Post-realism as an Alternative Aesthetics

in Contemporary Chinese Cinema

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Abstract

This thesis is motivated by the considerable number of Sixth-Generation films that

emerged in Chinese cinema after 1989. These films, which break the borders of cinematic

realism, seem to contradict the prevalent scholarship on Sixth-Generation filmmakers in

which their cinematic practices are incorporated into a range of frameworks derived from

realism. In this thesis, I conceptualize this alternative aesthetics as "post-realism," an

aesthetic product of the complexity of post-socialist China and an artistic response to the

dramatic transformation of Chinese society.

The thesis begins with the examination of realism in the context of Chinese cinema.

A historical review shows that the discourse of realism had been constantly ideologised

from the 1930s to 1976 and then has experienced a countervailing trend of

depoliticisation from the end of 1970s. Sixth-Generation filmmakers now associate

realism with individual vision and subjective perception of the transformed reality. This

sets the ground for the emergence of post-realist aesthetics characterized by its emphasis

on artifice.

The thesis then goes on to identify a thread of the alternative aesthetics of

non-realism in early Chinese cinema. The revival of non-realist aesthetics in some films

in the New Era can be seen as a prelude to the emergence of post-realism in the 1990s.

Employing multi-layered methods of trans-textual analysis, close reading and a

social-context approach, the main body of this thesis is a textual analysis of selected films

from diverse aspects. The first is the unreliable narrative shared by Jiang Wen's *In the Heat of the Sun* and Lou Ye's *Suzhou River*. Both Wang Quan'an's *Lunar Eclipse* and Zhang Yuan's *Green Tea* place the solidity of a coherent, stable and identifiable female identity into question. The heightened symbolic cinematic space in Jia Zhangke's *The World*, the defamiliarizing effect caused by some surreal elements in his *Still Life*; and Jia's playing with the documentary genre through — the integration of fiction and documentary in *24 City* will be examined. Through the close reading of these films, I also seek to delineate the inner landscape of post-socialist Chinese society in a fast-changing era.

Acknowledgements

From the inception of ideas to the completion of the dissertation, I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Paul Clark, for his inspiring guidance, sustained patience and intellectual support. His scholarship on Chinese cinema as well as his course on Chinese Film and Popular Culture have been the major influence in my approach to Chinese film studies. Without his support, I would not have been able to present my work in a meaningful way as a PhD dissertation. I also wish to express my sincere thanks to my co-supervisor, Dr. Xuelin Zhou, who has always been an insightful reader of my dissertation. His valuable feedback and constructive comments greatly benefited the dissertation.

I am immensely grateful to Chinese director Wang Quan'an who is a key subject of my study. My heartfelt thanks go to him for granting me an interview with him in Beijing in the summer of 2013 and for allowing me to quote from our talk.

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***The Problem:* Jishizhuyi, *a Key to the Sixth Generation*?**

This study is motivated by the considerable number of Sixth-Generation films which do

not sit comfortably in the discourse of *jishizhuyi* (realism, as differentiated from the

socialist realist mode of *xianshizhuyi*) in current scholarship on Sixth-Generation and

Chinese independent filmmaking. Focusing on the experimental features of most of these

films, this study seeks to show that these Sixth-Generation films present an aesthetics of

what I call "post-realism." In the context of post-socialist Chinese sociocultural

conditions since the early 1990s, they reshape the aesthetic landscape of contemporary

Chinese cinema.

Although the validity of the designation "Sixth-Generation" is problematic and

debatable[1], especially among Chinese scholars, in this study the term loosely refers to a

group of younger filmmakers who were born between 1960 and 1970, received their film

education at the Beijing Film Academy or the Central Theatre Academy, and began their

filmmaking careers at the turn of the 1980s and the 1990s. These filmmakers include

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[1] In Chinese film studies, they are also known as the new-born generation (*xinsheng dai*), or the independent filmmakers, underground filmmakers and the urban generation are less used.

Zhang Yuan, Wang Xiaoshuai, He Jianjun (He Yi), Zhang Ming, Guan Hu, Lou Ye, Lu

Xuechang, Jiang Wen, Wang Chao, Li Xin, Jia Zhangke, Wang Quan'an, Zhang Yang and

others. The Sixth-Generation filmmakers emerged in the shadow of the crackdown on the

Tian'anmen democracy movement in 1989 which is widely considered to be the

watershed between the idealistic and enlightening "New Era" (*xinshiqi*) of the 1980s and

the secular and materialistic "post-New Era" (*hou xinshiqi*) from the 1990s. With the

failure of Communist ideology, Chinese people lost their socialist values and ethos, as

well as their faith in Communist ideals. On the other hand, the flourishing consumer

economy resulted in the dominance of the market economy and consumerist values in

contemporary Chinese society. Thus, the specific political, social, economic, and cultural

changes after 1989 exerted a significant impact on Sixth-Generation filmmaking.

Unlike previous generations of filmmakers in China, the Sixth-Generation

filmmakers at the dawn of their emergence were confronted by the radical transition of

the Chinese film industry from a state-owned and fully supported system to a

market-driven business. Aside from artistic pursuits, young filmmakers had first to

consider how to survive under the cruel rules of marketization; this was especially the

case after 1994 when China started to import ten (Hollywood) films each year to

stimulate the depressed domestic film market. Meanwhile, the new generation also faced

survival pressures stemming from the development of three forces within Chinese film

industry during the early 1990s: 1) "main melody" films (*zhuxuanlü dianying*) which are

propaganda films concentrating on the revolutionary history, outstanding figures and

official policies; 2) entertainment films (*yulepian*); 3) and art films (*wenyipian*) which are exemplified by the Fifth-Generation films. Particularly, the Fifth Generation's national myth and allegorical mode which achieved great international success were regarded by the younger generation as their primary rivals. From the Sixth Generation's point of view, the historical and cultural images in the films of their predecessors bore no relation to contemporary reality, but concealed the real situation of individual living in an unprecedented, changing society.

In multiple aspects of cinematic aesthetics, film production and distribution, the filmmaking practice of these young filmmakers distinguishes their generation from that of their predecessors. One distinctive characteristic of this new generation is their status or identity as independent filmmakers. Unlike what the term "independent" connotes in the Hollywood film production system, "independent" in the Chinese context principally signifies independence from the state's filmmaking system and censorship. In the very beginning of their filmmaking careers, many Sixth-Generation filmmakers, such as Zhang Yuan, He Jianjun, Wang Xiaoshuai and Jia Zhangke, chose to make films outside China's state-run studio system and thereby avoided official censorship. Their early, usually low-budget works, are either self-funded or financed by overseas funding (including from Hong Kong). This independent filmmaking mode of the Sixth Generation also led to their unconventional way of film distribution and exhibition. Rather than seeking official-approval for release of their films in the domestic market, Sixth-Generation filmmakers made their films accessible to foreign (or more precisely, Western) audiences

by participating in a broad range of international film festivals. In doing so they received significant recognition as well as numerous awards. In terms of film representation, Sixth-Generation films mostly feature contemporary urban settings which differ from the timeless, rural and remote settings of the Fifth Generation's allegorical works. Their alleged documentary realist aesthetic is highly praised by Western audiences in the international film festival circuit since their realist films are considered to show the raw and nitty-gritty reality of post-1989 Chinese society, the reality of which cannot be perceived in the state-sanctioned Chinese films.

Western film critics and academic researchers pay much more attention to the documentary style of the Sixth Generation than to any other aspects of these films. My examination of the scholarship on Sixth-Generation films illustrates that a range of terms derived from realism, including on-the-spot realism (Chris Berry)[2], post-socialist realism (Jason Mcgrath)[3], documentary realism or the documentary impulse (Yomi Braester)[4], as well as record-realism (*jiluzhuyi*), are used to describe their film style and aesthetics. Under the dominance of the discourse of realism, the non-realist characteristics of some Sixth-Generation films have received relatively little detailed discussion. Even in the limited discussion, supernatural events and surreal visual elements in some Sixth-Generation films are either ignored or simply folded into the framework of realism.

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[2] Chris Berry, "Facing Reality: Chinese Documentary, Chinese Postsocialism," in Wu Huang, Wang Huangsheng, and Feng Boyi, eds., *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art (1990-2000) — The First Guangzhou Triennial*, Guangzhou: Guangdong Museum of Art, 2002, pp. 121-131.
[3] Jason McGrath, *Post-socialist Modernity*: *Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008, pp.129-164.
[4] Yomi Braester, *Painting the City Red*: *Chinese Cinema and the Urban Contract*, Duke University Press, 2010, p.22, 226.

A few critics have begun to show awareness of the Orientalist tendency underlying the

academic discussion on realism in Chinese studies. As Rey Chow states:

> [T]he study of modern and contemporary China is so dominated by
> so-called realism that even the most imaginative writings and art
> works, however avant-garde they might be, have tended to be read
> largely for factographic value, for making contributions to the
> production of empirical knowledge about China. This critical
> proclivity towards realism in the institution of area studies is
> inseparable from the strategic targeting of non-Western political
> regimes during the Cold War, and the representational politics
> surrounding China remain tightly in its grip.[5]

Indeed, the remnants of Cold War ideology in the West greatly influenced the

establishment of the dominant discourse on realism in the study of Sixth-Generation films.

However, we should not overlook the Sixth-Generation filmmakers' own participation in

the construction of this discourse. In his article *My Camera Doesn't Lie? Truth,*

Subjectivity, and Audience in Chinese Independent Film and Video, Yingjin Zhang's

examination of the independent filmmakers' truth claim ("my camera does not lie") gives

us some important clues to help understand the realist discourse of the Sixth-Generation.[6]

According to Zhang, the independent filmmakers make claims "not so much about certain

inherent truth content" in their films "as about the new strategic positions independent

directors have claimed for themselves ..."[7] He argues that such a position helped the new

generation to win a place for themselves in the cultural production of Chinese film. Thus,

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[5] Rey Chow, "*Not One Less*: The Fable of a Migration," in Chris Berry, ed., *Chinese Films in Focus: 25 New Takes*, London: British Film Institute, 2003, p.145.
[6] The "independent filmmakers" in Yingjin Zhang's discussion refers to Zhang Yuan, Jia Zhangke, Zhang Ming, Lou Ye, Wang Quan'an, Jiang Wen, Wang Chao, overlapping the Sixth-Generation filmmaker in my dissertation.
[7] Yingjin Zhang, "My Camera Doesn't Lie? Truth, Subjectivity, and Audience in Chinese Independent Film and Video," in Paul G. Pickowicz and Yingjin Zhang eds., *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China.* Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006, pp.39-40.

by naming some Sixth-Generation films as realist, both Western receivers and Chinese

practitioners take what they want. Western audiences thought that through the films of the

younger generation they can get access to see a real contemporary China which is absent

in Fifth-Generation films, while Sixth-Generation filmmakers made their name in

international art film circles and seized the discursive power of presenting a real China.

In fact, as Yingjin Zhang suggests, what really concerns the Sixth-Generation

filmmakers is not objectivity but quite the contrary: "[T]he desire to reclaim the artist's

subjectivity is that which has motivated their disassociation from or competition with

official and commercial filmmakers in the representation of the real."[8] The

Sixth-Generation filmmakers link the realist representation with their subjectivity by

emphasizing the personal perspective from which they perceive the world. Jia Zhangke, a

prominent figure of the Sixth Generation associates realism with a "feeling of the real":

> For me, all the realist methods are there to describe the real world of
> my inner experiences. We have almost no way to approach reality
> itself, and after all the sense of cinema is not merely reaching the
> level of reality. In films, I pursue a feeling of the real more than
> reality itself, since I think the feeling of the real concerns aesthetics,
> whereas the real is only a matter of sociology.[9]

In my interview with Wang Quan'an, he also articulates the unavoidable subjectivity of

film when he says:

> I think, a film, whether in realist style or not, is fictional and
> subjective. It cannot replace reality itself. Because no matter what
> way you make it, even shooting motionlessly like a monitor, the film

[8] Ibid.,p.27
[9] Sun Jianmin, "*Jingyan shijie zhong de yingxiang xuanze: Jia Zhangke fangtanlu*" (The choice of images in the experiential world: An interview with Jia Zhangke), *Jinri xianfeng* (Avant-Garde Today), no.12 (2002), 31.

is still your subjective choice.[10]

Jiang Wen also expresses a similar view of *jishizhuyi*:

> From my point of view, it is quite strange to stress objectivity when making a film. I think the existence of everything can be attributed to one's subjective recognition. In other words, the objectivity you emphasize is the objectivity that is recognized and accepted by your subjectivity. Then, when you try to represent the objectivity, what you present is necessarily subjective….Actually, I dislike and disdain the so-called "*jishizhuyi*." Once you pick up a camera, you cannot be objective.… So I never pursue so-called objectivity. For me, the more subjective a thing is, the more real it is.[11]

These statements demonstrate that the Sixth-Generation filmmakers' perception of what is real and what is realist film departs from realism's claim to a transparent representation of reality. In most cases, under the umbrella of realism (objectivity), the Sixth-Generation directors "have succeeded in re-establishing the artist's subjectivity, which authorizes them to proceed in a self-confident manner: my vision, my camera, and my truth."[12] Once the realist representation is associated with individual vision and subjective experience, the philosophical stand of realism becomes unstable. As new levels of experience alter our personal perception of the factual, "new modes of expression necessarily emerge to keep up with an ever-expanding sense of the real."[13] Realism thus slides into "new modes of expression," which may occasionally include its opposite. This is the case in regard to many of the Sixth-Generation directors discussed in this thesis. One of them is Jia Zhangke who has made a significant change in terms of film aesthetics

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[10] Interview with Wang Quan'an, Beijing, 12 August 2013.

[11] Shang Ke, an interview with Jiang Wen, "*Linglei de dianying shenhua*" (A unique cinematic myth), in Su Mu, ed., *Taiyang shaonian* (The youth of the sun), Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2007, p.276.

[12] Yingjin Zhang, "My Camera Doesn't Lie? Truth, Subjectivity, and Audience in Chinese Independent Film and Video," p.40.

[13] Jesús Benito Sánchez, Ana María Manzanas Calvo, and Begoña Simal González, eds., *Uncertain Mirrors: Magical Realisms in US Ethnic Literatures*. Rodopi, 2009, p.26.

after his "hometown trilogy" which was acclaimed for their realist style. Jia explained the

reason why he used some fantastical elements in *Still Life*:

> On *Still Life,* I initially thought I wanted it to be very realistic, but I
> couldn't ignore the surreal aspects of the Three Gorges landscape. I
> had to use fantastical elements, because without them I wouldn't have
> been able to adequately express the utter strangeness of our
> contemporary reality.[14]

Because the fast-changing reality has already changed our perception of it, Jia's words

illustrates that the conventional realist style is sometimes not adequate when representing

contemporary China. New modes of cinematic representation and aesthetics which break

the confines of cinematic realism are necessarily required to delineate the transformed

reality.

From the early 1990s to the first decade of the twenty-first century, the Sixth

Generation has been highly innovative in breaking the restrictions imposed by realism. A

variety of artistic techniques and devices are employed in their films: unreliable narrative

(*In the Heat of the Sun* [*Yangguang canlan de rizi*, dir. Jiang Wen, 1993], *Suzhou River*

[*Suzhou he*, dir. Lou Ye, 1999] and *Dazzling* [*Huayan*, dir. Li Xin, 2002]), an atmosphere

of uncanniness (*Red Beads* [*Xuanlian*, dir. He Jianjun, 1993] and *Rain Clouds over Wu*

Mountain [aka *In Expection*, *Wushan yunyu*, dir. Zhang Ming, 1996]), fantastic and

supernatural visual elements (*Still Life* [*Sanxia haoren*, dir. Jia Zhangke, 2006] and *The*

Sun Also Rises [*Taiyang zhaochang shengqi*, dir. Jiang Wen, 2007]), heightened symbolic

images (*The World* [*Shijie*, dir. Jia Zhangke, 2005] and *Little Red Flower* [*Kanshangqu*

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[14] Andrew Chan, an interview with Jia Zhangke, see http://www.filmcomment.com/article/jia-zhangke-interview
[accessed 5 May, 2013]

henmei, dir. Zhang Yuan, 2006]), ambiguous characters (*Lunar Eclipse* [*Yueshi*, dir. Wang

Quan'an, 1999] and *Green Tea* [*Lücha*, dir. Zhang Yuan, 2003]), and parody of the

conventions of a traditional genre (*24 City* [*Ershisi cheng ji*, dir. Jia Zhangke, 2008] and

Quitting [*Zuotian*, dir. Zhang Yang, 2001]). A few scholars have made some fragmentary

comments in regard to individual films about the new elements and devices that appear in

Sixth-Generation films. Bérénice Reynaud, for instance, points out that in *Beijing*

Bastards director Zhang Yuan tends to show space as "a state of mind" rather than the

realistic space of Beijing. Reynaud identifies the strategy of theatricalization in

reorganizing space and the "blurring of boundaries between reality and fantasy."[15] Lou

Ye's *Suzhou River*, in Zhang Zhen's phrase, features a "self-reflexive impulse" that

differentiates itself from the "documentary impulse" emphasized in current scholarship on

the Sixth Generation.[16] Gary G. Xu maintains "*Suzhou River* goes one step further by

playing with the notion 'my camera doesn't lie' and highlighting the intricate relationship

between realism as a mode of representation and value extraction."[17] The film challenges

the "rules of Chinese cinematic realism that never allow self-questioning of the narrative

mode and the realist content."[18]

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[15] Bérénice Reynaud, "Zhang Yuan's Imaginary Cities and the Theatricalization of the Chinese 'Bastards'," in Zhang Zhen, ed., *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century*, Duke University Press, 2007, pp.271-272.

[16] Zhang Zhen, "Urban Dreamscape, Phantom Sisters and the Identity of an Emergent Art Cinema," in Zhang Zhen, ed., *The Urban Generation*, p.370.

[17] Gary G. Xu, *Sinascape: Contemporary Chinese Cinema.* Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007, p.20.

[18] Ibid., p.85.

Post-realism: The Aesthetic Paradigm of the Post-socialist Era

Based on an analysis of a corpus of films with the aforementioned innovative techniques and devices, this study identifies the emergence of a new cinematic aesthetics which is alternative to the dominant realist style in the Sixth-Generation films. I call this aesthetics post-realism. Searching for a term for this new aesthetic paradigm can be risky as a particular terminology unavoidably entails some premises, assumptions and connotations. There are two reasons for my preference for the term "post-realism." First, as demonstrated in the preceding overview, the term suggests the inherent logic by which the new paradigm resulted from filmmaker's subjective transformation of the new reality of Chinese society. Second, this new aesthetic paradigm has a strong affiliation with the hegemonic tradition of realism in the history of Chinese film. The prefix "post-" in "post-realist" or "post-realism" does not imply a perspective which either is logically against realism, or chronologically emerges after the end of realism. As a matter of fact, both aesthetic paradigms of realism and post-realism co-exist in Sixth-Generation films. Some filmmakers' cinematic practice shifts between these two paradigms. I also do not claim that post-realism marks a radical break with realism. Instead, it seeks to reflect on and negotiate with the principal assumptions as well as the scope of cinematic realism by incorporating non-realist devices such as fantasy, surreal effect, and self-reflexive voice-over, while to different degrees still retaining, some codes and dimensions of historical reference to realism. In fact, as I will show in the next chapter, realism itself in some important film critics' theories (typically, in Bazin's), is an open concept to include

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film techniques and narratives that fall outside conventional realism in western film theories. While realism emphasizes film's reproduction of external or material reality, post-realism is distinguished by its cinematic rendition of subjective experience and is both a continuation of and a complement to realism. Post-realism avoids the extreme of the postmodernist contention that artistic representation is a sign that bears no relation to social and historical context. In contrast, the subtle blend to varying extents of mimesis and artifice in the Sixth-Generation films characterizes the new aesthetic paradigm of post-realism. Post-realism is proposed as an alternative aesthetics in contemporary Chinese cinema that can "incorporate para-modern traditions into clearly modernizing or post-modernizing aesthetics, and thus problematize facile dichotomies such as tradition and modern, realist and modernist, modernist and postmodernist."[19]

My use of post-realism is based not only on its important links to realism, but also on the widely-used theoretical framework of "postsocialism" which in current Chinese studies scholarship describes the political, social and cultural conditions of China from the end of the Cultural Revolution to the present. Eileen Williams-Wanquet's discussion of post-realism in British literature sheds light on my use of the term post-realism in the Chinese context. In her discussion, Eileen Williams-Wanquet notes: "If one distinguishes 'modernism' and 'postmodernism' as aesthetic paradigms, and 'modernity' and 'postmodernity' as historical epochs linked to an 'attitude' or 'world view,' both

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[19] Robert Stam, "Alternative Aesthetics: Introduction," in Robert Stam and Toby Miller, eds., *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, Blackwell, 2000, p.263.

'postrealist' and 'postmodernist' literature can be considered categories of fiction

belonging to a 'postmodern' epoch."[20] Bringing the theoretical perspective to the

Chinese context, I argue that post-realism is both an aesthetic product of the complexity

of contemporary China and an artistic response to its dramatic post-socialist

transformation. As in the case of Jia Zhangke's *Still Life* described earlier, the

contemporary reality that requires him to employ a post-realist aesthetics to represent is

no other than the reality of the accelerated post-socialist transition on the threshold of the

twenty-first century. The all-pervading market economy has already taken full control of

hundreds of millions of people, along with the overwhelming ideology of capitalism. The

unprecedented rapid pace of urbanization has brought about urban-rural dualization and

polarization, facilitated population mobility, reconfigured social structure and at the same

time has produced new social and cultural spaces. Since China was accepted as a member

of the World Trade Organization (WTO) at the beginning of the new millennium, China's

economy has been consistently and increasingly involved in the global system of

capitalism.

In the Chinese context, postsocialism does not refer to the end of socialism as it does

in the context of Eastern European countries and the Soviet Union. It refers instead to the

specific historical conditions that emerged following the end of the Cultural Revolution in

1976, in which a socialist political structure continued to exist while socialist ideology

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[20] EileenWilliams-Wanquet, "Towards defining 'postrealism' in British literature." *Journal of Narrative Theory* 36, no. 3 (2006), 389-419.

gradually lost its effectiveness. The term was first coined by Arif Dirlik in 1989 in his

examination of Deng Xiaoping's political and economic reforms. According to Dirlik,

what distinguishes "socialism with Chinese characteristics" is "a loss of faith in it

[socialism] as a social and political metatheory with a coherent present and a certain

future."[21] Dirlik's postsocialism "highlights the national-historical lineage,"[22] which is

distinct from postmodern, the "cultural logic" of late capitalism in post-industrial society

according to Fredric Jameson's canonical definition.[23] In fact, as the market economy

from the early 1990s transformed the fundamental social and cultural structures of the

country, and gradually integrated China into the global capitalist system, it could be said

that postsocialism is a Chinese version of postmodernity, or postmodernity with Chinese

characteristics.

Illuminatingly, Paul Pickowicz applies postsocialism in his analysis of Chinese

cinema by adopting the concept to discuss Huang Jianxin's 1980s film trilogy — *The*

Black Cannon Incident (*Heipao shijian*, 1985), *Dislocation* (*Cuowei*, 1986) and *Samsara*

(*Lunhui*, 1988). Postsocialism in Pickowicz's argument is not only an historical

periodization but also a popular perception, which had already emerged in Chinese

society before the end of the Cultural Revolution. He associates the concept with Huang

Jianxin's film plots which demonstrate profound disillusionment with the socialist system.

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[21] Arif Dirlik, "Postsocialism? Reflections on 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics," in Arif Dirlik and Maurice J. Meisner, eds., *Marxism and the Chinese Experience: Issues in Contemporary Chinese socialism*, ME Sharpe, 1989, p.374.
[22] Xudong Zhang, *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics: China in the Last Decade of the Twentieth Century*, Duke University Press, 2008, p.9.
[23] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991.

Using Pickowicz's post-socialist framework to understand post-Mao Chinese films, Chris

Berry and Mary Ann Farquhar raise the question as to whether it is appropriate to use

post-socialist as an aesthetic feature which is "parallel to postmodernism" when referring

to "the style and strategies of Fifth-Generation films."[24] After examining Chen Kaige's

The Yellow Earth and Huang Jianxin's *Black Cannon Incident*, they suggest that although

these two films "did not constitute a new paradigm or formula so much as a

non-formulaic formula," the emergence of a tendency toward a post-socialist aesthetic is

undeniable.[25]

   Berry and Farquhar's discussion of *The Yellow Earth* and *Black Cannon Incident*

also shows that the post-socialist aesthetics is not a monolithic entity. Rather, it may have

multiple varieties and forms. Extending the scope of investigation from the

Fifth-Generation to other filmmakers in 1980s Chinese cinema, we can discern at least

two distinctive kinds of post-socialist aesthetics: (post-socialist) realism and

(post-socialist) non-realism. In a 1988 essay, Chris Berry claimed to have identified two

opposite tendencies, hyper-realism and absurdism, in the case of Chinese urban cinema in

the 1980s. Taking the films of Zhang Liang and Huang Jianxin respectively as examples

of each aesthetics, Berry argued that both these two cinematic tendencies break from the

traditional socialist realist aesthetics.[26] In a recent discussion of filmmaking in the 1980s,

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[24] Chris Berry and Mary Ann Farquhar, "Post-socialist Strategies: An analysis of *Yellow Earth* and *Black Cannon Incident*," in Linda C. Ehrlich and David Desser, eds.,*Cinematic Landscape: Observations on the Visual Arts and Cinema of China and Japan*, University of Texas Press, 1994, p. 84.
[25] Ibid., p.110.
[26] Chris Berry, "Chinese Urban Cinema: Hyper-realism versus Absurdism," *East-West Film Journal* 3, no.1 (1988), 76-87.

some Chinese critics, such as Zheng Dongtian, point out that "at that time we pursued two tendencies, one is documentary style: lighting, cinematography, acting and so on must be real. On the other hand, we hoped to represent subjective psychology at the same time…We were under these two aesthetic tendencies and all the directors took what they needed."[27] These discussions show the coexistence of two aesthetic tendencies in the 1980s, which I loosely call realism and non-realism in this study.

Despite the distinctions between these two aesthetics, both of them are post-socialist. The reasons are two-fold: The first is because both these aesthetic paradigms belong to the post-socialist epoch, a dystopian cultural condition in which the mass populace is disillusioned with the socialist political grand narrative. In this epoch, the socialist principles of "literature and art are subordinate to politics" and "literature and art serve politics" are deeply called into question. Both the aesthetics of realism and non-realism are products of filmmakers' efforts to restore film's nature as art and reclaim the autonomy of art. These aims reflected the critics' and the artists' strong desire for the depoliticisation of Chinese cinema and challenged Mao's principles on literature and art.[28] The second is because both realism (*jishizhuyi*) and non-realist aesthetics subvert the earlier socialist realism which can be seen as a combination of Hollywood classical

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[27] Xie Fei et al., "*Bashi niandai chuqi de dianying chuangzuo sichao*" (The filmmaking trend in the beginning of the eighties), *Dangdai dianying* (Contemporary Film), no.12 (2008), 9.
[28] The slogan of "artistic democracy" demonstrated that writers and artists were calling for artistic autonomy at the dawn of the New Era. See Mao Dun, "*Jiefang sixiang, fayang wenyi minzhu: Zai zhongguo wenxue yishu gongzuozhe disici daibiao dahui yiji zhongguo zuojia xiehui disanci huiyuan daibiao dahui shang de jianghua*" (Emancipating the mind, developing literature and artistic democracy: Talks at the Fourth National Conference of the Representatives of Literary and Art Workers and the Third National Conference of the Members of Chinese Writers Association), *Renmin wenxue* (People's Literature), no.11 (1979), 3-8. Peng Ning and He Kongzhou, "*Wenyi minzhu yu dianying yishu*" (Literature and artistic democracy, and film art), *Dianying yishu* (Film Art), no.1 (1979), 28-33; Ke Ling, "*Wenyi xuyao minzhu*" (Literature and art need democracy), *Shanghai wenxue* (Shanghai Literature), no.2 (1979), 7-8.

cinema and Soviet montage techniques. In the following section, I will analyze how these two post-socialist aesthetic tendencies rebelled against the doctrine and formula of socialist realism.

(Post-socialist) Realism and Non-realism in Post-Mao Chinese Cinema

While both (post-socialist) realism and non-realism appeared at the dawn of the New Era, realist discourse was dominant in Chinese cinema in the 1980s. Realist discourse in the late 1970s and the early 1980s was primarily an ideological strategy rather than an aesthetic issue. It responded to film's status in the previous three decades as the instrument of politics. After 1976 the films of the Cultural Revolution were considered "false, boastful and empty" (*jia da kong*). With the adoption of the ideological principle of "seeking truth from facts" at the Third Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Party in 1978, the emphasis on truth seeking spread throughout various aspects of social life including filmmaking. In the field of film criticism, "seeking truth" was manifested in the advocacy of new realism. This was exemplified in Zhang Nuanxin and Li Tuo's influential article "The Modernization of Film Language."[29] In this manifesto-like article, Zhang and Li praise Italian Neo-Realism and the French New

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[29] When Chinese scholars translated Bazin's realist theory in the 1980s, they seemed to intentionally avoid using "*xianshizhuyi*," a term considered as carrying strong political implication due to its appearance in the official-advocated term "socialist realism." Instead, Chinese scholars use "*jishi lilun*" (documentary theory) and "*jilupai lilun*"(the theory of recording-reality school) to differentiate Bazin's theory of realism from socialist realism and revolutionary realism used in Chinese socialist period. This was an intentional effort to distinguish the new realism from Chinese socialist realism and revolutionary realism and to keep the new realism away from any political connotations. A similar discursive strategy was adopted by the Sixth-Generation filmmakers as well as critics when they emerged in the early 1990s, though their *jishizhuyi* is not explicitly linked to Bazin's theory.

Wave for their realistic style which presents viewers with a "not faked, but a truthful record" and "attempt to make redemption of physical reality."[30] This article evoked heated discussion on innovation in Chinese film and on the closely related issue of realism, especially on André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer's realist film theories. André Bazin's realist theory thus became the most popular film theory in China in the 1980s.

It is worth noting that the most popular and latest theory in the early 1980s international academia was Christian Metz's theory of semiology rather than André Bazin's realist theory, which was already considered too idealistic in its belief in the capacity of film to present reality. But Chinese film scholars of the 1980s were more willing to see Bazin's theory as the most advanced western film theory at the time. This was because, after film had been used as a propaganda instrument for three decades, Chinese critics and filmmakers were anxious for a film theory which could treat film as an artistic medium with a capacity to truly present non-politicised reality. They found this in André Bazin. Bazin's theory of realism criticizes the use of montage, and prefers long takes and deep focus photography for they bring together real time and allow audiences to make personal choices. For Bazin's Chinese advocates, "montage" was a synonym for the Soviet cinema tradition from which Chinese socialist films derive. (Bazin's montage though not only refers to Soviet theorist Eisenstein's montage theory, but also to the editing in Hollywood classical films.) Thus, Bazin's realist theory met the urge of Chinese

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[30] Zhang Nuanxin and Li Tuo, "*Tan dianying yuyan de xiandaihua*" (The modernization of film language), trans. Hou Jianping, in George S. Semsel, Xia Hong, and Hou Jianping, eds., Chinese Film Theory: A Guide to the New Era. New York: Praeger, 1990, pp.15-16. Originally published in *Dianying yishu* (Film Art), no.3 (1979), 40-52.

critics and filmmakers to eliminate human interference in film. (In fact, political

interference is what they really wanted to dispel.) This could subvert the ossified formula

of socialist realism which emphasized film's pedagogical function.

Chinese filmmakers of the early 1980s enthusiastically embraced Western realist

theory, and practiced various realist techniques — long takes, natural lighting, location

shooting and non-dramatized narrative in their films.[31] In contrast to socialist films which

portray revolutionary heroes in dramatic conflicts of life and death struggles, these films

pay attention to the particular social issues of contemporary China, and vividly present

the trivialities of ordinary people's daily lives. Inherent to the logic of socialist realism,

truth (*zhenshi*) means an underlying ideological truth, seen as being even more truthful

than reality itself. This concept arose as the result of the process of eliminating the false

and retaining the true (*quwei cunzhen*) from the perspective of the Communist Party

world outlook, as opposed to the raw reality.[32] In contrast, as Jason McGrath argues,

"rather than professing to show an ideological truth that underlies apparent reality, it

[*jishizhuyi*] seeks to reveal a raw, underlying reality by stripping away the ideological

representations that distort it."[33]

In comparison with realism (*jishizhuyi*), the other post-socialist aesthetic tendency,

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[31] The films include *The Drive to Win* (*Sha'ou*, dir. Zhang Nuanxin,1981), *Neighbours* (*Linju*, dir. Zheng Dongtian and Xu Rongming,1981), *Fogbound* (*Wujie*, dir. Guo Baochang,1984), *Sunset Street* (*Xizhaojie*, dir. Wang Haowei,1983), *Probationary Lawyer* (*Jianxi lüshi*, dir. Han Xiaolei, 1982), *Village in the City* (*Dushi li de cunzhuang*, dir. Teng Wenji, 1982), and *Yamaha Fish Stall* (*Yamaha yudang*, dir. Zhang Liang,1984).
[32] In 1942, Mao Zedong's *Talks at the Yan'an Conferenece on Literature and Art* advocated "proletarian realism," which in fact is Soviet socialist realism, as the principal of literary and artistic practice. See Bonnie S. McDougall, trans. and ed., Mao Zedong's *"Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art": A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary*, Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1980, p.70.
[33] Jason McGrath, *Post-socialist Modernity*, p. 132.

non-realism, was much less noticeable. Few remarks were made about it in the 1980s. But, in fact, one can argue that non-realism was even more post-socialist than its realist counterpart. New realism (*jishizhuyi*) is safe because of its affinity to socialist realism which has been advocated officially in China. Thus, *jishizhuyi* is used by the new generation as real realism to replace the fake realism of the revolutionary aesthetics. The rejection of fake realism (exemplified in the films of the Cultural Revolution) was in accordance with the ideology of Deng's reform era, a strategic stance which drew a distinction between the Deng era and the Cultural Revolution. Therefore, the dominant ideology of the New Era successfully matched the filmmakers' appeal for innovation in cinematic language and the audiences' desire to see more attractive films than those produced in the period of the Cultural Revolution. In contrast to *jishizhuyi*, the non-realist aesthetic not only rebels against Mao's revolutionary aesthetics, but also deviates from realism which was still the orthodoxy in literature and art practice in China. Realism's orthodox status in the People's Republic of China (PRC) was determined by two factors. First, realism was endorsed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the two foundational thinkers of the Communist movement. Second, since the early twentieth century realism has been regarded as the aesthetic counterpart of China's modernization. This will be analyzed in detail in the next Chapter. In the historical context of realism's hegemony in literature and art of the PRC, non-realist aesthetics was naturally a heterodoxy not favored by Chinese authorities.

In the early 1980s, despite the official's relatively loosening control over

subject-matter and themes, the propagandistic function of films was still strongly

endorsed by the Party under its new slogan of the Four Cardinal Principles (*sixiang jiben*

yuanze).[34] In 1979, Deng revived Mao's 1956 cultural principle of "Let a hundred

flowers bloom, a hundred schools contend" as the Party's policy on the development of

literature and art. This development appears to signal that the Party had relaxed its control

over literary and artistic activities. However, in late 1981 Deng's Hundred Flowers

Movement ended with the official critique of the film *Unrequited Love* (*Kulian*, aka *The

Sun and the Man*, dir. Peng Ning, 1980) and its original novel *Unrequited Love* (its author

Bai Hua also scripted the film). This critique was initiated by Deng himself, who saw the

film as transgressing the Party's Four Cardinal Principles. The film was banned and was

never publicly released. In the post-Mao era, the Party's totalitarian ideology and control

still casts a shadow over any post-socialist artistic practice.

Under these circumstances, some Chinese scholars prefer to use more conventional

or more safe terms to describe the non-realist aesthetics. For example, Ma Debo labels

Troubled Laughter (*Kunaoren de xiao*, dir. Yang Yanjin and Deng Yiming, 1979) and

some other experimental films with "romanticism."[35] Filmmaker and theorist Zheng

Dongtian also regards films such as *The Alley* as a development from the late realist

[34] The Four Cardinal Principles were established by Deng Xiaoping in 1979. They are: the principle of upholding the socialist path; the principle of upholding the people's democratic dictatorship; the principle of upholding the leadership of the Communist Party of China; and the principle of upholding Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong thought.
[35] Ma Debo, *Zhongguo dianying xinchaoliu: Jin shinian (1976-1986) woguo dianying de liubian* (The new trends of Chinese cinema: The evolution of Chinese film in the last decade 1976-1986), in Zhongguo dianyingjia xiehui yishu yanjiubu, ed., *Dianying yanjiu* (Film Studies), pp.172-177.

school and suggests there are "various kinds of realism (*jishi*)."[36] In the second half of

the 1980s there was still a possibility that a film in the non-realist style could be

denounced by the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) film authorities as being contradictory

to the propagandist and pedagogical purposes of socialist film.

Furthermore, the new stylistic devices in the non-realist films were bound with

Western modern art which was condemned as bourgeois and degenerate. Indeed, after the

Third Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Party in late 1978, China opened

its doors more to the West and Western cultural elements were introduced into China. An

avant-garde trend in Chinese literature and art emerged from early 1985, a development

which was also influenced by Western modernism. In this context, the non-realist

aesthetic of Chinese film is not a single case but echoed a wider intellectual engagement.

During the peak of the avant-garde trend in the period of 1985-1989 numerous works of

foreign history, philosophy, psychology and aesthetics (psychoanalysis, structuralism,

existentialism, for example) were published in translation. During this period surrealism,

absurdism, and expressionism were favored by young artists in China.[37] A similar

situation also occurred in literature. In the second half of the 1980s, a large number of

writers such as Ma Yuan, Mo Yan, Su Tong, Yu Hua, Han Shaogong, Ge Fei and Sun

Ganlu experimented with language, stylistic forms and non-linear narrative in their works,

[36] Zheng Dongtian, *Jinjin qinian: 1979-1986 zhongqingnian daoyan tansuo huigu* (Only seven years: Thoughts on explorations of middle-aged and young directors 1979-1986), *Dangdai dianying* (Contemporary Film), no.1 (1987), 51.
[37] Julia F. Andrews and Gao Minglu, "The Avant-Garde's Challage to Official Art," in Deborah S Davis, Richard Kraus, Barry Naughton, and Elizabeth J. Perry, eds., *Urban Spaces in Contemporary China*: *The Potential for Autonomy and Community in Post-Mao China*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp.221-278.

forming a renowned movement of avant-garde literature (*xianfeng wenxue*).

However, the introduction of modern Western culture into mainland China should be seen as merely a by-product of Deng's economic policy of openness. As a reformist in the Party, Deng may not have agreed with many aspects of Maoism, but he did see value in the socialist cultural system. In this sense, the Chinese authorities maintained a high level of vigilance against the spread of Western culture. However, the influence of Western culture soon went beyond what was acceptable to the Party. Several social campaigns, from the "Anti-Spiritual Pollution" campaign of 1983, to "Anti-Bourgeois liberalization" of 1985-1987, to the Tiananmen Incident of 1989, all show that the Party was fundamentally opposed to Western values and political systems. All those ideas associated with Western culture, including modernism and postmodernism, were considered in a derogatory way in official discourse. Because of these political pressures, commentators in China avoided referring to the experimental tendency of non-realism which derived from Western modernism in terms of cinematic technique and aesthetics. The discussion of Huang Jianxin's *Dislocation* during the period of the Anti-Bourgeois liberalization campaign is a good example.[38]

In the 1980s, non-realist films, including *Troubled Laughter*, *The Alley* (*Xiaojie*, dir. Yang Yanjin, 1981), *The Black Cannon Incident*, *Dislocation*, *Death Visits the Living*

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[38] As Pickowicz observes, "during the discussions on *The Black Cannon Incident*, many commentators…had agreed that it was appropriate to use a term like 'absurdity' to characterize Chinese social life….But suddenly, in January 1987, it was dangerous to suggest that Chinese society was absurd or that a cinematic theater of the absurd was an appropriate way to approach the problems of socialist society." See Paul G. Pickowicz, "Huang Jianxin and the Notion of Postsocialism," in Nick Browne, Paul G. Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack and Esther Yau, eds., *New Chinese Cinemas: Form, Identities, Politics*, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p.72.

(*Yige sizhe dui shengzhe de fangwen*, dir. Huang Jianzhong, 1987), *Red, White and Black*

Rooms (*Hong fangjian, baifangjian, heifangjian*, dir. Song Jiangbo, 1988) and

Filmmakers (*Dianyingren*, dir. Ding Yinnan, 1988), shifted their representational

emphasis to their characters' subjective experience, such as dream, fantastic hallucination

and imagination. This was in addition to the formal innovations of open endings,

embedded structure, self-reflexive techniques and other cinematic devices. These 1980s

films are diverse in subject matter and genre, but to some extent they do share

characteristics that enable them to constitute an alternative aesthetics in Chinese cinema,

which can be seen as the herald of post-realism of the 1990s and 2000s. I will discuss the

non-realist aesthetics of the 1980s in detail in Chapter Two.

Post-realism in Sixth-Generation Films

As China's reform and opening-up moved into its second decade in the 1990s, the terrain

of post-socialist culture was very different from that of the 1980s. On the one hand, the

crackdown on the student democratic protests on 4th June 1989 in Tiananmen Square

brought a sudden halt to the modernist and modernization ideology of the "New Era."

Instead of the 1980s atmosphere of idealism, an ethos of cynicism and disillusionment

prevailed in the post-Tiananmen era. On the other hand, after Deng Xiaoping's

well-known "southern tour" in 1992 and the official adoption of the "socialist market

economy" as the objective of economic reform at the Fourteenth Congress of the CCP in

the same year, marketization was intensified and expanded. In fact, in the name of

"socialism with Chinese characteristics" the capitalist economy as well as its concomitant consumerism became predominant in Chinese society. The configuration of the social structure and the cultural landscape underwent a tremendous transformation. The new post-socialist conditions not only fundamentally departed from the earlier stage of the New Era, but also prefigured their own development in the new twenty-first century. The emphasis on the concept "postsocialism" in the 1980s still lay in its root "socialism" (even though developed in an alternative or unconventional way). However, from the 1990s the accent undoubtedly shifted to the term's prefix "post," indicating its close affinity to "postmodernism." Because of this shift in emphasis, Yingjin Zhang tends to describe "postsocialism" in relation to Chinese cinema:

> …not as a singular concept governing the entire post-Mao era (i.e., from 1977 onward); rather…as a varied landscape of culture in post-Mao China against which filmmakers of different generations, aesthetic aspirations, and ideological persuasions struggle to readjust or redefine their different strategic positions in different social, political, and economic situations.[39]

Under the new circumstances, both aesthetic tendencies of (post-socialist) realism and non-realism significantly developed, reshaping the landscape of Chinese film culture in the 1990s. In contrast to the relatively limited experiment and practice in the early 1980s, *jishizhuyi* was extensively employed in a wide range of films, in both fiction and non-fiction. Prior to the Sixth Generation's fiction filmmaking, *jishizhuyi* was primarily the hallmark of the documentaries of Wu Wenguang, Jiang Yue, Duan Jinchuan, Wen

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[39] Yingjin Zhang, "Rebel without A Cause? China's New Urban Generation and Post-socialist Filmmaking," p.52.

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Pulin, Bi Jianfeng, Lu Wangping, and others who emerged in the late 1980s. They were

later known as members of the Chinese New Documentary Movement[40]. Influenced by

cinéma vérité, *jishizhuyi* of the new documentary is characterized by unscripted work,

spontaneous shooting and handheld camerawork which distinguishes itself from the

pre-scripted, illustrated lecture format of *zhuantipian* (special topic films).[41]

The documentary filmmaking of the New Documentary Movement is believed to

have had a great impact on the feature filmmaking of the Sixth Generation.[42] This can be

seen in the sensitive subject matter, language and technique which are features of their

films. With the economy growing at a surprisingly rapid pace, social structures and values

also changed enormously. A growing polarization appeared between city and country,

between rich and poor. Whereas the Fourth Generation did make ordinary people visible

in their realist films, the Sixth Generation goes further by pointing cameras at marginal

individuals on the periphery of mainstream society. The disabled, prostitutes, thieves,

homosexuals, migrant workers and laid-off workers, who were usually invisible in

mainstream films, became the main characters in Sixth-Generation films. In a certain

cense, the young filmmakers' shift of focus to the marginal people signifies their

self-position or identity of being distant or independent from the mainstream.

Notably, many significant realist techniques, such as non-dramatized narration,

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[40] See Lu Xinyu, *Jilu Zhongguo: Dangdai Zhongguo xin jilu yundong* (Documenting China: The New Documentary Movement in China, Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2003.
[41] Chris Berry, "Getting Real: Chinese Documentary, Chinese Postsocialism," pp.115-134.
[42] Ibid.

hand-held shots, long takes, location shooting, tracking shots, synchronous sound

recording, and the use of non-professional actors are widely employed in

Sixth-Generation films. By reducing narratives to the minute details of everyday life, their

films are presented as raw, direct reality, and create a sense of being "on-the-spot"

(*xianchanggan*) which would give audiences to "witness the film as raw life and as a

history of the present."[43] To enhance the realist effect of their films, directors even

deliberately shot some scenes on video, a technique which "give the film surface an

added documentary look and feel of actuality and liveliness."[44] Instead of the standard

Putonghua (Mandarin) speech of actors in earlier films, the Sixth-Generation directors

prefer using dialects and local languages to challenge *Putonghua* as the official standard

and restore the reality of original language.

Meanwhile, post-realist aesthetics appeared in some Sixth-Generation films after

1989. Here, one question arises: what is the difference between the non-realist aesthetics

of the 1980s and the post-realist aesthetics of the Sixth Generation? One radical

difference is that in films of the non-realist tendency in the 1980s, non-realist or

non-rational events and elements are usually relegated to dreams or artistic activities.

They are contained in an explainable frame of empirical and rational reality, leaving

unchallenged the realist framework of the films and the underlying ideology of the

superiority of the objective world to that of the sub-reality of imagination. In contrast, in

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[43] Zhang Zhen: "Bearing Witness: Chinese Urban Cinema in the Era of 'Transformation'," p.18.
[44] Ibid.

the post-realist films of the Sixth Generation, the clear boundaries between reality and

fiction and between art and life become very blurred or are even dissolved.

Simultaneously, the apparent transparency of verisimilitude is repudiated and the

exposure of artistic mediation is increasingly emphasized. This can be encapsulated in the

concept — self-reflexivity. Thus, self-reflexivity constitutes a significant feature of

post-realist aesthetics in the Sixth-Generation films.[45] Robert Stam describes

self-reflexivity as follows:

> [Texts with self-reflexivity] interrupt the flow of narrative in order to
> foreground the specific means of literary and filmic production. To
> this end, they deploy myriad strategies — narrative discontinuities,
> authorial intrusions, essayistic digressions, stylistic virtuosities. They
> share a playful, parodic, and disruptive relation to established norms
> and conventions. They demystify fictions, and our naïve faith in
> fictions, and make of this demystification a source for new fictions.[46]

Particularly, self-reflexivity in cinema might include devices such as "the designation of

the apparatus (cameras, monitor, and switches); the disruption of narrative flow; the

juxtaposition of heterogeneous slices of discourses; and the mixing of documentary and

fictive modes."[47] The Sixth-Generation films discussed in this study are self-reflexive in

many different ways. The presence of the camera and the protagonist's identity as a

cameraman or photographer are underlined in *Suzhou River* and *Lunar Eclipse*. In Jiang

Wen's *In the Heat of the Sun* the recurring voice-over often disrupts the normal flow of

the film narrative by negating his preceding statement or what we have just seen. We see

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[45] Although the highly self-reflexive films such as *The Alley* have already appeared in the 1980s, they were still unusual maverick experiments at the time.

[46] Robert Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard*. Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1985, xi.

[47] Ibid., p.16.

the combination of animation and live action in *The World* and the juxtaposition of realist

narrative and surreal events in *Still Life*. A hybrid of documentary style and fiction

appears in *24 City* as well as *Suzhou River*. These diverse self-reflexive devices highlight

film as a mediated presence and underscore the filmmakers' subjective vision of

experience. In addition, self-reflexivity results in a fundamental change in the relationship

between the audience and a film. The audience of a self-reflexive film cannot be a passive

recipient, but more like a co-creator, required to participate in the meaning construction

of the film. In certain cases, the audience's participation is crucial to the accomplishment

of the filmmaker's intention. For example, *24 City*'s parody of the documentary genre

depends on the audience's recognition of the fact that the roles of some of the workers

interviewed are played by celebrated actors. For some foreign audiences (Jia Zhangke's

films have a significant following in the West) who do not know these Chinese actors, the

mockumentary nature of *24 City* is not apparent.

Self-reflexivity breaks the illusion created by the allegedly faithful representation of

reality or verisimilitude for which cinema is often supposed to be an ideal tool.

Understanding the compatibility of self-reflexivity and realistic reference in post-realism

aesthetics in the Sixth-Generation films is a challenge. In regard to this, Stam's

observation on Brecht is helpful. He notes that Brecht "demonstrated the compatibility of

self-reflexivity as an aesthetic strategy and realism as an aspiration. His critique of

realism centered on the ossified conventions of the nineteenth-century novel and

naturalist theatre, but not on the goal of truthful representation."[48] Stam's observation

provides an appropriate viewpoint to analyse post-realism in the Sixth-Generation films.

Most of their films in the post-realist style retain a sense of history. Sometimes, they may

intentionally avoid historical references, as in the cases of *Suzhou River* and *Lunar*

Eclipse, but, as Chris Berry comments, they still "imply social critique and do not

function as consoling fetishes."[49] Keeping a certain distance from the real world, these

films usually possess a dreamy quality. But it is not fair to say that these dreams bear no

relation to reality. Rather, they often show a kind of invisible reality by not referring to

specific social reality. In the case of *Suzhou River*, the scepticism and nihilism the film

presents are an exact reflection of value vacuum of contemporary Chinese society.

Nevertheless, the tendency to stylistic ostentation and play with form does exist in some

Sixth-Generation films. Even a filmmaker with great concern for social reality like Jia

Zhangke also at times indulges in simple self-reflexive play in his film *24 City*. By

comparison, Zhang Yuan's *Green Tea*, which will be examined in another chapter in this

thesis, may be a much worse example with excessive arty techniques.

Methodology

I have chosen seven key films *In the Heat of the Sun*, *Suzhou River*, *Lunar Eclipse*, *Green*

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[48] Robert Stam, Robert Burgoyne, and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics: Structuralism, Post-structuralism, and Beyond*. New York: Routledge, 1992, p.17.
[49] Chris Berry, "Jia Zhangke and the Temporality of Post-socialist Chinese Cinema," in Olivia Khoo and Sean Metzger, eds., *Futures of Chinese Cinema: Technologies and Temporalities in Chinese Screen Cultures*, Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2009, p.114.

Tea, *The World*, *Still Life*, *24 City* from the batch of post-realist films I listed in the

preceding part as the main objects of this thesis. The reason for this selection is threefold.

First, all seven films were made by prominent filmmakers of the Sixth Generation, from

Zhang Yuan, the prominent independent filmmaker in post-socialist China, to Jiang Wen,

a former actor, and now a very popular director in mainland China; from Lou Ye, who

was banned by the Chinese authorities from filmmaking for five years for touching on a

politically sensitive subject to Jia Zhangke, an outstanding filmmaker who receives

massive recognition and praise in international art film circuits, and is now regarded as

the leading figure of the Sixth Generation. This research seeks to cover a wide spectrum

of Sixth-Generation filmmakers by combining an examination of the aforementioned

representative directors' important works with occasional references to some other

Sixth-Generation filmmakers such as Zhang Ming and Zhang Yang. My aim is to show

that the post-realist aesthetics is neither an incidental phenomenon nor the maverick

artistic practice of a few filmmakers, but an artistic trend that involves the great majority

of the Sixth-Generation filmmakers. Second, of course, the seven films contain a variety

of significant post-realist techniques, including unreliability of voice-over, meta-narrative,

unidentifiable characters, heightened symbolic settings/images, surreal effects and fake

documentary. By examining them from different aspects, I hope to offer a relatively

comprehensive understanding of post-realism in the films of the Sixth Generation. Third,

through considering these films, this thesis also seeks to explore the specific historical

and social context of the films in a fast-changing contemporary China. Thus, I prefer to

choose a film which can well mirror the on-going post-socialist transformation of Chinese society from the 1990s onwards. For example, though both Jia Zhangke's *The World* and Zhang Yuan's *Little Red Flowers* are characterized by heightened symbolic images, the former reflects more directly the immediate reality of contemporary China. So, instead of *Little Red Flowers*, I include *The World* in the scope of this thesis.

The conclusions of my thesis draw on a synthesis of three approaches: first, transtextual analysis, which allows me to scrutinize individual film texts within a network of textual relations; second, the study of individual films based mainly on close reading and secondarily on filmmakers' explicit statements of their aesthetic intentions; and third, the social-context approach, aiming to map the social and cultural background against which the films texts emerged.

Regarding the first approach, "transtextuality" is a structuralist theory proposed by French literary theorist Gérard Genette based on Bakhtin's notion of "dialogism" and Julia Kristeva's theory of "intertextuality." According to Genette, transtextuality refers to "all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts."[50] Instead of interpreting a single film text against a general and discursive context, transtextual analysis puts a film text into a relationship with systems of textual manifestations. In the initial stage of this research, the transtextual perspective enabled me to choose seven representative films from the post-realist film corpus of the Sixth

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[50] Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans., Newman Channa and Claude Doubingsky Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997, p.1

Generation, according to their respective hypertextual relations of unreliable narrative, female-double characters and aestheticized space. Hypertextuality, one of the five transtextual relations in Genette's taxonomy and which refers to the relation between hypotext (an earlier text) and hypertext, is the most useful relation for my research. "Hypertextuality calls attention to all the transformative operations that one text can operate on another text."[51] I shall explore the new elements which films of "hypertexts" transform in a relatively new historical context from films of "hypotext." In the first film group, in relation to *Suzhou River*, *In the Heat of the Sun* is a hypotext. The hypertext, *Suzhou River*, modifies *In the Heat of the Sun*'s theme of unreliable narrative to varying degrees. In addition, hypertextuality avoids the risk of static taxonomism. A film may belong to various systems or relations rather than just belonging to a certain group. For instance, *Suzhou River* is not only a member of the first film group of unreliable narratives, but also plays a role in the second group of "female doppelgänger" films.

The second level of my analysis is close reading. The seven films are the primary resources in this part of my research. Critical close reading of them forms a pivotal part of this study. Primarily treating film as a visual art form, I will explore these films from different aspects of film language and technique — mise-en-scène, editing, cinematography, sound and colour — to reveal how meaning is produced. The process of analysing films in my study is interpretation. To interpret a film, according to David

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[51] Ibid., p.209.

Bordwell, "is to ascribe implicit or symptomatic meaning to it."[52] The meanings of a film

are constructed, not found. "The sensory data of the film at hand furnish the materials out

of which inferential processes of perception and cognition build meanings."[53] I also place

particular post-realist films into the bigger context of the whole artistic world of directors'

oeuvre. To supplement my interpretation of the film texts, I also seek to relate the film

text and style to the director as their creator. Directors' explicit statements of their artistic

intentions and on specific ambiguous experimental cinematic devices provide a helpful

perspective, from which we can decode the meaning of their film texts. For example, I

have undertaken an interview with Wang Quan'an to get first-hand accounts of his artistic

intentions in his filmmaking, which are valuable resources in reaching my conclusions.

Nevertheless, one point should be noted: between my close reading of film texts and the

director's stated intentions, there may be correspondence, complementarity, or even

divergence. This study seeks to incorporate these directors' subjective intentions and

motivations, yet, in consideration of the broader social and cultural context which affects

the interpretation of these film texts, does not permit the statements to strictly confine my

close readings to them.

　　The social-context approach is the third level of my analysis. As an assumption of

this study, I argue that post-realism is an aesthetic paradigm that belongs to the

post-socialist epoch in which the market economy and socialist politics co-exist.

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[52] David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*. Cambridge, Mass.:
Harvard University Press, 1989, p.249.
[53] Ibid., p.3.

Post-realism is an aesthetic product of the complexity of the Chinese post-socialist

situation and an artistic response to the dramatic post-socialist transformation. Thus, film,

rather than being treated as a pure text, is understood in this study as social practice and a

symbolic system which is related to social, political, cultural and industrial context. The

social-context approach enables me to examine how these films relate to the historical

background, and achieve, as Bill Nichols comments, "some theoretically satisfying

combination of the personal and the political, the social field of interaction and the

unconscious domain of desire."[54]

Chapter Outline

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter One, "Chinese (Cinematic) Realism: A

Historical Review," examines the hegemonic discourse of realism as well as the dominant

cinematic conventions of (melodramatic) realism in the history of Chinese cinema. Only

with reference to this dominant tradition of realism can the aesthetics of non-realism (as

well as post-realism) be defined as alternative. This chapter pays more attention to the

discourse of realism than to realist convention, since the former to a greater extent than

the latter can reveal abundant and volatile political and ideological implications in

different historical conditions.

    Chapter Two begins by briefly tracing the alternative aesthetics of non-realism in

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[54] Bill Nichols, *Movies and Methods: An Anthology*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, p.14.

Chinese cinema before its socialist transformation in the PRC. After a halt during the

socialist period, alternative aesthetics revived in a number of Chinese films in the 1980s. I

argue that these films constitute a contrasting aesthetic tendency to the contemporary

realist cinematic practice. In the shadow cast by socialist realism as the officially favored

aesthetics, filmmakers confined non-realist elements or non-rational events to a rationalist

frame which is typically manifested as a form of sub-text such as a dream or as artistic

activities (for example, filmmaking and performing a play). In this chapter I am

concerned with how these post-socialist films deviate from realism, and also seek to find

reasons why non-realist or experimental representation had in previous decades become

taboo in Chinese socialist cinema.

Chapters Three, Four and Five, the core of this thesis, shift focus to the post-realist

aesthetics of some prominent Sixth-Generation filmmakers from the early 1990s to the

present, a period of two decades of increased postsocalist transition in Chinese society.

Chapter Three deals with Jiang Wen's *In the Heat of the Sun* and Lou Ye's *Suzhou River*

from the aspect of unreliable narrative. Both films are narrated by a highly untrustworthy,

first-person voice-over who at times lays bare the fabrication of his story or memory.

They present narratives with ascending degrees of unreliability interwoven with the real

and fantastic. The two films share a common concern with the theme of memory within

the Chinese post-socialist context. Inventing memory rather than recollecting,

character-narrators reconstruct either the socialist past or postmodern present in order to

relieve their confusion and perplexity about the real world.

Chapter Four sets out to examine the representation of ambiguous female characters with uncertain identities, and the reformulation of the revived theme of the female double in Wang Quan'an's *Lunar Eclipse* and Zhang Yuan's *Green Tea*. In both films one actress plays two female characters who thus look identical, putting the stability of coherent and identifiable characters into question. This chapter argues that the female characters with disrupted identities in the Sixth-Generation films mirror the inner split in Chinese society stemming from its dramatic transition to a post-socialist cultural pattern.

Chapter Five offers a case study of Jia Zhangke as a microcosm of his entire generation's general efforts to pursue more diverse approaches and techniques to delineate reality. The chapter draws a picture of Jia's endeavours to transcend his previous realist cinematic practice in his "hometown trilogy" by discussing Jia's later films *The World*, *Still Life*, as well as *24 City* from the perspective of aestheticized space. In *The World* both the simulated space of the World Theme Park and the virtual world of animation construct a highly abstract and symbolic rather than real cinematic space. *Still Life* achieves a defamiliarizing effect by infusing various surreal elements into the realist framework. Additionally, this chapter also examines Jia's experiment with post-realist device in *24 City*, a mockumentary which blurs the distinction between fiction and documentary. Chapter Five concludes with tracing post-realist aesthetics back to previous cinematic exploration and showinging its significant impact on some younger filmmakers such as those of Tang Xiaobai and Han Jie.

In the epilogue of this thesis, post-realism is further examined in the context of the

dynamics of the tripartite relationship of political heteronomy, market heteronomy and

artistic autonomy. After discussing the continuation of post-realism in the practice of art

film, remarks on the development of this new aesthetic paradigm in commercial

filmmaking in the recent decade conclude this thesis.

Chapter One

Chinese (Cinematic) Realism: A Historical Review

As I noted in Introduction, my labelling of the alternative aesthetics in some Sixth-Generation films as post-realism is largely due to the strong affiliation of this new aesthetic paradigm with the hegemonic tradition of realism in Chinese cinema. In the context of Chinese cinema, realism is qualified by several terms including social realism, critical realism, socialist realism and the "combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism" (*Geming de xianshizhuyi yu geming de langmanzhuyi xiang jiehe*. Hereafter, the "Two Combinations"). This glimpse of various kinds of realism already suggests that realism is a slippery term that was applied in a variety of texts and contexts throughout the history of Chinese cinema. An unavoidable question raised here is: in what sense is realism to be conceptualized and studied in Chinese cinema? Before delving into an elaboration of the new aesthetic of post-realism in the following chapters, in this chapter I seek to address this question by outlining the trajectory of realism in the history of Chinese cinema.

A preliminary assumption is that the use of realism in the context of Chinese cinema can be generally seen in two senses: realism as aesthetic convention and realism as discourse. The former sense, realist aesthetic convention, which focuses on cinematic representation, is enlightened by Robert Stam's discussion of realism in the current

post-structuralist and post-modern context. Stam suggests that from the classical realist theories of Bazin and Kracauer in the 1950s to the "intertextuality" of the 1980s and 1990s, our understanding of realism has shifted from "'ontological' interest in cinema as the phenomenal depiction of real-life 'existents,' to an analysis of filmic realism as a matter of aesthetic convention."[1] In film studies, there are a number of realisms with diverse denotations, for example, Hollywood classic realism as described in the notable work of David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson[2]; social realism in the case of British social realism; neo-realism in the context of post-war Italian cinema which reflects the influence of André Bazin's theory; and "Direct Cinema" or "Cinéma Vérité" referring to a style of documentary filmmaking. These realisms feature different sets of formal parameters. As to Chinese cinema, the connotation of realism is different from any of the above realisms. The dominant stylistic mode of Chinese cinema throughout the period from the 1930s to the early 1980s, as Chris Berry and Mary Ann Farquhar define it, is "melodramatic realism." They used this term because of the prominent melodramatic elements such as theatricality, sentimentality and exaggeration embedded in cinematic representation of immediate reality.[3]

The second sense of realism referred to above, realism as discourse, arises from the fact that the emergence of the various prefixes in the history of realism in Chinese cinema

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[1] Robert Stam, Robert Burgoyne, and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics*, p.188.
[2] David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.
[3] Chris Berry and Mary Ann Farquhar, *China on Screen*: *Cinema and Nation*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006, p.76.

tended to match changes in the political climate in the nation. The mutable prefixes, as

Theodore Huters notes, undermine the notion that realism as an aesthetics could be

"stable enough to provide a source of positive intellectual guidance."[4] Instead, the fact

that various prefixed forms of the term realism varied in accordance with different

political conditions shows that the political dimension of realism is heavily accentuated in

the Chinese context. This sheds light on my investigation of realism here: merely

examining Chinese realism in terms of aesthetic conventions would be very likely to

blind us to the intricate and particular historical and political circumstances under which

the aesthetic conventions were developed. In this light, another viewpoint — the

perspective of discourse — needs to be brought into the study of Chinese realism, through

this we can relate cinematic realism to its social materiality and ideological particularity.

According to Anchor, discursive practices "are the only possible objects of historical

inquiry, because human activity can never be understood apart from the ways in which it

is articulated."[5]

    In current scholarship these two senses of Chinese realism, realist aesthetic

convention and realist discourse, are usually intermixed, resulting in perceptions that slide

between different dimensions of understanding. For this reason in this chapter, trying to

avoid such a disadvantageous stance, I shall discuss both senses of Chinese realism, and

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[4] Theodore Huters: "Ideologies of Realism in Modern China: The Hard Imperatives of Imported Theory," in Liu Kang and Xiaobing Tang, eds., *Politics, Ideology, and Literary Discourse in Modern China*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993, p.152.
[5] Robert Anchor, "Realism and ideology: The question of order," *History and Theory* 22, no.2 (1983), 107-119.

pay main attention to the latter, realism as discourse. To examine the discourse of realism

will not confine me to the enclosed horizon of film studies but allow a broader cultural

consideration that can reveal the dynamics of the Chinese historical contexts in which

different discourses operate. Thus, in the following sections, I will adopt a

socio-discursive approach to scrutinize the discourse of realism in Chinese cinema,

particularly in film criticism, institutional policy and intellectual debate. I also aim to

sketch the evolution of the melodramatic realist tradition in several significant moments

in the history of Chinese film.

Realism in the Western and Chinese Contexts

Prior to the elaboration of any sense of realism in Chinese cinema, I must explicate the

essential divergences between Chinese realism and Western (classic) realism. In the

nineteenth century, the term realism first emerged as a literary concept, which was

influenced by the extensive social, economic and political changes in Europe. The

demand of the new bourgeois class for new art aesthetics and techniques to better present

their social reality resulted in the decline of previous romantic and neo-classical models.

In addition, the advance of scientific thought and theory also impacted on the

development of realism, leading people to believe that comprehensive and meticulous

observation would guide them to definitive truth.

This western literary notion that art forms exist in accordance with reality

significantly impacted on the conception of cinematic realism after the world's first film

was made in 1895 in France. The western discussion of cinematic realism pays much attention to the relation between image (photography) and reality, and highlights film art's photographical ontology by stressing the verisimilitude of image. In the1940s and 1950s, two most prominent realist film theorists André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer, believed that film is an art of reality and the objectivity of film is rooted in the nature of the mechanical reproduction of photography. In other words, without the material object, the photographer cannot work, which generates the ontological relationship between the photographic representation and what it represents. Bazin asserts that photography, compared with other arts forms such as painting, has minimal human interference, thus being free of subjective intention. He further links the media ontology closely with cinematic aesthetics by claiming that "the realism of cinema follows directly from its photographic nature."[6] Through the analysis of films by a variety of filmmakers including Jean Renoir, Robert Bresson, Orson Welles, etc., Bazin advocates depth of field and long takes in opposition to montage (Hollywood editing) since he believes that these techniques allow the spectator to experience a cinematic world which is more closer to what he or she enjoys in reality and implies "a more active metal attitude on the part of the spectator."[7] For Kracauer, to record the pre-filmic reality, the physical reality before the camera, is the essential function of cinema: "films come into their own when they

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[6] André Bazin, "The Screen and the Realism of Space," in *What is Cinema?* Vol.1, trans. Hugh Gray, Berkeley: Unveristy of California Press, 2005, p.108.
[7] André Bazin, "The Evoolution of the Language of Cinema," in *What is Cinema?* Vol.1, pp.35-36.

record and reveal physical reality."[8] Moreover, a realist film should record or reclaim events and objects which are overlooked in reality.[9]

During the 1950s and ealy 1960s, Bazin's theory of films had enjoyed the extensive acceptance. However, as the semiotic theory emerged from the late 1960s, the "classical" realist theories of film, both Bazin's and Kracauer's, were widely seen being outdated because of their naive believes in cinema's ability to restore reality or redeem the physical reality. Bazin and Kracauer, as the most representative realist critics, have often been accused of being idealist theorists.

The recent years witness the re-evaluation of the importance of Kracauer's and Bazin's legacies and contributions. In the case of Kracauer, his theory has received considerable critical rejection for his advocacy of realism is believed to be naively rooted in cinematic indexciality — film's referential relation to the physical reality as object. This prevalent understanding of Kracauer's materist film theory is greatly challenged by Miriam Hansen's reading of Kracauer's 1940 Marseilles notebooks on film aesthetics. Hansen argues that the "notion of the material dimension is far more comprehensive than the concept of 'physical reality' that appears to govern the later book"[10]— *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (1960). Hansen makes it clear that the "material dimension" in Kracauer's early writing not only means a world involving both visible and

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[8] Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997, xlix.
[9] He notes: "We literally redeem this world from its dormant state, its state of virtual nonexistence, by endeavouring to experience it through the camera." *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, p.300.
[10] Miriam Hansen, "'With Skin and Hair': Kracauer's Theory of Film, Marscille 1940," *Ciritical Inquiry* 19, no.3 (1993), 452.

invisible elements, but also, rather than merely "an object of representation," it "crucially

includes the subject and the subject's relation to the Other."[11] As Hansen elucidates,

Kracauer grounds his realist aesthetics in film's photographic base not because of its

"ability to reflect its object as real" but because of its "ability to render it strange."[12]

Rendering the material world strange, as specifies in Kracauer's discussion of films of

Jacques Feyder and Jean Vigo, can be achived through "isolat[ing] objects and milieus

from the human beings with which they are habitually and intimately entwined, and thus

succeed in confronting us as Other."[13] In this sense, what Kracauer's redeptive realism

emphasizes is not the surface verisimilitude and authenticity as understoond in common

misinterpretations but "film's ability to discover and articulate materiality, to enact 'the

process of materialization.'"[14]

In the case of Bazin, numbers of film critics' studies continues to find echoes of

Bazin's ideas in the latest film theory in the works of thinkers such as Deleuze and

Rancière, revealing the openness of Bazin's film theory. Among Bazin's prominent

readers, Daniel Morgan's reconsdieration on Bazin provides important clues to how to

understand and re-assess Bazin's realist aesthetics.

Morgan begins his discussion of Bazin with pointing out two typical misreadings in

the canonical interpretation of Bazin's theory. According to Morgan, realism, in Bazin's

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[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid., 453.
[13] Ibid., 459.
[14] Miriam Hansen, "Introduction to Kracauer", in Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, xvii.

formulation, is oriented, but not determined by film's photographic ontology

— the correspondce of the world of a film to the real world. He also opposes previous

standard reading by showing that Bazin's realism is not necessarily related to a series of

particular techniques or a set of criteria such as long takes, location shooting and depth of

field.[15] Bazin's several crucial statements in his work supports Morgan's point of view.

Bazin claims"there is not one realism, but several realism. Each period looks for its own,

the technique and the aesthetics that will capture, retain, and render best what one wants

from reality."[16] Somewhere else, Bazin states his argument more strongly as follows：

> The word "realism" as it is commonly used does not have an absolute
> and clear meaning, so much as it indicates a certain tendency toward
> the faithful rendering of reality on film. Given the fact that this
> movement toward the real can take a thousand different routes, the
> apology for 'realism' *per se*, strictly speaking, means nothing at all.
> The movement is valuable only insofar as it brings increased meaning
> (itself an abstraction) to what is created.[17]

Therefore, by examining Bazin's various interpretations of realism in different cases of

directors' films, Morgan argues that realism for bazin is not"a particular style or set of

stylistic attributes, but a process, a mechanism of using sound and image to give reality

meaning."[18] Meanwhile, Morgan insightfully points out that this aesthetic variety of

realism in fact is connected to film's ontology of the photographic image. He notes:

> It is that a film, to be realist, only has to respond to or take into
> account *in some way* the ontology of the photographic image. What

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[15] Daniel Morgan, "Rethinking Bazin: Ontology and realist aesthetics." *Critical Inquiry* 32, no.3 (2006), 443-481.
[16] André Bazin, *Bazin at Work,: Major Essays and Review from the Forties and Fifties*, ed. Bert Cardullo and trans. Alain Piette and Bert Cardullo, New York and London: Routledge, 1997, p.6.
[17] André Bazin, *Jean Renoir*, trans. W. W. Halsey II and William H. Simon, ed. François Truffaut, New York, 1973, p.85.
[18] Daniel Morgan, "Rethinking Bazin: Ontology and realist aesthetics," 445.

form this response takes is open to the individual films to achieve; the only requirement is that the style work with — take account of — the reality of the objects and world shown by the image. This model of realism leaves film rooted in its ontology, but also open to the aesthetic variety of films that Bazin wants to call realist.[19]

In this regard, Bazin's realist theory is in line with modernist critics', for example, Clement Greenberg's, emphasis the limitations or the disciplines of medium of the specific art, which actually is "a method, the relation between style and ontology" established by a specific art. Bazin's realism is thus a kind of modernism.[20]

Both Hansen's and Morgan's reading rehabilitates classical realist film theories from commn misunderstanding and long-stand critique. Morgan's analysis reveals a very important trait of Bazin's realist theory, that is: Bazin's realism is in fact open to include film techniques and narratives that fall outside our conventional understanding of realism. This conclusion actually sheds light on my conceptualization of the post-realist aesthetics of the Sixth Generation film. Their cinematic representation, on the one hand, acknowledges cinema's ontological foundation (exemplified in the device of self-reflexivity, for example); on the other hand, the styles they create in their film are not faithful or confined to the ontology of the medium. Sliding into a new expressive mode (a set of film technique and style), the Sixth Generation filmmakers share a common drive to re-define cinematic realism. Thus, their post-realist aesthetics bears inextricable links to realism as I suggest in the introductory chapter.If putting the conceptualization of post-realism into the framework of Bazin's realism as re-interprented by Mogan, I would

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[19] Daniel Morgan, "Bazin's Modernism." *Paragraph* 36, no.1 (2013), 15-16.
[20] Ibid.

say that post-realism is in fact a realist aesthetics.

Turning our attention from the Western context to Chinese traditional culture, there is no notion that corresponds to the concept of realism in Chinese aesthetics. Until the early twentieth century, the western concept realism (*xianshizhuyi* or *xieshizhuyi*) had been introduced from Japan to China in the New Culture Movement. Unlike the West's concern with the photographic ontology of film and its potential ability to reproduce reality, early Chinese cognition of film started with the similarity between film and traditional drama (opera). Film in China in its early years was known as "shadow play" (*yingxi*), a term itself indicating Chinese people's early cognition of film art as the combination of shadow (form) and play (drama).[21] At the beginning of the twentieth century Chinese were obsessed with the theatricality of film. For them, the difference between film and traditional drama (opera) lay largely in the fact that film is presented in the form of moving pictures while opera is not. Such emphasis on the theatricality of film fundamentally departed from the West's notion of film's ontology as photographic image. The Chinese initial understanding of film greatly influenced their view of cinematic realism. As regard to (cinematic) realism, Chinese in the very early years understood it from the perspective of film content (story, character and emotion) instead of film form and technique. Whether or not a film's content presented social reality was the most

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[21] See Chen Xihe, *Kua wenhua shiye zhong de yingshi yishu* (Film and TV arts from a cross-Cultural perspective). Shanghai: Xuelin chubanshe, 2003. Zhong Dafeng, "*Zhongguo dianying de lishi ji qi genyuan: Zailun yingxi*" (History and origins of Chinese cinema: Another discussion on "shadowplay"), *Dianying yishu* (Film Art), no.1 (1994), 29-35; no.2 (1994), 9-14.

important criterion, if not the only one, to determine if a film was realist or not. Despite some limited reflection on the issue of film form in early Chinese cinema, this content-over-form understanding of realism (in, for example, early Chinese film critic Hou Yao's theory) continued to exert its influence until the dawn of the New Era, a time when many modernist critics who had absorbed western realist film theories extended their concept of realism to film form and language.

Realism as Aesthetic Counterpart of Social Reform and National Salvation: From 1910s-1930s

In the early twentieth century, the western concept of realism (*xianshizhuyi* or *xieshizhuyi*) was introduced through Japan to China during the New Culture Movement. Among the new concepts and literary ideas imported from the West, realism was paramount to all others including romanticism and modernism. The leading figures of cultural reform in China such as Hu Shi and Chen Duxiu saw realism as an advanced literary technique and the right path for Chinese literature to follow in order to break from its fossilised classical tradition and achieve literary modernization. More importantly, some prominent intellectuals considered realism to have played a key role in nineteenth-century European social reform.[22] Thus, for these intellectuals, realism was likewise essential to

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[22] See, for example, Chen Duxiu, "*Xiandai Ouzhou wenyi shi tan*" (On the history of modern European literature and art), *Qingnian zazhi* (Youth Magazine), vol.1, no.3, November 1915; retitled in 1916 *Xin qingnian* (New Youth), in Qin Weihong, ed., *Chen Duxiu xueshu wenhua suibi* (Occasional essays of Chen Duxiu), Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 1999, pp.124-126.

accomplish the goal of China's social transformation.

However, in the first two decades (1910s-1920s), the discussion and practice of

realism was mainly confined to literary and intellectual spheres and did not have any

impact on film. Film was still seen as a low-level, popular commodity, and commercial

interest was the most important concern of filmmakers by the end of the 1920s. Chinese

film screens at that time were full of sensational stories packaged in the various genres of

costume drama, comedy, martial arts and urban romance. It is worth noting that in the ten

years 1921-1931, the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly writers, who catered to a popular

readership at the time, played a crucial role in making the melodramatic mode dominant

in Chinese film production for they wrote the majority of the output of 650 films.[23] Paul

Pickowicz draws a strong link between the melodramatic element in films of the

1910s-1920s and Mandarin Duck and Butterfly writers, whose creative imagination was

"something closely resembling melodrama."[24] Meanwhile, classical Hollywood

melodrama had become popular in China and exerted a huge influence on various aspects

of Chinese cinema. This influence was especially apparent in its narrative mode — a

linear narrative, flat characters and happy endings. As John Ellis notes, early Chinese

filmmakers "drew upon Hollywood genres, principally melodrama, and turned them to

Chinese themes."[25] By applying aesthetic conventions such as "strong emotionalism;

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[23] Vivian Shen, *The Origins of Left-Wing Cinema in China 1932-37*, New York: Routledge, 2005, p.140.
[24] Paul G. Pickowicz, " Melodramatic Representation and the 'May Fourth' Tradition of Chinese Cinema," in Ellen Widmer and David Der-Wei Wang, eds., *From May Fourth to June Fourth: Fiction and Film in Twentieth-Century China*, Cambridge; Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993, p.302.
[25] John Ellis, "Electric shadows in Italy," *Screen* 23, no.2 (1982), 80.

moral polarization and schematization; extreme states of being, situation, actions; overt villainy, persecution of the good, and final reward for virtue; inflated and extravagant expression,"[26] melodrama catered for the sentimental taste of the petty urbanites and became the dominant mode of cinematic representation in Chinese cinema from the 1920s. As Zhang Zhen points out, among the many commercial films, a few attempted to "reconcile and transcend the seemingly contradictory commercial and cultural (and even political) concerns" by paying attention to some contemporary urban issues such as opium addiction and prostitution. These films "addressed the persistence of a worldly or sensational taste of the petty urbanites as well as a sense of social immediacy and participation,"[27] presenting the earliest manifestation of melodramatic realism which later swept through Chinese filmmaking from 1931 to 1936.

The first milestone in early Chinese cinema was in the early 1930s, with the emergence of the left-wing cinema movement. As the Japanese army invaded northeast China, the tensions prevailing in Chinese society led filmmakers to make films more closely related to social reality to cater for audiences' increasing concern about the national crisis. It was in this context that the left-wing cinema movement emerged. Lasting from 1931 to 1936, the period is regarded as the first heyday of Chinese cinema. Distinct realist elements appeared in Chinese cinema as left-wing films criticized the

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[26] Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995, p.29
[27] Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, p.104.

inequality of Chinese society and of the poverty-stricken situation of the lower class. By conveying their didactic messages in a sentimental way, the left-wing films, as Ma Ning claims, call for the spectators to form critical judgments based on a combination of prior actual social experiences and their reception of the films. Chinese left-wing filmmakers did not attempt to coax spectators to believe the reality which was represented in their films, but encouraged spectators to reexamine their daily reality.[28] According to Pickowicz, the left-wing filmmakers who attempted to remould Chinese filmmaking also "became the captives of melodrama." Trying to present the May Fourth anti-traditional and anti-imperialist perspective and basic Marxist notions like class struggle, left-wing filmmakers saw melodrama, because of its strong appeal to ordinary Chinese people, as the most effective form to publicize their ideas. However, their embrace of melodrama did not bring about the effect which they desired. On the contrary in the films of the 1930s-1940s, May Fourth political content and "[M]arxist ideas were swallowed up by the melodramatic genre and reduced to stereotypes and caricatures."[29] Nevertheless, in the official history of Chinese cinema, left-wing filmmakers like Xia Yan are still considered to have succeeded in fostering "social realism" in the official history of Chinese cinema.

However, realism did indeed spread from literature to film in the early 1930s, initiating its dominance in Chinese cinema. The discourse of realism in Chinese cinema

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[28] Ma Ning, "The textual and critical difference of being radical: Reconstructing Chinese leftist films of the 1930s," *Wide Angle* 11, no. 2 (1989), 29.
[29] Paul G. Pickowicz, "Melodramatic Representation and the 'May Fourth' Tradition of Chinese Cinema," p.312.

can generally be divided into two phases. Within the first phase of 1930s-1976, realism was seen as the aesthetic counterpart of China's modernization and it was continually politicised and ideologised. This was a process in which realist discourse shifted its focus to political heteronomy — obeying the rules of political ideology imposed from outside art itself.[30] From the late 1970s to the present is the second phase in which realism has striven to rid itself of overloaded ideological content and tried to restore its status as pure aesthetics. Through the depoliticisation of realism, Chinese filmmakers reclaimed film's (relative) artistic autonomy and restored film as an artistic medium instead of simply being the mouthpiece of political ideology. Paradoxically, the depoliticisation process itself was sometimes politicised, as in the case of the Fourth Generation filmmakers' enthusiasm for Bazin's realist theory. It needs to be pointed out that neither of the dominant discourses of realism in these two stages was monolithic, instead they occasionally encountered resistance.

In the 1930s, left-wing film critics supported the ideologically coded realist films which exposed the social conflicts and oppression, thereby mobilizing the population to carry out social revolution. The critics' standpoint was soon criticized in film journals by some modernists who were mostly writers of "new sensationism" (*xin ganjue pai*). This triggered a famous debate between 1932 and 1935 — "Soft Film versus Hard Film" (*ruanxing dianying yu yingxing dianying zhi zheng*).

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[30] For the definition of heteronomy in the Chinese context, see Jason McGrath, *Post-socialist Modernity*, p.9.

In April 1933, the modernist Liu Na'ou published an article in *Modern Screen* on the

problem of the depth of expression in Chinese film. Liu criticized the overpoliticised

content and the supremacy of content over cinematic form existing in Chinese cinema. He

declared the artistic autonomy of film art in which "function is only a by-product of art;

art is not equivalent to utilitarianism."[31] Following Liu, another modernist Huang Jiamo,

in two articles published in the same journal, also articulated his dissatisfaction with

contemporary Chinese films which he considered were "raped" by "overt ideological

interests and left-wing 'isms', turning cinema into a propaganda instrument while

depriving it of its entertainment appeal."[32] Huang's second article, titled "Hard Film

versus Soft Film" which gave its name to the debate, made the controversial statement

that "film is ice cream for the eye and sofa for the heart."[33] This series of articles aroused

a strong counterattack from a number of left-wing critics such as Chen Wu, Lu Si, Tang

Na and Xia Yan. They denounced the modernists' apolitical view of film art as escapism

and purely commercial-orientated, which catered for low-brow entertainment and sensual

pleasures. As can be seen from the above statements of both sides, the focal point of the

debate in fact lay in the relationship between art and politics, aesthetics and ideology, as

well as film form and content. The major dispute between the two sides rested upon their

different views of the ontology of film. Modernists emphasized film's nature as an artistic

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[31] Liu Na'ou, "*Zhongguo dianying miaoxie de shendu wenti*" (On the depth of expression in Chinese film), *Xiandai dianying* (Modern Screen) 1, no.3 (6 April, 1933), in Luo Yijun, ed., *Zhongguo dianying lilun wenxuan 1920-1989* (Chinese film theory: An anthology 1920-1989), Vol.1, Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 1992, pp.256-261.
[32] Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen*, p.272.
[33] Jia Mo, "*Yingxing yingpian yu ruanxing yingpian*" (Hard Film versus Soft Film), *Xiandai dianying* (Modern Screen) 6, (1 December, 1933), 3, in Luo Yijun, ed., *Zhongguo dianying lilun wenxuan 1920-1989*, pp.265-268.

medium, and maintained that its content should not be separated from form. In comparison, left-wing critics highlighted film's function of reflecting reality and delivering ideological messages to audiences.

As can be seen from the standpoints of both sides, the issue of realism was embedded in this debate. Xia Yan pointed out that whether a filmmaker could artistically succeed or not was determined by his or her capacity to grasp the truth. Other left-wing critics claimed that as long as a filmmaker faces reality and represents reality as it is, his or her work would generate strong artistic appeal. It is worth noting that in 1933, Zhou Yang, who was one of the leaders of the League of Leftist Writers and was later to become the leader of the CCP's cultural and propaganda departments, introduced the Soviet term "socialist realism" to China in his article "On Socialist Realism and Revolutionary Romanticism: the Negation of the Dialectic-Materialist Method of Creation."[34] Left-wing film critics soon utilized Soviet theoretical resources in the debates. From their perspective, realism meant to truly expose social conflicts and class exploitation, it was thus the essential method to achieve the "hard" quality of film. Moreover, left-wing critics believed that truthfulness (*zhenshi*) is subordinate to tendentiousness (*qingxiangxing*), namely, an artist's world outlook. Only from the standpoint of Marxist materialism, can a film truly reflect objective reality.[35]

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[34] Zhou Yang, "*Guanyu shehuizhuyi de xianshizhuyi yu geming de langmanzhuyi: Weiwu bianzhengfa de chuangzuo fangfa zhi fouding*" (On socialist realism and revolutionary romanticism: The negation of the dialectic-materialist method of creation).This article was first published in *Xiandai* (Modern) 4, no.1 (November 1933). Zhou Yang signed the article with his pen name Zhou Qiying. In *Zhou Yang wenji* (Collected works of Zhou Yang), Vol.1, Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1984, pp.101-114.

[35] See Chen Wu, "*Dianying piping de jizhun*" (The criterion of film critic), *Min bao* (People's News), May 20, 1934, in

However, according to Mu Shiying, another advocate of soft film, the left-wing

critics' realism was imported from the Soviet Union and none other than "a

Shanghai-made counterfeit of Soviet standards…a kind of pseudo-realism."[36] In addition,

Mu also wrote a long article to point out the theoretical basis of the left-wing critics'

realism.[37] However, modernists like Mu Shiying could not prevent the discourse of

realism from continuing to gain in strength in Chinese film criticism.

In 1936, in the wake of further Japanese aggression, and with the public paying

increasing attention to the issue of national salvation, film critics and filmmakers had a

variety of discussions on the concept of the "national defense film." These included the

issue of whether a national defense film should be a realist film or not. Although most

film critics suggested a national defense film should not reject artistic techniques such as

symbolism and romanticism, they still believed that "realism is the most advanced

technique."[38] Meanwhile, a series of terms based on realism were developed in Chinese

literary discourse such as "revolutionary realism" (*Geming xianshizhuyi*), "realism of the

resistance against Japan" (*Kangri de xianshizhuyi*), and "democratic realism" (*Minzhu

xianshizhuyi*). When the nation was at stake, the discourse of realism was increasingly

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Wang Yongsheng, *Zhongguo xiandai wenlun xuan* (Selections of modern Chinese literary essays), Vol. 2, Guiyang: Guizhou Renmin chubanshe, 1984, pp.248-249.
[36] Mu Shiying, "*Dangjin dianying piping jiantao*" (Review on contemporary film critique), *Furen huabao* (Women's Pictorial), August 1935, in Yan Jiayan and Li Jin, eds., *Mu Shiying quanji* (Complete works of Mu Shiying), Vol.3, Beijing: Beijing shiyue wenyi chubanshe, 2008, pp.240-243.
[37] Mu Shiying, "*Dianying yishu de fangyuzhan: Chi qianzhe 'shehuizhuyi xianshizhuyi' de zhaopai zhe*" (The defensive warfare of film art: Denouncing on those who flaunt the banner of socialist realism), *Chen bao* (Morning Post), August 11, 1935-September 10, 1935, in Yan Jiayan and Li Jin, eds., *Mu Shiying quanji*, pp.192-239.
[38] Chen Wu, "*Yige dianyingren de dubai*" (The monology of a cineaste), *Dianying ·Xiju* (Film·Drama), October 1936, vol.1, no. 1. Also see Yang Lian, "*Guofang dianying yu xieshizhuyi dianying: Yu Li Yun xiansheng shangque*" (National defense film and realist film: Discussing with Mr. Li Yun), *Dagong bao* (Dagong Daily), September 6, 1936. Both Quoted in Li Daoxin, "*Xuanze yu jianchi: Zaoqi xianshizhuyi dianying piping 1932-1937*" (Choice and persistence: Early film criticism on realism 1932-1937), *Wenyi lilun yu piping* (Literary theory and criticism), no.1 (2001), 121-135.

highlighted in both literature and art.

From the series of debates and discussions during 1932-1936, we can see that as China was increasingly cast in the shadow of war the discourse of realism progressively established its dominance in Chinese cinema. At the same time, the discourse of realism had been constantly ideologised and closely associated with the political discourse of social transformation and national salvation. Under the grim circumstances of internal disturbance and external aggression in 1930s China, film could hardly be a pure artistic mediation. Instead, film's legitimacy as art derived from its ability to present social reality, propagate political messages and arouse audiences. In this light, realism in the thirties was not just about aesthetic or style, but rather a value orientation in Chinese cinema.

After the end of the War of Resistance against Japan (1937-1945), the eight years' war experience and its aftermath empowered Chinese filmmakers to be more closely connected to the mass audiences and the stricken nation. Melodramatic realism, which first came to fruition in the early 1930s, reached another peak in Chinese cinema in the late 1940s with films such as *The Spring River Flows East* (*Yijiang chunshui xiang dong liu*, dir. Cai Chusheng and Zheng Junli, 1947 and 1948), *Eight Thousand Li of Clouds and Moon* (*Baqianli lu yun he yue*, dir. Shi Dongshan and Wang Weiyi, 1947), and *Myriad of Lights* (*Wanjia denghuo*, dir. Shen Fu, 1948). Connecting closely the vicissitudes of individual life and family to the fate of the whole nation and the turbulent society, these films struck a chord among Chinese audiences.

In the Spirit of Mao's Yan'an Talks: Realism as Socialist (Revolutionary) Doctrine from 1942 to 1976

In 1942 in Yan'an, the revolutionary base of the CCP in the remote northwest area of the country, the Party leader Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Conference on Literature and Art" unprecedentedly enhanced the political and ideological dimension of realism in the Chinese context. Mao's *Talks* advocated "proletarian realism" as the artistic criterion to which literature and art should firmly adhere. Mao implicitly gave the authoritative definition of proletarian realism as follows:

> Literature and art that have been processed are more organized and concentrated than literature and art in their natural form; they are more typical and more idealized, and therefore have greater universality….Revolutionary fiction, drama, film and so on can create all sorts of characters on the basis of real life and help the masses push history forward.[39]

The prefix, proletarian, added before the root realism certainly endowed the term with a clear political connotation. Simultaneously, Mao's *Talks* also established guiding principles that "literature and art are subordinate to politics," "literature and art serve politics," and "literature and art serve workers, peasants and soldiers," which would be the foundation of the Party's art policies and the Communist regime's literary and art control system after 1949. These doctrines distinguish Mao's realism from the realism of the May Fourth Movement, although both of them have an evident political dimension. As Paul Clark comments, the distinction between Mao's aesthetic doctrines and the May

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[39] Bonnie S. McDougall, trans. and ed., Mao Zedong's "*Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art*," p.70.

Fourth heritage was accentuated in Mao's *Talks* as he drew a clear line between Shanghai

(KMT controlled area) and Yan'an (revolutionary base area).[40] While the realism of the

May Fourth Movement, derived from Western culture, was based on the spirit of western

enlightenment and science, Mao's realism drew heavily from the theoretical resources of

Leninist and Stalinist cultural totalitarianism in the Soviet Union.[41] Realism is

ideologised to serve the Party's politics, and required to depict reality from the point of

view of the CCP's current political concerns.

From then until the late 1970s, the influence of Mao's Yan'an *Talks* as cultural

orthodoxy gradually increased, reaching its climax in the Cultural Revolution. In the

thirty years after 1942, socialist (revolutionary) realism was promoted by the CCP as the

official aesthetic criterion for guiding literary and artistic creation and established its

status as a hegemonic discourse. Mao's emphasis on realism as the uniquely correct

creative method for literature and art exerted a profound impact on film production and

aesthetics in Communist China after 1949.

Meanwhile, melodramatic realism, as a defining characteristic of Chinese film,

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[40] Paul Clark, *Chinese Cinema: Culture and Politics since 1949*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987, pp.27-28.
[41] Later in 1953 "socialist realism" was officially raised, which finally made the affinity between Mao's proletarian realism and socialist realism explicit. In the official edition of Mao's Yan'an *Talkes* published after the establishment of PRC, "proletarian realism" was replaced by the term "socialist realism." The possible reason is that it seemed to Mao that China was still at the stage of New Democratic Revolution, thus it was not suitable to use socialist realism which was related to a higher stage, namely, socialist revolution. Mao Dun made it quite clear: "the method of socialist realism coincides with the requirement of our contemporary literary and artistic practice. While when people see the word "socialist," they will think about its political and economical meaning. However, we are still in the stage of new-democratic revolution, so generally we use "revolutionary realism" [proletarian realism] to distinguish itself from the old realism—critical realism. See Mao Dun: "*Lüetan geming de xianshizhuyi*" (On revolutionary realism), *Wenyi bao* (Literary Gazette), vol.1, no.4, 10 December, 1949. According to Hu Qiaomu, Mao's personal secretary and the editor of Mao's selected works, "proletarian realism is socialist Realism." Quoted in Lorenz Bichler, "Coming to Term with a Term: Notes on the History of the Use of Socialist Realism in China," in H. Chung, M. Falchikov, B.S. McGougall, and K. McPherson, eds., *In the Party Spirit: Socialist Realism and Literary Practice in the Soviet Union, East Germany and China*, Vol.6, Rodopi, 1996, p.35.

sustained its vitality in the socialist cinema of the People's Republic. According to Chris

Berry's discussion of socialist film, the two codes of melodrama and (Hollywood) realism

co-existed and complemented each other. The emotion, entertainment and identification

associated with melodrama "enhance the pedagogical structures" of the Chinese classical

cinema, a concept coined by Berry in the light of Hollywood classical cinema. Like its

Hollywood counterpart, Chinese classical cinema creates the impression of reality by

providing realist conventions, for example, narrative causality, character as agent of

causality, and a set of formal parameters involving mise-en-scene, camerawork and

editing.[42] Through techniques such as shot-reverse shots and continuity editing, the film

screen becomes transparent and the spectator is immersed in a seemingly internally

consistent, life-like fictional world. Socialist films, therefore, succeed in rendering an

illusion of the real in which the dominant ideology is embedded, and thus achieve their

pedagogical goal. The strong emotionalism and moral schematization of the

melodramatic mode were used to highlight class struggle and the conflict between

revolution and counter-revolution. By presenting a hell-like Republican era, socialist

melodrama legitimized the regime of the CCP and idealized the image of the socialist

nation-state.

In September 1953 the socialist transformation was progressing steadily in the

newly-founded PRC. Meanwhile, Sino-Soviet relations entered a honeymoon period of

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[42] Chris Berry, *Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China: The Cultural Revolution after the Cultural Revolution,* New York and London: Routledge, 2004, pp.27-75.

stable development. At the Second National Conference of the Representatives of Literary

and Art Workers (September-October, 1953), socialist realism was officially endorsed as

the sole criterion in literary and artistic creation and criticism.[43] Borrowing the label from

Soviet terminology, the new revolutionary aesthetics is the continuation of the Maoist

theory of the relationship between politics and art which had already been clearly

elaborated in Yan'an in 1942. However, the term "socialist" highlights the mission of this

revolutionary aesthetics to construct a unified imagination of the modern state and

solidify a socialist subject with a tripartite body consisting of workers, peasants and

soldiers. To this end, modeling new worker-peasant-soldier heroes in the spirit of

socialism was confirmed as the essential requirement of socialist realist literature and art.

At a meeting of film scriptwriters, Zhou Yang pointed out: "creating the typical model to

train people ought to be the most fundamental and most central task of our filmmaking

and all literary and artistic creation."[44] The key to creating a typical model is through

typification which foregrounds the "typical characters in a typical environment" (*dianxing*

huanjing zhong de dianxing renwu). By transforming individuals to certain "types," as

René Wellek comments, typification constitutes the bridge between the present and the

future, the real and the social ideal."[45]

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[43] As a prelude to the official confirmation, the *People's Daily* reprinted CCP propaganda and cultural department leader Zhou Yang's article "*Shehuizhuyi xianshizhuyi: Zhongguo wenxue qianjin de daolu*" (Socialist realism: The road ahead for Chinese literature), *Renmin ribao* (People's Daily), 11 January, 1953. Zhou's article was first published in the Soviet literary journal *Red Flag* in 1952.

[44] Zhou Yang, "*Zai quanguo diyijie dianying juzuo huiyi shang guanyu xuexi shehuizhuyi xianshizhuyi wenti de baogao*" (The Report on studying socialist realism at the First National Conference on Script Writing), in *Zhou Yang wenji* (Collected works of Zhou Yang), Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1985, Vol.2, pp.196-197.

[45] René Wellek, *Concepts of Criticism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963, p.242.

According to the orthodoxy of socialist realism, truth (*zhenshi*) means an underlying

ideological truth, being even more truthful than reality itself, because it was the result of

the process of eliminating the false and retaining the true (*quwei cunzhen*) from the

particular perspective of the Communist Party world outlook. In the theory of socialist

realism the correct political standpoint and worldview were more important than specific

techniques in achieving "historical truth" (*Lishi zhenshi*) and "essential truth" (*Benzhi*

zhenshi). In his comments on Chinese literary theory, Liu Zaifu points out that

"[e]pistemology in contemporary Chinese literary theory emphasizes the influence, even

the determining effect, of standpoint and worldview on literary creation (a reflection of

life)….For it [Chinese literary theory] stresses that realism is the only means of literary

creation, and that it must be restricted to the principles of socialist political ideology."[46]

Likewise, the determining effect of standpoint and worldview was often the most

highlighted aspect in Chinese film criticism during the socialist period. For example, Mao

Zedong's own critique of the film *The Life of Wu Xun* in 1951, which initiated the first

major politico-ideological campaign of the Chinese Communist regime, is probably the

first representative text of this sort of film criticism.[47] In the first half of the 1950s, under

the stifling atmosphere of the CCP's tight control over literature and art, especially after

the campaign of critique of *The Life of Wu Xun*, filmmaking under the slogan of socialist

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[46] Liu Zaifu, "Farewell to the Gods: Contemporary Chinese Literary Theory's Fin-de-siècle Struggle," in Pang-Yuan Chi and David Der-Wei Wang, eds., *Chinese Literature in the Second Half of A Modern Century*: *A Critical Survey*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000, pp.7-8.
[47] Mao's essay centered on criticizing the film's wrong historical standpoint which deviates from the Marxist historical materialist viewpoint, and it denounced the film as "introducing capitalist reactionary ideology." See Mao Zedong, "*Yingdang zhongshi dianying Wu Xun zhuan de taolun*" (We should pay attention to the discussion on the film *The Life of Wu Xun*), *Renmin ribao* (People's Daily), 20 May, 1951.

realism suffered from both formalism (*gongshi hua*) and stereotyping (*gainian hua*). Film

production almost reached a halt, and many domestic films had diminished audiences.[48]

The hegemonic discourse of socialist realism with a strong political orientation

encountered some resistance in the latter half of 1956 when the political atmosphere in

China became relatively more relaxed. A new cultural policy of "letting a hundred

flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend" (*baihua qifang, baijia*

zhengming) was implemented by Mao to promote the flourishing of literature and art.

Writers, artists and critics were encouraged to criticize the regime's cultural policies as

well as other aspects of life. During this time, some writers raised the "theory of

intervening in reality" (*ganyu xianshi lun*), the "theory of the broad way of realism"

(*xianshizhuyi guangkuo lun*) and the "theory of writing reality" (*xiezhenshi lun*).[49] These

theories all reflected the writers' and critics' efforts to release the root "realism" from the

tight control of its "socialism" and to get rid of the ubiquitous political interference in

literary creation. They aimed to promote a more free depiction of earthy realities. These

challenges to the hegemonic status of socialist realism actually reveal the internal

contradiction in the concept itself, as Wellek points out: "the writer ought to describe

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[48] Concerning this issue, in December 1956 *Wenhui bao* (Weihui Daily) organized a discussion —"*Weishenme hao de guochanpian zheme shao?*" (Why are there so few good domestic films?). Film critic Zhong Dianfei's "Gongs and drums at the movies" is one of the important essays in this discussion. According to Zhong, from 1953 to June 1956, around 100 domestic films were released and the box office income of seventy per cent of these films could not cover their cost. Zhong questioned the worker-peasant-solider subject matter in Chinese film and called for artistic freedom. See Zhong Dianfei, "*Dianying de luogu*" (Gongs and drums at the movies), *Wenyi bao* (Literary Gazete), 1956, no.23. Zhong's essay drew severe criticism from Mao Zedong, and he was thus condemned as rightist in the following "Anti-Rightist" campaign in 1957.

[49] See Qing Zhaoyang (He Zhi), "*Xianshizhuyi — guangkuo de daolu*" (Realism: The broad way), *Renmin wenxue* (People's Literature), no.9 (September 1956), 1-13; Zhou Bo, "*Lun xianshizhuyi ji qi zai shehuizhuyi shidai de fazhan*" (On realism and its development in the socialist period), *Changjiang wenyi* (Yangtze Literature and Art), December, 1956; Liu Shaotang, "*Xianshizhuyi zai shehuizhuyi shidai de fazhan*" (The development of realism in the socialist period), *Beijing wenyi* (Beijing Literature and Art), no.4 (1957), 9-11.

society as it is but he must also describe it as it should be or will be."[50] However, this

counter trend was soon critically denounced as a "revisionist line in literature and art"

(*xiuzhengzhuyi wenyi luxian*) in the Anti-Rightist campaign, launched in 1957-1958. Later

in 1966, these theories were condemned as components of the so-called "Eight Black

Theories" in "The summary of the forum on cultural work in the PLA presided over by

Comrade Jiang Qing on behalf of Comrade Lin Biao" (*Lin Biao tongzhi weituo Jiang*

Qing tongzhi zhaokai de budui wenyi gongzuo zuotanhui jiyao, hereafter "Forum

Summary").

In 1958, a new formula for literature was raised by Mao himself and later this slogan

was developed as "the combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary

romanticism."[51] At the Third Congress of Chinese Writers and Artists in August 1960,

the "Two Combinations" was officially recognized as the basic principle of literary and

artistic practice. At the same time, the Soviet slogan of socialist realism gradually went

out of use in official discourse. The birth of the new slogan can be partly attributed to the

deterioration of relations between the PRC and the Soviet Union after 1956. Another

possible reason is that Mao tried to promote the Great Leap Forward (*Da yuejin*) in China,

thus coining the new artistic concept could serve to show the unprecedented enthusiasm

of the Chinese people in the process of "rushing forward into Communist society." In this

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[50] René Wellek, *Concepts of Criticism*, p.242.
[51] In fact, the "Two Combinations" was never provided an established definition. At a Chengdu meeting in 1958, Mao suggested: "New poetry should develop on the basis of folklore and classical poetry with the content of contradictory unity of realism and romanticism." Later, Zhou Yang elaborated and interpreted Mao's idea comprehensively in his article "New folklore opens a new path for poetry." See Zhou Yang, "*Xin minge tuozhan le shige de daolu*" (New folklore opens a new path for poetry), *Hongqi* (Red Flag), June 1, 1958.

regard, the "Two Combinations" embodied the CCP's attempt to cast off the blanket of the Soviet culture and to establish its own subjectivity as a modern nation state.

To construct a Chinese national subjectivity, the new formula encouraged writers and artists to seek more creative resources from native forms and domestic culture such as folklore and opera. As Paul Clark points out: " the new formula [the "Two Combinations"]… could accommodate a range of aesthetic styles, from the 'romanticism' of the native forms, which Mao strongly favored in Yan'an, to the 'realism' of modern literature grounded in the May Fourth movement."[52] Thus, the large numbers of opera films and minority films emerging from the mid-1950s resulted from the pursuit of an indigenous aesthetic and national (*minzuhua*) and populist (*qunzhonghua*) style. During the Cultural Revolution, the "modern performance films" were the extreme embodiment of the nationalization that the "Two Combinations" implicitly promoted.

Superficially, the "Two Combinations" unprecedentedly raised the status of romanticism to the same level as that of realism. But the slogan actually just exteriorized the essence of romanticism which was already embedded in the previous concept of socialist (proletarian) realism. In discussing Mao's Yan'an *Talks*, Li Yang argues that Mao's "six mores" — "on a higher plane, more intense, more concentrated, more typical and more idealized, and therefore more universal than actual everyday life" — endowed socialist (proletarian) realism with a quality of lyricism. "In this sense, socialist realism is

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[52] Paul Clark, *Chinese Cinema*, pp.63-64.

in fact a kind of romanticism, and has lyricism in its nature."[53] This claim was echoed by

Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar who assert that romanticism is "intrinsic to realist

practices in the broad sweep of the Chinese cinema."[54] Therefore, when the new artistic

criterion was initially presented, some Chinese critics immediately traced its origin to the

"six mores" in Mao's Yan'an *Talks*.[55] The Vice-Minister of Culture Lin Mohan suggested

in 1960 that Revolutionary Romanticism emphasized a romantic spirit rather than a

romantic approach.[56] As Berry and Farquhar note, the so-called "romantic spirit" actually

stems from "the utopian quest to make China a nation-state," and it is "an active, utopian,

and mythic imaginary of China's future."[57] This utopian fervor was especially striking

during the time of the Great Leap Forward, exemplified in some documentary-style art

films (*jiluxing yishupian*, a new genre that emerged at the time) such as *Rhapsody of the

Ming Tombs Reservoir* (*Shisanling shuiku changxiangqu*, dir. Jin Shan, 1958), which

imaginatively represents China's future, a real utopia.

In contrast to the individual self of European traditional romanticism, the self of

exaltation in Chinese revolutionary romanticism is a national self, an imagined

community. Chinese artists were required to be passionate and lyrical according to an

impersonal ideal, the Communist ideal. Under the slogan of the "Two Combinations,"

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[53] Li Yang, *Kangzheng suming zhi lu: Shehuizhuyi xianshizhuyi (1942-1976) yanjiu* (The road of struggling with fate: On socialist realism 1942-1976), Changchun: Shidai weiyi chubanshe, 1993, pp.43-44.
[54] Chris Berry and Mary Ann Farquhar, *China on Screen*, p.82.
[55] See Yu Yan, "*Geming de xianshizhuyi he geming de langmanzhuyi xiangjiehe wenti de taolun*" (The discussion on the combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism), *Wenxue pinglun* (Literary Review), no.2 (1959), 122.
[56] Lin Mohan, *Genggao de juqi Mao Zedong wenyi sixiang de qizhi* (Raising higher the banner of Mao Zedong thought of literature and art), Beijing: Renmin ribao chubanshe, 1960.
[57] Chris Berry and Mary Ann Farquhar, *China on Screen*, pp.79-80.

molding an idealized Communist hero was the first task of revolutionary literature and art. Revolutionary romanticism transcended the tenet of "typification" in revolutionary realism, and aimed to portray mythical, lofty-great-perfect *(gao da quan)*, and larger-than-life heroes. After it was first raised in the Forum Summary in 1966, the promotion of molding Communist heroes peaked in the Cultural Revolution when Jiang Qing popularized the new principles of the "Three Prominences" (*san tuchu*) to guide the model performance (*yangbanxi*). "Three Prominences" means: "Among all characters, give prominence to the positive characters; among the positive characters, give prominence to the main heroic characters; and among the heroes, give prominence to the central characters."[58] This formula was transformed into concrete film techniques, in terms of frame composition, camera position, lighting and the performance of actors.

Over a period of nearly a half century, the shift from 1930s nationalist realism, through the Communist Party's cultural principle of proletarian realism, to the Chinese official doctrine of socialist realism that later transformed into the formulation of the "Two Combinations," realism was in constant redefinition. The emergence of a relatively new discourse on realism, as Christine Gledhill suggests, reflects a struggle to develop a new method of delineating and accommodating varying values.[59] With the conversion of realism from an intellectual discourse to an official discourse of the nation, its political

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[58] Quoted in Paul Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008, p.46.This formulation was first articulated in Yu Huiyong, "*Rang wenyijie yongyuan chengwei xuanchuan Mao Zedong sixiang de zhendi*" (To promote the circle of literature and art always be the front of disseminating Mao Zedong thought), *Wenhui bao* (Wenhui Daily), 23 May, 1968. Its standard version was articulated by Yao Wenyuan in 1969.
[59] Christine Gledhill, "Between Melodrama and Realism: Anthony Asquith's *Underground* and King Vidor's *The Crowd*," in Jane Gaines, ed., *Classical Hollywood Narrative: The Paradigm Wars,* Duke University Press, 1992, p.133.

dimension increasingly outweighed its technical or artistic dimensions, and its intrinsic

characteristic of romanticism was progressively externalized.

The Depoliticisation of Realism: From the Late 1970s

The late 1970s witnessed a turning point in the Chinese realist discourse, moving from

the official discourse (political heteronomy) of the CCP regime to intellectual discourse

(artistic autonomy) among filmmakers and critics. With the end of the Cultural

Revolution, the official doctrines of socialist realism and the "Two Combinations" fell

into disrepute. In the previous three decades they had been reduced to completely

instrumental criteria for political propaganda. Thus, at the dawn of the New Era, Chinese

critics and filmmakers considered the redemption of realism from the clutches of political

discourse and the restoration of its status as a cinematic aesthetic to be their primary task.

Their efforts to renovate realism had two salient features. One was the adoption of

extraneous resources such as the ideas of western film theorists André Bazin and Siegfried

Kracauer to replace the obsolete doctrine of socialist realism and the discredited theory of

the "Two Combinations." The other feature was the rehabilitation of the indigenous

heritage of the 1930s-1940s Shanghai cinema. By naming many pre-1949 Shanghai films

as "social realism" and "critical realism," Chinese critics rediscovered, or rather, invented

an indigenous realist legacy for Chinese cinema from the wreckage of 1949-1976 socialist

cinema. Of these two features, the influence that Bazin and Kracauer's realist theories

exerted on Chinese cinema has already drawn considerable academic discussion. The

second feature has been much less examined in current scholarship and deserves more

attention here.

In 1979, the introduction of André Bazin's realist theory in Zhang Nuanxin and Li

Tuo's article "On the Modernization of Film Language" served as a prelude to the

depoliticisation of realism in the post-Mao era.[60] Paradoxically, Zhang and Li could not

resist putting realism into another grand narrative, seeing it as the aesthetic counterpart of

modernization. This is detected from the term "modernization" (*xiandaihua*) they used to

describe film language, which is a typical social science concept.[61] This article aroused

heated discussion and led as well to the wide circulation of Bazin's and Seigfried

Kracauer's realist theories in Chinese film circles in the early 1980s. Filmmakers' and

critics' exploration of the ontology of the film medium reached an unprecedented level in

the history of Chinese cinema.

These western realist theories were used as weapons to oppose the socialist film

aesthetic characterized by dramatic conflict and theatricality. In his work, Bazin criticizes

the use of montage, while praising long takes as a film technique with minimum human

interference. Because of this, the long-take theory was seen as the one of the most

important parts of Bazin's realist theory in China in the early 1980s. For Bazin's Chinese

advocates, the long take as a realist technique avoids external intervention (more

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[60] Zhang Nuanxin and Li Tuo, "*Tan dianying yuyan de xiandaihua*" (The modernization of film language), trans. Hou Jianping, in George S. Semsel, Xia Hong, and Hou Jianping, eds., Chinese Film Theory: A Guide to the New Era. New York: Praeger, 1990, pp.15-16. Originally published in *Dianying yishu* (Film Art), no.3 (1979), 40-52.

[61] In the late 1970s, the slogan of "Four Modernizations" (the modernization of agriculture, industry, the army, and science and technology) was promoted by Deng Xiaoping to shift the country's central focus from class struggle to national construction.

specifically, intervention from the Party's political manipulation) in a film, thus

undermining the dogma of "literature and art serve politics." It is clear that underlying the

seeming aesthetic claim is a political stance that seeks to free film art from political

heteronomy and from its assigned role as an ideological medium and propaganda tool. In

fact, as Dai Jinhua reveals, the Chinese interpretation of Bazin's realist theory is either a

kind of "historical misreading" or an intentional strategic adaption. What in Bazin's

theory really interested Chinese filmmakers and critics was "the antithesis of Bazin's

realist theory," which actually concerned formalist aesthetics: new film techniques,

innovative form and personal style.[62] As Bazin's first students in China, what the Fourth

Generation filmmakers did was "trade realism for artistic independence [autonomy],

historical responsibility for personal style."[63] As a result, a number of stylized films such

as *A Girl from Hunan* (*Xiangnü Xiaoxiao*, dir, Xie Fei and Wu Lan, 1986), *Memories of*

Old Beijing (*Chengnan jiushi*, dir. Wu Yigong, 1984), *Country Couple* (*Xiangyin*, dir. Hu

Bingliu, 1983) and *In the Wild Mountains* (*Ye shan*, dir. Yan Xueshu, 1986) brought the

first aesthetic innovation of Chinese cinema in the post-Mao era.

At the end of the1970s and during the early 1980s, the other significant discourse of

realism in Chinese cinema was the rediscovery of realist aesthetics in pre-1949 films,

particularly those produced in1931-1937 and 1945-1949, the "golden ages" of Chinese

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[62] Dai Jinhua, *Xieta liaowang: Zhongguo dianying wenhua 1978-1998* (Lookout in a leaning tower: Chinese film culture 1978-1998). Taibei: Yuanliu chuban gongsi, 1999, p.17.
[63] Cecile Largesse, "Bazin and the Politics of Realism in Mainland China," in Dudley Andrew and Hervé Joubert-Laurencin, eds., *Opening Bazin: Postwar Film Theory and Its Afterlife*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, p.318.

cinema. In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, what confronted Chinese filmmakers and critics was the arduous task of reinvigorating film culture and production. After the fall of the Gang of Four, the socialist films fell into disrepute for bearing excessive political baggage and being "false, boastful and empty" (*jia da kong*). Where could filmmakers and critics draw practical and theoretical resources to restore Chinese cinema? Bypassing socialist realism and the "Two Combinations" (underlying both of which was basic spirit of Mao's Yan'an *Talks*), Chinese critics and filmmakers re-discovered the legacy of Shanghai's cinema of the 1930s and 1940s, a heritage which was interrupted by the shift of regime from the KMT to the CCP in 1949.

Reconsideration of the alleged realist tradition of Chinese cinema occurred almost simultaneously with the embrace of Western realist theories discussed above. In 1979 the third issue of the academic journal Film Art published two significant articles in addition to Zhang and Li's famous article referred to above. These were by Shanghai director Sun Yu and film critic Xu Nanming.[64] Sun's article "Recollecting 1930s' Films under the Influence of the May Fourth Movement" re-accentuates the May Fourth Movement's impact on 1930s Chinese films and, in particular, its role as a crucial component of left-wing cinema culture in 1930s Shanghai. The article reminds us of Mao's Yan'an *Talks* which exposed a prejudice against the May Fourth heritage by contrasting the different

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[64] Sun Yu, "*Huiyi Wusi yundong yingxiang xia de sanshi niandai dianying*" (Recollection of the 1930s' films under the influence of the May Fourth Movement), *Dianying yishu* (Film Art), no.3 (1979), 7-9, 36; Xu Nanming, "*Jicheng he fazhan sanshi niandai geming dianying de chuantong*" (Inheriting and developing the tradition of the 1930s' revolutionary films), *Dianying yishu* (Film Art), no.3 (1979), 1-6, 25.

aims of literature and art in Shanghai as a non-base area and Yan'an as a base area. In this sense, Sun's article defies the ethos of Mao's Yan'an *Talks*.

Xu's article "Inheriting and Developing the Tradition of 1930s Revolutionary Films" actually confirmed the left-wing films of the 1930s as a part of the cinematic heritage of socialist China and the forerunners of its revolutionary cinema. Meanwhile, Xu also rehabilitated the reputation of the two-volume *The History of the Development of Chinese Film*, published by Cheng Jihua and others in 1963. The concept "left-wing cinema" (*zuoyi dianying*) was first raised in Cheng's book to designate the progressive film movement of the 1930s and 1940s. The book surveys the terrain of Chinese cinema in the pre-1949 period, and in particular carries out detailed depictions of the "left-wing film movement" to show the CCP's leadership in pre-1949 progressive film production and culture. The fate of this book was closely linked to its positive evaluation of the left-wing cinema movement. During the Cultural Revolution, *The History of the Development of Chinese Film* as well as its authors were severely attacked largely for their "glorification" of the left-wing films.

In the socialist period of 1949-1976, the regime's official evaluation of pre-1949 "left-wing cinema" was an ideological issue more than an artistic issue. In *Chinese Cinema: Culture and Politics since 1949*, which centers on the theme of tensions between Mao's Yan'an *Talks* tradition and the Shanghai film cultural heritage, Paul Clark traces the trajectory of the Party's official evaluation of 1930s left-wing films in a series of political and cultural campaigns. According to Clark, the condemnation of 1930s-1940s

left-wing filmmaking began with the campaign of criticism of *The Life of Wu Xun* for "its

emphasis on the film as the work of artists who represented the Shanghai legacy of the

left-wing filmmaking in 1930s-1940s."[65] In the following campaign of rectification in

literature and art between late 1951 and early 1952, the attack was extended to other films

and other Shanghai artists. Filmmakers such as Shi Dongshan, Zheng Junli and Cai

Chusheng had to admit their artistic outlooks were bourgeois. The writing of *The History

of the Development of Chinese Film* by Chen Jihua and other coauthors took place during

the four-year period between 1958 and 1963 when the official attitude towards the

Shanghai legacy loosened. In a rare official event the China Film Archive (*Zhongguo

dianying ziliaoguan*) in 1963 organized a retrospective of some 1930s Chinese films.

However, from 1964, the official assessments of the left-wing cinema of the 1930s

suddenly changed into serious criticism. In February 1966 the "Forum Summary,"

endorsed by Mao, defined the literature and art of the 1930s as an "anti-Party and

anti-socialism black line" which was bourgeois and contravened the spirit of Mao's

Yan'an *Talks*. The negative assessment of pre-1949 films reached its apogee in the

Cultural Revolution when they were labeled as "poisonous weeds." One point that should

be made here is that the official ideological assessments of the 1930s-1940s left-wing

films greatly affected the academic discussion of the aesthetic aspect of these films. After

1949, the pre-1949 films were considered dubious in terms of ideology (insufficiently

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[65] Paul Clark, *Chinese Cinema*, pp.50-51.

proletarian, representing the urban petty bourgeoisie, as implicitly articulated in Mao's

Yan'an *Talks*). To avoid controversy, Chinese critics rarely, if ever, used the term "realism"

or "realist" to describe pre-1949 left-wing film style.[66]

By the early 1980s, the rehabilitation of films of pre-1949 films proceeded on a large

scale and a number of the pre-1949 films were praised as the cinematic heritage of the

nation. *The History of the Development of Chinese Film* was republished in 1980, along

with the rehabilitation of its authors. Between 1981 and 1984, a series of retrospectives of

pre-1949 Chinese films were held, both at home and abroad.[67] At the same time,

academic discussion by film critics emphasized on the issue of realist style in a group of

outstanding films of the 1930s and 1940s. In fact, the discourse should arguably be traced

to the French cinema historian Georges Sadoul's 1967 *The History of World Cinema*

(*Histoire du cinema mondial*) which was translated and published in China in 1982. In an

essay-length section devoted to mainland Chinese cinema from 1903 to the early 1960,

Sadoul associated the 1937 Chinese film *Street Angel* (*Malu tianshi*, dir. Yuan Muzhi)

with Italian neo-realism. He wrote: "if someone watches *Street Angel* but does not know

that it was made in 1937 by a young director Yuan Muzhi who knows nothing about

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[66] For example, even under the circumstances of relative relaxation, when Cheng Jihua and others edited *The History of the Development of Chinese Film*, they never used the term realism or realist to label any of the pre-1949 left-wing films. Interestingly, an exceptional case is that in the introduction of *The Selections of Film Scripts from the May Fourth* published in 1959. The editors identified the film scripts in the book as "realist." This may be partly because film scripts are more close to literary works. Another possible reason is that the book was edited by the Chinese Film Workers Association (*Zhongguo dianying gongzuozhe lianyihui*). This association, according to Clark, was an "independent, organization of filmmakers," established in the heyday of the Hundred Flowers discourse. The establishment of this association "was a similar gesture toward granting artists a measure of autonomy." "The body's executive even included such experienced artists as Sun Yu, writer-director of *The Life of Wu Xun*." See Paul Clark, *Chinese Cinema*, p.73. Thus, the specificity of this organization made the use of realism here an extraordinary case.

[67] In 1981and 1982, retrospectives of pre-1949 Chinese films were held in London, Turin, Milan and Rome. In July 1983, China Film Archive organized the "retrospective of the 1920s-1940s Chinese films." In 1984, a retrospective of early Chinese films and a related symposium were held in Hong Kong.

French cinema, he or she must think the film was influenced by Jean Renoir or Italian

neo-realism."[68]   Sadoul's claim was echoed by several distinguished Chinese and western

critics at an important symposium on early Chinese film held in Hong Kong in 1984.

Focusing on the issue of the realist style of 1930s Chinese films, the papers presented by

critics include Ni Zhen's "The Realist Style of Chinese Films in the 1930s," Luo Yijun's

on "The National Aesthetic in Chinese Films of the Thirties," and Italian critic Ugo

Casiraghi's paper on "A Comparative Study of 1930s Chinese Film and Italian

Neo-Realist Film." They set the tone for further academic discussion of 1930s Chinese

films and created a realist origin and heritage for Chinese cinema. In fact, the alleged

realist aesthetic of the 1930s films is fundamentally different from Italian neo-realism for

it is based on classical narrative structures and is highly melodramatic.[69]

In the early 1980s intellectual discourse on the realist style of pre-1949 films tried to

shake off the politicised assessment to re-evaluate the artistic achievements of pre-1949

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[68] My own translation from the Chinese version of Georges Sadoul's *Histoire Du Cinéma Mondial* (History of world film), trans. Xu Zhao and Hu Chengwei, *Shijie dianying shi*, Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1982, p.175. Georges Sadoul (1904-1967) knew little about Chinese cinema before he was invited to visit China in 1956. Cheng Jihua was one of those who met Sadoul during his visit in China. As Cheng recollected in 1984, Sadoul watched some 1930s Chinese films and said that a number of outstanding Chinese films of the 1930s resembled some Italian neo-realist films, but they appeared ten years earlier than Italian neo-realist films. See Cheng Jihua, "*Huainian Qiaozhi Saduer*" (In Memory of Georges Sadoul), *Dangdai dianying* (Contemporary Film), no.6 (1986), 91-97. Interestingly, for Sadoul's realist discourse on 1930s Chinese films, Cheng Jihua did not speak about or mention it in his editing of *The History of the Development of Chinese Film* until 1984 when pre-1949 films were being re-evaluated.
[69] In his article, Luo Yijun notes that realism in the Chinese context is usually a kind of value extraction which means the artist confronts social reality, and his or her work reflects social reality. He thus remarks that Chinese realism should be distinguished from realism in the Western sense — realism as artistic technique which means literature and art accurately and meticulously depict physical reality. Luo admits that his use of realism is in the Chinese sense. Further, he emphasizes, only in the sense that the "silver screen comes close to social life" is it reasonable to compare the realism of 1930s Chinese film with Italian neo-realism. See Luo Yijun, "*Sanshi niandai dianying de minzu fengge*" (The national aesthetic in Chinese films of the thirties), *Dianying yishu* (Film Art), no.8 (1984), pp.50-58. Nevertheless, Luo's statements did not prevent the wide spreading of the view that "1930s Chinese films are (neo-) realist." Only in the past few years have some scholars re-examined the previous discussion on the realist style of 1930s Chinese films. They have pointed out that there are distinctions between Chinese realism and Italian neo-realism, and that melodrama is intrinsic to Chinese cinematic realism. See, for example, Zhong Dafeng and Lin Li, "*Cong xiandaizhuyi dao xianshizhuyi*: *Ershi shiji sanshi niandai dianying chuangzuo ceying*" (From modernism to realism: The profile of filmmaking in the thirties of the twentieth century), *Dianying yishu* (Film Art), no.6 (2011), 90-96.

film from a pure aesthetic perspective. However, Xia Yan's 1983 reflection reveals the

undertone of the discourse.[70] He says:

> A retrospective of Chinese film, which screened more than a hundred films of the thirties, was held last year in Italy….I have read some articles and heard some comments, such as that neo-realism occurred first not in Italy but in China, that neo-realism had already appeared in Chinese cinema in the thirties….Is it realistic that the bourgeois critics highly evaluate our films of the thirties?…In my opinion, they have an ulterior motive in such propaganda. They know nothing about the Party's leadership in Chinese cinema in the 1930s. They always think that under the leadership of the CCP, Chinese film was no longer any good because the CCP would not allow artistic freedom. I disagree with this. It is incorrect to *praise the past but denigrate the present* (*hougu bojin*)."[71]

Xia was keenly aware of the fact that the seemingly aesthetic evaluation of pre-1949 film

art inevitably carried certain ideological implications. By identifying and highly praising

pre-1949 films as realist, the discourse of realism implicitly criticized revolutionary films

produced under the doctrine of socialist realism and the "Two Combinations."

The discussion of realism in the early 1980s, both the adoption of western realist

theories and the discovery of the indigenous realist heritage of 1930s Chinese film was to

some extent based on a strategic misreading. The discussion aimed to subvert the

principles of "literature and art are subordinate to politics" and "literature and art serve

politics," thereby reclaiming artistic autonomy.

However, once the artistic autonomy that Chinese filmmakers and critics yearned for

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[70] Xia Yan (1900-1995) is considered in the official history of Chinese cinema as a leader figure dispatched by the Party in the 1930s to launch the left-wing cinema movement.
[71] Xia Yan, *Zai "*Ershi zhi sishi niandai Zhongguo dianying huigu'shouying chang shang de kaimuci*"* (The opening speech at the premiere of the retrospective of Chinese films of the twenties to the forties), *Xinwenxue shiliao* (Historical Materials on the New Literature), no.1 (1984), 21-29.

was to some degree regained, the discourse of realism would lose its influence and effectiveness in Chinese cinema. That is why the discourse of realist gradually waned from the second half of the 1980s when the Fifth Generation established their reputation with their stylized historical allegory in films such as *The Yellow Earth* (*Huang tudi*, dir. Chen Kaige 1984), *The Black Cannon Incident* and *The Horse Thief* (*Daoma zei*, dir. Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1986). However, at the very start of the Fifth Generation's New-Wave movement in the first half of the 1980s, some of their filmmaking further subverted the doctrine of socialist realism by presenting a kind of "super-realist" (or photo-realist) style.[72] One salient aspect of the Fifth Generation's realism lies, as Xudong Zhang observes, in their "capture of the objective world in its crude, unprocessed texture and physicality."[73] This is readily apparent in *One and Eight* (*Yige he bage*, dir. Zhang Junzhao, 1983), usually seen as the debut film of the Fifth Generation. As the director Zhang Junzhao and one of the cinematographers Xiao Feng claimed, they aimed to "pursue verisimilitude and the absolutely real" in their first film.[74] Compared with the watery, beautiful environment which is the typical landscape of southern China in the films of the older generations, this film presented a harsh, dry and wild landscape.

As I have shown in this chapter, in the conventional paradigm of Chinese film studies, film generally can be divided into two aspects: form (cinematic language) and

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[72] Paul Clark, *Reinventing China: A Generation and Its Films*, Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2005, p.80.
[73] Xudong Zhang, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms: Cultural Fever, Avant-Garde Fiction, and the New Chinese Cinema*. Duke University Press, 1997, p. 242.
[74] Bai Xiaoding, "*Cong Yige he bage dao Huguang*" (From *One and Eight* to *The Shining Arc*: Interview with Zhang Junzhao and Xiao Feng), *Dianying yishu* (Film Art), no.1 (1989), 31. The film features Zhang Yimou and Xiao Feng's cinematography.

content (narrative). In Chinese cinema, realism usually refers to the aspect of content. As for the form, it must be subject to and serve the film content. Following the Fourth Generation's exploration of film language, the Fifth-Generation films break further away from the norm. In fact, many significant realist techniques of Sixth-Generation films, such as non-dramatized narration, hand-held shots, long takes, location shooting, tracking shots, and synchronous sound recording were already visible in several early works of the Fifth Generation. Tian Zhuangzhuang's *On the Hunting Ground* (*Liechang zhasa*, 1984) is an extreme example of the Fifth Generation's early realist practice. It is an ethnic minority film set in Inner Mongolia, the northern border of China. Beside the use of non-dramatized narrative, non-professional actors, natural light, and synchronous sound, the most striking documentary quality of the film is the minority language spoken by the characters. In contrast to the treatment of ethnic minorities in socialist films in which the minority language is only used in singing, dancing and praying, Mongolians in this film speak their own language. An off-screen male voice explains the characters' dialogue in *Putonghua* (Mandarin) in an impassive and monotonous tone. The ethnographic documentary-like style of *On the Hunting Ground* demonstrates not only Tian's impulse to experiment with the realist aesthetics, but also a new cultural perspective resulting from the depoliticisation of film art in the New Era.

With the emergence of the Fourth and Fifth Generation's new exploration of film aesthetics in the first half of the 1980s, melodramatic realism as the dominant mode in Chinese cinema was strongly challenged. However, while many Fifth-Generation films

were high-brow art films with very limited audience attendance,[75] melodramatic realism

still retained considerable attraction for many Chinese viewers. As in the 1930s, China's

society in the early 1980s was in a cultural and belief crisis in the wake of the Cultural

Revolution. Realist melodrama which can provide "easy and comforting answers to

difficult and complex questions" met the psychological needs of the Chinese people who

experienced the upheaval of politics and society and were now in a value vacuum.[76] This

was clearly manifested in the popularity of Xie Jin's ethical-political melodrama

"Reflection Trilogy" (*fansi sanbuqu*) — *The Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (*Tianyunshan*

chuanqi, 1980), *The Herdsman* (*Muma ren*, 1982), and *Hibiscus Town* (*Furong zhen*,

1986). His works in the post-socialist period merge Chinese traditional ethical values with

socialist values by dividing characters into "rightists" (the good) and "leftists" (the evil).

As Jerome Silbergeld argues, Xie's films depart from "the standard structure and the

bright outcomes required of socialist melodrama," and form a unique

"realist-melodramatic mode" or "realistic melodrama."[77]

In 1986, critic Zhu Dake's influential article "The Drawbacks of the Xie Jin Film

Model" triggered a heated debate in Chinese film circles. In his article, Zhu criticizes the

four motifs in Xie's films: "the good wronged," "the discovery of values," "morality

changed by persuasion" and "the ultimate triumph of good."[78] He draws a clear link

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[75] For example, only two copies of Tian Zhuangzhuang's *On the Hunting Ground* were sold when the film was completed.

[76] Paul G. Pickowicz, "Melodramatic Representation and the 'May Fourth' Tradition of Chinese Cinema," pp.316-321.

[77] Jerome Silbergeld, *China into Film: Frames of Reference in Contemporary Chinese Cinema*. London: Reaktion Books, 1999, pp.198-200.

[78] Zhu Dake, "*Lun Xie Jin dianying moshi de quexian*" (The drawbacks of the Xie Jin film model), *Wenhui bao*

between Xie's films and the Hollywood tradition, or to be more precise, the Hollywood melodrama mode. Zhu Dake's criticism of the Xie Jin model is in fact a criticism of the realist-melodramatic mode generally since the four motifs Zhu Dake lists are the main characteristics of melodrama. According to Zhu, as a matching aesthetic for the "obsolete" traditional cultural and psychological structure of Chinese people, could no longer accommodate the "modern consciousness" and "independent subjective consciousness" which intellectuals called for in the new historical context of the New Era. Through the short but vigorous revival in Xie Jin's ethical-political melodrama, melodramatic realism completed its last significant mission of comforting the Chinese people in the ruins of the post-Mao era. From then on its influence in Chinese cinema could never reach the heights it had achieved in Xie Jin's films.

The surge in entertainment films (*yulepian*) in the late 1980s and the subsequent tide of commercialization in the early 1990s, resulted in realism rapidly losing its influence in Chinese cinema. In this context, nevertheless, the Sixth-Generation filmmakers revived the realist discourse in a particular way when they competed against the tripartite forces of the art films of the Fifth Generation, entertainment films and main melody films. Consciously or not, they avoided using "ism" (*zhuyi*), replacing the specific term "realism" with its synonyms "documentary style" (*jishi fengge*), recording style (*jilu fengge*), sense of on-the-spot (*xianchang gan*), and objective (*keguan*) to describe the film style they

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(Wenhui Daily), 18 July, 1986.

wanted to achieve. Their avoidance of the term "realism" reveals the younger generation

filmmakers' attempt to distance themselves from the political ideology that the term

xianshizhuyi connotes. Furthermore, the Sixth-Generation filmmakers cut off the link

between realism and the grand narrative of modernization. This can be detected, as Chris

Berry observes, in the temporality of their new realism. Berry distinguishes the new

realism from socialist realism and revolutionary realism in terms of temporality: "all these

variants [socialist realism, the 'Two Combinations' and Three Prominences] are grounded

in a utopian future perfect tense," while the new realism (on-the-spot realism to use

Berry's words) had a "characteristic sense of being here and now with no clear connection

to past or future [and] results in great ambiguity."[79]

Nowadays, as a long-acclaimed aesthetics and value orientation, realism still appeals

to a number of Chinese filmmakers. On-the-spot realism, which as I showed in the

Introduction, was a feature of the New Documentary Movement from the late 1980s,

keeps on inspiring many successive independent documentary filmmakers. In the area of

feature filmmaking, some young filmmakers continue to regard realism as the most

appropriate means to explore the immediate social reality of postsocialist China. Numbers

of outstanding realist films such as Li Yang's *Blind Shaft* (*Mang jing*, 2003) and *Blind

Mountain* (*Mang shan*, 2007), Hasi Chaolu's *The Older Barber* (*Titou jiang*, 2006), Qi

Jian's *The Forest Ranger* (*Tiangou*, 2006), Cao Baoping's *Trouble Makers* (*Guangrong*

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[79] Chris Berry, "Jia Zhangke and the Temporality of Postsocialist Chinese Cinema," pp.114-115.

de fennu, 2006) provide close observations and in-depth reflections on the fast-changing

reality of Chinese society.

Chapter Two

A Non-realist Aesthetic Thread in Chinese Film before the 1990s

Although this thesis mainly focuses on the post-realist aesthetics of the Sixth-Generation films, I do not intend to merely confine the horizon of my research to films of the 1990s and 2000s. As I suggested in the introductory chapter, non-realism as an alternative aesthetic tendency had already appeared in the 1980s. This chapter thus mainly aims to examine some Chinese films made between 1979 and 1989, an epoch which is usually called the "New Era" (*Xin shiqi*) by Chinese intellectuals. In parallel with the May Fourth Movement at the beginning of the twentieth century, the New Era is one of the most innovative moments in the history of contemporary Chinese literature and art, witnessing the emergence of various artisitic alternatives to the orthodox representational mode of socialist realism.

In this chapter I argue that 1980s non-realist films, though not large in number, can be seen as the predecessors of the post-realist films of the 1990s and 2000s. The non-realist aesthetics engaged some films in the representation of the autonomous subconscious territory of fantasy, dreams and hallucination which were absent in previous socialist films. Meanwhile, a number of films began to break the illusive effect of (classic) realist representation which is an alliance with political ideology, drawing attention to art/film itself. However, before probing the non-realist aesthetics of the New Era, we

should examine several films that appeared in the first half century of Chinese film

history. A handful of early filmmakers' practices constitute a suppressed aesthetics which

is an alternative to the formal conventions of dramatic realism in early Chinese cinema.

The non-realist aesthetics in the 1980s might be seen as the delayed germination of an

older seed, planted by filmmakers like Fei Mu and Sun Yu in the form of short film or

film sequence in the 1930s and 1940s. Interestingly, in both Fei Mu and Sun Yu's films,

the non-realist aesthetics is employed only in representing dreams. Thus, the following

pages of this chapter will trace the origin of the alternative aesthetics in order to outline a

non-realist aesthetics thread in Chinese cinema before the 1990s. Simutaneously, I will

also seek to find out why both early filmmakers tended to use non-realist techniques to

depict dreams but eschewed representing reality in this way.

Pioneers in Alternative Aesthetics: Cinematic Representation of Dreams in Broken Dreams in the Women's Chamber *and* The Life of Wu Xun

In early Chinese cinema, Fei Mu's short film *Broken Dreams in the Women's Chamber*

(*Chungui duanmeng*, 1937) stands out as an exceptional film because of its apparent

non-realist style. *Broken Dreams in the Women's Chamber* is one of the eight short films

that make up *The Lianhua Symphony* (*Lianhua jiaoxiangqu*, 1937). This collection of

films was made by filmmakers from the Lianhua Film Company, the most influential film

company in China in the 1930s. *Broken Dreams in the Women's Chamber* portrays three

dreams of two women who share a bed. The first dream portrays a Chinese soldier on a

battlefield taking out a begonia leaf which was a symbol of China's territory at that time.

In the second nightmare a devil-like man frantically rotates a globe, as Hitler does in *The Great Dictator* (dir. Charlie Chaplin, 1940). He throws the begonia leaf into a fire, giving out a shrieking laugh. In the third nightmare, the two women are assaulted by the devil-like man, but they rise up in resistance and finally kill him. At the same time, soldiers win the victory on the battle field.

The Lianhua Symphony was made in late 1936 when there was growing tension between China and Japan, thus some of these short films including *Broken Dreams in the Women's Chamber* obviously allude to the resistance to Japanese invasion and belong to the category of "national defense film" (*guofang dianying*), a concept first used in May 1936.[1] In 1936, film critics and filmmakers held a variety of views on "national defense film" which included the issue of whether national defense film should be realist film. Although most film critics suggested dational defense film should not reject aesthetics such as symbolism and romanticism, they still believed that "realism is the most advanced technique."[2] However, Fei Mu's *Broken Dreams in the Women's Chamber* serves as a counter to such a viewpoint. In terms of the audio aspect, the stylized symphony accompanied by the characters' frequent laughs and screams, heightens the dream effect

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[1] Before the national defense film movement, in January 1936, Fei Mu, Cai Chusheng, Zhou Jianyun, Sun Yu and some other Shanghai filmmakers established the National Salvation Association of Shanghai Cinema (*Shanghai dianyingjie jiuguo hui*). This association called for: 1) Uniting the entire film industry to participate in the National Liberation Movement. 2) Abolishing the present film censorship system. 3) Using our own criteria to inspect and ban those local or imported films that might be against people's common interests or harm the National Liberation Movement. 4) Using all our efforts to make films that support the National Liberation Movement. See Laikwan Pang: *Building a New China in Cinema: The Chinese Left-Wing Cinema Movement, 1932-1937*, Rowman & Little field Publishers, 2002, p.60.
[2] Chen Wu, "Yige dianyingren de dubai" (The monology of a cineaste); Yang Lian, "*Guofang dianying yu xieshizhuyi dianying: Yu Li Yun xiansheng shangque*" (National defense film and realist film: Discussion with Mr. Li Yun).

and makes the film expressionist.[3] The visual aspect of the film, including the highly symbolic images, composition, artful use of shadow and light, and the changes of camera position, also distinguishes the film from other early Chinese films. *Broken Dreams in the Women's Chamber* shows that non-realist aesthetics are capable of representing social issues as real as national defense style is able to present issues.

In the history of early Chinese cinema, no other film shows such extreme exploration of film language and form as Fei Mu's *Broken Dreams in the Women's Chamber*. Nevertheless, the dream sequence in the 1951 film *The Life of Wu Xun*, which lasts for more than eight minutes, reminds us that the two films hang on the same alternative aesthetic thread. Made at the dawn of the new era following the CCP's victory in the civil war, *The Life of Wu Xun* was written and directed by Sun Yu, who established his reputation with a number of socially concerned melodramas in 1930s Shanghai cinema. Based on a real historical figure in the late Qing dynasty, the film traces Wu Xun's life which was devoted to raising money by begging to found schools for the poor. In *The Life of Wu Xun* the eight-minute sequence of Wu Xun's dreams in the middle of the movie diverges from an otherwise realist style which derived from the 1930s Shanghai left-wing film tradition. In Sun Yu's screenplay, the part with Wu Xun's dreams is titled "Fantasy Trilogy" (*Kuangxiang sanbuqu*). The sequence depicts a variety of Wu Xun's

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[3] According to Cheng Jihua's *History of the Development of Chinese Film*, *Broken Dreams in the Women's Chamber* originally had dialogue, but the dialogue was censored by Kuomintang (KMT) authorities. From June 1932, bound by the armistice agreement with Japanese, the Propaganda Department of the KMT government issued an order to prohibit Shanghai film companies from making films about war or containing revolutionary content. See Chen Jihua, *History of the Development of Chinese Cinema*, p.475.

psychological experiences during three days and nights when he is ill, interweaving

reality, memories and dreams. Wu Xun's dreams begin with depicting the hard life of the

repressed peasants: thousands of peasants turn mills in heavy yokes and iron chains, being

flogged, and moaning and sweating. Then, in a supernatural scene, the villain Juren

Zhang and his henchmen, all looking like devils, raise a giant brush and inkstone to drive

the peasants including Wu Xun to jump into the "Sea of Bitterness" and hell where poor

people suffer desperately. When Wu Xun suddenly realizes the only way to change

everything is schooling, the scene switches to Heaven where the children of the poor

receive education. Some scenes within the sequence of dreams present distorted images

of the psysical world like the spatial form in the scene of the Sea of Bitterness, rendering

the sequence more surreal. Similar to *Broken Dreams in the Women's Chamber*, the

aestheticized image of fire is often used when scenes shift from one to another. Sun Yu

himself attached much weight to the dream sequence. As the film was being completed,

he wrote an essay titled "How I Represent Wu Xun's Dreams" to explain why and how he

used over a thousand feet of film to portray Wu Xun's dreams.[4] In this essay, he implies

that the dreams turn into a crucial trigger, if not the central motivation, for Wu Xun's

efforts to found schools for the poor.

    The Life of Wu Xun was initially praised after its release in 1950. However, in 1951

an unsigned editorial in the *People's Daily* (widely known to have been written by Mao

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[4] Sun Yu, "*Wo zenyang biaoxian Wu Xun de meng*" (How I represent Wu Xun's dreams), *Xinwen ribao* (Daily News), 30 December, 1950.

Zedong) harshly criticized the film's historical viewpoint and political stand. This was the

start of the first nationwide campaign of criticism in literature and art after the

establishment of the PRC. In the large-scale criticism of *The Life of Wu Xun*, the dream

sequence drew considerable censure from many detractors. Zhou Yang, in the article

"Anti-People and Anti-History Ideology, and the Art of Anti-Realism: A Critique of the

Film *The Life of Wu Xun*," cites in particular parts of the depiction of the dreams from

Sun Yu's film script to show the film's "reactionary nature."[5] The detractors' criticism

focused mainly on two aspects: first, the dream sequence reflects a false historical view

— idealism. Wu Xun's individual subjectivity is the key point that the director seeks to

highlight rather than his class attributes. For the Party, this is unacceptable as historical

materialism is the Party's belief and philosophic guideline. In the view of historical

materialism, both an individual's and society's development is determined not by human

individual subjectivity but by material conditions. Seen from such a perspective, it is

ridiculous that a dream motivated Wu Xun to spend most of his life begging for education.

Sun Yu's filmic emphasis on the protagonist's subjective experience obviously could not

meet the Party's underlying demand to show the new regime's legitimacy as an

irresistible historical trend in literature and art. In terms of form, the non-realist

techniques used in the dream sequence were denounced as "the decadent techniques of

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[5] Zhou Yang, "*Fan renmin, fan lishi de sixiang he fanxianshizhuyi de yishu: Dianying Wu Xun zhuan pipan*"
(Anti-people and anti-history ideology, and the art of anti-realism: A critique of film *The Life of Wu Xun*), *Renmin ribao*
(People's Daily), 8 August, 1951.

the Western bourgeoisie (*xifang moluo de zichanjieji chuangzuo fangfa*),"[6] and as

contravening the spirit of Mao's Yan'an *Talks* in 1942 which advocated "proletarian

realism" as the principle of literary and artistic practice.

The campaign of criticism of *The Life of Wu Xun* was a turning point in the transition

of PRC's film cultural and industrial heritage of Shanghai to that of Yan'an.[7] From then

on, filmmakers were cautious about the content and subject matter of their films and the

exploration of film form and artistic techniques were only attempted on the premise that

they were ideologically acceptable. This is because the emphasis on film form or

aesthetics was very likely to be condemned as "formalism" (*xingshi zhuyi*). In socialist

cinema, formalism was seen as a "dangerous tendency" that would divorce filmmakers

from the broad masses of the people (*tuoli guangda renmin qunzhong*), thus violating the

principle "literature and art serving workers, peasants and soldiers" established in Mao's

Yan'an *Talks*. From 1951 to 1979, dreams representation (particularly, the representation

of positive characters' nightmares) became a sensitive territory in China's filmmaking.[8]

The bud of alternative aesthetics of non-realism had been nipped.

The dream representations in Fei Mu's *Broken Dreams in the Women's Chamber*

and Sun Yu's *The Life of Wu Xun* exemplify the limited aesthetic alternative which fit

neither realism (melodramatic realism) nor romanticism. It is not a coincidence that both

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[6] Quote in Yang Jun, "*Pipan dianying Wu Xun zhuan yundong yanjiu: Cong lishi yujing de jiaodu*" (A study on the campaign of the criticism of the film *The Life of Wu Xun*: From a historical perspective), a doctoral dissertation, Fudan University, 2006, p.77.
[7] Paul Clark, *Chinese Cinema*, pp.45-55.
[8] During the period of 1951-1979, only a very few films portrayed positive character's dreams (fantasy). The 1974 children's film *Sparking Red Star* (*Shanshan de hongxing*, dir. Li Jun and Li Ang) was one of them.

Fei Mu and Sun Yu chose to present non-realist aesthetics in dream sequences. Dreams

are naturally different from reality. The empirical and rationalist nature of reality is the

basis of (classical) realist aesthetics "characterized by internal coherence, plausible and

linear causality, psychological realism, and the appearance of spatial and temporal

continuity."[9] In comparison, dreams lack such coherence and continuity; instead, they are

usually fragmentary and discontinuous. Thus, the irrational nature of dreams makes them

a suitable locus where filmmakers can give free rein to their imagination, practicing

non-realist aesthetics. Moreover, Fei Mu's and Sun Yu's dream representations share two

significant features. The first is the clear boundary between the dream world and reality.

In both *Broken Dreams in the Women's Chamber* and *The Life of Wu Xun*, the filmmakers

consciously demarcate the two different worlds by either showing sleeping characters

tossing and turning in bed or by using the film techniques of superimposition and dissolve

to suggest the following events are only experienced in the protagonist's dreams.[10] For

Fei Mu, the dream representation was an effective way to circumvent KMT film

censorship which at the time did not endorse anti-Japanese content. The sensitive content

of resistance is confined to the dream world of two women, while the reality looks

peaceful and seems to bear no connection to the violent dream world. Sun Yu likewise

distinguishes the subjective world of dreaming from reality. But dreams in *The Life of Wu*

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[9] Robert Stam, Robert Burgoyne, and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics*, p.188.
[10] In his essay, André Bazin analyzes the character of superimposition as a sign, he notes: "Slow-motion and superimposition have never existed in our nightmares…. [However,] [s]uperimposition on the screen signals: "Attention: unreal world, imaginary characters," it doesn't portray in any way what hallucinations or dreams are really like…." See André Bazin, *Bazin at Work: Major Essays and Review from the Forties and Fiftie*, ed. Bert Cardullo and trans. Alain Piette and Bert Cardullo, New York: Routledge, 1997, p.74.

Xun play a pivotal, if not determining, role in the reality of Wu Xun's subsequent life. The significance of the dreams exceeds the safe level and transgresses the alleged natural relationship of dream's subordination to reality, which helps account for the severe criticism of the dream sequence.

The second of the significant features which Fei Mu's and Sun Yu's dream representations share is that dreams in both films are collective rather than individual. Dreams in Fei's and Sun's film are more likely to be a "big dream," as Jung called it. Diverging from Freud, who thought that all dream symbols are deceptive and only rooted in a individual's experience, Jung believed that dreams derive not only from personal experience (personal unconscious), but also from the "collective unconscious." The collective unconscious is comprised of collected material called "archetypes," which are forms or symbols that can be repeatedly seen throughout the cultures of the world. So, according to Jung,

> The psychology of the individual can never be exhaustively explained from himself [the dreamer] alone: a clear recognition is needed of the way it is also conditioned by historical and environmental circumstances. His individual psychology is not merely a physiological, biological or personal problem; it is also a contemporary problem.[11]

Rather than individual subjective experience, the dreams in both *Broken Dreams in the Women's Chamber* and *The Life of Wu Xun* are filmmakers' imagining of either the nation's past and status quo or projection of the social and ideological trends in Chinese

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[11] Carl Gustav Jung, *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, Vol.6, Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, and Gerhard Adler, eds., Pantheon Books, 1990, p.431.

society.

As I will show in the subsequent part of this chapter, these two features were

inherited by *Troubled Laughter*, the first post-Cultural Revolution film which marks the

full return of the dream representation to Chinese screen, along with the revived

alternative aesthetics.

The Discovery of Individual Subjectivity: Dream as Private Realm in Troubled Laughter

After being restrained for almost three decades in the socialist period, non-realism

re-emerged in several directors' films in the New Era. Yang Yanjin and Deng Yimin's

Troubled Laughter and Huang Jianxin's *Dislocation* (*Cuowei*, 1986) serve as two

representative examples. Like their predecessors Fei Mu and Sun Yu, these directors also

revitalized the non-realist aesthetics by means of dream representation. Both films

constantly demonstrated the protagnists' unconscious realm — dreams, through which we

perceive the dynamics of conflict between the outer social realm and the private realm in

post-Mao society. In the initial aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, when the political

climate was fickle and social prospects were still not clear, it was a relatively low-risk

choice to relegate the non-realist techniques which often accompanied social and

ideological criticism to dream sequence. Dreams, usually seen as a psychological world

inferior to the physical world, presented no threat to the doctrine of realism that remained

the official aesthetics in Dengist China. In the following section, by analyzing both the

conscious and unconscious levels of these dreams, I attempt to delineate the larger

sociocultural context of China in the New Era which strongly shaped these dreams.

In 1979, Yang Yanjin and Deng Yimin, filmmakers from the Shanghai Film Studio,

made their directing debut *Troubled Laughter*. In the wake of the upheaval caused by the

Cultural Revolution, the first dreams represented in *Troubled Laughter* are predestined to

be nightmares, not only about individual suffering but also about collective trauma.

Troubled Laughter is about a Cultural Revolution journalist — Fu Bin, who is asked by

the local Party leader Secretary Song to write a report to criticize a so-called rightist

medical professor. Faced with the dilemma of whether or not to obey the evil cadre, Fu

suffers from anxiety. Refusing to write an untrue report, Fu is put into jail. After the fall

of the Gang of Four, Fu is released and is reunited with his family.

In the narrative of *Troubled Laughter*, the protagonist's subjective conflicts, rather

than specific cause- effect events, are the main motivations. Various cinematic techniques

such as the alternate use of monochrome, split screens and freeze shots which were

considered as new techniques in Chinese film at the time, are used in this film to portray

the subtle changes in the character's complicated inner world. After the film's initial

release, some Chinese critics asserted that *Troubled Laughter* was different from

contemporary films such as *Little Flower (Xiao hua*, dir. Huang Jianzhong, 1979) and

Reverberation of Life (*Shenghuo de chanyin*, dir. Teng Wenji, 1979) which integrated the

technique of stream of consciousness into realist representation. For example, Zhang

Zhongnian claimed that *Troubled Laughter* "focuses on expressionism (*xieyi*)…being

more close to modernism….Numbers of film techniques already depart from the category of realism."[12]

The representation of the protagonist's three dreams or hallucinations is considered as the most innovative part of the film. Fu Bin has his first hallucination of falling from a tightrope up high in the sky when he is watching an acrobatic performance. Later he gets a second hallucination of climbing countless steps in the clouds to visit Secretary Song when he is in front of Song's house. While the first two hallucinations are simply the reflection of Fu Bin's anxiety, Fu's third dream, which is the climax of the film, signifies abundant cultural implications. The third dream is in somewhat absurdist-style and shares a parable-like characteristic with the dreams in *Broken Dreams in the Women's Chamber* and *The Life of Wu Xun*. In the dream, Fu is led into a modern, palace-like building with interior decoration that combines Chinese ancient and modern styles. In an unstable shot, a huge curtain rises and Fu witnesses a terrible scene: at a traditional Chinese birthday party, the villain Secretary Song wears a luxurious Ming dynasty costume and arrogantly asks the guests to comment on his newborn baby. Secretary Song's three followers assert that the child will have a rich and powerful future. The three receive official promotions and then get their clothes changed into either Qing dynasty robes or Nazi military uniforms. The other two who honestly say the child could die are beaten to death. At the following banquet, the villains and a dog together eat human beings. Fu Bin is shocked by

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[12] Zhang Zhongnian, "*Yizhi yanli de hong meigui: Shi lun Kunaoren de xiao de yishu tese*" (A gorgeous red rose: On the artistic characteristics of *Troubled Laughter*), *Dianying yishu* (Film Art), no.2 (1980), 10-12.

what he sees. Then the editor-in-chief, as leader of propagandistic media, brainwashes Fu

by torturing him. Nevertheless, Fu still refuses to tell lies and tries to escape from the

maze-like palace. Fu's dream ends with a shot in which, as the claw of a giant historical

hand reaches toward him, he finds nowhere to escape the palace. In the midst of the chase,

Fu Bin is woken up by a bus conductor. The interrupted ending of the dream implies a

pessimistic attitude to the predicament of Chinese history and culture and can also be seen

in the ambiguous ending of the film.[13]

Compared with his first two ordinary dreams, Fu's third dream is a "big dream" in

Jung's sense like the dreams in Fei Mu's and Sun Yu's film, at an archetypal level that is

beyond his personal experience. Different from the folk cultural elements in Wu Xun's

dream, Fu's third dream demonstrates three Chinese literature classics: Lu Xun's short

stories: *Li lun* (*Establishing an Argument*) and *Kuangren riji* (*A Madman's Dairy*), and

the historical story of *Zhi lu wei ma* (*Calling a Stag a Horse*) in Sima Qian's *Shiji*

(*Records of the Historian*). Through these allusions, *Troubled Laughter* suggests the

period of the Cultural Revolution in which Fu lives is a dark age of "eating people" when

man is forced to be a dog. Socialist China in Fu Bin's grotesque dream is represented as

an odd hybrid of imperial culture and material modernization. The exterior of the building

is modern, while its interior is mostly ancient: the villains' outfits (only villainous

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[13] See Chris Berry's detailed analysis of the fantasy sequences at the end of *Troubled Laughter*. Berry argues that diverse cinematic effects lead to a highly ambiguous ending which makes the "false open story film starts to become a genuine open story film." In *Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China*, pp.147-150. A similar viewpoint is held by Paul Clark who also notes that "the tone of the film is overwhelmingly somber," and the forced happy ending "come[s] as a surprise." See Paul Clark, *Chinese Cinema,* p.163.

characters wear special costumes), the Chinese ancient interior decoration, furniture and

traditional food. We can also see some modern appliances such as electric fans, TV sets

and radio-cassette recorders which in the 1970s China were symbols of material progress

and modernization. These modern goods in fact implicitly criticize the hypocrisy of some

officials in the Cultural Revolution when the majority of Chinese did not own such

appliances. The chasm between backward ideology and material modernization reveals

that material progress does not fundamentally change the fundamental structure of

Chinese imperial culture. In the dream, socialist China is none other than an upgraded

pre-modern society. *Troubled Laughter* thus deviates from the official evaluation of the

Cultural Revolution as an accidental political disaster and internal disorder, which was

the ideological strategy adopted by the Party in the post-Mao era. Instead, the film regards

the Cultural Revolution as dragging up the dregs of Chinese imperial culture.[14]

Troubled Laughter shares two characteristics with *Broken Dreams in the Women's*

Chamber and *The Life of Wu Xun*. As in the two pioneer works, the boundary between

dream and reality is evident in *Troubled Laughter*. The audiovisual language — shaky

shots, weird music and exaggerated images — readily signal that these scenes do not

occur in the real world. The criticism of the socialist bureaucratic system is relegated to

the protagonist's subjective experience as dream sequence, thus presenting no threat to

the objective, empirical reality of Chinese society under the CCP's leadership. This is

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[14] *Troubled Laughter* was not the only film at the time to reveal this essential aspect of the Cultural Revolution. Another 1980 film *Unrequited Love* criticized the Cultural Revolution in a more explicit way. The film was later severely condemned by officials and banned in 1981 before release.

similar to the case of *Broken Dreams in the Women's Chamber* in which Fei Mu uses

dream representation to skirt the Kuomingtang's (KMT) censorship.

In fact, in *Troubled Laughter* underlying the distinction between dream and reality

are the dichotomies between private and public, and between ordinary people and hero.

The dream world is private realm that is inherently distant from the public sphere.

However, the Chinese people in the Cultural Revolution had limited private life because

of the pervasive collective movements and collectivist ideology. The ideal situation that

the Party required was that an individual kept no secret from the collective; all private and

personal problems should be solved by "opening one's heart to the Party" (*xiang dang*

jiaoxin). In the initial moments of the New Era, the revival of dreams in *Troubled*

Laughter indicates the surfacing awareness of the existence of a private realm that only

belongs to oneself and is detached from the collective life.[15] Fu dreams when he is in

public spaces: a theater, a residential area, and a bus, but never dreams when he is at

home. In this light, Fu's dreams can be seen as an individual's auto-immune mechanism

under social and political oppression. The tension is raised by Fu's occupational identity

as a journalist (aiming at public outreach) and his subconscious return to his inner world.

By comparison, the local Party leader Secretary Song is depicted as a villain who

associates himself closely with the public realm by posturing as a manual laborer in order

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[15] A similar striving for a private realm can be also found in contemporary literature. For example, in 1979, *Renmin wenxue* (People's Literature) published the renowned writer Liu Xinwu's short story *I Love Every Green Leaf* (*Wo ai meiyipian lüye*) in which the writer "transform[s] the image of a hidden photograph into the striking metaphor of a 'private plot'… an autonomous corner of his mind, a spiritual retreat." See Cyril Birch, "Literature under Communism," in Roderick Mac Farquhar, John K. Fairbank, and Denis Crispin Twitchett, eds., *The Cambridge History of China Volume 15: The People's Republic, Part 2: Revolutions within the Chinese Revolution, 1966-1982*, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p.801.

to promote his image. *Troubled Laughter* thus, as Ma Ning notes, links the public realm

to deception while connecting the private realm to truth.[16]

The re-emergence of dreams (particularly, nightmares) indicates that Chinese screen

had already said farewell to revolutionary heroes and was in the process of re-discovering

individual subjectivity. In a large number of socialist films, especially the eight "Model

Performance" in the Cultural Revolution, the protagonists are always flawless, god-like

heroes whose human attributes are often absent. They do not have any nightmares since

they have no fears at all. This so-called hero is the extreme practitioner of the political

ideology of the CCP. In contrast, Fu, who always has bad dreams or hallucinations, is not

a hero at all. He actually resists the followers of the Gang of Four in an accidental rather

than heroic way. He also confesses that he is neither a hero nor wants to be a hero he just

wants to be a man. Fu's rejection of hero status is essentially a denial of the political

ideology which tries to deprive of the individual subjectivity. In this regard, *Troubled*

Laughter echoed another significant event in the history of Chinese philosophy in the

same year: Li Zehou proposed the theory of the "practical philosophy of subjectivity"

through a strategic rereading of Kant. Li's theory highlights "subjectivity" (*zhuti*) and

makes man as the subject in historical practice; it became the philosophical focus in the

early 1980s.

At the beginning of the New Era, non-realism reemerged in the dream representation

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[16] Ma Ning, "Notes on the New Filmmakers," in George Stephen Semsel, ed., *Chinese Film: The State of the Art in the People's Republic*, Praeger Publisher, 1987, pp.64-72.

by *Troubled Laughter*. In the film the dream becomes a locus of resisting or confronting tensions and pressures from reality, and of constructing individual subjectivity. While the boundary between the dream world and the real world is still distinctive in *Troubled Laughter*, in Huang Jianxin's *Dislocation* dreams as a subjective experience begin to challenge the superior status of the objective world.

The Confusion of the Split Subject: Socialist Utopia as a Corrupted Dream in Dislocation

Dislocation (also known as *The Stand-in*) is the second film of Huang Jianxin's urban trilogy in the 1980s. (The other two are *The Black Cannon Incident* and *Samsara*.) Standing out from his contemporaries Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige and Tian Zhuangzhuang, who sought the roots of the nation and culture in the countryside or remote border areas in obscure times, Huang Jianxin is a unique Fifth-Generation filmmaker since he always focuses on urban subjects.

Dislocation is usually regarded as a sequel to *The Black Cannon Incident* because of the same protagonist Zhao Shuxin, a similar critique of socialist bureaucracy and the non-realist aesthetics shared by both films. *Dislocation* is set in an unspecific time and place in a future China. Not an engineer any more, Zhao Shuxin in the film has been promoted to be a section chief in a high-tech industrial department. Exhausted by attending endless rounds of meaningless meetings, Zhao invents a robot, looking exactly like himself, to substitute for him at various meetings while Zhao devotes himself to

technical research. However, Zhao's stand-in is corrupted by the bureaucratic life and gets

addicted to participating in meetings, smoking, drinking and dating women. Finally, the

robot is unhappy with Zhao's control and tries to rebel against him. At the very moment

of a violent confrontation between the flesh-and-blood Zhao and his mechanical replica,

Zhao wakes up in a sweat that shows everything that just happened was a long nightmare.

The film ends with a confused Zhao in his laboratory.

In a certain sense the nightmares in *Dislocation* are a continuation of Fu Bin's third

dream in *Troubled Laughter*. The dream sequence in both films demonstrates the huge

gap between material abundance brought by industrial development and the backward

consciousness of the bureaucratic system.

Dislocation consists of three dreams. The first two consecutive nightmares are

represented in an apparently surreal ways — the eerie atmosphere, the shrill soundtrack

and the irrational activity, suggesting that the two scenes of Zhao giving a lecture and

undergoing an operation only occurred in his dreams. Later, this guess is confirmed by an

abrupt cut to Zhao's sudden waking up. Unlike the first two dreams, the narrative shifts to

Zhao's last dream in a quite imperceptible way, without using any special film langague

or effect such as unusual camera angles or odd sounds which may signal to audiences that

what is happening is different from the real world. This, to some extent, suggests the

seamless integration between the protagonist's dream world and the real world in which

he lives — the bizarre dream is none other than the socialist reality which the protagonist

experiences. Thus, as Nicolas Kaldis suggests "viewers leave the theater experiencing a

feeling much like Zhao's, an 'inability to differentiate dreams from reality, a delusional symptom in the waking state.' By this point, the dream/waking boundary has been challenged in so many ways that dream and non-dream are now virtually interchangeable."[17]

In the representation of Zhao's third dream, various cinematic devices and effects highlight the overpowering, suffocating quality of everyday bureaucratic life in Zhao's nightmare. As most scenes of the film are shot indoors, the interior decoration and settings are the main manifestations of oppression. Zhao's surroundings are dominated by a limited pallete of black, white and red and by exaggerated geometric shapes such as circles and squares. Zhao usually goes outside at night and the environment is generally empty. In such an environment, the feeling of lifelessness, being bored and being smothered engulfs everything, with no signs of possible improvement. As Chris Berry and Mary Ann Farquhar observe, the cinematic design and stylized elements of both *Dislocation* and its prequel *The Black Cannon Incident* show an aesthetic association with Western modernist art, characterized by alienation, expressionism and distanciation.[18]

The final waking scene in *Dislocation* is, interestingly, the cinematic duplication of Zhao's first awakening. Zhao wakes up with a start, and turns to gaze at a mirror in which his own image is in blue. Huang Jianxin deliberately bewilders audiences by re-using the

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[17] Nicolas Kaldis, "Huang Jianxin's *Cuowei* and/as Aesthetic Cognition," *positions: East Asian Culture Critique* 7, 2 (Fall 1999), 445
[18] Chris Berry and Mary Ann Farquhar, "Post-Socialist Strategies: An Analysis of *Yellow Earth* and *Black Cannon Incident*," p.100.

sequence which had previously misled viewers to believe it was the end of a nightmare and the beginning of Zhao's experience in the real world. No one can tell if this ending was another new dream or not. Furthermore, we intriguingly find that the shot of a lightning flash at the moment of Zhao's awakening in *Dislocation* is actually the same shot used in the opening sequence of *The Black Cannon Incident*. The re-used shot indicates a possibility that Zhao's waking experience is perhaps another version of *The Black Cannon Incident*. History is caught in a closed loop. Within the cinematic world of *Dislocation* and *The Black Cannon Incident*, nightmares resulted from the repressive socialist bureaucratic system go on endlessly. This highly vague ending together with the suffocating and listless atmosphere pervading the entire film, gives us an overwhelming mood of pessimism and hopelessness which resembles the ambiguous finale and the overall tone of *Troubled Laugher*. In certain sense, Zhao Shuxin's third dream is a rendition of the socialist future. Zhao in his dream tests socialist theory and its promise of a utopian society in the future. The opening sequence of the film in which some laboratory devices such as beakers suddenly explode without any apparent external force implies that the socialist utopia would ultimately collapse from inside. Attempting to rebel against the monotonous and rigid socialist system, though in an unaggressive way, Zhao confronts the risk of a personality split (symbolized by the white statue of two boxers fighting) and even self-destruction (Zhao's robotic twin tries violently to take over Zhao) without any decrease or change to the hegemony and stability of the repressive system. As Paul Pickowicz points out: "the Chinese future that one sees on screen is a

decidedly dystopian nightmare that has nothing in common with the socialist promise of an ideal society."[19] The disillusionment with a socialist utopian future ineluctably calls into question the legitimacy of the socialist regime as well as interrogating the present problems of the bureaucratic system.

Dislocation is an artistic reaction to the official discourse of "Four Modernizations" (*sige xiandaihua*; the modernization of agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology) the highlight of Deng Xiaoping's regime in the New Era. The film presents the dislocation between economic modernization and the pre-modern political system. It implies that without the modernization of the socialist system and ideology, China's modernization is unbalanced and could, as in Zhao's nightmare when he is threatened with being replaced by his split-self, generate an "explosion" from the inside. Similar to *Troubled Laughter*, Huang's *Dislocation* revives the discourse of the May Fourth Movement in which intellectuals believed that Chinese modernization could only be achieved with the joint help of two "gentlemen": Mr. Democracy (*De xiansheng*) and Mr. Science (*Sai xiansheng*), and neither of them was dispensable. The representation of absurd nightmares in *Dislocation*, not only reflects a deep disillusionment with the socialist system, a postsocialist perception as Paul Pickowicz defines it, but also, in terms of aesthetics, challenges realism as the orthodox socialist aesthetics, presenting a postsocialist aesthetics of non-realism.

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[19] Paul G. Pickowicz, "Huang Jianxin and the Notion of Postsocialism," p.68.

In the 1980s, some other filmmakers also used the dreams as a locus for exploring non-realist aesthetics in their films such as *Visions from A Jail Cell* (*Moku zhong de huanxiang*, dir. Wang Jixing, 1986).[20] In their cinematic representation of dreams, the boundary between dreams and the objective world is likewise vague. Meanwhile, in some other 1980s films — *The Alley*, *Woman, Demon, Human* and *The Mask*, the most radical borders crossed are "those between fiction and non-fiction and – by extension – between art and life."[21] Thus, these films, which explore the relationship between art (i.e., film, opera and drama) and the real world, constitute another group of films that went beyond mainstream realism.

Breaking the Illusion: Cinematic Representation of Filmmaking in The Alley

Despite being an early 1980s film, Yang Yanjin's second film *The Alley* already touched upon the notion of self-reflexivity — the exposure of film's own artificiality as discourse construction. This was later practiced more extensively in Sixth-Generation films. *The Alley*, representing the (collective) trauma resulting from the catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution, was the first cinematic attempt in the postsocialist era to break the illusionist mode of classical realist films of the socialist period. In this regard, *The Alley* is not just a film about the representation of politics, but, more meaningfully, illustrates the politics of

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[20] In Paul Clark's discussion, *Visions from a Jail Cell* is a remarkable film. Its "[s]tandard fifth-generation techniques in framing and composition are applied to the fantasy sequences." See Paul Clark, *Reinventing China: A Generation and Its Films*, pp. 203-204.
[21] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, Routledge, 1988, p.10.

representation.

The narrative of *The Alley* is actually about a film within a film. An unknown, semi-blind amateur scriptwriter discusses a film script, which is partly based on his own experience, with a director Zhong (played by Yang Yanjin himself). In the writer's script, the hero makes friends with a "boy" in the Cultural Revolution. When they go to collect wild herbs for the boy's seriously ill mother, the "boy" is revealed as a girl who has disguised herself in order to avoid the attention of the Red Guards. To restore the heroine's femininity, the hero tries to steal a wig from a "model opera" troupe for her, but is caught by a Red Guard soldier. The hero is beaten and partly blinded. When the protagonist comes back from hospital, he cannot find the girl any more. At this point, the autobiography-like story told by the scriptwriter is suspended and the narrative returns to the discussion between director Zhong and the scriptwriter. They conceive several possible endings to the writer's story. At the end of the film, however, the screenwriter decides to "let the audience determine the ending according to their real lives."

The narrative and structure of *The Alley* resulted in controversy among both critics and audiences. The focal point of the debate was the film's open ending in which after presenting three incompatible endings, the narrator finally decides to let audiences imagine the ending according to their own experiences. The film bureaucrat Chen Huangmei argued that the film's ending destroyed the stylistic integrity of the film, since

only the first half of the film was realist.[22] Like Chen, another film bureaucrat Zhang

Junxiang denounced Yang's exploratory devices as "poor imitations of similar Western

techniques…are the flaws of the film."[23] However, many scholars applauded Yang's

filmic experiment and praised the film for "establishing a new connection between the

silver screen and audiences."[24] But these scholars did not clearly specify what the "new

connection" was and in what ways *The Alley* offered to change the existing connection.

To better understand the "new," we should first investigate the "old" connection

between audiences and art. Here, *The White-Haired Girl* (*Baimaonü*), a revolutionary

classic which was transformed into various forms of art from the Yan'an era to the

Cultural Revolution, is an ideal example to show the "old" connection between a

revolutionary artistic text and spectators.[25]

In 1944-1945 in Yan'an, under the strong influence of Mao's Yan'an *Talks*, the

opera *The White-Haired Girl* was created by artists from the Lu Xun Art Academy, the

CCP's official arts institution in Yan'an. *The White-Haired Girl* premiered in April 1945,

and its first audiences included Mao Zedong, Liu Shaoqi, Zhu De, Zhou Enlai and some

other high-ranking CCP leaders. Meaningful historical events and anecdotes related in the

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[22] Chen Huangmei, "*Guanyu Xiaojie de yifeng xin*" (A Letter on *The Alley*), *Dianying* (Movie), no.7 (1981), 0-1.
[23] Zhang Junxiang, "*Xiaojie xin zai nali?*" (What is new about *The Alley*), in *Yingshi suoyi* (Miscellaneous thoughts on film), Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1985, p.144.
[24] Xue Yaoxian, *Xunzhao yinmu he guanzhong zhijian de xin lianxi: Ping Xiaojie de jiewei* (Looking for a new connection between the silver screen and audiences: On the ending of *The Alley*), *Dianyin xinzuo* (New Films), no.1 (1982), 93-96.
[25] *The White-Haired Girl* is a classic in Chinese revolutionary art. Initially, the white-haired girl was a character in a folk tale which circulated in some areas of North China. In 1945, the story was adapted into revolutionary opera in Yan'an. After the founding of the PRC, it was successively transformed into film (1950), Peking opera (1958) and ballet drama (1965). In the Cultural Revolution, the modern ballet drama version of *The White-Haired Girl* is one of the eight model performances and was popularized nationwide. It can be regarded as the embodiment of Maoist revolutionary aesthetics.

opera drama *The White-Haired Girl* suggested a rich basis in the real world. After its

premiere, Liu Shaoqi, as the number two figure in the CCP at that time, instructed that

because class conflict would become the major conflict in Chinese society after the end of

the Anti-Japanese War, the landlord Huang Shiren in the opera should be sentenced to

death instead of just being punished with imprisonment. Following this official

instruction, the villain Huang Shiren was shot to death in *The White-Haired Girl*, an

ending which was often widely welcomed by audiences in the liberated areas. Liu

Shaoqi's revision of the ending of *The White-Haired Girl* indicates the significance of a

politically-correct ending in a revolutionary artistic work; sometimes it is even a decisive

part. As Chris Berry suggests, socialist film's "[d]idactic narratives tend to privilege

resolution as an important element in the effectiveness of message transmission, and to

value clear and unambiguous resolution as a means to that end."[26] Because of this,

classical Chinese socialist films are always closed texts within which a happy ending is

expected.

The other event is usually seen as a manifestation of the artistic appeal of *The*

White-Haired Girl: the superb acting of the famous actor Chen Qiang who played the

villain Huang Shiren in the opera. On the stage in the revolutionary base in Shaanxi,

when Huang Shiren was put on trial, the audiences went in a frenzy. They shouted

slogans angrily and threw dirt at the evil landlord to show their hatred. Chen Qiang was

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[26] Chris Berry, *Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China*, p.138.

often injured on stage. Once, a soldier in audience even tried to shoot Chen Qiang who

played Huang, until promptly stopped by his squad leader.[27]

The first event, Liu Shaoqi's revision of the ending, shows that the world that drama

(and cinema as well) presents is already filtered through an ideology, and drama (and film)

is an ideological product and instrument. The second story, furthermore, shows that as an

ideological instrument, revolutionary drama (including cinema) succeed in creating the

illusion of the stage (or screen) as a transparent window to the real world, leading

audiences to see dramatic (or cinematic) representation as authentic fact.

With regard to the "old" connection existing in calssic realist film, Yang clearly

intended to innovate: "We do not want the audience to indulge themselves in the fictional

illusion on the screen….We hope that what the audiences get from this film is not

satisfaction but pity, not indulgence but reflection."[28] The distinctive structure of a film

within a film (*mise en abyme*) and an open ending distinguish *The Alley* from Chinese

revolutionary or socialist realist film and their "old" connections between film and

audiences. Self-reflexive devices such as "authorial intervention" and "narrative

discontinuities" demonstrate the filmmaker's conscious efforts to disrupt the illusion of

filmic transparency to reality, a feature which lay at the core of film's function in the PRC

as a propaganda instrument.[29] *The Alley* subverts the closure of the narrative paradigm of

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[27] For more details, see Wang Dezhang, *Baimaonü zouguo de liushi nian* (Sixty Years of *The White-Haired Girl*), http://epaper.rmzxb.com.cn/2008/20081113/t20081113_219332.htm

[28] Yang Yanjin and Wu Tianren, *Tansuo yu zhuiqiu: Xiaojie yishu zongjie* (Exploration and pursuit: Aesthetic summary of *The Alley*), *Dianying* (Movie), no.12 (1981), 28.

[29] Robert Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature*, 1985, xi.

socialist realist film by not having a clear ending. Almost the entire latter half of the film is devoted to conceiving and selecting an appropriate ending for the amateur screenwriter's story. However, at the very end of the film the screenwriter and director Zhong still cannot find a satisfactory ending for the script. With its ambiguous ending, *The Alley* subverts the didactic narrative of classical socialist film.

In *The Alley* Director Zhong and the amateur screenwriter envisage four endings for the screenwriter's story. The display of the process of conceiving possible endings mocks the mechanism of meaning production in film, and at the same time it also reveals how diverse ideological messages are encoded (through metaphors, for example) in the different texts of the four endings. The first two are pessimistic, while the latter two are upbeat. The first ending that director Zhong proposes is a complete tragedy in which the girl is dead. But the screenwriter flatly turns down this cruel ending. In the visualized second ending the two protagonists meet but in contrast to their recovery from physical wounds (for the male protagonist, the regaining of his eyesight, and for the heroine recovering her beautiful long hair which is a symbol of the restoration of her femininity), the psychic trauma of the heroine is permanent. She loses hope and becomes nihilistic, which will inevitably lead to a break-up between her and the male protagonist. The film reminds audiences that this is a fabricated ending through Zhong's oral description of his design for the last shot of this ending. Though not as tragic as the first one, the second ending is still very negative and is obviously not in accord with the dominant ideology of Deng's regime. These two endings with a similar sentiment of despair and perplexity

resemble the ending of the film *Unrequited Love* which, at the initiative of Deng Xiaoping, was being severely criticized in 1981. One of the critical focuses lay in the film's poignant ending in which the patriotic protagonist dies alone in the snow, with his body constituting the dot of a huge question mark. So, if one of the first two endings becomes the real ending of *The Alley*, the film would be at risk and could draw criticism from the authorities at the time. However, the subtle point is that these two endings are presented as complete fabrications and also rejected by the screenwriter, although he admits they are possible endings. In so doing, the film conveys the pessimistic attitude in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution through these two endings but at the same time subtly avoids possible official criticism.

In contrast, the latter two endings were more likely to meet the demands of the dominant ideology. In the third ending, the heroine has become a singer. Though the writer is not confident because of his semi-blindness, the woman promises him that she will never leave him and they go home together. At that point, some film equipment appears on screen, emphasizing that this is another fictitious ending. In this ending, the female protagonist's trauma is healed by her success in a music career. Interestingly, she also appears with long hair (though it is not as long as in the second ending). Meanwhile, the male protagonist's distress is eased by their reunion as well as by the prospect of a happy life with her.

After talking about the third ending, the director still wants to conceive more possible endings. The writer says he "will seek an ending from the heart" and leaves to

visit his mother. The scene then switches to the male protagonist's trip on the train where

he is reunited with the heroine who has been waiting for him there. For the first time, they

know each other's names: the screenwriter as Xia and the woman as Yu. Xia and Yu talk

about their experience and expectations for the future. Just when audiences may think this

is the real ending to the story, director Zhong, his film crew and some film equipment

reappear in the shot: they are shooting the scene of "meeting on the train," another

fabricated ending. If saying that the third ending is positive but still too limited to

personal affairs and individual fate, then the fourth ending is more closely associated with

the grand discourse of the nation which called for people to dedicate themselves to the

construction of "Four Modernizations."

In fact the last ending is a simulation of classical (socialist) realist film, presenting a

"natural" or "naturalized" film world of dominant ideology by encoding several

significant metaphors in the representation.[30] Chinese socialist realist film, as a kind of

classical realist film, "attempt[s] to efface traces of the 'work of the film,' making it pass

for 'natural,' and thus reproducing the vague and non-theorized world … of dominant

ideology in Althusser's sense."[31] Through these elaborate metaphors, the ideological

discourse succeeds in disguising itself as the transparent rendering of the real world. The

first metaphor is motherhood. As the preceding narrative has shown, Yu's mother is very

ill and Xia has been fostered by his aunt, which signifies the absence of mother in the

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[30] Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema," in Claire Johnston, ed., *Notes on Women's Cinema*, London: Society for Education in Film and Television, 1974, p.28.

[31] Robert Stam, Robert Burgoyne, and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics*, p.188

decade of turmoil. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, Xia and Yu go together to see their only mother. We can argue that the mother here, rather than a specific individual, is an abstract notion refering to the Communist Party and nation. In the film, the clichés about mother — "people never forget their mothers," "every mother loves her children," implies that the relationship between the nation and its people is just like the mother-child relationship. This analogy between mother and nation is familiar to socialist audiences. Underlying the analogy is the implication that the disorder in the country has resulted from the temporary absence of the genuine Party and the socialist system, like Xia's and Yu's absent mother during the Cultural Revolution. To face their traumatized past, Xia refers to what Yu's mother has said: "let bygones be bygones," suggesting that people should look to the future. This expression certainly met the demand of the dominant ideology of the Dengist period, articulated in the slogan "united as one in looking to the future" (*tuanjie yizhi xiangqian kan*).

The second metaphor is that of recovery from trauma. Among the three different visualized endings, the heroine's hair is shortest in the third. It seems that under the new ideology of the "Four Modernizations" the heroine has put aside her personal pursuit of being a singer, as she aspired to be during the Cultural Revolution. She has become an ordinary worker and relinquished her desire to reclaim her femininity: "if not for the purpose of becoming a lathe worker, my hair would be very long." The heroine's self-de-feminization neutralizes the significance of her trauma as well as the hero's trauma of blindness resulting from his failed stealing of the wig for her. Moreover, at the

moment the hero says he is confident of recovering from his wounds, a sequence in which

the train rushes forward on the track is presented. This montage clearly conveys the

optimism of moving forward into the future. Xia's trauma thus becomes nothing more

than a temporary physical wound which can be cured not only by medical science, but

also by the advent of a new era itself.

The third metaphor is that of the protagonists' names. The two protagonists in the

film are nameless until the last ending. The hero gets to know the name of the heroine

from her certificate of merit awarded by the factory, a plot point which implies that only

by integrating oneself into the new ideological system can one be named. It is also

interesting to note that both the protagonists' surnames are metaphors. The hero's

surname Xia refers to *Hua Xia* (华夏), a name often used to represent China or Chinese.[32]

The heroine's Yu (俞) is the same as *Yu* (愈) in ancient Chinese which means "to recover."

(*Yu* is also a play on the actress Zhang Yu's real name.) Their names combine together to

imply "China recovers," from the catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution. The infused

dominant ideology finally makes itself surface here.

Though the dominant ideological message has been successfully embedded in the

last ending, the screenwriter rejects it as his voice-over says: "let the audience imagine

the ending and the fates of the characters according to their own life and experiences."

Simultaneously, the screen shows director Zhong and his film crew shooting a sequence

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[32] According to *Shuo wen jie zi*, "*Xia* (夏), *Zhongguo zhi ren ye*" (*Xia means Chinese*). See Xu Shen (121CE), *Shuo wen jie zi* (Discussing patterns and explaining words); *References to Shuo wen jiezi zhu*, commentated by Duan Yucai (1776-1807). Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1981.

for the fourth ending beside the train tracks. Once again, the process of film production is exposed, indicating that what audiences have just seen is not a real ending but another fabrication. Thus, the dominant ideology, which is always a privileged discourse in socialist realist film, cannot retain its status as meta-language in *The Alley*. Instead, the dominant ideology is relegated to the position of one among several discourses.[33]

Moreover, the last voice-over narrated by the screenwriter shows that unprecedented importance is attached to the participation of audiences in the production of meaning. The film neither assigns the audience the role of pupil-spectator, as the socialist pedagogical film does, nor aims to gain the audience's heightened engagement in the diegetic world.[34] Instead, it attempts to invite audience reflection and returns "interpretive agency to the individual members of the audience."[35] In doing so, the film also cultivates an audience for the new aesthetic alternative to classical (socialist) realism.

Besides *The Alley*, a number of other films such as *Woman, Demon, Human* (*Ren gui qing*, dir. Huang Shuqin, 1987) and *The Mask* (*Jialian*, dir. Zhang Jinbiao, 1986) focus on the art world (opera, drama and film) and the intertextual relationship between the world of art and the real world. Huang Shuqin's film *Woman, Demon, Human* depicts how a

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[33] The self-reflexive device of exposing the sign of film production later also appeared in an "entertainment film" (*yule pian*) — *The Tribulations of a Young Master* (*Shaoye de monan*, 1987), directed by Zhang Jianya and Wu Yigong. It was presented in a more playful way, but, obviously, it does not break the illusionism as thoroughly as *The Alley*. In his two 1990s films *Mr. Wang's Burning Desire* (*Wangxiansheng zhi yuhuo fenshen*, 1993) and *Sanmao Joins the Army* (*Sanmao congjun ji*, 1993), Zhang Jianya practices diverse postmodern techniques including reflexivity and parody. Zhang is one of the earliest Chinese filmmakers who has intensively explored the idea of postmodernism in his filmmaking practice.

[34] For the discussion of socialist film (1949-1976) as pedagogical paradigm, see Chris Berry, *Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China*, pp.27-75.

[35] Yomi Braester, *Witness against History: Literature, Film and Public Discourse in Twentieth-Century China*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003, p.142.

Chinese traditional opera actress Qiu Yun devotes herself to playing the ugly demon role

of Zhong Kui. The realist representation of Qiu Yun's story is intermittently interrupted

by segments of the traditional opera called *Zhong Kui Marries Off His Sister* (*Zhong Kui*

jia mei). The film begins with the actress Qiu Yun making herself up as the demon king

Zhong Kui on a dim stage which is full of mirrors that reflect the fictional character

Zhong Kui staring back at Qiu Yun. This sequence in-between fantasy and reality sets the

overall tone for the film: the simultaneous appearance of both a real character and a

phantom leads the spectators to concern with their shared fate. In the following long

flashbacks, the film smoothly switches between two extremely different types of

space-time: one is realist and narrates the hardships on Qiu Yun's artistic road and the

other is a grotesque, fictitious-like stage where the homeward journey of Zhong Kui is

presented. These two worlds are not isolated from each other; instead, there is a

complementary relation between them. The operatic narrative of Zhong Kui sometimes is

the illumination of Qiu Yun's psychological state and inner world. At some point, Zhong

Kui's world even interacts with Qiu Yun's world. In a scene when Qiu Yun is deeply

frustrated and alone in the dressing room, Zhong Kui gazes at her with concern through

the door. As Shuqin Cui remarks, "[t]he use of ritual myth to interpret reality and the

opera ghost to signify the female player contributes a self-reflexive and interactive mode

to the film's production of meaning. Thus, as cinematic images visualize the life drama

and as opera numbers comments on those images, the dual registers (cinema and opera) self-reflexively interpret each other within the film diegesis."[36] Finally, at the end of *Woman, Demon, Human*, when the artistic world and reality are integrated into one by means of cut, the artist Qiu Yun talks face to face with the opera character Zhong Kui, the boundary between stage and reality is completely dissolved at the moment.

An intertextual relation between dual registers — drama and the film itself — also exists in *The Mask*. The narrative of *The Mask* centres on a local Culture Bureau's choice of a key play for a drama festival. Their choice rests between the absurdist play *The Fault of Wine* which criticizes the hypocrisy of social life, and an alleged "realist" play which is a eulogy of authority. The lack of official favour for the absurdist play (*The Fault of Wine*) self-referentially reflects the situation that non-realist artistic works faced during the mid to late 1980s campaign to "clean up spiritual pollution" (*qingchu jingshen wuran yundong*) and "against bourgeois liberalization" (*fandui zichan jieji ziyouhua yundong*). By presenting a new relationship between artistic worlds and reality, these films challenged the established understanding that art is subordinate to reality, thereby questioning the Party's guiding principles — "literature and art are subordinate to politics" and "literature and art serve politics." In this way, art retrieved a degree of autonomy from the grasp of political ideology in post-socialist China.

After decades of political oppression and ideological fanaticism from 1949,

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[36] Cui Shuqin, *Women Through the Lens: Gender and Nation in A Century of Chinese Cinema*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003, p.223

non-realism, as a repressed aesthetics in the shadow of the strong tradition of realism, had re-emerged in Chinese cinema in the "New Era." The cinematic exploration of the subconscious realm of the oppressed individual echoed the intellectual discourse of "the modernization of man," specifically of human essence (*renben*), the human subject, human subjectivity (*ren de zhutixing*) and the self-consciousness of human beings (*ren de ziwo yishi*), underlying which was the strong aspiration to emancipate the Chinese from the "political alienation" (*zhengzhi yihua*). The emphasis on undermining the film illusion and on the art (or artistic activity) per se reflected the pursuit of artistic modernism that aimed to free art from its subjugation to politics, an issue that had been heatedly debated throughout the decade of the 1980s. Both aspects of non-realist practice resonated with the intellectual focus of the "New Era" — modernity, modernism and modernization. Although the zeitgeist of the post-New Era (since 1989) is distinct from that of the 1980s, the attention on the interior landscape of the mind and on art itself has been sustained in the alternative cinematic practice of post-realism.

Chapter Three

The Crisis of Memory and Its Reinvention: Unreliable Narrative in *In the Heat of the Sun* and *Suzhou River*

Do not believe me, I am lying.

—— The narrator, *Suzhou River*

A man says that he is lying. Is what he says true or false?

—— Eubulides (Greece, 4th century BCE)

As China's reform and opening-up stepped into its second decade in the concluding

decade of the twentieth century, the terrain of post-socialist culture not only significantly

departed from its early stage of the New Era, but also prefigured its development in the

twenty-first century. Under the new circumstances, as I sketched at the outset of this study,

the cultural landscape of Chinese cinema has been reshaped by a group of young

filmmakers — the Sixth Generation. By representing individual perceptions, especially

the urbanite's subjective experience, in contemporary post-socialist conditions, this new

generation broke through the encirclement formed by the tripartite forces of commercial

film, main-melody film and the Fifth Generation's art film. They added new blood to the

1980s newly-established cinematic aesthetics of both *jishizhuyi* and non-realism in

Chinese cinema. While *jishizhuyi* was used by filmmakers to emphasize film's function

as the faithful record and witness of external or material reality in a fast-changing era,

post-realism is distinguished by its cinematic rendition of individual subjective experience. As outlined in the introductory chapter, the radical difference between the non-realism of the 1980s and post-realism of the 1990s and 2000s is that in the 1980s non-realist films, non-realist or non-rational events and elements are usually relegated to dreams or artistic activities. They are contained in an explainable frame of empirical and rational reality, leaving the realist framework of the films unchallenged. In contrast, in the post-realist films of the Sixth Generation, the boundaries between reality and fiction and between art and life become very blurred or are even dissolved. Simultaneously, the apparent transparency of the verisimilitude is repudiated and the presence of artistic mediation and its own construction is increasingly emphasized. Therefore, in order to provide a substantial discussion of the post-realist cinematic representation, in this chapter I will shift my attention to some Sixth-Generation films from the early 1990s to the present.

This chapter focuses on two post-realist films — Jiang Wen's *In the Heat of the Sun* and Lou Ye's *Suzhou River*, both of which are characterized by an unreliable narrative. In the narrative of classical realist film, such as Xie Jin's *The Legend of Tianyun Mountain*, the character-narrator automatically owns an authentication authority: what he or she says or recollects is beyond doubt. In comparison, the credibility of the narrative in *In the Heat of the Sun* and in *Suzhou River* is undermined and these films' own factitiousness is exposed through the first-person narrators whose trustworthiness has been seriously compromised.

In both *In the Heat of the Sun* and *Suzhou River*, the character-narrators confess frankly that they are lying, laying bare the fabrication of their stories and memories. This kind of "true liar" is defined as "unreliable narrator" in narrative theory, a term which Wayne C. Booth first proposed in his 1961 study *The Rhetoric of Fiction*: "I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not."[1] Although Booth's definition has recently been challenged, it remains a canonical account of the concept of the unreliable narrator. According to Booth, there is a discrepancy between what really happened and what the character-narrator accounts. Thus, the unreliable narrator, as Volker Ferenz notes, "appear[s] not only a creation of the films but also, first and foremost, their creator."[2]

So what is the advantage by using an unreliable narrator in storytelling? From Kathleen Wall's perspective, to use an unreliable narrator "is to foreground certain elements of the narrator's psychology…"[3] More specifically, Ferenz points out that "because unreliable narratives inevitably create psychologically rich situations — we are spatiotemporally aligned to a character-narrator who gives us access to their thoughts, subjective imagery charges the cinema with an air of intimacy, the revelation of their unreliability brings about a mixed bag of feelings — they usually engage the viewer in a

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[1] Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961, pp.158-159.
[2] Volker Ferenz, "Mementos of Contemporary American Cinema: Identifying and Responding to the Unreliable Narrator in the Movie Theater" in Warren Buckland, ed., *Film Theory and Contemporary Hollywood Movies*, New York: Routledge, 2009, p.258.
[3] Kathleen Wall, "*The Remains of the Day'* and Its Challenges to Theories of Unreliable Narration," *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 24, no.1 (Winter 1994), 21.

host of largely emotional ways."[4] These statements show evidence that the unreliable

narrator is naturally and intimately associated with the subjective realm.

With regard to the two films considered in this chapter, the psychological realm of

memory and imagination is what these unreliable character-narrators mainly deal with.

Viewers are granted access to the narrators' inner world and witness the process of the

reconstruction of memory in accordance with the narrators' particular needs in the

here-and-now. Both *In the Heat of the Sun* and *Suzhou River* share a common concern

with the collapse and reconstruction of memories. The unreliable narrator employed in

these two films is an indication that our contemporary understanding of memory has

significantly changed. Since the late nineteenth century, memory has no longer been

considered as a fixed, lifeless, finished project of the past. Many theorists and artists, such

as Freud and Proust, demonstrate that memory "is not a transparent reproduction of a past

event, but a result of later distortion, rearrangement, selection and other processes —

often amounting to a complete recasting of the past."[5] In this sense, the alleged authentic

memory is quite questionable; instead, all memory is polluted by fantasy and controlled

by present desires and needs. As Freud pointed out: "[T]he material present in the form of

memory traces [is] being subjected from time to time to a re-arrangement in accordance

with fresh circumstances."[6] In the following pages, I will address how these unreliable

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[4] Volker Ferenz, "Mementos of Contemporary American Cinema," p.266
[5] Marty Roth, *Cultures of Memory: Memory Culture, Memory Crisis and the Age of Amnesia*, Academica Press, 2011, p.31.
[6] Sigmund Freud, *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, 1887-1904*, trans. and ed. Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1985, p.207.

character-narrators re-construct their memories and how in these films the reconstruction

of memories reflects the "fresh circumstances" of the post-socialist conditions in China.

Remembering or Fabricating the (Personal/National) Youth: The Crisis of Memory in In the Heat of the Sun

In the Heat of the Sun initiated Jiang Wen's directorial career in the early 1990s after he

had made his name with a number of leading roles in the films of some significant

directors such as Xie Jin and Zhang Yimou.[7] As a director, Jiang has made four films so

far — *In the Heat of the Sun*, *Devils on the Doorstep* (*Guizi laile*, 2000), *The Sun Also*

Rises and *Let the Bullets Fly* (*Rang zidan fei*, 2010). The distinctive styles of Jiang's

works differentiate the actor-turned-director from most other Chinese filmmakers,

rendering any attempt to identify him as a member of a particular group awkward.

Notwithstanding, in this study, I categorize Jiang's *In the Heat of the Sun* as a work of the

Sixth Generation since the film provides a strong personalized style as well as a personal

perspective on history, features which are shared with many other Sixth-Generation

filmmakers.

In the Heat of the Sun achieved huge success both critically and commercially.[8] It is

adapted from *Wild Beasts* (*Dongwu xiongmeng*), a novella by Wang Shuo, a popular

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[7] Jiang Wen graduated from the acting department of the Central Drama Academy in 1984. He plays protagonists in Xie Jin's *Hibiscus Town* (1986), Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* (1987), Xie Fei's *Black Snow* (1989), Tian Zhuangzhuang's *Li Lianying, the Imperial Eunuch* (1990) and Lu Chuan's *Missing Gun* (2002), to name just a few.

[8] *In the Heat of the Sun* was No. 1 in the Chinese box office in 1995. It was rated first by *Time* magazine's list of 1995's Top Ten Films in the World and it won the best actor award at the Venice International Film Festival in 1995 and best director, best actor, best screenplay, best cinematography and best sound recording at Taiwan's Golden Horse Awards in 1996.

Beijing-based writer, who is a representative figure of "hooligan literature" (*pizi*

wenxue).[9] The film reminisces about Ma's passionate teenage in Beijing during the

Cultural Revolution through the voice-over of the adult Ma Xiaojun (narrated and played

by Jiang Wen himself). Despite the film's backdrop of the Cultural Revolution, Jiang

Wen dedicates his film to depicting individual growth and the vitality of youth instead of

traumatic experience as presented in many other films set in that decade. The film's

protagonist Ma (also known as Monkey Ma, the nickname used by his friends) is a

fifteen-year-old high school teenager, the son of a high-ranking military officer. Too

young to be sent to the countryside and lacking discipline from parents who are busy with

their work, Ma and his buddies wilfully vent their excessive energy and adolescent libido

by fighting with other gangs and meeting girls. Ma's mastery at making skeleton keys

helps him to sneak into other people's homes and brings him a lot of fun. Once, he

discovers a colour photo of a girl on the wall of an apartment, and becomes infatuated

with her. It seems predestined that Ma should encounter and makes friends with his dream

girl, Mi Lan. After spending some wonderful time with her, Ma introduces Mi Lan to his

buddies. Soon, Ma's handsome friend Liu Yiku becomes his rival in love and develops a

close relationship with Mi Lan. At the conclusion of the film, disappointed in love, Ma

attempts to rape Mi Lan to wreak his revenge. Ma's outrage isolates himself from his

friends. His adolescence ends with the end of the summer. The last part of the film

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[9] "Hooligan Literature" emerged at the end of the 1980s. In contrast with Chinese traditional and revolutionary culture and morality it is characterized by vulgar language, cynical attitude and rebelliousness.

switches to 1990s Beijing where the adult Ma Xiaojun, with his gang members, rides

around in a limousine being nostalgic for their lost youth. Although the background of *In

the Heat of the Sun* is set in the Cultural Revolution, Jiang's story of coming-of-age, as

film critic Peggy Chiao suggests, is about youth and growth rather than the Cutlural

Revolution.[10]

In the director's comments, Jiang notes: "All those difficult-to-remember Chinese

characters (*fangkuai zi*) become vivid movie pictures. How then can we not admire the

magic of film?"[11] In the film, Jiang Wen in one sense elablorately reproduces or

reconstructs a world of memory, a youthful age in the revolutionary ambience, by virtue

of the film's nature as a photographic medium. In another sense, by showing the

limitations inherent in the film medium and film as fictional construct, Jiang reveals the

incapability of memory in restoring the true past. Thus, tensions constantly arise from the

dynamics of these two antithetical aspects and are explicitly demonstrated when at times

the voice-over of the character-narrator challenges its own faithfulness.

In the opening shot of the film, the vibrant scene of "seeing off Ma's father,"

accompanied by the high-spirited revolutionary song, draws us back to the 1970s when

the whole of China was enveloped in a revolutionary atmosphere. However, what Jiang

Wen does in this film is far more than just turning characters into photographic images.

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[10] Peggy Chiao, "*Qingchun wutuobang: Wo kan Yangguang canlan de rizi*" (The utopia of youth: My perspective on *In the Heat of the Sun*), in Cheng Qingsong and Huang Ou, eds., *Wo de sheyingji bu sahuang* (My camera does not lie), Jinan: Shandong huabao chubanshe, 2010, p.67.
[11] Jiang Wen, "*Yangguang zhong de jiyi: Yibu dianying de dansheng*" (The memory in sunshine: The birth of a movie), in Jiang Wen et al., *Yibu dianying de dansheng* (The birth of a movie), Wuhan: Changjiang wenyi chubanshe, 1997, p.2.

Rather, he demonstrates the unique magic, a capability that belongs only to the medium of film. Such magic is preliminarily displayed at the very beginning of the film when, due to camera movements of zoom in and pan down, a solid statue of Chairman Mao seems to wave his huge hand and guide the direction of the revolution.

The most full display of film magic occurs in the climactic point in the film, in the scene of the "birthday party at the Moscow Restaurant," when the narrator's memory collapses in an instant. Diallectically, the extreme rendering of film's distinctive magic at the same time also demonstrates the ontological limitation of film as a time-based medium. The film thoroughly reveals its own fabrication in an astonishing way, even though several clues and reminders in the preceding 100-minutes narrative have already implied that. Having become jealous of the closeness between Liu Yiku and Mi Lan, Ma eventually provokes a fight between his rival and himself at the Beijing's Moscow Restaurant where the party takes place. Out of extreme anger, Ma breaks a wine bottle and fiercely and repeatedly stabs Liu with it. The most stunning moment of the film then appears: at first, Liu has a painful look because of Ma's attack. Gradually, after Ma's five or six stabs, Liu seems to realize something unusual has happened and looks at his stomach in wonder. There is no blood, nor wound. He looks around and is baffled by what is happening. Then he turns to Ma who is still fighting. Finally Ma begins to be aware of something and gazes in the direction of camera as if he is asking the director or the viewers what is happening. Then we hear a familiar voice of "Ha-ha…," the shot freezes. The mischievous character-narrator explains: "Don't believe any of it. I never was that

brave or heroic. I have kept swearing to tell the story truthfully, but no matter how strong

my wish to tell the truth, all kinds of things have gotten in the way, and I sadly realize that

I have no way to return to reality."

The frozen shot not only reveals Ma's story as cinematic imagination, but also, blurs

the line between film and reality by referring to the existence of the camera as well as the

possible spectator. The shot is then followed by a highly self-reflexive scene in which the

film visualizes the dynamics between remembering and forgetting and simultaneously

reveals its own factitiousness as constructs: the film plays backwards in slow motion.

Finally, even the broken wine bottle becomes intact. This is an unprecedented sequence in

the history of Chinese film. This sequence acknowledges, or rather, stresses the limits of

the medium of film and of cinematic mechanism. Thus, it features the self-reflexivity of

high modernist film, as Clement Greenberg remarks: "use[ing] of characteristic methods

of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to

entrench it more firmly in its area of competence."[12] On the other hand, the rewind

breaks the linear narrative, showing a kind of postmodern element as exemplified by the

game-like structure of some contemporary films such as *Run Lola Run* (*Lora Rennt*, dir.

Tom Tykwer, 1998). The innovative device is seamlessly integrated into the cinematic

representation of the instability of memory. In this sense, as Paul Grainge notes, "the

desire for memory as stable, reassuring, and constant has always been plagued by the fear

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[12] Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in Gregory Battcock, ed., *The New Art*, New York: Dutton and Co., 1973,
p.68.

of its instability and unreliability, and its disposition towards fantasy and forgetting."[13]

The intervention of the adult Ma's sceptical voice-over at this moment of breakdown reveals that memory, just like what happens in this sequence, is unavoidably under reconstruction and being revised in the present. The adult Ma realizes the factiousness of his reminiscence when he admits: "The stronger my desire to tell the truth, the more the interference. I am terribly distressed to be aware that I cannot restore the truth at all. My emotion changed my memories, which have in turn played with me and betrayed me. I started telling the story by wishing to be sincere. But my determined efforts have been futile and become lying." The segments of memory which do not meet the new demands of the fresh context are filtered, consciously or unconsciously, and what is left is the part that the nostalgic subject needs and wants here and now. After the stunning moment of rewind the voice-over of adult Ma resumes his narration of another happy version of the birthday party in which joy and laughter permeate the air while the violent element totally disappers. As a matter of fact, in the adult Ma's recollection of his youth, violence is represented in an obscure way. On the one hand, the cruelty of the violence of these teenagers is demonstrated when they ruthlessly beat another teenager. On the other hand, their violence is glamorised in the name of youth, strength, brotherhood and masculinity. In the film, playfully, a possible fight between two gangs is reconciled by a hooligan named "little bastard" (played by the novelist Wang Shuo) and then transformed into a

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[13] Paul Grainge, "Introduction: Memory and Popular Film," in Paul Grainge, ed., *Memory and Popular Film*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003, p.5.

carnival in a restaurant. Obviously, Jiang Wen's soft representation of the Cultural

Revolution contradicts the historical truth of prevalent violence during the ten-years of

turmoil. But, as Dai Jinhua notes, the nostalgic representation of the Cultural Revolution

"once again regains harmony and continuity in the name of the individual, or

consumerism," although "its own historical narration is also fragmented by the conflictual,

disparate authorizing languages and thus is full of blind spots."[14]

Key, Lenses, Photographs and Film: Mediums of Fantasy

Before the final collapse of memory in the Moscow Restaurant scene, the fracture

between the narrrator Ma's memory and imagination is hinted at several times in the film.

In the adult Ma's prologue, he warns audiences of the questionable reliability of his

recollection when he acknowledges that: "The change of Beijing has destroyed my

memories, and I cannot tell the imagined from the real." Yet, as Ma's story unfolds,

viewers tend to indulge in the revolutionary carnival in Ma's recollection and leave

behind the narrator's initial warning. But, when Ma for the first time sees Mi Lan (or

more precisely, Mi Lan's photo), the mystery of the scene allows the audience to recall

the narrator's earlier self-doubt. Ma's meeting with Mi Lan is a result of his particular

hobby of making skeleton keys, with which he can enter other people's apartments. To

some extent, the skeleton key for young Ma is just like memory for the adult Ma. For the

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adult Ma his memory serves as territory in which recollection and imagination are mixed together, and for young Ma the key opens a new world which is a compound of the real and the fantastic. Once, Ma unexpectedly opens a built-in lock (*ansuo*, as Ma himself describes) of an apartment which he never wanted to open before. (*An* in Chinese literally means dark, underground and hidden. Ma's opening of the lock gives him access to a dark, hidden realm — the unconscious realm of sexual desire and libido suppression.) After sneaking and enjoying some free food, Ma happens to see a telescope. He takes it down from the wall and spies something really exciting through the telescope: Teacher Hu. Ma's observations of Hu's in private subverts the serious image that Hu puts on in class: after having an intimate talk with a female teacher, he goes straight to an open-air toilet and relieves himself. This is a plot point that emphasizes the potential of the telescope to get access to something unusual (something private and individual). Spinning around fast, Ma inspects the apartment through the telescope. Suddenly, an image appears in Ma's vision. It is a photo. Ma removes the telescope from his eye, and looks around to secure the location of the image in the apartment but fails. Then, when he searches for the image through the telescope, it reappears. But when he tries to look with his naked eye at the place by the bed where the image should be, he fails again. This is repeated twice. Ma begins to doubt his eyes and rubs them hard. Instead of using his bare eyes, Ma now seeks to locate the image through the telescope again. He finds it in the lens and gropingly moves towards the image until the edge of the bed stops him. For the first time he sees with bare eyes the photo of a girl hanging behind the mosquito net above the bed. At this

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moment, the romantic music of Italian composer Mascagni's *Intermezzo* is playing.

Uncovering the net, Ma stares at a beautiful, smiling girl in the photo who seems to be in

a red swimsuit. Moving back to his previous point of observation, Ma takes the telescope

like a soldier and scans the fascinating face carefully, from mouth to eyes. The face

gradually fades out. Meanwhile, a close-up of another female figure with the same

hairstyle fades in, we will soon know her as Yu Beipei.[15]

In this scene, not only Ma, but also the viewers feel confused by what they see.

There is no photo when Ma looks at the wall with eyes. Only through the lens can Ma, as

well as the viewers, see the mysterious photo. Even when Ma finds the photo, instead of

using his eyes, Ma makes careful observation of the photo with the lens. However, we

later learn that the photograph is none other than Ma's illusion as the girl Mi Lan denies

the existence of the photo and what Ma finds in her album is a black-and-white photo in

which Mi Lan wears an ordinary blouse.

The relationship between Ma and Mi Lan in *In the Heat of the Sun* belongs to a

pattern, as Russell Kilbourn notes, that was established in Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) —

that of "a man obsessed with an image: not the 'real thing' but a visual representation, not

the referent but the sign."[16] Mi Lan's photograph is a sign — a sign of a perfect past.

Ma's idolization of the sign is shown later in the film: he surrounds the photo frame with

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[15] For detailed discussion of the pivotal scene, see Jerome Silbergeld, *Body in Question: Image and Illusion in Two Chinese Films by Director Jiang Wen*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008, pp.41-48.
[16] Russell J.A Kilbourn, *Cinema, Memory, Modernity: The Representation of Memory from the Art Film to Transnational Cinema,* New York: Routledge, 2010, pp.58-59.

two national flags — one Chinese and the other unidentified. The girl's image enjoys a status only given to the great leader Chairman Mao.[17] Through the lens teenager Ma sees a subjective version of an image that he longs for. This can be regarded as a metaphor for the film itself (which is also shot through a lens) through which the adult Ma visualizes a more masculine past and his youthful days as idealized "sunny days."

Nostalgia for Lost Masculinity in the Post-socialist Age

In the introductory part of *In the Heat of the Sun* the adult Ma Xiaojun, accompanied by the nostalgic flute music of a popular revolutionary song *The Wild Geese that Fly Away*, begins to tell his tale: "Beijing has changed so fast. In twenty years time, it has become a modern city where I can find almost nothing the way I remember it." Throughout the narration of the voice-over the credits, in black and white, roll on the screen, with no sign at all of Beijing. This absence seems to suggest that the adult Ma has little enthusiasm for or interest in the present, modern Beijing that he talks about. After the emergence of the huge red title *Yangguang canlan de rizi* (literally, sunny days), the film shifts to Ma's memory of his adolescence represented in bright, and warm colours.

However, in sharp contrast, in the epilogue of the film, Ma's present days and contemporary Beijing are not shown in colour but in black and white. As the acoustic background of the prologue, a western clarinet version of *The Wild Geese that Fly Away*

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[17] For more discussion of the links between the photo and Mao's image, see Jerome Silbergeld, *Body in Question*, pp.33-39.

echoes, as if from a distance. The adult Ma and his old buddies are riding a white limousine around Tiananmen Square in the capital city and enjoying luxurious drink on a lifeless winter's day. It seems that the generation of "growing up under the red flag" (*zhang zai hongqi xia*) have become the new rich in the market economy. In the black-and-white present, Mao's image, which is massive and lofty in the retrospective part of the film, is deflated to a small picture and used as a good-luck charm with the auspicious words "to bring in wealth and treasures" (*zhaochai jinbao*). The emblem of the Chinese revolution, together with the revolutionary rhetoric are totally commoditized and converted by the overwhelming market logic of the commercial age of the 1990s.

It is interesting to note that none of their female friends from the old days are with the gang, signifying that the catalyst for their masculinity is left in the past — those "sunny days." Liu Yiku, as the leader and the most masculine figure of the gang in the past, has now become an idiot due to his brain injury in a war. Unlike his friends who are dressed in western suits, the adult Liu Yiku is the only one who wears an old military overcoat which used to be regarded as a symbol of masculinity.[18] However, as Vicki K Janik points out that "[F]ool's nonparticipatory sexuality, insistent bawdiness, and implicit androgyny… blur[s] identification."[19] Thus a subtle contrast is formed between

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[18] During filming *In the Heat of the Sun*, actor Geng Le (playing young Liu Yiku) quarreled with the assistant director because he was not willing to wear army uniform. Jiang Wen told Geng Le: "This uniform looks more like a famous brand than any real famous brand you like now. It is not only a symbol of status, but also of the courage of you as a boy. (At that time), people can fight for this uniform and even die for it. No famous brand can lead to people's death nowadays." This indirectly suggests the significance of the army uniform in the film. See Jiang Wen et al., *The Birth of a Movie*, p.13.
[19] Vicki K. Janik, ed., *Fools and Jesters in Literature, Art, and History: A Bio-bibliographical Sourcebook*, Greenwood Publishing Group, 1998, p.13.

the masculinity represented by Liu's military overcoat and his identity as a fool. Liu's

military overcoat is a melancholy satire not only for his past valorous and handsome

youth but also for the loss of masculinity of Ma and his buddies.

The satire is further strengthened by the other idiot in the final sequence. The

neighbourhood idiot is presented five times throughout the narrative. In Ma Xiaojun's

recollection, the idiot always rides a stick and stands at the gate of the military compound

where Ma and his buddies live. Every time they meet the idiot, they exchange the words

"*Gulunmu*" and "*Ouba*" which derive from the passwords in the film version of the

Cultural Revolution model performance *Raid on the White-Tiger Regiment* (*Qixi

baihutuan*, dir. Su Li and Wang Yan, 1972). When many things have changed in their

present days, Ma and his buddies finally find somebody unchanged, the idiot Gulunmu.

He still rides his stick (a phallus symbol?) and still dresses in summer clothes — a

camouflage vest and shorts on a cold winter Beijing's day. For Ma and his buddies,

Gulunmu's changelessness means his close links to those youthful summer days.

However, when the gang excitedly try to exchange the passwords from their past with

Gulunmu, they only receive foul words: *Shabi* (means "stupid cunt" in English). The

words, as Jerome Silbergeld notes, cast "Xiaojun and his companions…in thoroughly

sexualized terms, not only charged with idiocy but their masculinity attacked."[20] In

comparison, the emblem of the idiot's masculinity is still at his crotch. The idiot's

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[20] Jerome Silbergeld, *Body in Question*, p. 61.

response declares the futility of Ma's attempt to re-establish ties with the socialist past —

his masculine youth, and again calls into question the credibility of Ma's memory.

Therefore, in this ending, the tone of the film is abruptly shifted to a sentiment of

nostalgia. It is worth noting that the ending of *In the Heat of the Sun* and the character of

the idiot Gulunmu are the director's creation: neither of them is in the original novella of

Wang Shuo. Thus, the concluding part of the film set in the early 1990s strongly shows

the director's motivation.

In the Heat of the Sun was shot in 1993, the hundredth anniversary of Mao Zedong's

birth and seventeen years after the end of the Cultural Revolution. It is a time when the

whole country was immersed in an atmosphere of what Geremie R. Barmé called

"totalitarian nostalgia."[21] Chinese people recalled the Maoist era not as a time of struggle

and turmoil but as a time when people had a close and stable relationship with the

collective and nation, and had clear and common goals about the their lives as well as the

future. Jiang Wen's film is a cultural product of this specific historical and social context.

As Barmé observes, "the widespread condition of nostalgia can be symptomatic of a

social interior dialogue regarding the irrevocable past, an identification with what is

perceived as having been lost….Nostalgia develops usually in the face of present fears,

disquiet about the state of affairs, and uncertainty about the future."[22] Superficially, what

the adult Ma (or Jiang Wen himself) has lost is youth. But, in the subconscious level, for

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[21] Geremie R. Barmé, *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture*, Columbia University Press, 1999, p.316.
[22] Ibid., pp.317-319.

these "wild beasts," it is their youthful libido and masculinity which are embodied in their purified longing for an idealized girl and their bravery and heroism in fighting for friends. It seems to the adult Ma that the only way to regain his masculinity is to return to memory, or, as Louise Williams notes, to "present masculinities through the performance of his personal history."[23] From Jiang's perspective, contemporary money-oriented social culture dismisses the idealism and lyricism which are represented by the revolutionary culture and the nurture of masculine identity. In this regard, an analogy is drawn in the film between these teenagers' erotic passion and the romanticized revolutionary fervour of the Cultural Revolution. The passionate youth as well as vigorous masculinity in Jiang Wen's *In the Heat of the Sun* are no longer just the life experience of an individual. Symbolically, they become the emblems of the spirited adolescence of the state.

In *In the Heat of the Sun*, the crisis of memory and its disposition towards fantasy is manifested through the representation of film as artificiality and narrative as fabrication. The self-reflexive device of "I am lying" is by no means a postmodern play of itself as a sign, but perfectly incorporated into the diegetic narrative of memory's instability and its contemporarily-constructed attribute. Memory, like film, also becomes "a representation system" and a "mode of narrating or mediating experience: a structure over which individual agency only ever has partial control."[24]

Like *In the Heat of the Sun*, *Suzhou River* is also narrated by an unreliable

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[23] Louise Williams, "Men in the mirror: Questioning masculine identities in *In the Heat of the Sun*." *China Information*17, no.1 (2003), 105.
[24] Russell J.A Kilbourn, *Cinema, Memory, Modernity*, p.57.

first-person narrator (both are voiced by their respective directors). In modern Beijing, when the reform and opening up policy were being implemented the adult Ma Xiaojun has problems with his attempts to recall his 1970s' youthful days in the city. So how about the "I" in Lou Ye's *Suzhou River* set in Shanghai at the turn of the twenty-first century, the heyday of "constructing a socialist nation with Chinese characteristics"? How does the character-narrator interact with a reality in dramatic transformation and negotiate his way in a fast-changing world? These are the main questions that I am going to address in the following paragraphs.

A Beautiful Mermaid on the Muddy Bank: Inventing Memory or Fantasy in **Suzhou River**

If we use "masculinity" to describe Jiang's *In the Heat of the Sun*, then no other word than "femininity" is appropriate for *Suzhou River*, even though its auteur-director is a male. Sun in Chinese traditional cosmological theory of *yin-yang*, is *yang*, while river — namely, water, is *yin*. In terms of visual style, *In the Heat of the Sun* is bright and warm, and most of its scenes are outdoors in the daytime with plenty of light. In comparison, *Suzhou River* has a noir look and its overall use of colour and light is dark in tone. For example, neon lights are used as a source of lighting in *Suzhou River*. Domestic scenes, night scenes, rainy and misty scenes account for a large proportion of the film. Generally, watching the film feels like experiencing a dream.

Lou Ye was born in Shanghai in 1965. In 1989, he graduated in film direction from

the Beijing Film Academy, and later with his classmates Zhang Yuan, Wang Xiaoshuai, Lu Xuchang, among others, became known internationally as a member of the new Chinese filmmaking generation. Part of their reputation, at least, is based on the fact that many of their early works were banned or strictly censored by China's film authorities. Nevertheless, Lou's first two films *Weekend Lovers*, a film about Shanghai rock n' roll youth (1993) and *Don't Be Young* (1995), a commercial horror film were both passed by the censors. It is *Suzhou River*, Lou's third feature that has never been officially released in mainland China due to its presentation at international film festivals without the approval of the State Administration of Radio Film and Television. Initially, *Suzhou River* was produced as part of Shanghai TV Station's 16-mm television series *Super City* project. With German funding this TV movie was later transformed into a full-length feature film. In this light, the film is to a large extent a transnational artistically viable film.[25]

    Suzhou River tells the tale of two romances between the narrator "I" and Meimei, and between Mada and Mudan. "I" is a videographer who makes a living by "shooting everything" as he declares to his clients. He is hired by the boss of a bar named Happy Tavern to shoot a promotional video. The leading role in the video is Meimei who dresses as a mermaid in a blonde wig and swims in a huge fish tank in the bar. The videographer becomes obsessed with Meimei, and starts a relationship with her. During one of Meimei's absences, the videographer narrates the love tale about Mada and Mudan. Mada

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[25] *Suzhou River* was awarded the Tiger Award at the Rotterdam International Film Festival and the Top Ten Films of 2000 by *Time*. The actress Zhou Xun won the Best Actress at the Paris Film Festival.

is a motorcycle courier. He receives an assignment to escort Mudan to her aunt's home, when her father, a rich bootlegger who smuggles Zubrowka Bison brand vodka from eastern-Europe, is enjoying time with prostitutes. Soon, Mada and Mudan fall in love. However, Mada is involved in a plan to kidnap Mudan for ransom. Shocked by the fact that her beloved is her kidnapper, Mudan leaps into Suzhou River, clutching the mermaid doll given to her by Mada as a birthday gift. She disappears. After his release from prison, Mada searches for Mudan until he meets Meimei, the videographer's girlfriend who looks exactly the same as Mudan. At this point, the two love stories interweave. After first denying it, Meimei begins to wish that she was the one Mada was looking for. Mada finally finds Mudan. Shortly after their reunion, the young couple are killed in a motorcycle accident due to excessive drinking. Devastated by the two deaths, Meimei leaves the videographer with a note saying "find me." However, the videographer does not go to look for Meimei, but prefers drifting on the river to "wait for his next love."

"My Camera Does Not Lie" versus "Do Not Believe Me, I am Lying"

Suzhou River is a film full of tensions. In terms of the mise-en-scene, after the initial disembodied dialogue between Meimei and the videographer, the screen slowly fades to footage of the river that the narrator is shooting, a footage which is seen as not only Lou Ye's but also one of the new generation's representative signatures in contemporary Chinese cinema. In this initial montage, the narrator's camera through his first-person point of view, lingers on the garbage, barges, and house-boats floating in the creeks,

bridges, the ruined or partially demolished buildings along the banks, and migrant

laborers, and residents, as well as dogs. Among these objects, the camera swiftly zooms in

and out, and jump cuts. The presence of the camera is visible as pedestrian gaze at and

people on the river wave to the camera. Lou Ye's innovative use of the first-person

point-of-view in most parts of the film makes *Suzhou River* stand out from other

avant-garde experimental films. The narrator always remains virtually invisible

throughout the film. Instead, audiences are allowed to see his hands, extending from

behind the camera (our eyes) to stencil video service advertisements, to hold a cigarette or

a wine bottle, and or touch his girlfriend's face. The invisible narrator, the unsteady

hand-held camera work, the optical point of view, and the absence of shot reverse-shot

patterns represent viewers' gaze on screen, rendering a sense of participation and reality

which seems to confirm the narrator's claim at the outset of the film that "my camera

does not lie." On the other hand, in the opening sequence of *Suzhou River*, in contrast to

the documentary-like visual style, the combination of the lyrical and mysterious

non-diegetic music mixed together with diegetic soundtracks, such as the sounds of boat

engines and worker s' demolishing buildings, forms unique and uncanny sound effects

which to some extent generates a sense of unreal. When the blond mermaid appears at the

riverside halfway through the film, this otherworldly image completely destroys the film's

documentary look, and forms a unique visual style of dreamy quality, as both J.

Hoberman and Zhang Zhen note.[26]

Tension also emerges in regard to the narrative. Alert audiences may be aware of the fact that the story of Mada and Mudan is narrated by "I" — the videographer and mediated through his camera, the extended part of his body. As a matter of fact, the videographer in *Suzhou River* is the only source of what audiences see and hear. Unlike the adult Ma Xiaojun who indulges himself in his narration of memory, in *Suzhou River* most of the time "I" detaches himself from his invented memory. As Cui Zi'en notes, the narrator is awake when he performs his dream to spectators. "He does not appear on the scene, instead, he keeps himself away from shot and does not get involved in the dream. He only puts his hands into the dream, and drinks alcohol in the dream but never says anything about the dream."[27] In *In the Heat of the Sun* it is not easy for the adult Ma to face the fact that he is imagining instead of recalling his past. In *Suzhou River* the videographer forthrightly admits the fabrication of his love story of Mudan and Mada, and even shows the process of improvisation. The process of his narration is characterized by the reflexive voice-over, the complicated camera movement, the shift of point of view (POV) and the change of lighting. It thus is a synthesized demonstration of film's capacity to create a fictional world within a fiction.

The narrator's improvisation comes from his being alone on the balcony during

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[26] See J. Hoberman, "Eternal return," *The Village Voice* 45, no.45 (2000), 131. Zhang Zhen, "Urban Dreamscape: Phantom Sisters, and the Identity of an Emergent Art Cinema," p.364.

[27] Cui Zi'en, "*Jueding Suzhou he*" (Choosing *Suzhou River*), *Nanjing yishu xueyuan xuebao* (Journal of Nanjing Arts Institute), no.4 (2000), 52.

Meimei's absence. The videographer aimlessly pans the street and passers-by as he recollects the story Meimei used to tell about Mada who "is a crazy guy living nearby and spent his life looking for the girl he had loved and lost." The videographer is explicit about his disbelief in the story and claims "there are too many love stories like Mada's. I could make one up too." Then the videographer's camera becomes purposive: it pans and zooms, from a couple fighting to a motor cyclist with a phone, and finally focuses for a while on a school girl with two pigtails (we cannot see her face). Soon the shot cuts to the motor cyclist, and then shifts back to the girl again. At this moment, a romantic score plays. It is in this random way that the videographer casts the actors for his love story. After a transient black screen, the narrator starts his story with a close-up shot of the motorcyclist Mada. The videographer's subsequent narration of the story is full of uncertain words like "maybe," "what else," "let me think," "could be," "what happens next," "what if," "and then," which constantly destabilize the narrator's authority and undercut the authenticity of the story.

The aural component during the intricate storytelling in *Suzhou River* also plays a key role in distinguishing the real world the videographer lives in from the fictional world he creates. At the beginning of the film, the section on the relationship between the videographer and Meimei is accompanied by diegetic music and sound which originates from the real situation of their lives. However, in the narrator's story about Mada and Mudan, non-diegetic music which establishes a mood of mixing affection with desolation plays. Meanwhile, the POV of the film also shifts from the first-person perspective of the

videographer to an omniscient perspective when the videographer begins to tell the story

of Mada. When the videographer narrates that Mada cannot find Mudan after Mada's

release, he says: "That's the end, I suppose. I don't know how to go on with it. Maybe

Mada can finish telling his story himself." At the point, the screen which has gradually

faded to black lights up again. Then, in what follows, the story resumes as if it is now out

of the narrator's control. The fictional Mada meets the real Meimei and takes her for

Mudan. More surprisingly the fictional character even has a face-to-face talk with the

narrator of his own story. When they meet, Mada tells the narrator that as long as the

narrator allows him to continue looking for Mudan, he will give Meimei back to the

narrator. This conversation, as Damion Searls notes, "is inexplicable on a 'factual' level":

"How could either of them possibly do these things; it does make sense, however, as a

character addressing his author. Give me a happy ending, Madar says, and that will make

Meimei love you again."[28] Fiction strongly influences reality, which makes the narrator

indignantly complain: "I really don't know how all these things happened. The bastard

messed up my life but still had the nerve to smoke my cigarettes, drink my vodka and

keep me up all night with his nonsense about love." The fictional character Mada who

escapes from the diegetic world of the videographer's narrative not only challenges the

authority of the videographer as a narrator, but also radically destroys the borders

between fiction and non-fiction and between art (film) and life.

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[28] Damion Searls, "*Suzhou River*," *Film Quarterly* 55, no.2 (2001), 59.

But the narrator soon regains his control over the narrative. According to what he has seen and heard by the Suzhou River, he arranges a tragic ending for Mada and Mudan after Mada's persistent pursuit, turning his reunion with Mudan into death. The drowned young couple's bodies are lifted out from the river by the police. The couple's death may remind us of what the narrator says in the prologue of this film when he drifts down the river. With somewhat documentary-style shots of the environment of the river, the voice-over of the videographer narrates in an unemotional voice: "If you watch the river long enough, it will show you everything….once I saw the birth of a baby on a barge, I saw a girl jump into the river, I saw the bodies of two young lovers being dragged out of the water by the police. As for love, I would like to say I once saw a mermaid sitting on the muddy riverbank, combing her golden locks." At this point, the narrator's voice becomes distant and echoing. But then the voice returns to normal "don't believe me, I am lying." Part of what the narrator sees later become essential in fabricating his story about Mada and Mudan. Moreover, the narrator occasionally reveals where the original materials for making up his story came from. In one of the most masterful cutting shots of this film, after Mudan jumps into the river, instead of presenting Mada's chase, the film cuts to a man reading a news report headed "Mermaid is Not Fairy Tale" with the voice-over: "I once read an article about a mermaid in an old newspaper in a toilet. The paper was full of the mermaid story for weeks. For a while, every boatman in Shanghai claimed to have seen Mudan or the mermaid." Then a mermaid who is paddling in the filthy water with her tail fin is shown on screen. She looks the same as the dressed-up

Meimei in the bar.

Thus, it is fair to say that the videographer makes up the story by using all the materials he has: what he saw by the waterways, the rumours spread in the lanes, and the news from the tabloids. It is also reasonable to argue that both Meimei and the videographer himself are raw material for his fiction. The videographer who gets addicted to shooting Meimei chooses his girlfriend as the heroine of the love story. We may remember that when the videographer fixes on the schoolgirl from among the passersby, his camera seems to deliberately avoid the girl's front so that spectators are unable to see her face. In so doing, he is able to endow the girl with Meimei's looks.

Mada can also be seen as a substitute for the videographer in his fiction since we discover that they have a lot in common. Like the videographer, Mada leads an isolated life: "Every day, after Mada comes back home, he usually watches his favourite pirate videos all night. That's his life." This is a penchant that a videographer is likely to have. What is more, the only crucial connections between these two men and the outside world — the city in which they reside — are their machines for making a living: for Mada, a motorcycle, for the videographer, a camera. Technically, the film calls attention to the identity between the videographer and the fictional Mada by using the same shot of peeping voyeuristically at Meimei outside her dressing room.

The crossed boundary between imagination and reality showed in *Suzhou River* distinguishes the film from its counterpart *In the Heat of the Sun*. The latter conveys a pessimistic view that there is an insurmountable gap between one's reality and one's

memory. The gap between these two is just like the distinction between colour and black-and -white, or between summer and winter according to Jiang Wen's cinematic representation. The adult Ma and his buddies cannot relate themselves to the past any more by exchanging passwords. In contrast, no clear line is drawn between the invented memory of the narrator and his reality in *Suzhou River*. Lou's film shows the possibility that the real world and the fictional world of the invented memory are interrelated and interact with each other. After her initial refusal, Meimei applies to herself the same peony tattoo as Mudan did to her thigh and through Mada's storytelling becomes increasingly identical with Mudan. Even the cynical narrator begins to reflect his attitude towards affection after he witnesses the death of the lovers. The invented memory filled with affection and persistence consititutes a sharp constrast to the nihilism and hopelessness of reality. In the film, inventing memory or fantasy for the aliened urbanite is a way to overcome the isolation, anomie and decadence associated with urban life. In so doing, the city dwellers in *Suzhou River* attempt to reconstruct their chaotic identities caused by the post-socialist transformation of the contemporary city.

Suzhou River's meta-narrative as well as the theme of women's self-discovery are also elaborated likewise in director Sun Zhou's 2002 feature *Zhou Yu's Train*. The film traces the romance between a woman Zhou Yu (played by Gong Li) and two different men Chen Qing and Zhang Qiang. In *Zhou Yu's Train*, poet Chen represents idealism and spirituality, while veterinary Zhang represents secularism and sexuality. "Your lover is your mirror who will let you know yourself better." By depicting Zhou Yu's hovering

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between Chen and Zhang, the film shows the female protagonist probing for her ideal self in an increasingly materialistic society. The story of Zhou Yu is narrated by a woman, A Xiu. Up to the end of the film, the film reveals that the story of Zhou Yu that A Xiu narrates is her subjective imagination based on the poet Chen Qing's newly released book titled *Zhou Yu's Train*. By imagining Zhou Yu's story, A Xiu also experiences a journey of self-discovery. The narrative similarities shared by both *Suzhou River* and *Zhou Yu's Train* point to the common historical backdrop against which the two films were made: the ongoing marketization and prevalent consumerism at the turn of the twenty-first century greatly impacted people's understanding of their own identities. Women's split identities and searching for selfs, which are central to *Suzhou River* and *Zhou Yu's Train*, also become the key theme of another post-realist film, *Lunar Eclipse* directed by the Sixth-Generation filmmaker Wang Quan'an. I will delve into *Lunar Eclipse* in the next chapter.

In *Suzhou River*, Lou Ye constantly reminds us of the presence of the camera and off-screen space through the first-person optical POV, directing the viewers' attention to the "constructed-ness of the narrative" and of the "filmmaking itself."[29] The statement "Don't believe me, I'm lying," the pretty mermaid sitting on the muddy bank, and the identical Mudan and Meimei, all of which show that the story is purely fiction. In this sense, the cinematic representation of *Suzhou River* thoroughly subverts "the rules of

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[29] Sun Shaoyi, "In Search of the Erased Half: *Suzhou River*, *Lunar Eclipse*, and the Sixth-Generation Filmmakers of China," in Haili Kong and John A. Lent, eds., *One Hundred Years of Chinese Cinema: A Generational Dialogue*, Norwalk: Eastbridge, 2006, p.194.

Chinese cinematic realism that never allow self-questioning of the narrative mode and realist content."[30] The claims of "my camera does not lie" and "I am lying" juxtaposed in *Suzhou River* should not be understood as mutually exclusive. The former emphasizes the realist potential of the film medium which is grounded in its photographic nature and the film's capability of capturing physical existence.The latter, at the other end, reveals the inevitable subjective intervention, the centrality of the filmmaker's creation in filmmaking and the truth that narrative as construct. The post-realist representation of *Suzhou River* presents both dimensions with its documentary look and stylisitc experimentation.

It is worth noting that Zubrowka Bison Brand Vodka which appears several times in close-up shots is a crucial narrative clue and element in the narrator's made-up story. When Mada and Mudan fall in love, they share it; because of it, Mada finds his missing Mudan; the couple is killed in an accident after drinking it. This kind of vodka comes from the border of Poland and Belarus and is well-known for a blade of buffalo grass placed inside the bottle. Allegedly, the buffalo grass with aphrodisiac properties is favored by bison (in polish, *żubr*). By eating it, this European bison which is in danger of extinction multiplies rapidly. In this light, the Zubrowka Bison Brand Vodka deliberately emphasized in *Suzhou River* is a metaphor for the film. Lou Ye sets his romance story in a filthy, anti-romantic urban environment of contemporary Shanghai — a modern

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[30] Ibid., p.85.

wasteland. Through the storytelling of a romance love, *Suzhou River*, like the vodka, tries

to infuse passion and romance into mediocre everyday life which is dominated by

materialist ideologies.

The River: A Metaphor for Post-socialist China as "Non-China"

Compared with the Fifth Generation's grand narrative of national allegory,

Sixth-Generation films are quite personalized. They pay much attention to the

individual's life and subjective feelings, particularly, those of the marginalized groups,

such as fringe artists, rock singers, and unemployed youth. Individualization distinguishes

the younger generation's works from their predecessors', but sometimes it also becomes a

byword for self-narcissism, being-affected, and indulging in an individual world devoid

of interaction with the outside world. The Sixth Generation's emphasis on

individualization is one of the main reasons for the limited acceptance of their films

among audiences. Yet, Lou Ye's *Suzhou River* escapes this predicament through building

a connection between examination of an individual's internal subjective fantasy and

exploration of the objective world. On the one hand, *Suzhou River* is fairly individualized

and what the film represents is no more than a lonely videographer's soliloquy. On the

other hand, in the film a bridge is built between an individual's inner mindscape and

Shanghai or even post-socialist China as a whole. This bridge is the river itself.

　　Besides its obvious Western look (a combination of Hollywood and French New

Wave as mentioned above)[31], *Suzhou River* is also nourished by traditional Chinese literary techniques of exposition (*Fu*), metaphor (*Bi*), and implied comparison (*Xing*). The prologue of *Suzhou River* exemplifies these techniques, and its detailed portrayal of the Suzhou creek reveals both the river's visible reality and its symbolic undercurrents:

> I like to take my camera to the Suzhou creek and just drift along, west to east through Shanghai. Its century long tradition makes it the filthiest river. Many people make a living on the river. They spend their whole lives here. Look, you can see them. If you watch it long enough, the river will show you everything. It will show people working, friendship, father and son, and loneliness as well.

This introductory passage implies that the Suzhou River is a cultural river rather than just a natural river in a geographical sense. It is polluted by not only rubbish, but also by cultural and psychological pollutants such as story and imagination. Fiction and imagination, like the floating garbage in the Suzhou River, are essential parts of the river of narrative. The river of narrative encompasses a wide range of heterogeneous elements, "the unreal, the real, the artificial and the unaffected,"[32] which are mixed together by the current. The liquidity, fluidity and volatility of the river of narrative make drawing a distinction between these elements impossible. Moreover, the unreliable narrator's fabrication of the story is not a completed action or event but is an on-going process. The present progressive tense of the storytelling, being analogous to a river in flow, sweeps the narrator along with the stream of the narrative river. In this process the fictional

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[31] Carlson Jerry suggests that *Suzhou River* "draws from the tradition of American film noir… and the French New Wave." In "*Suzhou he: Zai Haolaiwu yu Faguo xinlangchao zhijian*" (*Suzhou River*: At the crossroads of Hollywood and the French New Wave), trans. by Nie Wei, *Hangzhou shifan daxue xuebao* (Journal of Hangzhou Normal University), no.4 (2009), 75-78.

[32] See Cheng Qingsong and Huang Ou's interview with Lou Ye. Lou claims: "I represent some contradictory things, the unreal and the real, and the artificial and the unaffected, both in terms of narrative and filmic image," in *My Camera Does Not Lie*, p.226.

character that the narrator creates gradually takes control over the narrative. As both

director and screenwriter, Lou Ye is well aware of the river's status as a metaphor, as he

says:

> [The motif of river] in fact is the motif of this film. The river mixes our unromantic routine life with the possible story imagined in our minds….When a character approaches the river, the motif of this character would be transformed into the motif of the river, or even interact with each other and then the motif of this character mutates….Ultimately, there is a different Suzhou River in everyone's eyes.[33]

In a superficial way, the river primarily offers a geographical background for the four

characters' story of love, betrayal and pursuit. But their lives are infiltrated with the

watery flow of the Suzhou River and all have some kind of internal link with it. The

videographer records the flow of time through his camera; Mada delivers goods from one

side of the city to the other by riding on his motorcycle. They share the fluidity and

mobility of the river. For Mudan and Meimei, the femininity of the river is inherently

connected to their feminine identity and fates. The river reincarnates Mudan into a

mermaid and helps accomplish her return. Meimei, who used to perform as a mermaid,

transforms herself into Mudan's spiritual heir by disappearing in the river. In this sense,

the river becomes the source of their new lives.

Symbolically, the river consists of two incompatible worlds. In the river is reality —

floating garbage, dirty deals and betrayal; under the water are dreams — a beautiful

mermaid, affection and persistent search. Mada and Mudan belong to the latter, which is

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[33] Ibid., pp.238-239.

confirmed by the ending of their story when they are drowned in the river on the way home. For the videographer who likes drifting along the river and Meimei who lives in a house-boat on the river, Mada and Mudan are more likely to be their distorted reflections when they gaze at the watery surface of the Suzhou River. The ideal life is under the river.

Furthermore, the cinematic urban space of *Suzhou River* is also made up of two irreconcilable parts: the Suzhou River and other landmarks of Shanghai. As many scholars have observed, *Suzhou River* not only avoids portraying the Bund and its conspicuous bank buildings which recall the colonial history of old Shanghai, it also evades presenting the symbol of the post-socialist metropolis — the Pudong New Zone and the Oriental Pearl TV Tower. The city's skyscrapers and new landmarks only form an obscure, far-away background in the film. But there is an exception: in the scene following Mada and Mudan's reunion, Mudan is snuggling with Mada and both gaze across to the other side of the Huangpu River in the morning. Through an over-shoulder shot, the TV Tower is presented clearly in front of us against the warm colour tone background of the sunrise. Andrew Hagemen's analysis of the shot is insightful:

> In the narrative context of their romance, the sunrise seems to signify the hope of rejuvenating their once lost love. Simultaneously, the Pearl signifies the promise that Shanghai, and China with and through it, will rise to global economic and cultural prominence. As such, personal and national narratives of life in turn-of-the-twenty-first-century Shanghai converge in the synthesized ecological figuration of the sunrise and the Pearl Tower.[34]

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[34] Andrew Hageman, "Floating Consciousness: The Cinematic Confluence of Ecological Aesthetics in Suzhou River," in Sheldon H. Lu and Jiayan Mi, eds., *Chinese Ecocinema: In the Age of Environmental Challenge*, Hong Kong University Press, 2009, p.83.

However, what the expression of the couple shows is not the happiness of a new beginning but a sense of loss. Mudan says thoughtfully: "Mada, take me home." The subsequent death of the young couple in the Suzhou River implies that we should not understand "home" in a factual way. Rather, the river is the true spiritual home where they belong. In the scene, Mudan and Mada identify the symbol of the city's utopian ideal — the Pudong New Zone as non-home, which is an absent presence constituting a huge threat to the Suzhou River, the mother river of Shanghai in the film. For Mada and Mudan, returning home, the Suzhou River, means a retreat to a marginalized world in a sharply transformed society. For Lou Ye, it is both a withdrawal to the urbanites' inner world and at the same time a rejection of the utopian, post-socialist future.

Lou Ye's *Suzhou River* implicitly reveals the prominent characteristic of the contemporary Chinese cultural and psychological landscape: fluidity. Today's China is a great river that flows in an unidentified direction. We cannot grasp any essentialized concept to describe it. It is no longer the old, mysterious and closed country as represented in the Fifth-Generation films. "There is a Western mermaid in the river of Shanghai, and a Christmas tree and Santa Claus at the side of the red lantern." The essence of contemporary China, if it really exits, may as Lou Ye suggests be "non-China."[35] Therefore, Lou Ye's cinematic representation of the beautiful mermaid in the filthy Suzhou River, the local area of the Suzhou River co-existing with the

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[35] Norman Brock and Placidus Schelbet, "*Suzhou he fangtan lu*" (Interview on *Suzhou River*), *Nanjing yishu xueyuan xuebao* (*yinyue ji biaoyan ban*) (Journal of Nanjing Arts Institute: Music and performance issue), no. 4 (2000), 53.

metropolitan Pudong and skyline, the identification of bar girl Meimei with the innocent maiden Mudan accurately mirror what post-socialist China looks like today.

In both *In the Heat of the Sun* and *Suzhou River*, the character-narrators involve themselves in a process of what Robert Chi calls "I remember, therefore I am."[36] Inventing memory rather than recollecting, the untrustworthy character-narrators reconstruct either their socialist past or post-socialist present to escape from the lost real world which is completely dominated by a materialist ideology, devoid of idealism and romanticism. To some extent, these two films deal with a common issue of "who am I." The adult Ma Xiaojun attempts to build a connection (though it is weak, and even collapses) between his present and his past, thereby reconstructing his identity in the fast-transforming society. In contrast, the videographer in *Suzhou River* is already disconnected from both the past and the future. He only exists in the fictional world created by his camera. The shift from Ma Xiaojun to the videographer, symbolizes the transition of contemporary social-cultural conditions and mindscapes to fit a postmodern pattern.

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[36] Robert Chi, "'The March of the Volunteers'": From Movie Theme Song to National Anthem," in Ching Kwan Lee and Guobin Yang, eds., *Re-envisioning the Chinese Revolution: The Politics and Poetics of Collective Memories in Reform China*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007, p.217.

Chapter Four

The Divided Self of Women: Female-double Characters in

Lunar Eclipse and *Green Tea*

In *Suzhou River*, Zhou Xun, who was still a fledgling actress then, plays both Mudan and Meimei — two female characters with polar attributes. Mudan is a pure, single-minded and forgiving girl, like a beautiful mermaid in a fairy tale. Meimei is a seductive, sexy barmaid, who plays a fake mermaid in the bar. As I showed in the previous chapter, the striking resemblance between Mudan and Meimei is because Mudan is nothing other than a fabrication of Meimei by the videographer. In contemporary Chinese film *Suzhou River* is not the only Sixth-Generation film that involves female doubling, a mode characterized by two identical female characters with contrasting attributes (generally played by one actress). Wang Quan'an's *Lunar Eclipse* and Zhang Yuan's *Green Tea*, along with other films from Hong Kong, also show contemporary filmmakers' fascination with the female-double mode.[1]

Standing out from other female-double films, *Lunar Eclipse* and *Green Tea* are the focus of this chapter. What distinguishes these two films is their post-realist

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[1] These films include: *Anna and Anna* (*Anna yu Anna*, dir. Oi Wah Lam, 2007), *Like a Dream* (*Ru Meng*, dir. Clara Law, 2009), *Love on Credit* (*Xingfu e'du*, dir. Cheng-Tao Chen, 2011), *Shadows of Love* (*Yingzi airen*, dir. Yuen-Leung Poon, 2012), and *The Second Woman* (*Qingmi*, dir. Miu-suet Lai, 2012). Many of these Hong Kong films were co-produced by two or more production companies from both the mainland and Hong Kong. But I consider them Hong Kong films because they are all directed by Hong Kong directors.

representation of female doubles which brings the solidity of stable and identifiable

doubles into question. In conventional female-double films, two extremely alike women

always have a certain clear connection or relationship (most typically, it is sisterhood). In

contrast, neither *Lunar Eclipse* nor *Green Tea* explicitly show whether their two female

protagonists are one person or not, subverting the formula of the female-double mode. To

understand how *Lunar Eclipse* and *Green Tea* reconfigure this traditional mode, I would

first like to contextualize the mode of female doubling within the broader historical

context of both Western and Chinese films.

The Female Double in the Contexts of Western and Chinese Films

In the history of Western literature and art the theme of the female double is part of the

motif of the doppelgänger. This motif appears in the myths and legends of the ancient

Greek and Egyptian civilizations and has recurred in diverse arts forms in different

periods. However, before the twentieth century, compared with doubling men, female

doppelgängers in various kinds of art forms were rarely seen.[2] In the1930s and1940s, the

lack of representation of female doubles underwent a subversive change as a result of the

maturity of a new art form: the movies. Lucy Fischer's 1989 study examines the

female-double genre in Hollywood women's melodrama in the 1940s when Fischer

believes the genre reached fruition.[3] According to Fischer, the fundamental structure of

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[2] See, for example, John Herdmen, *The Double in Nineteenth-century Fiction: The Shadow Life*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991.
[3] Lucy Fischer, *Shot/Countershot: Film Tradition and Women's Cinema*, Princeton University Press, 1989, pp.172-215.

female-double films is based on the two sister-split of good/bad, virgin/whore. At the end

of female-double films, the good woman who can aptly manage her heterosexual desire is

accepted and praised by men, and the bad, sexually aggressive woman is normally

punished by, and excluded from the patriarchal society. In films of the female double "the

good woman's traits are those aligned with conventional 'femininity' (passivity,

sweetness, emotionality, asexuality), and the bad one's are associated with 'masculinity'

(assertiveness, acerbity, intelligence, and eroticism)."[4] Fischer thus argues that "the good

and bad twins in the films seem like nothing so much as dichotomized male projections of

opposing views of the Eternal Feminine,"[5] whereas male view, according to Fisher, has

cultural determinants. Because of these cultural determinants, as Lesley Johnson and

Justine Lloyd point out, the "division [between the good woman and the bad woman] fell

across a different line" in the post-war (1950s) melodrama in which "'normal' femininity

is increasingly represented not just by a heterosexual woman who loved and was loved,

but also by the middle-class housewife."[6]

Since the flourishing of feminism in the late 1960s the genre of the female double

has become a practice ground for feminist film theory. As variations of this genre

emerged, Fischer analyzes several European art films which reject the stereotypical

dualities of women in the canonical mode of Hollywood melodrama. These European art

films either reverse the polarities of the female, leading spectators to identify with the bad

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[4] Ibid., pp.202-203.
[5] Ibid., p.191.
[6] Lesley Johnson and Justine Lloyd, *Sentenced to Everyday Life: Feminism and the Housewife*. Berg, 2004, p.107.

(masculine) girl, or reject the archetype of the division between the good/feminine and the bad/masculine.[7] Since the late 1960s, the double-female genre has continually been challenged and rewritten by some feminist films to unveil the ideology of patriarchy.

When bringing a Western theoretical perspective to early Chinese film, we can readily discern that Chinese female-double films flourished at almost the same time as their Western contemporaries of the 1930s-1940s. In 1933, Zheng Zhengqiu's *Twin Sisters* (*Zimei hua*, 1933) marked the first appearance of the female doubling film on Chinese screens. This earliest Chinese female-double film was made five years earlier than its earliest Western counterpart *Stolen Life* (dir. Paul Czinner, 1939).[8] *Twin Sisters*, featuring Hu Die (playing the female siblings Dabao and Erbao) who was voted by audiences as "movie queen" in 1933, created the highest box office record at the time. In the 1930s and 1940s, the Chinese female-double film also came to fruition with the emergence of a number of films such as *Reborn Flower* (*Zaisheng hua*, dir. Zheng Zhengqiu, 1934) and *Memories of the South* (*Yi jiangnan*, Ying Weiyun and Wu Tian, 1947).

However, in various ways, Chinese female-double films diverge from their Western counterparts. First, the good/bad division between the two female characters in early Chinese films is not as polarized as that in the Western female-double mode. It is often

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[7] Lucy Fischer, *Shot/Countershot*, p.205.
[8] According to Fischer, *Stolen Life* is the earliest female-double film in the West. However, this claim has been challenged by the discovery of Hitchcock's early feature *The White Shadow* (1923) in New Zealand in 2011. Hitchcock started his exploration of the female-double theme in this 1923 film. According to the New Zealand Film Archive, the film is a "wild, atmospheric" melodrama in which Betty Compson plays identical twin sisters, "one angelic and one soulless." See http://www.nzherald.co.nz/entertainment/news/article.cfm?c_id=1501119&objectid=10753518 [Accessed 5 August 2012]

the case that one Chinese twin makes mistakes because she is deceived by a bad man. Thus, the evil role is usually assigned to an evil or hypocritical man. Second, Chinese endings also diverge from the Western endings in which the good woman triumphs and the bad one is defeated or disposed of by death. At the end of Chinese female-double films, the bad man is punished, while the twin sisters either come to mutual recognition or become reconciled in the name of familial connection and kinship ties. Underlying the seemingly conservative discourse of familial connection and sisterhood between the twin sisters, we can even perceive an obscure female consciousness, which emphasizes women's disadvantaged status and common fate in a patriarchal society. In contrast, female consciousness is absent in the 1930s-1940s Western female-double films. Third, the twin sisters usually belong to two different classes, the upper class and the lower class due to their divergent social experience. The female doubles thus become the embodiment of the social splits and stratification of 1930s-1940s Chinese society. Both female consciousness and class consciousness form the generic structure and elements of the Chinese female-double mode and, as I will argue in this chapter, are revitalized and reformulated in the contemporary film *Lunar Eclipse*. This argument brings into question some scholarship on contemporary Chinese female-double films in which *Lunar Eclipse* as well as *Suzhou River* are considered to derive heavily from Western art films such as Krzysztof Kieślowski's *The Double Life of Veronika* (*La double vie de Véronique*, 1991).

Although a few films in the socialist period, for example the folk-tale film *Malan Flower* (*Malanhua*, dir. Pan Wenzhan and Meng Yuan, 1960), still adopted the traditional

mode of the female-double film[9], socialist ideology remoulded the female-double mode in

typical revolutionary film *Struggles in an Ancient City* (*Yehuo chunfeng dou gucheng*, dir.

Yan Jizhou, 1963). As a socialist variant, *Struggles in an Ancient City* deviates from the

classical Chinese female-double film in various ways. There is no good/bad split between

the twin sisters, instead, they both are positive characters because of their common class

background and revolutionary identity rather than female consciousness. But the

masculine/feminine division still exists. Owing to the ideology of revolutionary war,

women's masculinity was accepted and praised by the patriarchal system, as in the case of

woman warrior Hua Mulan in the ancient Chinese legend. The elder sister Jinhuan, as a

masculine, intelligent revolutionary martyr, is the role model for the tender, younger sister

Yinhuan. Through a series of struggles against the enemy, Yinhuan eventually becomes

Jinhuan's spiritual heir, and thereby the twin sisters to a certain extent fuse into one under

the manipulation of political ideology. In the contemporary cases of *Lunar Eclipse* and

Green Tea, we likewise discover the imaginary fusion of the female doubles. Therefore,

the question I want to address in this chapter is in what sense the female doubles are fused

into one in these two contemporary films.

　　Placing *Lunar Eclipse* and *Green Tea* into a film web woven by both Western and

Chinese female-double films, this chapter sets out to examine the reformulation of the

female-double mode in these two contemporary films in the new socio-cultural context of

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[9] The contemporaneous Hong Kong film *The Happy Reunion* (*Xin zimei hua*, dir. Hu Peng, 1962) also a canonical text of traditional Chinese female-double mode.

post-socialist China. The post-realist representation of both films, especially in the more

art-oriented *Lunar Eclipse*, opens up a space of ambiguities which engage spectators in

the production of meaning. The meanings of the doubling female images in both films

arise from two dimensions: gender and ideology. In the first dimension of gender, *Lunar*

Eclipse rejects the artificial dichotomy of masculine and feminine within woman's traits

and confronts stereotypical dualities. In so doing, the film "keeps the spectator in a fluid

position, denying him or her the rigid modes of identification typical of more traditional

films."[10] *Lunar Eclipse* represents that women from different classes and of different

social status suffer from the common predicament of being insulted and enslaved in

contemporary Chinese patriarchal society, a patriarchal system which is now consolidated

and reinforced by the overwhelming dominance of capitalism. In constrast, as a

mainstream commercial film, *Green Tea* provides a consumerist attitude toward women's

divided psyche. In this regard, *Green Tea* still aligns with the traditional motif of man's

paradoxical fantasies about the stereotypical dualities of women. In the second dimension

of ideology, female characters with uncertain identities in both *Lunar Eclipse* and *Green*

Tea in fact mirror the inner split within Chinese society stemming from the significantly

increased social divisions and stratification from the early 1990s. *Lunar Eclipse* captures

the growing gap between ideal and reality, between the material and spiritual, as well as

the increasing tensions between money and human values, between social-discipline and

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[10] Lucy Fischer, *Shot/Countershot*, p.214.

self-realization. *Green Tea* reveals the divergence between the newly established

hegemony of capitalist ideology and the remnants of the previous ideology. In this light,

two women with totally different, if not opposing, attributes, or a woman's divided

selfhood forms a metaphor for contemporary China's socio-cultural landscape.

Additionally, *Lunar Eclipse* is a highly self-reflexive film text in which both still and

video cameras play a key role in the heroine's journey of searching for her phantom

double. The numerous commentaries on photography and the protagonists' pursuit of

photography self-referentially reveal the filmmaker's reflection on film art and at the

same time point to his identity as a marginal art-film director who has to contend with the

increasing commercial trend in contemporary Chinese cinema.[11]

Self as Other and the Discovery of an Ideal Self: The Female Double in Lunar Eclipse

Lunar Eclipse was the directorial debut of the Sixth-Generation filmmaker Wang Quan'an.

Wang was born in Yan'an, Shaanxi province in 1965. In 1985, the idea of making films

occurred to Wang after his visits to several Western countries as a member of a song and

dance troupe. In 1987 he applied to study film directing at an academy in Lyon, France.

However, when his application was accepted, Wang became hesitant. From his point of

view, he might benefit from learning how to make films in France but would miss the

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[11] Zhang Zhen, "Urban Dreamscape, Phantom Sisters and the Identity of an Emergent Art Cinema," p.347.

first-hand experience of undergoing tremendous transformation in Chinese society. So Wang relinquished the French opportunity and in the same year entered the acting department of the Beijing Film Academy. Wang began his short career as an actor by playing a role in Zhang Nuanxin's film *Good Morning, Beijing* (*Beijing ni zao*, 1990). After graduation, Wang was assigned to the Xi'an Film Studio back in Shaanxi. Between 1991 and 1999, Wang wrote a number of scripts including *Lunar Eclipse* which later not only began his directorial career but also initiated him into success at international film festivals. In 2007 Wang's feature *Tuya's Marriage* was awarded the highest prize at the Berlin International Film Festival.

Lunar Eclipse is an outstanding film among the Sixth-Generation works film because of its stylized film language and innovative narrative structure. *Lunar Eclipse* concerns an urban woman Ya Nan (played by Yu Nan) who gives up her dancing career and marries a wealthy businessman. When the couple go for an excursion to the countryside, they accidentally meet an amateur photographer Hu Xiaobing who shoots candid photos of Ya Nan before knowing who she is. Hu tells Ya Nan that a girl named Jia Niang looks exactly the same as her. In Hu's narration, Jia Niang is a girl who works in a disco bar but aspires to become a professional actress. Ya Nan is attracted to the story of her identical and undertakes a journey of discovery about Jia Niang. Towards the end of the film Ya Nan learns that Jia Niang was raped by a rich businessman. Meanwhile, she also discovers her entrepreneur husband is having an affair with his secretary. In the last sequence of the film, Ya Nan imagines that she sees Jia Niang when Jia Niang is hit in a

car accident.

At first glance, *Lunar Eclipse* invokes the archetype of Chinese female-double film. The doubles, Ya Nan and Jia Niang, come from radically different social class backgrounds. Ya Nan is characterized by the traits of sweetness, elegance and intelligence. She has quit her career as a dancer and embraced the bourgeois life as a housewife. Jia Niang, seemingly is an opposite to Ya Nan, suggested by her exotic appearance and inelegant behavior. She works as a dance hostess in a nightclub and unrealistically wants to be an actress. However, *Lunar Eclipse* significantly departs from the classical narrative mode of the female-double film. One of the most striking distinctions is that one woman, Jiang Niang, is an absent presence. She only exists as a story in a character's narration or is a photograph. Ya Nan assumes the active male role and embarks on a journey to search for her phantom other, Jia Niang.

A camera plays a crucial role in initiating Ya Nan's discovery of the "other." Early in the film when Ya Nan wanders in the street, she is attracted to her own image taken by a video camera and shown on a television screen. She stares at the replica of herself carefully, like looking at someone else. At this point, the television screen, in Jacques Lacan's sense, is a mirror through which Ya Nan for the first time sees herself as the other. After purchasing a video camera, Ya Nan randomly shoots in the streets, accidentally capturing a pair of identical twins, which "serves as a prelude to Ya Nan's own encounter

with her alter ego."[12] The camera enables Ya Nan to undertake her adventure of

self-discovery. Simultaneously, it endows Ya Nan with the status of the person doing the

looking, a position which is traditionally occupied by a male. Thus, Ya Nan "appropriates

the literal and metaphorical masculine gaze."[13] In the later scene of the couple's

excursion, the classical gender-power relationship of looking and being looked at is

subconsciously subverted when Ya Nan detects through her camera the voyeur Hu

Xiaobing. By breaking from woman's prescribed passive role of being looked at, Ya

Nan's masculine gaze is underscored, and at the same time her position as a potential

voyeur emerges. Late in the night Ya Nan repeatedly watches on a big television screen

her video clip of Hu's peeping that day. She also films her husband Li sleepwalking and

unconsciously polishing his shoes. In this sequence Ya Nan's position as a voyeur is

constantly reinforced, while men are being gazed at and mocked. This reversal of the

relation of looking and being looked at distinguishes Ya Nan from the assumed feminine

role of the classical female-double mode, while the revesal becomes essential in finding

Ya Nan's phantom other.

Ya Nan's interest in Hu's story about her look-alike Jia Niang, further aligns Ya Nan

with the male stance as a typical voyeur. Interestingly, Ya Nan's male stance is already

implied in the two female characters' names: *ya nan* (雅男) means elegant man in

Chinese; *jia niang* (佳娘) in Chinese means good woman. Meanwhile, Ya Nan's curiosity

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[12] Sun Saoyi, "In Search of the Erased Half," p.101.
[13] Lucy Fischer, "The Desire to Desire: Desperately Seeking Susan," in Peter Lehman, ed., *Close Viewings: An Anthology of New Film Criticism*, Tallahasee: Florida State University Press, 1990, p.209.

about Jia Niang accompanies the hidden crisis of her heterosexual marriage when she

accidentally finds her husband's hidden photo album which implies he has a promiscuous

private life. Thus, to some extent, Ya Nan's discovery of Jia Niang is driven by a possible

homosexual impulse.[14] Nevertheless, because of Jia Niang's resemblance to Ya Nan, this

subconscious homosexual impulse is, from the perspective of psychoanalysis, a kind of

narcissistic desire which wants to identify with an alter ego and to be a fulfilled self. Ya

Nan both desires and desires to be Jia Niang.

Besides curiosity, Ya Nan's interest in her look-alike also derives, as the film

constantly implies, from a mysterious dual relationship between herself and Jia Niang. In

fact the narrative of *Lunar Eclipse* is structured according to the principle of doubling.

The film begins with Ya Nan lying unconscious because of a traffic accident and ends

with Jia Niang being hit by a truck. Ya Nan accidentally cuts her husband's face with a

knife which used to belong to Jia Niang, but she immediately kisses his wound to soothe

him. Trying to escape the harassment of a rich man, Jia Niang cuts his face with the same

knife, but then she seems to realize her mistake, and comforts her suitor by kissing his

gash. Both women have a disease inherited from their absent parents. For Ya Nan, it is the

heart disease inherited from her father; for Jia Niang, it is the hereditary psychosis from

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[14] In both Western and Chinese scholarship on the female-double films, several critics have already found a homoerotic impulse in their examination of some particular cases of this genre. For example, Lucy Fischer's analysis of *Desperately Seeking Susan* shows homoerotic impulses between the female double "are 'safely' recouped in the reestablishment of symmetrical heterosexual liaisons for the two women." See Lucy Fischer "The Desire to Desire," p.206. In the Chinese case of *Stage Sisters*, by comparing the film with Xie Jin's original screenplay, Li Daoxin finds that the implicit homosexuality at the unconscious level between two female characters Zhu Chunhua and Xing Yuehong existing in the original screenplay is intentionally avoided in the film due to its need to comply with political ideology. See Li Daoxin, "*Wutai jiemei: Zuowei dianying jingdian de shengcheng jizhi ji qi lishi mingyun*" (*Stage Sisters*: Its generative mechanism and historical fate as a movie classic), *Hangzhou shifan daxue xuebao* (*shehui kexue ban)* (Journal of Hangzhou Normal University: Social science issue), 2009, no.1, 47-53.

her now institutionalized mother. Jia Niang's right eye is seriously injured; Ya Nan's right eye sometimes suffers from pain. The mysterious bond between the two women may remind us of the Polish director Kieślowski's masterpiece *The Double Life of Veronika*, in which a similar unexplained connection is shared by two identical women: Weronika in Poland and Véronique in France. Some scholars have pointed out that *Lunar Eclipse* as well as *Suzhou River* owe a debt to the European art film because these Chinese films similarly use female-double characters and show mysterious bonds between them.[15]

However, Wang's *Lunar Eclipse* is by no means a Chinese version of *The Double Life of Veronika*. This not only because, as Zhang Zhen notes, the Chinese film is more "earthbound" than its "metaphysical" European counterpart,[16] but also because, more specifically,it pays significant attention to the distinction between the doubles instead of simply emphasizing their duality as *The Double Life of Veronika* does. Mladen Dolar's insightful discussion of the structure of Hitchcock's films provides us with a helpful perspective to understand the differences between the female doubles. Inspired by François Truffaut and Donald Spoto, Dolar observes the duality existing in Hitchcock's films *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) and *Strangers on a Train* (1951). Meanwhile, he also pointed out that "there is a thesis implied on the structural level — not simply an obsession with duplication, but quite the contrary: every duality is based on a third. The

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[15] See Sun Shaoyi, "In Search of the Erased Half: *Suzhou River*, *Lunar Eclipse*, and the Sixth-Generation Filmmakers of China," in Haili Kong and John A. Lent, eds., *One Hundred Years of Chinese Cinema: A Generational Dialogue*, Norwalk: Eastbridge, 2006, pp.183-198. Also see Hao Jian, Dai Jinhua and other's discussion on *Lunar Eclipse*, "*Yueshi: Chufa Zhongguo dianying jianrui huati de xinrui zhi zuo*" (An innovative work that triggers incisive topics in Chinese film), *Beijing dianying xueyuan xuebao* (Journal of Beijing Film Academy), no.2 (2000), 29-36.
[16] Zhang Zhen, "Urban Dreamscape, Phantom Sisters and the Identity of an Emergent Art Cinema," p.355.

third element is both excluded and introduced as a stain in this mirror-relationship, the object around which it turns and which fills the gap of the exclusion, makes the absence present."[17] In *Lunar Eclipse*, a pivotal scene halfway through the film (at 40m: 40s), is the scene where Jia Niang and Hu Xiaobing converse in Hu's cab. The scene suggests that idealism serves as the "third" in the mirror-relationship of the female doubles and makes Jia Niang the woman that Ya Nan desire to be. In the scene, the young couple encourage each other to realize their ideals. Jia Niang urges Hu to develop his hobby and become a professional photographer or even a cinematographer. Hu also has confidence in Jia Niang's future career as a famous actress, though she currently works as a dance hostess. It is a time when talking about ideals seems to be a little extravagant even ludicrous, particularly for a working-class young couple who still struggle with making a living in a society that "puts money above everything else" (*yiqie xiang qian kan*). But Jia Niang still strives to realize her dream of becoming an actress. Jia Niang's persistence stands in sharp contrast to Ya Nan who readily gives up her career as a dancer to embrace a vacuous, materialized life by marrying a rich man regardless of his ignorance of music. The film, through Ya Nan's two visits to her friend shows the mediocrity of a life without passion. In certain sense, the divergence between Jia Niang and Ya Nan embodies the inner split in contemporary Chinese society between ideal and reality, the spiritual and the material, and self-realization and social disciplines in an increasingly materialized era. As

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[17] Mladen Dolar, "Hitchcock's Objects," in Slavoj Zizek, ed., *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*, London, New York: Verso, 1992, p.33-35.

Wang Quan'an himself says: "In the late 1990s, we Chinese were in a split situation, experiencing pain and suffering from both abandoning the old and going through the new...... Therefore, *Lunar Eclipse* is a true portrayal of that harsh circumstance, but it is not a realistic film."[18]

    Lunar Eclipse revitalizes the classical Chinese female-double mode by using doubling women to also embody the divergent life conditions and spiritual worlds of two different social classes in Chinese society. Meanwhile, more importantly, the obscure female consciousness in the 1930s-1940s Chinese female-double films finally becomes explicit in *Lunar Eclipse*, making the female-double mode no longer the dichotomized male imagination of women but women's self-reflection on their own female subjectivity. According to traditional Chinese culture, the moon is considered as the emblem of women, while the sun represents men. So *Lunar Eclipse* (*Yueshi*) — the film title itself implies women's common predicament of being harmed or overcome by cruel reality. In the film, Jia Niang is raped by a rich businessman; Ya Nan is cheated by her entrepreneur husband. No matter what social background a woman comes from, nor what attributes a woman represents, masculine or feminine, it is very difficult to escape her fate of being mentally or physically oppressed and abused by men and by a patriarchal society which is strengthened by capitalist ideology.

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[18] Interview with Wang Quan'an, Beijing, 12 August 2013.

***"Two Women, One Story; Two Stories, One Woman"*[19]**

The exploration of the common female consciousness between the doubling women

ultimately lead *Lunar Eclipse* to deconstruct the conventional mode of female-double by

revealing women's real relationship to the phenomenon of the double: the separation

within the selfhood of women. This is what the other half of the film slogan "two stories,

one woman" signifies. *Lunar Eclipse* is full of suggestions that the female doubles are the

two divided selves of a woman in a society which is dominated by a male-advantaged

gender hierarchy. In the film there is a vague, hidden narrative thread, which does not

surface until the last few scenes. When Ya Nan in Niuniu's studio first sees Jia Niang's

image in an uncanny atmosphere (the result of an overexposed shot), it seems that the

enlarged photo confirms the existence of Ya Nan's look-alike. Nevertheless, in the later

scene the sudden appearance of an odd man who takes photos of Ya Nan in the dark

makes everything that happened earlier deeply questionable. When Ya Nan is driving on

the way to her husband's office, the mysterious man quickly takes photos of her and then

flees. The odd man again appears and takes photos of Ya Nan in a quiet alley when she is

fleeing from her husband. As Ya Nan tries to catch up with the stranger, he fades into the

darkness. Up to the end of the film, the odd man remains a mystery. However, the sound

of the stranger's camera shutter reminds us of the inexplicable sound heard in a very early

scene when Ya Nan stares at her own image on television screens in a shop display. A

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[19] "Two Women, One Story; Two Stories, One Woman" is the tag line of *Lunar Eclipse*.

strange sound which we now know is the sound of a camera shutter distracts Ya Nan's attention from her own image. Underscoring this odd sound, the non-diegetic soundtrack ceases abruptly. This episode implies that Ya Nan may always be caught in candid photography and in the gaze of a voyeur.

Because of this surfacing narrative thread, the enlarged photo of Jia Niang is also placed in question. In fact, the unreliability of photographs is foreshadowed by an early occurrence when Hu and Niuniu combine two photos to make a funeral photo of Hu's father. Thus we cannot rule out the possibility that the photo of Jia Niang is a composite photograph cut and pasted from candid photographs of Ya Nan. As a matter of fact, all we know about Jia Niang comes from Hu's tale; except for Hu no one really sees her. But Hu mystically disappears at the end of the film. All these clues point to the most likely fact that the woman in this photo is Ya Nan herself. In fact, a series of mirror iconographies which appeared in preceding parts of the film already imply that discovering Jia Niang for Ya Nan is a journey of searching for her phantom self. Following the scene when Hu talks about Jia Niang with Ya Nan in the restaurant is a shot of Ya Nan sitting in contemplation in front of a mirror. Later, at Hu's friend's photo studio, Ya Nan for the first time sees an enlarged photo of Jia Niang, a girl who looks exactly the same as her — yet another mirror image. At the close of the film, Ya Nan surrealistically sees Jia Niang in the car accident. Intriguingly, the female doubles' gazing at each other is represented in the shot and reverse-shot, like two sides of a mirror.

Ya Nan's self-exploration reaches its peak in the night when in her imagination she

sees her divided self — Jia Niang. In *Lunar Eclipse*, night is not only about time dimension, but also a symbolic condition. In fact, the use of the moon as the metaphor for women already suggests the close bond between women and night. In the film Ya Nan is depicted as a woman who immerses herself in the dark night. She often keeps awake at night and observes the night-walking man. Jia Niang is also closely related to the city's night as she works in a nightclub. In traditional Chinese cosmology, the feminine or *yin* principle is characterized by darkness, water and the spectral light of the moon. Early in the 1980s Chinese poetess Zhai Yongming stated that there is an inherent and mysterious connection between women and night, and she proposed an important concept — women's nocturnal consciousness. The nocturnal consciousness "is derived from an individual woman's inner struggle and the metaphysical fight for 'women's values.'"[20] In a review of the theory of darkness and night in both traditional and modern Chinese contexts, Wolfgang Kubin argues that the nocturnal consciousness of women originates from women's resentment when they confront the social world with its gender inequalities. He believes that "nocturnal consciousness is a kind of inner consciousness, with which women's selves can meet with the universe…. Dark night is the most mysterious condition, which provides women with the possibility of contending against reality and offers an opportunity of knowing themselves, society and human beings. "[21]

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[20] Zhai Yongming, *Zhishang jianzhu* (Constructions on paper), Shanghai: Dongfang chubanshe, 1997, p.234.
[21] Wolfgang Kubin, "*Heiye yishi he nüxing de ziwo huimie: Ping xiandai Zhongguo de heian lilun*" (Nocturnal consciousness and female self-destruction: Towards a theory of darkness in modern China), trans., Zhao Jie, *Qinghua daxue xuebao* (*zhexue shehui kexue ban*) (Journal of Tsinghua University: Philosophy and social science), no.4 (2005), 52-53.

Seen in this light, the night in the last scene in *Lunar Eclipse* is a moment of

self-enlightenment for Ya Nan. In the process of symbolically re-experiencing the painful

moment of her divided self, Ya Nan achieves an understanding of an ideal "I" and

simultaneously realizes that women's self-fulfilling journey in a male-dominated society

is full of trauma.

In both audio and visual terms, the film represents women's oppression in a

symbolic way. At both the beginning and the close of *Lunar Eclipse* we hear a male voice

over a loudspeaker: "The red light is showing now. Cyclists please follow all traffic rules

and stop your bikes behind the stop line. If you have crossed the stop line, please go back.

Everyone must take responsibility to keep traffic running smooth. Thank you for your

cooperation." The echoing impassive male voice gives *Lunar Eclipse* a closed structure,

and at the same time it symbolizes a strong, invisible, and restrictive power over women,

discipline in Foucault's sense. As an invisible force, the disciplinary power assigns

women a prescribed submissive role, setting the boundaries of proper behavior. It

infiltrates women's subconscious and shapes their ideal self subjected to social and

gender norms which are none other than patriarchal social structure's assumptions about

women. Wang's cinematographic language in the film sometimes also suggests the

existence of a certain social power over individuals. The first shot of the film is, for

example, an overhead shot of Ya Nan lying on the street. The crane shot pans down to the

unconscious Ya Nan, suggesting her helplessness under the control of an intangible

power.

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***"Light Is at the Heart of Photography": Self-reflexive Devices in* Lunar Eclipse**

As an ambitious director's debut, *Lunar Eclipse* is avant-garde delving into film language and ontology. For example, as Wang Quan'an himself claims, the use of the female-double mode is due to his intention to choose "a subject matter that only film can accomplish."[22] At many points the diegetic narrative self-referentially points to the various aspects of filmmaking itself, for example, the actress, cinematography and lighting, making *Lunar Eclipse* a film about film.

In terms of character, the photographer Hu Xiaobing serves as a self-reflexive agent in *Lunar Eclipse*. In Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt*, the ring which goes from Uncle Charlie to niece Charlie then back to Uncle Charlie "serves both as a link of the dual relationship and as its destruction," circulating between two "specular protagonists."[23] In *Lunar Eclipse* Hu stands as the equivalent of Hitchcock's privileged object. It is Hu who connects Ya Nan with Jia Niang. He is the intermediate and messenger. However, Hu's own unreliable narration continually destroys such a connection. It is intriguing to note that *hu* in Chinese means "groundless" or "unfounded." Hu's several answers to the question of Jia Niang's whereabouts are contradictory: "she went to the south" or "she is dead." Sometimes it seems Hu even temporarily loses his memory of Jia Niang. The untrustworthiness of Hu's narration reaches its apogee when Ya Nan find out about Jia Niang's grim death, an event which deviates from what Hu had said. Hu's mysterious

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[22] Interview with Wang Quan'an, Beijing, 12 August 2013.
[23] Mladen Dolar, "Hitchcock's Objects," p.36.

disappearance at the end of the film also puts the whole narration in question. In this regard, *Lunar Eclipse* is a successor to *Citizen Kane* (dir. Orson Wells, 1941) or, rather, *Rashomon* (dir. Akira Kurosawa, 1950) in emphasizing the unreliability of the narrator. The incredibility of Hu (a photographer whom Jia Niang sees could become a cinematographer and shoot films in future), as Zhang Zhen argues, exposes "the ontological ambiguity of photography as a medium of mechanically reproducible images and artificial memory."[24]

In *Lunar Eclipse*, Hu is an amateur photographer living in straitened circumstances. Hu's father, who used to be the driver of a Party cadre, strongly opposes Hu developing his hobby of photography. Hu's meagre income prevents him from purchasing any advanced photographic equipment. Thus, Hu's pursuit of photography in the dual shadow of the patriarchal system and economic pressure can be seen as "the filmmakers' self-projections about the identity of an alternative film practice within a politically as well as commercially volatile film structure in China at the turn of the century."[25] As the opening film in Beijing in 2001 for China's first art theatre, A-G (short for avant-garde), *Lunar Eclipse* was a flop at the box office. This directly led to the closure of the short-lived (about six months) A-G cinema chain.[26] In the new century, with the emergence of a great number of so-called Chinese costume blockbusters (*guzhuang*

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[24] Zhang Zhen, "Urban Dreamscape, Phantom Sisters and the Identity of an Emergent Art Cinema," p.372.
[25] Ibid., p.347.
[26] *Zhongguo wenyipian cengjing de huihuang* (The past glory of Chinese art films) [online] available at http://www.artsbj.com/Html/zhuanti/xz_3462_9081.html [Accessed 11 August 2012]; *Yuanxian bannian jiu yaozhe* (Art theatre chain only lasts for half year) [online] available at http://www.people.com.cn/GB/paper447/5825/587154.html [Accessed 11 August 2012].

dapian)²⁷, the limited space for Chinese art films is continually being squeezed. Art-house filmmakers in contemporary Chinese cinema, like the amateur photographer Hu in *Lunar Eclipse*, struggle to pursue their artistic dream in the money-oriented era.

Self-reflexivity in *Lunar Eclipse* is also manifested in the exploration of basic film language such as light, in both diegetic and extradigetic level. To some extent, *Lunar Eclipse* is primarily a film about the dynamics of light and shadow. Hu as a self-reflexive agent raises the key theme of light in *Lunar Eclipse* when he says to Ya Nan: "Light is at the heart of photography. If light is used properly, no matter how dirty the wedding gown is, even if it is black, it looks white." The large number of shady domestic scenes and night scenes, as well as the considerable amount of shadow used in *Lunar Eclipse* make the film look noir (even in a few daytime, outdoor scenes, the light is quite similar to that of dusk, neither bright nor warm). The use of light/shadow contributes essentially to the production of meaning in the film. When the Ya Nan's wealthy husband first appears in the film, a heavy shadow casts across his face, implying that this man is being mocked. In the scene when Ya Nan makes the second visit to her friend, the latter is portrayed as a bossy and peremptory mother who is always seen in heavy shadow throughout the scene.

The expressive function of light is incisively demonstrated in the most tender and memorable scene in the film when Jia Niang and Hu talk in a cab as mentioned earlier. In this scene, Wang Quan'an creatively uses the reflection of neon light, making it a

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²⁷ For example, Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (*Yingxiong*, 2002), *House of Flying Daggers* (*Shimian maifu*, 2004), *Curse of the Golden Flower* (*Mancheng jindai huangjinjia*, 2006), Chen Kaige's *The Promise* (*Wuji*, 2005) and Feng Xiaogang's *The Banquet* (*Yeyan*, 2006).

significant iconography with rich connotations. The scene is a long take and fixed shot, lasting 170 seconds and is shot from about a 30° high angle above the hood of the cab. In the scene, what we can see in this shot is confined to the windscreen of the cab. Hu and Jiang occupy the front passenger seats. At the middle of the windscreen's bottom is a little movie poster of *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997), featuring the famous scene of the hero Jack holding the heroine Rose on the bow of the Titanic. Hu and Jia Niang talk about their ideals at a time when the market economy was sweeping the whole country. As the young couple's conversation about dreams, frustrations and perseverance continues, a twinkling flame which is the reflection of the flickering neon lights along the street gradually rises from the bottom of the frame. Eventually, the entire screen is covered by the reflection of the neon lights in the shape of a blooming flower, a flower that represents the young peoples' bright and beautiful dreams. At the moment, Hu's cab becomes another Titanic, a carrier of love, dream and passion for life.

Neon light is the core part of the modern urban landscape by night. Its close relationship with urban culture enables it to embody "the utopian promise or dystopian threat of a city devoid of substance, a city of spectacle, a city tantalizingly or threateningly close to cinema."[28] Moreover, neon light "whose source of pyrotechnics is already an inert gas" is a good manifestation of Marx's famous statement about the world constructed by capitalist modernity "in which 'all that is solid melts into air.'"[29] In the

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[28] James Tweedie, "Neon," in Yomi Braester and James Tweedie, eds., *Cinema at the City's Edge: Film and Urban Networks in East Asia*, Hong Kong University Press, 2010, p.92.
[29] Ibid., pp.89-91.

scene, the neon flames are for Jia Niang and Hu like the bright future the city promised

them, gorgeous and enticing. However, these neon flames are no more than an illusion

created by a gas which is as light as air. The artful use of light in motion in a fixed shot

not only makes static space dynamic, but, more importantly, shows Wang's paradoxical

attitude towards the dreaming young couple. On the one hand he applauds Jia Niang and

Hu's youthful idealism in an age that is devoid of spiritual vitality due to excessive

material desires. On the other hand, Wang implies their ideals, like the projection of

artificial light, are only illusory dreams and are never likely to be achieved. Representing

rather than merely *presenting* reality, this scene exemplifies Wang Quan'an's pursuit of

showing "both the sharpness of reality and the aesthetic perception of art" (*xianshi de xili*

he yishu de meigan bingcun) in this film.[30] This dialectic relationship between cinematic

mimesis and artifice actually lies at the heart of post-realist aesthetics. Post-realist

aesthetics, on the one hand, endows *Lunar Eclipse* with the incisiveness to penetrate

through the hard shell of reality, showing women's disrupted identity; on the other hand,

it enables the filmmaker to extract a kind of poetic sentiment that transcends mundane

reality in a very cinematic way. Thus, in *Lunar Eclipse*, which he describes as "the freest

film" so far in his filmmaking career, Wang succeeds in reconfiguring "the relationship

between reality (*shi*) and artifice/fiction (*xu*) and reveals a usually invisible object, the

spiritual reality of Chinese society."[31]

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[30] Interview with Wang Quan'an, Beijing, 12 August 2013.
[31] Ibid.

Green Tea *and Zhang Yuan's Early*, *Questionable Documentary Style*

In 2003, Zhang Yuan's feature *Green Tea* offered another post-realist version of the

female-double narrative. Zhang Yuan is considered the pioneer of Chinese independent or

underground film.[32] He began his career with *Mama* (1990) — the first independent film

in the PRC since the film studio system was taken over by the state in 1953. *Mama* is a

harbinger of the rise of Sixth Generation filmmaking in Chinese cinema. Zhang then

made a series of films including *Beijing Bastards* (*Beijing zazhong*, 1993), *East Palace,*

West Palace (*Donggong, xigong*, 1996), *Sons* (*Erzi*, 1996) and a documentary *The Square*

(*Guangchang*, co-direct with Duan Jinchuan, 1994). Zhang's early films focus on the

marginal people in Chinese society such as rock 'n' roll singers, homosexuals, and addicts

with mental illness. Due to their sensitive subject-matter, none of these films were

allowed to be released domestically. However, they received much attention abroad and

established Zhang's fame as an independent filmmaker and artistic dissident at many

international film festivals. Zhang's early career of making his name by attending

overseas film festivals exemplifies the Sixth Generation filmmakers' strategic rise in

Chinese cinema from the early 1990s. In 1999, Zhang's feature *Seventeen Years* was

finally approved by the censors after a full-year review process and for the first time his

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[32] In the context of Chinese cinema, "independent film" is a concept emphasizing the cinematic project's independence from the Chinese state, namely, the official system of production, distribution and exhibition. This is quite different from the term's original meaning in the context of American cinema, which is more about being financially independent from the Hollywood studio system. "Underground film" is a term more preferred by Western media and scholars than Chinese scholars for "underground" not only shows the filmmakers' opposition stance to the Chinese state in terms of film production, but also suggests their films touch on sensitive political issues that the CCP regime cannot tolerate. But, in fact, few Sixth Generation filmmakers' underground works explicitly deal with political subject-matter or content. For clarification of these two concepts and deeper discussion, see Paul G. Pickowicz, "Social and Political Dynamics of Underground Filmmaking in Early Twenty-First-Century China," in Paul G.Pickowicz , *China on Film: A Century of Exploration, Confrontation, and Controversy*, Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefiled, 2012 , pp.325-343.

film was shown legally to Chinese audiences. With this film, Zhang integrated himself into mainstream Chinese filmmaking.

Green Tea is one of the films Zhang made after the major turn of his filmmaking career from underground to "aboveground" practice. Unlike Wang Quan'an's art experiment *Lunar Eclipse*, *Green Tea* is driven by more commercial considerations and characterized by entertaining elements. It was produced under a strong commercial desire to reach mainstream audiences. The film cost ten million RMB, the largest investment of all Zhang's films (about US$1,400,000, in sharp contrast to, for example, *Mama*'s low budget of less than US$ 30,000). With novelist Wang Shuo as producer, popular actors Jiang Wen and Zhao Wei, and cinematographer Christopher Doyle[33], *Green Tea* possesses the necessary elements for a commercial hit and was already attracting attention before its release.

Ostensibly, *Green Tea*'s post-realist representation of ambigous female characters distinguishes itself from Zhang's previous features which are characterized by what scholars have called "grim realism" or the "documentary impulse." Indeed, we can readily find some documentary-like approaches and scenes in Zhang's early films: the documentary clip of interviews with real mothers who have handicapped children is inserted into the feature film *Mama*; in *Sons* the family members all play themselves and restage what really happens in their everyday life; the street level reality including the real

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[33] Christopher Doyle is renowned for contributing a distinctive visual style to a string of films by director Wong Kar-Wai, as well as other celebrated directors such as Edward Yang, Stanley Kwan, Zhang Yimou and Fruit Chan.

sites of large-scale demolition in *Seventeen Years*. Because of the alleged realist style of

his earlier films, Zhang was usually seen as the leading figure of the Sixth Generation.

However, relatively recently some scholars have shown that previous scholarship's

emphasis on Zhang's realist style is a situation that "can't see the wood for the trees"

assessment. It seems that such emphasis is more like a strategic coalition between

filmmakers and scholars. The Sixth-Generation filmmakers are attempting to contend

against the dominance of the Fifth-Generation filmmakers and commercial films by

presenting a different style, and scholars want to establish a new discourse in Chinese

cinema studies that differs from the paradigm of national allegory. So labels such as

neo-realism or documentary style are satisfactory for both of them. Examining Zhang's

films from *Mama* to *Green Tea*, Bérénice Reynaud finds "the apparent contradiction that

runs throughout Zhang's work — between the 'realistic,' semi-documentary impulse and

the theatricalization of the contemporary urban experience."[34] She claims that, for

example, the mise-en-scene of *Beijing Bastards* deviates from the reality of urban space, a

view which echoes Tony Rayns' analysis of the film's "gliding from documentary to

fiction to fantasy."[35] Another example discussed by Reynaud is Zhang's *East Palace,*

West Palace. By denaturalizing familiar urban spaces through "a few documentary-style

establishing shots [which] appear and disappear as in a dream,"[36] the film provides not a

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[34] Bérénice Reynaud , "Zhang Yuan's Imaginary Cities and the Theatricalization of the Chinese 'Bastards'," p.266
[35] Tony Rayns, catalogue for Vancouver International Film Festival, 1992, p.33, quoted in Berenice Reynaud "Zhang Yuan's Imaginary Cities and the Theatricalization of the Chinese 'Bastards'," p.269.
[36] Bérénice Reynaud, "Zhang Yuan's Imaginary Cities and the Theatricalization of the Chinese 'Bastards'," p.280.

real place but rather a stage. On this stage the gay man, A Lan, tells a story from a

Chinese traditional opera and give a transsexual performance as an opera character. In this

sense, *East Palace, West Palace*, telling a story within a story, is fairly self-reflexive. In

fact, Zhang Yuan is also aware of the fact that subjectivity plays an important role in his

realism: "If you want to say I strive for the authentic in my films, that authenticity has

two aspects to it. One side is realism, and the other side is subjective truth. ... Actually, all

of my films have a tension between the subjective and the objective, and in *East Palace,*

West Palace, my subjectivity has been particularly strong."[37] Dai Jinhua relates Zhang's

case to the entire Sixth Generation's filmmaking:

> In a certain sense, Zhang Yuan's 'objectivity' and 'passion' may
> constitute two poles of the narrative dimension of the Sixth
> Generation……. On the one hand, 'objectivity' means that their films
> try to show a cool or even grim visual style as a witness…. On the
> other hand, they must infuse passion, such as the confession and
> aspirations of their generation, into the objective scenes and stories
> that their cameras record. Thus, they cannot be true witnesses in their
> films, but rather, they are more like 'multi-subjects' appearing
> everywhere in their dreams.[38]

Having explored the dialectic relationship between realism and fantasy in Zhang's early

features, it may not surprise us to see that *Green Tea* and the following feature *Little Red*

Flower (2006), which are saturated with fantasy, appear in Zhang's oeuvre.

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[37] Chris Berry, "Staging Gay Life in China: Zhang Yuan and *East Palace, West Palace*," in Tan See-Kam, Peter X. Feng, and Gina Marchetti, eds., *Chinese Connections: Critical Perspectives on Film, Identity, and Diaspora*, Temple University Press, 2009, p.167.
[38] Dai Jinhua, *Xieta liaowang*, pp.382-383.

Reconciling Conflicting Ideologies: The Imaginary Fusion of the Female

Double in **Green Tea**

Green Tea is adapted from the Chinese female writer Jin Renshun's short story *Adeline by the Waterside* (*Shuibian de Adilina*) which was recommended to Zhang Yuan by Wang Shuo.[39] The film has the typical character setting of the female-double film: two young women Wu Fang and Lang Lang (both are played by Zhao Wei) with striking resemblances but who are exact opposites (virgin/whore) and a man Chen Mingliang who is dating both women at the same time. The story unfolds with Wu Fang, a bookish and bespectacled graduate student, who goes on ceaseless blind dates with men in order to seek a husband. When meeting various men in teahouses or cafés, she always spends time with the men talking about one of her friends. One of Wu Fang's dates is Chen Mingliang, a smooth man. As Chen keeps dating Wu, he learns more about the thrilling tale of Wu's girlfriend's parents — her mother kills her father due to both his physical and emotional abuse of her. Meanwhile, Chen meets a hotel-lounge pianist named Lang Lang who looks astonishingly like Wu Fang. Lang Lang is charming, sexy and outgoing. She works as an escort, chatting and drinking during the evening with whichever man pays her money. Chen is always in deep doubt about whether Wu Fang and Lang Lang is the same person.

Green Tea includes a quintessential diegetic element in Zhang's feature films — characters from dysfunctional families. Wu Fang narrates the story of her girlfriend's

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[39] See http://www.china.com.cn/chinese/2003/Sep/403964.htm [Accessed on 20 September 2012]

parents' lousy marriage and Lang Lang's parents' marriage also seems unhappy. In fact,

almost all of Zhang's features are involved with the issue of broken families or

dysfunctional families. In these families the protagonist's biological father is usually

absent, weak or incompetent.[40] Symbolically, the absence of the father embodies the

social and cultural rupture that Zhang's generation has experienced — the breakdown of

socialist ideology and the collapse of social symbolic order in the post-Mao era.[41] In

Green Tea the divergent value orientations in post-Tian'anmen Chinese society are

represented by the female doubles seen from the male perspective, as I will show below.

Mysterious links between the female doubles Wu Fang and Lang Lang are

consciously emphasized in the film. Wu Fang tells Chen Mingliang that her friend can

read fortunes from a glass of green tea; Lang Lang does fortune-telling from a glass of

green tea for a lady guest when she and Chen are at a friend's dinner party. Wu Fang

narrates the story of her friend's mother whose husband, because she is a

mortuary makeup artist, requires her to wear gloves when she does anything at home;

Lang Lang says her mother is the director of a glove factory. Both Wu Fang and Lang

Lang like green tea. All these details point to the possibility that Wu Fang and Lang Lang

are a woman's divided self. It is worth noting that Jin Renshun's original short story is

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[40] *Mama* features a single mother; A Lan was raised by his mother alone in *East Palace, West Palace*. In *Sons* the family is broken due to the alcoholism father. The family in *Seventeen Years* consists of two families broken because one of the daughters (Tao Lan) accidentally kills her stepsister (Tao Lan is from a broken family without a father). In *I Love You* (*Wo ai ni*, 2003) after interminable quarrelling, Xiaoju and Wang Yi finally end their marriage in divorce (it is worth noting that Xiaoju's father killed her mother). In *Little Red Flowers* Fang Qiangqiang is neglected by his busy parents and is looked after in a boarding kindergarten. In Zhang's recent *Dada's Dance*, Dada kills her stepfather who has sexually assaulted her.

[41] Zhang's peers, directors Lu Xuechang and Zhang Yang make efforts to find or establish a "spiritual father" in their respective films *The Making of Steel* (*Zhangda chengren*, 1997) and *Quitting* (*Zuotian*, 2001).

narrated in the first person, a female "I." Jin's story ends with the narrator "I" implicitly

letting Chen Mingliang know that Lang Lang and "I" are inhabitants of the same body.

Nevertheless, the female perspective represented by a woman's schizoid masquerade

resulting from terrible familial traumas is oppressed and replaced by a male perspective in

the film version. The potential theme of women's resistance to the patriarchy is constantly

undercut by the male perspective which intervenes throughout the narrative. The

patricidal tale of Wu's friend that Wu narrates (which is very possibly Wu's

autobiographical story) only serves as nothing more than a thrilling element in the film.

Women's split identities (as represented in the original novella), from the male

perspective, are no more than two different types of sex objects. According to the two

women's different attitudes towards a man's courting, Chen and his friend label Lang

Lang as a "forest-type" woman (who can readily make man get lost, as in a forest) and

Wu Fang as a "Rome-type" woman (referring to a woman with whom one can easily

establish an intimate relationship. The label alludes to the Western idiom "all roads lead

to Rome.") In this regard, *Green Tea* invokes the classical female-double narrative mode

in which two women "do not represent real poles of the female psyche, but rather two

opposing male views of woman," as well as their own ambivalence towards a woman's

body and mind.[42] In *Green Tea* Chen hovers between Wu Fang who is a virgin but "lacks

a little bit of femininity" and the charming Lang Lang who has hundreds of

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[42] Lucy Fischer, *Shot/Countershot*, p.187.

client-boyfriends. The representation of women in the film still align with the traditional motif of man's paradoxical fantasies about the stereotypical dualities of women, but in the guise of the modern motif of a woman's divided psyche.

Nevertheless, at some points, *Green Tea* does deviate from the paradigm of the female-double film. The film refigures the characters of good woman (virgin) and bad woman (whore) in a not so polarized way. Wu Fang does not appear to be a classical good woman, but seems rather lacking in warmth, even aloof. On the other hand, Lang Lang is clearly intelligent and not sexually forward. She refuses men who try to proposition her. The characterization of Wu Fang and Lang Lang, especially that of the latter, departs from the traditional value system which decide what attributes are associated with a good woman, and what qualities characterize the bad. Thus, unlike classical female-double films in which audiences are led to identify and sympathize with the good woman and dislike the bad one, it seems that *Green Tea* does not want to guide audiences to make emotional and moral choices between Wu Fang and Lang Lang. This ambivalent attitude towards the female doubles should be understood in a metaphorical way. Wu Fang and Lang Lang, two women with totally different, if not opposing, attributes (or maybe, a woman with two contradictory sides to her self) represent a series of binaries — tradition and modernity, the conservative and the open, and the East and the West. Lang Lang is the embodiment of a newly established ideology which came in a very short time to become hegemonic in early 1990s post-socialist China: capitalism. Lang Lang believes in the power of money in changing everything including social ethics. As she says: "There is

no bad person at all in the world. We are all business people." When Chen Mingliang asks

Lang Lang why she gets on with men in "that way" (a way that was usually considered

immoral in traditional Chinese morality as well as in socialist ideology), Lang Lang

claims that as a kind of work, there is no difference between accompanying men and

playing piano. In contrast, by going on blind dates in order to find an ideal husband Wu

Fang is the epitome of a relatively traditional and conservative lifestyle.

Moreover, the open ending of *Green Tea* also departs from the paradigmatic

"morally 'agreeable' manner"[43] of the classical female-double narrative in which the

saintly female is rewarded by obtaining true love, and the evil woman pays the price for

what she has done. Towards the end of the film, the double-female figures undergo a

symbolic identity exchange. Dressing more in Wu's manner than her own in a

conservative black skirt, Lang Lang disguises herself as Wu Fang to attend Chen's friends'

dinner party. At the dinner, Lang Lang's words and behaviour often remind us of Wu

Fang. For example, Lang Lang rages at Chen's friend: "I hate to see a man beat a woman."

This condemnation echoes Wu Fang's claim in the beginning of the film: "A man beating

a woman is one of the most immoral behaviours." In the following scene, Lang Lang and

Chen get lost in hotel corridors. What we hear, however, is the conversation between Wu

Fang and Chen from the preceding part of the film. Then the film cuts to another scene:

through a fuzzy glass table top, viewers can vaguely see that Chen takes off Wu Fang's

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[43] Lucy Fischer, " The Desire to Desire," p.202

glasses, which she previously refused to do. Wu Fang thus also transforms herself into Lang Lang. This ambiguous ending does not seem to reveal whether Wu Fang and Lang Lang are the same person or not. But it does implicitly fuse the two fractured female figures into one in an imaginary manner. In so doing, not only is woman's split identity imaginarily restored, but also the anxiety of men caused by "dichotomized male projections of opposing views of the Eternal Feminine" is relieved.[44] The hero gets a woman who is both virgin and sexy, intellectual and beautiful, loyal and passionate. Furthermore, the imaginary fusion of Wu Fang and Lang Lang in *Green Tea* reflects an attempt to bridge the ideological divides in a transforming China.

The fractured but coexistent ideologies are not only represented by the duality of women, they are also embodied by the hybridized urban space in *Green Tea*. Actually, the cinematic space of *Green Tea* is imaginary or symbolic rather than realistic, which is also a feature of Zhang's earlier films *Beijing Bastards* and *East Palace, West Palace*. Bérénice Reynaud argues that the urban spaces in Zhang's films "are mostly imaginary-hybrid spaces caught between the past and the future, incessantly (re)shaped by the fears, desires, memories, and projections of the protagonists."[45] Or in other words, "[s]pace is a state of mind."[46] In numbers of outdoor scenes in *Green Tea*, Zhang's camera captures some traditional Chinese architecture and spaces in the city, such as the back streets (*hutong*), corridors (*youlang*) as well as socialist-era architecture surrounded

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[44] Lucy Fischer, *Shot/Countershot*, p.191.
[45] Bérénice Reynaud, "Zhang Yuan's Imaginary Cities and the Theatricalization of the Chinese 'Bastards'," p.266.
[46] Ibid, p.272.

by modern high-rise buildings. The volatile and artificial indoor spaces, from quasi-Chinese style teahouse to Western café and bar, constitute a labyrinth inside the city. Thus, the urban space in the film is a mix of traditional and modern, socialist and capitalist as well as past and present. These contrasts embody the protagonists' perception of their postmodern urban living — split, fluid and neither-here-nor-there. A similar theme was developed in contemporary Chinese artist Cao Fei's virtual work, *RMB City*. Her totally fictional city is a fantasy island, a hybrid of utopian and dystopian post-socialist China. To some extent, Cao Fei's virtual city is a symbolic representation of the kind of urban space presented in *Green Tea*. In addition, the film's soundtrack is also characterized by the combination of two audio systems. Featuring the renowned musician Su Cong, the soundtrack is a synthesis of both modern music, such as electronic music, and Chinese musical elements including the use of traditional Chinese instruments such as bamboo flute and zither. Thus, both visual and aural aspects of *Green Tea* demonstrate the conflicting and confluent nature of urban life impacted by the collision and dynamics of two different value systems in today China, a nation proceeding down the road of "socialism (or capitalism) with Chinese characteristics."

As Sixth Generation filmmakers, Wang Quan'an and Zhang Yuan present distinct post-realist representations of female doubles. Using the experimental film language and intricate narrative, *Lunar Eclipse* makes a breakthrough in associating the phenomenon of the female double with women's disrupted identities in a multifaceted transforming social

world. In contrast, *Green Tea* is an aestheticized commodity, employing lustrous and

dazzling audio-visual form to represent the fractured images in male fantasies of women

in the post-modern city. However, the two films do share an important feature. In the face

of confusion and anxiety brought by worship of money, material desire and shift in

ideology, both male filmmakers try to transplant to the female doubles the socio-cultural

split and their own identity crisis. In their films, women, rather than men, are the

immediate and sensitive bearers of historical and social violence, intensively reflecting

the painful imprint of historical and social transformation. But the transition from male

consciousness to female roles cannot be traceless. Although in *Lunar Eclipse* the female

protagonist's discovery of her identity mainly derives from women's own subjectivity, she

can only do so the through the male character Hu Xiaobing (a self-reflexive agent). In

Green Tea the potential theme of women's identity crisis is seriously undermined by the

traditional male perspective. What *Green Tea* really presents to audiences is men's

stereotyped fantasy of women instead of women's self-exploration of her own identity.

Chapter Five

The Articulation of Strangeness: Aestheticized Space in

Jia Zhangke's *The World*, *Still Life* and *24 City*

With a growing reputation in the international art film circuit, Jia Zhangke has become

the leading figure of the Sixth-Generation filmmakers. Since his feature-length debut

Xiao Wu (*Xiao Wu*, a.k.a. *Pickpocket*; 1997), Jia has made more than ten fiction and

documentary films, most of which center on the theme of changes in multiple aspects of

post-Mao society.[1] From his early, underground, hometown trilogy *Xiao Wu*, *Platform*

and *Unknown Pleasures* (*Ren xiaoyao*, 2002) to the state-approved films *The World*, *Still*

Life, *24 City* and *I Wish I Knew* (*Haishang chuanqi*, 2010), Jia extended his attention

from hinterland county towns (*xiancheng*) to wider territory, such as Beijing, Chengdu

and the Three Gorges. Meanwhile, by integrating a variety of techniques such as surreal

effects and heightened symbolic images into his cinematic expression, Jia's cinematic

aesthetics has significantly departed from his early internationally acclaimed stylized

realism. Breaking free of the restrictions imposed by realism, post-realist representation

features Jia Zhangke's subjectivity as a filmmaker and creative artist.

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[1] Before *Xiao Wu*, Jia Zhangke made three short student films *One Day in Beijing* (*Youyitian*, *zai Beijing*, 1994), *Xiao Shan Going Home* (*Xiaoshan huijia*, 1995) and *Dudu* (*Dudu*, 1996) when he was still a student at Beijing Film Academy. Of them, *Xiao Shan Going Home* won the gold award at the1996 Hong Kong Independent Short Film and Video Awards. At this festival Jia met Yu Lik-wai, a Hong Kong filmmaker, who later served as cinematographer for almost all of Jia's films.

In this chapter, after a preliminary investigation of Jia's particular notion of realism as well as the external trigger for the shift in his cinematic aesthetics, I shall draw a detailed picture of post-realist aesthetics of Jia's recent films *The World*, *Still Life* as well as *24 City*. Specifically, Jia's post-realist aesthetics is mainly exemplified in his representation of aestheticized spaces which challenges viewers' habitual notions of authentic and simulated, public and private, space and time. In fact, throughout his filmmaking career, Jia is always obsessed with representing unique spatial forms of post-socialist China. These spaces vary from Tiananmen Square, one of the most meaningful spaces in China, in his student debut *One Day in Beijing*, to county towns where more than half of the people in China live, in *Xiao Wu*. In Jia's hometown trilogy we can already see his early attempt at aestheticizing space. For example, in *Platform*, an epic spanning the decade between 1979 and 1989, the ancient wall of Fenyang, which signifies an invisible obstacle to the town youth's strong desire to see the outside world, is continually shown and emphasized.

As in Jia's *The World*, *Still Life* as well as *24 City*, aestheticized space emerges as the predominant spatial form in the cinematic representation. The simulated environment of the World Park and the virtual world of animation together create the heightened symbolic cinematic space in *The World*. Centering on the lives of migrant workers employed in the isolated park, Jia explores two paradoxical relationships between real and fake, and between mobility and entrapment. Secondly, Jia's *Still Life* achieves a defamiliarizing effect by employing some surreal elements, presenting ruins as liminal

space that only exists in the present moment as transitional condition. The industrial wreckage and dilapidated factory also take the central role in *24 City*, the third film I mainly discussed in the last chapter. In general, the local simulacrum of the transnational space in *The World* and the devastated ruins in *Still Life* and *24 City* constitute two basic spatial forms in post-socialist China. Moreover, this chapter will also show that aestheticized space is not only significant in Jia Zhangke's films, but also can be found in another Sixth Generation filmmaker Zhang Ming's film *Rainclouds over Wushan*.

Aside from aestheticized space, this chapter will lastly analyse Jia's another experiment with post-realist aesthetics — blurring the distinction between fiction and documentary — in *24 City*. 24 *City* challenges the documentary genre and thus converts itself into a so-called mockumentary. Jia's parody of the documentary genre illustrates his challenge in the realist ontology of documentary and the assumed fact/fiction dichotomy between documentary and fiction film.

By examining the above issues, this chapter seeks to present a case study of Jia Zhangke's films, as a microcosm of his generation's efforts to pursue more diverse approaches and skills to delineate reality, rather than merely relying on a strictly realist style.

Reconsidering Realism: *The New Turn of Jia Zhangke's Filmmaking*

Jia Zhangke was born in 1970 in Fenyang, a small town in the northern province of Shanxi. In 1990, the experience of watching the Fifth-Generation director Chen Kaige's

Yellow Earth (1984) gave him a shock, inspiring him to pursue a filmmaking career. Jia

entered the Beijing Film Academy three years later but during his four years' study there,

he became increasingly disappointed by the Fifth Generation's commercialized films

which were distant from China's immediate reality.[2] Making every attempt to record the

current atmosphere, Jia Zhangke established his signature style of realism through his

early short films and the subsequent hometown trilogy. A prevalent perception of Jia

Zhangke's films, especially his hometown trilogy, is that they exemplify the style of

realism and the documentary impulse which from the early 1990s characterized the Sixth

Generation's filmmaking. Jia's early realism is marked by some significant stylistic traits

such as long takes, natural lighting, location shooting, non-professional actors, dialects,

synch sound, as well as lack of voice-over and flashbacks. His camera focuses on

ordinary people: migrant workers, small song-and-dance troupe actors and unemployed

youth. As Chris Berry observes, these folk are even more ordinary than the artists, drug

and alcohol addicts, rock n' roll singers and gays in other Sixth-Generation films.[3]

However, Jia's understanding of realism is more than merely using some realist

techniques. Jia is aware that realist techniques do not guarantee the realist nature of a film,

and sometimes, quite the contrary, they can create illusions.[4] Rather than understanding

realism simply as realist techniques, Jia links the real with subjective experience, when he

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[2] Jia Zhangke, *Jia zhangke guxiang sanbuqu: Xiao Wu* (Jia Zhangke's hometown trilogy: *Xiao Wu*), Jinan: Shandong huabao chubanshe, 2010, p.46.
[3] Chris Berry, "Jia Zhangke and the Temporality of Post-socialist Chinese Cinema," pp.111-128.
[4] Jia Zhangke, *Jia Xiang 1996-2008: Jia Zhangke dianying shouji* (Jia's thoughts 1996-2008: Jia Zhangk's notes on Film), Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2009, p.99.

states:

> In my view, all the realist modes are there to describe the real world of my inner experience. We have almost no way to approach reality itself, and after all the purpose of cinema is not merely reaching the level of reality. In films, I pursue a *feeling* of the real more than reality itself, since I think the feeling of the real concerns aesthetics, whereas the real is only a matter of sociology.[5]

Jia's realism thus should be understood more as realist motivation and feeling. The emphasis on a feeling of the real rather than unattainable objectivity enables Jia to deal with his cinematic style in an open and innovative way. After viewing Vittorio De Sica's neo-realist film (it is very probably *Miracle in Milan* [*Miracolo a Milano*, 1951]) while still a student at the BFA Jia realized that "there is no insurmountable barrier between realist content and expressionistic and surreal content. It is possible to go back and forth freely between these two as long as you handle it properly."[6]

The alteration of Jia's cinematic aesthetics is not only rooted in his unconventional understanding of realism, but also stems from China's fast-changing magical reality in the new century which, to capture on screen, requires more diverse cinematic techniques and styles. In contrast to the post-Mao decade of 1979-1989 portrayed in *Platform* and the relatively gradual socio-cultural transition after Deng's southern tour in *Xiao Wu*, the pace of transformation greatly accelerated both in terms of material reality and in the spiritual undertones of Chinese society. The surreal aspect of the new millennium is evident in Jia's remark during a 2008 interview:

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[5] Ibid., pp.99-100.
[6] Jia Zhangke, *Jia zhangke guxiang sanbuqu: Xiao Wu* (Jia Zhangke's hometown trilogy: *Xiao Wu*), p.176.

> I think surrealism is a crucial part of China's reality. In the past ten or so years, China has experienced kinds of change that might happen over a span of 50 or even 100 years in any normal country. The speed of these changes has had an unsettling, surreal effect.[7]

In response to such surreal conditions in contemporary everyday life, Jia Zhangke has diversified his cinematic expression in *The World*, *Still Life* as well as in *24 City* and developed the aesthetics of post-realism, central to which is the filmmaker's sensitivity and perception.

The Illusion of Globalization: *The World Park as Heightened Symbolic Space* in *The World*

In 2002 Jia Zhangke's fourth feature *The World* was approved by SARFT to play in cinemas, marking a turning point in Jia's filmmaking career from an underground filmmaker to an officially recognized director. The film also witnesses the expansion of cinematic space in Jia's films, from the hinterland county towns of his hometown Shanxi to metropolitan Beijing. In terms of aesthetics, Jia himself claims that in *The World* he transformed his style from the previous purely realist style to a new one that involved "conceptual matters."[8] Jia's "conceptual things" are centrally exemplified in the film setting — World Park, an artificial space, or a "fake scenery" (*jiajing*) to use Jia's term.[9] Located on the outskirts of Beijing city, World Park is a theme park in which there are a

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[7] An interview with Jia Zhangke, see http://filmlinc.com/index.php/film-comment-2012/article/jia-zhangke-interview [accessed 5 December, 2012]

[8] Gou Yina, an interview with Jia Zhangke, "*Jia Zhangke: Yong zhuliu de fangshi biaoda ziji*" (Jia Zhangke: Express myself in the mainstream way), *Dangdai dianying* (Contemporary Film), no.5 (2000), 40-41.

[9] Wu Guanping, an interview with Jia Zhangke, "*Shijie de jiaoluo*" (The corner of the world), *Dianying yishu* (Film Art), no.1 (2005), 34-35.

great many scale-model replicas of tourist monuments and landmarks from throughout

the world such as the White House, the Eiffel Tower, the Taj Mahal and the Leaning

Tower of Pisa. These monuments and landmarks provide park visitors a cosmopolitan

experience in a relatively small fantasy space. With its inviting advertising slogan "visit

the world without ever leaving Beijing," the theme park attracts tourists from across

China. Yet, instead of those visitors, Jia's camera focuses on a cluster of migrant works

from Shanxi working and living in the park. The narrative mainly follows the gloomy and

intricate relationship between two protagonists Zhao Xiaotao, a dancer at the park and her

boyfriend Cheng Taisheng, a security guard who is also dating another woman Liao Qun

behind Zhao's back. *The World* depicts these migrant workers' troubled lives when their

local identity encounters the fake global landscape.[10]

Capturing an intimate narrative against the backdrop of the relationship between the

lower-class workers and global capitalism, *The World* suggests that World Park is an

imaginary projection of the Chinese people's aspirations to integrate into the global

system of capitalism. The cinematic space of *The World* is represented as symbolic rather

than concrete, signifying a new basic spatial form emerging in the process of China's

globalization: simulated space. To reinforce the simulated and abstract effect of World

Park, Jia Zhangke employs a series of digital and virtual cinematic technologies, such as

high-definition digital format and 2:1 widescreen. These distinguish *The World* from the

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[10] Cui Shuqin, "Negotiating in-between: On new-generation filmmaking and Jia Zhangke's films." *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 18, no.2 (2006), 98-130.

gray, rough and gritty image quality of his early films. The bright colour resulting from

HD digital filming properly demonstrates the falseness and artificiality of the space. And

the 2:1 widescreen magnifies the representation of virtual reality and creates a sense of

being adrift and rootless, corresponding with the postmodern façade of World Park. In so

doing, World Park in the film is portrayed as "a detachment from the real world, an

abstraction of time and space that borders on surrealism."[11] Moreover, in accordance

with the artificial visual look of the film, Jia for the first time in his filming career uses

electronic music. Composed by Taiwanese composer Lim Giong,[12] the electronic music

of *The World* expresses a feeling of emptiness which signifies, as Jia himself says, "the

real emptiness of the lives of Tao and her friends."[13]

Jia's most formalist device in *The World* is the six flash sequences showing

protagonists reading a text-message. The film suddenly strays from the real world to a

bright coloured, dreamlike world, from reality to a virtual world, in which the

protagonists' subjective feelings and subconscious desires are visualized as a variety of

unfettered movements and fantasies extricated from the restricted physical world. The

glossy animated sequences readily distinguish themselves from the drab world of

live-action, which generates a Brechtian-alienation effect — the computer-animated

fantasy constitutes an abrupt interruption to the realist narrative. These animation

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[11] David Liu, "Distant voices, still Lives: Globalization and modernity in Jia Zhangke's *The World*," see
http://kino-obscura.com/post/13184669049/distant-voices-still-lives [accessed on 18 December, 2012]

[12] Lim Giong is the composer for *Goodbye South, Goodbye* (*Nanguo zaijia, nanguo*, 1996) and *Millenium Manbo*
(*Qianxi manbo*, 2001), two films of Hou Hsiao-Hsien who is one of Jia Zhangke's favorite directors.

[13] See http://www.zeitgeistfilms.com/films/world/presskit.pdf [accessed on 20 December, 2012]

sequences, as Hye Jean Chung argues, are not deployed to "'create a seamless virtual space' or to erase borders between reality and simulation, but instead [are] use[d] … to signal these very seams, disjunctures, and dissonances."[14] The sharp contrast between the escapism, romanticism and liberation in the virtual world of the animations and the fixity and cynicism in reality reveals Jia's central concern in the film — the illusive mobility and the real confinement of the lower class in an increasingly globalized China. In the film, the alleged unifying effect of globalization is deeply called into question.

In fact, Jia's reflection on the issue of mobility and entrapment in *The World* is a continuation of what he explored in his previous films *Platform* and *Unknown Pleasures*. At the end of *Platform* the protagonist Cui Mingliang, still cannot escape but gets trapped in the routine life in his desolate hometown surround by the ancient wall. The Chinese title of *Unknown Pleasures* — *Ren xiaoyao* (任逍遥), which literally means unrestricted freedom, is an ironic allusion to its protagonists Binbin, Xiaoji and Qiaoqiao who are trapped in their local environment because of their underprivileged status. The intermittent emergence of visual and audio elements, including an image of omnipotent Monkey King Sun Wukong, the pop song *Unknown Pleasures*, as well as of a highway under construction, all represent a kind of freedom and mobility. These elements serve as a foil to highlight the confinement and hopelessness of the protagonists' lives in a bleak city.

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[14] Hye Jean Chung, "Media heterotopia and transnational filmmaking: Mapping real and virtual worlds," *Cinema Journal* 51, no.4 (Summer 2012), 102.

In his book *Globalization: The Human Consequences*, Zygmunt Bauman

insightfully points out that in the process of globalization "[m]obility climbs to the rank

of the uppermost among the coveted values — and the freedom to move, perpetually a

scarce and unequally distributed commodity, fast becomes the main stratifying factor of

our late-modern or postmodern times."[15] Though from the lower class, the migrant

workers in *The World* likewise are well aware of mobility as of utmost value and thus

enthusiastically pursue it. Seemingly, they enjoy unprecedented mobility and freedom

compared to the characters in Jia's earlier features. Zhao Xiaotao and Chen Taisheng left

their remote, small hometown in Shanxi, and settled down in a corner of the international

metropolis Beijing, China's political and cultural center. Their work place — World Park

— is even more internationalized than Beijing itself, enabling them to range easily across

a wide range of miniaturized world-famous tourist attractions, without passport or visa.

As a performer in the park, Xiaotao at one moment plays an Indian woman wearing a sari

in front of the Taj Mahal, and in the next acts as a Japanese woman in a kimono in a

Machiya (Japanese traditional wooden townhouse). Mobility's value as "a scarce and

unequally distributed commodity" is highlighted when a rich businessman tries to seduce

Xiaotao by promising her a Hong Kong tour.

The group of migrant workers seems at times to consider themselves as

cosmopolitan rather than just workers in the park. This is illustrated in their acquisition

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[15] Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, p.2.

and use of global discourse. For example, Erxiao, a security guard in the park, tells his fellow-villager that his wage is "a commercial secret," despite its being no more than 300 yuan a month. At the wedding of two workers, Xiaotao and the other female dancers' toast is "For world peace, women's liberation and our faces without freckles, cheers!" For most of the time, these migrant workers live under the illusion that they "belong to the spectacle of global wealth staged in the park."[16] To some extent, a video device in the park — "A worldwide tour on a magic carpet" — serves as an exact metaphor for the status of these park's residents. Xiaotao and Taisheng sit in front of a camera and an attendant superimposes their images onto the video background of various tourist attractions around the world, making it look as though they are really flying over the world on a magic carpet. In an immobile way, this digital special effects gimmick creates a Baudrillardian simulation, a fantasy of extreme mobility.

However, the illusion of global travel and mobility is easily broken when they retreat to their own real lives. Lacking socioeconomic mobility, the confinement of the workers in World Park is primarily manifested in the limited physical space of their everyday life. Instead of presenting the intriguing global sights in the park or the dazzling show on the magnificent stage of the park, the opening passage of *The World* penetrates into the core of the park —the underground dressing room, a repressed, dim, and crowded space, which is totally different from the splendid aboveground space of the park. The film also

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[16] Tonglin Lu, "Fantasy and reality of a virtual China in Jia Zhangke's film The World." *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 2, no. 3 (2008), 170.

presents the other homogeneous spaces in which the workers live: the shabby dormitory and cafeteria, little hostel and workshop, as well as the gloomy and damp basement. In many scenes when the characters appear in these kinds of space, they are always shown against the background of walls, embodying the reality of their closed and cornered status.[17] The characters' real situation of being trapped is visualized in the cinematic representation of suffocating space.

If the real world means inescapable confinement, then, for the lower class workers, in the imaginary virtual world of the first four text-messages they obtain ephemeral freedom and release. The six animation clips in *The World* directly reflect the characters' inner feelings. In a scene, Xiaotao is on a bus passing Tiananmen Square, one of the few shots in the film that indicates that the story actually takes place in Beijing. On the bus TV is an ad for World Park, showing the Park's influence outside its boundaries. Taisheng's text message — "How far can you go?" becomes an annotation of the ghostly-everywhere-presence of the park. Xiaotao's bus travels through the night towards an unknown direction, as if fleeing as far as possible from the World Park. The second animation is the most surrealist one in which Xiaotao in an airhostess uniform, flies over the park, city, factories and countryside, like a bird. In the third flash sequence, after receiving Liao Qun's message of invitation, Taisheng's yearning for romanticism is demonstrated as he rides a galloping horse. Innumerable love hearts emerge from

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[17] Xia Xiaochun, "*Shijie de bianyuan: Dianying Shijie de meishu zaoxing qianxi*" (The edge of the world: A brief analysis on the art design of *The World*), *Beijing dianying xueyuan xuebao* (Journal of Beijing Film Academy), no.6 (2006), 92-95.

Taisheng's body, leading him to Liao Qun's workshop. Five of the six animations involve different means of transportation such as a bus, plane, subway, horse and train — symbols of mobility. But, when the transient fantasies fade, what follows is the gray and stifling physical space that these migrant works reside in, or simply another kind of simulated space, like the splendid and enclosed night bar where women like Anna sell their bodies.

There are a few characters in the film who manage through various ways to escape the Park — their present entrapped reality. However, this does not mean that the escaped workers can break out the real trap of global capitalist system. In fact, they may fall into another trap. By selling her body at the night club, Russian dancer Anna, one of Xiao Tao's friends who used to work in the World Park, is finally able to buy an air ticket to Ulan Bator. We do not know whether this will be the last time she sells her body, because Anna's underprivileged status does not fundamentally change. Liao Qun's visa application for France is approved and she will soon be reunited with her husband who was smuggled into France eight years before and now lives in Belleville, the Chinatown of Paris. Ironically, as Tonglin Lu points out, "Belleville in Paris is also a localized corner where Chinese immigrants conduct business in their own language while staying isolated from the rest of the city."[18] In other words, Belleville in Paris, paradise in Liao Qun's eyes, has no essential difference from the World Park or the "Zhejiang migrant worker village" where Liao lives in Beijing. "Wherever they go, migrant workers like them

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[18] Tonglin Lu, "Fantasy and reality of a virtual China in Jia Zhangke's film *The World*," p.173.

cannot avoid isolation and alienation in a territory localized by their economic status."[19]

In this sense, World Park in Jia Zhangke's film is the newest version of the "iron house." The symbol originated in the Chinese modernist writer Lu Xun's discussion on the smothering reality of Chinese society and reappeared in Fifth-Generation films such as Zhang Yimou's *Judou* and *Raise the Red Lantern*, Chen Kaige's *Temptress Moon* (*Fengyue*, 1996) and He Ping's *Red Firecracker, Green Firecracker* (*Paoda shuangdeng*, 1994). Both Jia's World Park and his generational predecessors' "iron house" symbolize a fixed social order in which people are hopelessly trapped and hard to challenge. In this light, Chris Berry argues that Jia Zhangke's films "share quite a lot in common with the retrospective critical modernist perspective of many early Fifth-Generation films, which look back in despair at the ruins of the socialist project after the calamity of the Cultural Revolution."[20]

However, the difference between Jia and the Fifth-Generation filmmakers is that the "iron house" in some Fifth-Generation films represents oppression, fetters from the past two thousand years of autocratic rule and the stubborn dregs of Chinese traditional culture, while Jia's World Park is a metaphor for the status of post-socialist China within the present system of globalization. In contrast to the Fifth Generation's pessimism about breaking with the old order, Jia Zhangke still preserves a glimmer of hope of escaping from the World Park, though it may be at the expense of one's life. At the end of *The*

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[19] Ibid.
[20] Chris Berry, "Jia Zhangke and the Temporality of Postsocialist Chinese Cinema," p.125.

World the two protagonists Xiaotao and Taisheng leave the park in a way which may be closest to death: they are carried out from their friends' apartment, having suffered near fatal gas poisoning and are laid on the open ground against the somber backdrop of industrial construction, a scene which completely breaks with the bright and gorgeous World Park. It is a cornered wasteland, but it is, to use Jia's own words, a "real destination away from the fake scenery."[21] Despite the two protagonists' unknown future and the remaining question of where they could go, this ending still indicates the possibility of breaking out of the "iron house."

World Park as a simulacrum, as well as the six flash animation sequences illustrate Jia's other critical reflection in the film — the paradoxical relationship between real and fake. Rather than fake or counterfeit, Chinese people prefer a word that does not directly indicate an artifact's status as non-original — *shanzhai* (山寨; in English its meaning is very close to copycat), a new word in today's China, particularly in cyberspace. Essentially, *shanzhai* is about cheap copying and imitation, usually from a famous original. It can refer to mobile phones, handbags, copycat pop singers or a behavior. Obviously, World Park is a *shanzhai* world for it features miniatures of attractions and landmarks of the real world. Like any other *shanzhai* product which aims at attracting consumers who do not have access to the originals, World Park's target customers are mainly Chinese visitors who cannot afford international travel. Jia says: "Many architects

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[21] Wu Guanping, an interview with Jia Zhangke.

and artists criticize such architecture (World Park), but I think it is quite a humane thing. It enables people who lack the means to go abroad to see the world." "However, the more exposure to this kind of fake landscape, the farther people get away from the real world."[22] *The World* centers on this paradox, a paradox that the migrant workers at the park experience on a daily basis.

On the one hand, with the absence of the real, characters like Chen Taisheng strive to convince themselves that there is no difference between the real and fake, and at times counterfeits even challenge the legitimacy of the originals. When Xiaotao's ex-boyfriend Liangzi remarks that the scaled-down copy of the Eiffel Tower looks just like the real one, Taisheng asks contemptuously "You've been to France? Seen the real tower?" What Taisheng implies is that if you have not seen the real one, how can you identify another one as a good replica?! In another scene, as Taisheng shows his visiting hometown friends around the park, he points to the replica of Manhattan and proudly claims: "Although the Twin Towers fell on September 11, we still have them!" Taisheng's words actually reveal World Park's nature as a "hyperreality" in Baudrillard's sense: "Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal." [23] Furthermore, the characters' understanding of the park's status as a simulacrum that is more real than the authentic obscures their perception of their real living conditions and identities in the isolated park. In one scene,

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[22] Ibid.

[23] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, 1994, p.1.

Taisheng rides a horse, patrolling the park in the quiet of the night. When he appears in front of a European castle, he seems to be like a knight, at that moment a master of the world. For Xiaotao, the fantastic stage of the park offers her consolation by presenting her in a beautiful wedding dress as artificial snowflakes fall, while in real life she discovers Taisheng's unfaithfulness.

As a matter of fact, characters in *The World* live in a world of piracy and faking, and they are part of this world. Taisheng is the security squad captain in the park, yet outside the park he engages in some illegal activities, like forging two identity cards which even include seemingly genuine anti-counterfeiting marks. Xiaotao carries a shopping bag of the luxury brand PORTS, which is supposedly unaffordable for her. In a later scene, in the attic where Wenzhou woman Liao Qun lives, we notice that there are also several Louis Vuitton shopping bags on her worktable. When Taisheng picks up a foreign magazine, Liao tells him that it's a Western fashion catalogue from which she can accurately copy luxury fashions, providing whatever her young customers want. The fake Burberry handbag Liao Qun owns suggests that she is also a consumer of counterfeit luxury goods. It is obvious that Liao makes a living by counterfeiting internationally famous brands. Xiaotao's PORTS bag should also be a fake and comes from a small workshop like Liao's. In Jia's previous hometown trilogy, Wenzhou is a sign representing new things in a new era and a bigger world outside of the hinterland, Shanxi. This is illustrated by so-called

Wenzhou hair salons in both *Xiao Wu* and *Platform*.[24] As in *The World*, Wenzhou,

represented by the counterfeiter Liao Qun, is nothing other than a counterfeit of the West,

a sign of *shanzhai* itself.

On the other hand, the gulf between the real and the counterfeit, and the disparity

between reality and simulation are noticeably displayed in *The World*. No character can

really keep living in the illusion created by the park or in the virtual world of digital

technologies. The very gap between World Park and the world outside the park is alluded

to in a panoramic shot of World Park after the opening sequence of the film. A poor waste

scavenger with a big, heavy sack suddenly intrudes the frame from the left of the screen.

He stops in the middle of the frame and then turns to the camera as if he is gazing at it. At

this point, the credit "A film by Jia Zhangke" appears. What follows is the film's title

"The World" as the scavenger slowly walks towards the right. Conspicuously, the poor

scavenger and the splendid World Park form a sharp contrast in this long take, implying

that "the world" actually consists of two dichotomous worlds. As the film progresses,

Jia's use of the six flash animation sequences, which are "unsophisticated and

ontologically demarcated from the live-action sequences," underpins the effect of the

"very seams, disjuncture and dissonances" between these two dichotomous worlds.[25]

Moreover, when a counterfeit encounters the authentic, the fake easily collapses and

all illusions are broken. After learning that Liao Qun is applying for a visa to France,

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[24] With the rise of entrepreneurs serving new consumer needs throughout China in the 1980s,Wenzhou in Zhejiang Province became a boom town.

[25] Hye Jean Chung, "Media heterotopia and transnational filmmaking," p.102.

Taisheng invites her to visit his park first as "we have the Eiffel Tower, Notre Dame and the Arc de Triomphe. All that French stuff." It seems to Taisheng that there is no difference between the miniature replicas of French monuments in the park and the real France. However, a French place name which Liao uses is beyond Taisheng's knowledge of France: Belleville, where Liao's husband lives. Of course, Beijing's World Park which aims to fulfill domestic travelers' exotic global imagination definitely would not replicate a Chinatown, a copy of China itself. In the face of Liao and her absent yet present husband (as an image in a photo taken in Paris), who are closely connected to the authentic France, Taisheng loses his confidence and pride that he had shown earlier in front of his rival in love — Liangzi who has no access to the real France. By representing Taisheng's distinct attitudes in two different situations related to France, Jia reveals the meaningful relationship between Taisheng's masculinity and World Park as a simulacrum. In certain sense, the husband assumes the equivalent position as the real France, while Taisheng's status is like the fake French attractions in the park.

In *The World*, the simulated space of the World Park functions as a non-place in Marc Augé's sense, a space which "cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity."[26] Following *The World*, Jia's next film *Still Life* continues to explore the basic spatial form in contemporary China and discovers another kind of "non-place," which is in sharp contrast to the splendid World Park.

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[26] Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity,* Vero Books, 1995, p.78.

***A Liminal Space without Past or Future: The Defamiliarization of Ruins in* Still Life**

In his 2006 Venice Golden Lion-awarded feature *Still Life*, Jia turns his camera on Fengjie, a small city with a long history along the Yangtze River. It has recently become famous for its submergence by the world's largest hydroelectric river dam project — the Three Gorges Dam. In this disappearing city due to large scale of demolition and emigration, Jia discovers perhaps one of the most prevalent spatial forms in post-socialist China: ruins.

In Jia's oeuvre, the origin of ruins can be traced to his student film *Xiaoshan Going Home*: the partly-destroyed traditional courtyard house (*sihe yuan*) tenanted by the protagonist Xiaoshan. In *Xiao Wu*, there is an implicit thread of demolition (in fact, Jia's filming of *Xiao Wu* was motivated by the impending large scale demolition in Jia's hometown Fenyang[27]). In *Platform*, ruins are the vast expanse of barren hills in the coal country which has almost become a wasteland due to excessive coal mining. Then in *Unknown Pleasures*, characters ride a motorcycle or walk through rubble and ruins in the declining industrial city Datong. Apart from human beings, ruins in *Unknown Pleasures* are totally devoid of signs of life. Finally, Jia demonstrates perhaps the extreme form of ruin in *Still Life*: a 2000-year-old city will become a wasteland within only two years. To present the radical change from a live city to a pile of debris, ruins in the film is

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[27] Jia Zhangke, *Jia zhangke guxiang sanbuqu: Xiao Wu* (Jia Zhangke's hometown trilogy: *Xiao Wu*), p.3.

represented in a formalist way into which Jia inserts a number of fantastical elements and surreal effects.

Still Life centers on two natives of Shanxi, coalminer Han Sanming and nurse Shen Hong, both coming to Fengjie to look for their respective long-separated spouses. The two juxtaposed narratives unfold independently. Both protagonists wander around the ruins of the city which are about to be submerged by the rising waters. Finally, Han Sanming reunites with his ex-wife and decides to resume their marriage, while Shen Hong asks for a divorce after finding her husband. Leaving their (and also Jia's) familiar hometown, Han Sanming and Shen Hong are two strangers to Fengjie. Through the perspectives of these two strangeres we are able to gaze at the ruined region of the Three Gorges and experience a defamiliarizing effect — a technique used to increase the challenge and length of our perception of the ruins in the film.[28] In certain sense, all film defamiliarizes the reality represented in other films, yet among those Chinese films involving the ruin image, *Still Life* is undoubtedly the one with a "high-coefficient" of *defamiliarisation*. This is because vast ruins are placed in the novel context of a soon-to-be submerged town and are part of an unfamiliar formal pattern of the interweaving both realist and surrealist representations.[29] Thus, *Still Life* strongly challenges our habitual and automatic perception of ruins established in other Chinese

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[28] Victor Shaklovsky, "Art as Technique," in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. and eds. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965, p.12.
[29] Kristin Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988, p.11.

films such as Zhang Yuan's *Seventeen Years* and Zhang Yang's *Shower* (*Xizao*, 1999).[30]

The effect of defamiliarization in *Still Life* is achieved in two significant ways. The first is the prominent surrealism, which mirrors the director's intricate perception and perplexity about China's unprecedented transitions. Highlighting *Still Life*'s defamiliarizing effect, Jia elegantly weaves several unexpectedly surreal visual phenomena into the realist narrative of the two main characters. The representation of fantasy and bizarre phenomena further lead us to question the very realist look of the film. According to Jia, he moves from the pure realist style to occasional touches of surreal elements in *Still Life* for the changes to the landscape "had occurred so fast and on such a large scale" that they are beyond our understanding, "as if a nuclear war or an extraterrestrial had done it."[31] In the scene of the demolition site where Han Sanming works, a crew of sanitation workers wearing hermetic protective clothes and masks suddenly appears. They walk across piles of rubble and devastated buildings while spraying disinfectant chemicals around. Their eccentric suits and movements create a feeling of absurdity which is intensified by the uncanny electronic soundtrack. In the deserted rooms they move through, there are still remnants of the former residents such as a calligraphy scroll, a poster of a pop star, a certificate of merit on the walls, and potted plants on a balcony. These traces bear testimony to the past lives here. Jia's cinematic

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[30] For more detailed discussion of the demolish theme in these films, see Yomi Braester, *Painting the City Red: Chinese Cinema and the Urban Contract*, Duke University Press, 2010, pp.257-280.
[31] An interview with Jia Zhangke, see http://filmlinc.com/index.php/film-comment-2012/article/jia-zhangke-interview [accessed 23 December, 2012]

representation of ruins resonate with Chinese photographic artist Rong Rong's "Ruin Pictures1996-1998," many of which are close-ups of tattered images of stars such as Marilyn Monroe and family portraits left on the walls of half-destroyed traditional houses. Rong Rong's representation of the remaining pin-up posters in ruins discovers a kind of new space between the private and the public and new time between past and future, grasping the transient moment of here-and-now in contemporary China. In *Still Life* these mysterious sanitation workers, who seem to come from an utterly different space–time continuum, are eliminating the last signs of life as well as fragmented memories in the ruin. Their professional suits and equipment indicate that they belong to a more advanced stage — a modernized stage. Representing scientific and instrumental rationality, they aim to wipe out all what they think as dirt and backwardness, like the memories and traces of past everyday lives, thus creating a brand-new utopian future disconnected from the past. The sanitation workers, to some extent, are the embodiment of Chinese official discourse on the Three Gorges Project, in which the submerged old town and a million people's loss of their homes are overridden by the alleged achievements of modernization represented by the Three Gorges Project.

(Figure 5.1)   (Figure 5.2)
Figure 5.1 and 5.2   *Still Life* (*Sanxiao haoren*, Jia Zhangke, 2003)

(Figure 5.3)   (Figure 5.4)

Figure 5.3 and 5.4   *Untitled* (*Ruin Pictures 1996-1998*, Rong Rong)

In the scene where the film switches from the narrative of Han Sanming to that of

Shen Hong's, a gleaming UFO quietly flashes through the overcast sky and draws the two

protagonists' attention when in different parts of Fengjie they look at the splendid

landscape of the Three Gorges. Surprisingly, Han Sanming and Shen Hong are not

astounded by what has happened and accept it very calmly as if "surrealism is a crucial

part of China's reality."[32]   As a higher existence, the UFO witnesses the dramatic changes

occurring in China's everyday life, the grotesque and incredible reality beyond our

understanding. The submerged old town, the loss of memory, and individual joys and

sorrows, all are connected to the entire universe. Jia's *Still Life* in this sense rejects the

official grand narrative which magnifies the "modernized project" while downplays

individual life and emotion, as exemplified in the government's propagandist slogan

"given up small families' good to attain the interests of the whole nation" (*she xiaojia wei*

dajia).

A more striking scene later in the story of Shen Hong suggests that surrealism not

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[32] Ibid.

only stems from certain external forces like the UFO, but also is an inherent part of China's reality today. In a still night, without drawing any attention from the residents living nearby, a strangely structured building which is already sufficiently surreal on its own abruptly launches skyward like a rocket. This bizarre looking derelict building is an incomplete monument named "Hua Tower" (*Huazi ta*) because it was built in the shape of the traditional Chinese character "Hua" (華). It was erected as a monument to the more than million people moved out of the Three Gorges region for the dam construction. When Jia Zhangke shot *Still Life* in Fengjie, the construction of Hua Tower was suspended due to lack of money.[33] Thus, the scene becomes a joke, or more precisely, a scorching satire that Jia adds to reality. To use a monument to embody the immeasurable emotional and physical sacrifices that Fengjie people made for the Three Gorges Project is as ludicrous as the ugly monument itself. Furthermore, according to Hua Tower's designer, Hua symbolizes Chinese civilization which some argue originated in the Yangtze River basin. In this light, Hua Tower's vanishing in *Still Life* could be interpreted as the uprooting of Chinese traditional culture in the process of China's modernization.

Spatial destruction and temporal compression in the everyday life of Fengjie before the deluge engender a kind of spatial-temporal disorder manifested in another surreal scene. In a scene of a shabby restaurant amid the ruins, the film slowly pans from Han Sanming standing by the windows, to three Sichuanese opera characters in full costume

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[33] In 2008, two years after *Still Life* was shot, the monument was demolished to allow for commercial development after the land where it was located was sold to a real-estate company. Jia's joke turned out to be reality. See http://news.china.com/zh_cn/domestic/945/20081124/15202152.html [accessed on 26 December, 2012]

sitting around a table. Their facial masks show that they are three legendary heroes from *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo Yanyi*): Liu Bei, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, who established the Kingdom of Shu (during the period of the Three Kingdoms, Fengjie was part of Shu and well-known for being the place of Liu Bei's death in the 3rd century). Sitting bored, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei are playing mobile-phone games and Liu Bei is staring blankly. In fact, earlier in the film, we already saw the TV version of these figures in the cheap China Inn room where Han Sanming and other demolition workers live. The camera movement of panning from right to left places Han Sanming, alongside Liu Bei, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, who should belong to a totally different space-time, into the same cinematic space. Such juxtaposition highlights the sharp contrast and cultural rupture between the two kinds of characters, between history and reality, and between past and present. In the ruins of reality, instead of pursuing the great achievement of establishing their own country as they did two thousand years ago, these historical heroes are captured in a sense of emptiness and powerlessness. What they are doing is only fighting in the virtual world of the video game. From the ancient past to the present, and from stage and TV to reality, the appearance of these historical figures indicates that the twist of space leads to a temporal twist, and time in Fengjie becomes disorientated and unreal. In another scene, twisted time is also suggested by a string of watches and clocks hung on the wall of the apartment of the archaeologist Wang Dongming each of which displays a different time. When a city is heading towards its end of time, events of different time (chronology) are transformed into synchronicity — unrelated events occur

together.

Still Life closes with another surreal moment. In order to earn enough money to redeem his ex-wife, Han Sanming decides to go back to Shanxi and resume his high-risk work in coal mining. Before departure, he looks back at the vast ruins of Fengjie and glimpses a distant solitary figure walking a tightrope stretched between two devastated buildings. It is easy to link the tightrope walker to his observer, Han Sanming, whose future likewise hangs in the balance. From a larger perspective, it is also appropriate to read the shot as an embodiment of China today. As Ackbar Abbas comments, China "is on a tightrope between two moments: on the one hand, a communist past that has gone forever; on the other, fantasies of the future…the not-yet-there, the as yet unrealized hope that the 21st century will prove to be the Chinese century."[34]

Coincidentally or not, set in the similar backdrop of a small city in the Three Gorges area, another Sixth-Generation filmmaker Zhang Ming's film *Rainclouds over Wushan* (aka *In Expectation*, *Wushan yunyu*, 1996) also shares these post-realist aesthetics. *Rainclouds over Wushan* has a seemingly realist look: natural lighting, hand-held shots, long takes, simultaneous sound recordings, and non-professional actors. However, Zhang Ming uses these realist techniques to create a post-realist cinematic world in which the protagonists "traverse both the natural (conscious) and supernatural (unconscious) worlds,"[35] the line between these worlds so ambiguous that we cannot really tell what is

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[34] Ackbar Abbas, "Poor theory and new Chinese cinema: Jia Zhangke's *Still Life*," see
http://www.humanities.uci.edu/critical/pdf/AbbasPoorTheoryStillLife.pdf [accessed on 10 January, 2013]
[35] Nick Kaldis, "Submerged Ecology and Depth Psychology in *Wushan yunyu*: Aesthetic Insight into National

real and what is imaginary. Both *Still Life* and *Rainclouds over Wushan* indicate the Sixth-Generation filmmakers' common pursuit in filmmaking: seeking not only to mirror the physical world of ever-changing reality, but also to use diverse film techniques and devices to delineate a subjective world undergoing dramatic change.[36]

Aside from the surreal visual elements and supernatural phenomena, *Still Life* re-enforces its defamiliarizing effect by representing interactions and mystical connections between individuals and ruins. And the effect further generates a very distinctive space of ruins falling between private and public space, a kind of space which is seldom seen in previous Chinese cinematic representations of ruins. Usually, ruins are closely associated with destruction and decay, and they are dead space having nothing to do with life and living. However, *Still Life* reveals another side of ruins: ruins possess a kind of vitality when they interact with man. In the film, in order to stay in Fengjie and wait for his wife, Han Sanming temporarily makes a living by working with a group of migrant workers demolishing buildings. They pull down massive ruined buildings and smash them into piles of debris. Those dying ruins become vibrant in the process of demolition. At one point, from the viewpoint of Han Sanming, the partly-demolished building suddenly moves — a wall collapses and bricks fall, without anyone in the shot. Apart from the residential ruins in the part of Han Sanming, massive socialist industrial

Development," in Sheldon H. Lu and Jiayan Mi, eds., *Chinese Ecocinema*, p.64.

[36] *Rainclouds over Wushan* is a good example of the Sixth Generation's early cinematic practice of non-realism. Limited to the length of this section, I cannot undertake a close reading of it. For an in-depth aesthetic analysis of the film, see Nick Kaldis, "Submerged Ecology and Depth Psychology," in Sheldon H. Lu and Jiayan Mi, eds., *Chinese Ecocinema*, pp.57-72.

wreckage and deserted factory workshops are shown in the part of Shen Hong. These industrial wreckage and dilapidated factory continue to take central role in Jia's next film *24 City*, a feature focusing on a large state-owned enterprise's glorious past and desolate present. In *Still Life* Jia's representation of the relics of the abandoned factory, the still lives seems to be alive — a rusted pipe drips water as if resisting the passing of time. Several workers are dismantling the huge cylinders and pipes in the factory. But compared to the gigantic machinery, these workers' arduous work does not seem to bring any change except to make noise.

Meanwhile, the bodies of people working and living in ruins in *Still Life* burst with a kind of absurd yet astonishing vitality. In his study of Chinese contemporary arts on the theme of demolition, Wu Hung remarks that a demolition site "belongs to no one because the breakdown it effects between private and public space does not generate a new space… [and it] signifies a kind of 'non-space' outside normal life."[37] Ruins in Jia's *Still Life* also register as a non-space which is neither public nor private and caters for the basic social and biological needs of the lower class. In a scene, a bare-chested, skinny teenage boy sings a vulgar love song "Mouse Loves Rice" (*Laoshu ai dami*) at the top of his lungs. As this kid strolls in the partly-dismantled housing, the camera pans over a group of residents as they gamble, cook and eat. Sex certainly is a necessary component of their everyday life in the ruins. A local woman leads the outsider Han Sanming to the

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[37] Wu Hung, *Making History: Wu Hung on Contemporary Art*. Time zone 8 Ltd, 2008, p.18

inner part of a ruined building. It shows that the inhospitable, decayed apartment serves its inhabitants, several rural married women, as a place to sell their bodies. Jia's representation of ruins deviates from the way we perceive them in films since the early 1990s such as Zhang Yang's *Shower*. *Shower* establishes a connection between human's weakened bodies and a dilapidated Beijing bathhouse. The film explicates the inevitable death of both the elderly and ruined bathhouse from which the next generation must emerge. Thereby "ruins have become a locus for looking to the future."[38] In contrast, ruins in Jia's *Still Life* are devoid of such a dimension of social progress and survival. They are neither an embodiment of death nor a sign of possible development and progress they are, instead, liminal space that only exists in the present moment.

Jia Zhangke's defamiliarized ruins can be included in the genealogy of aestheticised ruins which are exemplified in a wide range of contemporary Chinese arts such as photography, painting and film. The shared concern among Chinese artists and filmmakers for ruins as a new aesthetic spatial form and an embodiment of social transformation has produced some similar representation through diverse artistic mediums. For example, almost around the same time as Jia's *Still Life*, Chinese mainland artist Yang Yi's surreal photography series *Uprooted* (*Mo guli*, 2007) resonate with Jia's representation of ruins in *Still Life*.

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[38] Jami Proctor-Xu, "Sites of Transformation: The Body and Ruins in Zhang Yang's *Shower*," in Fran Martin and Larissa Heinrich, eds., *Embodied Modernities: Corporeality, Representation, and Chinese Cultures*, University of Hawai'i Press, 2006, p.163

<div align="center">(Figure 5.5)   (Figure 5.6)</div>

Figure 5.5   *Old Town of Kaixian: Courtyard on Cross Street* (*Uprooted #4*, photograph, Yang Yi, 2007)

Figure 5.6   *Old Town of Kaixian: Nanjiao, Dormitory on Ring Road* (*Uprooted #12*, photograph, Yang Yi, 2007)

Moreover, in *Still Life* ruins are also a projection of people's psychological trauma. In Jerome Silbergeld's discussion of the Fourth-Generation filmmaker Wu Yigong's film *My Memories of Old Beijing*, he argues that "the concept of 'ruins' need not be limited to the aesthetic products of human creativity (toppled architecture, fragmented stelae, whatever) but ought to include humans themselves, who are after all the first ingredient in any definition of culture and are just as vulnerable to decay and destruction."[39] In the stories of both Han Sanming and Shen Hong a disabled middle-aged man's mutilated body implicitly alludes to the socialist industrial wreckage of the factory he had worked in, as well as the predicament of state-owned enterprise reform. The quarrel between the man's sister and the factory director shows that the man's disability is related to the state-owned enterprise's bankruptcy and privatization. Moreover, the man's injury inevitably results in a traumatic experience for his whole family. As a disabled laid-off worker, the man cannot make a living but has to acquiesce in his wife's prostitution in

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[39] Jerome Silbergeld, *China into Film*, p.70.

order to survive. In fact, emotional ruination of human subjects is a central theme in *Still Life*. Trauma, for Han Sanming, is the lost connection for sixteen years with his ex-wife and daughter. For Shen Hong, it is her marriage being in name only. Thus, Fengjie's massive ruins have become a visible embodiment of the characters' psychological trauma and anxiety. After her preliminary search for her husband fails, Shen Hong walks from the noisy street into a deserted building. It seems that the devastated ruin rather than the lively street is where she can feel comfortable at that moment of disappointment. Similarly, Han Sanming and his wife appear in a partly-destroyed building as she sends him off shortly after their bitter reunion. While they are enjoying a rare sweet moment of sharing toffees, a high-rise is suddenly blasted with a tremendous noise into a huge heap of debris. In this scene, as Abbas notes, "the present instant becomes so readily the instant past."[40] The reconfiguration of the temporality thus makes the future become uncertain, with no exception made for the couple. Han Sanming and his wife's feelings of extreme confusion and anxiety about the future are mirrored by the ruined buildings.

In *Still Life*, material artifacts occasionally have a mysterious linkage with people's emotional states. As soon as Shen Hong learns that her husband is having an affair with another woman, a junction box on the wall suddenly short-circuits. This uncanny communication and connection between human being and ruined space is akin to the traditional trope of empathy in Chinese classical aesthetics which individuals and their

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[40] Ackbar Abbas, "Poor theory and new Chinese cinema".

environment interactively have with each other. In this regard, Jia's representation subjectifies space in its relationship with human subject, showing space as a key component in the construction of human subjectivity. Thus, the unprecedented scale of destruction brings perplexity, alienation and disorientation to the identities of individuals.

Furthermore, by applying diverse traditional Chinese aesthetics and artistic techniques, Jia Zhangke creates an allegorical dimension for *Still Life*, through which the film departs from merely recording reality, and makes Fengjie a symbol of the bigger story of China. Following the traditional Chinese cosmology of *yin-yang* Jia, in terms of narrative, chose one male and one female as the film's protagonists. He also borrows from the classical narrative mode of the martial arts story — a swordsman comes from a distant place to solve a problem, then leaves. Visually, *Still Life* owes debts to traditional Chinese painting. This tradition, as Corey Byrnes notes is "characterized as nonmimetic and nonrealistic, far more concerned with essences than appearance, spirit than matter."[41] The traditional concept significantly contributes to the post-realist aesthetics of *Still Life*. The film opens with a gliding long left to right panning across the passengers on a crowded Yangtze ferry, rendering a visual effect much like the unrolling of the horizontal expanse of a traditional scroll painting. In several scenes the cinematic representation of the magnificent natural landscape of Three Gorges likewise evokes Chinese brush-and-ink landscape painting characterized by the prominence of blue and green and the use of

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[41] Corey Bynes, "Specters of realism and the painter's gaze in Jia Zhangke's *Still Life*." *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 24, no.2 (2012), 54.

empty space. In terms of soundtrack, the arias from the Sichuan opera *Lin Chong's Night Flight* (*Lin Chong yeben*) in both the opening and closing sequences add a strong local feature to the film. To some extent, *Still Life* is an elegy written in a traditional way to bid farewell to that tradition. Witnessing China's increasing detachment from its own past and traditions, Jia implicitly articulates his melancholy through using a line by the character Brother Mark in John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow*: "Present-day society does not suit us because we are too nostalgic."

From some specific diegetic elements we can also see Jia's use of Fengjie to symbolize China. The small inn where Han Sanming and his co-workers stay is named *Tangren Ge* (China Inn). Han and the local workers show each other their respective ancestral hometowns on RMB notes: Hukou Falls and Kuimen, the respective symbols of the two sources of Chinese civilization —Yangtze River culture and Yellow River culture. Fengjie or Three Gorges in Jia's *Still Life*, as contemporary Chinese poet Ouyang Jianghe remarks, "becomes the common hometown of the Chinese."[42] What Chinese people confront today is the hometown we are no longer familiar with, the hometown that has been turned into ruins, the hometown to which we can never return. In *The World* and *Still Life* Jia relinquishes the local perspective used in his hometown trilogy. This is largely because such perspective becomes simply impossible when the undergoing huge changes across China have made Chinese become strangers to their own homeland. We

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[42] Li Tuo et al., "*Sanxia haoren: Guli, bianqian yu Jia Zhangke de xianshi zhuyi*" (*Still Life*: Hometown, changes and Jia Zhangke's realism), *Dushu* (Reading), no.2 (2007), 11.

can only gaze, like Han Sanming and Shen Hong, at this ruined land in change as outsiders.

In Jia's post-realist representation of the transformation of post-socialist China, ruins become a peculiar space that embodies the characteristic of that transformation: it belongs neither to the past, nor to the future. With suspended spatiality and temporality, it only exists in the present moment as transitional and intermediate condition.[43] Ruins as a luminal space, in this sense, become an appropriate metaphor for the contemporary Chinese cultural landscape of neither-here-nor-there. Together with the simulated space Jia portrays in *The World* that I analyzed in the previous section, these two kinds of space constitute the basic spatial form in post-socialist China.

Challenging or Validating the Documentary Genre? **:** *Photography and Self-reflexivity in* **24 City**

Following *Still Life*, Jia Zhangke's 2008 film *24 City* again focuses on a disappearing giant — the state-owned Chengfa Group which is also known as Factory 420, after its military code number. Located in Chengdu, the provincial capital of Sichuan, Factory 420 was founded in the 1950s. It was a top-secret manufacturer of military aviation engines, and is about to be demolished and relocated to the outskirts of the city to make room for the development of an up-scale residential, business and shopping complex — 24 City.

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[43] Wu Hung, *Making History*, p.18.

The narrative of *24 City* functions as an oral history. It weaves the testimonies of three generations of factory workers to trace the past 50 years of Factory 420 and to show its sombre present. All the stories of these witnesses allude to a series of significant historical events after the establishment of the PRC. These include the Korean War, Mao's Third Front strategy, the three years of famine, the Sino-Vietnamese War (1979) and state-owned enterprises reform. *24 City* shows Jia's ambition to use the Factory 420, a self-contained compound, as a microcosm of China. Its rise and decline mirrors the on-going political and economic changes from a Communist state to a consumer, capitalist entity, and the shift of ideology from collectivism to individualism.

More than this, Jia's ambition also lies in his formalist exercises in *24 City*. Categorizing the film into the documentary genre is quite questionable because four of the eight interviewees are played by professional actors, Lü Liping, Chen Jianbin, Joan Chen and Jia's regular Zhao Tao who are all famous on Chinese screens. Their lines are composites, extracted from more than 130 interviews of real workers at Factory 420. This typical self-reflexive technique makes Jia's film an unusual hybrid of fiction and documentary. This is rarely seen in Chinese cinema but can also be found in another Sixth-Generation director's film — Zhang Yang's *Quitting* (*Zuotian,* 2001).[44] Another film that also needs to be mentioned here is female director Tang Xiaobai's *Perfect Life*

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[44] In *Yesterday*, the actors all play themselves in their own staged lives. Nevertheless, the film keeps reminding viewers that what they see is not the real fact but mediated fiction. For example, the fictitiousness of the film is revealed when a pull-back shot shows that the protagonist's apartment is set on a stage. At a point the film turns into theatre performance when characters go into a monologue on a stage in black.

(*Wanmei shenghuo*, 2008), produced by Jia Zhangke and made in the same year as *24 City*. Tang's film weaves a documentary narrative with a fictional narrative. It is hard to disassociate Tang's *Perfect Life* from the impact of its producer Jia Zhangke. Jia's *24 City* goes further in parodying the form of documentary, and can be identified as mockumentary, a fiction film masquerading as a documentary.

As one of few contemporary Chinese directors engaged in the practice of both genres of documentary and fiction filmmaking (Zhang Yuan is another prominent figure as mentioned in the previous chapter), Jia's began to explore the documentary style from the very start of his filmmaking career. His student debut *One Day in Beijing* is a documentary, followed by *Public Space* (*Gonggong changsuo*, 2001), *Dong* (*Dong*, 2006) and *Useless* (*Wuyong*, 2007). According to Jia, documentary serves as an experimental field for his discovery of the possibility of the film form:

> Primarily, documentary is my professional need. To be honest, I have always shot documentaries not in order to look into real life but to continually renew my understanding of the film medium. Documentary itself is very open, without a fixed mode, and it always allows me to reflect on what film is.[45]

Indeed, Jia has made some innovative efforts in this genre, and the fusion of the documentary approach and dramatic fiction Jia's *24 City* is one of the most significant efforts. In the early interviews of real workers, the fictional representation in fact is already embedded in the realist narrative. The interview of Guan Fengjiu, former head of security at the factory, is set in an empty auditorium. As he talks, the deep-focus shot

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[45] Wang Xiaolu, an interview with Jia Zhangke, see
http://www.china.com.cn/culture/txt/2009-04/27/content_17681085_4.htm [accessed on 15 February, 2013]

shows that in the background two men are playing badminton onstage against a drop-cloth of the Great Wall with missiles on one side and military aeroplanes on the other. Soon, the film cuts from the interviewee to a full shot of the two men at play. This particular interview environment is designed as a metaphor for what the interviewee says about the confrontation between nations during the Cold War. It also implies the director's ironic and playful commentary on history: the tense situation between China and the West, which resulted in the large-scale relocation of military enterprises including the Factory 420, seems more like a game today. But because of such a "game," the lives of millions of people have totally been changed.

As the fourth interviewee Hao Dali (played by Lü Liping) appears, the nature of the film as a mockumentary surfaces (at least to Chinese viewers, who will recognize the actress), and the director takes us on a journey from the real to the artificial. Hao Dali narrates her tearful story of abandoning the search for her lost child for the sake of the factory's secret transfer. Being in poor health, Hao Dali holds an IV fluid bottle when walking past the dilapidated apartments of the factory. She passes two warplanes displayed in a square of the compound, showing the past achievements of Factory 420. Regardless of her glorious past as a role model, the woman who has devoted her entire life to the Communist factory shares a common bleak fate with Factory 420. Her criticism of a young office worker wearing make-up at work and the propaganda drama she watches about air warfare illustrate the profound and lasting impact of the bygone ideology of collectivism that has kept working on this individual's life.

To the younger generation workers Song Weidong (played by Chen Jianbin) and

Xiaohua (played by Joan Chen), youth and love are shared subject matters. The two

workers' past and present are also deeply and inextricably entwined with the fate of the

factory. In one scene, Xiaohua, as a member of the factory's amateur Shaoxing opera

troupe, plays Lin Daiyu, the tragic heroine of the Chinese literary classic *Dream of the

Red Chamber*. She sings two arias *Angel Sister Lin from Heaven* (*Tianshang diaoxia ge

Lin meimei)* and *Daiyu Buries Fallen Flowers* (*Daiyu zanghua*), which Jia uses as an

explication for the character's own circumstances — the beauty and youth she had once

owned and has now lost. In this sense, Factory 420 becomes Xiaohua's "Grand View

Garden" (*Daguan Yuan*), undergoing a historical process from past prosperity to present

depression and dilapidation. In the interview with Xiaohua in a hair salon, Xiaohua

recollects her romantic disappointments after she became a worker at Factory 420 in the

late 1970s. The most self-reflexive moment in the film is when Xiaohua says she was

dubbed Xiaohua (Little Flower) by her fellow workers because of her resemblance to the

eponymous heroine of a 1979 Chinese film, a role that made the teenaged Joan Chen a

star in China. More than that, director Jia Zhangke himself also takes a playful part in this

post-modern joke of "Joan Chen looks like Joan Chen," by asking through voice-over for

Xiaohua's real name. In fact, this kind of interaction between fictional interviewee and

interviewer has already appeared in the way of giving comment and answering question

in the interviews with Lü Liping and Chen Jianbin. At these points, instead of remaining

behind the camera, Jia Zhangke intentionally accentuates his presence, as an actor outside

of the frame, and playfully "undermines the objective stance taken by documentary, and challenges the audience to move beyond narrow conceptions of truth."[46] *24 City*, as a mockumentary, reflects Jia's conception of alternative history: "History consists of fact and fiction. It does not mean a faithful record [of what happened]. Instead, it includes fiction."[47] Jia's parody of the documentary genre illustrates his challenge in the realist ontology of documentary and the assumed fact/fiction dichotomy between documentary and fiction film. In his next documentary *I Wish I Knew* (2010), an oral history of Shanghai in the twentieth century, Jia keeps exploring documentary's possibility of being integrated with fictional elements and re-defining the genre by inserting an anonymous woman (played by Zhao Tao) between the narrative of various interviewees' recollections of their Shanghai stories. The angst-ridden woman roams Shanghai's riverbank, streets and landmarks. She bears no relevance to those interviewees as well as to the stories they tell, serving not only as the other of those celebrities' "Shanghai legends" but also as a fictional other of the non-fiction narrative of the film itself.

To challenge the ontology of the film medium which lies in its photographic presentation of images, Jia Zhangke goes even further by seeking to make a film that "returns to words." In Jia's view, words sometimes can express people's complex feelings more accurately than images. Words in *24 City* not only include ordinary words but also a

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[46] Jane Roscoeand and Craig Hight, *Faking It: Mock-Documentary and the Subversion of Factuality*, Manchester University Press, 2001, p.182.
[47] Wu Guanping, an interview with Jia Zhangke, "*Xunzhao ziji de dianying zhi mei: Jia Zhangke fangtan*" (In search of the beauty of my films: An interview with Jia Zhangke), *Dianying yishu* (Film Art), no.6 (2006), 74.

diversity of poems. This is largely because the celebrated woman poet Zhai Yongming,

also a Chengdu native, participated in the film as Jia's co-writer. These poems, quotations

from William Butler Yeats and contemporary Chinese poets Ouyang Jianghe and Wan Xia,

are occasionally presented as captions as the film cuts to black from scenes of workers'

laboring in workshops or of characters' interviews. They divide the film into several

chapters, and become annotations of reality and of the characters' life experiences.

In *24 City*, Jia blurs the boundary between documentary and drama to undermine

documentary's claim to recording the facts, as analyzed above. On the other hand,

however, Jia constantly validates the conventional recording function of documentary by

presenting what is on-going at present — the industrial units being dismantled and

relocated while the new commercial complex is under construction. The most

representative example of the recording nature of documentary is the recurring panoramic

shots of the factory compound's front gate. There are six shots of this gate in total

throughout *24 City*, from the first one of a massive influx of workers in blue uniforms

under the sign of the Chengfa Group to the last one with the sign replaced by Huarun·24

City. These shots visually suggest the different stages of the transition from Factory 420

to the commercial complex 24 City, calling to mind the Lumière brothers' *Workers*

Leaving the Lumière Factory in Lyon (1905) — the origin of film history as well as the

beginning of documentary aesthetics. They underscore the ontological realism of the film

medium in Bazin's sense and Kracauerian reassertion of film's intrinsic ability to record

physical reality. Moreover, Jia even demonstrates the recording nature of documentary in

a quite extreme way that traces back to the foundation of the film medium —

photography. Some shots in the film are portrait photographs of one or a group of workers,

or their families. They stand, looking straight into the camera for a considerable length of

time. More than capturing pictures of people, Jia also presents some close-up still life

pictures such as of a work permit, an admission ticket and a food ticket, products of the

old centrally planned economy of Communist China. These can be seen as continuation

of the theme of Jia's last film *Still Life*. When representing the factory in the process of

dismantling and demolition, Jia's signature long takes and static shots leave the physical

world in front of the camera untouched and intact, as a gesture of pure recording and the

"time-image" in Deleuze's sense.[48]

The paradox of Jia's cinematic practice in *24 City* is: on the one hand, Jia believes in

the documentary's capacity to record the physical world and preserve personal and

collective memory through the power of the image; on the other, he challenges the genre

by "'mock[ing]' the cultural status of documentary's generic codes and conventions,"[49]

and by using words instead of images to represent the characters' complex feelings.

However, not being well integrated, the above two opposing aspects sometimes

counteract each other. Some critics see Jia's parody of documentary as "pure film styling

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[48] In his books *Cinema 1* and *Cinema 2*, Gilles Deleuze distinguishes between two general types of images: the movement-image and the time-image. Deleuze uses movement-image to refer to the demonstration of time in the pre-war classical cinema of Hollywood in which the images proceed by rational incision and references. In contrast, time-image in some post-war films, for example in Italian neo-realist films, breaks down the narratological representation and linear order, providing direct manifestation of time.
[49] Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight, *Faking It*, p.47.

at the service of nothing."[50] Admittedly, *24 City* is not a film at his best, but it manifests

Jia's reflection on the limitations of the realist style of his early films. He aspires to infuse

reality, which itself is imbued with gritty power and complex ambiguity, with a more

subjective intervention and interpretation.

To some extent, Jia Zhangke's oeuvre can be seen as a filmic chronicle of over three

decades of China's post-socialist transformation since the end of Mao's era.

It is fair to say that the social change presented in Jia's early films is gradual rather than

radical, and its great impact on the interpersonal relationship of ordinary people,

especially the lower class, just sneaks in. The story is very different at the time when *The*

World, *Still Life* and *24 City* were made. China's unprecedented urbanization and

globalization have thoroughly changed both the material and invisible aspects of

contemporary society — the way the Chinese perceive the material world and their

psychological relation to the ever-shifting social milieu. Today's China is no longer the

mysterious closed country in Fifth-Generation films, but has become an entity being even

stranger than fiction as Jia represents in *Still Life*. Thus, these films not only present the

strange or surreal physical and social landscape of reality, but also, probably more

importantly, they capture the subjective feelings, sensibility and perplexity of individuals.

 As matter of fact, aetheticized space, as a significant feature of Jia's post-realist

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[50] Derek Elley, "24 City," *Variety* 411, no.2, (May 26-Jun 1, 2008), 23.

aesthetics, also shows its trace in previous cinematic exploration. The Fifth Generation filmmaker Huang Jianxin represents industrialized, geometric space in both his 1980s *The Black Cannon Incident* and *Dislocation*. Another Fifth Generation director Chen Kaige's film *King of the Children* (*Haizi wang*, 1987) constructs an unusual, superreal natural space with heightened artificiality. In both opening and closing scenes, for example, the weird tree stumps arouse a sense of the superreal. The changing colour of sky and hills, from red to blue, reinforces such a sense. In Chinese film of the 1930s and 1940s, the early prominent filmmakers Wu Yonggang's *The Waves Washing the Sand* (*Lang tao sha*, 1936) and Fei Mu's *Spring in a Small Town* (*Xiaocheng zhi chun*, 1948) also represent allegorical and symbolic space, deviating from conventional realist aesthetics. All these films open a line of continuity with the aestheticized space featured the contemporary post-realist aesthetics of the Sixth Generation, suggesting a connection beween post-realism, the newly developed aesthetics, and previous cinematic experiment with non-realist aesthetics.

On the other hand, post-realist aesthetics has begun to exert a significant impact on some younger filmmakers' cinematic practices. Tang Xiaobai's *Perfect Life* has been mentioned earlier. Han Jie, who was Jia's assistant in *The World*, *Still Life* and *Useless*, directed the feature *Hello, Mr. Tree* in 2011 with Jia serving as producer. The film tells a dark story of an underprivileged young peasant in northeastern China in an absurdist way combined with an otherwise realist representation. It owes great debts to Jia's post-realist aesthetics.

Jia Zhangke's own 2013 feature *A Touch of Sin* (*Tian zhu ding*) consists of four loosely interlocking chapters of violent incidents occurring in today's mainland China. The film is once again rife with post-realist elements, juxtaposing fiction with reality in moments of surreal fantasy. In one scene, the pattern of a tiger in a blanket suddenly turns into a roaring live animal when a protagonist, Dahai, gets ready to seek justice with his gun. In another fighting moment between the female protagonist Xiao Yu and her outrageous customer, the film breaks from the realist narrative and uses a quintessential shot of martial art film classics as if the violently resistant heroine is a swordswoman from a *wuxia* story. Drawing haunting martial-art classic and folklore into his cinematic vision, Jia continuously provides us with a post-realist representation of China's deeply troubled present of injustice, oppression and ruthlessness.

Epilogue

This thesis has mainly examined an innovative cinematic aesthetics of what I identify and describe as post-realism, a paradigm exemplified in a group of Sixth Generation films from the early 1990s. This aesthetics negotiates with the fundamental principle and scope of cinematic realism by incorporating non-realist devices, serving not only as an alternative to mainstream (and socialist) realism, but also to realism in contemporary Chinese cinema. As I have argued in the Introduction, post-realism is both an aesthetic product of the complexity of post-socialist conditions and an artistic response to the accelerated post-socialist transformation in China. The discussion of the seven films presented in the core of this thesis shows that post-realist cinematic representation provides a vantage point that the (post-socialist) realist representation cannot offer, from which to perceive the inner landscape of contemporary post-socialist Chinese society.

Though this study is triggered by post-realist aesthetics in Sixth Generation's films, I have not confined my discussion to this alternative aesthetics in the context of 1990s and 2000s Chinese film. Instead, this new aesthetic paradigm led me to adopt a retrospective perspective and a contextualizing approach to reflect on the undercurrent of alternative filmmaking practice beneath the surface of the dominance of (classic) realism in the history of Chinese cinema. Tracing its origins from the scattered pioneers in early films to the revival of non-realist filmmaking in the 1980s, this study has understood post-realism in a wider historical context and thus outlined a thin yet actual thread of alternative

aesthetics in Chinese cinema.

Instead of examining the alternative aesthetics in their own right, I have located this aesthetic in the dynamics of mainstream (realism)--alternative (non-realism) relationships. A historical overview of Chinese mainstream realist conventions and discourse indicates the dominant status of (melodramatic) realism and the hegemony of realist discourse in Chinese cinema. The discourse of realism, from the 1930s to 1976, had been constantly politicised, finally leading to its overpoliticisation in the Cultural Revolution. The reversing trend in which realist discourse has sought to rid itself of its overload of ideology and to restore its status as artistic aesthetics has lasted from the late 1970s to the present. Underlying the historical process of politicisation and depoliticisation is the essential contest between political heteronomy and artistic autonomy. In the immediate post-Mao era the revival of the non-realist aesthetic was almost synchronous with the shift of critical discourse in Chinese cinema from political heteronomy to artistic autonomy. It should be pointed out that although (post-socialist) realism and non-realism as manifested at the dawn of the New Era are two antithetic aesthetics as demonstrated in the Introduction, they can also be seen as two sides of the same coin, both resulting from (film) art's contending against political heteronomy and its ascribed status as a vehicle for propaganda.

(Post-socialist) realist filmmaking did not encounter much political obstruction in the 1980s due to its superficial resemblance to the official doctrine — socialist realism. In contrast, non-realism, as a more subversive aesthetic, was still disciplined by periodically

resurfacing political heteronomy. For example, Gao Xingjian's modernist drama *Bus Stop* (*Chezhan*) was banned in 1983, and in the late 1980s Huang Jianxin was under political pressure for making "absurdist" films such as *The Black Cannon Incident* and *Dislocation*.

In the post-Tiananmen era of the 1990s, with growing sociocultural openness and the development of the market economy, state heteronomy continuously declined, while artists' demands for artistic autonomy became bolder. With regard to documentary filmmaking, Wu Wenguang, a former journalist working for a provincial TV station, initiated a Chinese independent documentary movement in 1989 with his *Bumming in Beijing*: *The Last Dreamers* (*Liulang Beijing*: *Zuihou de mengxiangzhe*). Wu's groundbreaking documentary was made completely outside the state studio system. The film records a group of artists surviving in Beijing independently from the official system. Both Wu's own status as an independent filmmaker and his non-fictional representation of alienated artists reflect contemporary artists' striving for artistic autonomy. Following Wu's film, independent (fiction) filmmakers of the Sixth Generation such as Zhang Yuan, Wang Quan'an and Jia Zhangke, also chose in their early careers to make films outside China's state-run studio system in order to avoid the official censorship system. Holding on to artistic autonomy, these filmmakers kept their distance from the mainstream ideology as well as from the logic of the market. Aiming at a cultural elite rather than a mass audience, their early works including their realist films were generally art films featuring stylistic experimentation. As Hao Jian from the Beijing Film Academy suggests,

more than a realist style, the Sixth Generation's realism is rather a kind of stylized

realism.[1] What they really care about is not presenting the real reality in their films, but

displaying their own subjectivity and autonomy as independent artists. Therefore, it is not

surprising that a highly aestheticized representation which breaks the limits of cinematic

realism appears in their films, since this new aesthetic paradigm of post-realism aligns

with filmmakers' emphasis on artistic autonomy.

Aside from the seven main films examined in this thesis as well as some other

Sixth-Generation films I referred to previous chapters, post-realism has continued to

extend its influence and can be seen in a number of recent independent films and art films

with commitments to artistic autonomy. These films seem to be a little unfamiliar not only

to mass audiences but also to Chinese film researchers.[2] However, as in the case of the

Sixth Generation's early independent films, these artistically viable films have had little

influence among Chinese mass audiences. This is partly because most of these art-house

films only aim at small niche-market audiences, while a few cannot pass censorship due

to the sensitivity of the subject-matter. This raises the question: as an alternative aesthetic,

is post-realism limited to the cinematic practice of art-house films in contemporary

Chinese cinema?

In fact, Zhang Yuan's *Green Tea* has already shown that the answer to the above

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[1] Hao Jian, "*Andelie Bazan zai Zhongguo: Bei yanshuo yu bei xiaojie*" (André Bazin in China: Spoken of and forgotten), *Dangdai dianying* (Contemporary Film), no.4 (2008), 16.
[2] These films include: *How Is Your Fish Today?* (*Jintian de yu zenmeyang*, dir. Guo Xiaolu, 2006), *Good Cats* (*Haomao*, dir. Ying Liang, 2008), *Emperor Visits Hell* (*Tanghuang you difu*, dir. Li Luo, 2012), *Female Directors* (*Nü daoyan*, dir. Yang Mingming, 2012), *Useless Man* (*Tianjin xianren*, dir. Zheng Dasheng, 2012) and Jia Zhangke's 2013 fiction *A Touch of Sin* briefly discussed earlier.

question is no. As I showed, *Green Tea* was Zhang Yuan's third state-sanctioned film after his transformation from an underground filmmaker to an "aboveground" director, and was produced with the intention of achieving commercial success by appealing to mainstream audiences. Like Wang Quan'an's exploration in *Lunar Eclipse*, Zhang Yuan in *Green Tea* also tries to use the post-realist representation of ambigious women to show the atomized nature of life in a contemporary Chinese metropolis and the inner split and unstable identity of urbanites. However, what *Green Tea* really presents to audiences is men's stereotyped fantasies about women instead of women's self-exploration of their identity. Thus, *Green Tea* only repeats an old cliché about women, but in a stylish way. Zhang Yuan's own career trajectory, from making independent art films like *Beijing Bastards* and *East Palace, West Palace* in the 1990s to producing aestheticized commodities like *Green Tea* around 2000, also mirrors the striking trend of commercialization in Chinese cinema at the turn of the new millennium. In this trend, the artistic autonomy that Chinese filmmakers reclaimed from the state not long earlier was sold to the rapidly expanding market whose force is especially strong after China's entry into the WTO in 2001. It should be noted that a director may apply post-realist aesthetics in both commercial films and art-house films, and again Zhang Yuan can represent such a director. Following *Green Tea*, Zhang's next film *Little Red Flowers* is another post-realist art-house film with heightened symbolic images and surreal fantasy.

At the start of twentieth-first century, *Green Tea* was actually just one of a number of films that indicated post-realism was no longer an exclusive aesthetics for art film, but

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could also be applied for distinct commercial purposes.[3] The various stylish techniques

and non-conventional narratives such as self-reflexive voice-over, ambigous characters

and the insertion of animated sequences into otherwise live-action representation,

identified in Sixth Generation's art films in Chapters Three, Four and Five, also appear in

these pop-cultural commodities. These commercial films, though beyond the scope of this

thesis, offer interesting film texts for further study of the popularized post-realism against

the backdrop of China's increasingly postmodern and globalized conditions. In fact, in the

historical context in which commercialization has taken the place of political

instrumentalization in cultural production, Jason McGrath has already done some

illuminating preliminary research on these aestheticized cultural commodities.[4] McGrath

argues that the formalism of some commercial films "no longer pursues the logic of

artistic autonomy but rather often becomes mere ornamentation that distracts from and

substitutes for the lack of social content in the narrative it adorns."[5] Moreover, McGrath

points out that the aesthetics of these popular films is actually a global commodity in

rapid transnational flows. Although occasionally referred to in this thesis, McGrath's view

also requires further consideration to be given to the impact of international art film on

the post-realist aesthetics of Chinese Sixth-Generation film.

To sum up, the emergence of these stylish commercial films leads me to reconsider

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[3] An incomplete list of these commercial films is as follows: Feng Xiaogang's "New Year Film" (*hesui pian*) *Big Shot's Funeral* (*Dawan'r*, 2001), *Where Have All the Flowers Gone* (*Nashi huakai*, dir. Gao Xiaosong, 2002), *Dazzling, Rainbow* (*Wo xin feixiang*, dir. Gao Xiaosong, 2005), *PK. COM.CN* (*Pk. com.cn*, dir. Xiao Jiang, 2008), *Like A Dream* and *Lee's Adventure* (*Li Xianji lixian ji*, dir. Guo Fan and Li Yang, 2011).
[4] Jason McGrath, "The New Formalism: Mainland Chinese Cinema at the Turn of the Century," in Jie Lu, ed., *China's Literary and Cultural Scenes at the Turn of the 21st Century*, New York: Routledge, 2008, pp.207-221.
[5] Ibid., pp.220-221.

post-realism as a more neutral concept than the one I defined in the introductory chapter.

Post-realism, on the one hand, is capable of retaining a sense of history of rendering

subjective perception, while highlighting the existence of the auteur and drawing attention

to the film medium itself. On the other hand, a post-realist film can sometimes also be an

empty signifier, devoid of any social content, only leaving a fetish for form. Given the

current impetus toward the further commercialization and globalization of Chinese

cinema, post-realist aesthetics, which was once considered alternative, has become

increasingly integrated into mainstream Chinese cinema.

Filmography (listed in chronological order)

Features from mainland China:

Story of the South (*Nanguo zhi chun*, dir. Cai Chusheng, 1932)

Twin Sisters (*Zimei hua*, dir. Zheng Zhengqiu, 1933)

Reborn Flower (*Zaisheng hua*, dir. Zheng Zhengqiu, 1934)

The Waves Washing the Sand (*Lang tao sha*, dir. Wu Yonggang, 1936)

The Lianhua Symphony (*Lianhua jiaoxiangqu*, dir. Situ huimin et al., 1937)

Broken Dreams in the Women's Chamber (*Chungui duanmeng*, dir. Fei Mu, 1937)

Street Angel (*Malu tianshi*, dir. Yuan Muzhi, 1937)

Eight Thousand Li of Clouds and Moon (*Baqianli lu yun he yue*, dir. Shi Dongshan and
    Wang Weiyi, 1947)

Memories of the South (*Yi jiangnan*, dir. Ying Weiyun and Wu Tian, 1947)

The Spring River Flows East (*Yijiang chunshui xiang dong liu*, dir. Cai Chusheng and
    Zheng Junli, 1947 and 1948)

Myriad of Lights (*Wanjia denghuo*, dir. Shen Fu, 1948)

Spring in a Small Town (*Xiaocheng zhi chun*, dir. Fei Mu, 1948)

The Life of Wu Xun (*Wu Xun zhuan*, dir. Sun Yu, 1950)

Rhapsody of the Ming Tombs Reservoir (*Shisanling shuiku changxiangqu*, dir. Jin Shan,
    1958)

Malan Flower (*Malanhua*, dir. Pan Wenzhan and Meng Yuan, 1960)

Struggles in An Ancient City (*Yehuo chunfeng dou gucheng*, dir. Yan Jizhou, 1963)

Stage Sisters (*Wutai jiemei*, dir. Xie Jin, 1964)

Sparking Red Star (*Shanshan de hongxing*, dir. Li Jun and Li Ang)

Little Flower (Xiao hua, dir. Huang Jianzhong, 1979)

Reverberation of Life (*Shenghuo de chanyin*, dir. Teng Wenji, 1979)

Troubled Laughter (*Kunaoren de xiao*, dir. Yang Yanjin and Deng Yiming, 1979)

The Legend of Tianyun Mountain (*Tianyunshan chuanqi*, dir. Xie Jin, 1980)

Unrequited Love (*Kulian*, aka *The Sun and the Man*, dir. Peng Ning, 1980)

The Drive to Win (*Sha'ou*, dir. Zhang Nuanxin, 1981)

Neighbours (*Linju*, dir. Zheng Dongtian and Xu Rongming, 1981)

The Alley (*Xiaojie*, dir. Yang Yanjin, 1981)

The Herdsman (*Muma ren*, dir. Xie Jin, 1982)

Village in the City (*Dushi li de cunzhuang*, dir. Teng Wenji, 1982)

Probationary Lawyer (*Jianxi lüshi*, dir. Han Xiaolei, 1982)

Country Couple (*Xiangyin*, dir. Hu Bingliu, 1983)

Sunset Street (*Xizhaojie*, dir. Wang Haowei, 1983)

One and Eight (*Yige he bage*, dir. Zhang Junzhao, 1983)

Fogbound (*Wujie*, dir. Guo Baochang, 1984)

On the Hunting Ground (*Liechang zhasa*, dir. Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1984)

Memories of Old Beijing (*Chengnan jiushi*, dir. Wu Yigong, 1984)

The Black Cannon Incident (*Heipao shijian*, dir. Huang Jianxin, 1984)

The Yellow Earth (*Huang tudi*, dir. Chen Kaige, 1984)

Yamaha Fish Stall (*Yamaha yudang*, dir. Zhang Liang, 1984)

A Girl from Hunan (*Xiangnü Xiaoxiao*, dir, Xie Fei and Wu Lan, 1986)

Dislocation (*Cuowei*, dir. Huang Jianxin, 1986)

Hibiscus Town (*Furong zhen*, dir. Xie Jin, 1986)

The Mask (*Jialian*, dir. Zhang Jinbiao, 1986)

Visions from A Jail Cell (*Moku zhong de huanxiang*, dir. Wang Jixing, 1986)

In the Wild Mountains (*Ye shan*, dir. Yan Xueshu, 1986)

Death Visits the Living (*Yige sizhe dui shengzhe de fangwen*, dir. Huang Jianzhong, 1987)

King of the Children (*Haizi wang*, dir. Chen Kaige, 1987)

The Tribulations of A Young Master (*Shaoye de monan*, dir. Zhang Jianya and Wu Yigong, 1987)

Woman, Demon, Human (*Ren gui qing*, dir. Huang Shuqin, 1987)

Filmmakers (*Dianyingren*, dir. Ding Yinnan, 1988)

Red, White and Black Rooms (*Hong fangjian, baifangjian, heifangjian*, dir. Song Jiangbo, 1988)

Samsara (*Lunhui*, dir. Huang Jianxin, 1988)

Good Morning, Beijing (*Beijing ni zao*, dir. Zhang Nuanxin, 1990)

Judou (*Judou*, dir. Zhang Yimou and Yang Fengliang, 1990)

Mama (*Mama*, dir. Zhang Yuan, 1990)

Raise the Red Lantern (*Dahong denglong gaogao gua*, dir. Zhang Yimou, 1991)

Beijing Bastards (*Beijing zazhong*, dir. Zhang Yuan, 1993)

In the Heat of the Sun (*Yangguang canlan de rizi*, dir. Jiang Wen, 1993)

Mr. Wang's Burning Desire (*Wangxiansheng zhi yuhuo fenshen*, dir. Zhang Jianya, 1993)

Red Beads (*Xuanlian*, dir. He Jianjun, 1993)

Sanmao Joins the Army (*Sanmao congjun ji*, dir. Zhang Jianya, 1993)

Red Firecracker, Green Firecracker (*Pao da shuangdeng*, dir. He Ping, 1994)

Don't Be Young (*Weiqing shaonü*, dir. Lou Ye, 1995)

Postman (*Youchai*, dir. He Jianjun, 1995)

Weekend Lover (*Zhoumo qingren*, dir. Lou Ye, 1995)

East Palace, West Palace (*Donggong, xigong*, dir. Zhang Yuan, 1996)

Rain Clouds over Wu Mountain (aka *In Expection*, *Wushan yunyu*, dir. Zhang Ming,

    1996)

Sons (*Erzi*, dir. Zhang Yuan, 1996)

Temptress Moon (*Fengyue*, dir. Chen Kaige, 1996)

The Making of Steel (*Zhangda chengren*, dir. Lu Xuechang, 1997)

Xiao Wu (*Xiao Wu*, dir. Jia Zhangke, 1997)

Lunar Eclipse (*Yueshi*, dir. Wang Quan'an, 1999)

Seventeen Years (*Guonian huijia*, dir. Zhang Yuan, 1999)

Shower (*Xizao*, dir. Zhang Yang, 1999)

Suzhou River (*Suzhou he*, dir. Lou Ye, 1999)

Devils on the Doorstep (*Guizi laile*, dir. Jiang Wen, 2000)

Platform (*Zhantai*, dir. Jia Zhangke, 2000)

Beijing Bicycle (*Shiqisui de danche*, dir. Wang Xiaoshuai, 2001)

Big Shot's Funeral (*Dawan'r*, dir. Feng Xiaogang, 2001)

I Love Beijing (*Wo ai Beijing*, dir. Ning Ying, 2001)

Quitting (*Zuotian*, dir. Zhang Yang, 2001)

The Orphan of Anyang (*Anyang ying'er*, dir. Wang Chao, 2001)

Dazzling (*Huayan*, dir. Li Xin, 2002)

Hero (*Yingxiong*, dir. Zhang Yimou, 2002)

Unknown Pleasures (*Ren xiaoyao*, dir. Jia Zhangke, 2002)

Where Have All the Flowers Gone (*Nashi huakai*, dir. Gao Xiaosong, 2002)

Zhou Yu's Train (*Zhou Yu de huoche*, dir. Sun Zhou, 2002)

Blind Shaft (*Mang jing*, dir. Li Yang, 2003)

Green Tea (*Lücha*, dir. Zhang Yuan, 2003)

I Love You (*Wo ai ni*, dir. Zhang Yuan, 2003)

House of Flying Daggers (*Shimian maifu*, dir. Zhang Yimou, 2004)

The Story of Ermei (*Jingzhe*, dir. Wang Quan'an, 2004)

Rainbow (*Wo xin feixiang*, dir. Gao Xiaosong, 2005)

Shanghai Dream (*Qinghong*, dir. Wang Xiaoshuai, 2005)

The Promise (*Wuji*, dir. Chen Kaige, 2005)

The World (*Shijie*, dir. Jia Zhangke, 2005)

Curse of the Golden Flower (*Mancheng jindai huangjinjia*, dir. Zhang Yimou, 2006)

Trouble Makers (*Guangrong de fennu*, dir. Cao Baoping, 2006)

How Is Your Fish Today? (*Jintian de yu zenmeyang*, dir. Guo Xiaolu, 2006)

Little Red Flowers (*Kanshangqu henmei*, dir. Zhang Yuan, 2006)

Still Life (*Sanxia haoren*, dir. Jia Zhangke, 2006)

The Older Barber (*Titou jiang*, dir. Hasi Chaolu, 2006)

The Banquet (*Yeyan*, dir. Feng Xiaogang, 2006)

The Forest Ranger (*Tiangou*, dir. Qi Jian, 2006)

Blind Mountain (*Mang shan*, dir. Li Yang, 2007)

The Sun Also Rises (*Taiyang zhaochang shengqi*, dir. Jiang Wen, 2007)

Tuya's Marriage (*Tuya de hunshi*, dir. Wang Quan'an, 2007)

Good Cats (*Haomao*, dir. Ying Liang, 2008)

Perfect Life (*Wanmei shenghuo*, dir. Tang Xiaobai, 2008)

PK. COM.CN (*Pk. com.cn*, dir. Xiao Jiang, 2008)

24 City (*Ershisi cheng ji*, dir. Jia Zhangke, 2008)

I Wish I Knew (*Haishang chuanqi*, dir. Jia Zhangke, 2010)

Let the Bullets Fly (*Rang zidan fei*, dir. Jiang Wen, 2010)

Lee's Adventure (*Li Xianji lixian ji*, dir. Guo Fan and Li Yang, 2011)

Emperor Visits the Hell (*Tanghuang you difu*, dir. Li Luo, 2012)

Female Directors (*Nü daoyan*, dir. Yang Mingming, 2012)

Useless Man (*Tianjin xianren*, dir. Zheng Dasheng, 2012)

A Touch of Sin (*Tian zhu ding*, dir. Jia Zhangke, 2013)

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The Happy Reunion (*Xin zimei hua*, dir. Hu Peng, 1962)

Anna and Anna (*Anna yu Anna*, dir. Oi Wah Lam, 2007)

Like A Dream (*Ru meng*, dir. Clara Law, 2009)

Love on Credit (*Xingfu e'du*, dir. Cheng-Tao Chen, 2011)

Shadows of Love (*Yingzi airen*, dir. Yuen-Leung Poon, 2012)

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The Square (*Guangchang*, dir. Zhang Yuan and Duan Jinchuan, 1994)

Public Space (*Gonggong changsuo*, dir. Jia Zhangke, 2001)

Dong (*Dong*, dir. Jia Zhangke, 2006)

Useless (*Wuyong*, dir. Jia Zhangke, 2007)

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Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory in Lyon (*La sortie de l'usine Lumière à Lyon*,

    France, dir. Louis Lumière, 1895)

Stolen Life (U.K., dir. Paul Czinner, 1939)

The Great Dictator (U.S.A, dir. Charlie Chaplin, 1940)

Citizen Kane (U.S.A., dir. Orson Wells, 1941)

Shadow of a Doubt (U.S.A., dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1943)

Rashomon (*Rashômon*, Japan, dir. Akira Kurosawa, 1950)

Miracle in Milan (*Miracolo a Milano*, Italy, dir. Vittorio De Sica, 1951)

Strangers on a Train (U.S.A., dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1951)

Vertigo (U.S.A., dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1958)

Sisters, or the Balance of Happiness (*Schwestern oder Die Balance des Glücks*, Austria,
   dir. Margarethe von Trotta, 1979)

The Bad Sister (U.K., dir. Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, 1983)

The Double Life of Veronika (*La double vie de Véronique*, France, dir. Krzysztof
   Kieślowski, 1991)

Run Lola Run (*Lora Rennt*, Germany, dir. Tom Tykwer, 1998)

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