

CINEMATIC REALISM AND INDEPENDENT FILMMAKING IN CHINA

by

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## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Independent filmmaking in China, with the directors' reiteration of literary and cinematic realism carried on from May Fourth, reflects the nation's social uneasiness triggered by the enlarging division between the enlightenment indenture and the unidirectional modernization project. Resisting the national allegories and Hollywood-style big budget fantasies made by the Fifth Generation, independent filmmakers bring back to the screen the unadorned life of city inhabitants. The meaning of "independent" and "alternative" does not exclusively lie in the production and distribution venues but is galvanized by film directors' perception and cinematic depiction of what constitutes the social realities of contemporary China. The locality of hometown and the corporeality of the filmed subjects help to sustain a legitimate image-space for the socially underrepresented, at a time when the Party co-opts the discourse of nation-state to renew their regime. Directors employ the politics of sexuality, where body is the only thing remaining in their control, to usher in a redefinition of the Party and reassure the agency of Chinese intellectuals who were betrayed during the June Fourth massacre. The exegesis of the independent generation extends to the digital video (DV) filmmakers, whose cinematic language features the increased sense of interrogation between the camera and the

characters. For the directors' claims of neither representing the people nor wrestling against the Party, nonetheless, DV films retreat to a safe but enclosed space, in which the aggrandized size of the body on screen displays a fractioned and diminished self cutting off from the outside world and falling short of its full potential. Independent filmmaking in China derives its policy-shaping capacity from its increasing participants (domestic audiences, amateur filmmakers, critics, and scholars) and multiplying operative channels (film funds, online forums, and non-official archives), collectively converting filmmaking from a privilege exclusive to the state apparatus and its elite delegates to a right of self-expression belonging to each individual.

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Dedicated to families and friends

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation studies Chinese independent films produced since the mid-1990s, those that have been winning international film awards but were or are still denied the right to be publicly screened in domestic theatres. Either because of the ideological disturbance they cause to the state or simply due to the independent production mode they adopt, many of these films are still unknown to general audiences.<sup>1</sup> The directors of these films are mainly from the camp usually called “the Sixth Generation,” even though sometimes the Fifth Generation directors also engage themselves in the independent filmmaking strategy. Directors in focus are Jia Zhangke, Wang Xiaoshuai, Zhang Yuan, Lou Ye, Ning Ying, He Jianjun, Wang Quan’an, and other less-known young filmmakers such as Ying Liang and Liu Jiayin. Directors who grew up in mainland China but currently reside abroad and make films about the life experience of contemporary Chinese people are also considered, given the heavy imprint of revolutionary discourses on their cinematic languages. Independent directors from Hong Kong and Taiwan are not put in the direct spotlight of this research, for various reasons,<sup>2</sup> despite the fact that trans-China funding from these regions has been a crucial factor sustaining the Chinese independent.

The diverse canvas of independent films and filmmakers renders any effort of categorization cumbersome. The abovementioned directors are divided into three groups, based on my observation of their persistent thematic concerns and cinematic styles, their own comments about their filmmaking practice, and film critics’ understanding of each

individual director's position in Chinese cinema. I also take into consideration transformations these filmmakers' productions have gone through and endeavor to provide a more historiographical account. My work is far from, and cannot be, a panorama of all the Chinese films that have adopted an independent production mode or have been attached to the label of "independent." I do, however, try to offer a fairly comprehensive account of quintessential issues pertaining to those films.

The first group includes directors making films about the life experience of those non-heroic city folks who are left behind the nation's modernization project. Cinematic realism from world cinema has combined with the realism tradition since the May Fourth to nourish the urban generation. Films made by Jia Zhangke and Wang Xiaoshuai, for example, share motifs featured in realistic literature, such as the mute social bottom and the silent on-lookers. These directors encounter the dilemma of "representation" faced by May Fourth writers, that is, whether or not an author (the intellectual) can represent the people and what kind of Chinese "reality" an author can represent. Such a dilemma leads their contemplative camera lens to voiceless figures or historical relics to debunk the authority of representation.

The second group of independent filmmakers is composed of the so-called "underground directors" who began to make films outside of the strict political system after the 1989 Tiananmen massacre. Mao's revolutionary discourse avails in building the union between the people, the intellectuals and the Party. Yet June Fourth destroyed that relationship, betrayed and disempowered Chinese intellectuals. These directors employ the politics of sexuality, where body is the only thing remaining in their control, and the breakage of taboo to empower their voices. Meanwhile, in the post-Mao modernization

project, the role of the Party has been merged with “the state” and then the nation. Not only is the Party repairing its relationship with underground filmmakers, but also filmmakers are making the choice of abiding by the system. The state-nation union is a major reason for many directors to go aboveground and to discover the new roles of the Party and themselves.

The third group I identify in this dissertation is the post-Six Generation, i.e. the Digital Video generation, who advocate for personalized accounts of the regional imagery of China amidst industry transformation. They claim that their works neither represent the people nor wrestle against the party, proposing the conversion from the “Chinese independent” to “Chinese indie.” With the DV generation’s filmmaking activities the genealogy of Chinese films becomes more unstable and a new topology of Chinese cinema is coming into existence. In this topology independent films will be close to art-house cinema in the West, having their own production, distribution and screening channels. I also contend that this does not mean the discontinuance of “national cinema,” as similar thematic concerns and cinema aesthetics seen in the Sixth Generation persist in the DV generation’s films.

By claiming their stance as independents, these three groups of filmmakers all emphasize the right to filmmaking and the importance of representing the reality of China. In their struggle against the Fifth Generation and political control, independent filmmakers have to clarify their “point of view” and for whom they are making a film.<sup>3</sup> The question about who has the right to make a movie suggests the in-depth relation between author, the authorial, authority and the authoritative—a unique presentation of power struggles in contemporary China. Whereas the Fifth Generation locates their “right”

in the often-imaginative reflection of national history, independent filmmakers declare it in the “truthfulness” of current life presented through unadorned images.

It is claimed that films by the younger directors present personal and subjective space rather than Chinese tradition or national history.<sup>4</sup> And in that sense their artworks are considered cut off from the Fifth Generation, opening up a completely new territory of cinema space. However, I contend that the repository of independent films brings forward an imagery of an alternative China that is independent of the stark capital control as seen in recent Chinese blockbusters.<sup>5</sup> This imagery, to a large extent, is nurtured by the deep-rooted realistic tradition of giving voices to the socially unrepresented and the enlightenment<sup>6</sup> epistemology of locating meaning in each individual.<sup>7</sup> The subculture frenzy sustained by an anti-mainstream attitude and an individualism pushed to the extreme fore, as evidenced in many Western independent films, is pacified by the Chinese independent filmmakers’ continuing blueprint of making films truthful to the Chinese social realities. For the above considerations, these independent films are neither purely personal nor completely indifferent to national history. In my opinion, the urban generation has picked up the torment of root-seeking that has been dropped by the Fifth Generation in their later careers. The difference is, while the Fifth Generation projects their spotlight on the imaginative, independent directors want to dissect the components of the current moment which, to them, constitutes the real historiography of the Chinese people.

World film theories emphasize the ideological overtones of cinema, compared with other modern art forms, and it is argued that films are in themselves discourses (Benjamin, “The Work of Art” 199-203). With the divergent connotations of

“independence,” it is important to see how different participants engage themselves in the process of definition. The meaning of “independent” and “alternative,” in Chinese filmmaking, does not exclusively lie in the production and distribution venues but is galvanized by film directors’ and viewers’ perception of what constitutes the social realities of China. Zhang Yuan’s remarks on “how far a film director can see”<sup>8</sup> denote the attempt to debunk the historical allegories woven by the Fifth Generation. Demystified is also the national history envisioned by the state and its elite intellectuals. By claiming their legitimacy in defining the Chinese reality and sustaining a justified sense of history, independent films become an important factor in swaying the government’s policy change.

### **Naming**

Terms deployed by critics to categorize films made by these directors include “films of the Sixth Generation,” “new Chinese cinema,” “underground films,” “independent films” and “auteur films.” Frequently they are treated as interchangeable but with different emphasis. I contend that one of the most used labels, “the Sixth Generation,” is problematic for multiple reasons: First, “the Sixth” is named after “the Fifth,” a revered authority that is to be challenged. Generational division in the practice of categorizing artistic movement derives from a macroscopic orientation that subsumes the individualist bent to overarching historical or cultural imperatives. The tendency is coagulated by aesthetic theories that dominated cultural history studies in 1980s China.<sup>9</sup> This terminology bespeaks the Hegelian perception of the linear development of history that has prevailed in China since the late imperial period, was aggrandized in the Mao era,

and extended to contemporary cultural analysis. It also meets the politicized interpretation mode adopted by “international circles in the desire for a new ‘other’ to succeed the Fifth Generation and a new vocabulary to define Chinese cinema,”<sup>10</sup> a module nullifying the possibility to treat individual filmmakers as cinema *auteur*. The situation becomes more complicated at a time when the Fifth Generation directors deviate from their trademark national allegory to high-budget commercial productions: when the glorified “Fifth Generation” becomes an irretrievable past, what can we expect from the nomination of “the Sixth Generation”? While the Fifth Generation begins to strive for market recognition and national support, “the Sixth” flourishes via independent filmmaking and distribution channels, negotiating with both strict government censorship, and the demands of international film festivals. The paths these young directors take are undoubtedly different from their precursors, which, among many other reasons, may prompt film critics to rethink the validity of this naming.

Furthermore, whereas the Fifth has existed for a relatively brief period of time,<sup>11</sup> “the Sixth” is undergoing tremendous transformation in thematic matters, stylistic experiments and production modes, and with the continuing entrance of new directors, this transformation is still in process. The “Sixth Generation” can hardly label the heterogeneous practice of the post-Fifth filmmakers who come from different backgrounds and have distinctly different production agendas. To a great extent, this term exists as a tacit compromise that is inaccurate but is pervasively accepted, reflecting the limited terminology available in studies on contemporary Chinese cinema. Its application to the Chinese setting is also explained by the institutional system in which Chinese films are produced. China does not have a developed film rating system and films made in

China are seldom described by genre classification. Also, most film directors in China receive professional training from the same film school, the Beijing Film Academy, which seems to make generational classification appropriate. However, it is worth bearing in mind that generational categorization has grown increasingly precarious with the swift changes occurring in the film industry and the societal environment in China over the turn of the century.<sup>12</sup> Under the umbrella of the “Sixth Generation” are at least three types of filmmakers: first, the independent filmmakers of the 1990s who evade the official film production and censorship system, and make low-budget films with their own money or with foreign investment; second, young directors who work in the official system to make commercial productions; third, documentary filmmakers of the late 1980s who combine documentaries with television to reflect social problems (Dai, *Cinema and Desire* 75).

Another well-discussed label, Chinese “underground films,” similarly demands clarification. Its immediate conceptual association with Euro-American experimental films booming in the 1950s puts it on shaky ground. This naming appears to carry on the real designation as long as the context is transfixed to China: the word “underground” transmits the circumstance of young Chinese film directors being suppressed by the government.<sup>13</sup> However, the Chinese “underground” thrives in the high capitalistic 1990s. Facing the ubiquitous commercialization of transnational cultural productions and caught in the dilemma of sustaining a local brand in the global market, the underground’s status as a form of subculture is resolutely set apart from its Western counterparts of decades ago.

Other designations also deserve further scrutiny. For example, “new Chinese cinema” is mostly used by Western scholarship to incorporate films from mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan into a whole body. Scholars aim to map the topology more broadly, diminishing the demarcation between the older and the younger generations, hence foregrounding a grand picture of Chinese cinema ever since its inception.<sup>14</sup> I acknowledge their efforts to call attention to the most conspicuous Chinese films ever made, regardless of their generational belongings. Nonetheless, I argue that such practice cannot replace more specific analysis of film movements, styles and particularly, film auteur.<sup>15</sup> The “urban generation” is another well-known term used. For all its applicability, this designation perceives the young generation as the beginning of the urbanization and commercialization prompted by Deng Xiaoping’s open and reform policy,<sup>16</sup> instead of the outcome of the preceding new Enlightenment movement. The term, “urban generation,” follows the academic discourse that overemphasizes the sweeping commercial development post 1989 but meanwhile overlooks the intellectual forces stifled by the Tiananmen massacre. The political suppression Chinese intellectuals suffered during June Fourth does not mean a complete removal of the humanitarian concerns fermented in the high-culture eighties. This important aspect pertaining to independent filmmaking, however, has largely been ignored due to the one-sided focus on the dominance of mass culture and commodification.

Bearing in mind the problematic of naming, I endeavor to employ the terms in their most immediate and cogent meanings. For example, when discussing the issue of power relationship and censorship, I give the term, “underground film,” the priority in examining the negotiation between “underground” and “aboveground.” For a general

description of the diverse film corpus about contemporary city life, in contrast to those contemplating historical or national representation, I use the more influential “Sixth Generation” to strike a dialogue with existent academic works.

Hitherto most film studies in the United States deem the cinematic transformation to urban narratives onstage after the Fifth Generation’s rural myths as defining characteristic of the Sixth Generation. In my opinion, factors such as younger directors’ unconventional cinematic languages, low-budget and unofficial production mode, the assistantship of foreign investment and limited distribution channels make these films part of the pervasive independent art-creation movement in the 1990s’ China. For this reason the breakdown between the label of underground and that of independent can be more to the point. Furthermore, given the new circumstances faced by these urban directors in the 2000s as the Chinese government tries to domesticate the once-undisciplined underground filmmakers and many of their films are brought to big screen, I hold that “the Chinese independent” is more valid than other labels in describing the flourishing urban cinema since the 1990s. Those filmmakers fought their way through the repression of the bureaucracy, the scorn of the older generations as well as a market demand for big-budget blockbusters, shaping an increasingly self-organized cultural movement. According to *The Complete Film Dictionary* written by Ira Konigsberg, by definition, an independent filmmaker is a person or persons who make a film with no connection to the Hollywood scene or the established studio system (5). However, the Chinese independent poses questions that go farther beyond the issue of fundraising. The various factors involving making, distributing and screening a Chinese independent film

render it a nationwide cultural movement that finds its weapon in the art form of motion pictures.

### **Methodology**

Generally speaking, current Western resources relevant to Chinese films focus on studying cultural productions via a sociological reading of media texts. Studies accentuating the film and media aspects of Chinese cinema are only recent. On the other hand, resources written in Chinese are often sketchy, mostly scattered in newspapers, film journals and online critiques, rather than featured in book-length studies. Instead of essentializing media text as a literary text that bears on social-political references, this dissertation aims to dig out both the macroscopic dimensions and the textual details that could open new space for theoretic exploration.<sup>17</sup> To serve this purpose, my research is divided into three parts: the realistic, the underground and the post-Sixth Generation. Every part consists of two chapters with one dealing with macroscopic issues and the other providing textual readings. My study recognizes that the Chinese independent is still in process, which inevitably leads to the dilemma of researching a recent history replete with uncertainties and hypotheses. Possibly lacking a vision enabled by the distancing effect that can filter through chaos, dust, and noise to see foundations, patterns, and rules, this study attempts to compensate for that “deficiency” by interpreting the present through the debris of the past, and particularly the paths that independent filmmakers have followed. Dealing with a fast-growing cultural movement whose shape is far from settled, I am fully aware of the challenges and snares I can face. Nevertheless, I firmly believe that these difficulties should not prevent us from trying to read a field

blooming with images, texts, messages and voices that could be a significant lens to the comprehension of transitional Chinese society. Of particular interest to this research is how the search, by filmmakers and their supporters, for the full meaning of “independence” is positioned in current scholarly discussions on the transnational mechanism, national agenda, and globalization involved in contemporary Chinese cinema.

Some established scholars have found fault with cultural studies and Neo Historicism that reduce the rich bodies of texts and images into extension of a few dominant theories, or restrict their study to a few canonical texts. In light of their criticism, my study adopts an eclectic approach that tries to intermingle the contextual imprints with textual close readings, giving attention to less recognized films. In handling the dynamics between the cultural context and the film texts, I am inspired by Clifford Geertz’s viewpoints on “thick description.” As he theorized, “[culture] is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly—that is, thickly—described” (14). That is to say, culture is those webs, the analysis of which is not an experimental science in search of law, but an interpretive one in search of distinctive cultural meanings of “twitches, winks, fake-winks, parodies, rehearsals of parodies”(14). The arrangement of chapters, featuring a contextual description followed by a textual reading, does not indicate a cause-effect relation, but offers a more nuanced picture by bringing out the interactions between ideology and representation vis-à-vis addressing the relationship among the party, filmmakers, and viewers.<sup>18</sup> Such a relationship involves the multiple mechanisms of meaning-making—appropriation, rebellion, returning, approval, and recognition.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, I hold the belief that watching and studying independent films should not constitute an ivory tower where only the opinions of institutionally trained scholars are worthy of attention. Even though the connotation of “indie-films” is contested across regions, one cannot deny the innovative, free-spirited and mobilizing substance as indicated by the claim of being independent and this alone justifies more respect to viewers outside of academia. With this belief, my writing will incorporate threads, afterthoughts, surveys, feedbacks from multiple sources including online film forums, film festival participants, and audiences who have been partaking in the independent film movement. This effort is likely, unsurprisingly, to be checkered by the perennial discrepancies between elite interpretation and general readings, and further complicated by audiences speaking different native languages. When the discord does happen, however, instead of adopting an either-or approach, I attempt a more holistic methodology to look at the increasing cultural agency of independent filmmaking that is laden with discourses originating from different sources. As I will demonstrate, these disparate sources are grouped together not only as a branch of film practice but also as a social conception with their shared imaginary for the Chinese realities and the position of the author in these realities.

### **Current Studies**

The orthodox Chinese language scholarship on pre-1949 Chinese cinema prior to 1980s is *Zhongguo dianying fazhan shi* (The History of the Development of Chinese Cinema), authored by Cheng Jihua, Li Shaobai and Xin Zuwen. Jay Leyda’s *Dianying: Account of Films and Film Audience in China* (1972) was another important early study

on this field. Chris Berry's *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema* (1985 and revised in 1991) offers insightful analyses on individual Chinese-language films from pan-China. Paul Clark conducts a thorough study of Chinese films in the socialist years in *Chinese Cinema: Culture and Politics since 1949* (1988).

*New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics* (1994), co-edited by multiple authors, anthologizes papers presented at a conference entitled "Cinema and Social Change in Three Chinese Societies" held at UCLA in 1990. It addresses, from a sociopolitical perspective, films made in the People's Republic and those from Taiwan and Hong Kong. This book became one of the most important collections on Chinese film studies in the 1990s. Utilizing postcolonial theories and pondering shared Chinese identity, Rey Chow's *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (1995) provides a thought-provoking analysis on eminent Fifth Generation filmmakers. Another important work of the same period is *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender* (1997), in which the authors try to rethink the national/international interface in Chinese film history in the face of globalization. The book examines "the nature of Chinese 'national cinema,' the advent of 'transnational cinema,' the relation of film to the modern nation-state, the nexus between visual technology and gender formation, and film culture in the age of global capitalism"(1). On the Chinese-language side, *Xin zhongguo dianying shi 1949-2000* (A History of Cinema in New China, 1949-2000) by Yin Hong and Ling Yan pioneers the academic studies on the transformation of Chinese cinema from political apparatus to artistic media and entertainment industry.

*Chinese National Cinema* (2004) by Yingjin Zhang is an extensive study of the major trends and developments in Chinese film history, covering mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. This forward-looking scholarship probes into the question of what is Chineseness by looking at the formation, negotiation and problematization of the nation on screen. A more recent encyclopedic contribution, *One Hundred Years of Chinese Cinema* (2006), offers a panorama of Chinese cinema ranging from the cinematographic style of silent film in the early 1930s to the Sixth Generation outputs. *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation* (2006), by Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar, gives a thorough and thoughtful account of the relations among nation, transnationalism, and Chinese cinematic culture by engaging with existing scholarship on how films from different regions, including the Chinese diaspora, form the multifaceted conception of Chinese nation (empire, republic, or ethnically based). It delves into issues of star images, transnational production and the image of the “good foreigner,” among others.

In contrast to the attention focused on the Fifth Generation, scholarship on independent filmmaking in China has been at most sporadic. A few early English studies are Berenice Reynaud, “New Vision/New Chinas: Video-Art, Documentation, and the Chinese modernity in Question,” in *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices* (1996) and Xiaoping Lin, “New Chinese Cinema of the ‘Sixth Generation’: A Distant Cry of Forsaken Children,” *Third Text* 16 (no. 3, 2000) and Shuqin Cui, “Working from the Margins: Urban Cinema and Independent Directors in Contemporary China,” *Post Script* 20, nos. 2-3 (2001). *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century* (2007), edited by Zhang Yingjin, is one of the groundbreaking books that attends to the Urban Generation’s aesthetic innovation, its sense of social

urgency, its documentary impulses, and its relationship with mainstream film and the international film market. *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*, edited by Paul Pickowicz and Yingjin Zhang, inaugurates dense academic work on the social and cultural phenomena of independent filmmaking in China. Topics of this book range from theoretical interpretation of the politics of underground and independence to analytical readings of particular films that feature realistic or documentary styles. *Children of Marx and Coca-Cola: Chinese Avant-garde Art and Independent Cinema* (2009), written by Xiaoping Lin, looks at disparate issues in the midst of the conflict between globalism and nationalism. She argues that this innate contradiction has shaped the themes of urban decay and spiritual voids, in avant-garde art, independent films and videos.

An increasing number of scholars have been drawn towards the postsocialist condition of Chinese cinema. From perspectives including modernity, urban planning, postmodernism and postsocialism, authors scrutinize the fast-changing Chinese society envisioned in literature and films. Jason Mcgrath's *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age* (2008) examines the transforming and increasingly pluralized Chinese culture under the age of market reforms, touching on a broad range of autonomous cultural forms such as avant-garde and commercial literature, independent film and the entertainment cinema. Xudong Zhang composed *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics: China in the Last Decade of the Twentieth Century* and argues that Chinese socialism survives as postsocialism that is articulated through the discourses of postmodernism and nationalism. In his understanding, the state of postsocialism explicates the global shift from modernity to postmodernity as enacted in

China, which has been shown in the works of Mo Yan and Zhang Yimou. *Cinema, Space and Polylocality in Globalizing China* (2009), another important work from Yingjin Zhang, proposes “polylocality” as a new conceptual framework and calls for poly-local and trans-spatial (as contrast to transnational) studies of “the multi-dimensioned space created by screen projection”(12).

Compared with Japanese cinema, another constituent of East Asian cinema, studies of special directors or a group of filmmakers from mainland China have been inadequate.<sup>20</sup> Such a tendency is partially explained by the meager influence of auteur theories in China, with occasional exceptions to Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige and more recently Jia Zhangke. However, even for those who have established their position as auteur, current studies are still dominated by an ethnographic framework where Chinese films are taken as extensions of socioeconomic or cultural discourses traceable to nationality. Another reason is stated above: with its historical immediacy/contemporaneity, the Chinese independent is not yet “completed”, which seems to prevent a contemplative understanding, if this understanding involves speculative or predicative arguments. At the same time, when the theoretic paradigm is shifted away from formative interpretation to broader contextual mapping, and when the operative of “cultural capital”<sup>21</sup> is ever-increasing, the requirement for an interdisciplinary approach has posed probably the biggest challenge to scholarship. The Chinese independent, a field that is co-opted by more than a singular player, may either ask for alteration of existent critical models or expansion of regional and disciplinary studies.<sup>22</sup>

## Outline

This dissertation is divided into three parts with each part devoted to a certain group of filmmakers: the realistic experimentalists, the underground rebels and the post-Sixth Generation. Every part is composed of two chapters with the first one delineating the macroscopic socio-cultural setting of filmmaking and the second concentrating on textual readings of those films that bear on relevant issues. More specifically, part one provides background information on the genesis of the so-called “Sixth Generation,” with a focus on the new urban films’ rendition of cinematic realism. Directors in focus are Jia Zhangke and Wang Xiaoshuai. Part two outlines the interplay between the state, the nation and the media, and analyzes how the filmmakers deploy thematic matters such as youth culture, rock 'n' roll, performance artists, and body politics to map their journey of seeking meaning under political suppression. Part three, probably the boldest attempt in this study, dissects the latest independent filmmaking movement thriving in China. This part embarks from two infamous cultural anecdotes, the legal dispute between Chen Kaige’s *The Promise* and its parody entitled *A Bloody Cased Induced by a Bun*, and the social radius of a random online thread, to diagnose the multifaceted dimensions of the online space. Included in this part is also a descriptive introduction of the production and distribution circuit of Chinese independent films (film funds, websites, online forums, domestic art film festivals, international distributors). I have conducted selective textual readings of several independent films made by younger and less famous directors who both pay tribute to and challenge the module of the Sixth Generation.

The following is a more detailed outline of each chapter. Chapter II delineates the imperative of realism in modern China, which has provided the new generation with the

cinematic language they had been searching for in the debate with their predecessors. To the new generation, cinematic realism is not only an artistic vision but also a strategy of countermovement backed up by the literary and filmmaking legacy of speaking for the mute social bottom. The independent film directors' realist impulse will be factored with the preference for realistic arts since the May Fourth that contemplated the legitimate right of authors to state "positions" (*lichang* 立场). The Fifth Generation is designated the son's generation who seeks cultural roots and a redefinition of history, which "legitimize" their filmmaking. It is therefore urgent for the new generation to define their shared identity to qualify themselves as filmmakers. Directors such as Jia Zhangke, Wang Xiaoshuai and Zhang Yuan claim the significance of self definition and self expression for filmmaking. The singular or even isolated existence of those small-town youths, migrant workers and art performers as portrayed in the urban cinema counteracts the unidirectional total consciousness that diminishes the meaning of "self" for the sake of national glory. The agency of their self-expression, as I argue in chapter VI, is turning vigorous when echoed among the audiences who identifies with the local images and find in these films the truthful representation of their own lives. Such a rapport among filmmakers and viewers advances the momentum of the Chinese independent as an artistic and social movement.

Chapter III answers the modules of cinematic realism through the lens of value, corporeality and the expression of local voices, read mostly through Jia Zhangke's film, *Unknown Pleasures*. The film digs into the symptoms of moral loss and emotional chaos abreast with the modernization mandate befalling the despair teens. The issue of body politics takes on a collective dimension—the site of meaning construction/struggling—

when voices, a type of local language, or simply the lack of language, fail to utter meanings.<sup>23</sup> The still vibrant legacy of class consciousness left by revolutionary discourses keeps inquiring into which social classes constitute the body of China. Independent film directors, however, endeavor to construct the personalized and highly individualized metrics of the body and its confrontation with its surroundings. These films query the interplay between real and unreal, face value and the real value of the body, as well as the real self and the marked one via the phantom operation of capital flow. The collective characteristic of corporeality, borne out vividly as the bewilderedness of the “true self,” in a deeper sense, is received as emblematic of the state-nation redefining its new role, a point specifically addressed in Chapters IV and V.<sup>24</sup>

Chapter IV describes the transformation of the cultural and industrial system in which independent films were made, examining the ongoing dynamics between the intellectual and the central-control. The relation between the state and independent filmmakers unveils motifs of “betrayal” and “return” and registers the collective memory of June Fourth. Many independent filmmakers’ later effort of “going aboveground” and making commercial films manifests in their film narratives as the reunion between “self” and “home” and is legitimized by the synthesis between the Party and the nation.

On the one hand, these independent films prefigure attention to the traumatized “self,” often existent as the isolated other, the marginal or the abnormal, that is distant from the nation’s modernization project. In films such as *Beijing Bastard*, *Seventeen Years* and the commercial hit *Cala, My Dog!*, the struggle of the marginalized is shown as their constant encounter with the center—the police station, the institution and eventually the Party. The possibility of self-utterance as a method to establish one’s

identity, sought by performance artists, rock musicians, migrant workers, bar singers, and prostitutes, are generally annulled in the end. On the other hand, the shift from banned to unbanned suggests the government's reuse of independent films for its national agenda and independent filmmakers' homecoming serves the goal of accessing a larger base of Chinese audience. "As massive housing construction and interior decoration re-draw the physiognomy of urban China, "home" (*jia*)...is gaining unprecedented visibility in China's fast-growing urban culture industry, and featured in paintings, films, television programs, advertising, and other media"(Yan 78). The nationalistic imperative of reviving the film industry to compete with Hollywood generates a deep-down anxiety, among filmmakers, of "self" being exiled from "home." The directors' yearning for homecoming is paralleled with the increasingly personalized police officer on screen who does not show up as the authoritative patriarch any more but becomes an undefined individual. Their reunification with the Party is predicated on the identity of the Party as defined by them, as well as their self-positioning in the structure of nation-state. From physical labor to the act of sexuality, the afflicted body is both a last resort for taking control and the chosen form of communication and definition, for a bygone past and more importantly for the renewed image of the Party.

Chapter V devotes to nuanced textual analyses of a few important underground films, including Zhang Yuan's *Beijing Bastard*, *East Place*, *West Palace*, *Seventeen Years*, He Jianjun's *Postman*, Ning Ying's *On the Beat* and Lou Ye's recent work *Summer Palace*. Films featuring the relationship between the "policeman" and his captive, and about sexually rebellious college youngsters allegorize the struggle over "definition" sought by rock stars, gay people, prisoners, and marginalized artists. A corporeal subject

is reestablished by challenging the definition assigned by state and by seeking alternative self-utterance. In these works “self” reorients to its social relations with the surroundings, eventually pointing to the state. In an excursion into the relation between “self” and the state, I contend that independent films defy the “revolution plus romance” tradition<sup>25</sup> and instead pinpoint the nexus of sexuality as both the most political and personal site of self articulation. Zhang Yuan’s *East Place, West Palace* coagulates the relation between seduction, being seduced, being outrageous, banned, unbanned, all the allegorical mechanisms involved in the independent filmmakers’ journey. The oscillation of the state in comprehending and handling independent films, as embodied in this film as the ambiguous reaction of the policeman towards the gay man, reflects the complicity and confusion of the state itself.<sup>26</sup> In *Summer Palace*, the unruly dissents who fled from their college romances in the wake of the 1989 political upheaval find themselves bewildered, years later, about the proper definition of the past, both personally and politically. When the male protagonist returns to a homeland he cannot recognize anymore, the heroines’ desperate need to communicate and inability to do so lead to a similar ending of despair.

Chapter VI studies spectatorship involving urban film clubs, domestic film festivals and online film forums to identify the shared urge for “sincerity” and “truth” among filmmakers, professional critics and amateur viewers, particularly in cyber space. This proclivity resonates with the quest for truthful representation of the regional imagery of China. Instead of sticking to the notation of “pan-China,” a popular rendition of an imaginative China that exists beyond regional bounds (even though it is as much a simulacrum as the “world” in Jia Zhangke’s so-named film),<sup>27</sup> I argue that the regional expansion of the Chinese culture is inseparable from envisioning the possibility to

reconnect with the realistic tradition.<sup>28</sup> My argument is built on the following analytic layers.

Underneath the antagonism between the local image and the transnational big-budget blockbuster lies the question of “truth” and the subject, an inquiry closely linked to the filmmakers’ question of who has the right to make a film. As critics have noted, the internal contradictions of globalization are manifested in contemporary international cultural politics and exert an impact on a particular culture’s collective identity both on the levels of representation and public participation (Pang, *Cultural Control* 98). A case in point is the so-called *egao* (parody, pastiche) culture in recent years accompanying the big-budget sensations created by Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige and occasionally Feng Xiaogang. The online public employs parodies to express their discontent with the bureaucratic and the global capitalization, which in their union is considered eroding genuine Chinese identity. When the general populace was disenchanted by the cultural and political fever of the late 1980s, independent filmmaking forges a cultural identity that continues the search, in a drastically different era, for humanitarian expressions. Particularly, film funds, archives, festivals and clubs are fulfilling the circuit of the Chinese independent, anticipating a foreseeable industry transformation that allows domestic audiences to watch independent films on big or small screens. Independent filmmakers and viewers active in this circuit unveil a public awareness emerging in urban China that tries to negotiate both with the government for self realization and with the international capitals for independent development. When the state is suspected of conspiring with global capitals, attested by its efforts to support big-budget commercial productions, such discourses will arise to deliver their disagreement, not in the form of

revolt but through parodies. Those parodies spread via the cyber space, unadventurously affecting the trajectory of cultural production in China and playing an indispensable role in the government's policy-making.

Chapter VII focuses on a cluster of young and less famous directors, including Ying Liang, Peng Tao, Yang Jin, Liu Jiaying and Gan Xiao'er. Their participation in independent filmmaking bears increasing similarity with their Western counterparts, that is, seeking film funds or financial assistance from friends to make non-commercial films and bypassing the approval of censorship, or not. The definition of the Chinese independent seems to have shifted from political reference to non-studio production modes. However, these films maintain a similar penchant for realistic depiction and the uncompromising voice of the "author." Imminent social issues, such as chemical pollution, failing familial values, orphanages, the market of orphans, continue to play a large part in the younger generation's filmmaking agenda. The DV generation keeps searching for innovative film language to expand the spectrum of cinematic realism, for instance, forgoing static long takes and adopting extreme close-ups to announce the ultimate retreat to the self.

In general, this study attempts to probe into urgent questions intertwined with on-going scholarly discussions about the large-scale social transformations taking place in contemporary China. The significance of independent filmmaking and the discourses associated with it derives from three aspects, in Ban Wang's words: first, to register the swift change of time; second, to depict the disintegration of the social fabric, and third, to seek truth against commercial melodrama. It may sound overarching to associate "independence" with the Baudelarian rescue effort in the ruthless flow of time, but I find

Wang's observation about Jia Zhangke's films poignant and central to this research. Wang remarks, "Jia Zhangke makes a similar attempt to document the melancholy quest for authentic experience in a time when historical ground for experience is eroding." Wang's contention that "the shift from history to authenticity is symptomatic of a history in decline yet in need of restructuring" ("Epic Narrative" 216) is resonant of Walter Benjamin's Leftist preponderance over *angelus novus*<sup>29</sup>, or at least the attempt to extend the pre-modern (grand) discourse for further application in the high-modern era. The meaning of "independence" understood in this vein goes beyond the filmic vocabulary, but penetrates the finest component of everyday life including our own internet usage and daily consumption of cultural products.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For introduction of the respective awards these films win see <http://www.imdb.com>

<sup>2</sup> For all the transnational operatives assumed in new Chinese cinema, filmmaking in Hong Kong and Taiwan has adopted drastically different modes that effectuate distinct subject matters, thematic concerns, cinematic styles and ideological discourses.

<sup>3</sup> This question is constantly asked by interviewers of independent film directors in online forums and in various film festivals.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Shuiqin Cui observes that, "the worlds that unfold from a personal point of view are no longer traumatic histories and allegorical narratives, but explorations of an urban milieu inhabited by people who live at the fringes of mainstream society." (Lu, *Chinese-language Film* 99).

<sup>5</sup> Particularly, films made by Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige in the early 2000s.

<sup>6</sup> Definition of "enlightenment" in the Chinese context sounds too complicated to be properly used. And this categorization, even in its most immediate conjecture, is not applicable to every independent director. As I will explain later, the appropriateness of this categorization for most part derives from my study on domestic audiences' understanding of many independent films, that is, how they identify with film elements they see. See Chapters VI & VII.

<sup>7</sup> It is pointed out by scholars, such as Wendy Larson, that “[The] quality of ‘for the masses’ reiterates one of the primary directives of revolutionary culture: serve the people” (9). In my understanding, “for the masses” also echoes the penchant for realism.

<sup>8</sup> A comment made by Zhang Yuan in his interview. See Reynaud, “New Visions” 236.

<sup>9</sup> Li Zehou, *Zhongguo Xiandai Sixiangshi Lun* (On the History of Modern Chinese Thought), Beijing: Dongfang Chubanshe, 1987. Ni Zhen quotes Li Zehou’s thoughts and comments that, division into generations indicates “physiological age” as well as cultural and social consciousness (189).

<sup>10</sup> Shuqin Cui, “Working from the Margin: Urban Cinema and Independent Direction in Contemporary Cinema,” *Post Script* 20, Nos. 2&3: 77-93.

<sup>11</sup> For example, Wang Yichuan thinks that this fifth generation only existed between 1983 and 1993(20).

<sup>12</sup> As a matter of fact, multiple scholars have challenged the label of “the Sixth Generation”: for instance, Wang Yichuan, “Wudaiqi zhongguo dianying” (Non-generation era Chinese cinema), *Dangdai dianying* 5 (1994), 20-27, Han Xiaolei, “Dui diwudai de wenhua tuwei: Hou wudai de geren idanying xianxiang” (Getting beyond the Fifth Generation culture: Post-Fifth-Generation individual filmmaking), *Dianying yishu* 2 (1995): 58-63, and Lü Xiaoming, “Jiushi niandai zhongguo dianying jingguan zhiyi: ‘diliudai’ jiqi zhiyi” (An aspect of Chinese filmmaking of the 1990s: “the 6<sup>th</sup> Generation” and challenges to this label), *Dianying yishu* 3 (1999), 23-28.

<sup>13</sup> As Valerie Jaffee noted, “In order to obtain government recognition and permission to show their films in the nation’s theatres, Chinese filmmakers must fulfill several requirements: they must purchase a quota number from a state-run studio, they must submit both a plot synopsis and the completed film to government censors, and they must not make the film public—including submitting to international festivals—until the censors’ approval is secured. Filmmakers who fail on any of these counts can expect that their film will be banned and they themselves forbidden to make any more films in China until further notice.”

<sup>14</sup> Both Yingjin Zhang, in *Screening China* and Hsiao-peng Lu, in *Chinese-language Film* adopt this naming, for instance.

<sup>15</sup> The other problem associated with this naming is that theorists tend to use “independent films” to illuminate the production process while using “auteur films” to define these directors’ artistic styles, which literally counteract the synthesis of contextual reading and cinematic analysis.

<sup>16</sup> For a more detailed analysis on this part, see chapter IV.

<sup>17</sup> Recall Wendy Larson’s explanation of the dilemma faced by regional studies: “Now that our ...faith in the power of aesthetics has been tempered by an understanding of

exclusion and social power, we should recognize that aesthetic and creative texts and films may unravel their own unique and imaginative logic, and may point us toward more deeply theoretical understanding” (11).

<sup>18</sup> Current scholarship on Chinese independent filmmaking either commits to a few filmmakers or offers collection of disparate topics authored by multiple writers.

<sup>19</sup> Laikwan Pang declared similar approach. See *Building a New China* 198.

<sup>20</sup> With a few exceptions, such as the work by Michael Berry, *Jia Zhangke's Hometown Trilogy*.

<sup>21</sup> For detailed discussions of “cultural capital,” see Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*.

<sup>22</sup> I am fully aware of Wendy Larson’s accusation of the culture studies critic’s “arrogance” of overestimating their ability to shrink the complex world into a text, an attempt to replace the lived reality of the world with their understanding of the flattened “text” (Larson 237). On the other hand, aside from the heroic, or sometimes “arrogant” attitude from the academia (which is likely an antithetic reaction to the general reality/mass’s marginalization of academic discourses), I believe the ever broader academic study subjects inspired by the breadth of cultural studies may be an endeavor to mingle the division between the academic and material life experience.

<sup>23</sup> For a discussion of class consciousness and its influence in modern China, see Dikotter, *Crime, Punishment and the Prison in Modern China*.

<sup>24</sup> At the same time, I am aware that focus on cinematic realism is not equal to a moralistic reading or to replace analysis on realistic cinematic languages sustained by a vibrant aesthetic system. *Suzhou River*, for example, is read by critics as a lament for the moral loss of China with the imbue of western influence, which to me bears on the predicament of third-world cinema and national cinema, that is, a moralistic reading tend to prevail.

<sup>25</sup> As seen in leftist literature and films in the 1930s and replicated in renditions of the Cultural Revolution subject, a psychoanalytical understanding of grand political events has dominated modern Chinese literature and image making, that is, the assumed libido origin of the revolutionary spirit can both dignify and discredit the revolutionary project.

<sup>26</sup> Critics, for example, lament about Zhang Yuan’s recent reproduction of revolutionary classics such as *Sister Jiang* (Jiangjie 江姐) and consider it a disappointing drawback from his once upfront dissent gesture towards the communist party. I argue that these critics fail to realize the complications behind Chinese independent filmmaking and especially directors’ perception of their relation with the state and the Party.

<sup>27</sup> Refer to Anderson, the imagined community-as-nation is understood as a textual trope to be dispelled. Also see Berry, “If China Can Say No” 131.

<sup>28</sup> A methodology drawn from theories about the correlation between time and space, refer to Massey, *For Space*.

<sup>29</sup> Walter Benjamin's infamous description of Paul Klee's painting "Angelus Novus" (Angel of History): "*The face of the angel of history is turned toward the past. Where we perceived a chain of events, he sees a single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. The storm is what we call progress*" (Ishay 3).

## CHAPTER II

### REDISCOVERY OF REALISM:

#### GENESIS OF THE SIXTH GENERATION

Yet in so far as a compulsive skepticism and a jaded cynicism have become the orthodoxies of our age, this may be the moment to start rehabilitating reality –and André Bazin.<sup>1</sup>

With Dai Jinhua's designation of the Fifth Generation films as the art of sons (*Cinema and Desire* 13), one queries what would be a proper name for the urban filmmakers onboard in the mid 1990s and what their kinship with their precursors is. Where the Fifth Generation represents "the Father-Son symbolic relationship" and a fatherless land, in Dai's words, one finds the nameless situation for the new filmmakers. Yet core members of the two groups received their cinematic training from the same institution—Beijing Film Academy (BFA), the cradle for most contemporary Chinese filmmakers.<sup>2</sup> Given their same origin, is the Sixth Generation the grandson rebelling against his bewildered father? Or is it a lost child in the national filmmaking genealogy? To answer this question it is necessary to look at the institutional history of the BFA and track its role in modern Chinese filmmaking, the purpose of which is to offer a more nuanced characterization of the complex relation between the two groups.

For critics' emphasis on the opposition between the Fifth and the Sixth, interviews with the young filmmakers, however, reveal that canonical Fifth Generation films such as *Yellow Earth* sparked their initial interest in filmmaking.<sup>3</sup> If Jia Zhangke and his circle lauded the achievements of *Yellow Earth*, what was it that eventually made them aloof to other films made by the Fifth Generation directors? In addition to providing

background introduction to the film academy, I will investigate film theories and materials that largely comprised the film students' curriculum. Western realistic films and theories on cinematic realism, which gained its momentum in the fifties and sixties, inspired directors who were seeking their own film language, and importantly these directors include members from both the Sixth and the Fifth Generations. The significance of world cinema is undergirded by the variants of May Fourth typical realism that advocated the representation of the socially-oppressed.<sup>4</sup>

It seems to me that the need to promote the urban generation as dissidents of mainstream culture, a move not without commercial and/or political motivation,<sup>5</sup> has obscured the linkage between the two film camps. The labels of “Chinese dissidents” and “outlaws” have the side-effect of exaggerating the innovativeness of realistic filmmaking by treating it as a movement coming out of nowhere. Besides Western scholarship, this chapter will draw on Chinese-language resources to illuminate the coming-of-age of the so called Sixth Generation, including the post-Fifth filmmakers who live abroad, to examine issues related to the right of representation. My research shows that the realistic slant prevailing in the younger filmmakers is both a result of the directors' search for new film language—more or less a strategic move—and an indicator of a sweeping social and aesthetic shift in post-Mao China. The Sixth Generation is a chain in the ideological struggles for “truth” and individualism from 1978 to 1989 amidst the new enlightenment movement.<sup>6</sup> Habitually described as the urban generation, the Sixth Generation was not an antagonist of the Fifth but instead continued the missions that had been deserted by the Fifth in their later works. The rise of the independent filmmakers coagulates the path followed by Chinese intellectuals in the efforts to redefine cinema and convert

filmmaking from a privilege sanctioned by ideological discourses to a right of self expression. This right of representation is considered belonging to each individual and endorsed by nothing but the author-subject. During the process, cinematic realism is both an asset that grants them the right and an obligation they need to pay back.

### **Beijing Film Academy and the Generations of Filmmaking**

The BFA was established in 1956, presided over by Zhang Min, a key figure in the progressive leftist drama and film movement of the 1930s. In the years from its origin until the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution, the Academy developed into a comprehensive college with departments of screenwriting, directing, acting, cinematography, production design and film technology (later reformed into the sound department). Most of the Fifth Generation film directors graduated from the 1982 class, recruited four years earlier when the Academy was restored for the first time after the Cultural Revolution. Film directors' memoirs show that the first admonitions the students received was emphasis on a director's social responsibility and the importance of artistic innovation (Ni 56).

The BFA was modeled after the Soviet educational system and three core courses in the Directing department were "The Art of Film Direction," "Film Montage Theory," and "Screenwriting." Placed on the students' desks were important textual materials for their study of script-writing, such as Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm*, *Sunrise*, *The Peking Man*, Lao She's *Rickshaw Boy* and *Teahouse*, Tian Han's *The Death of a Famous Opera Performer*, and a list of foreign texts including Ibsen, Shakespeare and Chekhov. The Montage class studied classics of early Soviet cinema such as Pudovkin's *Mother* (1926),

Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1926), the Vasiliev brothers' *Chapayev* (1934) and Dzigan's *We are from Kronstadt* (1936).

In the later years of their study, the curriculum drew on a more extensive list of cinema including Chinese classics, Hollywood films of the thirties and forties, as well as the Soviet classics. Students had two evening film-screenings per week, one focusing on world cinema and the other contemporary Chinese films. Chinese classics such as Wu Yonggang's 1934 film, *The Goddess*, and Fei Mu's 1948 *Spring in a Small Town* were well received among students, while films made in the fifties and sixties were often slightly ridiculed. Those films made in the golden age of China's socialist era, usually called the Third and Fourth Generation cinema, were dismissed as "fake arts" for their over-theatrical acting and didactic messages.<sup>7</sup> Ni Zhen commented that "the Fifth Generation both broke with tradition and maintained it, because they skipped the fifties to pick up the humanist philosophy of classical China and extended the nonmainstream tradition of thirties Chinese film"(97). When BFA students were exposed to Chinese cinematic tradition, they filtered and selected materials that in their understanding were more aligned with the socio-cultural transition China was experiencing in the new era.

One of the most important events during the new era, from 1978 to 1989, was the discussion of the "criterion of truth." Initiated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), this nationwide debate ignited the new enlightenment movement that "as a counteraction to the feudalism of the Cultural Revolution, embraced rationalism as its principal element, hoisted the flag of science and humanism and launched a liberation in thinking" (W. Liu 17). Amidst the discussion of truth, individualism was recuperated to find faults with the communist collectivism and espouse thriving humanistic art creations in various regions

of China.<sup>8</sup> The oil painting, *Father*, exhibited in the 1980 “Sichuan Youth Art Exhibition,” portrayed the “father” as an old man with bronze face, deep wrinkles and quiet demeanor, no longer any revolutionary icon related to chairman Mao. The painting caused tremendous sensations in 1970s China—as if for the first time over a long period the Chinese started to discover the individual, his pain, sorrow and happiness that is not dictated by the collective. And also for the first time the independent dignity of artistic creation was restored to counter the charge of ideological control.<sup>9</sup>

As many were engulfed by the “sent-down” youth movement, the film class of 1982 shared the nationwide sentiments that advocated reinvestigating the totalitarian revolutionary past and restoring the dignity of individuals who had been belittled. To that avail they embarked on a journey to seek their unique film language, which was not determined by the older generation’s (which included the BFA teachers’) mission of recovering the revolutionary nobility, but was mandated by the rising enlightenment concerns for a new China. The stoicism of Chinese farmers conveyed in the painting, *Father*, largely inspired the *Yellow Earth* filming crew: “we filmed those long takes where he sits talking to Gu Qing on the bed platform or sings ‘sour tunes’ for him employing the tone and mood of the painting *Father*.”<sup>10</sup> Students in BFA were also influenced by modernistic artworks—including Japanese films made in the 1970s and western filmmakers such as Bergman, Resnais, Godard, Truffaut, and Antonioni—to locate their own cinema language. After graduating from the BFA, Zhang Yimou, Xiao Feng and He Qun were assigned to Guangxi Film Studio, a new studio in an outlying region that granted them more freedom than allowed by established studios in Beijing or Shanghai. Zhang Yimou and his friends seized the chance to form a Youth Film Unit and

made their first film, *One and Eight*, about an innocent communist whose loyalty to the Party was wrongly doubted. After this film, Guanxi Film Studio instructed the group to make a second film based on the novel *Echoes across the Ravine*, telling a typical revolutionary story about how a communist soldier in the Eighth Route Army leads a Shaanxi country girl to join the anti-Japanese war. Chen Kaige accepted the assigned project and paid a pilgrimage visit to Shaanxi and the Yellow river. The film narrative, collaboratively rewritten by the film crew, largely departed from the original script instructed by the Guanxi Film Studio. The film was later renamed *Yellow Earth*. *Yellow Earth* transformed the dominant film language from their predecessors; rather than adopting an explicit and theatrical style, it features subtle and nuanced relations between characters, between humans and nature, soldiers and the people, the people and the Party.<sup>11</sup>

The favorable reception of Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige in international film festivals, originally disturbing to the state authorities, was soon woven into the nation's open and reform policy and was sanctioned. As new representatives of Chinese cinema, Zhang and Chen contributed to our common understanding about what defines the Fifth Generation with their unprecedented success. However, the group later termed the Fifth Generation is far from a monolithic group but instead contains a variety of artistic styles.<sup>12</sup> A case in point is Tian Zhuangzhuang, whose features such as *Our Corner* (1980), *The Yard* (1980) and *Blue Kite* (1993) employed dramatically different styles than those seen in *Yellow Earth* or *Red Sorghum*. The predominance of documentary-style realism and nonfictional narratives in Tian's creations attests to the problematic of essentializing the oeuvres of the Fifth Generation as national allegory.

To general Chinese audiences, the initial allure of Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* was the foreign film awards it won. The sensation of *Red Sorghum* in China speaks to the "culture fever" period when the population, eager to bid farewell to the past, was awaiting the recognition of outside cultural symbols, and when international award is equalized to "artistic achievement." The movie was promoted in China as a marker of the nation's modernization project, a "must-see" for any Chinese who did not want to be left behind. The concert between the nation and the populace is built upon their shared understanding of the West as the epitome of modernity whose recognition amounts to the standard of cultural products. The cultural icon, *Yellow Earth*, acquires its credence from the international art critics directly, deviating from the intervention of the general audience and yet eventually reaching a critical height no less than that of *Red Sorghum*. To a large extent, the complicity between the international and the nation determined the general perception of the Fifth Generation. The need of international forces to define post-Cultural Revolutionary China as a resolute departure from the past and the nation's decision to inaugurate the project of modernization cooperatively forged the prestige of Zhang Yimou's and Chen Kaige's film models. Other options, such as Tian Zhuangzhuang's realistic depictions, are left largely in oblivion. That is to say, history has witnessed a selective reading of the past and determined our impression of the homogeneous styles of the Fifth Generation.

For urban films, the same mechanism working between the international and the nation plays the role of distinguishing the younger generation from the past and thus fills in a much awaited new discourse. The emergence of the urban generation was accompanied by institutional oppression and accordant defiance against the authority. In

1992, when Hu Xueyang, a graduate of the class admitted in 1985 to the BFA, finished his maiden work *The Left Behind* (Liushou nūshi) he declared that, “the five classes admitted in 1985 are the Sixth Generation of filmmakers”(Zheng 4). Guan Hu, a graduate from the class of 1987 in the BFA, printed a calligraphic “87” in the title of the film, *Dirty* (Zangren, 1994). Some of the students also published their aesthetic manifesto, “The Phenomenon of post *Yellow Earth* in Chinese Film,” in the name of “all graduates of the class of 1985.” These actions denote their awareness of shaping a new generation of Chinese cinema that is drastically different from the entrenched *Yellow Earth* mode.

In 1990 Zhang Yuan finished his debut feature, *Mama*, arguably the “first independent Chinese film since 1949.”<sup>13</sup> The film focuses on a mother struggling to raise her mentally handicapped son while at the same time dealing with her unresponsive husband. Shot mostly in black and white, the film shows Zhang’s documentary leaning, intercutting actual interviews with parents of autistic children throughout the narrative. The original film, entitled *The Sun Tree*, was planned in the Children’s Film Studio. Zhang Yuan at the time was still a student in the BFA’s cinematography department and was selected to serve as the film’s director of photography, with Fifth Generation graduate Sun Chen as the director. After working for the film for three months, however, the studio decided to cancel the production. The project was resumed by the August First Film Studio. Shortly after the 1989 Tiananmen student protest, however, the production was canceled again, in part because the screenplay writer Dai Qing supported the demonstrations.

Withstanding all the obstacles, Zhang Yuan eventually opted to produce the film independently, asking friends and family for funding. Zhang Yuan, Qin Yan, and Zhang’s

wife, screenwriter Ning Dai, rewrote the film's original story. The result was a film, in Zhang's words, that "was completely different" and "something much closer to the everyday reality of average Chinese people" (M. Berry, *Speaking in Images* 146). As a major in photography, Zhang Yuan originally planned to ask his friend, director Wang Xiaoshuai, to direct the film, but later took over the directing work himself. The film was shot in 1989 in Zhang's apartment on a budget of 100,000 RMB. *Mama* was registered with the state-run Xi'an Film Studio, but was given only a minimal distribution in China.

In 1991, Wang Xiaoshuai set out to make his debut feature, *The Days*, a film in black-and-white tracing the dire living condition of an artist couple residing in Beijing. As a new graduate from the BFA, Wang realized that a large-budget film would be impossible and became interested in small-scale and independent films. *The Days* was shot on a meager budget of less than \$10,000 (U.S.), with Wang's friends playing the lead roles. Made outside of the state film system, *The Days* was blacklisted by the Chinese Film Bureau upon its release. The defiant stance of this film does not merely lie in the independent production mode. Wang was consciously rebelling against the critically acclaimed films of the period: those lavish Fifth Generation films Wang found "unnatural and pretentious" (M. Berry, *Speaking in Images* 162). He wanted to create a film that spoke to the contemporary Chinese: "there may not be an obvious story line in *The Days*, but at least it presents the truth about the lives of people from my generation in the wake of the Tiananmen Square tragedy" (162).

While Zhang's and Wang's early works have been considered the pioneers of Chinese independent films, the first independent film production organization in China was founded in 1995 by Jia Zhangke and Wang Hongwei—the "Youth Experimental

Film Group of BFA.” The group was started by a few film students in the BFA who were passionate about making films but deterred by the many insurmountable difficulties involved in the process. One incident, however, finally consolidated their decision to make their own films. After viewing two contemporary Chinese movies, as part of the BFA screening events, Jia and his friends were disappointed by the banal cinematography and atmosphere in Zhang Yimou’s and Chen Kaige’s later films.<sup>14</sup> The group realized that the filmmaking mode established by Zhang and Chen was misleading Chinese cinema to the extent that even directors who originally made city films began to try Fifth Generation styles. For example, influenced by the international hit of Zhang’s and Chen’s national allegories, Huang Jianxin made *The Wooden Man’s Bride* (五魁), He Ping made *Red Firecracker, Green Firecracker* (炮打双灯) and Li Shaohong made *Blush* (红粉), all of which are irrelevant to the social reality of contemporary China. The Fifth Generation’s styles were entrenched in the BFA by that time. The very first film Jia Zhangke and his classmates watched during their study is Chen Kaige’s *Farewell my Concubine*. It is unclear which films from the Fifth Generation eventually ignited the young students’ fury, but the emulation of Zhang and Chen led Jia Zhangke and his friends to the idea of forming an independent film group. Later, when Jia recalled the earliest stage of this film group, he commented about the importance of depicting the ordinary life experience of people. He said, after seeing his hometown buddies’ experience of growing-up he felt that “contemporary life is extraordinarily fresh and alive. Why shouldn’t we make films about contemporary life in China?”<sup>15</sup>

In terms of discovering world cinema resources that have aided in the urban generation’s search for their own film language, one has to confront the fact that both the

Fifth Generation and the Sixth accessed similar foreign film theories during their formal training in the BFA. Theories on cinematic realism proposed by Rudolf Arnheim, Siegfried Kracauer and André Bazin were well received among students in the BFA, regardless of their generational belongings. For instance, André Bazin's theories significantly influenced the Fifth Generation and helped to establish the credential of cinematic realism as a separate and legitimate field of intellectual inquiry. What sets the Sixth Generation apart from the Fifth, in my opinion, is not only a different selection of cinema theories that gave them philosophical support, but also a fully conscious endeavor to seek the right to filmmaking, an operative and strategic move inspired by alternative world cinema. In particular, new German Cinema and the French New Wave nourished the Sixth Generation's ideas of independent production, as well as their rebellious inclinations, respectively. Representatives of new German Cinema, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Werner Herzog, Alexander Kluge, Volker Schlöndorff, worked with low budgets and sparked a renaissance in German film. French New Wave directors who were fully engaged in social and political upheavals rejected classical cinematic forms and favored iconoclasm and radical visual experiments, loaning their political momentum to the Chinese underground. Another source worthy of mention is the Taiwan New Wave that took shape right before the onset of the Sixth Generation. Jia Zhangke, for example, expressively showed his admiration for Hou Hsiao-Hsien's works.<sup>16</sup> The resurrection of a renewed national image in the international film industry (in the case of New German Cinema), focusing on the marginal and the socially oppressed (as in French New Wave), and dissecting history from personal accounts (as in Hou Hsiao-Hsien's films), furnished some of the most common themes in the Chinese independent.

In “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” (1945), Bazin propounds the perennial urge of humankind to copy the surface of the world faithfully into art, a wish he termed as the “mummy complex”—the intention to freeze the ceaseless flow of time by encapsulating it in an image. In his opinion, such a long-standing need of mankind was not completely fulfilled until the development of photography in the nineteenth century, when science replaced human craft to produce “reality.” Photography possesses a privileged relation with the “real,” not as artwork of human creation, but due to its objective quality. Therefore, both photography and its derivative, the motion picture, hold a prior obligation towards reality. In his understanding, a “higher” realism provides a rendering of time and space. And the technique of the long take, simulating the continuous nature of the two dimensions, serves that purpose the best. Given the limit of the camera frame, namely, the camera can only capture a portion of the reality on display, Bazin favors cinematographic integration of long takes and deep focus (particularly seen in Jean Renoir’s works), which, he claims, hints at a sense of ambiguity and avoids the equal clarity put on the screen.<sup>17</sup> To Bazin, cinema’s core realism is “not certainly the realism of subject matter or realism of expression, but that realism of space without which moving pictures do not constitute cinema”(112).

Walter Benjamin, another iconic theorist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, pinpoints the “fantasy” value of films in the setting of enclosed urban living: “Our taverns and our metropolitan streets...appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder..., so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling” (“The Work of Art” 12). The development of world cinema in the last century seems to suggest that alternative cinema

has adopted the proposition that film captures the truth of reality whereas mainstream Hollywood is content with providing fantasy via CGI (computer generated images), special effects, or simply confirmative rhetoric and narratives. Being aware of this difference, the Chinese independents at their earliest stage were cautious about their choices of western influences. They favored realistic imagery, not simply because of budget limitations, but more importantly because of their aesthetic preferences for non-Hollywood styles, and their agenda of seeking a film language that is different from their predecessors, a point to be further expounded below.

In the formative stage of the “Youth Experimental Film Group,” Jia Zhangke’s film partner Wang Hongwei developed interest in the independent production mode, particularly in light of the extreme amateurism of German director Fassbinder’s first feature, *Love Is Colder than Death* (*Liebe ist kälter als der Tod*, 1969). “Independent filmmaking,” albeit still not a very clear concept to the young students, gradually became the eternal token of their film group. To them, the most attractive part of this movement is the concept of “independent.” With all the controversies concerning what defines “independent cinema,” for initiators of the independent film group in China, this concept first of all meant disrupting the generational hierarchy of filmmaking and challenging the rigid departmental division within the BFA. It is worthy of notice that Jia Zhangke and his crew came from the Literature Department in the BFA rather than from its authoritative Directing Department. For a long time, it was a tacit rule that only students from the Directing Department had the right to make a film. Therefore, to the young film students, being “independent” is not only against the film language of the old generation, but also a rebuke of institutional constraint. They gradually arrived at the understanding

that being independent was the type of right they sought, the right to make films differently than the established mode, and the right of representation. Their disruption was surely to be checkered by various obstacles, including those coming from the older filmmakers who wielded a sense of “superiority” both in professional training and in their claims to the experiences of “national history” and “trauma.”

### **The Right to Make Films**

Of the same importance as the Fifth Generation’s effort to seek an alternative history, is the clear line that the Sixth Generation draws between history and reality. While the Fifth deployed a highly mystical version of the Chinese culture’s historical meta-narratives, what languages are adopted by the younger generation to give meaning to “reality”? As Marston Anderson and other scholars point out, modern Chinese literature had been burdened from birth with an enormous sense of responsibility. Chinese intellectuals were resolute to reconstruct literary culture after their efforts at political reform failed, and they did so with a specific purpose in mind.<sup>18</sup> Such a characteristic not only infuses in realistic works a didactic nature but also adequately builds up the imaginative affinity between realism and moral concern that extends to the suppressed and marginalized.

By analyzing the confusion between “historical reality” and real history latent in films produced in China, I contend that the schema of filmmaking genealogy preempts the urban-generation filmmakers’ departure from national history. On the level of terminology, the designation of the Sixth Generation itself poses a severe constraint to their quest for independence when genealogy becomes the eternal reference in cinematic

styles and subject matters. On a deeper level, cinema as a discourse backed up by nation-building predicates that the effort of breaking away from reflexive historical accounts leads to the inheritance of a highly moralistic realism. In other words, while the Fifth Generation, now as cultural elite, finds their legitimacy of filmmaking in providing a reflection of national history, the independent generation is compelled to locate their rights in the realist tradition of speaking for ordinary folks or social underdogs, an agenda they carry on not without precariousness.

The dilemma faced by the new generation is unveiled in the notorious debate between Chen Kaige and Jia Zhangke over the right to make films. Chen critiques that younger directors, for not experiencing the Cultural Revolution, the peak of China's national disasters, lack deep understanding of "bitterness" and life. To Chen's accusation Jia responded, "We cannot compare disasters as experienced by each person," or put in different ways, "one disaster does not weigh more than another."<sup>19</sup> As a delegate of each generation, the two directors approach the legitimacy of making films in China from different perspectives: for Chen, it is the immediate experience of national change and the resultant pain that endows an individual with the qualification to make films while, to Jia, personal experience itself weighs as much as the imprint of national disasters. Deep beneath the surface discrepancies, however, is their shared understanding of a prerequisite for making films, and the privileged position of cinema. That is, film's ideological reference, discursive mobility, and how verisimilarly they portray reality prescribe other rubrics. The unwitting rapport in their debate points to one of the most pertinent and persistent issues confronting Chinese filmmakers—the right to make films and the right of representation.

Another issue underlying Chen and Jia's debate is whether or not reality in the form of contemporality can take over the authoritative position of history. Being distant from the grand revolutionary history themselves, the Fifth Generation directors map the outlier of history in allegorical tales. The tales they tell are far from the historicity recounted by precedent directors, although "the severed bridge"<sup>20</sup> is ponderous enough to assist in constructing the cinematic topology of Chinese nationality. Independent filmmakers, in contrast, willingly admit that they may not have been exposed to the remnants of the "grand history," in particular, the Cultural Revolution, but they still own the rights to make a film about themselves, people like them, or people around them. Zhang Yuan comments, "The Fifth Generation has done a terrific job writing history as a parable. But I can only be objective. Indeed, to me objectivity is crucial. Each day I pay attention to what happens immediately around me. *I cannot see beyond a certain distance.*"<sup>21</sup> Zhang Yuan rebuked Chen Kaige's accusation from another angle and gives Chen the hardest strike, claiming that the metrics of objectivity instantly belittle the parables told by the Fifth Generation who neither provided a reliable account of history nor a truthful representation of their own life experience. If the Fifth Generation could not even adequately account for their own life experience, the reliability of their historical account is instantly doubtable. The endeavor of the new generation is to replace the predominance of history with the accountability and reliability of contemporary life experience, a living history still being written.

In their advocacy of contemporary reality as replacement of "history," independent filmmakers register the enlightenment concern of cultural renewal that is assumed to be forward-looking and based on current life experiences. Chen and Jia's

debate on the relative weight of history and reality in art creation occurred at a time different from the tumultuous early 20<sup>th</sup> century when social Darwinism derived the referent status of history. However, independent filmmakers involved in this debate are reminiscent of the many intellectuals in late imperial China who espoused the thorough valorization of Chinese literature by replacing historical tales with direct social reality.<sup>22</sup> Among the competing theories about what literature is and how it ought to function in a society in crisis, *rensheng pai* (humanist theory), *pingmin wenxue* (plebeian literature), class literature, and proletarian literature took control across different stages of the May Fourth period. Realism and its comprehensive theories gradually dominated literature and cinema that is concerned with being pertinent or socially mobilizing. The “sacred” position of realism and its crucial concept of depicting the contemporary life experience of ordinary people were further strengthened during the revolutionary era by the Maoist doctrine of speaking for the exploited.<sup>23</sup>

Given the dominance of realistic tradition in modern Chinese history, the Sixth Generation’s redeployment of “realism” as a harbinger to open fire on the Fifth Generation is amusingly provoking. Realism, understood as a thematic devotion to ordinary people, and the most legitimate claim of mainstream artworks, begins to express the interplay between mainstream and the independent. Above all, realism, with its close linkage to the state machine, more often than not invokes anticipation of submission.<sup>24</sup> Concerned about realism’s co-option with the state, authors and critics have been coining new words to refer to new forms of realism, for example, *xieshi* gradually seeps in and takes the place of *xianshi* in many critiques, ushering in a post-socialist realism that, instead of portraying oppressed peasants, shifts attention to the life of urban

commoners.<sup>25</sup> Rather than focusing on the stylistic and thematic experiments these neo-realistic writers have conducted, I am interested in how they attempt to cut off immediate association of realism with the state apparatus. Another term, “post-socialism,” is deemed as alternative aesthetic practices employed by directors from multiple generations to distinguish themselves from the dominant socialist realism in the Mao era. Independent directors, for all their claims to “reality,” have strategically avoided *xianshi zhuyi* (realism), instead using *jishi* (documentary), and *jishi fengge* (documentary style) to distinguish their style from the overloaded formula of realism.

In his perceptive analysis, Yingjin Zhang addressed the often self-contradictory statements and the politics of differentiation behind the Sixth Generation slogan—“my camera doesn’t lie.” This proposition comes from Lou Ye’s *Suzhou River* and iterates the director’s intention of capturing the “real look” (*zhenshi mianmao*) of city life along the polluted river in Shanghai. The unspoken suggestion is that some other cameras, presumably from the earlier generation, tell lies. For a film replete with “cinematic doubling, narrative suspense and optical illusions” (Pickowicz 39), however, the director reaffirmed the truth of his expression from the camera, disregarding the ontological dilemma of rendering mechanical reproduction of the “truth.” Zhang Ming, director of *Rainclouds over Wushan* (1996), similarly expressed his abhorrence of yellow earth, sorghum fields, waist drums, red cloth, bandits, and the like in Chinese cinema and appealed for “a sense of reality” (*xianshi gan*). Nonetheless, he holds that truth is but an instrument for each new generation of directors to break new ground from their predecessors. He remarked, “Truth itself never exists in a work of art. What we have are the author’s imagination, his attitude, taste, sensibility and personality, as well as the

extent to which you as an audience member identify with all these items.”<sup>26</sup> This antagonistic opinion coagulates the inherent discrepancies in the independent circuit regarding the understanding of “reality and truth,” and what qualifies as a measure for their city films. Zhang Yuan’s claim for objectivity or zero degree narrative, as Yingjin Zhang points out, is not shared with other independent directors. Rather, “the desire to reclaim the artist’s subjectivity is that which has motivated their disassociation from or completion with official and commercial filmmakers in the representation of the real”(Pickowicz 27). The slippery slope from objectivity to subjectivity discloses yet another innate discrepancy within the independent directors’ artistic beliefs.

Instead of looking at this complexity from the perspective of how directors reestablish subjectivity in the modalities of “truth,” as have done by theorists,<sup>27</sup> I will stress the importance of filmmaking as a “right” that has been striven for by independent directors, and then open up discursive analysis of the cultural fixation on “legitimation” (*quanli*) attempted by directors from different generations. Recalling Jia Zhangke’s notion of amateur filmmaking (*yeyu dianying*), which is mobilized as a strategy against the Fifth Generation’s privileged depiction of history, the independent is inspired by a different vision of “history”: “...remembering history is no longer the exclusive right (*tequan*) of the government. As an ordinary (*putong*) intellectual, I firmly believe that our culture should be teeming with unofficial memories (*minjian de jiyi*)” (Cheng 370). The ambiguous meanings of *minjian*, as noted by Yingjin Zhang, can be viewed from vastly different angles, such as “unofficial,” “popular,” “folk,” and therefore used for different purposes. First, independent directors may not agree with each other regarding what constitutes *minjian de jiyi*: are these memories of the rural folks, the city dwellers,

migrant workers who have a dream of city life, or marginal figures who survive in the shadow of the skyscrapers?<sup>28</sup> Second, it is worth bearing in mind that when the Fifth Generation was searching for cultural roots prior to the Party narrative, they also conjured up a *minjian* to offer them the ultimate axis to counteract official history. Both *Yellow Earth* and *Red Sorghum*, for example, largely invoke folk songs and other rural customs to stir up personal histories of ordinary people that are not dictated by historical records. The question remains, therefore: Why is the *minjian* offered by the Fifth Generation dismissed by independent filmmakers who have been proposing the very same concept?

Manifestos delivered by the new generation confirmed their demarcation between *tequan* and *quanli* which, in their understanding, determines not only the author's point and view but also the truth value of the films he or she makes. To recognize the central latitude of *quanli* involved in filmmaking in modern China is not to reiterate the importance of legitimating in various fields of social-cultural practice, but to discover the common rubrics beneath the contradictory proclamations about "truth" and unofficial history. What links the Fifth and the Sixth Generation innately, besides their institutional training at the BFA, is a hidden discursive obsession with legitimation in cultural production, an obsession that the independent generation, ironically, has been trying to break free of. On the one hand, *quanli* is directed at the moral referent of literature, a crucial concern about the social responsibility of the intellectuals. Albeit the highly-ambiguous notion of "the people," the accusation of "not serving the purpose of the people" itself disqualifies the artistic achievements of a film. The intellectuals are endowed to make films on behalf of the people and this delegation gives them the prerequisite right they need to make a film. On the other hand, *quanli* is put forward to

counter the asset of *tequan* (exclusive right, privilege) that is assumed to be owned by the state and by the privileged group, including elite intellectuals who have forsaken their position as representatives of the people.<sup>29</sup>

The right of representation endowed to filmmakers is at first derived from their association with a nationwide community called “the people” and then from their own existence as part of that community, in filmmakers’ later pronouncements. The transition is vividly expressed by Zhang Ming, who positions himself with the “ordinary people” instead of “ordinary intellectuals.” He writes that,

We no longer value Balzac’s type of omniscient point of view. We cannot see nor can we know everything. We are not the spokespersons of the nation. The age of the panoramic film is over. As ordinary people, we see from the inside of human hearts, adopt a concrete human point of view and accept individual personality (good or bad) and all its limitations-this kind of truthfulness (*zhenshixing*) is hard to conceal.(M. Zhang 9)

Jia Zhangke in his later stage resonates with this view and states that no one has the right to represent the majority; one only has the right to represent himself (Cheng 367). Such declarations about the type of rights of representation they have, and whom they can represent bring about the crisis of representation immanent to realist tradition in China. In the eyes of film critics and general audiences, the directors’ stand remains pertinent to the innate value of the film, so much so that it frequently emerges as the central probe of their interviews. Yet to the filmmakers, this question appears in a daunting and unfriendly way, at the risk of muffling the artistic value of their films. In the heated contentions regarding the rights of a filmmaker, film directors gradually find themselves unwilling to demarcate their stance. When asked “for whom do you serve as a spokesperson” in an interview, Zhu Wen, director of *Seafood* and *South of the Clouds*, was slightly annoyed and refused to give an answer (Xianmin Zhang 83).

Deviating from the scholarly facades of “subjectivity” in independent films, I am inclined to examine a closely related notion—the “subject.” Different understandings about the “subject” have facilitated the transition from *quanli* as endowed by the people to one that arises from one’s self, as well as from *tequan* to *quanli*. Directors across different generations debating over the right to filmmaking and independent filmmakers with different artistic slants claiming the validity of subjective perceptions, in my opinion, reveal the difficulty of sustaining a “subject” in the making of a Chinese film. That is, the question of whether or not contemporary daily life—as understood by filmmakers as individuals rather than as spokesperson of the state, cultural elite, or even intellectuals—is qualified to be filmed, subscribes to another question: whether an individual is entitled to be the filming subject or not. Here I locate one more mechanism that continues the preemption of the younger generation’s attempt at “independence”: after breaking away from the confinement of “grand history,” they find themselves confronting the dilemma of establishing a subject of their own.

Underlying all their efforts to seek a film language and to define “independence” is the attempt at a capitalized “I” in the Chinese language, a position both detached and participative, both collective and individualistic—“I” as a subject that is capable of delivering truth through the observation of reality. In my understanding, the media, in their demand to know how the filmmakers position themselves, embody the entrenched coalition between the enterprise of filmmaking and the state-nation discourse. Such a kinship threatens to erode the independent art value filmmakers have been striving for. The contradictions in their own statements and the shift from objectivity to subjectivity, even for a same director, disclose not so much their uncertainty in artistic visions as the

magnitude of a social context demanding them to mark their stand. Lowering their status from that of privileged intellectuals to ordinary intellectuals and then one of the ordinary people, the directors try to demystify the preeminent *tequan* and *quanli* discourses and uphold the voices of each individual.

As Yingjin Zhang noted, claims of truth by independent directors are sustained by two factors: first, alternative styles, marginal characters and sensitive subjective matters, which ironically do not validate any claim to reality; second, “the decision of most independent directors to ‘see’ from the otherwise alien point of view of ‘ordinary’ people (the adjective emphasized by Jia Zhangke and Zhang Ming) and to resist the feeling that they are intellectually superior to their subjects” (Pickowicz 31). Even though these directors have already realized the problematic of being read as spokespersons for others and therefore denied the privileged position of representation, they still cannot evade the fact that most of their films involve representing the underprivileged. Wang Chao, director of *The Orphan of Anyang* (2001), asked the questions directly, “[what] right do you have to arrange plots for them? What right do you have to script dialogue for them? What right do you have to declare their salvation as your theme? ... And what right do you have to assert your moralistic stance?” (Cheng 165, 173) Wang’s doubts echo the concerns of many independent directors about the ontological dilemma of representation: could documentaries and documentary-like films, with their immediate evocation of reality, tell a bigger lie or tell lies in a more deconstructive way, when the representing subject is in question? Critics have remarked that the large presence of mute or extremely quiet characters in films about marginal people may speak to the inability of representation, a practice done by filmmakers to qualify their own stance. As mentioned

above, some directors undergo the artistic turmoil of positioning themselves in the process of representation and eventually come to the conclusion of speaking (only) of oneself.

The interweaving of “truth” and “right” is reminiscent of the problematic of self-positioning in literary works by modern Chinese intellectuals, as Lydia Liu observes.<sup>30</sup> During the May Fourth cultural movement, Zheng Boqi’s infamous critique of “class literature” raised the question of who can represent the oppressed class. He remarked that only the lowest social class themselves can speak for the hardship they endured; “the most that the other classes can do in terms of representing such experiences would be like trying to scratch itchy leg from outside..., if not like watching a fire burn at a safe distance on the other shore of the river.”<sup>31</sup> Debate about realistic literature from the mid-1920s to 1930s was centered on class consciousness and the problem of representation, as encapsulated in Lu Xun’s short story “New Year’s Sacrifice.” As Rey Chow pointed out, this story “demonstrates that the most powerful formal effect of writing—that is, the effect of representation as distancing—never truly alleviates suffering but only compounds guilt.”<sup>32</sup> The suffering of Sister Xianglin is not translatable to the sympathetic narrator’s class-bound narrative. The dilemma of capturing the oppressed becomes relevant when, and probably only when, the concern of faithful representation predominates, and when the subject as an individual is considered unable to reach at a “truth.” Zheng Boqi’s and Lu Xun’s warnings about self-positioning, in literary works involving bottom social rungs, once again confirmed the premise that the (unspeakable) truth is only harbored among the wordless people and only when completely immersed in the people can an individual access the truth.

Claims for truth by filmmakers pushes them to the question of on what grounds they are offering this truth, which is exacerbated by the politics of international cultural exchange, namely, the very limited exposure of these films to domestic audiences. As Dai Jinhua said, “News about ‘China’s underground films’ ...was communicated to me only through overseas publications and friends. They were seen only at Western film festivals and foreign embassies in Beijing, and in the cramped, small rooms of friends.”<sup>33</sup> Therefore, the question of to whom these directors voice the “truth” about ways of Chinese life strikes hardest at the “reality” they hold to. On the one hand, the refurbished apparatus of cinematic realism is traceable to May Fourth literary and cinema tradition; it supports them, and helps them build a union with domestic audiences—a reified body of the people. On the other, the form of truth has to be presentable to international film critics before it is accessible to the domestic audience the directors (originally) wanted to access. The cross-border presentation of these independent “truths” plays up the interaction between the local and the global: in international film festivals, the films were well-received as depictions of local lives, and in domestic theatres they are welcomed more often than not as cultural icons glamorized by international art standards.

### **Independent Films and Diaspora**

The issue involved in the debate on reality and the subject takes on a different layer when taking into account the factor of nationality. This section considers the case of Li Yang and a few other filmmakers who reside overseas but are making films about the real or imagined Chinese experience. As previously discussed, foreign investment, transnational production and international film festivals have been paramount to

filmmaking in China as early as the 1980s. Jia Zhangke and Zhang Yuan's frequent trips to Europe or America are often haunted by the domestic audience's suspicion of these Chinese directors selling out local products. How do overseas Chinese directors partake of the global scene and join in the conversations about subjectivity and truthful representation shed light on the rich connotation of the Chinese independent. Filmmakers residing abroad reinvent the connection between diaspora and independence, and in this way endorse the truthfulness of their account. Whereas directors such as Jia Zhangke, Wang Xiaoshuai and Wang Chao feel the agony of being different from ordinary people and question their right of representing, overseas Chinese directors tend to delight at the advantage derived from distancing themselves from contemporary China. To many of them, this advantage endows them with the ability to remain independent and display the objective truth.

Li Yang graduated in 1995 from the Academy of Media Arts in Cologne, Germany and resides there as a German citizen. His debut feature *Blind Shaft* (2003) is touted as "fervently realistic in the manner of G. W. Pabst and Jia Zhangke" for displaying the two protagonists' moral decline in a ruthless living environment.<sup>34</sup> The film completely uses hand-held shots to emphasize the sensation of affinity to the characters and the feel of reality. In dealing with lighting, sound, and other filming techniques, the film focuses on events and people's lives, instead of the director's concepts or ideologies, to make it resemble real life. For example, the camera is kept at eye level throughout the shoot, with only two exceptions, one at the beginning and the other in the end, to provide an objective perspective. No contrived long shots were used;

instead the camera moves constantly to underscore the rhythm of the narrative and fulfill the function of suspense that permeates the whole story.

The film is based on Liu Qingbang's novella *Holy Wood* (Shenmu) and yet departs from the original story in characterization and structure. One of the most noticeable adaptations Li makes is in the ending. In the novella, the character, Song, realizes his cruelty and decides to kill Tang and commit suicide; beforehand he apologizes to Fengming for killing his father, the first victim shown in the beginning sequence. Further along in the novella Fengming refuses to accept the compensation money offered by the mine officials. In Li's own words, he made these adaptations because he thinks that people are not "black and white; we actually live in a much more morally ambiguous world."<sup>35</sup> As Michael Berry points out, the Chinese title "mang jing" refers to both a specific term in mining and a larger social and moral blindness where the line between right and wrong is blurred. It also works well with the phrase, "mangliu," migrant workers who blindly flood into the cities to work. The director did a substantial field investigation across coal production areas in northern China to know the mine workers' real-life experience. Li comments that the film is ultimately an exploration of human nature of those on the lowest rung of society.

The film hints at social violence on a larger scale, including abusive interpersonal relations, the dire situation of education in the countryside, and the workers' oblivion to the others. Initially, the mine bosses threaten to kill Tang and Song because they ask for too much money. When the two are walking on the street, the camera poignantly captures how they are scared by a driver stepping out of an extravagant car to scold them. "On the one hand, they are timid peasants, but that does not stop them from abusing prostitutes

and bullying other people. There is also the whole relationship between the city and the country, which plays a big role here.”<sup>36</sup> The miners stay working in the mines regardless of its danger because they have to send their kids to school. In the film, a child beggar sitting by the street to raise money for school conjures up Song’s sympathy, since he is also experiencing the burden of paying for his son’s education.

Rey Chow’s analysis focuses on the contentious notion of humanism, borrowing Heidegger’s assertion of “homelessness as the condition of the modern world”<sup>37</sup> which is defined as “the symptom of oblivion of Being.”<sup>38</sup> Rey Chow suggests that *Blind Shaft* places education at the position of *techne* and *poiesis* which is arguably the essence of Heidegger’s definition of Being. To characters in the film, the biological bond between family members, passed down in the patriarchal father-son lineage, replaces ethical values that used to dominate the socialist China. Song’s hesitation in killing the teen arises from his unwillingness to eliminate the Yuan family line, since the prior victim might have been the boy’s father. In line with her analytical framework, Rey Chow tries to offer a new definition of the “sentimental” by looking at the dimension of the “excessive,” and hints at the basic and collective consciousness of the Chinese ethnicity: when social ties between the characters in the film are toppled and torn apart, the two killers form an intimate bond, as the insiders of their own group, to prey on the outsiders.

This observation regarding the Chinese consciousness of demarcating between the outsider and the insider, as shown in this film, is reminiscent of the controversy about the director’s own status: is Li Yang the insider or the outsider? The decision of Chinese independent filmmakers to unite with the general public demonstrates the efforts to be an insider. Yet for directors like Li Yang, being an insider is not only unnecessary but also

detrimental. According to Li, *Blind Shaft* is an “individualized meditation on the self and the society.”<sup>39</sup> Different from his characters, Li debunks the role of the collective Chinese ethnicity playing on his actions. Teo comments, “Li has the mind of an outsider with the heart of an insider. His outsider’s persona is marked by a keen desire to be a part of China’s filmmaking scene, to express his side of the story of China’s destiny.”<sup>40</sup> Li Yang himself admits that even though the exteriors of the film were shot in China and he has done an extensive field work in the mining industry of northern China, this film is not a Chinese film in its strict sense.<sup>41</sup> After all, the film was made primarily out of the director’s own savings with the rest of the funding coming from overseas. Therefore it successfully eludes the strict Chinese censorship regime, a situation the director is content with. Although, as iterated, being blacklisted in China often increases the allure of an underground film, most independent directors express their hope to see their films unbanned. Li may be one of the few who is fully outside of the filmmaking system in China, and yet has not shown any interest in making his film accessible to Chinese audiences.

Being an outsider enables Li Yang to claim his truthfulness with a higher certainty, as he commented on the overtly daring nude scene in the film, “I am greatly opposed to falsehood, and perhaps this has something to do with my background in making documentaries or perhaps the fact that I live overseas.”<sup>42</sup> Nonetheless, recognizing that the realistic tone of his film needs the vision of an insider, Li locates this insider vision in his experience of growing up under the red flag and the memory of the Cultural Revolution, which, in his words, granted him the insight to look at reality from a deeper level.<sup>43</sup> Li Yang’s confident reliance on his past experience resonates with the

Fifth Generation in their devaluation of the urban filmmakers: both comfortably and confidently locate the prerequisite of national history, with the understanding that filmmaking is a privilege endowed by that prerequisite.

Li Yang is not the only post-Fifth Generation director who resides abroad and makes films about China. Ann Hu, director of *Shadow Magic* (2000), came to America to study Business Administration in 1979 and later became a filmmaker after completing courses at the NYU Film School. *Shadow Magic* tells a story of friendship between an Englishman, Wallace, and a young Chinese portrait photographer named Liu Jinglun in 1902 when the technology of films were first introduced to the old imperial capital. Liu's cooperation with Wallace to open a shadow magic theatre brings him into conflict with his community, including his boss, his father and Lord Tan, star of Beijing's traditional opera. Towards the end of the film, the Shadow Magic pair is invited to show the films to the Empress Dowager. When things are starting to look good, however, a fire breaks out from the shooting camera and destroys their promising future. The film ends with subtitles informing viewers that the two friends reestablished their business at a later time when the Beijing locals began to accept their new technology. Wallace's comments on top of the Great Wall conclude the film with resounding force: "if there were more people like you in China, Chinese do not need to have built the Great Wall." The film slightly pokes fun at the provincialism of local people in their encounters with foreign innovations, and insinuates the importance of open-minded reception of Western newness.

The thematic concern of *Shadow Magic* recaps another well-known film, *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* (2001), made by Dai Sijie, an author and director living in France who writes in French, often about his life experience and thoughts related to

China. *The Little Seamstress* retrieves the memory of rustic romance and the sent-down youth movement of the late Cultural Revolution, with a focus on the characters' growing passion for foreign literature and freedom. Even though the stories in Ann Hu's and Dai's films are set in different historical eras, both directors express their understanding of a past China by depicting it as a "lack" that is awaiting the embrace of the West. Furthermore, they both embroider a Western entity, either taking the form of new technology or the concept of art, as a guide for the local Chinese. Reactionary populations who oppose this instruction are benignly mocked while open-minded local folks radiate a communal wisdom of adaptation. For example, in *The Little Seamstress* the old tailor in the village puts French style into his designs, thanks to the inspiration of Balzac. *The Little Seamstress* ends with the upper-hand of the advanced Western, when the pretty young girl is converted to the foreign belief of technology and consummates a romantic escapade with the progressive male artist. A gimmick clock, a modern instrument that is new to the villagers, fuels the inception of the little seamstress' romance just as in *Shadow Magic* the shadow camera ignites the interest of Lord Tan's daughter in the enterprising boy. Balzac's quote that a woman's beauty is the most treasured thing inspires the little seamstress to leave her lover. Inasmuch as the Chinese rural is contrived as exotic innocence for directors living abroad, the modern West is allied with them to offer the ultimate reference.

What their filmmaking modes illustrate, to me, is not merely the problematic of representing a lost tradition, but the little attention they give to the problem of representation, with all their claims to being truthful or realistic. As long as the films are circulated in the transnational art festivals, the directors can be content that recognition

by the standards of international arts can complacently compensate for the lack of domestic audience. The village's frenzy about Balzac, an abstract Western icon, engenders a higher idolization than that ensured by rural traditions or even the words of Chairman Mao. The groundless circulation of cultural icons offered by the West, as I will analyze in Chapter III, prescribes the reception of the film and the characters' life. By excavating the newly found idol of Balzac, *The Little Seamstress* tells an alternative story of the Cultural Revolution and transforms the collective worship of Mao into the reverence of Balzac. The effort to retell history echoes the Fifth Generation's major works where filmmaking has a privileged status. The right to make films, an issue quintessential to the independent generation, seems to find no application in films made by directors who make films about China, yet are not constrained by the Chinese filmmaking system. To them, making films about China is still a privilege in the sense that it can bypass the official and legal system with the backup of transnational art standards and production teams.

Li Yang's comments about the filming process of *Blind Shaft* disclose the many illegal means he had to use in order to get the sensitive scenes shot. Such a practice goes beyond those used by Zhang Yuan and Jia Zhangke, who are concerned about censorship. If to Zhang Yuan, Wang Xiaoshuai, and their peers living in China censorship is the battleground whose boundary asks for continuous testing, to Li Yang it is a hopeless land not worth testing at all. Therefore, the right to make films at the institutional level—with state approval—is a precondition to the former, but not for the latter. Li Yang lightly criticized Zhang Yuan's recent film production after returning "aboveground" with the rationale that cooperation with the mainstream in China is in itself a menace to the art.

The long-lasting tension between representation and the represented social group is replaced by the imagined and imaged lost China, in the case of Ann Hu and Dai Sijie, or the documented cruel Chinese reality, in the case of Li Yang.<sup>44</sup>

Reviews on *Blind Shaft* from Western media share a common focus on the film's "realistic" exposé of China's social problems including declining morality, prostitution and child labor. Reviewers notice the similarity between Li Yang and Jia Zhangke, to whom Li pays his homage, in that the two show "a similar ability to ground his story, enacted largely by nonprofessionals, in flavorsome reportage and the grit of daily life."<sup>45</sup> Chinese mine workers who have known of this film, however, accuse the director of distorting their lives; their indignation is particularly aggravated by the fact that the director himself is not a miner.<sup>46</sup> In addition to reflecting the persistent allegation that directors are "selling out" the backward image of China to win global recognition, the mine workers' reaction highlights the crucial issue of how artists position themselves in depicting the life of others, a requisite rendered essential by the directors' claims of truth and reality.

In a comparative reading of *Blind Shaft* and Jia's first feature about a pickpocket, *Xiao Wu*, I want to tackle the two directors' realistic depictions of social issues and their understandings of the right to make films. In a striking way, *Xiao Wu* begins with the crime scene—the protagonist steals from a passenger on the bus. Then the camera cuts straight to a portrait of Chairman Mao hanging in front of the windshield and stays there for an uncomfortable duration of time. In the opening sequence of *Blind Shaft*, the abrupt contrast in narrative topples the viewers' expectation of a proletarian story about the lives of mine workers, shifting away from the official rhetoric of miners as core members of

the communist cause. In mainstream narratives, the miners are only “temporarily” trapped in an impoverished situation in the early development of national modernization; their later improvement and personal fulfillment is ensured.<sup>47</sup> In *Blind Shaft* the sinking shaft cart and the camera’s tracking down suggest the plunge of official rhetoric about a foreseeable bright future for the working class. By contrast, the camera in *Xiao Wu* pans from a few random peasants wandering on the crop field to the bus riders and then remains focused on the Mao portrait, gleaning the many elements relevant to the protagonists’ life.

More importantly, Li Yang’s film displays a disembodied “home” that only serves the slaughter’s end, while Jia Zhangke traces the hero’s homecoming voyage. In a very cruel way, Tang and Song habitually ask their target the same question, “Do you want to go home?” Just as the target answers “yes,” they kill him, saying, “Now let me send you home.” As floating figures themselves, the two miners are apathetic to other miners’ yearnings for home. Their homes are never presented in the film: they wonder from one mine to another, across different towns, to look for the right target; yet their homes are as imaginative as their victim’s. However, albeit all the problems associated with the home, the character, Xiao Wu, is paying a visit to his parents and all his actions in the film are linked to his social ties in the hometown.

Claims of truth among the independent directors, given their heterogeneous and often conflicting nature, are about the new *strategic positions* they “have claimed for themselves with regard to truth, subjectivity, and audience” (Pickowicz 40). In light of Zhang’s observation, I argue that the nuanced alteration of power struggles can be understood more clearly when seen within the context of the redefinition of generational

identity and its corresponding film language. Although the two groups seem to embark on different directions in their search, it would be naïve to exaggerate the absolute contradiction in their practice. The discrepancies of the independent filmmakers' claims about truth, reality and subjectivity, in my opinion, result both from the intention to differentiate themselves and the contextual discourses dictating that a film text gains its right via representing the people.

The realistic impulse of independent film directors is reconfirmed by the historical magnitude of literary and cinematic realism since the May Fourth. *Red Sorghum* annoyed Jia Zhangke and Cheng Qingsong not because it is about history, but due to its imaginative depiction of history—it is not about “real” history. To wrestle against the allegorical language the Fifth Generation deployed, the younger generation strategically resorts to the opposite side. The self-righteousness of their realism claims, in my opinion, comes from a literary and film tradition that overvalues realism and downplays other reference metrics. The directors' realistic claim cannot be sustained without support from critics and the general audience who are no less infatuated with the allure of “realism.” The semantic drift from being “realistic” in cinematic language to being “true to art” presides over the arena of filmmaking in China, attesting to the complicated relation between legitimacy and representation in national cinema.

I find relevant Zhang Yinjing's insight on the competing four “players” in contemporary society that hold claim to “truth and reality.” The first force that claims “truth and reality” is art, characterized by imagination and creativity, funded from private and overseas sources. The second one is politics, characterized by power and sustained by censorship, pursuing propaganda and leitmotif films, and funded by state subsidies.

The third player is capital: funded either by private or the state sources, it is characterized by money and motivated by the market. The last one, marginality, or dissent, pursues reality and draws on low-budget funding to present “truth.” Zhang argues that after the mid-1990s the four players all revolve around the market force and increasingly accommodate each other while politics and capital are complicit in sharing profits and control. The only site where dismissal is possible is the player of “marginality” whose impact, however, is blocked by strict censorship in the domestic market. In Zhang’s words, “the lack of engagement with the domestic market also renders marginality an ineffective player in the political economy of Chinese filmmaking in the new millennium, which is once again dominated by a tripartite division of—or, more precisely, a new alliance of—art, politics, and capital.”<sup>48</sup>

What Zhang overlooked in this diagram of power relationships, nonetheless, is the consumer of cultural products, that is, the irregular circulation channels of these independent films besides international film festivals. When art, politics and capital form an alliance, where is the position of the marginality? Does the alliance of the former three erode the marginal so that the game is over (in the sense of extreme monopoly, as seen in the frequent acquisitions of giant entertainment conglomerates) or can the marginal still make its voice heard? The core question of the Chinese independent is to make visible the alternative, the difference that can provide inspiration to the current systems or offer solutions to cultural or economical crises. The government’s increased loosening of state policy can also be considered an effort to make different opinions heard—a gesture of confidence, expansion and growth. Consumers of these independent films, as active participants, offer their understanding of filmmaking as *quanli* owned by each individual.

With the small exposure of these films, the distinction between audiences and producers is not clear cut. Audiences become producers and the producers sometimes are the only persons who watch their own films. The strategy of the young directors seeking the patronage of international film festivals goes beyond commercial motivation, or for fame, but serves as a detour of returning to the Chinese audience. As their cultural influence increases, the government reconsiders the positions of these directors in providing alternative discourses, as happened to Jia Zhangke and Zhang Yuan. And what enables the above circulation, in my view, is the fifth player in the power struggle diagram—the spectators of independent films that have sustained the strength of the marginality.

Independent filmmaking witnesses later changes, including some returning to the mainstream to make commercial films while some others such as Lou Ye still hold on to their uncompromising independence. Lou says, “I never give up on what I have envisioned for a film, including the right of making the final cut. Whenever I negotiate the contract, I always demand to have this right. The investor will say, ‘you want the final cut, right? Don’t you know only a selected few enjoy this privilege?’”(Sun 149) Lou Ye’s artistic pursuit and the comments made by his film investors reiterate the centrality of filmmaking as a right, the tacit understanding between the BFA, the critics and the general audiences. This ideology is presented to the independent generation as a double-edged sword: it is where they disrupt the union between the Fifth Generation and the state; it is also where they confront the anxiety of trying to represent underrepresented others with the assurance of a subject.

On a deeper level, whereas main melody films (zhu xuanlü dianying) display the union between the people and the nation-state, and demonstrate the alignment between

the act of filmmaking and the connotation of the film text, independent filmmakers find those unions contrived and disturbing. They reuse cinematic realism, especially the core of speaking for the people, to appeal to the general audience and justify the truth value in realistic films. What they inherit from cinematic realism, meanwhile, is the innate crisis about the often discordant relation between the self-positioned subject and the represented others. As I will elaborate in the following chapters, directors incessantly strive for the right of the subject, that is, cinema designated as a form of self expression rather than as a state or national discourse, a notion gradually taking control. To many directors the crisis of the subject is only alleviated when in the meteoric rise of the DV movement the filming subject and the filmed become one, and when the audience becomes the real self-empowering factor in the diagram of cultural players. In an interview, Cheng Qingsong summarizes his understanding about Chinese independent filmmaking this way: “I don’t like the designation of ‘one generation’ that binds us together, because we all have too many similarities and differences. Our professions are all filmmaking, but film made by each individual is so different. We start to look at the world, look at people using the perspective of ‘I’” (Cheng 10). In 2001, Cheng opened the “independent era” column in the magazine, *Pop Songs: Chinese Rock’n’ Roll*, and started the dialogues with multiple independent directors. Cheng’s documentation of the history of independent filmmaking in China reflects a self-conscious effort of the intellectuals to resurrect an artistic movement and to rewrite history.

The process of cultural change in post-Mao China is usually divided into two discrete stages, that is, the 1980s and the 1990s, the former labeled “modernity” and the latter “post-modernity.”<sup>49</sup> Scholars including Dai Jinghua and Zhang Xudong announce

that with urbanization, commercialization and globalization, the new enlightenment discourse of the 1980s had ended.<sup>50</sup> In its place is postmodern culture, which pursues the enjoyment of self, giving up any depth of nation/history.<sup>51</sup> These theorists overlooked the ideological oppression existing since the June Fourth of 1989 and the resultant suppression of the enlightenment discourses.<sup>52</sup> The rebels find their often implicit expression in avant-garde arts including underground/independent filmmaking, and their efforts are often echoed by audiences who refuse to be passive consumers of cultural products.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Matthews, “The Innovators 1950-1960: Divining the real.”

<sup>2</sup> Another important institution is the Central Academy of Theater Art (CATA), where Jiang Wen graduated from. For simplicity and concentration, this research will focus on Beijing Film Academy.

<sup>3</sup> *Yellow Earth* delineates the harsh conflict between party ideology and a pristine rural land that is ready for the penetration of ideology; such thematic concern pervades Jia early films. See Cheng Qingsong, Huang Ou, *Wode sheyingji bu sahuang*, the chapter about Jia Zhangke, “Jia Zhangke: waiting on the ‘Platform’.”

<sup>4</sup> However, independent filmmakers since the mid-1990s are distinguished from realistic and left-wing cinema thriving in 1930s, not merely due to the different historical context they are situated in, but because a whole set of political, economical and social fabrics are encoded in a different way into their reconstruction and exploration of cinematic aesthetics.

<sup>5</sup> The new film-school graduates have been hailed by Western critics and art-house distributors as the “outlaws” who take up the position as a new ‘other’ to define Chinese cinema of the post-Fifth Generation era and fall into the post-Colonial and new Orientalistic reading modes.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed analysis of the different stages of enlightenment cultural movement onboard in the late imperial era, refer to Schwarcz, *The Chinese Enlightenment*.

<sup>7</sup> This does not mean films made by the Third Generation directors were completely discarded. For example, Tian Zhuangzhuang and Chen Kaige both expressed their respect for those non-didactic and more nuanced films such as Shui Hua’s *The Lin Family Shop* (1959) and *Regret for the Past* (1981), Chen Huaikai and Cui Wei’s *Song of Youth* (1959).

<sup>8</sup> In May 1980, *Zhongguo qingnian* (*Chinese Youth*) published a reader’s letter entitled “Why Does the Road of Life Become Narrower and Narrower?” This article spoke of the author’s miserable experiences during and after the Cultural Revolution and expressed strong suspicions about collectivism and the communist idea. It led to a three-year dispute that tried to defend individualism. Films students in BFA

frequented the “Nature-Society-Humanity” art exhibitions in Beijing, where farmers were invited to be connoisseurs of amateur artists’ works. Among the various art exhibitions across the nation were those held in Sichuan that later included the painting, *Father* (Ni 91-2).

<sup>9</sup> For more details regarding the heated discussions nationwide about this painting, as a reflection of the new enlightenment movement, refer to Ni 91-2. The painting *Father*, actually is included in the iconic artworks of modern China in middle school art education.

<sup>10</sup> For extensive discussion of the contemporary art scene, see also Robin Munro, “Unofficial Art in China,” *Index on Censorship* II, no. 6 (1982): 36-39.

<sup>11</sup> For details about the Fourth Generation filmmaking, refer to Paul Clark, *Chinese Cinema*. In the book he discusses the productions of model operas, a type of Communist art form that dominated art productions during the Cultural Revolution. See also *Chinese Film Theory: A Guide to the New Era*, in which Zhang Nuanxin and Li Tuo’s article, “The Modernization of Film Language” offers an accurate outlook regarding the change of cinematic styles in China.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Wu Ziniu’s cinematic themes are war, exile, adventure in remote areas and historical incidents, dwelling on situations that place people in fiery life-and-death battle, extreme despair, danger and violence. Xia Gang’s works feature humorous depiction of characters and well-arranged plot development. Zhang Jianya portrays the urbane temperament in a comic tone. Yin Li tells daily life stories of Beijing city folks and He Qun offers straightforward social reflections. There are also female directors such as Li Shaohong, Hu Mei, Peng Xiaolian and Liu Miaomiao who examine in details women’s emotions and mentality, as well as their conflicts with traditional social ideas.

<sup>13</sup> See the website dedicated to Zhang’s works, Zhang-yuanfilms.com. Retrieved on 24 Aug. 2008.

<sup>14</sup> See Z. Gu 37, when the students walked in a dark alley from the film viewing auditorium to the BFA, Jia said to his friends again, “Let’s make a film, and it must be a film we want to shoot.” He said, “See the films nowadays—although they are winning so many awards, as a matter of fact, they are so bad. It is only an illusion.”

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Valerie Jaffee, “An Interview with Jia Zhangke.” According to another interview, Jia claims “the Taiwan director Hou Hsiao-hsien as one of his major influences.” See the article, “Jia Zhangke Rises to the Surface,” china.org.cn.

<sup>17</sup> Introductions of Bazin’s theories can be found in various resources, for example, Ian Aitken, *European Film Theory and Cinema: A Critical Introduction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), Chapter VII, “The Redemption of Physical Reality: Theories of Realism in Grierson, Kracauer, Bazin and Lukács,” and the 1999 BFI (British Film Institute) entry, “The Innovators 1950-1960: Divining the Real,” bfi.org.uk, n.d. Retrieved on 16 Apr. 2010.

<sup>18</sup> For detailed discussion about realistic literary tradition, see Anderson, *The Limits of Realism: Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period*.

<sup>19</sup> Information about this famous debate between two generations can be found both in Cheng Qingsong, Huang Ou, *Wode sheyingji bu sahuang* and Michael Berry, *Speaking in Images* 142-61. After the production of *The World*, Jia Zhangke reexamines his relation with the Fifth, in response to the question about how to look at Chen Kaige’s *The Promise*, and calls for Chinese cinema to annihilate the concentration on power struggle, or the sense of privilege, see “Zhongguo dianying xuyao quxiao quanli yishi.”

<sup>20</sup> See Dai, *Cinema and Desire*, Chapter 1, “Severed Bridge: The Art of the Sons’ Generation.”

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 94. See also Ning Dai's captions in his "Beijing Bastards' Plot Briefing," *Dianying gushi* (Film story), 5 (1993): 9.

<sup>22</sup> For a detailed discussion of enlightenment and the social function of literature, in which Chinese intellectual played a key role in late imperial period, among many, refer to Lydia Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity China 1900-1937*.

<sup>23</sup> Mao Zedong's "Speech at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" compared literature creation to military front at the battlefields and literary authors to cultural army that can help to fulfill the task of national liberalization, with the purpose of making literature and art a "constructive part of the whole revolutionary machine." In his words, "We adopt the standpoint of the proletariat and the people. CP members must also adopt the standpoint of the party, of party spirit, and of party policies" (Saich 1123).

<sup>24</sup> No matter it is the May-Fourth typical realism, 1930s revolutionary realism or the social realism after the founding of PRC, literature is required to account for the great social transformations taking place or expected to strictly adhere to party doctrine, most of which characterized by the depiction of external reality, with little attention projecting inward.

<sup>25</sup> Bao Chang, for example, wrote an article to argue that China never had much interest in modernism and realism was modern Chinese literature's "law of development" (J. Wang 145-47).

<sup>26</sup> Zhang Ming, *Zhaodao yizhong dianying fangfa* (Discovering a Film Method), (Beijing: Zhongguo guangbo dianshi chubanshe, 2003), 27-28.

<sup>27</sup> Yingjin Zhang, for example, located Wu Wenguang's call for "returning to yourself" (*huidao zishen*): "his new position is not an official position (government), not a popular or folk position (*minjian*), not a people's position (*renmin*), not an intellectual's position (enlightenment), not an underground position (marginality), nor even an oppositional position (rebellion), but simply an individual's position—"I would speak of myself rather than my position"" (Xinyu Lü 8-9).

<sup>28</sup> Significantly, these demographic divisions are no longer those of class structure as it used be, which could indicate a overhaul of a fast developing society in looking at its social compositions.

<sup>29</sup> One may even inquire what the new generation's definition of "privileged intellectuals" is and, when they themselves gradually occupy the position of cultural icons, whether or not they remain "ordinary intellectuals" who have the accessibility to the mass.

<sup>30</sup> Here I am not making a distinction between the people (*renmin*) and the ordinary people (*putong ren*), an egalitarian category that exists as a post class-consciousness concept, as I am going to argue that the concern about the division between the intellectual and the people, a gap that has bothered May-Fourth intellectuals in their attempt at offering social remedy for the people, lingers in the new era and is transformed into another group concept.

<sup>31</sup> Zheng Boqi, "Guomin wenxue lun" (On national literature), see Rao 79, also Lydia Liu, *Translingual Practice* 193.

<sup>32</sup> Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity* 111.

<sup>33</sup> Dai, *Cinema and Desire* 77& 91.

<sup>34</sup> Stephen Teo, "There is No Sixth Generation: Director Li Yang on *Blind Shaft* and His Place in Chinese Cinema."

<sup>35</sup> M. Berry, *Speaking in Images* 217.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>37</sup> Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films* 167.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>39</sup> Teo, “China with an Accent.”

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Li’s judgment that China needs a better education system, compared with the country he resides in, further raises concerns about the standing point of his film. Refer to Stephen Teo, “‘There Is No Sixth Generation!’ Director Li Yang on *Blind Shaft* and His Place in Chinese Cinema.”

<sup>45</sup> “Coal-Miners’ Slaughter,” villagevoice.com, 20 Jan. 2004, retrieved 23 Feb. 2010.

<sup>46</sup> Zhang Xianmin, “Jinbi shuangyan” (Eyes Tightly Closed), see fanhall.com. The site is banned by the government since November 2010.

<sup>47</sup> *The Shaft* (dir. Zhang Chi, 2008), for example, is one the most well-known recent films about mine workers’ life. It is a collection of three stories on the mine community in a small Chinese town.

<sup>48</sup> Zhen Zhang, *The Urban Generation* 73.

<sup>49</sup> Jilin Xu, “Cong xiandaihua dao xiandaixing:xiezai zhongguo xiandaihuashi chuban shinian zhiji.”

<sup>50</sup> Yiwu Zhang 104-109.

<sup>51</sup> Yin 61-67. In 1993, Wang Meng, the vice president of the Chinese Writers’ Association, published an article titled “Duobi Chonggao” (Escaping the Loftiness), which advocated enjoying material life and giving up idealism.

<sup>52</sup> Some scholars in the West also discuss the social condition of post-modernity in China. Their discussions can be found in *Postmodernism and China*. It seems that the role of events of 1989 in the emergence of the post-modernist culture has yet to be explored in this book.

## CHAPTER III

### JIA ZHANGKE'S *UNKNOWN PLEASURES*

This chapter is a case study of the first DV feature, *Unknown Pleasures*, by established Sixth Generation director Jia Zhangke, with reference to his other film works and films made by Wang Xiaoshuai, Lou Ye and Zhu Wen. Born in 1970 in the Fenyang County, Shaanxi Province, Jia Zhangke is one of the most important figures of the Sixth Generation who resort to self financing to make accented hometown series. *Unknown Pleasures* was a follow-up work after the director's first digital short—a thirty-minute video called *In Public*—under the Jeonju Film Festival commission, which was provided to three directors to make a documentary city trilogy.<sup>1</sup> As a transitional work from film stocks to digital video, this film marks Jia's last production outside of the Chinese studio system. As analyzed in chapter II, the problematic of representing the unrepresented others, a predicament to many independent filmmakers, prompts directors to search for a film language that is both objective and empowering. In a quiet, observant and sometimes abstract cinematic style, *Unknown Pleasures* delineates the moments when the teens residing in a small city of China misappropriate heterogeneous cultural icons befalling them. The camera helps them land an alternative historicity that restores their subjectivity in the outskirts of China's economic glories.

The film follows three young people in the industrial city of Datong. Nineteen-year old Bin Bin lives with his mother in a small apartment near his workplace, Datong's textile mill. His best friend, Xiao Ji, lives with his father and spends time riding his motorbike around the city, aimlessly, until he meets Qiao Qiao, a singer and dancing

model working for the Mongolian King Liquor company. Qiao Qiao's boyfriend, Qiao San, is a loan shark and the official of the textile mill. While Xiao Ji's increasing infatuation with Qiao Qiao is deterred by her rich boyfriend, Bin Bin enjoys a few nights with his high school girlfriend watching TV and singing pop songs, in particular, a song about freedom, love and failed heroism called "Ren Xiao Yao." Later an explosion breaks out in the textile mill and propels the two friends to different paths. In the city hospital, Xiao Ji helps Qiao Qiao to withdraw 2000 RMB for her father's hospitalization entry fee, which triggers the turning point of their relationship. Bin Bin, meanwhile, has to bid farewell to his girlfriend who is leaving for Beijing to study International Trade.

The ending of the film extinguishes the changes that have been happening to the lives of the three characters and brings out a similarly bleak outlook for their prospects. In line with Bin Bin's defeat, Xiao Ji breaks up with Qiao Qiao. At the same time when Qiao Qiao sits in a run-down club wearing a blue wig and waiting for patrons, Bin Bin and Xiao Ji attempt a bank robbery.<sup>2</sup> Detained in the police station, Bin Bin is asked to sing a song for the bored police officer. Of the many songs he sang with his ex-girlfriend in the KTV bars, Bin Bin chooses *Ren Xiao Yao*. The last sequence of the film is composed of a long shot of the escaped Xiao Ji riding his motorcycle on the highway and being halted by the mechanical breakdown in the middle of his trip.

Michael Berry argues that the central theme of "money control" transforms the narrative from a typical coming-of-age to "a tragic-comic parable of undoing."<sup>3</sup> However, whether or not money has occupied the central position as he claims is questionable: the importance of money to the characters and plot development in *Unknown Pleasures* may have precipitated compared to *Xiao Wu*, yet its magnitude is

still largely determined by the characters' relationships with each other. Second, "money control" itself is not adequate to distinguish the insatiable collective desire for money in today's China from the myriad forms of the local operations of global capital. Whereas the former, captured in quite a few recent TV dramas, usually invokes the moralistic lament of scholars over the loss of communal values, the latter imparts both a political and philosophical predicament in developing the volition of self, especially for those teenagers, against "the control of money."

Jia's understated cinematic take derives its significance from an unsentimental and objective film language that, in portraying the details of the daily life of local folks, measures the weight of their otherwise overlooked life tidbits and approximates the afflicted, trivialized and muffled self. Jia's film illuminates the fundamentals of "the money control" that has often been taken for granted. First, the material form and financial value of money/currency is not as important as its symbolic value, and the magnitude of social status it can bring. Second, money is merely one of the forms that mark an individual's social status—commodities, for example, are another. Third, one's speed in catching up with the accumulation of wealth and therefore the progress of modernization determines the outcome of his "doing." In this sense, the film presents not a parable of "undoing" but the futility of "doing," or the doomed ending of all the attempts. And fourth, the expression of self and genuine affection is compelled to abide by the symbolic value of money, rather than one's true intention, which, in my opinion, is the heaviest damage the operation of money has inflicted upon the local.

The creased one dollar US bill, with its obscure origin, goes through different phases of the film narrative and magically exchanges hands from one character to

another. It not only affects more than one character's life but also coagulates the irrational power of international capital<sup>4</sup> and its imprint on local life. The bill first shows up in Xiao Ji's shabby bedroom when his father opens a wine bottle and discovers a bill he cannot recognize. From hindsight, it is inferred that the bill comes from the "US Dollar prize" promised by the Mongolia Liquor group to their customers. As announced through a loud broadcaster in the film's opening dance performance, the Liquor group uses US bills as a promotional tool. The performance stage is where Xiao Ji meets Qiao Qiao for the first time and watches her boyfriend, Qiao San, demonstrating his wealth by placing 100 RMB on his forehead upon a female dancer's solicitation for money. While Qiao San wins applause from the crowds, Xiao Ji is taught about the explicit connection between the possession of money and one's social recognition.

As the camera pans through the crowds and locates Xiao Ji's appalled face, the narrative weaves Xiao Ji's infatuation with Qiao Qiao into his newly gained awareness of the magical power of money. It is therefore not difficult to understand the complicated emotions of both resentment and thrill that Xiao Ji experiences when he sees the one dollar bill: after cursing the bill, he instantly grabs it and rushes to the hair salon to have a haircut. On a deeper level, the alienated form of money, the US currency, brings out the simultaneity between worshipping the imposed "money equal to social recognition" formula and acknowledging the insignificance of personal feelings. The US bill is no less alien to residents in Datong than the Chinese note Qiao San puts on his forehead—it only magnifies the alienation effect that has already been taking place. When Qiao San replaces the show girl to become the center of the attention, not only is he converted into an idol of worship, but also the mere form of money stands in as an icon of symbolic

power.

The formula Xiao Ji learned during Qiao San's performance of the "money power" is reaffirmed in the first semi-formal conversation with Qiao Qiao offstage. As with other themes that have been reiterated in the film, such as the one dollar US bill and the pop song "Ren Xiao Yao," the characters appropriate the original meaning of those external icons imposed on them, to counter the alienation effect they are experiencing, or to reconcile the increasing gap between the changes that befall them and their innate disturbances. For the first step of the verbal exchange, Bin Bin walks up to Qiao Qiao and informs her of Xiao Ji's intention, by using a verb coming from late 1980s Hong Kong media—*pao*, a slightly derogatory slang that means "go after" or "hook up with."

The choice of word captures the two teens' eagerness of adopting an outlandish word to adorn their presence in front of the seemingly modernized girl who wears a blonde wig. Amused by the word, Qiao Qiao asks, "How are you going to court me?" (你怎么泡我) The question connotes the possessions that Xiao Ji needs to qualify his pursuit. Xiao Ji's answer, however, goes to the basic meaning of the word, "Just like immersing instant noodles in hot water" (就像泡方便面一样泡). With his simple approach to the multifaceted issue of love, Xiao Ji presents to Qiao Qiao a type of relationship that is different from the one she has with Qiao San, one based on daily life necessities rather than material possessions. In these scenes, the lexical meaning of the word "pao" is overshadowed by its signifying or even symbolic function. As much as this Hong Kong word arms Xiao Ji with the icon he needs to approach Qiao Qiao's lifestyle, the one dollar US bill boosts his hope for symbolic power. The similarity between these two icons, the word *pao* and the one dollar, particularly lies in Xiao Ji's

misunderstanding and misuse of them.

At a deeper level, what is on display is not the exchange of different understandings of “love” but the unreal nature of the personal lives of these individuals, caused by the ever expanding alienation and painstaking efforts of reconciliation. The one dollar US bill, insignificant in the world financial fund market, triggers a microcosm of the global capital whose weight on the lives of these characters is immeasurable. The first problem to examine is the real worth of this one dollar bill. International currency exchange provides an exchange rate for currencies in circuit based on measures including absolute purchasing power parity,<sup>5</sup> and determines that one US dollar is worth no more than seven Chinese yuan, a knowledge even people living in provincial areas of China are likely to be familiar with. The narrative of the three characters speculating on the worth of the bill is only to be explained by its surreal power. One of the speculations offered, that the bill is worth 1,000 yuan, is obviously mistaken in term of international monetary exchange. Yet, as an estimate of the influence it has on the lives of ordinary local people, it is more accurate than the financial number could have predicted, as attested by later occurrences in the film.

The film follows the pattern that whoever owns this one dollar bill will own the body of the girl: Like the bill that has been exchanged between parties in alliance with the Liquor Group (an unimportant teenager, and then his father), Qiao Qiao’s body is possessed by whoever gets hold of that bill. This is not to say that the film is iterating the cliché equalization between commodity/belongings and women. What expresses the mandate, after all, is not the sheer volume of wealth or even the entrapment of commodities as claimed by theorists following a consumerist interpretation. Instead, a

single unit of the monetary total, as both the original and ultimate component of the capitalist system, presents to us the primitive power it brings to the native soil of China in transformation.

At the end of the film, Qiao Qiao is wearing a blue wig and awaits her patrons in a theatre booth. Xiao Ji's father at first offers fifty Chinese yuan and was mocked, "You cannot afford me." After the old man carefully takes out the one dollar U.S. bill and places it on top of the fifty Chinese yuan, Qiao Qiao acquiesces. The unreal rendering of a prostitute's reaction to money, as discussed above, is not to be understood in financial terms but rather the symbolic power it represents. Fifty Chinese yuan plus six yuan, that is, the accepted market value of the one dollar bill, could not have changed the girl's decision if not due to the halo effect the currency embraces. To a great extent, the dollar bill becomes a symbol of the meta-currency that propels the global flow of capital in third-world countries, whose effect is not manifested in economic indicators published in newspapers but in the unfolding of personal frustration felt by individuals.

In addition to the magical quality of the one dollar bill, the film accentuates the ultimate unreality of local life caught in the battle between alienation and entrapment, between imposing external icons and the trivialized physical body. In Jia Zhangke's words, "The process of globalization is closely related to cultural values. Youngsters in *Unknown Pleasures* have lost faith in their cultural system...they receive more and more information on everything else in the world, except for that on their own lives and on their environments; in short, the information that matters to them the most."<sup>6</sup> Fleeing from Qiao San's control, Xiao Ji and Qiao Qiao spend a night in a hotel room. For the first time, Xiao Ji notices the butterfly tattoo on the chest of Qiao Qiao and inquires about

the origin. In her response, Qiao Qiao refers to the butterfly parable of Zhuang Zhou (aka Zhuangzi) as imparted by her ex-boyfriend.

Once Zhuang Zhou dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn't know he was Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly he woke up and there he was, solid and unmistakable Zhuang Zhou. But he didn't know if he was a Zhuang Zhou who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Zhuang Zhou (Chuang 49).

Far from Zhuangzi's Taoist philosophy of free spirit, Qiao Qiao's rendition, "Do whatever you want to do" comes from Qiao San and speaks to the void of any identity she can establish on her own. As Tonglin Lu notes, Qiao Qiao's wig functions as a condiment to her true identity which is to be recovered only when the wig is ripped off and when she stays with Xiao Ji. The short union with Xiao Ji, however, is instantly disrupted in the following morning when the audience sees her wearing thick makeup in the bus. The butterfly is instead found on Xiao Ji chest, as close to his heart as it can be, carrying him to the unknown future. At that moment, the tragic fate of the two lovers is disclosed, although such an ending has been alluded to much earlier.

The inability of Qiao Qiao to define her identity is paralleled with Xiao Ji's inability to rise to the modern lifestyles she desires. The national modernization project insinuates its way into local life through the way of living it promotes, including the concern for hygiene, one recurring motif in Chinese independent films, portrayed through the daily routine of taking a shower. In line with the discursive shift from grand history to personal narrative, the once tabooed act of bath and shower prompts one of the most intimate images in the landscape of contemporary Chinese cinema. One of the best known examples is Zhang Yang's *Shower* (1999) that in my view dissects the conflict between the sweeping construction project and traditional ways of living, which

culminate in the imagery of demolition.

Also independently produced, however, *Shower*, approaches the motif of demolition in a more light-hearted way. The film delves into the relation between the body and the architectural structures it inhabits, in which the body reflects on changes in lived spaces. Demolition is naturalized and legitimized when the present is deemed part of a project that aims for the future and outweighs the past. As Old Liu's strolls around the street on a tricycle taking photos with a digital camera, the film concludes the generational and ideological conflicts with a tone of confirmation: after all, the prospect of a better future, enacted from the central government and epitomized by thriving, new technology, will pay off the pain the residents have undergone, that is, "the future" has granted the right to demolish "the past"—here, the old ways of living.

What hides beneath the association of time frame with the right to demolish is the quest for reality: "the real" in the setting of modern Chinese culture is intermingled with the dimension of time phases, starting from as early as the late imperial China when progressive intellectuals attacked or reused the invented "tradition" under the influence of social Darwinism. Behind the modernization project is the national mobilization for a better future legitimated by large-scale industrialization. For a long time, more than eighty percent of the Chinese population resided in the countryside—this fact, sustaining the filmmakers' enthusiasm for portraying the life of country folk, is simultaneously the state's and also the nation's stigma. For film directors, contemplation on the loss of tradition is extrapolated by the temporal division between past and future. The faces of reality, or the displays of the present, lie in their multilayered tensions with the two time periods. The discursive synonym between the reactionary countryside and pre-modern

values exists side by side with the perceived urban expansion that has gained its privilege to the future. That is, the image of the future is based on a modernized and expanded urban space, the prominence of which not only displaces the past but also relinquishes the signification of the present.

The kernel logic of “reality” manifests its vivid bearings on the biological body. The correlation made in *Shower* between the natural death of Old Liu and the demolition of the bathhouse is a disavowal of the despotism of the national project. The critique, if any, is expressed as a low-voiced lament when demolition is placed against seemingly promising life changes at the end of the film. In contrast, *Unknown Pleasures* focuses on the corporeality of Xiao Ji’s naked body in the bathroom to illustrate the frustration of his ego entrapped in the mesh of modern lifestyle. His masculinity in front of Qiao Qiao is initiated by his bravery when saving her from life difficulties—including family emergencies and her abusive relationship with Qiao San—but eventually depends on the extent to which he can survive the demand of “modernization.”

Xiao Ji rescued the girl twice, the first time in the hospital when he ran to the bank to withdraw money for her, and the second time riding away with the girl on his motorcycle. The elevation of his relationship with Qiao Qiao is accompanied by the advancement from resorting to his physical labor to counting on a modern vehicle. The earliest attraction between the two may be as simple as his analogy of putting “...instant noodle into hot water;” to carry out the relationship, however, he has to live up to a lifestyle he is unfamiliar with and unprepared for. Recalling Qiao Qiao’s question in the taxi, that is, on what grounds he can date her, Xiao Ji demonstrates his “qualifications” step by step: at first it is his physical labor, then the motorcycle he owns and at last a

modern hotel room which stands for a lifestyle oriented towards the future.

Modern Chinese realistic literature is heavily invested in the motif that explores the question of how personal belongings displace the significance of human body and determine an individual's relationship with the world around him, a point on which I will elaborate later. Suffice to say for now that corporality, to be understood against the background of realistic literature, serves to mark the destructive effect of the modernization project on the body when the latter is stripped off the possibility of connecting with the world in its naked form. Although the distinction between the biological and social dimensions of the human body has always been pertinent, Jia's cinematic depiction excavates the distorted biological factors of interpersonal relationships, a distortion so inundated in resounding noises (such as broadcast news, lottery announcement and ambulance siren) that it often goes unnoticed. In this film, the existence of those noises is so ubiquitous that any attempt for the body to break away seems futile. The numb facial expression of Xiao Ji speaks surreally to the violence of societal imperatives done to individuals who undergo the psychological process of "foreclosure" to cope with the anxiety of emotional deformation.

The time Xiao Ji spent with Qiao Qiao is one of the few occasions in the film when he shows observable emotions. Rescuing Qiao Qiao consists of the most heroic gesture to Xiao Ji, one that opens the interface to not only heal his emotional deformation but also rebuild a self. The extreme long take with Qiao Qiao sitting in the back seat of Xiao Ji's motorcycle leads to a speculation on the two lovers' new life: No matter how dim the prospect is, the possibility of a brighter future for them existed briefly, at least before the bathroom scene. However, the shine of hope, enacted by the long take of Xiao

Ji's recuperated masculinity, is cut off abruptly by the shot of frustrated Xiao Ji trying to turn on the shower knob. When he has nothing but his body, not even his long-time companion—the motorcycle, his incapability is borne out.

As much as the wig is Qiao Qiao's mask of her real self, the motorcycle enables and defines Xiao Ji. The real self divested of materialistic possessions is presented as "useless" in confrontation with the requirements of basic daily life. Xiao Ji's frustration with the bath gears encapsulates the dire reality of being cut off from the functionality of a certain lifestyle that indicates the future. In other words, when Xiao Ji and Qiao Qiao escape from the control of Qiao San, they are aiming for a future at whose entrance lies the test of modern life minutes. Fulfilling the task and passing the test would be another crucial part for Xiao Ji to establish his masculinity in winning the girl. Therefore, when he has to ask for Qiao Qiao's help in turning on the shower knob, he is at the same time admitting his incapability/impotency. The connotations of cleansing oneself and building communal connections in the bathhouse, as portrayed in Zhang Yang's film, are replaced with the motif of scrutiny and testing.

The bath scene, from the socio-economic perspective, embodies the early infiltration of modern commodities before the creation of their consumers. Although consumerism tends to claim a secondary position to the consumers of commodities, that is, commodities exist to satisfy the consumers' needs, the swift change taking place in contemporary Chinese society, reverses such a relationship and imposes commodities on individuals before their needs rise. On the one hand, the characters in the film are defined by their materialistic belongings, which stir the desire for even more belongings. As shown in the bathroom, they are constantly placed in the middle of new things the

consumption of which is going to determine, consolidate or challenge their identity, frailly established previously (the moment when Xiao Ji rides the motorcycle and successfully rescues the girl).

Meanwhile, the consumption of such a new thing requires an innate skill or ability the individual does not possess. The expansion of capitalist development is manifested as the arbitrary imposition of new commodities whose price are predetermined not by its value in the eyes of the incapable users (who lack the ability to price it), but by the value assumed by a far-away corporate marketing department (based on their estimate of the “needs” of target consumers). Ironically the target consumers, as imagined by the international corporate, barely have anything in common with the folks living in a provincial town such as Datong. The egalitarianism claimed by capitalistic consumerism, in the maxim that “consumers are gods,” is torn apart when extended to the third-world context and its inhuman cruelty laid bare.

Far from locating any innate need or wants for the new thing, Xiao Ji only finds it alien and frustrating as much as everything else in his life. The feeling of entrapment, as noted by Tonglin Lu, works hand in hand with the agony of alienation, a feeling of unreality and incomprehensibility for the world in which he lives. As Kevin Lee accurately points out, “the process of social reform acquires a surreal quality of cultural incongruity,” and “the imposition of cultural forces on an unprepared rural community can be discerned in the film Jia claims to have inspired him to become a filmmaker, Chen Kaige’s *Yellow Earth* (1984).” The state of incomprehension, “of being unprepared to deal with cultural reforms and the new rules they require, is a theme that resonates throughout Jia’s work” (Lee).

The agony is inflated when this alienation is mixed with a youthful longing for romance and personal fulfillment whose insistence is smothered ruthlessly. The coming-of-age mentality that seeks the inclusion of the outside as a means to define the self makes it impossible for these teenagers to diagnose their own problems. For example, Bin Bin thinks that showering his girlfriend with expensive gift is the only way he can express his love – he willingly accepts the equivalence between “goods” and affection, or between the external possessions and ones innate being. The tragic and heroic undertone of his act is particularly acute when the narrative unfolds that this will be his last expression of love: the intensity of emotion is in proportional relation with the price of the gift; in such a manner the equation is legitimized without his awareness. Deeply enmeshed in the ebb and flow of the collective wonder for new goods, Xiao Ji and Bin Bin’s personal emotions are commoditized just as Qiao Qiao’s body is sold out to the one dollar bill. In the manner of self-parody, the director uses cinematic image to price the teens’ emotions—the worth of Bin Bin’s love for a girl is 1,000 Chinese yuan in the form of a cell phone. The saddest part of this equation between price and emotion, in my view, is the diminishment of genuine utterance, or the innate expression wiped out by external noises, a central theme in Jia Zhangke’s films.

Aphasia is defined as the state of losing one’s own language due to the experience of emotional shock. The language used by Xiao Ji to court his girl, such as *pao*, is a phrase borrowed from Hong Kong action movies used by gangsters to refer to casual hookups. Xiao Ji’s rendition of this phrase is at odds with his deep infatuation with Qiao Qiao. The girl’s take of this Hong Kong word, however, is adorned with the excitement of modern newness. The state of aphasia in the film, ironically, is composed of vehement

background noises—the surfeit of voices from various sources, from state government to private companies. The Mongolian King Liquor claims that after drinking their liquor the buyers will regain strength, make many friends and remain young forever, and these claims have been played repetitively throughout the film. It constitutes a most devastating aphasia in the sense that it claims to speak for its listeners and therefore forecloses their own language.

Another noticeable example takes place in the KTV bar when Bin Bin and Yuan Yuan meet each other. Their dates start when Bin Bin picks her up after school and the two walk upstairs to the karaoke room. Along their way up, the camera captures the two teens walking side by side with no facial expression. The background is filled with sounds breaking out from karaoke rooms in the parlor, among which is the famous music note from Wang Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love*.<sup>7</sup> The same soundtrack that has accompanied Su Lizhen and Zhou Muyun walking in the hotel hallway now becomes the background music for a teenage couple in inland China walking on the stairs of a shabby commerce building. The melancholic sentimentality of Wong's film music forms an interesting contrast with Bin Bin and Yuan Yuan who are also waiting for their departure.

When the couple finally steps into their private karaoke bar, their commutations are not boosted but are further inundated in the mix of sounds from other rooms, ranging from the lingering theme song, a woman's moaning from a porn video, to TV programs about China joining the WTO. After a while, Richie Jen's Song "Ren xiaoyao" appears on the screen. The theme song from *In the Mood for Love* was on stage in CCTV's festive Chinese new-year show for 2001, as the state signals its acceptance to overseas Chinese and the advancement of the nation's modernity. The relevance of this song to the

two teens living in Datong is as trivial as the moaning of the porn star that immediately follows, and the suitability of Richie Jen's song is no less questionable. The regional union among Taiwan, Hong Kong and mainland, as a persistent national discourse, successfully overtook the party's hesitation about a morally ambiguous art work about extramarital affairs.

Jia's almost satirical take of the nationwide fever over Wong Kar-wai's film showcases provincial individuals who are unable to appreciate an artistic rendition of illicit affairs. As much as Xiao Ji is desperate to use the bath tub in the hotel room, only to realize that he lacks the ability, Bin Bin's inability to appreciate Wong Kar-wai forebodes that he will be left behind, and that is what literally happens when later Yuan Yuan leaves him for Beijing. If Wong Kar-wai's cinema expresses the feeling of loneliness for people trapped in high-modern cities, Jia's works document the ruins created by the national discourse, which is desperate to move forward, at whatever expense, toward high modernity. To be understood in this light, the ubiquitous destruction in *Unknown Pleasures* is a metaphorical referent to the characters' innate world stripped of any identifiable structure and left in a state of aphasia. In Jia's films, aphasia is presented as the encroachment of disparate voices—a spectacle the nation is creating.

The one dollar US bill, the hotel bathtub and theme song from *In the Mood for Love* become abstract cultural icons standing for a better lifestyle and a more desirable future the residents are forced to catch up to. Jia's camera accurately captures the predominance of these icons in the local life, and particularly their destructive magnitude in preempting the voicing of local feelings. As stated in Chapter One, independent

filmmakers have been exploring the probability of self expression in the setting of culture production in current China, against state control and elite supremacy. I will argue that the right of representation and expression sought by filmmakers endues their realistic film canvas—those of objective or naturalistic quality—with a relentless fortitude.

In the image of Chinese reality and historiography portrayed by independent filmmakers, those petite characters occupy a position as conspicuous as the noises surrounding them and it is exactly by appropriating the imposing icons and noises that they remake them and mark their own existence. Jia Zhangke, in particular, uses icons such as the US dollar bill, the Hong Kong slang “pao,” and the blonde wig Qiao Qiao wears to show the process of their localization and in this manner searches for the meaning of the regional imagery. Compared to other independent filmmakers such as Wang Xiaoshuai, Jia Zhangke does not stop at depicting the destructive effect of modernization on local individuals; he consistently looks for genuine gestures of the subjects’ reconstruction of the icons/signs that befall them. In the battlefield for the right of expression, the almost suffocated subjects fail at the original meanings as desired by the state or the global capital, but eventually reach their localized form in the film text.

Richie Jen’s song, “Ren xiaoyao,” plays a major part in the film by exemplifying how Jia demonstrates the process of converting a pop song from Taiwan to an expression of the two teens’ genuine feelings. The song is a commercial mixture of romance, martial art heroism and a hint of Taoism, none of which is relevant to the inhabitants in the inland city of Datong. However, through its recurrences in the film, the original meaning is replaced with the pronouncement of Xiao Ji’s personal failure in front of the police officer. The song first appears at the open auditions for the Mongolian King Liquor

Group, meant as an upbeat advertisement for the spirit of the true Mongolian. It recurs at the end of one of Bin Bin and Yuan Yuan's dates in a karaoke club: after the theme song, *In the Mood for Love*, the moaning of a porn star, and news about China joining the WTO, "Ren xiaoyao" becomes the only icon the young couple finds connection with. They start to hold hands and sing along with the singer. Finally, it is used to entertain a bored police officer and sung by Bin Bin's weak voice without accompanying music. As the lyric unfolds, "many are my ambitions, proud is my heart. Only the word love lingers in my mind; all my life, I've pursued it in vain." It is Bin Bin's insistence on his own understanding of the Taiwan pop song that gives the silent character a way of expression. The distorted song significantly becomes an alternative rebuttal to the distortion those characters suffer in their emotional world.

It is pointed out that popular music has the sublime power to transcend and transform, as every time the song reappears the rendition changes and the atmosphere it carries is converted to a different level. "Along the way, the saccharine song transforms from a pure pop product into a highly personal statement about the characters' predicament, ultimately challenging the ideal of heroic masculinity espoused by the original song."<sup>8</sup> In my opinion, however, the prominence of this particular song, as well as other pop songs prevailing in Jia's films, is not merely to show the transcendental power of pop music, but to incorporate it into the group of economic and cultural icons that have been misunderstood, appropriated, reconstructed, remade and then reborn. All these processes are about how the local soil encounters foreign or external impositions. Meanwhile, they are subversions in the manner of submission: when they make use of those icons they also change it; and when they (have to) mark their life with those icons

they also imprint on them their own life experiences.<sup>9</sup>

Jia's cinema understatement, including minimal arbitrary cuts and zero non-diegetic soundtracks, create a cinema space for the characters to present the flow of their life in surroundings filled with voices of all pitches. On one hand, the quiet cinema foregrounds the harsh voices that penetrate directly to the voiceless characters and scourge the remaining pieces of their identities. On the other hand, through capturing the natural composition of the same scene and particularly the uncanny correspondence between different elements in the shot, Jia's film language not only unfolds how the filmed subjects redefine the external cultural icons but also reveals the moments when those economic, political and cultural impositions correlate with each individual's personal life changes. Jia tends to provide a personalized account of economic and political events that bear no relevance to the depicted characters, and in a non-intruding way pinpoints the magnitude of their seemingly trivial lives. In other words, those events at times magnify the characters' innate expressions and their relevance to local life stays at an abstract level.

Surrealism in *Unknown Pleasures* has been more identifiable, to the degree that critics claim that it designates the director's cinematic transition. The increased surrealist elements in this film and in Jia's later films are not unrelated to the director's intention of capturing the chaotic reality confronting the nation. In Jia's words,

I have the impression that a surrealist atmosphere prevails in China today, because the entire society faces an enormous pressure to speed up. As a result, many strange and unimaginable events have occurred in reality. As they say, 'reality is more exceptional than fiction.' The surrealist elements sound unbelievable to most of us, but they are part of reality.<sup>10</sup>

Conversely, inasmuch as Jia's films describe not only the jarring coexistence between

political events, foreign icons and the local life but the moments when those events and icons seem to resonate with the rhythms of the nameless individuals, I contend that these surrealist elements deserve a more thorough scrutiny, especially their detailed patterns and structures.

As discussed in Chapter II, Andre Bazin's theories on cinematic realism<sup>11</sup> lend a very useful perspective to analyze Jia's outstanding achievement in realistic filmmaking and help us understand that cinema realism is far from the tediousness of surface reality as assumed by some art critics as well as directors from the Fifth Generation. Bazin distinguishes photography from painting in one of his most influential theoretic books,

*What Is Cinema:*

For the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent. For the first time, the image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man.... All the arts are based on the presence of man, only photography derives an advantage from his absence. Photography affects us like a phenomenon in nature, like a flower or a snowflake whose vegetal or earthly origins are an inseparable part of their beauty.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, cinema records the space of objects and also composition between objects in an automatic way, i.e. without the intervention of humans. Bazin confers on photography a primitive psychological impetus that will be hampered if the transference of visual properties of the objects has been altered. He holds that, however, a significant film is not a plain photography of the flow of raw materials, but instead a "continuum from the most unadorned realistic films to the most abstract" (Andrew 146). A crucial viewpoint of Bazin's theory is termed the "natural style," that is, a filmmaker's contribution lies in how he/she selects from reality rather than how to transform it. Audiences are not expected to comprehend the significance created by the filmmaker but

should recognize the degree of significance within reality itself. In his thought-provoking analysis on the films of Jean Renoir, Bazin argued that in contrast to Eisenstein who largely employed diagonal composition Renoir did not artificially form appearances into meaningful presence but allowed the natural composition of the world to radiate its own meaning, which is a higher level of dramatization, and filmmakers only need to record it.

The so-called surrealistic elements in Jia's films, situated in this context, are not a challenge to the core of cinematic realism, but an effort to explore the abstract potential of realism. As analyzed beforehand, the singer of the song "Ren xiaoyao," a sudden star in the late 1990s, Richie Jen, probably never posits teens such as Bin Bin in the central mainland as his target listeners. The way his song becomes the direct expression of Bin Bin's personal turmoil is only random and coincidental. In Jia's later work, *A Still Life*, Sanming, the quiet side character in *Platform* whose parents plan to buy him a bride, is found to have lost his wife and daughter. While he is searching for his families on the verge of the three-gorge dam, an 8-9 years old child sings loud a pop song about the intensity of romantic love. An irrelevant boy's mournful song over the loss of romantic love unexpectedly adds a corresponding layer to the protagonist's suppressed innate feelings. The young child affected by a pop song is not aware of Sanming's grief of losing his loved ones, but in an uncanny way his singing fits the mood of the latter.

The correspondences between multiple events in *Unknown Pleasures* give rise to the effect of a naturalized dramatization of the seemingly trivial everyday life of the local inhabitants. The sequences about Xiao Ji's first semi-official date with Qiao Qiao on the dance floor sees the transitions from personal defeat to national glory and then a local disaster, all of which happens almost simultaneously, so that each event seems to

comment on the other. The lightning of fireworks for Beijing winning the 2008 Olympic holding right overtakes Xiao Ji's disgrace of being beat by Qiao San in the dance club. However, the feel of national glory did not last long: very soon the sound of the fireworks is muffled by a bombing in the textile factory.

As the mysterious bombing serves well to Xiao Ji's ends—Qiao San is wounded in the explosion, Bin Bin jokes that Xiao Ji must be the suspect. What's more, the bombing assists in Xiao Ji's heroic rescue of Qiao Qiao who is caught in a fight with the hospital nurse. Xiao Ji's "revenge," even though not under his own plan, is reconfirmed when Qiao Qiao invites him for a meal and prompts an important turning point of their relationship. Among the abovementioned sequences is the contrast between the image of Xiao Ji's bloody face, the upbeat speech of the TV broadcast, the cheerful sound of the fireworks and the loud explosion lightning up the dark sky. Significantly, all those events happen at the same time that Xiao Ji's buddy Bin Bin is drinking a coke with the background noise on TV announcing the arrest of an American jet spy. Those simultaneous occurrences speak to both the discordant and correspondent relationship within the represented reality.<sup>13</sup>

Scholars have noticed Jia's idiosyncratic use of music score and attribute its significance to the shelter function of pop culture.<sup>14</sup> This conclusion, however, only answers part of the question. It does not explain how Jia differs from other independent filmmakers such as Zhang Yuan and Lou Ye in terms of using pop songs; neither can it set apart the music in realistic films and that in films of different styles.<sup>15</sup> I argue that music constitutes an indispensable part of Jia's film language—the natural style he has been pursuing and the right of expression he locates for his characters. Music in cinema

can be a key device for storytelling (with editing and shifts of cinematography, the film narrative may appear disjointed; the continuity of sound carries one shot over the next and assists in the continuation of the images), or hint to viewers motifs the film wants to convey, which otherwise can be hidden or unnoticeable.<sup>16</sup> Use of musical soundtracks can also run the risk of violating the verisimilitude required by cinematic realism: to have music that the characters are oblivious to and that comes from nowhere plays at odds with the visual congruity the film has been laboring at.<sup>17</sup> Claudia Gorbman calls music “unheard melodies” since it is supposed to complement the imagery rather than distract the audience’s attention from the story.<sup>18</sup>

Jia’s films feature the contrast and exchange between the functions of music, which in different ways enhances the richness of imagery. In many other films that are extolled for the use of pop music—Wong Kar-wai, for instance—non-diegetic music follows a unidirectional module to pass on to the audience the emotional layers contained in the imagery, that is, the soundtrack works in line with the image to accentuate its expressiveness. Jia, instead, excavates more extensive potentials of the music as a form of film language. Rather than trying to manipulate the audiences’ affective response, Jia minimizes the use of arbitrary non-diegetic music and instead largely resorts to images that contain built-in sound to give a verisimilar portrait of the characters’ lives.<sup>19</sup>

Jia’s different treatment of music speaks to the aestheticism of a natural style: his film canvas allows different components within the captured reality to comment on each other and in this manner excavates the abstract meaning of reality. His later films increase surreal elements to probe into the absurd, abstract or even existentialist dimension of reality. Whether it is the animated character portraits in *The World* or

Sanming's hallucination of an old shaman walking on the high-voltage cord hanging over the gorge, Jia accurately captures the thrilling *correspondences*<sup>20</sup> of the wordless reality itself, a structure composed of both image and sound. Where the embodied characters lack voices, the void is filled with disembodied speeches and the sound of pop songs. The mixture of soundtracks and background noises articulates the dialogue between characters' innate feeling (aphasia) and the diegetic soundtrack befalling them, a dialogue taking the forms of appropriation or coincidental correspondence.

Employing the concept of "cinema of time," Jason McGrath points out that Jia organizes "time" not by the rule of dramatic needs, but rather corresponding to "life time"—"the experience of time as simple duration in a life that is more full of quotidian moments, inactivity, and boredom than spectacular events even in an era of dramatic historical changes."<sup>21</sup> Cinema of time is realized by the style of filmic ellipses—minimizing apparent cause-effect narrative and instead adopting detached, objective, non-judgmental narrative that displays the natural flow of life events. In Li Tuo's words, Jia Zhangke has discovered a certain poeticism amid stagnation and destruction: hometown life in his films on the one hand "exists in a state of stagnation" and on the other is constantly shattered by the uncontrollable outside force called "modernization."<sup>22</sup> While these theories highlight the "quotidian moments, inactivity, and boredom" in Jia's films, they risk equalizing Jia's film language to a flat record of tediousness that is often mistakenly received as the aesthetics of everyday life.<sup>23</sup>

I contend that Jia's artworks astutely capture the enthralling factors of seemingly quotidian reality: local residents' misuse of foreign cultural icons and the uncanny correspondence of political events to their personal experience are considerable examples

of those thrilling moments. Furthermore, Jia's style accentuates the motifs of silence to identify the quiet characters' unspoken emotions and their demonstration of resistance, all of which denotes the persistence of "self" in a suffocating environment. In a deeper sense, his films contribute to the enlightenment inquiry about subjectivity, truth, and representation by insisting on a quiet and respectful cinematic language that mends the breach between the representing subject and the represented ordinary folks. The moral stand noticeable in his films does not come from the director's comments, but from the image that is often saturated with various sound sources. The composite reality of heterogeneous images and sounds displays the quality of correspondence rather than fits into an arbitrary cause-effect linear narrative, and in this way allows for a cinematic space to harbor the quiet characters' self expression.

The fortitude of this often silent and sometimes skewed self expression is sanctioned by nothing but the screen image, or when the genuineness of a local self is basically impossible, justice is found in silent historicity, a point I will elaborate later. Labeled as a film about "undoing," as stated previously, *Unknown Pleasures* nonetheless engrosses the protagonist's genuine, persistent and even heroic traversing in frustration, to a large extent resembling Jia's earlier works such as *The Platform* and *Xiao Wu*. To follow I will analyze Bin Bin and Yuan Yuan's reunion at the bus station to exemplify the camera's deliberation on the character's silent expression. Before Yuan Yuan leaves for Beijing to study international trade, Bin Bin borrows money from his mother and buys Yuan Yuan a cell phone. Upon receiving the gift, Yuan Yuan asks Bin Bin to kiss her. However, he only sits quietly in the dark corner of a dining booth left in the dilapidated station, with an ambivalent expression on his face. Yuan Yuan walks over to

her bike and then rides back to him. She pauses in front of him for a while, makes a circle in the center of what was once the dining hall, comes back to him for a second, and one last time, at the midpoint of the circle. After a brief pause, she finishes the other half of the circle and resolutely rides away. At that moment, the loudspeaker starts to announce the departure of the bus and urges passengers to be ready for boarding, with Bin Bin still sitting in the empty station hall.

In *The Platform*, youngsters from the performance troupe were also left behind in a stagnated train station, waiting in a remote town for a train whose arrival is never certain. Since no railroad runs through the town, the troupe members have to travel across a dry riverbed and onto a bridge just to get a glimpse of a distant train passing. “The train is thus both a literal industrial emblem of modernization and a more abstract symbol of a modernity actually experienced largely as an absence and a longing.”<sup>24</sup> In *Unknown Pleasures*, the abandoned Bin Bin is found the next day resting his head on the lap of the hair salon masseuse—in remembrance of Yuan Yuan, he refused the masseuse’s consolation for the first time, but not this time, after he confronts the reality that he cannot board the bus as Yuan Yuan could. Yuan Yuan left to study International Trade in Beijing. Just before she left, she changed her outfit to look more like a city girl; she won her admittance to the modernization project while Bin Bin was declined that right. If in *The Platform* the act of boarding the train takes on a collective meaning, in *Unknown Pleasures* the director tracks the aftermath of the yearning on a personal level: for some—those young people trapped in a small town—the pace of the train will not accommodate the rhythm of their pulse: they either catch it or miss it, presumably, forever.

The narrative in which Yuan Yuan offers Bin Bin a ride in the bus station is reminiscent of the film's opening sequence when Bin Bin rides motorcycle amidst the crowd of a city market. A shot in some sense resonating with the establishing sequence in Zhang Yimou's *The Story of Qiu Ju* (where the heroine's dopey face is contradicted later with her stubborn pursuit of communal justice), the opening lays a foundation for the overtone of the whole film. The other two well-known tracking shots in the film depict Xiao Ji riding with Qiao Qiao along the bank of a river, and riding on a highway after robbing the bank.<sup>25</sup> Different from Qiu Ju, who, with persistence, breaks away from the entrapping crowds in the market, both Bin Bin and Xiao Ji have failed to escape from the location that defines and confines them. As Tonglin points out, "Although the frame is changing, the tracking shot creates the illusion that the protagonist is trapped in the same position and in the same location, despite his spatial displacement. Regardless of how fast Bin Bin moves, he can never break away from the frame imposed on him."<sup>26</sup>

In *Unknown Pleasures*, Bin Bin not only loses his girlfriend to the capital city of Beijing, but also to her imagination about a future that is different from entrapment in current time. In *Xiao Wu*, the pickpocket living in Fenyang fails to look forward (in the Chinese language, it sounds exactly like "look at the money") and consecutively loses his old-time buddy, Ji Xiaoyong, and his KTV-hostess girlfriend.<sup>27</sup> In the film's hidden commentary, realized by the pop song "Farewell, My Concubine," Ji is compared to the Western Han emperor Liu Bang who eventually won the Chu-Han war because of his pragmatism while Xiao Wu is likened to Xiang Yu, whose idealized values only led him to defeat. Scholars including Michael Berry, Jonathan Rosenbaum and Tonglin Lu highlight the nostalgia motif in Jia's hometown trilogy, some even claiming that the

contribution of Jia's works to the corpus of Chinese cinema actually lies in the director's unique small-town origin. Berry rightly points out that Jia's works present "an *implosion* of the hometown"<sup>28</sup> when the characters' lifestyles and moral codes are disassembled beyond their comprehension, different from the motif of longing for an idealized hometown as seen in classical literature. In contrast, Tonglin Lu observes that *Xiao Wu* uses a subjective point-of-view, materialized by soundtrack noises to present a sense of hybridity between traditional and Communist culture, diaspora, and the "bewilderment felt by individuals facing a world in permanent transition" (Hall 39). "[Through] pop music, which exemplifies hybrid culture in contemporary China, the film presents a slightly nostalgic image of male bonding...because the current trend of money worship has shattered the last refuge of this relatively disinterested connection."<sup>29</sup>

Jason McGrath utilizes the style of "narrative distension" to analyze the temporal and spatial differences as shown in *The Platform*, a style that I believe is also applicable to Jia's other features. First, Jia's film corpus tends to pass through a nostalgic look towards a lost past. When watching many of Jia's films, most audiences who had the experience of living in China would recall those sweepingly popular pop-rock songs from that era, and probably, in the case of *The Platform*, also revisit a time when the national passion for revolution was transplanted onto newly discovered foreign cultural products. Accompanying those pop-rock songs is also the memory of a self-consciousness just liberated from the collective mentality. However, the minute it broke off from the collective, the self was lost in an undefined topology, only to find the underlying passions wasted away in idleness/nothingness. Therefore, melancholy associated with nostalgia in this case is more due to the memory that "nothing particular really happened" than to the

feeling of a lost age. Second, the stories are usually set in a geographically marginal region in China whose involvement in the “Four Modernization” project is inconsequential and incomplete. Being remote from the central governance creates for them a free space but at the same time exacerbates a desire that was never to be fulfilled.

The theme of nostalgia and the hometown motif, noted by the above theorists, are not unique to Jia’s films, but are common to the film canvas of the independent generation. The temporal difference between the past, the present and an imagined better future, and the spatial contrast between the center state and the remote hometown, in my view, presents a concrete and dialectical history. It is claimed that the Sixth Generation does not care to make allegories. Hence it seems unsettling to point to scenes that insinuate allegorical meanings, such as in *Beijing Bicycle* shots of the old residents sitting in alleys watching two teens’ chasing and beating each other. Their indifference to what is happening in front of their eyes, to be placed in the circuits of Beijing’s alleys, is captured with median shots and suggests a larger connotation.

Whether they serve merely as the background for the main narrative or they actually suggest “a present participant,” these quiet senior onlookers constitute the dimension of “passing time,” or in an allegorical way, as witnesses of the occurrences. The critical undertone of realistic modern Chinese literature, as I have pointed out, inaugurates from Lu Xun’s observation of how the ordinary population watched their own people being executed. What is left unsaid is the collective expectation for the link between acting and watching: vision should lead to action, and historicity attaches to justice. As Lu Xun expected the dumbfounded lookers to stop the execution, the audience of *Beijing Bicycle* is bewildered by why those old residents do nothing to stop the

violence happening in front of them. Their watching in itself calls for the necessity of action by the logic of May Fourth realism. Nonetheless, like the permanent presence of history, their presence is not in the form of actions, but instead in a way similar to an objective historiography that does not provide solutions.

Lu Xun saw those onlookers, as the audience is aware of the alley dwellers' quiet observation, both establishing a subjectivity central to the tradition of critical realism, which tends to find faults with the objectivity of historiography and to insert an arbitrary subject—the author and/or the audience who is watching. Aside from recounting stories of the oppressed social bottom, as a typical May-Fourth realism rhetoric, independent films tend to use long shots to capture the cityscape and offer an invisible witness to the often tediously chaotic occurrences. *Beijing Bicycle* reminds us of the glory of China's imperial history—not just by the film title's apparent reference to the capital city—but also by the large scale of the tracking shots of narrow alleys behind the imperial palace. The dilapidated alleys, compared to those appearing in many Fifth Generation films, exist as the status quo and are part of the city folk's ordinary life.

All the daily occurrences, including monetary disputes, family squabbles, generational conflicts, the pressure of making a living, seem too trivial to occupy a position beside the grand mansions in Beijing. Yet when the camera silently captures those senior Beijing residents sitting in the alley quietly observing the teens' frantic chase, the tranquil face of those old people astutely conveys the presence of history. In this case, the presence is shown in the gesture of “nothing being done” as those onlookers never take any action to intervene in the events. Their participation in the story line breaks the lineage of the film narrative, unsettles the meaning of the main characters'

doing by their “undoing” and what’s more, underlines the abstract quality of reality by indicating the haunting existence of a remote history.

In one of the most choreographed sequences of *The Platform*, Cui Mingliang trying to divulge his love for Yin Ruijuan on the top of the old city wall; the scene epitomizes the director’s fondness for long-take aesthetics and “narrative eclipse.” As Jia remarks, ideas about the shots on the city wall appeared out of nowhere. The shooting crew had been laboring on those shots for a long time, until the current version came together. It is considered the most appropriate for the atmosphere of the whole film. The full meaning of this filmic sequence is not to be understood without taking into account the prevailing shots of the archaic city walls, streets and squares which in my opinion constitute an alternative space to the troupe members. The film exhibits a dichotomy between the interior setting where the collective group enjoys folly laughter and the exterior yards individuals express their suppressed feelings. Cui Mingliang and Yin Ruijuan often meet each other to talk about their relationship on top of the old city walls or in the courtyards. Another couple in the performance troupe meets there to talk about their longing for the distant city.

For Cui Mingliang and his friends, the desolate old city, whose past glory no one can restore, somehow affords a concrete site for their imagination of the city. The dilapidated city ruins add to the film a dimension of history: as a miniature of China’s “Four Modernization” project, the town is divided by the old walls. Cui Mingliang and his folks kick the bricks by the wall in a belittling manner and swear that one day they will not be back. Their promise, not surprisingly, is disavowed by the ending, where middle-aged Cui dozes off on his couch on a random summer afternoon. As a matter of

fact, scenes about the setting were filmed in Pingyao, a much more picturesque neighbor city of Fenyang. With its traditional architectures, Pingyao has been named a world cultural legacy by the UN and attracts numerous tourists around the world. On one hand, changing the shooting location is attributable to the increase of funding. On the other hand, I would argue that as a significant old town, Pingyao successfully creates an alternative space, not only to resist the hegemonic discourse of the central city, Beijing, but also offers the site for self-expression. The ellipse in the narrative, shown on top of the city tower where Yin Ruanjuan often hides herself behind the wall remnants during her conversation with Cui Mingliang, is filled up with the image of the city wall. As if Cui is constantly talking to the wall instead of Yin, the camera captures the composition of Yin's voice, the image of the wall and Cui standing alone facing the history that the wall represents.

Walter Benjamin's conception about "natural history," reused later by Xudong Zhang, claims the possibility for nature to reactivate history and calls for an enlightenment project that can go beyond the subjectivist and positivist scheme of modern society.<sup>30</sup> This live, concrete and open history transcends the anthropocentric constraint of historicism and subjectivism that determines the privilege of representation. I argue that an alternative historicity is not only where independent filmmakers locate their right to filmmaking, but also a solution to the paradoxical divergence between filmmakers as intellectuals, and the local inhabitants they represent in their films. Films made by them are not simply about what constitutes the Chinese reality of today; they also probe into the questionable side of represented reality and the very act of representation itself. In Lou Ye's *Suzhou River*, the claim made by the voiceover, "my

camera does not lie,” bespeaks the new generation’s departure from obsession with “the real” to questioning the subjectivism of “what is real.” Shaoyi Sun identifies the Lacanian implication in the film: the “erased half” (the disappeared girl Mudan and the narrator-videographer) triggers the male characters’ “search for the possibility of constructing a speaking subject that is not only ‘national’ but also ‘personal’—the biographical historicity of the individual.”<sup>31</sup>

In urban films by independent directors, pop culture and national events intervene in the daily lives of the characters, and become the political dimension of their personal history. At the same time, lingering images of the historical cityscape denotes the dialectic between different time frames and provides an alternative space for those petite characters who cannot find justice in the entrapping city. Their objective cinematic understatement does not subscribe to predetermined cause-effect narration but embraces the coexistence of seemingly unrelated components and hence the opening semiotic potentials. Characters in the film unfold the composite status of their lives, which do not lead to a linear account or join a political discourse, but instead forge a history of their own.

As quiet as the presence of the historical town is the silent social bottom, who shows up in many films as a wordless side-character. The narrative apparatus of inserting a quiet or even mute character has been consistently used by modern and post-Mao writers such as Lu Xun, Yu Hua and Ah Cheng.<sup>32</sup> As discussed in Chapter II, the mute social class, the masses that do not speak for themselves, are also what the independent filmmakers intend to capture, in order to probe into the relation between representation and reality, and between the author and the narrated ordinary people. The perception that

the social bottom comprises an indescribable silent existence will also determine which filmic techniques will be hailed as indigenous while others are dispelled as “imitation.” Whereas overseas critics accurately locate the elliptical narrative shot atop the city tower to illuminate Jia Zhangke’s aesthetic transition, the general audience is keen to the director’s persistent attention to the “mute” bottom social class. To a great extent, the social bottom is as silent as the “reality” that leads to the truth and yet cannot speak for itself. In *Platform*, the aestheticization of the landscape and deployment of more elegant cinematic techniques, termed as Jia’s cinematic transition, triggers criticism from its local viewers. The ambivalent long-take has been designated a “foreign gimmick.” The domestic audience contends that the non-diegetic music intrudes and is inappropriate to the film’s low-key atmosphere.<sup>33</sup> Intended to enunciate the characters’ emotions, the soundtrack composed by a Japanese musician for *Platform* was found by these audiences to be too articulate and expressive.

In *Platform*, the wordless character is Cui Mingliang’s cousin, San Ming, who is onstage only twice: the first time Cui and his friends drive a truck passing San Ming’s mining district and the second time they stop there for a performance. In his early 20s, however, San Ming sets himself apart from Cui’s groups with an extraordinary shy demeanor. When Cui offers him a ride on the truck, San Ming insists on climbing a hill on foot, murmuring “this is closer.” During the second visit, San Ming asks Cui Mingliang to take back some cash to his sister for her college tuition. The extended long-take on San Ming climbing up the hill conveys the director’s thoughtful fixation on the bottom group in the social strata.

San Ming is not stirred by the social changes as Cui Mingliang and his folks have

been, and persists in certain simple beliefs, such as walking can reach the destination in a shorter distance than riding a modern vehicle. His lone figure captures the camera, the eyes of Cui Mingliang and the audiences. Ironically, Cui Mingliang's ardent, idealistic, and heroic exploration ends in the mundane act of taking a nap in a room in the house when his wife plays with their child. Second Girl in *The World* is another quiet figure in Jia's film corpus whose simple life values are in sharp contrast with the hustle and haste of other characters, which is magnified in the ending when he dies in a coal mine accident. Once again, the director shows how monetary concerns impinge on the migrant workers' lives: before dying in the hospital, Second Girl writes on a paper noting the amount of money he owes to others and asks his relative to pay it back for him. The film, often called a simulacra of the post-modern phantom city,<sup>34</sup> ends with a full-screen close-up of the young man's handwritten note.

In looking at the stories written by Johann Peter Hebel, Walter Benjamin comments, "death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death. In other words, it is natural history to which his stories refer back."<sup>35</sup> In Jia's and many other independent films, silence and death, amidst all the background noises that claim different privileges, is the final authority those social subalterns can resort to and the director can "sanction." "Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face—or rather in a death's head."<sup>36</sup> At the end of *Beijing Bicycle*, the beat-up teens walk on a crowded crossroad of Beijing surrounded by automobiles, motorcycles, bikers and pedestrians. The high-angle shot not only captures a generation lost in their own land, but also indicates an indifferent city and a historiography that has led to failure. In *Suzhou*

*River* the redemption is both triggered and fulfilled by “death:” at first it was Moudan jumping off the bridge and later the reunited lovers are found dead along the river. What is redeemed is not Mardar’s betrayal of his innocent girlfriend, but an arbitrary narration that determines his betrayal. In Zhu Wen’s *South of the Clouds* (2004), the protagonist has been longing for Yuannan, a province remote from the Communist capital. When he actually travels there in his senior years, however, he realizes that the alternative space he dreamt of has become an entrapment.

The spectacle created by a future-oriented nation, in its march forward to modernization, is sustained by nothing but constant cultural icons and political speeches. Living for a predetermined future and resolutely erasing the meaning associated with the past, the national spectacles overshadows the current temporality and narrates an arbitrary historiography that ordinary folks are compelled to catch up with. When their living space is disregarded and demolished, the filmed subjects locate an alternative history of empowerment in their misappropriation of those imposing icons. As kernel members of Chinese intellectuals, independent directors resort to an objective film language to tackle the dilemma of positioning persisting since the May Fourth literary reform. The motif of “muteness” and “death” is both a rebellion against oppressive and stifling background noises and the ultimate sanction the film text gives the represented characters, withstanding the perceived gulf between the directors and the depicted social bottom.

Furthermore, the increasing alliance between political institutions, cultural symbols, and the film language established by the Fifth Generation cultural elite requires a disruptive cinematic language to break through, an agenda often causing severe anxiety among independent filmmakers. In that sense, the inability to iterate the living conditions

of a silent social class also reflects the institutional constraints the directors are set in, which largely determines the directors' contemplation of the relationship between expression and silence, between actuality and the ineffable coexistence of disparate images, and eventually between representation and the annulations of that effort. Recalling the tradition of realism, advocacy for the socially oppressed is checkered by the authorial tone of the spokespersons, and the trustworthiness of language is hampered by the very act of iteration. Thus, Chinese independent cinema qualifies the authoritativeness of images with the failure of representation—in the mystic death of characters or undecipherable silent side-characters who do not seem to belong to the film text.

The central latitude of moralistic concerns and social justice from the May-Fourth realist tradition increases the relevance of Jia's films as records of the ongoing social reality of China and provides the weight of historiography. Cinematically, his films achieve a poetics of objectivity where a both autonomous and highly personal world displays its own compositions, including corresponding images and synchronized sounds that quietly comment on each other, providing the moral reference. Minimal intervention into the displayed image, for example, zero non-diegetic sound, allows for the texture of the image and the patterns of the captured reality to develop naturally and to harbor the filmed subjects in an alienated world. Different from typical realist films, the social bottom in Jia's films does not take the form of a social class or a communal group but are often separate individuals whose life experiences articulate the nation's distancing from its own past. They are not only caught in the crevice between self and the modernization project, current life experience, and the nation's desire for a more promising future, but

they are also victims of abandoned enlightenment ideals. Films made by the new generation challenge the boundary of representation under the current political system, and explore the composition of reality for individuals living in a vastly changing environment. Reality is shown as the disempowered self set in a shattered locale and a disintegrated present that often displays an abstract or symbolic quality.

The “truth” value of many independent films is enfranchised by an objective point of view that presents the precise moments of an afflicted self in the national project of modernization. Distinguished from sentimentalism or romanticism, these films accurately capture an unadorned and composite reality where the quiet image is saturated with heterogeneous diegetic sounds, each making a claim on the individuals. The aesthetics of independent films culminate on the compartments of self expression that have been muffled by the chaos of urban development, nation building and global capital operation, and empowers the voiceless images with “borrowed sounds” that do not appear to belong. In *Unknown Pleasures*, the intermittence of sounds is illustrated by the three on-and-off renditions of the same pop song which, in combination with the silent images, become the characters’ self expression amidst all the jarring background noises. Pop songs often occur in Jia’s films in a coincidental way and comment on the otherwise quiet images by making references to different and seemingly more justified temporality. The represented subjects on screen become an integral part of the imagery of an alternative (in terms of challenging the official) and living (in terms of corresponding to historical relics) history.

Allowing the captured reality to display its own truth is buttressed by the directors’ epistemological beliefs of the transmutability between reality and social justice, and their agendas of bringing back to the screen the reality in its raw form. Their film

language differs, not only from the mythical national allegories of the Fifth generation, but also from popular Hong-Kong films dominating Chinese theatres, including sentimental urban romance, heroic action thriller, grotesque city portraits and so on. Intertextual references to identifiable cultural names weave yet another component of the heterogeneous realities the unidentifiable social figures are set in, are demanded to cope with and are unable to fully enjoy.

To the petite pickpocket, disinterested teens, or migrant workers depicted in Chinese independent films, the warranted pleasures of these cultural icons are as unattainable as the gimmicks brought in by global capital and approved by the state. The void of their voices parallels the meaninglessness of the current temporality and space, as the nation is seeking to both look forward and look abroad. This void is also filled with free-spirited pop songs that become a not-so-accurate appropriation of their emotions. In Jia's film, the "unknown pleasures" of modernity loom in the hotel bathtub as a daunting test waiting to be passed by the unskilled testee and persists throughout the film as the possibility of a happy ending (a modernized self winning his girl) drifts away. The truth value independent filmmakers have been insisting on comes from recovering the manners of self expression enacted by the body and enabled by the aesthetic conversion from reality to corporeality. Where corporeality fails, justice and sanction are found in the mute expression of "death" shown on the screen, as in *Suzhou River* and *The World*.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The other two directors in the commission are John Akomfrah and Tsai Ming-liang.

<sup>2</sup> Ironically, the bank the two try to rob of happens to be a branch of the China Construction Bank,

which forms a sharp contrast with the motif of demolition featured in this film.

<sup>3</sup> See M. Berry, *Xiao Wu, Platform, Unknown pleasures* 97.

<sup>4</sup> This motif is later played up in Jia's film, *A Still Life*: when a group of audiences watch a show, one of them pulls out a U.S. bill and attracts admiration among his peers.

<sup>5</sup> A best-known example is the Big Mac index, which is the notion that a dollar should buy the same amount of goods measured in baskets of typical goods and services in all countries. For the difficulty associated with choosing the right consumption basket, McDonald's Big Mac, produced in about 120 countries, is favored to compare price level across countries. The Big Mac PPP is the exchange rate that would cause hamburgers cost the same in America as abroad.

<sup>6</sup> Prudentino, *Le Regard des ombres* 100-101.

<sup>7</sup> Wong Kar-wai's film came out in 2001, shortly before Jia's film. The intertextual references made in many of Jia's films to pop culture and also to his own earlier works extends to a different direction when Wong Kar-wai is involved. It is ambiguous if Jia is purposefully making reference to another big name of art-house cinema whose films also ardently favor the use of music. However, it does offer a different cultural angle to analyze the Wong Kar-wai fuzzi so prevalent among city dwellers in China, especially this phenomenon is placed abreast with Jia Zhangke. Petite bourgeoisie (*xiao zi*) is a slightly derogatory name for the cultural consuming group who prefers sentimental and light-hearted literary short pieces offering the ointment of consolation to their readers. A well-known example is the Chinese *Readers Digest* (读者文摘) which, albeit its phenomenal popularity since the reform period, is criticized by some intellectuals as narrow-scoped, escapist and in short *xiao zi*. The well reception of Wong Kar-wai's films in mainland China similarly has stirred controversies from critics.

<sup>8</sup> M. Berry, *Xiao Wu, Platform, Unknown pleasures* 108.

<sup>9</sup> Jia told a story about his patronage to a karaoke club, seeing a guy repeatedly singing the same song all alone. Such an experience makes the director look at popular culture from a different perspective: popular cultures, even those originated from a foreign source, can provide a shelter for people to come home to when "home" has been reduced to a remote concept that is not reachable as in *Xiao Wu* or a wasteland with only ruins of traditional values as in *Unknown Pleasures*.

<sup>10</sup> Pickowicz, *From Underground to Independent* 126.

<sup>11</sup> Refer to Chapter II regarding the influence of Bazin's realism theories on BFA students. Jia Zhangke and his core film crew graduate from the Literature Department of BFA and have been systematically trained in realism theories. Jia's writings on contemporary Chinese cinema also showcase his theory awareness.

<sup>12</sup> Bazin, *What Is Cinema?* 13.

<sup>13</sup> Jia's recent film, *The Twenty-Four City*, has its own musical score rather than borrowing from pop songs. The transition is paralleled with the director's success of career and the incurred growth of budget. The rights to recordings of pop songs surely cost less than finding one's own composers and singers. However, although viewers on cybe-forums hail the beauty of ending theme song in *The Twenty-Four City*, I consider a compromise the director made for the purpose of attracting more domestic audiences, just like the strategy of employing popular professional actresses including Lü Liping and Chen Chong.

<sup>14</sup> In particular, see Tonglin Lu, “Music and Noise: Independent Film and Globalization” 57-76.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Scorsese has been particularly well-known for his extensive use of popular songs to engage the viewer. For example, in the opening sequence of *Mean Street* (1973), the action of Charlie’s head hitting the pillow is accompanied with the drum beat of Ronnettes “Be My Baby.” Following him, Spike Lee and Quentin Tarantino have established their position in experimenting with the potential of popular music. In the arena of Chinese language films, Wong Kar-wai is yet another well-known example of using pop music.

<sup>16</sup> Functions of film music vary: first, background music is to sustain audience’s attention and add coherence to a scene when it moves from shot to shot, that is, fill up empty shots between pauses in dialogues. Music in some films can also has its own systematic structure by helping to establish motifs, contributing to the emotional and intellectual complexity, situating historical context, geographical space, shaping emotions, and even defining characters.

<sup>17</sup> On the set of *Lifeboat* (1944), for example, Alfred Hitchcock questioned the logic of adding a music score to a set on a lifeboat in World War II. He asked, “But where is the music supposed to come from out in the middle of the ocean?” The composer David Raksin wittily suggested that Hitchcock should be asked, “Where the camera come from.” See Prendergast 222-3.

<sup>18</sup> See Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies*.

<sup>19</sup> Compare this with *Platform*, where the director occasionally uses non-diegetic music to interrupt the flow of the image to enhance the emotional effectiveness, *Unknown Pleasures* reduces the use of non-diegetic music to zero. A world-class film, however, *Platform* has incurred criticism from domestic audiences for the intrusion of non-diegetic music. Refer to mtime.com and douban.com for viewers’ critiques online.

<sup>20</sup> This is also a concept from the poetry of Baudelaire, referring to the connection between Nature and the Metaphysical world. Refer to Hassan 437-445.

<sup>21</sup> Andre Bazin, “De Sica: Metteur en scene,” see Bazin 76. He defines “life time” as “the simple continuing to be of a person to whom nothing in particular happens.” Also refer to Z. Zhang 112.

<sup>22</sup> See M. Berry, *Xiao Wu, Platform, Unknown pleasures* 16.

<sup>23</sup> The Fifth Generation directors, as a matter of fact, dismiss the new generation’s works as “trash,” mostly because of the “tediousness” and “meaningless” depicted in some of those works. See Cheng 115-122.

<sup>24</sup> M. Berry, *Xiao Wu, Platform, Unknown pleasures* 98.

<sup>25</sup> The highway is probably the Datong-Beijing highway, what Xiao Ji knows when he inquires of the hair stylist’s hometown in the hair salon.

<sup>26</sup> Tonglin Lu, “Trapped Freedom and Localized Globalism” 137.

<sup>27</sup> When they were working as partners and in desperate need of money, Xiaowu once promised to Ji that one day they would get rich and by that time he would give Ji five pounds of money as a wedding

gift. When Ji later becomes a model entrepreneur, however, he does not invite Xiaowu to his wedding. Agonized Xiaowu still pays a visit to Ji, carrying five pounds of money, and only is told by Ji that he should look forward instead of looking at the past.

<sup>28</sup> M. Berry. *Xiao Wu, Platform, Unknown Pleasures* 16.

<sup>29</sup> Tonglin Lu 74.

<sup>30</sup> Xudong Zhang, *Chinese Modernism* 85.

<sup>31</sup> See Sun, “In Search of the Erased Half” 3.

<sup>32</sup> In Yu Hua’s *To Live*, the deaf-and-dumb daughter of Xu Fugui amasses the best personal qualities.

<sup>33</sup> Refer to reviews on [douban.com](http://douban.com) and [mtime.com](http://mtime.com) about *Platform*.

<sup>34</sup> For example, the review on *New York Times*, by Manohla Dargis, briefs that “Tao yearns for a better life but can barely articulate much less envision what a life beyond this peculiarly conceived simulacrum might look like.” This opinion has been resonated by reviews from various sources.

<sup>35</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* 83.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

## CHAPTER IV

### JUNE FOURTH, THE REBELS, AND THE MARKET

One of the most important conditions in constructing the notion of the Sixth Generation is the filmmakers' ideological rebellion against the state discourse. In the early 1990s when these young directors began their film careers, they all expressed the spiritual suffering caused by the failure of the new enlightenment movement in the 1980s and especially, the political repression after the Tiananmen massacre. The revolutionary utopia provided earlier filmmakers with an institutional and ontological security that sustained the production of "main melody" films. To the Sixth Generation, however, the institution does not offer that security for their belief system any more. "Coping with the political pressure of state censorship and the financial restrictions of an unevenly developed market, these young film-makers have, even if not completely by choice, become the first generation of independent film-makers in socialist China."<sup>1</sup>

This chapter analyzes the multifocal relationship between independent directors—an integral part of Chinese intellectuals who pursue impartial access to the "truth"—and the state authority. This relationship often manifests as the struggle between a singular subjectivity and a confining authority. Through art performance, music expressions and sexual transgression, films made by underground filmmakers confront the state's rhetoric of control and objectification. The agency of those subjects culminates in the dissolution of state power, when its status is reduced from the sublime to the mundane and the individual. In particular, filmmakers favor the imagery of state or municipal policemen whose authoritative demeanor in the end is challenged by the counterparty's inquisitive

gaze or their persistence on redefinition. Filmmakers that have been afflicted by state suppression probe into the possibility of looking at the state as a “self” with whom a conversation is anticipated. Quite different from the general assumption that independent films tend to concentrate on portraying political oppressions waged by the state, these films have been seeking channels to depict the state as a perplexed self. The personalized and individualized state official offers an opening to look at the other side of the state apparatus, not as an oppressor but as an authority that has betrayed its own oath. To counteract the confinement of the state, these screen images drift away from proper definitions and build on the import of corporeality. Sexuality, as a form of social taboo, takes on a public status when its ideological potentials are maneuvered to mark the director’s political stand and initiate a conversation with the state discourse.

Many independent directors undergo the transition from “underground” to “aboveground,” seeking cooperation with the state studios in their later career. Their decisions are not so much a sudden conversion as a gradual change induced by the goal of mending the break between the Party, which is assumed to take on a new identity, and the intellectuals. This change happens at a time when Chinese intellectuals find them losing the ontological security of the nation-state, a loss that threatens to displace their subjectivity. It also results from an effort to repair the broken father-son relationship, which as analogy and strategy, used to fulfill the semiotic amalgamation between state and nation.<sup>2</sup> Chinese intellectuals break away from the Party and return to its embrace for the same reason—they view the nation as their home. Included in this analysis are also video makers who worked outside of the state system, but later chose otherwise for similar considerations. To be specific, they work within the system to modify the official

language from authoritative reiterations to a language that reestablishes the “self,” from portraits of prominent high-ranking officials to stories of ordinary folks (*laobaixing*).

### **June Fourth, Taboo and Sexuality as Rebellion**

The relationship between Chinese intellectuals and the Party reflects the contrast between the imperial traditions of literati officials<sup>3</sup> and the Maoist scornful attitude towards the intellectuals. To expand the revolutionary front line, intellectuals were included in Mao’s revolution, although treated as the least trustworthy group of the ally. After the establishment of the PRC, Mao mobilized the Hundred Flowers Campaign from 1956 to 1957 under Premier Zhou Enlai’s suggestion. The campaign refers to a brief interlude when the CCP encouraged intellectuals to offer a variety of alternative views for national policies. The slogan of the movement alluded to the Warring States era when numerous schools of thought competed for ideological supremacy.<sup>4</sup> However, when it was clear to the leadership that widespread criticism of the Party policies was out of control, Mao launched the Anti-Rightist Campaign to reestablish orthodox ideologies. The crackdown, taking place immediately after the campaign and during the Cultural Revolution, denounced intellectuals as the “stinking ninth category.” In the latter stage of the Cultural Revolution, Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping set out the Four Modernizations program and appealed to Chinese intellectuals, once again, to participate in the program. In December 1978, the Four Modernizations were officially made a basic national policy and Chinese intellectuals were reemphasized as the forefront for reaching that goal.

A more tolerant policy during the New Era gave intellectuals a rare opportunity to voice their different opinions and to explore western theories. However, the nationwide

cultural liberalism in the early 1980s was soon curtailed by the Party's campaigns of "anti bourgeois liberalization" and "anti bourgeois spiritual pollution."<sup>5</sup> In 1979, Sha Yexin's drama *What If I Really Were?* (Jiaru wo shi zhende) was accused by high officials of depicting the miserable condition of rusticated urban youth and the bureaucratism of the government. In 1981, the novel *Man Oh, Man* (Ren a, Ren), written by Dai Houying, was criticized for advocating humanism and attacking the faults of the Communist Party. In the same year, the screenplay, *Bitter Love* (*Ku lian*, by Bai Hua), and the film based on it were banned because they violated the "four cardinal principles" (Si xiang jiben yuanze)<sup>6</sup> and attacked the socialist system.<sup>7</sup>

The ambiguous relation between the Party and the intellectuals as described above provides members of the early independent filmmakers a legacy that they have to face. To Chinese intellectuals, the Party is at times a shelter, and other times the persecutor, and they become either the son or a rebel. With the Party's stringent control on cultural productions and the society's increasing defection from traditional socialist ideology, young filmmakers saw themselves drifting away from the center shelter. The protest in Tiananmen Square in 1989 marked the eventual split between Chinese intellectuals and the Communist Party. June Fourth provides the major themes for the earlier Chinese underground: the feelings of depression, betrayal and loss.

Until June 4 they [Chinese people] believed in the communist Party as an abstraction, still hoped that a single man, Deng Xiaoping, could be relied on to reform China...The June 4 massacre put an end to all this...No longer will the Party's invocation of its right to speak for "the people" be believed as in the past...This ruling body has lost its legality and reason for its existence.<sup>8</sup>

For political reasons the relationship between the Sixth Generation and the Tiananmen Square protest in 1989 has not been fully explored. While the Cultural

Revolution's presence has been restored in screen images, such as in Jiang Wen's *In the Heat of The Sun* (1994) and Dai Sijie's *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, any discussion about the 1989 protest, even those consistent with the government rhetoric, is strictly banned in China. The government puts out its best efforts to erase June-Fourth from the nation's collective memory. Scholars, including both those from mainland China and the U.S., propose that full scale commercialization has taken over the major concern in cultural productions. They argue that with the intensification of economic reform, elite culture was overthrown by popular culture, and the discourses of enlightenment and freedom in the 1980s were supplanted by complete consumerism. For instance, Dai Jinhua describes the cultural background for the emergence of the Sixth Generation as follows:

Complex as eighties Chinese culture is, it is still subject to integration into modernity, on the basis of a common desire for progress, social democracy, and national prosperity, and by virtue of its resistance to historical inertia and the stronghold of mainstream ideology. In the nineties, however, the following elements fed a different socio-cultural situation: the ambiguous ideology of the post-Cold War era; the implosion and diffusion of mainstream ideology; global capitalism's tidal force and the resistance of nationalism and nativism; the penetration and impact of global capital on local cultural industries; cultures' increasing commercialization in global and local culture markets; and the active role local intellectuals besieged by postmodern and postcolonial discourse, have undertaken in their writing.<sup>9</sup>

These arguments have dominated current academic studies on Chinese cinema, which sees a negligence of the sweeping impact of the 1989 protest on Chinese film. The enlightenment project in the eighties did not automatically disappear with the impetus of global commercialism. In my opinion, it is oppressed by the pervasive integration of the state and capital, and its eruption is seen from time to time in independent films. This dissertation highlights the alternatives that have been ignored by current studies,

considering the fact that most members of the Sixth Generation were students in the Beijing Film Academy, whose involvement in the June Fourth influenced their survival conditions and production modes.<sup>10</sup>

Banned in the campaign of the “anti bourgeois liberalization” was also Cui Jian’s rock music. During the 1989 protest, thousands of students sang Cui’s song *Nothing To My Name* (yi wu suo you), from Cui’s first album, *Rock ‘n’ Roll on the New Long March*. The popularity of rock music in the late 1980s is embodied in films such as *Weekend Lover* (dir. Lu Xuechang, 1993), about an adolescent girl sharing a relationship with two boys, *Beijing Bastards* (dir. Zhang Yuan, 1993), and *Dirt* (dir. Guan Hu, 1994). In terms of the similarities between rock music and independent filmmaking in China, Yingjin Zhang observes that both pursue “authentic self-expression” (ziwo biao xian) and emotional release (xuanxie) in the face of oppression (yayi). In these two types of art forms, he argues, collective performance functions not only as a ritual and resistance, but also the process of “self-discovery and moral self-redefinition.”<sup>11</sup>

Other scholars have attributed the ideology in independent films and Chinese rock music to “youth culture,” a form of subculture pursued by youth and characterized by impulsive rebellion against the standards, orders and values of adult society.<sup>12</sup> Films involving these themes are compared to *Rebel without a Cause* (1954), *Look Back in Anger* (1959) and *Easy Rider* (1969), those made in the late 1950s and early 1960s. A common conception is that Chinese youth culture is informed by the collapse of the communist system and fueled by consumer capitalism. In Liu Zhifeng’s collection on ethics and humanism, an author notes that “[although] secularization, popular culture and commodity culture are marked with various shortcomings...they play a positive role in

deconstructing the centralization and monopolization of political culture.”<sup>13</sup> It is claimed that the seemingly spontaneous youth culture in China paves the way for more pervasive influx of capitalist mass culture. Western styles and images were borrowed and adapted to Chinese conditions, offering an alternative to Communist culture. Stuart Hall and John Clark comment on “youth” in post-war Britain: “Youth appeared as an emergent category in post-war Britain, one of the most striking and visible manifestations of social change in the period...above all youth played an important role as a cornerstone in the construction of understandings, interpretations, and quasi-explanations of the period”(Hall 9).

However, important differences between images of Chinese youth and their British counterparts are overlooked in the above statements. The young-rebel pictures disrupt the filmmakers’ focus on the life of workers and peasants, a tendency prevailing in earlier films, especially those made in Mao’s era. On the other hand, most of the young rebels are college students who formed the kernel of the revived Chinese intellectuals. In a new social context, they are considered by the general public “the favorites of society” (社会的宠儿) and “the proud children of heaven” (天之骄子), that is, the future direction of the nation’s development and the discourse of progression. In the sense that they are preset as an integral part of the adult social order, they greatly differ from the rampant street boys in British and American films.

In my opinion, the concept of youth cultures fails to address the pertinent nationalism and native spirit interweaved in the father-son complex between the Party and Chinese intellectuals. Youth, rock musicians, artisans, and avant-garde artists are not rebelling against every social order issued by the adult society but are trapped in the

breakage between the Party's promise and betrayal, and locked in the void of an ontological and emotional shelter. To diagnose the social context in late 1980s China, one would need to look at the positioning of Chinese intellectuals in the Party's modernization project, both their self-positioning, and how the Party is willing to endorse their participation. Marginalized social figures in many independent films resonate with the directors' claims about their own marginalized social position caused by the default of the father's promise.<sup>14</sup>

Film censorship, in which the governmental bureau takes charge of or imposes limits on the production, postproduction and screening processes of filmmaking, is not unique to Chinese cinema. To many international (and domestic) audiences the designation of Chinese film censorship instantly conjures up a vision of central political control, which predetermines a political reading of artworks created in China. And claims by filmmakers of their independent status can be identified as an opportunist strategy to fit an ethnographic account of third-world cinema. Another important issue about film censorship, to understand within the complex relationship between the Party and the betrayed intellectuals, is the screen visibility of "secret" and "taboo": the characters are either haunted by the secret or forbidden to disclose the secret. Independent films such as *Postman* (dir. He Jianjun, 1995) and *East Palace, West Palace* utilize the fusion between secret and taboo to challenge the central authority and capture the instinct to debunk secrets as a quest for "the whole truth," especially the forgotten, forbidden and hidden truth. Therefore, the meaning of censorship to independent films does not derive from the portrayal of central control as an authority, but from the outbreaks of secrets and taboos as a challenge, a challenge both to the authority and to their screen image.

Both *Postman* and *East Palace, West Palace*, which deal with topics of taboos and secrets, run into the question of how to define debunked “facts” or label the taboo image in a decipherable film language. *East Palace, West Palace* draws on the theatrical romance between a female prisoner and her male guard in traditional drama to depict the love-hatred relation between the oppressed and the central authority. In Zhang Ming’s 1995 film, *Wushan Yunyu* (aka *Rain Clouds over Wushan*, or *In Expectation*), about the dreamed encounter between a lonely thirty-year old river signalman and a widow living on the other side of the river, the meaning of the hero’s life lies in symbolic suggestions of his otherwise mundane daily activities. For example, pulling up the ferry signal and catching goldfish in a bucket both convey his sexual suppression. In *Postman*, the younger mailman, Xiao Dou, who has been secretly opening mail, ends up being promoted rather than being fired as his coworker was. The narrative goes beyond the meaning of rectification as pointed out by Wendy Larson<sup>15</sup>. Xiao Dou’s intention to correct people’s lives—epitomic of the selfless cultural icon, Lei Feng, is not as strong as the atmosphere of suppression hinted by the permeating grey landscape and confining interior households. At the end of the film the image and grueling sound of workers rolling down a dangling post box allude to the imperial rite of death hanging, replacing “rectification” with the leitmotif of “penalty.”

In these films one secret leads to another and a taboo gives rise to another, where neither can solutions be found in open spaces nor released on a personal-level. The intricate relation between secrets and taboos materializes through the imagery of “sexuality,” which not only fulfills the linkage between sexual secrets and political taboo but also defines a space in the cinema to encapsulate the release of oppression. Directors

break the taboo of what is presentable in cinema, both sexually and politically, expand the frontier of independent filmmaking, and demonstrate the courage to reexamine an erased past. *East Palace, West Palace* does not merely construct a subversive gay discourse; it also displays the interwoven relation between authority and homosexuality. The location is set at a public space, a park where the gay group meets and engages in sexual escapades. What is special about the authority's interrogation, as Cui Shuqing points out, is the shift of focus from inspection to the gay man's confession of his sexual history. "The 'I' speaking position and gay perspective, therefore, opens a subversive force within the authoritarian power."<sup>16</sup> As the gay man confesses, he has always been waiting for a policeman: "I have been longing for a powerful policeman since my childhood. Don't you know that I love you as a jail guard loves his female prisoner?" "[The] cinematic transgression has the gay subject change to assert the police as his desire."<sup>17</sup> The gay man identifies the cop as both interrogator and lover, and to his avail, the policeman is brought to confront his own ambiguous sexual orientation. The film releases a fantasy of homosexuality from its concealment behind the curtain and reverses the power struggle between the policeman and the captive.

In *Postman* the far-from-romantic sex scene between Xiao Dou and his female coworker starts with Xiao Dou's innocent intention of reaching for the mail placed on the top of the delivery box. His act of "reaching," however, is misinterpreted by the female who stands next to him as a sexual initiative. He is at first shocked by her move, then willingly accepts her embrace because it seems to work well with his goal of reaching the mail. The female's bold advancement, meanwhile, is less triggered by her physical desire for the man than by her desire to be temporarily away from her monotonous work. As

Xiao Dou's intention of reading other people's mail leans towards a sexual direction, he becomes immersed in his sexual encounter with the coworker. His life undergoes a transformation from releasing others from oppression to releasing his own desire. The film is converted from a story about voyeurism, when Xiao Dou opens the letters and reads about other people's private lives, to one about self-correction, when his intervention in their lives leads to the awareness of his own life problems.

Significantly, sexuality in the film takes an unprepared, abrupt and explosive form, as a result of the sudden release of the oppressed desire, and obscures the line between the legitimate and the forbidden. Xiao Dou's sexual encounter with his coworker, coming from nowhere and leading to nothing, merges with the countless illicit anecdotes he has been reading in the mails. For Xiao Dou's sister and her boyfriend, the outburst of passion takes place in the clandestine hallway when she sees him off, which is described the same way as Xiao Dou's liaison in the dark mailroom, and takes on the appearance of an illicit affair. Inasmuch as the feel of the forbidden haunts different characters in the film—including the authors of those mails Xiao Dou has been reading, Xiao Dou's coworkers and family member, and eventually Xiao Dou himself—the film is permeated with a fierce tension between inescapable constraint and the urge to break out. Hidden behind the state rhetoric of peace, prosperity and propriety is not only the prevalence of unlawful affairs, but also the individual's compulsion to debunk those affairs. In *East Palace, West Palace*, as the imperial parks next to the Forbidden City become the camouflage of gay activities, Ah Lan discloses to the policeman the truth behind the curtain. Xiao Dou, working as a public servant, diligently engages himself in disclosing

the untamed parts of the private lives—those opposing state publications—and tries to rewrite them.

How to perceive the centrality of sexuality in films made by the younger generation? In comparison with the Fifth Generation, sexual relations have become one of the most important markers of the urban experience, rather than allegories of national history. As Cui Shuqing observes, “The camera goes into the households of ordinary people to expose their sexual relations or problems. It also reveals the space behind the curtain by making the once-hidden gay image visible. The unrestrained representation of heterosexuality and the counterexposure of homosexuality bring the rhetoric onto center stage and under reinscription.”<sup>18</sup> The intention of exposing the sexual problems of ordinary household, nonetheless, cannot fully explain the dominant atmosphere of suppression that has been closely associated with the imagery of sexuality. When the Fifth Generation, by displaying the female image on screen, narrates the national traumas and fulfills an exotic fantasy for transnational audiences, the centrality of sexual images for the younger generation are not completely apolitical.

Zhang Ming’s *Wushan Yunyu* is set in Wushan, a remote town on the banks of the Yangtse River. The isolated area entraps a quiet man called Mai Qiang who, in his early thirties, is yet to discover the opposite sex. Operating a signal station, Mai Qiang’s life is unbearably monotonous, but this tediousness is portrayed in an understated manner. The NY Times review recalled the case of Matthew Buckingham’s 20-minute *Amos Fortune Road* (Maslin), in which the tone of the voiceover is notably flat and the director similarly leaves eventful occurrences aside. For example, Mai Qiang and Chen Qing’s sexual encounter is not given visual presence but disclosed by the conversations of the

other characters, including Chen Qing's boss who has just cut off his liaison with Chen. The film depicts the conversations, gossip, and surveillance by side characters about Mai and Chen's relationship rather than presents what really happened between the two. The police officer's impending marriage, in combination with his somewhat feminine figure and the symbolic meaning of forging a wedding ring in the blacksmith shop, takes up much larger space than Mai Qiang's romance. The film makes full use of off-screen or negative space, by inducing inferences from what have been told by the beholders. Tinged with the narrative function of "suspense," the film invokes speculation of what is left behind—what is unknown, unseen—until the very end when Mai Qiang jumps into the river and swims to meet Chen Qing. Probably the only "sensual" scene in the whole film (an ironic contradiction to the film packet featuring explicit lovemaking) happens at the end of the film when Chen Qing punches a soaked Mai Qiang and discloses the intensity of their oppressed sexual longing for each other. Significantly, what is left behind, or as the alternative English title indicates, what is expected of, is nothing but the inferred sexual reunion between the two. As much as they are disallowed from meeting each other because of their life circumstances, the film never shows their encounter until the very end. The severity of yearning, a feeling that fills Mai Qiang's isolated life, overshadows his actual union with Chen Qing. In the final shot of the film, Mai Qiang pulls off the traffic signal again, as usual: life does not really change after meeting his dream lover, and audiences are left wondering whether the theme of romance and sexuality is important to the film at all.

Apolitical compared to other independent films included in this dissertation, *Wushan Yunyu* offers a subtle critique of the social arena that is assumed to be full of life,

but is far away from the small town of Wushan. While the liveliness of the sex between Mai and Chen is off screen, the faraway capital city and its lifestyle intrude on the scene through the quibbles of a few tourists and the images on TV. Often, the TV hangs on the fence of a yard that is adjacent to the river. The screen of the TV forms a contrast with the image of the river, suggesting a dialogue between the river and the framed life shown on TV, between Mai's real life and its unrealized potentials. In the director's words, "everyone wants to cast off the current turmoil and leave one's own life, want to look for a desired result. But a satisfactory result is not found."<sup>19</sup> In a political reading, as Nick Kaldis points out, "issues of conflicted sexual desire constitute the heart of the narrative, against recurring signs of the Three Gorge project in the background. Almost all of the film's events arise out of this overarching structural relationship between national development and individual sexuality."<sup>20</sup> In the director's words, "in the time of peace and prosperity in which we live, many people's emotional desire cannot be satisfied. Our film is concerned with this fundamental aspect of existence."<sup>21</sup>

As identified by Kaldis, *Wushan Yunyu* questions the facets of "reality" and the reliability of that reality by overturning realistic conventions taken granted for Sixth Generation films. Cinematic devices such as intertitles, long takes, hand-held shots, natural lighting and simultaneous sounds all contribute to the style of an omniscient realism. However, the viewers' omniscient vantage point is constantly interrupted when the character enters the scene from a particular angle. After the intertitle introduces the protagonist, Mai Qiang is shown drawing quietly in the room, picking up a pair of binoculars on the floor and then watching over the river. The camera cuts to a shot of the river vista shared by Mai Qiang and the audience, which predates an omniscient point of

view until Mai abruptly enters the shot from bottom screen, hauling two buckets of water from the river. The transition disrupts the omniscient vantage point established a short while ago and builds up the sense of disorientation. Additionally, the film lacks a surrogate character who can provide an intradiegetic position to aid in the viewer's point of view. "Nothing confirms a larger 'truth' or master narrative that ties events and protagonists together, nothing contextualizes them within a more familiar narrative of a shared reality."<sup>22</sup>

Aside from a disoriented point of view debunking the continuity of reality, in this film both protagonists are constantly associated with signs and symbols that question the dependability of their daily life. For example, Mai Qiang is mystically silent; he tells his friend that he often has dreams about a woman, but the dream is never given any visual presence in the film, and Chen Qing is haunted by hallucinations of people and voices. Chen sees a man dressed in Taoist garb staring at her from the outside of the hotel doorway; he disappears moments later. Both characters reflect the prevalence of the belief in allegorical figures, ancient witches and shamans in the region. Fish and water, as ostensible symbols of desire and energy, are significant in the film. In Kaldis' understanding, the pervasiveness of abstract symbols in the film bespeaks the linkage between the Three Gorges project and the characters' troubled sexuality.

I disagree with Cui Shuqin's conclusion that the film "allows ordinary people to expose their sexual yearnings in a daily reality and frank form." *Wushan Yunyu* demonstrates the far more complicated facets of "sexuality as central motif" than a "frank form" would allow. First, on the narrative level, almost every figure is involved in sexual relations, liaisons or affairs. The policeman who is in charge of investigating Mai Qiang's

case is planning his own marriage. The screen image offers the audience a fixation on how he frequents a blacksmith shop to refurbish a wedding ring. Mai Qiang and his friend fuddle with the possibility of sharing a girl who might be a prostitute. The female protagonist cuts off her relationship with the manager due to her impending marriage with someone else she barely knows, a marriage purely built on a materialistic foundation. The central narrative of the film, shown in the form of an ellipsis, is Mai Qiang's sexual encounter with Chen Qing. The disembodiment of sexuality does not prevent various characters in the film from getting involved in the whirlpool of sexual relationships.

Sexuality, cut off from its intimate connection with revolutionary libido, becomes a restless presence that is not identifiable, just as no one knows about the nature of the relationship between Mai Qiang and Chen Qing. Meanwhile, it becomes hauntingly disturbing and affects everyone's life; its prominence appeals to the modernity discourse that privileges the rights of individuals and their pragmatic needs, including sexual consummation, over collective and metaphysical values. Such a discourse is something the filmmaking industry aims to embrace and young filmmakers have to revere. *Wushan Yunyu* presents sexuality as a dominant discourse everyone talks about, but its truthful representation is left in doubt. In this manner, the film not only unsettles the centrality of sexuality but also questions independent films that foreground this centrality.

The younger generation's films denote a regenerated politics of sexuality, which either exists as a taboo or a secret, something that is dispelled from the public sphere but everyone is eager to access. In *Wushan Yunyu*, what the policeman cares about most is not to carry on his righteous duty, but to discover the "hidden facts." Surveillance and gossips from coworkers keep Chen Qing from continuing her relationship with her boss.

Most of the time the characters remain seated and exchange only a few words with each other, permeating the atmosphere with a sense that something important is left unsaid. With its close association with avant-garde art, sexuality is a taboo that independent films explore in order to expand the frontier of filmmaking. Whereas female characters in the Fifth Generation's films stand for an oppressed female subjectivity and national identity, the mysterious, unstable and marginalized females in most independent films unveil the directors' uncertainty in regard to their positioning in national cinema and world art cinema. While sexuality no longer constitutes a national allegory, a discourse of modernity now foregrounds the secular and carnal needs of individuals and downplays the collective, idealistic, and nationalistic political fever that took place decades ago. The dominance of such a discourse in cultural productions and independent filmmaking, contradictory to our assumption about the independent filmmakers' wholehearted welcome to post-socialist new age, is presented in independent films as that which is oppressed, illicit, deformed, doomed and disembodied, rather than ameliorating or fulfilling. It is no coincidence that both Xiao Dou and Mai Qiang return to their regular workplace after their sexual encounter with women: Xiao Dou is promoted by his work unit and increases his mail delivery areas; Mai Qiang continues to pull up boat signals along the river. If anything, the rebellious connotation of sexuality eventually leads to the motif of "return," as the individualistic compulsion of sexuality finds no concrete entity to attach to, and establishes no meaning of its own.

## **The Return of the Rebels**

The union between the state and the burgeoning nationalist spirit, and the Party's effort to recruit Chinese intellectuals once again, are attested by multiple cases. In 2009 the blog of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, MN, published an article about the film series "The People's Republic of Cinema: 60 Years of China on Film." The article tries to summarize New China's turbulent history, the "intense economic, political, and cultural growing pains" that led to today's emerging global power, and points out that "Chinese filmmakers (those both inside and outside of the border) are in a unique position to process and reflect their current cultural moment."<sup>23</sup> The Party, presumably, has reclaimed its position as the representative of not only the ordinary but also the oppressed people. With China's increasing role in the global economy, not only is the possibility of a socialist nation with Chinese characteristics enhanced, but also the foundation of Chinese culture—those composed of more antique elements—is excavated to define Chineseness. The consolidation between the state and the people, the two fundamental components of the nation, is strengthened. The distinction between nation and state, as has been seen at an early stage of China's reform period, is gradually giving way to the renewed alliance between the state and its people. The shared personal pain and national turmoil in the past centuries has successfully established a common ground for the Party to refurbish its image even after this image has been tarnished by its policy blunders. The common phrase popular among Chinese people, "eating bitterness," is converted to recalling the bitterness and relishing the sweetness, a collective morale that strengthens the state's position and in this manner draws the alienated independent filmmakers back to the embrace of the state. When established independent directors

unexceptionally declare that their intention of return is not for the money, nor for market share, but for the Chinese audience, they are acknowledging the possibility of working with the state. On the other side of the story, the thriving domestic film market opens a space for the younger generation, a space that did not exist before. Recalling the memoir by Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige regarding their time in BFA, breaking ground and shocking the audience with bold innovations was the only way out for new directors trapped in a remote town in Guangxi. For the new generation, marketing out to world cinema remains an alluring option, but it is no longer the only one.

The transition from banned to unbanned, from secret and taboo to exposition and release is an interesting phenomenon that betokens not only the state's up-down political adjustment, but the bottom-up search for a shelter called the "nation." The opposite side of censure, that is, freedom of speech, impurity from oppression, is often placed in the imagination about an idealized western political system, whose capacity to provide a dependable emotional shelter, however, has been historically demystified. During the June-Forth incident when college students set up the Liberty Statue to demonstrate their revolt against the hegemony of the CCP, they suspended the cause that partially led to their rebellion: the ruling of foreign capital and wealth accumulation at the expense of socialistic ideals. Later they had to confront the devastating effects of speedy capitalistic development in China that accompanied Deng's advocacy for deepening the market economy, and reappraise their rebellious past that has been rendered meaningless.

In *East Palace, West Palace*, the more tangent secret to Ah Lan is not his gay identity but his deep-rooted desire for the policeman; the more powerful, righteous and handsome the policemen is, the more attracted the gay man is. As his confession unfolds,

this attraction is based on the common experience of pain they experienced in the past. Pain, rather than pleasure or glory, becomes the hidden force forming the bond between the two and ignites the policeman's personalized look at the gay man. The pain as experienced by Ah Lan is visually embodied in a flashback to his younger days, whereas the cop's perplexed mentality is not disclosed until the ambiguous ending. The policeman understands the gay man because he also experienced an unspoken pain, which in a symbolic way points to the connection between the Party and the people: whenever the former emphasizes the shared affliction of the past, its regime is approved by the people and by history.

The return of the rebels to the embrace of the nation-state is first enacted by the proliferation of screen images of police officers, who no longer exert their absolute political power but are accessible individuals. As significant representatives of the state, the policemen are subjugated to the imperative of individuality and everyday life: instead of setting out to rehabilitate the captive, the policemen are brought to face their own existence. Therefore, films made by the younger generation demonstrate the amusing quality of approaching and accessing the state officials who have usually been kept at a distance. The film language attempts to convert the battle for authority and power into the quest for "being," the subjective dimension that exists as a whole entity and links the sense of one's physical body to his perception of the world, in Heidegger's words.

Ning Ying's film, *On the Beat* (1995), deals with the perplexed life of the policemen and questions the relationship between the people and the state. The second feature in *Beijing Trilogy*—a collection that follows the changes of the capital city in the last decades of the twentieth century—*On the Beat* focuses on a group of police officers

in the Deshengmen district who help implement Beijing's dog restriction law. The film opens with a regular lecture on police duties and a young cop paying a visit to a local community led by a veteran officer. Life at the police station is grim, with male camaraderie hunting down a rabid mutt, then arresting a migrant for street gambling (who, while detained, beats the bored police with his gambling tricks), and detaining another man for selling posters of a woman wearing a bathing suit.

In portraying the minutes of petty law enforcement, the film silently comments on the obsession with bureaucracy and procedure. The municipal prize-giving ceremony for the best precinct satirizes collective meaning-making for blind obedience to authority. On the other hand, the film is an allegory of the growing impotence of the once-feared police force as the country moves toward individual pursuits and market-based freedoms. As Ning Ying comments, her films appear as extreme re-positional realism, yet they convey a highly subjective personal opinion that is often political, making "people come back to the disappeared and numbed reality and reexamine this reality...The story becomes the fable of the alienation of the whole system. What the audience sees is the everyday small events, those they are very familiar with, but the film helps them transcend the familiar reality and reflect more issues."<sup>24</sup> The policeman and the residents in the community alike are alienated from their daily routine, no matter if it is in regards to daily work or in how they treat ordinary people.

In the end, it is only a disrespectful local factory head named Wang Xiao'er who disrupts the impasse of boredom and alienation. Before informing Wang of what he did wrong, the policemen start to interrogate him about his name, hometown, family members, parents, social class and other items required for Chinese household records.

While this strategy has been working successfully on other detainees in the film—to the extent that they disclose to the policemen petty crimes that were previously unknown—Wang bluntly mocks the absurdity of this interrogation procedure: “Is it for all these craps you take me here at midnight?! Do you have something serious to do?” When the thwarted policeman starts to instruct him about Deng Xiaoping’s new “Five Stresses and Four Beauties”<sup>25</sup> and other propaganda issued by the central authority, Wang rebukes them, saying, “Why don’t you tell me something serious? Didn’t I tell you that I have a meeting tomorrow morning?” To Wang, socialist propaganda is not any more important than his meeting with the workers the next morning.

Among films centering on the dog restriction of late 1990s Beijing<sup>26</sup> is Lu Xuechang’s *Cala My Dog* (*Kala shi tiao gou*, 2002), an independent film depicting how a middle aged factory worker, Lao Er, risks all his financial belongings to redeem his arrested dog. In contrast to his affection for his dog are his alienated relationships with his wife and his son who both loathe his incapability of supporting the family. In order to pay the 5000 yuan to bail out his dog, Lao Er is brought to confront the ruthless police and eventually the loss of his dignity. Different from Lu Xuechang, who is known for making commercially oriented films outside of the state-sponsored studios, Ning Ying deals with the same subject matter from the perspective of the policemen, treating them as individuals no less victimized by the law enforcement than ordinary city folks. *On the Beat* has an entirely nonprofessional cast, with all the policemen played by real policemen in Beijing. The police are portrayed as perplexed subjects who find their jobs challenging and their role confusing. As Janet Masline points out, “they live in a society that demands utmost obedience to the law, yet many of the laws are of little real

consequence. The police put in long, grueling hours just meddling in people's lives."<sup>27</sup> In their spare time, the policemen gather around to watch an American TV show, *Hunter*, which, by showcasing fancy police cars and blazing guns, offers the Beijing policemen an outlet to imagine bravery and heroism, something that has been eliminated from their work.

Because of their night shift work, the policemen suffer from insomnia and increasing family discordances. The most visible character in the film, Yang Guoli, fails both his mission of being an accomplished policeman, and being a good father at home. In one of the long takes about his personal life, Yang Guoli finally pays a visit to his family after a long week's stay in the police station. His wife starts to ridicule the meaning of his work by telling their son a fairy tale about a self-conceived and also self-deceived male tiger who abandons his family for no good reason. The camera foregrounds the dismayed policeman in the middle of taking off his uniform; in the scene he stands silently in a corner of the room, to the right of the screen. He then decides to put on his uniform and rushes back to the police station, with his wife running after him in increased anger and disappointment. These sequences happen right before Yang leads his team to scout Wang Xiao'er's residential area at midnight. After being "kicked out" by his own wife, Yang is deterred by Wang's wife, who chastises him severely with the purpose of protecting her husband. While the policemen drag Wang away and push him to the police motorcycle, Wang's wife firmly grips Wang's arm and bitterly curses the violation of the policemen. The film ends with Yang Guoli, once a model officer, being disciplined for venting his frustrations on Wang Xiao'er. Both Lao Er, as an ordinary city resident, and Yang Guoli, a member of the law enforcers, are cast in a helpless situation

in the face of chaotic life occurrences. In this sense, the two films complete each other and provide a look at both sides of the issue, the oppressed and the authority.

Rather than providing a real solution to the Beijing policeman's dilemma, the "Coca-Colaization" of China, i.e. the irresistible onslaught of commercialization and Westernization, poses a threat to the survival of local identity, as seen in Ning Ying's earlier feature, *For Fun*.<sup>28</sup> In addition to images of policemen, the return of the rebels is heralded by films diagnosing the problematized members of the young generation, who are alienated from their "father," (the Party) but have failed to form a value system of their own. These films reexamine the very gesture of "rebellion" and find that not only the current life, but also the rebellious past, lacks proper definition. The breakage between the Party's promise and the enlightenment ideals of Chinese intellectuals extends to a temporal level: the self is paralyzed, not merely because of the loss of trust in the father, but also because the present life has rendered the rebellious past meaningless.

In Ning Ying's film, *I Love Beijing* (xiari nuan yangyang, 2000), the incapable father figure is portrayed as the non-interfering older generation who are losing their validity in urban life. With jump cuts and incessant, jarring background sounds to match a motorized world, the Beijing trilogy reaches its conclusion: the Westernized young generation is not able to find themselves a solution at a time when the seat of the father is empty. Clots of traffic, surrounded by high-rises under perpetual construction, display a city with a vanishing past. The protagonist, Dezi, a taxi driver in Beijing, amasses cash and countless life anecdotes but is estranged from his mother, his wife and girlfriends. In one of his rides, Dezi is beaten up by a group of gangsters and wakes up in a foggy park the next morning, where senior Beijingers are practicing morning exercises. The jarring

traffic sounds and the senior residents' exaggerated workout motions present to Dezi a world he has never seen before. As if for the first time the practice of "tradition" is under his subjective gaze, and yet it offers no solution to his problems caused by the acceleration of modernization. The dilemma is aggravated by the separation between the past and the present: a past that is not able to renew itself cannot find its relevance to the present life and a forward-looking present is in stagnation, ironically, due to its disconnection with the past.

The world composed of the young generation, with the heavy influence of Western lifestyles and without the presence of the father generation, is far from trustworthy. In the high-end Maxim bar, a fashionable girl does not care about Dezi's affliction any more than the senior resident practicing Taiji in the park. When Dezi is drunk and vomiting, she is pleased with the sound of music from his taxi and dances gleefully in front of the sick man. Dezi—who enjoys hooking up with women in his taxi—becomes disinterested not only in her dancing, but also in the hedonistic pleasure he had been seeking. Soon after that incident, he agrees to marry the plain country girl who has been introduced to him by one of his ex-flings. The ending of the film cuts from the awkwardness of the newly-weds trying to fake smiles while in the process of having their wedding photographs taken, to one of Dezi's fares singing in tears in his taxi. Ironically, the fare asks him, "Did you ever love someone for real?" The city has constructed and demolished Dezi's life numerous times, as with his personal relationships—they start with his divorce, and end with a quick arranged marriage; in between are his liaisons and separations from different women.

The contradiction between the liberalism of economic development and the tightening of political control suggests an uncertain future, which will continue to leave important imprints on Chinese filmmakers. Many of them embark on the journey of digging out recent national history and revolutionary discourses which could offer a uniting force in the face of rapid economic development. Recent films such as *The Founding of a Republic* (2009) and *Assembly* (2007), directed by Feng Xiaogang, *Bodyguards and Assassins* (2009) directed by Chen Desen manifest their endeavor of renovating the revolutionary past with the collaboration of pan-China celebrities. By refurbishing the past and infusing the present with the celluloid glamour of transnational stars, these films not only present a renewed past, but also forge the imaginative Chinese community across borders and times. Other directors similarly have to redefine their position in the swiftly changing situation, in particular, their relationship with the state. When the state brings forth its promised prosperity and fulfills long-term prospects, the alliance between the state and the people is strengthened, and for the independent directors, their role as rebels begins to contradict their pronouncement of representing the Chinese people. The people, as analyzed in Chapter II, have always been a contested center of attention for their filmmaking, as legitimate factors that both distinguish them from the Fifth Generation and refute the charge of catering to foreign taste. Wang Xiaoshuai is one of the independent directors who have gone “aboveground” after being censored by the state for years. He confesses that if subject matter becomes restricted and cannot be expressed, he may go back underground again.<sup>29</sup> The Party-state has created this new bond with even the most outrageous group of intellectuals— including directors

such as Wang Xiaoshuai and Lou Ye—in its proclaimed attention to the everyday life of ordinary people.

Along with the increasing reunion between the once-estranged Chinese intellectuals and the state, a group of directors have been working within the system to promote the image of a more liberal Party and assist in the policy reform of the government. Independent documentarists, the same as directors of fictional films, break away from the official and then work within the system. According to Yingjin Zhang, “Chinese independent (or underground) filmmaking actually started with independent documentary in the late 1980s and... the Chinese embrace of the *cinéma vérité* and interview styles represents an attempt to resist the propagandist, voice-of-God approach in the official news and documentary programming.”<sup>30</sup> Unlike narrative filmmakers, however, most renowned independent documentarists had the experience of working for China Central Television (CCTV) in their early careers. Some of them later left CCTV, but many more stay there and have created influential documentary TV shows that serve as the hub of communication between ordinary people and state policies.

Wu Wenguang started working on *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers* (Liulang Beijing: Zuihou de mengxiangzhe, 1990) outside the state system in 1988. In the same year, Shi Jian obtained external funding for the series *Tiananmen* (1991) despite discouragement from CCTV. In June 1991, Shi Jian gathered a few close friends of CCTV and organized the first independent Chinese documentary group, “Structure-Wave-Youth-Cinema” (Jiegou-Langchao-Qingnian-Dianying), or SWYC, which takes one letter each from their names in pinyin romanization—Shi Jian, Wang Zijun, Kuang Yang, and Chen Jie. To gather momentum, Shi Jian organized a conference on

documentary filmmaking at the Beijing Broadcast Institute near the end of 1991, which attracted around two-hundred people (including Jiang Yue, who signed his registration card as an “independent”) and induced considerable public interest. While working on *Tiananmen* and *I Have Graduated* (Wo biye le, 1992) with his group, Shi Jian met Wu Wenguang, Duan Jinchuan, Jiang Yue, and other aspiring independents in Zhang Yuan’s place in Beijing in the year of 1991. They discussed the significance of documentary and decided to launch a new documentary movement in China. Wu Wenguang quickly emerged as a nominal leader of the independents, who defined their *oppositional* stance vis-à-vis the mainstream: to resist the “corrupt” filmmaking tradition and to turn the world of film and television upside down. They set two requirements for the independent documentary: independent production (i.e., raising money on one’s own and controlling the entire process) and independent thinking (i.e., no longer serving as a mouthpiece to official ideology).<sup>31</sup>

The documentary group, through their close ties with friends working in CCTV, exercises their influence on documentary TV shows made by the central station. Shi Jian’s *Tiananmen* series, originally conceived for the celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the People’s Republic of China, did not pass the censors because of its “gray” and “passive” depiction of the ordinary Beijing residents. Shi Jian later abandoned his independent production and instead worked for structural changes within the CCTV system. In January 1993, Shi helped launch the “Eastern Horizons” (东方时空), a program focused on investigating contemporary issues; in May of the same year, he inaugurated the “Eastern Talents” (东方之子), which features in-studio interviews, and in March 1996, he started the first Chinese talk show, “The Ernest Talks” (实话实说).

These programs showcasing real people, authentic lives, and truthful representations became extremely popular in China.<sup>32</sup> Chen Meng, producer of the popular CCTV program “Living Space” (生活空间), proposes that journalists should abandon the so-called sense of responsibility and the deep structure of culture, and treat interviewees as friends and loved ones. “Living Space,” as part of the “Oriental Horizon” program, announces the slogan, “let ordinary people tell their own stories,” and has become one of the best-received programs in “Oriental Horizon.” The popularity of these TV documentaries and news broadcasts help to enhance the rapport between independent documentary filmmakers and their friends working within CCTV, and ushers in a new aesthetic style for both official and unofficial documentaries. More importantly, it helps to create a more liberal state image and reiterates the shifting points of view to “ordinary people” (*laobaixing*, literally, “people of a hundred surnames.”) That is, the efforts to distance themselves from propaganda and to address the audience’s everyday concerns are seen not only among independent filmmakers; they also exist inside the official institution. Changing the term from “the people” (*renmin*), composed of “workers, peasants, and soldiers” (*gong-nong-bing*),” to *laobaixing* illustrates that the class distinction has been replaced by a more humanitarian view. “The desires to distance—if not always resist—the official rhetoric and to document the everyday lives of *laobaixing*, especially those from the lower social strata, had united documentarists inside and outside the state system.”<sup>33</sup>

## **The Market: The Changing Film Industry**

The trajectory of independent cinema to a large extent reflects the structural changes in the film industry during the 1990s, as part of the in-depth state-run enterprise reforms in China since the 1980s. The Ministry of Radio, Film and Television (the MRFT), set up in January 1986 to coordinate the three major sectors of China's audiovisual industry, issued "Document 3—Suggestions on Deepening the Chinese Film Industry's Institutional Reform," acknowledging that film is one type of economic commodity and film production, distribution and exhibition are participants in the market economy.

Film studios were the forerunners of the market-oriented reforms. With the studios' financial crisis in the early 1990s, policy makers realized the importance of venturing into other audiovisual businesses to bring in multiple revenue streams.<sup>34</sup> The structural reforms include horizontal integration, vertical integration and non-state and international co-production. Horizontal integration seeks non-audiovisual-related business such as Disco bars for investment. In contrast, vertical integration gives rise to several of China's most eminent film studios, many of which are business entities engaged in a variety of industries to ensure the financial stability of filmmaking. In 1993, Shanghai Paradise (Yongle) Film Ltd. Co., based on the former Shanghai Film Distribution and Exhibition Co., was established. It was the first film company in China funded by capital raised by floating shares, from both state-owned capital and non-state capital, that is, investment by multiple entities with personal contributions from their employees. Paradise later expanded to own twenty-five member companies. It is worth noting that, besides film production, distribution and exhibition, Paradise is also involved

in unrelated business such as publication, tourism, advertising, and education, in order to fund film production. By the same token, Shanghai Film and Television (Group) Company, based on the core of Shanghai Film Studio, was established two years later; it includes Shanghai Studio, Shanghai Film Technology Factory, and Shanghai Orient (Dong Fang) Film and TV Distribution Co.<sup>35</sup>

The Chinese government encouraged the vertical integration stated above and actively participated in such integrations. Forbidden City (Zi Jin Cheng) Motion Picture Ltd. , completely invested by the state (with MRFT owning fifty-one percent and the Ministry of Culture owning the rest), was set up in 1997. The reform of the film studios, among many other social transformations in the early 1990s, demonstrates the government's attempt at full-scale commercialization and a market-oriented modern management system for different industries. The vertical integration of production, distribution and exhibition sectors reduced the financial risk faced by film producers and gave them more incentives to make commercialized films. However, it did not completely solve the financial problems in film production until later, when combined with horizontal integration, enabling other businesses to invest in filmmaking.

During the structural reforms—although the government's funding for the “main melody” films continued—the number of films invested in by the state largely decreased. The MRFT began to loosen up its monopoly on film production and invite non-state investors to participate in it in the form of “co-production.” Outside investors were permitted to buy the production rights, which allowed them to use personnel and equipment from studios after paying a “management fee” of approximately 300,000 yuan. If the film made profits, the studio would take 40 percent of the profit.<sup>36</sup> Albeit the film

studios' dominance of the production rights, the co-production policy in the early 1990s attracted tremendous amount of outside investments in film production. It was estimated that non-state capital constituted 77 percent of the investments in film production during that period.<sup>37</sup> The co-production policy was also extended to international investors. Overseas investments, including those from Hong Kong and Taiwan, contributed extensively to the fundraising efforts of many Chinese films made in the 1990s, among which are the well-known examples of *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) and *Farewell My Concubine* (1993).<sup>38</sup>

Allowing non-state and foreign investors to participate in filmmaking brought in changes unpredicted by the policy makers and hence some policy shifting afterwards. In 1995, the MRFT issued a regulation and stipulated that a non-state investor could only be the co-producer of a feature film if its investment constituted 70 percent of total budget. In 1996, the MRFT reduced the required percentage from 70 to 30 percent. After this new policy, more and more none-state companies like Wanke Culture & Media Ltd. Co., Dayang Motion Picture Ltd. Co., and Changcheng Film & Television Co. signed contracts to co-produce feature films (Wan 79). In 1997, another major change happened to the Chinese film industry when the MFRT issued "the Circular about Licensing for Single Feature Film Production," a regulation extending the permit for making feature films from major studios to other smaller film companies, and ended the monopoly of major studios on film production. With this new policy, countless small companies began to produce films and raised even more vehement competitions.

With increasing autonomy in production, Chinese films also enjoyed more diversified distribution and exhibition channels. The government-controlled China Film

once monopolized the distribution of domestic films; with the new policies, its monopoly is now restricted to imported films. Major studios such as Beijing Film Studio, Shanghai Film Studio and Changchun Film Studio are allowed to distribute domestic films by negotiating with provincial-level and lower level distributors based on profit-sharing contracts. Moving towards the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT, formerly MRFT) is expanding distribution channels on a larger scale by permitting foreign investors to hold 75 percent in joint ventures such as the construction and renovation of theatres and film exhibition businesses in large cities. In anticipation of China's booming film market, in 2004 Warner Brothers and China's Wanda Group signed an agreement to build over 30 theatres in China.<sup>39</sup>

An even larger reform influenced the film distribution-exhibition sector in 2005 when the government decided to adopt the Hollywood "Cinema Chain System," under which the distributors and cinemas have unified exhibition schedules and consistent management.<sup>40</sup> The new system makes it possible for audiences around China to watch the latest film at the same time. More than ever, film-going has become a national feast that anyone can participate in simultaneously, by paying the ticket to get in the theatre, or by paying attention to news broadcasts. Co-production with foreign film investors, scriptwriters and directors, and ever-deepening distribution-exhibition reform generates China's own blockbusters, such as Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002), *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006)<sup>41</sup>, Feng Xiaogang's *Cell Phone* (2003) and *A World without Thieves* (2004). The 21<sup>st</sup> century sees the proliferation of commercial films by renowned directors from the Fifth Generation. *Hero* had a Hollywood-style budget (31 million US dollars) and features an international film-

making crew including Jet Li, Tony Leung, Maggie and Zhang Ziyi. When questioned about the big budget by some reporters, Zhang Yimou commented that this budget was not a big deal compared with Hollywood movies.<sup>42</sup> The other guru of the Fifth Generation, Chen Kaige, joined the commercial tide and made *Together* in the same year. On the list are also Feng Xiaogang's blatantly market-oriented New Year Films (贺岁片): *Big Shot's Funeral* (2001), *Cell Phone*, and *A World without Thieves*. Chinese blockbusters glean phenomenal box office returns never seen in the history of Chinese filmmaking: Zhang Yimou's *Hero* grossed 250 million yuan (30.5 million US dollars) in China and 35.3 million US dollars in the United States in 2004. It topped the Chinese domestic box office and also topped the U.S. box office as a foreign movie in the year of its release.

The international success of Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige indisputably encourages his peers to consider the commercial route, among many other factors that propelled the commercialization of Chinese cinema.<sup>43</sup> It is pointed out that the used-to-be underground filmmakers also undergo a commercial transition, as evidenced by the change of Zhang Yuan, one of the most avant-garde directors in contemporary China. *I love You* (2002), *Green Tea* (2003) and *Little Red Flowers* (2006) all concentrate on personal life with diminished social or political critique. Building on the tremendous popularity of the TV series *Guo ba yin* (过把瘾) adapted from Wang Shuo's novel, *I Love You* lingers on the trivial side of romantic affairs to reflect the timeless interaction of the two sexes. In Lu Xuechang's *Cala, My Dog* the family discord and the trouble caused by the policemen are touched with a slightly comic tone, which renders the film more affirmative of the current system than disturbing. Although these films are no

competitors of the Hollywood-style blockbusters made by Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, they amassed desirable box offices with a relatively big investment and eye-catching casting crews.

The unprecedented freedom in filmmaking and distribution and the increased market force of the industry, however, do not go hand in hand with a proportionally comparable loosening in the Party's ideological control. No matter how ardently the policy-makers attempt to subsume the film industry in the rules of the market economy, they simultaneously keep a vigilant eye on what the films are about, in addition to the question of whether or not film directors abide by production regulations. Censorship has always been a prominent part of the state's control over cultural products and it remains paramount to examine how the state manages to maintain a transfigured censorship in the new era of market economy.

Prior to 1988 when the Film Bureau formalized and publicized the censor process, China did not have explicit guidelines for filmmaking as films were unexceptionally made in state-owned studios. With the thriving economic and industrial development, the government saw the need for more transparent cultural policies; such a concern facilitated clearer censor steps and criteria. One of the stipulations is that the rough-cut of a film and its completed stand print be viewed twice before its release. A "pass" certificate is issued to a film that has no ideological, artistic or technological problems.<sup>44</sup> The former two criteria are very ambiguous and its application can be to the avail of the censor bureau. Ideological problems may be those posing a threat to the stability of the nation, or simply other narratives containing negative descriptions of historical or contemporary life in China. In the early 1990s, banned films extended to Chen Kaige's *Farewell My*

*Concubine*, Zhang Yimou's *To Live* (1994) and Tian Zhuangzhuang's *Blue Kite* (1992), all of which fall into the category of having ideological problems in handling historical subjects. These films were either forced to be edited or simply banned by the MRFT. The renewed 64-article regulation system issued in 1996 by the MRFT orders that no film be produced, distributed, exhibited locally or abroad, or imported without approval. The regulations outline seven areas to be banned: "anything that endangers the Chinese State, discloses state secrets, libels or slanders others, promotes pornography, feudal superstition or excessive violence and other content forbidden by state regulations."<sup>45</sup> Many films made by the Sixth Generation, with their urgent concern for the unadorned life of ordinary people, fall into these seven categories and are prohibited from public screening. Zhang Yuan's *East Palace, West Palace* unequivocally tarnishes the orthodox and the authoritative role of the governmental institutions by exposing a policeman's personal life enmeshed with a gay man. The somewhat naturalistic account of a family separated by alcoholism and insanity as seen in *The Son* (1996) is also considered inappropriate.

The fact that many domestically banned films succeeded in international film festivals prompted the government to strengthen the restrictions on screening films abroad. The MRFT requires films to obtain a permit for release before being sent to foreign film festivals and anyone who disobeys these regulations will be severely penalized. Renowned cases are Zhang Yimou and Tian Zhuangzhuang; Zhang was forbidden to make films in China for five years after he sent *To Live* to the Cannes Film Festival in 1994 without the government's approval; Tian Zhuangzhuang received similar castigation after *The Blue Kite* was shown in the West. To work around or with the

relentless ideological scepter, filmmakers in China embark on different journeys. Zhang Yimou's next film, *The Road Home* (1999), a romantic love story set in the midst of the Cultural Revolution and deviating from the provocative political tone in *To Live*, provides a commensurable eulogy for traditional values and the Communist past, compensating for the transgression of the director in his previous film.<sup>46</sup> *Not One Less* (1999), while touching on the dire situation of education in rural China, upholds the state as a facilitator of personal endeavor and eventually the real savior of education, embodied in the film by the radio and TV stations. The teenage girl's single-minded goal of bringing back her student crosses the border with personal interest in monetary gain (her pay of 50 yuan, which cannot be realized unless all the students remain in the class in the end). It is the officers working in the TV stations who elevate her personal quest and help her to reach the ameliorating Hope Project. Given this circumstance, Zhang's later full-scale devotion to commercial filmmaking cannot be easily labeled as a voluntary choice or a forced compromise.

Younger directors such as Zhang Yuan deal with state censors in a more sophisticated way. For example, to make *Seventeen Years* (1999), Zhang Yuan had to spend months to negotiate with the censorship bureau before the shooting started. Because of their insistence on individualistic and anti-romantic description of contemporary urban life, the younger generation faced even harsher obstacles than the Fifth Generation. Many times their films were drastically cut, shelved for years, or simply banned at the very outset. Zhang Yuan's first film, *Mother*, was released in 1990, but the China Film prohibited the film from distribution without explanation. His second film, *Beijing Bastards*, portraying the lives of bohemian rock musicians roaming around the

city, was officially banned as well. Wang Xiaoshuai's *So Close to Paradise* (1998), presumably for its ambivalent descriptions of migrant workers, gangsters and prostitutes, had to suffer countless re-shots and re-cuts, and was still withheld for five years.<sup>47</sup>

Strict government censorship sets off the phenomenon of alternative filmmaking among young directors, which is termed as “underground” or “independent.” Financially, they have to rely on themselves or outside investors to complete the production of a film project. Because of extreme budgetary limitations, these independent films feature an amateur style—documentary feel, long takes, hand-held cameras, and ambient sound. When the situation gets worse, they smuggle films outside of China for production or post-production work. Not a few directors had to do part-time jobs or extra work including soliciting wealthy businessmen to acquire money for their films. Zhang Yuan self-financed *Beijing Bastards* with money he gained from working on MTV and advertising. Wang Xiaoshuai had to disguise himself with the pseudonym Wu Ming when he made *Frozen* (1997) for fear of government punishment. The script of Jia Zhangke's *Xiao Wu* (1997) was rejected by the censorship bureau and therefore he had to shoot the film secretly. Jia's second film, *Platform* (2000), was partially financed by Japanese star director Takeshi Kitano.<sup>48</sup>

Aside from overseas investment, international film festivals have aided productions made by independent directors caught in strict censorship, although the question of whether or not they intentionally take such a short-cut remains unsolved. Zhang Yimou once commented in a slightly acerbic tone, “[S]ome Sixth Generation directors are very smart in knowing ways to succeed in their filmmaking. They are better informed of the outside world than their predecessors. Sometimes, they have already

contacted foreign embassies and foreign film institutes for the channels to export their films even when the films are still edited at the early stage.”<sup>49</sup> What triggers the older generation’s discontent and what matters to the young generation may be the fact that this short-cut tends to work, although not without a few twists thrown in. Zhang Yuan, embarking on his film career as late as 1990, has gained more than 30 major international awards and has been considered a leading figure of the Sixth Generation Independents around the world.<sup>50</sup> In 1994, he was selected by *TIME* magazine as one of the hundred young “people to watch” in the 21st century.<sup>51</sup> Wang Xiaoshuai’s *Beijing Bicycle* won the Silver Bear Award at the 2001 Berlin Film Festival before it was approved by the government.<sup>52</sup> Jia Zhangke’s *Xiao Wu* was highly acclaimed at the 1998 Berlin Film Festival. On the other hand, the success of underground films in international film festivals was not achieved without pressure from the Chinese government. Because the MRFT required that the film must be approved before it was sent to any foreign film festival, the directors would face a deteriorated situation after winning international awards. In 1993, *Beijing Bastards* was exhibited at the Tokyo Film Festival, but the director Zhang Yuan was forbidden to attend it and the film was eliminated from the official list of feature films for a long time. After attending the 1997 Cannes Film Festival with *East Palace West Palace*, Zhang Yuan came back to China only to find his passport confiscated at the airport.

Recently, given the nation’s deepening participation in the global economy and cultural production, the Chinese government has been impelled to shape a new relationship with the young directors, to signal a more open gesture to the world. In 1999, the semi-official Association of Chinese Filmmakers, China Film Group, Beijing Film

Studio, and Film Art Journal organized a symposium in Beijing, titled “Symposium on Young Filmmakers,” and invited twelve filmmakers, including Jin Chen, Lu Xuechang, Wang Xiaoshuai, Guan Hu, and Wang Quan’an, to attend the meeting.<sup>53</sup> After this significant conversation, Zhang Yuan’s *Seventeen Years*, Wang Xiaoshuai’s *So Close to Paradise* and Lu Xuechang’s *A Lingering Face* were green-lighted for public showings. Jin Chen, director of *Love in the Internet Age* observes that the popularity of his film, as an independently made national hit, helped the authorities discover the less confrontational side of young filmmakers: rather than segregate underground directors, the Chinese government now aims to guide them so that they can be a vitalizing force in Chinese film industry.<sup>54</sup>

In February 2002, the Film Bureau of the SARFT passed a regulation allowing independent film companies to make their own films after acquiring a license from the SARFT. Some companies like Imar Film Co. Ltd., the first Sino-foreign joint-venture film company in China, produced independent films such as *Spicy Love Soup* (1998) and *Shower* (1999) by getting licenses through the state-sanctioned Xi’an Film Studio. Xu Jinglei’s *My Father and I*, a 2002 film made by the Supreme Concept Cultural Development Co., became the first independently-financed Chinese film since 1949 to be screened nationwide.<sup>55</sup> In November 2003 the SARFT held a working conference in Beijing for underground directors, including Wang Xiaoshuai and Jia Zhangke, to facilitate communication between regulators and filmmakers, establishing the milestone that later leads to the “cooperative” stance of many independent directors.<sup>56</sup> During the conference the censors invited filmmakers to submit proposals for reform. Included in the proposals are a new system of film classification, a review of banned movies, and the

ensorship process being made more transparent and eventually abolished.<sup>57</sup> Wang Xiaoshuai's *Beijing Bicycle* was once banned because he submitted the film to the Berlin Film Festival while waiting for the government's approval. In 2004, not long after the working conference, the film was granted the chance to be reexamined and approved. The Chinese censor cleared *Beijing Bicycle* for public screening in China and made it the first legitimized underground film since the implementation of reform, which signals a more lenient film production and distribution environment.

According to the interim regulations governing movie production, distribution, and projection, effective as of December 1, 2003, films are encouraged to be sent to foreign film festivals only if they first obtain a permit for release from the SARFT or *have been put on record* (SARFT, 2004b). A transition in the policy language from “must be approved” to an alternative choice of being “put on record” shows a more relaxed censorship provision, which directly contributed to the reexamination and release of *Beijing Bicycle*. In line with the new policy, He Jianjun's once-banned film, *Postman*, also got a license for release in China. The years of 2004—2005 mark a principal change in the trajectory of Chinese independent filmmaking when three films made by the Sixth Generation were officially and legally submitted to the Cannes Film Festival—Wang Xiaoshuai's *Shanghai Dreams*, Zhang Yuan's *Could be Beautiful* and Zhang Yang's *Sunflower*<sup>58</sup>—while Jia Zhangke made his first “aboveground” film, *The World* (2004), and submitted it to the 2005 Venice Film Festival.

## Conclusion

The production and screening of independent films is a process of negotiation, with vigorous trials and tests on the boundaries and the crisscrossing of multiple forces, including the hegemonic official system, the mechanism of international art film festivals, and the operative of global capital. International film markets create a space for underground directors to not only survive the system but also to negotiate with the authorities for their rights of representation. Although being censored in China is still a route to win international embrace and guarantee domestic attention—especially for anonymous new directors—the working of censorship on filmmaking is no longer unidirectional as it was before. As I will discuss in Chapter VI, with the ascendancy of the domestic filmmaking circuit that covers the complete processes of script-writing, production, marketing and public screening, the importance of international film festivals in the making of the Chinese independent is descending, but not disappearing.

Distinguished from the Fifth Generation, the self-identification of the independent director as a truthful narrator of the life of ordinary people, free from institutional regulations and ideological manipulation, has been placed against commercial imperatives to acquire recognition abroad and the need to meet the transnational anticipation of a new orient or the oriental urban.<sup>59</sup> General audiences and film critics alike tend to overstress ideological elements in these films and downplay their aesthetic values and stylistic innovations. When the awards these films win stand for more than the recognition of the directors' artistic talents, but are explained by a changing relationship between the West and the East, the claim of “independence” becomes controversial. Art film festivals per se have been put under skeptical scrutiny with the hypothesis of

postcolonialism and a new Orientalism. After all, who are the festival-goers? Does the reservoir of the festival critics set up a discourse within which the “independent filmmakers” are (forced to be) trapped? To what degree, if at all possible, can the “successful celebrities” who catch the spotlight in the film festivals stand for or speak for marginalized characters portrayed in their films? What sort of objectivity, authenticity and locality are the filmmakers are seeking?

On the other hand, aside from Western investors, producers from Hong Kong have been a great factor in creating the impact of the Chinese independent movement. The phenomenon that Chinese diaspora— migrants who traveled abroad or to regions separate from the mainland regime—assist in the making of “Chinese independent” deserves further analysis. A union between independent directors residing within the border and Chinese film curators living abroad may reconfigure the concept of “pan-China” that falls in the liminal, borderless, and consumption-oriented area of imagery production. It may also fuel the imagination of an idealized Cathay in which the Chinese independent filmmakers are nothing but political dissidents under the Western gaze.

The transformation of the film industry and film market in China gives rise to a bifurcated definition of “mainstream narrative” and a new role for the Chinese government. It is captured by the government slogans broadcast immediately before the 7pm daily news on CCTV: from “stability, unity and prosperity” (稳定, 团结, 繁荣) to “building a harmonious society” (创建和谐社会), not “Communism” in its original sense, but rather a mixture of capitalist economy and socialist politics eulogized as “Socialism with Chinese characteristics.” To the general populace, however, the “mainstream narrative” is a capped commercialism and mercantilism that reduces cultural products to

the simple pleasures of entertainment; such an understanding is legitimized with filmmakers' nationalistic mission of competing with Hollywood.<sup>60</sup> The oscillation of banning, being banned, and lifting the ban in the realm of film production and marketing can provide a piquant opening to diagnose the interaction between cultural production and politics. Once the claimed representative of the proletariat and the socially oppressed, the Communist Party ponders its transformed identity within this new context, in which its legitimacy is increasingly subject to a bond with the nation-state, and its relationship with rebellious Chinese intellectuals becomes indispensable.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Tonglin Lu, "Music and Noise" 59.

<sup>2</sup> Refer to Jinghua Dai's analysis on the Fifth Generation and Sixth Generation directors in *Cinema and Desire*.

<sup>3</sup> Also called scholar-bureaucrats or scholar-officials, these literati had passed the nationwide imperial service exam and were appointed by Chinese emperor to perform daily governance, from the Sui Dynasty to the end of the Qing Dynasty in 1912.

<sup>4</sup> Spence 539–43.

<sup>5</sup> Analyses of the "anti bourgeois liberalization" and "anti bourgeois spiritual pollution" can be found in McDougall 336-344.

<sup>6</sup> The Four Cardinal Principles were started by Deng Xiaoping in 1979 and are the four issues for which debate was not allowed within the People's Republic of China. These 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 Chinese Communist Party, and the principle of upholding Marxist-Leninist-Mao Zedong thought.

<sup>7</sup> The story and the film tell a story about an overseas Chinese painter, who returns to China after 1949 with enthusiasm and works for his mother land only to be humiliated, and finally dies as a criminal.

<sup>8</sup> See B. Liu 176-178.

<sup>9</sup> Dai, *Cinema And Desire* 71-72.

<sup>10</sup> Xiaoming Lü 28.

<sup>11</sup> Z. Zhang, *The Urban Generation* 61-62.

<sup>12</sup> Subculture can be broadly defined as “[...]meaning systems, modes of expression or lifestyles developed by groups in subordinated structural position in response to dominant meaning systems...which reflect their attempt to solve structural contradictions arising from the wider societal context.” See Brake 8.

<sup>13</sup> Tao Dongfeng, “Daode lixiang zhuyi zhuanxinqi zhongguo wenhua” (Moral idealism and Chinese culture in the era of transformation), in Z. Liu 327.

<sup>14</sup> Refer to Chapter V, Zhang Yuan’s comment about independent directors’ marginalized position in the society.

<sup>15</sup> Refer to her recent work, *From Ah Q to Lei Feng: Freud and Revolutionary Spirit in 20th Century China*.

<sup>16</sup> Cui, “Working from the Margins,” see Sheldon H. Lu, *Chinese-language Film* 107.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> “Interview with Director Zhang Ming,” *gd.sohu.com*.

<sup>20</sup> Kaldis 167.

<sup>21</sup> Kaldis 168. “In Expectation (Clouds and Rains in Wushan) [Advertisement and Information Flier],” pp. 1-3, Beijing Film Studio & The Beijing East-Earth Cultural Development Co., Ltd., 1997.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>23</sup> “Lessons from the Underground: China’s Indie Music Scene,” see *dgeneratefilms.com*.

<sup>24</sup> Cheng, “Minjing gushi daoyan jianmianhui.”

<sup>25</sup> On February 25, 1981, The National Federation of Trade Union, the League Central, the All-China Women’s Federation, and etc, 9 organizations decided to call on all country people to perform better behaviors named “5 stresses, 4 Points of beauty and 3 loves.” The five stresses include decorum, manners, hygiene, social order and morals; the four beauties include the beauties of one’s mind, language, behavior and the environment; and the three loves include love of the motherland, love of socialism and love of the Chinese Communist Party.

<sup>26</sup> For detailed information regarding Beijing’s dog ban, refer to “the Dog Restriction Provisions in Beijing,” (March 30, 1995 Beijing Municipal People’s Government, March 31, 1995 Beijing Public Security Bureau).

<sup>27</sup> Maslin, “On the Beat.”

<sup>28</sup> Kraicer, Review of *On the Beat*.

<sup>29</sup> See the interview with Wang Xiaoshuai in “Underground Film Director Wang Xiaoshuai Comments his Thaw: I know My Way in My Mind,” *WaiTan Huabao*, no.2 (2004).

<sup>30</sup> Yingjin Zhang, “Styles, Subjects, and Special Points of View: A Study of Contemporary Chinese Independent Documentary,” *LEWI Working Paper Series*. See [http://www.hkbu.edu.hk/~lewi/WPS/32\\_Zhang.pdf](http://www.hkbu.edu.hk/~lewi/WPS/32_Zhang.pdf), pp. 3.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Xinyu Lü, *Jilu Zhongguo* xix.

<sup>33</sup> Yingjin Zhang, “Styles, Subjects, and Special Points of View,” *LEWI Working Paper Series*. pp. 7.

<sup>34</sup> Zhu, “Chinese Cinema’s Economic Reform” 905-921.

<sup>35</sup> Refer to the dissertation by Jihong Wan, *Hollywood and the Changing Political Economy of the Chinese Film Industry in the 1990s*, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon, 2000.

<sup>36</sup> Zhu, “Chinese Cinema’s Economic Reform” 905-921.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> “Warner Brothers Marches into China’s Cinema Market.”

<sup>40</sup> “Zhongguo Dianyingyingshi gaige you da dongzuo.”

<sup>41</sup> *Curse of the Golden Flower* was at the time of its release the most expensive Chinese film to date, surpassing Chen Kaige’s *The Promise*.

<sup>42</sup> For related comments from Zhang Yimou and his producer, see [www.China.com.cn](http://www.China.com.cn) or [sina.com.cn](http://sina.com.cn). For example, Zhang Weiping discusses the inferior investment condition in China, over his interview with the Internet companies.

<sup>43</sup> Mostly noticeably, making commercial films or art house films have been a focal point of contention regarding the systematic change of Chinese film industry. Many filmmakers and theorists argue that for the development of national cinema, China should produce commercial films to compete with Hollywood and resist the encroachment of Hollywood blockbusters. For more discussion about filmmakers’ opinions in this regard, see chapter VI.

<sup>44</sup> Xianggui Wu, *Chinese Film Industry since 1977*, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.

<sup>45</sup> See May 156-60. Another source is an introduction of the broader social backgrounds for print and media, in Esarey 37-83.

<sup>46</sup> Along the same lines, the title of the film, “The Road Home,” can be read in an allegorical way as the return of the director to the embrace of the state regime.

<sup>47</sup> Refer to the discussion of Jinhua Dai in *Cinema and Desire* about the Fifth Generation.

<sup>48</sup> See Corliss, “Bright Lights.”

<sup>49</sup> See Tan 2-13. Similar comments from Zhang Yimou can also be found online at <http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/58/58zhangiv.html>.

<sup>50</sup> A list of the awards Zhang Yuan has won at international film festivals: *Mother* won Jury Award and a Special Mention at France’s Festival des Trois Continents in Nantes, *Beijing Bastards* won a Special

Mention at the Locarno Film Festival and the Jury Award at the Singapore Film Festival, *Sons the Tiger* Award at Rotterdam and *Seventeen Years* the Best Director award at the 56th Venice Film Festival.

<sup>51</sup> See the website <http://www.Zhang-yuanfilms.com> for more information.

<sup>52</sup> Tang, "Underground Directors 'Bicycling' Aboveground."

<sup>53</sup> For details, see *Film Art* Editorial Board's article "Young Images in the New Millennium," *Film Art*, No. 1(2000): 8-11.

<sup>54</sup> Tang, "Underground Directors 'Bicycling' Aboveground."

<sup>55</sup> Ruggieri, "Market Forces: Chinese Cinema in 2002."

<sup>56</sup> Tang, "Underground Directors 'Bicycling' Aboveground."

<sup>57</sup> Jonathan Watts, Interview with Lou Ye, "Camera obscured." The author accentuates that, "for defying the Chinese authorities and taking his film to the Cannes festival, the director Lou Ye has been banned from film-making. So why did he do it?" In the interview, Lou Ye talks about the change of China's censors and the censor system. See *Guardian*, Sept 9, 2006. The online version can be found at <http://www.guardian.co.uk>

<sup>58</sup> Yiyi Chen, "Diliudai daoyan jiti chuzhen Gana" (The Sixth Generations Go to the Cannes Film Festival).

<sup>59</sup> They flee from the old caption but fall to a new trap, see Jinhua Dai, *Wu zhong wen jing* 380-382.

<sup>60</sup> For more analysis see Xiaoming Wang, *Zai xin yishi xingtai de longzhao xia* (Under the New Ideology) and Jinhua Dai, *Cinema and Desire*.

## CHAPTER V

### REBEL AND RETURN:

#### FILMS BY ZHANG YUAN, WANG XIAOSHUAI, AND LOU YE

When inquired by interviewers why he favors the socially marginalized as his subject matter, Zhang Yuan comments that the working condition and social status of Chinese independent filmmakers are not so much different from those of marginal figures. First of all, the problem of visibility as shown in independent films also applies to filmmakers who have been oppressed by older and more established directors. Furthermore, as young and liberal artists estranged in the nation's growing apathy towards its own past, the Sixth Generation is exiled from the collective pursuit for unidirectional modernity that comprises of materialistic development. By examining underground films made by Zhang Yuan, Wang Xiaoshuai and Lou Ye, this chapter demonstrates that the power struggle between the periphery and the center, suggested by Zhang Yuan, is often embodied as an unfettered subject encountering arbitrary external forces. These imposing forces include the police station, prejudiced family members or a clandestine entity that alludes to the Party.

In his new book, *Painting the City Red*, Yomi Braester rebuffs the Kantian notion of the subject—an autonomous, self-aware participant who contributes to a “greater consciousness.” He contends that film spectators are regulated and subsumed by the urban contract; in his own words, “insofar as the cinema provides a ‘horizon for the experience of modernization and modernity,’ ... it is a horizon that is often receding rather than expanding, and an experience that is at least institutionally imposed as it is

subjectively generated.”<sup>1</sup> By accentuating the effect of policy-making and screen arts on the spectators, Braester preempts the existence of an independent artist or subject who seeks dialogue with the institutional context and against all the constrictions locates his/her agency. It is true that the possibility of blunt self-utterance as a venue to establish one’s identity—sought by the rock stars, the gay group, the prisoners, marginalized artists and rebellious youth—is often severely challenged in the film narratives. Self-expression in those independent films takes on fluid or even distorted forms, for example, as unconventional music styles, sexual frenzy, or bodily performance leading to death, which awaits a proper definition. However, the fact that this definition often comes from the nation-state does not mean the abolishment of the subject, but denotes its reliance on a renewed relationship with the Party. The melancholic atmosphere permeating in these films designates not a subject that is vanishing but one in bewilderment, a mixed feel of confusion and loss caused by the displaced alignment between Chinese intellectuals as the subject and the Party as the policy-maker. Instead of proposing self-sufficient screen images capable of altering policy-making, I argue that the unfinished enlightenment project—with artists’ concern for verisimilitude and the truthfulness of representation—still upholds the discursive framework for independent filmmaking. The sublime in Kantian terms, or the grand historical consciousness in Benjamin’s conceptions, is redacted into the coalescence between the state, the nation and the subject.

The following readings will inquire into how independent films, both well-recognized ones and less familiar recent features, reveal different facets and statuses in the relationship between a corporeal subject and the nation-state. The modernist discourse on culture, either in the May Fourth era or during the post-Mao decade, granted artists the

role of universal intellectuals who, in Michel Foucault's words, speak "in the capacity of a master of truth and justice...the spokesman of the universal."(126) As discussed in Chapter VI, scholars contend that the emergence of post-modernist discourse in the 1990s divests intellectuals of their access to these grand narratives of enlightenment, nationalism and modernism. A close look at independent filmmaking in China, from the onset to its later development, reveals that these discourses are not dismissed, but are suppressed; their release is often contingent on rereading the policy-maker as an accessible and humanitarian individual. Independent films are not simply characterized by the screen images of rampant rebels, but also preoccupied with redefining the authority in its relevance with history, justice and intellectual subjects.

**Zhang Yuan: *Beijing Bastard* (1993)**

*Beijing Bastards* (*Beijing zazhong*), shot by Zhang Yuan in 1993, tells a story about a rock band trying to find a stage to perform their concert, but after several efforts, they fail their mission. The main story is constantly interrupted by other anecdotes: a girl named Maomao gets pregnant and her boyfriend, Kazi, forces her to have an abortion; a painter cannot sell his painting; a writer does not succeed in helping his friend collect a debt. These seemingly disjointed episodes share the common ending of failure: The stage built by the band is finally destroyed by the government, and the painting remains unsold. The debt has not been paid back, but a quarrel breaks out between the writer and his friend. In this pessimistic film, the hoarse song and the furious performance of the band becomes a release of the characters' frustrated feelings.

The main actors in the film are Cui Jian and his rock band. Cui Jian was a trumpet player for the Beijing Philharmonic Orchestra. In the early 1980s, economic reforms and China's openness to the outside world brought new style to the used-to-be monolithic Chinese music scene: sappy romance songs imported from Hong Kong and Taiwan were sung alongside disco songs extolling the advancement of socialism. Before June Fourth, liberal reformers within the Party temporarily gained the upper hand; the economy was booming, and conservatives seemed powerless to stop the flood of new wealth and new ideas. Provocative western theoretical books were available on the black market, including Nietzsche, Kundera and magical realism. Along the same lines, there was an unending supply of new, mind-opening western music.

The liberal lifestyles of guitar-playing, drinking beer, sleeping around, seen also in Lou Ye's *Summer Palace*, added up to total rebellion against all that was traditional, stale, and dead. Cui Jian, He Yong, and their circle of friends spent the years before Tiananmen absorbing rock music, including the then-famous Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Bob Marley, the Clash, heavy metal, and jazz, which they copied from foreign students living in Beijing. The musicians' listening experience was described as an intense activity that led to their ideological conversion: "Listening was a dizzying process, a conversion to a new faith. Each tape brought new revelations...that they could pick up and bend to their own use. ...they'd found a way to...revolt against everyone and everything—parents, friends, Party bureaucrats, cultural tradition."(Andrew Jones 7)

Copying and imitation gradually evolved into creation: finding their own voices. Cui Jian first performed at a pop music contest in Beijing in 1986 and stunned the audience with politically ambivalent songs. "Cui Jian was hopping around the stage in

tattered Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) khakis” and “within minutes, people were cheering wildly and defying the security guards to dance on their seats. Within days, bootleg tapes of the performance were circulating all over China.”(Andrew Jones 7) In March 1989, Cui Jian played two stadium shows in Beijing to college students and released the first album *Rock 'n' Roll on the New Long March*. During the performance, Cui made the following pronouncements on the meaning of rock music: “If rock in the West is like a flood, then Chinese rock music is like a knife.”

However, the states started to consider pop culture from the West, Hong Kong and Taiwan, jeans, hair styles, sun glasses, and disco dancing part of the “peaceful evolution” process toward capitalism (和平演变) that was threatening to the authoritative ideology. In 1987 Cui Jian was attacked as an agent of “bourgeois liberalization” and banned from recording, appearing on TV, or openly performing to audiences in China. Although the ban was lifted for a brief time before the Tiananmen movement, due to his involvement in the event, Cui Jian and his group were banned again and rock musicians stayed in the margins of the society. Cui’s song *Nothing to My Name* (一无所有) inspired thousands of students in Tiananmen Square in 1989. The importance of rock music to young people goes abreast of its political meanings. In Cui Jian’s own words, “Rock is an ideology, not a musical form,” “Rock musicians, operating outside the strictures of mainstream popular music, yoked their music to the service of an oppositional ideology of individualism, and anti-feudalism.” (Andrew Jones 9)

The influence of Cui Jian’s rock music stagnated abruptly after 1989. The political fever resulting from exposure to Western culture, a passion no less ardent than that experienced by the Red Guards in the Cultural Revolution, was soon supplanted by

pervasive commercialism—a deal made between the Party line and the Chinese people for the goal of materialistic development. The film *Beijing Bastards* is not about the prime stage of the rock music, but offers a retrospective look at the aftermath of the political upheaval. The rock musicians' political energy is replaced with the failure of handling life problems and the difficulty of making a living. Their role in social transformation is reduced from the frontier of expressive intellectuals who tell the truth, to quote Cui Jian's lyrics, to social underdogs who are pleading for a space to survive, amid the police control. The Tiananmen protesters' idealized understanding of western democracy and its economic promises fall into pieces, and in hindsight that Western knowledge was as devastating to the musicians as the totalitarian system.

The consuming and unsatisfactory results of June Fourth are encapsulated in the film as the dreadful pain of forcing an abortion to Maomao. The bohemian lifestyle the rock band and their artist friends pursue is brought to an abrupt confrontation with the need for an abortion—a drastic, brutal and bloody end. The film ends with Maomao giving birth to a boy in the hospital and Cui Jian's band performs a song entitled "Walking in the Wind": "I'm walking straight into the wind, anger in my soul...Don't wanna think about the past. Year after year the wind blows, changing form but never going away."<sup>2</sup> The bitterly cold, sweeping wind may be a metaphor for the brutal changes of Chinese history ("revolution after revolution... how much pain to how many people") or a lament for the rapid advent of global capitalism. Times are changing and "globalization threatens the indigenous space of creativity, which, in turn, has to be renegotiated within rock culture itself."<sup>3</sup> The musician Kazi, shocked by the announcement that he is now a father, wanders on the streets in Beijing, aimless and

hopeless: he is barely making a living in the new circumstance of China's social changes and now he has to shoulder the role of a father.

*Dirt* (头发乱了, 1994, dir. Guan Hu) is another film dealing with the life of rock musicians after the Tiananmen Square protest. It shares the pessimism in *Beijing Bastards* about the prospect for youth but is approved by the Party because its political undertone targets at the Cultural Revolution instead of June Fourth. A female character working in a foreign company of Beijing finds herself pregnant and seeks the help of her nurse friend to abort the child. In the end, however, she decides to keep the child, a narrative that might have contributed to the approval of the censor bureau. In addition, the film traces the nurse's indecisiveness over two men, a disillusioned and long-haired young man who leads a local rock band, and an upright and conservative police officer. Each character in the film, all of them childhood friends, adopts a different lifestyle when they grow up, and speaks for different ideologies. The foreign company is considered threatening to the once-peaceful community, while the rebels and the institution exert an influence of the same weight on local youngsters.

*Dirt* and *Beijing Bastards* similarly end with the birth of an unwanted child, whose father is either unknown or unable to assume the responsibility. The image of an unwanted child, as the title of *Beijing Bastards* indicates, resonates with a lost generation whose connection with the past is broken and whose birth is the mixed outcome of heterogeneous forces, including both communistic idealism and capitalistic pragmatism, both rebellion and suppression. Yet, the symbolic meaning of abortion offers an emotional reflection of the new enlightenment project in the 1980s and particularly its apex—June Fourth—the sudden and forced demise of the cultural fever. The eventual

birth of the child, however, denotes the latent desire of reconnecting with the past and the relentless effort to activate the image of a potent father.

Drawing a parallel between western underground cinema and Chinese independent films is surely simplistic, but it is similarly problematic to discharge the political undertone of Chinese films made in the 1990s. If Jia Zhangke's description of the reform period is a quiet and personal observation distilled by memory, then Zhang Yuan's is a vibrant and restless frontal shot of the overwrought chaos caused by the overdue release of oppositional energies. Independent films, different than those of the Fifth Generation, describe the breakage with the past, especially for those rebellious artists who, as rational intellectuals and holders of "truth," plummeted to oblivion. Zhang Yuan's later films, *East Palace*, *West Palace* and *Seventeen Years*, exemplify the attempt to repair that breakage—not by surrendering to the authority—but by redefining its relevance to everyday life.

*East Palace, West Palace* (1997) and *Seventeen Years* (1999)

The title of *East Palace, West Palace* derives from the two parks near the Forbidden City—the East Palace and the West Palace, in which homosexuals of Beijing meet at night. As many other independent features, the film was smuggled out of China for post-production. Extolled as the first gay film from mainland China, the film instantly attracted wide attention from international critics. The film distinguishes itself from other homosexual films with its riveting tension between the policeman's interrogation and the gay man's self-revelation to the interrogator. Permeating the film is the theatricality of condensed storyline and suggestive atmosphere that constantly defies the distinction between normality and hysteria. In dramatized form, the film stages a gay man's active

performance in front of the interrogator and his endeavor to reestablish his identity, which has been skewed by a suppressive system. The performance of Ah Lan, whose name was not disclosed until a much late point in the film, brings memory, trauma, and history into the confinement of reality that has entrapped him in the cramped police station. When answering the policeman's questions, Ah Lan incessantly leans towards his past sexual liaisons as a way of confronting the official rhetoric.

The film starts with a music score from a Peking opera, comprising the high-pitched singing of a female—later found to be a wronged prisoner—and oppressive soundtrack of chimes and beats; the camera moves up the crevice between walls shaded by tree branches and vines, and discloses scenes hidden behind them. Subsequently, an aerial view and a pan across the bushes cut to the corner of the park, where Ah Lan is first shown in a man's room. He encounters a policeman who inquires about his address and occupation, and asks for his ID card. Leaving the restroom, Ah Lan is found riding his bike off in the alley between two red imperial mansions and then arriving at the other park. His lovemaking with a target gay man in the dark is soon stopped by flashlights and siren of police cars. Arrested by the police, they are forced to squat on the floor and are interrogated one by one. For unknown reasons, the policeman in charge plans to let the captured gay man off, as he makes the assumption that Ah Lan is just an innocent passer-by. Unlike the cop in the restroom, he inquires about the gay man's name. Being escorted on the way to the police box in the park, Ah Lan passionately kisses the policeman and then runs away, leaving the latter dumbfounded, confused and lost in the dark, which is captured in a still camera lingering on his face.

The second part of the prelude starts from the policemen's routine duties, including arresting a pickpocket. In contrast to the gritty and sinuous introduction sequences about the open park in which the gay men wander around, the policemen conduct their work duties in a bounded compound shot from a distinct high angle. After the establishing introductions between Ah Lan and the policeman, the film transits to the interior of the police office and the narrative is unlocked with the policeman opening a package that contains Ah Lan's diary. It is worth noting that the diary presents the very first time when the names of both sides are disclosed. The name of the gay man was never exposed beforehand, albeit his multiple confrontations with the police officers. When requested by a policeman in the restroom, for instance, Ah Lan silently shows his ID, displaying to the inquirer a "public" name, occupation and address that grants him a proper social position. The gay men, who are forced to meet with each other in the two parks, are called by the police the "dregs of society," a suppressed social group that is divested of legitimacy. This situation explains why the protagonist chose to keep himself nameless until presenting his diary in front of the cop he admires. Similarly, the name of the policeman was not addressed in his work duties but is disclosed in the diary of the gay man, a private belonging that opts to enter the public space of police station. Insofar as the names of the two men show up at the front page of the diary at the same time, the gay man not only announces his own identity but also generates a private name for the policeman, who now exists as an individual.

Borrowing ideas from Queer Studies on theories of performance and performativity, Chris Berry analyzes how Ah Lan successfully transforms the "interrogation" into a voluntary act of history-unveiling and self-expression. As discussed

in Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “being” is based on the kind of “doing” that acting is. “If identities in the real world are also performed rather than given, then they can be cited and read ‘wrongly’ but productively in order to construct different identities and undermine seemingly natural givens.” In Zhang Yuan’s film “being is connected to the special kind of doing that acting is.”<sup>4</sup> Berry notes that Zhang’s work emphasizes more the access to public discourse and the ability to find a place to stage a public performance, in contrast to the emphasis on perversion as in Butler’s works. In light of the changing social-economical environment of China, Berry accurately pinpoints the gap between China’s booming free market and the government’s insistence on the central control on ideology and cultural production. The result of this gap is burgeoning social groups trying to establish their (public) identities and win social recognition, defined as public positions for their existence. Alluding to Zhang’s earlier features, especially *The Square*, Berry argues that the highly dramatized quality of the film accentuates the difficulty of staging gay subculture into public discourse in China. The more important question in this film about “staging,” then, is not how identities can be performed differently, but how they can be performed at all.

Ah Lan’s ability to restage himself and establish agency is confirmed by how he treats Shi Xiaohua as one of his nighttime partners instead of a government official. During the police interrogation, the verdict Shi is taking, called a “document,” takes on a public nature. As Berry points out, the verdict resembles the one in Zhang Yimou’s *The Story of Qiu Ju* (1992): it is a government announcement or directive which can be perceived as an opening to public discourse that the gay group desperately needs. The gay man’s longing for the policeman, as he reiterates, is understood as the gay

community's longing for a chance of self-expression. Ah Lan tells Shi that he has always been waiting for a handsome policeman, and that when he was young he was never afraid of policemen as other children were. The longing embodies a desire for public presence through interaction with the other side—the oppressor, the controller, the powerful. As the policeman takes a nap, Ah Lan mumbles in front of him, “The convict loves her prosecutor. The thief loves her jail-keeper. *We love you, we have no other choice.*”

The emotional fluctuations of the gay man and his excitement of encountering the policeman are only stabilized by his own rendition on what really happened. The night of interrogation and the official document written by the policeman opens to the gay man an opportunity to unveil his suppressed identity. As the policeman chastises Ah Lan for his affiliation with a well-known writer, the gay man rebukes him, saying, “No, it is love. It is not disgusting.” Ah Lan recalls that in the second morning after his first sexual encounter with a man, he felt alive. He blurs the distinction between confession and seduction as much as he repeals the line between sadist and masochist. He converts the act of remorseful confession into the opportunity of self-definition and seduction. On display is not only Ah Lan's performative attempt to reconstruct his own identities differently but also the linkage from a gay man's private life to his position in the public space. Speaking of the living situation of the gay communities, Zhang Yuan remarks, “all the stories I heard...were bound by circumstances of oppression, discrimination, and control.”<sup>5</sup>

As much as the film is not a love story about obsession, neither is it simply an argument for gay rights. As Berry rightly observes, the general citizens in China are more eager to engage in public discourses although the government never loosens control on

access to the public sphere. The film, understood in this vein, is “a forceful appeal for a government benign, liberal and wise enough to embrace dissidence.”(Gelder) It not only emphasizes the dissident’s position but also suggests an ambiguous relationship between the dissident and the state. In the struggle between the powerless and the powerful, staging becomes the opening by which the oppressed community performs their identities to appeal to the powerful. Ah Lan holds a masochistic infatuation with the policeman, and he repeatedly uses the word “love” to confront or convert the policeman’s accusation of being “pervert” or “disgusting.”

In the condensed space of the police station, the gay man’s conversation with the policeman often borders on hysteria, cancelling the line between reality and allegory, and calling for a symbolic reading of his affection for the cop. Besides a masochist understanding of Ah Lan’s intonation of “love,” his voluntary communication with the policeman marks the endeavor of seeking the officer’s understanding and more importantly, self-awakening. At the end of the film, the cop walks away alone in the misty dawn light; for once in the film he is presented as an individual rather than a government official. In this sense, the film not only brings up the dissident’s desire for the nation-state and the center, but also questions the identity of the state itself, a point to be explicated below.

First, the purpose of the cop arresting Ah Lan is ambiguous, after being kissed by the gay man in a teasing way. He keeps the gay man’s diary, inside of which is Ah Lan’s ardent love confession for him. The night-long interrogation often runs on into an intimate encounter between the two men. At stake is not simply Ah Lan’s redefinition of his gay identity—the inevitable individuality that defies the official discourse of

oppression—but the understanding and self-awareness of the policeman. The cop in the end is converted into a “gay” and this conversion awakens his “self” that exists not institutionally but as an individual, not locked in a secured compound but wandering lost in a space awaiting definition. While the policeman becomes a person unmarked by his uniform, the gay man becomes an individualized subject that has secretly seized the power of giving definition. As Ah Lan “describes the sometimes tortuous conditions of being gay in China, which he proudly proclaims ‘make life worth living,’ the master and servant relationship slowly evolves into one of curious attraction and fear.”<sup>6</sup> And the director uses the chamber drama to create a metaphor for “the sado-masochistic relation that Chinese people have with their own authority figures.”<sup>7</sup> The metaphorical meaning of the relationship between the two characters shows that not only is sexuality politicized but also politics is sexualized in the arena of Chinese independent films. From Shi, the policeman, we see the gradual change from being a public official to a perplexed individual whose confrontation with the “powerless” instead divests him of his power. And in the end, this individual—without a uniform and disintegrated from the central power—succumbs to his impulsive sexual desire for the oppressed.

Second, albeit the daunting difficulty for marginal groups in China to gain access to public space, as pointed out by Chris Berry, the film shows that the marginal group has the agency to reboot the power and therefore obtain their subjectivity. Ah Lan is transformed from being interrogated, questioned, and humiliated into someone who is pronouncing his position as not only an individual but also a subject. What’s more, he even forces the cop to look into himself and in this way dissect the composition of the power. The fortitude and courage of the gay man derives from his disinterest in

participating in the power structure—his desire for the police is personal, destructive, and then constructive. He desires the policeman and longs for his arrest, but his obsession is so personal that Shi is transformed into a sexualized individual.

From the social taboo to state censorship, filmmakers perennially face the problem of what is not allowed to be on screen and what is censored. In this film, the overlooked issue is the awakening of the individual not only outside of the state imperative but also within. The policeman in the end realizes the existence of his self, revealed by his encounter with the gay man. The policeman's feelings toward his subject are conflicted—they change from disgust to curiosity and desire. At the beginning of the interrogation, the police officer says, "You've got a problem and I'm going to cure you. Now talk." This psychoanalytic "talking cure," as it turns out, only serves the purpose of curing himself.

Wendy Larson claims that revolutionary subjectivity remained a topic of concern in the face of radical social changes and "may be more central to contemporary consciousness than we have recognized."<sup>(10)</sup> Meanwhile it is important to notice the fine but important line between revolutionary subjectivity and the enlightenment individualism proposed during the May-Fourth. Mao's revolution, while carrying on one part of the enlightenment project that is mainly for national modernization, leaves the problem of humanistic subjectivity unresolved. Studies on contemporary culture tend to polarize current Chinese films: on one end of the spectrum there is the hasty conclusion that commercialism has dominated 1990s China; at the opposite end there is the proposition for a complete revival of the revolutionary spirit. Whereas the first position fails to recognize the rebellious undercurrent, the second is at risk of shrouding the

nuances in the new generation's artistic visions and, in particular, the relation between seduction, being seduced, banned, and unbanned, and the multifaceted mechanisms involved in the independent filmmakers' journey. The oscillation of the state in comprehending and handling independent films—embodied in this film as the ambiguous attitude of the policeman towards the gay man—reflects the complexity and confusion of the state itself. Furthermore, the sympathetic feeling the gay man holds toward the police underscores an image of “self” that is closely intertwined with the existence of the state, a posture that is in striking contrast to that suggested by the label of “political dissident.” The return to the aboveground as happening to most underground filmmakers is not unrelated to the once-to-be dissident's innate yearning for “home.”

Written by Zhang Yuan, his wife Ning Dai, and renowned Chinese authors, Yu Hua and Zhu Wen, *Seventeen Years* won the “Special Prize for Direction” at the 1999 Venice Film Festival. Zhang was first inspired to make *Seventeen Years* after watching a television program about prisoners returning to society. The film is based loosely on the true story of a girl who was sentenced to prison for having accidentally killed her sister (Gaskell). The narrative is divided into two parts: the first part recounts the disputes and the resultant homicide in a Tianjin family composed of two single parents each bringing his/her own daughter; the second part cuts to 17 years later when the imprisoned daughter, Tao Lan, returns home during the Chinese New Year. According the rehabilitation decrees, the purpose of a prisoner's return is to “reunite the family” and to announce the mercy of the government. Tao Lan's prison captain, Chen Jie, has also been given special leave to return home for the holidays, but because the tickets to her home town have been sold out, she decides to accompany Tao Lan home.

“Seventeen Years” is a widely used term referring to the period between the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 and the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, “viewed as the Golden Age of Chinese socialism, and a source of sentimentalism and nostalgia.”<sup>8</sup> The Chinese title, *Guonian Huijia*, –“New Year Homecoming” – similarly suggests a nostalgic feeling for return.<sup>9</sup> With the demise of the Soviet Union, Socialism loses its vitality as a counter-discourse to capitalism. The film’s emphasis on the female prisoner’s homecoming, as pointed out by scholars, reconstitutes the familial and social values into a social discourse that has broader political meanings.<sup>10</sup> Olivia Khoo attributes the division of family and the demolition of home to money and modernization: the *guanxi* (connection) discourses in this film are not just about what is essentially “Chinese,” or a form of regionality; they “signal a return to the ‘social’, against the destructive effects of capitalism.”<sup>11</sup>

Both Chua and Khoo, however, did not factorize the role of the central government in mobilizing the “social” (the *guanxi* discourses) as the “political” (counteractive to the destruction made by capitalistic development). Although *Seventeen Years* was transnationally produced, to declare that the Sixth Generation is commodifiable, transnational, and diasporic as the Fifth has been (based on transnational backing and global distribution of their films) is problematic.<sup>12</sup> The film’s quiet nature suggests a complicit relationship between the captain, as representative of the authority, and the prisoner, as a victimized individual. The suggestive mood and allegorical meaning connects the theme of a prisoner’s return to the film director’s return to the state. In Zhang Yuan’s filmmaking trajectory, *East Palace, West Palace* was his fourth in a row that was not shown in China. As early as 1994 Zhang was put on the Film Bureau’s

blacklist and became one of the six film and video directors who were not to be “financed, supplied with equipment or services or in any other way supported by companies or individuals.”<sup>13</sup> Significantly, *Seventeen Years* was the director’s first film produced under the aegis of the state studio and marks the director’s transition from underground to aboveground (Tasker 427).

On the other hand, the film can be seen as the director’s counter gaze towards the expectation of western viewers immediately after *East Palace, West Palace*. On the cover of the film jacket, a torn-apart image comprising the half faces of the two female characters suggests a conflicted affiliation, which has induced unnecessary reference to the motif of homosexuality as seen in *East Palace, West Palace*. The film does suggest Tao Lan’s female identity through the lipstick anecdote; yet it at most conveys a homosociality between women, shown in the film as a warm sisterhood. In a subtle but sophisticated way the films play the two roles of subversion and submission, as an international coproduction that effectuates the flow of global cultural-production, and simultaneously the first work for which the director sought permission from the government and co-produced with a state studio. A double-edged sword that corresponds to two different imperatives, the film is both realistic and dramatic, revisiting the bold sexual encounter between the policeman and the gay man seen in *East Palace, West Palace* and replacing its controversy with a cooperative sisterhood between the prison guard and the detainee.

Like the rest of Zhang’s early films, *Seventeen Years* depicts the dissolution of a special family formed by two separate households. The film recalls *Beijing Bicycle* by Wang Xiaoshuai in the sense that both attribute family discord to the collapse of

traditional familial ties and the invalidity of the household patriarch. The conflicts between the two sisters in *Seventeen Years* reflect the squabbles between the two parents and their problematized marriage. Contrary to the purported *guanxi* discourse, from the onset the film questions the leitmotif of family union reacted to from both the personal level and from the state. What the lawmakers envision, when they initiate the amendment allowing prisoners to go home, is the social binding effect of including everyone into the communist family, something they wishfully announce, without giving consideration to the model prisoners' intention. Returning home, as a way to appeal to and incorporate even felony prisoners, organizes the government's effort of uniting the dissidents.

The film shows how the prison guard rescues the prisoner by escorting her home in an affective and symbolic way. Inasmuch as she unites the torn-apart family members and makes the two parents apologize to their daughter, she is playing the role of the Party—both as the authority to resort to and the savior. Compared with the policeman in *East Palace, West Palace*, femininity gives Chen Jie the demeanor of a counselor and nurturer instead of an official. She is assimilated into the imagery of the Chinese New Year sent-down members from above as showcased in CCTV's New Year news report. At that time of the year, the central government leaders will visit the poor, the old, the widowed and the veterans who are unable to enjoy a family reunion. As the apex of the news report, those who have been visited will comment on the benevolence of the political leaders and their comments usually are condensed into a motto—"the Party is the savior." Reiteration of the official language, enabled by the political leaders' benevolent gestures during the most valued traditional holiday, refurbishes the bond between the Party and the people.

In the case of *Seventeen Years*, the destroyed *guanxi* discourse is unable to amend the family discords and has to be enabled by the official rhetoric of civility and generosity. It is worth noting that Tao Lan did not want to go home to visit her family: the fact that she killed her half-sister makes her a traitor of the family whom none of the parents can accept. During her 17 year stay in prison, her parents never visit her. “Home,” as announced by the rehabilitation high official in the broadcast, is nothing but an empty concept. When she follows her memory and arrives at the location of her old apartment building, what she sees is a pile of dilapidated bricks—surprisingly, the two parents did not bother to inform her of their new address. Chen Jie advises Tao Lan to go back home when Tao is unwilling to, and, in order to consolidate her decision, accompanies her the whole way, including searching for the new address of her parents. When the household cannot solve their cacophony, Chen Jie, as the state representative, intervenes and admonishes the parents to forgive their daughter.

However, this film is not a redaction of the CCTV Chinese New Year news report. When the household cannot solve their own problems with the “*guanxi*” discourse—the social and political dimension of the family tie, neither can the authoritarian and totalitarian state. Soon after the tragic homicide, the film transits from family disaster to the disarrayed scene of female prisoners rushing out to the crowded washroom, as if to draw a parallel between the chaos taking place in the two different spaces. Before the women prisoners leave the rehabilitation center for their hometowns, they are required to recite the laws and regulations they learnt in the prisons, including “do no abuse the weak, no fighting, no cursing, do not threaten fellow inmates, do not sabotage production, do not damage state property...” As the enforcer of the recitation, Chen Jie remains on the

left side of the screen while the prisoners obediently sit on the right. When the prisoners recite the decrees, Chen stands in front of them and looks encouraging. In opposition, the prisoners do not appear enthusiastic about the content of their reciting. What they are supposed to know, “do not tell lies, always tell the truth,” because of poor punctuation, is retold as “do not tell” and a separate line, “lies always tell the truth.” In a witty trick the director plays with the authorities about the reversed relation between truth and lies. The act of reciting, reminiscent of that occurred during Mao’s era when everyone across the nation was asked to recite Mao’s words, was meant not to (critically) process but (passively) internalize the decrees. The prisoners are at most copying the words, mechanically and roughly, and fail the mission of reiterating the official language.

Participating in the act of reciting, Chen Jie is both a passive enactor of the routine power-operation and a highly-regarded authority whose order the prisoners have to obey. Chen’s later choice of sending Tao Lan home is equivocal: it serves for the official rhetoric of helping the once-strayed to return to the right track and meanwhile stands in for a personal expression of sympathy. Similar to Zhang’s earlier work, *East Palace, West Palace*, the representative of the Party is ambiguous and her sympathetic attitude to the prisoner suggests a complicated relationship between the state and the rebel. Zhang Yuan shows not only the participatory agency of the oppressed but also the frailty of the government official. Chen Jie’s personal life and her thoughts are never revealed in the film except for her brief discussion about her father during an intimate moment while having dumplings with Tao Lan. At the end of the film, after watching Tao’s family get together, Chen Jie quietly leaves their house and walks alone in the

night, her face showing a complex emotion of loss, relief and sorrow, evocative of the last appearance of the policeman in *East Palace, West Palace*.

Zhang's films reverse the power relationship between the authority figure and the oppressed rebel by leaning to the individualized decisions of the state agents and by unveiling their perplexed innate self. In view of the police imagery in independent films, the cinematic representation of the CCP has undergone tremendous changes. In Chen Kaige's *Farewell, My Concubine*, for example, the Party that dictated the direction of history and manipulated the life of those individuals was presented as a mysterious voice coming through the lighted window of the prison cell. What the new generation sensitively captures are the individual participants of the central power machine, especially the policemen. The police figures in Jia ZhangKe's films are ordinary folks whose household matters, such as taking care of the grandchild, merge with their police duties. In *Xiao Wu*, the policeman investigating Liang Xiaowu's theft case has to do his work at home with his son running around. In *Wushan Yunyu*, the policeman is busy preparing his wedding while also investigating the alleged "rape" case.

Aside from representing the marginalized and the oppressed as subjects, a point expounded in Chapter II and Chapter III, independent directors personalize the presence of the central authority and in this way demystify its power. Instead of being questioned and interrogated, the rebel redefines the state agent as an individual who is no less confounded. The filmmakers' desire to return to the state is intertwined with the requisite of rereading the state authority. Returning and collaborating with the government, for many directors, does not mean the waning of their rebellious edge or a strategic move to get around the stringent censorship, but instead indicates the endeavor to reinterpret their

relationship with the state on the premise of a personalized, individualized or even humanitarian state image.

**Wang Xiaoshuai: *Frozen* (1997) and *In Love We Trust* (2007)**

Wang Xiaoshuai was another director who was on the Chinese Film Bureau's blacklist. As what happened to the early works of Zhang Yuan, the shooting process for Wang's film, *Frozen*, had to be delayed because of the intervention of Chinese authorities. The film was smuggled out of the country and Wang was forced to use the pseudonym "Wu Ming" (literally "Anonymous") in order to make this film. Based on a news report about an artist's attempt at suicide, the film follows a young performance artist, Qi Lei, who is determined to create a masterpiece by demonstrating various renditions of the death ritual. *Frozen* was originally entitled *The Great Game*, reflecting how the artist and his performance in front of the public function as a manipulation of death.<sup>14</sup>

Performance artists explore different ways to signal their emotional reactions to the social realities in the post revolutionary era, which defines the overall thematic concern of the film: the artists are acting on a keen eagerness to locate the meaning of art and life at the risk of social ridicule, police crackdowns or even their lives. Qi Lei's art pursuit, however, is constantly interrupted by his uncertainty about the relation between "meaning," "art performance" and "public presentation." In addition to Qi's death performance, the film encapsulates two other artists who perform the act of eating soap and vomiting to articulate the idea of repulsion (*exin*). During their demonstration, spectators on the spot use cameras to record the process. In a detached narrative, the film shifts the point of view from the audience, enacted by the cameras they hold, to Qi Lei

who quietly observes the scenes presented in front of him. While watching other artists performing, Qi starts to doubt his own art and relocates the “truth” and meaning he has been searching for in his personal relationship: the camera immediately cuts from the soap-eating performance to Qi Lei passionately making out with his girlfriend in the car. At one point, after witnessing a school girl’s suicide—a real life anecdote of “death”—Qi Lei told his girlfriend that he wanted to quit his performance of death rituals.

According to Peggy Phelan, “performing oneself necessarily entails cultural visibility, and visibility is necessarily a desirable goal for subjects seeking to reject or transform their position of marginality.”(Amelia Jones 6) And, “performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participated in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance.”(Phelan 147) Qi Lei’s disbelief of the performance artists’ veracity points to the autonomy of performance art as analyzed by Phelan: Qi used to be a painter and then transfers to performance art because, to him, body itself can convey concepts without the medium as needed by other art forms. The immediate affinity between body and meaning gives performance art an advantage that has been sought by avant-garde artists in excavating meanings in personal acts and actions. That is, performance art helps to define the subjectivity of an individual, as a counter-discourse to consuming social and political imperatives that have entrapped their existence. “Recording,” in its complicity with the mechanism of repeating the power machine, disqualifies the independence of the artists trying to record their performance. The eagerness of other artists trying to participate in the “circulation of representations of representations,” enabled by technology, emphasizes Qi Lei’s anxiety over his representation of “truth.”

Tonglin Lu, nonetheless, provides a positive understanding of “filming” as a new form of recording, as he observes that “the process of visualizing the performative introduces not only performance art, but also independent filmmaking... The intertextual transgression, therefore, mobilizes the artists, performative and cinematic, from margin to center, from personal to public, and from presentation to interpretation.”<sup>15</sup> He holds that the filmic form continues to generate meaning at the point where the performative ends. The art form of film does not destruct the meanings in performance but assists in the transition from performance art to film production and from avant-garde to independent.

More than the subversive value contained in the performative, the film puts forward the dilemma of representation and expression, a dilemma the artist has to confront in the end. Qi Lei’s contemplation on the possibility of reestablishing his subjectivity through performance art and on the rejuvenating potential of death is coagulated into his relationship with his family, girlfriend and mentor. On a surface level, Qi Lei tries to discover and convey the meaning involved in the experience of death and its immediate consequence. After the performative attempt at death, he asks his mentor if he could go back to take a look. First, he makes a phone call to his sister but says nothing in the call. Then he goes to the art exhibition set up to commemorate him and is affected by the deep sadness of his girlfriend over his “death.” Tonglin Lu points out that the film sacrifices the feelings of the female characters to fulfill the artist’s “masculine” mission. Upon seeing his girlfriend from outside of the exhibition window, Qi Lei becomes aware of the cruelty in his acts, and during his visit to the fake “posthumous” world, he also discovers the hypocritical face of his mentor. He not only encounters the dark side of the

art circle but also comes to the realization of his own fakeness in pursuing death performance.

On a deeper level, Qi has always been doubtful about the possibility of acquiring truth and meaning through art performance. He realizes that his performance of death will be recorded, commemorated and become a chain in the repetition of the current system, thus failing his mission of launching an independent search for the truth. When staying in the reclusive temple after the death performance arranged by his mentor, Qi attempts a few metaphysical verbal exchanges with a mysterious old man living there, but receives no response. The question he raises is about the meaning of life, something he had consulted with a fortune-teller earlier. During that visit, the fortune-teller reminds Qi Lei that the importance of living a natural life supersedes any possible artistic values created by committing suicide.

Qi Lei's death in the end can be deemed as the conversion from the performance of bereavement to the reality of death, which cancels the gulf between representation and reality and, in a seemingly bizarre way, redeems his betrayal of his uninformed girlfriend. The real attempt at suicide is a both an extremist performance of his concept and a cancellation of the meanings associated with performance art. While Qi Lei pushes his performance to the extreme and eventually comingles representation and reality, the film is transmuted from a recording of the performative art to a reinterpretation of the realistic impulse in independent films, especially those taking verisimilitude and authenticity as the linkage between representation and truth. Being authentic to his girlfriend, to the exhibition patrons mourning over his death, and to his brother-in-law—who bets on his death in order to charge a high price for his paintings— displaces Qi's original plan of

acting out all the death rituals. The meaning of the performative is taken over by the meaning of being authentic, against a suspicious crowd questioning the sincerity of artists and exploiting the meaning of art creations, and the shattered art is restored in the reality of death. The ending speaks to the satirical post-1989 atmosphere where the ontological trust between the state and the collective totality of “people,” the union between the Party and the nation are destroyed. The film turns on the sociopolitical mandate of being real: whereas Qi Lei’s art performance fails to register the tie between sincerity, authenticity and subjectivity, his eventual death makes up for this deficiency.

The four different forms of death ceremony as performed by Qi Lei coincide with the natural seasons and betoken the multifaceted sociopolitical meanings of death. Aside from alluding to T.S. Elliot’s *Wasteland*, which chronicles various death ceremonies mourning the end of the world, the film builds on the semantic corpus of “death” and “rebirth” by referring to seasonal festivals in Chinese traditions. The ceremony of being buried in the earth alive, taking place in the summer, is brimming with the connotation of national trauma caused by historical holocausts and in this sense publicizes Qi Lei’s artistic statement. Furthermore, Qi Lei has been extraordinarily ponderous in selecting public locations for his art presentations and renders them integral parts of the art form he wants to convey. The locations include streets, public squares, a quiet corner of a Buddhist park, a bustling market and on the walls of high buildings where Qi Lei climbs up to hang a vertical sign. Probably more central than the act of art performance is the effort to publicize the existence of the artists, via their bodies, blood, wounds and bruises.

The film shows that self-utterance, even in an artistic way and involving different locations, is unable to establish one’s identity. For his multiple attempts at suicide, Qi Lei

is sent to the mental hospital, accompanied by his artist friend. When the doctors come out to get the patient, the talkative artist friend is mistakenly captured by the doctors. In order to convince the doctors that he is not Qi Lei, the artist tries various ways to prove that he is sane: he attempts to show the doctors his I.D. and yet he forgot to bring it; then he starts to talk in his hometown accent to confirm that he is from the Northeastern area instead of Beijing. He tells the doctors that he must not be Qi Lei since the guy who is supposed to be sent to the mental hospital is from Beijing, as the doctors already know. However, the more he tries to confirm his sanity, the more suspicious the doctors become. Without an official I.D. issued by the state, the loci of accent fails to define his identity, as much as Qi Lei's efforts of demarcating public locations for his art expression only get him into trouble.

Compared with the performance artists in Jia Zhangke's films, whose shows impart a passive reflection of social changes and the impetus of commercialism, for Qi Lei and his artist friends, performance requires the most heart-felt sincerity and the utmost directness. The film features an alternating point of view that blurs the facets of the truth behind what is performed and disclosed: by using a voiceover narrating Qi Lei's life, no one, including the audiences, is sure about why Qi decides to pursue death performance; in the end the narrator says that Qi's dead body has been found under a tree and his death is reported in a news report. The mixture of points of view is enacted as various perspectives intervening into the main story. The role of the narrator and the trustworthiness of his narration are questionable. The audiences do not know who the narrator is; neither are they assured of the relation between the narrator and the narrated protagonist. Qi Lei's mentor, Lao Lin, is the only character who understands Qi Lei's

decision, and in that sense he is the only truth holder in the film, until the end when it is disclosed that his soulful advice serves solely for personal interest. Instead of using an omniscient perspective favored by many realistic independent features, *Frozen* unfolds each layer of the story from a certain character's perspective, including the few times that Qi Lei observes the performance of other artists and the "posthumous" world.

Insomuch as Qi Lei's intention of performing death and then committing suicide is cloaked behind various and often conflicting perspectives, the "truth" that has been sought by him in art creation is suppressed by narratives about the viewpoints of other characters. While Qi's mentor aims to exploit his death, Qi's sister is confused by his heedless choice. She laments that these young kids have no life experience and only seek death, a sentiment similar to the accusation levied by the Fifth Generation against the younger generation: the youngsters did not experience the trauma of national history but are trapped in a void that is lacking any collective significance. In the film, the pursuit of performance artists, as extension of the 1980s youth culture, takes up the collective mission of rebuking both the imposing accusation of the self-conceived older generation and the void they have been living in. The ontological and epistemological "truth" is directly associated with its sociopolitical dimension, against the parameters of China's enlightenment project. The years of the early 1990s, in its swift leap forward to free market and commercialism, were filled with breakages from communist belief and from the government-controlled economy. The buzz of wealth accumulation successfully transferred the role of the state, from leader of the search for "truth" to policy-maker that regulates the money-making movement. Qi Lei realizes that the interpretation of the death performance and its truth value, depends on an age that has been lost and replaced

by full-scale commercialism. As a betrayed and forsaken past finds its expression only in death, the demise of the body marks the artist's final expression.

As a matter of fact, the motif of death as a refuge, remedy, and revenge for the nation's betrayal of its own past, permeates movies made in the late 1990s. In the popular novel *Lan Yu* and the so-named film based on it, the protagonist dies from a car accident when he finally listens to his lover and enjoys a lifestyle brought by wealth. As Michael Berry remarks:

Lan Yu's struggle against so much of what Chen Handong stands for takes on new meaning as he dies not amid the violence of Tiananmen Square but years later, amid the rampant development overtaking China. Implied sacrifice for democratic freedom is transmuted, devolving into a random consequence of taking advantage of new forms of capitalist freedom. But was this not precisely the unspoken deal that the Chinese leadership made with its people in the wake of the crackdown trading people's political agency for new economic mobility and capitalist freedom?(M. Berry, *A History of Pain* 318)

By the same token, the death of Qi Lei marks the expression of a past time when avant-garde arts constituted an integral part of the nationwide enlightenment discourses. It is both a rebellion against the deal imposed by the Party, the deal erasing the agency of artists and intellectuals and pushing for market control, and a remedy for the concomitant breakage between representation and reality.

Wang Xiaoshuai's recent work, *In Love We Trust*, is included in this dissertation mostly to examine the career span of one of the most influential Chinese independent filmmakers. His later stage, after his ban was lifted by the Chinese government, has a large bearing on the general transition Chinese independent films are experiencing in the new era. *In love We Trust* suggests to us not merely the director's new artistic achievement, but more about the constructive mechanism of "self" and "sexuality" behind the presented images. The film competed for the Silver Bear award at the Berlin

Film Festival and won the best screenplay prize. Wang thanked the jury, saying the award would help “all of us who try to make independent films in China.”<sup>16</sup> According to reviews by film critics, this Chinese film seems to have nothing to do with China. The medical melodrama follows four middle-class strivers living in anonymous apartment blocks; it does not concern broader issues of Chinese life, but focuses on saving the life of a little girl.<sup>17</sup> In their opinion, the fact that these Beijingers have excellent health care and the same kinds of options enjoyed typically by Americans in the same circumstance makes the film less interesting than it otherwise might be.<sup>18</sup>

Breaking away from the Fifth Generations’ model of subscribing to the oriental exotic, new Chinese films aiming for the common ground of humanism similarly is put in a shaky situation. This film and its global recognition exemplify how established Chinese independent directors co-opt to the new condition and endeavor to make Chinese films whose artistic value, rather than political inferences, speaks for their independent stance. *In love We Trust* explores the artistic layers of cinematic realism by molding semantic and semiotic coincidences that transcend the surface verisimilitude of everyday life. The film opens with a tracking shot of the heroine’s trip to the apartment she tries to rent out. For various justifications, many clashing against each other, none of the potential tenants ends up renting it, a narration resembling Tsai Mingliang’s *Vive l’Amour* (1994) in which the disinterested real estate manager fails to sell the apartment but finds its use in her casual sex with a new hookup. Taking place in different cosmopolitan settings—one in Taipei and the other in Beijing—these similar narratives indicate different meanings. Departing from Tsai’s somewhat ontological anxiety over interpersonal alienation in the urban setting, Wang conjugates the central import of maternal love and fills the sex scene

with familial values. The narration of real estate development and apartment renting encapsulates an urban reality under construction and renovation, at the crossroads when Chinese independent films are facing an uncertain future. As a prominent forerunner of independent filmmaking in China, Wang expands the spectrum of the Chinese reality from the subaltern social classes, migrant workers, marginal artists, to the less edgy middle-class households.

Far from providing a surface reality, Wang's new feature continues to make use of the uncanny effect conveyed by narrative coincidence and semiotic doubling. Whereas coincidence is commonly used in melodrama to propel plot development, it is shown in Wang's films as inexplicable entities intervening in the creation of meaning creation. In *Beijing Bicycle*, Gui and Lian meet with each other primarily because of the mystical working of "fate"—one happens to buy the other's bike from a underground market and the other happens to find this bike among millions of bicycles—a probability one would not expect to happen often. In *In Love We Trust*, the perseverance of Mei Zhu resembles the country boy in *Beijing Bicycle* who insists on finding his bike against everyone's opposition. Her idiosyncratic insistence leads to the unidirectional development of the film and suggests a semiotic control: as Mei Zhu jumps to the conclusion that the only way to save her daughter is to have sex with her ex-husband, Xiao Lu, the film expels other possibilities and entangles the characters in the moral turmoil caused by the dire option. The desire of a 17-year-old teen for a bike is transformed into the determination of a middle-aged working woman to save her daughter; both are characterized by their single-mindedness against all the surrounding obstacles.

The opening shot is characteristic of a camera located behind the windshield of a moving car and then panning to both sides; the car windows set the frame of the screen, giving an eye-level portrait of the forest-like skyscrapers, automobiles and pedestrians. Among the pedestrians on the streets is a mother holding her daughter, which forebodes the central motif of maternal love. Immediately after Mei Zhu's unsuccessful real estate work, the film cuts to her ex-husband's prolonged arguments in the construction sites with his subordinates about paying money. Empty construction buildings, isolated and abandoned, have been pertinent to Wang's earlier films and serve to illustrate the characters' living conditions and mental states. While the construction has to be put on hold because of financial difficulties, Xiao Lu's masculine potency in the bedroom is also stalled: distracted by his workplace difficulties, he time and again apologizes to his wife in bed for not being a man for her. For Mei Zhu, the ethic dilemma of disobeying a moral standard, i.e. having sex with her ex-husband for the sake of their daughter, parallels her inability to rent out the apartment. She later decides to mate with her ex-husband in the empty apartment that cannot attract any tenant, a narrative speaking to the insistence of the director as much as that of the heroine. After all, by working with commercial ventures, Wang Xiaoshuai transits his filmmaking from desolation to meaning-making, from the image of despair artists attempting death rituals to the confirmation of a new baby being born.

The director juggles with the tension between theatricality and verisimilitude, enduing everyday life, mundane activities, and simple emotions with bigger social meanings. Tunnel vision has been used twice in the film, both in the hospital: first when the doctors informed Mei Zhu about her daughter's severe health situation and later at the

same spot, when the doctor tells her that she cannot be a donor for her daughter. The turmoil of individuals is put under macroscopic inspection, in a long shot set in the empty hallway of the hospital. The tunnel shot conveys philosophical pondering over the intensity of maternal love, which unfortunately goes unrecognized and falls victim to the easy designation of “melodrama.” In reading a film made by directors from mainland China, it seems that, no valid interpretation exists for ontological questions related to the urban space. If the narratives about empty constructions are not superficial gimmicks mistaken for bigger meanings, then we have missed the director’s deeper intention, or the interpretative potentials a new independent filmmaking practice opens up.

Central to the narrative is the conflict between the moralistic dilemma caused by the necessitated extramarital sexuality and the undeniable legitimacy of a mother wanting to save her daughter. As if to mingle the apparent discrepancy of different motifs, Wang introduces the multifaceted significance of sexuality, as many other independent filmmakers have been doing. In this case, sexuality does not serve purely to accentuate the daily life of ordinary people; rather, it becomes a publicized and contested arena in the context of global filmmaking. As an index of a nation and a director’s openness to the individualist quest—sexual openness is perceived as the level of modernity, to a nation, as well as to an individual. The more personalized a national cinema is in treating sexual images, the more advanced the nation is considered on the modernization ladder. If, for the Fifth Generation, sexualized woman on screen is (mis)interpreted as the oppressed oriental nation, personalized experiences of sexuality in films made by the younger generation are stuck in the association between modernity and sexual openness—a discourse prevalent in the international exchange of art house cinema.

Sexuality in Fifth Generation films takes on the deformed manners of arranged marriage, kidnap, incest, and illicit affairs, and allegorizes different traumas the nation underwent. In *In Love We Trust*, sexual behavior assumes the sacred meaning of “saving life” and, different from the prior generation, it is not to save a nation’s destiny, but one’s nuclear family members, making the film personal enough to shed the charge of national allegory. The film cuts off the habitual association of sexuality with national vicissitude and assigns it to the most intimate side of personal life. Compared with his earlier work, *Beijing Bicycle*, the emphasis transits from the body politics of labor exploitation to the politics of sexuality, which seeks the communicative function of sexual images. Both the eagerness to transgress and the inability to do so capture the director’s often deterred intention to expand the spectrum of independent films, and to transnationalize Chinese cinema.

As stated beforehand, *In Love We Trust* is not so much favored in international film festival, and the caliber of authenticity and sincerity abates its domestic reception. The film, with a plot considered remote from ordinary people’s life, is harshly ridiculed among Chinese audiences: no matter how well the script seems to emboss the most immediate human emotions of maternal love, the story is deemed outlandish and didactic. Furthermore, the increased tonality of sexual presence ensnares the reception of the film both in the domestic market and in international film festivals. The lukewarm response of art-film goers can be explained by their diminished approval for an overly-universal film that does not look regional enough, especially in comparison with *Beijing Bicycle*, where the archaic imperial palace and the cramped Beijing-style courtyards mark the identity of the nation. The film attempts at the interpretative potential heralded by *Hero*, in which

Zhang Yimou utilized the first emperor of China to lay out the message of world peace—a universal language that goes across national borders. For Wang Xiaoshuai, a clear and didactic message, packed underneath the trademark of realistic life depiction, does not help him in cross-border communication. The perennial dilemma between playing exotic and playing universal haunts directors who have an eye for global recognition.

**Lou Ye: *Summer Palace* (2006)**

In the popular memory of the June Fourth, the Beijing spring of 1989 was marked by dreams of democracy with “images of student hunger strikers, the lone nameless hero who held back a line of tanks,”<sup>19</sup> the chief commander of the students’ Tiananmen Square Committee, Chai Ling, who pleads to the western media in tears, and “militiamen marching into the square in the early morning of June Fourth.”<sup>20</sup> But spring 1989 was also a time of love and romance. One of the most famous romantic events took place in the square in May, when a student leader, Li Lu, from Nanjing University married his girlfriend, Zhao Min, a fellow student from Nanjing. Li Lu declared that “in my life I’ve experienced everything but sex and marriage. I may die at any time. I owe myself this pleasure.”<sup>21</sup> Under the recommendation of Chai Ling and with an “official marriage certificate” issued by student leader Wuer Kaixi, Li Lu and Zhao Min were married and spent their honeymoon in a small tent in the center of Tiananmen Square amid a sea of student protesters (Thomas 248). This episode not only renovated the narrative pattern of “revolution plus romance,” but also marked the personal undertone of the Tiananmen incident.

Lou Ye's *Summer Palace* is the first Mainland feature to show events around Tiananmen in the summer of 1989 and also the first to feature full frontal nudity.<sup>22</sup> Because the film incorporates footage of the Tiananmen Square demonstrations and wasn't screened for Chinese officials, Lou Ye was banned from making movies for five years, and the government demanded that all copies of the film be confiscated. The film's early scenes sketch out the youth-like euphoria of the late 1980s when China opened up to the West and started to embrace more individual freedoms. The protagonist, Yu Hong, a 17-year-old female student in the northeastern town of Tumen in the Heilongjiang province, has just been accepted into BeiQing University (an innuendo to Beijing University and Tsinghua University). Before she leaves for college she loses her virginity outdoors to her high-school boyfriend. During her study in Beijing, she makes friends with a girl in her dormitory, Li Ti, who teaches Yu Hong how to feel the desire of her own body. Yu also meets the love of her life, Zhou Wei, in the dance floor where Beijing students and intellectuals meet for romance and heated political discussions.

The matriculation of Yu Hong and Zhou Wei comes at an extraordinary moment of the pro-democracy demonstrations in Tiananmen Square and their violent suppression by the Chinese government.<sup>23</sup> In the whirlpool of history, Yu Hong tries to define her subjectivity through multiple ways, including monologue, the habit of keeping a diary that retells her sexual encounters, and the meanings she locates in sexual behavior. As pointed out by film critics, in mapping the intersection between Eros and politics, the delirious scenes of dorm-room sex and nightclub dancing convey more sensation than narrative or psychological meaning.<sup>24</sup> The director is not trying to reflect on the recent Chinese past so much as communicating its texture. He resorts to a cinematic language

that does more than summarize the important events of a confusing decade. Instead, he “distills the inner confusion — the swirl of moods, whims and needs—that is the lived and living essence of history.”<sup>25</sup> The texture of senses and sensations dominates the film: as if for the first time, Chinese films, as a form of national cinema, are not merely reduced to political readings. As in *Suzhou River*, Lou has been one of the Chinese directors who have tried to explore the alternative potential of cinematic realism that is often composed of sensationalism. Voice-over, monologues, personal diaries, idiosyncratic Lou styles, reflect an effort to feel the chaos of the time as it is, rather than condense it into a predetermined narrative pattern or a discursive paradigm.

Lou explores the different forms of “I” that is distant from the charge of the Party and tries to picture the texture of the self. Permeated with the feel of confusion and chaos, the film delves into the private life and psyche of each individual through the lens of an extraordinary time period. More importantly, “I” exists as a female subject, a subject of desire and the captive of national disasters who constantly seeks definition. Yu Hong both seeks to be defined by her relationships with men and at the same time refuses this definition, as Zhou defines his relationships with different female partners. The vortex of social changes dictates people’s lives and smashes the dreams they held when they were young. Romantic love, liberated from public domain, does not secure its position; instead, it becomes threatening, taking the form of destructive interpersonal struggles. The philosophies read during college that advocate personal freedom failed to fulfill the promise of a bright future, and the notion of “love” becomes forever unattainable.

In one of her many diary-like voiceovers, Yu confesses that she is as much frightened as exhilarated by the force of love she feels for Zhou. After one long sack

session, their dialogue slips into exchanges like: “I want us to break up.” “Why?” “Because I can’t leave you.” The heroine is detached from her strong sexual and emotional attachment to Zhou, the man she loves, and later the multiple men she has sex with, a paradox disclosed by her chaotic personal life, as well as in her vocalized diaries. In her monologue, she narrates that having sex, especially with different men, becomes her venue of seeking communication. That is, sex is not only the oozing of libido, or a psychoanalytical release but a saturated expression of frustration and a bold way of communication, in a time when an isolate self has lost its connection with a common and intelligible ground.

With its full scope of personal sensation and political intervention, *Summer Palace* differs from *In the Heat of the Sun* (1994), directed by Jiang Wen, which also draws an analogy between revolutionary energy and teenage libido. It seeks a third dimension, the individual outside of the political discourse, who resorts to barely readable sketches of his/her innate self rather than to the ontological security offered by the nation. The narrative of Yu Hong and Zhou Wei, carried away by their romantic conflicts and oblivious to the political events, reveals the effort of establishing personal identifications without relying on the communist past and the Party line. It is not surprising that, in this consideration, *Summer Palace* does not dwell upon political deliberations, albeit the apparent historical background of the June Fourth.

Due to the high sensitivity of the political event, most critics, and the censor bureau alike, overweigh the very brief political footage in the film and ignore the personal struggles the director tries to explore. The female protagonist barely attends to her surroundings, which are permeating with political fever. Most of the time, she is only

obsessed with her innate feelings for her personal affairs. Touted as a June Fourth film, however, the only historical reference was an inserted footage that interrupts Zhou Wei and Li Ti's lovemaking. Amongst the many different ways to look at the relation between the individual and the nation-state, this film situates itself in the private space of self expression and eventually portrays the failure of that expression. It is only years later recalling their past experience in Beijing that the characters realize that political events were internalized in their memories; with the filter of time, the devastating effect of national history becomes most noticeable than it was. Questioning what really happened between the two lovers, the love and sex they shared in the shadowed dorm-room leads to their separation and reunion, and a new look at the role history played in their life.

Sexual behavior taking place in the private domain helps Yu Hong to shape a union with men representing different discourses, be it Beijing intellectuals, the moralistic middle-class man, or the wealthy businessman. Since the first intercourse with her boyfriend in Tumen, the "union," the mania of attaching to a tangible existence, becomes increasingly threatening. The film opens with Yu Hong's voiceover in the dark, "I feel a breeze in a summer night. I don't know how to name it, so I call it love." To seek her own identity and to be identified by others causes her promiscuous relationships, each of which is a union trying to reach a certain definition. The subsequent disillusion and confusion experienced by Yu Hong bares out the difficulty of seeking an identity in a new area: the subject is liberated from her historical lineage, and yet has not found an innate value adequate to name her own life experiences. The trauma caused by the sudden demise of the enlightenment project for social, political, and personal progression engenders a melancholia permeating many independent films. At the end of the film

when Zhou Wei is back from Germany after 12 years, the lovers find that they have drifted apart: they cannot be together anymore, not simply because time passes and they have changed, but because their past relationship cannot be properly defined in the current time frame, when secular commercialism overtakes the political and romantic fever.

Hong Ying's novel, *Summer of Betrayal*, the first full-length fiction about the Tiananmen event, offers a cogent angle to look at Lou Ye's work. The novel narrates the story of a female student fleeing away from the victims in the square to her boyfriend only to find him in bed with another woman—his wife. The dual betrayals, by her government and by her lover, are similar to what Yu Hong in *Summer Palace* has experienced: shocked by the massacre in Tiananmen, Yu runs back to Zhou Wei's dorm for consolation and catches him having sex with her friend Li Ti. The ambiguous film title alludes to what happened in the infamous Summer Palace, the imperial palace used as a summer resort about 100 years ago, when the eight allied imperial powers betrayed the Manchu court.<sup>26</sup> In Hong Ying's novel, poetry also takes up a major part in the heroine's life: under political suppression, poetry was the only way to express herself. In the farewell party taking place at the end of the novel, when the old poetry by Liu Ying is narrated with music, she has an epiphany that the only meaning that can be found is through the corporeal self. She stands before the body art on display, strips naked, and begins a wild sexual orgy with Yan Heituo, to bring out a physical manifestation of the symbolic union between her words and Yan's music. The novel concludes with the unbridled sexual acts that mark the transition from poetry to sex. As Liu Ying struggles with the powerlessness of her poetry, "she finds a new kind of power or autonomy

through sexuality. As the state infringes upon her personal space, making art all but impossible, the only resource she can turn to is the physical.”<sup>27</sup> “[All] that is left is the biological self. In the end, sex is her only weapon.”<sup>28</sup>

However, Lou Ye’s film unveils the predicament that sex is no more empowering than art forms or personal expression such as diaries. As the narrative unfolds, the more Yu Hong has sex, the further she is away from “love”—a breeze in a summer night that could not be properly named. Seduction of Western music, Western philosophy and the allure of freedom is packaged together with “love,” and freedom surely entails liberty in the bedroom. In Zhou Wei’s on-and-off relationship with Yu Hong, the second female lead Li Ti first plays the role of mediator and then the saboteur, by sleeping with him. Li Ti later immigrates to Germany with her boyfriend and keeps her friendship with Zhou. On the morning after she sleeps with Zhou again, they sit in the patio, Zhou combing her long hair quietly. Suddenly, Li bursts out with a question, “So, what was between us in that summer of Beijing? ...What is this between us now?” The package imported to modern China, the combination of liberty and love, eventually cannot answer the female characters’ question about naming and proper positions. “What was between us” questions the sexual liaisons of Yu Hong with different men as well; it is also a lament for the time during which students were led by their ardent belief of Western values, including the summer “breeze” called “love.” Zhou Wei cannot give Li Ti an answer about their compulsive sex, which took place in the same dorm bed he slept in with Yu Hong; he is unable to define their past, not because of the passing of time, but because the present they are living in has cancelled the past.

The melancholy feeling persistent in many of Lou's films also haunts this film, especially because it is not about how the narrative develops into a future but instead about how the characters are going to redefine their past. The film as a whole shows the urgency of looking back to the past and redefines it from today's perspective. Not told retrospectively, however, the film devotes more time to the post-1989 era when the two lovers have left each other. As Zhou Wei resides in Germany with other Chinese intellectuals and local artists, they often question the meaning of the old time when they were young and ardently believed that a different system was going to happen. Zhou tells a German girl friend that his hometown is in China and that he has to go back there for his true love. His ultimate union with Yu Hong, assumed to be consummated sexually in Zhou's high-end hotel room, is far from satisfactory. They are not able to be together again, in the same way that the past cannot be relived, (re)defined or even confirmed.

In terms of the self positioning of the director in world cinema, Orientalism and self-display featured in the Fifth Generation<sup>29</sup> have been transmuted into the new generation's impulse of union—or something called transnationalism. These films cross borders with transnational production and global screening. Attending to both the niche international film market and the domestic art-creation circuit, the films seek to be understood by both domestic and Western audiences. The dreamy and sometimes hysterical film narrative and film language mirror the times in which the urban films are situated: in the trajectory from Gong Li's exotic, oppressed and erotic face to the constant sexual liaisons of the female lead with different men, Chinese cinema undergoes the conversion from ethnographical accounts to illustrations of a self afflicted by the imposed desire to identify with heterogeneous external imperatives.

The imagery of sexuality as seen in *Summer Palace* attests to how the Chinese independent is involved with the body politics of sexuality, one that builds a direct linkage between individualism, openness in sexual representations and a modernized film language. The most intimate aspect of personal life amplified on screen, it is assumed, will land a language significant enough to combat the dominant rhetoric of nation-state, a privatized language that is able to unify individuals across borders and defy generations. However, questions remain regarding whether or not Chinese cinema is increasingly internationalized and hence no longer subscribes to the appetite for exotica in the center-periphery paradigm of the West versus the East. One is also not certain about the discursive inferences for independent directors following the Western art-house cinema pattern of graphic sexuality standing for the profoundness of individuality.

Following the international hit by Ang Lee, *Lust, Caution* (2007), which garnered fat gross domestic box office returns, largely thanks to the very sexually-oriented film advertisement, established underground filmmakers have been more inclined to locate the importance of secular life in the imagery of sexuality.<sup>30</sup> From *Frozen*, *So Close to Paradise*, *Beijing Bicycle*, *Shanghai Dream*, to *In Love we Trust*, the conspicuous change in Wang Xiaoshuai's thematic concerns and cinematic styles speaks more than the director's pursuit of artistic diversity. The reiterating sexual intercourses in *Summer Palace*, as the female narrator claims, is meant to be a substitute for verbal communication. The inability of the heroine to express herself across opposite genders and different time periods of China, and to explain herself so that others understand her, results in her decision to have hasty sex instead. Sexual behavior, to her, becomes a replacement for interpersonal relation and is transformed from being physical to verbal.

Just as the female protagonists thought they accomplished the mission of communication by indulging in sexual presentation and representations, the directors assume the probability of employing sexual images to induce universal meanings. The heroine in *Summer Palace* is desperate to make herself understood and accepted by having sex with the male partners. However, as the trailer of the film remarks, the more they have sex, the farther away they are from love. The unattainable nature of “love,” here not simply the romantic affection but its abstract reference to one’s psyche, self, or self-position in the surrounding, speaks to the problematic of definition and representation.

To Li Ti, love is understood as one’s position in the flow of time, how one defines her encounter with others, as she asked Zhou Wei about the definition for their past physical relationship. The answer Zhou gives is “I don’t know,” as neither of them knows the proper definition for their romantic affair. Li Ti follows her question with suicide, a few days later, jumping off the top of a building while talking with a group of German artists about art creation. Her hysteric lifestyle in the summer of 1989 awaits no definition and hence no meaning decades later. Mourning over Li Ti’s suicide, Zhou Wei asks Li’s boyfriend if he ever really loved her; the latter cannot give an answer, just as Zhou cannot define his relationship with Li. When sexuality fails to transmit meanings, death follows: the death of Li Ti unveils the desperate desire of representation and definition, and the need for a proper naming has caused the eternal impossibility of representation. As in *Suzhou River*, Lou Ye once again shows his idiosyncratic prefix of setting “death” as the solution and sanction when naming is impossible. As the state hesitates over an appropriate name for the student protest in 1989, so that only the time

reference, “June Fourth,” remains usable and no mention of “political event” or “massacre” is allowed in official rhetoric, students involved find themselves living in a void that cancels the connection between their current life and their rebellious past.

The prominence of sexuality on screen in recent independent films is explained by a film industry built on mass consumption and large-scale recognition; it also underlines the status of national cinema in global competition. Sexuality in Chinese independent films involves multiple layers of meaning-making. In *East Palace, West Palace*, the motif and imagery of sexuality is a form of rebellion and identity-building closely intertwined with the identity of the state. In *In Love We Trust*, sexuality becomes the token of modern subjectivity that stages its presence for both domestic and international audiences, and announces the director’s statement of pulling down sexuality from the holy hall of national allegory. While *Postman*, as discussed in Chapter IV, successfully transforms sexuality into the oozing of political and social release, *Summer Palace* sketches the despair of definition and representation when sexuality becomes the last resort of body politics against national erasure and international encroachment.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Braester, *Painting the City Red: Chinese Cinema and the Urban Contract* 12.

<sup>2</sup> Cui Jian, *Like a Knife (Xiang yi ba daozi)*, music and lyrics by Cui Jian, in his album *Solution* (Beijing: zhongguo wencai shengxiang chuban gongsi), 1991.

<sup>3</sup> Refer to B er enice Reynaud, “Zhang Yuan’s Imaginary Cities and the Theatricalization of the Chinese Bastards,” in Z. Zhang ed. *The Urban Generation* 269-270.

<sup>4</sup> Refer to Chris Berry, “Staging Gay Life in China: Zhang Yuan and *East Palace, West Palace*,” Kam T. See, *Chinese Connections* 168.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>6</sup> Written on the jacket of the film's DVD.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Khoo, "Seventeen Years."

<sup>9</sup> Xudong Zhang gives a more detailed account of the sentimentalism of nostalgia during post-socialism period. See *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms* 222.

<sup>10</sup> Chua 589.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Rayns, "Provoking Desire" 26.

<sup>14</sup> M. Berry, "Wang Xiaoshuai: Banned in China," in *Speaking in Images: Interviews With Contemporary Chinese Filmmakers*.

<sup>15</sup> Tonglin Lu, "Working from the Margins," in *Chinese-language Film* 110.

<sup>16</sup> Wang, who is well-known outside China, won the Grand Jury Silver Bear Award at the 2001 Berlin Film Festival for his film, "Beijing Bicycle." He won the Special Jury Prize for "Shanghai Dreams" at the 2005 Cannes Film Festival. "Shanghai Dreams" made more than five million yuan (685,000 U.S. dollars) at the box office China in 2005, which was considered reasonably successful for a small-budget independent movie.

<sup>17</sup> Willmott, review of *In Love We Trust*.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> M. Berry, *A History of Pain* 310.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Elley, review of *Summer Palace*.

<sup>23</sup> Scott, "Those Chaotic College Years in Beijing."

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> The Old Summer Palace (圆明园) was destroyed by British and French troops in 1860 during the Second Opium War. Empress Dowager Cixi built the Summer Palace (颐和园) near the Old Summer Palace, but on a much smaller scale. During the 1900s Boxer Rebellion (义和团), Cixi sought the protection of western nations against the boxers. The consequence, however, is the destruction of the Summer Palace. The film title might have more than one meaning due to this complex historical background.

<sup>27</sup> M. Berry, *A History of Pain* 313.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> For a detailed analysis in this regard, refer to Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*.

<sup>30</sup> The trend of filmmaking, that is, what topics would attract more global attention, seems to at work here. Not long ago it was proved by Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* being followed by Zhang Yimou's *Hero*, *Curse of the Golden Flowers*, Chen Kaige's *The Promise*, Feng Xiaogang's *The Banquet*. These films collaboratively fuel the martial art heat. Years later, Ang Lee's success with *Lust, Caution* once again ignites the used-to-be underground filmmakers to explore the daily life politics in the bedroom.

CHAPTER VI  
ONLINE SPACE AND THE DV GENERATION

Pierre Bourdieu's theory on the field of cultural production opens the potential to look at independent filmmaking in China as a dynamic and open-ended circle that goes beyond minute textual analysis. Bourdieu divides cultural production into four relatively autonomous fields: *habitus*, as the result of a long process of formal and informal education and a feel for the game that lasts through one's lifetime, derives from objective social relationships; *field* is conceived as a hierarchically organized social formation that is relatively autonomous, has its own laws, and is determined by the positions of its agents; *cultural capital* is understood as the acquisition of knowledge and skills that results in lucrative positions within any given field and *symbolic capital* means fame, prestige, authority that comes from honors and awards. All fields contain similar structural oppositions between the dominant and the dominated, or the powerful and the powerless, which are maintained by different types of capital. In addition, each field is encompassed by a force of power within which the field of cultural production remains dominated in its relation to the economic and political fields. An interesting point noted by Bourdieu is that each field contains a heteronymous pole, a part influenced by the outside logics, and an autonomous pole, a part governed by the logic unique to the field.<sup>1</sup>

To build on Bourdieu's proposition, Wendy Larson accentuates the imperative of "capital" and "cultural capital," that is, the relationship between "money and movies," faced by Third-World filmmakers. Film production, as a collaborative enterprise, requires vast resources, which removes the possibility for film to function as an independent field.

More specifically, Third-World film needs capital from First-World countries. Thus “parts of a film may respond to... demands from international investors, while other parts are calculated with the domestic audience in mind.” Furthermore, when Third-World films are deemed as “markers of cultural identity,” the label of “independent” becomes a selling-point to exotica-seeking transnational consumers, a menace that independent filmmakers have to confront. The success of Chinese films in international festivals does not mean the waning of euro-centralism: “Europe has the advantage of many film festivals with different visions of Asian cinema, including some of the world’s most stereotypical [visions of Chinese cinema]. ... Chinese filmmakers deserve a chance to tell their stories too, not just the stories that feed an anxiety of a rising China.”(Cremin)

Most existing research on China cinema focuses either on the filmic texts or on the industry, while limited attention is paid to the socio-cultural contexts related to the processes of distribution and exhibition.<sup>2</sup> Bourdieu points out that “in a field whose autonomy is developed, distinction between issues of production and consumption becomes blurred” because consumers of cultural products are often themselves producers of those products.<sup>3</sup> Recent independent filmmaking in China witnesses the increasing merge between cultural production and cultural consumption, with the thriving consumption activities in online forums, film clubs, and domestic film festivals. Especially, online film forums nurture a virtual public space where domestic audiences are engaged in the full cycle of film screening, viewing, exhibition and production, sustaining the independent stance of filmmakers.

James Donald and Stephanie Donald observe that some Chinese films offer the audience a unified viewing experience and manifest a “publicness”—a shared experience

of the cultural present. They posit that in the 1980s Chinese cinema constructed an imaginary space for people to reflect upon rural dislocation resulting from China's economic reform.<sup>4</sup> In light of their arguments, this chapter probes into the roles of various public spheres forged in the online viewing space, inaugurating from the nationwide sensation caused by Chen Kaige's fantasy epic, *The Promise* (2005). The production of a Chinese blockbuster involves the government's support of big-budget commercial films as well as the opposition voiced from the online community, encapsulated in the infamous website parody, "A Bloody Case Triggered by a Bun" (一个馒头引发的血案).

A shared understanding among filmmakers and film consumers of the urgency of realistic representation bridges the gap between the two fields, cultural production and consumption. The ascendancy of a domestic film viewing circle diversifies the promotion channels directors rely on. It also furthers industry transformation when more and more filmmakers and critics are opting for the development of a genre system and proposing a separate venue for independent films as seen in Western cinema. The lively exchange and conversion between cultural production and cultural consumption denote the increasing momentum Chinese independent cinema has been gaining. On its way towards the Chinese "indie," a new term pioneering filmmakers ardently adopt, the Chinese independent is growing into an autonomous field that aims for its own say in policymaking and market demarcation.

### **Online Space and the Participation of Public Discourse**

Film clubs in big cities, college film festivals, website downloads, internet film forums and pirate DVDs are the main channels by which the independent films are

distributed in China.<sup>5</sup> These channels collaboratively help to shape a domestic distribution route that begins to challenge the entrenched relationship between the government, the media and the public. The internet speeds up the formation of multiple ideologies on the basis of equal communication and provides directors with the opportunities to face their audience directly, though mostly in the virtual world. For them, this is another essential path to express their voice among the public, besides winning international awards.<sup>6</sup> As Zhang Zhen notes, “with the loosening of official control in the distribution and exhibition sectors and the boom in alternative venues other than state-owned cinemas, a whole cluster of new screen practice have been shaping a different kind of public sphere for moving images.”<sup>7</sup> In Zhang’s research trip back to China in 2001, he discovered the Yellow Pavilion Bar near the BFA, the Butterfly Swallow Movie Bar in Sanlitun, the Box Café by Tsinghua University, and so on. Many film clubs in Beijing are coordinated by an association called the Practice Society (shijianshe), which is actually inspired by the success of Jia Zhangke and his first filming circle.

Zhang’s study also pays close attention to private film viewing clubs in Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen. He observes that a general tendency of these film clubs is to stay in tune with the daily life and genuine concerns of ordinary people. By using digital video technology, these clubs open online discussion forums to encourage more amateur cinephiles to participate. Frequently, the film club will publish an open-ended question such as “what subject will you focus your lens on with your digital camera” to motivate forum users to chime in. Despite the unequal quality of film videos made by amateurs, these films clubs attempt to introduce a productive spectatorship that will participate not

merely in the production of films, but also in a critical intervention of the most important issues involved in filmmaking.

It is assumed that pirate DVDs constitute an important channel for the distribution of independent films in China. In Jia Zhangke's *Unknown Pleasures*, one of the protagonists, Bin Bin, seeks a pirate DVD titled *Xiao Wu* from a street-stall-seller. Hearing that the seller does not stock this kind of film, Bin Bin throws a tantrum: "why not sell some art-house movies?" This narrative, besides highlighting the style of self-reference favored by the director, points to the issue of rampant piracy in China. Whereas Walter Benjamin posits that films are not about "real" or "fake" and counterfeit does not apply to films, information analysts contend for the mobility of piracy in capitalistic development.<sup>8</sup> My research reveals that the demand for DVDs of independent films is not high enough to cover the already low cost of replication. A seller of pirate DVDs, as the one in *Unknown Pleasures*, would not be interested in stocking a cheap version of Chinese independent films. If there is ever a "process-oriented" relational framework for critical intervention, it is not found in piracy, but in online video sharing (including websites such as youtube.com, youku.com and tudou.com), urban film clubs, and film festivals (college, domestic and international).

The annual college student film festivals organized by several top-ranked liberal arts universities, including Beijing University, Beijing Normal University and Beijing Post Service University, provide participants with direct access to films never shown in public theatres. Zhang Zhen's field trip to private film clubs<sup>9</sup> shows that the majority of the film clubs not associated with the college setting are eventually dominated by pop culture (western imports, soft porn, for example), or even taken over by commercial KTV

bars. Among the many films the viewers can choose, not many club-goers will pick an independent feature. By contrast, college film festivals tend to harbor many of the most ground-breaking films and stage the early power struggles of independent filmmakers. Jia Zhangke's student work, *Xiaoshan Coming Home*, for example, received its first invitation from the council of the second college film festival held in Beijing Normal University. Even though the screening was stopped by film bureau officials, and Jia's work was replaced by a film of optimistic social descriptions, the invitation demonstrates to nascent directors the enthusiasm of college film festivals for their artworks. After the screenings, students can talk openly with the directors, who are thrilled at the opportunity to face their audiences directly.<sup>10</sup>

If in the cultural consumption market of China Chen Kaige is a brand and Jia Zhangke is another, the former enjoys a better market value. The relaxed policy of the government was meant to improve the reception of alternative films, but the result is a similar, if not worse, box office disaster. Website download was once a forced strategy for the viewers of independent films, but with the public release of these films, the issue becomes complicated. Box office records prove that general Chinese audiences are not willing to spend 20 yuan watching Jia Zhangke's new release even though many of them pay a doubled price for the blockbusters made by Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige. When the ban is lifted and the factor of curiosity is eliminated, who still watches Jia Zhangke; or to cite the phrasing of online forum users, why does Chinese cinema need Jia Zhangke? In my opinion, the unifying experience shared by online viewing groups allows for the nurturing of a tacit collectivism that not only challenges the disintegrating effect of the global capital impetus, but also delineates their conflicted positioning in the national

project of modernization. The disastrous box office of films made by “aboveground” directors, Jia Zhangke and Wang Xiaoshuai, is not equal to the disinterest of general audiences. Besides ardently seeking to download their film videos online, the audiences shower independent filmmakers with acclaims, if not money. Independent cinema helps them to demarcate a (sometimes idealized) private space, separating their real identity from their public role of disgruntled participants who pay a high premium to enter the game of power activated in the formation of Chinese blockbusters.

### **Case 1: A Parodied Promise**

Chen Kaige’s film, *The Promise*, caused a nationwide fiasco when it was released in China on December 15, 2005. Before the premiere, the film group waged an unprecedented box office battle with Peter Chan’s *Perhaps Love*. Soon after its release, an internet user, Hu Ge, made a parody video entitled “A Bloody Case Triggered by a Bun” and uploaded it to a popular video-sharing website. Borrowing the format of the TV show, “Legal Issues” (Fazhi jiemu), from a mainland TV channel, this short video re-edits clips from *The Promise* into a legal education show. It exposes the loopholes in the original plot and achieves maximum comic effect, thus the internet instantly bubbled up with laughter directed at the parodied film. In February of 2006, Chen Kaigei, argued back, “How can one be so shameless?” He claimed at the Berlin International Film Festival that he had sued Hu Ge for violating copyright, provoking the attention of the media and the public in China, who, however, unanimously sided with Hu Ge. In the end, Chen had to drop the legal case and Hu Ge became a hero.<sup>11</sup>

Olivia Khoo utilizes the theory of “interruption” to analyze the sensation of *The Promise*: “these online communities and forums allow spectators to register their reactions to the films against the viewpoints provided on ‘official’ websites and in government or corporate-sponsored media outlets.”<sup>12</sup> Yet by resorting to the overarching concept of an alternative viewpoint, Khoo fails to recognize the reasons behind forum users’ unfriendly reaction towards the films by Chen Kaige. She contends that the “interruption effect” caused by the awful CGI (computer-generated imagery) in *The Promise* awakens the audience to new realities and realisms as those failed CGI sequences intrude into the official story. She suggests that when the audiences are disrupted from full absorption in the story world they instead contemplate the (failed/failing) technology. This “time” of speculation and contemplation—“an alternative temporality intruding on the film”—indicates to the audiences a different kind of reality. In her ambivalent arguments, Khoo also links those “interruption” moments to the “new reality” in earlier cinema of the 1970s when films are deemed as the device to make spectacles, or in other words, when spectacles exist for its own sake—as showcases of technology.

Dai Jinghua’s analysis, on the other hand, highlights the particular cultural-production atmosphere permeating China at the millennium, and opens a very important interface to diagnose not only the film industry but also the audience’s involvement in the discursive transition from print culture to the screen venue. In her point of view, *Hero*, made in 2001, initiated among audiences the curious mixture of extreme publicity with relentless angry responses. The release of those high budget costume martial arts films instantly attracts frantic attention. Chinese audiences are compelled to pay close attention

to the production process of the films and then an extraordinary high price to watch these sensations. However, during the screening, they blatantly laugh at the presumably most emotional scenes claimed by the directors. The international hit, *Hero*, did not win the same acclaim from the Chinese audience as it did in the Northern American market. *Xiaochang* (笑场, laugh out in the theatre) becomes a frequent companion for these Chinese blockbusters and amusingly helps the infuriated viewers to build up a latent rapport in the theatre. “Paradoxically, the angrier the responses are, the more popular the film becomes. Thus, the main venue of cultural discourse shifts from print media and TV toward cinema and the internet, the latter providing the ideal site for relentless comments.”<sup>13</sup>

Dai Jinhua piquantly observes that those high budget films parade a grotesque cultural phenomenon of the new millennium. “If a contemporary Chinese audience is still not able to fully enjoy the pleasure of consuming an expensively made cultural product like a film, the film’s publicity nevertheless successfully produces popular identification with and the desire for power, wealth and fashion.”<sup>14</sup> In contesting the future direction of Chinese cinema, Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou, among the Fifth Generation directors, wholeheartedly advocate reviving national cinema with the production of Chinese blockbusters. Hu Ge’s video, however, makes fun of the plot, which is considered by general audiences to be shallow, meaningless and, most importantly, remote from the life of real people; and the online public endorse this video to express their discontentment against the alliance between the bureaucrat, the cultural elite, and global capital.

The opinions of internet users (*wangmin*) are often used as indicators of the responses of the general public, and are quoted to evaluate a film after its premier

screening. The so-called *wangmin* critiques are cited in live documentary programs on CCTV, China's central TV station. Chinese website Sina.com, among many other sites, furnishes a thorough account of "the bloody case"—the cultural and legal controversies associated with the conflict between Chen Kaige and an anonymous internet user's heedless art creation.<sup>15</sup> The immense box-office success did not quench Chen Kaige's anger caused by Hu Ge's video.<sup>16</sup> Critic Zhou Liming comments on the website that Hu Ge's work is a parody, an art form, and therefore is exempt from the property rights violations Chen Kaige accuses him of. Another author poignantly reminds Chen of the hazard of suing Hu Ge: as a Fifth Generation filmmaking guru who is held in national-level high regard, Chen is destined to lose the legal case against a "nameless" figure who does not have any cultural or political influence. Soon after this author's post was published, a different forum user countered the post, claiming that Hu Gei is not nameless: "behind him stand the Chinese people. It is not that Hu Ge created the video but that the people created Hu Ge."<sup>17</sup>

The online generation's parody, called by Chen Kaige a shameless act, bears on a similarity with that conducted by the Fifth Generation in their rebellious earlier years: in *Red Sorghum* "my grandpa" profanely pees into the fermenting wine, stirring the imagination about unbridled rural customs that is counteractive to the propaganda; and in *King of Children*, the village children mischievously recoup authoritative Chinese characters to present incomprehensible and disruptive cultural pigments. At the core of Bakhtin's theories on the carnival spirit, the parody is the apparatus to challenge authority when alternative means are not available.<sup>18</sup> The rapport between the online generation and independent filmmakers brings out the central import of "positioning" in Chinese

cinema, that is, how a filmmaker positions his works among conflicting political, social and economic interests taking over China's recent development. Not coincidentally, both Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou grasp the gimmick of "real love" to substantialize their blockbusters. The producer of *House of Flying Daggers*, Zhang Jiping, before the film's premiere, assured the audiences that they would definitely shed tears upon seeing such a heart-touching love story. Chen Kaige also shrunk down the motif of *The Promise* into "the search for true love."<sup>19</sup> The directors' rival claims for sincerity play up the semantic intersection between being real (zhen) and being sincere (cheng). Indeed the "promise" that the audience will undoubtedly cry in the theatre, apparently serving to boost the film's box office, highlights both the filmmakers' and the viewers' need for "sincerity."

The amusing relation between sincerity, tears and lucrative motives in the film business and entertainment industry is reminiscent of *The King of Comedy* (1999), a film by Stephen Chow, in which the desperate and prevalent need for tears provide the financially challenged protagonists with monetary opportunities. First, a wealthy business man in the brothel rejects every prostitute because he does not consider them "sincere" enough, no matter how hard the prostitutes pretend to be so. Thanks to the suggestion of the unemployed actor, the heroine sprinkles pepper in her eyes, shows up crying in front of the businessman and makes herself a good fortune. Second, for the test shot in the film studio, the actor cries passionately and wins a precious chance to work with a famous celebrity. In a similar vein, Feng Xiaogang benignly laughs at monetary reasons for sincere tears in *Big Shot's Funeral* (2001). According to the protagonist, Youyou, played by Ge You, the funeral documentary will not be able to make a large sum of money if no one cries sincerely for the dead big-shot. The problem is solved when the film crew finds

a skillful actor who has just rushed in from another acting job. Upon receiving the director's blunt admonishment that "the sadder you cry, the more money we will make," the actor cries his heart out as soon as the director begins shooting.

Situated in this cultural background, the audiences' laugh belies the directors' claim to sincerity and invalidates the regional imagery of China comprising the big budget fantasy. Instead of crying for the "true love" fabricated by Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, the audience laughs in the theatre for the presumably most tear-jerking moments. The big names of the Fifth Generation, now high-profile representatives of China's cultural elite, reconfirm their authoritative tone as the absolute herald of transformative Chinese cinema, when they declare the direct relation between big budgets and the nationalistic spirit of competing with Hollywood.<sup>20</sup> The film bureau, in order to support big budget Chinese films, demands monopolized theatre release for films made by Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige. Nonetheless, the audiences, as consumers of newly-made cultural commodities, are dissatisfied with their dubious and double-exploited positions—they are both financially ripped-off and ideologically divested of the right to critical comments.

Dai Jinhua calls "grotesque" the phenomenon that audiences go to the theatre to watch Chen Kaige's fantasy, listen to his authoritative preaching, and then make fun of it. Chinese blockbusters and events surrounding its production, post-production and premiere all induce the desire for power and wealth. On the national level, this manifests as the mentality that whatever the Hollywood can do, Chinese cinema can do better, and on the individual level as the idea that the ability to afford a high-budget film is directly linked to one's social status. Filmmaking in this way becomes the game of power

creation and social strata classification. Chinese audiences are caught in the mix of resentment and anxieties: while resenting the claims to truth (the way Chinese cinema should be) and sincerity (“a real love story”) offered by cultural authorities, they are also anxious about being left behind the game for power.

The anxiety of joining in the power operation—in the form of paying for the pricey movie tickets to enter the theatre of fantasy—and the resentment of that operation, exacerbates an afflicted self that often seeks release nowhere but in the internet community. The nationwide publicity caused by the conflict between Chen Kaige and Hu Gei epitomizes the struggle between different social strata—the established elites versus the incognito. More importantly it reflects the uneasiness within underrepresented social groups when their renditions of the regional imagery of China are left in oblivion, and they are compelled to catch up with the discourse of national development delivered by the state and its representatives. Parody is both their antagonism against and participation in the “grotesque” cultural phenomena in a fast-changing nation.

## **Case 2: “Jia Junpeng” and a Close Look at Internet Users**

Chen Kaige’s case presents the intact image of public audiences and internet users who claim to be representatives of “the people.” However, a more recent internet sensation caused by a thread on Baidu.com directs the accusation away from film directors, but places diagnostic attention on the general public per se. On July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2009, an internet user posted a thread on Baidu.com: “Jia Junpeng, your mom is calling you to come home and have a meal.” In several hours, 400 thousands of users followed and commented on the thread, some claiming to be the mom of Jia Junpeng, or his other kin

relatives. Some others, in reminiscence of Hu Ge's video spreading on the internet a few years ago, even named this new sensation "a bloody case induced by eating a meal."<sup>21</sup> Sociologists and scholars who study communication analyzed the event from various angles. *New Beijing Daily* (Xin jingbao) asserts that the event is explained by the loneliness of internet users—their deep-down emotion about calling and being called, about being remote from one's mother, or even calling for a lost memory. Authors on the column highlight the distinctive communicative mode of the cyber space, in which the reciprocal agreement among internet users shapes a popular but illusionary space. As in the animated version of the movie, *Matrix*, where none of the residents is able to articulate his understanding about the world, in the cyber space users can only echo the voices they heard but cannot relate to each other. To understand in this vein, "your mom is calling you to come back home" is a way of expression when something is felt wrong but cannot be articulated.

Yet the forum users point to the direct cause of this popular thread: the Chinese version of the *World of Warcraft* (WOW) video game was down for a few hours and the bored players made a buzz online. To them, the thread simply implies that WOW is just a video game and it is absurd for the players to be addicted. One user's comment underlines the absence of the mother figure in the life of internet users, video gamers and online chatters alike, "when we were young and hanging out with other children, moms would call us to go home and eat meal. When other buddies heard it, they would tell it to their friend, saying, 'hey you, your mom is calling you home to eat.'"<sup>22</sup> The image of "a mother" and the meanings associated with the nurturing maternal figure suggests a lost

tradition, a past lifestyle, whose memory is absent until a joking thread stirs immense resonance among the “motherless” generation.

In the year of 1999, to show the ameliorating influence of high technology, Jin Chen made *Love in the Internet Age*, a film that heralds the government’s policy relaxation on banned Chinese films. By contrast, *Betelnut* (Bing Lang, 2009, dir. Yang Heng), similarly an urban romance revolving internet usage, gives a less than positive description of adolescent life around an internet café. Not much happens in the stretch of 90 minutes; just two delinquent boys, Ali and Xiao Yu, wander along a riverside in Jishou, Hunan, and experience the heat of summer romance. The internet is both a space where the teens search for romance and self-confirmation, and the reason that their missions end up in complete failure. Ali one day encounters a pretty girl in an internet café chatting online using typical internet language. The following conversation is overheard:

The girl: So, how do you know I’m pretty?

The boy: I can just tell.

The girl (giggles): Didn’t you hear that “there is no pretty girl online?”

The boy: Well, there must be some exceptions. I am sure you are [one of the exceptions].

The exchange ends with the girl suggesting the online conversationalist visit her, so that he can know if his guess is right. Before they almost finalize the arrangement for a meeting, Ali approaches the girl and asks for a lighter. Later when Ali and Xiao Yu both successfully get the girl they want, Xiao Yu discovers that his newly won-over girlfriend is going to meet her online friend. With a subtle romanticism, the static camera captures the spatial relations and connective points among characters who are oblivious to each other in real life. In the multiple dimensions of space, one character enters the screen

when another person has barely disappeared. Restrained *vérité* and strict formalism not only acquaint the audience with the atmosphere of Hunan, as the director declares,<sup>23</sup> but also engrosses them in the mystic power of the virtual world. The teens live around numerous internet cafés in town and allow the internet space to advertently interfere with their lives. Until the end of the film, neither Xiao Yu nor the audience was aware that Xiao Yu's girlfriend also maintains a relationship with someone via the internet. The internet and the physical location of the internet café both provide the two guys with opportunities to meet girls and destroy the nascent relationships they have just built there.

This film has been one of the few examples in Chinese cinema that features the absolute absence of the parent generation. None of the four teens' parents are present in their life in any form. The film shows a group of young people who are not short of money, yet lack attention from their parents. The poetic landscape in western Hunan that nourished Shen Congwen's lyrical fictions about pure teenage romance this time is tarnished by the destructiveness of modern technology and the off-screen presence of teenage violence. Missing is the parent generation who could have offered the final reference to their disjointed life, the consolation they need in personal turmoil.

Youngsters like Ali, Xiao Jun and the girls they date constitute a large portion of the internet users in China, who are also the majority of the players addicted to the WOW video game. The fictitious figure "Jia Junpeng" who has attracted phenomenal attention is a name for any video-game players or internet users. The call from mom to "come home and eat" strikes a chord from the deepest memory of young people who have been away from their mothers, and the palpable memory of familial attachment. Sociologists' explanation for the "Jia Junpeng" case, that is, the loneliness of the internet user, is

slightly mocked by the online communities. The joke varies from “the forum users did not follow the thread, they followed their loneliness,” to later versions, such as “what I drink is not liquor; it is loneliness.” The joking line has become so well-received that it takes up a position in CCTV’s 2009 Chinese New Year Celebration show, which, ironically, concludes the “Jia Junpeng” case with the intervention of the state language.

When filmmakers declare to audiences their sincerity in story-telling, the case of Jia Junpeng leaves us wondering whether or not the audiences themselves are able to be sincere, not only to the films they watch, but also to their own emotions. The prevalent *egao* (parody) culture risks testifying to nothing but “a cultural of meaninglessness”—the creation of sensations around trivial occurrences or nothing at all.<sup>24</sup> Underneath this online event is the dire need to walk down “fantasy” and go back to the everyday life, epitomized by the call to “come home and eat.” Memory about the call of the mother becomes the ultimate self-expression, surviving clueless lines in Chinese blockbusters as well as the detriment of online gaming.

It is worth noting that the same group of people who play the WOW video game and forged the Jia Junpeng phenomenon, closely follow the recent national/patriotic filmmaking fashion in the pan-China region. The topic of going back home and going back to (the revolutionary) tradition has been favored by a large spectrum of filmmakers, sparing their fantasies from the ridicule of internet users. The intent to be included in the “home” of the nation-state, as I have argued beforehand, also inspires banned filmmakers to reappear endorsed. The extreme popularity of nationalist films made in the past few years is exemplified by Feng Xiaogang’s consecutive works excavating historic moments of the nation’s formation and development. *The Foundation of a Republic* (Jianguo da ye,

2009) is modeled after the 1989 film *Kaiguo da dian*, and *Aftershocks* (Tangshan da dizhen, 2010) traces a family's journey through the 1976 Tangshan earthquake and the 2008 Wenchuan catastrophe. On the list of nationalistic films is also new Hong Kong martial arts film *IP Man* (Ye Wen, 2008) that visits the module of the Chinese Kung-Fu master beating the foreign bully. These films on one hand attest to the possibility of placing main-melody and popular films in the genre system, and on the other manifesting the collective effort of rewriting the revolutionary past into the union between home, state and nation. The loneliness of the online users, which became a featured show in CCTV's 2009 new-year performance, has been alleviated by the nation's presentation of collective happiness. If the mother's call to return home is not substantially answered in the online space or by cultural experts, it is at least addressed by the attendance of the nation-state—the real “home” in Chinese context.

The question remains as to whether or not the union between the imagery of family, state, and nation, and its strong impact on renowned independent filmmakers will preempt the effort to remain independent/underground. Is there still a difference between Feng Xiaogang and Jia Zhangke, at all? Feng Xiaogang's tongue-in-cheek satire about the overcrowded situation of Chinese filmmakers fighting for a proper “position” in the sacred hall of cinema is still thought-provoking.<sup>25</sup> What is the direction of the Sixth Generation and the Chinese independent when the “sacred hall” of filmmaking is losing fortitude to the “outhouse,” and when Chinese cinema witnesses an overturned topology? While successfully assimilating commerce and the nation-state, Feng Xiaogang and other directors have created film imagery that dictates the imperative of “returning home to eat”—returning and reestablishing the meaning of the (revolutionary) past. This past will

help to envision a collective future; it is presumed to liberate the entrapped video-game players from the meaningless online world.

The key word of “sincerity” is no less proclaimed by independent filmmakers. The question about sincerity in the mapping of a regional imagery of China leads me to conduct a study on the opinion of internet users about Jia Zhangke’s films. A thread in Mtime.com reads, “Which aspect of Jia Zhangke’s films appeal to you?” The responses fall, at times, into three overlapping categories: being real, attention to social responsibility, and sincerity. A thorough inspection of these users’ comments shows their preferences for “truth” and “sincerity.” A selection of these comments is presented below, which illuminates how general audiences perceive some of the most important artistic contributions Jia has made, and reveals their understanding of what defines the regional images of China.

1. Care about small characters’ life in social transition
2. Honesty: his film excavates the reality that has been forgotten by us, telling stories of our own, comparing to western filmmakers
3. Honesty, real, life, realism, being indie, depth of thoughts about life
4. Help the world to know the real China
5. Represent the temporal-spatial relation, represent relation and absurdity
6. Closeness to one’s personal experience
7. Capture greatness in the ordinary
8. Acute attention to details, subtle memory of the time, penetrating the flow of time
9. Latent tension, quiet torrents
10. The silent parents, the wordless romance
11. Seeking the truth in a fake time, searching for the broken heart under the intact appearance

Against this dynamic struggle, conflict, and cooperation between different players in the attempt to envision a regional or local imagery, I disagree with arguments by scholars who claim that China is undergoing disintegration and cultural indifference.<sup>26</sup> I am more inclined to identify with theories proposed by Chris Berry: “rather than arguing

for the total abandonment of the concept of national agency in regard to national cinema, argue for recasting national cinema as a multiplicity of projects...bound together by the politics of national agency and collective subjectivity as constructed entities.”<sup>27</sup> The comments of forum users about Jia Zhangke, the most prominent Chinese independent filmmaker, bears out the fixation they have on realism and the importance of ordinary people.<sup>28</sup> The independent generation endeavors to locate its own rendition of the regional imagery, defying the one imposed by the nation-state or its cultural elite. To apply Feng Xiaogang’s witty analogy, what the independent filmmakers are doing, especially the most recent ones, is to dissolve the “sacred hall” guarded by the Fourth and Fifth Generations and to give the right of image-making to each ordinary individual.

### **Case 3: Crowd-Funding and *Beijing Taxi* (2010)**

Compared to Feng Xiaogang’s voluptuous financial resources and the Fifth Generation’s reliance on state funding in recent years, independent directors constantly face the challenge of securing funds for their productions. Most less-known filmmakers will take whatever fund they can get to make a film, including money from international investors, disregarding the allegation of “selling out.” The accusation of making films to please foreigners, refracting a clandestine cultural complex since the late imperial era, has accompanied every eye-catching film, internationally funded or not. In regard to whether or not foreign investors hinder filmmakers’ creativity and artistic independence, independent directors hold vastly different opinions. Jia Zhangke comments that investors consider their investment a long-term one instead of a one-time gamble and therefore they care less about commercial success.<sup>29</sup> Liu Binjian, director of *Men and*

*Women*, remarks that financiers are not involved heavily in the creative process—especially (and ironically) because they are foreign investors, they grant him total freedom. To quote his words, “I am all for the international cooperation in Chinese cinema. In recent years, *international cooperation and financing* has been a catalyst for the development of Chinese cinema, particularly Chinese independent cinema.”<sup>30</sup> However, there are also different voices. For example, Ma Liwen, director of *Gone Is the One Who Held Me the Dearest*, said that the investors were quite stingy with their money and the director was only paid a very low monthly salary, not entitled to make films their way.<sup>31</sup>

The above comments underscore the problem of equalizing investors to market force, capital operation, and the sheer purpose of monetary return. On one hand, a world niche market for the Chinese independent seems to grant more resources to Chinese filmmakers than their American counterparts. On the other hand, as a well-known producer points out, “very rich people do not typically invest in independent movies,”<sup>32</sup> and the actual investors of these movies aim for a purpose beyond profits. Very recently an innovative fund collection method has appeared on the internet with the rise of social media crowd-funding platforms such as Indiegogo, Biracy and Kickstarter, among which Kickstarter.com is claimed “the largest funding platform for creative projects in the world.”<sup>33</sup> Touted by *New York Times* as one of the best ideas in 2010, Kickstarter.com is changing how an independent film is financed around the world: Directors who need financing support make a pitch video, choose a deadline and a target minimum of funds to raise from users of the website. If the chosen target is not gathered by the deadline, no funds are collected. Most owners of the projects promise backers who “pledge” more

than a certain amount the reward of owning a copy of the project when it is done. More than 350,000 people have pledged over \$30 million dollars to projects on Kickstarter since its launch in spring 2009. While the real impact of crowd-funding waits time to tell, Dan Nuxoll, the program director at Rooftop Films, comments that almost every novice self-funding filmmaker and also many experienced directors in unexpected financial hardships resort to Kickstarter (Ryzik). Furthermore, the relationship between Kickstarter and independent filmmakers becomes more formalized at Sundance film festival with the announcement of a new program connecting Kickstarter with the Sundance Institute and its artistic development programs for filmmakers and theatre artists.<sup>34</sup>

The foundation of a web-based crowd-sourcing venue like Kickstarter.com not only encourages increased innovation and creativity, but also enables direct interaction between independent filmmakers and a new type of investors. Particularly, individuals who were not wealthy enough to invest in the highly volatile business of filmmaking now can decide which films should be made, by contributing a few dollars. The website works as a platform to gather monetary resources from the general public who are potential consumers or close followers of certain types of projects, circumventing many traditional profit-driven avenues of investment.<sup>35</sup> It helps to merge the roles of investors, producers and consumers in the production of an independent project and build an online community where directors and financial contributors share their enthusiasm for a common cause.

*Beijing Taxi* (2010), a documentary made by Wang Miao, reflects the enormous social transformation of Beijing after the 2008 Summer Olympic Games. By vividly capturing the daily life of three taxi drivers, the film unfolds the nation's bumpy roads to

modernization, and ordinary residents' struggle to reconcile contradictory social values. While adjusting to the new capitalist development, residents try to grasp the elusive—the history that remains, the buildings torn down and their current experience of the quickly changing city. The three taxi drivers are all Beijing locals, either from the suburb or the city, representing two different generations: Bai, in his mid 50s, came of age during the Cultural Revolution and feels lost in the new era; Wei and Zhou are both in their 30s, but the former aspires to a free-spirited life and entrepreneurial success, while the latter holds on to a traditional lifestyle. In Wang Miao's words, she wants to show “the juxtapositions between the old and the new Beijing that exist side by side today, and, most importantly, to experience how the lives and mentalities of people on the ground have been affected.”<sup>36</sup>

This film is supported by Women Make Movies,<sup>37</sup> a grant from Sundance Institute Documentary Fund, NYSCA (New York State Council on the Arts) and Jerome Foundation.<sup>38</sup> When the film was one month away from the finish line, the film crew launched its fundraising campaign on Kickstarter.com to complete the post-production process and to bring the film to the SXSW Music and Media Conference and Festival. It set a goal of \$11,000, to be reached by February 14, 2010, the auspicious Chinese New Year Day. The goal was successfully met with the support of 101 backers, about one half of them donated less than \$50 and five of them contributed slightly over \$500. Among the donators, about ten had been backing other projects, and the rest made their first donation ever on Kickstarter. In the director's interview with the Wall Street Journal, Wang notes that social media and the Internet played a large part in helping her finish the film when she ran out of money for post-production. She also received helpful feedback

from Twitter.com and the film's Facebook fan page, which "she updated regularly with new material, as to keep her followers apprised of new developments."<sup>39</sup> As noted by an article about social media posted on "Associated content"—the community-created content website from Yahoo!—"calls for support often inspire the best in people."<sup>40</sup> For independent films, many supporters who have been following the director's works for a long time come out of the shadows and become contributors.

Even though Wang Miao is not the only independent filmmaker who has benefited from social media in finishing her production, among the 39 projects related to China, only a small portion successfully collected enough funds before the due date. Meanwhile, most producers of these projects are America residents, including Wang Miao herself. The real impact of crowd-funding on Chinese independent films is at most marginal. The success of Wang's filmmaking mode, however, will encourage more China-based directors to expand their avenues of fund raising. There is no Chinese kickstarter yet, but the arena of Chinese cinema is growing its own platforms and channels for the production and distribution of independent films.

### **Overview of the Independent Film Circuit in China<sup>41</sup>**

Besides their personal savings, financial sources an increasing number of filmmakers rely on are domestic private funding, film grants from non-government organizations and award money from film festivals. While art critics or small business owners who happen to be cinephiles donate their wealth to create film funds, individuals, often enthusiastic participants of the online film forums, use affordable technology to make low-cost videos. These activities give rise to a plethora of amateur filmmakers and

kaleidoscopic online videos, helping to shape the Chinese independent into an artistic movement, joining in to claim the right of representation and the redefinition of their life experiences. This section examines domestic independent film festivals, their organizers and participants alike, independent video-making workshops that connect filmmakers with their direct audiences, and the thriving digital video filmmaking movement that is changing the contours of the Chinese independent. As stated previously, “indie,” simply a short form of “independent” in the West, in the Chinese context is predicated on the establishment of a clearly classified genre system and a transparent and well-formulated censorship. With its specific contextualization, “indie” has not been favored in academic studies, which have barely completed the shift in awareness from the heterogeneity of “the Sixth Generation,” “urban cinema,” “Chinese underground” to the still contentious concept of “Chinese independent.” However, frontier independent filmmakers in China and their followers have willingly accepted the new lexicon to label their viewpoint.

### **Domestic Independent Film Festivals and Multi-Screen Realities<sup>42</sup>**

One of the most prominent film funds exclusively supporting independent films is the Li Xianting Film Fund, founded by art critic Li Xianting as a nonprofit organization in 2006 during the Beijing Independent Film Festival. Li raises funds from artists to support Chinese independent films for production, promotion, communication and academic purposes. The fund sets the goal of financially supporting about ten Chinese independent film projects each year. It runs the Chinese Independent Film Archive (CIFA) and a professional film magazine, *Notes on Films* (電影劄記), and co-presents the Beijing Independent Film Festival and the China Documentary Film Festival. The non-

governmental CIFA was founded in 2008 to collect and promote contemporary Chinese independent films, distinguishing it from the official Chinese Film Archive that serves to store only approved Chinese films. The Iberia Centre for Contemporary Art, located in the Songzhuang art village of northeastern Beijing, has become the hosting site for multiple independent film screenings, forums, and festivals.

Outside of the cultural centre of Beijing, another important intellectual centre, Nanjing, hosts the Chinese Independent Film Festival (CIFF), an annual film festival including all different genres—narrative features, documentaries, and shorts.<sup>43</sup> Founded in 2003 and operating in conjunction with the Nanjing RCM Art Museum, the festival aims to select the year's best Chinese films to support “independent spirit, openness, inventive in form, forward thinking,” as stated by their programmers, which include Zhang Xianmin (critic, actor and Beijing Film Academy professor) and Cao Kai. Roughly taking place in the summer season, the festival usually lasts a week, hosting concurrent screenings and post-screening discussions with the filmmakers. As festival participants comment, the festival cultivates a real sense of intellectual energy and ferment.<sup>44</sup>

Fanhall Films, operated by Zhu Rikun, is a multi-faceted organization based in Songzhuang, Beijing, in support of independent films. Fanhall initiated from the Shijian Film Club and started as a website for online discussion. Broadened into film production and distribution, the Fanhall organization has produced a series of independent films, released DVDs of unauthorized films, and sponsored the annual China Documentary Film Festival and the Beijing Independent Film Festival. With its mission of community

building, Fanhall constructed a medium-sized screening hall to show independent films and invite directors to spend the week in Songzhuang during the two festivals.

Besides film funds, archives and festivals, a few well-known independent film workshops are gaining more momentum in major cities. Beijing Indie Workshop, founded by Zhang Xianmin in 2005 as a non-profit organization, provides independent filmmakers with equipment and post-production facilities. The workshop organizes a series of informal screenings of recent works during which participants are encouraged to fill out scorecards to rate each film. It also works to connect new filmmakers with foreign festivals, curators, and researchers.<sup>1</sup> Caochangdi Workstation (CCD) was founded in 2005 by documentary filmmaker and theoretician Wu Wenguang, made up of his Documentary Studio, the Living Dance Studio, and the Beijing Storm Company. The workstation provides a space for video and performance art and organizes a series of film, video, performance exhibitions and festivals at Caochangdi, a suburb of Beijing close to the 798 Arts District. In 2010, CCD hosted the May Festival of performance arts and films, including works from their 2009 Young Choreographers' Project and a documentary forum. CCD provides technical and organizational support for an ongoing series of films called "the Villager Documentary Project"—documentaries made by people living in Chinese villages. Additionally, the bi-annual Yunnan Multi-Culture Visual Festival (Yunfest), a documentary film festival based in Kunming, features the screenings of Chinese and foreign documentaries, a documentary competition, and seminars, bringing together Chinese and foreign documentary filmmakers. Compared to other festivals and workshops, Yunfest was founded with a strong anthropological bent, and still devotes a section to these films.

The 1990s new documentary movement needs to be re-thought in light of the recent developments in film and video making, reality TV and the videotaping of avant-garde arts. In the past few years, documentary has moved from being the experimental work of a relatively small number of filmmakers with a very limited audience, to becoming both a new wave within the development of fiction films, and a mass phenomenon in the context of new media. In the flourishing scene of Chinese independent films are both feature-length filmmakers and alternative video producers, including video photographers, performance artists and directors of home-video documentary (“reality TV”),<sup>45</sup> which in collaboration builds up the eye-catching phenomenon of “small-screen culture.” Among avant-garde artists who videotape their performance is Meng Jinghui, who explores the status of art in China’s commercial development and the front line of realistic representation. One of his theatre performance, *Chicken Poets* (像鸡毛一样飞, 2002) experiments with the relationship between poetry and video games; it remains an inspiration to independent filmmakers.

The presence of “multi-screen” images has emerged in Jia Zhangke’s later films—for example, *The World*—and inaugurates a dialectic engagement with the real in independent films. Paola Voci observes that “computer and mobile phone screens with their artificial images point to visualizations that bear no obligation either towards narrative cinema or documentary realism, and are conducive to more critical, provocative and possibly even distorted representation of the real.”<sup>46</sup> And “by directly calling the viewer’s attention to the presence of screens, a self-reflective process of negotiation of the real thus substantiates and, at the same time, destabilizes authenticity.”<sup>47</sup> By contrast, Chris Berry considers “jishizhuyi” and “on-the-spot realism” an approach to reality that

strives to achieve authenticity, as opposed to *zhuanti* (special topic) films.<sup>48</sup> The disparity between Voci's and Berry's understandings—that is, whether or not the explicit reference to multiple screens disables authenticity—is tied to a renewed understanding of authenticity in the controversial relation between authenticity and realism.

In Voci's opinion, the existence of multiple screens alludes to three separate temporalities—"the selection of reality, the act of editing and finally the viewer's active decoding," which all denotes interpretative freedom. Since the artificial quality of recording is recognized as inescapable and in fact necessary, both "makers and receivers of the moving images" come to the conclusion that reality is unattainable and one can only "break it down through multiple screens."<sup>49</sup> In multiple-screen realities, such as those enacted by mobile phone movies, "authenticity severs itself from realism and 'jilu' ('record') can reclaim the right to interpret, alter and ultimately create realities."<sup>50</sup>

What these arguments fail to recognize is the emergence of a dynamic and interactive reality, including its multiple layers and players, with the participation of image receivers—the audiences, the spectators and the consumers. The interpretative freedom effectuated by multiple screens continues to disrupt constrictive linear narratives and authoritative ideology, rather than displace them. In other words, a renewed and expanded realism, containing the reaction of its receivers, locates its momentum in alternative video practices that speak against the propositions of making state-sanctioned and big-budget celluloid features. Multi-screen culture is far from being about "the unattainable nature of reality." Rather, it's about envisioning a reality that is lived, unofficial, interactive and multidimensional. Similar to online film forums, domestic film

festivals and the practice of villager filmmaking, multi-screen culture constitutes part of the independent filmmaking movement that strives for the right of representation.

### **Self-Financing, the DV Movement, and Control of Distribution**<sup>51</sup>

Self-financing has been an important venue for novice directors to have their films made. Some of them take the detour of doing businesses in order to make and distribute their films, while others compete in international film festivals to win award funds for additional works. The self-financers range from BFA graduates to countryside villagers who are united around the allure of the screen, helping to propel the transformation and proliferation of Chinese cinema outside of the official system. In my understanding, the notion of multi-screen culture should take into account the many unconventional filmmakers who continues—after Jia Zhangke and Zhang Yuan—to challenge the authoritative position of the silver screen and the state-sponsored Chinese blockbusters made by Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige. The smaller screens demarcate a space for ordinary intellectuals and the social bottom to articulate their existence, a Chinese reality based on their real life experience, instead of on the future-oriented national spectacle forged by the state and its elite.

In 1998, with no connection to the BFA or CATA and no experience in filmmaking, Meng Qi, a demobilized army soldier, decided to adapt the novella by Liang Xiaosheng, *The Dead Tired Man*, into a film. He sold his restaurant business and brought his lifelong friend Ding Zhanhong, a hotel manager knowing nothing of celluloid film, on board to make their first film. They took the script to many potential investors and finally managed to secure initial funding from a stock trader. Not intended to make it

“underground,” Meng submitted the script to the government censors and spent more than a year waiting for its approval. After the film was eventually finished, Meng could not find a distributor. He took the film’s two copies, the only two they could afford, to Shanghai and talked two theater managers into screening the film. To make the screenings known to the public, Meng and his friend put up posters in Shanghai’s busy shopping malls and business centers. The film, *What a Snowy Day* (2001), tells the story of an ordinary worker following the rules, being deceived, but managing to live through the deception. For the consideration that films should appeal to ordinary folks, Meng Qi works to create a mainstream narrative encoded with the government’s anti-corruption campaign, forgoing innovative styles seen in experimental films.<sup>52</sup> Yet the film distinguishes itself from most “main melody” films with subtle and underplayed performances, and an upbeat voiceover that questions its own narration. As the first independent film that has been granted the right to a public screening by the Film Bureau, *What a Snowy Day* became a national hit, heralding the prospect of self-financing for filmmakers.

*Master of Everything* (自娱自乐, 2004), a melodrama featuring a transnational cast including John Lone and Coco Lee, reflects the flourishing video-making practices in the countryside. This film fits a native-soil romance into the ardent video experiments of cinema fans, by theatricizing the romantic motive behind a peasant’s (John Lone) perseverant film tryouts. The film opens on a group of villagers trying to make their own martial-arts TV drama, including a countryside girl, Luhua, who wants to realize her dream to become a star, and her secret admirer, Wan Jihong, who is trying to please her.<sup>53</sup>

In the end, almost everyone in the village plays a role in the TV show and is excited to see his own images on screen.

This film indicates a new venue of video production in China, one that is not only free from state-sponsored studios but also separate from international financing. The “producer,” who himself is a peasant, comes up with the idea of affiliating the amount of one’s money donation with the importance of his role. While poking gentle fun at the ubiquitous mechanism of money talk in the industry, the film chronicles the activism of local villagers who are not content to be receivers of the screen images. Remote from the central ideological control, the countryside is shown as a place taken over by the power of the visual. The villagers’ eagerness to watch themselves on screen replaces moral standards or communist ideals, and becomes the catalyst that infiltrates meaning into their daily life. In one of the final sequences, when villagers stand in the rain alongside the two protagonists, begging the village chief to allow them to finish the shooting, the dispersed Chinese peasants are shown to be reunited around the celluloid.

Gao Wendong, a young director from Dalian, Liaoning, made a 30 minute debut entitled *The Xihai Village* (2006) about the disappearance of a fishing village in his hometown. His film, like others made by independent directors, competed in the Chinese Independent Film Festival and international festivals, and helped him garner funds for his later films such as *Sweet Food City* (2008) and *Ant City* (2009). Shu Haolun, a Shanghai native, shares a similar experience with Gao Wendong when he made a name for himself in 2006 with the documentary *Nostalgia*, a film exploring the demolished community of allies (*nongtang*) in the suburb of Shanghai. In the director’s words, this film is to preserve his memory of the community life in those *nongtang*, withstanding rapid urban

development (Louisa Lim). When making *Betelnut*, director Yang Heng completely avoided indoor scenes and resorted to free equipment, in order to save money. He was in charge of every process of the filmmaking, including directing, script-writing, photographing and sound synchronizing so that the total expense stayed at the minimum of 30,000RMB. The film won a \$30,000 award in a Korean film festival and a European festival for additional 3,000 Euro, which is used for Yang's next film, *Sun Spots* (2009).<sup>54</sup>

Self-financing has been made possible largely by digital technology. The fact that almost everyone can make a film with an affordable digital camera stirs up interest in becoming a director. DV and amateurism entail a plethora of potentials: on one hand, DV can forge a new stage of diverse artistic styles and usher in egalitarian video making; on the other hand, it could cause a repetition of “documentary methods” (endless long takes plus shaky handheld camera shots) or simply serve to formulaically stage the symbolic rebellion of subculture.<sup>55</sup> Yingjin Zhang warns us of one consequence: DV films may lack artistic power as they become more and more amateur, nonprofessional, and therefore insignificant.<sup>56</sup>

Yingjin Zhang finds the connection between the 1990s independent documentary and the new DV movement in their common sponsor—the Hong Kong-based Phoenix Satellite TV station. In 2002 Phoenix Satellite launched their program, “Chinese Youth Image Competition: the DV New Generation” and made it open to college students. Based on this program's mission, “the personal has been resurrected to propagate a new fashion, the so-called amateur DV movement.” The editorial group declares in the name of the potential DV practitioners: “We have nothing to do with the so-called ‘underground condition,’ ‘marginal discourse,’ ‘independent position,’ or ‘unofficial

voice'. We are just a group of ordinary people passionate for DV, and we care for whatever we like to care for."<sup>57</sup> This DV slogan constitutes the cornerstone of the proclamation for the "Seventh Generation": their films will be more personal, more individualistic, more truthful, and more honest, providing diversified and unofficial texts for understanding contemporary Chinese society.

The DV practitioners want to set digital video apart from all the political claims of their predecessors—both the Fifth Generation and the Sixth Generation—even though their claim of returning to the self resembles the statement made by Sixth Generation directors.<sup>58</sup> One may even argue that the DV generation is the extension of independent directors who have gone to the extreme of seeking truth from nowhere but the "self." When directors appeal for a return to the personal, they are at the same time proposing a political stance for renewing the legitimacy of independent filmmaking in China. In my opinion, this claim not only reflects the dissolution of communist ideology, the discourse of modernization, and even Darwinian linear temporality—it also captures the younger generation's bewildered position of being caught in-between.

The new fashion of "returning to the personal" manifests a reluctance to move forward or back. Following the urban generation's proposal of returning to the current life, amid historical allegories made by the Fifth Generation, is the DV generation's extremist claim of relying completely on the personal. The present and the personal continue to furnish the new generation's understanding of what constitutes the facets of Chinese reality. The difference is, their preoccupation with a resolutely disinterested self could circumscribe their artwork into a much smaller space than that explored by the Sixth Generation, a point to be discussed in Chapter VII.

The accusation that digital videos lack a provocative edge and professionalism contributes to the increased gap between celluloid movies and amateur DV. Independent films comprised of low-budget digital works may further distance them from general audiences at a time when Hollywood blockbusters sweep Asian theatres with spectacular visual effects.<sup>59</sup> Meanwhile, with the directors' camouflage claims of "nothing official," or "completely personal," the agency of digital technology in shaping a new film market is not fully recognized. In my opinion, the seemingly apolitical stance of young directors results from their disillusionment with combustible proclamations delivered from various sources, and as a strong position, this stance is no less political than that of the Sixth Generation.

"Digital technology has disrupted the balance of power and forms of control in the film industry by erasing space and rewarding speed," for the multiplication of ancillary markets. Compared to 10 years ago, there have been many more alternative ways to exploit a motion picture than that of theatrical exhibition: for example, video, cable television, pay per view, broadcast television, and particularly the Internet.<sup>60</sup> Movies, from the perspective of economic analysis, constitute a joint consumption good that demonstrates a "public" quality. By definition, a joint consumption good meets the following conditions: first, the viewing by one person does not use up the product or detract from the experience of others; second, an additional viewer does not increase the cost, and third, the replication of such a product has a very low cost (McFayden). Even though this definition applies for most art works, digital video distinguishes itself with a diminished reliance on the material carrier. Windowing strategies<sup>61</sup>, including pay-per-view, are set on the premise of exclusive rights to reproduction, distribution, performance,

and display.<sup>62</sup> What is immanent is therefore the issue of control, of when and where the films are watched, by whom, and through what channels. The online space provides alternative channels for directors to deviate from the control of corporate distributors and face their audiences directly, which contributes to the restructuring of the film industry. “While new production technologies have certainly altered the process of film production, it has been the new technologies of distribution and delivery that have had the most far-reaching and profound impact on the industry structure.”<sup>63</sup>

Although the position of the DV movement in the development of Chinese cinema is still undetermined, suffice it to say that new digital technology provides independent directors a means to be involved in the once-privileged ivory tower of screen culture, which in return will exert influence on larger economic, political, and cultural context, market structure, and eventually policy-making. By making an impact on distribution channels, digital technologies are changing the balance of the existing power structure of independent filmmaking in China.<sup>64</sup> Laikwan Pang questions how likely it is for Chinese cinema to embody “subversive ideology” or “people’s collective anti-hegemonic action.” This point of view does not address the fundamental role of cinema as a form of art creation and a special type of industry whose participation in sociopolitical influence is never direct or proportional. Hence, the key question to ask in terms of whether or not Chinese cinema can embody subversive ideology is not how many propaganda slogans have been incorporated in the films, nor even what the direct social mobilizing effect of these films may be, but instead: What other subversive possibilities are latent in the functioning and distribution of the films?

In my opinion, the collective experience of making DV, sharing views in online forums, and expressing dislike for Chinese blockbusters, sustains a subversive agency not to be ignored. More than anything, faith in the reality of daily life endorses the images made by Chinese independent filmmakers: making and watching films is a collective effort to rebuild one's experience of the reality after the dissolution of communist ideologies. Jia Zhangke reinforces the egalitarian significance induced by DV camera, contending that the DV filmmaking will democratize the spirit of Chinese film by encouraging an increasing number of people to try making documentary and experimental films. These two modes, the documentary and experimentalism, will nurture a humanist spirit and a desire for the new—rudimentary elements missing in contemporary Chinese cinema.<sup>65</sup>

The founder of Fanhall, Zhu Rikun, argues that the current situation, in which most independent films are not screened in big theatres, can open up new film-watching spaces and cultivate small screen aesthetics.<sup>66</sup> His insightful comments affirm the central latitude of alternative screening practices in promoting independent films: thanks to the small screens in film clubs, video-sharing websites, and one's cell phone, state-owned theatres are no longer the hegemonic screening sites independent filmmakers are constrained to.<sup>67</sup> The aesthetics advanced in various small screens challenges the dominance of stunning visual effects pursued by theatre releases. As analyzed in Chapter IV, the infrastructure related to cinema is not a sealed and monolithic totality but a porous variable swayed by domestic social conditions and global market challenges. Therefore, film policy provides an opening to look at the configuration of the state and its transformation. Modeling itself after the Hollywood regulation system, the Chinese film

bureau is weighing the possibility of loosening up control over some part of the filmmaking process in the face of booming amateur videos.<sup>68</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Bourdieu 216-218; Johnson 38.

<sup>2</sup> A few exceptions include Seio Nakajima's study on the film clubs in Beijing. In his opinion, those film clubs provide an important public space where exhibition and consumption of independent films take place. Refer to Seio Nakajima, "Film Clubs in Beijing: The Cultural Consumption of Chinese Independent Films," Pickowicz, *From Underground to Independent* 161.

<sup>3</sup> Bourdieu, "Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field" 60.

<sup>4</sup> Donald 114-29.

<sup>5</sup> For more information, refer to Fiske.

<sup>6</sup> For a substantial introduction of film clubs, refer to Seio Nakajima, "Film Clubs in Beijing: The Field of Cultural Consumption of Chinese Independent Films," In Pickowicz, *From Underground to Independent*. And, "Film Clubs in Urban China: Consumption as Production of Public Discourse." In Department of Arts Studies, Beijing University and School of Film and Television Arts and Technology, Shanghai University, eds. *National, Transnational, International: Chinese Cinema and Asian Cinema in the Context of Globalization*. Beijing and Shanghai, China: Beijing University and Shanghai University, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Zhen Zhang, *The Urban Generation* 26.

<sup>8</sup> They argue that piracy moves its products at a much faster and more efficient rate around the globe than its legitimate counterparts. "If mobility equals profitability and if speed in this digital world translates into profit, then the ultra flexible local, regional, and global piracy networks prove to be among the greatest challenges the film industry has ever had to face. Thus, speed becomes a major goal of, and challenge to, participants in this global information structure and capitalist expansion." See S. Wang 14. Based on this premise, theorists find faults with existing framework that focuses on the dichotomy between the center and the peripheral, the local and the global. Doreen Massey, for example, propose a spatial-, network-, and process-oriented relational theoretical framework. For her theories, refer to Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> In 2001, I watched Zhang Yang's *Shower* and a few other independent features in the college film festival held in Beijing Normal University, an experience I shared with other college students. The same group of students are also active participants in other cultural activities such as poetry reading, modern art exhibition and theatre performance. The year of 2001 also saw a boosting concern for social justice and the role of Chinese indigenous culture, due to the bombing event happened to Chinese embassy located in Europe.

<sup>11</sup> Dai, "Celebratory Screens," see Olivia Khoo, and Sean Metzger, *Futures of Chinese Cinema* 53.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 248.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> “Chen Kaige’s *The Promise* Encounters Hu Gei’s *Bloody Case*.”

<sup>16</sup> “Chen Kaige’s *The Promise*.”

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Refer to Bakhtin.

<sup>19</sup> Based on the interview with the producers, conducted by sohu.com, both *House of Flying Daggers* and *The Promise* are films about one’s search for truth love. See “Chen Kaige’s *The Promise*.” As a matter of fact, the sensations caused by the promotion, production and post production of *The Promise* have been reported in full coverage on the Chinese website sina.com.

<sup>20</sup> In order for Chinese cinema to compete with Hollywood cinema, they have to be as commercial as the latter and even surpass its commercial value. “Nationalistic spirit,” hence is supported by the government as efforts to boost Chinese automakers, enterprises, Chinese brands, etc.

<sup>21</sup> “Jia Junpeng, Ni mama han ni huijia chifan.”

<sup>22</sup> “Pingxi: ‘Jia Junpeng, Ni mama han ni huijia chifan’ weihe chuanhong.”

<sup>23</sup> “Interview: Yang Heng-*Sun Spots*.”

<sup>24</sup> Dai, “Celebratory Screens,” see Olivia Khoo, and Sean Metzger, *Futures of Chinese Cinema*.

<sup>25</sup> In Feng’s own words, “(The Chinese film tradition was) a sacred hall (*baodian*), an orthodox place strictly guarded by professionally trained third and fourth generation filmmakers. The fifth generation didn’t enter through the gates of the hall but broke in from the windows. However, since they gained entry, these fourth and fifth generation directors have now become guardians of the orthodoxy of the sacred hall of Chinese film. The sixth generation then occupied another part of the sacred hall, but they didn’t come in through the doors or windows: they dug up from underground! So when I came, I found not only that I couldn’t enter this heavily guarded sacred hall; but even if I could, there was no longer any space for me inside. So I decided to build an outhouse (*erfang*) instead. To my surprise, I found that life in this outhouse was not bad at all, and when I look at the sacred hall now, it seems so overcrowded that I wouldn’t go there even if they invited me. In fact, since life in the outhouse is so exciting, even those who occupy the sacred hall want to come here now, and some have already popped their heads in.” See Feng Xiaogang, “I am an Outsider in the Sacred Hall of Chinese Cinema,” a speech delivered 16 Nov. 2000 at the Beijing Film Academy, *Beijing Youth Daily* 24 (Nov. 2000).

<sup>26</sup> For instance, Laikwan Pang contends that “any imagination of a totalizing oppositional collective action and experience is doomed to collapse under the consumerist indifference and fragmentation China is experiencing.” See Pang, *Cultural Control and Globalization in Asia* 99.

<sup>27</sup> Chris Berry, “If China Can Say No” 132.

<sup>28</sup> See chapter IV and V for a detailed analysis on the role of the state in depicting ordinary people’s life and heeding their voices.

<sup>29</sup> Shaoyi Sun, Xu Li 135.

<sup>30</sup> Shaoyi Sun, Xu Li 140.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Martin 19.

<sup>33</sup> Refer to the logo on the Kickstarter.com website.

<sup>34</sup> It is also pointed out that Sundance is launching “an online hub” of resources for funding and distributing films, and is starting a partnership with Facebook. For details see “Sundance Institute Launches New Program to Connect Artists with Audiences: Three-Year Plan with Kickstarter as Creative Funding Collaborator / Facebook® to Provide Guidance to Institute Alumni,” at its official site [sundance.org](http://sundance.org).

<sup>35</sup> This opinion is shared by Emily Gould, “Start me up.”

<sup>36</sup> From the official website of the film, see [beijingtaxithemovie.com](http://beijingtaxithemovie.com).

<sup>37</sup> Established in 1972, “Women Make Movies” is a non-profit media arts organization based in New York City. The organization distributes and assists with the production, promotion, exhibition of independent films by and about women. Refer to the official site at [wmm.com](http://wmm.com).

<sup>38</sup> The Jerome Foundation, created by artist and philanthropist Jerome Hill (1905-1972), makes grants to not-for-profit arts organizations and artists in Minnesota and New York City, to support the production of new works by emerging artists. See its official website, [jeromefdn.org](http://jeromefdn.org).

<sup>39</sup> Kung, “‘Beijing Taxi’ Explores Country’s Evolution from Perspective of Drivers.”

<sup>40</sup> Bell, “Grassroots Social Media Campaigns Help Crowdfund Indie Films: Crowdfunding Campaigns for Film Continue to Breach Social Media.”

<sup>41</sup> Kraicer, “Shelly on Film: An inside Tour of the Chinese Independent Film Circuit.”

<sup>42</sup> Refer to the website of the fund, [lixianting.org](http://lixianting.org).

<sup>43</sup> Refer to the [fanhall.com](http://fanhall.com) website, thread 14157.

<sup>44</sup> Refer to the [fanhall.com](http://fanhall.com) website.

<sup>45</sup> Li Jinghong, Liang Zi, Jiang Yue, Duan Jinchuan are some of the renowned independent documentarists in China.

<sup>46</sup> Olivia Khoo, and Sean Metzger, *Futures of Chinese Cinema* 273.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Chris Berry, “Facing Reality: Chinese Documentary, Chinese Postsocialism,” see H.Wu 121-131.

<sup>49</sup> Olivia Khoo, and Sean Metzger, *Futures of Chinese Cinema* 274.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> For details about DV documentaries, see Yiman Wang.

<sup>52</sup> Shaoyi Sun, Xu Li 169.

<sup>53</sup> Off the screen, or the story behind the narrative, is the fact that two global stars who play local peasants were severely criticized by domestic audience for lacking peasant look.

<sup>54</sup> Paquet.

<sup>55</sup> Pickowicz , *From Underground to Independent* 34.

<sup>56</sup> Xinyu Lü 99.

<sup>57</sup> “DV xin shidai.”

<sup>58</sup> See Chapter II.

<sup>59</sup> “Film and cultural criticism of CGI effects has on the whole been preoccupied with demonstrating the extent to which the aesthetic dimensions of this imagery reflect the film and entertainment industries’ obsession with realism, photorealism, simulation, and illusionism, terms that have increasingly come to be used interchangeably.” See Pierson 53.

<sup>60</sup> Olivia Khoo, and Sean Metzger, *Futures of Chinese Cinema* 13.

<sup>61</sup> For a detailed look at the effect of internet video on the media industry’s windowing strategies, see Park.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*,13.

<sup>63</sup> Shujen Wang 13.

<sup>64</sup> Hollywood majors take up 75% to 90% of the box office of most foreign territories and transnational satellite and cable TV companies compete away local TV stations. American independent media companies have long depended on foreign distributors and public television stations for its economic survival. The problem Chinese independent films faced since its inception, that is, they have been heavily reliant on international investors and distributors, is confronting independent cinema in other nations as well. Amongst the kaleidoscopic scenes of independent filmmaking in China, one can safely predict that, in a foreseeable future, independent media companies will become a major player in producing and promoting Chinese independent films.

<sup>65</sup> Xianmin Zhang 306-11.

<sup>66</sup> Xiaolu Wang, “What is Independence and How.”

<sup>67</sup> Significantly, the lessened importance of “big screen” may trigger a series of changes. For example, video makers who publish their video online do not need to wait for the approval of the censor bureau. And the entrenched dilemma, that Chinese audiences cannot access these independent films, is alleviated. Linked to Chapter II, one may also have to reevaluate the importance of the fourth player in cultural productions, namely, the marginal, as proposed by Yingjin Zhang.

<sup>68</sup> As a matter of fact, film studios around the world have realized that, “control over distribution was indeed a key to control over finance and thus the industry.” The crucial battle, it seems that, is converted to the battlefield for distribution channels. Refer to the Paramount Decree of 1948 in the U.S., mentioned in Shujen Wang 10.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE “SEVENTH” GENERATION: FROM INDEPENDENT TO INDIE

Following Jia Zhangke’s earlier works about people living in his hometown, independent directors have been employing regional setting and local accents for their narrative features. Chen Daming’s ensemble drama *One Foot off the Ground* (鸡犬不宁, 2006) was shot in the director’s hometown Kaifeng. Zhang Yibai directed a dark thriller about the detrimental consequences of an extra-marital affair, the changing cityscape of Chongqing and its dramatic impact on the relations between local people (Cremin), reminiscent of Ning Hao’s box-office hit, *Crazy Stone*.<sup>1</sup> Directors in search of subjects for alternative cinema often go to peripheral regions of the nation, remote from the Beijing center. Ying Liang’s first feature, *The Other Half*, made in the same year as *Crazy Stone* and set in a backward city in Southwestern China, is characterized by the use of Sichuan dialect. Young and aspiring independent filmmakers help to expand the scope of the regional imagery from Jia Zhangke’s Fenyang to Chongqing, Nanjing and small cities in incognito.<sup>2</sup> In the practice of regional filmmaking, Chinese cinema witnesses a crucial moment of industry reconstruction as well as aesthetic experiments and, for intellectuals, deepening questions about the reality of China. As pointed out in Chapter 5, filmmakers and critics welcome the possibility of establishing a genre and classification system that might be able to harbor a separate production and distribution chain for independent films, similar to that in Euro-American cinema. The perceivable outcome that the Chinese independent may be reduced to targeting a niche market in global cultural consumption, nonetheless, has resulted in cautiousness among filmmakers.<sup>3</sup>

Cinematically, younger directors, many of them born in the latter half of the 1970s, continue to explore motifs featured in the Sixth Generation's productions, for example, depicting the other side behind the miracle of China's economic boom. The image of the orphan and the key motif of saving the children pay tribute to the legacy of May Fourth realistic literature and film. On the other hand, they experiment with innovative cinematic styles and strive for a film language that can characterize and demarcate them from the language established by Jia Zhangke, Wang Xiaoshuai and Zhang Yuan. Particularly, the metamorphosis from reality to corporeality and the increasing sense of interrogation between the camera and characters embody an often unsuccessful retreat to a private space that is cut off from outside imperatives. And different than their predecessors, younger directors examine the reliability of experience either by advancing extreme close-ups of the quotidian daily life, or by presenting non-intervening reflections of mundane humanity. Their camera brings forward the mechanical, suppressive and repetitive dimensions of modern life that were not measured in earlier Chinese independent films.

### **Regional Filmmaking and the Corporeality of Local Life**

#### **Ying Liang: *The Other Half* (2006)**

Ying Liang graduated from the Department of Directing at the Chongqing Film Academy and Beijing Normal University. As with other young and aspiring filmmakers who lack resources, he started off by making shorts and then invested award money he won in longer features. His short film "The Missing House" (2003) won the best script award at the Beijing Student Film Festival, and Critics Award at the Hong Kong

Independent Short Film Festival. After the success of his short films, he borrowed equipment and recruited friends and family to make his first feature, *Taking Father Home* (2005), which was selected at multiple international film festivals. The film is about a teen leaving his countryside hometown to search for his father in the city. The boy experienced urban life comprised of gangsters and a few sympathetic city residents. Towards the end, his efforts are annulled by a flood warning forcing the whole city to evacuate. In 2006, with the support of the Hubert Bals Fund (HBF) from the Rotterdam International Film Festival, Ying made *The Other Half*, a film about the life struggle of a young woman residing in a city of southwestern China. The film is virtually Ying's single-handed work: he is credited with script, photography, sound, editing and even art direction.

Zeng Xiaofen, working as a clerk at the municipal police office in an inland city, documents the complaints of different plaintiffs, most of them women. Her live-in boyfriend, Deng Gang, is addicted to gambling and drinking, which leads to her mother's insistence that she date a more promising man. Later Deng Gang goes missing, leaving Xiaofen in an agony of searching for him to no avail, in the midst of her colleagues' increasing gossip about her personal life. In the end, the city is blown up by an explosion taking place in a local chemical plant. This film consists of two alternating parts: one part comprises the stories told by the female plaintiffs in Xiaofen's workplace and the other part is the narrative about Xiaofen herself.

The film opens with a three minute close-up shot of Xiaofen being interviewed by the off-screen recruiter, a local policeman. It is later disclosed that her job is to document the statements of municipal legal cases. The opening establishes the divide between the

interviewee and the recruiter, hinting at the sense of interrogation. It also alludes to the connotation as suggested by the film title—the unseen half erased from representation, including the interviewer and the off-screen counterparts of those female plaintiffs. Those testimonies point to a social environment afflicted by ill-defined malaises, whose symptoms emerge in the form of various disputes—marital affairs, divorces, medical malpractice suits, financial difficulties, ranging from a woman’s complaint about her husband and her dog, to a female worker demanding compensation from her company because she has to drink with her clients to enhance business. Many times, their talking borders on anger venting instead of serving the purpose of seeking consultation.

As a secretary, Xiaofen is assumed to be an objective observer of the clients’ litany of woes. The indifference on her face about the clients’ grievances establishes the division between herself, this time as the enactor of power, and the “interrogated” complainants. Within a few cuts, the film adeptly shifts the role of Xiaofen from the confounded subordinates to the assured authority. However, during the process of bookkeeping, her asthma constantly causes unnecessary attention and interferes with the client’s talking, to the extent that one client stops her own story and inquires about Xiaofen’s health problem. At one point, Xiaofen is brought to face the camera directly, as her plaintiffs do, and asks for the policeman’s advice. Being afraid of disclosing her private life to her colleagues, she claims that the advice was meant for a friend.

The film plays the dynamic between on-screen and off-screen spaces and presents the camera as a mirroring device capable of capturing the full picture. Employing the same shooting angle and position, the camera shifts from interviewer to interviewee, from interrogator to the interrogated, and from the police office to Xiaofen’s bedroom. The

narrative alternatives between what is told by the complainants and Xiaofen's personal life, forges a resounding relation between different women in the film as they experience similar sufferings. The director allows for subtle comparisons between the two sets of story lines and probes into the intricate relationship between the collective and the individual, the public and the personal (Scheib). Like the other women involved in the lawsuits, Xiaofen is inundated in her own emotional turmoil as well—torn between her attachment for her gambling boyfriend, Deng Gang, and her mom's opposition to this debilitating relationship. Xiaofen's mom has been pestering her to meet a local factory chief because Xiaofen looks like the internationally-famed actress, Zhang Ziyi, and is assumed to marry well.

However, the joke about Xiaofen's resemblance to a Chinese celebrity only reinforces the anonymous status of her life: she eventually acquiesces to her mother's intention and meets the wealthy man. Disempowered, she wears the name of "little Ziyi" and wanders lost in the alleys, neither able to please her mother nor find happiness with her boyfriend. The camera alters from an observatory stance to one of sympathy when describing Xiaofen's personal life, one of the many occurrences experienced by ordinary women living in the city. Soon after the emotionless work in the police office, she is found sitting alone in a Karaoke bar, while her friend Lili dances vigorously in the background. With pop music imported from the West, Lili moves mechanically, presenting nothing but an inflated sham of the imagined western life. Xiaofen, tortured by her struggle with her delinquent boyfriend and her mother's arrangement, sits in the front of the bar, facing the camera and weeping in the dark.

Characteristic of well-crafted image compositions, the ending emphasizes the tragedy faced by Xiaofen. While the radio announcements shift between news about the chemical plant explosion and announcements by those searching for disappeared families, as if weighing the relative importance of the official news and the requests from individual households, Xiaofen walks away from the camera towards a destroyed building compound located at one end of the road in the distance. Xiaofen has been dimmed out from the screen several times in the film: once after recording the complaints of clients, she is seen holding an umbrella and walking alone in the dark and rainy street; another time she runs away from the camera towards Lili's dead body dumped in a shabby alley between buildings. The disastrous accident in the chemical plant, ironically, trivializes Xiaofen's personal sufferings, as much as her wretched life is mixed in other women's tragedies and becomes unnoticeable. She eventually disappears from the screen, amid the urgent radio calls for "missing people." When her image dims on the screen, her colleague runs from the foreground to the spot in the distance, trying to offer her a ride home. Rejected, the man runs back to get his motorcycle while Xiaofen remains in the remote background, almost indistinguishable. The motorcycle abruptly breaks down and when the man bends down to fix it, Xiaofen, now almost an invisible black dot in the shot, falls off to the ground. The contrast between the vast and empty landscape that Xiaofen is walking into and her persistence in walking away from the exploded city becomes a paradoxical metaphor for "erasure and persistence"(Acquarello). Beneath the surfaces of an objective observance is the haunting anxiety that "something might have gone wrong." Just as Xiaofen falls down her cell phone rings and the audience hears her boyfriend's

voice message: he has gone to Shanghai, is operating a restaurant and will return to marry her—a belated message unable to save Xiaofen from despair.

The film uses a reverse shot to show what happened before the fire broke out in the silk shop where local residents gather around and play mahjong. Those residents experienced a sudden rupture caused by the unknown fire: from being lively to lonely, the community's simple leisure entertainment is destroyed by the fire. Minimizing shooting angles and camera positions, this film is composed of shots of exactly the same angle, that is, the camera is placed at eye-level with the characters, and from a medium distance with the objects in view. The reverse shot resembles the ending in Hou Hsiao-shien's 1989 film, *A City of Sadness*, where the static shot of family dinner concludes historical turmoil and community vicissitudes. Before the fire breaks out is the same tabloid of a group of villagers sitting in front of the camera playing mahjong. Then the film reverses the sequence as if to rewind the flow of time to retrieve a lost past. The rather formalistic composition where each character occupies a specific position in the shot is disrupted by the aberrant time flow. If the blinking house light in *A City of Sadness* indicates the possibility that something might go wrong and the increasing speed of that blinking hints at an urgency that needs to be addressed, then the ending of *The Other Half* restores a peaceful communal past counteractive to the traumatized present, when any rescue becomes futile. With scanty funding, the director manages to show a rescue team from the PLA (People's Liberation Army) mobilized to rush into the city after the explosion. Immediately following is the shot of helpless local residents sitting in the refugee tunnel, whose rescue is left in doubt, inasmuch as Xiaofen has already collapsed on the ground before her boyfriend's "rescue" message arrives.

As the director himself remarks, “*The Other Half* is a film that comes from both despair and hope. The ill-fated incident that it relates did not actually occur in the city in which the story is set, but it is a problem that is found worldwide. My film attempts to show a portrait of the future, and symbolizes the existential and spiritual crisis which ordinary people experience.”<sup>4</sup> The confined screen space hints at the other (not-shown) half of Chinese reality, taking the form of a haunting anxiety (Xiaofen’s asthma) and the totality of personal sufferings (of the complainants and Xiaofen). Xiaofen’s chronic cough is as persistent and detrimental as the chemical pollution and environmental disasters that have contributed to her illness. The two-dots-one-line dwelling space from the police office to Xiaofen’s apartment provides a provoking interface to look at what is not shown on screen.

The heroine’s personal suffering is exacerbated by its unprivileged place inside a social context overburdened with different malaises, as the camera quietly captures her sitting in a secondary position in the shots. There are only two times when she faces the camera, aside from the dance floor scene: the first time is during the job interview and the second time she seeks advice from her supervisor about her relationship. She tells her supervisor that the advice is not for her but for “a friend.” As in the end none of the “searching for missing persons” radio announcements is meant for her, a solution to her life problems, something she has been longing for, is not claimed to be hers. Through the interaction between different spaces, onscreen or off-screen, the film shows how multiple claims correspond to and also diminish Xiaofen’s life. She has been searching for her disappeared boyfriend in angst and worry, but did not try her friend’s advice of posting a broadcast notice. Quiet and enduring, she shoulders the burden of financially supporting

her boyfriend, and keeps everything to herself, constituting another figure of the silent and underrepresented social bottom. When illness knocks her down in the ending, the radio announcement about the search for missing people belatedly airs out her life tragedies. When she passes out on the ground, the resounding theme of death endorses the meaning of her life, similar to the characters in Jia Zhangke and Lou Ye's films who only find an appropriate expression and representation in the "solution" of death.

The lighthearted tone permeating the complainants' narrations changes abruptly towards the end of the film, with the deterioration of Xiaofen's health and the chemical plant explosion. Like his first feature, *Taking Father Home*, the subtle and neutral tone of the first half is suddenly cut off in the middle of the film, as if to demonstrate the sudden breakout of all the off-screen spaces, when accumulating anxieties begin to intrude into the characters' lives. As in Jia Zhangke's *Unknown Pleasures*, the factory explosion offers a mystic correspondence and the only conclusion to the socially suffocated inhabitants. The sensation created by the disastrous accident projects individual problems onto the broader social background, and serves to dramatize the subdued emotions of the marginal group, the damage they have endured, and the only solution they can pursue. In comparison with mainstream or commercial films that deal with national disasters in recent years, the "explosive ending" in independent films sidesteps the well-treaded motif—the binding effect of disasters (Feng Xiaogang's *Aftershock*, for example)—and leaves the characters wandering alone in the wasteland. Rather than offer the dialectic between disasters and their aftermaths, Ying Liang depicts the minute moments of an unprivileged life constantly dictated by erasure and non-existence. The same social occurrence that speaks to their torturous inner feelings ends up erasing the significance of

their life experience and feelings: the explosion encapsulates and expresses one's personal pain, for both Xiao Ji in *Unknown Pleasures* and Xiaofen in *The Other Half*, but their "expression" is soon inundated in the voices coming from various sources that place them in an even wider gulf of alienation.

On Nov 8, 2009, Beijing "Caihuoche" cultural salon held a screening to watch this film made by Ying Liang and completed the screening with a heated discussion about the film. Five months later, in the city of Fuzhou, Fujian, Cola Loft "Straitfilm" club also showed this film in the building of the same name.<sup>5</sup> As a young director, Ying Liang has not amassed an artistic and social influence comparable to the Sixth Generation directors. Nonetheless, his single-handed artwork has surely inspired more followers than has been acknowledged by the academia. Viewers of these new independent films voluntarily document the thriving film-screen activities in big cities, for the purpose of tracking the historicity of the Chinese independent.

### **Peng Tao: *Little Moth* (2007)**

A low-key production made on digital beta cam video and distributed by the America-based company "dGenerate films," *Little Moth* (dir. Peng Tao), is an exposé of scams, schemes and social scum in small cities, bearing some similarity to Li Yang's *Blind Shaft*. It received its North American premiere at the 2007 Vancouver Film Festival and has been highly acclaimed in international film circuits. It has been called "tough realism in the best sense," and "melds the anger and storytelling scope of Dickens, the doc-influenced immediacy and sensitive gaze of the Dardenne brothers, and the best tendencies of recent Chinese cinema"(Koehler). Just after its premiere at the Locarno

film festival, the Chinese authorities disallowed Peng Tao to send copies outside of China, which, however, did not prevent the digital video of the film from being distributed internationally.

The narrative follows the life journey of an 11- year-old girl, Xiao Erzi (aka “Little Moth”), who is sold to a middle-aged couple to help them earn money. Suffering from a blood disease that leaves her unable to walk, Little Moth is asked to sit on the side of streets to beg for money, when her adoptive father, Luo Jiang, refuses to buy her medicine. After being threatened by local extortionists, the family has to flee into a territory “controlled” by a thug named Mr. Yang, who forces a one-armed boy Xiao Chun to beg in that area. When the grownups argue about how to divide the begging territories between two families, the adopted children develop a bond with one another and decide to run away from their foster parents. In their trip they encounter a local elementary school principal who showed sympathy to Little Moth earlier. This time the principal saves Little Moth from starvation and showers her with maternal love—until a revelation in the hospital changes everything.

The film opens with a quiet family visit taking place in the countryside, followed by a farm-style meal, during which the information about Little Moth’s blood disease is disclosed. The story appears to follow that of a family docudrama until a much later point the Luo couple put the handicapped little girl on street and ask her to beg for money. The narrated situation deteriorates, with various crooks intruding the scenes and one preying on the other. Every subplot takes a plummeting turn and in the end smashes the possibility of hope that existed briefly at different turning points. Two thugs demand protection money from Luo and a fellow child exploiter, Mr. Yang, asks Luo to forsake

part of his profit. In the devilish schema, “those on the lowest rung of China’s social ladder” (Koehler) climb over each other to get ahead and even the innocent become suspicious. Zhong, a career woman working in education, finds Little Moth on the street and offers her 100 yuan. Later Guihua tells her husband that this woman wants to adopt the little girl. Close to the end of the film, when Little Moth is enticed by Mr. Yang’s foster son, Xiaochun, to run away, Zhong saves her again from the fate of resuming the business of begging. Zhong feeds the girl with the best food and dresses her up with young girls’ clothes, murmuring that in this way Little Moth will resemble her lost daughter, which belies her seemingly innocent intention for the first time in the film.

The dramatic yet cinematically subdued finale uses a detached film language to show how Little Moth is stranded on the bridge, after both Zhong and the maid have abandoned her. Zhong first intends to help the little girl to have a surgery, thus curing her illness. Upon being informed that the surgery will cost 100,000 yuan, or else the girl will die soon, Zhong finds that all her benign intentions cannot carry through. In the turning point of her characterization, Zhong asks the maid to carry Little Moth back. On a highway overpass, Zhong demurely walks twenty-feet ahead of the maid and Little Moth, as if making a tough choice; then she turns back to tell the maid that she needs to use the restroom. Left behind, the maid waits only several minutes to find a decent excuse to abandon the little girl. The suspenseful ending reveals that the only two “righteous” persons in the film are no less vicious than the crooks and thugs who are exploiting child labor.

Avoiding any moral judgment and emotional involvement, the film sketches a topology that connects the countryside with the city and builds the linkage between

different social strata. In this structure, each character is limited to the consigned space purely determined by his or her birth origin which they are unable to change. The biological determinant becomes the eternal propellant for the narrative development. In this way the film reduces human agency to the level of carnal needs. Each individual is divested of the potential to defy their consigned space and ends up in the same spot where they departed from. The predetermining biological structure manifests as a resolution that allows for no alternative possibilities: each character in the film is fully devoted to his/her mission set at the beginning, and none of them deviate from the route. To follow Zola's naturalism, or natural realism, the film sets up an alcoholic father who sells his daughter to criminals for money, villager gangs who collaboratively exploit children to make a living, and muggers who harvest human organs, all of which is bounded by natural determinism. The only social intervention into this naturalist schema is a highly-educated career woman who endeavored to save the little girl out of the human emotion of sympathy, which, however, is ruthlessly belied in the ending.

Furthermore, the film challenges the ethics of social realism by portraying a dubious image of the ill-fated little girl. As the crux of the story line that connects multiple regions and social classes, *Little Moth* foregrounds the imploration to “save the children,” a legacy from May Fourth literary realism and in particular, Lu Xun. This recalls the ending of *A Madman's Diary*, in which the analogy of “eating people” fits well into the dire social conditions depicted in *Little Moth*.

I can't bear to think of it.

I have only just realized that I have been living all these years in a place where for four thousand years they have been eating human flesh. ...It is possible that I ate several pieces of my sister's flesh unwittingly, and now it is my turn. How can a man like myself, after four thousand years of man-caring history—even though I knew nothing about it at first—ever hope to face real men?

Perhaps there are still children who have not eaten men? Save the children...<sup>6</sup>

Insomuch as the film questions whether or not the children are worth saving, it musters the biggest blow to the May Fourth legacy and gives even a bleaker visage than *Blind Shaft*, in which a teen boy tries to resist his environment. In Peng Tao's film, what the little girl has lost is not her mobility but also the ability to think and respond in an active way. She is a sheer reflector of her surroundings: when Luo tells her that her last name has changed, she does not show any resentment and willingly sits next to her foster mother on the street begging for money. Later she acquiesces to Xiao Chun's suggestion of running away, even though she has not shown any antipathy towards the life of begging.<sup>7</sup> At the end of the film, Little Moth sits on the overpass, appearing to wait for rescue, or not really waiting—she is simply obediently taking in whatever befalls her.

Little Moth's physical body and her blood disease allegorize a social illness overtaking different social groups; similarly, in *The Other Half*, Xiaofen is caught in asthma, her broken relationship, and the numerous predicaments of her clients. The reception of this film, unfortunately, falls into a post-colonialist or a politically-charged reading mode, as many other Chinese independent films have undergone. For example, international viewers tend to find themselves immediately identifying with the dark Chinese reality the film discloses. For example, one viewer notes, "It's fascinating to see how young Chinese directors have the courage to release films against the Chinese laws and reveal the darker side of the Chinese society."<sup>8</sup> In terms of the film's artistic value, I contend that the "darker side" revealed by the film is less prominent than the homage to and the provocative conversation with literary and cinematic realism. Mapping a regional imagery called China, the film incorporates within its rhetoric an indifference to the

humanistic foundation of realism and instead finds its originality in the corporeality of naturalistic determinism. Inaugurating from Yu Hua's *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* (1995), illness has been favored by Chinese intellectuals to express a deep-down anxiety over the future of the nation and its people. Whether it is Xiaofen in *The Other Half* or the little girl in Peng Tao's work, characters in recent art creations demonstrate a passiveness attributed to their physical condition. Following the underground directors' rebellious efforts of liberating "self" from the party-state unity, and the collective eulogy of the national spectacle, younger directors continue to contemplate on the composition of "self." If in the earlier works of Wang Xiaoshuai, Zhang Yuan and Lou Ye, body is the last resort for self empowerment and self expression, then Ying Liang and Peng Tao show to us that this last resort is eroded, decayed and ill-fated. Reducing "reality" to the level of "corporeality" and realism to naturalism illuminates the futility of providing the entrapped subjects any solution.<sup>9</sup> Striving for a dialogue with the May Fourth mega motifs, including the famous theme of "saving the children," young directors find themselves stuck at the dead-end of the route on which their forerunners have been walking. Confronting the dilemma of either subscribing to the hunt for a "dark China" by Western viewers, or succumbing to domestic audiences' demand to fix social problems via image-making, new independent films have to both rely on and rebuke the heavy imprint of realism.

**Yang Jin: *Er Dong* (2008)**

Yang Jin's film tells the story of an unruly teen, Er Dong, living alone with his devout Christian mother in a small village. Frustrated with his bad behavior, his mother

takes him to a Christian boarding school with the hope that he will find God and a new direction in life. Instead, he finds a girlfriend, Chang'e, and eventually gets expelled by the school. The newly-formed couple, drifting away from their families and social organizations, have to face up to the harsh realities of work, parenthood and adult life. The protagonist's far-from-heroic life comes to a turning point in the second half of the film when recurring nightmares plague him and lead to a revelation of his birth origin. The film is also one of the few independent films that address the influence of Christianity in the countryside, as a testament to change in the rural area. With the absence of the communist party, the conversations of villagers about the love of God create the sole connection among different families, generations and genders. The school principal in the Christian boarding school spends hours retelling biblical Genesis to Er Dong and his mom as if the Bible were of crucial importance to their problems.

In Er Dong's heedless journey, he changes jobs and relocates from one city to another. His search for the past seems to never take form until the bathhouse scene where he meets his great uncle. The mystic atmosphere in the bathhouse resonates with Er Dong's dream-like life and bespeaks the unattainable truth of his identity. On the other hand, when removed of any social decorations and constraints, his naked male body in the bathhouse marks a brief moment of freedom, a homage paid to Jia Zhangke's feature.<sup>10</sup> The senile great uncle is soaked in the steaming air and the sunlight coming through the window, an abrupt scene disconnected from the rest of the narratives and seeming to initiate Er Dong's identity crisis.

In a style of typical *Cinéma vérité*, the film is dominated by long takes and long shots, often blurring out the characters' facial expressions and annulling their differences

from each other. Yet in one of the few extreme close-ups, Er Dong faces the camera, lowers his head back and forth several times and yells out the question: “who is my father?” The defiant teen in the bathhouse is brought to the awareness that everyone else but himself knows the “truth” of his birth origin. Prevalent long takes capture his living status of being left in obscurity about his surroundings and about the origin of his own existence, when revelations fall upon him one after another, yet none helps him to build up his genealogy. The boarding school principal exhorts Er Dong to believe that God is his real “Father,” and the old man in the bathhouse retells the grand history of Er Dong’s biological father. Yet the great love from both “fathers” is as unreal as the steams and bubbles in the bathhouse, neither of them saving Er Dong from being an orphan.

A few of the medium shots in the film mark Er Dong’s endeavors to establish his manhood through forging emotional bonds with male characters who quietly respond to his problems. He makes friends with a young man in the boarding school and the two divulge to each other their relationships with girls. In the yard behind the school, two identical scenes take place at different stages of their encounters: the first time Er Dong stays silently in the front of the shot while his friend sings loudly in the back. Time elapses and the two hang out at the same place again. Yet this time Er Dong, having met his girlfriend, is happily singing in the front while his friend, who has just lost his girl to a more devout suitor, stands in the back wordlessly. What Er Dong sings happens to be the same song from Andy Lau, “It’s not a Crime for Men to Cry.”

The quiet film language shows the different stages of the two teens’ efforts to build their manhood.<sup>11</sup> Being disconnected from family ties, both find a short moment of rapport in their appreciation of the same pop song. To a great degree, they become Gao

Ping and Dong Zi as in *So Close to Paradise* or Gui and Jian in *Beijing Bicycle*: their relation with each other waits for time to affirm it, yet the male bond helps them to cope with a ruthless environment. Unlike other characters who either instruct Er Dong on moral doctrines (his mom and the school principal) or claim to help him make life decisions (his “great uncle,” teacher, and girlfriend), the teen boy in the boarding school never intervenes. He provides a reflection of different stages of Er Dong’s life, both his sorrow and his small happiness. Alienated from the various sources declaring his origin, Er Dong iterates the pop song sung by his friend in the wild grass field, far away from his foster mother and the boarding school.

Besides *mise-en-scène*, the film alternates between black-and-white and color to suggest the protagonist’s negotiation with different forces laying claim to his existence. His dream is narrated in black-and-white slow-motion shots, probing into the nature of real life and forming a contrast with daily drudgeries that are shot in color. The film recalls the black-and-white ending in Jiang Wen’s *Devils on the Doorstep* (2000), where the local peasant Ma Dashan sees the world in colors for the first time right before being beheaded by the Japanese. Whereas in Jiang’s film the contrast between black-and-white and color suggests different visions of history that could have been seen, but was missed or misinterpreted, Er Dong’s personal history shot in a colorless world suggests the suppression of his daily life. His efforts to make a living to support his family muffle him from understanding his subconscious. In one of his dreams, his son is sold in the black market for 15 *yuan* per *jin*. Later his mother tells him that she found him in a child-for-sale market when he was an infant. Er Dong’s dreams disclose the dark reality of children trafficked in the countryside of China, where children were weighed and charged a price

based on their weight in the black market. The value of a human body, when divested of the labor it can provide, is hooked to the ubiquitous central-controlled pricing system.

The only time Er Dong seems to care about something, throughout the whole film, occurs in the end when he asks his foster mother persistently about his real parents. Compared to *Little Moth*, both films show the life of abandoned children, and push to an extreme the conundrum raised in *Unknown Pleasures*, that is, the value of a human body is either determined by physical labor or simply by the weight of their flesh. It also participates in the May Fourth humanitarian project of renewing a nation by saving its children, who in Lu Xun's account are supposed to be innocent and hopeful. At the end of the film, Er Dong's child is born and this life change triggers his immense anxiety of searching for his real identity. From the unwanted child to the awakened father who is running away for a better future for the sake of his son, the rhetoric resembles Zhang Yuan's *Beijing Bastard* where a young rebel is forced to assume the role of a father unprepared. In one of Er Dong's dreams, his new-born son repeats his fate of being sold beside the rock hill, a prospect he dreads.

The motif of the orphanage and the abandoned children that speaks for a whole generation of city inhabitants, has taken up an important weight in the films made by the DV generation. Zhao Ye's *Ma Wu Jia* (2007), for example, tells another story of a fatherless teen, Wu Jia, taking care of his sick mother and younger brother who, due to an illness, requires regular blood transfusions. Donating blood for his little brother leaves Wu Jia too weak to realize his childhood dream of joining the track team at school. Compared with *Orphan of Anyang*, a film made by a veteran Sixth Generation director Wang Chao,<sup>12</sup> the futility of Er Dong finding his real father and the heartless father

selling out his daughter for liquor money in *Little Moth* rebut the fable of “reality” recounted by Wang.

In *Orphan of Anyang*, an unemployed middle-aged factory worker has to rear an abandoned child for the 200 *yuan* the child’s mother, a prostitute, specifies in the note. The middle-aged man and the mother, seemingly for the sole purpose of raising the child, form an unorthodox yet semi-sweet family. The “father” takes after the baby in his street bicycle stand and watches as his “wife” solicits customers on the other side of the street. Both have their needs met in this arrangement until their brief peaceful life is disrupted by the police’s anti-prostitution excursion. Peng Tao’s film about the grown-up orphan emphasizes the sense of the absurd prevalent in the Sixth Generation film corpus. If Wang’s film still shows how the parent generation, however distressed, manages to take care of the unwanted child, then Peng Tao demonstrates the emotional damage the child has undergone in his growing-up experience. The “absurdity” of various occurrences happening to an ordinary member of the social bottom is replaced by the prevailing alienation and numbness the orphan feels in his adult life.

The difference between abandoning a child and selling one lies in the latter’s potential of earning the market value of a human body invested in its future labor. The significance of human value, as called for in the May Fourth enlightenment project, is soon subdued by the capitalistic concern for profit, and the hue of realism is placed on the imagery of corporeality. The all-encompassing and state-supported waves of consumerism and commercialization arrived before the realization of the May Fourth project. This feeling of being “undone,” owing to the bygone and betrayed promise, leaves not only a nostalgia for the disappeared past, but also an aimless resentment of the

current life, explicated largely by the intellectuals, artist rebels, and angry internet commentators. In Yang Jin's own words,

Er Dong's country town is my hometown, and I have many memories of growing up there. However, it has already changed completely. The government decided to develop the mining industry in that isolated mountain district. ...The reality beneath the apparent prosperity is one of confusion. Having always lived in this isolated area, this put a lot of pressure on Er Dong.<sup>13</sup>

Both *Little Moth* and *Er Dong* show a grotesque combination of Chinese communal values and the effect of primeval capitalistic development in the countryside. In *Little Moth* the village chief helps Luo search for his wife who is suspected to have become the prey of organ harvesters. In *Er Dong* the protagonist is released from prison even though he could not afford a bail-out, thanks to the benign police-officers.<sup>14</sup> This film is both a neutral account of an ordinary guy's experiences harbored in community life as often seen in Jia Zhangke, and an exposè of the dark side of the social reality featured in Li Yang's coolheaded observation. This inclusiveness reveals the heterogeneous influences on younger independent directors, endowing the film with an ambiguity that marks their endeavors to negotiate with the heritage they inherit.

### **Reconstructed Realism**

Recent developments in Chinese independent films behold an aesthetic that blurs the line between the real and the staged, which merges documentaries with narrative features. Documentarists who lighten up the scene of independent filmmaking in China include Zhao Liang (*Crime and Punishment*, 2007, and *Petition*, 2009) and Wang Bing (*Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks*, 2003, *Crude Oil*, 2008 and *The Ditch*, 2010).<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, filmmakers best known for making narrative features experiment with a mix

of different styles. For example, while increasing unrealistic elements in his portrayal of social reality, Jia Zhangke has begun to utilize techniques such as digital camera, face-to-face interview, real people playing themselves, etc. that give his films a more documentary look. Characters in *The World* appear largely in their animated forms, sometimes sent as text message, creating a surrealistic effect enabled by the latest in animation technology. A more noticeable example is in *Still Life* where the protagonist, Sanming, on a journey out of the city to search for his wife, hallucinates the vision of a shaman walking on a rope hanging on the Three-Gorge Dam. He even sees a rocket soaring into the sky beside the dilapidated residential housings along the Yangtze River. Sanming's hallucination might be explained by his traumatized mentality caused by the bleak social environment in which he is placed. It also bespeaks the director's attempt at unraveling reality through alternative narrative dimensions. Jia's recent narrative film, *Twenty-Four City* (2008), is discredited by his fans for leading viewers to mistake it for a documentary.<sup>16</sup> Admitting his intention of attracting a larger audience by using famous professional actors, Jia underscores this intent by forging an abrupt film language to add a sense of instability.<sup>17</sup>

*Perfect Life*, a film made by Hong Kong-based filmmaker, Emily Tang, transgresses not only the distinction between documentary and fiction, but also different modes by which to present reality. The film features a bifurcated narrative, each part devoted to a separate story and a different filmic texture: The first part presents a splintered reality that evokes a sense of fictiveness with meticulous frames, ominous coloring and cluttered mise-en-scène. The unstable life of Yueying seems to be a mere product of her perplexed imagination. The second part is grainier, shot in low-definition

DV, about a mainland Chinese emigrant, Jenny, residing in Hong Kong. Jenny joins figures such as Fengming (in Wang Bing's film of the same name) and the testimonials in *Twenty-Four City* as she alternates between stoicism and startling emotional transparency. Whereas the connection between Yueying and Jenny is unclear, the bigger distance lies in the disparity between the visual representations of the two separate parts, one in well-crafted celluloid and the other in DV.

The fiction/documentary combo can be both socially significant and aesthetically innovative, even though it might become a cliché for postmodern filmmaking. Albeit the provocative forms, those films unveil the filmmakers' pursuit of truthful representation of reality. As it is well recognized, "no matter how purely reportorial or observational a documentary claims to be, it still—by virtue of operating in a moving-image medium with a long history of artistic practice—transforms images from real life into aesthetic objects, ushering them into the imaginary space that all cinema creates."<sup>18</sup> Younger Chinese filmmakers wrestle with the impossibility of capturing, in narrative cinema, reality in its living form; they display a preoccupation with the dialectic between different perspectives to realities. The verisimilitude of reality that has been largely taken for granted and put on the altar of realistic filmmaking is increasingly subject to scrutiny, with directors' increasing awareness of the act and means of representation.<sup>19</sup>

Film critics such as Shelly Kraicer emphasize the value of independent cinema in offering alternative imageries to antagonize the overly formulaic commercial culture, on the premise that multiple visions of realities exist. Mainstream Hollywood movies give a sham version of reality, removing the complications and contradictions of reality, pacifying the audience with reassuring and at times distracting fantasies. They have the

effect of repeating themselves, and block out the chances for alternative representations. What's more, these films naturalize and hence falsify "the relationship between a highly constructed faux-reality (commercial American fiction film) and something like "real life."<sup>20</sup> For the reason that Hollywood creates a falsified vision of reality that is mistaken for real life, Kraicer holds a high opinion of third-world cinema produced in nations where alternative visions have not been smothered by Hollywood.

The abovementioned opinions are echoed in online forums. For example, a user named "thoughtful" on douban.com comments on June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2010 that "indie is not that far from our life. If we can extend the definition, I used to be independent too." He continues to discuss his indie-making experience during a time of despair and struggle and concludes that he probably has walked out of the situation of being independent/isolated (被独立).<sup>21</sup> Another user contributed remarks regarding the lineage from Jia Zhangke to Ying Liang:<sup>22</sup>

Independent films are not only a dream; it needs sincerity and acute observation of life. For a long time on our screen are illusionary images remote from real life, in which we cannot see real characters. We know those are not what we hear and see in daily life. Yet since Jia Zhangke's *Xiaoshan Going Home*, things are quietly changing. Spending 30,000 RMB completing a 90mins narrative feature by a single person sounds like a dream, yet someone made it, that is Ying Liang. He not only tried but also persisted. Under his camera, ordinary city life shows a different aliveness, making me feel that in the populace there is naturally a lively atmosphere, full of vigor—these are exactly what we cant see on TV screen.

Comments from two different cultural forces, elite film critics and anonymous online users, identify with the "truthfulness" ardently pursued in Chinese independent cinema, an enlightenment contemplation confronting the displacing effect of mass-consumption and the commercialization of cultural products. While Shelly Kraicer's impassioned judgment sometimes risks obscuring the difference between independent cinema and

national cinema, the domestic Chinese audience pinpoints the nationalistic vigor and livelihood found in the cinema about ordinary Chinese folks. Online forum users extend the Chinese equivalence for “independent,” *duli*, to other semantic groups containing the key word “du.” Being independent, “bei duli,” is understood as an marginalized status forced upon by one’s surroundings, and by emphasizing the meaning of “du,” audiences highlight the importance of “being isolated, being alone and being individualistic” in the setting of filmmaking. On one hand, “independent” has its historic context in China: with its association with the minority, the outsider, and the more ideologically-charged intellectuals and avant-garde artists. One may suspect that Zhang Yimou and his classmates in BFA could have used the term to label their early defiant films against earlier studio directors. The concern of Chinese intellectuals since the May-Fourth has consistently been in the mind of Chinese independent filmmakers. As analyzed in Chapter One, the Sixth Generation both rebels against their predecessors and continues its search for “meaning,” “definition” and “truth” that has already been revived in the 1980s cultural fever. In the face of the June Fourth massacre, the new generation sets out to excavate the kaleidoscopic facets of Chinese reality, carrying on the mission that has been dropped by the Fifth Generation, who are more and more aligned with the rhetoric of the state.

On the other hand, the audiences, including online viewers, help to shape the Chinese independent into a movement where the semantic unit becomes the loci in which Chinese intellectuals place their hope for the aborted humanistic spirit. From Zhang Yuan’s early films of young rebels, the Chinese independent gradually locates the vigor of their films in viewers who voluntarily propel the independent movement. The Fifth

Generation's elite stance of root-searching has been replaced by the younger filmmakers' new outlook for the agenda of cultural regeneration, a conversion bearing similarity to Lu Xun's reexamination of his condescending attitude to the general mass.<sup>23</sup> Contrary to the "commercial indifference" proposed by not a few scholars about film viewers, I contend that ordinary folks, urban residents, and the general population, endeavor to forge a public sphere that serves to cultivate the revival of self and the right of expression.<sup>24</sup>

### **Liu Jiayin: *Oxhide* (I) and (II)**

Liu Jiayin's debut, casting her parents and herself within her family's fifty-square-meter home in Beijing, consists of twenty-three static, one-scene shots. Besides the bold film language of combining extreme long-take with idiosyncratic close-ups, the film also transforms documentary into fiction and blurs the lines between reality and representation. The film explores the unnatural feel and formalistic potential incurred by authentic imagery, and the amusing connection between objects in the film's composition. In this manner it challenges established assumptions about on-the-spot realism. In *Oxhide* (I) the director's father, Liu Zaiping, is clouded by worries because his leather-bag business is not going well. He argues with his wife, Jia Huifen, and his daughter about how to boost business in the shop. To work out successful business strategies, the daughter becomes the assistant in printing out advertisement fliers and the wife becomes the model trying on different types of bag in front of the camera. In addition to his leather-bag shop, the father is also worried about his daughter's height as his short stature suffers mockery from his wife.

Liu's film language is defined by the claustrophobic closeness she keeps between the DV camera and her subjects. A majority of the shots show only parts of the characters' bodies—often the characters' head is left outside of the screen—while allowing their voices to replace the missed body parts. As Tony Rayns commented during the Vancouver International Film Festival, “Liu takes the film language of ‘realism’ into an entirely new dimension” by magnifying on a widescreen canvas the microscopic physical and emotional details of a family. The film sees the descending influence of the party-state, which is superseded with the magnifying power of the camera. Compared to *Little Moth* and *Er Dong*, the nuclear family is shown as a safe place whose enclosed presence is compensated by what is indicated outside of the screen; for example, the conversations of characters reveal their understandings of the outside world and expand the cinematic space of the family.

The director experiments on camera positions in multiple ways, including the camera angle, the distance between the camera and the subjects, and in particular, camera level. Striving for a dialogue with world cinema auteur, for example, Japanese director Ozu Yasujiro who is known for favoring low-level shots, Liu uses a monolithic camera angle, i.e., right in front of the characters, and the camera often is placed at a fixed and medium distance above the ground. The pace of the film pays tribute to filmed theatre popular in the early phase of cinema development, the film consisting of the single “tableau” of the cramped space of Liu's family. Camera movement has traditionally been an important means to express the character's state of mind or to assist the actor's performance, particularly prior to the time when dialogue and music replaced those functions. Stable camera movement, although privileged by many independent

filmmakers, is not the defining aesthetic of Chinese independent. Liu's minimalist and formalistic work stands out as microscopic everyday realism: instead of digging out the meaning of "reality" as in the Sixth Generation films, the much younger director aspires to circumscribe a piece of the everyday life and magnify its presence by the univocal interference of the camera, leaving aside the quest for deep "meaning." The film is touted by some film critic as "the most important Chinese film of the past several years—and one of the most astonishing recent films from any country,"<sup>25</sup> insomuch as the daily life of a working-class Chinese family is taking on epic proportions. This exuberant praise puts forward the interesting question of how the Six Generation and beyond portray the dignity of self, household and everyday family life in a cramped space of existence.

Such a highly formalistic and observational film language, in my opinion, delves into the uncanny dimension of reality, in particular, the relation between human subjects and the quintessential objects entailed by modern living. By magnifying characters' torso and body parts in motion, the film not only questions the reliability of the assumed reality but also objectifies the subjects captured on screen. Because of scanty financial recourses and the constraints of the family's cramped living conditions, the film is shot in extreme darkness that lends a noir setting.<sup>26</sup> Many times in the film, with the source of light coming from the above, the characters sitting in the room were left in darkness while the dining table is illuminated. Anton Kaes contends that highlighting a small area of the stage can "convey changes in the emotional content of a scene, emphasize visual conflicts between characters, and produce the effect of dream and hallucination."<sup>27</sup> The low-key light on the characters who surround the center spotlight not only brings out the effect of dream but also dramatizes the existence of the "object"—the dining table, the cutting

board and the cooking appliance become the focus of their attention and their attention towards each other seems unimportant. “The special kind of luminosity that comes from objects being lit and at the same time radiating light, brings forth the illusion of a special kind of ‘essence’”(Elsaesser 251). In F.W. Murnau’s *The Last Laugh* (1924), for example, when the doorman lost his job and uniform, the uniform locked in the closet “glows ... with an inner light” and is “infused with a life of its own.”<sup>28</sup>

To the extent that the objects on the stage serve not as the backdrop to portray the characters’ psychological developments or the linear progression of the story lines but to disrupt the coherent logics of the narrative, a reversed relation between the objects and the characters is built. The special “essence” of the object in many noir films, in my understanding, revokes the intrinsic values of the subjects. In Liu Jiayin’s film, the objects take on this mystic power in the second scene when a view down to a desktop discloses a corner of a green machine sitting in the upper right. In the off-screen space, low voices discussing Chinese calligraphy revolve into instructions about text formatting and the sounds of typing. After as long as six minutes, the machine in the upper right starts to sputter and slowly produces a document that reads “50% off sale”—it is only then the audience is aware that the green machine is actually a printer. Another example is the constant but barely noticeable click-clack sound which intervenes into the conversations of the families and causes a glass of water sitting on the table to shiver during an intense moment in their argument. The source of the sound is not disclosed until later when the father works by the half-veiled window and a white train passes by.

The film depicts a circumscribed life that is associated with the outside world solely with its material substance, for example, the printer, and especially the leather bags.

The father brings home the leather bags from time to time, and exchanges comments with his family about new fashion trends. The mother walks into the scene with a handful of groceries and informs everyone of fluctuating market conditions. In the film the only view to the outside is not induced by the family's choice to look out, but by the accidental outcome when searching for their missing cat on the covered balcony: when their rushing about ruffles the curtain and opens it, the audience not only sees the cat, but also a glimpse of the sky. The contrived space circumscribes the characters, their fighting, argumentation, discussion and in the meantime connects them. They fight over trivial things such as what to have for dinner and reach a consensus only about seemingly more important decisions such as setting proper prices for the bags.

The importance of "things" in their life is especially emphasized by the overly meticulous characteristic of the father figure. In the prelude he runs on, talking about how his daughter should arrange the font for the typing paper carefully, even though in the end he decides not to use the advertisement poster they designed. Later he fastidiously works on the nails of the leather bags piece by piece. The father's obsession with the qualities, functions and components of commodities and every aspect of the things in his house gives the objects of his focus a dominating position. When he looks at and touches the oxhide, he fantasizes the pain the cow has suffered before it was killed. His overt appreciation of material things in his life infuses a commercial interest with ardent craftsmanship and occasionally borders on Marxist commodity fetishism. However, in contrast to depicting an obsession that often points to the inadequacy of the gazing subject, this film presents the objects, mostly unfinished commodities, as an opening to the outside world and in this sense compliments the subject inscribed in the interior house.

The household in the film is not open to the outside world until in *Oxhide II* when the daughter looks outside the window and comments that the cupboard has blocked the view of the passing train, a lament that immediately destroys the contentment of the dumpling-making family.

In a microscopic view, the film treats its characters the same way as the objects shown in the film—the human body, dim in comparison to the illuminated objects—enduring the same fragmentation effect when only parts of the objects or human body are shown. The space is so cramped and limited that a fully-grown subject is impossible, just as its efforts of expanding the space by material possessions are annulled. Whether it is the sectioned printer or the peeled ox skin, the things owned by the Liu family have the dual role of complimenting the subjects, while at the same time failing in that mission. The green printer, first unrecognizable in its partial presence on the screen, forebodes the fragmentation and limitation the family members experience. The advertisement flier meticulously designed by the father and his daughter, slowly printed out of a dissected and distorted machine, is in the end abandoned, and fails in the aspiration of saving their dying business. The film “distorts the outsized figure of the father, recapturing him in claustrophobic framings that can’t contain the grandeur of his wounded dignity,”<sup>29</sup> as vividly portrayed in the ending when the father, lying in bed, murmurs in the dark, “I have a lot of things waiting to be fulfilled.” He then calls out to his wife and daughter who, however, seem to have fallen asleep and do not answer his call. The motif of “waiting to be fulfilled” reaffirms the feel of “waiting to be completed,” suggested in the opening sequence—fractioned objects, the mismatch between the images of different things and the sound of human voices, and particularly the fifty-percent discount rate

printed out on the document. The social milieu that requires “50 percent off,” a forced business strategy the Liu family adopts, cloaks the full potential of the family members. As much as *The Other Half* brings to the screen only the plaintiffs of the legal cases and leaves the other parties in oblivion, Liu Jiayin’s film reveals a circumscribed space whose contour and surroundings are at most detrimental—the represented fifty percent is the warmly-lit household while the other fifty percent is left in an unknown darkness.

With the success of *Oxhide*, Liu Jiayin made a sequel that pushes the everyday realism to the extreme of deliberate compositions, with nine shots confined to one tight room, each shot lasting from 5 to 21 minutes. As in the first *Oxhide*, the camera is placed near table level and for that reason characters’ heads are cut off unless they bend down. The film shows the Liu family talking, squabbling and cooking together in real time. In regard to the remaining minimalism where small things are assumed to take up large impact, there are clashing opinions from viewers. Whereas some critics touted it as one of the best Chinese films made in the 2000s, the online film magazine [variety.com](http://variety.com) disparages the same fixed camera method maneuvered in a longer running time, implying that the director’s studied engagement with space would not be able to compensate for the loss of originality and the hollow content.<sup>30</sup> The film continues to explore the extent to which the urban living space circumscribes the subjects to a privatized and trivialized “self” who fails to connect to the outside world and therefore is unable to grow. The camera prevails at returning the attention to the self, the both magnified and sectioned private space, patiently dwelling on its contentment and agony.

On the other hand, from the first film, when the audience first confronts a shot of part of an unidentifiable object, to the sequel, where the family spends hours preparing

dumplings, the limitation of the urban space is shown within the suffocating frame of the film itself, completely cutting its subjects off from any social references. By displaying a Chinese family as a fully enclosed entity, resembling the “museum” in the Fifth Generation’s portrait of the northern patriarchal family, it initiates a conversation with previous filmmaking practice, an attempt that could provoke interpretative potentials. The enclosed household as a shelter stands in contrast with the debilitating courtyards that often symbolize the old China; yet the curtained outside world looms as the same darkness. When trying to diminish the presence of the broad social milieu, as the digital generation so claimed, their films go somewhere innovative and groundbreaking, and in that sense interesting, yet meanwhile they are claustrophobically tedious.

Even though *Oxhide* (I) and (II) subscribe to the same foreign distribution mode shared by many Sixth Generation films, it is easily accessible through video sharing sites such as tudou.com, youku.com and pplive.com. Different from quite a few other Chinese independent films whose directors still hold onto proper distribution channels such as international and domestic art-house film festivals or a high premium for the DVD versions,<sup>31</sup> these two films enjoy publicity created by the applause of online film viewers as well as the recognition of film critics. On the website douban.com, the entry about *Oxhide* garners over one hundred affirmative comments from film students, festival goers, amateur DV filmmakers and general audiences. More than one commentator regards Liu Jiayin as “the Chinese Ozu” who masters the art of everyday life captured in a stationary camera and extreme long-takes, while several others pinpoint the motifs of cramped space, the forced oppression, and the warmth of enclosed family life. One user notes that, the train, which exists in the film only as a sound, replaces views that used to be outside

of Liu's window, indicating a loss, but at the same time filling in a supplement, as a way to leave their cramped lives.<sup>32</sup> The film's success is partially due to the director's choice to avail of unconventional distribution channels, in particular, the booming online space, to back up her solitary artwork against the monopoly of market control. The constraints are manifested in numerous senses: the restricted space, which the Liu family inhabits and the camera films, the short height of the daughter that worries her father, the zero possibility for theatre release due to state policy in favor of nationalistic Chinese blockbusters, and the challenged legitimacy of the independent auteur in filmmaking.<sup>33</sup> The flexible online viewing and commenting space provides the small, independent director with a public sphere to exchange ideas and comments with her supporters and unleash herself from the imposed restrictions; in this manner, the off-screen space of the film goes beyond the voice of the three actors or their cut-off body parts, and extends to the participatory viewers who feel the same anxiety of a constrained self.

#### **Gan Xiao'er: *Raised from Dust* (2006)**

This section examines a film made by a Guangzhou-based young director, Gan Xiao'er, and analyzes the industrialization of Chinese films that have expanded from self-financed production to independent self screening. Gan's filmmaking practice, especially his effort to organize film screenings for rural villagers, attests to more diversified film exhibition venues in China. Whereas an increasing number of critics have been noticing the rise of small-screen viewing enabled by advancing technologies (cell-phones and other video devices), much fewer are aware of the interaction between filmmakers and their audiences carried out during alternative screenings. Venturing into the possibility that the "indie" is becoming an integral part of the film industry as a "genre," a type of

cinema that serves to complement rather than challenge commercial films, I will examine the digital generation's continued engagement in humanity and empiricism, which, in a new era, surfaces as the questioned trustworthiness of everyday experiences and the renovated definition of realistic representations.

Gan Xiao'er was born in a village in Henan, where fifteen percent of the population is Christian, including his parents who were both teachers and devout Christians.<sup>34</sup> Gan attended the Beijing Film Academy, graduated in 1998, and is now teaching in South China Normal University in Guangzhou. Being religious himself, Gan's films are noticeably different from other independent filmmakers. Working in the Guangzhou area where he has his own production company, Gan helps to demonstrate that the radius of independent filmmaking has reached beyond Beijing and Shanghai. Called the Seventh Seal Film Workshop, Gan's production company pays tribute to his religion and the director Ingmar Bergman. Gan intends to direct seven feature films, forming a set of "Seven Seals" all dealing with the spiritual life of the Chinese people. In his understanding, spiritual life is not to be equalized to religious life, as he emphasizes, "the goal...is not to spread the Gospel, but rather to depict the state of the Gospel in China." "The Only Sons" and "Raised from Dust" are the first two films. The scripts of the remaining five are not yet done, but Gan has already decided on the titles: "Waiting for God," "Fear and Trembling," "To the Ends of the Earth," "Going to Jerusalem" and "Before the Clarion."<sup>35</sup>

Gan's debut feature, *The Only Sons*, is about poverty and spiritual salvation in a farming village in Guangdong, which, compared with the second work, *Raised from Dust*, is better received in international film festivals.<sup>36</sup> *Raised from Dust*, produced by Zhang

Xianming and co-written by Gan Xiao'er, presents an unprecedented and intimate portrait of the lives of Chinese Christians in rural China. An underground film made without permits from the central film bureau and shot in the director's home-village in Henan, the film uses a completely documentary method. Except for the heroine and Zhang Xianmin who is playing her paralyzed husband lying in bed, all the characters are played by non-professional actors. Many villagers even keep their real names in the film and act out their own life. For example, the story of the big brother Lu is based on the actor's conversion from a hooligan to a believer, which is disclosed when he educates his misbehaving peer villagers. The story of the dying husband and his loyal wife was inspired by the true account of Gan's parents: Gan's father suffered from a liver disease for seventeen years and his wife kept watch over him at his sick bed till the last minute.

*Raised from Dust* depicts the hardship undergone by a rural woman in the Henan province, Xiaoli, a dedicated housewife and devout member in a local Catholic church, as her husband is hospitalized with respiratory illness caused by poor mining security. Xiaoli is urged by the hospital staff to pay up her husband's medical bills and by the school teachers to pay her daughter's tuition. Xiaoli's daughter is also a devout Christian who prays alone to God to save her father's life. After being dismissed from school for failing to pay tuition, she observes how her mother makes coal and quietly punches the stick into the coal mold, when her mother is not home, to offer help. A minimalist account of a countryside woman's struggle, the film locates the maternal nature of women in a quest for solutions to the urban vicissitudes—Xiaoli's motherly acceptance of everything befalling her conjures up the image of a rustic hometown that endures every disaster.

Gan Xiaoger offers a gentle and sympathetic look at the role of faith in a poor rural community. It is estimated that there are 80 to 130 million Christians in China, including both Protestants and Catholics in official and underground churches; the number has been growing quickly in the last two to three decades. However, as Gan remarks, there haven't been many films dealing with the rising religious feeling among rural villagers. In weighing his options, Gan leans towards cinematic realism that incorporates spiritual belief into ordinary people's lives, rather than making an explicit speech about gospel, and his film achieves the objective of representing ordinary Chinese folks who have religious convictions. To a large extent, the director's religious belief imbues the film with a humane feeling, instead of reducing it into religious preaching.

Gan points out that many independent films do not reach the people they are concerned about, which he believes poses a severe threat to the legitimacy of independent filmmaking. Gan is keen to the issue of who is watching his films and what social functions his films are playing. He comments that the era when people such as Liang Xiaowu—the titular character in Jia Zhangke's film about a hapless pickpocket—cannot watch a film like *Xiao Wu* should pass.<sup>37</sup> Gan has organized a few private screening events in his hometown and tried to show his films to “the subject-audiences”—the villagers portrayed in his film—even though hampered by the films' underground nature. He converts the churches in the countryside, including the one where they shot *Raised from Dust*, into film-screening sites and plans to make a documentary about people's reactions to his films. The village audiences reach as many as hundreds to thousands of people and his films have received mixed opinions.

In the new era, to be recognized by international film critics becomes the means to seek investment funding for less-recognized directors, rather than the benchmark of their art work. The long-term goal is to carve out a segment of the fast-developing film industry in China and to participate in the system transition, which may open up a new growth space for Chinese independent films. Gan started to make films in Guangzhou as early as 1998, when advertisement production dominated the career of video makers. After Zhang Yimou's blockbuster, *Hero*, the film industry in China was awakening, along with the blooming film and TV programs in colleges, thanks to the belief that everyone can become a director with the aid of DV technology. Although DV as a popular movement is reaching its end, college students continue to fuel it with large numbers of DV films every year.<sup>38</sup> In the West, independent filmmaking enjoys the partitioned distribution channels of the industry and occupies a properly assigned position—often as an indispensable stimulus that propels the innovation and transformation of mainstream films.<sup>39</sup> The Chinese independent, however, is still hesitant about following the Western mode or not. During the early stage of the DV movement, critics compared the camera of independent filmmakers to the pen of writers in the high-cultural eras of the 1980s, who probed into urgent questions about China's cultural heritage, the role of history, and Chinese reality. Cinema to many aspiring young directors is more than an emotional catharsis; it is a form of social critique and a method to intervene in the direction of history by bringing audiences in confrontation with their real life conditions, unembellished, borne out, precise and boldly truthful. To quote Andrew Chan, "[It's] difficult to imagine a film culture more impassioned about cinema's potential to document and even change history, or one in which cinema is more

central as the chosen form of artistic and political expression.”<sup>40</sup> Gan Xiao'er's films present to us a frontier of the independent filmmaking movement in China that seeks to document and preserve the current time, restore the interrupted enlightenment idea about the subjectivity of each individual, and eventually establish image-making as a personal right.

Gan remarks that, aside from the influence of his mother, he was converted to a religious believer due to the appealing motto that “everyone is precious,” which, significantly, was a stance Jia Zhangke held onto in his contestations with Chen Kaige about the right to make films. Since the re-opening of the BFA, as discussed in Chapter One, the very first lesson imparted to his 1978 film students by the teacher Wang Shuihan was that of the social responsibility of filmmakers—as films tend to use up large social and financial resources, they are not personal expressions, but collective registers of sociopolitical imperatives (Ni 56). The Fifth Generation in their rebellion against the earlier generation and in their pursuit of a new film language won the audience's hearty support in the cultural fever era. Yet their mode of filmmaking is gradually extolled as the standard that cannot be challenged, and they themselves become the authority that newcomers are not supposed to compete with. The power of representation shifts from the older generation to the new, who eventually become authoritative again—filmmaking in China repeats its generic dynamics of rotation, like the enclosed courtyard portrayed in Zhang Yimou's film *Raise the Red Lantern*.

Given their narrow distribution radius, independent films are considered unable to engage in the social development of their nation in a profound and extensive manner. The anxiety of being eclipsed and ignored, without participating in the epitome of time

and the writing of history, continues to haunt the independent generation.<sup>41</sup> The docudramas about the gritty reality of China are not to be sanctioned as a legitimate art form without the participatory viewing experience of expanded audiences, especially domestic audiences. The plethora of film-making and viewing groups in China, lively both in cultural centers and at the periphery, successfully amends the breakage between intellectual filmmakers and the wordless social bottom portrayed in their films. For the post-Sixth Generation (which I venture to argue was actually inaugurated by Jia Zhangke, the Youth Experiment Film Club and the followers of Jia), their film viewers are active agents rather than passive listeners of the directors' preaching, helping to break the generational cycle of power struggles, and shape a nationwide movement that is empowering the voices of each individual.

Independent directors, unlike the Fifth Generation gurus, stand side by side with their viewers, who are also members of the open-ended independent movement, to speak against the generational divide and the practice of guarding one's artistic model. In one of the screening activities held by "Cai Huoche" to watch Lin Xin's films, one audience member comments that those films were of no help to the filmed subjects at all, and the meaning of the films stop at the screening room. Another viewer instead points out that these films are able to cultivate a transformed social mentality in film-making and watching activities—a collective mentality possessing its own patterns and structures—and their significance is immeasurable. As art critic and curator Wang Xiaolu notes, "We confirm with our own life experience and historic memory that these films are sincere. When our films are riding a flying machine that departs from the ground at an

accelerating speed, independent films shoulder the mission of expressing and recording the reality.”<sup>42</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Crazy Stone* is a 2006 mainland Chinese black comedy film directed by Ning Hao and produced by Andy Lau, a Hong Kong-based actor. Immensely popular on its release, the film gleaned 6 million RMB in its first week and more than 23 million RMB in total box office in Mainland China, despite its low budget (3 million HKD/US\$400,000) and cast of unknowns. The movie was shot digitally on HD cameras. Refer to Wikipedia and *danwei.com*, the online magazine on “Chinese media, advertising, and urban life.”

<sup>2</sup> In the realm of documentary films, for example, Zhao Dayong’s *Street Life* (南京路) gives a thorough account of the homeless and beggars wandering on the notorious Nanjing road in Shanghai.

<sup>3</sup> For detailed discussion of issues related to film generic classification in China, refer to the column of “Zhongguo dianying fenji zhidu” on *Southern Weekend*, a weekly newspaper based in Guangzhou, China. *The New York Times* has described the *Southern Weekend* as “China’s most influential liberal newspaper.” See Rosenthal.

<sup>4</sup> fanhall.com.

<sup>5</sup> Refer to douban.com and mtime.com.

<sup>6</sup> Lu Xun, “Diary of a Madman.”

<sup>7</sup> In my understanding, the exaggerated flatness of her characterization serves to deemphasize the dramatization or sentimentalism seen in most commercial films, even though at the expense of realistic depiction.

<sup>8</sup> Rev. of *Little Moth*.

<sup>9</sup> A “solution” to those malaises, however, is often what demanded by domestic audiences when they watch an independent Chinese film.

<sup>10</sup> As analyzed in Chapter III, in *Xiaowu*, Liang Xiaowu has been asked by his girlfriend to sing a song but he is too embarrassed to do that, until he went to a bathhouse and sung the same song, naked and loud.

<sup>11</sup> Different parties claim to the nation, or their ideas of rebuilding the nation. Different from the alliance of the central government and the privileged who is promoting the union of power and fame, the independent group is trying to propose alternative claim of the nation—a different regional imaginary: the grassroots instead of the pan-Asian celebrities.

<sup>12</sup> “Interview with Wang Chao.”

<sup>13</sup> Fanhall.com.

<sup>14</sup> In all their efforts to challenge the Jia Zhangke model and demarcate a new generation, it seems that Jia’s influence is seen in not only styles but also narratives and motifs.

<sup>15</sup> Included in the list of documentary is Shu Haolun's *Nostalgia* that epitomizes the recent trend in post-modern documentaries, that is, the aesthetics of narrative features are bending towards documentaries and at times celluloid films and digital video are in a mixture. For analysis of Ying Liang's works, refer to Jie Li, "Filming Power and the Powerless: Zhao Liang's *Crime and Punishment* (2007) and *Petition* (2009)."

<sup>16</sup> Refer to the interview with Jia Zhangke conducted by sina.com.cn, "Jia Zhangke tan ershisi cheng." In the interview Jia Zhangke mentioned that some people he encountered had told him that he made a fake documentary. One of the titles on the column about this film actually reads, "*Twenty-Four City: A Fake Documentary*."

<sup>17</sup> Jia's interview with the online magazine, *Humanity and Society*, 2009, refer to "Interview with Jia Zhangke: *Twenty-Four City*."

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Chan, "Sinophilic Cinephilia."

<sup>19</sup> Shelly Kraicer, "The Problem of Representation."

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> The number of comments for Ying Liang and his films reach only five, which, in a comparison to the large number of followers to Jia Zhangke, seems rather bleak. However, what matters is the fact that Ying Liang is placed at a paralleled position with Jia Zhangke, which shows his importance and their connection in the eyes of some viewers.

<sup>23</sup> Lu Xun's essay written in 1919, *A Small Matter*, about a tricycle rider helping a wounded old lady, praises the greatness found in a member of the Chinese social bottom. At the end of the essay, the narrator not only belittles the meaning of grandiose political events but also examines his own position as an elite intellectual.

<sup>24</sup> Refer to Chapter IV, about the role of Chinese intellectuals and Chapter 5 about the agency of Chinese film viewers online and in the theatre. For discussion about the legacy of enlightenment, see Vera Schwarcz.

<sup>25</sup> Shelly Kraicer, Rev. of *Oxhide*.

<sup>26</sup> According to the director herself, the shooting usually starts from midnight because during day time her parents have to work and she was in the BFA busying with her studies. The fact that the shooting time is not the time shown in the narrative, among other reasons, helps to justify the director's claim that *Oxhide* is not a documentary.

<sup>27</sup> Anton Kaes, "The Expressionist Vision in Theater and Cinema," in Pickar 92.

<sup>28</sup> Silberman 28.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Weissberg.

<sup>31</sup> The standard price for the DVD of an independent film distributed by foreign companies such as "dGenerate" is US \$295.

<sup>32</sup> Refer to douban.com, the entry on "niupi."

<sup>33</sup> Refer to Chapter VI, the part about how critics doubt the legitimacy of art-house films in china.

<sup>34</sup> Refer to douban.com, the entry about Gan Xiao'er.

<sup>35</sup> It is also the title of Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard's seminal work.

<sup>36</sup> For example, it is praised as "one of the most exciting discoveries in Chinese cinema of the last few years," by the French critic B é é n i c e Reynaud during the 2003 Vancouver International Film Festival.

<sup>37</sup> Refer to the official website for Songzhuang art village, an area located at the suburb of Beijing: chinasongzhuang.cn . Also see mtime.com, the entry of Gan Xiao'er.

<sup>38</sup> "Fangxinweiai de zhongguo duli dianying."

<sup>39</sup> Most studios aim for making money and therefore are hesitant about making innovations. It is therefore left for the independent filmmakers to keep intact the avant-garde and artistic front of filmmaking. Many directors working in the Hollywood were previously working in independent segment. They are absorbed into the Hollywood when they make artistically influential films that also did well in the box office. In that sense, the independent in the West has existed largely as a frontier of the Hollywood or as supplement to amending the Hollywood mode.

<sup>40</sup> Andrew Chan, "Sinophilic Cinephilia."

<sup>41</sup> Xiaolu Wang, "2009 Zhongguo duli dianying guancha."

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., also see Xiaolu Wang, *Dianying yu shidaibing: Duli dianying wenhua pinglun yu jianzheng* (Film and the Illness of the Time: Comments and Witnesses on Independent Film Culture).

## CHAPTER VIII

### CODA:

#### GLOBALIZATION OR MISINTERPRETATION?

In “Trapped Freedom and Localized Globalism,” Lu Tonglin points out that globalization has the effect of decentralization, and the amorphous nature of globalization has gradually “freed the collective imaginary in the developing world from the cultural complex created by the myth of modernity, Eurocentrism.” As a result, “instead of looking for salvation” in the center of ultimate reference, cultural products in the developing world, “which are often shaped by globalization, may question the value system of their own production, global capitalism, as in the case of Chinese independent films.”<sup>1</sup> His arguments foreground the dilemma of maintaining “independence,” as well as a lucid vision of “reality,” at a time when almost all filmmakers are involved in the ebbs of global capital. Recalling the keynote speech delivered at the 2006 Independent Spirit Awards by James Schamus, the co-producer and screenwriter of many of Ang Lee’s works, the Spirit Awards and the Independent Feature Project that sponsors the awards ought to be disbanded.<sup>2</sup> Clarifying his position, he explained that he was worried, not so much about “independent film,” as about independence itself—“the preservation of some form of civic space in which freedom of expression is not merely a privilege purchased with the promise of an eventual profit, but the exercise of a fundamental right.”<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, as noted in Chapter V, a practice common to Chinese independent films—describing social injustice and marginalized people—may serve nothing but to

uncover the “ugly” reality behind China’s economic miracle to the outside world. When the Sixth Generation grows out of the Fifth Generation’s self-Orientalization, they risk the mechanism of self-differentiation that is often enmeshed with the growingly politicized international art circuit. Questioning how urban filmmakers can transcend this “double-bind”<sup>4</sup> is crucial, not only to the enterprise of independent filmmaking in China, but also to the wholesomeness of national cinema and alternative films outside Hollywood majors. Chinese independent films stand out in global cinema, with their immediacy of sociopolitical concerns, their keen obligation to realistic aesthetics, and the directors’ relentless pursuit of the “truth.” While the mix of cinematic realism and the dialectic between the state and the individual furnishes the Chinese independent an incommensurable sense of history, it may also hamper film directors from breaking their own constraints. Customary practices in filmmaking, such as utilizing the diegetic sound of state broadcast as background noise and decorating the characters’ private space with government newspapers, speak to a political consciousness existent among directors, as well as film connoisseurs, who are trained to appreciate them. The immense success of Jia Zhangke has inspired younger directors to follow his route, to disclose the less-promising side of China’s reality. It also poses the threat of channeling the creativity of younger directors in one singular direction. When Jia’s film crew, wearing suits and dresses, walk on the red carpet of glamorous international film festivals, following the Fifth Generation, his films become yet another brand in global cultural feasts; he himself becomes the icon of “power” he has been vehemently fighting against.

When the industry transformation in China pushes for the development of a genre classification system and a separate distribution channel for independent films, it remains

a question whether or not the Chinese independent will resemble its Western counterpart. As Mario Falsetto poignantly notes, many so-called independent film production companies in the U.S. are in fact owned by major Hollywood studios. These big studios not only control the distribution of most films but are also heavily involved in financing independent and international films. Formulating the relation between “independent” films and studio filmmaking as if they were divorced from Hollywood, he stresses, fails to address “the realities of contemporary filmmaking.”<sup>5</sup> In the late 1960s and early 1970s, extraordinary films were produced within the studio system. In recent years, studio films have been focused on special effects, and hyper-edited, formulaic, genre films. The most adventurous films are now made outside the major Hollywood studios, but one cannot say they are made outside of Hollywood per se. Robin Anderson, author of *A Century of Media, A Century of War*, emphasizes the importance of alternative cinema in the third world where “directors, actors, and screenwriters value the art of film. In the hands of these filmmakers, the inspiration for and practices of making movies, are decidedly varied, and usually quite distinct from commercial motivations.”<sup>6</sup> It is therefore ironic to see how Chinese independent directors place hope in the implementation of the Western industry model, while Western critics consign the possibility of art independence to alternative cinema as seen in China.

When queried about the Chinese title of his recent work, *Thomas Mao* (Xiao Dongxi), Zhu Wen comments that the key word “xiao”(small) is to contrast with our time dominated by big-budget blockbusters, and “dongxi” refers to the clash between the East (*dong*) and the West (*xi*).<sup>7</sup> The film tells the story of a drained Western painter, Thomas, who comes to a remote village in China to seek inspiration, and encounters a local artist

with whom he has a dream-like conversation. As they do not speak the language of the other party, their communication is restricted at the level of misunderstanding and speculation, which, however, provides Thomas the inspiration he has been longing for. To what extent the misunderstood Chinese “orient” will continue—with its alternative filmmaking politics—to offer sustenance to the Hollywood-dominated world cinema? And what is left for the similarly confounded local artist after his encounter with the Western painter? Zhu Wen’s film does not give a clear answer, and neither can we be certain about what will happen to Chinese independent films if an industry overhaul takes place in the near future.

In 2009, Jia Zhangke and Zhao Liang withdrew from the Melbourne International Film Festival to avoid appearing beside Rebiya Kadeer, the exiled Uighur leader whom the Chinese government has accused of instigating the riots in Xinjiang. Kadeer is the subject of a documentary, *10 Conditions of Love*, which will also be shown at the festival. Jia released a statement from his production company, saying that “withdrawing from Melbourne is a self-restraint,” and lamenting the increasing political overtone of the Melbourne festival. Interpreted by his overseas fans as “China’s greatest living director bending to the autocratic demands of the government,”<sup>8</sup> nonetheless, Jia’s stance is wholeheartedly backed up by a slew of famous film directors, including Feng Xiaogang, who criticizes the organizers of the festival for turning it into a political drama. On Internet portal 163.com, over 4,000 comments have been made about the news, almost all of which have been in support of the two directors.<sup>9</sup> In light of this, overseas critics including Osnos realize that the position of the two directors may not simply result from the decision to work within the system, but that interpretation of the violence in Xinjiang

“looks different to Chinese observers...than it does to foreigners.”<sup>10</sup> Surprised at how the Chinese “dissidents” became “patriots,” international critics seem to misinterpret the intention of the independent filmmakers, not only regarding their withdrawal from the politicized festival, but also about the genesis of the young generation’ filmmaking.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Pickowicz 124.

<sup>2</sup> See *Filmmaker* magazine, winter 2006. “The war is over,” Schamus declared, “and we should all now celebrate around the pyre of our victory bonfire the accomplishments that have brought the independent movement this far, and wonder, perhaps, if from the ashes something new might arise.”

<sup>3</sup> Alan Riding, “Berlin Fires up its Film Festival with Star Power.” The author also states, “The utopian dream of independent film makers is in turn quite simply to be noticed here. By the end of this week, when an 11-member jury comes to award the Golden and Silver Bear prizes to the best films, directors and performers, attention will turn again to the studio-backed American and British films. With their wide distribution already guaranteed, these films do not need prizes. But for deserving low-budget films, recognition at Berlin’s festival is a rare chance to escape obscurity.”

<sup>4</sup> Gary Xu, *Sinascape* 48.

<sup>5</sup> Falsetto 19.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>7</sup> “Dapian shidai de xiaodongxi.”

<sup>8</sup> Evan Osnos, “Jia Zhangke and Rebiya Kadeer.”

<sup>9</sup> “Films’ Withdrawal from Melbourne Festival Supported at Home.”

<sup>10</sup> Evan Osnos, “Jia Zhangke and Rebiya Kadeer.”

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