

**HOW EAST ASIAN FILMS
ARE RESHAPING NATIONAL IDENTITIES**

Moon, dir: Chen Kaige, 1996).

⁷ All references concerning the time line in this article are based on VCD versions of the movies using the VCD-software tool ShtSVCD 5.5 1999 created by Southern Liang.

⁸ It was used in a very similar manner in *Hongse niangzi jun* (*The Red Detachment of Women*, dir: Xie Jin, 1960), with an even more dramatic twist, when one of the workers is shot by a foreign guard because he moved too slowly.

⁹ Chen Xiaoming, "The Mysterious Other: Postpolitics in Chinese Film," in *Postmodernism & China*, ed. Art Dirlik and Zhang Xudong (Durham, London: Duke UP, 2000), pp.222-238.

¹⁰ Xiao Zhiwei, "The Opium War in the Movies: History, Politics and Propaganda," *Asian Cinema* 11 no.1 (Spring/Summer 2000): p.78.

¹¹ For this term, which was coined for contemporary Mainland Chinese filmmakers (5th Generation as well as Xie Jin) see Paul Pickowicz, "Velvet Prison and the political economy of Chinese filmmaking" in *Urban Spaces in Contemporary China*, ed. Deborah Davis (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), pp.193-220.

Chapter Three

Cinematic Representations of the Chinese Cultural Revolution

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Introduction

The assumption in this paper is that fictional films can be seen as agents that enhance our historical understanding. Believing that the interaction between film and history is too significant to be ignored,¹ this paper draws on the fields of history, philosophy, and literature, and is essentially an attempt to link film studies to its broadest historical interpretations.

The historical events examined here relate to the Chinese Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976. The films discussed are Chinese films made after the New Era, which begins with the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and the political comeback of Deng Xiaoping in 1977. The directors in this discussion are mainly the so-called Chinese Fifth Generation filmmakers who experienced and made movies about the Cultural Revolution. The Fourth and Sixth Generation films have also been examined for the purposes of comparison.

The Fifth Generation Directors and their Films

Chinese film directors have been divided into five major generations based on the artistic criteria of their work and the different stages of Chinese political and economic development in which they worked. The First Generation refers to the pioneer filmmakers in the silent film era of the 1920s and 1930s. The Second Generation includes the directors from the 1930s and 1940s, while the Third

Generation directors were active between the 1950s and 1960s. The Fourth is the lost generation who experienced the Cultural Revolution firsthand, and only got a chance to make films in the late 1970s and the early 1980s after the end of the Cultural Revolution. The Fifth Generation directors began to make films in the mid-1980s and most of them graduated from the Beijing Film Academy (BFA) in 1982. The Sixth Generation includes directors who began making films in the early 1990s, and they themselves experienced the Cultural Revolution in early childhood.²

The Fifth Generation mainly refers to Zhang Yimou (1950-), Chen Kaige (1952-), and Tian Zhuangzhuang (1952-), all of whom graduated from the Beijing Film Academy which was closed down in 1966 and re-opened in 1978 following the Cultural Revolution.³ They were born in the 1950s and grew up during the political turmoil of the 1960s. In the mid-1980s, this group of young directors faced a new political climate that created an unprecedented renaissance in Chinese cinema.

During the trauma of the Cultural Revolution, like millions of other youths, Chen, Zhang, and Tian were sent to the countryside as part of a nationwide movement for students to be educated by peasants. Thus the films made by these three directors mirror their responses to the Cultural Revolution and maintain a high level of personal commitment to the subject matter.

The Fifth Generation films examined here are Chen's *Ba wang bie ji* (*Farewell, My Concubine*, 1992), Tian's *Lan feng zheng* (*The Blue Kite*, 1993) and Zhang's *Huo zhe* (*To Live*, 1994). The three films have certain commonalities: firstly, an obsession with the Cultural Revolution and political events, secondly, critical acclaim received at international film festivals, and finally, censorship imposed by the Chinese government.

Chen Kaige's *Farewell, My Concubine*

Farewell, My Concubine is a drama depicting the lives of two opera actors, Duan Xiaolou and Cheng Dieyi, who play the roles of emperor and concubine respectively in a Chinese classical opera. The story line spans more than half a

century of Chinese history, from the warlord era of 1925, the invasion of Japan in 1930s, the rule of the Nationalists, the triumph of the Communists in 1949, to the horrors of the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath in 1977.

Duan and Cheng grew up together and spent their childhood training in the Peking opera school. So completely does Cheng identify with the female character he plays in the opera that the boundary between his real self and his fictional female character blurs. He has to deal constantly with the problem of gender role in his real life as he becomes less sure about his masculinity and his real life role as an actor playing the emperor's concubine. When Duan marries Juxian, a former prostitute, Cheng sees her both as an intruder and a rival in their relationship characterized by homoerotic tension. During the Cultural Revolution, in a heartbreaking episode, Duan is forced to denounce Cheng, his best friend as a homosexual, and his beloved wife Juxian as a prostitute. This turn of events proves too much for Juxian who escapes humiliation by committing suicide. After the Cultural Revolution, the aged Duan and Cheng meet again and play the same roles of king and concubine. Cheng sings his final tune and suddenly takes the sword to his own throat. The tragic scene mirrors the historical story between an ancient king and his concubine who finally kills herself with a sword to encourage her beloved king to fight his way through his enemies.

Farewell, My Concubine, which won awards as the Best Foreign Film from the New York and Los Angeles Film Critics, was the first Chinese film to win the Cannes Palme d'Or and an Oscar nomination for best foreign film.⁴ However, it could not be released in its home country without re-editing⁵ and was mysteriously banned and unbanned twice. One of the reasons was that the authorities were angry about the film's harsh depiction of the Cultural Revolution, its portrayal of homosexuality and suicide.⁶ However, according to the *New York Times*⁷ when Deng Xiaoping and the other members of China's first family saw Chen's film, one of Deng's daughters suggested a world premiere in Beijing. Since Deng and his family were also victims of the Cultural Revolution, they seemed to have a better

understanding of the events of that period. His eldest son, Deng Pufang, a 24-year-old student at Beijing University in 1968, buckled under the humiliation of the Red Guards and jumped out of his dormitory building. He was paralyzed for the rest of his life.⁸ Deng realized that Chen did not grossly distort or exaggerate historical truth in this film.

Tian Zhuangzhuang's *The Blue Kite*

The Blue Kite, the story of a Beijing family living through the turmoil of the 1950s and 1960s, is shot through the eyes of the child named Tietou. The film begins with Tietou's librarian father, Lin Shaolong, and school teacher mother, Chen Shujuan, planning to get married. But, unfortunately, they have to postpone the wedding banquet because of the death of the Soviet leader, Joseph Stalin. As a consequence of his alleged anti-revolutionary crimes in 1957, the rectification movement sends Shaolong to a labor reform camp where he eventually dies. Shujuan thus marries her late husband's friend who took care of her and her son when her ex-husband was sent away from home.

The arrival of Tietou's second father coincides with the tragedy of the Great Leap Forward. Tietou's new father soon dies of illness, whereupon his mother marries a high ranking communist party official, who subsequently dies of a heart attack when assaulted by a mob of Red Guards. Before his death, he asks Shujuan to divorce him because their relationship stood to get her into political trouble.

The Blue Kite, a co-production between Beijing Film Studio and Hong Kong's Longwick Film Production, won the best film and best actress award at the 1993 Tokyo Film Festival, but remained banned in China.⁹ When screened at the Tokyo Film Festival, the Chinese official delegation walked out of the theater in protest.¹⁰ Sadly, because of this film, the director Tian was banned from filmmaking for two years.¹¹

The Blue Kite, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, was the most "authentic," "accessible," and "powerful" of all the Chinese films over that period.¹² Although the

film is not an autobiography, Tian had experienced the horrors of the Cultural Revolution. The Chinese government's decision to censor the film was not prompted by concerns for the accuracy of the events portrayed, but rather the opposite. In short, *The Blue Kite's* indictment of China's past political situation is so damning, it made Chinese authorities very uncomfortable.¹³

Zhang Yimou's *To Live*

To Live is a story about a couple who struggle to survive through 30 years of political turmoil in modern China. The film opens with the husband Fugui gambling away his ancestral mansion. He then becomes a puppeteer and by chance performs for the soldiers of the People's Liberation Army. Upon his return to the family after the civil war, Fugui witnesses the execution (carried out by the communists) of the very landlord who had won his old mansion through gambling. Inadvertently, Fugui helps his family to survive. Thus, in an absurd turn of events, the winner loses his life and the loser survives. But Fugui also witnesses the death of his only son Youqing during the Great Leap Forward. Youqing was an elementary school student assigned to participate in a local labor collective to make steel. He was accidentally killed when a car hit the wall behind which the boy was sleeping. The next tragedy comes during the Cultural Revolution when his daughter, Fengxia, dies in a hospital because the inexperienced Red Guard nurses cannot handle the complications of Fengxia's labor.

To Live caused Zhang some trouble because it was smuggled to the 1994 Cannes without the approval of the Chinese authorities. Even though this film won the Grand Jury prize and Best Actor award at Cannes, according to *Time* and *New York Times*,¹⁴ Zhang was required to produce a written apology for wanting to promote it. The film was officially banned in China. Zhang was barred from making films for five years and his major actress Gong Li was banned from attending foreign film festivals and asked not to grant interviews.¹⁵

Hayden White's Four Modes of Narrative of History

In his "Historiography and Historiophoty," Hayden White argues that written history is no different from the filmed representation, because "every written history is a product of processes of condensation, displacement, symbolization, and qualification exactly like those used in the production of filmed representation."¹⁶ White's view is summarized as follows: (1) films are better suited than written discourse to the actual representation of historical phenomena, for example, landscape, scene, atmosphere, wars, battles, crowds, and emotions, (2) imagistic data can provide a more accurate reproduction of scenes and atmosphere than verbal testimony, (3) modern historians ought to recognize that the analysis of visual images requires a manner of "reading" quite different from that of written account, and (4) a filmic representation of historical events should be as analytical as any written document by use of editing designs like montage.¹⁷

White asserts that history is like literature, in particular, novels. Historiography, to White, is the form of narrative discourse that purports to be a model of past structures and processes. If a historical film turns out to be a romance, it is because the romance genre was adopted to develop the story, not because it is a narrative film.¹⁸ In others words, the nature of the historical narrative is governed by the genre in which the historian decided to cast his story as ironic, tragic, heroic or romantic.

For White, history is both art and literature, which interprets or invents facts by four modes of employment: romance, tragedy, comedy, and satire.¹⁹ He believes that in the process of narrating a story, a historian, like a novel writer, gives a story the plot structure of a tragedy, in one way, or a comedy, in another way--this is what he means when he uses the terminology of "explanation by employment."²⁰ Any area of these narrative elements can be intermingled with each other, forming many possible variants. These four categories of representation probably overlap and are not mutually exclusive. Simply put, comedy may be romantic, tragedy may be ironic.

William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, can be explained as a romantic tragedy, or comic tragedy.

Representations of the Cultural Revolution in Chinese Films

The traditional myths or genres in literary works are also applicable to film representation. Genre mixing in film has become very common. In view of White's modes of historical explanation, the Cultural Revolution may be interpreted as a tragedy and as a comedy, romance or irony. For instance, Zhang's *To Live* combines tragedy with irony, while Chen's *Farewell* is a tragedy within a subdivision of romance.

Before going on to discuss the Cultural Revolution's representation in Chinese films, this paper should first briefly define the literary sense of tragedy, comedy, romance, and irony, and then apply them to the broader context of filmic works. Since a specific introduction to this terminology would be helpful to those who are not familiar with its usage in the fields of history, literature and film. Definitions for the terminology will be given with examples from the films. These definitions are not merely those of either Northrop Frye or White; they have been adjusted in order to suit the subject of Chinese film in a historical context. This paper, for instance, will not apply a historiographical definition of romance to the films examined here; rather, it will take a stand closer to the cinematic sense of romance, which is usually associated with love-stories.

In addition, even though the main purpose of this paper is to examine the films made by Fifth Generation directors, the work of other generations is also worth analyzing for the purposes of comparison. In so doing, we can recognize the commonalities in their representations of the same historical events.

The Cultural Revolution as Tragedy

One can trace the roots of tragedy in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Tragedy, Aristotle suggests, by evoking "pity and fear" in the audience causes the "purification" of

emotions.²¹ In other words, tragedy aims to “evoke pity and fear” in response to success and failure of the characters, the situations, or the events.²² Tragedy may occur when the protagonist loses his/her struggle or conflict. In most of cases, the hero may face a terrible fate, live a hopeless life, and even worse, end up dead. For this reason, Frye indicates, tragedy is usually associated with pathos, which is attached to “the sensational reflex of tears.”²³

In the case of the Cultural Revolution, the tragedy on screen can be seen from some episodes focusing on events or situations, for example: outbreaks of violence during public criticism meetings, false accusations of innocent people, the repression of the so-called class enemies of the proletariat, the destruction of art and literature, denunciations of family members or friends, and brutal sexual attacks on women. These are almost unbearable stories, evoking pity, fear, and tears.

Based on material gathered from primary sources, the Cultural Revolution is no doubt regarded as a tragedy, as are the Fifth Generation films. In *Farwell, My Concubine*, Duan Xiaolou and Cheng Dieyi grew up together in a Beijing opera school and later become famous for their performance of the historical story: *Farwell, My Concubine*. However, following the Communist takeover of China in 1949, Peking Opera is no longer welcome. In one scene, while lecturing on the theory of Peking opera to the younger generation, Cheng is opposed by his adopted son as well as his student Xiao Si. Cheng criticizes modern opera by saying that the “costumes are not very attractive,” and “the backdrops are too realistic.” Xiao Si retorts by saying “Why is it Peking Opera when ancient heroes and beauties take the stage but not when the laboring masses do?” Cheng is upset at Xiao Si’s misconduct and attempts to punish him. However, Xiao Si does not believe in authority any more and chooses to leave. He becomes a Red Guard at the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. As a Red Guard, Xiao Si first interrogates, and then forces Duan to beat himself with a concrete brick. Duan begins to bleed, but Xiao Si shows no mercy to his former father-like figure.

The next scene takes place in a rally where a crowd of Red Guards shout the slogan: “Sweep cow demons and snake ghosts.” A group of opera actors, including Cheng and Duan, gather at a public rally. Wearing derogatory cardboard signs around their necks, they are pushed ahead of the crowd. Duan, beaten by the Red Guards, is brutally forced to denounce Cheng and Juxian.

The mutual criticism seen in the film is unbelievably cruel but true to reality. Director Chen Kaige told the *Los Angeles Times*, the Cultural Revolution he “experienced in his own life was tougher than” what was portrayed in *Farwell, My Concubine*. He “had a deep personal stake in making” this movie “as honest and powerful as possible.”²⁴ When Chen decided to make *Farwell, My Concubine*, he wanted to add an episode about the Cultural Revolution to the original script, which showed a violent historical event, he and his parents had witnessed. Chen, as a teenage Red Guard, watched his Red Guard classmates raid his house and burn the family books, and, worse, in order to show his determination as a good Red Guard, Chen himself had to take sides.²⁵ So, in a public rally, he assaulted and denounced his own father, labeling him a counterrevolutionary rightist.²⁶

During the Cultural Revolution, under the dictation of Jiang Qing, the wife of Mao, both Western and traditional Chinese art became a source of (what the Red Guards criticized as) decadence and obscenity because they would poison and paralyze the minds of the people. Old culture which included classic novels, music scores, and theater was literally under attack and irreparable damage was done. Innumerable Chinese intellectuals and artists thus were purged and persecuted.

In *To Live*, for example, Fugui is asked to burn his shadow puppets because the characters of emperors, generals, scholars and beauties all are symbolic of a corrupt culture. Similarly in *Farwell, My Concubine*, Duan Xiaolou and his wife Juxian burn the painted masks of the Beijing Opera in their house before the Red Guards can find them. Faced with the same political pressure, the elderly Cantonese musician in *Swan Song* (dir. Zhang Zeming, 1985) hides his own score in the attic. His classical music

is considered to be “melancholic,” and “pornographic in tone,” and thus is not allowed to be performed.

People had to avoid so-called suspect materials. *Wo men de tian ye* (*Our Fields*, 1983), directed by the Fourth Generation director Xie Fei, shows that the reading of classical novels was a major taboo and against policy, and transgressors were brutally criticized in public meetings or sent for re-education. *Niu peng* (*China, My Sorrow*, dir: Dai Sijie, 1989), was produced in France, shows a schoolboy sent to a cowshed²⁷ for re-education after he is caught playing a love song on a turntable in order to attract a girl's attention. The Red Guards destroy his records in a public meeting where he confesses he listened to “obscene” music. The brilliant teacher, Mr. Chi, in *Wo de xiong di jie mei* (*Roots and Branches*, dir: Yu Zhong, 2001) loses his job as a music teacher because he is reported to have taught students “unhealthy songs.” Chi's career as a teacher was cut short by his reactionary ideology, so he ended up working as a street-repairman. In the Fifth Generation director Gu Rong's *Hong niu er* (*Red Swan*, 1995), the Red Guards sealed a piano and burned a cello and other musical instruments. The ballet dancers were sent to a farm to do hard labor.

In this insanely ideological environment, both popular songs and classic songs disappeared from the country. People could only sing propaganda songs that praised Mao and the Party. As hard as it may be to believe today, Chinese people did not have the right to choose any form of entertainment unless it was given the blessing of Mao and his wife Jiang.

The Cultural Revolution as Comedy

Contrasting comedy with tragedy, Hayden White points out:

In comedy, hope is held out for the temporary triumph of man over his world by the prospect of occasional *reconciliations*. . . . Such reconciliations are symbolized in the festive occasions. In tragedy, there are no festive occasions, except false or illusory ones. . . .²⁸

In tragedy, the protagonist loses his/her struggle or conflict, but in comedy he/she succeeds. At the end of comedy, the reconciliations are represented in a society that is “purer, saner, and healthier” than the more “somber” world commonly depicted in tragedy.²⁹ In this sense, *To Live* appears to be a comedy. In the end, Fugui and his family face a more positive and optimistic life, as compared to the beginning of the film.

Most films about the Cultural Revolution concentrate on the tragic experience of survival and death. Jiang Wen's *Yang guang can lan de ri zi* (*In the Heat of the Sun*, 1996) presents another side of the experience and exemplifies a relativistic view of interpreting history in feature films. This movie won six awards, including Best Film, and Best Director in 1996 Taiwan's Golden Horse Festival. Yet, the Chinese Government did not allow the director to attend the award ceremony held in Taiwan.³⁰ In his depiction of the chaotic years of the Cultural Revolution, Jiang, a Sixth Generation director in China, portrays the fantasy of sexual pursuits and pleasure of juvenile delinquents. Growing up in a historical context different from that of the earlier Fifth Generation directors, Jiang shows the Cultural Revolution to be an absurd and playful experience, rather than the catastrophe depicted in the work of Fifth Generation directors.³¹ This does not imply that Jiang's film is unfaithful to history or that he intended to distort history. Rather, the film-maker, with an unerring instinct, presents a story which reflects his own experience.³²

In *In the Heat of the Sun*, Ma Xiaojun enjoys great freedom since his father constantly is away on army service in some remote area and his mother does not have enough time to take care of him. As wild teenagers, Ma and his friend hang out together all the time and have fun, moments which are somehow different from what we see in the films of other generations. Without having to worry about school, Ma and his friends talk about girls constantly and are eager to experience love first hand. As such, sexual fantasy, instead of brutal struggle, plays a major role in their lives. In one scene, Ma finds a couple of condoms left by his father in a drawer. In an absurd scene, Ma blows a condom into a balloon, which floats around the room while

he performs a military march. On one occasion, after a fight with another gang, Ma and his team go to a public bath to take a shower. They all are naked and frightened when suddenly a girl they know sneaks in and begins to tease them, causing one of the men to get an erection, and thus embarrass them.

Xiao xiang ming liu (*Back Alley Celebrities*, dir.: Cong Lianwen, 1983), a black comedy, contains elements of the absurd. During the Cultural Revolution, an old man named Sima Shouxian, who sells funeral supplies, is locked up for re-education because of his attempt to help his neighbor get out of political trouble. One day, his teenage son comes to visit him while he is asleep. The son tries to wake up his father. However, Sima does not respond to his son for a while. Assuming his father to be dead, the son, in panic, can only cry. At that moment, Sima abruptly wakes up and slaps his son, angrily saying, "If I really die, bite your teeth and don't even cry. You should draw a clear line with me." He then demands that his son rehearse this possible situation one more time. Again, Sima pretends to be dead and his son stands beside his body, cursing "Sima Shouxian, You are evil . . . I do not have any relationship with you. You deserve to die . . ." This scene conveys the senselessness of the Cultural Revolution. As indicated earlier, during that period, family members oftenimes were forced to disown each other for political reasons.³³ The absurd rehearsal scene between Sima and his son is the best reflection of the mercilessness of the reality of the time. This is probably one of the most powerful depictions of the Cultural Revolution as comedy.

The Cultural Revolution as Irony

The *New York Times* praised the ability of Zhang Yimou to capture the "comic ironies on screen that resonate in life"³⁴ in *To Live*. Perhaps more than any other film here, *To Live* encapsulates the comic and tragic moments of frustrated expectations and the cruel reversals of fate that we associate with irony.³⁵ Indeed, for the thirty-year-period, Fugui's life is full of ironies. The film begins with the gambling house where the leading character, Fugui, has fun but keeps losing money.

He does not realize that he has been set up by his friend Long Er who wants to see Fugui lose his fortune so he can take over his huge mansion. Eventually, Fugui loses his house, his pregnant wife leaves him, and his father dies of anger. He and his mother are forced to move out and live in squalor. The situation becomes very depressing. Yet, ironically, this misfortune later on turns out to be a piece of luck. His wife comes back to him, not only their daughter Fengxia, but also their new born baby boy, Youqing. The family is united again. To make a living, Fugui borrows a set of shadow puppets from the now rich Long Er and forms a puppet troupe. When the Communists come, Long Er's landlord status becomes suspect. Eventually, he refuses to share the mansion with those poor peasants and decides to burn it, and in a public trial, the Communists execute him for counterrevolutionary sabotage. Fugui witnesses this execution, and becomes frightened. He rushes to go home to tell his wife. "They executed Long Er by five bullets. If I had not lost my home to him, that would've been me."

The most bitter irony could be the death of Fongxia, the only daughter of Fugui and Jiazhen. Fongxia marries a factory Red Guard named Wan Erxi. When Fongxia is about to give birth, she is sent to a local hospital. Since all the doctors have been imprisoned by the Red Guards in the so-called "cowsheds," the hospital is being run by young Red Guard nurses. Jiazhen questions the ability of those young nurses, showing no confidence in them. She wonders if Wan Erxi can find an experienced doctor, in case of emergency. Wan has to put on a show in front of the nurses in order to free Doctor Wang, who has not been fed for three days. Fugui offers him seven steamed buns. On the verge of starvation, the doctor is offered seven steamed buns, which he eats in one go. After giving birth, Fongxia begins to hemorrhage badly. In a panic, the inexperienced nurses, suggest asking Doctor Wang for help. But Wang is unable to move because he consumed the buns too quickly. Without medical help from Doctor Wang, Fongxia dies. Some years later on a visit to Fongxia's grave, Fugui and Jiazhen joke about this particular story of Doctor Wang. Fugui says that they should not have given water to Wang when his stomach

was full of buns because the water made each bun seven times bigger. They heard that Doctor Wang can no longer eat buns or wheat products.

Divorce is very unpopular in Chinese traditional culture. However, Lao Wu's divorce of Shujian in *The Blue Kite*, ironically turns out to be the best way to protect his wife and stepson from the persecution of the Red Guards. At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, Wu, a high-ranking communist official, already knows that he will eventually become a target of criticism; therefore, he divorces Shujian. Soon, the Red Guards come to raid his house and purge him. Wu is very weak at that time, but the Red Guards show no sympathy and he dies.

Choosing "politically correct" partners was not an uncommon practice in Mao's China. Because of the class struggle, people needed to be careful when choosing a spouse. A poor peasant was the best choice; in contrast, a rich landlord was risky. In *Yue liang wan de xiao sheng* (*Laughter from the Moon Village*, dir. Xu Suling, 1991), the rich peasant, Jiang Maofu, has difficulty arranging the marriage of his son because Jiang himself has been branded as a capitalist-roader. He was once a model peasant and when Jiang was a welcome figure in the village, his neighbors would have been happy to see their daughters marry Jiang's son. However, with the advent of the Gang of Four, Jiang is criticized in a meeting, and not until the end of the Cultural Revolution does Jiang regain sufficient confidence to start his own business, and his son is able to marry a girl he loves.

The Cultural Revolution as Romance

According to Hayden White, romance is "a drama of self-identification symbolized by the hero's transcendence of the world of experience," and "a drama of triumph of good over evil, of virtue over vice."³⁶ In this sense, romances tend to have happy-endings, even when, as in Chinese films, major obstacles faced by lovers included social or political pressures, for example the disapproval of parents and political conflicts between the lovers. During the Cultural Revolution, subjects like unrequited or forbidden love³⁷ or films dealing with the "highly exciting and

mysterious or supernatural experiences"³⁸ we may associate with romance were taboo.

However after 1976, love stories began to account for a high proportion of new films.³⁹ In the first half of the 1980s, romances set during the Cultural Revolution tended to have happy endings. For example, in *Bei ai qing yi wang de jiao luo* (*A Corner Forsaken by Love*, dir. Li Yalin, 1981), the poor Huangmei originally plans to marry a man she has never met, which is basically a marriage for the sake of her family. However, Huangmei, at the last moment, changes her mind, turning down the arrangement in order to pursue a man she really loves. The other typical examples can also be found in *Xu Mao he ta de nu er men* (*Xu Mao and his Daughters*, dir. Li Jun, 1981), *Xiao jie* (*The Alley*, dir. Yang Yanjin, 1981), *Mu naren* (*The Herdsman*, dir. Xie Jin, 1982), and *Furong zhen* (*Hibiscus Town*, dir. Xie Jin, 1986). These films are made by Third and Fourth Generation filmmakers, yet, romances related to the Cultural Revolution generally become bitter in the work of Fifth and Sixth Generation directors, overturning the dramatic storytelling model of former generations. Some examples of tragic romances are Tian Zhanqun's *The Blue Kite* (1993), Gu Rong's *Red Swan* (1993), Joan Chen's *Tian yu* (*Xiu Xiu: The Sent-Down Girl*, 1999), and Chen Kaige's *Farewell, My Concubine* (1993).

Farewell, My Concubine, for example, is a story of forbidden love during the Cultural Revolution. The *New York Times* claimed that the film is "rooted in a love story."⁴⁰ *Beijing Review* introduced the movie as "a love triangle between two Peking Opera actors and a prostitute."⁴¹ Duan, as a senior, takes care of Cheng well and thus they develop a special friendship. The physically weak and effeminate Cheng is trained to think of himself as a woman from childhood eventually confusing his his real identity with the female character he plays on stage. He begins to show more affection to Duan, becoming jealous when Duan marries Juxian. During the Cultural Revolution, Duan denounces Cheng as a homosexual and a traitor in public. Feeling betrayed by his loved one, Cheng reveals Juxian worked as a prostitute. In order to

protect himself, Duan, tells Red Guards that he does not love Juxian, which later leads to her suicide.

In the Heat of the Sun is a good example of a story of unrequited passion. The teenager Ma Xiaojun enjoys skipping class and starts to break into people's houses—out of curiosity, rather than to steal. One day, he sneaks in an apartment owned by a beautiful woman called Milan. He sees her picture on the wall and decides he would like to meet her. He eventually gets a chance to talk to Milan and develops a deep affection for her. Milan seems to have complicated relationships with men, and with much more life experience than Ma, she does not take this young boy's feelings too seriously.

To a sixteen-year-old boy like Ma, as the director Jiang indicates, his personal relationship with Milan probably is more exciting and important than Mao's review of millions of Red Guards in Tiananmen Square.⁴² In this film, the Cultural Revolution provides a backdrop for a group of teenagers to play out their sexual fantasies. For Ma, the most important lesson of the Cultural Revolution was about how to get a girl, rather than how to catch a counter-revolutionary.

Conclusion

The Fifth Generation filmmakers demonstrated a painstaking concern for the representation of historical events in their films. The films of Chen Kaige, Tian Zhanqzhuang, and Zhang Yimou bear historical evidence and provide historically plausible interpretations of the Cultural Revolution.

These Fifth Generation filmmakers present an unorthodox political ideology as well as serious concerns about historical issues in their films. Some historians⁴³ believe that the study of the past becomes difficult, partly because of the absence of eyewitnesses to particular events. This is not true of the Fifth Generation film makers who experienced first hand the Cultural Revolution, and understood the significance the events had in people's lives.

Farewell, My Concubine, *The Blue Kite*, and *To Live* are true to the real story. Through their collective personal memories, one can see a reappraisal of the Cultural Revolution. They recreate moments of history they had experienced thirty-five years before and successfully transform them into a view of reality that helps us understand the multiple meanings of the Cultural Revolution in China. As Tian himself indicates, if one experiences an historical event oneself, one becomes enthusiastic and invests one's emotion in it.⁴⁴ Yet, engagement with the discourse of history cannot depend merely on personal imagination. All three directors assume the responsibility as serious interpreters of history and do not degrade the essence of historiography. The historical experience, the humanistic concerns, and the cultural spirit reflected in their films inspire us to rethink some serious, significant questions about the representations of historical films as well as their value as history.

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Notes

- ¹ Marc Ferro, *Cinema and History*, trans. Naomi Greene (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), p. 14.
- ² Regarding the Fifth and Sixth Generation definitions, see Zhang Yingjin and Zhiwei Xiao, *Encyclopedia of Chinese Films* (New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 165, 307-308; Zhang Wei, "Chinese Films: Can They Go to the World?" *Beijing Review* 31, no. 1 (4-10 January 1988), p. 27; Donald J. Marion, *The Chinese Filmography: The 2444 Feature Films Produced by Studios in the People's Republic of China from 1949 through 1995* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 1997), pp. 8-9.
- ³ Zhang and Xiao, *Encyclopedia*, p. 29; Jerome Silberfeld, *China into Film: Frames of Reference in Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), p. 7.
- ⁴ Vincent Canby, "Top Prize at Cannes is Shared," *New York Times*, 25 May 1993, p. 13; Pauline Chen, "History Lessons," *Film Comment* 30, no. 2 (March/April 1994): p. 85.
- ⁵ David Ansen, and Deirdre Nickerson, "The Real Cultural Revolution," *Newsweek* 122, no. 18, 1 November 1993, p. 74.
- ⁶ Patrick E. Tyler, "Who Makes the Rules in Chinese Films?" *New York Times*, 17 October 1993, p. 15.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- ⁸ Deng Rong, *My Father Deng Xiaoping: Years in the Cultural Revolution* (Beijing: Central Documentary Press, 2000), pp. 96-97.
- ⁹ *The Economist*, "Black-balled," review of *Beijing Bastards and Blue Kite*, *Economist* 329, no. 7338, 20 November 1993, p. 108.
- ¹⁰ Kenneth Turan, "'The Blue Kite': An Honest Powerful Chinese Saga," *Los Angeles Times*, 1 June, 1994, p. 3.
- ¹¹ Bob Edwards, "Profile: Chinese Filmmaker Chen Kaige," *Morning Edition*, 20 January 2000.
- ¹² Turan, "Chinese Saga," p. 3.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ Richard Corliss, "Red Plague," *Time*, 5 December 1994, p. 90; Janet Maslin, "Mixing Humanity and History to Illustrate the Flux of Family Life in China," *New York Times*, 2 December 1994, p. 10.
- ¹⁵ Stella Cornelius, *New Chinese Cinema: Challenging Representations* (London: Wallflower, 2002), p. 45.
- ¹⁶ Hayden White, "Historiography and Historiophoty," *The American Historical Review* 93, no. 5 (December 1988): p. 1194.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 1193-99.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 1195.
- ¹⁹ White's four modes of emplotment, actually, as he says, are borrowed from Northrop Frye, who indicates that the literature constructs a story via a form of mythological archetype: Tragedy, Comedy, Romance, and Irony/Satire, see Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 158-238.
- ²⁰ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), p. 7.
- ²¹ Aristotle, *Aristotle: Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath (New York: Penguin, 1996), p. 10.
- ²² See Heath's introduction to *Aristotle, Poetics*, p. xxi.

- ²³ Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 206.
- ²⁴ Kenneth Turan, "A Visionary Journey through Space, Time," Review of *Farewell, My Concubine* (Tomson Films), *Los Angeles Times*, 22 October 1993, p. 10.
- ²⁵ Zha Jianying, "Chen Kaige and the Shadows of the Revolution," *Sight & Sound* 4, no. 2 (February 1994): p. 34.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 31; Turan, "A Visionary," p. 10.
- ²⁷ The term "Cowshed" or "Cow-Pen" refers to the detention centers that imprisoned the "enemies of the people," such as intellectuals and counter-revolutionaries.
- ²⁸ White, *Metahistory*, p. 9.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ Zhang Kewen and Ray Zhang, "Taiwan Awards Mainland Chinese Director," *China News Digest*, 17 December 1996, [on-line].
- ³¹ *Ibid.*
- ³² Jiang, interview by Yang Lang.
- ³³ Roger Fowler, ed. *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), pp. 128-129.
- ³⁴ Caryn James, "Zhang Yimou's Comic Ironies on Screen Resonate in Life," *New York Times*, 30 September 1994, p. 30.
- ³⁵ See Sylvan Barnet et al., *Dictionary of Literary, Dramatic and Cinematic Terms* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), pp. 62-63.
- ³⁶ White, *Metahistory*, pp. 8-9.
- ³⁷ See Timothy J. Lyons, ed., *Glossary of Film Terms* (Houston, TX: The University Film Association, 1979), p. 259.
- ³⁸ C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1980), p. 387.
- ³⁹ See Paul Clark, "Film-making in China: From the Cultural Revolution to 1981," *China Quarterly* 94 (June 1983): p. 315.
- ⁴⁰ Vincent Canby, "Action, History, Politics and Love Above All," *New York Times*, 8 October 1993, p. 22.
- ⁴¹ Hong Lanxing, "Chinese Movie Wins Top Prize at Cannes," *Beijing Review* 36, no. 26 (28 June - 4 July 1993): p. 29.
- ⁴² Jiang, interview by Yang Lang (CD cover, purchased in China).
- ⁴³ For instance, Karl Popper, see Keith Windschuttle, *The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists Are Murdering Our Past* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), p. 198.
- ⁴⁴ Tian Zhuangzhuang, "People and Politics, Simple and Direct," Interview by Robert Sklar, *Cineaste* 20, no. 4 (October 1994) [on-line].