

**Nostalgia in Contemporary Chinese Cinema  
(1993-2008):  
A Reflection of China's Socio-Cultural Postmodernity**

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## **Abstract**

Since Deng Xiaoping's "South Tour Speech" which he delivered during his inspection of special economic region in southern China in 1992, China's reforms and opening-up have entered a period of stable and rapid development. These undoubtedly are driving a comprehensive range of areas of social transition in Chinese society, including state affairs, social activities, mass culture, and globalization. All these factors may have a significant impact on the situation of Chinese film, but in the meantime, local cinema will inevitably present contemporary China and its social culture in a certain way.

This thesis chooses a period of time from 1993 to 2008 and examines "nostalgia", a unique area of contemporary Chinese cinema, as its basis for discussion. In the light of Western and postmodern cultural theories, this study aims to explore the current state of nostalgia film and its postmodern elements in China and to extend the discussion to social areas and cultural studies. The conclusion reached by the discussion includes two major aspects. First, through historical reconstruction and superficial pastiche, China's past (or its nostalgia) has inevitably presented certain distortions when facing the global mass cult and Chinese communist leitmotiv ideology. Second, contemporary China has reached the stage of a visually featured, postmodern consumer society.

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## **Chapter ONE**

### **Introduction – Nostalgia and Its Postmodernity**

In certain postmodern conditions, the concept of “nostalgia” has become widely divergent from its original meaning in Western languages. The word, nostalgia originated in the early modern period. In 1688, Johannes Hofer (1669-1752), a Swiss doctor, first coined the term in his dissertation, in order to describe a frequent occurrence in Swiss mercenaries who in the plains of lowlands of France or Italy were longing for their native mountain landscapes. Such medical cases of mental illness are what we commonly described as homesickness today. To be more precise, the word “nostalgia” is a Greek compound, consisting of *nóstos* (homesick), and *álgos* (pain or ache). It was described as a medical condition at that time as nostomania and philopatridomania (qtd. in Natali, “History and the Politics of Nostalgia”). Soon after that, the Industrial Revolution of Europe rapidly led to a large-scale movement of population and colonial expansion in capitalism. The original idea of nostalgia as an emotional state of melancholy quickly spread through boom cities and colonists. In the early modern period, homesickness became the theme of nostalgia.

In this way, one may realize that the initial idea of nostalgia in the early stage of modernity is quite different compared with today. The former, pining for a physical home, concerns the shifting from one geographical location to another; whereas the latter, yearning for the past, focuses more on the ellipses of time. Such a difference

consists in different relations of time and space. That of Western modernity can be embodied in an improvement in transportation (such as the invention of the train and steamships), and by the scattering of the modern urban industry (as Raymond Williams pointed in his *The Country and the City*, the urban prosperity and resulting population mobility brought by the industrial revolution). Then the root of the pain comes from the impassable distance between the country and the city. Because of the spatial distance people at that time could not return to their native land and even fell ill from nostalgia. However, as time went on, contemporary nostalgia gradually changed from a longing for space (homesickness) to a time of recall of the past. According to Janelle Wilson, “the definition of nostalgia as a disease prevailed until the late nineteenth century. Nostalgia during this time was de-medicalized.” (Wilson 22)<sup>1</sup>

This, to some extent, profits from a certain psychological disorder of people’s spatial identification with their homeland in modern development. A typical example is from a recent Taiwan film, *Cape No. 7* (by Wei Te-Sheng, 2008), about the end of the colonial era on the island. In the film a Japanese young man born in 1920s Taiwan<sup>2</sup> is forced to leave the place by boat at the end of World War II. When the ship is heading for Japan, the young fellow writes down the words below for his lover

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<sup>1</sup> Also as Linda Hutcheon believes, “by the nineteenth century, a considerable semantic slippage had occurred, and the word [nostalgia] began to lose its purely medical meaning [...] and by the twentieth century, it had begun to attract the interest of psychiatrists. But curious things happened in that generalizing process: nostalgia became less a physical than a psychological condition”. See Hutcheon, Linda. “Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern”, Online data, 1998 at <http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/criticism/hutchinp.html> Last access: 4 Oct. 2010

<sup>2</sup> From April 1894 to August 1945, Taiwan was a Japanese colony.

in Taiwan:

The ocean in December is always with rage,  
The pressure of shame and regret is too great for me,  
Combined with the restless shake,  
I don't know if this is to return home,  
Or go away from home!<sup>3</sup>

In this case, the spatial identity of the young man (with his homeland) has been at a loss in the inexplicability of a colonial history. However, as has happened in today's culture, the disorder of identification with our space is not always related to the colonial aftermath. As evanescent as snowflakes on a river, a world of the spectacle in the postmodern has been quickly changing our home scenes of childhood and altered many things beyond recognition. This is particularly in evidence in those booming metropolises. Alleyways and small shops have been fast disappearing, and replaced by high-rise buildings and busy streets. People are still there but the things are no longer the same. Those unvarying promises, like "fifty years without change"<sup>4</sup> for Ackbar Abbas, have thus been quietly "belied by an urban landscape that mutates right under our noses", making our home "subtly unrecognisable" (441-64).<sup>5</sup> This raises the question of the disappearance of the difference between the past space and the spatial distance. "Homeland" is never going to be any real-life realization by putting up with separate space. It is no longer simply a real physical space, but merely

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<sup>3</sup> "十二月的海总是带着愤怒，我承受着耻辱和悔恨的臭味，陪同不安静地晃荡，不明白我到底是归乡，还是离乡！" If an English version cannot be found in direct quotations of this research, a translation from Chinese to English is usually translated by the author, except specified in reference.

<sup>4</sup> "五十年不变". Chinese government has promised to let local people administer the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) with a "high degree of autonomy" for fifty years (from the return of Hong Kong in 1997), which means to keep a "way of life" that was supposed to remain unchanged for fifty years.

<sup>5</sup> When talking about Hong Kong, Abbas mentions "a peculiar kind of city – it appears in the moment of disappearance (first sense) and it disappears in appearances/representations (second sense)" (446).

a disappeared past. The substitute is to rely on time. That is certain past recall in our thoughts. Such a memory has become hard to fix in any actual space, and just as has been said in a Chinese TV play, becomes “our youth that has nowhere to set up”<sup>6</sup>.

Can the memories today pass through the handicap of distance and get to the other shore in our dreamland? Zhu Ziqing, a famous essayist of China, said, “Our days leave us, never to return”.<sup>7</sup> We do not miss some place because of leaving it, but we experience a loss of identity because we cannot get back to a past of the place any more. Thus, the “days” that make us feel lost are not a problem of space or distance at all. It has become a time barrier. Linda Hutcheon asserts,

What made that transition possible was a shift in site from the spatial to the temporal. Nostalgia was no longer simply a yearning to return home. As early as 1798, Immanuel Kant had noted that people who did return home were usually disappointed because, in fact, they did not want to return to a *place*, but to a *time*, a time of youth. Time, unlike space, cannot be returned to – ever; time is irreversible. (Hutcheon, “Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern”)

Such a transition from “place” to “past” is also perceived by Janelle Wilson, who says “I believe there is a shift from longing for a particular place to longing for a particular time” (Wilson 22). Boym agrees with this and emphasises that,

At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time – the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desire is to obliterate history and turn it into private or

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<sup>6</sup> 《我们无处安放青春》(directed by Shen Yan. 2005).

<sup>7</sup> “我们的日子…… 一去不复返”。Zhu, Ziqing.



collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition. (xv)

By this token, nostalgia in different stages of history may have a different dependence on the distance of space and time. As Fredric Jameson pointed out, the inference “that modernism is temporal and postmodernism spatial has often been affirmed” (*Geopolitical* 153). This opinion has perhaps proved a changing process of the nostalgic concept. Properly speaking, the “change” is closely interrelated with a pair of contrary concepts: linear “order” and its “loss of sequence” (out-of-sequence or disorder). Generally, time, to a large extent, is related to the linear order constructed in people’s minds, like a linear loop of narrative with beginning, middle, climax, and ending. On the contrary, those spatial feelings are often in a state of chaos without any trace of sequence, just as what postmodernism is usually fond of, visual combinations, parody, appropriations, and bricolage. Accordingly, space is more related to a fragmentary state and its lack of order. This is why sometimes the postmodern receives a cold stare for its great passion for space, which easily leads to a prejudice that it contains subversive inclinations. If to look for certain time traces in space (like homesickness) means to rebuild order; then to hunt for (those imaginary) spatial traces in the past tense (like the postmodern nostalgia) will probably mean a disorder in time. Taken in this sense, the nostalgic shift – from pining for one’s birthplace to longing for the past – perhaps purports to be a cultural transformation from a certain modernist (time) order to a postmodernist lack of sequence in space.

It seems that contemporary Chinese nostalgia has completed such a shift

already. Today's nostalgia, even in some developing parts of China, has never been confused with a homesick sentiment, nor has it been used to describe the accumulated sorrows of peasant-workers in urban areas because of failure to go back home. Contemporary people in China, in their reference to nostalgia, may often think more about those representations of the revolutionary past with war-flame from films and TV plays; about all kinds of everyday reproductions printed with images of Chairman Mao, Guevara, red pentagrams, and other radical logos selling in Southern Gong and Drum Lane (Beijing) and Tian Zi Fang (Shanghai). Think of the revolutionary relics and slogans in Factory 798;<sup>8</sup> about those old pictures, old music, old native cartoons, and old daily clothing; about friends in childhood and the old games; about the radical parades, various propaganda teams, and their red flags of the 1960s...

Perhaps in the tradition of the Chinese language, the meaning of missing the past has always been separated from the concept of homesickness. There has always been a factor of "longing for the old" in all periods of China as Ban Gu, a historian in the Han Dynasty (206 B.C. to 220 A.D.) mentioned in his *Poetic Essay for the West Capital* (*Xidu fu*):

The hope that one may express nostalgic sentiment through his reminiscence, and to recall with old emotions.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Compared with those brand new modern buildings, people can find a unique architectural style of old Beijing, Shanghai and an old decommissioned military factory respectively in Southern Gong and Drum Lane, Tian Zi Fang, and the 798. Today, they are being developed into commercial shopping centres that house a thriving artist community with scores of galleries, lofts, publishing firms, design companies, tailor shops, and cafés and fancy restaurants set up. There are a lot of beautiful, special and unique goods (or handicrafts), some of them with nostalgic impressions.

<sup>9</sup> Ban, Gu. 班固, *Xidu fu* 《西都赋》, Han Dynasty, “愿宾摅怀旧之蓄念，发思古之幽情。”

Yuan Zhen, a Chinese poet in the Tang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.), also wrote:

The tear is for the separation and nostalgia,  
Call to mind our world again and begin a long march.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, Liu Xun, a writer in the Yuan Dynasty, mentioned his personal experience in his work, and overcome with emotion wrote:

I have lived on past 66 years of age, the older I am, the more I can feel  
a nostalgic dreariness.<sup>11</sup>

It is thus clear that nostalgia in China is familiar from time immemorial. To meditate on the past has been common for a long time.

Accidentally or fatefully, contemporary nostalgias from both China and the West meet at a point of intersection and become similar ideas in today's cultural concept. This in return is testing and verifying a referential feasibility between cultural studies of China and the West. If we recognize that what Jameson called (the Western) nostalgia is weighed with Western culture in postmodernity, it will naturally lead us to ask: Has China reached certain contexts of a postmodern culture yet? It thus inevitably becomes a crucial issue in the contemporary nostalgic culture of China. Although Simon Malpas emphasizes that the "plurality of definitions has become crucial to the sense that the term 'postmodern' now carries" (5), this research will only focus on those postmodern issues that cinematically relate to Chinese nostalgia. Chinese postmodernity on some economic levels does still remain the subject of much

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<sup>10</sup> Yuan, Zhen. 元稹,《赠吴渠州从姨兄士则》,“泪因生别兼怀旧,回首江山欲万行。”

<sup>11</sup> Liu, Xun. 刘埙,《隐居通议·礼乐》Yuan Dynasty,“余亦六十有六矣,老冉冉至,怀旧凄然。”

controversy<sup>12</sup>, but this is not the focal point of the thesis. Because, whatever the economy, a globalized cultural development has led to the germination of both a postmodernism in Chinese literature and art and a postmodernity in its socio-cultural aspects. In nostalgic debates, this research has attempted to reflect a postmodern condition of China from a particular angle.

Undoubtedly, postmodern issues have attracted widespread interest and criticism in the film studies of China. Since 1988 when a local journal, *Northwest Films*<sup>13</sup>, started a serial discussion on postmodern films, the topic has never left the research field of vision. In the 1990s, two crucial scholars, Yin Hong and Dai Jinhua, provided impetus to postmodern studies in local films. In his article “The Chinese Film in a Postmodern Context”, Yin aims to break the local academia free from entanglement in the pure artistic strategies of Western postmodernism, and instead advocates changing and extending the academic concerns into a (postmodern) cultural context of contemporary China so that a postmodern issue can be involved in the local film studies and their cultural debates (Yin 60-7). Meanwhile, on the other hand, Dai Jinhua focuses her efforts on introducing Chinese postmodern culture to the West. In the late 1990s, quite a few of her essays, on Chinese postmodern presentations through local films, television soap operas, pop music and literature, were translated into English and released in Western academic circles. In “Imagined Nostalgia”, Dai

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<sup>12</sup> There is an undeniable fact that China has a long way to go to catch up with the developed world economy.

<sup>13</sup> *Northwest Films* 《大西北电影》 was the first to release serial essays discussing postmodernism and film in China. See *Northwest Films*, 1988-1,3,4-7,9,10.

explores how “the giddy and aggressively rapid urbanization” in China has made nostalgia “a strategic need, a necessary spiritual space for imagining and for consolation” in a postmodern context (147). This is the earliest known research on nostalgic culture in China today. Though there has been a great diversity of film studies in China combined with postmodern ideas since the new century, topics and papers are still rare on interdisciplinary studies between postmodern cinema and the cultural traits of local nostalgia. This thesis has attempted to focus on the latest developments in that field.

However, as far as a literature review is concerned, the discussion on nostalgia in (even Western) academic circles seems still limited. As Svetlana Boym points out, “nostalgia remains unsystematic and unsynthesizable; it seduces rather than convinces” (13). Janelle Wilson also says that on the topic of nostalgia it “is difficult to reach conclusions which can be stated in definite, absolute, certain terms” (8). If one examines the basic concept of nostalgia from different scholars, it is not hard to find that their academic focuses usually include individual interests with little collision of views appearing. Generally speaking, essential ideas of nostalgia in today’s academic domain can be reflected in the three following questions.

First, is nostalgia a private experience or collectively discussible? Some scholars consider it as quite a personal affair. According to Elihu Howland,

Nostalgia is [...] unique. We have all encountered it, but not

necessarily in the same setting, and each of us feels grasped by it in a special way that he alone can know, so that the experiences of no two of us are probably quite the same. ("Nostalgia" 198)

Also as Wilson states, in spite of today's popular cultural texts which provide a general landscape for describing and expressing a public experience of the past, "the individual experiencing this emotion" is apt to find it difficult to truly capture in general affairs (24). However, in the meantime, Wilson also asserts the fact that most of the nostalgic resources may be provided by the dominant culture in the public sphere. So "there is an interplay between what is available culturally and the individual's own bibliography, memory, and emotions" (30). Fred Davis has made still further progress to define the distinction between "collective" and "private" nostalgia.<sup>14</sup> Generally, a collective and public domain can, to a great degree, influence the contemporary cultural wave. Davis then relates collective nostalgia to the purpose of forging national identities which suggests that, by representing past reference, collective nostalgia from the "dominant culture" might both influence and reflect "selective remembering and selective forgetting that occur at the collective level" (qtd. in Wilson 31). In the light of that point, this thesis is inclined to take advantage of the nostalgic double-movement of both remembrance and oblivion in exploring the way contemporary China has forged her public history (especially, the politically radical period between the 1950s to the 1970s) in the mass culture today, through its nostalgic cultural control such as film release and censorship.

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<sup>14</sup> As Davis terms, "collective nostalgia" refers to "that condition in which the symbolic objects are of a highly public, widely shared, and familiar character, i.e., those symbolic resources from the past which can under proper conditions trigger off wave upon wave of nostalgic feeling in millions of persons at the same time." While "private nostalgia" refers to "those symbolic images and allusions from the past which by virtue of their resource in a particular person's biography tend to be more idiosyncratic, individuated, and particularistic in their reference." (Fred Davis 222).

In the second place, is nostalgia a nice memory or disconsolately painful? To this question, most of the answers from Western academic circles are similar to what Wilson said: “One’s nostalgic memories may connote a pleasant or good time in the past, the fact that the individual is removed from that ideal situation can trigger sadness and a sense of loss” (22). Ralph Harper agreed with that and said “nostalgia combines bitterness and sweetness, the lost and the found, the far and the near, the new and the familiar, absence and presence” (120). Lowenthal also asserts, “nostalgia is memory with the pain removed, the pain is today” (8). Therefore it is almost common sense that the past is the good old days in nostalgia, which leaves regret today. Even as Wilson insists, “my position is that [...] there cannot be a so-called ‘negative nostalgia’”. She then gives two examples for its impossibility. One is the Great Depression<sup>15</sup> experienced by many individuals who may actually recall how difficult their lives were. But Wilson does not think there is longing for the Depression. In spite of their hard time, “many individuals reflected nostalgically on families and communities pulling together [...] which, compared to the present, may seem healthier and more intact” (27). The other example is about nostalgia for the Cultural Revolution in China, which as Wilson says, was objectively not “the good old days” but seemed rather “puzzling”, since “individuals’ lives and careers were wrecked during this time of political struggle”. As Wilson considers it, nowadays, “those feature images and slogans from the Cultural Revolution” have been “aired”

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<sup>15</sup> A worldwide (economic) recession in the 1930s.

commercially. In this way, “communist nostalgia has been turned into a capitalist marketing device”. According to her it is “a response to modernization in China, longing for a past that was more simple and certain, and less materialistic and commercially driven” (28). The Cultural Revolution is also what this thesis has attempted to bring widely into the discussion, and it does not much care whether the piece of the past is good or sad. After all, different individuals with different stands do have their own sentiment. What this research really cares about is the way by which today’s culture represents its past in Chinese nostalgia films, and how its aftermath in return reflects on the contemporary (and the postmodern) society and culture.

Thirdly, is nostalgia always a presentation of the realistic past? Andrew Wernick answers that nostalgia “might never have been present at all” (219). Hence the past in nostalgia is turned into myths or utopias. Moreover, as George Mead argues, the past is never left as the past. Indeed, the past is as uncertain as the future (26). Wilson asks a similar question, “Does the ‘nostalgic’ truly long to go back in time? Instead, I think it is more a longing to recapture a mood or spirit of a previous time” (26). She uses the verb “nostalagize”, instead of “nostalgia”, to reveal that we actually yearn for (and recreate) a past that we wish for, rather than it really was. Thus one may realize a realistic significance of nostalgia for contemporary culture, which as Chilton suggests, could be quite “valuable in helping us figure out what [today’s] people want” (qtd. in Wilson 26) or what kind of historical opinion the dominant culture or market would like the masses to hold. In this case, nostalgia is not always a



realistic or rational speculation upon the real past. Just as Wilson comments, “nostalgia is between the head and the heart, [...] the head knows that what is being fondly recalled wasn’t really that way, but the heart finds comfort in the feeling” (23). Finally nostalgia is, indeed like Elihu Howland’s observation, “a confusing emotion, full of paradoxes” (198).

However, I do not intend to explore the (purely academic) concept of nostalgia in writing this thesis. Instead, there is an attempt to examine the way the idea of nostalgia implemented in Chinese cinema (since the 1990s) has influenced and is reflected in the forging of postmodernity in contemporary China. This study brings together research I have carried out over the past several years on the postmodern.<sup>16</sup> To understand how nostalgia relates to the postmodern studies, Linda Hutcheon’s research seems definitely enlightening. In her 1998 article, “Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern”, Hutcheon attempts to find possibilities for the coexistence of irony and nostalgia in a postmodern context. As she said, “[i]n general cultural commentary [...] irony and nostalgia are both seen as key components of contemporary culture today”. Even so, she does not deny that there is a connection between irony and nostalgia in today’s postmodern culture. “[H]ere was irony’s end and nostalgia’s proliferating types sharing [...] the same popular culture”, says Hutcheon, “[i]n the 1980s, it was irony that captured our attention most; in the 1990s, it appears to be nostalgia that is holding sway”. In this case, her argument, “the end of irony seemed actually to

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<sup>16</sup> A necessary framework of postmodern theories and Chinese social background have been sorted through in Chapter 2.

necessitate this proliferation of nostalgia” (Hutcheon, “Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern”), has become the academic basis of existence for my Chapter 3. That chapter, through a case study on a Chinese postmodern film (*An Orphan Joins the Army*), not only explains how postmodern irony can be presented in the cinema by parody, intertextuality, game spirit, fake documentary, and ahistorical discourse; but also elaborates a social context of the contemporary China (in the early 1990s) in both its literary and cultural domain, which seems prepared for the germination and proliferation of China’s nostalgia. Thus it is reasonable to start the discussion from postmodern irony in this research. The following discussion in Chapter 4 begins to introduce the idea of nostalgia (in what Fredric Jameson called pastiche) through the comparison with Hutcheon’s postmodern parody. Facing the contemporary cultural exhaustion and the exclusively stylistic nightmare in modernity, nostalgia (pastiche) becomes a passive acceptance, the only choice in the postmodern culture. As Jameson believes “the moment at which pastiche appears parody has become impossible” (Jameson 1983, 114). It is then that Chinese nostalgic films remount the historical stage in the early 1990s.

This research takes note of the numerous examples of nostalgia (and postmodern nostalgia<sup>17</sup>) that abound in the contemporary local cinema, in mass culture, and among people’s memories of the past. The category of nostalgic cinema

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<sup>17</sup> This thesis does not mean to juxtapose the word “nostalgia” with the idea “postmodern nostalgia” as a pair of comparable concepts, nor does it admit that there is any essential distinction between them. Here it just emphasizes that this research is more inclined to study the contemporary nostalgia by a concept of the postmodern.

studied in this thesis is from the early 1990s to the near present around 2009. Within that two decades' duration, Chinese cinema has roughly experienced a nostalgic film-making climax twice. The first was around 1993, with Chinese fifth generation directors and their works, including the *Blue Kite* (Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1993), *Farewell My Concubine* (Chen Kaige, 1993), and *To Live* (Zhang Yimou, 1994). The other was started after 2005, by a group of post-fifth generation directors, such as Gu Changwei's *Peacock* (2005), Wang Xiaoshuai's *Shanghai Dream* (2005), Zhang Yang's *Sunflower* (2005), Li Yu's *Dam Street* (2005), Lou Ye's *Summer Palace* (2006) and so on. These are called the two nostalgic waves in this study. The first nostalgic wave will be mainly discussed in Chapters 5 and 6; the second in Chapters 7 and 8.

How are these nostalgic trends expressed in cinema? What purposes are being served through both selective remembering and selective forgetting? The crucial relationship between nostalgia and postmodernism that Fredric Jameson presented in "Nostalgia for the Present", in his 1991 book, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, finds support in the discussions I have conducted. Part of my research, especially Chapter 5, is based upon the basic idea of Jamesonian nostalgia which, through its postmodern characteristic of spatial superficiality in filmic pastiche, makes Chinese cinema gradually understood as a production process, a global marketing strategy, and international consumer participation. Similarly to Wilson's argument, "[n]ostalgia is prepackaged and sold as a commodity" (30), nostalgia in Chinese cinema is casting away from its real history, distorting itself, and putting on

colourful adornment in the purpose of commercial temptation. This discussion is extended in Chapter 6, where such commercial supplies of overseas nostalgic consumption might be regarded as the seduction of Chinese cinema that profited greatly from a “selective forgetting” by the dominant culture in the local film market through censorship. When a radical past memory combined with pent-up emotions cannot be released domestically, the local filmmakers then cast their sights abroad. Seen from the angle of the Chinese intellectuals, such a change hints at an intentionally fawning position towards the West and a psychological escape. Accordingly, the Chinese past has gradually become a part of global nostalgic illusions.

Chapter 7 introduces a social transition from political retrospections to a rapid development in the economy and entertainment in the late 1990s. The local film industry slowed its nostalgic creation, and the reconstruction of the Chinese radical past was dramatically reduced for a while. That is called a short silence of nostalgia in this research. When the economic prosperity since the 1990s becomes a decisive force in the social culture, some Western arguments from Jean Baudrillard and David Lowenthal may eventually correspond with the Chinese process of nostalgic development. If consumer society becomes true, its culture, its space and its fashion must then be involved, says Baudrillard, into a ceaseless circle of accelerated replacement (*Consumer* 42-6). Thus as Lowenthal asserts, where there is accelerated obsolescence, there appears to be over-running nostalgia (399), not excepting

contemporary China.

The last part of the thesis (Chapter 8) stresses a cinematic comparison between the 1990s' first nostalgic wave and the second launched since 2005. Owing to the lesson drawn from strict (nostalgic) film censorship in the 1990s, the second wave is drifting towards the edge from a political (radical) focus of history. If we see a nostalgic estrangement form radical trauma as a hint that the dominant culture (the local authorities) is selectively forgetting certain past history, one may come to realize a trivialized nostalgic "everyday" as a selective remembering. That is likely to be an act of historical whitewashing, which is then apt to influence (and even form) our contemporary understanding of the past. Therefore nostalgia, in such a process of historical reconstruction, perhaps has limitations, which however can still be read as a profound reference to reflect the contemporary Chinese society.

Before the discussion starts, it should be emphasized here, that what the thesis will talk about is not an entire nostalgic category of Chinese cinema. It never denies that there were perhaps some nostalgic inclinations in Chinese films before the two nostalgic waves, which are not involved in this topic. Moreover, there may have been some films that convey nostalgic feelings but which have been ignored by this study. As far as these imperfections of film selection are concerned, three points have been given below for explanation:

Many Chinese films before the 1990s – including some of the scar films (such as Xie Jin's *Hibiscus Town*, 1986; and Huang Shuqin's *Woman Demon Human*, 1987), the war movie (such as Wang Ping's *The Story of Liu Bao*, 1957; and Li Ang and Li Jun's *Sparkling Red Star*, 1974), the historical theme (such as Li Qiankuan and Xiao Yungui's *The Birth of New China*, 1989), and the homesick general (such as Wu Yigong's *My Memories of Old Beijing*, 1982) – are more or less related to the topic of nostalgia. However, they must be excluded from the main part of the discussion, either because they are outside the study phase focusing on 1993–2008, or distant from a postmodern or contemporary nostalgic issue.

As far as the textual content is concerned, a historical category which can be generally recalled by contemporary nostalgia could probably extend back to a period from the 1920s to the 1990s. But the span that this thesis will mainly focus on is not as long as that. What the first nostalgic wave mainly concerns is a stretch of history from the 1940s to the 1960s; and the second wave is generally about a past social scene in the 1970s and 1980s. In a sense the study interest of this thesis will mainly include a radical and political reinterpretation since Socialist China was founded (the first wave) and a self-examination and representation of the new social reform in China during the late 1970s and early 1980s (the second wave). While beyond this interest, there are perhaps many other nostalgic factors that this study has not dabbled in, and their existence is not denied.

Finally, one's general outlook of nostalgia is perhaps a dynamic or flexible field of view, which to a large extent depends on a dynamic age-state of the mainstream audience of the day. A person who was born in the 1930s may find it hard to share a similar piece of nostalgia with a junior born in the 1980s. When the junior reaches his later years in life, his grandparents' early experiences around the 1930s would not be called nostalgia any longer, instead they could be termed "a memorable personal history".

Thus, any topic about nostalgia cannot claim a comprehensive (rounded) analysis. As time goes by, all nostalgic feelings will degenerate and all this research can really do is to grasp the most recent feelings of nostalgia. The two nostalgic waves are matched with two generations of directors in China respectively, the fifth generation and the post-fifth generation. The past periods referred to in their films may be generally in accord with the early backgrounds (childhood or youth) of themselves. However, this situation seems a bit different from a broad sense of nostalgia, in which one's nostalgia is for a period much earlier than their own age. For instance, a person who was born in the 1960s may have a nostalgic interest in the 1930s and 1940s, because they relate to their parents and elders' experiences, which can easily excite nostalgic feelings since the young never stop imitating and being infatuated with their elders' world in their early years.

Nevertheless, in most of the films selected in this research, their nostalgic

content does not extend beyond the childhood of their directors. This is because Chinese history has turned over a new leaf since 1949. The fifth generation directors were born in the early 1950s, and their nostalgic films are mainly about the radical period of the new socialist country (the 1950s to 1960s). At that time, a communist revolution itself had the ability to wipe out all the heritage and consciousness of the traditional timeline. Such a thorough abolition may have considerable implications for certain deconstruction in a radical past (like the Cultural Revolution). In this case, the mental growth of the fifth generation directors in their childhood may have become immersed in a radical practice of spurning history and traditions. Their parents' early experiences may have become their targets for rebellion or at least made them despair. It is a spiritually independent period, a real age that forsakes the past. People of those days may retain independent thinking and memories. Comparatively speaking, the post-fifth generation directors (generally born around the latter half of 1960s) could have had more opportunity to overstep their childhood and imitate their elders in the second nostalgic wave. However, for a variety of reasons, most of their nostalgic focus has been delayed to the second half of the 1970s. Beyond doubt, Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening-up combined with dramatic social changes have brought them more intensified heart-quake.

It was the sixtieth anniversary of the People's Republic of China (1<sup>st</sup> October 1949-2009) when the first draft of this research was finished. Through the guidance of governmental investments in filmmaking, the Chinese film authority prepared and



dominated as many as forty film productions that are called “celebration films” for the national anniversary, including *The Founding of a Republic* (Jianguo daye, Han Sanping and Huang Jianxin), *The Message* (Fengsheng, Chen Guofu and Gao Qunshu), and *Tiananmen* (Ye Daying). From August to October, 2009, the domestic cinema chains have been peppered with such greeting films. Among them, most of those films can be brought into a film category of nostalgia. However, these films are too close to the time the thesis was written to allow a settling time for academic review. It is difficult to tell whether these films were a flash in the pan, or a new wave of nostalgic culture in China. Thus, this thesis will just leave it at that. The nostalgic film-case study of this research will mainly focus on a filmmaking period from 1993 to the first half of 2009. All the films involved in the discussion have been listed in the film appendix at the end of the thesis.

As for the name spelling style of this thesis, all Chinese names (including political leaders, film directors, and academic scholars) are spelt in Chinese style, which is to print Chinese surname followed by given name.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Theoretical Framework and Social Background**

#### **2.1. Significance and Methodology**

Each piece of research in universities has its own social meaning and the discussions contained in this thesis are no exception. Although the whole thesis is based on filmic examples, which generally emphasize the discussion in the domain of film studies, the pivot is on a broad discussion of postmodern issues (especially postmodern nostalgia), and it tries to seek a balance between films and contemporary culture. Thus a combination of film studies and cultural studies, and their interaction and infiltration, seem significant as well. Both sides may have influence on and significance for each other. Concerning culture, as Peter Koslowski (1999) argues, certain points of view in postmodern study should be diverted to cultural study (108-52). This actually includes the cross combination of postmodern films and culture. Films, as a cultural communication platform and impetus, are gradually showing their value in cultural studies (e.g. globalization, consumer society and post-industrial life). Since film studies, whether about film making, distribution, internal narrative, flat appearance, or audience reception, all have close relations with mass cultural activities that should be emphasized and applied as a crucial basis for a discussion of contemporary culture. Therefore, through this research, the methodology and experience of a cross-disciplinary study may also be further

accumulated.

As far as postmodernist study is concerned, this thesis is of great value for reference as well. Postmodernism and postmodernity are multifunctional. They are not only a kind of subversion of modern rational enlightenment, but a very creative and innovative impetus to shape a new cultural prospect. On the one hand, postmodernism may be regarded as a cultural weapon of the masses to erase the social-estate boundary between the high arts and the popular tastes; on the other, it may be exploited by the mainstream power to trivialize/fragment social contradictions and to reduce/weaken the rebellious voice. Meanwhile, of course the absolute status of the mainstream discourse is inevitably impacted on as well. All the social power — from its accumulation, taking effects, to having results — has possibly been reflected by the contemporary cinema, which provides explanations for the flexible cultural trend. Hence the postmodern study in this paper will not only be a theoretical fulcrum for films and culture, but more importantly, it will give profound reasons for cultural phenomena and offer evidence and comments for cultural debates and orientation in the future.

To study Chinese issues in a framework of postmodernist theory seems not as easy as studying those of the West. The social reality of China is not just an ‘industrial-modern’ issue and a ‘post-industrial, postmodern’ issue, but a mixed reality that consists of national, traditional, post-traditional (modern), post-colonial,

postmodern and post-Marxist issues. This means that Chinese ideology, the historical track and the development of the economy are not consistent with the Western world. Furthermore, with the impact of globalization, Chinese society is facing more and more infiltrations of cultural imperialism, which fragment the local traditional life. Meanwhile postmodern culture in China is also showing subversive trends towards the bureaucratic government. All these social environments tend to shape a new dominant influence on mass culture, which differs from that of the West. It is not easy to know whether to regard Chinese cinema as a process of learning from and imitating the West, or a course of nostalgia and fragmentation as the country (post) modernizes. Whether a film reflects a realistic response, a distorted image or a creative drive, they all have special reference to the research.

Chinese nostalgia has its special importance as well. In the light of discussions on “pastiche” and “cultural exhaustion”, Fredric Jameson tries to bring the postmodern round to a topic of nostalgia. Based on the imitation of the past, he introduces a way to understand a historical superficiality and its incredulous gaze on the past. For China however, its local nostalgia seems different from Western feelings of pure bright sunshine, and memories of the past may be clouded with historical or political pain. Much of the contemporary nostalgia in China focuses on the political and radical themes from the 1950s to 1970s. Therefore, the special, historical case of the Chinese past experience has given literary (cultural) criticism from the Western “new left” a realistic meaning, which prompts a historical review of the Chinese

socialist practice and its reflections of the time. In this case, the local nostalgic studies may make an independent contribution to the global academia.

It is beyond dispute that film has provided an immense stage for nostalgic presentations. Film studies, in this sense, may naturally become a junction of the postmodern discussion, cultural studies, and an ideological past of China. So this research will still mainly depend on methodologies of film study. Generally speaking, there are two dominant methods for the field, narrative analysis and genre analysis.

In terms of the former, it seems obvious that the narrative style of those films related to postmodernism has its own stance and characteristics, by which, as Peter Wollen (1985) suggested, we may compare and analyse the narrative difference between a counter/alternative cinema and the mainstream cinema. Cited in the table below are several differences identified by Wollen (500-8). Although there is some difference between the so-called counter cinema and the postmodern film in their narratives, we may still receive some inspiration and accumulate analysing experiences from their comparison with the mainstream.

<b>Mainstream Cinema</b>	<b>Counter Cinema</b>
<p><i>Linear Narrative</i></p> <p>One episode follows another in the course of narrative construction</p>	<p><i>Nonlinear Narrative</i></p> <p>Gaps, interruption, episodic construction, digression, and narrative break up</p>
<p><i>Identification</i></p> <p>Empathy and emotional involvement</p>	<p><i>Defamiliarization</i></p> <p>Forcing the audience to see common things in an unfamiliar or strange way; Direct address, multiple central characters, mass as hero, Overt commentary on people and events</p>
<p><i>Transparency</i></p> <p>Neutral window on the world, Seamlessness</p>	<p><i>Foregrounding</i></p> <p>Making overt and explicit the technical and constructed nature</p>
<p><i>Single diegesis</i></p> <p>Homogenous world</p>	<p><i>Multiple Diegesis</i></p> <p>Heterogeneous world</p>
<p><i>Closure</i></p> <p>Self-contained, beginning/middle/end</p>	<p><i>Open</i></p> <p>Open-ended narratives, over-spill and Intertextuality</p>
<p><i>Fiction</i></p> <p>Actors wearing costume and make-up telling a story</p>	<p><i>Reality</i></p> <p>Real life, non-professional actors, Breaking-up representation</p>

Rowe and Wells also emphasize that, by comparing the different ways the stories are told, it will become clear “how far each text uses [mainstream] narrative, and how far, and in what ways, it rejects it” (89). Not only may this comparative method be applied to narrative analysis, but it can also be extended to other parts of textual analysis. For example, some actors’ lines (in juxtaposition) may be compared

in the mainstream context and the postmodern context to explain how different these lines are in their sense making; some nostalgic elements may also be compared with the features of documentary films or historical films to show what and how different connotations (about their attitudes towards the historical ‘reality’) have been conveyed.

For the latter (genre analysis), few people regard postmodernism or postmodernity as a film genre, because its components are too complex and obscure to classify. As Chris Newbold concludes, postmodernism in films would have a pastiche base, drawing on the categories of experimental, classical, parody (self-reflexive), and deconstruction, and “creating a kind of product which is based on nostalgia, fragmentation of content, relativism of values, erosion of time/space and symbols, hyper-signification or the over use of intertextual and symbolic message, and recycled themes” (177-8). Therefore, horizontally, in terms of a film, postmodernism reflects a bricolage of various genres; vertically, it reviews the historical tracks (e.g. nostalgia) where different genres have developed. To a certain extent, genre seemingly fits more to be an evidence, object or symbol in the field of postmodernism rather than a method.

## **2.2. The Postmodern, Theory and Society**

But ‘film’ is not the only object in this research. It is just one of the media

through which postmodernism/postmodernity is reflected and which influences the culture. Thus, to discuss its relations with contemporary society, the postmodern thought itself and its social phenomenon should be emphasized as well. Then it naturally leads to the question as follows: What is postmodernism?

Before answering the question, a point should be clearly stressed at first. That is, many scholars concerned with postmodernism have rejected giving a definitive definition of “the postmodern”. As Best and Kellner argue, “[p]ostmodern critiques are directed against the notion of ‘theory’ itself [...] a systematically developed conceptual structure anchored in the real” (x). Furthermore as Malpas said, “unfortunately, finding such a simple, uncontroversial meaning for the term ‘postmodern’ is all but impossible [...] But things are even more difficult than this. Few critics even agree about what exactly it is that they are dealing with” (Malpas 4).<sup>18</sup> Three reasons can be given to explain such a dilemma: first, a “clear and concise process of identification and definition is one of the key elements of rationality that the postmodern sets out to challenge” (Malpas 4); second, there is the fear that simple definitions miss the complexities of the postmodern, for the “plurality of definitions has become crucial to the sense that the term ‘postmodern’ now carries, and it is important to grasp both its multifaceted nature and its propensity to open up debate” between the various values within its definition (Malpas 5); third, from the very

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<sup>18</sup> As Malpas concludes, “the postmodern has been defined in a huge variety of different ways: as a new aesthetic formation (Hassan, 1982, 1987), a condition (Lyotard, 1979; Harvey, 1990), a culture (Connor, 1997), a cultural dominant (Jameson, 1991), a set of artistic movements employing a parodic mode of self-conscious representation (Hutcheon, 1988), an ethical or political imperative (Bauman, 1993, 1995), a period in which we have reached the end of history (Baudrillard, 1994; Fukuyama, 1992; Vattimo, 1988)...” (Malpas 6-7).



beginning, the postmodern is an typical interdisciplinary theory, which has interacted, and continues to interact, with various thoughts and domains, such as post-colonialism, feminism, queer theory and the politics of globalisation, as well as with literature, music, architecture, history, philosophy and so on. Therefore, different critics, who began to understand it and developed it from different fields, are bound to have divergent views more or less. To make matters worse, according to George Ritzer, “it is impossible to adjudicate conflicts between interpretations” (3).

However, although the concept of the postmodern looks quite loose, fragmented, and even mutually exclusive, a basic theoretic framework is still necessary. “While postmodernists may reject theory, what most of them in fact do is to theorize” (Ritzer 3). Because a “theory” is not only a pre-decided systematization, but it can reflect internal relations of a group of conceptual aggregation.

As far as academic practice is concerned, most scholars have adopted or borrowed a structuralist approach to explain the “postmodern”, a word that is clearly of post-structuralist sense. Like its own pluralism, the postmodern framework has been diversified as well, by all kinds of theorists.

Not all of the frameworks are appropriate for this research, because this thesis has a special relationship with film studies. Not only should it have a comprehensive consideration for postmodern films, but it should also develop a profound

understanding about its theoretical principle (source of philosophy) and its close links with politics, economy, and social culture.

Therefore, in this section a theoretical framework by John Hill to structure and review postmodern concepts and their social influences will be chosen. Hill, in *The Oxford Guide to Films Studies* and *Film Studies: Critical Approaches*, established a framework by dividing the discussions on the term “postmodernism” into three types of debate: philosophical debates, social-cultural debates and aesthetic debates (94-103). At first, he explained the suspicious, negative and uncertain attitudes of postmodernism in philosophy. Then he introduced the new economic order, consumer culture and the development of new media in the field of postmodern society, as well as the consequent results, including the disorder of space-time relation, globalization, and Baudrillard’s so called hyperreality. Finally, in the aesthetic field, Hill argued the exhaustion of modernism, the fall of high arts, and intertextuality and its strategies.

### 2.2.1. Philosophical Debates

In philosophical debates (related to “the groundings of knowledge”), postmodernism is mainly demonstrated as a growing “incredulity/suspicion” (Lyotard *Knowledge* xxiv) towards the logical concept of integration and the “universal or all-embracing systems of thought and explanation” (Hill 97). There are many features of postmodernism in this respect and as Hill concludes, these may include

- a suspicion of totalization that tends to “offer comprehensive and all-embracing accounts of social and cultural phenomena”;
- an “anti-foundationalism” which “rejects claims to ‘absolute’ or ‘universal’ foundations for knowledge”;
- a rejection of “ethnocentric” systems of thought;
- a rejection of “‘depth’ epistemologies” or “‘essential’ realities”.

From these features, it is clear that postmodernism advocates ideas of multiplicity and uncertain identity, and emphasizes the “heterogeneity and fragmented character of social and cultural realities...as well as the impossibility of any unified, or comprehensive, account of them” (Hill 97).

### 2.2.2. Social-cultural Debates

In the context of socio-cultural debates (concerned with the social, economic, and cultural transformations in contemporary life), postmodernism may be understood as a term used to describe and identify a new order that has emerged in social and economic fields. Moreover postmodernism is usually related to the concept of postmodern society, which, according to Hill, can be also identified as a shift “from an old industrial order to a new ‘post-industrial’ one” (Daniel Bell, qtd. in Hill 98). This transition, associated with postmodernism, has been characterized by some features in social and economic life. As Hill concludes, these features are

- a transition from manufacturing to service industries: the surplus value of economics does not mainly come from factories but from some service

industries, such as business, banking, and tourism.

- a change of the producing model from Fordist production to ‘post-Fordist’ production: the standardized (mass) production is being replaced by a new pattern of production that is based on the flexible and individual consumer requirement.
- a great increase in the population scale of the middle class, white-collar class, and service class: people from these classes have gradually dominated the mainstream attitude and taste of the social and cultural life, and they have an inclination to accept the existence of postmodernist culture.
- diversity of the social identity: the fading and the ambiguity of the social class differentiation make the individual identity (related for example, to gender, sexual orientation, and religion) become more significant and dominant.<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, Hill also points out that the improvement in new technologies (especially those computing and communications technologies) has played an important role in the social and economic transitions as well. He mentions that the new media is “significantly reshaping social experience and subjectivity” in two ways:

One is that a superabundance of the circulation of information and images through the advanced communication platforms (such as the Internet and satellites) may probably result in “an increasing compression of time and space, a deterritorialization of culture, and the construction of forms of identity which are no longer strongly identified with place” (Harvey and Meyrowitz, qtd. in Hill 98). This can easily be linked with the context of “globalization”, and then be associated with

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<sup>19</sup> Also refer to Stuart Hall. “The Question of Cultural Identity”, in Hall, D. Held and T. McGrew (ed.) *Modernity and Its Futures*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992.

the accelerated flow/communication of goods, services, ideas and so on. That forms a cultural perspective, in which some mixed, depthless space has been compressed in a single temporal conception.

The other way in which the new media and new technologies have influenced the social shift may be described as a changing opinion on the social/cultural ‘reality’. According to Baudrillard, we are living in a world where a new “social reproductive order based upon communication and the circulation of signs” is gradually replacing “the old industrial order based upon labour and the production of goods”. Thus in this transition, images and signs are becoming our “primary reality”. As Baudrillard summarized, it is a world of “simulations”, or “hyper reality”, which has no reality beyond itself, and it is impossible to prove the real, because all we have are just “signs and simulations”.<sup>20</sup>

### 2.2.3. Aesthetic Debates

In the aesthetic debates, the characteristics of postmodernism are often argued to respond and resolve the problems left by modernism. According to Hill, there are two main difficulties in the development of modernism: one is that it is confronted with ‘failure’ or ‘exhaustion’ (refer to Huyssen, “Mapping the Postmodern”); the other is that modernism is losing its mass market due to its “institutionalization as ‘high

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<sup>20</sup> Jean Baudrillard. *The Mirror of Production*, St Louis: Telos Press, 1975; and Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. P. Foss, P. Patton, and P. Beitchman, New York: Semiotext, 1983.

art” and its lack of communications with “a public beyond a small elite” (Berman, “Modern Art and Desublimation”). Therefore with the decline of modernism, for Hill, three features of postmodernism should be identified: firstly, postmodernism demonstrates a cordial attitude to suit popular tastes, and it has fused with some elements from popular culture; secondly, postmodernism in this respect may also be characterized as ‘eclecticism’ which means mixing different “styles, genres, and artistic conventions” to form “a stylistic promiscuity” or to emphasize the strategies of “appropriation and hybridization”; thirdly, as a result of the ‘cultural exhaustion’, the feature of postmodernism may be linked with a “declining emphasis upon originality” (Hill 99). For Dick Hebdige, this can be reflected by a series of postmodernist elements (such as parody, pastiche, and bricolage...), and then the innovative spirit becomes indifferent (191).

## **2.3. Background**

### **2.3.1. The Social Situation of China**

Since the late 1970s, the socialistic politics of China have gradually cast off the left-leaning perspective of the Cultural Revolution, and the emphases of the government have shifted to economic development. Contradictions inevitably happened between the socialist bureaucracy and a growing economy. In order to reduce the adverse effects of these contradictions, as well as a historical emphasis, the

communist government has always put propaganda into the media, including the film industry, which has been encouraged and has developed rapidly. In the meantime, the voice from the opposition is still being censored and suppressed.

With the innovation of modern technologies and the promotion of productivity, a great amount of labour surplus has emerged throughout the country. Many rural labourers swarm to urban areas to be engaged in manufacturing and service industries, which has led to a huge inflation in the urban population. In addition, the implementation of the 'one-child' policy depopulates the Chinese family, which has perhaps eased the financial worries of the parents and accelerated families' accumulation of wealth. Then private wealth has triggered greater demand for consumer goods, yet the 'one-child' policy has also changed the old cultural model that centred on large extended families into nuclear families that rely much more on social communication and popular entertainments. Moreover, with an extension of the 'opening up' policy, Western culture, such as McDonald's, Hollywood cinema, and French fashions, have been infiltrating the daily life of Chinese people. The impressions of history and tradition are fading from people's memories. All in all, China is increasingly becoming a part of globalization and a typical example of global cultural colonialism.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> For further readings, please see William H. Overholt, "China and Globalization, Testimony Presented to the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission". 19 May 2005. [http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/2005/RAND\\_CT244.pdf](http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/2005/RAND_CT244.pdf) Last access: 4 Oct. 2010; and David Rothkopf, "In Praise of Cultural Imperialism?" *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.107, Summer 1997. 38-53.

New technologies also shape a new life for the Chinese masses. They not only promote productivity but also generate a surplus that may be used for more cultural activities. The new media provide more sources and platforms for the communication of information. The Internet and mobile technologies are providing people with much wider views than those of traditional media. Meanwhile they shorten the ‘distance’ of time and space, which challenges traditions. Additionally a consumer society inevitably results in an overflow of advertisements, brand names and trade marks. All of these tend to make people more devoted to materialism, which seems to dramatically conflict with those spiritual traditions of the masses who lived in a Marxist society for several decades.<sup>22</sup>

### 2.3.2. The Postmodernity of Chinese Society

Postmodernity in China does not seem to originate from its ‘cultural exhaustion’ of modernism, nor as Jameson<sup>23</sup> analysed, to be a result of late capitalism (1991). Its origin is far more complicated than it is in the West.

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<sup>22</sup> Arthur Rosenfeld, an American scholar in Chinese studies, in his recent essay “China: Spirituality Or Materialism”, argues that “While the recent recession has many Americans rethinking the wisdom of chasing money and things all our life even at the cost of our health and happiness, the Chinese have no such reservations. Theirs is an all out frenzy of industry, a rampant desire to assume economic primacy in the world. [...] as I’m also sure that at some point they will come to the same realization we are reaching, which is that the American Dream, replete with a new car every few years, an ever bigger house, an ever shinier refrigerator, is not the road to happiness, and it’s certainly not the road to health. The Chinese people are remarkable for their capacity for suffering, for tenacity, for focus, and for industry.” This seems to be a proof from Western eyes that Chinese spiritual belief are been eroded by today’s materialism. See Rosenfeld, Arthur. “China: Spirituality or Materialism?” 2009. online article: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/arthur-rosenfeld/china-spirituality-or-materialism\\_b\\_349963.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/arthur-rosenfeld/china-spirituality-or-materialism_b_349963.html) Last access: 4 Oct. 2010

<sup>23</sup> As Willie Thompson said “postmodernism has been designated by Fredric Jameson as ‘the cultural logic of late capitalism’ and there is a lot of sense in this” in *Postmodernism and History*, New York: Palgrave, 2004. 127-8. Also see Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, London: Verso, 1991.



As far as social economy is concerned, though the Chinese economy is booming, China is still far from being a well-developed modern state. The per capita GDP of the country was only US\$ 1700 in 2004, unimaginable poverty in the countryside remains very high and China is experiencing a transformation from traditional to modern civilizations. However, these realities should not counteract the influence and the development of cultural postmodernity in China. On one hand, the great amount of labour surplus from rural areas saves a great deal of the urban production costs that accelerate social and individual accumulation of wealth and is of benefit for the promotion of consumer and citizen culture. On the other hand, an ample labour force may benefit the service industry, which combined with globalization and the new media, is gradually making the world's popular culture and fashion life flood into every corner of the country. Furthermore, the dramatic growth of materialistic desires in the Chinese masses has changed their notion of identity into a decentred, fragmented and superficial one<sup>24</sup>. In addition, traditional ethical and rational thought also faces challenges from a pluralistic culture and individualism.

In the field of politics, owing to the establishment of the market economy and the opening up since the early 1980s, the political notions of Chinese citizens

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<sup>24</sup> As Douglas Kellner argued, in premodern societies "one's identity was fixed, solid, and stable" (p231); while in postmodern society, identity becomes "a freely chosen game, a theatrical presentation of the self, in which one is able to present oneself in a variety of roles, images, and activities." (p246-7) He also pointed out that "once upon a time, it was who you were, what you did, what kind of person you were – your moral, political, and existential choices and commitments, which constituted individual identity. But today it is how you look, your image, your style, and how you appear that constitutes identity. And it is media culture that more and more provides the materials and resources to constitute identities." In Kellner, Douglas. *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics between the Modern and the Postmodern*, London: Routledge, 1995.

(especially the educated elite) have gradually produced a liberal tendency, which has led to a growing suspicion of communism. This may reflect a contradiction between the market economy and bureaucratic politics, which eventually resulted in a social ferment (protesting against the unfair distribution and corruption) in 1989. Though it does not seem necessary to discuss the whole movement, the result and the means the government adopted to appease it provided Chinese postmodernity with three hints. Firstly, suppressing the storm with military force showed the government's resolution to pursue economic growth and private ownership, which greatly encouraged both national and international investors and made the Chinese economy soar rapidly in the 1990s. These also gave China more postmodern social characteristics (such as consumer culture) that were similar to those in the West. In addition, a military solution showed an uncompromising and arbitrary attitude on the part of the government over its political control. More importantly, it tended to have results limiting freedom, becoming a unipolar, bureaucratic and meta-discourse system. Secondly, the left-leaning liberalism was repressed in the ferment, even any rational protest based on binary opposition was intimidated by the authorities. Thereupon, some of the citizens gradually lost themselves in communist ideals, and irrationalism was inclined to be accepted. (Some scholars consider this to be a phenomenon of the global new conservatism.<sup>25</sup>) Subsequently, binary opposition in China has gradually been replaced by a pluralistic/fringe culture and a diversity of ideas that provide a mass basis for the spread of postmodern thought in the country. Thirdly, through

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<sup>25</sup> For example, Zhao, Yiheng. "Postmodernism, New Conservatism & Literary Criticism", in *21 Century (HK)*, 1995-2. And, Zhang, Xuchun. "The Postmodernist Roles in China", in *Journal of Foreign Language College, Sichuan*, 2002-1.

dealing with the movement, the Chinese authorities have been aware of a menace from the class-consciousness and the solidarity of the masses. To distract mass attention from protests, two policies have been adopted: one is to increase people's income, encourage consumption and the growth of a "middle class"; the other is to develop a pluralistic culture to spread mass interest around, such as to support social entertainment, soap opera, fashion journals, to import Hollywood culture and so on. All of these have brought China close to a global postmodernity. Therefore, as far as the government is concerned, postmodernity in China does not always subvert it, contrarily it is helpful. From 1990 to the present, Chinese social policies continue without radical changes.

### 2.3.3. Postmodernism in the Local Academia

Postmodernism, as an important part of the contemporary Western literary/cultural theories, has absorbed broad attention in China since 1985 when Fredric Jameson gave a series of lectures on postmodernism and its cultural theory at Beijing University. Subsequently, a significant number of postmodern-related works have been introduced in China, which included the works of F. Jameson, F. Lyotard, J. Habermas, Jean Baudrillard, D. R. Griffin, T. Eagleton and J. Derrida. Besides, Chinese academics have discussed in depth the 'possibility and particularity' of the existence of postmodernity in China, and it seems that these debates have been

extended to many related fields,<sup>26</sup> such as post-colonialism, feminism, psychoanalysis and the 'third road'. Furthermore, postmodern studies in China have been related to their own literary practice all along. From literature and drama to cinema and the 'Net media', many new works have been enlightened by the theory. They either reflected postmodernity from the real world or imitated/simulated postmodernist elements from the West. No matter what they did, they all contributed to the local society and social culture. In this concern, the development of postmodern theories in China seemed earlier than its social germination of postmodernity. When postmodernism comes into a developing country, people define it, imitate it, accept it, digest it, and then put it into the local cultural practice to form a particular/unique cultural landscape. Thus, the theory and its practice may be regarded as an accelerant for the postmodernity of Chinese society.

#### 2.3.4. Feasibility Study on Postmodern Issues in China

The reason to introduce a feasibility study on Chinese postmodernism is that until recently there were still some scholars from both the West and Asia who thought postmodernism was a Western phenomenon, which is irrelevant to the third world and Asian societies (Wang Ning in Dirlik and Zhang, *Chinese Postmodernity* 21). Additionally, in the light of Jameson's construction of postmodernism, especially his periodization of capitalism, China was automatically excluded (Wang 22), for it is still

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<sup>26</sup> For more introduction to the early propagation of postmodernism in China, please refer to Chen, Xiaoming. (ed.) *Postmodernism*, Henan University Press, 2003. 2-7.

a developing country in the Third World and is far from attaining the standards of a post-industrial society. Therefore, it seems necessary to provide some evidence to prove that a postmodern study on China is feasible.

The first evidence is from the relationship between modernism and postmodernism. Although modernism is “the logical starting point of postmodernism”, as Lyotard has observed, the postmodern is essentially “part of the modern” and is an inevitable product of the development of modernism (Wang 22). This means their relation is quite unlike the past and the present. The modern and the postmodern are not as simple as two successive periods. The existence of postmodernism does not need to wait for the accomplishment of modernism. Both the two social formations may coexist in a contemporary society connected by globalization. Therefore, it seems irrational to neglect postmodern issues in the third world where modernization is being promoted and extended.

The second point is that some Western scholars in recent years have gradually been thinking of postmodernity as a globalized/universal phenomenon which may be related to further discussion on economic globalization and cultural imperialism in developing countries, even if “postmodernity germinated in the cultural soil of Western postindustrial society” (Wang 21). For instance, Lyotard in his famous work *The Postmodern Conditions* suggested that postmodern questions should be discussed and reconsidered in a worldwide context, which probably includes the globalization of

the third world. That makes it necessary to reconsider the possibility of studying postmodern issues in China in a global context. Furthermore, when debates about postmodernism overlap with questions of post-colonialism in the Third World, the relevance of postmodernism to critics and scholars in the East is enhanced even further.

Also, the “uneven development” of China should be emphasized. Wang Ning, Professor in Beijing Language and Culture University, argues that although China is still a developing country and is still far from being a post-industrial society, yet “uneven development in its politics, economy, and culture undoubtedly manifests post-industrial symptoms in the economy and postmodern elements in political life and culture” (22). Then, agreeing with Jameson’s and Fokkema’s descriptions of postmodern culture, Wang re-described the actual situation of postmodernism developed in the Third World within the scope of literature/culture alone as the following eight forms:

- a) It is a fundamental cultural phenomenon in highly developed capitalist countries or post-industrial societies that occasionally appears in unevenly developed regions within developing countries;
- b) Postmodernism is a kind of worldview, in which the world is no longer a world of totality but rather one of plurality, fragmentation, and decentralization;
- c) It may also be seen as a main current of literature and art that is erasing, weakening, eliminating the gap and boundary between modern high arts and popular culture, and facing the fall of modernism;

- d) Perhaps postmodernism is a narrative style or kind of discourse that is relevant to the suspicion of “master narratives” or “metanarratives”;
  - e) In the fifth place, postmodernism gradually becomes an interpretive code or a reading strategy with which non-Western texts (including certain film texts) can be analyzed from the perspective of postmodernity (e.g. consumer culture and hyper-reality);
  - f) Postmodernism can also be a cultural/philosophical trend that is contrary to the elite preoccupation with the enlightenment, and it is characterized by the crisis of legitimation and representation;
  - g) Then next, it is a cultural strategy adopted by the Third World critics during their economic modernization and struggle against cultural colonialism and linguistic hegemonism;
  - h) Finally, postmodernism is a critical mode related to post-structural and deconstructed approaches to literary texts.
- (23)

Therefore, all of the points mentioned above manifest that postmodern elements have been infiltrated into the Third World’s literature and culture, and it is becoming a dominant part of cultural criticism in developing countries.

The last proof is from the frequent academic and cultural exchanges since the 1980s, which have made postmodern studies in China come true. One of the most memorable academic exchanges was Jameson’s series of lectures at Beijing University in 1985, which lasted for four months and set off a rush of postmodern studies on China. Soon after his visit, many Western works in relation to postmodernism were translated and published in China in the late 1980s. Meanwhile, a few young Chinese students followed Jameson back to America for PhD research, and some of them, such as Tang Xiaobing and Zhang Xudong, have become famous in the academic field of postmodern studies on China, and their writings will be of

great value for this research. On the other hand, cultural exchanges (through Hollywood, the Internet, foreign advertisements and popular fashions and so on) also provide China with broad opportunities and references to borrow postmodernist elements for its own literature and arts.

### 2.3.5. The Local Film Industry

Since the 1990s, China has taken further steps to intensify reform and open more widely to the outside world. With the explosion of the market economy, the local film industry has paid more attention to capital operations, commercial markets, and extraction of profit. Meanwhile, the viewing tastes of the local audience have shifted from the political and spiritual appeals to commercial and entertaining interests. These changes in filmmaking and its reception unconsciously led to an unlimited inflation of material desires, making faith, morality, and spirituality become lost in the process. This has been reflected by people's blind chase of Western screen productions that have been pouring into China. Those old filmic stereotype and socialist viewing experiences (full of revolutionary romanticism) in people's minds have been strongly replaced by Hollywood's commercial films, European cinema trends, and celebrity appeals from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Thus the Chinese film industry has had to make great changes in the new conditions. But it must at first face certain limitations brought by the local bureaucracy, such as film censorship.



On the other hand, Chinese filmmaking has encountered a variety of difficulties in its macro environment of technology and a cinematic globalization. The popularity of television since the 1990s is making more and more audiences stay at home rather than go to a cinema. An oversight in the protection of intellectual property has also created opportunities for film pirates. Then the loss of audiences and profits is indirectly resulting in a decline in the domestic box office on national films and a decrease in interest from film investors; meanwhile the big movies from Hollywood and Hong Kong have been changing the viewing habits of Chinese audiences as well. These have compelled the Chinese film industry to expand its overseas markets. Looking for overseas investors, narrating international stories, chasing international film festivals and awards, promoting overseas box office are all becoming the prime purposes of Chinese producers and directors. Pessimistically speaking, it leads to a distance between the national film environment and society in reality; while optimistically, it may be seen as a powerful drive for the shape of a new, global culture of China.

## Chapter Three

### Postmodern Elements in Contemporary Chinese Cinema

#### – A Case Study on *An Orphan Joins the Army*

#### 3.1. Background and Arguments

As the most flourishing and international city in China, Shanghai has been influenced by Western culture through history for a century or more<sup>27</sup>. Thus it seems logical to commence discussion on an early combination of the Chinese cinema and the postmodern with the city. *An Orphan Joins the Army* (*Sanmao congjun ji*, directed by Zhang Jianya<sup>28</sup>, 1993) was produced by the Shanghai Film Studio in 1993. The film was probably inspired by a certain cultural atmosphere and Western thinking besides some accidental factors of literature and the arts. Nevertheless no one can dictate which film was the first postmodern text in China. The reason is simple, for even though it is common in the West, few people study the postmodern as a cinema genre. The postmodern itself is a pioneer against genre and definitions, which makes it hard to trace back and tell that which one was the earliest postmodern film. However, three points should be confirmed as follows: first, before *An Orphan Joins*

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<sup>27</sup> Since the First Opium War (1840), Shanghai has gradually grown in importance, from a fishing town to a metropolitan area, due to its favourable port location and as one of the cities opened to foreign trade by the 1842 Treaty of Nanking. The city flourished as a center of commerce between east and west, and became a multinational hub of finance and business by the 1930s. Therefore it is also a typical representation of semi-colonial culture before 1949. However, Shanghai's internationalization was suspended between 1949 to the late 1970s when the communist China developed a planned economy and a de-Westernization. However a new market economy brought it back to prosperity by the 1980s. From then on Shanghai has again become in the forefront of being influenced by the West.

<sup>28</sup> Please distinguish Zhang Jianya from the other film director Zhang Yimou, both of them are fifth generation directors of China.

*the Army*, few Chinese films had ever been discussed or compared in a postmodern debate in academia<sup>29</sup>; secondly, after its premiere, it is clear that quite a few scholars or film critics related some sections of the film to certain postmodern elements and provided various positive feedbacks and reviews<sup>30</sup>; thirdly, some tertiary institutions specializing in film studies have already taken this film as a typical instance of postmodernist work in teaching<sup>31</sup>. There are reasons for *An Orphan Joins the Army* to be discussed as the beginning of the main body in the thesis. The film laid the foundations of and presents a few postmodern keynotes (features) in contemporary Chinese literature and culture, such as “conservative strategies”<sup>32</sup>, parody, bricolage, absurdity, and an infatuation with history. These elements were integral to the cultural development of the postmodern in China through the last two decades. The reason I

<sup>29</sup> Adam Lam had launched a postmodern discussion focusing on the international attention on the fifth generation directors of China, such as Zhang Yimou and his world-famous *Red Sorghum* (1987), but Lam's intention was to talk about the Western cultural acceptance of the Chinese films in a global context, see his *Post-Cultural Revolution Chinese National Cinema and Global Culture* (2005, 67-75, 123-9); Wang Yichuan, in his “Zhang's Myth and Its ending” (1997-5, 68-79), also combined Zhang Yimou's films (before early 1990s) as a cultural symbol to discuss its postmodern transformation from elite enlightenment to a popular mass culture. Though the films mentioned by both Lam and Wang were made earlier than *An Orphan Joins the Army*, those film texts seem difficult to discuss in detail as postmodernist instances. Other postmodern related reviews were mostly based on Western films, while it is seldom that a scholar discusses postmodern cinema with typical examples of Chinese films before *An Orphan Joins the Army*.

<sup>30</sup> Such as Yin Hong, “The Chinese Films in A Postmodern Context”, *Contemporary Film* (60-7); and Zeng Yaonong, *The Postmodern Criticism on the Latest Chinese films* (53-6, 100). Zhou Huan, in his “Authors' Films”, mentioned that “Zhang Jianya's two films, *An Orphan Joins the Army* and *Mr. Wang's Burning Desire*, were not absolutely the first Chinese films combined with postmodern consciousness, but they were indeed the earliest films that stopped talking about it but showed it on the screen and exploited postmodernism through the film texts themselves.” (55-61)

<sup>31</sup> The film has been listed as one of the compulsory teaching films in the college of Communications, Tsinghua University since 2002, refer to <http://www.tsinghua.edu.cn/docsn/cbx/cft/kaifang/ys.htm>; and selected by Beijing University in its teaching plan of the course “History of Chinese Film” in the period of 2007-08, see <http://203.208.37.104/attach/boards/CFH/M.1211814209.A/2007-2008.htm>; the director Zhang himself also mentioned in an interview that “now these films [*An Orphan Joins the Army* and *Mr. Wang's Burning Desire*] have been cited in many film research institutions as a postmodern teaching example”, *New Beijing Daily*, cultural edition, 3 Feb.2007.

<sup>32</sup> A conservative strategy here means to take evasive actions in films to avoid political repressions, like film censorship. Conservative strategies (such as marginalization) are directly related to the neo-conservatism of China under the social background of the 1990s, which will be explained later in this chapter. In this context, the word ‘conservative’ does not prefer the traditional situation, but resists the radical position (on politics) or sudden social change in the case that subversion or irony may coexist with mainstream discourse without repression.

have chosen the film as the first text for analysis is not because it is exceptional, but because it contains a comprehensive demonstration of a variety of practices of postmodern thought.

There are two arguments in this section. One is that, textually speaking, *An Orphan Joins the Army* presents many postmodern elements, which seems a round-up of representation of the postmodern features in the contemporary Chinese film. It enlightens people's minds and points out a way for the postmodern culture in China to turn into an artistic practice. Actually, other sections in this chapter are all discussions developed or extended from here in this part of the analysis, including imitations, fusions between the high (elite) and the masses and incredulity towards meta-narrative. The other argument is that the film seems to be a kind of self-conscious experience for contemporary China. Its connotation lies not so much in personal or individual inspiration as in the inevitable social cultural context as a whole. That makes it possible for the film to be seen as a showcase, through which the postmodern evolution of contemporary Chinese culture, rather than just the text itself, can be understood in a better way.

## **3.2. Postmodernism and the Film Text**

### **3.2.1. The Theme**

#### **3.2.1.1. The Film Adaptation**

*An Orphan Joins the Army* is not developed from an original film script but adapted from a manhua<sup>33</sup> comic series called ‘Sanmao’ – the name of the orphan – drawn by Zhang Leping<sup>34</sup>, a quite famous comic artist in China, since 1935. The duration of its publication lasted until the 1980s.

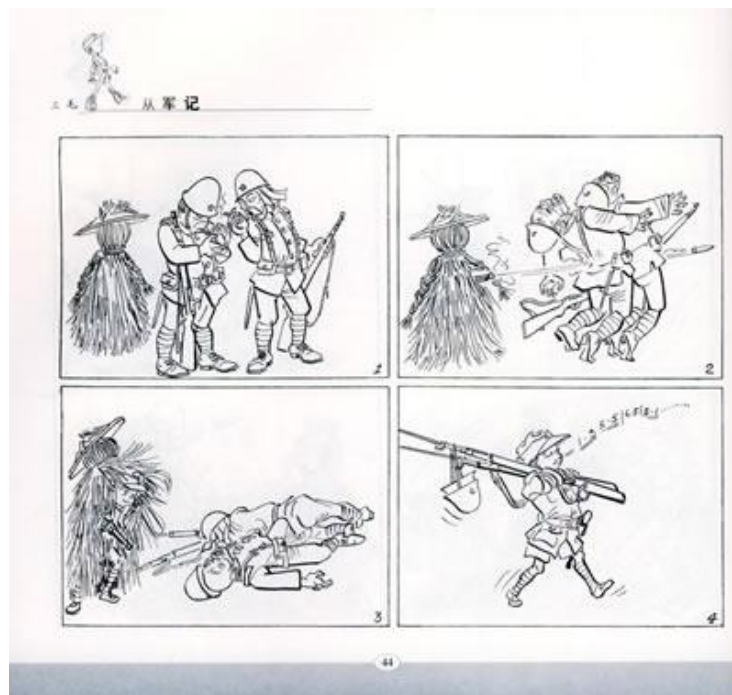


Figure 1. *An Orphan Joins the Army* (Manhua)

Sanmao is probably one of the world’s longest running cartoon characters and remains one of the most famous and beloved fictional characters in China today. However, as time goes on, the character has undergone quite a few transitions; Sanmao – as a protagonist in various comic stories – has been planted in a number of

<sup>33</sup> “Manhua” means Chinese comics originally produced in China, and distinguished from other national comics, such as Japanese comics (manga) or Korean comics (manhwa).

<sup>34</sup> Zhang Leping (1910-1992), a comic artist in Shanghai, China. He played a key role in the development of modern manhua in China, and is mostly remembered for his work in Sanmao.

the most important periods in Chinese history<sup>35</sup>. The original part of the story, which has been adapted by the film, was firstly serialized in the *Shanghai Times*<sup>36</sup> from 12<sup>th</sup> May to 4<sup>th</sup> October 1946 under the same name as the film. It is an early work of Zhang Leping. Sanmao's general identity is an orphan wandering on the streets in Shanghai, and because of malnutrition as the result of poverty he has always been drawn with three strands of hair that became his trademark later. In his early works, such as *An Orphan Joins the Army* (comic series, 1946) and *Wanderings of Sanmao* (comic series, 1947-9), Zhang Leping's original intention was to refract the ordeal of China in the Anti-Japanese War<sup>37</sup> through the destiny of the orphan. As a household character, it was not the first time that Sanmao had been adapted for film. Before *An Orphan Joins the Army* was shot in 1993, the Sanmao series had been adapted as motion pictures four times already: *Wanderings of Sanmao* (1949, drama), *Sanmao and the Business* (1958, puppet), *Wanderings of Sanmao* (1958, drama), *Wanderings of Sanmao* (1984, animation), and after 1993, the stories of Sanmao were continually revised as TV drama (1996), movie (2004), animation (2006), and even an Internet game (2006). From a diachronic view, it raises the question why most of the adaptations in recent decades have been based on *Wanderings of Sanmao* (1947-9), while the Chinese film ignored the great changes made in the socialist new China, and

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<sup>35</sup> For instance, *An Orphan Joins the Army* (1946) reflects the Anti-Japanese War (1937-1945); *Wanderings of Sanmao* (1947-49) shows the social poverty in Shanghai in the second Chinese Civil War (1946-49); *Sanmao's liberation* (1951) reflects the renewed vigor of the new socialist China; *Sanmao's Past and Present* (1959) was published in the Great Leap Forward (1958-60, which leads to a huge economic disaster); *Sanmao Learns Lei Feng* (1977-1984) shows the new period of China after the Cultural Revolution.

<sup>36</sup> Also called *Shen Bao* (申报), published since 1882 to 1949, it was one of the most influential newspapers in Shanghai and throughout China.

<sup>37</sup> Also known as War of Resistance against Japan, or the Second Sino-Japanese War, 1937-1945.

used a comic strip, *An Orphan Joins the Army* (1946), which seems not very famous today. Perhaps the reasons are complicated, while within those chances, contingency, or uncertainty, is there any inevitable relationship implied?

### 3.2.1.2. Disharmonies in the Film Industry (1990s), Repressions, and Marginalization

This possibly reflects a conservative, compromised, and marginalized strategy on postmodern theme selections in the contemporary reality of China. In the 1990s, China was experiencing a transitional period of reform when the market economy had been developing at top speed. A prosperous economy<sup>38</sup> has made China – an old communist country even before the 1980s – largely expand its materialized desires. Accordingly, there emerge three disharmonies between the domestic market and the Chinese film industry: first, unlimited materialization and inflation gradually made the masses lose their way or become confused about their belief in the spiritual world; second, a contradictory coming out between the old watching (appreciation) experience left from a planned economy and the shock of filmic thoughts suddenly breaking in from the West; third, a disjunction between those new, advanced, and rapidly changing thoughts in the reform of film arts and the sluggish transformation in the film system and its censorship. These disharmonies made the Chinese audience of the 1990s steeped in a certain, perplexity, or loss of orientation, gradually develop some sceptical attitudes towards a tradition of revolutionary romanticism or realism

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<sup>38</sup> The economic growth has played a crucial role in the development of the postmodern culture in China since 1980s. It will be discussed later in this part.

that had typically predominated in the seventeen-year cinema<sup>39</sup> of China. Additionally, the huge numbers of Western films pouring into the country since the 1980s considerably changed people's tastes in watching contemporary culture. Chinese people, at least some of them, do not chase lofty ideals in certain dogmatism or spiritual instillations any more, but turn to its entertaining elements. On the other hand, filmmakers in China have to try to offset (or counteract) and comply with those side effects brought by a lag or delay in the system or censorship, in order that their works will not be seen as a sensitive taboo in politics or realities, which probably leads to a prohibition. Therefore, objectively speaking, those avant-garde or counter cinemas in the 1990s chose neither to get back to the old way of romanticism nor to have more entanglement with a realistic context today. Instead, there was a preference towards playing a ridiculous farce in a fictional context, such as historical, parodic, or nostalgic themes, rather than realism. In this respect, certain avant-garde tendencies in 1990s China did correspond with some postmodern contexts in the West in their spiritual realities, which inspired some kind of conservative sentiment among intellectuals.

For Zhao Yiheng, the postmodernity of contemporary Chinese literature directly boils down to a germination of a new conservatism (Zhao 201-8)<sup>40</sup>. This kind

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<sup>39</sup> A period of film history in China, 1950-1966. Chinese cinema has had a long tradition of presenting revolutionary romanticism and realism since 1930s. In particular, they were prosperous in the seventeen-year cinema of China.

<sup>40</sup> For Zhao, conservatism means to give up a radical position and the elitism, and to combine with a trend of the mass culture. For further argument about relations between the postmodern and neo-conservatism, see J. Habermas (1989) *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians Debate*. ed. and trans by Shierry Weber Nicholsen, introduction by Richard Wolin, Cambridge: Mass MIT Press.



of compromise, presented in filmic themes, shows a marginalized tendency, which simultaneously creates various ‘margins’. These include the marginalized genre or theme (to avoid the mainstream discourse and the leitmotif), marginalized space (the margin of cities<sup>41</sup>), marginalized characters or identities (the hero has been superseded by a mere nobody), marginalized time (nostalgia or other fictional background), and marginalized narrative (deconstruct metanarrative). Being on the margin is not the only choice, while some of the Chinese films in 1990s were inclined to be so. Many films discussed in this research embody various strategies based on the inclination of marginalization, such as *In the Heat of the Sun* (Jiang Wen, 1995) that shows a nostalgic story through a boy’s memory in which his heroic dream is shattered (a marginalized character tells a marginalized story with a marginalized narrative setting in the Cultural Revolution); and as some ‘sixth generation’ directors did in their films like *Beijing Bastards* (Zhang Yuan, 1993) and *Xiao Wu* (Jia Zhangke, 1998), a marginalized space and voices from the minority cultures or sub-cultures are increasingly more valued than they used to be.

On one hand marginalization shows a reluctance to cooperate with the dominant position and a compromised position (rather than radical opposition) for self-protection; on the other hand it may help filmmakers to avoid political censorship. It may be considered as a crucial feature of the postmodern cinema in China, especially in the later 1990s. However, this kind of ‘conservative’ attitude (or

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<sup>41</sup> Or as Susan Hayward (2006) said, “voices from the margins, minority cultures, are finding spaces within contemporary cultures”, in talking about “postmodernism”. (309)

compromise) does not mean that those filmmakers are cowards<sup>42</sup>. In fact, what conservative thought and a deconstructed discourse did was just give up a face to face conflict with the mainstream in form. However it was not really the case. The postmodern must have alternatively given birth to other meanings or “signified” from critics. In the last two decades, a concealed struggle like this has been adopted broadly in Chinese literature and arts. Postmodern culture must be associated with certain politics, which is a vital clue throughout the discussion on the postmodernity of China.

We may read what Zhao Yiheng cited from Liu Kang:

...for good or ill, [Chairman] Mao’s conception of the relationship between politics and aesthetics might in fact have inspired Foucault’s radical critique of western liberal humanism. The fact that Mao considered these matters from the angle of political strategy and the power struggle certainly makes his views prone to repressive cultural policies. But this does not alter the fact that politics always permeates, in various forms, every cultural formation and institution. The People’s Republic of China’s avant-garde writers and critics of the late 1980s tried to counter the Maoist political dominance in literature by a cultivation of the aesthetic object of language or artistic form. But this very act of aestheticization is in itself political. It attests to Mao’s view of the political nature of cultural and literary activity, rather than undermining that view. (Liu 14; or qtd. in Zhao 2003, 137)

Here, a so-called “repressive cultural policies” from Liu, may be clearly realized as a period of China before 1977, when politics dominated the everyday and clouded every corner of the social culture. At that time, everyone believed in politics, and saw culture as an instrument of revolution, but it neglected a key role played by a market and a consumer culture. Liu’s point not only focuses on those specific issues

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<sup>42</sup> Because of a long term influence by the left-leaning ideology since the 1950s, the word “conservative” has a slight negative or derogatory suggestion in modern Mandarin.

on the piece of history of China, but also consists in emphasizing the effect that politics works towards every cultural formation, including commercial economy, the market economy and late capitalism itself<sup>43</sup>. However, in the 1990s, after the market economy had been dramatically developed in China for more than a decade, what Chinese contemporary culture needed to face, on its political permeation, seems much more complicated than what the West met. In addition to reacting to the changes of those powers and discourses brought by the market, consumption, globalization and the new medium, China also needed to deal with a variety of disturbances left from the old planned system and its repressions. So if a literary reality is considered here, it must include a sensitivity of censorship towards political discourse. The word ‘sensitivity’ can be elaborated in films through various evidences. For example, directors from those fifth generation like Zhang Yimou and Tian Zhuangzhuang to sixth generation like Lou Ye, have all had their works prohibited from the domestic box office. But without participation of the domestic audience, how can we read their films as a Chinese national cinema? Thus, in this sense one may understand that politics is always crucial in its relations with every culture it has penetrated. As a conservative, outwardly tamed and concealed trick, postmodernism inevitably becomes a way to gamble with the culture permeated.

### 3.2.1.3. Questioning the Marginalized Theme

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<sup>43</sup> This is why Linda Hutcheon, a Canadian literary critic, wrote a book on political self-examination in Western literature. See Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Routledge: London, 1989.

On this basis, we may reconsider the theme of the film, *An Orphan Joins the Army*. The characteristic of being marginalised seems obvious. The film is set in 1938 before the new socialist China (1949) has been founded. The country was still under the military regime of the Kuomintang and invaded by Japan. Politically speaking, that social background apparently has no part in the new (communist) China nor its honour or disgrace; nor does it touch a sensitive nerve of contemporary censorship. This temporal marginalization leads to the alienation of the film's theme from a realistic context of the 1990s, so that it can trade time for a space of criticism or satire. Of course, the contemporary authority cannot become a legitimate target of satire (or it will be prohibited by censorship); it is naturally replaced by the Kuomintang government a few decades ago in the film, which can be seen as a marginalized object. Then the plot develops as follows: as a result of poverty, Sanmao was forced to join the army. Though his friends in arms saw him as a child and used to tease him, he was still obstinately in the forefront of the fighting and dreaming of becoming a hero. According to its director – Zhang Jianya in a later interview – the battle scenes of the film were faithfully copied from the real Songhu campaign<sup>44</sup>, which means that the film plot is in accord with the real historical background. Here, two points need to be emphasized. On the one hand, what Sanmao joined was the Kuomintang army rather than the troop led by the Communist Party; on the other, the Songhu campaign in history ended in the failure of Kuomintang China. When the two points are combined,

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<sup>44</sup> Refer to the interview with Zhang Jianya, 12 Oct.2005, in People Net. <http://culture.people.com.cn/GB/40473/40476/3761931.html> Last access: 4 Oct. 2010. The Songhu Campaign is also called "the Battle of Shanghai" (Aug - Nov. 1937) in the West. It is one of the battles in The Anti-Japanese War. The result of battle was that Chinese army retreated from Shanghai with the strategy of trading space for time.

it naturally leads to a question: why did the Kuomintang fail? There are reflections on the corruption of the Kuomintang army in the film. As a reward for his bravery in battles, Sanmao was allocated to be an orderly for a division commander. Besides dealing with the trivial round, he needs to take care of the whole family of the commander, such as washing underwear for the family, entertaining the child, and concealing the infidelities of the commander and his wife. Through Sanmao's busy life, the film reflects the Kuomintang's corruptions bit by bit with a strong irony. This naturally leads to the question: when Chinese film develops in 1990s, why did it not choose a revolutionary romanticism to sing a song of Chinese bravery? Why can't it adopt a realism to reflect the contemporary issues of China? But it must adapt a comic series published forty years ago to show the corruptions of the Kuomintang that retreated to Taiwan in 1949. In addition, the relationship between the mainland of China and Kuomintang Taiwan has greatly improved since 1992. From then on the Chinese government has not advocated giving the Kuomintang a negative role in films any more, but why is *An Orphan Joins the Army* separated from the mainstream tendency? If this were only a particular case, it would not be necessary to get to the bottom of it at all. But here what I am questioning is not just this film and its specific theme, but the postmodern themes in contemporary China as a whole. The understanding of this question will run through the main body of the research.

### 3.2.2. Incredulity towards History

#### 3.2.2.1. A Cartoon Character in a Documentary

There seems adequate evidence to say that *An Orphan Joins the Army* is a film about history. A statement that it is “not fictional at all” appears at the very beginning of the film. Many patterns from the early silent films, like adding film captions before each section, have been imitated in it. Actually, quite a few parts of the film are directly shot and presented in black and white film with an old documentary style. The director Zhang apparently intends to let the audience trace back to a piece of history in the late 1930s. At the beginning, the film sounds an air-raid warning; a documentary sequence about Japanese bombers raiding Shanghai appears on the screen. With a frame rate of 16 per second, the old film makes vehicles and pedestrians on the streets of the city seem as if they were moving in great haste, which sets off a big panic around old Shanghai in wartime. Indeed Chinese audiences have been used to looking at those days of humiliation with a heavy heart. However, the oppressive feelings of that history may be challenged or deflated by a fictional protagonist in the film, Sanmao, a widely known cartoon character in modern China. Everyone knows that he is just a myth that has been widely adapted in literature and arts in the recent fifty years. So in people’s minds, there is always a clear boundary between him and reality. But to plant a famous cartoon character in a documentary – a kind of precise, historical, and realistic context – was a completely fresh attempt, at least in China at the time. Accordingly, it became a selling point to see how Sanmao

was drafted into war and perhaps to be a part of history. That was just one of the director's intentions. Zhang Jianya said in his later comments:

At that time, I would like to make a film between the mainstream and the counter-cinema<sup>45</sup>, so I needed a brand new train of thought... Sanmao, in my mind, should be an existence in the historical reality rather than a fiction. So we made quite a few fake documentaries which seem quite real. We let Sanmao emerge in them and even in a same scene with those big shots in history, like Chiang Kai-shek, head of Kuomintang...<sup>46</sup>

This leads to two additional points: What attitude does the film emphasize on history?

Can Sanmao eventually become a historical hero?

The film apparently shows scepticism towards the past and its reality. That is reflected through two sections in the film, imitating old, black and white film style. The first is at the beginning, when Sanmao is being chased by a policeman. The black and white style conveys a sensation of silent film. From the sound track and *mise en scene* to the comic performance of the actors, all of these seem like a (postmodern) parody<sup>47</sup> of Chaplin's early comedies, which brings 1930s Shanghai into a light and humorous context, namely, to narrate the past with a game-like or ridiculous attitude. This corresponds with Sanmao's fictional identity as he was in any comic series; so that the parody may simultaneously copy a comedy style of the 1920s and subverts its

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<sup>45</sup> Postmodern film can be seen as a counter-cinema to mainstream cinema. To define "counter-cinema", please refer to what Peter Wollen (79-91) identifies: a number of oppositions between mainstream cinema and counter-cinema, which are mentioned in the part of postmodernist narrative in the literature review of this paper.

<sup>46</sup> See the interview with Zhang Jianya on People Net.

<sup>47</sup> This section may also be considered – in the other way – as 'pastiche' resulting from the crisis of stylistic exhaustion. See another part of this chapter, 'Cultural Exhaustion and Desublimation'. For the difference between parody and pastiche, please refer to the next chapter about nostalgia.

historical context by using a fictional character ‘Sanmao’ in the process of representation. Its purpose as I see it is to challenge the metaphysical attitudes on historicity that have been held by the audience for a long time. In addition, this is in sharp contrast to the previously mentioned documentary sequence in which people on the street seemed scared under the Japanese bombers. War indeed causes universal misery, while the humor brought by Chaplin cannot be ignored in our memories as well. How can we always generalize a piece of the past with only cruelty and solemnity? It is clearly a dangerous preference. The originator of the prejudice is not history itself, but in our way of presentation. As Linda Hutcheon said, postmodern parody is just a historical and dialectical revision and rethinking; in this process it simultaneously constructs and subverts the power of the historical representation (95): “[p]ostmodern parody is both deconstructively critical and constructively creative, paradoxically making us aware of both the limits and the powers of representation – in any medium.” (98)

The significance of this parody consists in scepticism and adjustment on our cognitive style towards a past. I do not mean to compare the sublime with humour, nor see them as a pair of binary oppositions. There is no quantitative measure to tell which one is better. What parody does is to break through in the monotony and dignity of a historical discourse and its representation, and meanwhile advocate a pluralism and a variety of attitudes.



The second section with black and white style emerges towards the middle. The sequence tells a story about a commendation meeting. After a victory in a campaign where Sanmao successfully raided the enemy's artillery unit, the film suddenly changes from colorful scenes of disarmed Japanese soldiers into a silent film caption "A Triumphant Return", then turns into a black and white sequence of Chinese troops marching forward on streets, and the citizens standing on both sides of roads giving them a warm welcome, while children with flowers enthusiastically fly to their heroes. A visual impression of the section is that it was shot crudely and lacks change in camera positions, suggesting a propaganda documentary style. It is unclear if this is real or false, but what follows is definitely a mockumentary rather than a documentary. The big shot (Chiang Kai-shek) makes an inspection of the front line. When he is observing the enemy's situation through a periscope, he unintentionally sees the film camera shooting him from the side. Then his face falls, and he winks at his staff officer who immediately walks towards the camera and covers it with his hand. The sequence is then cut into another scene in which Chiang is expressing sympathies with the wounded. A commendation meeting follows: soldiers are lined up for inspection in a yard. The film camera is facing the platform but behind the soldiers; for them the attraction from the camera is obviously much more than that from the leader. They turn to look at the machine continually; some of them even point to the camera and whisper to each other. Meanwhile, Sanmao turns for a glance as well. After a speech, Chiang poses for a group photograph. Then Sanmao caught his attention and was taken to his side. Chiang raised Sanmao's hat and laughs at his three

stands of hair. At that time, Chiang is presented with a flag that symbolizes a victory. He then lets Sanmao hold the flag and be photographed with him. But Sanmao is too short to make the whole flag rise up from the ground, so the photographer lets him raise it higher over and over again. Eventually Sanmao lifts it over his head, and the flag completely covers his body and face. The next day this picture is published on newspapers, but there is only the big shot and a flag in it.

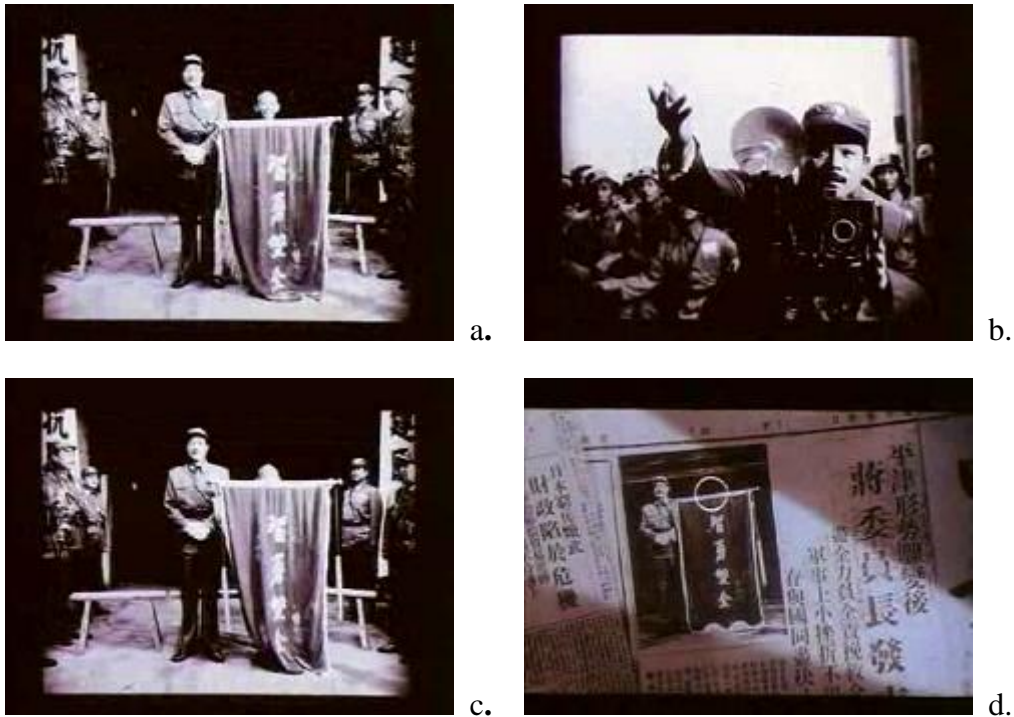


Figure 2. The “Documentary” in *An Orphan Joins the Army*

The purpose of elaborating this sequence is to represent clearly those postmodern elements. Generally speaking, the sequence appropriates a documentary style, combines a counter narrative, and eventually illustrates certain film forms existing between parody and mockumentary, in order that it may achieve an ironic

effect on history and insist on an incredulity towards the historical reality.

### 3.2.2.2. Historical Context and Big Shots

First of all, the appropriation and imitation of a documentary style is quite apparent in the film. In addition to the use of black and white style and silent film form, the director Zhang Jianya also invited a typecast actor, Sun Feihu who is famous for acting Chiang in a series of “leitmotif” films<sup>48</sup> in early 1990s, in his film so that the historical feelings can be conveyed accurately. A similar example may be found in *Forrest Gump* (1994, R. Zemeckis), where Forrest was received by Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. The difference is that Chiang is played by the typecast actor, while the two presidents are digitally made by computers. But no matter how different, they share one intention, to make the historical discourse and its context prominent through the big shots.

### 3.2.2.3. Counter-cinema Narratives

Secondly, the sequence is not just an imitation of documentary. It also merges with some counter-cinema narratives. For example, the soldiers look into the audiences’ eyes through the lens of the camera, which can be understood in different ways. On one hand, a direct vision between actors and the lens may help to promote a

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<sup>48</sup> The “leitmotif” is usually used in the mainland of China as 主旋律, which generally refers to politically mainstream cinema in revolutionary discourse advocated by the government.

sense of random shot. An unconsidered *mise-en-scene* that is lack of plan may set off the realities of a documentary style. On the other hand, people in the past or in a historical context continually communicate with audiences by eye contact in the present tense. That may arouse audiences' self-awareness of their own peering behaviors towards the past; thus it separates them from the historical context, and eventually breaks a film narrative closure and influences the totalization of history. Two points may support this argument, one is what Wollen (1982) mentions, the counter cinema narratives, which include an opposition between counter-cinema and the mainstream. He argues that audiences are distanced from the characters in a "counter" film rather than empathizing with particular characters as in the mainstream, so they see the stories as fictional constructs rather than adopting and enjoying them as real events (79-91). The other point is about the "fourth wall"<sup>49</sup> and its breaking, which makes the boundary between the audience and the fiction obvious and forces an audience to see the fiction less passively but think more critically about what they are watching rather than dreaming. When Chiang in the sequence had the camera covered, the film demonstrates a barrier that interferes with a historical reading behavior through lens. This restriction seems not friendly, but it emphasizes the existence of a camera in a history. When a history realizes a camera, as far as the audience is concerned how can they get a completely authentic and objective history? A historical

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<sup>49</sup> The fourth wall is the imaginary "wall" at the front of the stage in a traditional three-walled box set in a proscenium theatre, through which the audience sees the action in the world of the play. The idea of the fourth wall spread in nineteenth-century theatre with the advent of theatrical realism, which extended the idea to the imaginary boundary between any fictional work and its audience. The presence of the fourth wall is an established convention of modern realistic theatre, which has led some artists to draw direct attention to it for dramatic or comedic effect when this boundary is "broken", for example by an actor onstage speaking to the audience directly. See Elizabeth S. Bell, *Theories of Performance* (2003).

reality then becomes impossible. It simultaneously exploits the documentary style and betrays its original intention. This postmodern appropriation can be explained as what Linda Hutcheon mentioned, in her chapter on “re-presenting the past”. In describing a process of “total history, detotalized” (or as similar as meta-fictions<sup>50</sup>), she said,

[T]he postmodern questioning of this totalizing impulse...there are equally powerful examples of the postmodern paradox of anti-totalizing totalization in [postmodern works] which structurally both install and subvert the teleology, closure, and causality of narrative, both historical and fictive.<sup>51</sup>

#### 3.2.2.4. Parody, Fake Documentary, and an Absent Past

Thirdly, by this token, an appropriation of documentary style is inevitable. The strategy, in counter cinema, leads to the germination of two literary forms, parody<sup>52</sup> and mockumentary. The former creates an absurd historical situation, which in my view provides a seedbed for the latter in questioning a historical-cognitive framework. The intentions of both parody and mockumentary do not consist in the reappearance of history, but in reconsideration of its reality<sup>53</sup> and our totalizing impulse. In this

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<sup>50</sup> Meta-fiction is a type of fiction that self-consciously addresses the devices of fiction and self-consciously draws attention to its status as an artifact in posing questions about the relations between fiction and reality, such as irony and self-reflection. See L. Hutcheon (*Narcissistic* 139).

<sup>51</sup> For Hutcheon, totalized narrative can be seen as follows: “we have seen that narrative has come to be acknowledged as, above all, a human-made structure – never as ‘natural’ or given. Whether it be in historical or fictional representation, the familiar narrative form of beginning, middle, and end implies a structuring process that imparts meaning as well as order. The notion of its ‘end’ suggests both teleology and closure... it is considered a mode of ‘totalizing’ representation”. (Hutcheon *Politics* 62).

<sup>52</sup> For Hutcheon, parody and appropriation are equal and similar. See Hutcheon (*Politics* 93). But some other scholars see them as two tied strategies.

<sup>53</sup> Alisa Lebow believes the term ‘mockumentary’ more effectively works to signal a skepticism toward documentary realism, rather than to reauthorize documentary’s ‘truth’ against the fake doc’s ‘false’.” In “Faking What? Making a Mockery of Documentary” edited by Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner, *Fake Documentary and Truth’s Undoing*, (223).

regard, they arrive at the same end. As a typical fiction, the joint photo of Sanmao and Chiang becomes a living example to explain that how a parody and the fake documentary construct a fictional narrative in an empty shell of history, which seems enough to subvert, or at least waver in, our firmness on any source of information about the past. Actually, through the ages, our historical cognitions do not depend on the authentic or direct-viewing reflections, as Hutcheon pointed out, “the past really did exist, but we can only know it today through its textual traces” such as documents, archives, photographs, films and so on that are often indirect presentations in the present (*Politics* 73). Like the joint picture of Chiang and the flag, its reality or existence cannot be denied, for it is published in a real newspaper, but no one knows what exactly it was behind the flag. So the point is not discussing whether a past tense has happened before, but to realize that what existed in a history and what we can recognize in the present from history are totally different questions. Therefore, an absent past can only be inferred from those unimportant and circumstantial evidences. If so, to let Sanmao stand behind the flag is just an exaggerated assumption rather than a subjective imagination, while this assumption seems so easy to be looked through so that people may be clearly aware of the limitations of historical perception.

### 3.2.3. The Downfall of Heroes

The discussion above may be read as a fragment of epic heroics or a

suggestion of meta-narrative<sup>54</sup>. Since the Homeric hymns, heroism, as one part of grand narrative, has dominated the historical narrative in the West. This inclination has a long history in China as well, since Sima Qian wrote his *Records of the Grand Historian* in a biographical style two thousand years ago.

### 3.2.3.1. To Be a Hero?

However, according to Lyotard, to question the legitimacy of a meta-narrative is exactly a primary mission of the postmodern. In his *The Postmodern Condition*, he points out that a subversion of meta-narrative depends on the invalidation of two legitimate narratives. Both of them were developed in the Enlightenment, one is the Freedom narrative based on the French Revolution; the other is the rational tradition inherited from Hegel. On behalf of a radical independence, the former leads to a “hero of liberty”; the latter defends rational science and works hard in pursuit of the validity, totality, ultimate principle, and sublime authority, which leads to a “hero of knowledge”<sup>55</sup>. For Lyotard, a postmodern attitude is delegitimation. The legitimate

<sup>54</sup> Also known as master or grand-narrative. Meta-narrative is “a term that is used in critical theory, and particularly postmodernism. In this context it refers to a grand or all-encompassing story, which attempts to give order to the historical record, and to justify the existence of social institutions and authorities. The term is most well-known for its use by Jean-François Lyotard in the following quotation: ‘I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives’ (1984). By this, Lyotard meant that the condition of postmodernity is characterized by an increasingly widespread skepticism toward metanarratives, such as reason, truth, and justice, that were accepted without question in modernity”. (see “*Metanarratives: Lyotard Postmodern Human Existence*”, online definitions on <http://www.economicexpert.com/a/Metanarratives.htm> Last access: 4 Oct. 2010) “meta” refers to beyond, and “narrative” means story. So a meta-narrative is a story about a story beyond. The primary emphasis of a meta-narrative refers to a set of beliefs applied universally that is unquestioned by the individual and group holding those beliefs. For more definitions on meta-narrative, please see the part of literature review in this paper.

<sup>55</sup> See J. F. Lyotard (*Condition* 31-6). The hero of knowledge is similar to what Frankfurt School (T. W. Adorno and M. Horkheimer) argued an “elite culture” germinated from the authoritarian personality. Lyotard noticed that the integration between knowledge and authority are inclined to an opposition between the masses and the elites. This leads the high art to a profound collapse in popular culture.

device of meta-narrative has had its day in the postmodern condition. The grand narrative and its social context – including hero and oracle, rescue and liberty, the great victory, and the splendid landscape – are going to be obscured as time goes by. People do not believe in political or historical discourses any more, nor in those great themes. A *petit récit* has replaced them. A hero narrative – a process from calamity and rescue to a nice ending – is no longer fashionable. The postmodern world is a realm of mortal existence without oracles, and an era which emphasizes a process rather than the end (Wang Yuechuan 188). Here “the mortal” means ordinary people or the masses, which consists of the marginalized characters in postmodern films of China, such as Sanmao.

### 3.2.3.2. Chiang’s Temptation

Though Sanmao did not eventually become a historical hero, he had no intention to give up. The film creates a context of historical meta-narrative for him. Whenever a piece of history is mentioned in the film, there always comes out a black and white sequence to set off the past, which must include Chiang. As if there was no history without a big shot. This perhaps makes the audiences aware that the big shots are not only the representatives or dominators of history, but controlling history they identify with it. Under the circumstances of the Anti-Japanese War, Chiang apparently played a role, which Lyotard mentioned, the hero of liberty. Therefore, in a historical context, Sanmao has to count on (or relate to) Chiang in order that he may join into a



history and show the impossibility of his existence and how tiny the ordinary people are in master narrative. Chiang emerges in the film three times (three sequences with fake-documentary style) and made a great impression on Sanmao. The first is in the beginning, after the documentary sequence of Japanese bombers. Chiang is standing on a platform for a speech and he said, “The national crisis warrants special measures, every Chinese should try their best against the invasion. We should bring up a famous hero among uncounted unsung heroes...” his speech spread throughout the country and reached Sanmao’s ears as well. Then when was asked why he joined the army, Sanmao answers that he wants to be the “famous hero” advocated by Chiang. Thus it is Chiang that tempts him to join the army. Ironically, Chiang is the only one who becomes famous in the film and his second appearance is in an army parade before a campaign. Sanmao marches in the formation with a rifle in his hands and his head turning right. That was his first chance to see the “big shot”. It may be argued that most people have a similar dream, a subconscious motive, to become a hero emerging in the same space time with those big shots and to leave an eternal memory on history<sup>56</sup>. The third time, Chiang emerges in the commendation meeting mentioned above, where Sanmao got a chance to go near the “big shot” and even had a joint picture taken with him. However in the end, he was still covered by a flag and disappeared in history without trace. While the fake-documentary sequences bring the “traces” back for us, everyone realizes it is meta-fiction.

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<sup>56</sup> For example, Ma Xiaojun, in *In the Heat of the Sun* (Jiang Wen, 1995), looks at himself through a mirror and imitates Wang Cheng, another hero in the other film *Shang Gan Ling* (1956), saying the famous lines “fire towards me!” a self-irony on those who had dreams to be a hero.

### 3.2.3.3. Incredulity towards Metanarratives

This is an extreme satire on meta-narrative that seems lack trace or process but just focuses on a result or outcome. It may also remind the audiences that only public figures (those “big shots”) can become a history, a hero, or a permanent legend. Conversely, who did create a history? Most audiences may have this belief: the people are the makers of history. Chiang also emphasizes in the film that all of the honors should go to Chinese soldiers like Sanmao. He cannot deny the influence of the ordinary people on history either. But most of them finally faded out behind the flag. If we see the flag as a result of history (or at least a historical appearance), all the processes have already been covered behind it. It is not a fault of history, but of representation, which again leads to distrust of narratives. According to Lyotard:

Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives. [...] The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, and its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements – narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on. (xxiv-xxv)

As a meta-narrative, a typical documentary is used to celebrating heroes and their great outcomes but ignoring the masses and their traces. If an imitation of documentary style brings some new meanings, it may be considered as a parody, which simultaneously constructs a process of how our historical consciousness creates and arouses scepticism of narratives by which a hero is portrayed or molded and ordinary people are hidden. Its intention seems in accordance with Lyotard’s point – heroism is past now, the postmodern is an ordinary world, an era where we only focus

on process rather than consequence<sup>57</sup>.

### 3.2.3.4. Trivialization, Desire and Their Repression

In addition, the film provides another way of dealing with “hero”, a trivialization. Since Sanmao cannot flourish in historical narratives, why not fashion him as an ordinary person? Through such trivialization, the film reconstructs a pattern of trivialized discourse. Its core consists in Sanmao’s illusions and desires. Before going to the frontline, the troop invites some dancing girls for a performance, looking very sexy in their dress. The film provides quite a few close-ups of their chests and thighs and soldiers are sexually excited by the pornography. Here the director apparently excited the audience’s subconsciousness to show how a libidinous feeling works on people’s minds. It reminds me of certain aesthetic intentions related to the postmodern, I call it a resurrection of irrational desires, such as sexual fantasies. This may be explained by Daniel Bell who argues that the core of the postmodern cultural industry consists in resisting a rational restriction. The postmodern advocates an individual liberty, instinctive catharsis, a freedom of impulsion, and a return of some pre-rational spontaneity (Bell *Exhaustion* 370-8; Bell *Contradiction* 79-125; Wang Yuechuan 135-7). Generally speaking, these inclinations in postmodern films are mostly presented as a pornographic temptation<sup>58</sup>, a violent impulse<sup>59</sup>, or indulging in

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<sup>57</sup> In talking about *An Orphan Joins the Army*, Zhou Huan said that, when the myth of history is demonstrated as a performance of the historical process in front of the audiences, the historical result then becomes a fictional illusion that will collapse and fade out from audiences’ awareness. See Zhou Huan (57).

<sup>58</sup> Like *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986) that is full of temptations of curiosity and nudity.

certain drug fantasies<sup>60</sup>.

The other film directed by Zhang Jianya, *Mr. Wang's Burning Desires* (*Wangxiansheng zhi yuhuo fenshen*, 1994), also discusses the relations between high arts and lust/lechery, when the two male protagonists quarrel with each other about a nude picture. One asks the other, “Why when you look the picture, you have a keen eye for aesthetic appreciation; but when I do the same, you see me as a satyr?” This is a typical example that demonstrates how the postmodern questions the high arts, which is maybe a metaphysical excuse for people to legitimately release their desires in a rational context. Sanmao here is tempted by porn as well, first from the dancing girls, then from the underwear of his commander’s wife, and eventually dreaming of a series of love fantasies with a young female partisan after a combat. In this section, the film shows the typical happy life of traditional China – men till the land and women weave cloth with children playing around. This illusion forms a sharp contrast with his early dream, in which Sanmao had dreamed of being a hero on the stage of traditional Peking opera. It manifests that Sanmao subconsciously transfers his desire to a longing for an ordinary life. This may be seen as a transition from the grand narratives to a *petit récit*. However, the dream is immediately broken by another discourse. A voice over, with a self-reflexive strain, says “Sanmao knows, as a soldier he should not have affections or desires...” then he bewilderedly walks up a stage of

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<sup>59</sup> For instance a film, *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999), demonstrates an irrational violence.

<sup>60</sup> Like *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1996) which tells a story of a group of young people in Edinburgh. Drugs helped them breakthrough the rational standards of conduct.

modern Peking opera<sup>61</sup>, surrounded by a group of communist soldiers. One of them holds Sanmao's hands enthusiastically and says, "Little comrade, welcome to take part in the revolution!"<sup>62</sup> After that, Sanmao returns to the battlefield. This arrangement, on one hand, proves – with the meta-narrative strain – that human history is a narrative history with its desire suppressed; but on the other, it is also a metaphor for the influences brought by the ideological revolution on public life, and meanwhile shows how much *petit récit* (in this particular case, subversively) exists in a left-wing political discourse (or mainstream censorship), which in return asserts the necessity of the existence of postmodern conservatism in contemporary China and its social context.

### 3.2.4. War, Game, and Their Intertextuality

Parody in the film is widely used to present the battle scenes. The application of parody leads to a dramatic change in attitudes on wars, namely a change from a cruel and solemn impression into an absurd game. It lacks linear association between scenes, so that it forms a bricolage including: Sanmao playing Yue Fei, a famous ancient hero, fighting with Japanese soldiers on the stage of classic Peking opera<sup>63</sup>; the parodies of *the Tunnel Warfare* (*Didao zhan* 1966, film) and *Shajia Creek* (*Shajia*

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<sup>61</sup> The modern Peking opera refers to the "Eight model plays", which were the most famous operas and ballets that were permitted during the Cultural Revolution in China (1966-1976). They all have communist or revolutionary themes.

<sup>62</sup> Exactly speaking, this is a scene imitated from the revolutionary Peking opera *Sha Jia Bang*, in which revolutionary masses were joining with the New Fourth Army led by the communist party of China.

<sup>63</sup> This is a sequence of parody of the traditional Peking opera: such as *Tiao Hua Che*, *Man Jiang Hong*, and *Ba Da Chui*, both of them adapted from the Story of Yue Fei (1103-1142).

*bang*, modern Peking opera); even an imitation of an early Chinese film *Laborer's Love* (*Zhi guo yuan*, 1922); and in the end, the film appropriates a children's game, "Hawks Catching Chickens", to show the battle scenes. These sequences not only practise a language game on film, but also fill the film with intertextuality<sup>64</sup>. As far as the postmodernity is concerned in the film, both of the elements present a denial of the primacy of subjectivity. What is different consists in that the former denies the subjectivity of a war; the latter illustrates a subjective crisis in literary acceptance.

#### 3.2.4.1. War or Game?

"Game" does not simply mean to demonstrate certain entertainment with a film language. For L. Wittgenstein, all of human activities can be seen as games. He argues that there is no intrinsic quality in any of the words. Their meanings are all reflected in certain contexts, in other words, in their applications of concrete games<sup>65</sup>. Therefore in his late considerations<sup>66</sup>, Wittgenstein refused to define "language game", and even denied that a language has any essential logic or idea<sup>67</sup>. Hence, when we make language concrete into a specific word such as "war", it cannot become an essential concept any more. Here what I am referring to is neither to see a war as a

<sup>64</sup> Intertextuality is the shaping of texts' meanings by other texts. It can refer to an author's borrowing and transformation of a prior text or to a reader's referencing of one text in reading another. Please refer to Julia Kristeva and Linda Hutcheon's works.

<sup>65</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953) *Philosophical investigations*. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe, Oxford : Blackwell, parts related with "language game".

<sup>66</sup> Compared to his early works (*Tractatus Logico – Philosophicus*, 1922), the late consideration refers to Wittgenstein's *Philosophical investigations* (1953).

<sup>67</sup> Jiang Yi (2002) "Wittgenstein's Language Game" a speech in Beijing Normal University, 22 Oct. 2002. <http://www.zisi.net/htm/ztlw2/xfzx/2005-05-10-19562.htm> Last access: 4 Oct. 2010.

game nor to present a war with any entertaining form; but mean that, to read a war as a sign in language and to comprehend it in a concrete context. This process itself is a game. Then whether it is a Peking opera, an old movie, or a children's game, the parodies of those texts actually provide diverse contexts for the understandings of a war. This kind of fragmentation or bricolage towards various games of the war leads immediately to a plurality and uncertainty of the meanings of the war. While they have a common ground that all the original texts of these parodies contain dramatic conflicts, such as Yue Fei versus invaders, hawks versus chickens and so on, the contexts of those conflicts exist on stages, movie screens, or games in kindergartens rather than a real battlefield. So it does not describe a war with language any longer, but a war that has been brought into games by language<sup>68</sup>. These parodies, based on the mimicking of wars, have erased the basic intentions, the cruelty, and the feeling of justice of a war, which indirectly shake the audience's inherent sense of mind on wars. Once the cognitive essentiality has collapsed, the binary subject consciousness on wars – such as win or lose, contradictions or hostility – begins to lose its existent necessity. Then people (or any party against each other) in wars gradually lose their dominant position to control the game and its rules, and they are reduced to insignificant participants or by-standers. Parody and bricolage, from this perspective, construct a filmic language game, undermine the position of human as a subjective cognition in wars, and shake people's stereotyped images of warfare.

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<sup>68</sup> To be extreme, people's cognitions on wars are gradually controlled by language and media. This concept is as similar as J. Baudrillard's views on the Gulf War and the hyper-realities. See Baudrillard (*Gulf*, qtd. in Malpas 63-74).

### 3.2.4.2. The Authors, The Works, and The Readers

Intertextuality is usually characterized by the lack of individual styles and the appropriation of many original texts. Therefore, it is almost impossible to avoid, when the participation of Sanmao in the war has been presented as the parodies of other texts. An appropriation means a disappearance of the differences between texts, or at least an indistinction among styles. The lack of textual styles then naturally leads the question to a subjective concept of literary reception. The “subject” emphasized here means a discussion on what the core is between the authors, the works, and the readers. It was generally thought that a literary work was created through its author’s inspiration and conveys the author’s intent, and the distinctions between works embody the styles of authors. However, through the application of parody and appropriation, the film demonstrates a fragmented bricolage on various styles that seems quite confusing. It is not only the author’s motive that has been called into question, but it shakes its principal position through the process of the reception. For J. Kristeva, “the notion of intertextuality replaces the notion of ‘intersubjectivity’” when we realize that meaning is not transferred directly from writer to reader but instead is mediated through, or filtered by, “codes” imparted to the writer and reader by other texts (69). Hutcheon also argues that excessive interest in intertextuality obscures the role of the author, because intertextuality can be found “in the eye of the beholder” and does not necessarily entail a communicator’s intentions (87). In addition to the author, the lack of distinct textual styles also makes it nearly impossible to have a text



become the core subject of literature. Thus as Roland Barthes pointed out, this intertextual view implies such kind of significance that the meaning of an artistic work does not reside in that work, but in the viewers<sup>69</sup>. Ultimately we have to rely on readers to achieve a creation of meanings from works. This is in accord with H. Gadamer's view. In his *Truth and Method*, he believes that a truth is reflected from not only the work but also a reality participated in and influenced by the readers and their viewing behaviors (262-71). In this respect, it implies a concept of postmodern hermeneutics<sup>70</sup>, and its substance does not make readers become a subject or the centre of literature<sup>71</sup>, but just emphasizes the significance of the participation of readers and their subjective contexts, thus breaking the centricity, totality, objectivity, and certainty of modern philosophy. This is what a filmic intertextuality conveys, as a postmodern aesthetic inclination.

### 3.3. The Film Reflected As a Culture

Based on the discussion above, it is more than convincing that *An Orphan Joins the Army* has close ties with the postmodern in many aspects. The argument below is that the postmodernity of film texts is not only based on any occasional, accidental, or personal attempts by certain individual directors or artists; it can also be

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<sup>69</sup> Roland Barthes (*S/Z* 21). He also announced 'the death of the author' and 'the birth of the reader', declaring that 'a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination'. See Roland Barthes "the Death of the Author", (142-148).

<sup>70</sup> Here refers to those hermeneutics after Martin Heidegger, including Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, Habermas's critical hermeneutics, and Hans R. Jauss's reception theory.

<sup>71</sup> Actually, for postmodernism, there is not any intrinsic core in its nature. See Jiang Yi.

read as postmodern in cultural debates, in other words, its germination was affected or catalyzed by certain social factors so that the film becomes a self-conscious cultural practice and presentation, rather than an innovation or avant-garde artistic practice created purely from personal awareness.

### 3.3.1. Cultural Exhaustion and Desublimation

#### 3.3.1.1. The Embarrassing Situation

As one of the fifth generation directors of China, Zhang Jianya, in an interview ten years later, does not admit that he personally had any postmodernist motive when shooting the film, but emphasizes the embarrassing situation he met in the early 1990s.

“After graduation in 1982, I got back to the Shanghai Film Studio, busy in some peddling details. At that time I really wanted to shoot a film of my own, but when my turn really came to me [in the 1990s], I found that my classmates had already gone beyond me by a long way<sup>72</sup>. Then I jokingly said that all the colors have been already used by others, such as *Yellow Earth* (Chen Kaige, 1985), *Red Sorghum* (Zhang Yimou, 1987), *Blue Kite* (Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1993), and *The Black Cannon Incident* (Huang Jianxin, 1985) etc... all kinds of styles of the fifth generation have stood in great numbers, the front road has been closed and there is no leeway for me to create something unique. What I may do is just enjoy the old cartoon that makes people comfortable.”<sup>73</sup>

Zhang’s words presented a crisis of innovation in the Chinese film style at the

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<sup>72</sup> “Classmates” refers to those fifth generation directors who at the same time as Zhang Jianya graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in 1982, such as Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, Huang Jianxin and Tian Zhuangzhuang.

<sup>73</sup> See Zhang Jianya’s interviews in People Net.

beginning of the 1990s. There may have been various interpretations of the crisis, but here I will only mention two points related to culture: one is Fredric Jameson's so-called cultural exhaustion; the other is Russell Berman's so called high art and its desublimation. The former leads the creative arts to an imitation, and the latter points out the direction for the imitation.

### 3.3.1.2. Postmodernism and Cultural Exhaustion

So far as the former is concerned, Jameson believes that there exists an absence of original innovation or a crisis of originality in late capitalist culture, where people increasingly infiltrate a culture in which everything has already been said and done, and into a world in which it is impossible to accommodate an innovative style any more (1983, 111-25). In such a culture and world, what is left are only those repeats and imitation of the dead styles<sup>74</sup>. Our discourses covered with stylistic masks are all roaming in the old image archives. This situation is quite similar to what Zhang Jianya met. In the early 90s, the whole Chinese film had been enveloped by Zhang Yimou's success around those international film festivals, and most of the fifth generation directors had already established their styles and won awards frequently in the world (Wang Yichuan 68-79). However in this period Zhang Jianya had just begun getting his opportunity and making his first film independently. It was hard to overtake others from a backward position. He later recalled, "I do not like to follow

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<sup>74</sup> Imitating and mixing up dead styles may be considered as pastiche or empty parody. They are discussed in the "nostalgia" part of this paper.

others, I cannot duplicate them, those are their success.”<sup>75</sup> He had obviously given up on the efforts of innovative style, for to follow others means being always left behind. This is a dilemma when facing cultural exhaustions, which is obviously not only a personal frame of mind, but a realistic situation reflected from the contemporary Chinese culture as a whole. This gave Zhang Jianya no choice. He can only, as Jameson pointed out, wear dead masks and pick up those old styles and clichés again to make a reconstruction and redeploy them. However, compared with Jameson’s pessimism, Zhang found an alternative style from parody, an absurd and humorous satire and self-derision. The reason I call it a substituted style rather than an occasional imitation is because after *An Orphan Joins the Army*, Zhang’s second film, *Mr. Wang’s Burning Desires* (1995) also continued the same pattern of style. It is adapted from another comic series as well, and is full of parody, bricolage, and intertextuality<sup>76</sup>. These elements were rare in Chinese films before.

### 3.3.1.3. Mass Culture and Desublimation

The other initiator of the crisis is cultural desublimation (Berman, “Modern Art and Desublimation”). It manifests a clear direction of getting back to the mass culture. For Russell A. Berman, the word “sublimation” means a posture, like high art, that overtops a mass-level culture and seems too highbrow to be popular in recent

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<sup>75</sup> See the interviews with Zhang Jianya on People Net and *New Beijing Daily*.

<sup>76</sup> For instance, the parodies of and the bricolage between the films such as *Red Sorghum* (1987), *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* (1970), *Battleship Potemkin* (Броненосец Потёмкин, 1925).

years. The word was then borrowed by John Hill to set off the gradually subverted high art in the postmodern culture. He said, it has lost its capacity to challenge and provoke as well as its capacity to communicate to a public beyond a small elite (97). Thereupon in a postmodern culture, high art is gradually giving up sublimation of upward and in return condensing into a mass taste. I call this as a process of “desublimation”. Except for Zhang Jianya, other fifth generation directors and their works, especially their early films before the mid 1990s, generally have a sublime quality saluting modern literature and art. On the one hand, this derives from the blind worship of modern Western culture; on the other hand, it results from the return of humanism after China’s Cultural Revolution and the inherent cultural ambition of the intellectuals in China. But the most important influence perhaps comes from the change of film audiences. The works of the fifth generation gradually lost their creative focus fully serving the revolutionary masses, and turning their range of vision overseas<sup>77</sup>. Or to put it extremely, they were catering for the foreign artistic tastes and developing their Chinese illusions from international film festivals. Though no detailed evidence can be provided to argue that most of the fifth generation films in early 90s had ever had absolute sublimation effects, it is indisputable that those works had become partially detached from the local audience and its commercial markets already<sup>78</sup>. Facing this situation, Zhang had to refocus his attention on the local market

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<sup>77</sup> Adam Lam mentioned that the Chinese cinema had experienced a crucial transformation since the mid 1980s. Chinese films have not only focused on the domestic market, but have started trying to get attention of the overseas audiences with various cultural backgrounds (2005, 61). Then he takes *Red Sorghum* (1987) as an example to argue that most of the successes of the Chinese cinema in overseas partially come from their catering for the Western tastes and its cultural identity (67-8).

<sup>78</sup> For example, when talking about Chen Kaige’s early films like *Yellow Earth* (1985), Adam Lam has pointed out that this kind of film, although it received some good feedback from both overseas and domestically on the artistic achievements, yet it is only effective for a narrow audience and lacks the support of the masses (2005,

in addition to giving up an individual style. “To the early 1990s, the fifth generation directors had already grabbed their styles in great numbers”, Zhang said, “every way had been gone through by others, so what should I make? I put myself as an audience [rather than a judge], and asked myself what would I like to watch?”<sup>79</sup> His words convey a passive choice. It is better to say that Zhang has passively accepted the realistic situation of the contemporary culture in China<sup>80</sup>, rather than actively giving up his own style and going back to the masses. Actually he has realized a disharmony between the modern arts and the masses, and consequently put the fusion of the high art and popular culture as his breakthrough. At that time, no matter whether Zhang himself had realized the process of transition or not, he had already plunged into a cultural state of desublimation, and consciously practised various postmodern elements for public awareness. When referring to his original intentions for *An Orphan Joins the Army* and *Mr. Wang’s Burning Desires*, Zhang said that he just wanted to make a joke on films, arts, and the directors themselves. When he was shooting the two films, there was not any [postmodern] ism in his mind at all, and his aim was just to make his works popular<sup>81</sup>. His words provide a clear direction for the imitation. That is to tease literature and arts with the vision of the masses. In this respect, no matter whether Sanmao is standing on the stage of a revolutionary drama

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77); then he argued that after *Red Sorghum* (1987) Zhang Yimou’s other films in the early 90s did not get high box offices in the domestic market (2005, 150). Additionally for Wang Yichuan, the reason Chinese audiences paid more attention to Y. Zhang’s Red trilogy was not because of its intrinsic attractions, but because the films got awards from foreign film festivals, in “Zhang’s Myth and Its ending” (68-79).

<sup>79</sup> See the interviews with Zhang Jianya on People Net and *New Beijing Daily*.

<sup>80</sup> The popular culture of mainland of China was experiencing a high-speed development in 1990s. Its social background will be discussed later on.

<sup>81</sup> Refer to the interview with Zhang Jianya on People Net.

or Mr. Wang is lying in the field of red sorghum and instead of “my grandpa”<sup>82</sup> with his weak chest in a context of sexual behavior, a parody is no longer a pure or empty imitation, but shows an attitude of giving up the idolization of lofty ideals and turning into certain satire over public consciousness.

### 3. 3. 2. Conservative Refutation

The great changes in the Chinese social and cultural background since the late 1970s also provide a fertile soil for the germination of the postmodern. A cultural reality is inevitably playing a role of a catalyst. So its result is not just demonstrated by the intellectuals’ auto criticism on their separations from the masses. Actually since the very beginning of this period, the postmodernity of China was not limited to the category of literature and arts, and this was related in its films. This section shifts from the view of seeing film as a literary art and focuses on a wider field, the influence from social-cultural respects.

#### 3.3.2.1. Social and Political Background, China 1990s

In the period of the early 1990s, China had been reformed for more than ten years. The market economy was being developed rapidly all over the country, and its economic achievements were obvious to all. The local capital market was facing a

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<sup>82</sup> The protagonist of Zhang Yimou’s famous maiden (directing) film *Red Sorghum* (1987).

great innovation, which led to a reshuffle of the income distribution system. The unbalanced distribution and the problem of corruption gradually resulted in a polarization of rich and poor<sup>83</sup>. Without their markets and protection from the old planned economy, some of the nation-owned enterprises began to go bankrupt one after another. Unemployment levels rocketed to new heights, which became social factors of instability. As for politics, the student movement of 1989 had just ended. The government showed a tough attitude towards the radical leftist intellectuals<sup>84</sup>; from the point of view of international politics, socialist China was enduring tremendous pressures from the decline of international communism<sup>85</sup>. Such a situation on the one hand forced the government to ease the tension of the domestic social conflicts; on the other hand it awakened intellectuals to the negative consequences of radical protests, and they then instead began to seek other means of discourse. So during this period, conservatism and eclecticism began to receive acceptance by both the mainstream discourse and the public, and since then a right-wing conservative attitude has started to play a relatively leading role in its social culture.

### 3.3.2.2. Neo-conservatism of China

Zhao Yiheng clearly pointed out that, based on the Western “postism”<sup>86</sup> the

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<sup>83</sup> See, *The Basic Issues on Deng Xiaoping Theory* (1).

<sup>84</sup> Please refer to relevant information about “Tiananmen Massacre”. The three main purposes of the movement were to advocate the freedom of speech, to punish corruption, and to improve the treatment of intellectuals.

<sup>85</sup> The decline here is for the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the socialist camp in Eastern Europe.

<sup>86</sup> Postism (后学), created by Yiheng Zhao, generally refers to those “post” related to Western thoughts developed in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as post-structuralism, postmodernism, and post-colonialism (Zhao



Chinese academia started a new tide of discussion on neo-conservatism around the early 1990s. He argues that “conservative” is not a derogatory term, and it is at least much better than radical. Its basic meaning is to maintain the status quo and to emphasize a rationality of the existing contemporary culture. In “The New Ten Symposium” attended by Chen Xiaoming, Zhang Yiwu, Zhu Wei, and Dai Jinhua, a status quo of the contemporary culture has been made clear, that is, the mainstream discourse or the elite culture has no longer had complete control of the production and dissemination of cultures. Zhu thinks, to blindly defend the elite culture is already ridiculous; Chen points that now that the elite and the mass are growing towards integration in the post-modernized West, the Chinese mainstreams should also move closer to the public, then he borrowed Lyotard’s point, that in contemporary culture we should improve our sensitivity to the differences in order to promote the capability of tolerance on “incommensurability”; additionally, Zhang directly concludes the conservative mentality as a postmodern-culture compliance: postism means a participation in the contemporary culture, it neither stands on the opposition of culture, nor attempts to go beyond it (in Chen Xiaoming 138-9). Those discussions had obviously led the Chinese society of the 1990s into a conservative relationship to the postmodern.

## 3.3.2.3 Mutual Tolerance

Maintaining a status quo then becomes a provisional contract between the elite and the mass. Maintaining does not mean doing nothing, but having a little more tolerance and patience. Ordinary people, who do not come from a privileged background, need a way to release their pressures, which need not touch the sensitive nerves of the government; there is also an urgent need for the government to shift people's attention away from politics. Therefore, in addition to improving the economy, the government has had a relaxed attitude and loose management on the cultural industry and entertainments<sup>87</sup>. For instance, with the popularity of TV sets in Chinese families, the number of entertainment programs and foreign soap operas had sharply increased by the beginning of the 1990s<sup>88</sup>. Corresponding to this, the film industry of China was in a rapid decline over the same period<sup>89</sup>. The huge reduction of the film audience made the film industry gradually lose its significance as the main ideological propaganda media. In this sense, there should have been reasons for censorship holding certain tolerance towards a postmodern film practice. As far as the filmmakers are concerned, they need a kind of text with something tame, humorous, absurd, and naïve like the postmodern literature so that they may live in harmony with

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<sup>87</sup> Feng Xuan (2005) "An Entertaining News, from Market, Audience, and Ideology", People Net, <http://media.people.com.cn/GB/22114/51231/51271/3576668.html> Last access: 4 Oct. 2010

<sup>88</sup> See "The Political & Economic Analysis on the Contemporary Chinese TV Drama", Xinhua Net, 15. July. 2003. The article clearly pointed out that the large-scale import of foreign TV programs started from the late 1980s in China. [http://news.xinhuanet.com/newmedia/2003-07/15/content\\_974317.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/newmedia/2003-07/15/content_974317.htm) Last access: 4 Oct. 2010

<sup>89</sup> The Chinese box office sharply declined from US\$ 500 million in 1989 to US\$ 380 million in 1992 and then to no more than US\$ 170 million in 1999. However the average single ticket fare increased from 0.25 Yuan (1989) to 20 Yuan (around US\$ 3) in 1999. "Is a film ticket price high or low?" *World Entertainments Reports*. 3. Dec. 2004.

the mainstream at least on the surface. As for the audience receptions, the masses are more inclined to resonate with those realistic and practical senses of humor, and tend to conservatively release their pressures through self-irony and self-fragmentation. Postmodern elements like parody are in line with such a demand. No matter its absurdity in form, its vague intentions under cover of intertextuality, or its fragmentation of high art, all of these met a conservative context needed. Thus, it should be argued that the birth of *An Orphan Joins the Army* reflected a self-conscious choice by history and culture. The germination of its postmodern elements was an absolute necessity.

#### 3.3.2.4. Criticism and Subversion

However postmodern culture is a double-edged sword. It can be used for suppression of radical potential, but at the same time it may also provide the possibility of subversion. When this chapter talked about marginalization before, it argued that conservative does not mean blindly retreating. The contemporary Chinese intellectuals are not cowards either. The postmodern for them is only a tool of cultural expression. Fragmentation, self-irony, and conservatism only abandon a head-on collision or positive conflict with the main discourse in form, but turn to convey other significations and criticism. Though *An Orphan Joins the Army* is set in a historical period before communist China was founded, this temporal retreat can only be seen as a compromise on the surface. In fact it cannot prevent Sanmao from being attached

(as a bricolage) on the stage of revolutionary opera, nor can it restrain the old memories from audiences to reflect a reality. The director here just borrows certain postmodernist elements (like intertextuality) to cover up his own traces. When Sanmao, who was still indulging in his better life illusions, is suddenly pulled back on to the ideological stage and warmly invited by communist soldiers (dancers) to join the revolution, the audience may naturally associate the left-leaning awareness in the Cultural Revolution with its negative impact on the public in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This absurdity then contains a reflection and criticism towards today's mainstream (communist) politics as well. Additionally, when the film makes Chiang its target to question the heroic narratives and the meta history, it also conveys an idea that the people are the real makers and heroes of history. This symbolic meaning may perhaps be associated with the Tian An Men Massacre which happened not long ago (in which the voice of the people was suppressed), and meanwhile it may transfer its suspicions of Chiang to criticism of the mainstream ideology and discourses in a realistic context. This awareness of conversion seems not hard for those who had experienced the movement of 1989.

#### 3.3.2.5. Successful Distribution and Marginalized Genre

The most important factor is that, the new conservatism reflected from the postmodernist elements in the film successfully circumvented the political censorship

and came into the commercial distributions<sup>90</sup>. The education department of China also organized primary and secondary school students to go to the cinema for the film<sup>91</sup>. Even in Shanghai, the local government launched a film review contest in its middle schools. One review comes from a senior middle school student (around seventeen years old)<sup>92</sup>. That is a completely negative comment. It argues that the appropriation of various styles does not have any new ideas; the absurd humor is sheer nonsense; and using the silent film style in a high-tech society is a complete degeneracy. Apparently, not all ages can understand the postmodern intentions. So it is not surprising that the film bureau sees it as a film for children, and it won the award of the best children's film in 13<sup>th</sup> Jinji film festival of China. The film today is still considered as one of the best children's films of China (Huang Jun 103). This leads me to suspect that the film may be using the marginalized genre as a shelter to pass the censorship. While no matter how, the fact is undeniable that both *An Orphan Joins the Army* and *Mr. Wang's Burning Desires* had been smoothly distributed and released in China and had adequate feedback from the audiences. The films seem very lucky when compared with other movies in the same period that were prohibited from domestic cinemas, like *Blue Kite* or *To Live*<sup>93</sup>.

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<sup>90</sup> Zhang Jianya himself mentioned that he was satisfied with the box office result. Please refer to the interview with Zhang Jianya, *New Beijing Daily*, 3. Feb. 2007.

<sup>91</sup> At that time I was a junior middle school student, and forced to watch the film before summer holiday in 1993.

<sup>92</sup> Yang Jingxin, "Humor Needs More Innovation, A Review on *An Orphan Joins the Army*", (33).

<sup>93</sup> *Blue Kite* (1993) and *To Live* (1994) are directed by Tian Zhuangzhuang and Zhang Yimou respectively. Similarly to Zhang Jianya, they are all of fifth generation directors. What is different with *An Orphan Joins the Army* is that it consists of four points: first, though both *Blue Kite* and *To Live* are famous overseas, they have never been distributed in the Chinese film market; second, the investors of the both films were not from mainland China; third, both of the films present Jameson so-called pastiche or nostalgia rather than Hutcheon's parody; fourth, both of the two films directly illustrate a nostalgic social life under the left-leaning ideology (1950s and 60s) and refuse a temporal marginalization. The comparison between pastiche and parody will be mentioned in the next chapter.

### 3.3.3. A Reflection on Mass Culture

It seems that today, *An Orphan Joins the Army* came out on the right occasion, or in other words, its birth was inevitable. But the audiences of the day did not identify its post-modernity at the very start, when the film was probably seen as a movie for children. It usually takes a little more time to recognize and to accept the postmodern. I remain to such a view that people within the situation of their own cultural awareness generally lie behind the self-conscious development of culture. It is similar to what capitalism experienced. When capitalism had germinated and developed for a long time in Europe, scholars like K. Marx only started providing a systematic summary of it. A consumer society and its existence cannot be denied or ignored before J. Baudrillard published his *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* in 1970. The postmodern arts had germinated in Chinese poetry and other literature as early as the 1980s (Dai, in Lau 151-66). So comparatively speaking, the postmodern participation in Chinese films was not very early. Only after one or two years after the premiere of the film (1994) did some scholars start exclaiming that *An Orphan Joins the Army* has a strong inclination for the postmodern (Yin 60-7; Zhou 55-61). Even today its director Zhang Jianya still denies that he had ever been inspired by any postmodern thought from the West when shooting the film. All of these show that the birth of the postmodern in Chinese films did not depend on any individual interest or occasional idea, but derived from an automatic cultural practice influenced

through the social transition. The postmodern is no longer like that which its predecessors (such as realism or modernism) did to enlighten its readers by rational thinking or to highlight its personalities with distinctive styles, but is trying hard to take itself out of the ideological obsession or high arts and back to the mass culture, to let nature take its course. When a film gets rid of the control from authors and is exposed under a contemporary cultural awareness, film studies and its significance then gradually turns to a field of cultural studies rather than literature and arts.

## Chapter Four

### Parody, Pastiche and Nostalgia – Definitions and Contexts

*Life back then seems brighter not because things were better but because we lived more vividly when young; even the adult world of yesteryear reflects the perspective of childhood. Now unable to experience so intensely, we mourn a lost immediacy that makes the past unmatchable. Such nostalgia can also shore up self-esteem, reminding us that however sad our present lot we were once happy and worthwhile.*

(Lowenthal 8)

The reason for including nostalgia films as a crucial part of postmodern discussion is not only Fredric Jameson's personal interest in nostalgia, but in fact, its attraction also lies in the long-term debate between Linda Hutcheon's concentration on parody and Jameson's on pastiche. For Jameson, nostalgia<sup>94</sup> is apparently not as fascinating nor is he as sentimental as Lowenthal (above). Jameson, instead, directly associates nostalgia with film as an example to highlight a vital postmodern artistic strategy – pastiche<sup>95</sup>. This seems so important that it is regarded, by Jameson, as “one of the most significant features or practices in postmodernism today” (*Consumer* 113). To explain what pastiche is, he makes a comparison with parody on the one hand, and uses nostalgia (film) for example, to explore how pastiche represents postmodern culture on the other. Although Jameson has not systematically elaborated the relation between pastiche and nostalgia in his works, it seems apparent that (at least for him)

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<sup>94</sup> Please note that the word “nostalgia” here – as elsewhere in this study – is generally based on what Jameson called postmodern nostalgia, rather than sentimental longing for personal things that are past (in the common sense). (Fredric Jameson, Chapter 9: “Nostalgia for the present”. In *Postmodernism* 279-96) Their difference in detail will be discussed hereafter.

<sup>95</sup> For instance, as Hutcheon cited from Foster, “pastiche has been offered as the ‘official sign’ of neoconservative postmodernism”. See Hal Foster (127); or Linda Hutcheon (*Politics* 94).



the two concepts are similar or as he said, nostalgia film is a “particular practice of pastiche” and is “very much within mass culture” (Jameson *Consumer* 116). Therefore, this section of the discussion attempts to identify some controversial differences between parody and pastiche in film, and to give some cinematic examples in contemporary Chinese cinema of parody and pastiche. Through the comparative study, the significance of imitation in postmodern culture can be better understood.

#### **4. 1. Parody**

In the last chapter, I briefly mentioned the parody and intertextuality reflected in *An Orphan Joins the Army*, but did not see parody as a main concern. This section will define the controversial term (based on the views of Hutcheon and Jameson, the two important postmodern critics) and analyze the respective effects of both parody and pastiche in the postmodern context (especially Chinese postmodernity), so that a (postmodern) concept of imitation will be gradually drawn out through their comparison, and reflected in the Chinese cinema context.

##### **4.1.1. Definition**

What is parody? In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, parody is defined as a “(piece of) speech, writing or music that imitates the style of an author, composer, etc

in an amusing and often exaggerated way; comic imitation.” For Hutcheon, this kind of definition seems “still tainted with eighteenth-century notions of wit and ridicule”. She does not think people should be limited to such period-restricted definitions of parody. Hutcheon argues that the twentieth century has brought us into a brand new era, where “parody has a wide range of forms and intents – from that witty ridicule to the playfully ludic to the seriously respectful” (*Politics* 94).<sup>96</sup> In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon completely breaks with the concept of the age-old ridiculing imitation. What she means by “parody” – as elsewhere in postmodernism studies – is not rooted in “eighteenth-century theories of wit” any more. Instead – as the Greek prefix “para” originally means both “counter” and “near” or “beside” (Hutcheon *Poetics* 26) – she redefines parody with a postmodern representation. “Parody – often called ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or intertextuality – is usually considered central to postmodernism, both by its detractors and its defenders” (*Politics* 93). With this double code irony, Hutcheon believes postmodern parody can both provide and undermine context paradoxically (*Poetics* 127).

#### 4.1.2. “Styles” and the “Norm”

However, when Jameson talks about imitation, instead of parody that “finds itself without a vocation” (*Postmodernism* 1984, 65) in the postmodern, he prefers “pastiche” – neutral or blank parody – to express its intent. But before discussing

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<sup>96</sup> “Ludic” derives from Latin ludus, “play”. It means literally “playful”, and refers to any philosophy where play is the prime purpose of life. Ludic connotes anything that is “fun”.

pastiche, two questions should be answered. How does Jameson think of the concept of parody, and why does he bear a grudge against it? Jameson's understanding of parody derives from its two essential elements, the uniqueness of styles and a linguistic norm:

[P]arody capitalizes on the uniqueness of these styles and seizes on their idiosyncrasies and eccentricities to produce an imitation which mocks the original. [...] Still, the general effect of parody is – whether in sympathy or with malice – to cast ridicule on the private nature of these stylistic mannerisms and their excessiveness and eccentricity with respect to the way people normally speak or write. So there remains somewhere behind all parody the feeling that there is a linguistic norm in contrast to which the styles of the great modernists can be mocked. (*Consumer* 113-4)

Apparently for Jameson, “styles” and the “norm” play a vital role in parody. It seems necessary to lay more stress on the two elements.

Firstly, what does a “style” mean? It certainly has some special qualities or something different from others (other authors) of the same type, which can make it stand out and become unique. Jameson argues that all styles, no matter how different they are, have one thing in common: “each is quite unmistakable; once one is learned, it is not likely to be confused with something else” (*Turn* 4). To be brief, parody capitalizes on styles as certain personalized identification signals, through which some stylistic stereotype can be aroused or realized consciously in its readers' minds. Only on this basis could the existence of imitation be realized, and a comparative process between the original and the mocked make sense and (perhaps) create an element of humour.

In the 1990s, Zhang Jianya's early films usually contained certain legible parodic sequences. For example, his *Mr. Wang's Burning Desires* shows a scene in which Shanghai is invaded by Japan, which is obviously an imitation of "The Odessa Steps Sequence" in Sergei Eisenstein's *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925). Japanese soldiers in Zhang's film are substituted for Tsarist soldiers marching down the steps with their rifles, and what they are suppressing is no longer the Odessans but the underworld gangs of Shanghai. A close-up of soldiers' boots, a baby in a carriage falling down the steps, and a wide shot of the massacre are completely imitated and edited in the same way as Eisenstein applied his montage, so that a filmic narrative style can be recognized at once. Here the personal style apparently becomes a main principle that underlies a successful parody. The other parody in the same film is a copy of Zhang Yimou's maiden work as director *Red Sorghum* (1987), where the imitations of red filter and the field full of vigorous sorghum reconstruct the original style and intensively drop a hint of Mr. Wang's sexual desires. Based on the original style, this parody tries to evoke a comparison between the stereotype of My Grandpa (Wo Yeye, by Jiang Wen in *Red Sorghum*) and Mr. Wang (by Lin Dongfu in *Mr. Wang's Burning Desires*), and through their differentiation a sense of humour can probably be generated. Similar parodic strategies can be found everywhere in *An Orphan Joins the Army* as well. In general, the application of parody in contemporary Chinese films was not a flash in the pan<sup>97</sup>. After Zhang Jianya, Feng Xiaogang's *The*

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<sup>97</sup> For more detailed examples of applications of parody in contemporary Chinese cinema, please refer to Wen Dezhao (12-3); and Wang Xianping (69-73).

*Dream Factory* (*Jia fang yi fang*, 1997), for example, introduces a parody of the image of General George Smith Patton (especially in the film *Patton*, Franklin J. Schaffner, 1970); Jia Zhangke in his *Unknown Pleasures* (*Ren xiao yao*, 2002) uses a number of sequences to refer Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994)<sup>98</sup>. *If You Are the One* (*Fei cheng wu rao*, 2008), Feng Xiaogang's recent film, even directly "quotes" (transplants) a scene of "the variance terminator" from Hong Kong director Pang Ho-Cheung's *A.V.* (2005) and has in its end title "Thanks to Pang Ho-Cheung – the inventor of the variance terminator", so that the director's (Feng Xiaogang) parodic strategy can be realized without a doubt. All these instances do emphasize the point that intentional imitations of "styles" have been present in contemporary Chinese cinema for quite a long time.

Secondly, in addition to style, Jameson stresses another meaning behind parody when he said it was "a linguistic norm in contrast to which the styles of the great modernists can be mocked". Then what is a "normal language", "ordinary speech", or a "linguistic norm"? It is likely there are some hints in these words. If there is a norm or anything normal – which the postmodernist takes leave to doubt – it may be associated with a wide range of stereotypes, such as meta-narratives, narratives following linear logic, the blind worship of high art, certain modes of totalizing representation in rationalism or didacticism and so on... Everything transcendental or going beyond the limits of human knowledge, experience or reason;

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<sup>98</sup> Including the scenes of John Travolta's dancing and the restaurant robbery by Pumpkin and Honey Bunny.

and everything which becomes fixed or standardized in a conventional form without individuality, may be included in the understanding of the word “norm”. Jameson believes this is why parody seems unreliable. A reconstruction of any style is very likely to rebuild (or re-emphasize) a linguistic norm of authority (or power of discourse), and lead to blind faith.

When talking about parody in his early films, Zhang Jianya makes no secret of his respect for those original authors of the styles he reconstructed, and he explains his meaning of parody as being a mark of honour to them.<sup>99</sup> His words prove the possible existence of belief and worship through the “norm” being reconfirmed. To take The Odessa Steps Sequence as an example, many films made in different countries in different periods have paid homage to the scene through various means of imitation<sup>100</sup>. Consequently, the process of the sequence being constantly repeated by others has probably changed the original scene of Eisenstein into a classic fragment, through which his montage gradually becomes a paradigm of film language; and countless filmmakers regard it as a model of film narrative, or even a dogma. However, this transcendental stereotype is just what the postmodernist is suspicious of and tries to break away from. That is probably the reason that Jameson feels anxious about parodic behaviour – paying a tribute to a classic norm again and again.

<sup>99</sup> Refer to the interview with Zhang Jianya, in People Net.

<http://culture.people.com.cn/GB/40473/40476/3761931.html> Last access: 4 Oct. 2010

<sup>100</sup> In addition to Zhang Jianya’s imitation, The Odessa Steps Sequence has been mentioned, copied and mocked by many other films world wide: Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil* (1985), Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather* (1972), Brian De Palma’s *The Untouchables* (1987), Tibor Takacs’ *Deathline* (1997), George Lucas’s *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* (2005), and Chandrashekar Narvekar’s Hindi film *Tezaab* (1988)...

#### 4.1.3. The Double-coding Strategies

However Jameson's anxiety about parody seems unpalatable to Linda Hutcheon. Compared with the effect of blind worship, she thinks of a parody more in its ironic and subversive sense. She believes that in any case, (postmodern) parody always plays a role of contrast through the rebuilding and imitation of styles, namely letting readers be conscious of the "norm" and its fetter. Hutcheon provides a double-coding strategy – two parallel trains of thought by which a unique style or an individual characteristic can be reconstructed and subverted simultaneously in parody – to provide a further explanation of the role of self-reflection (and its postmodern irony and sense of humour). In the beginning of *The Politics of Postmodernism* she says "the postmodern's initial concern is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life", and points out that "those entities that we unthinkingly experience as 'natural' are in fact 'cultural', made by us, not given to us." (*Politics* 2) Those entities are not concerned with or produced by nature but subjectively transcendental. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism* she says:

Postmodernism questions centralized, totalized, hierarchized, closed systems: questions, but does not destroy. It acknowledges the human urge to make order, while pointing out that the orders we create are just that: human constructs, not natural or given entities.... (*Poetics* 41)

What [postmodernism] does say is that there are all kinds of orders and systems in our world – and that we create them all. That is their justification and their limitation.... (*Poetics* 43)

[Therefore] postmodernism is a fundamentally contradictory enterprise: its art forms (and its theory) at once use and abuse, install and then destabilize convention in parodic ways, self-consciously pointing both to their own inherent paradoxes and provisionality and, of course, to their critical or ironic re-reading of the art of the past. (*Poetics* 23)

Here, we may realize that Hutcheon's perspective on the working principle of parody – at least on the level of construction (rather than subversion) – tends to accord with Jameson's. What he called 'parodic exploitation of styles' is perhaps what she referred to as a kind of reconstruction of *a priori* order and what we thought it should 'naturally' be. What is different is that Jameson's view of the redeployment (of parody) seems more negative, cautious, anxious, suspicious and distrustful; while Hutcheon is more optimistic about its further effect – an inclination of deconstruction, destabilization, and subversion.

There is a parody scene in *Unknown Pleasures*. When Xiao Ji, sitting with Qiao Qiao in a restaurant, tells her the story of a film he has watched – *Pulp Fiction*<sup>101</sup>, he imitates its sequence where Pumpkin and Honey Bunny rob a cafe in improvisation. Though the scene is quite short, it seems adequate to rebuild a sense of Tarantino's style, especially when Xiao Ji suddenly turns back to the crowd and yells, "Everybody be cool this is a robbery!" with his right hand imitating Pumpkin's pistol. However, compared with the original, one can realize that the parody replaces the mock robbery with a completely different context. The original story in which an improvised robbery with a real gun happens in North America, perhaps suggests a feeling of

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<sup>101</sup> Please note that, *Pulp Fiction* (both in novel and film) also contains its own parody.



individual liberalism used to relieve tension from repression or to subvert the authority of the social order; while by contrast, Xiao Ji's mock robbery at a small restaurant in Shanxi Province, China, apparently seems ironic. He tells Qiao Qiao, "If I were born in the States where money is everywhere, I would have robbed banks". His words remind the audience to recognise the different contexts. Then at the end of the film, Xiao Ji drives Bin to a bank for a robbery with a fake exploder, but then they fail. Bin is left at a local police station where he is forced to sing by a policeman. Nevertheless Bin chooses to sing *Ren Xiao Yao*<sup>102</sup>, a pop song about being spiritually free. If one understands the police station to be a sign of mainstream discourse, then the spiritual connotation of the song clearly reflects the ambivalent reality of young Chinese marginalized groups and their repressed feelings. Here I would argue that the purpose of a parody in which a contemporary Chinese film imitates an American original is not only just to reconstruct a classic (or re-enjoy its aftertaste) but also to express certain postmodern irony through its abuse in pluralistic situations. As a result, a parodic tease makes people realize certain constraints of order and the difference in pluralistic effects in diverse contexts, so that order, ideology and those other norms covered by totality and universality can be sufficiently exposed.

Hutcheon's process of "de-naturalization" is similar to Jameson's process of "being compared with the great linguistic norm". This (process) is a postmodern

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<sup>102</sup> "Ren Xiao Yao", 任逍遥, is also the Chinese name of the film *Unknown Pleasures*. Here it refers to a popular song by Ren Xianqi, a famous singer from Taiwan from the mid 1990s. It expresses a spirit of unfettered freedom. However, when Bin is forced to sing the song under the pressure of a national apparatus, the artistic conception of the song then becomes a sharp-cut irony as a result of his situation.

parody of what *An Orphan Joins the Army* has shown. It reuses a documentary (black and white) style to rebuild a historical belief, and at the same time places a fictional protagonist (Sanmao) in it to bring a paradoxical contrast (between history and fiction) to audiences, who then are aware of transcendental orders (and their limits) in history, wars, grand narratives, and heroism.<sup>103</sup>

#### 4.1.4. Criticism of Parody in China

In spite of the positive explanation by Hutcheon, there is no lack of negative criticism of, or anxiety about parody in critical circles in China. Wang Xianping, in his recent article “Token and Significance of Contemporary Chinese Parody”, points out that an immediate cultural consequence resulting from parody in related Chinese films leads merely to “a construction of a pro forma pleasant sensation” (happiness as a matter of form or on the surface) and certain mass entertainment trends accommodating Chinese cultural consumption (72). The unspoken words of his point are that (following the rules of a market-oriented economy) parody in China (especially in its films) has been excessively exploited for consumers’ advantage, for their (external) desire for humour and “pleasant sensation”, rather than for certain postmodern (internal) intentions of deconstruction. Because according to Wang, parody in films, in the same way as other factors in mass culture, is at root a part of the market economy. In order to promote its own economic interests, “parody is apt to

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<sup>103</sup> See the related discussion in the last Chapter.

lose its artistic merit (profound value) of self-discipline and merely welter in happiness and absurdity on the surface”. Accordingly in recent years, most of the parody in China has become “pure consumables of mass culture”, “rarely reflecting on humanistic spirits”, “lacking innovative values of art”, and has eventually lost its way in slapstick comedy or practical jokes. (72-3)

Moreover, Li Xijian’s attitude is further proof that anxiety about parody exists widely in Chinese circles of literature and art. He pointed out that nowadays the freedom of humanity has been affected by material desires. “Instinctive satisfaction, superficial happiness, and all the luxury, coziness, torpidity of human beings have largely superseded their real freedom; however this particular state of existence is not human liberty, and it can only lead individuals to new alienations.” (64) As far as the two criticisms (mentioned above) are concerned, the entertainment elements of parody have been considered to be a byproduct or a side effect, which blocks the expression of postmodern connotations, for it makes the audiences fail to understand its central meaning.

From the standpoint of mass culture of China, personally, I would not go as far as to argue that parody in China has gone astray from extremes of consumer culture, and I do not entirely agree with the criticism mentioned above for three reasons. The first is that, if some critics consider the “pleasant sensation” as something similar to a byproduct or side effect, I would say they obviously do not fully understand what

postmodern parody means. For Hutcheon, the double code strategy of parody is simultaneously to construct and subvert the stereotypes of the “norm” in people’s minds to create absurd humour and irony through the comparison. In this process, postmodern parody will dissolve the fixed, magnificent norm in its own absurdity, so that the incredulity of universality, totality, and grand narratives can be realized. Thus the germination of a pleasant sensation and the process itself prove that the stylistic discourse and its hegemony have been detected. Perhaps the humour from the sensation manifests (or displaces) the challenge to and the subversion of the stylistic originality. For that reason, humour, happiness, and pleasant sensations are not side effects, but indispensable for postmodern strategies. It seems too one-sided to simply understand parody as pure consumer desires in films.

The second reason is that a part has obviously been taken for the whole when criticism blindly attributes the motive of parody to the market economy or material desires, but ignores other factors that stimulate and catalyze the cultural environment in the germination of parody, such as technical innovations and the ideological background of China. So far as technology is concerned, the spread of the internet, the personal computer, digital video cameras, and home editing equipment in China have probably promoted the attraction of parody for the masses. Zhang Jianya recently pointed out that there is no essential difference between the parodies in his early films (*An Orphan Joins the Army* or *Mr. Wang’s Burning Desire*) and the prevalent (internet)

spoof<sup>104</sup> in recent years.<sup>105</sup> As I see it, ten years after Zhang made his parodies (in the early 1990s), *The Bloody Case Caused by a Steamed Bun* (Hu Ge, 2006)<sup>106</sup>, a re-edited parody cut of Chen Kaige's *The Promise* (*Wu Ji*, 2005), can be seen as one of the typical amateur parody works spread on the net. The advent of the internet and home editing technologies have dramatically fired the crowd with enthusiasm for active participation in comic imitations of film "norms". Furthermore, the internet has changed some individual parodic behaviours into a part of universal entertainment. I have no intention of making a judgement about the influence on the advantages and disadvantages of the spoof. But I am inclined to lay stress on the part that technologies play in the democratic art forms of China. As a new media platform, the internet, in the above-mentioned example, has obviously inspired the Chinese audience with an interest in parody. *The Bloody Case Caused by a Steamed Bun*, a free download of an internet video, was at first not created for the purpose of marketing benefits or consumer desires. This at least proves that, beyond the market economy, the spread of parody in China is perhaps stimulated by the promotion of technique. The attraction of parody for the crowd is probably not limited to an economic category. If technical innovation has promoted consumer interest in artistic

<sup>104</sup> Internet spoof is the name of a Chinese video parody from the Internet. It is also called "e gao" in Chinese (网恶搞), a kind of funny imitation of current popular films and TV programs, usually made and edited as short movies by personal computers and widespread in network communications.

<sup>105</sup> Refer to the interview of Zhang Jianya, *The Beijing News*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Feb. 2007, <http://discovery.cctv.com/20070203/100831.shtml> Last access: 4 Oct. 2010

<sup>106</sup> Also known as *Parody of Promise* or *Steamed Bun Spoof* 《一个馒头引发的血案》, a short parody video of director Chen Kaige's film *Wu Ji* (2005). After *Wu Ji* was released, Hu, an ordinary young man, spent \$15 to see the movie and thought it was a mediocre piece of work – as did Chinese film critics. He then crafted a 20-minute video satirizing Chen's creation and blogged it to a few friends as something of a lark. Hu's spoof basically takes Chen's mythic storyline and ridicules it by refashioning the drama into a mock legal-investigative TV program. The video ricocheted quickly around the blog sphere and networks in the early 2006, becoming one of the most downloaded video clips on the Chinese Net. Hu's efforts also led to concerns by newspapers and magazines, and eventually became a national story on Chinese TV networks.

imitation, and criticism of consumer desires seems unlikely to reverse the progress of social history to a no technique era, then apparently the criticism will be caught in a negative dilemma without facing up to the real condition of contemporary Chinese culture.

As for the ideological background of China, I have borrowed the discussion of Chen Xiaoming et al<sup>107</sup> in the last chapter and argued that one of the current cultural situations is that Chinese elitism (and its literature and art) have gradually lost their entire capability of controlling the creation and broadcast of social culture (Chen *Postmodernism* 138-9). The phenomenon of internet spoof is an example, for it is already out of the control of the mainstream discourse<sup>108</sup>. Consequently, there emerges a fusion of eclecticism between elitist art (such as Chinese “leitmotiv” films and some of the mainstream commercial films, which usually contain “high” art or ideological themes and seem too highbrow to be popular) and mass/pop culture. Postmodern parody is in tune with the signs of the times. Based on its double-code strategy, parody on the one hand conforms to the elite discourse on the surface and takes a self-constructed attitude with its mood of lofty sentiment imitated. On the other hand it leads the imitation to absurd jokes and facetious deconstructions, in order to relieve the monotony of everyday life and the blank minds of the crowd that result from a disharmony between the reality of the capitalized market economy (in China) and an

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<sup>107</sup> Please refer to the related discussions in the last chapter. Detailed Chapter numbers to be advised later.

<sup>108</sup> The term “mainstream” is mainly used in this thesis to describe what has been encouraged and promoted by the Chinese government.

ideological discourse of “postsocialism”<sup>109</sup>. The disharmony precisely reflects the distance of the mass culture from the elite perspective of the mainstream (dominated by the government’s cultural control, such as the Chinese National Film Bureau and its censorship). So there is reason to believe that the masses and their popular culture have confronted pent-up emotions which seem hard to release. At the precise situation of such restriction, perhaps, parody (and its apparent pleasant sentiment) may become a remedy for their repressed grief. Taken in this sense, it is better to consider the absurd humour (of parody) as a sad sneer in the face of lofty elitism (and its grand narrative) than to regard it as the superficial pursuit of pleasure in contemporary Chinese cinema. The absurd motive is probably not limited to the surface. Perhaps, it has deeply worked on the spirit of the crowd and been potentially helpful in relieving their repressions. If this imitation of “restaurant robbery” in *Unknown Pleasures* brings the audience some pleasant sensation, it may convey a feeling of occasional release from a restraint caused by conflicts between the general substantial desire of human beings and the reality of the social order. I do not agree, in this connection, that the audiences have consumed the delight so that they can simply get vicarious pleasure by going to watch films about crime. I prefer to understand it in this way, that the audiences watch an indulged behaviour breaking through order (in films), and simultaneously (through an absurd humor) they may consume their own repressions

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<sup>109</sup> As Sheldon H. Lu argued, contemporary China – “as a socialist/communist country in name” but with “a fledgling quasi-capitalist economy – “confronts a series of social, institutional, and psychological problems”. I would argue that a vacuum in the spiritual life of the Chinese crowd is probably one of the problems which results from the development of a capitalist economy where the masses care more about the substantial life but gradually lose their communist faith in spirit. “Postsocialism” in China, by Lu, means “a society that was a Soviet-style socialist country before the end of the Cold War around 1990, and still maintains a socialist/communist political structure today but pursues capitalist economic practices in the era of globalization.” (Lu 130, 224)

which seem hard to release in reality. Thus some of the pleasant sentiments (especially in the parody of Chinese cinema) may become a path leading the masses to escape from certain restrictions in real life.

Thirdly, returning to the point of a detailed market, if the pleasant sentiment or absurd humour (as a consumer product) can attract attention from contemporary culture (as a market) and become a selling point, its own market value must prove the mass demand for it. Public interest determines the direction of mass culture, and it is not easily swayed by any criticism. If cultural studies remain outside (or opposed to) mass culture with more indiscriminate criticism of, and restriction on what the masses need, they will lose our cultural diversity and integration, and become a spokesperson for a certain polarised discourse.

Postmodernism has a monopoly of neither parody nor imitation, which have existed for centuries. However the question is why, since the 1990s, comic imitations have flooded the contemporary Chinese cinema. It seems obviously too simple to merely impute the rise in imitation to a consumer culture. As far as a spiritual state of the contemporary Chinese masses is concerned, the socialist mental realm that was constructed during the 1950s to the 1970s, including revolutionary idealism, egalitarianism, self-sacrifice, and innocence, has gradually faded out since the 1980s; or as Sheldon H. Lu argued it is “putatively absent today” (131). What appears to be most difficult is that many of the crowd have no alternative but to confront the



temptation of substantial desires brought by the economic reform. The dialectic of its result consists in that, on the one hand, not all of the Chinese can become rich and realize their desires quickly; on the other hand, however, there is no longer any mental realm to be relied on as a spiritual shelter in a China becoming capitalized. Thus there must have been some material repressions in dire need of spiritual reparation. Perhaps, contemporary Chinese cinema is just a good place for that. Accordingly, no matter whether it is the “robbery” in *Unknown Pressures*, the “burglar” in *Crazy Stone* (Ning Hao, 2006), “realizing dreams” in *Dream Factory* (Feng Xiaogang, 1997), or the “sexual desires” of *Mr. Wang’s Burning Desires*, they all tend to represent certain depressions of public desire or lust. Parody and its absurd humour just provide a temporary exile<sup>110</sup> at their spiritual level. The mass consumption of the pleasant sentiment has deeply reflected their mental blankness and release.

## 4.2. Pastiche

If parody is considered to be a postmodernist (artistic) strategy rather than a reflection of culture, then pastiche embodies certain features of postmodern culture from an entirely different perspective. When referring to pastiche, Jameson is equally concerned about the roles of both style and linguistic norm in it. However, this time he totally changes his viewpoint on the two terms (the style and the norm). In the

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<sup>110</sup> The word was exploited and re-termed by Sophia A. McClennen with the “ludic” postmodern use of “exile” as a metaphor for a “new phase of social alienation” which, as she argues, is at the core of the many strains of cultural studies and border studies. She found that “in many scholarly works the term ‘exile’ having lost its reference to a painful state of being, was empty of history and an association with material reality.” Consequently, her point is dedicated to “reconcile the exile of the theoretical discourse with concrete cases of exile from repressive authoritarian regimes”. See Sophia A. McClennen (304).

distinction between parody and pastiche, or the dispute between Hutcheon and Jameson it does not matter at all who is correct. It depends entirely on the various ways in which the style and the norm are read.

#### 4.2.1. Pastiche – Exhausted Styles

In term of style, if parody takes advantage of the unique feature of style, then pastiche presents a situation of having no alternative to the limiting of styles which have been swallowed up by modern literature and art. This can be considered together with Jameson's idea of cultural exhaustion. In the discussion on *An Orphan Joins the Army*, the awkward situation that the fifth generation directors met in the early 1990s has been mentioned – the “yellow earth”, “red sorghum”, “black cannon”, and “blue kite”...<sup>111</sup> Everything (every colour) has been used, all the styles have been tried by others before. The situation illustrates the distressing difficulty in contemporary Chinese cinema. Jameson considers the exhaustion to be an aesthetic dilemma:

If the experience and the ideology of the unique self, an experience and ideology which informed the stylistic practice of classical modernism, are over and done with, then it is no longer clear what the artists and writers of the present period are supposed to be doing. What is clear is merely that the older models - Picasso, Proust, T. S. Eliot - do not work any more (or are positively harmful), since nobody has that kind of unique private world and style to express any longer. And this is perhaps not merely a “psychological” matter: we also have to take into account the immense weight of seventy or eighty years of classical modernism itself. This is yet another sense in which the writers and artists of the present day will no longer be able to invent new styles

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<sup>111</sup> See the “cultural exhaustion” related part of the discussion in the last chapter.

and worlds - they've already been invented. Only a limited number of combinations are possible; the unique ones have been thought of already. So the weight of the whole modernist aesthetic tradition - now dead - also “weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living”, as Marx said in another context...

Hence, once again, pastiche: in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum. (Jameson *Consumer* 115)

For parody, artistic originality/uniqueness means (or probably leads to) possible humour, irony or postmodern satire through imitation; but for pastiche, a distinctive style has long become a psychological burden that creators have to bypass. Innovations of individual colour can no longer continue, because they have been created, or the most inimitable have been already considered. It seems completely impossible for postmodern culture to have similar experiences in styles as modernism had. In other words, Jameson has sentenced (those individual) styles to death. As he mentioned in *Postmodernism and Consumer Society*, “postmodernism [is] not as a style but rather as a cultural dominant”. (4) He further elaborates,

In postmodern society narratives break down when the great modernist expressions of style evaporate and the subject splinters away from its unique individuality. As a result, postmodern culture becomes pastiche. (113)

What a postmodern artist may practise can only be established on the basis of those (dead) styles already existing, such as combining, mixing, synthesizing and recycling familiar genres, styles or narratives. That is what it called bricolage.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> In art, bricolage is a technique where works are constructed from various materials available or on hand, and is seen as a characteristic of postmodern works. In cultural studies bricolage is used to mean the processes by which people acquire objects from across social divisions to create new cultural identities. See online definition at <http://www.jahsonic.com/Bricolage.html> Last access: 4 Oct. 2010

Whichever you practise, you are bound to experience pastiche.

#### 4.2.2. The Exhausted Condition in Contemporary Chinese Cinema

I do not agree with those biases that contemporary culture and its artistic/literary development have had no innovation in the postmodern context at all. Actually, at least in my view, innovation is still an important ingredient in social/cultural development. However, what seems irrefutable is that innovations can no longer completely free themselves from those authorized originals and their stylistic uniqueness. Considering contemporary China though, it seems quite hard to roughly prove or decide whether it has been transformed into a postmodern society (in fact there are no common standards in academia at all). There is no lack of detailed examples in Chinese cinema reflecting what the postmodernist has to face –in fact there is a “nightmare” of styles. The “colour” exhaustions that Zhang Jianya has met have already been mentioned; other instances come from *In the Heat of the Sun* (*Yangguang canlan de rizi*, Jiang Wen, 1995), *The Forest Ranger* (*Tian gou*, Qi Jian, 2006), and *Crazy Stone* (*Fengkuang de shitou*, Ning Hao, 2006).

*In the Heat of the Sun* was originally adapted from Wang Shuo’s novel, *Wild Beasts* (*Dongwu xiongmeng*). After its premiere the film was a great success (in its domestic box-office). However, as time has gone by, it has been criticized by some critics – although I personally dissent from what they said – for its appropriation of

Edward Yang's *A Brighter Summer Day* (1991) in its whole narrative and stylistic outline<sup>113</sup>. The argument consists in stating that, despite their difference in plot details and colour tones, both of the films contain similar themes, such as a rebellious childhood, juvenile violence, and sex consciousness during puberty; in addition, both films try to indirectly reflect a society and its ideological background through the exploration of friendship, gang-banging, love, loss, greed, the passage of time, broken relationships and so on. The contents of the films are so close that they can be read as the same story with a similar narrative style in different contexts: one is set in 1960s Taipei, the other in early 1970s Beijing. Jiang Wen (the director) never responds to the criticism. However, his silence does not stop some of the audience associating his film with Edward's. Furthermore, the style of Edward in his *A Brighter Summer Day* may not seem the most original. When Zhang Xiaodan published his review in the *South Metropolis Daily*, the recognition of styles developed to such an extent that it made any originality too hard to recognize:

The great admiration for the director's talent of *In the Heat of the Sun* faded out soon after *A Brighter Summer Day* was introduced. I mean, people were all shocked by *In the Heat of the Sun* around 1994 at its heated nostalgia; while they had not realized how Jiang Wen's creative ability through his lens was inspired until *Once Upon a Time in America* (Sergio Leone, 1984) was shown in China; and then it was not until 1996, when Edward Yang's *A Brighter Summer Day* came into the Mainland with pirate VHS being popular, that people started to understand that what really deserves to be called "Once Upon a Time in China" is not *In the Heat of the Sun*, but *A Brighter Summer Day*. However what the latter imitated was not *Once Upon a Time in*

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<sup>113</sup> Tian Huiqun (387-405). Or see Mtime.com, an audience blog for film review, "相比牯岭街, 处女姜文无论如何都显得稚嫩无比, 尽管他模仿了大量镜头, 制造了不少笑料, 但是最终却没有超越。不过学来一些也就足够了, 阳光也依然经典。" <http://www.mtime.com/my/1401261/blog/1595846/> Last access: 4 Oct. 2010

*America*, but a grim German New Wave.<sup>114</sup>

This example proves that – at least for some of the audience – some contemporary Chinese cinema (in its domestic market) can be considered to be a process of pastiche, which has gradually sunk into a postmodern cultural condition where artistic originality, uniqueness, and its ownership become indistinct and increasingly difficult to distinguish. That could be speculated to be the result of two factors. One is that stylistic combination and its abuse have already made the original individuality become hard to perceive or detect. Consequently, if an imitation fails to indicate its original, or the original style cannot be recognized clearly, the imitation will lack a process of reconstructing any unique style to maintain a “double-code” function. As Hutcheon argued, parody needs to rebuild an original consciousness first, and compare it with the mock in order to create deconstructions or a subversive position. Therefore the imitation cannot be called parody any more, and perhaps it does not generate humour any longer. It then can be considered as an empty parody or pastiche. However pastiche or stylistic abuse is not the only reason leading to a disappearance of originality. The other factor is that people in the postmodern context are holding more and more diverse perspectives of the originality of style. *In the Heat of the Sun* is just a good example. No matter whether the director recognizes his indiscriminate plagiarism, audiences with different watching experiences who fail to reach an agreement about where on earth a stylistic archetype comes from. Does the film’s narrative style originally derive from Jiang Wen/Wang shuo, or as Tian thought,

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<sup>114</sup> Zhang Xiaodan (2007) “Edward Yang – The Cavalier in Dark”, in *South Metropolis Daily*, 4<sup>th</sup> July, 2007.

from Edward Yang, or even as Zhang presumed from the States or Germany? There is short of an agreeable answer for everyone in the exhausted cultural context.

*The Forest Ranger* (*Tian gou*, Qi Jian, 2006), an influential film in the domestic film festivals<sup>115</sup>, encounters similar difficulties as well and produced a sudden reaction from the press. Many newspapers and websites found fault with the film for its plagiarism of a classic French film, *Jean de Florette* (Claude Berri, 1985) through its identical narrative style<sup>116</sup>. The protagonists in the two films are all disabled and settle down in a new countryside where they are framed and persecuted by local officials and civilians, with even their water supply being cut off. Nevertheless, in the face of such accusations, both the producer and the actor of *The Forrest Ranger* repeated their denials of the suspected imitation. They kept insisting that the film was adapted from Zhang Ping's novel *Murderer*, which derives from actual persons and events in Shanxi Province, and Zhang himself had not watched the French film before (Wang Yang). Another typical example of imitation is *Crazy Stone* directed by Ning Hao. This is a well-known film in China with the ninth position in the annual domestic box-office table in 2006. It is considered as a comprehensive imitation of Guy Ritchie's style from his *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (1998) and *Snatch* (2000). But on this occasion, one of the Chinese film directors, Ning

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<sup>115</sup> The film won two awards in the 16<sup>th</sup> China Golden Rooster and Hundred Flowers Film Festival (Best Director and Best Actor) and received many awards and nominations in the Shanghai International Film Festival and China College Students Film Festival.

<sup>116</sup> For instance, Wang Yang (2006) "*The Forrest Ranger*" is Indicated as a Plagiarism", in *Chongqing Business Daily*, 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2006; and Zong Shan (2006) "Is *The Forrest Ranger* a plagiarism? Fu Dalong Denies", in *Beijing Daily Messenger*, 24<sup>th</sup> June 2006.

Hao's response to the imitation was immediate and positive. At a press conference in July 2006 Shanghai he explained:

Indeed I have watched Guy Ritchie's films before, and his style appeals to me so much. But the script of *Crazy Stone* was written by myself much earlier, before I watched *Snatch*. It is my first screenplay, and I really enjoy showing some absurd and accidental happenings. When making the film, we certainly borrowed some tricks from Ritchie. You should understand that after all *Crazy Stone* is of a similar genre to Ritchie's. A genre does have its inherent technique of expression. To avoid being accused of plagiarism, the scriptwriter and I had drawn quite a few possible plans; however, the best one is always that what had been used, so we had to try our best to make a film in that way.<sup>117</sup>

The above words prove that certain imitations – for some Chinese films – are perhaps no longer a director's subjective and active (artistic) strategy. Even though contemporary Chinese filmmakers have been working hard to produce individual innovations of their own, it has become hard to escape from an embarrassing reality of stylistic exhaustion.

#### 4.2.3. A Comparison of Parody and Pastiche

Therefore as a pastiche, imitation becomes a passive acceptance, with a neutral or even negative sentiment, as it does not have any motive, impulse and conviction. According to Jameson, there is a significant difference between pastiche and parody.

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a

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<sup>117</sup> See Yifan Wu and Ya Huang (2006) "Crazy Stone: Ning Hao Dismisses Plagiarism with Scorn", in *News Times*, 5<sup>th</sup> July 2006.



neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared with which what is being imitated is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humour... (*Consumer* 114)<sup>118</sup>

I supplement this with some of my opinions on the distinction between parody and pastiche. As has been mentioned above, both of them are involved in imitation. However I would emphasize that their mimicking mind-sets are completely different. As far as parody is concerned, imitation is an active and energetic strategy of art, which means artists/authors have their choice of various ways to present their feelings and ambitions. Directors may achieve their purpose or at least convey certain of their motives through their dominant roles of choosing strategies. While in a postmodern culture, styles are going to dry up, imitation is no longer a kind of dispensable art strategy, but a passive cultural reality that people are forced to accept. No matter to what extent China has been involved in a postmodern context, or whatever happens there, the unavoidable imitation (a passive reality) has already appeared in the contemporary Chinese cinema. Even though many Chinese filmmakers, like the above examples, were unwilling to subjectively acknowledge the fact of appropriation and their intention, it seems impossible to prevent their works from being considered as an example of mimicry by others. In this way, partially speaking, some Chinese cinema has (consciously or unconsciously) co-existed with all kinds of styles and continually practised a variety of bricolage, appropriation and combination. Jameson calls these

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<sup>118</sup> Or Jameson presents a similar explanation: "Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, without the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists." (*Postmodernism* 17)

“cultural dominants” by which art and aesthetics can be conveyed in the contemporary culture. That is Jamesonian pastiche. According to Jameson, the appearance of pastiche means that

contemporary or postmodernist art is going to be about art itself in a new kind of way; even more, it means that one of its essential messages will involve the necessary failure of art and the aesthetic, the failure of the new, the imprisonment in the past. (Consumer 115-6)

Pastiche then becomes a cultural dominant with imitating features. In contrast, it is impossible for parody to develop a characteristic of its own, and it will never become a style. Parody is at best an imitation of style, for it has to reconstruct the original style, an extension (or a transformation) of the original, rather than an innovation such as pastiche. Thus there remains a sense of legitimacy, norm, or order in parody. For example, like those parodies in *An Orphan Joins the Army* and *Mr. Wang's Burning Desire*, where all kinds of styles and their combinations can be obviously recognised at once from the originals: such as Chaplin's early comedy, documentary styles, Eisenstein's *Odessa Steps*, Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum*, and Zheng Zhengqiu's *Labourer's Love* (1922). However, it seems hardly possible for all of these imitations and the combinations to be integrated and regarded as a new “parodic style” as a whole. Because each parody that mixes in the combination clearly refers to a uniqueness of the originals and an incompatibility of their stylistic originality. Consequently, one could hardly think of parody as a brand new style which has been undermined by the incompatible. When audiences enjoy a parody, they will say it should not be like this, the original was like that... It is such a strong

sense of error correction that leads to humour, or a funny sense of irony.

But pastiche does not have such sense or any ulterior motive, because it not only refuses to carry the original style but also establishes a new type of norm. The new order has only one particularity, which is to confuse and cleanse the relationship between styles and the linguistic norm behind them. Can parody successfully imitate a pastiche? The answer is negative, and that tells why pastiche seems not humorous. Just because of this uniqueness, Jameson considers it as empty parody. Therefore, in pastiche (a new style of imitation) which is flat, superficial, covered with bricolage and separated from the signified(s), such as postmodern nostalgia, people find it difficult to have a sense of error correction any more. When you face a pastiche or nostalgia, you may prefer to give a positive answer to what is floating on the surface – the simulation of light and shadow in the past – yes ah, that is what the past may look like!

In the early moments of *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986) there are idealized small town images in around the 1950s or 60s, accompanied by the 1963 Bobby Vinton song “Blue Velvet”, blooming red roses and immaculate white picket fences show up to advantage with the blue sky<sup>119</sup>, a fireman is smiling and waving his hand towards the lens, and a few kids at a crosswalk. Altogether, this presents a safe, quiet

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<sup>119</sup> As John Powers wrote: “a red-white-and-blue vision whose saturated 50s hues announce, in a sense, Lynch’s whole approach: Everything is slightly off — don’t trust it.” In his “Blue Velvet: Last Tango in Lumberton”, in *LA Weekly*, 12 September, 1986.

and peaceful American life. The past tense takes you back to a good old time. Those depthless appearances relating to the past become the impressive stuff of nostalgia, which means that you probably have no way (at least on the surface) to detect any individual style from pastiche. Actually postmodern nostalgia does not emphasize any personal original, but a simulation of the whole atmosphere and cultural peculiarities of a public era in the past. If there were any original style, it should be their own past of each audience or the stereotypes they have of the past. However the nice illusion in *Blue Velvet* soon cracks apart. In a white house, two women watch a TV programme where a man is holding a gun; outside, a man watering his lawn suddenly falls to the ground, his hose shoots into the air, a little boy watches the toppled figure, and the camera tracks down deep into the grass where some ugly beetles climb all over the ground to the highly amplified sound of their grinding roar. Then not until a young college student comes across a rotting ear in an open field, do viewers realize how different the illusion looks from the lifelike reality. It not only implies the dirty undercurrents hidden behind the conventional, bourgeois lives in America but also impressively reminds the audience of the effect of superficial nostalgia serving as a foil to a conventional real life. Perhaps postmodern nostalgia hints at a feeling of uncertainty or disbelief about a past memory and the present reality. Just as what has been shown in some Chinese nostalgia films set in the 1960s, behind a past social atmosphere that is full of revolutionary passion and romantic stories, an ideological storm may be hidden from the surface. It hints at the painfulness of the age. The wound, the past, and the tradition seem too distant to be reached by the present.

However, pastiche, similarly to postmodern nostalgia, does not like parody that contains any tendency to literary deconstruction; instead it is a reflection of postmodern cultural realities. Parody, no matter whether it exists in modernism or postmodernism, is always a literary and artistic strategy; but pastiche belongs to the public, the mass, the culture..., it has neither strategy nor motive. They are not in a same area, but both have crucial links to the postmodern.

#### 4.2.4. Jameson's Misgivings and the Linguistic Norm

On the other hand, as far as the linguistic norm is concerned, Jameson does not believe that, once parody momentarily borrows an abnormal (or stylized) tongue, it will find and rebuild a consummate or healthy linguistic normality. The fatal weakness of parody is that, it is only temporarily teasing or showing-off in the face of styles; the conventional criterion – that which the postmodern is questioning – will still exist or be resurrected after the quantitative change; even with teasing those “willful eccentricities”, the original norm that parody “ostentatiously deviates” from probably “reasserts itself”<sup>120</sup> and reconfirms a legitimate style and model. If parody seems still infatuated with or unwilling to leave the legitimate norm, then the deconstructing attitude of pastiche is quite determined. It is in this way that pastiche surpasses parody. More importantly, Jameson believes parody, in a future tense, will

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<sup>120</sup> Jameson (*Postmodernism* 16-7).

be completely replaced by pastiche:

[...] if one no longer believed in the existence of normal language, of ordinary speech, of the linguistic norm (the kind of clarity and communicative power celebrated by Orwell in his famous essay ‘Politics and the English Language’, say) One could think of it in this way: perhaps the immense fragmentation and privatization of modern literature - its explosion into a host of distinct private styles and mannerisms - foreshadows deeper and more general tendencies in social life as a whole. Supposing that modern art and modernism – far from being a kind of specialized aesthetic curiosity – actually anticipated social developments along these lines; supposing that in the decades since the emergence of the great modern styles society had itself begun to fragment in this way, each group coming to speak a curious private language of its own, each profession developing its private code or idiolect, and finally each individual coming to be a kind of linguistic island, separated from everyone else? But then in that case, the very possibility of any linguistic norm in terms of which one could ridicule private languages and idiosyncratic styles would vanish, and we would have nothing but stylistic diversity and heterogeneity.

That is the moment at which pastiche appears and parody has become impossible. (Jameson *Consumer* 114)

The reason I draw these assumptions mentioned above into a future tense is because it seems hard for Jameson to discover a typical instance of individual styles being isolated and fragmented in a realistic context – the present time. In fact, though contemporary language has a growing trend to be “flat”, “superficial” or “depthless”<sup>121</sup>, master narratives and grand discourses (and any other legitimate orders and norms) – as a leading role – are still dominating the mainstream consciousness of contemporary social life. For Jameson, only when individual language has been

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<sup>121</sup> As Jameson argued, the first and most evident of postmodernist moments is the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense (*Postmodernism* 9). Jameson imagined that, in a utopian late capitalism, a linguistic fragmentation of social life as similar as a host of distinct private styles is going to change into the point where “the norm itself is eclipsed: reduced to a neutral and reified media speech... Modernist styles thereby become postmodernist codes.” This, relatively, testifies its departing from the signified depth. (*Postmodernism* 17).

totally isolated and become a private taboo making communication impossible, will parodic humour and irony gradually fade out from our life. That reflects Jameson's deep concerns about the isolated condition of high-modernist styles. His anxiety is based on the assumption that the future tense is not enough to form a binary opposition to Hutcheon's opinion<sup>122</sup>. Jameson has to lead his prediction in a past tense, and try to explain pastiche through some historical memories. That is what Jameson called nostalgia<sup>123</sup>.

### 4.3. Nostalgia

#### 4.3.1. Nostalgia in the Postmodern

The reason Jameson considers pastiche as “blank parody” (that has “lost its sense of humor” (*Postmodernism* 17) and does not carry any meaning new to compare with the original), is as I see it, because intrinsic connections between original styles and their pastiche – namely the fixed conjunction between signifier and signified or between code and its linguistic norm – have been blurred or have even faded away. Accordingly, the appearance of traditional art gradually separates its essence, and presents a process of transformation from literature and art dominated by semiotics and structural linguistics to a superficial culture based on an unprecedented sense of visual experience, like those tremendous spectacles in nostalgia films. When culture

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<sup>122</sup> Linda Hutcheon maintains that parody is a vital part of postmodernism. See Hutcheon (1989) Chapter 4: “The Politics of Parody” (*Politics* 93-117).

<sup>123</sup> What should be explained is that, Jameson's so-called “nostalgia” here is not the traditional one for the past, but a nostalgic genre existing in a timeless reality – what Sheldon H. Lu concludes, a “Jameson nostalgia for the present”, which will be discussed later. See Sheldon H. Lu (132).

makes a quantum leap from quantity to quality, separation and isolation caused by individual styles will gradually result in an overshadowed language community. The so-called linguistic model will only be reduced to neutral and stereotyped “media speech”. The old modernist styles then become more like a rigid language code (Jameson Postmodernism 17). All of these provide evidence to prove the rupture. Actually, pastiche is just an empty and numb reflection of those “codes” or “dead language” floating on the surface, instead of the standard linguistic norm. What kind of imitation cannot only be far away from the original styles of elite/high culture but also represent a type of new language with imitating features? Nostalgia films are a good example. Nostalgia is neither a strategy for literature and art nor a private style. It is cultural experience based on public/mass awareness. It comes from certain image memories of the past; hence it is not subject to the old language trap<sup>124</sup>. The essence of nostalgia film may be considered as the imitation of past images, that is images stacked with appearances of the old days. What nostalgia imitates is our past-life, a kind of visual action reanimating a collective sense of the past; a process (and production) from text to video, spectacle, and mass culture.

#### 4.3.2. Nostalgic Waves of Chinese Cinema, a Brief Introduction

In last two decades Chinese cinema has experienced two main bursts of nostalgic themes. I sum them up as two nostalgic waves of China. The first one took

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<sup>124</sup> Think of what Jameson called, the “prison-house of language”.



place in the early 1990s, and is typically represented by some fifth generation directors' works, such as the *Blue Kite* (Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1993), *Farewell My Concubine* (Chen Kaige, 1993), and *To Live* (Zhang Yimou, 1994)<sup>125</sup>. The second wave began in the early twenty-first Century and involved quite a few sixth generation directors such as Wang Xiaoshuai's *Shanghai Dreams* (2005), Zhang Yang's *Sunflower* (2005), Zhang Jiarui's *The Road* (2006), and Gu Changwei's *Peacock* (2004)<sup>126</sup>. Comparatively speaking, the first wave is much more inclined to convey certain ideological (or political) suffering in the 1950s or 1960s, which caters for the Western audiences' taste for novelty-hunting and happens to build a global illusion of nostalgia. The second wave, however tends to overcome those ideological traumas and recollects a social style of the late 1970s and early 1980s, and it is increasingly becoming a nostalgic consumer commodity in China's domestic market.

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<sup>125</sup> It should also include a crucial film *In the Heat of the Sun* (1994) directed by Jiang Wen in this wave. However Jiang is not commonly known as a fifth generation director. He is much younger (the same age as the so-called sixth generation) and was not trained as a filmmaker, but an actor. This film is his maiden work as a director.

<sup>126</sup> While the term "sixth generation" is already problematic, Gu Changwei was in the same (cinematography) class with Zhang Yimou and should definitely be seen as a fifth generation filmmaker, despite the fact that his directorial debut came rather late in 2004.

## Chapter Five

### Postmodern Essentials of Nostalgia

Nostalgia is not a peculiarity of recent decades. People all over the world always create their own classic memories of the past, such as the Victorian era of the United Kingdom, the 1950s golden era of the United States, and the Student Movement of Western Europe in the late 1960s. These eras often appear in contemporary literary and artistic works, or some of them, such as the Victorian era, have even become an independent branch of the best-selling novels in English-speaking countries (Thomas and James 164-7). However, now that the social culture has entered the post-industrial era, technological advances have given nostalgia some new media, such as “film” (the subject of this study), one form of the mechanical reproduction industries critiqued by Walter Benjamin. As part of the postmodern culture, nostalgic film has some characteristics: its dependence on technologies, its bricolage from superficial images, and its special objects of imitation. These essentials are to be discussed in this section.

In the first half of the 1990s, three Chinese fifth generation master filmmakers each directed their own classic pieces: the *Blue Kite* (1993), *Farewell My Concubine* (1993), and *To Live* (1994). These three films made at the same time have realistic colour and trace back to a certain nostalgic context (the *Blue Kite* is set in the 1950s to 1960s; *Farewell My Concubine* is set in the 1930s to 1970s; and *To Live* is set in the

1940s to 1960s). All three plots have similar historical backgrounds and all three films were completed within two years. In this case, it naturally leads me to associate them together and to think of them (as a whole) as a nostalgic film wave of contemporary China. In this section, these three films will be briefly discussed in terms of their nostalgic elements, and at the same time serve as an introduction to further analysis in the next chapter.

Additionally, I would argue that it is not only the above-mentioned films that contain old memories of the past. Many Chinese films shot before the 1990s had historical backgrounds as well. Leitmotif films such as *Da Jue Zhan* trilogy (Wei Lian etc. 1990) and *The Birth of New China* (Li Qiankuan and Xiao Guiyun, 1989) can also be considered as stories rebuilding the past. However they are more concerned about events in the history of grand narratives, and about the representation of public affairs (stories) in history rather than imitations of any past superficiality of personal memories. So for me they can only be described as historical themes rather than (postmodern) nostalgia. Some other films, such as *Sparkling Red Star* (Li Jun, 1974) and *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* (Xie Tieli, 1970) are more concerned with heroism in a fictional past of master discourse, thus they seem far from trivialized nostalgia and lack concern about the past itself. *My Memories of Old Beijing* (Wu Yigong, 1982) adapted from Lin Haiyin's novel of the same name is a particular case. It is a homesickness story about late 1920s Beijing, and can be seen as the beginning of (contemporary) Chinese nostalgia. In addition, Xie Jin's *Hibiscus Town* (1986)

traces the protagonist's life back to the period from 1963 to 1979 (around the Cultural Revolution and its end). Though I prefer to think of it as a typical reflection of “scar literature” on Chinese films of the time, it still contains certain nostalgic ingredients. However, as both of the films mentioned above are outside the limit of the research domain (Chinese films since the 1990s) and lack an echo from other films of the time, it does not seem possible to make them typical examples of a contemporary cultural discussion in this research.

### **5.1. Glossy Technology – History or Image?**

A fundamental element of (postmodern) nostalgia film derives from glossy technology. The word “glossy” was originally used by Jameson in his *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*: “the formal apparatus of nostalgia films has trained us to consume the past in the form of glossy images” (287; ch. 9). Nostalgia films make us focus on a certain form of the past with rapt attention. It remains to be discussed whether the form (of the past) is the real reality in the real past; but before answering the question, the basis of the form and its carrier – glossy images – require some investigation. Where does the image that seems full of glossy colours and relationships with the past come from?

Actually, it is largely due to technological advances in recent decades that films can acquire the capability to exceed historical texts and relics to represent an

overall landscape realistically associated with the past. An interest in glossy colours is clearly not just a personal preference of Jameson; the popularity of colourful films since the 1960s reflects a tendency in the mass culture as well. Only when the film industry has developed a large-scale application of colours, could films through glossy objects/superficiality convey a “live” past. The fifty years or so since the rise of colour films have been roughly in line with the development stage of nostalgia films in Hollywood<sup>127</sup>.

However, compared with North America, the growth of nostalgia films in Mainland China did not occur till the 1990s, thirty years after colour films became popular in 1960s China. The reasons for the delay are complicated and I would like to emphasize two points. On the one hand, ideologically speaking, one could not expect national films in the new socialist China (the 1950s to the 1970s), in which all its culture, literature, and art were dominated by and served politics, to freely bring the 1920s or 30s – a period generally called the “old society” in China and considered to be humiliating times full of exploitation by imperialism, capitalism, colonialism and so on – back into the colourful minds of the masses. Therefore it would have been quite hard for a Chinese film of the 1970s (controlled by the Communist Party) to – similarly to what *China Town* shows, the 1920s of the States – recall happy memories of its past. On the other hand, as far as filmmaking is concerned, a nationalized studio (and film distribution) system dominated by the government (and its planned economy,

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<sup>127</sup> According to Jameson, in his “Postmodernism and Consumer Society”, nostalgia films rose from the early 1970s in North American, such as Bertolucci’s *The Conformist* (1969, but set in 1930s Italy), Lucas’s *American Graffiti* (1973, set in the 1950s), and Polanski’s great film *Chinatown* (1974, set in the 1930s). (118)

from the 1950s to the 1980s<sup>128</sup>) presumably failed to provide suitable space for a mass-dominated culture, like nostalgia. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that colours and technologies have brought vital attractions for Chinese nostalgia in overseas markets. When China started its reform of filmmaking cooperation with foreign investments (and distributions) in the early 1990s<sup>129</sup>, fifth generation directors then positively introduced some Chinese nostalgic themes to the West. From then on, their glossy images and colourful appearances of the past have become an important factor that influences the global constructions of Chinese phantasms.<sup>130</sup>

Glossy colours in nostalgic images – a reconstruction of those flat, past appearances in films – are beyond the reach of historical writing or black and white documentaries. According to D. Lowenthal, new media supported by technical progress apparently promotes filmic/visual culture to represent and participate in past memories, and forms an absorbed attraction. Compared with books and pictures, movies are clearly more influential. The former are “more taxing and less convincing” because “books have been contrived by later minds, artifacts have suffered subsequent erosion”; while the latter “plunge[s] us into a vivid past – or bring that past directly into the present – seemingly without mediation”. People may suppose “the camera

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<sup>128</sup> Rao Shuguang in his “The Historical Turning Point of Chinese Cinema” argued that before the 1990s the Chinese film industry had been completely controlled by a planned economy and a planned distribution system (16). Therefore, it probably lacked the influence of a mass film market and mass-oriented productions.

<sup>129</sup> The cooperation reform started from 1988 when the government enacted “The Rule of International Filmmaking Cooperation” and allowed all the national studios to independently communicate with foreign investors and producers; and in 1993 a new rule permitted and pushed the local studios to compete for their own distribution benefits from cooperation markets. Refer to Zhang Yan (61). With that situation, Chinese filmmaking and its market have been gradually internationalized.

<sup>130</sup> This argument will be further discussed later in chapter 6.

cannot lie, because it cannot think... Forgetting that camera angles are selected, tapes and films edited and distorted, we attend to them as raw glimpses of what actually happened.”(Lowenthal 367) That is what glossy technology brings to us, an unprecedented experience of the past. Its difference from “historical newsreels” is obvious. Documentary films are those shot contents left from a past time – at least the objects on the screen were “quite real” when they were shot<sup>131</sup> – and are a product of time; relatively speaking, nostalgia films are shot in a present time, but set in or related to certain past contexts. They belong to technology rather than time, although, sometimes, they may challenge a linear time-span of narratives.

We seem less bothered by the over-realistic images<sup>132</sup> created by mimicking technology, and to fear that they confuse the “truth” of history. Because, as John Frow said, “history is always a textual construct; the question cannot at all be about the gap between representations of history and history ‘itself’, but only about the relative effectiveness, the relative political force of different representations” (78). Furthermore, if we are thinking of images based on the technology as fakes of lost origins of the past, we should remember the adage, cited by Lowenthal, that “a forgery can be distinguished from an original because it looks more genuine” (291). It then naturally leads one to shift the focus to skepticism. One may realize that technologies not only promote the over-developed instrumental rationality, but also

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<sup>131</sup> There is nothing completely “real” in films, for any filming involves choosing of angle and framing, which are both very subjective. It can only be read as the cinematographer’s interpretation of the real.

<sup>132</sup> Or maybe associated with what J. Baudrillard called, the hyper-real.

provide opportunities for postmodern scepticism and pluralism through those mechanical reproduction industries, such as colour film developing. The suspicion, in my view, comes from a dilemma of judgment between the original and its hyper-representation. Here glossy technology forms an attraction across time and space, in which nostalgia films constitute a paradox of the past – the glossy images. It is this that reminds me of diversity between a hyper-reality and its real past when considering Chinese nostalgia and films. “Distortion” will become a fatal argument (in the next chapter) when examining how nostalgia builds a hyper-real past of China to cater for the Western audience and to simultaneously deviate from an earlier position of local reality. But it seems too early to organize a separate discussion on audience receptions between the domestic and overseas film markets. Because, apart from its readership, whether a nostalgic film itself has the ability to reflect an objective, authentic past is still unanswered. The last section of this chapter (5.6) will put stress on the doubt and argue that postmodern nostalgia – as a kind of popular realism – is leading its hyper-real appearances into certain temptation and seduction in order to remind people of the unreachable truth.

## **5.2. The Appearance**

### **5.2.1. Flatness – The Fate of History**

The superficiality and bricolage of appearances are the most significant elements in postmodern nostalgia. In traditional philosophy, it is perhaps to be taken



for granted that people should see through the appearance to perceive the essence. However such common sense has already been considered by those postmodernists as a dogma that we cannot rely on any more. As Jameson argues, the most simple and apparent stuff is the most basic of the things; the fact is not as Descartes affirmed, that the simplest is just the foundation of a pyramid, that then leads the system to a higher grade<sup>133</sup>. When a society strides forward to a postmodern culture, the current era becomes similar to that described by Ludwig Feuerbach, “the present age is one which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, presentation to reality, the appearance to the essence” (qtd. in Frow 5). Nostalgia film derives from images collaged with appearances of the old days. Here we may interpret the meaning of “appearance” in nostalgia through the concept of “superficiality”.

Superficiality (or flatness, depthlessness) manifests the fate of history in contemporary culture. Jameson directly linked the postmodern culture with a historical consciousness. He mentioned that historical consciousness has faded out from the universal flatness and superficiality of postmodern culture. Those old, modernist feelings about history were related to linear time, painful memories of feeling, or a sadness for loss of the past... That deep, traditionally nostalgic, and personal emotion has already changed into a jaunty, schizophrenic, and brand new life of the eternal present in the postmodern<sup>134</sup>. In other words, people in contemporary

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<sup>133</sup> F. Jameson (1997) *The Postmodernism and Cultural Theories*, 《后现代主义文化理论》Tang Xiaobing (ed.), (7). The book derives from a series of speeches by Jameson at Beijing University, 1985. To date, there has not been any English version published.

<sup>134</sup> Jameson “Realism, Modernism, and Postmodernism”, originally published in *Collected Speech of Comparative Literature*, (275-300). This article has not been published in English. It originally came from one

culture have long isolated the present from the past tense in their mind, and self-consciously realized the irreversible fracture of time. This rupture results in two situations occurring, and both results have been achieved.

### 5.2.2. The Signifier without Signified

The first situation is the disappearance of a sense of history. Then a past exists only in the pure image/mirage. As the “history” of the United States has been converted into a number of pictures of the past; in a similar way, the “history” of China – through the mimicking of nostalgic movies – may also be changed into film that relates to the past. For a postmodern culture, the past has completely changed into a dead warehouse which is full of out-of-date hardware you can freely borrow. Eventually in film, it presents a heap of historical appearances, or a medley of patchy collage.<sup>135</sup> This kind of (postmodern) nostalgia – based on pure appearances, or signifiers without signified – seems obviously not on the same level as the personal-homesickness nostalgia shown in Wu Yigong’s *My Memories of Old Beijing* (*Chengnan jiushi*, 1982). The historical melancholy of the latter has been dissolved in a bricolage of the former.

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of Jameson’s speeches in Beijing University 1985. Jameson’s English version cannot be found, its Chinese version (translated by Liu Xiangyu) is the only one published: “历史的意识在后现代文化普遍的平淡和浅薄中已经消失了。老的现代主义对历史的感觉是一种对时间性、或者说对往昔的一种怅然若失、痛苦回忆的感觉……那种深深的怀旧的个人情绪在后现代主义中完全转变成一种新的永远是现在时的异常欣快和精神分裂的生活。”

<sup>135</sup> Ibid, p291. “东拼西凑的大杂烩”

Secondly, the rupture of time reflects the issue of schizophrenia. That is a popular theme in postmodern theory. Jameson tried to explain the feature of time in postmodernity through the perspective of patients with schizophrenia, and he termed it (following Lacan) a “fracture of the symbolic chain”<sup>136</sup>. In the mind of the patients, syntactic and temporal organizations have disappeared without trace, leaving only pure symbols/signs<sup>137</sup> (namely, the postmodern appearance) that mean nothing to them. This is what Gao Xiaosong did in his film, *Where Have All the Flowers Gone* (*Nashi huakai*, 2002), when he populated a currently popular love story with a collage of performers wearing old/historical costumes and living in traditional folk houses which seem quite singular today, such as the old-fashioned gowns of the early twentieth century and the courtyard of quadrangles in Beijing (Siheyuan). Or like the other film, *Set Off* (*Jiri qicheng*, Liu Jiang, 2008) where Lao Cui (by Fan Wei), wearing a theatrical costume of the police uniform of the Qing dynasty<sup>138</sup>, walks along a modern avenue in Beijing, and is then surprised by two present-day policemen in the act and misnamed “fellow comrade” by them. Both of the examples, for no reason, combine some old type appearances (that had been discarded for years) with the uncorrelated, current environment, which tends to result in an isolated signifier separated completely from a time-related signified, in order to form a spatial hotchpotch of film appearances without linear-time trace. Many postmodern films have become typical examples of the betrayed concept of linear time. However the

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<sup>136</sup> Quoted in Jameson (1988) “符号链条的断裂”; and Xudong Zhang (*Capitalism* 291).

<sup>137</sup> Ibid, “句法和时间性的组织完全消失了, 只剩下纯粹的指符”。

<sup>138</sup> Qing dynasty, 1644 – 1911.

flat, isolated appearances do not merely react to time disorder. Broadly speaking, appearances in postmodern culture may be read as free-floating signifiers that lead to uncertain meanings of anything signified<sup>139</sup>. Thus, this is what Jamesonian postmodernism argues is a disassociation between signifiers and signifieds. Using Eisenstein's "montage" as an example of modernism, Jameson distinguishes the aesthetic significance of postmodern films by their "patchy collage":

The aesthetic forms in modernist works may still be explained by the logic of filmic montage. As S. Eisenstein theoretically argued, it is still necessary to seek certain ideal models in modernism to juxtapose all unrelated signifiers/images together. However, such a unified ideal is not accepted by (or the purpose of) the postmodernist clutter on the heaps of superficiality, consequently it seems impossible to obtain any new form/meaning (signified). We then may conclude that the transformation from modernism to postmodernism is in fact a transition from montage to patchy collage. (Jameson 1988; ed. in Zhang Xudong *Late Capitalism* 292)<sup>140</sup>

### 5.2.3. "Dusty Spectacles" – A New Spatial Logic Instead of Time

Therefore, based on depthlessness and superficiality, the sense of the past in nostalgia films is often conveyed by a number of daily appearances of the past, through which the memories of the old era, old life, and old style can be aroused at once. Postmodern nostalgia is considered by Jameson as certain "museum" culture. "The producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past: the imitation of dead style, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a

<sup>139</sup> As such a "floating signifier" may "mean different things to different people: it may stand for many or even any signifieds; it may mean whatever the interpreter wants it to mean." See Jeffrey Mehlman (10-37).

<sup>140</sup> Translated from the Chinese edition: "把毫无关系的意象并列仍然是寻求某种理想形式所必需的, 后现代主义那种杂乱的意象堆积却不要这种统一, 因此不可能获得任何新的形式[所指意象]。我们可以归纳说, 从现代主义到后现代主义的这种转变, 就是从蒙太奇到"东拼西凑的大杂烩"(collage)的过渡。"

now global culture” (*Postmodernism* 17-8). Nostalgia has to absorb various nutrients from the museum and make the bricolage become today’s cultural product. On the other hand, a cultural “product” implies certain types of consumption values. Nostalgia is apparently of no practical use, but a kind of spectacle, which is made up of a variety of appearances of previous styles (or crusted properties for filmmaking) (such as old hair styles, old houses, old furniture, old music, old dress, and even streetscapes of the past...) Those props, whether true or false, are not important any more. Their images are the real substance of nostalgia. In Guy Debord’s words, “the image has become the final form of commodity reification” (qtd. in Jameson *Postmodernism* 18)<sup>141</sup>. For Jameson, the commercialization of the image, spectacle, and appearance directly subverts the historical sense of nostalgia. We are indeed getting more incapability of reaching a feeling of time. With this sense, an example can be found from the *Blue Kite* (Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1993) on which Zhang Xudong writes in his review about the nostalgic reconstruction of Dry Well Lane, a bustling residential quarter of Beijing in the film, that

Visually, one cannot tell to which time period it belongs. Even though the subject matter is highly time specific, there is simply no traits of temporality in terms of the way people dress, means of transportation, architectural style, etc. Rather, everything seen in this setting – from the traditional-styled residential courtyard, chimneys and smoke in the coal-burning winter of Beijing, a cart pulled by a donkey, to children playing on the street – gives rise to a sense of timelessness. (*Trauma* 34)

Though I do not quite agree with Zhang’s extreme criticism of “timelessness”

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<sup>141</sup> Guy Debord (1970) *The Society of The Spectacle* (English Ed. Translated by Fredy Perlman and Jon Supak), quoted by Jameson (1991) p18. (However this quotation cannot be found in the third edition of *The Society of The Spectacle*, published in 1994 by a different English translator, Donald N Smith).

with the film (because as he later argued the film is still “an ‘anthropological’ documentation of ordinary life in Beijing in the 1950s and 1960s” (*Trauma* 40), which proves a time indicator is still there in the nostalgia), it is just a good example here showing the postmodern tendency that nostalgic space/appearance is gradually encroaching on a concept of time. Perhaps as Jameson mentioned, the feeling of time has gradually been substituted by a new spatial logic in postmodernism:

The new spatial logic of the simulacrum can now be expected to have a momentous effect on what used to be historical time. The past is thereby itself modified [... It] has meanwhile itself become a vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum. Guy Debord’s powerful slogan is now even more apt for the “prehistory” of a society bereft of all historicity, one whose own putative past is little more than a set of *dusty spectacles*. In faithful conformity to poststructuralist linguistic theory, the past as “referent” finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts. (*Postmodernism* 18)

This approach [nostalgia film, beyond real historical time] to the present by way of the art language of the simulacrum, or of the pastiche of the stereotypical past, endows present reality and the openness of present history with the spell and distance of a glossy mirage. Yet this mesmerizing new aesthetic mode itself emerged as an elaborated symptom of the waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way. It cannot therefore be said to produce this strange occultation of the present by its own formal power, but rather merely to demonstrate, through these inner contradictions, the enormity of a situation in which we seem increasingly incapable of fashioning representations of our own current experience. (*Postmodernism* 21)

### 5.3. The Rupture of Time

An obvious example that embodies the disappearance of historical

consciousness is the (floating/slippery) uncertainty<sup>142</sup> between texts and their (historical) background (or the appearance of time). Postmodern films and their plots are no longer limited to modernism on linear time experience. Texts are not necessary to keep a fixed association with matched background/linear logic, which is likely to lead to a nonlinear time-span in film narratives. The *Back to The Future* trilogy (1985/1989/1990), for instance, was shot in the late 1980s, but its story shuttles between 1955, 1985, 2015, and 1885 through Doc Brown's time machine. This ruptures temporal connections of the narrative. The text then changes into a "bricolage" combined with the past, the present, and the future. Marty, the protagonist, travels back to the 1950s and participates in his parents' love, but accidentally attracts his young mother's romantic interest; lotto files taken back from the future (by Biff) make the condition of the present change dramatically. Through these plots, the audience's historical consciousness becomes misted over. The original fixed and dignified historical feelings have changed into an erratic game without any fixed result.

### 5.3.1. The Slippery Appearance

However, the most important point of the film is not the "medley" based on the combination of textual cues, but the appearance's bricolage constructed on space-time disorder. It is necessary to think of the way the audience reads the story

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<sup>142</sup> Here, the understanding of "uncertainty" may be linked with the "floating signifier" and the "slippery signified" from Lacan, by which the subsequent deconstructions were deeply influenced. J. Lacan (1998) "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud". Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (190-205).

backgrounds from the silver screen, such as the 50s, the 70s, the present, or the future. On film of motion pictures, this kind of recognition process mostly depends on the stacked appearances of various times, which is what Jameson called a “list of stereotypes, of ideas of facts and historical realities” (*Postmodernism* 279), such as hair style, music, clothing, language, street views and anything else that relates to a historical sense. Therefore, a rupture (or disorder) of time in a postmodern pastiche/nostalgia tends to be revealed as those exterior appearances of a diverse past. The audience’s consciousness of historical time (in nostalgia films) then completely relies on (and is transformed into) expressions of spatial qualities, such as scene, props, and costumes for a particular period. This point proves Jameson’s early prediction that the postmodern culture is gradually changing its attention from a modernist historical consciousness on “time” to purely spatial issues, and focusing on “space” itself (Jameson *Realism*; republished in Zhang Xudong *Capitalism* 299-300).

### 5.3.2. *Farewell My Concubine*

*Farewell My Concubine* (Chen Kaige, 1993) deliberately takes advantage of various appearances to substitute a sense of time and to form a collage of an historical outer shell, which provides “sliding” opportunities (or intertextuality) between signifiers and signified in texts of history, of drama, and of fictional nostalgia. The film borrows a famous text/plot that is set in the historical era of 2200 years ago and shows a traditional Peking opera adapted from it on the stage. Eventually it tries to



present the life experience of the two protagonists of the opera in a long nostalgic context, from the 1920s to the 70s.

#### 5.3.2.1. A Historical Legend

The name of the film, *Farewell My Concubine*, can perhaps be associated with a historical event in 202 B.C. According to Sima Qian, in his *Records of the Grand Historian*<sup>143</sup>, the great hero Chu Bawang (Xiang Yu, the Great Conqueror from the State of Chu, 232-202 B.C.) was defeated in his war with Liu Bang (the first emperor of the Han dynasty, 256-195 B.C.) and finally trapped by him at Gaixia. Bawang, on the night before his last sally, felt so sad that he drank for the last time with his favorite concubine, Lady Yu, and was reluctant to part from her. Then on the next day he committed suicide with his sword beside the Wu river (Sima, Ch. 7 “Xiangyu Benji” 333).

As Adam Lam argues, “Lady Yu was not significant enough to deserve any further words about her fate in the formal historical record” (2000, 196). Indeed, there are very few words (only two sentences) in the *Records of the Grand Historian* that refer to Lady Yu:

There was a beauty, named Yu, who often followed and played with Bawang.... Then Bawang sadly composed his song/poem:

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<sup>143</sup> *The Records of the Grand Historian* (史記), written from 109 B.C. to 91 B.C., was the magnum opus of Sima Qian, in which he recounted Chinese history from the time of the Yellow Emperor (2600 B.C.) until his own time.

My strength plucked up the hills, my might shadowed the world;  
 But the times were against me, and Dapple runs no more;  
 When Dapple runs no more, what then can I do?  
 Ah, Yu, my Yu, what will your fate be? (Sima 333)<sup>144</sup>

It is obvious that Yu had just a negligible role in the formal history.<sup>145</sup> The purpose of her existence in the record is only to serve as a foil to the sadness of Bawang's failure and the heroic tragedy.

However, in the two thousand years that have passed since the tragedy, many novel writers and playwrights have taken the role of Lady Yu and "her story more seriously and expanded it into romance", in which she "becomes the tragic heroine who kills herself in front of Chu Bawang to prove her loyalty and preserve her chastity. This suicide is not mentioned in the official historical record."<sup>146</sup> Nowadays Yu's suicide has been romantically adapted and widely passed down from one generation to another through all kinds of related Chinese poems, novels, dramas, historical criticism, and so on<sup>147</sup>. Therefore I have reasons to presume that most contemporary Chinese readers have a stereotyped image of Yu as a model of loyal

<sup>144</sup> “有美人名虞，常幸从……于是项王乃悲歌慨，自为诗曰：‘力拔山兮气盖世，时不利兮骓不逝，骓不逝兮可奈何，虞兮虞兮奈若何’歌数闋，美人之和。” Translated by Burton Watson (45).

<sup>145</sup> In the official history, there are even no records of Lady Yu's last name, nor was the name "Concubine Yu" (Yu Ji). "Yu ji" begun to be used in any record until the book *Kuo Di Zhi* 《括地志》 in the Tang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.)

<sup>146</sup> For instance, Chinese folklore records that "Lady Yu speaks to Bawang: 'the soldiers of Han have invaded, we have been trapped without leeway; your future has come to an end, how can I survive.' Then she cut her throat," in order to eliminate the burden for him and enhance his faith to breakthrough. “霸王歌罢，虞姬应和道：汉兵已略地，四方楚歌声；大王意气尽，贱妾何聊生。歌罢自刎。” (Lam 2000, 196).

<sup>147</sup> For example, Lu Jia's *Chu Han Chun Qiu* 《楚汉春秋》 (陆贾, Western Han Dynasty), Zhang Shoujie's *Shi Ji Zheng Yi* 《史记正义》 (张守节, Tang Dynasty), Shi Naian's *Shui Hu Zhuan* 《水浒传》 (施耐庵, Yuan/Ming Dynasty), Feng Menglong *Qing Shi* 《情史》 (冯梦龙, Ming Dynasty), Zhen Wei's *Xi Han Tongsu Yanyi* 《西汉通俗演绎》 (甄伟, Ming Dynasty), Shen Cai's *Qian Jin Ji* 《千金记》 (沈采, Ming Dynasty), and Yuan Mei's 《过虞沟游虞姬庙》 (袁枚, Qing Dynasty) all mentioned about Lady Yu's suicide.

women today. Ironically, it is Lady Yu who bids farewell to Bawang in literary common sense, rather than Bawang saying goodbye to her in the untouchable history. So the process itself – in which a real history was passed down and eventually changed into a totally different literary expression through the two thousand-year adaptations – can be considered as a reminder of the textual prejudice of the way a historical reality evolved to the grand narrative of such a popular love story. Taken in this sense, the traditional legend of “Farewell My Concubine” can be seen as a typical example of postmodern incredulity about grand history. However it is not the point that the film would breakthrough. Instead, the film not only reconfirms Yu’s suicide, but also put it in a different context – nostalgia.

#### 5.3.2.2. The Film Text and Intertextuality

What the film title actually refers to is a romantic Peking opera piece<sup>148</sup> (with the same name as the film) that tells the historical event mentioned above combined with the plot of Yu’s suicide. Then the film text slides between the historical text, the opera stage, and the nostalgic life story (the 1920s to the 1970s) of the two protagonists of the opera.

It is well known that female characters in traditional Peking opera are always

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<sup>148</sup> The Peking opera “*Farewell My Concubine*” was originally adapted from *Qian Jin Ji* 《千金记》 and premiered in 1918. Since then it has become one of the masterpieces of traditional Peking opera.

played by male actors<sup>149</sup>, who usually learn performance from a very young age. The film, *Farewell My Concubine*, tells of a pair of actors who played in the opera (and their lives, loves, and relationships) from when they were young in the 1920s until, they lived to a great age, the 1970s. Strictly speaking, the film is a story about two men. What is different is that one (called Stone, or Duan Xiaolou) plays Bawang, the other (called Bean, or Cheng Dieyi) plays Lady Yu on the stage. The nostalgic story spans a very long period, from the beginning of the Republic of China<sup>150</sup>, the period of the Second Sino-Japanese War, the new socialist China, to the end of the Cultural Revolution.



Figure 3. Bawang and Lady Yu on Stage in Film

Presumably, as the result of a long unbearable trial in historical movements and his failed homo-relationship (with Stone), Bean eventually kills himself when playing the role of Lady Yu on stage in a rehearsal in the late 1970s, which makes the

<sup>149</sup> At that time females acting on the stage were not accepted by social morality in China.

<sup>150</sup> The Republic of China, 1912-1949, which then retreats to Taiwan.

nostalgic narrative form a reference with the other two texts – the traditional legend and the opera plot of “Farewell My Concubine”. However, if comparing the nostalgic story with the legend or the opera, one may find that the reasons for “farewell” in literary history or traditional opera of China are largely different from the reason for Bean saying goodbye on the stage of nostalgia. The contemporary nostalgic text endows the suicide of “Lady Yu” with some new agents, such as the Cultural Revolution and unsuccessful homosexuality. The film, over a great deal of time, shows Bean’s love for Stone offstage, but Stone seems to find it hard to extricate himself from heterosexuality and to accept his feelings. Moreover, the film also represents the way the cultural reforms and movements encroach on traditional opera after the liberation of China (in the 1950s and 1960s), which even deprive Bean of his opportunity onstage and his performing life that he has placed all his love on. These clues appear to have a direct link with the suicide. Nevertheless, those new factors seem quite far away from the spiritual content of “Farewell My Concubine” by Sima Qian, in his *Records of the Grand Historian*, two thousand years ago. In the historical narrative, it was Bawang rather than Lady Yu who really got into trouble. It was because of being defeated that Bawang was compelled to take his leave of Yu; while this is obviously not the same reason that results in Bean’s suicide in the identity of Yu. It is not hard to realize that a contemporary nostalgia has become adrift (disjointed) from history and its past tradition of narratives. Its result could lead to two different views of postmodernity.

On the one hand, if we borrow Linda Hutcheon's words that what "postmodern intertextuality challenges [is] both closure and single, centralized meaning" (*Poetics* 127), the film, *Farewell My Concubine*, just forms an intertextuality intertwined between history, opera stage, and nostalgic text. Originality from past texts in postmodern literature and films can no longer exist in a stable form; "if it were", according to Hutcheon cited from Barthes and Riffaterre, "it could have no meaning for its reader. It is only as part of prior discourses that any text derives meaning and significance" (Barthes *Image* 160; Riffaterre 142; cited in Hutcheon *Poetics* 126). Just like the nostalgic story of Bean and Stone – though they play "Farewell My Concubine" (opera) on the stage and it forms a reference to their real life, they are not limited to following a textual destiny from a historical context. Nostalgia provides a wider understanding of Bean's suicide because, it relates to the film reader's personal memories, feelings, and experiences in the present, such as their sufferings in the Cultural Revolution and perspectives on homosexuality today. All of these (situations) help readers develop their own comprehension of the film and the suicide, beyond a historical text or fixed opera plot. As Barthes argued, "intertextuality replaces the challenged author-text relationship with one between reader and text" (*Image* 160). Thus I would argue that nostalgia combined with intertextuality may probably embody a postmodern value of release in the film. Because for one thing, it can be considered as a liberation of text from the shadow of the author (no matter whether it is the author of the history or of the film); for another, it awakens people to the limitation of authorship in originality.

On the other hand, the above-mentioned “disjointing” just manifests the postmodern relationship between past and present in contemporary culture. The understanding of the past at present and our historical experiences today have greatly surpassed what it was in original texts of the past. Just as *Farewell My Concubine* did in its film narrative, nostalgia rebuilds a traditional opera stage for the current generation of visual consumers, but the culture today already lacks an ability to return to the original condition. Nowadays what a postmodern culture can accomplish is no more than to treat issues (such as the Cultural Revolution and homosexuality) from current perspectives and to fill up a textual frame of the past with today’s brand new life experiences. As quoted from Jameson above (see the end of part 5.2.3.), nostalgia as a present way of “the pastiche of the stereotypical past” has provided us with not only a “new aesthetic mode” but also “the spell and distance of a glossy mirage”. That is just the most important symptom of our historicity being faded out in the current era. Instead, we are “experiencing history in some active way”. We seem not to be able to observe historical relations between past and present any more, nor could we experience the past concretely. Our powers to grasp a historical experience are not what they were. The reason for this does not consist in any “strange occultation of the present”. The fact is that the new aesthetic mode is verifying our “increasingly incapable [situation] of fashioning representations of our own current experience” with its “inner contradictions” of time and space. (Jameson *Postmodernism* 21)

## 5.3.2.3. The Floating Appearance and the Confused Time Span

Apparently, the intertextuality which is blended with the history, the opera, and the actors' lives has been refracted into the audience's mind through certain nostalgic illusions. In this process, the pure appearance, the spatial flatness, and their bricolage make the textual feeling of "time" become increasingly complex, fuzzy and chaotic. It blurs the audience's impression of time. The collaged images give nostalgia more and more of a sense of flatness in "space". The text becomes a superficial game (a dead frame) in which you may freely jump to and fro in your mind. Just as in another film, *Curse of the Golden Flower* (Zhang Yimou, 2006), its original text (*Thunderstorm* by Cao Yu) was written and set in the 1930s, but was adapted for the contemporary film market and reset in the royal family of the Tang Dynasty (more than a thousand years ago). So the text is totally separated from any unique concept of time. Thus, what is most important in postmodern culture is not a "deep" text any more, but a redeployment of those visual symbols freely floating on the surface and projected on the screen.

The most prominent feature of the filmic appearance consists of taking advantage of costumes and facial makeup in the opera – certain apparent material that lacks specific signifiers of time and connections with real life – to blur the experience of time. At the beginning of the film, there is no caption or title showing when the story happens. The first scene is a long take slowly moving back in a gloomy corridor



with sundries; two persons (a man and a woman), wearing opera costume and with their faces made up so that their age cannot be told, are walking towards the camera shoulder to shoulder. The camera keeps a regular distance from them and slowly retreats into an empty sports hall with seats. The sharp comparison between the strong light coming through the entrance of the hall and the dark inside constitutes the back scene behind the two protagonists, as if they were just shuttled in with bizarre dress from another space-time. Through their conversation with an off-screen voice (a conservator of the hall) viewers may generally know that the scene takes place in Beijing not long after the fall of the Gang of Four<sup>151</sup> in the late 1970s. The identities of the two persons are Peking opera actors who have come for a rehearsal. Then there follows a full shot. A stage spotlight is suddenly turned on in the dark, and its focus slowly moves to the two actors standing in the centre of the hall.



Figure 4. The Opening Sequence in *Farewell My Concubine*

The sequence suddenly stops here. Consequently, we see a traditional Chinese

<sup>151</sup> The fall signalled the end of the Cultural Revolution. The Gang of Four was the name given to a leftist political faction composed of four Chinese Communist party officials. They came to prominence during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) and were subsequently charged with a series of treasonous crimes.

painting – in which Lady Yu is holding a sword to her neck but Bawang beside her can do nothing to help – accompanied by the sounds of the traditional Peking opera tune that gives the film its title, *Farewell My Concubine*. Then the story starts and it cuts to 1924.



Figure 5. The Film Title and the Traditional Painting, *Farewell My Concubine*

With these two beginning scenes, the film transplants the two opera characters, who confuse the precise time, into a dim hall of the late 70s; while the audience's thoughts are returned with the name of the movie to two thousand years ago, puzzling them in terms of the period of history and its text. Here the dressing up of the opera – as a sort of crucial appearance – has been completely separated from the context/situation of the stage, and collaged together with a nostalgic story lasting fifty

years. That foretells the subversion and collapse of a linear time experience that will be caused by the whole film.

### 5.3.2.3. The Makeup and the Confusing Identity

A similar situation (the collage of the reality and the stage) is repeated in the film several times. Bean who plays Lady Yu on stage hopes all along that the love story between Bawang and Yu will continue in his real life; but Stone, with his opera costumes taken off, always treats Bean as his brother rather than lover. Consequently in their offstage life, Bean, Stone, and his lover Ju Xian form a love triangle. When the film describes the dramatic conflict, it frequently presents Bean wearing operatic makeup appearing in the same scene (narrative space-time) with Stone wearing no makeup, to create a confusion of identity of characters between the stage and reality. A historical character referred to in an opera text is associated with an opera actor in his real life; while the relationship itself is represented in a postmodern nostalgia. This obviously implies a concept of nonlinear time and space.



Figure 6. The Confusion of Identity between the Stage and Reality

Actually, a subversion of the linear text by the collaged appearances in *Farewell My Concubine* looks more complex than the pure skip over the time-span in the *Back to The Future* trilogy. The latter simply breaks the rational linear time of the film narrative by introducing a time machine; while the former – through the appearances (visual signs) of costumes and makeup and their bricolage – makes the audience's mind dissociate history, opera and nostalgia, which results in a slippery move between signifiers and signified from various texts<sup>152</sup>, and leads to a vague textual time.

#### 5.3.2.4. The Bricolage from Diverse Appearances of Time

As far as Jamesonian nostalgia is concerned, a fundamental factor that leads to the disorder of time in the film narrative consists of an empty pastiche/simulation of the purely collaged appearance of the past. The reason that I consider those opera costumes and facial makeup in the traditional culture of the past to be visual signs in a pastiche of its culture rather than a parody of a Peking opera style, is because the original styles of Peking opera (that kind of legitimate and formal staging language norm behind the costume, the makeup, and the mask) are not constituted any longer, nor have they led to any humour or irony. In fact, these appearances have totally broken-away from the opera stage, and changed into some dead visual symbols

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<sup>152</sup> For instance, in *Farewell My Concubine*, its director Chen Kaige is interested in relating the actors' destinies in the nostalgic Cultural Revolution to Bawang and Yu's story end in the historical text, so that the intertextuality may convey certain political criticism. That will be further discussed in the next chapter.

appropriated with other stereotyped images of nostalgia. All of them, in other words, seem more like that which Jameson called the culture of museum: the medley of historical collage.

A typical example of that bricolage in *Farewell My Concubine* is in the later part of it, when Bean and Stone are violently criticized by Red Guards<sup>153</sup>, where the traditional costumes and the identities of Yu and Bawang are combined with the radical guards and their appearances in the Cultural Revolution. In this scene, the significance and feelings of history (and the concept of time) are fading out through the flatness of the visual collage consisting of those pluralistic appearances.

However, from the position of Jameson on postmodern nostalgia, this argument may very much depend on who are the audience. The understanding of the collaged appearances may also vary from person to person. As far as those who have experienced the Cultural Revolution are concerned, the scene containing political struggles is likely to cause some negative memories. For them, traditional costumes appearing at the critical assembly may not be a “spectacle”, but a lingering nightmare. In such a political setting where everything traditional has been fought against, Chinese people (no matter whether they are the critics or the targets of criticism) have already had their mentalities extremely distorted in that period. When being criticized

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<sup>153</sup> Red Guards were mostly students and other young people in the mainland of China, who were mobilized by Mao Zedong between 1966 and 1969, to attack the "Four Olds" of society (believed to be old ideas, cultures, habits, and customs of traditional China), and to make posters and speeches, criticizing other Party leaders, and some committed violent acts in the name of the Cultural Revolution.

together with Stone (who is forced to dress up as Bawang by Red Guards), Bean hysterically says to the public “I’m despicable, and I have been so for a long time. But now even the King of Chu (Bawang) is on his knees begging for mercy! Can Peking opera survive? It’s doomed [...] that is retribution!” This part of the film obviously shows a past social context of the late 1960s, which is inclined to criticize traditions and to break with history. However when the scene was reconstructed thirty years later by Chinese nostalgia of the 1990s, the process of the criticism (of the political disaster) itself, as a part of historical representation, appears to be pale and ironic. Because, from an understanding of how the historical, political and ideological feelings and stands have changed after a mere 30 years, how can a reader today authentically reach a history of 2000 years ago to examine the original fact of “Farewell My Concubine”? Perhaps no one will have a definite answer. As a result, (postmodern) nostalgia and its aesthetic mode bring the present an expression of shock and utter incredulity as well as an unreachable and fashionable historicity. With this sense, nostalgic experience for those old, domestic audiences of China is no more than watching a pile of flat, unattractive, and old pictures. While on the other hand, those who, for various reasons, were mostly absent from the past of China, such as an overseas audience, or young Chinese viewers who were born after the Chinese reform and opening-up of the late 1970s and seem increasingly to be forming the mainstream audience taste of contemporary Chinese cinema in the near future, are more likely to accept (rely on) superficial, visual appearances to constitute their historical perceptions that they have never experienced. Then gradually, as Jameson pointed out,

nostalgic films are forming a society losing all of its historicity, the past has thereby had “itself modified” and become “a vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum... one whose own putative past is little more than a set of dusty spectacles.” (*Postmodernism* 18)



Figure 7. “Lady Yu” at a Struggle Meeting

In this situation, where the appearance departs from its texts and the relationship between signifiers and signified is no longer stable, the historical reality of *Farewell My Concubine* will then be transformed into a totally different form of representation – farewell my concubine – nothing more than the three common words<sup>154</sup>. Thus the destinies of Bawang and Yu are not limited to any historical

<sup>154</sup> Just as Jameson said about the “fifties” in his “Nostalgia for the Present”: “to shift from the realities of the 1950s to the representation of that rather different thing, the ‘fifties’.” (*Postmodernism* 281).

discourse, but freely exist in a representation of visual depthlessness.

#### **5.4. What Does Nostalgia Imitate?**

##### **5.4.1. The Mass Consciousness**

Beyond the flat appearance, a further question is, what does a nostalgia film imitate? What does it represent? Will postmodern nostalgia be similar to parody which, carries out a double-code strategy by which elitist styles in high art are both constructed and subverted simultaneously? In this section, the point is that nostalgia film (in China, in the 1990s) has broken away from a peak of heroism as well as a centre of master narrative, and changed into a representation of certain mass/group consciousness. Based on that trend of mass culture, nostalgia has constructed a trivialized context in a realistic narration and shaped a new film fashion. Through the imitation of a specific past, nostalgia tries to convey the impossibility of historical “authenticity” in the face of the subjective and pluralistic consciousness of the past.

As Hutcheon argued, “postmodernism clearly attempts to combat what has come to be seen as modernism’s potential for hermetic, elitist isolationism that separated art from the world, literature from history” (*Poetics* 140). What is called the “mass/group consciousness” is just a cultural position relative to elitism or the “elite consciousness”. Featherstone, in his *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, points



out that what the Frankfurt School (Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse) were interested in – “an elitist critique of mass culture” – has already gone out of date. “They are generally regarded as looking down on the debased mass culture and as having little sympathy for the integrity of the popular classes’ pleasures. The latter position has been strongly endorsed by the swing to postmodernism” (Featherstone vii). Going back to the point of this part, I would argue that a de-stylized imitation, such as nostalgia in contemporary cinema, has probably proved “the swing” to a mass culture of postmodernism. In this process, modernist styles combined with its “high”, artistic uniqueness/originality may be considered as a bottleneck that blocks the freely-opened popular culture by its dated potential for the “hermetic, elitist isolationism”. Taken in this sense, isolated styles though do not seem to be completely equal as a result of elitist modernity, they have already played roles in defending our humanist assumptions about high artistic notions of originality and scarcity<sup>155</sup>. However imitations from postmodern parody and nostalgia have been contesting this gradually. It is the de-stylized imitation and its self-absorption in constructing a mass/group consciousness that proves an active example of the mass culture today.

#### 5.4.2. Different Targets of Parody and Pastiche

Relatively speaking, as far as parody is concerned, its works tend to emphasize imitations of certain literary/artistic styles. Then the impact of parody and its sense of

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<sup>155</sup> As the saying goes, “less is more”. That proves the distance of mass culture from elitism and “high” art.

humour often depend on the extent to which its original style can be well-known by the (popular) readers. A style generally has something distinguished and out of the ordinary; it may have more or fewer differences from the ordinary life of the masses, and even place itself above the common way of life and its common sense. This is one of the differences between elite art (high art) and mass culture (Kellner *Dialectics* 4). Postmodern parody is then good at mimicry of those unique styles, genres and narratives of elitism, for example, the imitation of a black and white documentary style in *An Orphan Joins the Army*. The genre of the old documentary film has a wide advantage (so that it can be easily recognized or identified); for another, its unique style has considerable charm in showing some of the grand historical scenes and historical figures. That makes it impressive for the audience with stereotypes of grand narratives in history and separate from the masses that are popularly conscious. However when the film imitates its documentary style with a parodic way and adds a fictional (cartoon) character (Sanmao) to its historical context, parody on the one hand is equipped with some implications of deconstruction, subversion, or irony; and on the other hand it presents certain signs of fusion between the elite and the mass (high art and popular culture).

But postmodern nostalgia, based on pastiche, cannot be considered as an imitation or a reconstruction of elite art and its styles at all. Instead of that, it is the direct retrospect, the original simulacrum, the superficial appearance, and the empty representation of the mass consciousness that become the target of nostalgic imitation.

Within this process, there is no ulterior motive, nor any subversion or satire; then what has been left is only the construction of the old, collective, and stereotyped memories of the past, rather than any personal genre. By this token, perhaps it can be also seen as a de-stylized process. For example, *Chinatown* (1973) rebuilds a historical background of Los Angeles, 1937, when Jack (a private investigator) helps his customers to investigate adulteries; *The Godfather: Part II* (1974) represents the rise to power of the young Vito Corleone in his early life and career in 1920s New York; *Back to the Future* (1985) makes Marty look back on the school life of 1950s' North America. All the sense of the times restored by the films does not belong to any individual, artistic style, but a past experience of ordinary people and their everyday life. This version of imitation of the past is not completely in accord with what parody did in its stylistic satire:

	<b>Postmodern Parody</b>	<b>Filmic Nostalgia</b>
the object/target of imitation	familiar styles, narratives & genres	images of lost originals
construction	stylistic consciousness	memories of ordinary life
deconstruction	redeploy the dominant discourse	-
depth	profound self-reflections	superficiality
humor	postmodern irony	-
culture	high/elite, but simultaneously exploited and subverted by parody	the mass

Thus, what nostalgia imitates is different from the target of parody. Nostalgia is no longer limited to an (double-coded) intertextuality or an imitation of literary/artistic styles, but directly involves itself in a simulacrum of an overall cultural style of a past age. Eventually, it embodies three transformation trends: a transformation from textual strategies to superficial appearances (visual images); a change from elite arts into mass culture; a conversion/extension from a literary theory based on text to a macro cultural theory (cultural studies) based on visual appeals – namely a cultural turn.

#### 5.4.3. Trivialized Experiences – *To Live* and *the Blue Kite*

Chinese nostalgia films of the 1990s may be considered within a context of cultural studies; the audience's consciousness is not necessarily subjected to the authors' artistic intentions or restricted to a textual frame. But it may freely roam in its own memories/illusions of the past. This illusion (or what Baudrillard called "simulation"<sup>156</sup>) is not created by an author (or a filmmaker) for his/her originality – nor does it come purely from any personal expression of the author's own sentiment, but it may (independently of the plot/text) arouse universal resonance in the general audience through their own experiences of the past. When talking about the contemporary nostalgic movies in China, Sheldon H. Lu argues that elitist heroism is no longer accorded great significance:

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<sup>156</sup> As Jean Baudrillard argues, we live in "the age of simulation". See his *Simulations* (1983), New York: Semiotext, p4. Thus nostalgia of the past can probably be seen as a case in point of contemporary culture of simulations.

What should be noted here is that such [nostalgic] films and TV dramas take on the everyday in the representation of the past. That is, they do not linger on the sublime historical moments in national history and narrate the stories of great heroes, but rather focus on the personal and private dimensions of individuals. (133)

This is the charm of nostalgia. *To Live* (Zhang Yimou, 1994) represents a piece of the past from the 1940s to the 60s. The story is not converted from real historical material, but adapted from a novel by Yu Hua. As far as the story is concerned, the film bears mainly imaginary/fictional colours. On the other hand, the historical context beyond the plot seems so appealing that the audience may easily soak themselves in past memories. The historical background that the film restores is not a positive performance from a great discourse of grand history. Instead, it is an ordinary person (a small shot), Fugui (the protagonist), who strings together quite a few fragments of history through his life. Fugui experiences many landmark events of the public history in China, such as the Civil War<sup>157</sup> (1946-1949), the Great Leap Forward<sup>158</sup> (1958-1960), and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).

The historical retrospect in *To Live* (1994) is quite similar to an American film, *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994), shot in the same year. Forrest, in his epic journey through life, influences the era of Elvis Presley, and experiences a sequence of American history, such as the Vietnam War, the Ping-pong Diplomacy, the Anti-war

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<sup>157</sup> It refers to the Second Nationalist-Communist Civil War, between the Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist Party) and the Chinese Communist Party. As a result, the newly founded the People's Republic of China controlled mainland China and the Republic of China was restricted to their remaining territories of Taiwan.

<sup>158</sup> It was an economic and social plan used from 1958 to 1961 which aimed to use China's vast population to rapidly transform mainland China from a primarily agrarian economy dominated by peasant farmers into a modern, agriculturalized and industrialized communist society. However it led to a great famine in 1960-62.

Movement of the 1970s, and the Watergate Scandal.

But it is useful to compare the different ways in which the two films portray their protagonists. Although Fugui and Forrest are the main characters in their films, their historical status is entirely different. Hollywood moulds Forrest into a leading role or an accidental hero (rather than an ordinary person) in many public events in history. From the beginning of the film, Forrest inspires Elvis Presley to his best performance as the “Hillbilly Cat”; later he becomes an All-American (a great football player) and hero from Vietnam; then he is received twice by U.S. Presidents; and after that he contributes to improving Sino-US relations as a table tennis player. Forrest is always placed in a central position when he emerges in a grand history, and he promotes the smooth development of history. This kind of role model seems quite similar to the parody in *An Orphan Joins the Army*. This is to mix a fictional character into a grand narrative historical discourse, such as a documentary or newsreel, and let the character combine with those events and big shots. Then it (as a foil) shows the absurdity of history in great narratives.

However, beyond the absurd/deconstructed strategy of parody, nostalgia brings a new wave in the representations of history. Just as Pam Cook argues, in her *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema*, the “master narratives of major events focused on the activities of public figures have shifted to include the experience and perspective of the ‘ordinary person’” (1). This transformation has been

implemented in what *To Live* represented. Its historical context does not rely on those documentary styles or grand themes of history, but is mostly constructed on the basis of the mass consciousness and memories of past appearances. Fugui, the protagonist of the film, goes through the twenty-year changes and shifts encountered in his life (from the Civil War in the 40s to the Cultural Revolution in the 60s); he never stands in a central position of any historical event. In the war, he is at first forced to be conscripted as a soldier in the Kuomintang army, soon to become a captive of the People's Liberation Army without fighting, and plays "shadow puppet show"<sup>159</sup> for communist soldiers. After the war, he returns home and becomes a water-deliverer in the street. Whether it be the war, the Great Leap, or the Cultural Revolution, Fugui cannot change/save/dominate a single historical event as a hero throughout his life. He is only one of the many ordinary people that silently suffered and dumbly experienced those memorable years.

Similarly to Fugui, the protagonists of *The Blue Kite* (1993) are also common residents of Beijing. Tietou's Mom is a grade teacher and his father is a librarian. The family leads an ordinary life in a small alley in western Beijing of the 1950s. With Tietou's memory of his childhood, the film tries to bring the audience back to their own nostalgic illusions (which can be seen to be the "everyday" of representations of the past): a series of common memories of the 1950s and 1960s, such as (in the Spring Festival) burning Chinese lanterns, setting off firecrackers, making dumplings, and

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<sup>159</sup> It is called "皮影戏", a typical national culture of the traditional China. Here the director Zhang Yimou takes the advantage of its unique appearance as a cultural spectacle to cater for the interest of modern audiences, especially those from overseas.

paying a New Year call from door to door. Tietou's story is just in accord with the group memories of the mainstream audience thirty years later (when the film was shot in 1993). Some scenes in *To Live* and *Farewell My Concubine* represent similar impressions. The posters about the Great Leap, scenes of the collective dining-hall, the sight of the Red Guards, propaganda on state radio broadcast, political slogans and banners, mass parade, drums and red flags, and portraits of Chairman Mao all over the streets – as the crucial stereotypes that have been used in presenting the period of the late 1950s and 1960s – all arouse the audience's own nostalgic feelings.

For those who have experienced the “Mao era”<sup>160</sup>, all of these past illusions are not of any author's brand of personal attitude and style, nor an individual mirage from any directors. As precise cultural symbols in mass consciousness, they construct a model of the “past everyday” into a contemporary mass culture, though sometimes it seems politically idealized. As Xu Bi points out, any yearning for, or recollections of the Mao era and its related (political) movements should be viewed as a kind of “collective memory”<sup>161</sup>. Because even the most individual memory is sure to happen in certain social frameworks that constitute a fundamental condition of a memory to be understood by others.<sup>162</sup> Xu then borrows Lev Vygotsky's point and argues that the

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<sup>160</sup> The history of the People's Republic of China is often divided distinctly into the “Mao era” and the “post-Mao era”. The Mao era lasted from the founding of the People's Republic on October 1, 1949 to Deng Xiaoping's grip on power and policy reversal at the Third Plenum of the 11th Party Congress in December, 1978. The first wave of nostalgia in contemporary Chinese cinema usually focuses on Mao's social movements from the early 1950s onwards, including Land Reform, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution, and evaluates Mao's ideological/cultural legacy as a whole.

<sup>161</sup> “Collective memory” is a term coined by Maurice Halbwachs, separating the notion from the individual memory. The collective memory is shared, passed on and also constructed by the group, or modern society. Recently, the concept has extended to include the human body as a site for the collective processes of retention and propagation of memory in mass media, like film and television news broadcasting. For more information, please refer to Maurice Halbwachs (1992) *On collective memory*, translated and re-edited by Lewis A. Coser, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

<sup>162</sup> Xu Bi (徐贲 2006) “Cultural Relic Collections and Nostalgia in Mass Culture”, *Chinese Art Criticism*, 2006-10.



reason every human being has a grand memory is not because they have inherent power to remember, but must recall their memory through the use of cultural symbols. Without an exogenous process, symbols can directly touch/enlighten thoughts and ideas in people's minds. That is memory/recollection.<sup>163</sup> We understand the nostalgia of Mao's era today exactly by means of various social, cultural symbols and relics of that period. Nowadays, those symbols have already lost the ability to control the current ideology, but still constantly strike deep into the memories of the people.<sup>164</sup>

From all appearances, (nostalgia) films have become an excellent carrier/media of cultural symbols to recall the group/public memories. They simultaneously, may throw off those private, isolated, textualized, and sometimes elitist styles, by projecting the (mass) visual symbols on to the screens for depthlessness. They then, to a large extent, do arouse a nostalgic consciousness of the masses towards their "felt" past. Regarding Chinese nostalgia in the early 1990s as a whole, no matter whether it is *Farewell My Concubine*, *Blue Kite*, or *To Live*, they all happen to coincide in their time background, focusing on the Mao era and its ideological situation. Regardless of the length of their time span in the films or how their stories differ in narrative, they all have a similar intersection on the narrative background – China, the 1950s and 60s. The question is why the intersection is formed in a cinematic nostalgia of China in the special period (of the early 1990s).

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<http://www.zgyspp.com/Article/ShowArticle.asp?ArticleID=3084>

<sup>163</sup> Lev Vygotsky (1978) *Mind in Society*, edited by Michael Cole, Vera John-Steiner, Sylvia Scribner, and Ellen Souberman. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Cited in Bi Xu (2006) *ibid*.

<sup>164</sup> Xu (2006) *ibid*.

There must have been some cause for the coincidence.

Perhaps on the one hand, it is closely bound up with the social environments of the fifth generation directors' early growth. Chen Kaige and Tian Zhuangzhuang were both born in 1952, and have similar family backgrounds, so that they befriended each other at an early age. Their parents were famous filmmakers (or actors) in China and all heavily criticized political movements subsequently.<sup>165</sup> This has probably resulted in their keen interest in representing that specific period in their later professional career. Those representations of the 1950s/60s – reflected in the contemporary Chinese cinema of the 1990s when the economic and political reform had been implemented for more than a decade – must have contained intense emotions/senses of scar literature or ideological criticism. Another director, Zhang Yimou, was born in Xian 1951. Though Chen and Tian were his contemporaries (1978-1982) at the Beijing Film Academy, yet comparatively speaking, Zhang's early experience seems quite different. He had not suffered from the many changes in the political wind.<sup>166</sup> Perhaps, this point partially leads to his *To Live* containing more

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<sup>165</sup> Chen's father, Chen Huaikai was once a famous film director in the early period of the Beijing Film Studio. When Chen Kaige was in junior high school, he had participated in criticizing his father on a public gathering as a Red Guard, but was expelled subsequently from the organization for his "counter-revolutionary" family blood. Tian's father was the first head manager of the Beijing Film Studio, but he was then criticized and died despite the Cultural Revolution. In 1966, Tian Zhuangzhuang had witnessed his parents being violently criticized by Red Guards. For more information about their sufferings in early life, please refer to Adam Lam (2000, 162, 251); and Sha Hui "Passing Melody of the Sad Youth – the Chinese Fifth Generation and What Succeeds" (4-13).

<sup>166</sup> Zhang's father and his father's two brothers all graduated from The Whampoa Military Academy of Kuomintang before 1949, but not like Chen and Tian's parents who first became communist cadres in socialist China and then were persecuted in the political movements. So since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the generation of Zhang's father had already gone down the wind and not been a main target of political struggle. That led to a negative but peaceful family background for Zhang, who developed a great inferiority complex over his childhood. It seems quite distinct from Chen and Tian's early experiences where their parents' radical ups and downs in their political life possibly led to their accumulated rancor in early age. For Zhang's early life, please refer to Wang Zheng (184).

humorous and comic material than the other two films directed by Chen and Tian which tend to be more inexorable, solemn and frank as a result of an exposure to left-leaning ideology in their early days. Sha Hui, in her recent article “Passing Melody of the Sad Youth – the Chinese Fifth Generation and What Succeeds”, wrote

The Cultural Revolution, as a course of growth in their early life, has become a perennial dream lingering in the minds of Chen Kaige and other fifth generation directors. Just because of this, there have come the three comparable films that together appeared in international film festivals<sup>167</sup>, *Farewell My Concubine* (1993), *The Blue Kite* (1993), and *To Live* (1994). Even though it [the burst of nostalgia movies in China in the early 1990s] was not cooperation in concert with the directors’ efforts, it at least happened to coincide with a chorus of a battle-cry. It is obvious that these directors, who had experienced national and domestic calamity in the Cultural Revolution when they were young, still suffered considerable discomfort from feelings of deep hurt. That led to their works being loaded with omnipresent emotions of complaint and anger. (Sha 7)<sup>168</sup>

It must be clear that the above-quoted “emotions” do not only derive from personal anger or release by individual “fifth” directors. Their attitudes in the films, to a great extent, conform to a general ideological orientation of contemporary China, such as what Sha mentions, to associate their family experiences with the whole “national calamity” of China.

On the other hand, the reason China in the period of the 1950s and 60s became

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<sup>167</sup> The international awards for the three films and their situation of overseas distribution will be introduced in the next chapter.

<sup>168</sup> “少年时代所经历的‘文革’，是陈凯歌和他所代表的“第五代”挥之不去的旧梦。正因为如此，才有先后在国际上获奖并经常被人相提并论的三部影片，陈凯歌的《霸王别姬》、田壮壮的《蓝风筝》和张艺谋的《活着》。这即使不是一次齐心协力的合作，至少也是不约而同的大合唱，可以看出，这些在‘文革’中经历了国与家的巨大变故的少年，至今仍对他们受到的伤害耿耿于怀，这使得他们的作品中弥漫着一种无处不在的控诉感和愤怒的情绪。”

a target of the filmic interest of the 1990s, has a close bearing on the political discourse and ideological context of that period. From the founding of socialist China (1949) till the 1970s, before the economic reform and opening-up, China had experienced a period of relatively pure socialist movements, where most of the crowds were forced to break away from capitalist, colonialist, and feudalist domination and their life styles. The whole country had to lose its individual colours of personal life and live under the rule of a highly-centralized socialist ideology. The economy, education, social culture, and everyday life were all dominated by the single-polar political system at that time, which provided the ordinary Chinese citizen with a relatively unified cultural context and an orthodox political discourse. People all over the country read *The Little Red Book*<sup>169</sup>, wore a green/blue uniform or Mao suit, actively applied for party membership, watched revolutionary films, and sang revolutionary songs similarly. In brief, that period left the people with quite stereotyped impressions that supply vivid symbols of culture, of the past, and of nostalgia today. Thus, no matter whether it is Tietou in *Blue Kite* or Fugui in *To Live*, the life stories of the two families can resonate with the audience, and be close to the past daily life of the Chinese masses. It is the unknown living experience of the never-was that becomes the basis of a trivialized nostalgia and creates a common narrative context.

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<sup>169</sup> Also called *Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong*, it was published by the Chinese Government from April 1964 until approximately 1976. As its title implies, it is a collection of quotations excerpted from Mao Zedong's past speeches and publications. As one of the most printed books in history, it had an estimated 5 to 6.5 billion copies printed during Mao's attempt to transform Chinese society. The book's phenomenal popularity may be due to the fact that it was essentially an unofficial requirement for every Chinese citizen to own, to read, and to carry it at all times during the Cultural Revolution. During the 1960s, the book was one of the single most visible icons in mainland China. The importance of the book waned considerably after the rise of Deng Xiaoping in 1978.

#### 5.4.4. Postmodern Nostalgia, as Distinct from Personal Homesickness

Postmodern nostalgia is demonstrably distinct from any personal homesickness in the general sense of nostalgia. Postmodern culture in contemporary Chinese cinema is probably inclined to introduce a nostalgic sense into certain public, socialized, and ideological contexts of the everyday in a past tense rather than some individual recollections. This point is to a large extent based on the understanding of the three films mentioned above. No matter how differently, the stories have been viewed from the directors' standpoints; the films all represent pieces of history – whether they are the destinies of Peking opera in various periods of the twentieth century or the hard chapter of the political movements reflected in *Blue Kite* and *To Live*. However, compared with another film, *My Memories of Old Beijing* (Wu Yigong, 1982), what is reflected from the three films are extreme social and ideological landscapes rather than pure personal experiences or memories; because the stories of postmodern nostalgia (in China) are provided with the general typicality of a whole time spirit but not with any form of escapism for individuals.

This point can be partially proved by the fates of the protagonists at the end of those films. Bean in *Farewell My Concubine* loses his love, his stage, his dignity of art, one after the other, and is humiliated by Red Guards; but eventually he is still unaccustomed to a life of stress, which leads to his suicide. Such a conclusion of the

film makes Bean, the protagonist, place an individual identity in real life on one side and separate from an escape and the numbness of grief; he then looks back and faces straight/bravely the social pressures of the past reality. In this sense, his death is not merely an individual story, but it strongly suggests an impression of its time and marks the passing of an old epoch that was morally and spiritually distorted. In *Blue Kite*, Tietou firstly loses his father in the Anti-rightist Movement around 1957, and then loses his stepfather (in succession) in the period of the Great Chinese Famine (1959-61). Finally when his second stepfather is caught away from home by Red Guards at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, Tietou, a boy aged about fourteen years, chooses to face the reality with courage and to grapple with the Red Guards. As a result, he is laid out in front of his house, but he comes round after a time. While lying on the ground, Tietou looks up into the sky and sees his broken blue kite being wound round the branches of a tree. It is swaying in midair, but cannot freely ride on the wind. If we consider this as a metaphorical expression of the ideological stresses at that time, the image of the stuck kite has not been of any specific sort of personal memory. Perhaps, instead it has become part of the collective consciousness of the Chinese masses that had experienced the past. *To Live* is interrelated with a social reality as well. Fugui (the protagonist) successively loses his son and daughter, but he still encourages his grandson that “our life is getting better and better”. This shows that Fugui has an optimistic vision of the future he wants for later ages. However it also contains a subtext that in the past of China there was too much distress and sadness for the crowd to avoid, so that they can but place reliance optimistically on

the future. Thus the conclusion of the film does not avoid narrating any social context.

Comparatively speaking, the ending of *My Memories of Old Beijing* seems not to be combined with much public/group images of a social reality. The movie script was adapted from a personal homesickness story by Lin Haiyin (林海音 a writer in Taiwan) who spent her childhood in 1920s' Beijing. The film pieces out some of her nostalgic recollections and changes them into three dim memories of the protagonist, Yingzi (a young girl from the age of six to twelve). At the end of the film, Yingzi sits in a carriage with her family and leaves the city. She takes leave of her own childhood with a sense of uncertainty locked in her little mind. There is little relationship between the personal leave-taking and the historical/social reality. Therefore one may consider it as a nostalgic romance that offers an escape from a public reality of the past. Thus the memories of childhood are only a blur that seem like a fairy tale full of personal nostalgia, but it only exists in and shelters under private emotions; rather than any socialized context that would make a mass/postmodern consciousness stand out as a narrative subject being prominently displayed through the cultural symbols of the time.

The film does not completely lack contemporary visual signs of the 1920s; but those old costumes, buildings and street scenes in *My Memories of Old Beijing* are not highlighted or expressed as the crucial stuff of postmodern nostalgia. Perhaps, it is partially because that those visual signs of the 1920s seem to be not sufficient to

arouse more socialized memories of the mainstream audiences sixty years later when the film was premiered in the 1980s. As time has gone by, it seems unavoidable that the nostalgic feelings from the film will gradually fade away from the minds of the new generation of contemporary readers and their life experiences. Especially in the sense of this research, which focuses on Chinese society since the 1990s, *My Memories of Old Beijing* seems like a recollection of “history” or a personal feeling of a past, but no longer a social/mass nostalgia. This is not because nostalgia loses its function, but that probably the generation today has already lost its capability of reaching that trace through their experiences. It could be considered as a spectacle in the future, but it is a spectacle of a strange history rather than the nostalgia accumulated by the readable symbols. If there were any reconstruction of collective consciousness or ideological context left in the film, it would be better considered as a delicate hint of the spatial absence – a homesickness – of (some of the) Taiwanese who had left their native place (the mainland of China) for several decades (since 1949), than as nostalgia for Beijing.

Fundamentally, a nostalgic transition in the 1990s – from *My Memories of Old Beijing* to *Farewell My Concubine*, *Blue Kite*, and *To Live* – indicates that contemporary Chinese culture is moving towards a social recollection beyond stylized individual or personal feelings. Thus what (postmodern) nostalgia represents in the period of the 1990s, to a great degree, reflects the past of society, of the ideology, and of the collective memories as a whole through their cultural symbols. An essential



difference consists in those personal memories (in their sense of modernist aesthetics) that can often trace back to one's own past through imitations of their unique styles – just as Lowenthal pointed out, “we mourn a lost immediacy” to remind ourselves “however sad our present lot we were once happy and worthwhile” (8). So a personal memory-sickness does usually dwell in a past tense, in reflection of the past that is not an easy parting. But postmodern nostalgia is largely based on a comparison with the present time. It combines all the socialized symbols from the past and spreads them out on the surface today without the signified. It then forms a collage of past images floating on the present to hold a memorial ceremony for sacrifice. Similarly to a photograph of the deceased at a funeral, nostalgia of the postmodern is not directly related to a past any more. Instead, it has changed into stereotyped impressions resting on the present forever, but leaving a past itself untouchable.

### **5.5. The Suspecting Effect**

In addition, it seems that nostalgic context (in the postmodern sense) constructs a past related realism presenting the everyday. But the (above-mentioned) “untouchable stereotypes” of the past are purely imaginary reality. Realization, writing or painting realistically, means going closer to not only the history but also a sense of reality from the audience. As far as ordinary experiences are concerned, compared with the irrelevant grand historical discourse (such as those monumentalizing events in *Forrest Gump*, or the dream to be a hero in *An Orphan*

*Joins the Army*), people probably have more interest in nostalgia through which their own facts and experiences of the past can be traced or aroused. However, realism does not promise an authentic reality or history. Here, two opinions (one from Baudrillard, and the other from Jameson) elaborate how nostalgia facilitates certain suspicions through trivialized reality in postmodern culture.

### 5.5.1. Excessive Simulation

In the light of Baudrillard's thinking, a realization strategy in nostalgia of postmodern film can be probably reduced to a reproduction of the appearance (duplication of superficial images). In other words, nostalgia can be considered as the "flooded symbols of the postmodern"<sup>170</sup> that isolates from any signified image (or truth). In the meantime, postmodern culture itself is becoming even more a world surrounded by hyperreality, and a world of "superficial images seemingly 'invented with the screen in mind', where 'life is cinema'"; however, when nostalgia films move "the perfect simulacrum" (Baudrillard *America* 28 55 and 101; or qtd. in Rizter 106) of the past into such a vivid cinema, its consequence may probably be reversed – deviating from a sense of reality. As Lam argues:

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<sup>170</sup> “后现代泛滥的符码” Adam Lam (2005) Baudrillard's "The Fatal Strategies", in *Post-Cultural Revolution Chinese National Cinema and Global Culture*, Beijing: Cultural and Art Publishing House, p74. When talking about the cultural simulation and the fatal strategies, Lam points that "The cultural simulation seems inevitable. To resist cultural simulation effectively, Baudrillard, a postmodernist theoretician in the West, calls for some fatal strategies... [Which means] by playing on the dual meanings of fatal as both predestined or inevitable and disastrous or deadly." See Lam (2000), p156. For more information on fatal strategies and their application in Chinese culture, please refer to Baudrillard (1988) *Selected Writings*, Mark Poster (ed.) Stanford: Stanford University Press, p183-99; or Baudrillard (1999) *Fatal Strategies*, translated by Philip Beitchman and W.G.J. Niesluchowski ; edited by Jim Fleming. London: Pluto Press; and Lam (2005) p74 or Lam (2000) p155-60.

In a postmodern culture full of hyperreal symbols and a world where the reality and the truth have already disappeared, it seems impossible to resist the seductions of commodities, powerful cultures, and symbols... Now that the truth has faded out from the symbols without trace, it looks unpractical to pick it up again in the collaged visual symbols [or appearances]; on the contrary it, to prominently present their essential character of simulation through the accelerated duplication of those symbols, is perhaps practical to help people realize the fact that the real truth has ceased to exist.<sup>171</sup>

For Baudrillard, nostalgia films can be also read as the “ecstasy and inertia” of suspicions of (or confrontation with) the reality:

We will not seek changes, nor oppose the fixed and immobile; we will seek what is more mobile than mobile: metamorphosis [...] We will not distinguish the true from the false; we will seek what is more false than the false: illusion and appearance. (*Selected* 183)

Nostalgic images provide an opportunity for this kind of illusion and appearance. Whether it was the purpose of providing consumer product, aesthetic value, political criticism, or a target of novelty-hunting, as Zhang Xudong argues, “the professional visual quality” of these cinematic nostalgia and “the riot of colors, images and unheard-of stories” of the past, at first in essence, present a sense of “postmodern authenticity” (*Trauma* 31). But how can one read the word “authenticity” here in a postmodern sense? It may be argued that when it has been unavoidable for an authenticity to sink into a monetary system and then have a certain consumption value, or to suit a transformation of the political environment by developing some ideological criticism, or even to follow the steps of cultural globalization and

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<sup>171</sup> “在一个真实与真理已经消失在后现代‘超仿真’符码里的时代，抵御商品、强势文化、符码的诱惑并不可能……真理既然已经消失在符码中，在符码堆里去重拾也是不现实的，反而加快这些符码的复制，特显他们的仿真本质，或许可以帮助人们意识到真理已不复存这一事实。” (Lam 2005, 74)

changing completely into a visual spectacle for a cosmopolitan spectator, a fact seems undeniable: that this kind of (postmodern) authenticity and its appearances (those riots of signifiers) – in contemporary culture, including China – have been gradually divorced from the essence that they relied on (namely the past of the original) and have evolved into senseless (visual) signs<sup>172</sup> that break away from fixed signified(s). Signs, for Baudrillard, are not simply an “object”; rather they are a seductive object. No matter whether it (such as the nostalgic appearance) is a temptation for the box-office in the market economy, of elites in political criticism, or of the global audience in novelty hunting, Baudrillard always emphasizes the object of seduction, rather than the so-called desire of the subject from Freud. In fact, seduction is power. “Only the object is seductive... all initiative and power are on the other side, the side of the object” (Baudrillard *Fatal* 119).

However seduction is merely a factor of what Baudrillard termed “fatal strategies”. He pointed out that objects possess various fatal strategies; and in describing what he means by a fatal strategy, Baudrillard says “something responds of its own accord, something from which it is impossible to escape” (qtd. in Gane *Interviews* 50). The fatal strategy of nostalgic signs does not only consist in its mysterious narrative to rewrite a past, but also in the distance from the “authenticity” embodied by nostalgia to the real reality of the original past. It is the fate that this gap

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<sup>172</sup> Here as George Ritzer argued, it is better to think of the postmodern authenticity as what Kellner called “games with signs”. “We tend to think of seduction and illusion as false and therefore to be rejected in our search for the ‘truth’. However, for Baudrillard illusion is not false and does not involve false signs; rather it is senseless, involving senseless signs.” (Ritzer 110)

can never be filled. Fatal strategies lay great stress on the power of the object. Nostalgic appearance/representation as an object, just embodies its power, its being and meaning. What if one were to return to a past, to find out what its true colours look like, and if there were no difference between nostalgia and history, what could nostalgia do? Would it have the (false) allure of history any more? Would it be necessary for it to exist any longer? Perhaps as postmodern culture is concerned, “there is no real, there never was a real. Seduction knows this, and preserves its enigma” (Baudrillard *Fatal* 108). Postmodern nostalgia is such a seduction, which as Baudrillard argues, shows “our fundamental destiny” that is “not to exist and survive, as we think: it is to appear and disappear. That alone seduces and fascinates us. That alone is scene and ceremony” (*Fatal* 175). This is exactly a hyperreal world full of illusions that originally result from seduction rather than desire. Therefore, the existence of nostalgia (as the object) not only proves that Chinese culture today could not resist the temptation to visit the past, but also tends to hint at the fatal distance between the nostalgic authenticity and a reality of the original. As a power of “ecstasy and inertia” (Baudrillard *Selected* 185), the distance preserves its enigma of historicity through the constant reproduction of nostalgia.

### 5.5.2. The “Past” in Our Mind

On the other hand, for Jameson, the trivialized realism of nostalgia is aimed at bringing that universal and objective consciousness of the masses back to their

subjective/internal souls and their sensory impressions; and verifying their own experiences of history by the time span, so that those transcendental, fated, fixed, unitary, and impersonal realities of history are immersed in certain scepticism.

According to him, nostalgia films

... do not represent our historical past so much as they represent our ideas or cultural stereotypes [prejudice] about that past.... Cultural production has been driven back inside the mind, within the monadic subject: it can no longer look directly out of its eyes at the real world for the referent but must, as in Plato's cave, trace its mental images of the world on its confining walls. If there is any realism left here, it is a 'realism' which springs from the shock of grasping that confinement and of realizing that, for whatever peculiar reasons, we seem condemned to seek the historical past through our own pop images and stereotypes about the past, which itself remains forever out of reach. (Jameson *Consumer* 118)

This is a definition of nostalgia film according to Jameson: it is a product of mass culture in post-industrial society, a kind of visible description based on superficial images, instead of any textual or language prison<sup>173</sup>; and it is a visual cultural expression that can directly communicate with the heart. This kind of direct-viewing narrative seems quite different from heroic and epic narratives. Its difference is not only embodied in the distance between old memories and great legends, but also presented in the capability of arousing audience interests. Those nostalgic contexts (build into the 1930s of *Chinatown*, the 1950s of *Back to the Future*, or the 1950s and 1960s of Chinese nostalgias) look more tangible than those stiff, grand, and august film discourses, such as *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000), *Troy* (Wolfgang Petersen,

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<sup>173</sup> Refer to Jameson's idea in *The Prison-House of Language* (Jameson, 1972). Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

2004), and the *Indiana Jones* series (Steven Spielberg, 1981, 1984, 1989, 1992, and 2008).

### 5.6. An Idealizing Nostalgia

Nevertheless, the nostalgic sense of the past does not derive from any “real” history, but from the fusion of nostalgic appearances (of films) and subjective illusions (of the viewer). Jameson sees this as “our ideas or cultural stereotypes [prejudice] about [the] past”, in other words, it is certain ideological or utopian memories in our minds. It is important to emphasize the difference between “idealizing nostalgia” (or “the ordinary traces of old everyday life”) and an official history in postmodernity. John Frow argues:

The past is reworked through different economies of value, and acquires a correspondingly differential force. The concept of the everyday may in its own way be as much an idealizing and a unifying category as that of the national, but it is perhaps more workable, more flexible, more open to multiple appropriations than the modes of official history. At the same time, however, it remains crucial to guard a deep suspicion of the auratic object, whatever the uses to which it may seem to lend itself. Nostalgia for a lost authenticity is a paralyzing structure of historical reflection. (79)

As a result, postmodern nostalgia, with all kinds of periods opening up for “aesthetic colonization”, tries to “witness the stylistic recuperation” (Jameson *Postmodernism* 19) of revolutionary China; and it is looking to the old period-related superficiality (the appearance and stereotypes) to result in a startling proliferation of individual perspectives on history, that is an unfixed and pluralistic concept of history.

By this token, it can lead to such a premonition that those simulations deriving from flatness and visual appearance may probably ferment a profound turbulence related to historical consciousness (in China). Properly speaking, that will directly relate to the subjective ideology, and lead to a suspicion about the absolute (fixed) objectivity of the past. As a result people's previous ideologies may differ as time goes on. Nostalgia just reminds us of temporal variability around time. I agree with Susan Stewart that nostalgia is "the repetition that mourns the inauthenticity of all repetition". According to her, nostalgia is sadness without object. Nostalgia,

is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack. Hostile to history and its invisible origins, and yet longing for an impossibly pure context of lived experience at a place of origin, nostalgia wears a distinctly utopian face, a face that turns toward a future-past, a past which has only ideological reality.  
(23)

This opinion answers my previous doubt: nostalgia film attracts us with rapt attention to a certain form of the past; however, is the form a real reality in the real past? It seems not. If nostalgia constructs a certain past, then it proves the absence of that past – at least the lack on the objective level – the inability to represent a historical authenticity. Consequently, all discussion around nostalgia will rest on ideological grounds, and talk about cultural illusions and representations of a utopian past, such as those political issues in ideologies and consumer desires in economies. They will be discussed in the following chapters.



## Chapter Six

### To Be Nostalgic Overseas

This chapter will focus on the ideological illusions of nostalgia and its cultural consequences. Discussions in the last two chapters have mentioned that, from a historical standpoint, the Chinese cinema of the early 1990s had really experienced a series of nostalgic narratives. The fifth generation directors gained a widespread reputation in the world at that time. The three major figures, Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou, and Tian Zhuangzhuang, had offered their most famous works, respectively *Farewell My Concubine*, *To Live*, and the *Blue Kite*, which intellectually and artistically led to such extensive influence that they had largely consolidated their positions as the best known fifth generation filmmakers internationally. (Wang *Myth* 67-79)

However, the domestic distribution and box-office of the three films were not encouraging, when compared with their success abroad. Even to this day, the *Blue Kite* and *To Live* still lack permission for a public premiere by the local film bureau, nor can any box-office statistics be reliable in the domestic market. Presumably it is the cinematic content in relation to certain ideological taboos that have produced such tender and sensitive results. In fact the nostalgic films of the early 1990s contain an especial period of history, the thirty years of Chinese history from the founding of the People's Republic of China (1949) to the end of the Cultural Revolution (the late

1970s). The nostalgic narratives in that period generally reflect some political movements. Such social unrest, through its political appearances and description in postmodern nostalgia, obviously involves the films in trouble with censorship.

While certain political nostalgia was not allowed any release in the domestic market, the Chinese cinema shifted its stress to overseas interests in the 1990s. From then on, nostalgic films from China began to consciously construct some globalized illusions that to some extent distort historical authenticity, separate from Chinese social realities. They attempted certain representational distortion in order to cater for exotic novelty hunting from overseas. This was likely to make the cultural connotation of the Chinese cinema temporarily isolated from its local reality and ideological trauma, and become a common subject-matter of today's global market.

All of these issues result in a series of further considerations: What is it that blocks Chinese nostalgia in its domestic film distribution and public showing? What are the relations between Chinese nostalgia fettered by political ideology and a Western nostalgic sense for the counter-culture movements of the 1960s? What functions does orientalism perform in the 'exotic' nostalgia?

To answer the above questions, the main points and arguments of this chapter are as follows. Though the films are greatly successful overseas, they are simultaneously limited, censored, banned in, or excluded from the domestic market.

“Banned in China” has become an international trade mark to attract foreign attention, whereas political retrospection is one of the main reasons preventing them passing the domestic censorship. A sudden change in the political climate of the late 1980s and an international background of the films’ investment proved that, from the very beginning, those films were largely shot for and focused on an overseas audience. The Chinese “nostalgia” (or, as it can be called, the first nostalgic wave of the Chinese cinema) in this sense could probably be extended to an international longing for the past radical movements of the Sixties in the Western world. Thus the first wave of nostalgia takes up a fawning position towards the West and simultaneously distorts its own historical reality.

## **6.1. Going Abroad, Distribution and Censorship**

### **6.1.1. International Reputation and Distribution**

The three films, the *Blue Kite*, *Farewell My Concubine*, and *To Live*, yielded unusually brilliant results at overseas film festivals in the early 1990s. The *Blue Kite* first won the Grand Prix (the highest award), the Best Actress Award, and three Special Mention Awards at the Tokyo International Film Festival in 1993. Then in the same year it won the Best Feature Film at the Hawaii International Film Festival. After that it was nominated for the Independent Spirit Award in California in 1995. *Farewell My Concubine* began its splendid success in Cannes, France, 1993. It is the

first and the only Golden Palm<sup>174</sup> that Chinese speaking movies have ever won. Later the film also won another twelve awards in the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA), Boston Film Festival, the Japanese National Society of Film Critics, Poland's Film Festival, LA Golden Globes and the New York Film Festival in succession. *Farewell My Concubine* was nominated for two Oscars (Best Foreign Film and Best Photography)<sup>175</sup> as well in 1994. That same year, *To Live* won three awards and a nomination at Cannes, a Best Film not in the English Language from BAFTA, and it was nominated for the Best Film on Golden Globes in the following year.

Along with their successes in festivals was the films' box-office overseas. According to statistics published in the *Movie World*, in the United States alone *Farewell My Concubine* made more than five million US dollars. This success is quite close to the sum total of Zhang Yimou's red trilogy films<sup>176</sup> in the U.S. *To Live* also made more than two million US dollars from the American box-office, which is much higher than some of Zhang's subsequent films (in America), such as *Not One Less* (1999), *The Road Home* (2000), and *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles* (2005). By contrast, the *Blue Kite* only made 0.36 million in the U.S., which was probably a result of the depressing sentiment of the narrative and its lack of film promotion.

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<sup>174</sup> In 1993, *Farewell My Concubine* shared the Golden Palm Award with Jane Campion's *The Piano*, a New Zealand film.

<sup>175</sup> The film represented Hong Kong at the Oscar. *Farewell My Concubine* was made through co-operation between Mainland China and Hong Kong, but the main investor (HK Tomson) is actually controlled by Taiwan. So the film is a model of filmic cooperation between the Mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

<sup>176</sup> The trilogy includes *Red Sorghum* (1989), *Ju Dou* (1990), and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1992).

Nevertheless, its achievement in the U.S. box-office is still better than some other famous Chinese speaking films, such as Ang Lee's *Pushing Hands* (1992), Wong Kar Wai's *Happy Together* (1997), *Fallen Angels* (1995), and *Days of Being Wild* (1990) (Tang 27-9). In addition, Zhang Xudong recalled that "when the film [*Blue Kite*] made its way to the 1994 New York Film Festival, it became a hot ticket and received rave reviews nationwide" (Zhang Xudong *Trauma* 34). It was not easy for three artistic films to achieve such a brilliant success in the overseas market fifteen years ago, when a Chinese film still lacked universal attention<sup>177</sup> in a world dominated by Hollywood.

#### 6.1.2. The Silent Treatment

However, such an international reputation is quite different from the way the films have been treated in China. The silent treatment by the Chinese official administration forms a striking contrast with the foreign rave notices.

Presumably because the film content includes a certain far left political history of China, the *Blue Kite* has been unable to pass the local censorship since its editing was completed in 1992. Soon afterward the film was sent to the Tokyo International Film Festival by its Japanese investor without the permission of the Chinese Film Bureau, and won the highest award there as a "Japanese movie" in 1993, which led the issue becoming so acute that the Chinese film delegation stormed off from the

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<sup>177</sup> It is commonly known that a large scale commercial (and cultural) export of Chinese language films started from Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) that won an Oscar for the Best Foreign Language Film in 2001. See Huang Shixian (55); or Zhu Ying (53).

festival. This left the *Blue Kite* as a nasty incident that brought shame to Sino-Japanese relations. In consequence, the film has never been premiered in China up until today. Its director, Tian, was punished as well with the full rigor of the local film bureau. He was prohibited from directing films for the next ten years. The *Blue Kite* was his one and only film in the 1990s.

One year later, in 1994, *To Live* faced a similar adversity. Because of its absurd and satiric description, it has been given a durable silent treatment in the Chinese official film market. Nowadays, Chinese audiences can only watch the two films on pirated disks or illegal Internet connections rather than in cinemas. Even so, these films are still well-known in China,<sup>178</sup> though it is hard to support this fact with any official statistics.<sup>179</sup> The reason these films are of universal concern among the people depends on at least four factors, one of which is the celebrity appeal of both the fifth generation directors and film stars. Second, they profit from being admired at overseas film festivals. Third, that also benefit from new media technologies that break through the official block in cinemas; the overflow disks/Internet is becoming a typical postmodern subversion against a controlling force of the mainstream discourse (by the government, or say the elite culture). Finally, the silent treatment along with a

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<sup>178</sup> An informal comment from the Internet is that cinemas in the mainland of China may never receive any copy of *To Live*, but all over the cities there are many Chinese families that possibly treasure their copy (pirate DVD). Xiaoxie Huang (2000) Baidu – Chinese film column – *To Live*, <http://baike.baidu.com/view/3408.htm> Last access: 19 Dec. 2007

<sup>179</sup> China started to build its own box-office statistical system gradually only from 1994, so the results of the statistics are not very reliable. On the other hand, with the large-scale prevalence of the Internet and DVDs in the 1990s, the official box-office seems not high enough to reflect the real size of the audience for each film in China. See the article “Why is it hard to count the Chinese film box-office?” Southern Network – Entertainment Edition, 2001-12-24, <http://www.southcn.com/ENT/yulefirst/200112240368.htm> Last access: 4 Oct. 2010

political taboo has the opposite effect from its original intention and causes more curiosity in the masses to explore the ‘forbidden’ films. Beyond those extrinsic factors above, an ideological connotation from its nostalgic narratives could probably be an important reason that will be discussed later on.

Compared with the two films above, the distribution for *Farewell My Concubine* seems a little smoother. Although it was stopped from premiering domestically at first, it was permitted a public showing<sup>180</sup> among a small circle in China after it won the Golden Palm from Cannes. But there is a precondition that any advertisements and promotions for its distribution are not allowed in the local market, nor can the film be sent to any national and local film festivals.<sup>181</sup> Therefore it is still criticized overseas as a typical ‘forbidden’ film in China. In his article “Banned in China”, James Mudge mentions:

[T]he 1993 *Farewell My Concubine* was initially banned in its home country despite winning the prestigious Palme d'Or at Cannes, mainly for its tackling of homosexuality and its depiction of the country's tumultuous modern history. Following its hailing around the world as a masterpiece, the film was grudgingly released, albeit in cut form.<sup>182</sup>

However, this discussion is not going to focus on any individual film texts but

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<sup>180</sup> The Chinese film industry had a lack of ability in its box-office statistics at that time, so there is no accurate data from the official box-office for *Farewell My Concubine* in domestic market. One estimates about 9 million Yuan (RMB), the other says 20 million Yuan, and the latest data from the “Domestic box-office ranking list” in *Mtime* is 40 million Yuan. But the list does not mention whether its data was of the time (1993) or is for an accumulated box-office today. <http://www.mtime.com/group/yeying/discussion/418181/> Last access: 4 Oct. 2010

<sup>181</sup> Please refer to a news report “*Farewell My Concubine* Has Eventually Broken the Ban, It Makes A Stir in Shanghai Without Promotion”, in *Cheng Bao*, 28<sup>th</sup> July, 1993.

<sup>182</sup> James Mudge (2008) *Banned in China*, online: <http://www.yesasia.com/us/yumcha/banned-in-china.html> Last access: 15 May 2009

on a common situation (a cold reception by the authorities) that the three films face jointly. There are reasons to believe it is the integral nostalgic connotation of a whole in the early 1990s that must be involved in conflict with the mainstream (official) ideology. In any case, a clash between films and government will normally reflect on its censorship first. It seems necessary to give a brief introduction to that.

### 6.1.3. Censorship or Promotion?

In the Oxford Dictionary, the word ‘censorship’ is defined as follows: an authorized act or policy of censoring books, films, plays, letters etc and a proper act to remove parts which are considered indecent, offensive, politically unacceptable or (esp. in war) a threat to security.<sup>183</sup> That is to say, when certain modifications or a cut form cannot completely avoid the above troubles, works will be kept away from the public, or at least separated from the mainstream field of vision.

The executing agency of film censorship in China is called the “State Administration of Radio, Film and Television” (SARFT)<sup>184</sup>. What should be mentioned is that China is not the one and only country in the world that takes advantage of film censorship. Many other countries have set up similar administration

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<sup>183</sup> Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary (2004), the third edition, p255.

<sup>184</sup> Literally 国家广播电影电视总局. Chinese Film Bureau (电影管理局) is a subordinate body of SARFT. As for what the bureau is responsible for, please refer to its official website:  
<http://www.sarft.gov.cn/articles/2008/08/07/20070909004206220673.html>



sections, such as the British Board of Film Censors<sup>185</sup>, the Japanese Administration Commission of Motion Picture Code of Ethics<sup>186</sup>, and the Office of Film & Literature Classification, New Zealand<sup>187</sup>. However, as James Mudge pointed in his latest article, it has become an indisputable fact that it is censorship in China that gets most attention from overseas:

Of course, China is by no means the only country in the world to prohibit certain films made within its own borders, though again in this case the productions in question tend to attract a lot more interest, often being seized upon by the international media, or being trumpeted at festivals as causes.<sup>188</sup>

In other words, censorship in China has almost become an attraction point receiving global attention constantly. What is more, it may directly tempt the overseas box-office. The illustration below is a film poster for the *Blue Kite* when it was released in North America, on which it is capitalized in black and red, “THE FILM THAT IS BANNED IN CHINA”. It is so eye-catching that the poster can become a good example of how significant censorship is for its foreign box-office.

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<sup>185</sup> Later, it changed the name to the British Board of Film Classification, BBFC.

<sup>186</sup> えいりんかんりいいんかい, 日本映画倫理規程委員会

<sup>187</sup> The Office of Film & Literature Classification is the Government body responsible for classifying publications that may need to be restricted or banned in New Zealand.

<sup>188</sup> James Mudge (2008) *Banned in China*.



Figure 8. A Poster Advertising the *Blue Kite* Overseas

It can be argued here that one is more likely to read the capitalized words as a highly-coloured promotion implying a certain false allure of the mysterious China. For a foreigner, this temptation comes not only from the geopolitical differences of Chinese culture and society, but also from the mystique of its socialistic ideology, as if an unspeakable national secret could be uncovered immediately by buying a film ticket. But for those who have ever watched the *Blue Kite*, the so-called secret

covered by the film censorship is just a fictional nostalgic story.

In today's global culture, censorship embodies some postmodern elements. For one thing, through its censorship, a Chinese ideological taboo has attracted universal concern all over the world, and gains a potential commercial value gradually. Thus censorship, originally as a media control device, has more and more been transformed into an integral element in global culture. A process of such taboo consumption then partly fragments the controlling force of the will to power of both the government and an elite consciousness. For another, beyond nostalgic appearance (a difference of time) and exotic diversity (a difference of space), censorship (a difference of ideology and politics) becomes the third, independent symbol and a tempting spectacle in a nostalgic culture representing China. As an object of post-modernity, censorship seems to have deviated from the significance of its origin, and has been exploited by some subsequent Chinese films on their overseas promotion. It then turns into a marketing ploy with the purpose of creating temptation, a sign empty of the signified. In the last two decades, many Chinese films, such as Zhang Yuan's *East Palace West Palace* (or called *Behind the Forbidden City*, 1996), Jiang Wen's *Devils on the Doorstep* (2000), Wang Xiaoshuai's *Beijing Bicycle* (2001), Lou Ye's *Suzhou River* (2000), were all sent to international festivals right after editing in an underground way without passing censorship. Then they were accused of that by the local government<sup>189</sup> but succeeded in overseas markets. This strategy continued when Lou

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<sup>189</sup> "Showing out of line in Cannes, Lou Ye will be prohibited from a five-year career", *Shenzhen Evening Paper* 18 May 2006.

Ye sent his *Summer Palace* (2006) to Cannes. As I would like to propose, hidden in the process is that avoiding censorship seems sometimes not to be a passive alternative but an active and positive strategy, even an activator for overseas promotion. Films may not be banned (or isolated from the local cinemas) at first, but filmmakers or distributors wittingly rub the censors (or the authority) up the wrong way in order to promote fame and gain. Whatever the facts may be, Chinese film censorship and other executive resistance as a tempting postmodern cultural symbol cannot be neglected.

Returning to the content of those films, one may wonder what exactly a Chinese censor (or the authority) intends to hide, which leads to such a long-range concern from overseas?

The purposes of censorship are various. In the light of the Chinese film bureau's statute<sup>190</sup>, there are roughly three rules as follows. First, similarly to film censorship (or film classification) in other countries, the film bureau needs to shield a whole film or remove parts which are considered nude, nasty, bloody, violent, or immoral. For instance, *Lost in Beijing* (*Pingguo*, Li Yu, 2007) is banned in China for its overdone nudity and a plot concerning extramarital affairs.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> See "the Film Administrative Byelaw" 《电影管理条例》 Chapter 3: "Film Censorship", in the *Decree of State Council (PRC) No. 342*. 《国务院令 第 342 号》  
<http://www.sarft.gov.cn/articles/2007/02/16/20070913144431120333.html> Last access: 4 Oct. 2010

<sup>191</sup> See "Notification of the Punishment on *Lost in Beijing* by SARFT", 4th January, 2008  
[http://www.gov.cn/zfjg/content\\_850139.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zfjg/content_850139.htm) Last access: 4 Oct. 2010

Second, the bureau and its censorship are also responsible for protecting the national film industry from overseas competition. An unlimited importing of foreign films would probably hit national filmmaking and its market. Thus, in terms of those foreign releases, “the simple truth is that many are withheld, rather than actually banned. This is generally for economic purposes, in an attempt to boost local production and to ensure that screens are not overwhelmed with overseas films”.<sup>192</sup> However such protectionism makes the words, “censor” or “banned”, more confusing. As some of the “banned” films mentioned above are actually involved with foreign investment, these cooperative products could then be reasonably considered “foreign” films. The *Blue Kite* might be called a “Japanese” film and *East Palace West Palace* might be seen as a “French” film. So sometimes the Chinese authorities may just withhold their import permission with the excuse that those “foreign” films are not under consideration. Therefore technically speaking, these films are ignored (excluded) by the Chinese market rather than banned or censored. But if the nationality of an investor can easily change the country of a film, why do the nationalities of directors, actors, stories, filming locations not do the same? These “foreign” films are set in China, shot in China, and their directors and actors are Chinese as well, so there are adequate reasons to call them Chinese films. Then why must “protectionism” isolate a Chinese film from its local market? For this reason, the point is that it is equivalent to being “censored” or “banned” if the Chinese film bureau “ignores” the existence of a successful Chinese film from international festivals or markets. In a broad sense,

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<sup>192</sup> James Mudge (2008)

censorship is the same as protectionism in this context. They can both be understood as interchangeable administrative resistance.

Third, apart from ethical censorship and protectionism, political content unsurprisingly becomes a crucial point of the Chinese film censorship and is considered to be the most important factor that attracts foreign attention:

[O]ne of the main causes for films being banned, and probably the cause which attracts the most attention is political content. Certainly, some kind of social criticism, negative portrayal of the government or revisionism – either based on current or historical events – is usually enough to result in a film being refused release, and often also results in those involved being censored in some capacity, with directors frequently being banned along with their works.<sup>193</sup>

In conclusion, in contrast with the three rules mentioned above, the three nostalgic films seem not to offend against the first rule. The *Blue Kite* and *To Live* do not contain any nude, nasty or immoral issues at all. As for *Farewell My Concubine*, though a homosexual plot is implied, it is without explicit expression. When the film was shown in China, such a plot was not removed or amended overmuch. It is obvious that gayness was not the main misgiving focused on by the censor. In addition, the domestic film industry benefiting from a national protectionism seems wrong to reject those nostalgic films (directed, played, set, and shot in China). After all they are not a threat to local filmmaking, whereas the films could help the export of culture. In this case, the main reasons for their prohibition or restriction should be related to their political content and the source of investment. These factors closely concern its

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<sup>193</sup> James Mudge (2008)

nostalgic readership.

#### 6.1.4. The Target Audience of the First Nostalgic Wave

At the end of Chapter 4, the three films (*Farewell My Concubine*, the *Blue Kite*, and *To Live*) have been classified as the first nostalgic wave in contemporary China. If we see the three films as a whole in considering a holistic nostalgic tendency of the wave, the discussion above has proved that it is in their overall character that the films happened to coincide in their wide recognition in the West but in exclusion (or restriction) in China. This naturally leads the discussion to the following doubt. As far as the Chinese nostalgic wave is concerned, what on earth is the target audience of the films? In other words, who were those films shot for in the early 1990s?

##### 6.1.4.1. Cultural Revolution, a Political Content and a Forbidden Cultural Region

In an article on his reminiscences of the 1980s, Mou Sen sums up the Chinese cultural atmosphere of that time in this way, “Retrospectively, in the year of 1988, an artistic atmosphere in Beijing was all one can desire” (60).<sup>194</sup> Guo Jian also assesses the 80s of China as a “relatively gentle/moderate political climate”<sup>195</sup>, and his

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<sup>194</sup> Mou Sen (牟森) is a famous theatrical director of China since the late 1980s.

<sup>195</sup> Guo Jian (2006) “A Cultural Ghost in Contemporary Left-wing Cultural Theories”, *21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 2006-2. <http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/ics/21c/supplem/essay/0601014.htm> Last access: 4 Oct. 2010; Guo (郭建) is a Professor in the University of Wisconsin Madison.

argument is that as a focal point of scar literature<sup>196</sup> the topic of the Cultural Revolution had met a comparatively open, tolerant and broad-minded discourse environment, and the film industry was no exception. Xie Jin's *Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (1980) and *Hibiscus Town* (1986) are typical films that mainly reflect social scars in the anti-rightist movement (1957)<sup>197</sup> and Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). There is no evidence available that the two films were thwarted by the censorship. The former won the Golden Rooster Award in 1981, the latter won the best film in both the Hundred Flowers Film Festival and the Golden Rooster Film Festival<sup>198</sup> organized by Chinese officialdom. So there is enough evidence to prove how tolerant the atmosphere was in the 1980s towards its past political content. In this case, one would have said that political nostalgia set in the 1950s or 60s had never failed to become popular in the domestic market of the 1990s.

However, the practical situation runs in the opposite direction and the official position suddenly changed in the late 1980s. No one could overlook the political disturbance of 1989 (allegedly the Tiananmen Square Protests). The position of the Government towards the "Cultural Revolution" (as being a subject matter in the

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<sup>196</sup> Scar literature is a genre of Chinese literature which emerged in the late 1970s, soon after the death of Mao Zedong, portraying the sufferings of cadres and intellectuals during the tragic experiences of the Cultural Revolution and the rule of the Gang of Four.

<sup>197</sup> The Anti-Rightist Movement of China in the 1950s and early 1960s consisted of a series of campaigns to purge alleged "rightists" within the Communist Party of China (CCP) and abroad. The definition of "rightists" was not always consistent. But in general it referred to those intellectuals who appeared to favour capitalism and class divisions and against collectivization. The first wave of attacks began immediately following the end of the Hundred Flowers movement in July 1957. By the end of the year, 300,000 people had been labelled as rightists. Most of the accused were intellectuals. The penalties included informal criticism, and re-education through labour in countryside. Online information from: [http://www.experiencefestival.com/anti-rightist\\_movement](http://www.experiencefestival.com/anti-rightist_movement) Last access: 27 Jan. 2009

<sup>198</sup> The Hundred Flowers and Golden Rooster are the most prestigious awards in film given in Mainland China (held by the Government).



mainstream culture) completely altered around the disturbance. According to Guo, “a loud shot of 1989 marked the end of a political defrosting<sup>199</sup>”, from then on “the Cultural Revolution” becomes a “forbidden region” of discourse in Mainland China.<sup>200</sup> But it was the Cultural Revolution (and other political anti-rightist movements in the 50s and 60s) that became a main motif of the first nostalgic wave in the early 1990s. Thus the main reason that the three nostalgic films were restricted or excluded in that time seems hard to separate from the (above-mentioned) changing attitude of the Government. The early discussion has concluded that such political contents are probably one of the main reasons for their domestic failure. But the question is: What significance does the Cultural Revolution contain, which made the films so sensitive that they become no longer tolerated by the Government and its mainstream ideology? To answer this question, Guo makes a pointed comment. He stressed the significance of retrospective criticism of the Cultural Revolution:

Just because the Cultural Revolution was in opposition to democracy and freedom, and it was an extreme era of tyranny, so a rethinking and criticizing of Culture Revolution is always in accord with voiced opinion of advocating democracy and liberty and of challenging a totalitarianism of the contemporary authorities. Therefore, an official attitude towards the Cultural Revolution is the best barometer of today's consistency of democracy.<sup>201</sup>

In such a strained political situation of the early 90s, the fifth generation directors (Chen, Tian, and Zhang) unanimously focused on the retrospection of the

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<sup>199</sup> A political defrosting means an unprecedented open-minded atmosphere met by Chinese artistic creation from the end of Cultural Revolution to the late 1980s.

<sup>200</sup> See Guo Jian (2006)

<sup>201</sup> “正因为文革时代是一个反民主、反自由、极权统治登峰造极的时代，对文革的批判反思在中国特定的历史环境中和社会条件下总是和倡导自由民主、挑战当局的威权主义、呼吁政治改革有同一性。官方对文革的态度实际上最能从侧面反映文革批判与自由民主的一致性”。Ibid.

Cultural Revolution. That reflects a voice for the hope of freedom, but in the meantime it inevitably contradicts what the Government wants – to maintain social stability. In consequence it is a foregone conclusion that a political content of nostalgia was excluded from domestic markets.

Here, the purpose of referring to the exclusion is not to emphasize how incompatible the first nostalgic wave was with a mainstream ideology of the time, but it leads the argument to the question at the beginning of for whom the nostalgic films were shot? The Chinese situation of the 1990s cannot return to what it was before 1989, the condition of being free from confinement (or certain political control). The schemes and preparations for making the nostalgia films had started after the Tiananmen Square Protests. It seems impossible that their producers and directors did not foresee that political nostalgia would have difficulty being released in China. Nor were they guilty of a lack of notice of the tightened atmosphere. But why did the fifth generation directors collectively pay attention to the political nostalgia, and were willing to be “cannon fodder” for the local censorship? If a film that is directed, set, and shot in China cannot be released in its motherland, then what significance does the first wave embody? Thus there is cause for speculation, that to some extent the three nostalgic films were presumably not customized or targeted towards natives of China and its market. Even from the beginning of the filmmaking scheme, the filmmakers had already thought more about their foreign audience and overseas markets, which can be proved from their sources of investment.

#### 6.1.4.2. Becoming Involved with External Investment

In fact, *Farewell My Concubine*, the *Blue Kite*, and *To Live* have connections with external investors. By “filmmaking co-operation” it is understood that a film is (fully or partly) invested in by investors from overseas (or Hong Kong and Taiwan), but is shot in China with performers and facilities from local film studios. Now that external investments were involved, it seemed to be a common sense that film productions certainly would consider their return on investment. Perhaps the first nostalgic wave, to a great extent, had made a great attempt to humour Western markets and foreign festivals.

*Farewell My Concubine* is a co-operation between the Beijing Film Studio and Tomson (Hong Kong) Group, while actually the film has only two producers, Tang Junnian and Xu Feng, who are the Chief Executive Officers of Tomson. So it can be gathered that Tomson’s ratio of investment must be the greatest part of the film. Later on, it was Xu who provided the financial contribution and led the chief creators of the film to Cannes. It shows how film investors had begun to predominate in overseas promotions and foreign releasing. The couple are not from Hong Kong, they are actually film investors in Taiwan and Xu established Tomson Film Ltd. in Taiwan 1984, and tried to make films with Mainland China in the late 1980s. However, with

the hindrance of prohibition<sup>202</sup> in filmmaking on both sides of the Straits, Xu decided to let Tomson go on the Board of Hong Kong in order that it (on behalf of Hong Kong) may smoothly participate in film co-operation with Mainland China.

Furthermore, it is presumed that Tomson's ambition was never limited to the film markets of Hong Kong and Taiwan from the very beginning of investing in *Farewell My Concubine*. Two reasons can be proved. One of which is that in the early 1990s the Taiwan authorities did not only block the film co-operation, but also strictly censored/restricted in its local cinemas films produced by the mainland. For instance, when a film had a majority of chief creators from Mainland China, it had to be banned in Taiwan. This prohibition was still in force when *Farewell My Concubine* came back with the best award from Cannes, which resulted in the film not being premiered at the time in Taiwan. But later the issue aroused controversy around the island. Many local legislators thought it was an irony that an internationally awarded film invested in by Taiwan could not be shown to the Taiwanese. As a result, the authorities changed the law and allowed co-operated films that won awards in the five main international film festivals to be released in Taiwan. This adjustment helped *To Live* to be shown in Taiwan smoothly in 1995 (W. Sun 66-72). In addition, as far as the Hong Kong film market was concerned, it was so small that the Hong Kong film industry itself (party) relied on the Taiwan market at that time. If a film is to be potentially banned in Mainland China and Taiwan, a market in Hong Kong is apparently not

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<sup>202</sup> At that time, the Taiwan authorities forbade local investors to co-produce films with mainland China.

adequate for cost-recovering.<sup>203</sup> Therefore, *Farewell My Concubine* was not mainly shot for audiences in Hong Kong and Taiwan so the only target left was the foreign markets. Second, according to a published interview with Chen Kaige, the interviewer (Li Erwei) recalled:

Kaige had ever mentioned that, before the post production was finished, a jury's chairman in the Berlin International Film Festival had contacted Xu Feng and Chen, and invited *Farewell My Concubine* to the competition for the 'Golden Bear' award on February, 1993. Chen was quite sure that his film would win the award so long as he participated. However he refused the invitation from Berlin, as the only objective of Xu and himself was a Golden Palm (at Cannes). This was because in the whole of the Eastern countries, only Shohei Imamura (a Japanese director) had won the Golden Palm before and no Chinese had ever won the award.<sup>204</sup>

Though this is from an individual's memory, it is noticeable that Chinese filmmakers of the time made a fetish of foreign reputations of their films. Chen (as a cultural elite) and Xu (as an investor and producer) made no secret of their expectations that Chinese films would become famous all over the world. However, an argument would be that such a patriotic passion does disguise their ambitions to access the Western markets and so far as its purposes are concerned, foreign film festivals and the overseas markets do not clash with each other at all. Overseas markets, as a vital target of *Farewell My Concubine*, were not just a hearsay guess. For that matter, Adam Lam argues that "fulfilling the Western audience's expectations and making every effort to gain a high rate of investment return, become the most

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<sup>203</sup> In fact, the box-office of *Farewell My Concubine* in Hong Kong is about 15 million HK dollars, but the filmmaking cost reaches up to more than 30 million.

<sup>204</sup> Li Erwei (2004) *Farewell My Concubine in Cannes, the Whole Story*, International Online, 2004-3-22, <http://gb.cri.cn/41/2004/03/19/602@102822.htm> Last access: 4 Oct. 2010

important factor that the film needs to seek” (2005, 100).

To some extent, that fifth generation directors are going to the West, shows that the Chinese film-makers (as cultural elites) are gradually walking down an altar of high art and attempting to accommodate their artistic pursuits to a globalized and secularized market. The process itself may persuade one to believe that Chinese films of the 1990s had probably surpassed the domestic cultural products’ market and taken the lead in an integration into cultural globalization. That not only indicates a postmodern transition from national elite arts to a global and popular culture, but also proves that overseas markets are able to become a key factor of the contemporary Chinese nostalgia and a main point of the discussion.

By the same reasoning, the investment conditions of *To Live* and the *Blue Kite* were quite similar to *Farewell My Concubine*. *To Live* (1994) was co-operated on by Era International (Hong Kong) and Beijing Film Studio. The CEO of Era International, Qiu Fusheng, like Feng Xu, comes from Taiwan. Actually, it was not the first time that Zhang Yimou participated in a co-operated film. As early as 1989, his *Ju Dou* was completed by investment from Japan. After that, Zhang’s *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) was invested in by Era International as well. When talking about the external investors and readerships of the two films, Adam Lam argued that,

although Zhang Yimou has more than once stressed that his films were made primarily for Chinese audiences, the fact that both *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern* were fully overseas funded forced Zhang and

the films to have as much a focus on the international market as on the domestic, or even more (2005, 125).

By this token, a few years later when *To Live* was sent to the West, its target market would not have changed too much.

The funds for the *Blue Kite* came from Hong Kong and Japan. It has been mentioned above that one of the obvious reasons for the film to be banned (in China) was that it was sent by its Japanese investor to the Tokyo Film Festival for competition on behalf of Japan. This is recalled by Tian Zhuangzhuang afterwards in his reminiscences on making the *Blue Kite*:

There was an investment company from Japan planning a film co-operation with China and looking for a local director. They had supported Zhang Yimou for his *Ju Dou*, so they asked what kind of film I would like to make... I told them I intended to shoot a courtyard (in Beijing) where I spent my childhood with so many stories. Then they asked what exactly the story is. I said it's about a kite. There was an uncle from the neighborhood when I was young. He always took us to fly kites on the roofs every autumn. The Japanese company was quite interested in the story... at that time (the early 1990s) Uncle Chen Huangmei was the chief of the Chinese Film Bureau, and he lived in the same yard with my family for many years. He reminded me that I'd better not set a film within the first seventeen years of P. R. China (1949-1966). I knew that was a fact, and I understood his warning was to take good care of me. But the problem was that, the "seventeen years" had become a load on my mind. Why cannot I talk about it? [...] My heart was full of so many past events and paradoxes. When growing up you would see that those past experiences had extensive connections to the "Cultural Revolution". Their merits and demerits would never be made clear. But one's course of growth, interpersonal relations, and one's destinies have solid content and will have eventual results.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Sun Xiantao and Li Duoju (ed.) (2006) *A Century of the Chinese Cinema*, Part II, Beijing: Chinese Broadcasting Publishing House. Or online: <http://book.sina.com.cn/nzt/ent/cnmovie100years/100.shtml> Last access: 4 Oct. 2010

This memoir foregrounds three points. One is that foreign funds had participated in the nostalgic film plan from its very beginning. Second, as same as Guo Jian mentioned previously, the Chinese officials do indeed bear a grudge against the past (radical) period of 1950s and 60s China.<sup>206</sup> This can be conjectured between the lines of the chief's reminder to Tian. Third, as an average person, Tian is fascinated by and infused with rich sentiments over his own past as well as a Chinese past, so it even becomes an impulse and responsibility in his mind to represent a nostalgia. Here I am not inclined to emphasize subtle hints and relations between political movements reflected through the first nostalgic wave and the contemporary Chinese authorities with its censorship, but as a fact it does seem undeniable. When an ordinary Chinese (no matter whether a director or an audience) is interested in his/her nostalgic sentiments, the Chinese political situation and its ideological atmosphere yet seem reluctant to accommodate them with such nostalgic images and political retrospection. Accordingly, alluding to certain political movements and the Cultural Revolution almost became a taboo of Chinese cinema in the 1990s. Comparatively speaking, overseas investment and its market, as it turns out, may have provided appropriate narrative opportunities and nostalgic germinations outside of China, to let the Chinese film-makers carry out their impulses. It certainly grounded Chinese nostalgic cinema well as an oriental visual commodity in a global market

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<sup>206</sup> This has been explained by Guo Jian in the previous discussion, see 6.1.4.



## 6.2. Chinese Nostalgia, a Global Illusion

### 6.2.1. The Chinese Cultural Revolution and the Sixties of the World

In the latter half of the 1960s, radical riots swept almost the whole world. From the Chinese Cultural Revolution, to the American counterculture movements<sup>207</sup>; from 1968 in France<sup>208</sup> and Prague<sup>209</sup> to the liberation rush in the Third World<sup>210</sup>; from the British Angry Young Men<sup>211</sup> to the Beat Generation<sup>212</sup> of the United States, perhaps it was only this period in history that implemented a globalized radical ideology. Various radical protests and liberation movements formed eddies of

<sup>207</sup> The counterculture of the 1960s refers to a cultural protest movement that developed in the United States and Western Europe between 1960 and 1973 as a reaction against the political conservatism and perceived social repression. It was characterized by anti-war and counter-mainstream cultures, life styles, and their values among young people. It also contained all of the protests in American society, regarding the Vietnam war, race relations, sexual mores, women's rights, traditional modes of authority, experimentation with psychedelic drugs and an interpretation of the American Dream based predominantly on consumerism etc. Those cultural waves like pop music, sexual liberation, and hippies were also included. See Theodore Roszak (1969/1995) *The making of a counter culture : reflections on the technocratic society and its youthful opposition*, Berkeley: University of California Press. In the book, Roszak found a fundamental consensus for the movements: counterculture is to protest against all of the industrialized phenomena based on science and technology.

<sup>208</sup> May 1968 refers to the period the events occurred in France; it is regarded as the largest general strike that ever stopped the economy of an advanced industrial country. It was caused by a far-left student movement in Paris, which can be seen as a typical event of Western youth in the late 1960s. See "The Beginning of an Era" translated by Ken Knabb, in *Internationale Situationniste* No. 12 (September 1969). <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/beginning.html> Last access: 4 Oct. 2010

<sup>209</sup> The Prague Spring was a period of political liberalization in Czechoslovakia. It began on 5 January 1968 and continued until 21 August when the Warsaw Pact allies invaded the country to halt the reforms. Ben Fowkes (2000) *Eastern Europe 1945–1969: From Stalinism to Stagnation*, Longman

<sup>210</sup> It means those national liberation movements happened in Asia, Latin America, and Africa of the 1960s and 70s, when many Third World countries freed themselves from imperialist colonial rule and joined the United Nations. It marked an unexpected rise in the Third World, and proved that the movements had reached a crescendo at that period.

<sup>211</sup> The Angry Young Men was a group of mostly working and middle class British playwrights and novelists who became prominent in the 1950s. It is thought to be derived from the autobiography of Leslie Paul, founder of the Woodcraft Folk, whose *Angry Young Man* was published in 1951. The label was later applied by British newspapers to describe young British writers who were characterized by disillusionment with traditional English society. It also refers to a British film genre of the 1960s, featuring working class heroes and left-wing themes. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angry\\_Young\\_Men](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angry_Young_Men) Last access: 4 Oct. 2010

<sup>212</sup> The Beat Generation is a term used to describe a group of American writers in the 1950s, and the cultural phenomena that they wrote about and inspired (later sometimes called "beatniks"). Central elements of "Beat" culture include a rejection of mainstream American values, experimentation with drugs and alternate forms of sexuality, and an interest in Eastern spirituality. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beat\\_Generation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beat_Generation) Last access: 4 Oct. 2010. Here in the discussion, the purpose of quoting "Angry Young Man" and "Beat Generation" is to emphasize their influences and reflections upon Western young people of the time and their radical/rebel stance against the mainstream.

anti-culture tides. Political posters, irony discourses, great quotations, alternative music, new lifestyles, poetry, and radical dramas and movies were all greatly developed in the Sixties.

It is not an individual subjective assumption to combine an ideological history of China, in the 1960s with the corresponding period of radical burst in the West and the whole background of the global culture. Inspired by the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Fredric Jameson had termed the period of the Sixties an international era of “culture revolution” (*Unconscious* 95-8). Guo Jian also mentioned that “the Sixties indicate a termination of modernism and a rising of postmodernism”, and he repeated Jameson’s word as follows:

An interaction between liberation and domination was the main developing progress of the Sixties. Jameson then combined the Chinese radical practice together with the Third World’s anti-imperialist/anti-colonialist movement, the protests against industrialization in the West, counter-culture movements of the U.S., student movements of the Western young, shock waves against modernism and its social system by the mass culture and certain peripheral ideologies, and a fragmentation of the linguistic system that freed itself from a myth of signifier and signified. All of these can be called a liberation phenomenon. Furthermore, within these Western movements of anti-system, anti-culture, and anti-war, the Chinese Cultural Revolution still provided a model of political culture. Because it is not only a political movement, but also a systematic and theoretical transformation of culture and a whole ideology of the society, which had a profound significance around the world. (Jameson 60s 178-209)

By this token, “the Cultural Revolution of China was not just a part of the world

structure, but was the epitome of that” (60s 180).<sup>213</sup> Setting aside the linear logic in economic development and political form, China did not lag behind the West at least in its radical (far-left) movements of the Sixties. Jameson is full of compliments for the active role China had played in the global culture of the time: the Cultural Revolution was a collective re-education of the oppressed nations and all of the proletariat that lacked revolutionary consciousness; as a strategy the Cultural Revolution aimed at breaking the docile and obedient habits of the exploited classes: “It evoked the emergence of a genuine mass democracy from the breakup of the older feudal and village structures” (60s 208). Thus according to Jameson, the practice of Cultural Revolution by Mao Zedong, or so-called Maoism, is the most abundant of the great ideas and ideologies of the Sixties. As an uncompleted Chinese social practice it is “unparalleled” in world history,<sup>214</sup> where a “freshness of a whole new object world produced by human beings in some new control over their collective destiny; the signal event, above all, of a collectivity which has become a new subject of history and which, after the long subjection of feudalism and imperialism, again speaks in its own voice” (Jameson *Postmodernism* 29).

In addition, Arif Dirlik<sup>215</sup> also integrates the Sixties of China into a postmodern process of the whole world and uses a strikingly attractive expression,

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<sup>213</sup> As Jameson argued, “Indeed, politically, the first world 60s owed much to third-worldism in terms of political and cultural models, as in a symbolic Maoism.” (60s 180)

<sup>214</sup> Jameson (1984) “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”, *New Left Review* 146 (July-August 1984): p53-92. Cited in Guo (2006).

<sup>215</sup> Born in Turkey, 1940, Dirlik is a historian best known for his works about 20th century Chinese history. He was a member of the History faculty at Duke University (from 1971-2000). In 2001 he moved to the University of Oregon.

“the two cultural revolutions in the perspective of global capitalism” (*Two* 4-15). This first makes the West clearly a cultural object (or cultural others) from the concern of Chinese political movements. He pointed that, since the 1960s, the world has germinated two cultural revolutions, one a cultural revolution of capitalism, which Jameson called cultural phenomena leading to late capitalism, which changed the culture into commodities and remade them with infinite and desirable plasticity, namely the alleged “postmodern” culture; simultaneously, there was the other cultural revolution, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China (Dirlik *Globalization* 241-70).<sup>216</sup> The difference in the two mappings of revolution is that the former sees cultural production and consumption as a consequence of a revolution;<sup>217</sup> whereas for the latter, a cultural revolution in China was not a result or goal, but means to an end.<sup>218</sup> In other words, “culture” was regarded as a weapon in the revolutionary struggle and radical rebellion, in order that the crowd may participate in the revolution through cultural movements to counteract any bureaucracy, power, and autocracy brought by social structures. If the commodity culture and technological innovation are cast aside, and one only focuses on the ideological struggle spread over the world of the Sixties, it is undoubtedly the case that the Chinese Cultural Revolution indeed coordinated its efforts from the global trend of counter cultures at that time. Even to

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<sup>216</sup> Moreover, Dirlik extends the period of the Cultural Revolution from what the authority terms “ten years” (1966-76) to what he believes is “twenty years” (1957-76). His definition of the twenty years is in accord with the historical period that the first nostalgic wave focused on.

<sup>217</sup> As Dirlik mentioned, scientific technology makes capitalism successful in its cultural revolution. Its core substance consists in playing a role of creator of ideas, media, information, images and so on, rather than a goods producer (commodities still need to be produced, but they are made by the Third World regions, whereas the developed world serves as a brains trust of the earth). In an ideological level, the postmodern culture of capitalism is producing the culture itself, rather than achieving other aims through culture. See Arif Dirlik (1996).

<sup>218</sup> Guo (2006).

some extent, the Cultural Revolution did promote left/radical movements among nations.

The promotions can be substantiated from two films made in France. One is Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise* in 1967, telling of five college students in Paris who set up a radical Maoist group and participated in a far-left revolution. The film is full of advocating of the Cultural Revolution. Those political appearances from China: the Little Red books, quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong, shortwave radio broadcasts from Beijing, and resentment of the French Communist Party, revisionism of the Soviet Union and imperialism of the United States, are seen everywhere in the film. The other one is *Les Chinois à Paris*, 1974, by Jean Yanne. It is an imaginary tale of Paris being occupied pacifically by many Red Guards from China. In addition, another film, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Guy Debord, 1973), may also be involved as it directly represents Maoism and the French riot 1968. No matter what the purposes and political stands of these films are, their existence proves the far-reaching influence of the Cultural Revolution on the West of the day. A book, *A Rebellious Generation: Western Student Movements of the 1960s*, by Shen Han and Huang Fengzhu, also reflects the enlightenment of China towards Western countries: "Asia, Africa, and Latin America, all of the Third World's national liberation movements, communist revolutions, and anti-imperialist waves, were followed by a left-wing backlash in the West, and in return impacted on developed and capitalist countries. The student movement of the Sixties was an echo and feedback of the Third World.

The Rebellious Generation (of the West) was inspired by such models, consequently Mao Zedong, Che Guevara, and Ho Chi Minh became the revolutionary idols of the 1960s” (Shen and Huang 383).

From today’s perspective, though the world’s cultural situation is daily engulfed in a capitalized globalization, there are still reasons to believe that the Sixties, that surging forward era of radicalism, dropped seeds in the hearts of some of the Western audience. Nostalgic narratives about the Cultural Revolution from China perhaps changed into a certain catalyst of Western nostalgia, to remind Western audiences of their memorable, radical youth. At least in their forms, the Cultural Revolution in China has similarities in some respects with contemporary radical movements of Europe and America. Both “May 1968” in France and the American counterculture movements were all involved with large-scale mass participation. Their disorderly demonstrations, political catchphrases, slogans, students and industrial strikes, and burning vehicles and other radical actions against social order and oppressions, are quite similar to what the Red Guards did in all kinds of Chinese nostalgia. That leaves good opportunities for bricolage, appropriation, and combination in a postmodern pastiche that makes a god of past appearances. Through the confusing illusions, the Chinese visual past of the Sixties has perhaps become a part of Western nostalgic imagination.

Moreover, the Cultural Revolution in China seems much more realistic,

practical, and complete than the movements in the West. Chinese nostalgia and its film productions have probably made up for a radical, violent or utopian dream of the Westerner. To some extent, Western movements of the Sixties were idealistic daydreams lacking a long-term and real-life practice. It has a close bearing on the social context of the day. Capitalistic social unrest in common sense is largely based on, and caused by, social crises (such as economic crises, natural calamities, or increasing unemployment). For example, fascism coming into power in Germany and Italy and militarism in Japan of the 1920s and 30s were directly influenced by the depression during the late 1920s and the 1923 Great Kantō earthquake. However, the Western radical trends of thought in the 1960s happened in a period of economic boom in the developed world. The United States was in its twenty years of golden times since the 1950s. Its average rate of economic increase (per year) reached 3.7%, and Europe's was even more at 5.5%. Their unemployment rates were at a low level, that of the Europe was only around 1.5%. Therefore, the advocates and the main forces of the radical movements in the Western societies of the period were not mainly from the working class or the upper class, but those young students that came from the middle and lower middle classes.

This social background may lead to three results (weaknesses). One of these is that the participants and their identities and the social constitution of the movements were quite narrow and lacked support from the main economic actors of the society (such as the proletariat or the government). Second, the movements of the Sixties

were short of unified or concordant purposes and slogans, all kinds of protests – against war, government, race, gender discrimination, industrialization, tertiary education system, imperialism, and colonialism and so on – were in great confusion. Young participants were quite confused with their ambitions of struggle. There was no profound revolutionary principle. Third, the two points mentioned above meant the radical movement could only shake the social orders on the surface temporarily, but it was incapable of freeing the people from them. As a result, it was on the wane from the beginning of the 1970s. Perhaps, “liberation” for the youth of the West was just a transient utopian illusion.

Whereas China had paid a ten-year social practice<sup>219</sup> for such a radical dream. That meant China did have adequate time and space to break away from the frame of theoretical reference, from hollow slogans and the utopian dream, and to create various authentic life experiences in its left-wing cultural context. As far as its implementation is concerned, the ten-year radical practices are much more real, comprehensively affected, and cruel than the Western flash in the pan. Compared to those surface formalities of strikes, parades, hippies, and burning vehicles in the Western movements, the Cultural Revolution provided more opportunities for everyone living within it to deeply realize what influence a revolution brought to one’s destiny. No matter whether it is Cheng Dieyi (Bean), Fu Gui, Tie Tou and his mother, Chinese nostalgic narratives can always describe a radical context by going

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<sup>219</sup> It means the Cultural Revolution in China, from 1966-1976. Even though as Dirlik argued, the Chinese Cultural Revolution had started in 1956 and carried on for twenty years.



deep into a “real life” story of the protagonists, rather than just a superficial bricolage of the radical signs. This is what Western nostalgia (in the radical respect) finds hard to reach. The Cultural Revolution, as a typical symbol of the radical Sixties, is not only similar to the Western movements that may arouse nostalgic sentiments in the West, but also transcends the left-wing illusions of the Westerners, which (with a real practical history of China) contribute to continue their radical delusions about certain Occidental peoples.

In the beginning of *Les Chinois à Paris*, the French president goes abroad for political asylum. The citizens of Paris voluntarily accept the leadership of communist China. The whole city is full of Red Guards and the People’s Liberation Army. This scene may more or less show a burning desire of the West that the results of the Cultural Revolution may be applied immediately to a Western reality. Although the end of the film stands on the side of criticizing the communist revolution, the plot of the film itself proves the whole Western world of the day was devoid of a radical cultural practice, while as early as the 1960s, China had possibly become a focus in the West and a model that Western revolutions followed. Nevertheless, when the world entered the period of the 1990s, left-wing political practice had rung down the curtain in China, a sudden disintegration of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe made it impossible for those leftists and radicals (in the West) to find a real mirror image reflecting a lasting utopia in their minds. Then nostalgia became the only consolation of the radical past. Since the 1990s, Chinese nostalgia, as certain

postmodern visual signs and consumer goods, entered into Western cinemas. On the one hand, it is a late call-and-response to what Dirlik alleged are “the two cultural revolutions in the perspective of global capitalism”; on the other hand, through the utopian imaginations on the flat screen, it brings ideological recall to the Westerners of the halfway radical movements in their hearts. For some of the Western audience, such allure of the past is not just from an exotic spectacle, but also from the West itself, its own nostalgic excitement at the Sixties.

#### 6.2.2. Maoism or Orientalism? – China, the Supposed Eastern “Empire”

As time goes by, the younger generation of the late Sixties will have grown into the backbone of Western society by the 1990s, but this does not predicate that a radical trend of thought (from the younger generation) can gradually dominate the mainstream position of the contemporary Western audience. In fact, the democratic political standpoint that has been generally received in the modern West has been widely divergent from its radical slogans of the Sixties. As far as the process of the radical decline in the 70s was concerned, on the one hand it is as a result of an amelioration and compromise by the governments (or the Western mainstream) on a series of issues of race, gender, war, social welfare, colonialism and so on. A crusade for civil rights for black people and fairer treatment of minorities had received a wide range of sympathy; the troops of the United States had gradually pulled out from Vietnam; gender discrimination and homosexual issues had seemingly begun to be

resolved... On the other hand, the main body of the radicals (those young and rebellious counterculture groups) had gradually moved to maturity. By the mid 1970s, the early baby boom generation (after the World War II) had reached the age of 30, and in their marriages had begun to shoulder more family and social responsibilities, which urged them to dissociate from the radical struggles. Additionally and most importantly, as Jameson argued, in the economic debates, oil in short supply and “the worldwide economic crisis” in the 70s, meant that “the great explosions of the 60s have led to powerful restorations of the social order and a renewal of the repressive power of the various state apparatuses” (60s 207-8). All of these arguments suggest that a contemporary Western democracy is completely different from what it was in the Sixties. A left-wing illusion has receded into the background since the 1970s and disappeared rapidly in the 80s. The capitalist world has returned to extremely rational politics, which to some extent can be considered the beginning of neo-conservatism. Perhaps, today’s Western audience is used to looking at a communist and radical movement (or history) through its conservative, right-wing stances and a linear logic of democratic development in the West. As a result, the Stalin era of the Soviet Union and the Mao era of China can be put together and seen by the West as typical models of extreme left political power and violent centralization.

Such a stereotyped image of communist countries by the West, can be found in a joint intersection, with Edward Wadie Said’s orientalism, China. According to Said, the term “orientalism” describes a Western tradition, both academic and artistic, of

hostile and deprecatory views of the East (*Orientalism* 203-5). It is an extreme position on understanding: the system of perception and discourse, of the East, constructed by a Western thinking model. Since the controversial book, *Orientalism*, was published in 1978, the way to describe a Western perspective towards the East by orientalism, has usually contained (or implied) a negative or one-side view. That emphasizes an imperialist and colonialist attitude by the West on reading and interpreting the Eastern world, to the extent that the West sometimes portrays a stereotyped prejudice against the East and its culture. In such a discourse system of orientalism, the East is placed under a logic of Western culture, in other words, the East becomes objected “others” for being criticized, distorted, studied, described, and created. The operating strategy of the discourse is a binary and oppositional system: in the view of orientalism, the East is always lagged, primitive, rude, absurd, mysterious, and strange, and imbued with inhumanity, violence, threat, and horror; whereas the West is democratic, rational, enlightened, progressive, civilized.

Though Said seldom chose the Far East as his talking point, nor might he comprehend the full historical situation of Eastern Asia, yet it seems undeniable that Chinese nostalgia films, when facing the Western audience, may still have certain intentions or motives, through their narrative strategy, to cater for an orientalism of the West. Namely, they portray the Chinese radical era (its 50s and 60s) as an old eastern empire without rationality, order or democracy, but full of bloodiness, unrest and political witch-hunts.

Such a tendency can be proved through the film narratives. In the latter half of *Farewell My Concubine*, the political investigation of Duan Xiaolou (Stone), public criticism and struggles against Duan, Cheng Dieyi (Bean), and Juxian, and the subsequent suicides of Cheng and Juxian, all lead the political tragedy to a rebuke of the whole radical era. *Blue Kite* is full of plots of political fatality. Lin Shaolong, Tietou's father, dies of the "reformation through labour"<sup>220</sup> in the anti-rightist movement of the late 1950s; Tietou's stepfather, the cadre of the communist party, violently struggles at home with the Red Guards at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, and when he is unconscious from the struggle they still carry him away on stretchers for a public criticism; Madam Lan, Tietou's landlord, becomes the object of the dictatorship of the proletariat and is deprived of her rights to eat steamed buns, just because she owns property; Tietou's eldest uncle is originally a technician in the air force of the Kuomintang, but after the liberation (the founding of the PRC in 1949) he cannot gain acceptance by the communist party. Later on, his blindness is then compared to his life of falling into darkness. Seemingly everyone's destinies in the film have a shadow cast over them by radical movements, which is in accord with its dim colour-tone.<sup>221</sup>

*To Live* does not, as the other two films, represent the radical past with sharp

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<sup>220</sup> Literally "Laogai" 劳改 or 劳动改造. During the 1950s and 1960s, Chinese prisons contained large numbers of people who were considered to be too critical of the government or "counter-revolutionary". Prisons were organized like factories (called laogai camps) in rural areas for work without pay.

<sup>221</sup> The dull blue may be seen as a "depressed" colour in *Blue Kite*.

criticism, though it still tells of the tragedies of Chun Sheng and the director of the street indirectly in the Cultural Revolution. However the film stresses a certain position towards orientalism with absurd contingencies in the plot. Fu Gui is originally of the landlord class. Due to his unrestrained gambling, he plays away all his house property on the eve of the liberation. Soon afterwards, the loss in return makes him beat an execution by shooting in the Chinese land reform<sup>222</sup>. Later, his son and daughter successively die of absurd tragedies, but the plot by changing does abandon the prejudiced frame of orientalism towards a radical past of China. During the Great Leap Forward<sup>223</sup>, people (all over the country) work on the street in steel production all night, which means Youqing (Fu Gui's son) does not sleep at night. When he dozes off under a wall at school in the afternoon of the next day, he is killed by a car driven by the chief of the district who is going to inspect steel production in the school. Obviously the film intends to impute the accidental death to the rash advance of the Chinese movement. Fengxia, Fu Gui's daughter, is about to give birth during the Cultural Revolution. But the hospital has been occupied by a group of young students from medical school and all the skilled doctors have been locked in prison. As a result, Fengxia cannot get effective treatment and dies from a massive haemorrhage. Both of the tragedies of Fu Gui's family have indirect connections with

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<sup>222</sup> The Communist Party of China launched a land reform from 1946 to the early 1950s. It won the party millions of supporters among the poor and middle peasantry. The land and other property of landlords were expropriated and redistributed so that each household in a rural village would have a comparable holding. By the time land reform was completed, at least a million landlords and members of their families had been publicly executed or beaten to death by enraged peasants. See Stephen R. Shalom (24).

<sup>223</sup> The Great Leap Forward was an economic and social plan used from 1958 to 1961 which aimed to use China's vast population to rapidly transform China from a primarily agrarian economy by peasant farmers into a modern communist society through the process of agriculturalization and industrialization. Mao forecast that within 15 years of the start of the Great Leap, China's steel production would surpass that of the UK. However in the end, it led to a widespread famine that resulted in millions of deaths.

the social and political contexts. The film in its own ironic fashion implies an attack on the far left radical era.

It is unknown whether the directors of the first nostalgic wave intentionally catered for the tastes of the Western audience by showing complaints about the ideological (or political) differences of China. But it cannot be denied that these films and its narrative do have something indeed that is consonant with orientalist positions of some of the investors and audiences overseas. Those visual narratives have intuitively intensified a bloody-cruel, brutal, uncivilized and irrational Eastern illusion in the minds of the Western audience. They may contain certain negative biases towards the East. When talking about American prejudices against Islam, Said has said,

So far as the United States seems to be concerned, it is only a slight overstatement to say that Moslems and Arabs are essentially seen as either oil suppliers or potential terrorists. Very little of the detail, the human density, the passion of Arab-Moslem life has entered the awareness of even those people whose profession it is to report the Arab world. What we have instead is a series of crude, essentialized caricatures of the Islamic world presented in such a way as to make that world vulnerable to military aggression.<sup>224</sup>

In a similar way, borrowing the tone of Said above, a Chinese past can be told in such “biased” words below, when its nostalgia films cater to a Western orientalism,

So far as the Western world seems to be concerned, it is only a slight overstatement to say that socialist China and its people are essentially seen as radical trouble makers and an impulsive gang of red guards

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<sup>224</sup> Edward W. Said (1980) “Islam Through Western Eyes”, *The Nation*, 1980-4-26, or *The Nation Online* at <http://www.thenation.com/doc/19800426/19800426said> Last access: 4 Oct. 2010

who have their minds stuffed with Maoist dogma. Very little of the detail, the country's basic condition or state, the passion of Chinese life has entered the awareness of even those Western audiences of the 90s who were interested in the socialist history of China. What we have instead is a cruel, despotic, violent, and excessively simplified Maoist empire presented in such a way as to make Chinese civilians miserable in front of the mob rule.

In consequence, the misery of the radical affairs in the Chinese cinema exemplifies the typical nostalgic style of the political past in China. It reconfirms the Western prejudice in the one-party state of China and Soviet Union. In the start sequence of the *Blue Kite*, Tietou recalled that, "as Stalin passed away (in 1953), my parents' wedding day was postponed unconditionally for ten days". The film intends to relate the social background of China and the Soviet Union together and implies a strong impact of a "great man politics" (or despotism) on ordinary life. Combined with the argument in the beginning of this section, – that some people get used to taking a linear logic of democratic development for granted in the West – such a monologue from Tietou may further their extreme views on the despotism of socialist histories in the minds of the Western audience. At least some of them could possibly have a linear logic on a development track of government systems (from primitive society through slave society, feudal/monarchic form, and constitutional monarchy, to a democratic republic). In those forms, it seems difficult to avoid assuming, or supposing, according to the Western concept that a left-radical government combined with a personality cult (such as Stalin in Soviet Union and Mao in China) is a phase of dictatorial monarchy or empire before entering into democracy. Simultaneously, Western audiences may automatically find (or be supplied) with certain tragic



elements from Eastern nostalgia to prove their own superiority in democratic politics. On the other hand, as an important part of the Far East, Chinese radical history in such an Eastern narrative of tragedy is probably involved in the frame of orientalism, as proof of its uncivilized stereotype. Here orientalism generates certain connotations of the West, which helps call to mind past sufferings and think over the good times today.

In the light of the above discussion, there seems enough evidence to believe that the first nostalgic wave of Chinese cinema in the 1990s had experienced a metamorphosis and changed into an exotic nostalgia spectacle for the West, where the Western audience recalled its own course of social evolution history by the “others” (a past of China). In the process, a Chinese past is not just as simple as a product of postmodernity. It is possible to surpass a Chinese reality and become a historical novel of global culture.

### 6.2.3. Fawning or Seduction?

The purpose of borrowing “orientalism” in this discussion, does not consist of criticizing the biases of the West, but indicates its stress on the issue reflected from the Chinese cinema itself. Actually, Said’s orientalism (especially, its discussed context) does not completely coincide with the historical situation of China. One should be dialectically cautious in thinking of China in the debate on orientalism. Historically

speaking, most regions of China have never become Western colonies as thoroughly as Egypt or India. The attitudes of the Western world to Arabic Islam and China were totally different too in the period of the 1950s to 70s. For the sake of petroleum in the Cold War, the Middle East was stirred up in the long drawn-out wars; while when the Korean War finished in 1953, the Western countries adopted a twenty-year economic blockade and cultural isolation towards China. As a result, China temporarily left the Western field of view. For most Westerners, the 1950s to the 1970s in China had an inscrutable face, which led to China and its socialist history becoming an extremely alluring spectacle in the contemporary West. Such a deficient knowledge of China caused by the shortage of international communication prompts me to read orientalism from another standpoint. That is, orientalism does not only contain criticism of Western prejudices, but it may also provide hints on the Eastern issues themselves, especially their own fawning intentions towards the West.

This idea may be in accord with Christopher Alan Bayly's opinion. He argues, "even at the height of the imperial era, European power in the East was never absolute, and remained heavily dependent on local collaborators" (Bayly 143). A cultural discussion on Chinese nostalgia films may probably become a typical instance of exploring such a "local collaborator".

The argument then would be, so far as the first nostalgic wave of the early 90s is concerned, the most important is not how and what the Westerners regard China as,

but how the Chinese filmmakers interpret its past to the West. There are a number of intentions of humoring, fawning, even actively seductive in the issue. Through the ages, the Eastern people always regard the developed world in the West as a centric subject, and put themselves on an objective margin lacking the right of speech, but neglecting their own seductions and fatal strategies<sup>225</sup> when they become objects being watched by others. The real power should be held by the objects being watched. If this is your fate, it is not how people watch you, but how would you like to show yourself in front of others. This is what Baudrillard emphasized time after time. Those nostalgic films from China, conspicuous in overseas markets, then make such a seduction of accelerated reproduction prominent.

This discussion is inclined to regard the nostalgic seduction as individual fawning behavior by the Chinese directors. Because, no matter what the West wants to see, those violent tragedies and other narrative strategies reflected in Chinese cinema are all the directors want to show to the West. It could be proved by orientalism that some of the Westerners have a biased stereotype of Chinese radical “autocracy”; however it does not mean that a prejudice or investors from the West could directly control the expression and seduction of a Chinese film itself. In such a process, Chinese filmmakers cannot avoid their responsibility and suspicions of collaboration.

Such a fawning attitude seems unavoidable in contemporary China, and is

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<sup>225</sup> As for the interpretations on seduction and fatal strategies, please refer to the discussions at the end of Chapter 5. Or see Baudrillard (*Seduction* 85-129); and Baudrillard *Fatal Strategies*; or Baudrillard (*Selected Writings* 183-99).

perhaps the only way out. That could be supported by some inklings of views from other Chinese scholars.

“Post studies”<sup>226</sup> in China are a paradox, as they expand on the Cultural Revolution and its cultural criticism. When talking about the Chinese literature of the New period<sup>227</sup>, Zhang Yiwu re-emphasized that, since the 1980s, Chinese literature and arts (including many critical works of China’s radical past based on the background of the Cultural Revolution and other movements in the 50s and 60s) do generally have a strong intention of “learning from the West” that can be termed “modernization” or “westernization”. These works always try to represent a “China” that is based on individualism in myth and a great narrative of the “individual” as well as their life blighted by tragedy, and the way the nation is time-lagged in culture. These works display that, “the (Chinese) intellectual indulged in an enlightened discourse of the 1980s have unconditionally surrendered to and enthusiastically been infatuated with Western modernity” (Zhang Yiwu 34).<sup>228</sup> Before the expansion of the West-worship in China, Zhang Xudong shows an attitude of having no alternative as well: “at least nowadays we (China) could not construct a completely self-directed identity of value orientation, and we are understanding our own life, world, and everyday phenomena in a frame of interpretation of ‘others’ (the West)” (Zhang

<sup>226</sup> Post studies means those cultural criticisms expanded from Western postmodernism and post-colonialism to a context of China. See Jian Guo (2006).

<sup>227</sup> The New period means Deng Xiaoping’s reform and opening-up since the late 1970s. It is a subsequent period of the Cultural Revolution.

<sup>228</sup> “80年代在启蒙话语中沉溺的（中国）知识份子对西方话语无条件的臣属和对於（西方）‘现代性’的狂热迷恋”。

Xudong *Interview*).<sup>229</sup> Guo Jian also points out, in the debates of postmodernism and post-colonialism, the Western enlightenment and its modern discourse have gradually formed a cultural hegemony (or predominance) in the last two centuries. “the self-identity of those non-Western nations finds it hard to overstep a Western model of interpretation. For instance, the Chinese in their recollection and criticism of the Cultural Revolution must not free themselves from a shadow of ‘orientalism’.” In this case, one of the key roles of the “post studies” in China is to “ruthlessly deconstruct such a critical recollection, in order to differentiate those cultural codes that the West saddled on China.” (Guo *Resisting* 343-76) However conversely, such a process itself of “deconstruction” (by token of post-structuralism, postmodernism, or the field of cultural studies) must not succeed in escaping from borrowing, reproducing, and imitating Western opinions. It is a dilemma when the postmodern criticism in China faces westernization.

As for the Chinese nostalgic films, Chen Xiaoming had criticized the *Blue Kite*: it was quite late, until 1994, that Tian still emphasized that such a subject of “political persecution and fear” was same as what had been prevalent in the late 1970s, ‘scar literature’.” As a result, it (the film) was just “a well-conceived reproduction of the ‘China image’ in the Western cultural imaginary”. (*Mysterious* 132)<sup>230</sup> In other words, it criticizes certain fawning inclinations towards the West in contemporary “national”

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<sup>229</sup> “至少现在我们（中国）无法获得完全自主的一种价值认同，我们还在别人（西方）的解释框架里寻找资源来理解我们自己的生活世界和日常现象”。

<sup>230</sup> Or cited from Chen by Guo Jian (*Ghost*). “都到 1994 年了”，田壮壮还在“强调 70 年代末期‘伤痕文学’所表现的政治迫害和恐惧这样的主题”，其结果不过是“复制了西方文化想象中的‘中国形象’”。

nostalgia, and such a point is suitable for *Farewell My Concubine* and *To Live* as well.

But Chen's argument is only right in one part and his criticism does not indicate a solution. So far, we may realize that actually there was no feasible way of avoiding the Western impact at all, for those writers or filmmakers of that time. Since the Chinese Opening-up in the 1980s, as Zhang Yiwu asserts, the new minds of the generation of intellectuals and elites in China became flooded with Western thoughts, and immersed in fanaticism and infatuation for Western modernity (34). Such a radical enthusiasm by China reached a climax in the late 1980s, but was suddenly suppressed at home and ceased abruptly. In a short time, this situation may possibly and conversely have influenced Chinese film production to (temporarily) change their target-market to beyond the sea, going abroad to seek Western reviews, attention, consumption, recognition, consolation, patronage, and asylum.<sup>231</sup> It is only the West that can truly understand those Chinese intellectuals who have been widely baptized in a Western discourse. So it is not a collective impulse or self-exile at all. The spiritual matrix of the Chinese intellectuals in the 80s might originally have existed in the West but when such liberalism of modernity does continue domestically after 1989, it is an inevitable and necessary choice to return to its matrix. It explains why in the early 1990s Chinese cinema must approach Western markets through its nostalgic scar.

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<sup>231</sup> Similarly as Zhang Xudong mentioned, the "epic exposes" in the *Blue Kite* is "an ongoing effort to transport the symbolic capital of a local new wave to the international network of review, consumption, recognition, and patronage...In this way, the post-Tiananmen transformation of new wave Chinese cinema stands as an allegory of the rapid incorporation of the Chinese national economy with the capitalist world system." see Zhang (2008).

If this can be seen as a destiny, its predestination in Chen's argument may have positive significance. Some Chinese intellectuals of the early 1990s could rapidly get rid of the Western discourse and its spiritual shadow. Then they were unavoidable and they had no alternative but to get intimate with the West spiritually. If they thoroughly abandoned the Western discourse, they would have developed aphasia and become lost in silence. To be extreme, to become immersed in Western discourse was the destiny of Chinese literature and arts in the 1980s and early 90s as well as its fatal problem. For Jean Baudrillard, being fatal means to be predestined or inevitable, and disastrous or deadly (Baudrillard *Selected* 183-99; Baudrillard *Fatal*, qtd. in Lam 2005, 74). His fatal strategies may exceed those negative arguments by the Chinese critics above and regard Chinese nostalgia as having certain positive effects through its post-modernity. But through its borrowing from Western discourse, its imitation of socialist "despotism" and the stereotyped orientalism, and its active seduction and fawning actions, Chinese nostalgia, with its fatal strategies (both deadly and fatefully), becomes a sitting duck (or a cultural target) of postmodern criticism in China, in order to make those Chinese cultural codes imposed by the West betray themselves. Thus, seduction and fawning actions are no different in essence. Now that there is no way to avoid Western discourse, it might as well accelerate its reproduction of discourse so that a "hyper-real" nostalgia could draw more attention to make its prejudice prominent and let people realize the untouchable authenticity of the past.

As was expected, such a fatal strategy implemented by the seduction of self-fawning certainly will suffer much criticism from nationalists and lead to a self-dying out. Since the 1990s, criticisms of the filmmakers' making up to the West, trading of traditional culture, and their turning traitor for personal gain have never ceased in critical circles. After all, their parochial nationalism is only superficial. It just embodies a national pretence of their own. As Adam Lam pointed out, the fatal seduction is "a challenge to the lasting Chinese national pride, a survival seeking by self-destruction, and a truth seeking by self-falsehood." The false "tradition" in its nostalgic cinema on the one hand becomes hyper-real signs and a substitute for the real Chinese traditional culture fading out; on the other hand it uncovers the "pretence of its nationality" (Lam 2005, 74-5). If Chinese nostalgia had been not based on the radical motif of political movements, not catered for the West, not sacrificed itself, it might have not aroused criticism over the dominance of Western discourse on Chinese arts, nor could it have awoken the Chinese national consciousness of post-colonialist culture. It is just the cinematic self-sacrifice that made the first nostalgic wave start off upon the road to what Jian Guo called a deconstruction of "post" studies. Therefore the globalized nostalgic illusions exported from China seem definitely illustrative of the postmodern culture and its post-colonial criticism.

### **6.3. A National Scar and Domestic Nostalgia**

#### **6.3.1. Distortion and Trauma**

*We seek to link our personal past with collective memory and public*



*history [...] People are so eager to be part of 'history' that they falsely 'remember' their responses to, or even having been present at, some momentous event.*

*(Lowenthal 197)*

The above-mentioned words by Lowenthal may be a reminder that Chinese nostalgia towards its past Cultural Revolution is likely to be a kind of false fulling of historical temptation. Such a forgery then displays what he called “distortion” (200).

Undoubtedly, although the first nostalgic wave in China was distorted from the real past realities of the 1950s and 60s, the distortion does not only result from those radical motifs catering for the Western orientalist complex, where personal destinies are completely immersed in political discourse and ideological struggle, and individual fate is mainly decided/substituted by a stereotyped political fatality of China in the Western mind. Also and most importantly, the essence of the distortion consists in that the destinies of the film protagonists all fall into tragic despair in the radical movements, which is perhaps geared to, or compatible with the humanistic spirit and value orientation of the West, in order that political tragedy becomes the most predominant model of nostalgic narrative in that period. As Zhang Xudong argues, national “trauma becomes the rule” (*Trauma* 37).

However, as far as the “trauma” is concerned, when it was becoming closer to the Western taste in Chinese stories, it was gradually moving far away from the real tone of a radical China in the past. Similarly to other movements of the Sixties in the world, the Cultural Revolution in China did take on its own positive role. That is to

fight against bureaucracy, social power, the exploitation of proletarianism, imperialism, hegemony, and colonialism... those zeitgeist and realities closely linked with the past of China are not represented by the first nostalgic wave at all.

The substitute (in the representation) is that, those nostalgic films have all chosen certain characters and identities, which seem capable of arousing sympathetic sadness and compassion in the West, as their protagonists. Cheng Dieyi (Bean) fits into a traditional mould of a high-art performer as well as an unacceptable view of love (but gayness is becoming a commonplace in the West). Duan Xiaolou (Stone) with his role “the Conqueror” on the opera stage expresses a sense of arrogance and despotism that seems close to the characteristics of those Western Empires in his identity of invader and colonialist in the past; however such a “Conqueror” is violently counterattacked and suppressed by the far left Red Guards in the film. Juxian’s previous identity as a prostitute seems more acceptable to the West where people may (in somewhere) legally trade their bodies out as commodities. Fu Gui is originally of the landlord class which is enough to arouse compassion in the West with their private ownership of land, and his children’s deaths are obviously related to the socialist movements. Tie Tou’s father, uncle, and step father are all victims in the movements too. His elder uncle’s girlfriend suffers obscenity and retaliation from the revolutionary authorities. No matter how hard his landlord may try, she cannot change her family’s class status and avoid class conflict. All of these protagonists and their tragedies may easily arouse Western sympathy with its contemporary humanistic

spirit.

While what has been distorted in those films consists of those identities of the protagonists in the nostalgia they seem incapable of representing the zeitgeist of the past China. The spiritual subject and the main part of social life in 1950s and 60s China should be made up of the majority of its population, its workers, farmers, city residents, the red-blooded youth, or even the thousands of Red Guards... But why has the majority of the masses been silenced in such an ideologically coloured nostalgic narrative and been given minor roles or voiceless, political, and symbolic appearances in the films? Why has the absolute minority who were being dragged on to platforms in the 1960s (as in the old picture<sup>232</sup> below) taken the place of the majority of the public (who were brandishing banners, shouting slogans, and supporting the revolution around platforms) and become the absolute majority of protagonists (and the main body of its narrative) in the nostalgia of the early 1990s?

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<sup>232</sup> The illustrations shows two leaders being violently criticized on a truck in Shenyang, northeast China, 1967.  
<http://hhhh.hhh.hh.h.blog.163.com/blog/static/127216373200981995128287/> Last access: 25 Jun. 2010



Figure 9. A Struggle Meeting in the Cultural Revolution, Northeast China

Even today, the nostalgic narrative in contemporary Chinese cinema still lacks positive regard for the zeitgeist of the masses and the little which has been represented today, may not be the real truth of the past. Zhang Xudong observes the *Blue Kite* that the film's narration of political movements is unlike that which most people had ever experienced in China, but just aims to reach a taste consensus on scar narrative (*Trauma* 37). In other words, the trauma of the Sixties may not belong to the majority of the Chinese people but to the minority who were criticized. In this case, the discussion cannot exclude the possibility that the contemporary Chinese nostalgic cinema has probably had a vicious circle of binary opposition between the radical "left" and the conservative "right". When a radical, political, revolutionary, and left voiced opinion has been suppressed since 1989, an economic reform and its capitalized proposition (what Maoism was dead set against, the far-right and capitalist

statements in the 50s to 70s) have begun to predominate in the Chinese culture of the 90s, including its nostalgic trends. Such a corrective inclination against the radical left is called, by Dirlik, a political climate turning to the right and a today's overcorrection constantly brings shame on the Cultural Revolution (*Two* 9-14).

On the other hand, the rigorous exclusion and censorship in the domestic market show that the nostalgic wave does have differences (or distortions) from the mainstream ideology of the Chinese authorities.

In a review of the *Blue Kite*, Xudong Zhang emphasized the appeal in the film of a great celebrity for the domestic audience. Lǚ Liping (as Shujuan, Tie Tou's mother), Pu Cunxin (Shaolong, Tie Tou's father) and Li Xuejian (Tie Tou's uncle) are all influential stars in the 1990s' China. From this, Zhang thinks the film originally was intended to be shot for its domestic market, especially the bourgeois audience in large and medium-sized cities of China (*Trauma* 34). This argument could be applicable to *Farewell My Concubine* and *To Live* as well. Leslie Cheung (as Bean) is not only a star with charisma in Hong Kong and Taiwan but also has wide influence on the Chinese mainland; Zhang Fengyi (Stone) and Gong Li (Ju Xian) are also in the first-line of film stars of that time in China; Ge You (Fu Gui) (together with Lǚ Liping) is a household star since the TV series, *Stories from the Editorial Office*, a hit in China in the 1990s.

Thus the celebrity's appeal in the first nostalgic wave provides reasons for an argument as follows. The casting probably hints that the films did not completely give up on the Chinese mainstream market at first, and the filmmakers underestimated the suddenly ironfisted attitude of the censorship on the theme of political nostalgia in China. In fact, the government's attitudes to political nostalgia and the Scar literature do not have consistency, but rather there is a sudden shift after 1989.

This shift reflects the way that contemporary Chinese society has been transformed towards certain right-wing and conservative cultural trends. The "scar" is perhaps not a natural or objective result of the "left" (radical) period (the 1950s-1976) of China, but a stereotyped verdict made by the post-revolutionary age<sup>233</sup> for its historical predecessor.<sup>234</sup> Zhang Xudong also pointed out that "the birth of trauma itself is a cultural event of the post-revolutionary age" (*Trauma* 31). In other words, "scar" is just a subjective cultural definition imposed on a past. Furthermore, to extend the view from Dirlik, regarding the Scar literature of the 1980s and what he called today's overcorrected shame over the Cultural Revolution, then conversely, we may realize the scar itself can be understood as a far-right extreme cultural trend with the inclination to criticize the left radical past of the 50s and 60s. This argument can be supported by a number of "scar" literary and artistic works, including those popular (and mainstream) films of trauma, such as Xie Jin's *Legend of Tianyun*

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<sup>233</sup> The "post-revolutionary age" indicates contemporary China since the late 1970s (the end of Cultural Revolution).

<sup>234</sup> This argument will be extended in Chapter 8, where nostalgia is seen as historical bleach today.

*Mountain* (1980) and *Hibiscus Town* (1986) and Huang Shuqin's *Woman Demon Human* (1987). It illustrates that the mainstream ideology of the 1980s maintained a positive and encouraging attitude to the extreme scar literature. Nevertheless, such an attitude has obviously had a subtle transformation since the early 1990s. Both the domestic market and local film festivals remain almost silent on the nostalgic wave. *Farewell My Concubine* is prohibited from sales promotion, and even to this day the other two films are still banned from public release. Such an outcome in the 1990s is quite different from *Hibiscus Town* in the 1980s when it was well received by the public of China. It shows the Chinese authorities may probably resort to a strategy of conservative moderation towards the scar literature and the extreme right criticism. China, in its economic and high-speed development period (especially the 1990s), may not want to lean to any radical or extreme side in politics, in case the golden opportunity for its economy is delayed. This deduction dovetails nicely with Deng Xiaoping's tour speech in the southern inspection<sup>235</sup> in 1992, when he expressed his intention that China should concentrate its strength on economic development and lighten the political struggle. Herein, we may presume, through the government's attitudes toward its nostalgic cinema, that since the early 1990s the contemporary Chinese mainstream ideology has changed into a relatively conservative and moderate mode of prevailing culture ignoring radicalism or extreme struggles. Undeniably, with

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<sup>235</sup> South Tour Speeches are a series of speeches delivered by the late leader Deng Xiaoping, the chief architect of China's reform and opening-up, during his inspection tour of southern Wuchang, Shenzhen, Zhuhai, and Shanghai in early 1992. Targeted at domestic misgivings and confusion among some scholars and even officials about the country's reform and development, Deng put forward some new viewpoints on a series of crucial issues, such as the core of Marxism, the essence of socialism, market economy, and how to emancipate and develop productivity. The significant speeches outlined an unequivocal path for the country's further reform and opening-up and have greatly driven its political, economic, and social development. Please see the official compilation of his speech at, <http://www.oklink.net/lszl/dangdai/dxp01.html> Last access: 4 Oct. 2010

the dominance of the official will, contemporary mass culture in China approaches conservative trends of postmodernity. As Zhang Xudong said, “if there is such a thing called Chinese postmodernism, then what it takes to be over is not the age of modernity, but the age of revolution and radicalism” (*Trauma* 30-1). I agree with Zhang’s opinion and recognize that beyond an economic modernity, Chinese society has reached certain postmodernity in its culture.

### 6.3.2. A Nostalgic Sense of China

Though much evidence and argument in the above discussion show that the first nostalgic wave of the early 1990s seems much more intended to satisfy the West, it cannot be forgotten that the films have a nostalgic attraction for the Chinese audience. Apart from those nostalgic symbols and flat appearances, the deep hurt of the past days makes people treasure those wonderful memories all the more. So the political trauma reflected from the wave does not conflict with the nostalgic connotation of its humanistic care. What it has diffused is the dialectically aesthetical allure, which according to Zhang Xudong, consists in “the paradoxical beauty...in the duality of images as the bearer of both traumatic witness and nostalgic remembrance” (*Trauma* 40). Political history was full of national trauma, just because of that, kindness and friendship between people become even more desirable and memorable. It is the power of tragedy. Juxian’s great sympathy for Bean (*Farewell My Concubine*); the love between Shujuan and Guodong (the *Blue Kite*);



the great suffering when Fu Gui loses his children and his later forgiveness of Qiusheng (*To Live*)... all of these true feelings and sacred fire could probably arouse a sympathetic response in the Chinese audience to their nostalgic past. Compared to the increasing capitalization and modernization of contemporary China, today's interpersonal relations blinded by greed may be refined and released through nostalgic memories of the 1950s and 60s. Therefore, no matter where the film investment comes from, no matter whether the fifth generation directors have become completely Westernization, no matter how big its box office will be and how charming Chinese nostalgia would be for Western reminiscences, and no matter if the wave has separated from a national film category, those nostalgic films still retain countless ties and relations with Chinese society, its historical recollection, and the nostalgic feelings of the Chinese people.

Therefore, the exclusion and the censorship that the first wave met in its domestic market, cannot be explained that the political nostalgia is out of joint with the Chinese audience and the contemporary reality, and the disjunction can only be read as a governmental compulsion. Since the 1990s the authorities have hidden the past trauma and tended to evade and restrain a reconstruction of political history from the public. However the ideological past of the 50s and 60s is indeed a part of the memories of the common people. Recollections become brilliant because of the happy experiences of the past; similarly they should not be written off because of the historical pains. The prohibition, limitation, or exclusion of nostalgic films from its

local cinemas has in reverse explained why such a scar continues in contemporary China. Perhaps, the real trauma of a historical mistake has changed into regret that today's mainstream opinions (dominated by the government) seem unable to (or dare not) face up to a piece of history. So far as this transformed trauma is concerned Zhang argues,

What is truly traumatic, then, is not so much the horrors to be re-lived visually as the moment of discovery and shock when one finally comes up with a narrative, a picture of the past from a distance. It is in this distance that the past, in the form of memory, suddenly becomes morally and ideologically unbearable. (*Trauma* 31)

Nevertheless, what really find the past unbearable are not the films themselves, nor the contemporary Chinese masses. There is a sequence in the *Blue Kite*, when Tie Tou's eldest uncle (Shusheng, a former Kuomintang insurrectionist) is working in a dim hangar of the socialist air force (in the 1950s), the slide door of the hangar is suddenly opened and a sunbeam penetrates the dark workshop and shines on his head. The glare is so dazzling that he looks quite insignificant, tiny, and frail in the huge hangar. His eyes cannot resist the sunlight, and his hand goes up in the air trying to cover the overwhelming brightness. On the one hand, this scene hints at his later blindness; and on the other hand it is perhaps a trope of people's trembling and helplessness in the face of radical politics. But furthermore, to a deeper level, if the blazing light could be seen as a fearless retrospection of historical politics by the Fifth Generation directors into the ideologically "forbidden" China, then obviously Tian Zhuangzhuang in his *Blue Kite* pre-installs an allegory for the domestic failure of the first nostalgic wave, where the hand stretching up into the air is just the same as film

ensorship concealing the public from the past, and it continues hovering and enveloping the sight of the public.

By this token, the first nostalgic wave, as a typical retrospection of the fifth generation directors, directly expresses their radical criticism of a political past of China that forms a sharp contrast with the censorship of the authorities. Being censored without a pass, nostalgic films cannot get full attention from domestic audiences, which is totally unfavorable for the development of nostalgic culture in China. In consequence, it naturally leads the Chinese cinema and its nostalgic narratives to a postmodern conservatism. There are only three roads left for the eclectics and their compromise, they may either ignore the past; or take either a peripherization to weaken the political narratives and to reinvent a nostalgic story in a pure everyday life; or as a representation of the mainstream ideology, develop a set of moderate right-wing discourses and to continue bringing shame on the radical politics of the past.

## Chapter Seven

### Silence and Revival

It has been discussed in the last chapter that the first nostalgic wave of the early 1990s found it hard to break through the blockade of governmental censorship. Neither the frontal (positive) reconstruction and criticism of political history in the *Blue Kite* and *Farewell My Concubine* nor the black humour based on a reinvention of historical and political appearances in *To Live* had complete freedom in the domestic cinemas. It seems undeniable that the nostalgic narrative largely based on a radical past of the 1950s or 60s had become taboo in the contemporary Chinese cinema, especially from the mid 1990s to the beginning of the twenty-first Century. As far as the practical situation is concerned, after the first wave disappeared, there was no nostalgic film released in China with the motif of looking back at a political discourse. In the latter half of the 1990s, the creation of nostalgic filmmaking lapsed into silence. However such a consequence cannot be completely attributed to administrative censorship or political inhibition; it is probably a result of multiple causes, including economic development, political barriers, and interactive cultural phenomena. China has experienced rapid economic growth since the 1990s, and most of the population were probably not prepared to accept nostalgia as the postmodern consumption in that period. But in the middle of the first decade of the new century, especially around 2005 and for a few years afterwards, there was a sudden outbreak of a nostalgic creative rush in the Chinese cinema, with such films as *Peacock* (*Kongque*, Gu

Changwei, 2005), *Shanghai Dreams* (*Qing hong*, Wang Xiaoshuai, 2005), *Sunflower* (Zhang Yang, 2005), *Dam Street* (*Hong yan*, Li Yu, 2005), *Peach Blossom* (*Taohua canlan*, Fu Huayang, 2005), *The Road* (*Fangxiang zhilǚ*, Zhang Jiarui, 2006), *Summer Palace* (*Yi he yuan*, Lou Ye, 2006), *Xin Jie Kou* (Xue Cun, 2006), *The Sun Also Rises* (*Taiyang zhaochang shengqi*, Jiang Wen, 2007), *Teeth of Love* (*Aiqing de yachi*, Zhuang Yuxin, 2007), *Sailfish* (*Qi yu*, Jin Yimeng, 2008), *A Tale of Two Donkeys* (*Zou zhe qiao*, Li Dawei, 2008), and *The University Entrance Exam 1977* (Jiang Haiyang, 2009)...<sup>236</sup> Most of these nostalgic films are set in the social background of the 1970s and 1980s, and their directors are much younger than the fifth generation. Moreover, more importantly, most of these films received success and great attention in both the international festivals and domestic box-offices, which may allow one to realize that a real nostalgic era for China (rather than for the West) has come, termed in this thesis, the second nostalgic wave of the contemporary Chinese cinema. If one stands on the second nostalgic wave and looks back to the first wave ten years ago, then comparatively speaking one can see that the first wave of borrowing both foreign investment and Chinese stories has largely satisfied the Westerner's nostalgic demands and curiosity; while the second wave with its developed consumer consciousness and postmodern cultural atmosphere has given more attention to suiting (or catering to) the nostalgic consumer psychology of the Chinese audience. An increased consumer consciousness in the Chinese masses towards nostalgia illustrates that contemporary Chinese society at least in its cultural debates has already had

<sup>236</sup> And from their spiritual connotation of the past, *Gimme Kudos* ("qiuqiu ni biao yang wo", Huang Jianxin, 2005), *Unfinished Girl* ("di san ge ren", Cheng Er, 2007), and *24 City* (Jia Zhangke, 2009) can be read as certain nostalgia related films as well.

certain postmodern symptoms of the visual consumption. All of these issues are discussed in the last two chapters (Chapters 7-8).

The focus of Chapter 7 is not the narrative connotations of the second nostalgic wave but a transition process of the contemporary social culture of China between the two waves and its postmodern strategy of keeping silent. In this sense, an absence of nostalgia in China and its post-modernity do relate to its social and cultural reality.

## 7.1. The Darkest Time Is Near the Dawn – Silence of the Fifth Generation

### Directors

*The silence was a massive reply through withdrawal, that the silence was a strategy... they [the masses] nullify meaning. And this is truly a power... Basically they absorb all systems and they refract them in emptiness.*

*(Baudrillard, qtd. in Gane Interview 87-8)*

For whatever reason<sup>237</sup>, such as an after-effect following the censorship and

<sup>237</sup> There are many reasons that may explain why the first nostalgic wave is excluded or limited in China. One of them would be that the Chinese authorities are quite sensitive and worried about the negative influence of its extreme criticism on and connotation for the social stability.

It may perhaps be a punishment for the filmmakers' intentional stunt in the process of applying domestic release. This is called politicized film releasing, namely to avoid the domestic official examination and approval after a film is completed, it is directly sent overseas without authorization, so that a stunt of "political asylum" can be created and attract foreign attention; see Adam Lam (2005, 148-50 & 158). In the contemporary Chinese cinema, examples of punishment caused by the politicized release are frequent. The lighter will be refused a domestic permit for public release; a serious matter will lead to a restriction on its filmmaker making films in the future. For instance, because of the *Blue Kite* Tian Zhuangzhuang was banned from being a director for the last years of the 1990s; the sixth generation director Zhang Yuan was banned from making films in domestic film studios for six years since his *Beijing Bastards* (1993) got out of line in release; Lou Ye is banned for five years from directing in China since his *Summer Palace* was excluded by the local authorities in 2006. The producers of *Summer Palace* (2006) declared that the film had been sent to the local film bureau for censorship and modified several times according to suggestions from the bureau before it was sent to overseas film festivals, however the film bureau asserts that they never received any application for censorship of the film and the film story (which includes the background of the Tiananmen Square protests of

limitation of the first nostalgic wave, it is beyond dispute that the fifth generation directors have seldom referred to (or focused on) the radical past of politics (the background of the 1950s and 60s) in their filmmaking.

After *Farewell My Concubine*, Chen Kaige's *Temptress Moon* (*Feng yue*, 1996) is a story of the beginning of the Republic of China (the 1920s); and his *The Emperor and the Assassin* (*Jingke ci qin*, 1998) traces back to the period of the Warring States two thousand years ago; later *Together* (*He ni zai yi qi*, 2002), *The Promise* (*Wuji*, 2005), and *Forever Enthralled* (*Mei lan fang*, 2008) never even mentioned the radical past of Communist China.

Following *To Live*, Zhang Yimou made *Shanghai Triad* (*Yao a yao yao dao wai po qiao*, 1995). It is set in the 1930s and shows the only flourishing scene of the modern history of Shanghai. If it is compared with the Chinese economic take-off in the 1990s, Shanghai's prosperous past is indeed capable of arousing certain nostalgic sentiments in the contemporary Chinese masses. But sixty years later, as far as today's mainstream audience is concerned, such a nostalgic imagination has been more sublimated into a retrospection of a past sense of economic honor, and it seems too antiquated to achieve a visual reconstruction in the collective memories of the mass culture today. Afterwards, Zhang's *Keep Cool* (*You hua haohao shuo*, 1997), *Not One*

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1989) is largely different from its censored script before shooting. In this paradoxical case, it is presumed that the politicized release process is probably either the filmmaker's stunt or a governmental salvo for prohibition or exclusion. The real reason for the censorship may be a mystery forever.

Another possible reason is that the fawning behavior (towards the West) and its distortions emphasized in the last chapter led to strong dislike and hatred in the Chinese national patriotic discourse.

*Less* (*Yi ge dou bu neng shao*, 1999), *Happy Time* (*Xingfu shiguang*, 2000), *Hero* (*Ying xiong*, 2002), *House of Flying Daggers* (*Shi mian maifu*, 2004), *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles* (*Qianli zou dan qi*, 2005), *Curse of the Golden Flower* (*Man cheng jin dai huang jin jia*, 2006) are all set in either contemporary realities or are ancient costume narratives. They do not reflect concern with the public's familiar memories of the period between the 1950s and 80s.<sup>238</sup>

In consequence of the *Blue Kite*, Tian Zhuangzhuang was banned from his career as a film director. As a result, he did not direct any other film for the whole of the 1990s. In the new century, his *Springtime in a Small Town* (*Xiaocheng zhi chun*, 2002) was a remake of the classic 1948 film of the same title (directed by Fei Mu), one of the most important masterpieces in the history of the Chinese cinema. The action of remaking a film itself does probably contain a sense of nostalgia or pastiche. But within such a process of imitation, what the new film recalls and rebuilds, is actually the original filmmaking features and its classic screenplay, rather than what Jameson emphasized, a postmodern reconstruction of the past social style and its whole period of mass culture.<sup>239</sup> Even though Tian's remake could be read as a retrospective of a real life experience of the past in the 1940s (before the socialist People's Republic of China was founded), it has still distanced itself from a past sense

<sup>238</sup> *The Road Home* (1999) directed by Zhang Yimou is a particular case in the discussion here. The film indirectly touches on the Anti-Rightist Movement in the late 1950s, but it is just mentioned casually and lacks related narration and political background. Thus it shows a political peripherization in the contemporary Chinese nostalgic cinema, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

<sup>239</sup> As Jameson said, the "nostalgia film" "consists merely of films about the past and about specific generational moments of that past". Alternatively, it may "not reinvent and picture of the past in its lived totality; rather, by reinventing the feel and shape of characteristic art objects of an older period (the serials), it seeks to reawaken a sense of the past associated with those objects." (Jameson *Consumer* 113)



of the radical politics reflected in his early work, the *Blue Kite*. In addition, other main fifth generation directors, such as Huang Jianxin, Zhang Junzhao, Wu Ziniu, Zhang Jianya and so on, have not positively referred the radical period of the 50s and 60s in their works since the mid 1990s.

Although the situation mentioned above seems inadequate to prove that, after the first nostalgic wave, the fifth generation directors (in their creative subjectivity) made a conscious effort to avoid (or not to touch) the radical period of socialist China; yet to be objective, one cannot deny that their narrative concerns have indeed involved a long-term silence on the radical past. Even if this is not a subjective taboo, it cannot be read as a fact by accident either. Nostalgic films are not as dispensable as a commercial genre and reflect the collective memories of the contemporary public. The main three influential fifth generation directors made three earthshaking nostalgic films within a short period between 1992 and 1994, so why did the whole film industry collectively fall into silence about its stirring past in the ten years after (1995-2000)? Is there any intention in the “occasional” silence?

What the “intention” means is not any personal taste or inclination towards a total disregard for the past. The individual silence on political nostalgia probably derives from the government, rather than being purely voluntary. Wang Keping’s early sculpture (woodcarving) *Silence* (Chenmo, 1979) was a typical example of such taboo (Koppel-Yang 120). It depicts a man’s head, with one eye covered and whose mouth

is sealed, an agonizing image of a man who cannot see and speak freely. This work dates precisely from the tension surrounding the opening-up of China. As *Wenweipo* (“Wenhuibao”, Hong Kong) remarks “that sculpture shows the suppressed thought and expression of the people in the Cultural Revolution”.<sup>240</sup> However, when the same sculpture was exhibited in Pompidou Art Centre (Paris, France) ten years later (immediately after Tiananmen Square Protests of 1989), there was obviously a slight change in its political connotation. If its first successful exhibition in Beijing 1979 testified that a past extreme had been remedied, then the latter one (overseas) probably indicates that China had run to another extreme, which led to silence again in the 1990s. This thesis does not focus on the blocking actions of the government, but pay attention to a collective anoesis (passive intension) of the circle of Chinese filmmaking in the face of such curfew.

Figure 10. *Silence*

<sup>240</sup> *Wenweipo*, Hong Kong, 7<sup>th</sup> Dec, 2008.

Here the discussion would emphasize, what Baudrillard set his mind on, “silence” and its functions in postmodern fragmentation<sup>241</sup> towards politics, social power, and dominant discourse:

They [those who keep silent] exercise a passive and opaque sovereignty; they say nothing, but subtly, perhaps like animals in their brute indifference, they neutralize the whole political scene and discourse. (*Fatal* 94)

As Baudrillard said, silence means certain objective power, for the power itself does not need the people who keep silent to take up any subjective attitudes or give a swift reply. What they do is, in the same way as those animals which lack the faculty of thinking, to continue their silence. As the mainstream film-creative group of the 1990s in China, the fifth generation directors and their collective silence present a kind of position of paying no attention to their past era. Their stance predicates a neutralization of “powerful discourse”, a dominant esthetics formed and shaped by the censorship. If a cinematic element can be read as a reflection of its time and society, then the collective absence (silence) of nostalgia may lead to a reflection as well, a sort of fragmenting discourse that turns into a passive conservatism.

Such a conservative silence is in accord with the general atmosphere of the whole social/cultural development of the 1990s. It has been discussed in the last chapter that a public debate about the ideological/political issues of Chinese society

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<sup>241</sup> Here “fragmentation” means to resolve the culture hegemony of power politics.

has been restrained since 1989, and trauma related literary criticism has been restricted too.<sup>242</sup> Relatively speaking, it seems impossible that the censorship and exclusion suffered by the first nostalgic wave have no relation to the above mentioned situation. Actually, the moderately tightened policy of film censorship on the radical past and political theme proves from a different angle that such a restrained policy has spread in contemporary Chinese culture. Banning the *Blue Kite* and *To Live* from being publicly shown and the draconian punishment of Tian Zhuangzhuang can be read (to some extent) as an attitude consistent with the get-tough policy that the authorities adopted in Tiananmen in 1989. The government neither wants to see any extreme political movement disturbing the progress of economic reform and opening-up, nor to let the contemporary cinema have close relations with ideological criticism of the past. Consequently, as for those Chinese filmmakers of the 1990s, it is better to choose to keep silent than be the second “Tian” in the face of governmental censorship. In other words, they chose a collective absence from the concerns of the nostalgic film narrative, in order that the silence may give prominence to the dominant/powerful discourse and its absolutism and mighty logic, through which people may clearly realize that there is a firm grasp of power. And some of them may have participated in the effort to neutralize and balance the potency of power and its efficacy of discourse. Taken in this sense, a collective silence by the mainstream filmmakers is a reflection upon the cultural conservatism and postmodern fragmentation.

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<sup>242</sup> Guo Jian (2006) online.

## 7.2. The Nostalgic Concern and Political Silence of the Post-fifth Generation Directors

Also to be mentioned, beyond the fifth generation directors, there is still sporadic nostalgia reflected in the maiden films of other newborn directors at the same time as (or a bit later than) the first nostalgic wave. This mainly refers to Jiang Wen's *In the Heat of the Sun* (*Yangguang canlan de rizi*, 1995). Other films, like *Dirt* (*Toufa luanle*, Guan Hu, 1994) and *The Making of Steel* (*Zhangda chengren*, Lu Xuechang, 1997), though they cannot be totally regarded as nostalgia, still contain certain traces of retrospection of the past. The three films were made simultaneously with the first nostalgic wave, but they should not be confused with each other for at least the three reasons below.

First of all, the three films seldom deal with subjects of ideological or political nostalgia. This can be supported by two pieces of evidence as follows. On the one hand, as far as their narratives are concerned, the films seem to neglect to represent (reconstruct) the political appearances or recollect the radical politics of the past. *In the Heat of the Sun* tells of a group of teenage boys living in Beijing in the Seventies. The whole film has nothing to do with the radical politics of China. More than 90% of *Dirt* is a narrative of sentimental entanglements of a few young people in the 1990s. Only in its beginning sequence are there a few shots that look back to the childhood of

the protagonists in Beijing, the mid 1970s, when the scene shows a couple of boys (around 7 years old) “apprehending” a little girl (a bit younger than them) and playing together in an alley. The adults passing by do not realize their play at all. One of the boys speaks to the girl, “Hurry! Own up!”, which is followed by a medium shot framing the three children in the film. Each of the boys holds one of her arms behind her back.<sup>243</sup> The little girl tries to break loose from the “jet position” and says: “Let go of me! I’m Ye Tong [her name], I’m not a spy!” Obviously, the scene implies a naive imitation of the radical behavior of the Red Guards in the Sixties. But it only sketches a background of the protagonists’ childhood and has no apparent intention<sup>244</sup> of letting the political behavior relate to the realistic theme of the film. On the other hand, as far as the period of the nostalgic background in the films is concerned, it is totally not what the first wave has intensively focused on. The first wave typifies nostalgic concern about the 1950s and 60s. However, *In the Heat of the Sun* is mainly set in the summer, 1975. The black and white newsreel quoted in *Dirt* was shot in 1976 at Premier Zhou’s funeral. At the beginning of *The Making of Steel*, Zhou Qing (a teenage boy), experiences the Tangshan Earthquake (which occurred in July, 1976), and meets Fu Shaoying (a senior class girl in his school) in an earthquake shelter-tent in Beijing. When the film plays its first 15 minutes, it hints at the smashing of “the gang of four” (October, 1976) that indicates the end of the Cultural Revolution. This historical background means that the nostalgic era framed by the films is not of the

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<sup>243</sup> In China it is called “jet position” (喷气式), usually used in critical gatherings of the Cultural Revolution. People that were publically criticized were usually seized by two Red Guards behind them with their heads dropped and arms held up in a tight grip, like a jet aircraft.

<sup>244</sup> The whole film does not relate to any political connotations.

high-tide period of radical politics any more, but is set on the verge of the radical ending<sup>245</sup>. Such a historical setting not only leads a political representation to an absent condition in their nostalgic narrative, but also evades the possibility of directly facing the radical past. Thus, no matter whether they are in film narrative or a time-setting, the films do imply a silent strategy for political nostalgia.

Secondly, the silence does not completely mean that the post-fifth generation directors have always intended to avoid the political past of the 50s and 60s. Their age is probably an insuperable factor as Jiang Wen (born in 1963), Lu Xuechang (1964), and Guan Hu (1968) seem quite different from those of the fifth generation. In the light of the directors' classification in the history of Chinese cinema, Lu and Guan can be identified as typical directors of the sixth generation<sup>246</sup>. However, Jiang's cinematic experience seems more sophisticated, as in the early days of the 1980s he was originally trained as a professional actor in the Central Drama Academy. Then fortunately he acted in the leading roles in Xie Jin's *Hibiscus Town* (1986) and Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* (1989) and soon became famous. Although, as an actor Jiang has teamed up with many fifth generation directors (such as Zhang Yimou and Tian Zhuangzhuang<sup>247</sup>), he in no way can be categorized as one of the fifth directors.

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<sup>245</sup> It refers to the verge of the end of the Cultural Revolution and the eve of the reform and opening-up of PRC.

<sup>246</sup> In its narrow sense, the "sixth generation" directors refer to a group of youth who entranced the directing department of Beijing Film Academy around the late 1980s and began to direct films in the 1990s. As one of its directors, Lou Ye, said, the Sixth Generation may be only a label, its definition open-ended because of the lack of a commonly shared manifesto or school of thought. Sixth Generation directors have their distinct individual tastes and their films all look different. <http://www.filmreference.com/encyclopedia/China-SIXTH-GENERATION.html> Also, the definition of the Sixth Generation, as Adam Lam mentioned, is still "a question yet to be answered. Critics generally define the sixth-generation directors as those who grew up after the Cultural Revolution, so it is a very loose term." See Lam (2005, 152-3).

<sup>247</sup> For instance, *Li Lianying, the Imperial Eunuch* (Tian, 1991).

However, as Jiang also lacks any professional background of film directing, he is seldom regarded as a sixth generation director in academic circles. This is the reason why Jiang, Lu and Guan are called by joint names in the discussion of “post-fifth generation directors”.<sup>248</sup> As for the age of Jiang, his childhood seems closer to the sixth generation group. The reason that he may exceed the sixth generation and take the lead directing his own films is largely because he became a film star at a very young age, before 25. Therefore he could accumulate more advantages from filmmaking than his peers. Both Jiang and Lu were born before the Cultural Revolution, but there is still more than a ten-year age gap between them and Chen Kaige (born in 1952), Zhang Yimou (1951), and Tian Zhuangzhuang (1952). When China and its radical politics were experiencing a climactic period (around 1967 and 1968), perhaps Jiang and Lu had not yet established a clear memory of their childhood. It is impossible for them to have personal feelings about the Red Guards and the violently critical gatherings that the fifth generation had experienced. So radical movements are probably not remembered with deep sentiment by the young directors at all, as in the radical moment of 1968, Guan Hu was just born. When his *Dirt* was completely finished in 1994, he was only 26. Thus as can be seen, the age distance may have become a barrier for those young directors to become involved in the political nostalgia.

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<sup>248</sup> Similarly to Jiang, some other directors today also interpose their positions between the fifth and the sixth generation, such as Gu Changwei, Hou Yong, and Lü Le. All of them are classmates of Zhang Yimou and graduated from Beijing Film Academy in 1982. They are younger than the fifth generation directors but much older than the sixth. In the early days of their careers, they worked with the fifth directors as photographers; and in recent years, they have created their own directed films. In this case, these directors can be also seen as post-fifth generation directors.



Thirdly, compared with the first nostalgic wave, *In the Heat of the Sun*, *Dirt*, and *The Making of Steel* have not been strictly censored or banned by the domestic film bureau. All of them have received a film permit for public release from the authorities and were successfully distributed in the domestic market. *In the Heat of the Sun* not only won awards from the Venice and Taiwan film festivals, but also became the one of only four local films that made a profit in the Chinese box office, 1995 (Lam 2005, 185). *Dirt*, and *The Making of Steel* received their governmental permits in 1994 and 1997.<sup>249</sup> The public release of those films in the domestic market shows that they are not restricted or excluded by the mainstream ideology (the government) any more. This is probably evidence that proves that the Chinese nostalgic film has gradually managed to come out from the domestic shade of the first nostalgic wave. Moreover, it provides a reference function for the new nostalgic mode for sometime in the future when the second nostalgic wave could smoothly avoid difficulties (in censorship). In fact, ten years later the second wave, no matter what the age structure of its directors is, with its nostalgic motif and narrative setting, and its historical background, seems in accord more or less with the mode of *In the Heat of the Sun*. The new kind of nostalgia is in a silent position (or possesses conservative and avoidable strategies) regarding left-wing or radical themes and pushes the second nostalgic wave into a peripheral state. That will be discussed in the next chapter.

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<sup>249</sup> Also mentionable, *The Making of Steel* was finished as early as 1995, but due to the investigation of censorship it was modified and delayed for two years. Eventually the film received its permit in 1997.

### 7.3. The Nineties' Social Background with Its Nostalgic Sense Faded Out

However, nostalgic creation reached hard times in the second half of the nineties. Nostalgic cinema in China had been stagnating for about ten years until the second nostalgic wave suddenly came into being around 2005. Perhaps the deadlock may reflect some new tendency in Chinese social and cultural development (or changes) of the nineties. These social conditions are likely to be relevant to the fading consciousness of the mass nostalgia.

Compared to the 1980s, there seemed to be a much more limited belief in the 1990s. In his latest public speech, Gan Yang concludes that the ideological and cultural differences between the eighties and the nineties of China were as follows: “the nineties is relatively simple, just one word can conclude its motif, ‘economy’; whereas the eighties seems quite complex and diversified... various liberal minded thoughts sprang up, and they were not merely dominated by an economic logic” (Gan *Rich*). To some extent, this opinion seems to correspond with the historical situation of the Chinese nostalgic cinema. The first nostalgic wave happened in the early nineties, and its ideological thoughts on society, politics, and history may presumably go along with the spiritual status of the eighties to look to open-minded liberation and freedom. And it tries to culturally communicate (or get into accord) with the West through the “export” of its nostalgic narrative. To some extent, we can see the catering for Western market as a practice of the “narrowed” belief in economic reward

overseas. Therefore, the discussion has emphasized the fawning position that the first wave took towards a Western or late capitalist consumer culture in the last chapter.

However, domestically speaking, a great divide formed in China, after 1989 when those radically coloured and open-minded ideological propositions were suppressed strenuously. Also in the world, the simultaneously drastic changes in Eastern Europe (in late 1989) and the disintegration of the Soviet Union (1991) may probably have placed great pressure on Chinese socialist politics. China (especially its authorities) may have hoped for the withdrawal of the eyes of the mass culture from the conflicting ideologies to keep its social stability. In this case, accompanied by Deng Xiaoping's south inspection tour in 1992 and the deepening economic reform, China of the nineties (from the governmental origin of force to the whole social climate) mostly turned its direction towards economic construction. China gradually accelerated its freedom from the old trouble of a planned economy and came into a new phase of sustained and rapid development of the market economy.<sup>250</sup> Consequently it led to a rapid expansion of the bourgeoisie and the urban culture (Qiu *Expansion*), which probably prepared the ground for a Chinese climate of large-scale consumer culture in the future (Xie Ronghua 65). In this sense, the nineties could be regarded as a crucial accumulating phase for a cultural logic of Chinese post-modernity. Furthermore the nineties of China were also an important stage in

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<sup>250</sup> Within the thirteen years between 1989 to 2001, China's average growth rate of GDP (gross domestic product) per annum reached more than 9.3%; but the same rate in the whole world in the nineties was merely 2.5%. See Xinhuanet 2002-11-5. [http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2002-11/05/content\\_618871.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2002-11/05/content_618871.htm) Last access: 4 Oct. 2010

China's slipping the leash of the planned economy and trending towards the market. In that period a number of state-owned enterprises declared bankruptcy and their capital was regrouped, which led to large numbers of people losing jobs and their indemnification of social welfare. This to some extent may have forced the masses to change their attention from politics into improving their individual economic positions. "Make money and live better days" became a dominant theme all over the nation. As far as the dreariness of political issues is concerned, the government of the time perhaps implied certain purposes through economic improvements, which were to bury the past, forget the misery, and look ahead in everything<sup>251</sup>, an out and out propitiatory strategy of the social culture. Effectively speaking, in the nineties of Chinese society, the levels of the economy, life style, and value orientation were all gradually integrating with (or keeping abreast with) Western social formation and its physical modernity. Looking into the future, it seemed possible for China in such a time of transformation to cast the past aside and to neglect its ideological trauma for a while, so that it could whole-heartedly long for and enjoy a daily improved material lifestyle.

The above-mentioned social symptoms were also embodied in the national film industry of the nineties. On the one hand, Chinese film output in the period dramatically reduced and its box office sank into atrophy as well<sup>252</sup>; on the other hand

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<sup>251</sup> "ahead" (前) is a homophone of the word "money" (钱) in Chinese language.

<sup>252</sup> The annual film output of mainland China decreased from more than 100 films in the eighties to less than 40 films in 1998; the audience in domestic cinemas in 1979 reached 27.9 billion persons or times, while the average cost of movie tickets were up to 15 Yuan (RMB) in 1998 but the gross box office of that year in China was merely 2 billion Yuan. On such a basis, the annual person-time of film watching in the late nineties was no

television became the dominant audiovisual entertainment in China<sup>253</sup>, TV plays and entertainment programmes began their explosion<sup>254</sup>. As for the film market, domestic cinemas started to import foreign commercial movies (especially Hollywood block-buster movies) systematically from 1995, and during the late nineties the Chinese box office was mostly dominated by those visual spectacles from Hollywood and Feng Xiaogang's comedy movies for greeting the new year.<sup>255</sup> All of these phenomena prove (at least to some extent) that the Chinese masses did have an obvious propensity to consume everyday visual productions in the late Nineties: that

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more than 1/200 of what it was in 1979. See Yin Hong, "Chinese Films in the 1990s" <http://www.tecn.cn/data/23371.html> (last updated in 2009-4-30) and the web data "An Overlook on the Chinese National Film Industry", <http://www.mianfeilunwen.com/Yishu/Dianying/19534.html> Last access: 4 Oct. 2010

<sup>253</sup> The Chinese ownership of TV sets in 1965 was 0.1 per thousand people, but in Japan it was 285 in the corresponding period; while the number in China had risen to 156 in 1990 and 293 in 2000, which means its TV set ownership increased nearly 3000 times within 35 years (1965-2000). 1987 was the first time that China's TV set output exceeded Japan's and reached 1.934 million. From then on, China became the biggest country producing TV sets. By the end of 2007, the gross ownership of TVs in China was more than 0.4 billion. Hu Angang and Zhang Xiaoqun (2004) *Analysis of rising popularization of China's media based on actual evidences*, *News and Communication Studies*, 2004-4, p5. And the web data, "The Developing Route of Chinese TV Set Production", <http://www.csmpte.com.cn/window/060516TVlishi.htm> Last access: 4 Oct. 2010

<sup>254</sup> Since 1990 CCTV (China Central Television, the mainstream TV studio of the time) has started to broadcast a large-scale entertainment programme "Super Variety Show" (Zongyi daguan) at prime time each weekend, the show is high in the ratings (18%, an audience of more than 0.2 billion per week); from the mid 1990s regional satellite channels become popular all over the nation. Provincial entertainment programmes spread through the country, for example "Kuai le Da ben ying" from Hunan province won success quickly. As for the aspect of TV plays, since the first indoor TV serial "Ke Wang" (Lu Xiaowei) came out in 1990, many other TV serials like *The Story of an Editorial Office* (Zheng Xiaolong, 1992), *A Native of Beijing in New York* (Zheng, 1993), *Guo Ba Yin* (Zhao Baogang, 1993) have continually appeared in the TV ratings. The narrative contents of these mainstream TV plays were inclined to focus on the contemporary realities and modern loves of the Chinese society rather than nostalgia. Other series from outside of mainland China, such as costume plays *Xiang Shuai Chuanqi* (Fan Xiuming, 1995), *Xi Shuo Qianlong* (Fan, 1991), *Xin Bai Niang Zi Chuanqi* (Xia Zuhui & He Qi, 1993); Qiong Yao's serial TV plays *Qingqing He Bian Cao* (Shen Yi, 1991), *Huan Zhu Gege* (Sun Shupe, 1997); the remakes of Jin Yong's Kung-Fu (martial arts) serials; and the American sitcom *Growing Pains* (broadcasted in China between 1990-1994) and so on, endlessly expanded the entertaining space of the Chinese mass culture. Television became a main and dominant mass media in the Nineties of China. Its tendency as a pastime in visual culture, and the inclination for entertainment have been obvious. Comparatively speaking, those political pasts, scars, trauma, and criticism (towards the 1950s-70s) had almost faded out from the mainstream visual arts of the Nineties in China. This is quite in accord with the situation after the censored first nostalgic wave, especially its consequent silence.

<sup>255</sup> Beginning from *Dream Factory* (1997), Feng successively directed many popular movies like *Be There or Be Square* (1998), *Sorry Baby* (1999), *A Sigh* (2000), *Big Shot's Funeral* (2001)... these films played an absolute leading role in the domestic market, and they even surpassed the greatest Hollywood block busters in the Chinese box office of the time, while all of these Feng's movies lack nostalgic concerns. Please refer to Yin Hong, "Chinese Films in the 1990s", <http://www.tecn.cn/data/23371.html> Last access: 23 July 2009. In addition, a latest article from Xinhua News Agency argues that the Chinese film market from 1995 to 2002 was nearly the world of (or occupied by) Hollywood. See Xiao Chunfei, Xu Xiaoqing and Zhang Jiansong (2009) *Wenhui Daily*, 2009-6-15.

people or the mainstream interests/concerns at that time generally stressed what the television reflected – the realities, everyday life, entertainment, contemporary issues, and what Jameson so-called the superficial culture (*Postmodernism* 17-25) – rather than some of films full of profundities, symbols, and criticisms of the previous, politics, and trauma. Chinese visual culture of the late nineties preferred a modern prospect rather than her own scarred past and traditions; it was keen on comedy and humour<sup>256</sup> rather than political trauma and ideological tragedies. It was probably a phase in that it was temporarily deprived of memories, traditions, and the past. From today's perspective, it has become hard to tell whether it was the government that intentionally covered its past (and offset its public memories) through the economic success and modernized prospects; or the mainstream audience themselves who had not realized their past had a nostalgic value of consumer culture yet; or the Chinese cultural condition of the nineties was still distanced from a postmodern nostalgia. But at least a symptom cannot be denied: the mass consciousness regarding nostalgia represents a certain estrangement or even silence.

#### **7.4. An Accumulation of Power**

Chapter 7.1 suggested that silence may be power. Here the discussion would argue that silence also means an accumulation of power. From a linear viewpoint,

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<sup>256</sup> People may think that comedy and humour could probably lead to criticism, irony and satire on the social situation of the time. This perhaps shows that the mainstream media (and its audiences) would rather criticize today's social issues than focus on its political past; or conversely that the authorities (government) would rather compromise on the current criticism of today than let people recall their scarred experiences of the past. Therefore a connotation of the silence towards the past is very prominent through it.

there is a ten-year distance between the end of the first nostalgic wave in the mid-nineties and the eve of the second nostalgic wave around 2005. While an evaluation of the significance of the silent decade should not be as simple as only using a negative word like “ignorance” or “silence”; it should have a more positive effect on its future development. Perhaps it could be regarded as a phase of saving up strength to start out again.

Adam Lam briefly summarized the period (the 1990s) as follows, “what China had experienced in the period was a social developing process that simultaneously combined with both industrialization and post-industrialization. It was a transformation period of historical economy and social system” (Lam 2005, 156). In other words, that was a key stage for China to evolve its social culture from a traditional economic mode into a post-traditional, or a modernized (and post-modernized) status. Then China of the nineties obviously made certain preparations for its future cultural development in the twenty-first Century.

As far as nostalgia is concerned, the preparation was presented as a certain distance of cultural space or the march of time. Nostalgia is not as simple as memory recall. It is not really nostalgia to recollect what happened last week today. The emotional germination of nostalgia needs a relatively long temporal distance and a qualitative change of cultural conditions between circumstances of reality and of its past. Just as in the United States of the fifties relative to its eighties, the social

circumstances – including the political situation, economic condition, life style, family status, and various other cultural phenomena – have completely changed.<sup>257</sup>

As for China, though it started its reform and opening-up from the 1970s, its mass culture in the following decades still needed a long-term accumulation of quantitative changes to break out of its tradition<sup>258</sup> and to grow and adapt to a brand new modern life. Properly speaking the transformation process from the quantitative to the qualitative mainly happened in the nineties of the last century. Economic development not only leads to an increase in social wealth, it may also mean a transformation of systematic, spiritual, and cultural conditions. The transition from a planned economy to a market economy led to collapse of the socialist welfare system built in Mao's era. Egalitarianism was replaced by distribution according to one's performance, which could force the contemporary masses to give up those unrealistic communist convictions, then think of how to take advantage of reform, market and capital to trade a better standard of living in return. That is to say, the whole spiritual status of the Chinese public has changed fundamentally from a certain utopian fantasy to material desires.<sup>259</sup> Such a production of desire may probably lead contemporary China to a further distance from the Mao era and to become closer to the global

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<sup>257</sup> North America, within the period of the 1950s to 80s, had experienced the Golden Age, the Cold War, the Vietnam War, counter-cultural movements, the oil crisis, the third industrial revolution, and its baby boom generation have gradually dominated the social mainstreams. American life and its social formation have changed much from the fifties.

<sup>258</sup> Here the word "tradition" includes backward economic traditions, cultural traditions, and radical or left-wing ideological traditions.

<sup>259</sup> Even to associate the Chinese social economy since the nineties with the basic concept of "capitalism" is not a horrendous opinion in academic circles any more. For instance, Sheldon H. Lu mentioned that China "pursues capitalist economic practices in the era of globalization" ... and "quasi-capitalist China in the 1990s" ... (130, 148).



(especially the Western) capital<sup>260</sup>, markets<sup>261</sup>, and its consumer culture. Therefore a feasible speculation could perhaps be made that no matter what the economy, social culture, or the mental status of its population was, China before the nineties was totally different from what it is today. This is really what nostalgia needs to develop, a feeling of cultural and historical distance. The reason to stress the necessity of distance is that one could not imagine or create too many (postmodern) nostalgic emotions in a non-industrialized traditional China before the nineties (for example, China in the 1980s) or the other (quite similar) old and conventional China (like that of the 1950s).<sup>262</sup>

However after the nineties, when contemporary culture entered into a new (twenty-first) century, China experienced its greatest modern and economic

<sup>260</sup> Since the nineties China has become the biggest country introducing foreign capital in the world. By the end of 2003, the gross foreign direct investment (FDI) in China has exceeded 500 billion U.S. Dollars, accounting for 40% of the annual GDP of the year. The extent of taking advantage of foreign investment is apparently higher than the developed countries. It shows China has roundly opened its capital market and its economy has gradually moved into the global economic system. See "A Report on the Exploitation of Foreign Investment", by National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) (2004), [http://www.fsa.gov.cn/web\\_db/sdzg2005/internet/infoweb/DQWFB/qwfb35-01.htm](http://www.fsa.gov.cn/web_db/sdzg2005/internet/infoweb/DQWFB/qwfb35-01.htm) Last access: 21 July 2009

<sup>261</sup> The Chinese total export-import volume was 165.5 billion U.S. Dollars in 1992, and it increased to 474.3 billion in 2000; its gross national product per capita rose from 226 U.S. Dollars in 1978 to 420 Dollars of 1992, and with a steep rise from 945 Dollars in 2000 to 3266 in 2008. It took China 15 years to develop its GDP per capita from 200 Dollars to 1000 Dollars, but only 4 years from 1000 to 2000, and no more than two years from 2000 to 3000. The data reflects the rapid growing economy, its market vitality, and the increased consuming capacity of the Chinese masses. See "China's GDP Per Capita has Exceeded 3000 US\$, the Interim of Becoming A Consumer Society", by Xinhua News Agency, 2008-3-24, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/fortune/2008-03/24/content\\_7848957.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/fortune/2008-03/24/content_7848957.htm) Last access: 4 Oct. 2010

<sup>262</sup> There are examples of films in the 1980s (like *My Memories of Old Beijing*) that contain such a homesick feeling towards the 1920s, and it still depends on time and distance to create nostalgia. While other films in the 80s such as *Hibiscus Town* and *Woman-Demon-Human* (Huang Shuqin, 1987), represent only a distance of a political transformation (from the Cultural Revolution to the reform and opening-up) and an ideological change (from left-wing radicalism to a pluralistic liberalism of the Eighties), rather than the life and cultural difference from its postmodern and visual superficiality. By this token, the first nostalgic wave in the early 1990s is basically the inheritance from the Eighties. What seems different is the readership (it has been discussed before that the first wave is to a large extent shot for the West). If there is a certain postmodern sense reflected from the first wave, it probably consists of the political/ideological difference in the appearances and the perspectives between the West (or the daily Westernized China) and the radical China of its past; rather than what the second nostalgic wave largely depends on in the new century: a great change in the social culture and economy. That will be discussed in the next two chapters.

transformation for a long time, with its traditions and past rapidly vanishing. Compared to the old times, perhaps it has accumulated adequate distances. “The Chinese public who have been used to living in the market economy may need to wait up for a while and stop to have a rest.”<sup>263</sup> And recall the aftertaste of their past, no matter whether it was good or bad, brilliant or unbearable. It may also mean that China in its modern development of literature and arts has bordered on a stylistic exhaustion, or at least a lack of popular feedback from the public.<sup>264</sup> Thus at this moment, taking advantage of cultural appearances and rebuilding a public memory as visual commodities, may perhaps save the desperate situation of the cinema. Accordingly at all events, various signals indicate that nostalgia suddenly became prevalent and popular in China around 2005, when Liu Yangdong published collective and nostalgic memoirs about his childhood in the 1960s and 70s in Beijing. In the preface, he writes,

Because the manners and morals of the time change rapidly, nostalgia has been upgraded into a life style. When the book was half written, a TV station [in China] released an Internet survey of public opinion. The result shows, that in the table of the top ten most popular living styles, nostalgia comes first. This is also a reminder that those old memories, past events, former happenings, and those crusted odds and ends, which seemed flat and uninteresting before, are becoming more and more important, profoundly, flavored, attractive, and significant. (Yangdong Liu 1)<sup>265</sup>

<sup>263</sup> See “The Accelerated Era of Nostalgia”, *China Youth Newspaper*, 2008-7-18, the culture edition.

<sup>264</sup> As John Hill mentioned, those high arts and culture, full of modernity and stuck-up individual styles, may probably be jammed in the deep freeze in the postmodern era. (Hill 99) This situation is similar to the embarrassed failure the Chinese cinema met in its domestic box office of the late 1990s. It can perhaps be read as a distance problem between a modern style (a high art in cinema) and the popular culture.

<sup>265</sup> “因为世道变得快，怀旧已升格为一种生活方式。这本书写到一半的时候，（中国）有家电视台公布了一项网上民意调查，它显示，在十大时尚生活方式的排名榜上，怀旧列在了头一位。这也意味着，当年那些陈芝麻烂谷子事情，那些鸡零狗碎的事情，那些淡而无味的事情，正在变得越来越有分量，越来越有滋味，越来越有意思和有意义了。”

Just then, the second nostalgic wave of the Chinese cinema burst out.

### **7.5. Cultural Replacement and the Production of (Postmodern) Nostalgia**

The social transition experienced by China since the recent decades not only involves an economic transformation from the traditional to modern or post-modern society, but also predicates a change, from a production economy dominated by the planning system for the purpose of satisfying primary material demands, to a consumer economy based on measureless consumer desires. This changing process is an important foundation from which a contemporary issue of Chinese culture can be deduced or compared with the Western idea of a “consumer society”. That should start from the understanding of an accelerated “replacement”.

This section is attempt to explore the way China’s consumer culture produces a new (second) nostalgic wave of its own.

#### **7.5.1. Self-replacement, Waste, and Washing Out**

What is called here “replacement”, is to be precise, more like “recycling”. However it is not associated with a scarcity of commodities in a common sense or any kind of saving for the purpose of environmental protection in everyday life (such as the increasingly popularized charges for shopping bags in supermarkets), but refers to

the self-replacement, elimination and discarding in the mass domain of contemporary culture.

Such replacement derives from an inner source of cultural guidance in human beings. As Baudrillard mentioned, “everyone who does not wish to fall behind, be left on the shelf or lose their professional standing must update their knowledge, their expertise”. This kind of renewal has increasingly become something unavoidable, “the cycle of fashion” in consumer society, where “everyone must be ‘with-it’ and people must ‘recycle themselves’ – their clothes, their belongings, their cars – on a yearly, monthly or seasonal basis”. If they refuse to do so, “they are not true citizens of the consumer society”. Today what we have is “not a rational process of the accumulation of scientific knowledge, but a non-rational social process of consumption” (Baudrillard *Consumer* 100). Just as all living matter needs a process of metabolism, without reason, this introduces a re-discovery and re-explanation of natural qualities of our own.

But beyond the built-in impulse of human beings, consumer society is applying itself to transfer such self-replacement into certain waste, disuse and discarding of the mass culture. In the meantime, human beings try to free themselves from the emotional stress and anxiety associated with confronting universal moral commandments towards waste, and turn it into a positive need. After all, “all societies have always wasted, squandered, expended and consumed beyond what is strictly

necessary". Only when it is "in the consumption of a surplus, of a superfluity", can individuals or a society "feel not merely that they exist", but that they are living their lives. Then there must be a positive connection between profusion and waste in a consumer society. Profusion means a surplus beyond basic existing satisfaction, while "all production and expenditure beyond the needs of strict survival can be termed waste" (Baudrillard *Consumer* 42-5).<sup>266</sup>

When "waste" becomes certain necessary needs, it (the term) then can be regarded as "disuse" and "discardment". Consumer society improves such a fundamental and direct system of discardment in an economic process of the everyday, where "wasteful consumption has become a daily obligation", a "forced and unconscious institution", and a "cool participation in the constraints of the economic order" (Baudrillard *Consumer* 47). This means in a consumer society, from the very beginning a product is not only created for its use value and durability, but for its death, its obsolescence, and to be disused. In other words, discarding (or waste) becomes part of the social production and has been added, at very beginning, to final destiny of the product. A consumer society places much stress on consuming the "produce" or producing the "consumption" through wasting and discarding, so as to promote a never ending cycle of production and consumption.

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<sup>266</sup> This point also raises a question between real needs and false needs. We go through life very conscious of what we need, or is there any system that continues fostering what we think we need? Are people, in consumer society, spending time, money and effort chasing after things that they do not really need? Replacement and obsolescence are thus good excuses for renewing our needs endlessly.

Nowadays, waste is largely based on “technological ‘sabotage’ or organized obsolescence under the cover of fashion”. Its only purpose is not to promote but to wipe out the use value of objects, to detract from their time (or life) value by “subordinating them to their fashion value” and to accelerate their replacement. (Baudrillard *Consumer* 46)

“Organized obsolescence” tends to be closely related to the nostalgia of contemporary culture. In the following discussion, nostalgia becomes a vivid symbolic scene of time and space. Through the retrospection of its past space, and in the countercurrent of the trend, it tries to build a value of past time. But underneath, nostalgia helps consumer culture (and post-industrial society) corroborate the fact that time is, time was, and time is past.

#### 7.5.2. A Byproduct of the Obsolescence – The Production of Nostalgia

When such compulsive and organized obsolescence/elimination becomes an economic driving force, the discussion will naturally lead to an understanding or an explanation of today’s increasingly overflowing nostalgic culture developed by Lowenthal. An eliminating acceleration (or an accelerated obsolescence) seems to be the author of this sedition of nostalgia under such a condition of violent consumption.

“The transience of artifacts of all kinds – houses, clothes, books, furniture,

crookery – transforms our surroundings no less than outright destruction”. According to Lowenthal, all the objects around are here today and gone tomorrow, and “rapidly become useless and die out”. In an old society where use value was still dominant, and “materials were expensive and labour cheap, many things were made to last, often handed down from generation to generation”. But today, replacement seems much easier than repair:

Who now protects fabric with dust covers? How many turn cuffs and collars or darn socks? Manufacturing makes it cheaper to buy whole new aggregates than to furnish old structures with new parts. Because profits depend on high turnover, old goods become obsolete even when still serviceable. [...] Most things lasted a lot longer than now [...] Entire categories of objects rapidly become useless and die out. (Lowenthal 398)

Those daily products, the everyday environment, their appearances... and everything in the consumer society – under the veil of fashion (which is producing “waste”) or on the false pretences of self-replacement – are rapidly being washed out. In this sense, nostalgia can be better understood in the accelerated obsolescence of the postmodern: The more the past is destroyed or left behind, the stronger the urge to preserve and restore. (Lowenthal 399)

This is the connection between the obsolescence of a post-industrial culture and the bursts of nostalgia. In other words, it is not our subjective minds that instill a consciousness that we have entered the postmodern age and unintentionally pay more attention to some past appearances; but the consumer society and its production features that promote (or force) people today into a system of obsolescence and

compel them to separate from a past of their own. Therefore, people's historical feelings about a few hundred years ago seem quite different from the nostalgic feelings of the past thirty or forty years: the former perhaps concentrates more on understanding the past, but the latter is preoccupied with the present tense,<sup>267</sup> namely an alienation between a past and the reality.

Here one may emphasize the word "more" used by Lowenthal. "More" does not just mean a quantitative increase, as if people today would have more past memories than the people before in sheer quantity. "More" here indicates a certain concept of pace or speed in time and space. That is to say, what the people today have experienced, the individual vicissitudes and environmental changes in their lives, seem much greater than those of the ancients. In a consumer society, the alienation of time has been accelerated and proliferated more than that of space. The original meaning of nostalgia based on a distance of space has been replaced by an inability for time to return. The postmodern is based on such an eternal present where people can do nothing but mourn for their yesterday. For measuring the past, "more" can be probably juxtaposed with "fast": the more the past is destroyed, the faster the past is left behind, the stronger the urge to preserve and restore. This can best explain why nostalgia comes regularly, but especially floods consumer society today. In fact, contemporary China has shown a great dependence on its nostalgia in the huge social revolutions as well. For instance, what has appeared nowadays, an accelerated

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<sup>267</sup> As Lowenthal said, "nostalgia is memory with the pain removed, the pain is today" (8).



obsolescence of the social spectacle.

### 7.5.3. An Obsolescence of the Social Spectacle

An accelerated supersession in everyday spectacles is closely connected to the commodification of time as well. The experience and observation of human beings in terms of “time” usually derive from their direct spatial experiences. People always ask themselves in every life: what the past looked like, rather than what is a past time. The quickly changing spectacle of social life makes people realize there is a lapse of space related to a symbolic passage of time. The most powerful nostalgic feeling in film is not driven purely by excitement at diachronic alienation, but perhaps some indefinable sadness, loss, and regret. To reconstruct past spatial symbols on the screen one must simultaneously realize the loss of that space is beyond retrieval in the present reality. The feeling of modernism, with its linear time consciousness breaking through tradition, quickly isolates the past, not veer off in another direction, moving straight into the future, seems ineffective on nostalgia. According to Jameson, “modernism is temporal and postmodernism spatial” (*Geopolitical* 153). Nostalgia today apparently runs counter to an extension of certain linear time, but acts more on rebuilding a past space, and leads to a fragmentation of time.

Such disorder of time should have provided a common perspective from the accelerated obsolescence and the rapid development of the recent thirty years in China

gives just the opportunity for social space. The two photos below of a courtyard dwelling from an alley in Xicheng district, Beijing, were shot by the writer in winter 2001. On the right side of the first photo, there is an aluminum chimney stretching out under the low eaves which was a typical range exhaust system for domestic stoves (burning honeycomb briquet) in old Beijing. There is also a wooden birdcage hanging under the chimney, which provides a source of imagination to the owner of the house who saunters along the alley every morning with the lovely bird together, a vivid description of the local culture and traditional atmosphere. The lower-left of the second photo shows an outdoor hut for showering in the same courtyard. There is seen indistinctly an icon of Mona Lisa on the wooden, shabby door of the hut, but actually it is only a title page of a back copy of a calendar, which is similar to what Walter Benjamin or Andy Warhol emphasized in the industrialized reproduction of arts, an accidental appearance in the present popular culture. The Chinese destination of high art from the West – becoming a dilapidated fig-leaf in a shower room – is increasingly discarded in the same way as it is in the West. However, the actual influence of Western modernization has gradually changed from the illusion of Mona Lisa to the certain reality of contemporary China and has been represented by the other part of the photo, where the eaves become a clear-cut watershed and powerlessly bear the oppressive feeling of the outer-space of the yard: the pressure of a nearly completed skyscraper<sup>268</sup> towards the traditional everyday life. To express the threatening action of the modernization on the traditional spectacle in terms of “strangulation”, “invade”

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<sup>268</sup> It is actually a headquarters block of a foreign bank in Beijing.

and “occupy” seems not undue at all. In fact, the age-old eaves and the shower room (shown in the photos) combined with the archaic courtyard and the whole alley had been demolished before 2006 without trace. The old and traditional architecture in Beijing had been formed at least 700 years before, when the Mongolian ruler Kublai Khan established his Chinese dynasty at Beijing. But now the obsolete courtyard with its seven hundred-year history cannot long evade its doom, being gradually melted into the modern city spectacle, and changed into a part of a car park and public green space near the modern bank building on the West Second Ring road (the chief business street) of Beijing.



Figure 11. A Birdcage and Modern Times



Figure 12. Mona Lisa in Beijing

Modernity is inclined to erase those dated and broken traditions from one's eyes, but nostalgic films tend to include contrasts. The dilapidated downtown streets in old Anyang in *Peacock* and Sichuan in *Dam Street*, the low ceilings of the past staff dormitories and the gloomy workshops of third-line factories in *Shanghai Dream*, the barely furnished university campuses in the pioneering period of the 1980s in *Summer Palace*, the loading and unloading station of the planned economy in old Wuhan in *Peach Blossom*, and the traditional courtyard of Beijing in *Sunflower*, through all these obsolete spectacles (the past visual symbols), nostalgia is trying to construct distant recollections of time by the rebuilding of space. In films today, these symbols have turned the time values into cultural commodities. Nostalgia is attempting to free itself from the linear sense of modernity which usually loves the new and loathes the old. Instead of that, it goes upstream, against the current, and recycles the timeworn ideas in combination with today's disordered visual (spatial) culture of the

postmodern. However, the nostalgic spectacle, by taking the space and visual culture, gives a definition of a “past” which makes people assure themselves that an earlier space-time has belonged to a time long gone. Only then may it rapidly break apart from a psychological past, so as to push the yesterday (or a history) to become an absolute otherness, and eventually in the present tense, it isolates itself from (or ignores) its own conscious subjective aspect of emotion.

#### 7.5.4. Nostalgia in China: An Obvious Deduction

If a consumer society, as Baudrillard said, has catalyzed a cultural system of certain accelerated obsolescence, and the system as Lowenthal said, has quickened the self-elimination of social symbols so that people have rapidly left behind a sense of a past and in return intensified their desire to recall it with nostalgia, then such an agenda is not merely similar in context to China’s development of the last thirty years. It should be said that the nostalgic culture and its cinema in China have generally tallied with the (consumer) cultural conditions outlined above.

Those symbols of everyday life, mentioned by Lowenthal seem equally transient in China. His descriptions of Western cultural obsolescence can easily apply to a similar cultural reality of contemporary China as well. The dress, bicycles, furniture, streets, and the whole urban landscape of the Chinese people in the 1980s are totally different from China today. Little boys do not feel ashamed any longer

because of receiving used clothes from their elder sisters; people in China do not see clothes as their heirlooms and hand them down from one generation to another. They will not ride their old Feige, Yongjiu and Fenghuang<sup>269</sup> in the streets; antiquated furniture and the stagnant vista of the local cities in the past age of public ownership have all vanished with little trace. The accelerated obsolescence of all the everyday spectacles has increasingly shown that China's mass culture is moving into a cycle of fashion and consumption. Without constant consumerism and elimination, how have the life appearances brought about such tremendous changes? The cultural and fashionable transmutation is in return proving a consumer society is on the rise in China.

The accelerated cultural replacement has also been represented by images in film from the second nostalgic wave. *Xin Jie Kou* (Xue Cun, 2006) reminds us that tape recorded advertisement for "Yanwu" was known to every household in China from television in the 1980s; while today, the brand combined with its outdated product has collapsed without being noticed in the flood of various price wars a long time ago.<sup>270</sup> *Peacock* (2005), set in a small city of northern China in the late 1970s, relates a family's past life experiences where the elder brother, the sister and the younger brother sit together around a table with their parents in a shabby and open corridor of a dormitory building, create homemade coal balls in autumn, or deposit

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<sup>269</sup> They are outdated brands of bicycle made in China.

<sup>270</sup> Since 1982, Yanwu recorders had become a pillar product of the Radio Factory of Jiangsu. They had occupied the first place in the market share for over eight years. But after the 90s, the factory did not catch up with the world development trend in digital productions and was bankrupt in 1996.

fresh tomato slices in glass bottles for the winter. But nowadays all these previous household lifestyles are gone forever, as a result of changes in family structure (the one child policy), the modern heated buildings, and the increase in vegetable greenhouse technologies. Also the public earthquake shelter-tent (set in 1976) in *Sunflower* (2005) seems quite strange to the young generation today. Its romantic love story set on the ice surface of Houhai<sup>271</sup> in the 80s reflects many happy memories of the contemporary audience, but in recent years a warm winter resulting from greenhouse gases has made the ice surface of the lake often unsafe. Furthermore the market economy makes the lake cease to be an innocent breath of romance and turns it into a red-light district full of pubs and bars. The flared trousers and slick disco moves reflected from *Shanghai Dream* (2005) went out years ago and have been replaced by the present fashions (such as Hip-Hop). The immature (university) campus love of the 80s is shown in *Summer Palace* (2006) as certain utopian nostalgia. Zhou Wei and Yu Hong, hand in hand, roamed the lakefront glorying in the sunset. College students get together in the evening talking about democracy, freedom and the West. All of these show a cultural temperament which is romantic, modern and plain (naive) for the new generation of Chinese intellectuals of the 80s. But now Zhou Wei's sports suit with the traditionally made double white lines has already been discarded by contemporary college students who mainly yearn for Adidas and Nike, and the past single-minded pursuit of freedom and democracy in the 80s has been swallowed up by the sound of hysteria all night from college halls playing CS and

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<sup>271</sup> Shichahai is an historic scenic area consisting of three lakes in the north of central Beijing. Houhai is one of the lakes.

*Warcraft*.<sup>272</sup>

Today's nostalgic reinvention of past life in the 70s and 80s may perhaps astonish every Chinese audience with brevity of their own past, and trigger their unprecedented interest. This interest may not only derive from an infatuation about the past, but focus more on the present isolation and alienation from the past, and the huge changes which mean a rapid supersession of the contemporary everyday.

#### 7.5.5. Political Supersession or Consumption Supersession? – The Different Production of Nostalgia in the Two Waves

Nostalgia plays a promotional action in a consumer society. If Baudrillard is right that the accelerated supersession of consumer culture is based on “sabotage or organized obsolescence under cover of fashion” (Baudrillard *Consumer* 46) and for the purpose of eliminating the use – and time – value of commodities to quicken the replacement, then nostalgia obviously sides with consumption (consumer society) and fosters its growth. The instinct for memory-based nostalgia of human beings is just like a rubbish museum that changes abandoned cultural garbage with its use – or time – value lost into something memorable and recycles it into circulation.<sup>273</sup> So within the circle, nostalgic culture accomplishes a shift in tense from the present to a past,

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<sup>272</sup> CS, Counter-Strike, and *Warcraft* are both popular internet games in the campus culture of China.

<sup>273</sup> Such a cultural circulation, apparently, is quite in accord with the postmodern parody (or imitation) after the present cultural exhaustions, but the motive of rubbish recycling seems more positive as one of the postmodern cultural reactions.



like a public oath of naming, by which people are convinced that the culture of yesterday is now all ancient history. In other words, it is not just a consumer society that produces nostalgia, but nostalgia is also creating a time consumption of the public. This is one of the important factors leading to the flood of nostalgia in consumer society.

But the accelerated obsolescence of consumer society is not the absolute requirement for Chinese cinema to produce nostalgia. Undoubtedly the domestic economy and the local consumer culture in China had crucial influences on the rise of the second nostalgic wave; however this point does not apply to the first wave. In fact, the causes of the two waves differ considerably. In the former discussion (in Chapter 6), it has been argued that the creation of the first nostalgic wave had more connection with China's political (ideological) changes, fawning positions in regard to foreign novelty-hunting and the childhood experiences of the fifth generation directors. Nevertheless, the first nostalgic wave seemed quite limited in its connection with the local factors in the economy. At least from its macro performance (for instance, the above-mentioned macroeconomic improvement), it was still showing few signs of a qualitative change in China's social conditions in the early 90s from those of the 60s or 70s. The real economic take-off of China should be counted from the mid nineties. Thus there is a distant connection between the nostalgic sense of the first wave and an economic (or consuming) supersession.

As things stand now, many nostalgic symbols have been remade from the first wave, such as the repeated signs of the Sixties: the Red Guards, radical slogans, and the scenes of people being violently criticized and denounced. These cannot be read as an economic obsolescence or self-replacement in a consumption sense, but rather tend to satisfy the overseas interests in an exotic distance through the imitation of obsolete ideology and past (radical) politics. People, such as Jameson, may still call the first wave an “imaginary museum”, full of past memories, dead styles, masks and voices (Jameson *Consumer* 115); and assert that they themselves are consuming certain past representations and spectacles. However such consuming behavior in the early 1990s (based on ideological supersession or geopolitical difference) does not equate to the economic renovation of domestic consumer culture (mainly reflected from the second wave) in twenty-first Century China.

The first nostalgic wave was largely constructed on certain breaking points of ideological history, such as the turn and change from stratocracy (the Republic of China, 1912-1949) to a socialist politics (the left-leaning period, 1950-1976), and to Deng’s era to set things right (the late 1970s and 1980s). Ideological representations dominate its nostalgic reinvention. *Farewell My Concubine* contains a fifty-year long history from the 1920s, and many of its appearances derive from political variations through wars, regime, or political strategies, including the Second Sino-Japanese war (1937-45), the Civil War between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party of China (1946-49), the founding of socialist China (1949), the Anti-Rightist Campaign (since

1956), and the Cultural Revolution (since 1966). Most of the nostalgic representations of the first wave – the Japanese army uniform of the 1930s, those regimentals of Kuomintang officers in the 1940s, the Chinese tunic suit, and the emerald green uniform of the Red Guards in the late 60s – were not eliminated as a result of a profusion or supersession in consumer society at all. In the same way as the fatal embarrassment that happens to Cheng Dieyi (*Farewell My Concubine*), when his traditional costume for the Beijing opera does not satisfy the new (socialist) situation of the 1950s, it implies a certain compulsory replacement of cultural representation by political changes rather than a consumption supersession.

However the second nostalgic wave is not inclined to contain such lengthy and far-flung history as *Farewell My Concubine* and *To Live* did in their narratives. Nearly all of the stories in the second wave take place after the Great Tangshan Earthquake (1976). *Peacock* is a piece of the ephemeral past from 1977-1984; *Shanghai Dream* happens in the early 1980s; *Xin Jie Kou* is set in the mid 1980s; the nostalgic section of *Summer Palace* focuses on the late 1980s; and *Sunflower*, *The Teeth of Love* and *Dam Street* all start their stories from the late 1970s; even *The Road* and *Sailfish* set their nostalgia in the 1960s, still narrated as a point of the past rather than a long historical clue. Generally, the second wave has kept itself away from the politically sophisticated period of Chinese history (1920s-1960s). The late 1970s and 1980s were a relatively stable period for economic development, which probably makes its nostalgia present much purer supersession in consumer culture.

The difference and distance of the nostalgic representations between the two waves consist in a transformation from a politically compulsory obsolescence (for instance, the radical Cultural Revolution with its compelling intentions) to a self-replacement of a mass cultural system, such as a postmodern consumer society with its accelerated elimination of the past. Consequently to some extent, the alleged two cultural revolutions of the contemporary world by Dirlik, the great Cultural Revolution of China and the postmodern cultural revolution of the late capitalism (*Two* 4-15), have acted in concert with each other through a process of nostalgic representation in the Chinese cinema. The transition from the first to the second wave testifies that the domestic cultural consumption of the twenty-first Century in China has greatly improved over what it was in the early 1990s. Its social function (significance) has transformed from presenting political scars and satisfying exotic novelty-hunting, to a postmodern nostalgia increasingly penetrated and dominated by a local and public consumer culture of China.

#### 7.5.6. A Disappeared History – To Read a Postmodern Nostalgia in Spectacle

A dramatic change in economic development naturally leads to a transformation of cultural conditions. The shift from economic consumption to consumer culture seems unstoppable. If a constant self-supersession makes China

achieve a consumer society in the economic category, the spectacle<sup>274</sup> is filling the space of consumer culture.

Spectacle, as John Frow put it, is derived more “in part from the increasing integration of ‘cultural’ process and ‘cultural’ goods into the system of production” (Frow 6). That, of course, is closely related to the development of the productive forces, because according to Guy Debord, when the accumulation of capital (or economic abundance) develops to certain extent, the primary logic of production will change into a spectacle and its portrait (34). This frees mass culture from the limitation on technological innovation and pushes it to certain visual and virtual levels of an inauthentic transition. Just as Roberto Finelli alleges,

In the postmodernist era, things — mass-consumed commodities — become more and more sheer occasions for capital’s realization and less and less the means for satisfying the natural and cultural needs of human beings. Things progressively become less authentic and lose their use qualities; they turn into superficial, rapidly seductive, and consumable commodities.  
(qtd. in Frow 6)

Deriving from its superficiality and seductive quantities, an extreme viewpoint from Debord thinks that such a visualized commodity has gradually been instilled in and dominated social life: the modern world “presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that was once directly lived has become mere

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<sup>274</sup> John Frow introduces the term as follows, “the ‘present age’ is defined in more precise terms as a set of social relations of production, and the ‘sign’, ‘copy’ and so on reappear as the category of the ‘spectacle’: the fetishized form of the commodity in a system of representation which is in part to be understood as the system of the mass media, including advertising and design; in part more specifically as the social force of television (which can often be directly substituted for the word ‘spectacle’); but at times more generally as the visual, or the forms taken by the gaze within a consumer-capitalist society”. (Frow 5)

representation"... reality becomes "a pseudo-world apart" (Debord 1-2). Therefore, as a foundation of the commercialized illusion and "its most general form" (Debord 47), spectacle has completed its colonial reforms on a modern society (Debord 42).

For Frow, Debord's argument that spectacle has increasingly shifted into a commodity culture has opened many postmodern topics for discussion later, such as superficiality and the in-depth, the hyper-real world, a spatialization of time, and its domination of the everyday abstraction. (Frow 7)

One must however stress the ambiguous relationship between spectacular effects and nostalgia, which largely determines the special role nostalgia plays in consumer culture, where a presentational, visual, and filmic commodity has increasingly become a part of the spectacular culture of the postmodern. The sudden burst of nostalgic presentations in the Chinese film industry since 2005 may conversely testify to the large-scale spread of the past spectacle in a commodity culture of the mainland. Nevertheless, this has also shown a dilemma as to how to present the relation between spectacle and nostalgia.

Outwardly, the flooded images of nostalgia return the audience to their thoughts of the past, and build a bridge between presenting reality and history. Through a reconstruction of past spectacles, contemporary people may achieve the consumption of a certain past tense. That is of much cultural consequence in a linear

time deconstruction. As Pam Cook put it, “Nostalgia plays on the gap between representations of the past and actual past events, and the desire to overcome that gap and recover what has been lost” (4). Here a nostalgic spectacle has been described as a visual form used to break through (or annihilate) the distance of time and promote their communication.

However, this thesis has repeatedly emphasized that the consumption of the spectacle’s appearances has actually severed its relationship with historical verity, as a postmodern spectacle has tended to be a simulacrum without deep realities any more.<sup>275</sup> A social culture dominated by the spectacle will directly lead to a paralysis of history and memory. According to Debord, a spectacle should be explained as “the reigning social organization of a paralysed history, of a paralysed memory, of an abandonment of any history founded in historical time” (Debord 158). Furthermore he said, “the first priority in the spectacle’s domination is to obliterate all knowledge of history”... and impose upon us “a world without memory” (qtd. in Frow 7). If his point is accepted, it runs counter to the understanding of nostalgia by Cook.

If a spectacle can still become effective in postmodern culture, it seems necessary to adjust the explanation of nostalgia. In fact, a postmodern nostalgia usually indulges, waives, dispels, and releases a historical past, rather than redeeming or retrieving it. In a flat, superficial and depthless culture of spectacle, Susan Stewart

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<sup>275</sup> As Baudrillard quoted from Ecclesiastes, “The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth--it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true.” (*Select Writing* 169)

points out, “that a surface is projected so that a profundity can be lost” (qtd. in Frow 8). In other words, the “past” images reflected from a screen do not have much effect on communicating, stimulating, and resurrecting a history, but intend to cover and replace the profound depth. Consequently a past profundity melted irreversibly in an accelerative process under the spectacle of cinematic nostalgia. “Many accounts of modernity view the world retrospectively, in sadness; *a fortiori*, many accounts of postmodernity mourn a loss of history and of memory” (Frow 7). The implication is probably that the latter and its mourning have no intention of redeeming but to give away all the past.

Thus, the understanding of nostalgia by Pam Cook may be modified in a postmodern context as follows: nostalgia is not playing on, but *appearing* in the gap between representations of the past and actual past events, and the desire is not to overcome but to *distance* that gap and not to retrieve but to *reconfirm* what has been lost. Then a dated image affirms the elapse of yesterday, rapidly separates it from people’s consciousness of their real space, and eventually enables the commodification of time.

The second nostalgic wave is laden with just such a responsibility. Nowadays spectacles make yesterday’s memory become history and objects of mourning and are freely consumed. A condition of forgetfulness has accorded well with the needs of the rapid social reform (and economic development) in China since the 1980s. Compared



with the first nostalgic wave, the second one is not indulging in the sadness of past, and its narrative seems relatively light, easy and pleasant. Its recollections about past youth and lost love have replaced those radical and political conflicts. Even though some of the loves (as they are in *Shanghai Dream*, *Sunflower*, *The Teeth of Love*, and *Peacock*) turn sour quickly and seem not sweet enough, there is no sinister political fate such as that which Bean, Shujuan and Fugui meet in the first wave. The execution by shooting in *Shanghai Dream*, Yuhong's abortion in *Sunflower*, He Xuesong's drowning in *The Teeth of Love*, and the sister's despair over her first love in *Peacock* are not played up (as "radical" trauma) in the visual sense on the screen. Nostalgia obscures the pain and scrapes off its scar in one's memory. Neither does it provide love with any perfect ending, nor has it left any possible chance to reconnect the past with today. The past has already passed and no longer has a connection to the present. This is not a rethinking or a reassessment of history at all, but a firm chopping off (amputation). Such a determined attitude then may force people to turn back to the eternal present.

## **Chapter Eight**

### **A Real Nostalgia for China**

#### **8.1. The Families That Are Broken**

The traditional China according to Zhao Shu, a sociologist, is much based on the concept of family as a basic element of the society. Zhao also argues that China forms a relatively steady social system with the core idea of filial piety within each family. (6) This implies the importance of maintaining a stable family for Chinese society as well. A family is not only a main determinant of each member's happiness but also indicates the basic status of each society and era.

The discussion of this chapter starts with an analysis of the second nostalgic wave from its interpretation of “family” in cinema. The point is that broken families in nostalgic films lead directly to a conjunction between nostalgic appearances and a mass (postmodern) consumer culture of China.

Both of the nostalgic waves in Chinese cinema history stress their dramatic conflicts through the reflection of broken families. By way of contrast their mode and conditions of representing the “break” are different. Moreover, there is a basic difference (between the two waves) in the expression of the relationship between the family and the outer world (namely the society).

Whether it is *Farewell My Concubine*, the *Blue Kite*, or *To Live*, the narration of the first wave is always centred on a unique subject, which is the way the families are devoured by the external world. With no exception, Juxian (*Farewell My Concubine*), Shujuan (*Blue Kite*), Fu Gui (*To Live*), all regard a complete family as a prerequisite for happiness. That is consistent with the social aim of traditional China.<sup>276</sup> However beyond their families, radical politics and its social atmosphere play a negative role and overhang the nostalgic narration as the greatest villain of the piece. It is the immediate cause of Juxian's suicide, Shujuan loses her three husbands one after another, and Fu Gui loses his son and daughter. In other words, the miseries of those families are caused by outside factors in politics. The nostalgic appearances and their reconstructions of the first wave are totally shrouded in the depthless political haze, such as the Red Guards, red flags, the Maoist propaganda team, Dazibao (big-character posters), and critical gatherings. The domestic harmony and the wicked political setting are formed or shaped as a crucial binary opposition in the dramatic conflict in the films, which seems overwhelmingly favorable for constructing and intensifying a stereotyped oppositional conflict in some of the minds of the Western audience, between a weak image (a traditional and broken family) and a radically mighty social status. At the end of the last chapter, the discussion argued that these kinds of stereotyped political images cannot present the entire content of the

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<sup>276</sup> For the relationship between family and society in China, please refer to (Li Guimei 30-3). The article pointed out that the (special and unique) social and historical conditions have always made the Chinese family deeply combine and integrate with the geographical relationship of kin. To attach importance to the family-oriented conception does have the positive significance of maintaining family stability and social harmony. To understand the conventional culture of China, one must read the Chinese family.

culture and lives of the Chinese masses in the 1950s and 60s. It is probably the fawning position of the first wave towards the West, and in the meantime it can be seen as a distortion of the radical past. In the view of orientalism, the essence of their intentions consists in that, through the stereotyped political elements, the export nostalgia may emphasize the negative effect of the social status and the tragedy of the social life. To a large extent, the first nostalgic wave seems to lack concern with the cultural reality of the local masses, but it intentionally stresses a kind of domestic pain in the past memories.

A past pain is a kind of nostalgia too, which has been overwhelmingly represented in the first wave of films exported. Lowenthal has said that Western people today love nostalgia and firmly believe that what is old is necessarily good, and they hope that nostalgia may help to remove them from their real predicaments and to escape into a past dream (4-8). But what the nostalgia in China represents is perhaps quite the reverse. People hope that the pain from their memories will not trouble them any longer, so the “pain” in their nostalgic setting is not only to relive the thrilling past but also to assure them that those past disasters are out of reach today. Therefore the “fearsome” past “is by no means universally rejected” in a nostalgic sense (403), and one is none the less glad to recall one’s early days of trauma. “Yi ku si tian”, or calling to mind past sufferings and thinking over the good times, is a proverb all over China.<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>277</sup> Literally 忆苦思甜. The sufferings experienced by the Chinese public from the 1950s to the 60s are unique and are difficult for Westerners to understand. Lowenthal cited a case to describe what in the past disappointed

But in the second nostalgic wave, the domestic pains gradually moved away from the binary conflicts of the radical politics and changed into emotional reflections on cultural and social changes between the Mao era and Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening-up (around the late 1970s and early 1980s). If the first nostalgic wave seems inclined to cater for (or satisfy) a Western stereotyped consumption of the radical, oriental imagination, then the second nostalgic wave perhaps leans towards giving more attention to the consumer mentality of the local/mass nostalgic culture in China.

Differently from the first wave, the nostalgic films of the second wave choose a sort of "implosion" (internal contradictions) to represent the broken family (domestic) in most cases. In other words, this kind of breakdown of families does not derive directly from the external persecution of political movements, but it results from the autonomous internal contradictions and represents the family members' resistance to the concept of a traditional family itself from inside to outside.

*Shanghai Dreams* (Wang Xiaoshuai, 2005) is set in the early Eighties. The protagonist, Qinghong is an adolescent high school girl. She has followed her parents and migrated from Shanghai to Guizhou Province (one of the most undeveloped

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people in the West. It was in 1981 when a Western man walked through the hippie encampment at Stonehenge's solstice rites and it felt "like stepping back in time... I have returned to the Sixties... and it stinks" (Lowenthal 28). While I would argue that the cultural style of hippies just embodies the freedom of the Western public in the Sixties to freely choose their own life styles; however in China, the Sixties were completely smothered by Maoist politics, people had no alternative at all. For the Westerners, the Sixties is probably a radical coat, and one may choose whether he/she would like to put it on or to take it off; but for the Chinese public, the Sixties are no form of escapism for any one. Maybe they seem not happy but still deserve thought and recall.

places in China) to implement the Third-line Construction<sup>278</sup>. But many years later, with the beginning of the Chinese reform and opening-up, many parents of the Third-line hoped that their children could study well and be admitted to a university so that the families could return and improve their lives in the big cities. Such a homeward urge proves that from then on the political pressures on individual families have become flexible and gradually fade out, so people are increasingly having freedom of choice to reside where they want to. This means an external (political) atmosphere is no longer the most important factor that directly forms the dramatic conflicts in nostalgic narratives, but just an actual storytelling background. The real main conflict of the film consists in the contradictions between its family members, the parents and their daughter. It is Qinghong who is beset with puppy love and deviates again and again from the homeward plan of her parents.<sup>279</sup>

*Sunflower* (Zhang Yang, 2005) tells the story of a boy (Xiangyang) and his course of growth in Beijing. From his childhood Xiangyang loses the freedom he enjoys (playing with other boys) and is forced by his father to learn art and drawing. When he grows up, his parents want him to be a student in art college, but he fails his entrance exam and falls in love with a girl. His father then compels him to prepare for

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<sup>278</sup> The “Third-line Construction” was regarded as a major decision of the Chinese industrial system and national defence construction from the 1950s to the 70s. As a preparation for war and to guarantee logistics support in the interior areas (or third-line) in the event of war, the Chinese leadership decided to build new factories in the southwestern regions, mainly Sichuan, Guizhou and Yunnan. For this very reason, a huge number of technicians and skilled workers were transferred from big cities like Shanghai, Harbin and Shenyang to southwest China that seemed far away from the potential front line in the Cold War.

<sup>279</sup> Though potentially speaking, the film takes advantage of Qinghong’s story to hint at a criticism of the Chinese authorities that stripped her parents (and many other Third-line workers like them) of their own lost youth, the motif of the nostalgic story has already wandered away off into an ideological theme and focused on its realistic legacy of the past.

the next exam and prevents his love by taking his girl friend for an abortion. Xiangyang is filled with a desire to break through the family barrier and look for his freedom.

*Peacock* (Gu Changwei, 2005), The film is divided into, “sister”, “elder brother”, and “younger brother”, the three parts (of the family) to be narrated. They (the parts) interrelate with each other but still seem independent. This narrative strategy itself may imply a divisive effect. The sister wants to trade her future with her bloom (her love and body), but her dreams have been shattered over and over again; because he is slightly mentally deficient, the elder brother is spoiled all the time by the parents, which leads to his sister and brother’s envy; the younger brother does not like to live in his brother’s shadow of bearing the cap and bells, while he fails to overcome the inauthenticity of his own existence and eventually chooses to escape.

*Dam Street* (Li Yu, 2005) tries to break through a family ethic in an extreme way. A ten year old boy Xiaoyong falls in love with a twenty-six year old woman Xiaoyun without the knowledge that she is his biological mother and he is her son. All of these films represent the inside explosion/contradiction within the concept of family. The impact of the collapsed idea of family then embodies (to some extent) the process of a social transformation in China from its traditional consciousness of family to a modern (postmodern or post-family) society that upholds individual freedom.



Figure 1. Xiaoyun and Xiaoyong in *Dam Street*

Completely different ideas of a broken family are shown in the two nostalgic waves. The first wave tends to impute most responsibilities to the political environment and regards radical politics as the immediate cause of the domestic sufferings. However the second wave does not blindly blame the contradictions on society and politics, but takes advantage of the discontent of the young individuals with their families and pushes them to change society. Through the process of being in society, the new nostalgic wave uses more space to show the connections between individuals and the social realities, which can be read as direct evidence proving that the visual culture (nostalgic films) in China has gradually left its stereotyped political



factors behind<sup>280</sup> and paid more active attention to the realities of its own mass culture. Only in this way (by breaking through the restrictions of the family) can Chinese nostalgia make its films break certain stereotyped styles and represent a reconstruction of the entire social climate of the past. If we say that the family sufferings reflected from the first wave accomplish the task of pastiche towards a radical climate of Chinese politics; then the broken family with its inside explosion is likely to lead the narrative emphasis towards the whole climate of the social culture. The retrospection of the mass culture and the representation of the vivid life experience of the past have directly connected the Chinese cinema with its domestic/indigenous (rather than foreign/Western) postmodern nostalgic (and mass consumer) cultures.

Here in the second wave, the main dramatic conflict of the nostalgic narration has changed from a contradiction between family and the external ideology (political context) into a conflict between individual freedom and traditional family cohesion. Those external social factors no longer play a negative role full of political intrigues, but they are transformed into certain temptations (of the reformed new China) that entice the young family members into fighting against the old families and step into a brand new society. The relationship between individuals and society is no longer similar to what orientalism embodies, to seek an extreme conflict between the

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<sup>280</sup> Some of films in the second nostalgic wave (such as *Shanghai Dream* with its the Third-line issue) still exploit the family contradictions to hint at some of the historical (or even political) legacies, so that they form a historical or social criticism in potential. But this kind of connotation seems neither apparent nor immediate. It could be seen as a peripherization of the critical strategy, which will be mentioned later in the chapter.

innocent weak and the ruthless politics. But it relives all kinds of wonderful memories and life experiences of the masses, from the “underground party” attended by Qinghong (*Shanghai Dream*) to the romantic ice-skating encounter of Xiangyang and Yuhong (*Sunflower*)... All of these are beautiful memories of the Chinese masses beyond the political sufferings. For Fredric Jameson, they not only mean a pile of freely-chosen parts of a nostalgic museum, but perhaps indicate the sort of mass consumer products that belong indeed to the Chinese audience of their own. As far as their nostalgic time is concerned, the main historical period that the second wave focuses on is no longer the Fifties and Sixties, full of political symbols, but the late Seventies and Eighties that seem peaceful in politics but gradually cause restlessness in people’s mind with the various new ethos of reform.

## **8.2. Reflections on the Transitional Society**

Diachronically, it seems undeniable that nostalgic films would refer to certain reflections on the historical transitions of society as they change through time. Owing to the different historical stages that the two waves are separately focusing on, their modes of describing the transitional stages are not quite similar.

### **8.2.1. Political Transitions of the First Nostalgic Wave**

What the first wave pays close attention to is the period between the 1940s to

the 1960s when the People's Republic of China was newly founded. That is the dramatically evolutionary phase of the political and social systems in China, where the undeveloped, semi-feudal and semi-colonial country had suddenly changed into a socialist state. It is mainly through the appearances of those political symbols at that time that the first wave embodies the situation of social transitions.

For example, *Farewell My Concubine* develops its transitional background through representing the scenes in which the Communist forces (the PLA) enter Beiping (old name of Beijing) without a fight in January 1949. On a vernal morning the communist soldiers, smiling and shouldering their rifles, march in procession. There are jumbo portraits of Lenin and Mao raised by the troops, and the sides of streets are full of hailing crowds, singing and dancing. Xiaosi<sup>281</sup> also shouts and jumps for joy with the crowds, cheerfully receiving the new socialist era in his name. The warm sunshine floods the opera theatre. Bean gives a performance for the Communist soldiers and there is a shower of applause afterwards. In return, the soldiers sitting in seats also sing their war song with their heads held high. The orderly singing from the seats is so loud that it apparently dominates the atmosphere of the theatre and constrains the delicate Peking opera. One may realize from the scene that even though the whole theatre is immersed in a victorious atmosphere, the victory, the applause, and the performing stage do not belong to Bean and his traditional opera. Here the film pre-sets a foreshadowing of the potential tragedies of

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<sup>281</sup> Xiaosi is a young man adopted by Cheng Dieyi (Bean) at an early age who follows Bean as an apprentice in the Peking opera performance. Later in the Cultural Revolution, it is Xiaosi who becomes a Red Guard and leads Bean, Stone and Juxian to be violently criticized.

the story.

While beyond the military force, critical gatherings become a crucial political symbol of the transition as well. They clearly indicate the profound changes in the social system that had taken place in the country around the early Fifties. Master Yuan (Yuan Siye, played by Ge You) in *Farewell My Concubine* could always keep his social identity as a member of the upper class in both the period of Japanese occupation (1937-1945) and the Republican era (1911-1937 and 1945-1949). However, after 1949 when the communist system commenced, he is unavoidably called to account by socialism, as a reactionary. Soon after Yuan is sentenced to death. His destiny seems quite similar to that of Long Er in *To Live*, which tries to combine a historical scene (of criticizing rally) together with the situation of Chinese land reform<sup>282</sup> of the time. That reflects a profound transition of the ownership of productive means (from private to public land ownership) by the newborn communist authorities in the early 1950s. Because he owns land and property, Long Er is classified as part of the landlord class and then publicly executed by shooting. The crack of the shot marks the beginning of a new era. But what seems ironic is that the first wave avoids giving those radical scenes a reasonable explanation. For instance, *Farewell My Concubine* does not suggest that Yuan has ever committed any crime-ridden error, and what the audience hears at the criticizing rally are just those

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<sup>282</sup> China has been through a series of land reforms. Here in the film it refers to the thorough land reform launched by the Communist Party of China from 1946 to 1952, around the period of the foundation of the People's Republic of China. It won the party millions of supporters among the poor and middle peasantry. The land and other property of landlords were expropriated and redistributed so that each household in a rural village would have a comparable holding. By the time land reform was completed, at least a million landlords and members of their families had been publicly executed or beaten to death. See Stephen R. Shalom (24).

inane accusations, such as “reactionary theatergoer” or “has to be executed to assuage the people’s anger”. Again, Long Er’s death penalty does not result from any particular offence or crime caused by his property, but because he refuses to give his estate to the socialist authorities and burns his own house down which blocks the socialist land reform. From the Western standpoint, these reasons seem completely preposterous and may perhaps easily arouse Western sympathies. In a Western audience’s eyes, there are only violent killings without providing logical reasons. This probably caters for a stereotyped prejudice of barbarous cruelty in the discourse of orientalism. Similarly, in the *Blue Kite*, the story does not give any reason why Tie Tou’s own father is classified as a rightist after he returns from his toilet and why his stepfather must be carried away on a stretcher for public criticism when he has been stunned by the Red Guard. All in all, the political nostalgia of the first wave has over-simplified those historical campaigns in vague presentation.

#### 8.2.2. Cultural Transitions of the Second Nostalgic Wave

The second nostalgic wave however relies rarely on political appearances as its transitional indices. This is largely because what the new wave mainly focuses on is not the same historical background/era that the first wave is concerned with, but a relatively new historical stage, the late 1970s to 80s. Since then China has gradually moved towards the path of market, capital, and economic development, and been away from the radical life of political struggle. Through the social transition, the

infiltrating ideas of the market economy and popular culture may practically surpass the political settings in the everyday life of the public (especially the youth of that time) and become the prominent feature in their memories.

Accordingly, the second nostalgic wave rids itself of the dull symbols of politics, and focuses on taking advantage of popular singing and dancing – certain vivid symbols of culture – to embody the reconstruction of the society and its transitional spirit. That has met with general acceptance by the films of the second wave.

The first film to be discussed is *Peacock*. The story is set in the period around the late 70s and early 80s. In the sexual excitement of his adolescence, the younger brother draws some naked sketches at school, which are soon uncovered by his father and this offends the son's *amour propre*. His adolescent overreaction results in his dropping-out and travelling to distant parts without trace. Then in the latter half of the film, the narrative time line develops into the transitional period of the early 1980s. The changing process (from the planned economy to the economic reform and opening-up) is embodied in the return of the younger brother in the film: a few years later, he gets back to his parents from the South. By this time, he has changed into a loafer living with an older woman and her son, but the change reflected in the film is not limited to this. The name of his partner is Zhang Lina and she is a street singer. The film tries to use her singing scene in an outdoor dance place to represent the

changing climate of the whole society. The scene is made up only of a long take. At the beginning, there is a close shot with Lina standing behind the microphone and presenting her speech of welcome to the audience, “Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to our open-air dance of Eden. I’m going to sing a song...” What she performs is a traditional Henan Zhuizi<sup>283</sup>, *Gua Wang Ba*. With her singing continuing, the close shot is gradually and steadily zoomed out to a long shot. From the movement of the lens, the shot shows a series of dissonant collages between traditional and modern, Eastern and Western cultures. The dance held on the street has a totally Westernized name, “Eden”; but what is performed is a quite traditional, nationalized and localized opera. The performer, Lina, with a folding fan in her hand, makes as if to present the traditional ballad in its original taste and flavour; but what she wears is a formal Western style evening dress and possesses a kind of sexual allure. Originally, the incidental music for the opera should be played by Zhuiqin, a traditional Chinese string instrument; but with the extension of the zoom lens (all the instruments on the stage are gradually shown in the long shot), what the audience has watched and heard from the film scene is a hybrid music combination of Western drums, electronic organ, and the traditional string instrument. When the long take zooms out toward its end, one may realize that the stage where she is singing is not a well equipped dance hall at all, but a pop and open air gathering, in which the local Chinese are woodenly doing their dance in a Western style (ballroom dancing) that had come into vogue not long before in China. What they are accompanied by is a bricolage of Western instruments

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<sup>283</sup> Henan Zhuizi (河南坠子), a traditional local opera and ballad, singing to the accompaniment of the zhuiqin (a Chinese stringed instrument), popular in Henan Province.

and oriental opera. Thus the cultural transition of that time has been vividly conveyed by the dramatic hit and the exaggerated use of the oriental tradition and the popular culture from the West, or perhaps it can be read as an (postmodern) intertextuality of the depthlessness of both Chinese and Western cultures.

Almost the same long take and *mise-en-scene* appear in *Dam Street* as well. The story is set in a small city of Sichuan province, in the early 1980s. Xiaoyun, a sixteen year old school girl, becomes pregnant by her classmate and later gives birth to a baby boy. Xiaoyun is told that the baby has died at birth, but behind her back her child is privately adopted by his paternal aunt (an obstetrician). Then the film's time line jumps to ten years later, when the baby has grown up into a school boy. With that, similarly to *Peacock*, *Dam Street* also takes advantage of singing and dancing in a sequence (of a long take) to accomplish the narrative transition, from the 1980s to the early 1990s. At the beginning of the shot, there is a close-up of Xiaoyun's face. She is singing a traditional Sichuan opera and has already had her face painted with thick make-up with the theatrical costume paraphernalia on her head. This explains that her identity has changed from a school girl into a Hua Dan<sup>284</sup> in a theatrical troupe of Sichuan.

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<sup>284</sup> Dan (旦) is the general name for female roles in Chinese opera, often referring to leading roles. Hua Dan (花旦) is a kind of Dan, and its actresses often play lively, vivacious young female characters.



Figure 14a. *Dam Street* and Its Long Take Sequence

Then the camera slowly tracks out into a medium (close) shot in which Xiaoyun's costume and the traditional opera scenery behind her are gradually shown in focus, so that the film audience may realize that she is performing on an opera stage. Suddenly there comes a series of noisy voice-overs from the opera audience in the film. They seem over satiated with the traditional opera and require Xiaoyun to change her performance into pop songs. The camera does not turn back to her audience, but still keeps on Xiaoyun's medium shot. She stops her performance and abuses them with a word in whisper, then has to cater for their tastes and starts to sing a popular song, *Just Like Your Tenderness* (*Qiasi nide wenrou*)<sup>285</sup> by Cai Qin. The camera is continuously tracked out to a panorama with some modern instruments (guitars and an electronic organ) emerging on the stage, even more there are two dancing girls standing on both sides of Xiaoyun with their shoulders and waists naked.

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<sup>285</sup> 《恰似你的温柔》(1979) 蔡琴。

Figure 14b. *Dam Street* and Its Long Take Sequence

Such an appropriation of both the traditional art (Sichuan opera) and the vulgarized pop culture together conveys certain postmodern implications, similar to that which Charles Jencks originally argued in postmodern architecture and Lyotard's comments on eclecticism (Jencks 14-9; Lyotard *Explained* 8). It is not too much to say that traditional culture in China is increasingly engulfed by pop culture, and it is reflecting a fact that the tradition as a high art is faced with an awkward predicament in the contemporary Chinese mass market. There is a fading border and a compulsory eclecticism between the Chinese tradition and modern times, and the high art. Jencks defines postmodernism in terms of the concept of bricolage, involving "the combination of modern techniques with something else (usually traditional buildings) in order to communicate with the public" (14). I would argue that for contemporary China the postmodern situation seems the converse. It is not the modern avant-courier that fuses itself in the "traditional" public, but the Chinese traditions that have to be mixed together with some modern, post-traditional, Western, and popular ingredients to please the "modernized" public today. However, the bricolage or the eclecticism is just the temporary and surface phenomena, the real implication is that it is a dying tradition that is increasingly being replaced and swallowed by the popular culture.



Figure 15. Pop Dance on Traditional Stage

Later when Xiaoyong (Xiaoyun's son) goes to the theatre for her performance, the traditional opera stage emerges in the film again. This time Xiaoyun simply changes her opera costume into a model of a showgirl with a modern miniskirt. What she sings is a pop song *Don't Pick the Wildflowers on the Roadside* (*Lubian de yehua ni buyao cai*)<sup>286</sup>, by Deng Lijun (a household singer from Taiwan) from the early 80s. Those traditional cultures (like Sichuan opera or Henan Zhuizi) have been discarded on the opera stage today and have lost their existing space. As a high art, they have been increasingly shelved and forgotten by the contemporary mass culture. In this process, a rough idea of the foreign (including Hong Kong and Taiwan) cultural influences – which may be considered as cultural colonialism or post-colonialism – on China can be reflected through the nostalgia. Instead of those outdated radical politics, certain new cultural representations, such as electronic organ, guitar, Western drums, sexual dancing dresses, the colourful stage-lighting, the “Eden”, pop music, and ballroom dancing, have become the most crucial indicators of transitional times.

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<sup>286</sup> 《路边的野花不要采》邓丽君

*Shanghai Dream* also describes a green purity of calf love in the new era (the early 80s) with the benefit of dancing sequences. At the beginning of the Chinese reform, the popular dancing saloon (as something new introduced from the West) had not yet been accepted by the Chinese mainstream. Influenced by the remaining social conduct of the former radical politics, people of the time (especially in some remote areas) still regarded the modern Westernized singing and dancing styles as bourgeois (or capitalist) dirt. But the young generation in China rapidly lost patience with their inability to withstand the popular allure and were ready to make trouble. That is the origin of “underground” dance. In the film *Qinghong and Xiaozhen* (two high school girls), behind their parents’ backs, take part in an underground dance held by a group of youths at a nearby factory building. The temporary dance hall seems quite dull with dim lights. All the girls stand on the periphery of the dance floor with their heads hanging in shame. The young fellows stand in the centre of the dance place in pairs and are dancing Western ballroom dancing ungracefully. The reserve between the sexes is not broken until Lüjun appears in the hall. He is the most handsome boy in the party. He instantly places his eyes on Xiaozhen and decides to seduce her with his special solo dance.



Figure 16. Dancing in *Shanghai Dream*

The dance music in the cassette radio is changed into “*Gotta Go Home*”<sup>287</sup>. All the boys stop to surround Lü Jun. He takes off his coat and shows up his attractive appearance: exaggerated sunglasses, checkered shirt in a light colour, wasp-waisted flared trousers, and a pair of polished shoes... simply a Chinese Elvis Presley. He goes out on the floor towards Xiaozhen on the other side with his disco dancing steps, like an adult rooster performing a courtship rite. His giddy steps with sexual cues easily work to capture her heart. Xiaozhen lets herself be seduced on to the floor. The whole sequence lightens up the long stifled youthfulness of the Chinese public on the eve of new times. In the face of the new life of reform, Chinese people start to accumulate passions in their hearts. Here there are no guitars or Western drums nor any eclectic effects (between the tradition and Western cultures) reflected in the film, but one may feel the signs of the times through Xiaozhen’s excitement that seems hardly to be restrained.

If *Shanghai Dream* shows that the Chinese early 1980s still retained some reservations about the exotic popular culture in the remote town of Guizhou; by the late Eighties of *Summer Palace* (Lou Ye, 2006) the intellectuals of a great metropolis like Beijing have already thrown themselves into the completely modern, Westernized and popular culture. Yu Hong and Zhou Wei are lovers in college. The location of their first meeting is set in a pub. Formerly such places of Westernized entertainment as pub or bar had not existed in a planned economy (before the 1980s) at all. But from

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<sup>287</sup> The song is also called “*El Lute*”, a double A-side single by the German band “Boney M” in 1979.

the second half of the Eighties, they became an important gathering place for educated youth in Beijing. While a group of young people (including Yu Hong and Zhou Wei) are walking into a pub, a reproduced version of *Can't Take My Eyes off You* by Andy Williams (1967) rings out from the scene immediately (as background music). Accompanied by the old song, the film arranges a set of sequences imitating the culture in the pub of the late Eighties in Beijing: a college girl sitting in the pub is reading aloud the modern poem *To the Night* by Haizi<sup>288</sup>; a few individuals sit together around the table and talk about how to protect workers, peasants and intellectuals; a young fellow sings a campus song<sup>289</sup> to his guitar. Without grief or restraint, they are in the dim and red lights, and all the people of the pub are immersed in a reformed atmosphere of romantic and free excitement. It does of course include Yu and Zhou's love. Another song then rings out, Paul Evans's *Seven Little Girls (Sitting in the Back Seat)* from the dance floor. From this great hit released in North America in 1959 it seems not hard to associate the golden age of the U.S. with the relaxed cultural climate in Beijing on the eve of "1989". The young couple (Yu and Zhou) stands facing and staring at each other in the wonderful singing from the West, then they lean together and freely twist their bodies in the dancing crowd of the floor. Along with Evans's song, they immerse their love and their yearning towards the future in the belated admiration for Western culture.<sup>290</sup> Then one may rediscover how

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<sup>288</sup> Haizi (1964-1989) modern poet in contemporary China.

<sup>289</sup> Campus songs here refer to a music genre that originated in Taiwan around the 1970s. It combines a folk music style and a rhythmic breath of youth in colleges. Campus songs from Taiwan had a profound effect on the pop culture of the Mainland of China in the 1980s. <http://baike.baidu.com/view/959815.htm> Last access: 4 Oct. 2010

<sup>290</sup> Such a nostalgic scene is roughly in accord with Zhang Yiwu's argument (cited in Chapter 6) that the new minds of the generation of intellectuals and elites in China 1980s became flooded with Western thoughts, and

the epochal characters in the Chinese social elites of the Eighties (with their position of leaning towards the West) had developed their process of modernization.

While the process is represented in a nostalgic way, it may perhaps have certain postmodern and post-colonial effects of introspective examination. The beautiful things that are past (but sentimentally left in one's memory) always sweep people off their feet; however it is related to a realistic pain today by nostalgia. As far as postmodern introspection is concerned, the pain comes from waking up to the exhaustions of the Western modernity and an unavoidable return to certain eclecticism (namely, getting back to the conflicts and the appropriations between the origins of the modern and the tradition). On the other hand, as far as the post-colonial reflections are concerned, what the pain from the nostalgia has produced is a potential vigilance (criticism) over a series of cultural changes in the Westernization, materialization, and modernization of China.

As for its postmodernity, generally speaking the second nostalgic wave (like the four singing and dancing examples shown above) is full of enthusiasm for reflecting the contemporary Chinese social evolution of a modernization through its cultural appearances; if this transitional progress can be seen as part of Chinese modernity, then the process of imitating and self-reflecting a past modernization by a large number of nostalgic films may probably imply a cultural symptom of

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immersed in fanaticism and infatuation with Western modernity. See Zhang Yiwu (34-41).

post-modernity. It is by no means an accidental reflection from individual cinema, but a collectively retrospective trend towards the modernized transition. After experiencing the spiritual worship of communism (from the 50s to the mid 70s of China) and the materialized worship of the Western capitalism, perhaps all the advanced civilizations and prevalent styles from the modern world have been admired, imitated and exhausted in China today; and when any exotic innovation seems no longer fresh in the twenty-first Century, the Chinese modernity is likely to be on the point of drying up with nothing to follow. The people there (in the new century) need to stop to gather breath and get back to their traditions and past memories by which they can find the driving source of the future development in China. Therefore, if there is something called a Chinese post-modernity, it first should be a fusing (combining) process in which the extreme modernization and the blind Westernization may return to its self-directed tradition and history. Only in this way can the Chinese nostalgic/postmodern connotations be coordinated with the “postmodernism” outlined by Jencks and Lyotard: namely an eclecticism and the cultural return from what is modern to the traditional. In this writing, a certain architectural sense of the times may reflect and support Jencks’s perspective. For instance the “West Railway Station” (completed in 1996 in Beijing) simultaneously upholds the Bauhaus style<sup>291</sup> and reintegrates some historical elements of a traditional China (like the stately gate towers on the top of the building). It proves that an eclectic trend has already germinated in the contemporary architecture of China, but it is ten years later (around

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<sup>291</sup> One of the most influential currents in modernist architecture.



2005) that a similar cultural return has been largely embodied in today's nostalgia.



Figure 17. The West Railway Station, Beijing

As for its post-colonial connotations, in the same way as the puppy-love of Yu and Zhou, one could not help feeling puzzled. How long could the honeymoon last between China and the West? Why must a Chinese nostalgic past memory be radiant with and full of Westernized modern colours? Could it be that the second nostalgic wave is a Chinese epic exposing an ongoing effort of the Western culture to permeate the traditional/modern China? If such a hypothesis can be realized, then for the Chinese audience of the new century and as time goes on, they may probably create a new awareness of such an exotic penetrating power in culture. Taken in this sense, nostalgia as certain post-colonial criticism (or in national/cultural self-defence) is trying to arouse people from their modern dreams to rebuild a traditional heritage of their own.

In any case, the second nostalgic wave has seldom become involved in those intuitional appearances of politics. Instead of the radical/ideological changes, it emphasizes a whole climate of social and cultural transition. But conversely, what

does the lack of politics<sup>292</sup> mean?

### 8.3. Evasive Strategies and the Marginalization

*This ain't no truth or dare,  
They'll kick you, then they beat you,  
Then they'll tell you it's fair.  
So, beat it...*

*(Michael Jackson, "Beat It" in Thriller, 1982)*

This discussion is not going to pay attention to racial prejudice. But the words of Michael's song seem helpful to stress a conservative and evasive strategy in the broad range of cultural sense. In fact there is no comparability at all between the repressed feelings of the racism in America and a restricted nostalgic filmmaking in China. However, in the face of suppression the countermeasures by the Chinese cinema are likely to be in accordance with what Jackson suggested, "beat it".

The avoidance of the local censorship is an unavoidable consequence under compulsion. Since the 1990s the governmental attitude to political nostalgia in the Chinese cinema has tightened up. This point has been discussed in Chapter 6 (about the local film censorship) and in the beginning of Chapter 7 (about the punishment received due to politicalized film releases) in detail, so it is not repeated here. There are examples of the uncompromising posture by the governmental censorship in both of the two nostalgic waves, such as *Blue Kite* and *Summer Palace*, which have left

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<sup>292</sup> Here I do not mean that there are no political connotations reflected from the second wave at all. Actually those social/cultural transitions in the films (especially *Shanghai Dream*) may still arouse much political imagination. However most of them are not directly reflected by the imitated political appearances that seem obviously inadequate in the second wave in comparison with the first one.

deep impressions (and painful lessons) on the Chinese cinema history of censorship. Their absence (exclusion) from the domestic box-office and the punitive sanction<sup>293</sup> suffered by the directors (Tian Zhuangzhuang and Lou Ye) have all cast a shadow over the Chinese nostalgic filmmaking since the 1990s. In this case, Chinese nostalgia must adopt evasive strategies in peripherization if it is to attract great attention in local cinemas.

It has been mentioned in Chapter 7 that between the two nostalgic waves (1995-2004, especially the late 1990s) the whole film industry of China had sunk to a low ebb, but there were still sporadic films released with a nostalgic sense in that period, such as *In the Heat of the Sun*, *Road Home* (1999), and *The Making of Steel* (1997). These films, no matter what their nostalgic characteristics, quantity, and release dates are, seem hard to classify in either of the waves. However to various degrees, they have all learnt the lessons of the domestic failure of the first wave and adopted all kinds of evasive strategies, which provide referential experiences for the large-scale outburst of the second wave later in 2005. This part of the discussion will be first based on these films of the late nineties and will then combine some details of the second wave in order to discuss and summarize some of the features in the transitional nostalgia of marginalization.

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<sup>293</sup> From the very beginning of Chapter 7, the discussion has argued that the politicalized release process of the two films is probably an excuse for a governmental salvo on censorship. In fact the exclusion of the films from their domestic market is perhaps largely related to the political contents reflected in the *Blue Kite* (for its concerns with the anti-rightist movement and the Cultural Revolution) and the *Summer Palace* (with its implications for the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989). As a result, the directing careers of Tian and Lou were prohibited for eight and five long years respectively.

## 8.3.1. The Marginalized Narrative

On the issue of marginalization, *In the Heat of the Sun* (1994) shows similarities to *An Orphan Joins the Army* (1992).<sup>294</sup> The earlier discussion (at the end of Chapter 3) has discussed the postmodern connotations and significance of the conservative, evasive, and marginalized strategies in the Chinese cinema of the Nineties (with the example of *An Orphan Joins the Army*). As a result it has argued that there is a big difference in domestic box-office between *An Orphan Joins the Army* and the *Blue Kite*. The former has been successfully released in the domestic market; but the latter is still frozen out by local censorship today. The reason for the difference seems complicated, but it is undeniable that certain marginalized elements have probably played an important role in the domestic success of the former. Subsequent to the failure of the *Blue Kite*, another nostalgic film, *In the Heat of the Sun*, was then a hit in the local cinemas (Lam 2000, 328).<sup>295</sup> The film perhaps can be read as a successful adjustment towards marginalization after the first nostalgic wave. Therefore, *In the Heat of the Sun* may probably be comparable to *An Orphan Joins the Army* in such a “margin” debate.

An evasive tactic is at first represented in the narrative genre and its story-line.

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<sup>294</sup> In Chapter 4 the discussion had made a clear distinction between the postmodernist parody in *An Orphan Joins the Army* and the postmodern pastiche in nostalgic films. This has actually ruled out the possibility of *An Orphan Joins the Army* being regarded as a typical nostalgic film. But from its crucial postmodern origin in the Chinese cinema (and with general elements of postmodern conservatism), its marginalized strategies are equally of directive significance to a nostalgic debate here in this discussion.

<sup>295</sup> Adam Lam had even mentioned that the film was quite successful in its domestic box-office in 1995.

Differently from the narrative style of the *Blue Kite*'s historical melodrama, *In the Heat of the Sun* goes back to a juvenile genre similar to *An Orphan Joins the Army*. Although the *Blue Kite* tells its story through Tie Tou's memory of his childhood, the main characters in the film consist of his mother and her three lovers that form three stretches of tragedies in politics. However *In the Heat of the Sun* develops its story totally through a teenage boy (Ma Xiaojun), The plots, of his participating in a gang of youths and fighting with other group of boys, and his being infatuated with a young woman (Milan) and the sex fantasy with her, have all lost in touch with any direct political climate of the radical time. Instead of the political symbols, the everyday appearances from a genre-painting of Ma's childhood fill the nostalgic film. This implies the film with its focus on children's interesting and muddled puberties has (at least on the surface) gained its potential effect of estranging itself from a realistic background of politics in the 1970s.

Next, it also shows evasiveness over the narrative time (time background) selection. Contrary to the *Blue Kite* that directly faces the peak time of Chinese radical politics (1957-1968), *An Orphan Joins the Army* sets its story background on the eve of the Communist Party in power (before 1949) and *In the Heat of the Sun* chooses its narrative in the mid 1970s when the radical situation has gradually levelled off. By the mid 1970s, the Cultural Revolution was drawing to an end. Those so-called "rightists and reactionaries" had been already overthrown and transferred to a lower level (the countryside) for reformation through labour, thus the political struggles in the main

cities were not as sharp as they were in the late Sixties. Such a period setting has probably made the dramatic conflicts of nostalgia sheer away from the summit of left-leaning politics, and obviously in consequence (the distanced narrative from politics) it seems hard to arouse censorship displeasure. By this token, although the production period of *In the Heat of the Sun* (1994) is contemporaneous with the first nostalgic wave (1992-1994), its narrative strategy on time-setting seems much closer to the second nostalgic wave ten years later, or perhaps better, the time-background of the film is more inherited and carried forward by the second wave, as will be discussed later in this section.

Also mentionable, beyond the avoidance of politics, is that a crucial feature of the narration from *In the Heat of the Sun* is its deconstruction of heroism or a grand narrative. The teenage protagonist, Ma is similar to Sanmao (the orphan) and other ordinary children of the same age, who are usually full of day dreams of becoming a hero in order to feed their vanity or attract attention from girls. For instance, Ma always shows off that he has an older “girlfriend” (Milan) in front of his fellows; and in the presence of Milan, Ma climbs up a tall chimney to display his courage; even later for Milan, he does not hesitate to rough up with his friends. Finally, Ma unexpectedly confesses (to the film audience) that the film story-line is a complete invention by himself.<sup>296</sup> It is perhaps a postmodern self-reflex or to remind the

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<sup>296</sup> A monologue by Ma: “Haha... Don’t believe this! I’m never brave enough to do this (fighting). I continue swearing that I don’t lie any more. But the stronger the desire I have to tell the truth, the stronger the interference I meet. I sadly find that I can reproduce no reality at all. My memory is always changed by my emotion, and then it ridicules me, betrays me, and even makes my mind jumbled. I can’t tell truth from fiction. I now believe that the first meeting between Milan and me was fictional. In fact, I never met her on a road. In

audiences that a film is actually a fiction, which is helpful to let them realize the fact that they are immersed in a nostalgic illusion of heroism, and it is this that covers and obliterates the real memories of the individuals of the mass. That sense then sets off an absence (or deletion) of the individual memories which have been wrapped in the collective consciousness of a nostalgic culture.<sup>297</sup>

Therefore, the main point of this section is that a marginalization of Chinese nostalgia is not just an evasion or self-surrender, it also contains an implied criticism of centred, grand, meta-, and all powerful narratives. The film with its self-reflexivity (or self-fragmentation) towards heroic narrative has actually placed a protagonist (a “hero” of a great narrative) into a marginalized situation. Then I would argue that to make one realize the existence of a marginal position will have a similar deconstructive effect on a centred narrative. So if *In the Heat of the Sun* draws one’s attention to the lack/absence of individual memories (covered by the heroic illusions) in the past, it would probably be read as certain criticism and deconstruction of a (communal or collective) nostalgic culture constructed by the contemporary cultural sense of the mainstream.

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that afternoon, it was Liu who introduced her to us, that was our first meeting. I was not familiar with Milan at all. We have never been familiar with each other. God! Is she the girl that I’ve seen in the picture? Why does Yu suddenly disappear from my story? Or perhaps, they’re the same person? I dare not think more about that.”

<sup>297</sup> In my thesis for the Master’s degree (2005), I have mentioned that the first shot of the film (*In the Heat of the Sun*) “is a big statue of chairman Mao Zedong, the leader of the movement. Then the camera pans down from the top of the statue to a pavement where a group of ‘red little guards’ are dancing the ‘revolutionary dance’, which drops a hint that the Chinese people were ‘enjoying’ their life under the communistic sunshine... As Ma Xiaojun, said (monologue) at the beginning of the film: “about that era, I can only remember that it was so brilliant and so bright, looked like sunshine, that it made me feel dark...” The word ‘dark’ here seems to express an unconscious or insensible condition. It reflects that the Chinese people tended to lack self-consciousness, for in that period, political ideology had dominated everything, they could do nothing except follow it like sheep. Thus, through the disharmony between the nostalgia and the boy’s experience, the film tries to shake and subvert the central position of the mainstream ideology in the spectators’ mind, and help people retrieve their lost egos.” (Shen Jiang 28-9).

## 8.3.2. The Space-Time Marginalization

As far as nostalgic films (such as a contemporary visual production) are concerned, perhaps one of the best ways to filter out political entanglements is to avoid them in the spatial appearance. By this token, it seems unwise (as in *Farewell My Concubine* and the *Blue Kite*) to set a nostalgic narrative in a great metropolis and political centre like Beijing, since it is obviously not hard to arouse political recollections behind those radical symbols which may be what the governmental censorship is reluctant to see. Therefore it is to be expected that the two films will be limited (or excluded) in their domestic release. Consequently after the first nostalgic wave the Chinese filmmakers constantly attempt to vary the space setting of their nostalgic narratives, so as to avoid political sensitivity.

A typical example of such avoidance is *Road Home* completed by Zhang Yimou in 1999. The film is set on the eve of the Expanded Anti-Rightist Movement (1957) which is similar to the time-background in the *Blue Kite* when Lin Shaolong (Tie Tou's own father) is purged as a "rightist". In other words, *Road Home* did not adopt any evasive tactic to keep away from the radical period of its time setting. However it seems to be impossible to define the film as political nostalgia, as it has not provided any opportunity for showing political symbols/appearances in its space-background at all. This is read as a spatial marginalization in the discussion



here. The film (*Road Home*) tells the story of Luo Changyu, a graduate college student from the city, who comes to a rural area in the north of China as a grade teacher and then falls in love with a local girl, Zhaodi (by Zhang Ziyi). The filming was located in a grassland in Fengning, Chengde (Hebei province), a piece of steppe with rustic peace and far away from the metropolis and the political climate. The whole visual background of the film consists of beautiful scenery including a birch forest, the glow of sunset, and the country lane with loess foundation, which pervades the film with a poetic romance. If it were not for the second half of the plot in which Luo is arrested and taken away from the village (as a rightist), causing painful thoughts in Zhaodi, one would find it hard to perceive a political climate within the beauty of nature. Here the brief tragedy of politics shoots across the narrative like a meteor, but it suddenly forms a sharp contrast with a natural space and leaves the audiences with an open reverie of their own. This kind of geographically distanced space-setting may perhaps come very close to the ideas of Bertolt Brecht on “defamiliarisation” (sometimes translated “alienation effect”). That involves, as Brecht wrote, “stripping the event of its self-evident, familiar, obvious quality and creating a sense of astonishment and curiosity about them”, in order to force the audience to see the common things in an unfamiliar or strange way and to enhance perception of the familiar (Brooker 191). By this principle, film authors can not only evade restriction of the government censorship on special space and time (such as a Chinese urban area in its radical past), but also deliver their true intensions to the audience. Accordingly, it makes the evasive strategy more positive.

Compared to the first nostalgic wave, which usually directly portrays the political sufferings and shows off the groans of pain of the protagonists, *Road Home* leaves room (and thinking space) for the viewers. A silence (avoidance) of the past pain and the visualized suffering may perhaps make an alternative wisdom prominent: on the one hand, at least in its visual/spatial presentations, the film (with its absence of radical space) shakes off a critical comment on – what has long been criticized by Chinese scholars<sup>298</sup> – the Chinese cinema with an extremely political and orientalist spectacle and with its Westernized fawning position; on the other hand, the lack of political elements (on their visual/spatial debate) has greatly eased the anxiety over the governmental censorship, which forms a positive/successful mode for the domestic release of the later nostalgic films.

In 2005 when the second nostalgic wave burst out, spatial marginalization had become a narrative strategy in common use. Many filmmakers of the wave attempted to remove their story background from the big cities and to focus their lens on rural areas. *Shanghai Dream* (2005) sets its shooting location in Guizhou province that seems close to area of the personal boyhood of its director, Wang Xiaoshuai. No more than two months after his birth in 1966, Wang was expelled with his parents from Shanghai to the remote Guizhou for the Third-line Construction. He stayed there in Guiyang (the provincial capital) for 13 years, until the late 70s (the end of the Cultural Revolution) when most of the Shanghai workers (who supported the remote factory in

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<sup>298</sup> Please refer to Chapter 6, the end of the former discussion in section 6.2.3.

Guiyang) were impatient to get back home and return to the metropolis, and this is where the film title “Shanghai Dream” is derived. Although no scene is set in Shanghai, the film still spiritually represents a centripetal desire of those Third-line workers to return from the remote area to the central cities. Perhaps the absence of urban space made it easier for the film to pass the entanglement of political censorship. However an element of satire is that the difficult process of getting back home (in the nostalgia) leads the criticism to a political history and its leftover problem: by whom and why were a large number of skilled workers transferred from cities to those remote factories in the radical period of politics? Who did forget them away in the distance when the international military threat was gradually on the ebb in the 1980s?<sup>299</sup> To represent a nostalgia in such a forgotten distance, may again make the marginalization full of critical implications.

Not all of the nostalgic films are related to their filmmakers’ personal experiences in the debate of filmic space. Li Yu is from Shandong province, but her *Dam Street* is set in a solitary county in Sichuan; Gu Changwei is a Xi’an native (in Shaanxi), but his *Peacock* is a story about Anyang, a small city in Henan province; Zhang Jiarui was born in Sichuan, but he shot *The Road* in the frontier county of Luoping, Yunnan province. Perhaps, these space settings could be read as certain intentional evasions by the directors. The practical use of marginalized space helps the

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<sup>299</sup> Since the late 1970s, with the normalization of the Sino-US relations (1979), and the adjusted relations with the Soviet Union and Vietnam (the mid 1980s), China has entered a period of rapid economic development and peace. In consequence, its requirement for military products had linearly decreased and the whole Third-line Construction was at a standstill. Even some workers in the state-owned factories were not all well provided for.

nostalgic films (of the new wave) to evade the uproar of the flourishing cities and their past sense of politics smoothly. It then leads the historical/nostalgic concerns into a recollection of life activity, which means Chinese nostalgia in the twenty-first century has gradually faded out from the political reflections and an orientalist submissive position, and turned back to reflect a national, domestic, and popular interest of nostalgic culture. Conversely, it may prove that a domestic cultural climate has probably formed a land fit for a popular nostalgia of the local public.

On the other hand, following *In the Heat of the Sun*, most of the Chinese nostalgic films (after the first wave) continue a “marginalized” strategy on their narrative time-setting as well, to avoid showing the peak period of radical politics in the Sixties. It has been mentioned in the early discussion (Chapter 7) that *In the Heat of the Sun* (1994) and *The Making of Steel* (1997) are both set in the mid 1970s. It seems that in Chinese nostalgia now, their time-background-setting has actually become a typical model (an infallible law) followed by the second nostalgic wave around and after 2005. Except for *The Road* (2006) that sets its narrative background in 1960s Yunnan,<sup>300</sup> all other films in the second wave are set no earlier than the mid 1970s. In the very beginning of *Sunflower* (2005) the story (similar to *The Making of Steel*) starts from the Tangshan Earthquake (1976);<sup>301</sup> also some nostalgic narratives such as *The Sun Also Rises* (2007), *Peacock* (2005), *Peach Blossom* (*Taohua canlan*)

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<sup>300</sup> As a result of space marginalization (Yunnan is quite distant from the political centre of China), *The Road* does not refer to any visualized radical scar or political violence. So the film is still different from the first nostalgic wave, though its time setting (the 60s) seems in accordance with it.

<sup>301</sup> It is a nostalgia marked by natural history rather than a political event like the Cultural Revolution.

(2005), and *Teeth of Love* (2007), are set in the late 1970s; while some others, such as *Shanghai Dreams* (2005), *Dam Street* (2005), *Xin Jie Kou* (Xue Cun, 2006), and *Summer Palace* (2006) all begin their stories from the 1980s.

Therefore, an obvious difference between the two waves can be clearly read from their time-background-setting. The first wave mainly focuses on the historical period of the 1940s to the 1960s; while the second wave places particular emphasis on the 1970s to 80s. As far as the latter is concerned, it is perhaps not an accidental coincidence that so many nostalgic films (in such a short period, 2005-2007) are simultaneously crazy about such a specially appointed era in the past (the late 70s and 80s). There must be some logical reasons and apart from the time-setting avoidance of the radical period, the age structures of the directors and their audiences may also be an influence.

With regard to the age of the directors, the fifth generation such as Chen, Zhang and Tian) were generally born fifteen years earlier than most of the post-fifth generation directors of the second wave.<sup>302</sup> Their childhood backgrounds have made the personal experiences of the two groups of directors different. New generation directors whose childhood memories are of the 1970s find it impossible to set the radical politics of the 1950s or 1960s as a main theme of their own works.

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<sup>302</sup> Chapter 7 has mentioned that Zhang Yimou, Tian Zhuangzhuang, and Chen Kaige were born in 1951 or 1952; but most of the directors who were involved in the second nostalgic wave were generally born in the late 60s or 70s, such as Wang Xiaoshuai (1966), Zhang Yang (1967), Li Yu (1973), Fu Huayang (1964), Lou Ye (1965), Zhuang Yuxin (1972). Their age difference from the fifth generation is from 15 to 20 years.

The other objective factor consists of the dynamic change in the age structure of the mainstream audience. One should not expect that the mainstream viewing taste of the early 1990s regarding nostalgic films would always remain the same for the young generation of the twenty-first Century. What the latter had experienced and would like to view retrospectively in cinemas may not be the same as that of their elders. As time goes by, more and more younger audiences will replace their parents, brothers and sisters in dominating the film market. Though they still have a special interest in the experiences of their elders, they are likely to be hungry for recollections of their own past. Shunting the nostalgic background into a later period may probably reflect the changing interest of the Chinese audience in their past. This then naturally leads to the discussion below.

### 8.3.3. Nostalgia, A Dynamic Fusion of Horizons

Like a flash in the pan, an ephemeral destiny for nostalgia seems unavoidable.

Lowenthal said,

The past we depend on to make sense of the present is, however, mostly recent; it stems mainly from our own few years of experience. The further back in time, the fewer the traces that survive, the more they have altered, and the less they anchor us to contemporary reality.  
(40)

Therefore in the process of time (and the change in the mainstream audience from one generation to another), a nostalgic background reflected in (by contrast with)

real life today may continue a forward movement to a later period of the past. Just as the mainstream audiences in the 1970s made their thoughts fly to the Thirties (*Chinatown*); the 1980s to the Fifties (*Back to the Future*); the audiences of the 1990s would like to focus their attention on the remakes of the Sixties and Seventies (*Forrest Gump*)... And conversely, as time goes by a “remote” past with its memories will gradually fade out from the visual field of contemporary mass culture.

This may lead to the deduction that the term “nostalgia” for films would probably disappear in the march of time. It should be a dynamic variable closely related to the constant changes of contemporary culture. It is not nostalgia that seems, as musical, horror or science fiction films, to be a fixed and regular genre. A pastiche of the past social background of the Thirties could be called “nostalgia” in the audience’s eyes in the 1970s; but when contemporary culture has entered a new period – the twenty-first century – in its history, the social background of the Thirties would have perhaps gone beyond the memory span of the mainstream audience today. It then turns into a stereotyped historical play that has gradually lost the involvement of today’s audience’s personal memories. Nowadays, even the most regular reader in Britain seems unlikely to regard a Victorian (1837-1901) story as nostalgia in contemporary culture. People today may still have an interest in the era, but it is stylistic or historic, rather than nostalgic. Most of the nostalgic products will (or have) experience(d) such a turn of the wheel (or a twist of fate) in a few decades after their creation. By this process, nostalgia is practising and implementing what Gadamer

called “Fusion of Horizons”<sup>303</sup>, a truth criterion that edifies the (uncertainty of) postmodern hermeneutic. An understanding of history should be combined with the current condition of the person who reads the past; a current understanding cannot restore the original state, nor can it completely decide the future.<sup>304</sup> Time is fleeting, a present truth of the past only exists in its current condition, in the same way as nostalgia that flies by like a flash in the pan.

However it cannot be denied that people’s interest in nostalgia could slightly exceed their own age bracket. A young man born in the 1980s may become interested in an early cultural background (say the 70s or 60s). In an academic article discussing masquerade culture in New Zealand, Christina Stachurski found that some of the youth today in their twenty-first celebrations like to choose costumes in a parody of old icons of the 1980s. This is because, though they were still children in the 80s, their early consciousness of adulthood in the process of growing up was largely marked by, constructed and gained from observing their elders as adults (98). Thus they prefer to reconfirm their own adulthood through the adult images of the past rather than what their own life looks like today. Through their childhood people perhaps never relax their imitation of their brothers, parents, and teachers for a moment. These elders (with their everyday lifestyle) would be a living example to children before they grew up. Nostalgia, to a large extent, is based on people’s infatuation with and their

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<sup>303</sup> It argues that anyone who tries to interpret or understand a past, must take his/her bias (their own field of views), using current conditions and trends as a point of departure, to fuse together with the original text of the past. (Hans Georg Gadamer 262-9).

<sup>304</sup> As far as the current condition of the interpreter is concerned, a past interpretation is a prejudice; and for the future, the current one is perhaps biased as well.



admiration for older generations. So the readership of nostalgia does not by any means belong to only a certain age level; but extends to several generations from the old, the middle-aged, to the young. Different people of assorted ages would perhaps have different views and attitudes about the same nostalgic theme, but simultaneously they all consume the same era and its nostalgic symbols. Here the writer of the thesis finds it impossible to escape from his own age limit, or to provide a completely objective appraisal of the two nostalgic waves of the Chinese cinema. Maybe a few decades later when the coming generations try to understand their “history”, will those “nostalgic” films combined with the thesis merely become an unappreciated reference or a small bias in their fusion of horizons.

#### **8.4. An Invisible Hand, the Nostalgic Reinvention by Governmental Leitmotiv Consciousness<sup>305</sup> – Control and Resistance**

Since the reform and opening-up, China has been widely inspired by Adam Smith and has paid attention to what he stressed, the social influence from certain natural forces or natural inclination. Chinese premier Wen Jiabao has mentioned that he often read Adam Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and understands the two invisible hands as market (law of value) and morality.<sup>306</sup> In fact, the thirty-year economic reform in China (since the late 1970s) is more or less based on belief in

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<sup>305</sup> It refers to a mainstream consciousness promoted by the Chinese government through films recognized as leitmotiv nostalgia.

<sup>306</sup> “我最近常读亚当斯密的《道德情操论》，他实际上讲过两只看不见的手，一只是讲市场，一只是讲道德”。See Wen, “Invisible Hands”, *Oriental Review*, <http://pinglun.eastday.com/p/20090630/u1a4469584.html>  
Last access: 4 Oct. 2010

such a natural force. However here in this discussion, the metaphorical expression of “an invisible hand”, is aimed at the reinvention of nostalgic consciousness in the Chinese cinema. If to regard a macro-filmic regulation and control (through Chinese film censorship) as a visible hand, then what it has been forced to form – like the above-mentioned, a marginalized, de-politicalized or unfamiliarized expression of nostalgia – will probably change into an invisible hand that has reshaped and distorted the past knowledge and the nostalgic understanding of the public.

#### 8.4.1. The Everyday Normalization of Nostalgia

The marginalization of Chinese nostalgic films (since the mid 1990s) has largely resulted from the tightened restrictions by the authorities through their censorship, and it seems not hard to transfer this into a controlling force over culture. For this point, a supporting argument comes from Xu Bi. He alleges “in China today, the memories of violence, terror, and evil in the Cultural Revolution are still getting repressed.”<sup>307</sup> While the so-called “repression” must have a definite direction, it needs always to dodge some things and to advocate others. This is where the argument of the section lies: the contemporary Chinese cultural spectacle is inclined to change/normalize those radical memories of the Cultural Revolution into an everyday past. Through the process, a mainstream ideology (a governmental intention of the historical reinvention) has undoubtedly been reinforced, and its everyday

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<sup>307</sup> Xu Bi (2006) “Today’s cultural relics and the mass culture of nostalgia on the Cultural Revolution”, *Artistic Criticism of China*, 2006-10. <http://www.zgyspp.com/art/ShowArticle.asp?ArticleID=3084> Last access: 17 Feb. 2008.

reconstruction in nostalgia has replaced the cruelty and reality of a real past gradually.

According to Xu,

[W]hile the government exerts its influence to forbid the political criticism on the Cultural Revolution, it simultaneously allows those cultural relics<sup>308</sup> from the radical period to be freely traded in its market; in order that, with the benefit of the (antique or sudo-antique) market, the centralized authorities can eliminate the political and ideological connotations of those radical relics, and change them into the pure money-valued relics and cultural collection.

(Xu 2006)

The same applies to contemporary nostalgic films as well, when the point extends to the discussion of the cinematic debate. That is to say, while the will of the authorities goes to great lengths to restrain a radical criticism within the society, it perhaps has a mind to simultaneously connive at (or even foster) a representation of the old, radical relics, appearances, and its images in those marginalized and trimmed nostalgic films without (political) criticism. In consequence, a popular nostalgia and its consumer culture in spectacles may turn to help the mainstream (governmental) power eliminate political and ideological connotations and remnants from a radical history and its memories, so that they may change into a series of everyday life appearances of a past without pain. Nowadays, the everyday (normalized) nostalgia has increasingly become a pure consumer-valued historical spectacle with only esthetic force and national traditions in form. Nostalgia in the contemporary popular culture of China (at least on its surface) is gradually effacing its despotic, radical, and left-leaning imprints from a symbolic representation of its past, and “making them

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<sup>308</sup> Like a large number of badges with Chairman Mao’s image on them, as well as radical costume, revolutionary pictures, porcelain, stamps, and little red books...

whitened and glorified, and incorporating them into a harmless memory of the Cultural Revolution” (Xu 2006).

As Jack D. Douglas emphasized, people in society are always unavoidably lost in a certain “natural stance” of the “everyday”,

The natural stance is that supposedly taken by men in everyday life, though whether or not they in fact take this stance is certainly an empirical question. It is the stance in which the everyday world is taken for granted as it is experienced in everyday life. It is that stance taken by the individual within the stream of everyday life. It is a stance that does not raise serious and persistent questions concerning the nature of the everyday experience but, instead, takes that experience as a fact. (Douglas 14)<sup>309</sup>

Moreover, Baudrillard deepens the criticism of the “natural stance” and argues that those everyday symbols (such as the superficial images or consuming appearances) have become a daily obligation that is similar to the action of taxes payment, a normally intangible dictate with certain coercive effect, to naturally (unconsciously) melt and foster people’s standpoint on certain economical, cultural, or ideological participation (*Consumer* 47). Thereby it embodies an obsessive-compulsive repression. Furthermore when such a compelling stance blends with nostalgia (a visualized illusion of the “past” everyday life), history in its everyday memories is then provided with what is called an anaesthetic effect by Debord,<sup>310</sup> arguing that through the everyday spectacle of nostalgia, the (nostalgic)

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<sup>309</sup> This criticism of the natural stance is quite in accord with the understanding of postmodernism by Linda Hutcheon: “those entities that we unthinkingly experience as ‘natural’ are in fact ‘cultural’, made by us, not given to us.” (*Politics* 2)

<sup>310</sup> Debord, *Society of Spectacle* (30). “The spectacle is a permanent opium war designed to force people to equate goods with commodities and...”

films have increasingly purified and anaesthetized those negative factors of politics, criticism, and trauma from the contemporary impressions (consciousness) of history in public memories. Before the audience, there is only past life, past childhood, past love, past goodness, and past peace left without pain, scar, and blame<sup>311</sup>. Roughly speaking, most of the films in the second nostalgic wave do have such a whitening effect on the everyday. All that remains of the nostalgic tense and everyday representations is an empty shell, and although there are various modern love stories, those true colours of a real history no longer obtain outside the remade appearances.

Nostalgia of the “everyday” is like an invisible hand. With its natural stance and the compulsive effects, it controls the stereotyped impressions of today’s public towards history. As Lowenthal said, “the past as we know it is partly a product of the present; we continually reshape memory, rewrite history, refashion relics”... and “the most compelling motive for altering the past is to change the present” (26-7). As a cultural remake of history, nostalgia seems overwhelmingly favorable for helping a nation move away from its trauma and heal the past wounds, in order to create a different “good old time” for the present. This is a positive role.

However, its negative role consists in its compulsive forgetfulness of certain

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<sup>311</sup> Here the argument of the “painlessness” only follows the extreme point from Xu. However eclectically speaking, now that the everyday past remake could help the authorities cleanse its political spots (so that nostalgia can continue to exist in its mainstream culture today); then conversely, it seems unavoidable that such an existence of nostalgia can be also exploited by the filmmakers for implied (political) criticisms. As in *Shanghai Dream*, a critical sense of the past issue (the Third-line Constructions) had been aroused by the film in the viewer’s mind, though its intuitional appearances of the remote everyday do not matter to the political blame at all. Thus a double-edged sword has come again, between the whitewashing of everyday and its implicit criticism. Their correlative dependence embodies a conservative and eclectic strategy in a contemporary (postmodern) nostalgia between the will of the government and a (counter-) cultural criticism.

history. This argument can be supported by two points from Lowenthal. One of these is the transition from political scar to domestic pain. As Lowenthal argues, “memory” in nostalgic culture “converts public events into idiosyncratic personal experiences,” and “political history has become an annexe to family history” (195). This is a predominant characteristic of the second nostalgic wave. At the beginning of this chapter, it has been mentioned that the two nostalgic waves adopt different ways of representing the “family broken”. Political factors in the first wave are represented as the primary cause that breaks a family harmony, while in the second wave, nostalgic narrative has gradually freed itself from the political threat and upgraded the domestic contradiction caused by the confusion of time (the new social changes since the reform of the late 70s) as the chief dramatic conflict (and it put those political factors into a subordinate, or even an absent, position). Such narrative making seems propitious for what the mainstream nostalgia advocates, a harmless memory of history. That is to let the audiences focus on domestic (family) contradictions with rapt attention, in order that the everyday memories (of the past household affairs) may weaken the (negative) historical impress of the politics in the public’s minds. The trauma and scars then tend to sink into oblivion.

The other way is to cover up individual memories with a general and collective nostalgia. According to Lowenthal, “we need other people’s memories both to confirm our own and to give them endurance”... “memories are continually supplemented by those of others.” Those individual events in our personal minds are

“less certainly, less easily evoked”. So in the process of “knitting our own discontinuous recollections into narratives”, it seems people may “revise” their personal “components to fit the collectively remembered past”, and gradually “cease to distinguish between them” (196). As a matter of fact, the process of its own has to some extent obliterated abundant individual experiences of the past that were contained behind the public historical appearances. On its merits, a nostalgic narrative in public cinemas does integrate the signified(s) of its remade past images into a unitary and exclusive memory of the masses. As a result, nostalgic films stand the mainstream ideology in good stead to influence people’s perspectives on the past. Again, this equals a compulsive forgetfulness of the individual recollections.

To conclude, with the radical period having increasingly passed away, more and more people have no longer had firsthand experiences of the Cultural Revolution. As Xu points out, nowadays the attitudes of the public towards the past period have become much more complicated than in the 1980s when the radical politics were immediately over. Actually the contemporary Chinese nostalgic culture is analogous with the situation that West Germany had met in the late 80s over its trend of thought on the “trivialization” of the Nazis.<sup>312</sup> That is, some of the German citizens of the time were reluctant to live under the shadow of an incriminatory atmosphere of Nazism; while some others would stake a claim that the historical lessons of bloody cruelty should be engraved on the nation’s memory. On this issue, Habermas had

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<sup>312</sup> Xu (2006)

argued that a negative effect of history and its bloodiness should not fade from one's memory with the passage of time; on the problem of the public history making, everyone must envisage it in their own person first, for none of us is able to sit on the sidelines with the identity of nonparticipation (230-7).<sup>313</sup> If one thinks of his argument as a reference point, then one may realize that the nostalgic "everyday" of the Chinese contemporary culture today has gone to an extreme.

#### 8.4.2 Xie Jin Model

One may develop a comparison between the political whitewashing (of the second wave) and the so-called "Xie Jin model" (of the 80s). The third generation director, Xie's *Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (1980) and *Hibiscus Town* (1986) are regarded as typical "scar films" relating the period of the 1950s to 70s.<sup>314</sup> In the light of certain clues to the structuralist approach to myth (such as the theories from Claude Levi-Strauss or Vladimir Propp<sup>315</sup> who proposed that there are universal laws by which various arbitrary myths and narrative contents seem to have similar orders or structures), Zhu Dake, a film critic in Shanghai, reduced the narrative structures of Xiejin's films in the 80s to the "Xie Jin model" and began to criticize his narrative law

<sup>313</sup> In the famous "Historians' Quarrel", Habermas attacks the revisionist German historians who have been trying to trivialize and "normalize" the history of the Nazi period, and in the debate he defends the need for a realistic and discriminating approach to the Nazi period and its legacy.

<sup>314</sup> Li Jie and Zhang Enhua. "Red Legacies in China", in *China Heritage Quarterly*. No.22, June 2010.

<sup>315</sup> Levi-Strauss and Propp were mentioned by Zhu Dake, a Chinese critic, in his criticism of "Xie Jin model" in 1986. This thesis will not make an intensive study of structuralism. For further concern about structuralist theory, please refer to Claude Levi-Strauss (1963) *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf, New York: Basic Books. And Levi-Strauss (1978) *Myth and Meaning*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. And Vladimir Propp (1984) *Theory and History of Folklore*. Ed. Anatoly Liberman. University of Minnesota Press.



in 1986. This approach is quite similar to the structural study of the Western films by Will Wright in the 1970s<sup>316</sup>. According to Zhu's conclusion, Xie's film-narration of the 80s always follows the norms of the structure below:

1. The protagonists of these films usually live in a background of a radical politics.
2. Morality and justice are always on the side of the protagonists, but they are persecuted by the political setting.
3. The miserable experiences of the protagonists seem easily to arouse sympathy from the audience.
4. Radical politics turns into a principal factor of tragedy and pushes the protagonists to a tragic high.
5. At the end, with the changes in the social (political) climate, the justice of the protagonists is upheld.

Based on the above model, Zhu argues that Xie's films, on the one hand, are in accord with the process of the medieval Christian mission in Europe, taking advantage of the tragedy of the moral in order to stimulate tears and the box-office. "Its outmoded esthetics (to see the enthusiasm arousing as its paramount object)" has obviously "denied a modernistic and rational science", and returned to a traditional and outdated filmic Confucianism<sup>317</sup>. On the other hand, the model is quite similar to the classic narrative structure of the Hollywood (the weak – in a precarious situation – meets a hero – salvation), and it is fostering a popular, or Hollywood mode of viewing taste in the Chinese masses with "the stance of cultural colonialism".<sup>318</sup> From today's

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<sup>316</sup> For example, Wright reduces the narrative structure of the classical plot of the Western heroism to sixteen unvarying functions in his *Six Guns and Society, A Structural Study of the Western*, University of California Press, (Wright 40-9). However, Wright points out a different emphasis between his filmic study and those of Levi-Strauss: "Levi-Strauss wants to discover the meaning of a myth in order to exhibit its mental structure, while I want to exhibit the structure of a myth in order to discover its social meaning." (17). Zhu Dake in his criticism of Xie Jin model may perhaps approach to the Wright's stress rather than Levi-Strauss.

<sup>317</sup> Here what Zhu called "Confucianism" means a moralized filmic intention that serves for the governing class.

<sup>318</sup> For the idea of Xie Jin Model, please refer to Zhu Dake (1986) "The Defect of Xie Jin Model", *Wenhui Bao*, 1986-7-18.

perspective, one may feel that Zhu's argument had perhaps had a jaundiced mind in the 80s. Even nowadays, the whole film industry of China has made an inexorable march of progress in its globalization, commercialization, and popularization; also in the meantime, the contemporary Chinese (or even global) cinematic esthetics apparently does not much surpass the popular culture in its range of enthusiasm aroused. Thus, it is clear that Zhu's point (combined with his Xie Jin model) could only be seen as an avant-courier criticism by the Chinese intellectuals (elites) of the 80s who urged that literature and art discard tradition and advance into modernity, but simultaneously he deviated from a social reality of the mass culture.

However, the structuralist mode of thought reflected from Xie's films led the discussion to a deeper level. As Chen Xihe argued, the Xie Jin model also contains a story-plot accompanied by a sexual theme (202). The villains of his films who are usually power holders in radical politics (like Wu Yao and Li Guoxiang) always harbour a grudge against the protagonists (like Luo Qun, Hu Yuyin, and Qin Shutian) just because the love-life of the villain cannot be satisfied (or he is sex-starved). Consequently with the opportunity from radical movements the villain always discriminates against those kindhearted protagonists which lead to their miserable experiences. In a similar way, Adam Lam regards the clue as "sexual politics" in Xie's films (Lam 2005, 31-8). They generally have two endings, either the villain is punished by his/her sexual plotting (for example, the breakup of the marriage between

Song Wei and Wu Yao<sup>319</sup>), or there is a happy ending in which both the protagonist and the villain get a rose without a thorn<sup>320</sup>. Some people may argue that the mode of putting such sexual politics as the first cause of the narrative tragedy has actually shifted the historical responsibility of the radical politics on to the “individual’s” sex impulse or sexual envy, which would be regarded as a general flaw in the natural quality of human beings. In this way, many critics of the Xie Jin model proposed that, as cited by Lam, Xie’s films have in fact reproduced and served the traditional Chinese Confucian ideology; and they “accused Xie of using political settings but lacking a critical view, favouring the authorities instead” and “this aligned Xie with Confucian conservatism.” (Lam 2005, 37)<sup>321</sup>

By this token, like the remake of the everyday past in the second nostalgic wave where those political blots are covered or whitewashed through past trivialization, the Xie Jin model also plays an active role in masking the radical past and consolidating (affirming) the contemporary political control. On the other hand, the model may still contain a critical inclination. Instead of the political animadversion, can sexual politics be read as “sex” satire with conservative sagacity?

<sup>319</sup> In *Legend of Tianyun Mountain*, Wu Yao plays the role of the villain, he breaks the love relation between his rival Luo Qun and a beautiful girl Song Wei in the Anti-rightists movements (late 1950s), then lets Song become his wife. Twenty years later, when the Cultural Revolution finished, Wu still thwarts the righting of a wrong for Luo. At the end of the story, Song eventually leaves Wu for Luo by a force of justice.

<sup>320</sup> In *Hibiscus Town*, Li Guoxiang, a female radical leader, is jealous of Hu Yuyin, a beautiful woman in the town. Li successively breaks Hu’s business, executes her husband on a charge of being a “counter-revolutionary”, and sends her later lover (Qin Shutian) to a distant exile. After the Cultural Revolution, Qin is set free. On his way home he meets Li by chance on a ferry and is told that she is getting married, which hints that the villain’s sexual desire is going to be released without jealousy. For more details of the two films, please refer to Lam (2005, 31-6).

<sup>321</sup> “谢晋的电影仅仅是利用政治运动做故事背景，缺乏对运动本身的质疑，实质上是在维护当权者，体现了中国传统的儒家保皇思想”。

Imputing all of the political impulses to libido and its emotional urge does not only mean a profane criticism against the past Mao era and its conception of history, but it may simultaneously imply a certain tinge of irony and sarcasm towards all of the political rulings, past and present. One may ask after seeing Xie's films, if mistakes of the past politics mostly resulted from personal urges of the libido, can the rulers, leaders of the authorities today completely overcome the drive of sexual politics? When such a doubt comes into being in the viewers' minds, it may also become an obscure, absurd, and self-contradictory sword with its double edges, good or evil, in postmodernity: in accord with the marginalized inclination of the second wave, they (both the wave and the model) all live in the present and comply with the taste of the power holder, cater to its pleasure and become a political shield or pretext; but they conversely target the political authorities for criticism on the sly. By way of contrast the model was twenty years earlier than the wave; and their materials by which the swords are made are different as well: one is of sex, the other the trivialized past of the everyday.

#### 8.4.3. The "Peaceable" Right

Following Habermas, if we see a nostalgic everyday as one extreme of a two-pole structure, which tends to trivialize (cover or whitewash) a left-leaning, radical history, then the recent expansion of the second wave has gone to the other extreme, namely that to which the heading points: the peaceable right that is inclined

to interpret history in a right-leaning way.

Although the term “right” was originally coined during the French Revolution and referred to those supporters of the institution of the monarchy, it is now primarily used throughout the world to refer to tradition-related conservatives, reactionaries, or other groups that have views supporting capitalism the free market and so on (Bobbio and Cameron 9-37). However the term used within the thesis is mostly based on the special use of the “Right” in China, where left and right are not fixed positions and they largely depend on what side a viewer is on. From the proletarian view of Marxism, Mao and his radical period of socialism may be seen as the left, while those who advocate capitalism and preservation of the capitalist system can be regarded as the right. However, practically speaking, as far as the contemporary era of China (since Deng Xiaoping’s reform and opening-up from the late 1970s) is concerned, the definition of left or right seems uncertain. As its market economy takes advantage of capital accumulation, its position seems to be more to the right in the economic debate, while it can still be on the left as China retains a political system of socialism. Furthermore it can be divided into left-leaning and the right-leaning within a left position, as the understanding of the reality differs.<sup>322</sup> When understanding of the social reality is forward-looking, it is left-leaning (like the radical China that was eager for quick success and instant revolution); conversely when one’s evaluation is limited to a practical situation of society, it seems conservative, reserved, and it may

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<sup>322</sup> <http://baike.baidu.com/view/483.htm> Last access: 4 Oct. 2010

be read as right-leaning (as the Chinese reform that blindly indulges itself with market benefits and the expansion of capital value, but lacks social morality and equity).<sup>323</sup>

Both of the leanings are under the mask of the left. By this token, even the mainstream social stand of China today is not of the complete right as some of its positions may still be right-leaning ones of the left.

In this case, it may be argued that there is no absolute standard for the right, which is quite unfixed. But there should be a direction of the “right” in the discussion of the thesis. Compared with the strong points of the radical (or far-left) politics, the right side of the social culture may consist in an overcorrected discourse reflected from the contemporary nostalgia.

At the end of Chapter 6 I have argued, within a frame of the postmodern conservatism (or in the situation of a contemporary mainstream discourse where a criticism of the far left seems unacceptable), that Chinese nostalgic narratives may only have three options (roads) in front of them. They may either ignore the past (keep silence); or take either a peripherization to weaken the political narratives and to reinvent a nostalgic story in a pure everyday life; or as a representation of the mainstream ideology, develop a set of moderate right-leaning discourses and to continue bringing shame on the radical politics of the past. The first two roads have been mentioned separately in Chapter 7 and in the above discussions of this chapter.

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<sup>323</sup> Criticized by Zhang Hongliang (2009) “the rightist in China”, 2009-7-22.  
<http://www.wyzxsx.com/Article/Class22/200907/95306.html> Last access: 4 Oct. 2010

So this part will discuss the last road combined with some examples of the latest nostalgic films, *The University Entrance Exam 1977* (Jiang Haiyang, 2009), *Sailfish* (*Qi yu*, Jin Yimeng, 2008), and *A Tale of Two Donkeys* (*Zou zhe qiao*, Li Dawei, 2008).

Before discussing the films' details, a fact should be stressed. The release dates<sup>324</sup> of these films were actually quite close to either the sixties' national anniversary of PRC (1<sup>st</sup> October 1949 - 2009) or the 29<sup>th</sup> Summer Olympics held in Beijing not long before (August 2008). In this case, to be in concert with these great events, the Chinese film bureau may have already examined, approved and put those films on record a few years earlier when their filmmakers were still in the process of preparing the shooting plans, in order that the films' release would not negatively influence the cultural climate of the events. In other words, the authorities and the administrative powers may perhaps have initiated a potential interference or even a domination over screenwriting and film creation in various ways, such as ordering directors to revise or delete some parts of the screenplay, or to defer screen examinations or film censorship so that they cannot be publicly released on time. By this token, if some films (such as those mentioned above) have successfully and precisely been released in the domestic market on the eve of the great events, they may not only have been agreed on and approved by the authorities, but also (to some extent) represent/embody a governmental will of power instilled in the mainstream

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<sup>324</sup> *The University Entrance Exam 1977* was first released in March 2009; *Sailfish* was in June 2008; and *A Tale of Two Donkeys* in May 2009.

stand of history. On the other hand, through the guidance of governmental investments in filmmaking, the Chinese film authority also prepared and dominated a great number of film productions that are called “greeting films” for the national anniversary and the Olympics. There is sufficient evidence from the media showing that both *The University Entrance Exam 1977* and *Sailfish* are part of such a greeting category.<sup>325</sup> Thus these authorized “greeting” nostalgia (films) were perhaps more intended to cater for, reflect, express, or even represent a governmental cultural will for the social elites of China. With certain peaceable or moderate discourses of the right-leaning stands, the films may attempt to deny, bring shame on, and rebuild a radical (and far-left) past of China.

After these films, the Chinese cinemas premiered about forty national anniversary greeting films thick and fast between August and October 2009, such as *The Founding of a Republic* (*Jianguo daye*, Han Sanping and Huang Jianxin) and *The Message* (*Fengsheng*, Chen Guofu and Gao Qunshu). Those films in various ways remold many important historical events of the past century in China, and some of them may be probably brought into the discussion of nostalgia. However, because the release dates of those films are so close to the present (when the thesis is being written) there is a lull before the feedback from the box-office, the industry, the academic circles and the audiences. In this case, the writer cannot yet provide a fixed comment

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<sup>325</sup> See web data, “Entrance Examination 1977, the First Gift Film for the Sixtyth National Anniversary”, <http://www.jxwmw.cn/news/system/2009/03/13/010116369.shtml> Last access: 4 Oct. 2010; and “Sailfish Declares Its Views on Shanghai International Film Festival”, <http://bbs.bar.sina.com.cn/thread.php?tid=2151310272&bid=230> Last access: 24 July 2009



on whether the nostalgic tide in 2009 could be seen as a new wave of the mass culture, or just a flash lasting briefly during the anniversary.

*The University Entrance Exam 1977* is one film that may best embody the leitmotiv intentions of the elite culture in contemporary China. The film was directed by Jiang Haiyang.<sup>326</sup> It is set in 1977 when the Cultural Revolution had just ended and China's university entrance system was reconverted for the first time, and the examinations were completely abolished. The substitution was to enrol new students by recommendations from leading CCP<sup>327</sup> members' groups at all levels such as factories, rural communities, People's Liberation Army and so on. So most college students of that time were revolutionary activists with "red" political (or family) backgrounds. Conversely those who had been politically criticized in the radical period (and their family members that came into the picture) and those "rusticated youth from urban areas"<sup>328</sup> found it hard to enter a university. However with the continual development of the reform, from 1977, university entrance exams were reinstated, inspiring the majority of rusticated youth to attempt to return to the cities, which, later on, was regarded as a major turning point for the contemporary

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<sup>326</sup> Jiang Haiyang, graduated from Beijing Film Academy in 1982, a classmate of Chen Kaige and Tian Zhuangzhuang.

<sup>327</sup> CCP commonly refers to Chinese Communist Party.

<sup>328</sup> The Rusticated Youth of China, or Zhiqing (知青) is a term used in China to refer to a young person who had received a high level of education, especially those who, beginning in the 1950s until the end of the Cultural Revolution, willingly or under coercion, left the urban areas and were rusticated to rural areas to assume peasant lives. The vast majority of those who went had received elementary to high school education. It is estimated that there were a total of between 12 and 18 million rusticated youth, throughout the 1950s to the end of the 1970s. Please refer to [http://www.bing.com/reference/semhtml/The\\_Rusticated\\_Youth\\_of\\_China?mkt=zh-CN](http://www.bing.com/reference/semhtml/The_Rusticated_Youth_of_China?mkt=zh-CN) Last access: 24 July 2010

intelligentsia in China. From today's perspective, those students passing the exam and enrolling into universities in the late 1970s and early 1980s are now over fifty years old. They are the main body of the new generation intellectuals since the reform and are widely active in government, higher education, scientific research, legal departments, culture and arts, and all kinds of key and leading posts of the contemporary society. In other words, such graduates are today's backbone of China and the important component part of the leading brains (the elite class) in the country.

The story is set in a remote village of the late 1970s. Some of the educated youth from big cities have been sent (rusticated) to a communal farm for quite a few years. When they suddenly read the news that the government is about to reinstate the entrance exam system, everyone seems ready to try. The only dramatic conflict of the film comes from a radical cadre, Laochi, the head of the revolution committee in the farm and without whose official seal and permission no one shall enter for the exam. The film neither goes to an extreme of whitewashing the every day, nor does it try to fade out from politics. Instead, it directly sets the radical leader against the right-leaning youth. The reason to read the latter as of a "right" stand is because these young people are the sons and daughters of those "old-line counter-revolutionists" or "Rightists". Even without these negative titles, most of the intellectuals (like the educated youth in the film) were scornfully called the "stinking ninth category"<sup>329</sup>,

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<sup>329</sup> The "stinking ninth category" (or the "stinking old ninth" 臭老九) is a Chinese dysphemism for intellectuals used in the Cultural Revolution. In the view of the far-left, intellectuals were usually set behind the other eight counter-revolutionists of the "Nine Black Categories", which include landlords, rich farmers, anti-revolutionaries, bad influences, right-wingers, traitors, spies, capitalist roaders. See *Xinhua Dictionary*, Commercial Press, 1996 edition, p121.

and had suffered from the left radical politics in general.

Therefore, the film narrative obviously contains a subjective attitude and a specialized stand by the contemporary intellectual class, who may excessively tend towards an overcorrected historical conception and intentionally stress the repression of the radical politics. Even though such an attitude cannot be generally regarded as an absolute rightist concept, it at least includes an intensified criticism against the colours of the left. However, such a political conflict ends peaceably. Humane justice eventually affects the “brutal” radical. At the end of the film Laochi drives the youth to the exam in a tractor. The right-leaning discourse in the film tones down its oppositional conflict against the radical past and reflects an eclectic mind. This kind of peaceable ending is not like those grievous pains and tragedies left from the end of the first nostalgic wave. Instead, it is a type of triumph over past difficulties. In this sense, political tensions have gradually eased. The historical victims are freed as a result of the reform, and the radicals receive public acceptance. The happy ending seems propitious to social harmony and means that past trauma has gradually healed. It is as if its nostalgia becomes a peaceable mouthpiece of the leitmotiv ideology instilled by the elite authorities.

A similar ideology is represented by *Sailfish* (Jin Yimeng<sup>330</sup>, 2008) as well. It is generally regarded as a greeting film for the synchronous summer Olympics in

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<sup>330</sup> Jin Yimeng, born in 1970, Harbin, China. A Chinese female director educated in the U. S. with a Master’s degree in film production.

Beijing. However the film traces back to the radical period to reflect the hardship of Chinese athletes in the past, which again largely relates to far-left politics. The story is set in the 1960s about two boys (Yue and Gao, both around twelve) who are in training for competitive swimming in a city sports school. Each time Yue takes the first prize at matches, Gao is second. Soon afterwards, at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution Yue's father dies of a heart attack in a political struggle and Yue is forced to move to a rural area without even a swimming pool. But he does not give up swimming and meets a girl, Bai who loves swimming as well. Eight years later, Yue (in his twenties) gets back to the sports school with Bai enrolled as well. At that time Gao's father has become the leader of the city's revolution committee. In the selection trials for the district, Gao is still defeated by his mate Yue, but Gao's father swings his weight to let Gao replace Yue in being selected to the national team. Simultaneously Gao manages to seize Bai's love from Yue. Here the film returns to the old wine of the Xie Jin model of the 1980s and tries to produce a negative impression of the radicals (leftists) who are usually depicted as greedy, rascally, incompetent and shady.. It is not surprising that *Sailfish* was smoothly released on the domestic market during the course of the Olympics. Perhaps with a joyful memory of the Olympic Games, the bad pain of the radical past can be reconfirmed through nostalgia. Similarly the film repeats the happy ending represented in *The University Entrance Exam 1977* and Xie Jin's *Legend of Tianyun Mountain*. It devotes itself to removing the scar. When the Cultural Revolution is over, Gao's father is divested of all authority and Yue eventually receives bumper harvests from both his career and his love. If so, such

nostalgia still remains on the right-leaning side and is tinted with subjective sarcasm about the radicals. This, if not a completely extreme attitude, is at least a peaceable “Right”.

Concerning the eclecticism of such an oppositional narrative structure, “right” nostalgia is obviously suspected of bringing shame on a “left” past. However, it is not the only way to disparage it. The other way is to humourize the past appearances of the radical politics, which seems intensified by *A Tale of Two Donkeys* (2009) and *The Road* (2006).

*A Tale of Two Donkeys*, directed by Li Dawei<sup>331</sup>, is set in the mid 1970s and is a story of an educated young man, Ma Jie who was sent to work (rusticated) at a rural production team. Ma was originally a do-nothing loungeur or trifler from an urban area. He likes reciting Ostrovsky’s revolutionary sayings<sup>332</sup> all day in a village lane. But in fact, Ma only takes advantage of such quotations to confess his love to Caifeng, a village girl. In the second half of the movie, Ma puts his badge (with Mao’s image on it) awarded by the production team on Caifeng’s chest so as to please her. With the excuse “You’ve got the badge on skew-whiff” he then adjusts it by touching her left breast. In this case, a strong sense of political honor has been degraded to an absurd rite of heavy petting. In *The Road*, when Laocui and Chunfen go into their bridal

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<sup>331</sup> Li Dawei, graduated in 1993 from the department of photography, Beijing Film Academy.

<sup>332</sup> “Man’s dearest possession is life. It is given to him but once, and he must live it so as to feel no torturing regrets for wasted years, never know the burning shame of a mean and petty past; so live that, dying he might say: all my life, all my strength were given to the finest cause in all the world – the fight for the Liberation of Mankind.” Nikolai Alexeevich Ostrovsky (271).

chamber, the intense sexual drive and love making movements make the whole furniture around the bed tremble. This then leads to a white statue of Chairman Mao on the bedside table being shaken off, in which a radical appearance with its rational spirit is covered, replaced, and redefined by an emotional libido and fades out from the contemporary mainstream discourse.



Figure 18. A Badge with the Statue of Mao

Either the revolutionary quotation or Mao's image can be read as a nostalgic appearance of the radical discourse in the past. Through the series of gut reactions, the original connotations of the signified (with its lofty ideals) behind the remake of the past signifier have disappeared without trace. Thus it is again a conservative criticism or a moderate irony towards the past left.

#### 8.4.4. Nostalgic Films by Way of Counter-culture

If a nostalgic everyday (trivialization) could be called a purified history for the present, and a moderate criticism could be regarded as sort of subjective prejudice (on the part of the right) against the radical past, then both of them are probably suspected of distorting representations of the old days. This naturally leads to the question: are there any other film narratives existing in the contemporary cinema that attempt to adjust, revise, break through, or contradict such a whitewashed representation of the

past, which can be criticized for distortion?

This section is trying to break away from a superficial debate on nostalgia and to find some other texts from the contemporary cinema, such as *Unfinished Girl* (Cheng Er<sup>333</sup>, 2007), *24 City* (Jia Zhangke, 2008), and *Gimme Kudos* (Huang Jianxin, 2005), in the hope of contrasting them with the one-sided (unilateral) lack of the second nostalgic wave and its depthless past remake.

Properly speaking, the three films above are not really nostalgic films, since their narrative time-lines are set in the present. However, I would call them a “realistic nostalgia” or “spiritual nostalgia”, because their modern stories all contain and imply certain retrospections of the past, of past revenge, past splendence, and past spiritual life. As a result, by comparison, real life is not as happy as people imagine. One may even realize that nostalgia cannot screen the audiences from real life forever.

*Unfinished Girl* tells a story about a young woman who is mentally ill and tries to uncover the unspeakable and amazing revelations of her brother-in-law’s past experience, which leads him to confide his emotionally depressed monologue of the heart. The story is set in the present age. He Wei is an insurance salesperson and he loves his wife (Xiao Feng) beyond measure. Feng has a younger sister, Xiao Ke, who suffers from a brain tumour. Wei is very attentive to Ke and does almost everything

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<sup>333</sup> Cheng Er, graduated from the department of film directing, Beijing Film Academy, 1999.

for her. However it so happens that Ke finds from an old photo that her brother-in-law (Wei) has kept his childhood experience secret from his family. Accordingly she compels Wei to confess the truth by binding him to a chair with rope. It turns out that as a Little Red Guard, Wei killed Feng's parents with his own hands when he was around thirteen. Later on a sense of class hatred forced him to marry Feng, which places him in a position of conflict today:

[He Wei:] You wonder why I killed your parents. [...] How should I explain this to you? This is the power of hatred. I did hate your family, very much. You had a big house, with a yard and flowers, and a big iron gate. Your father wore his watch all day. Your mother liked being dressed up and wearing bed gowns. That night your gate was smashed up and I just passed by, so I walked in. All the flowers in the yard were destroyed by us early in the afternoon when we beat them and made them go down on their knees on broken glass. Suddenly I wanted to see what they looked like at night. Your father perhaps recognized me. He saw I was in a sweat, then asked if I want a drink, as if the afternoon incident had never happened. I was so angry. Your mother was asleep, peaceful and serene. And she was unexpectedly wearing that gown. I thrust my knife at her without hesitation, and added a thrust for each of them before leaving.

Such recollection of the past is only represented at the end of the film by Wei's monologue. The three minute soliloquy, though it seems marginal (compared with the 90 minute length), has become the most important part of the film. And what is more, a monologue has replaced those visual retrospections of nostalgia with the actor's lines. It then either evades or counteracts the predominance of the nostalgic intentions by the mainstream ideology through the visual media, and leads a conflict and hatred of the past to the scare and pain today.

[He Wei:] At the same time I'm also scared. I dread the night with its



nightmares. I feel shame at my behavior. For some time, I have even felt it would be good if I could be found guilty by the public for my offence. At least I would not be in a state of anxiety anymore.

While such “pain” of the present age is perhaps not all from a sense of guilt for a past radical behavior, but results as much from a spiritual loss of the past ideal twisted by a reformed (or to some extent, materialized) social climate at present.

[He Wei:] Feng has changed me. It's true. Our life is quiet and peaceful. She has revised my mind. [...] I flung myself at her. [...] I'm not going to repent of or do penance for it, but I just feel kindness is good. I fell in love with what I hated before. Understand? Every night when I'm lying in bed, I want to talk to myself, the previous me when I was young. Your sister and I have a happy life. I am changed, changed into vulgarized trivialization. Now I love all of these, and I'm reluctant to leave the vulgarization.

Feng is He Wei's wife. Here, she may be understood metaphorically as an avatar of a happy marriage and the contemporary trivialized happy life. She has changed He Wei, as similar as those countless radical revolutionaries have been reclaimed by the Chinese reform and the colourful niceness of material realities since the late 1970s. They change into blankness, sloth, and cowardice as a result of an abundance of material possessions. At the end of the film, He Wei is no longer anxious, but his monologue has transferred the anxiety to thousands of audience that had come across the radical past. Those former Red Guards and Little Red Guards, who had ever firmly supported the leftist Maoism, could not help searching their souls today and asking themselves how their past revolutionary ideas have entangled with the contemporary reality.

Talking about the leading roles of the first nostalgic wave, Chapter 6 mentioned, “even today, the nostalgic narrative in contemporary Chinese cinema still lacks positive regard for the *Zeitgeist* of the masses”. On the contrary, *Unfinished Girl* does not evade such a long forgotten theme; as a protagonist of the film, He Wei does represent millions of radical crowd and reflect their spiritual trauma by the reversal of the times. Such a retrospection does not rely on any past appearance, public history, or sensitive words like “Cultural Revolution” or “radicalism”, but consists in a short and brief monologue. In this process, a historical past is not represented by any stereotyped visual impressions (as those good old days in normal nostalgia) or by any narrative prejudices misled by will power of the government, but is left open to every audience.

*24 City* extends a past pain today as well. The film tells about the rise and fall of Chengdu Engine Works. Following Mao’s wish to develop the Third-line Construction, the original Shenyang Aero-engine Works (in northeast China) with its 3000 staff was relocated to Chengdu, Sichuan province (southwest) in 1958. Nearly fifty years later, the old defence industry enterprise was on the verge of bankruptcy in 2005. In consequence, the main site of the factory (originally located in the city centre of Chengdu) was auctioned off to a real estate developer at the knock-down price of 2.14 billion RMB. It now has been constructed into a new commercial housing estate, named the “24 City”. The film is not like *Shanghai Dream* with so many historical (superficial) images about a third-line factory. Instead, it turns its lens to the present

and focuses on the various living behaviours of its workers today. Some of them are getting old, and they have devoted the entirety of their life to the factory; some are about fifty years of age and in their prime, but have experienced being laid-off and penury through the process of reform; while some others are still young and full of vigor, they take over duties from their parents and try to realize their ambitions in the enterprise transformation... In the face of history and its relics, people with personal experiences do have different feelings and longings of their own. *24 City* spurns any sense or inclinations of nostalgic aesthetics with superficial disguises, past appetites, visual consumption, and an unreal “everyday” of the past. It returns to a real present and lets people tell their past story with the purpose of reconstructing a history through cinematic interviews.

*Gimme Kudos*, literally means “beg your praise” and is a contemporary story. One day a construction worker, Yang Hongqi, comes to the office of a newspaper. He wants the editors to publish a commendatory letter to praise him, for he has rescued a college girl from a rape. Such a request sounds ridiculous to Gu Guoge, a journalist of the newspaper, since the materialized reality of contemporary China had long ago broken away from the shackles of propaganda in spiritual commendation. As the investigation goes further, Gu finds that Yang’s requirement is not for his own sake but for some facts he wishes to hide. In a cabin in the countryside, Gu meets Yang’s father. The old man is lying on a sickbed and not long for the world. However, his spirit rises at the journalist’s arrival. The old man gladly guides him around his past

reflected glory. It turns out that the room is full of medals and certificates of merit that were awarded to him for his former achievements. Yang's father hopes his son can also get a commendation to extend his spirit before he dies but things do not turn out as he wishes. At the end of the film, the praise is eventually published by the newspaper, but the old man has already passed away. In front of Gu who brings the newspaper Yang just said, "I don't need it any more". Here Yang's word potentially separates the "praise" (certain past spiritual discourse) from the present reality and brands it with an outdated name. Conversely it in return reflects the reality – if contemporary China no longer needs good people, good deeds and positive commendations, then, except for desires, is there any other spirit left in the materialized communism? – that in this sense can be called a "spiritual nostalgia".

All of the three films contain a counter-cultural sense in comparison with a general nostalgia. They are set in the contemporary reality, in other words these films have been in defiance of representing nostalgic appearances, and have not intended to cover any particularity of history through the nostalgic everyday. However the films conversely tend to highlight the influence of the past on a contemporary society and its individuals, to show a real (present) reality as a result of history. Their narratives have neither paid close attention to the criticized trauma of the past which left the "right" with a feeling of deep hurt nor responded to radical politics with illiberal attitudes. They trained their camera lens on the ordinary people – the Red Guards, the working-class and the revolutionary crowd who went through the whole journey of

the radical period – to explore the spiritual pulse and living status of those people today. He Wei (in *Unfinished Girl*) looks very healthy, but inside he is smouldering with revenge, crime and dread. He acknowledges that his ideal is consistently being encroached upon by the real world and becoming commonplace. The laid-off workers in *24 City* have quietly faced their individual destiny in the face of the factory's rise and fall. Yang's father (in *Gimme Kudos*) has lived all his life in the spiritual kudos of "serve the people"<sup>334</sup>, but his son must beg for praise in the materialized present. It has proved that film art has the power to combine (integrate) the public experiences together with a social history, by which a personal rough and tumble of the masses will never be written off from history.

To perceive the present as a result of history is a totally different way of thinking, from the "nostalgic everyday" or "peaceable right" that usually remake a history from certain limitations or biases of some preoccupied past appearances. Comparatively speaking, focusing on a result of history (or the present) seems much more open than a remade nostalgic stereotype (by the past flatness), and it leaves the understanding of a past to each of the individuals with independent thinking. Furthermore this provides a reminder of the shortage of nostalgia that, under the circumstance of consumer society, the superficial visualization is not the only way to reconstruct a history. If to see a superficial nostalgia as a secluded beautification of past, then a spiritual nostalgia (in the three films above) can indeed convey the pain to

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<sup>334</sup> “为人民服务” one of the most influential quotations by Mao, which often recurred on all kinds of certificates of commendation in the radical past of China.

the common people today.

## Conclusion

This thesis has discussed a general thread of nostalgic representation in contemporary Chinese cinema since 1993. Two filmmaking periods of local nostalgia are divided through discussion. The first phase, namely the first nostalgic wave, is the early 1990s. It is a retrospection of the radical past of China's modern history by the fifth generation directors. In general, the so-called first wave can be also called certain political nostalgia. Chinese "politics" in nostalgia are not the authors' personal interests, but the cultural climate in the 1990s. However, such a trend was derived more from overseas. This can be testified by the films' exclusion from the domestic box-office and their passionate foreign audience and investors. Owing to strict censorship in Chinese cinema at that time, we may definitely assume that the first wave indeed was only pseudo-nostalgia for Chinese audiences. Those presentational reconstructions of the past by visual signs have, on the one hand, made a distorted history stand out through postmodern culture; and on the other hand, satisfied a global illusion and foreign aesthetic demand for radical narrative and orientalism. In a sense, those films invested in overseas may be seen as nostalgic extension from a Western perspective. The true (contemporary) nostalgia that belongs to the Chinese public did not appear until 2005 onwards, and can be called the second phase of local nostalgia. Only then, have the years of economic development in China accumulated and prepared adequate (postmodern) consumer elements and cultural references for its mainland audience, local market, and artists.

The emergence of the second nostalgic wave proves a local potential for “past” cultural consumption. It also predicates that contemporary China has entered into a visual-appearance featured, postmodern consumer society.

When David Ray Griffin introduced postmodern theories to China in 1995, he was so enthusiastic about such a wonderful hope:

Our original intention consists in learning, from the study of those lessons of Western mistakes, whether China can avoid destructive effects brought by modernization. If so, China has been effectively “post-modernized”. (13)<sup>335</sup>

Unfortunately, the actual circumstances reflected from nostalgia films of the recent twenty years of China are quite contrary. China may not necessarily implement a post-modernity by avoiding Western detours. Instead, either it places itself in a fawning position, actively caters for a Western taste of nostalgia, and gradually distorts its own past; or it follows the old Western road and strides forward to a consumer society by economic modernization. It is then inevitably trapped in the onrush of consumption in a postmodern spectacle. This is why China’s cultural studies can more and more clearly find their grounds of argument in contemporary Western cultural theories. As far as Chinese nostalgia is concerned, it is not purely derived from the West. However, the discussion proves that nostalgia film in China has come close to what Jameson called postmodern elements. That not only indicates that China’s nostalgic culture has increasingly been engulfed in the globalization, but

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<sup>335</sup> “我们的出发点是：中国可以通过了解西方世界所做的错事，避免现代化所带来的破坏性影响。这样做的话，中国实际上是‘后现代化’了。”



also hints at a postmodern trend of its whole society. If postmodernism in China is showing game playing between elite domination and mass culture, then a nostalgic post-modernity may equally take on a double-edged effect. Through the reconstruction of past visual signs, it fluctuates between a whitening function and a subverting position. In brief, past appearances in nostalgia are reflecting assorted standpoints of the contemporary social culture of people. Thus, nostalgia does not just predicate historical concerns, but it provides reliable clues for understanding contemporary culture.

## Filmography

- 24 City* (*Ershisi cheng ji*, Jia Zhangke, 2008,) 《24 城记》
- A Brighter Summer Day* (Edward Yang, 1991) 《牯岭街少年杀人事件》
- A Tale of Two Donkeys* (*Zou zhe qiao*, Li Dawei, 2008) 《走着瞧》
- A.V.* (Ho-Cheung Pang, 2005) 《青春梦工厂》
- American Graffiti* (Lucas, 1973)
- An Orphan Joins the Army* (*Sanmao congjun ji*, Zhang Jianya, 1993) 《三毛从军记》
- Back to The Future* trilogy, The (1985/1989/1990)
- Beijing Bastards* (*Beijing zazhong*, Zhang Yuan, 1993) 《北京杂种》
- Beijing Bicycle* (*Shiqi sui de danche*, Wang Xiaoshuai, 2001) 《十七岁的单车》
- Blue Kite* (*Lan fengzheng*, Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1993) 《蓝风筝》
- Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986)
- Cape No. 7* (Te-Sheng Wei, 2008) 《海角七号》
- Chinatown* (Polanski, 1974)
- Crazy Stone* (*Fengkuan de shitou*, Ning Hao, 2006) 《疯狂的石头》
- Curse of the Golden Flower* (*Man cheng jin dai huangjinjia*, Zhang Yimou, 2006)  
《满城尽带黄金甲》
- Da Jue Zhan* trilogy (*Da jue zhan*, Wei Lian etc, 1990) 《大决战》
- Dam Street* (*Hong yan*, Li Yu, 2005) 《红颜》
- Days of Being Wild* (Kar Wai Wong, 1990) 《阿飞正传》
- Devils on the Doorstep* (*Guizi laile*, Jiang Wen, 2000) 《鬼子来了》
- Dirt* (*Toufa luanle*, Guan Hu, 1994) 《头发乱了》

- Dream Factory* (*Jiafang yifang*, Feng Xiaogang, 1997) 《甲方乙方》
- East Palace West Palace* (*Donggong xigong*, Zhang Yuan, 1996) 《东宫西宫》
- Fallen Angels* (Kar Wai Wong, 1995) 《堕落天使》
- Farewell My Concubine* (*Bawang bieji*, Chen Kaige, 1993) 《霸王别姬》
- Forever Enthralled* (*Mei lan fang*, Chen Kaige, 2008) 《梅兰芳》
- Forrest Gump* (R. Zemeckis, 1994)
- Gimme Kudos* (*Qiuqiu ni biao yang wo*, Huang Jianxin, 2005) 《求求你表扬我》
- Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000)
- Happy Together* (Kar Wai Wong, 1997) 《春光乍泄》
- Hero* (*Yingxiong*, Zhang Yimou, 2002) 《英雄》
- Hibiscus Town* (*Furong zhen*, Xie Jin, 1986) 《芙蓉镇》
- House of Flying Daggers* (*Shi mian mai fu*, Zhang Yimou, 2004) 《十面埋伏》
- If You Are the One* (*Fei cheng wu rao*, Feng Xiaogang, 2008) 《非诚勿扰》
- In the Heat of the Sun* (*Yangguang canlan de rizi*, Jiang Wen, 1994) 《阳光灿烂的日子》
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