consumerism that he saw infiltrating Chinese culture, *Shower* meets change with more open arms and presents a more uncritical view of 'the father.' Although Mr Liu is firmly placed as a symbol of the past, his values are presented as a path to the future. Like Luo Changyu in *The Road Home*, Mr Liu represents all that is best in tradition, omitting

the oppressive gerontocracy portrayed in *Judou*. Moreover, *Shower* does not portray an oppressive master narrative. If anything it warns of a potential one in the guise of modernisation imported wholesale (it is implied) from the West. While Zhang Yimou's films set alternative patriarchal narratives in the past, Zhang Yang warns of such a peril in the future, in the shape of an unguarded modernisation process that fails to acknowledge the human values of tradition.

Like Fugui in *To Live*, Mr Liu accepts his lot: however, his life outside the immediate concerns of the moral message of the film is left unexplained. While Fugui suffers through history, history is not mentioned in *Shower* since (paradoxically for a film ostensibly concerned with past traditions and ritual) Zhang Yang is more concerned with the future. If history is mentioned at all, it is in the service of binding China's diverse traditions together. Fathers do not only represent history but a more unambiguously positive conception of heritage. However, they are firmly placed in the past, and the future of moderate modernisation is seen to lie very much with their sons. The community in Zhang Yang's Beijing accepts this future with the equilibrium presented in Zhang Yimou's *To Live*. However, whilst Fugui has his family destroyed by the Party, dominant historical narratives are not an oppressive force in *Shower*. Instead, history does not cast burdens on a younger generation of men, but liberates them from the false promises of an uncertain future.

This chapter has demonstrated that the concept of fatherhood has changing meanings in changing economic and social realities. Its representation in the 1990s carries on many of the themes of early reform era productions, such as the search for subjectivity on the part of filmmakers in the midst of patriarchal master narratives. However, these later works have different emphases from their predecessors. Both Zhang Yimou and Zhang Yang are very conscious of being sons to both personal and symbolic fathers. Nevertheless, Zhang Yimou's direct experience of Mao's rule makes his attitude towards fatherhood vastly different from the younger Zhang Yang. While Zhang Yimou sees family fathers as sons to the dominant social systems of the past, thus compromising their ability to carry out their responsibilities, Zhang Yang turns towards the future. This future lies in following all that is good in the fatherhood of the past in order to curtail the individualism of the reform era generation. The individual fathers in the films of Zhang Yimou and Zhang Yang are placed firmly in

the past, whatever their qualities. Only towards the end of the 1990s does this past turn into nostalgia as a direct response to China's uncertain future in the face of expanded consumerism and modernisation. In this situation, despite their different personal histories, both Zhang Yimou and Zhang Yang insist that sons may need the help of a fatherly guiding hand.

## CHAPTER SIX – DISCUSSION

This thesis has explored the representation of masculinities in films from the Fifth and Sixth Generations of Mainland Chinese filmmakers. It has hypothesised that these directors either represent male protagonists that are ‘on the run’ *from* more official formulations of male gender identity, or those who reject this past altogether and actively rush *towards* contemporary conceptions of individual expression and ‘modernity’. In other words, the male protagonists engaged by this study attempt to escape from an all encompassing state *masculinity* rooted in the revolutionary past, eventually striving towards the goal of expressing multiple, often conflicting, *masculinities*. However, the main body of this study has demonstrated that this is not simply an uncomplicated rejection of an all-powerful master narrative in favour of a utopian subjectivity. The films in this study represent male protagonists who may try to flee from state ideals of being a man, but find that their identities are intimately structured around the legacies of past Maoist models. Even the re-writing of revolutionary histories cannot but reference and inadvertently pay homage to the same impossible ideals of masculinity that they attempt to dismantle. Similarly, the conceptions of individuality and subjectivity that more recent filmmakers may aim for are far from uncomplicated. In the uncertainty of China after Mao, aspirations of economic freedom for young men simply may not be realised or, if they are, similar political and cultural freedoms may pull back their hopes. The Party’s own models of guided modernisation also confuse visions of Western style modernity, and even unchecked economic development can be perceived as a threat rather than as a source of prosperity, as Zhang Yang theorises in *Shower*. These complications mean that masculinities on the Chinese screen remain in a state of perpetual limbo, running away from the aggressive representation of the past yet finding no stable destination.

This study has selected films from fifteen years of representational history. During this relatively short time, China has transformed from a nation negotiating the social, political, cultural and economic legacies of Mao’s rule into a world power facing the ambiguities of entering a global village. Whereas in the early and mid-1980s Fifth Generation directors were concerned with rediscovering their place inside China’s representational history, the end of the twentieth century saw these ‘angry young

men' growing older and taking a less antagonistic approach to their country's traditions. For example, is the older, more fatherly Zhang Yimou of *The Road Home* (1999) recognisable in the angry rebellion of *Judou* (1990)? Later graduates from the Beijing Film Academy concentrated upon the questions that arrived with new discourses of individuality and ideas of modernisation. Previously, Fifth Generation productions had portrayed masculinities that challenged political models of the past and strove towards new formulations of the idea of 'the nation'. In contrast, later Sixth Generation productions made in the early 1990s and beyond defined masculinities against *femininities* and tended to be employed in the expression of issues of individual (rather than national) potency.

The films in this study are visual responses to the changes and contradictions of life in the reform era, and are devices through which their directors come to terms with the issues of individual and national identity that came to the fore in the place of the Maoist worldview of their youth. Male protagonists repeatedly express the uncertainty, experimentation and disillusionment of the post-Mao era through negotiations of their gender identities. This chapter will assess the conclusions that can be reached about the masculinities engaged by this study. It will employ the study's central terms of subjectivity, history and nation in order to assess whether the cinematic masculinities that are on the run have finally settled down.

### **1: Subjectivity**

This study has argued that the idea of individual subjectivity became a central concern to a budding male Chinese intellectual class in the years following the sharp curtailment of expression in the Cultural Revolution. However, experiences of the past, a multiplicity of social and sexual identities and the persistence of an official hard line in social and cultural policy meant that attaining an individual gender identity is represented as a complex process. This section will assess the methods that are employed by the films discussed in order to represent this search for a coherent subjectivity in the years after Mao's death.

### a) No more heroes

In the Mao years, representational orthodoxy dictated the prominent position to be given to heroic characters in visual and literary representation, particularly during the Cultural Revolution (Yang 2002: 188). The films discussed inside this study consciously engage with a representational history that depicted masculinity in the terms of a one-dimensional revolutionary machismo. With the passing of the ultimate Chinese male hero, and the exposure of the population's ambivalent memories of their nation's founder, can models survive in films produced after 1976?

While the idea of socialist model heroes survived into reform era propaganda, there are few male heroes in the films discussed in this study. While male heroes were unambiguous in their revolutionary credentials, the prominent male characters from the first phase of Fifth Generation cinema are ambivalent, uneasy with the influence of Maoist social codes or inept in spreading them. For example, the soldier protagonists in *The Big Parade* reformulate ideas of heroism out of a collective revolutionary myth, and rewrite this bravery in terms of individual acts in the present that more than live up to the collective efforts of the past.

In fact, it is difficult to pick out a prominent hero from the films that make up this study. *Devils on the Doorstep's* Ma Dasan is the most obviously heroic character, sacrificing all for the safety of his small village. Nevertheless, unlike the heroes of the past, Ma is rewarded for his self-sacrifice by condemnation from the Chinese mob that gathers to witness his execution. Again, his heroism is made up of *individual* acts (both in terms of their isolation and in terms of Ma's agency), far from the collective actions of Maoist heroes who obediently played their part in a unifying national fiction. In fact, male characters either prove the redundancy of Maoist heroic archetypes or are divorced from the (CCP) notion of heroism altogether. Men like Kazi (*Beijing Bastards*), Xiao Bo (*Men and Women*), and Mingliang (*Platform*) live without a notion of sacrifice for 'the people' (since ideas of the collective have been weakened) and spend their days directionless and unrecognised. The protagonist who is presented mostly as a model is, oddly, Cui Jian in *Beijing Bastards*. Cui's rock performances structure the lives of the underground rock scene, and he is a flesh and blood emblem of, and leader in, calculated dissidence. Despite the redundancy of red

socialist models, its devices are still being recalled in the presentation of the folk hero of 'grey' Beijing.

### b) Marginality

Since male Chinese directors of the 1980s and 1990s have been described as either sidelining their female protagonists or employing women as metaphors for the injuries done to a larger 'China'<sup>1</sup>, it may be surprising to note that male protagonists do not occupy a strong central position in the films discussed in this study. Male gender identities are often portrayed as marginal or separate from mainstream society. This sense of alienation is most clearly seen in the films produced by later graduates from the Beijing Film Academy. In these cases, this isolation from mainstream culture is actually sought out; directors represent their main male protagonists as *running towards* a sense of subjectivity, however complicated this quest will prove to be by the misdemeanours of the past and the contradictions of the present. For example, Kazi in Zhang Yuan's *Beijing Bastards* is marginal since his lifestyle is out of step with both socialist and more 'traditional' ideals of masculinity. However, Kazi and his male friends revel in this dissident status, as dangerous as it may be. His desire for centrality is instead a *subjective* one in which he seeks to strengthen his identity in the search for his pregnant girlfriend.

In other cases, male protagonists struggle to *run from* a disenfranchised position and assert their subjectivity before the society that once excluded them. Sometimes they are successful (as is the wealthy entrepreneur Xiaojun in *In the Heat of the Sun*), and sometimes they remain forever at the margins of respectability (as is the unfortunate Tianqing in *Judou*). Some men are simply excluded from or dominated by hegemonic masculinities. For example, Jiang Wen's hesitant hero in *Devils on the Doorstep* not only grapples with Japanese notions of an enfeebled Chinese masculinity, but with his powerlessness as a peasant inside competing narratives of war. Fugui in *To Live* exemplifies that all men are, in effect, sons before one paternalistic social system or another.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Rey Chow's arguments in *Primitive Passions* (1995) on the films of Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou.



I contend that the marginal status of many male protagonists is in part an attempt by reform era directors to assert their *own* subjectivity and to run from the dominant forms of representation of the past, Maoist era. Directors' portrayals of marginal masculinities challenge notions of what is and who are considered to be suitable subjects for representation. The flaws and vulnerabilities that are wilfully exhibited by male protagonists directly challenge Mao era representation in its emphasis on single-minded, flawless male heroes. Protagonists' status on the edges of respectable society (whether or not their marginalisation is a deliberate political act) disputes the very existence of central model characters. It also represents the ambiguous status of male directors themselves, coming to terms with their dissident status in the years following the Mao era, yet (as films about social outsiders show) directly representing this alienation from dominant social discourses in their films.

### c) Performance

This study hypothesises that male gender identities are at their most vulnerable when they are exposed as social and cultural constructs. This deconstruction challenges a single masculinity that is represented in official models, and stresses their artificiality against the presumed *subjectivity* of individual men who are supposed to live inside these norms. Films display this gender destabilisation by means of unconscious *performativity* and deliberate *performance*. Xiaojun's mimicry in *In the Heat of the Sun* is an example of the deconstruction of certainties surrounding masculinity through *performativity*. Xiaojun tries on and rejects a series of approved masculine identities, only to find that his imitations can only ever be distorted reflections of a reality that never really existed. Xiao Bo in *Men and Women* also acts out the manner in which gender identities are constructed. He is unwillingly 'outed' as a gay man by his substitute family and is thus expected to conform to certain stereotypes of feminised, camp homosexuality. However, Liu Bingjian's refusal to allow his protagonists to live up to the potential expectations of his audience destabilises ideas of a stable and singular gender identity and stresses the unpredictable identities of his protagonists.

Even the Maoist models of masculinity critiqued in Chen Kaige's *The Big Parade* are revealed to be carefully constructed performances. The soldiers preparing for the national day parade in are literally staging a show for the assembled leaders in

Tiananmen Square. However, their masculine identities are revealed to be only loosely held together; that is, the tough machismo of the army camp is made up of heroic performances that collapse under pressure. In a less 'official' arena, the conscious performances of Cui Jian in *Beijing Bastards* articulate the dilemmas of the young male dissidents. Although these performances are in deadly earnest, they still literalise the extent to which identities are flexible constructions that are acted out. Cui Mingliang in *Platform* is also a stage performer. His performances of identity, either upon the stage or when listening to his favourite songs, visualise the alienation and confusion of many young people in the early days of economic transformation. These conscious gestures create a space for individual expression beyond the economic and societal constrictions that limit Mingliang and Cui Jian. Despite Cui Jian's performances (intra- and extra-digetically) being more influential than Mingliang's efforts in his cultural troupe, both men employ the device of performance to create more perfect, desirable selves far from the basements of Beijing or Fenyang's narrow alleys.

#### **d) Control**

The masculinities represented in this study are often defined by a quest to control the environment and personalities surrounding them. These attempts at assertion and agency are positive efforts towards a subjectivity that simply would not have been available to men in the immediate Maoist past. In Chapter Two, both *Beijing Bastards* and *In the Heat of the Sun* represent quests to master masculine anxieties through the pursuit of women. Kazi in *Beijing Bastards* cannot cope with the uncertainty that comes with the absence of his girlfriend, Maomao, and embarks on a quest to find her in order that he might be in charge of his own world once more. In *In the Heat of the Sun*, Xiaojun makes repeated attempts to find a stable, coherent identity in his efforts to woo Mi Lan and even in the representation of his memories to a curious audience. Lou Ye's videographer in *Suzhou River* attempts to fix Mei Mei for his appreciation on videotape; his whole story is an exercise in the control over representation through which he defines his masculine identity. The cinematic focus on male protagonists' search for mastery over their environment and themselves can be seen as symptomatic of an attempt to overcome a lack of agency in reform era male lives (as visualised by Tianqing in *Judou*). While some directors have re-asserted a male monopoly over oral and visual cultural (such as Zhang Yimou in *The Road Home*) in order to find safety

in a familiar legible fiction of China, younger male directors (Jia Zhangke in *Platform*) still insist that their male protagonists cannot hope to exert a meaningful subjectivity, despite (and even because of) political and social change.

## **2: History and Nation**

This study has argued that, while directors may have strived towards subjectivity and the expression of individual male gender identities far from the Maoist past, they were also intimately involved in discourses of history and felt a responsibility to reformulate the legends that had contributed to their national identity. Indeed, the idea of running away from dominant discourses that appeared to inhibit the individual desires of male directors and rushing towards a longed-for opportunity to express individual subjectivity are interlinked – indeed, this interdependency is responsible for the uncertain status of the male protagonists analysed in this study, preventing them from fully reaching the agency that they search for or from successfully negotiating the legacies of the social order of the past. The very act of rewriting past revolutionary legends and reformulating the models of the Mao era demonstrates to what extent history and nation were not to be rejected in their entirety, but to be mastered by the very men who were once its victims. Therefore, how have directors sought to run from the codes of the past and attempted to rewrite it in individual terms?

### **a) Authenticity and truth**

Masculinity on the Chinese cinema screen is tied to questions of authenticity. This attempt to engage meta-issues of reality and narrative authority directly challenges a Communist representational history that excluded versions of the past and national identity that diverted from the dominant fiction upon which the integrity of the country's leaders was founded. For example, in some of the more recent films featured in this study, men seek to present themselves as authentic bearers of truth. *Beijing Bastards'* project is to present the experiences of a group of musicians, who in the prevailing cultural currency would be described as 'hooligans', but are instead portrayed as carriers of a visceral, authentic masculine youth culture which cannot be touched by the CCP's *tarnished* claims to authority. In *Men and Women*, Liu Bingjian is keen to present an honest picture of dissident sexualities through his protagonists, and in *Platform*, Jia Zhangke presents post-Mao life far from the excitement of the big

city in as 'real' a manner as possible. Cui Mingliang is the bearer of unpredictable feelings of alienation and despair, which Jia Zhangke seeks to be perceived as unadorned for the camera.

However, other male protagonists question the very existence of a central, organising 'truth'. Sometimes, old political certainties are dismantled and tested. The soldiers in *The Big Parade* contemplate the authenticity of their experience when faced with the grand narratives of the Long March generation immortalised in the posters and stories of their youth. Other, later, productions employ male protagonists to explore issues of representation, and even to challenge the idea of an objective reality. For example, *In the Heat of the Sun* undermines personal and political histories in the blatant falsehoods that appear to form Xiaojun's memories of growing from a boy into a man. The anonymous videographer in *Suzhou River* pits visual images against voice-over narrative in order to deny the stability of identity in the changing city.

#### **b) New authors of an old China**

This study has observed that male gender identity has been closely associated with ideas of the nation and national strength in China since the beginning of the twentieth century. The male protagonists discussed in this study demonstrate that national and political issues cannot be extracted from issues of gender identity; that is, *running away* from dominant versions of the past and asserting a masculinity that is not in some way enmeshed with these legends of China reasserting itself is impossible. Chapter Three and Chapter Five have considered their source material in relation to this hypothesis, both in terms of reformulations of archetypes of Maoist masculinities, and in terms of the contestation of a national histories previously written by older men. For example, the protagonists of *The Big Parade* search for their place in a narrative of masculine heroism in a time when soldiery is no longer perceived as a hegemonic expression of masculinity. *Devils on the Doorstep* writes the Communist Party out of Anti-Japanese War history, the central event proving Chinese potency, ridiculing gendered narratives of national glory as illegitimate inside the realities of war. *The Black Cannon Incident* displays the extent to which these identity formulations still function as measures of individual gender identity, even almost a decade after the death of Mao. Zhao Shuxin cannot run from intellectuals' past stigma as black elements; when he attempts to put his faith in the dominant fiction of Party

omnipotence, he is left in an uncertain state, allied with the children whose powerlessness he comes to mirror.

Zhang Yimou's early films as director, explored in Chapter Five, present ambivalent attitudes towards his country's past, demonstrating the chameleon nature of many of the masculinities that this study has set out to investigate. He attempts to run from male gender identities structured around gerontocracies towards a longed-for subjectivity that is never truly realised or represented (unlike his younger counterparts from the Sixth Generation). In his early films, young men are presented as victims of patriarchal discourses that prevent them from taking social and sexual initiative. *Tianqing (Judou)* is stifled by the familial duties and obligations of a community (and, by extension, a nation) ruled by senile old men. *Fugui (To Live)* cannot act as an adult protector to his children since he is a child himself in relation to the state fathers whose campaigns blight his family life. History is presented as a series of disasters, the weight of which creates a Chinese nation that is threatening in its anonymity and unpredictability. For individual men, the nation is dominated by forces that compete against their desires for subjectivity and cultural and social power, disenfranchising and emasculating husbands and fathers.

The films in this study configure the ideas of history and nation rarely as a matter of collective experience, but as concepts that are internalised by *individuals*, demonstrating the interdependency between ideas of the past and directors' goal of subjectivity. When this link goes unrecognised, the masculinities engaged by this study appear at their most unintentionally unstable. The disillusionment following Mao's death, the disasters of Tiananmen and the growing discourses of individualism that entered an increasingly consumer orientated urban society placed ideas of national, cultural and gender identity into flux. However, some films made at the end of the twentieth century attempt to resist this charge towards a more negative conception of individualism by presenting more 'traditional' ways of life through their male protagonists and calling for the relevance of community and nation. Both Zhang Yang's *Shower* and Zhang Yimou's *The Road Home* and *Happy Times* attempt to reconfigure a notion of ideal 'Chinese' values through their main male protagonists. In *Shower*, Mr Liu's old-fashioned virtues directly confront the suits and gadgetry that signify his elder son's fast-paced life. In *The Road Home*, Luo Changyu

reinforces the importance of having respect for elders in the youth orientated rush towards economic progress, and *Happy Times* calls for a benevolent paternalism in order to preserve collective values. Possibly riding the tide of nationalism that re-emerged in the mid 1990s and responding to a trend for a less 'art-driven' cinema in the late-1990s (see Zhu 2003), these films turn discourses of a 'sick man of Asia' on their heads. A masculine China (although in the shape of wise old men rather than the muscular, impulsive My Grandpa in *Red Sorghum*) wins out over the superficial, feminised West. The fathers that haunted early Fifth Generation cinema are returning in a more benevolent guise, and some directors now seem to be running towards the certainty of a more stable national identity, headed by a 'new' generation of old men.

### **3: New questions from the study**

This study offers an interpretation of expressions of male gender identity in Mainland Chinese cinema. However, it cannot answer every question surrounding the visual representation of masculinities. For example, a further study might expand upon the link between the representation of masculinities and ideas of nation that are introduced in Chapter Three. Although this study has analysed representational history, the masculinities that it has interpreted cannot be described as mainstream. The male characters that appear inhabit films that often place themselves at odds with official discourses of gender, nation and identity. Can they ever represent hegemonic masculinities? If they do not, where can these dominant symbols of gender identity be found? Are Mainland male aspirations reflected in Hong Kong or Hollywood blockbusters, or can they be found in the homegrown 'main melody' entertainment films that crowd the shelves of so many VCD stores?

Another study might concentrate upon these official portrayals of masculinities. A major portion of Mainland Chinese filmmaking output concentrates upon the (officially sanctioned and financed) retelling of the glorious narratives of the Communist past. How have visual histories changed over time? What is the role of men within the narrative, and do they express unequivocal heroism, or are they used to convey more ambiguous themes? Are there any qualities that are given solely to men, and how do these models compare to the new roles that men are supposed to play in a market economy?

Since representation is useful for analysing how gender identities are formed, it may be beneficial to compare the manner in which cinematic expressions of masculinities on the Mainland stand next to other visual representations. How do artists portray men, and do they situate themselves as image makers in a similar manner to late twentieth century film directors? Poster art can also be a tool in the comparative analysis of masculinities in film. For example, the male worker, peasant, soldier icons that once adorned the walls of the old school house in *The Road Home* are replaced in the present by Zhao Di's display of a new idea of masculinity in the shape of a poster of *Titanic's* Leonardo di Caprio.<sup>2</sup> How has the influx of new masculine models affected the portrayal of homegrown masculinities? And who are the new models of masculinity in reform era China? Are they the slick young urban Chinese men who sell mobile phones on advertising hoardings, or are they found in a more international arena?

This study has aimed to add to the slowly expanding inquiry about formulations of and complications in male gender identity in China. Through picturing masculinities as on an uncertain 'middle ground' (on the run from the organising categories of the Mao era yet rushing towards equally prescribed concepts of subjectivity), it has demonstrated how filmmakers negotiate profound changes in society through the hopes and fears of their male protagonists. Male identity has been proven to be central to ideas of history, the 'nation' and to late twentieth century formulations of subjectivity and 'self-hood'. Filmmakers have demonstrated how fragile male gender identities are in the performances undertaken by their protagonists, in the marginal social positions that some inhabit, and in their struggle to assert themselves against dominant political and social discourses. Debates on masculinities in developed nations often point to a 'crisis of masculinity' stemming from an increasing emphasis on tertiary industry and a consumer ideology that works in favour of women and against the forms of work previously dominated by men. With the decline of the Maoist hegemonic *gongnongbing*, does this study propose that a similar trajectory (from masculine dominated manufacturing industry to unregulated consumerism) prompted the uncertain representations of masculinities on the Chinese screen? Instead, I would argue that the masculinities engaged by this study are not 'in crisis',

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<sup>2</sup> *Titanic* images appear more than once in *The Road Home*, which may also be a swipe at then-Party-Secretary Jiang Zemin's insistence that Chinese filmmakers should 'study and emulate *Titanic*', which he interpreted to be a 'moving depiction of class tensions and love' (Zhu 2003: 144).

but *'in flux'*. Whereas the notion of masculinity in crisis superficially implies anxieties about growing female power, the protagonists in this study express anxiety about a dominant fiction that subjugates both men *and* women in its insistence on representational orthodoxy and in its intrinsic opposition to the subjectivity sought by many male leads. Where masculinities are defined against femininities, women do not represent a threat to male protagonists in their potential to usurp male centrality, for men are not central to begin with. For example, where consumerism is given a feminine voice (in Daming's wife in *Shower*, for example), the real threat is instead a deterioration in patrilineal ties that are a bastion of national integrity against this unknown force.

The masculinities that are on the run in this study are truly unsettled. They are in a cultural and ideological limbo, being pursued by both national and historical expectations of male gender identity, and by an uncertain future inherent with contradictions, which at the same time other masculinities are running towards. This uncertainty, however, also can be liberating, as the wilful shattering of identities in films like *Men and Women* and *In the Heat of the Sun* shows. In the most recent films that are discussed in this study, male characters are breaking away from expectations of their sexuality (*Men and Women*), coming to terms with their position on the edges of wider social change (*Platform*) and challenging fifty years of representational history head on (*Devils on the Doorstep*). Just as recently, male protagonists are also guardians of hazy Chinese traditions as high-rises and shopping malls jostle for space on urban skylines (*The Road Home*, *Shower*, *Happy Times*). These contradictory positions, running away from the constrictions of an imaginary China yet holding onto its comforting sameness, perhaps embody the contradictions facing filmmakers today, for which their male protagonists will surely stand as symbols in the future.



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