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The mythology of Hero

A study of Chinese national cinema



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Abstract

As the twentieth century ended with globalization and commercialization, popular culture begins to challenge the dominance of national culture. The Chinese intellectual community tries to defend national culture against the incoming global culture and local cultures. The conflicts between localism and nationalism, and also between globalism and nationalism, are clearly demonstrated in the *Hero* phenomenon, which basically concerns the unanimous disparagement on director Zhang Yimou's debut martial arts film *Hero* within the Chinese critics' circle. Through a discursive analysis of the phenomenon, we can see how the conflicts between modernism and postmodernism, between elitism and commercialism shape the landscape of contemporary Chinese culture. In this article, I first seek to understand how modernism evolved into nationalism in China during the last century and what role the intelligentsia played in the process of such evolvement. I further seek to understand why the intellectual community has distaste for popular culture and commercialism. Other research on this topic has linked nationalism to national culture, and localism and globalism to popular culture.

La fin du 20e siècle céda la place à la globalisation et à la commercialisation. Conséquemment la culture populaire a commencé à mettre au défi la dominance de la culture nationale. Plus précisément la communauté intellectuelle Chinoise essaie de défendre la culture nationale contre l'arrivée de la culture global et locale. Cet événement provoque des conflits entre la localisation, la globalisation et le nationalisme. Cette réalité est clairement démontrée dans le phénomène cinématographique *Hero*. En effet ce film d'arts martiaux, dirigé par Zhang Yimou, fut grandement jugé par la critique Chinoise. Une analyse discursive de cette situation permet d'observer plusieurs conflits. Effectivement ces conflits se retrouvent entre le modernisme et le postmodernisme; entre l'élitisme et la commercialisation, et ils font partie intégrante de la culture Chinoise contemporaine. Dans cet article, je débute en me questionnant sur l'évolution du modernisme qui découle du nationalisme en Chine

dans le siècle dernier. De plus, je regarde quel rôle les intelligentsias ont joué dans ce processus. D'autre part, j'essaie de comprendre pourquoi la communauté intellectuelle trouve la culture populaire et la commercialisation inappropriée. Nombreuses recherches à ce sujet ont relié le nationalisme à la culture nationale et la localisation et globalisation à la culture populaire.

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Introduction

Last December I witnessed the much-anticipated film *Hero*. This movie created a furor throughout China. The film quickly climbed to the top of the box-office and stayed there for more than a month. It was director Zhang Yimou's debut martial arts film. Zhang gained fame in international film circles for his renowned art-house movies such as *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) and *To Live* (1994). Although *Hero* didn't replicate the global glamour of *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon (CTHD)*, it broke box-office records in China, bringing in 242 million RMB (the People's Republic of China's currency) two months after its initial release on December 20, 2002 (Contemporary China, No.2, 2003). These numbers may not be as impressive as those of *the Matrix* (1999), but *Hero* is the first Chinese movie able to compete with Hollywood for Chinese and other overseas markets. What is interesting here is not the film *per se* but the phenomenon it brought, specifically the unanimity of various domestic critics in terms of their opinion on *Hero*. The theme of this thesis is the mentality of the Chinese elite who remain supporters of national culture in the age of globalization and commercialization.

I have designed a structure that allows me to utilize the “*Hero* Phenomenon” as a case study to analyze the temporary Chinese culture in particular and the global popular culture in general. One effective approach to such a big topic is to study some small *milieus*, find relationships among them and then organize them within a larger structure. Here details eventually illumine something beyond the surface of themselves. In this thesis, I will first take a look at the subjective realms outside of strictly capital interest: politics, culture, tradition, innovation and so on. Secondly, I will discuss the mobility and interchangeability of the productive force, labor power and financial capital in the film industry. Most importantly, I will seek to find the causal relationship between the two. With consumerism replacing production as the engine for China’s market expansion, popular culture steps up to the center stage while both the so-called communist totalitarian culture and the elite’ national culture are fading away or falling apart. For a developing country like China, because of historical reasons, it encounters both enlightenment (modernism) and globalization (postmodernism) simultaneously. These two incompatible elements are forced to co-exist. The struggle in between is inevitable as it continues to grow more pronounced. Such a conflict is demonstrated in the *Hero* phenomenon. Through the content and context analysis of the film, we can see how the conflicts shape the landscape of contemporary Chinese culture.

Literature Review

Before elaborating the thesis, I reviewed selected readings from books in libraries and bookstores, articles on the university websites and entertainment news on the Internet or various newspapers. These texts are classified and analyzed, and constitute the bibliography appended at the end of the paper. Basically, the texts are sorted into the following 17 categories:

1. Globalism, localism and nationalism
2. Consumerism and popular culture
3. Nationalism, national culture and national identity
4. Postmodernism and Post-constructivism

5. Post-colonialism and Culture protectionism
6. Modernism and modernity
7. Modernism and nationalism
8. Chinese ancient philosophy
9. Hong Kong Film Industry
10. Mainland China Cinema
11. Hollywood film production and distribution
12. Martial arts and martial arts literature and films
13. Medieval literature of Europe
14. Current saturation of Chinese culture studies
15. Current situation of Chinese politics and economy
16. Video game
17. International film festivals

Methodology and Structure

Material for the thesis involved intensive searching, reading, collecting, sorting and note taking. I take some theoretical tours while examining both the Western and Chinese intelligentsia; meanwhile, I also collect many on-line anecdotes, news and scandals related with *Hero*. I try to be as objective as possible and give equal attention to both sides of an argument. The involvement of my personal voice in the thesis is by no means of subjectivity. It is instead an objective endeavor to reduce the impact of subjective arguments. The adoption of a theoretical position is fore-grounded and shows precisely how the theory informed the conclusions of the paper. In addition, I present facts and their sources, together with my relevant personal experience in various historical contexts, which assist and inspire my analysis and lead to a conclusion. I had to transcend the constraints I faced in the process of writing such as attitudes, readership, collection of sources and limited experience and knowledge base. I try to listen to the warning voices inside myself. Besides being a trained communication major, I am also a fan of martial arts novels and films, a critic influenced by both orthodox Marxism and some anti-Marxist thoughts, and an

overseas Chinese with a severe homesick and nostalgia because of dislocation, etc. In other words, my personal taste and my academic training may fail to neatly cooperate. In examination I could utilize my twisted patriotism and favor of some aspects of Western life, or my long-term Marxism training back home and my absorption of new thoughts and ideas here in Canada. All these could make my research unique but problematic. I will tell my readers that this is a biased thesis and the reasons for my biases. By this way the thesis will obtain an “alienation effect” to let the readers make their own judgments. I have no intention to play god.

I also know that my viewpoint always changes. Therefore, I don’t want to wait till I am 100% sure what I should say. I prefer to take a dynamic approach to the thesis writing. Professor Sheryl Hamilton recommended an essay about such an approach when I was in McGill University. In the essay “Writing, a Method of Inquiry” Laurel Richardson criticizes the traditional static writing model which ignores the role of writing as an on-going process. The traditional model, coherent with outdated mechanistic scientism and quantitative research, conceptualizes writing as “writing up” the research, rather than a method of discovery. The writing model shuts down the creativity and sensibilities of the individual researcher. Consequently, authors are homogenized through professional socialization and evaluation; individual voices are silenced and then the texts become tasteless. For Richardson, true writing is “a way of finding out about yourself and your topic...also a way of “knowing”—a method of discovery and analysis” (516). She suggests experimental writing as a method of knowing in the postmodern era. Postmodern “writing is always partial, local, and situational, and that our Self is always present, no matter how much we try to suppress it—but only partially present, for in our writing we repress part of ourselves, too” (Richardson, 520).

How could I exercise experimental writing, with the help of a method of discovery? It seems that I need to weave my personal experience and changing opinions into the professional research. But how? C. Wright Mills used to say, “If you write solely with

reference to ... the ‘context of discovery’ you will be understood by very few people; moreover you will tend to be quite subjective in statement” (222). Certainly, I will not just throw out some monologues and say, “Ok, this is my work, take it or leave it.” I want to make my work as objective as possible since I address the entire national film industry. Therefore, I have to rely on the second-hand material that I collected in the library, on the Internet or through discussion.

To think neutrally, I try to catch as many angles as possible. However, I don’t want to get lost in the jungle of viewpoints. In this connection, the writing of dialogues could be a useful approach. Therefore, I lay out my major arguments, each of which locates a pair of opponents: modernism/postmodernism, director/audience, elite/popular and so on. The binary approach encourages me to think in the extreme. Nevertheless in reality we often find ourselves in a gray area. My emphasis here is not on black-or-white, but on the tension in-between. It is this tension which drives all these arguments.

In connection to the binary take on the structure, I use some comparative approaches such as trend, gender, audience and cross-cultural analysis. I not only employ a content analysis on the dialogue between the audience and director/critic, but also focus on their historical, economic, political and cultural backgrounds. Historical analysis allows me to analyze China’s past and its connection to what it is today. Economic analysis helps me to understand the relationship between culture and industry. Political analysis is closely related with historical analysis. Cultural analysis is based on all other analysis. On a whole, I apply a discursive approach to analyze the *Hero* phenomenon and attempt to delve into its relevant topics such as martial arts, genre film, Hong Kong film industry, Hollywood, postmodernism, globalism and consumerism.

I construct the thesis around two cultures—national culture and popular culture as well as their corresponding agents: the film critic circle and common audience. Also,

the structure follows a chronological order from ancient China (before the 19th Century), the totalitarian culture (before the falling of the Maoists in the government in 1978), to the post-Mao era (after 1978). As my research target is the Chinese elite in the post-Mao epoch. I analyze them in two related but different historical periods: pre-Tiananmen (roughly between 1978 and 1990) and post-Tiananmen (from 1990 to the present). The entire argument (the second and third chapter of the thesis) is built around the historical framework in which the Tiananmen incident of 1989 is the marker between the pre-postmodern and postmodern era.

There are five chapters in total. The first chapter is a brief introduction of the *Hero* phenomenon. The next several chapters follow up the questions raised in chapter one as well as the arguments around those questions. The second and the third chapter, as I mentioned above, are arguments set in the eighties and the nineties respectively. The arguments then lead the case analysis of the *Hero* phenomenon in chapter four. Chapter five is the conclusion and summary.

Text

Chapter I *Hero*

In this chapter I will present *Hero* and its impact on both the critics' circle and the audience in China. I have seen this movie at least five times. I first watched it in a Saturday afternoon with an audience of hundreds in a crowded theatre at my hometown Chengdu. It is the funniest Zhang Yimou's film I have ever seen, full of martial arts clichés and cartoonish characters. All of these elements are packed in a serious tone (which makes it even funnier). Later I brought the movie in a DVD and carefully "read" it several times for research purpose. Meanwhile, I collected almost all related news and stories on the popular Chinese websites such as sina.com, tom.com and some famous domestic magazines. In addition, I checked some foreign websites for relevant information and watched a TV interview of the director Zhang Yimou about the film. Because the film was only released in a small number of North

American theatres and still has not been put on the shelves of local video stores, it is necessary to outline the content and the context of the film for further analysis.

1.1 The Story

Zhang Yimou's *Hero* tells about a well-designed conspiracy to assassinate the Emperor Qin Shi Huang during China's Warring States Period (403-221 BC). In this story, seven kingdoms vie for supremacy and the people suffer. The King of the Qin Kingdom (later the Emperor Qin Shi Huang) demonstrates a strong desire and determination to conquer the other six kingdoms. His ambition makes him a target of assassination. Among all the assassins, three people stand out: Broken Sword, Flying Snow and Sky. To anyone who eliminates these three most wanted would-be assassins, the king promises property, power and a private guest of the king himself. The awards are attractive but the mission seems to be impossible. For almost a decade, nobody has showed up to claim the prize until one day a mysterious low-rank county prefect official named Nameless walks into the palace, carrying the legendary weapons of the slain assassins¹. At the King's entreaty, Nameless tells his story of how he was able to kill all of the three famed assassins.

Nameless has undertaken the cruelest of training in the past ten years in order to kill the three assassins. He first defeated Sky in a chess house, then used Sky's sword as an engagement gift for Lady Flying Snow and successfully divided the fame duo: Broken Sword and Flying Now. Broken Sword thought that Flying Snow had an affair with Sky. To respond to Flying Snow's disloyalty, he deliberately slept with his maid and made him die under Flying Snow's envious sword. Jealousy and sadness disturbed and disoriented Flying Snow. She lost concentration when fighting with Nameless. As a result, Nameless took her life within several rounds.

The story does not stop here, nor flash back or forward. Instead of "a struggle within

¹ In ancient times, a warrior must not separate himself from his weapon unless he died.

narrative”, *Hero* adopts a *Rashomon*-like structure and “stages a struggle among narratives” (Kraicer, 9). However, such a struggle does not mean to put the control of narratives or narratives themselves into question, rather, narratives facilitate communication and comprehension between the king and the assassin Nameless. Through the interaction between different versions, the truth is gradually revealed and finally the King and Nameless reach mutual comprehension and appreciation. This is entirely contrary to the anti-narrative theme in *Rashomon* (1950).

After Nameless finishes his first version, the king doubts the story and posits his own version in which Nameless and his adversaries turn out to be conspirators against the king. The King has his reasons. He encountered the famed killers three years ago and was impressed by their valor and dignity. It is impossible for well-trained assassins to lose control as Nameless describes. In the king’s version, the three killers sacrifice their lives in order to allow Nameless to get close to the king and kill him. Nameless must have acquired a unique skill to be the chosen executor. At this moment, the King smells the death.

The king’s version is in turn refuted by another version of the tale. Now Nameless tells the truth: there is one crucial move in his skill called “death within ten paces”, which allows him to kill anyone or make him/her look like being killed within ten paces of him. He befriended Sky and the two set up a plot to let Sky be “defeated” by Nameless in front of many witnesses. Sky didn’t really die. Then Nameless made Flying Snow and Broken Arrow believe his swift swordmanship. The couple agreed to assist Nameless. They must, like Sky, perform being “killed” by Nameless in front of thousands of Qin soldiers. Flying Snow couldn’t forgive Broken Sword after he let the king go three years ago. Afraid of that the same thing happened again, she injured Broken Snow and went alone to the Qin camp for the performance. Nameless collected her weapon and most important of all—evidence of thousands of witnesses in the Qin camp. However, Broken Sword stopped him on his way to the assassination and wrote two characters on the ground.

“What did he write?” asks the King.

“All under the heaven.” says Nameless. In China, “all under the heaven” means the world. Three years ago, Broken Sword suddenly realized that personal hatred was far less significant than the people’s suffering. The wars were not for the people but for the privileged stratum. However, it was the people who suffered most because of the wars. Enlightened, Broken Sword renounced what he had been striving for at the last moment. He let the King live.

Like Broken Sword, Nameless also abandons his original plan, though now he is within ten paces of the majesty. Nameless walks to the gate of the palace where thousands of archery men are waiting for his appearance. He breaks the game plan of an assassin but the king doesn’t. To establish his absolute power, the king must punish those who violate his will. He orders his marksmen to shoot the assassin at once.

The king grants Nameless a magnificent funeral to show his respect to the assassin. Several years later, the king unites all seven kingdoms and becomes the first emperor of China.

1.2 The *Hero* Phenomenon

As we know, most films fall into two major categories: either art films or genre films. In Mainland China, art films have been seen as the norm since 1978. Director Zhang Yimou and his classmates in the class of 82 at the Beijing Film Academy gained their international glamour and glory as art house filmmakers because of their precise craftsmanship and their political stance. However, genre films still have not been taken seriously within the domestic film industry.

Zhang Yimou is a down-to-earth Chinese director. He was born and grew up in communist mainland China where class struggle dominated life and literature. His hometown Xian, the capital city of Shanxi province, is near the ancient capital of the Qin Kingdom (in *Hero*). During the Cultural Revolution he was sent to farms and

factories nearby where he gained grass-roots knowledge of country life in Northwest China, a place frequently reflected in his later masterpieces such as *Yellow Earth* (1984) (cinematography), *Judou* (1990), *the Story of Qiu Ju* (1992) and *No One Less* (1999). His passion in photography gained him a student status in the cinematography department of the Beijing Film Academy in 1978. From there he started his splendid film career. Zhang was by chance among the graduates of the class 1982 (from 1978-1982), which later formed a famous art-house film circle called the Fifth Generation.

Zhang Yimou's sharp turn from art films to genre films shocked the Chinese film critic circle. Although he insisted that the original idea of *Hero* emerged before Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* (CTHD), his hesitation to produce the movie till Ang Lee's huge success in Hollywood reinforced his public image as a speculator². The film also represented China's bid for an Oscar award in 2003 and got a nominee for the best foreign movie with the help of its North American distributor—Miramax.

Unlike other Fifth Generation filmmakers who focus on filmmaking only, Zhang is a guerrilla in the art world, chasing applause and the spotlight. Currently he seems to seek a shortcut to jump straight into the upper echelons of studio Hollywood. Because of his flexibility and versatility, a whole critical industry has grown up around the various images he and his films have created. For years he has been the hottest topic and target for the domestic film critics.

Zhang always pushes his limit. He first established his fame as a superb cameraman in *Yellow Earth* (1984), then the best actor in *Old Well* (1986), and later the best film in *Red Sorghum* (1987). He didn't want to stay in art films but his early attempt at an action movie was a box-office disaster³. He also tried to pursue some topics that he

² Zhang Yimou has already had a "reputation" as a speculator because of his frequent appearance in the international film festivals.

³ See <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0955443/>, Zhang's first action film *Codename Cougar* (*Puma Action*) in 1989

was not quite familiar with, for example, the perspective of urban life. After Wong Kar Wai used handheld camera in *Chungking Express* (1996), Zhang adopted the same method in his *Keep Cool* (1997). However, his images couldn't match the bodily gestures and movements of the performers. As a result, the city in *Keep Cool* does not resemble the point of view of an urban flaneur, comfortable with the fast rhythm and changes; rather, the film seems to reflect the experience of a country man in his first visit to a city: overwhelming, dizzy, noisy and out of pace. Later he did the stage design of Puccini's Opera *Turandot* (2000) and also directed the Ballet *Raise the Red Lantern* (2001). His works were praised by the Western critics for their splendid spectacles. However, the Chinese audience couldn't bear his postmodern tricks such as pastiche or "decontextualization of tradition" (Featherstone, 66). For example, performers dress in costumes from different dynasties. It is like watching a man in the Victorian era wear a Toga of the Roman Empire. By making a Chinese scene a masquerade Zhang flattened the history. Recently Zhang turned to Martial Arts films, the genre that many mainlanders see as a taboo. Because the Chinese government had banned the martial arts literature for years, most mainland directors had no access to the genre during their childhood. Consequently they are far worse at producing such kind of films than their Hong Kong and Taiwan contemporaries. However, when asked for the reason of making *Hero*, Zhang gave the same reason as Taiwanese director Ang Lee did to his reporter: homage to the martial arts literature of his childhood. "I always enjoy Wuxia. I am a fan of Wuxia since childhood." He said to his interviewer (Southern Daily, 11/24/2002).

But Chen Kaige, the director of *Farewell My Concubine* (1993) and also Zhang's classmate, denied the existence of such a boyhood fantasies in his generation under the tight control of the Maoists in their adolescent years. He said ironically that he was not an all-round talent in terms of making a martial art film (Chen Huiru, 09/08/2003).

Chen Kaige's *Assassin* (1999) employs the same historical background as *Hero* does but has a totally different story line. *Assassin* is not a martial arts film though it is

about a martial artist. It focuses more on history and philosophy. In *Assassin*, Jin Ke, a professional assassin, is the true hero who kills for friendship and justice. Although he fails to kill the king, he plays a critical role against tyranny. The king is by no means a hero but a prisoner of his ambition and revenge. He takes unification of China as a legitimate excuse to invade the neighboring kingdoms and slaughter the people there. But later he finds out that he himself is an illegal inheritor⁴ of the royal family.

Almost all Chinese rulers liked to give a reasonable excuse for their bloody policies.

Chen “doubted the ‘necessity’ of such shameful bloodshed in the progress of the Human history” (Nanjing Weekly, 13/08/2003). History may still go forward without the vigorous efforts of dictators.

However, Zhang has a totally different viewpoint. His *Hero* endorses personal sacrifice and bloodshed for the greater social good. Nameless (the assassin) realizes at the last moment what huge damage he would bring to mankind if he killed the king. Actually the true hero is a not commoner such as Broken Sword, Nameless, Sky or Flying Snow but the king who shoulders the historical burden to unify China. Without the king’s powerful reign, China would have returned to wars and history would have gone backwards. The theme reflects the Communist Party’s policy of “a strong, united China”. Chen Kaige revealed his disagreement on *Hero*, “It is not right to sacrifice an individual’s life to satisfy the collective’s needs” (Wang Zhishe, 06/08/2003).

Condemnation of *Hero* by the domestic critics’ circle grew fiercer after Jin Yong, the master of modern martial arts literature, criticized the movie for its unbelievable twist of the history and the truth. Jin holds that *Hero* depicts Emperor Qin Shi Huang as a far more compassionate character than what historical evidence would have justified (Beijing Entertainment News, 01/01/2003). Following Jin Yong, many critics bombarded Zhang for his ideological justification for tyranny as a necessary means to a peaceful end. Jiao Xongpin, a famous Hong Kong film critic, holds that *Hero* is a typical socialist artwork, which fits the discourse of the Culture Revolution. Actually

⁴ The king is an illegal child of the Prime Minister Li Si and the queen mother.

Mao Tzedong used to be regarded as an incarnation of Emperor Qin Shi Huang. There are many similarities between the two. For example, both of them paid high price to unite China and ruthlessly persecuted intellectuals.

Sao Bing lays blame on *Hero*'s promoting philosophy of servitude. It seems that the assassins would rather be tortured than torture the king. Their deeds reflect the so-called "sacrifice the little self (individual) for the benefit of the big self (the homeland)", a mainstream idea praised highly by the Communist Party for years. "Nameless didn't kill the emperor... instead he chose to be killed by emperor's marksmen. The assassin reached over-the-top euphoria at the very moment when thousands of arrows speared through his heart" (Sao).

Professor Wang Binbin of Nanjing University creates a new category for *Hero* —"political martial arts films". He is quite surprised by Zhang's poor knowledge on modernism given Zhang's frequent exposure to the Western culture. "The theme is totally against freedom, liberty and benevolence", says Wang (Nanjing Weekly, 13/08/2003). Jia Leilei holds that the film "murders the traditional spirit of martial arts"(Hu Xiaoding). Young naysayer Yu Jie goes even further. His comments are: "the movie is a feudalist trash... and an ode for a tyrant" (Nanjing Weekly, 13/08/2003). Critic Xu Juyi feels being fooled after seeing the movie. "It ignores the pain that we went through in the tyrannical past (the Culture Revolution) and provides beautiful excuses for the dictatorship. It's an insult for our memories..." (Wang Nanmo, etc). Filmmaker and also critic Hu Xiaoding concludes that *Hero* agrees with the axiom of "might is right".

In addition to the mainstream idea of unification, the movie is also seen as Zhang's answer to the post-911 world: a world in need of hero-like peacemakers or pacifist heroes. This idea, of course, targets at the international market. In the documentary about *Hero* and Zhang Yimou, Zhang said when he first shot the film 9.11 just had happened. The tragedy haunted his mind through the whole production process. Though he denied, some people read *Hero* as a parody of modern USA and terrorists

through the futility of the small states as well as stubborn but worthless actions of assassins. In *Hero*, personal hatred is meaningless compared with the world peace. It “glorifies absolute renunciation and perfects non-violence as precondition for peace” (Kraicer, 9). Terrorists (assassins) should put down their weapon and choose to die under the shower of arrows, a symbol of modern destructive weaponry. However, the anti-terrorism theme did not make *Hero* a blockbuster movie in America.

Compared with Zhang, Chen Kaige is regarded as a true intellectual and a spiritual aristocrat by many Chinese critics. They separate Zhang from the elite (Nanjing Weekly, 13/08/2003), and describe him as a tasteless artisan and unabashed opportunist. Here I cite Hu Xiaoding, a famous film critic’s comments on Zhang Yimou:

How could Zhang Yimou degrade himself from *Red Sorghum* to *Hero*? There is only one answer: he has become or perhaps he is always a disciplined speculator. When disciplines require him to destroy his conscience and cheat the audience, he will take the call regardless the price he has to pay...Zhang Yimou’s *Hero* is not a real martial arts film, rather it is anti-martial arts film because instead of standing with commoners and praising the assassin such as Jin Ke, it speaks for the king, the emperor, the power bloc...It is a victory of commercial and political speculation but the degeneration of the arts and the renunciation of the history.

Zhang does not try to prove his taste; rather he “lowers” himself to make a box office hit, “My idea of the film was to be not too lofty or sublime. I just thought that let us make a good film, make it attractive and get people to come and see it” (Southern Daily, 24/11/2002). Zhang Weipin, the producer of *Hero*, even called the film “product” instead of “artwork”.

On the whole, the domestic intelligentsias disagree with the movie for four reasons: first, subordination of content to spectacle; second, pro-dictatorship and pro-unification-by-force; third, twisted history; forth, no respect for life. From these points of view, the *Hero* phenomenon appears to be not just a simple argument about a more open play of the “free market” in a transnational globalized economy, but rather,

an attempt by the government to reassert its feudalist logic and terminate modernism in the cradle.

Despite the unambiguous disparagement from the domestic critic circle, *Hero* received huge commercial success. The film pocketed 756 thousand Yuan over its first two hours opening on December 20, 2002 while “70 percent of Chinese-made films each year fail to recover their copyright and printing costs”(Asianfilms). It is more successful than *CTHD* in the domestic box-office and the highest-grossing Chinese language film ever.

Regardless of its content and questionable theme, *Hero* pleased many moviegoers. On a technical level, “it is difficult to overstate the magnitude of the filmmaker’s aesthetic achievement” (Kraicer, 9). Its scenes are unbelievably beautiful: a matrix-type mind fight in a Zen atmosphere, a combat among yellow-turned-red leaves, pure crystalline standoff above a blue lake, etc. The cinematography, martial arts choreography, art design, costume, music, sound effect and animation are all award-worthy. The selling point of *Hero* is not its hyper-historical context or any deep meaning behind the stories. The audience did not expect a philosophical mind fest but a visual spectacle and audio effect under Zhang’s excellent craftsmanship. “It is a story, don’t read it as history” (Tang, 16/08/2003). “As long as it catches your eyes, your ears, it’s OK” (Tian, 23/12/2003).

Chapter II: Modernism, Nationalism and Totalitarian Culture before the 90s

In the first part of the thesis we see that the Chinese critics’ circle and the common audience have two totally different viewpoints on *Hero*. A simple explanation for the divergence is that the former deems it as an art-house film while the latter perceives it as a genre film. The director’s original intention is “walk a fine line between an artistic endeavor and commercial viability” (Ong, 08/01/2003). What I read from this discrepancy is two different cultures that each side represents respectively. The former are the cultural elite and the latter are the aficionados of popular culture, especially

martial arts movies. One problem I see in the critics' circle is their inability to view a film as a commercial product. Why can't they? Because they are trained not to view film in this manner? Because their education precludes them from reading anything lightly? Because the critics' circle could not tolerate the commercialization of the film industry or because there really exists two different opinions on filmmaking in China?

Several methods are adopted in this thesis to analyze the film critics' circle of China. First, I use a critical approach to the films of the Fifth Generation. Such an approach is based on three facts: 1) Many film theoreticians are also film critics. The practice-oriented characteristics of the Chinese film study make it difficult to distinguish film theory from film criticism. Critics/theorists usually work directly with filmmakers and have little interest in and impact on the public. There is no "two thumbs-up" type of critical rating system in China. TV anchors may invite theorists to introduce films on their programs, but these critics hardly gain popularity among the public since the audience only value their expertise, not their names. 2) Domestic film study had a great influence on filmmaking until some filmmakers turned their interest to international festivals in the nineties. 3) There is frequent interaction among various artists and intellectuals. Therefore, I put the Chinese film critics into a larger social network—the domestic intelligentsia, and take a historical analysis of the entire intellectual community. A common character of all Chinese intellectuals is their enthusiasm for introducing modernism to China, albeit a modernism that differs on various ideas. In addition to a criticism-led approach and a historical approach to the film criticism, I also employ a comparative analysis of China cinema and other cinemas in the world. On a whole, I intend to describe/analyze the critics' community from various perspectives in order to gain a bigger and clearer picture of Chinese Cinema.

It will be helpful to review several historical periods before I start my analysis on modernism and modernization in China. The final feudalist dynasty (Qing) was overthrown in 1911 by revolutionaries fueled by Western modernism. However, the

revolutionaries headed by Dr. Sun Yet Sen did not obtain power. Instead, China entered a warring period. The fierce and cruel competition among warlords for supremacy ended with a strong government controlled by the Nationalist Party. The Nationalist government was weakened during the anti-Japanese war (1937-1945) and was finally over taken by the Communist Party in 1949. Between 1949 and 1978 was a period of extreme socialism under Mao Tse-tung's leadership. The Culture Revolution (1966-1976) was a ten-year's ideological civil war, ended with Mao's death in 1976, leaving a corrupt government under the tight control of leftists. The leadership of Deng Xiaoping was confirmed by the end of year 1978 after several rounds of political struggle between the leftists and reformist within the Party. From 1979 to 1989 there was a period of economic reform. This period was also the golden period of creativity for the Fifth Generation. The Tiananmen Incident⁵ in 1989 finished the romantic relationship between the government and the intellectuals. Since then, China entered the era of commercialization and market economy. The period of commercialization (1989-present) overlaps with that of globalization.

I construct chapter two into six sections. First, I will introduce the modern history of China in which modernism replaces Confucianism as the new spiritual guide for intellectuals. Second, I will discuss the history of China cinema and its connection to the high art. Third, I will discuss the intellectuals' role in introducing modernism to China. Forth, I will take a theoretical detour to examine the relationship between nationalism and modernism. Fifth, I will analyze the unique phenomenon of Chinese culture: the marriage between the avant-garde artists/critics and the totalitarian culture. Finally, I will narrow my research target to the elites in the film industry and analyze the relationship between nationalism and national cinema. Chronologically, all these parts are set in the historical period between 1979 and 1989 with flashbacks to ancient times.

2.1 Modernism, a New "Religion"

⁵ Well-known as the Tiananmen Square. Here I deliberately use a neutral term.

Chinese intelligentsia has a tradition of participating in politics due to the heavy influence of Confucianism and the ancient civil service examination system. Confucianism requires the intellectual to work for the government just as a priest works for the church. Politics was and perhaps still is the reason for being an intellectual. Confucius once said, “the student, having completed his learning, should apply himself to be an officer” (19.13). A state should be ruled by men of ability and virtue. Upon this concept a civil service recruitment method along with a corresponding educational system was put in place during the Han dynasty (206 BC-AD 220). From then on till it was nullified in 1905, the examination played a critical role in social mobility. As a result, education became the key to success. Ancient Chinese rulers unanimously accepted and adopted the examination system. The rulers of a large state like China constantly face two major challenges: the lack of capable officials and the increasing power of military governors in charge of distant provinces. The former usually bring about corruption and the latter leads to decentralization of royal power. The ancient rulers found that the examination system provided them with an objective method of recruiting governmental personnel who were both capable and loyal. A typical Confucian intellectual usually takes loyalty as the primary discipline.

The examination system transmitted rule by aristocratic families to rule by trained bureaucracy (intellectuals). However, it was challenged later by the Western-type curriculum, which was highly regarded by modern intellectuals as the only feasible solution to China’s poverty and weakness. Under the pressure of the intellectuals home and abroad, the government finally abolished the old examination system based on the Confucius’ texts and adopted the Western mass education practice. Intellectuals in the new education system, though abandoning Confucianist tradition, inherited the political passion of their Confucian ancestors. However, with the annihilation of the old examination system, they had to find some other system to get into the power arena. It became apparent in the twentieth century that intellectuals tried to use their knowledge to create and cultivate their own followers. They liked to posit themselves as a sort of Prometheus, holding the torch of civilization to enlighten and liberate the

masses. Some of the intellectuals (e.g. Mao Tse-tung) then turned their followers into armies and tried to overthrow existing governments.

To be an official remained the major reason for being an intellectual. While most Western intellectuals could satisfy their ambitions within institutional organizations, Chinese intellectuals lacked such a channel to realize their value until very recently. The first modern university in China was established in 1898, the only accomplishment of a failed political reform. Before 1898, the majority of intellectuals were trained in private schools⁶ for passing the civil service examination. The modern institutional system after 1898 was not an ivory tower for the intellectuals to enjoy their lives. The system was always under the close watch and tight control of the government as part of national apparatus and was even totally destroyed during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Intellectuals found that they actually did not have many choices to promote themselves within the institutional system. Political participation was still the most effective way for social climbers.

With the help of Western missionaries and Chinese intellectuals studying abroad, the Enlightenment beliefs were translated into the parlance of the May Fourth Movement, which erupted in 1919. The movement, known as New Literary Movement, appealed to invite Mr. D (democracy) and Mr. S (Science) to China. However, the introduction of modernism in China was and still is regarded as an unfinished task for Chinese intellectuals for two reasons. First, the ruling class at that time, the feudalist warlords, quickly realized that Mr. D and Mr. S did not really share the same agenda and then advocated science as a powerful weapon and suppressed democracy as being a political taboo. The collapse of the old examination system in 1905 closed the intellectuals' most important channel to government administration. Military officials then had a chance to step into the political center. After the Qing Dynasty (1640-1911) China went through a warring period, during which feudalistic warlords vied for

⁶ Most of these schools admitted only a few students.

supremacy. To stop interference in their administration, most warlords suppressed dissidents. Second, the transplanted Enlightenment was dislocated in a feudalist country short of preparation for modernity and was therefore incompletely introduced. Inevitably most imported ideas were misunderstood, or even twisted and edited for different purposes. To win the public's support in their political struggle against the power bloc, the intellectuals did not employ Enlightenment rationalism but the seductive revolutionary romanticism and nationalism. In this way, modernism became a religion, full of passion and sublimation. Leninism, which is in essence the nationalism for colonial nationalist liberation movements, gained the popularity during the anti-Japanese war. The fad of Leninism promoted its Marxist heritage to the most favorable school in China. Intellectuals saw the political potential in Marxism and tried to utilize it as an ideological weapon for their political involvement.

From Li Bulou's "Shock and Think—Western Thoughts in China", I found that unlike what happened later, at the beginning Western philosophers were indiscriminately introduced to China, including Spinoza, Adam Smith, Hegel, Kant, John Locke, Hume, Voltaire, Rousseau, Feuerbach, Karl Marx, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Freud and American pragmatists such as C.S Pierce, W. James and John Dewey, to name a few. Marxism first gained its fame among leftist intellectuals in the 1930s and 1940s and his ideas were later chosen as the only orthodox thought by the newly born Communist government for the establishment of the Party's own legitimacy and authority. Marxism was spread all over the country but was largely reduced to class struggle. Incomplete comprehension and the irrational abuse of Marxism led to political terror and economic disaster. Right after the Communists took over China, the wholehearted national celebration for and support of the revolution's success⁷ sustained self-sacrificial and tolerant attitudes for the sake of the country's military growth and national comfort. Under such circumstance, the government's suppression of the freedom of speech was successfully carried out with few obstacles. The

⁷ The success is highlighted by overthrowing the government of the Nationalist Party and driving all imperialists out of China.

intellectuals' participation in construction of new China later was prevented and even prohibited because of their frequent interference in the government's policymaking. Mao Tse-tung, unlike most Chinese rulers in the past, trusted armies rather than intellectuals. His most famous saying is "the power comes out of guns." As a self-educated communist, Mao had a unique approach to Marxism. His ideas varied between flexible pragmatism and traditional utopianism, exemplified in the Great Leap Forward (1958) and the Culture Revolution (1966-1976) respectively. Mao's version of Communism did not modernize China; instead, the country's economic condition became even worse than that of its peaceful and harmonious feudalist past. His modification of orthodox Marxism was, in fact, questioned by the Marxists intellectuals. Mao's response to questioning was political persecution. Many intellectuals were sent to "Gulags" during Mao's regime.

The incomplete introduction of modernism to China was and still is regarded as the reason preventing Chinese intellectuals from political participation. They assumed that if modernism was fully introduced to effectively influence the people, it could be a new religion against the power bloc. With this strategy intellectuals could regain their political power in the realm of ideology.

2.2 The Fifth Generation and the History of National Cinema

Regardless the juxtaposition of the Fifth Generation, the Sixth Generation and some popular filmmakers in the 1990s, I have narrowed down my research on the Fifth generation between 1980 and 1990. Noticeably, some important works from this generation came after 1990, for example: *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) and *Farewell, My Concubine* (1993). However, after 1990, foreign capital started to seep into China cinema. Since then the film industry went through a painful but also hopeful process of globalization and commercialization. Driven by market force, filmmakers have begun to pay attention on box-office success. "In fact, a side effect of this new, commercial approach means that the traditional way of defining directorial styles—by

“Generations”—has started to disappear as everyone competes for the audience” (Ruggieri, 2002). The Fifth Generation was gradually divided into different groups and lost its singular image. Cognizant of this, I treat the Fifth Generation filmmakers in the post-Tiananmen era not as a particular group but as various unique artists seeking international recognition. In the 1990s, the concept of the Fifth Generation was merely a marketing strategy for brand-awareness.

However, the Fifth Generation filmmakers were and still are seen by outsiders as a group of political dissidents against the official censorship and freedom of speech. Foreign theorists like to conceptualize relationships between avant-garde artists and the state as essentially antagonistic. Based on this idea, they categorize the Fifth Generation directors as marginal artists who are against the mainstream propaganda films. Such classification is not one I find convincing because it fails to account for the important position the Fifth Generation was given in official film history.

The official film history is written by a group of Chinese film critics under the government’s support. However, the point is whether these film historians can represent the entire film circle. In other words, are there two groups of critics in the film industry, one that works for the government and the other that works for their own interests? The independence of the elite from the government is valued highly by the Western radical intellectuals. However, for a long time in China the industry had been seen as a state-run enterprise. The system of film production itself was part of a national apparatus to promote mainstream ideology for the nation. The practice-oriented film study in China made possible a long-term romance between the film study and filmmaking till 1990, when more and more domestic filmmakers sought success in overseas film festivals. Film study also serves national culture by sanitizing the realm of ideology and excluding any non-orthodox ideals. Most film theorists were also film critics. They seldom cared about the reaction of the public. Recently, with the maturity of the domestic film market, some journalists/critics

started to directly interact with the audience and hereby separated themselves from the film elitism.

In the 1980s, the film critic circle, within which contradictory views co-existed with and confronted each other, almost unanimously agreed to divide China cinema into the following six generations: the first generation appeared at the early 20th century as pioneer filmmakers in the silent film era. Most of these filmmakers were trained by American film technicians. It was the second generation that set the tone of China cinema for the next 40 years: film would be used as a propaganda tool. During this time, the dominant power in the film circle was politics. This was a natural and reasonable consequence of the historical moments when China encountered the danger of extinction of both its culture and population under the imperialist aggression. In such a context, all cultural activities, including film, concentrated on the political struggle for survival and a revival of the ancient empire. As a result, nationalism was deeply embedded into the filmmaking and film criticism. The generation was dominated by a group of left-wing, Shanghai-based artists during the interwar period between the 1930s and 1940s. Non-left-wing artists, mostly genre filmmakers, relocated to Hong Kong during this time⁸. These artists were not even placed into the Second Generation by official academia. The artists' "political incorrectness or passive attitude" later gave them no place to survive in the Communist regime. Most of them had to stay in Hong Kong for the rest of lives and brought prosperity to local popular film. The Third Generation, which emerges after 1949 is a short-lived group due to their lack of access to professional training during the warring period. They were quickly replaced by the Forth Generation, a sophisticated professional group of filmmakers in the 1950s and 1960s. These artists and filmmakers were both victims and agents of the propaganda cinema. Although with strong political passion, they couldn't survive through numerous political movements during those chaotic years. Some of them were arrested and even sentenced to death. Others quickly changed

⁸ Between 1927 and 1949, China went through civil wars among warlords, the anti-Japanese war and the civil war between the Communists and the Nationalists.

their careers. A few of them remained in the industry after the Culture Revolution and made some quality political melodramas. However, the narrow scope of the generation as a result of the long-term isolation of Chinese cinema from the rest of the world seriously limited their creativity. The Fifth Generation (1980s-1990s) is more aggressive than their forbearers in criticizing the society. The generation is formed by a small circle comprised of graduate students of the Class 1982 in the Beijing Film Academy. Almost all were born right after the founding of the Communist China in 1949, squandered their adolescent years on the Red Guard ferment and then responded Mao's calling to go to the countryside for reeducation by the masses. Later they received a systematic training in filmmaking at the Beijing Film Academy, where they had access to Western film theories and techniques. The shared backgrounds and experiences of the Fifth Generation made them a united group and "began what is known as the Chinese New Wave, a cinema noted for its artistic and political motivation, creative originality and keenness to expose social issue" (Ebert, 04/2003). The Sixth Generation, appearing in the early 1990s, was accepted by the film academia only recently. It consists of a diversified group who focuses more on urban melancholy and marginalized people. Actually this is the first group since the Second Generation that separates itself from propaganda cinema. Noticeably, like those popular artists leaving for Hong Kong in the forties and the fifties, current genre film directors such as Feng Xiaogang are also excluded from the official film history. This echoes the orthodox viewpoint that political participation is still the major responsibility and role of Chinese intellectuals. In the ancient times, only those who failed the exams were likely to become involved in popular literature. A successful intellectual should find a position in the government or at least be a spiritual leader among the masses. This old vision still prevails. Furthermore, Chinese film study still clings to national culture and shows little interest in popular culture.

Evidently, history is usually classified within the "high culture" area where popular artists are all excluded from the official documentation. Such a conventional historical approach could be well explained by the Foucaultian power-knowledge structure. The

absence of popular artists in the official documents arouses my interest to discover the potential power embedded in popular films. Without such a power, popular film might be accepted by the official history. Although I agree with Foucault that the conventional treatment of power that concentrates on powerful individuals and repressive intuitions might not be an effective way to describe the nature of power, I prefer to use such treatment not as a way to disclose the nature of power but as an approach to comprehend the nature of the select knowledge. To put it simply, why were the popular films deserted by the recorded history? I will connect this question with Mao Tse-tung's and Deng Xiaoping's governments respectively as well as with the whole institutional system during these two regimes. The close relationship between filmmakers and film critics before the 1990s allows me to analyze both of them as a whole. Furthermore, the frequent interaction among various artists and intellectuals makes possible to put the film elites into a larger society—the Chinese intelligentsia.

2.3 Modernity and Radical Intellectuals

Before answering why popular films were deserted by film history, I have to answer another question about history. How could it be that an avant-garde culture (e.g. the films of the Fifth Generation) was more acceptable than popular culture if the former is purely anti-government? It is true that the avant-garde films of the Fifth Generation were not quite appreciated by the government and sometimes not even allowed for theatrical release because of the implied rebellious sentiments. However, these filmmakers, like their predecessors, represented the mainstream of society and shared the same agenda with the government. An agenda that sought to negate the Cultural Revolution and reconstruct the country into a modernized power. Inheriting the traditional role as political participants, the filmmakers, along with other intellectuals of the time, became a part of the so-called “new culture movement” after the Cultural Revolution. Such a movement responded to the government's calling for the Four Modernization (i.e. the modernization in industry, agriculture, national defense and

education). The Four Modernization plan, which implemented a joint effort of the government and the intelligentsia to modernize China, was gradually accepted by the public.

Among various similar but sometimes slightly different definitions about modernization and modernity I choose the definitions by Madan Sarup. The reason for my choice is simple: I have carefully read his book “An Introduction Guide to Post-structuralism and Postmodernism” and therefore feel safer to quote his definitions than take some sentences from a book I never read circumspectly. In his book, modernization refers to “the stages of social development which are based upon industrialization...(It) is a diverse unity of socio-economic changes generated by scientific and technological discoveries and innovations, industrial upheavals, population movements, urbanization, the formation of nation states and mass political movements, all driven by the expanding capitalist world market” (131), while “modernity is generally held to have come into being with the Renaissance and was defined in relation to Antiquity... (It) implies the progressive economic and administrative rationalization and differentiation of the social world...modernity can be taken as a summary term, referring to that cluster of social, economic and political systems brought into being in the West from somewhere around the eighteenth century onwards” (130).

Based on these definitions, market economy is inevitable to achieve modernization because it is the master driver of “all”. The Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and also China spent many years seeking another way to modernize. All their endeavors ended in economic disaster and resultant political turmoil. When Deng Xiaoping came to power in 1979, he realized the significance of market economy. Only market economy could stimulate peasants’ productivity and thus reduce labor forces in the countryside; and only a market economy could attract these surplus peasants to work in cities and therefore undergird urbanization and industrialization. A country cannot achieve modernization while 90% of its population is stagnating in the countryside.

Right after the Cultural Revolution, the situation was abysmal. “Hundreds of problems were crying for solution, the “left” thinking which had completely dominated the country for so many years was now deeply rooted and the economy was on the brink of collapse....More and more people realized that it was high time to repudiate “left” thinking and to set things to rights” (Asian System Media), and class struggle became questionable though it still dominated the ideological domain. The new government was comprised of a group of victims and survivors of the previous political movements. Deng Xiaoping, for example, had been jailed as a capitalist roader⁹. These top officials had both motives and reasons to correct Mao’s political and economic policies. Their first move was to undermine the legitimacy of class struggle and carry out more pragmatic policies instead. As the founders of the Communist Party, these elder statesmen had no intention of overthrowing the Party. Their strategy was to maintain and even enforce the Party’s leadership while diluting the role of Maoism in policy-making.

At the beginning of his economic reform Deng Xiaoping did not openly challenge the existing state-planned economy, which was seen as the basis of a socialist country. As a sophisticated politician, he knew full well that if a market economy replaced the planned economy, there would be a fundamental change in the economic infrastructure. Competition stimulated by market economy could lead to privatization and social inequality, and consequently weaken the authority of socialism. In accordance with Marxism, superstructure (ideology) is literally based on the economic infrastructure. If the economic base changes, so does ideology accordingly.

Conversely, ideology also affects the economic base. Here I do not intend to use Marxist economic determinism as a universal tool but as an approach to analyze the mentality of the ideological policy makers (e.g. Deng) by such a theory. Based on this theory, it is easy to understand Deng’s much relaxed ideological policies at the beginning of his reform. Deng believed that the key to all problems was to correct ideology with the help of radical artists and scholars. He first promoted Hu Yaobang

⁹ A political term during the Cultural Revolution, refers to the one who supports capitalism

to the leading position within the Communist Party. Hu carried out a series of policies to help the intellectuals return to their previous social status. The whole institutional system was reestablished within several years. Meanwhile, Deng relaxed the control on art by replacing the policy of “art should serve politics” with “art should serve socialism and the people”. De-politicization in the art field invalidated Mao’s slogan “politics takes command!” To fill the possible ideological vacancy resulting in the abandonment of Maoism, Deng advocated the open-door policy, which allowed for the dissemination of various non-Marxist modern thoughts. He never openly negated Maoism. Instead he co-opted Maoism into his own style. To free himself from the leftists’ attack for his departure from orthodox socialism, Deng repositioned China at the primary stage of socialism within the Marxist framework of the linear historical development. Deng’s first step was aimed at making Chinese people Xiao Kang (comparatively well-off). Here he played a rhetorical trick by employing the Confucian term to eschew the tough debate over capitalism vs. socialism. Later he mixed the two concepts (socialism and capitalism) by promoting a third concept called “socialism with Chinese characters”. Finally he overtly advertised a pragmatic approach later called “cat theory”, which refuses to tell whether a policy is surnamed socialism or capitalism. His famous saying is “black cat or white cat, whoever catches mice is a good cat.” The pragmatism “inevitably leads to the reform and open-door policy along the capitalist road and destroys the socialist cause” (Mile, 87).

Modernization was regarded as a panacea. It effectively distracted people’s attention from existing problems. Modernity replaced Communism as the new utopia in Deng’s age. As modernity is defined in relation to the West’s antiquity, it is hard to posit it in the Chinese context. To approach modernity implies that China is behind the West in terms of development. “Ever since the May Fourth Movement in 1919 which led to the formation of the Communist Party, generations of Chinese intellectuals have been trapped in this dilemma. On the one hand, they want to realize a Western-style modernization; on the other hand, they want to resist imperialist aggression...People cannot easily locate the struggle for power on the discursive level” (Li, xiv).

Sandwiched between nationalism and modernism, the intellectuals became an easy target for political persecution. They had to waste most of time on how to talk themselves out of the blame of Westernization by national chauvinists. Deng knew the Achilles Heel of the intellectuals. This allowed him to control them in a relaxed environment. Radical intellectuals helped Deng to defeat his political enemies—the leftists. However, once the empowered intellectuals started to confront the legitimacy of socialism, Deng then used political plaintiff of spiritual pollution and anti-bourgeois liberalization to control the intellectuals in the name of patriotism and nationalism.

Modernism is seen as an ideological guidance for modernization. In accordance with Webster, modernism is classified into modernism in arts and in Protestantism.

“Modernism in arts (is) a general term used to describe the 20th century’s conscious attempt to break with the artistic traditions of the 19th century; it is based on a concern with form and exploration of technique as opposed to content and narrative. In the visual arts, direct representationalism gave way to abstraction; in literature, writers experimented with alternatives to orthodox sequential storytelling, such as stream of consciousness; in music, the traditional concept of key was challenged by atonality; and in architecture, functionalism ousted decorativeness as a central objective. Critics of Modernism have found in it an austerity that is seen as dehumanizing. Modernism as a movement is followed by Postmodernism” (775). From this definition, we can see that modernism is radical, always associated with avant-garde and it is typically a Western occurrence.

Modernism as a cultural movement was adopted by Chinese intellectuals for the nation’s push to develop in order to defend against foreign powers. However, they faced two critical problems, which Western intellectuals didn’t confront. First, unlike what happened in the West, Modernism in China is not a derivative of modernity, rather it existed before the emergence of modernity. Modernization therefore became a myth, an imaginary term with no possibility of dispelling. It is in essence the

continuation of Confucius' utopian narrative. The country lacked a retrospective system to critically absorb the borrowed modernistic concepts. In addition, the absence of social rationalization and disenchantment, which were embedded in the "original" modernity, led to abuses of modernist theories and resultant political and social chaos. Mao's Great Leap Forward exemplifies the irrationality with which the whole Chinese population enthusiastically threw themselves into making steel in order to "surpass England and the United States in thirty days."¹⁰ The Hegelian Marxian cult of progress brought China three year's national famine and the subsequent political movements to make up for the loss caused by the government's idealistic policies.

The second problem the Chinese intelligentsia met with was their inability to use modernism as a critical weapon. Since modernism did not simply reply but also set itself against modernity, Chinese intellectuals tried to take a middle way in order to absorb the borrowed concepts. On the one hand, they praised the value of modernism for modernization; on the other hand, they also used modernism to criticize modernity. However, their opinions on modernity, negative or positive, were all based on their imagination about modernity and therefore became meaningless. Even worse, the Communist government reduced modernism to Marxism and Marxism to class struggle only. Such a discriminative approach to modernism led to political terrorism with zero tolerance to any alternative voice. Through positing itself as the absolute truth and law, the "modernism" in China killed the true meaning of modernism. Such modernism is in essence the revival of the ancient feudal ghost. For a long period of time, Chinese intellectuals seemed to be a little bit off the mark, never really targeting the real problems of the nation. They "enjoyed" signifiers (e.g. modernism) that have little connection to the signified (e.g. the reality, modernization, modernity). For example, intellectuals criticized capitalists for robbing the surplus value of the working class but at that time capitalism in China was still in its fledgling period; they also visualized factory workers as the leading class of the society regardless of

¹⁰ The slogan of the Great Leap Forward by Mao Tse-tung

China's economic base of the peasantry; while modernity and modernism were centrally located in urban culture and big capital cities, China had only a few cities, most of which actually were not regarded as cities according to modern standards.

Although the correspondences between different social groups are always less or more precise in one country than in other, the Chinese government insisted that class struggle is the supreme universal truth. This theory of class struggle is known for its simplification of history. It asserts that history is basically a struggle between oppressors and the oppressed. The struggle usually leads to either a revolutionary reconstitution of society or the common ruin of the contending classes. In a feudal society, there are two classes: landlords and peasants; in capitalist society, bourgeoisie and proletariat. But in truth, at that time in China, the majority were peasants, peddlers, or other landless labors. There were only a few landlords due to land consolidation in the warring periods. In addition, as industrialization was only in its primary stage, there were a few capitalists and workers in the cities. Under such social condition, the question was how to use the weapon of class struggle in the context of a feudal country with few bourgeoisie and landlords? With the scarcity of oppressors, the signifiers created its own reality. Classification of classes became a source of political persecution. Class struggle quickly became a form of personal revenge. People often found that one day they sent those they disliked to public trials and the next day they were beaten by their opponents as the people's enemies¹¹. This is what Mao called the "great democracy", which is essentially fascism. As Walter Benjamin said, "Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves. The masses have a right to change property relations; Fascism seeks to give them an expression while preserving property"¹². During the Culture Revolution, the masses did not obtain any benefit from the series of political movements though they were granted this "great democracy". As Madan Sarup says,

¹¹ Five enemies of the society were landlord, capitalist, anti-revolutionary, bad person, and rightist.

¹² See "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction",

<http://www.student.cs.uwaterloo.ca/~cs492/Benjamin.html>

One of the many debts we owe to Foucault is his insistence that power relations cannot be adequately explained by class relations, that power is discursive and is to be understood in the specific contexts of its exercise, not in generalized social structures. Social power does not equate with class or any other objectively defined social category...Social power cannot be adequately explained by social categories (179).

In this case, the misclassification of class and its corresponding political persecution during the Cultural Revolution prove that the link between social power and social categories could be arbitrary and unreasonable, and therefore of no constructive value.

After the Cultural Revolution, the Fifth Generation filmmakers, along with other artists and writers of their age, intended to solve the two problems that Chinese intellectuals consistently encountered in the process of absorbing imported modernism. The first problem, the absence of modernity, could only be solved through a long-term endeavor to gain modernization. The second problem, the intellectuals' inability to use modernism as a critical weapon, was the focus of debates within the intellectual community. Some intellectuals pointed out that such incomplete Enlightenment had already become an obstacle for modernization because the country lacked an appropriate reference frame to absorb or abandon an imported idea. If so, why not fully, indiscriminately introduce modernism to China? The extreme of this trend is the calling for complete Westernization in China. The most popular TV series "River Elegy" in 1988, echoing the tone of the May Fourth Movement (1919), fiercely attacked the tradition and advertised the superiority of the Blue civilization (a symbolic description of the Western civilization) over the Yellow civilization (a symbolic description of Chinese culture originated by the Yellow River). Contrast to the official slogan of looking ahead for modernization, the intellectual attempted to draw people's attention to the supposed ugly past. Chen Kaige, the leading director of the Fifth Generation said:

Our generation, which went through many ups and downs in childhood, grew up in a chaotic period for the country. We have seen much suffering and experienced the lowest life. We absorbed much real nutrition from those who endured all the suffering and had the chance to feel and

understand our hopes and desires. Because of this experience, we realized that our race is a race without tears—most people never complained...Thus if we do not single out and condemn the stupidity, backwardness, and ignorance of the Chinese people, we will see their internal perseverance...When the people finally awaken, we hope to make a fresh start and hope the ideas aroused out of the wound will be sufficient to stimulate the spirit of the entire nation.

Western critics therefore regarded the radical artists as mavericks pitting against the conformity of Communism society. But by taking a close look at their works one will find that “the radical strand of self-examination...pursued a relentless critique of Chinese Culture in which socialist politics became a more or less displaced target” (Yau, 107). Unlike Western radical artists, film directors like Chen Kaige and many other Chinese intellectuals believed that the powerlessness and weakness were not the results of the social system but the inadequacies of the people within it. “By suggesting that the peasants, intellectuals, army, cadres and Party secretaries had all internalized, though to a different extent, oppressive and self-oppressive aspects of the culture,” the films of the Fifth Generation and the novels of the new era “explicitly reversed accepted standards concerning good and evil, and implicitly refuted the 1950’s definition of both feudalism and the anti-revolutionary mentality. Alternative forms of feudal and non-revolutionary thinking were offered: cultural conservatism and ethnocentrism, patriarchal domination of the young and blind political behavior. It was this backward-looking positioning which accounted for the cyclical nature of China’s political and economic nightmares; and no one—neither peasants, intellectuals, thieves, Party members nor soldiers—was exempt from the blind perpetuation of outdated values. This strand of self-examination was much less humanistic, in that it did not valorize any aspect of human nature as worth salvaging” (Yau, 107). By this way, the radical artists and writers avoid interrogating the unforgettable mistakes made by the Party. In addition, they still clung to the non-humanistic criticism. They might focus on the human sickness, not for the discovery of the human nature but for the reasons of China’s backwardness. Such a

totalitarian approach proves that they were just another group of radical intellectuals working for the totalitarian culture.

The government, in an effort to create order out of the political and economic chaos, encouraged the intelligentsia to import some radical thoughts in order to dilute the influence of the orthodox Marxism. Although intermittently exercising its tight control over the ideological domain to make sure its legitimacy was uncontaminated, the government made the open-door policy of unlocking the long-closed gates of the nation. The policy assisted the government not only in its economic reconstruction but also in its political struggle against the leftists. Modernism paved the way to the Four Modernization—an official version of utopia. In the sense, the intelligentsia shared the same agenda with the government though these two groups might not have trusted each other. The intellectual, including the Fifth Generation artists, represented the mainstream of the society at that time.

A ruling class (here the Communist Party) could temporarily lose its social power and have to rely on cooperation with other classes and even outsiders (Western thinkers). However, with a clever strategy, the ruling class could regain its power and control over the subordinate. Whether the Fifth Generation was the agent of the people or the spokesmen of the government remained unclear. But one thing is clear: they objectively cooperated with the government albeit their willingness to be adherents of the power bloc. The Chinese intellectual are interested in not just interfering but also participating policy-making. In another word, they want to be a part of the ruling power. From the cooperation between Confucians and emperors, between leftists and the Communist Party and then between the radical intellectuals and the reformers, we can see that the cooperative relationship between the intelligentsia and the government is deeply rooted in Chinese culture.

2. 4 Modernism and Nationalism

One distinguishing characteristic of Chinese modernism is its tight relationship with nationalism. Without the external pressure of imperialist aggression, there was no internal urge to abandon the existing political and cultural heritage of Confucianism and absorb the Western modernism. Modernism is applied to unite the whole nation and pave the way to modernization in order to resist the foreign invasion. Therefore nationalism is both the reason and the result of importing modernism to China. Here I would like to acknowledge the work of Anthony D. Smith in enabling me to confirm and further develop some of my arguments advanced above and hereafter in terms of the relationship between modernism and nationalism, especially his idea about the role of the local elite in nationalist and modernistic movements of the third world.

Smith establishes his argument on nationalism based on Ernest Gellner's definition on nation. According to Gellner, a nation is a society with a high culture, that is, a literate, public culture inculcated through a mass, standardized and academy-supervised education system, serviced by cultural specialists. It is essentially a preserve of cultivated urban personnel, and so many be likened to a tamed 'garden' culture. For Gellner national identity is simply the identification of citizens with a public, urban high culture, and the nation is the expression of that high culture in social and political spheres. Nationalism in turn can be conceived of as the aspiration to obtain and retain such a high culture (37). Following this idea, Smith writes, "Contrary to its folk idiom and romantic self-image, nationalism is, essentially, the general imposition of a high culture on society, where previously low cultures had taken up the lives of the majority, and in some cases the totality, of the population. It means the generalized diffusion of a school-mediated, academy-supervised idiom, codified for the requirements of reasonably precise bureaucratic and technological communication. It is the establishment of an anonymous, impersonal society, with mutually substitutable, atomized individuals, held together above all by a shared culture of this kind... That is what really happens" (33).

Although the “high culture” formula might be problematic in explaining some phenomena such as whether all high cultures are embodiments of power, several issues in China could be well explained by this formula. For one, modernization, which basically is the transition from an agroliterate to an industrial society, is marked by the replacement of low (various local popular cultures) by high cultures (national culture). Second, since the classification of high/low cultures was used by the elite to identify and differentiate the intellectuals from the masses, the effacement of low cultures suspends the difference between the elite and the masses and consequently the prestige of the elitism. This made it possible for Mao Tse-tung destroy the whole institution system with the help of the Red Guards. The students were encouraged to beat their teachers who gave them too much homework. Zhang Tiesheng, a Red Guard who handed in a blank paper in the national entrance examination, was admitted by the best university in China as a national hero. Students were sent to the countryside to be re-educated by the peasants. The reversed roles of the illiterate peasants and the intellectual subjugated the traditional social order of high/low. Third, the relationship between high culture and nationalism led to the intellectuals’ pivotal role in nationalist movements. Nationalism bridges the gulf between the elite and the masses. On the one hand, nationalism helps the elite establish their leadership among the masses; on the other hand, nationalism also changes the traditional meaning of elitism along with the disappearance of the high-low differentiation. Finally, the ‘high culture’ formula implies the discontinuities between the older ‘low’ and the modern ‘high’ cultures. Nationalism-modernism therefore has to either take pre-existing cultures and turn them into “the nation”, or invent new cultures and obliterate pre-existing ones. The May Fourth Movement (1919) was to erase the old cultures and establish a new mass culture. The spirit of the Movement reached its climax during the Cultural Revolution, which was basically a cultural suicide. That is, the eradication of the old cultures requires the self-reference quality of nationalist propaganda. During the first 30 years of the People’s Republic of China, the whole nation was devoted to building up various role models for the nation and eventually creating its God: Mao Tse-tung.

In the late 1910s, the intellectual intended to use modernism to salvage the country; however, their original task to modernize China remains unfinished. Part of the reason is that they never successfully introduced Enlightenment rationalism to China but the so-called “revolutionary romanticism”, which is essentially an irrational populism. Such irrationality, like an epidemic, quickly spread all over China. In the next almost 60 years, China went through numerous political movements.

The distortion of modernism into nationalism/romanticism could be explained as follows. For one, the people themselves were all the Chinese elite had after the collapse of the old social order. The abolishment of the old examination system suspended the coalition between the elitism and the power bloc. In addition, the uneven development between the West and China made the Chinese intellectual the peripheral elite. Smith borrows Tom Nairn’s theory of uneven development to describe the situation of the peripheral elite. Nairn links such uneven development to capitalism rather than industrialism. In the process of exploitation of the peripheries, the peripheral elite possess no advantages against Western bourgeoisie. They become “marginal youth”, “bound in the ‘fetters’ of imperialism and are all too conscious of their helplessness. The only resource left to them is people, masses of people” (Smith, 50). In China, the adoption of Western curriculum confirmed the center position of Western elitism. Nationalism then became the only weapon against the hegemony of Western elitism. The strategy for Chinese intellectuals since the early 1920s was to use modernism to resist the Confucian/feudal government and use nationalism to defend Western elitism within China.

Another reason for the distortion of modernism is the elite’s abandonment of their own language in order to win the public support. To turn to the people means to speak their language. “As a result, nationalism is inevitably Janus-headed, facing backward to a mythical past and forward to a future of development in freedom. It is also inevitably populist as well as romantic” (Smith, 50). The irrational approach first strengthened the popularity of the local elite among the masses but later made these

intellectuals the victims of mob riots¹³. Romanticism and populism turned diversified popular cultures into one united and also sentimental national culture. As Smith says, “the largely mute and passive role of an undifferentiated ‘people’ ...derives from... the romantic mythical quality of the inter-class community. The myth of the self-aware and self-determining nation, as well as of its class unity, is the product of the romanticism of the intelligentsia, because only romanticism can create a ‘national culture’ and hence a nationalist movement” (52). In addition, romanticism is always linked to utopianism, which is as seductive to the masses as religious sermons. However, national culture is quite remote from Enlightenment rationalism originally purposed by the elite, and eventually destroyed the whole intellectual world during the Cultural Revolution. This is why Chinese intellectuals in the postmodern era still yearn for complete introduction of modernism.

Chinese national culture is invented by the left-wing intellectuals in order to win the public’s support. It remains a secret how the elite quickly abandoned Confucius’ lesson that “the superior man is catholic and no partisan. The mean man is a partisan and not catholic” (Confucius, 2.14), and embraced the brotherhood and comradeship of the masses. But one thing is for sure: some of them could not hide their arrogance and gradually lost their popularity among the masses. These intellectuals therefore did not earn the people’s compassion when persecuted by the Red Guards.

The third reason for the distortion of modernism into nationalism is because nationalism can generate mass support for it provides an underlying rationale for the masses’ separate social interests. The nation is likened to a family, and the family is treated in most of human history as a sphere of disinterested love, purity and solidarity. As Anthony points out, “it is not because it is pure and disinterested that the family engenders such powerful attachments. On the contrary: as history too often proves, families have powerful interests, and their members equally fervent attachments bound up with those interests” (140). The word “country” (Guo Jia) in Chinese is

¹³ Cultural Revolution could be seen as a mob riot.

made up of two words: country (Guo) and family (Jia). Only combining the state with the family could the masses' self-sacrifice be possible because such sacrifice embodies the traditional value of "loyalty to one's family". It is not a surprise that Chinese people could tolerate the government's harsh policies in the first 30 years of the Communist China. Through linking the state to the family, comradeship to brotherhood, nationalism united the masses as one. It effectively performed "the functions of social mobilization, political coordination and ideological legitimization" (85).

This nation (country-family) is an imaginary community invented by the elite. Most self-styled Communist states (such as China) are built upon nationalism. An imaginary community demands a self-referential propaganda system. Existing histories and cultures must be rewritten or erased for the consistency of the imagination. Mao chose the latter: he effaced almost all old cultures. He wanted a stormy revolution¹⁴ rather than a gentle social reform. The whole propaganda system, under his guidance, worked towards creating new heroes and martyrs as role models for the younger generation. Meanwhile, Mao's books were read by everyone, literate or not. For these phenomena, Smith has a vivid discussion:

We must begin our explanation with the two great fatalities of human condition: death and bible. Death brings the threat of oblivion...and the collective memory and solidarity of the nation helps us to overcome the threat of oblivion. Nations are characterized by symbols of commemoration, notably the Tombs of Unknown soldiers. Without name or known remains, these tombs are filled with 'ghostly national imaginings'. What this suggests is that nationalism, like religion, takes death and suffering seriously –in a way that progressive and evolutionary styles of thought like Marxism and liberalism do not. (132)

This tells how nationalism made popular the martyrs' stories and Mao's books. It also tells how the self-styled socialism departed from its original form: Marxism. The intellectual therefore were destroyed by what they had created: the totalitarian

¹⁴ In Chinese language, revolution means "to kill lives".

culture. The marginal elite, originally sought to use the masses to help them go back to the center, ended up with the same marginal position as the result of centrality of the masses.

Smith's analysis on modernism and nationalism reconfirms my belief that the radical artists and intellectuals in China emerged from national culture.

Although some of them might be political dissidents, they were and still are essentially a part of mainstream which serves the totality: "China" and "Chinese people". Both the Fifth Generation directors' root-seeking movement and the film study circle's claim on making new national cinema reflect the impact of nationalism on the formation of national culture.

2.5 Tragic Life of Radical Intellectuals in the Totalitarian Culture

The marriage of avant-garde and national culture formed a unique landscape of post-1949 Chinese Culture. The national culture between 1949 and 1990 is basically a radical totalitarian culture with a focus on macropolitics—construction of socialism. Here the totalitarian culture is related to the nature of those regimes in which official ideology covers all aspects of social existence mainly through monopoly of the means of mass communications. Totalitarian dictators usually act as the defenders of cultural purity. National culture is an important dimension of the overall orchestration of power. After 1990, especially after Deng Xiaoping's open support of capitalism in 1992, the totalitarian culture started waning along with the waxing of market economy. However, this does not mean that the intellectuals no longer focused on macropolitics. After the Cultural Revolution, the majority of Chinese radical intellectuals ascribed their previous misery to the totalitarian culture, yet they still stuck with national culture and distanced themselves from popular culture.

John Fiske's "Understanding Popular Culture" helps me to understand the relationship between radical intellectuals (including avant-garde artists) and the totalitarian/national culture. Fiske's comparative analysis clarifies the difference between radical

arts of the left wing and popular culture. He holds that the left-wing theorists focus more on macropolitics of organized action while the popular culture primarily works with the micropolitics of everyday life. The former is usually radical, assisting, questing or threatening the current social/political system while the latter takes a progressive approach to reform the world rather than revolt against it.

In the section of “the Fifth Generation and the History of China Cinema”, I used the conventional treatment of power to reveal the nature of the selected knowledge: the history. Such a treatment allows individual powers and repressed institutions to be core reasons for the Mao discourse from 1949 to 1976 and that of Deng from 1979 to 1997. In this chapter I will follow the Foucaultian suggestion to analyze the nature of power by a more pervasive and insidious mechanism, through which power reaches into the atom of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their deeds and discourse, their emotions and expectations, above all, their everyday lives. To put it simply, how did different individuals become the masses?

According to Foucault, the analysis of nature power should not be outside the production of discourse. Power produces the truth and the truth in return reinforces power. The communists legitimized their access to power through creation of the masses, an abstract signifier without a particular signified. The masses first appeared as a nation against foreign invasion, then as proletarians against capitalism and imperialism, later as peasants against the rebellious intellectuals or Maoists against anti-Maoists. The masses were defined as the majority: the representatives of the truth and the enemies of the minority.

To examine power at its lowest level: the individual, national culture is a good place to start. In China, national culture successfully transformed everyday life to political life via the promotion of nationalism. The calling of “million of hearts with one mind” so as to “brave the (foreign) enemy's gunfire” and “march on”¹⁵ set the tone of

¹⁵ From national anthem of People's Republic of China

China's ideology for the next half century. The collectivism buried the individual colors and voices. While the people underwent the power of the masses, they also exercised and enforced it. National culture allowed the power to be circulated but never really locate in some individual's hand except for a few people such as Mao Tse-tung. In this section I will examine how national culture shaped the power structure of China.

Chinese national culture is essentially a radical culture with a focus on macro-politics. Since the Communist Party took over China, national culture appeared in a form of a totalitarian culture. The culture was supported by Soviet Socialist Realism, Maoism and the Communists' tight control and extensive use of mass media (film, newspaper, radio and so on). To say the totalitarian culture is radical is because it is basically the negation of the Confucian tradition. The Cultural Revolution even turned the totalitarian culture into a cultural suicide, a collective amnesia. However, the totalitarian culture was not only revolutionary but also reactionary since it was spread through a top-down mechanism. It followed the Soviet Socialism Realism that required creative artists to tow the Communist Party line, to deal only in subjects approved by the Party and display the correct political attitude. By the rigid control of all media the government sanitized the public space, in which only one voice was heard, talked and disseminated. Popular culture was banned as the residual of the feudal past. The people could only entertain and inform themselves with what the government provided. In addition, Maoism also had a great impact on the form of the totalitarian culture. Mao was a believer in the masses' power. He "empowered" the masses to purge all his political opponents. As he said, "the revolutionary war is a war of the masses; it can be waged only by mobilizing the masses and relying on them" (Mao, 147).

Looking at the history of the last century, one can easily find that the left-wing always dominated the intellectual community, either in the warlords' period of the 1920s, the

Nationalist regime between 30s and 50s, or the Communist government after 1949. The public, under the influence of the May Fourth Movement (1919), attributed all Chinese problems to the Confucianism and Feudalistic society. The leftists' claim, with its complete repudiation on tradition, was more inflammatory than other conservative suggestions. During the anti-Japanese war the left-wing artists got the leading position in the entertainment industry, especially in the drama circle and the film circle. However, unlike traditional intellectuals who usually supported the emperor and seldom questioned his majesty's authority, the leftists were seen as natural leaders of political movements. As a result, their popularity became a potential danger to existing governments. That tells why the Nationalist government arrested and assassinated them and Mao ruthlessly persecuted and purged them after they led him to the throne.

Nationalism eliminated the distance between the elite and the masses. By leveling down the elite culture to match the taste of the masses, the intelligentsia lost their priority and prestige. The demystification of the intelligentsia certainly encountered their resistance. However, such confrontation was quickly suppressed by ruthless political persecution. As an intellectual who joined the May Fourth Movement (1919) and later formed and enlarged his army through peasant uprisings, Mao knew thoroughly the political potential of the intellectual. Because the value system of Confucianism was entirely abandoned, the intellectual were less likely to loyal to a particular leader as Confucians were to their emperors. Mao sensed the "betrayal" of the intellectual and his comrades after the failure of his economic policy in the early 1960s. Some of them severely criticized his irresponsible idealism to socialist construction. Figuring out how to obliterate the influence of the intellectual became a critical issue for him in salvaging of his own political career.

Under the dictatorship, power could operate through a straightforward 'top-down' mechanism where the authority exerts coercive restraints upon the innocent masses. Mao's strategy against the dissidents is simple yet effective. He first used the

intellectual's influence on the masses to promote him to a god-like position. Then he applied his god-like image to call upon the public to overthrow whoever stood in his way, including those who formerly had glorified him. Of course, making him a god was not enough; he had to eradicate all other gods and make himself the only reference. The effacement of both traditional culture and the Western influence left China nothing to cling to except for the class struggle redefined by Mao himself.

Through the intensive and extensive dissemination of his thoughts and words as well as the destruction of intellectual's political potentials and their major habitat: namely, the whole institution system, Mao made his own discourse the only discourse in China at that time. His poems were the textbooks and Bibles; his image was reproduced and hung everywhere. He was regarded as the red sun, "wherever he went, there was no darkness".¹⁶

Two theories explain well the quick ritualization of Mao. One is Foucault's Power theory and the other is Walter Benjamin's Aura theory. As Foucault says, power "produces reality", it "produces domain of objects and rituals of truth". "Conversely, knowledge induces effects of power. It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power" (Madan Sarup, 74). With the magic power of the god, Mao successfully erased the whole knowledge system through student movements and quickly established the authority of his own words and will. His "Talk on Question of Philosophy" revealed his derision of the institution system: "To get some experience of class struggle -- that's what I call a university. They argue about which university is better, Peking University or People's University¹⁷. For my part I am a graduate of Greenwoods University¹⁸, I learned a bit there" (Mao, 18/08/1964). A deep understanding of the "reasonless rebellion" embedded in the blood of adolescents allowed Mao to easily take away the political power of the intellectual. All he needed to do was to give

¹⁶ From the most popular song during the Cultural Revolution: The Red Orient

¹⁷ Two of the most famous universities in China

¹⁸ Greenwood (Lulin) is a world of outcast in martial arts literature

students/Red Guards a reason. The reason is revolution. Dissenters, mostly intellectuals, were called “Ox Ghosts and Snake Gods” and were treated as animals or non-human beings. This is not new in the history of human beings. Foucault’s work “Madness and Civilization” vividly describes how dissidents were isolated from the public, branded as lunatics. For Foucault, lunatics were dispensed because useless to production. Following the same logic, the intellectual were deserted because they were deemed useless to the socialist course. The Red Guards, mostly young energetic yet ignorant students, assaulted the intellectual, sent them to the public trails, and confiscated their belongings. Foucault depicts how societies use the human body as the site where social power is most compellingly exerted. Only through the body could societies effectively discipline and punish the deviation from the social norms. Bodies are the incarnation of law while “law constantly writes itself on bodies...this machinery transforms individual bodies into the body politics” (Certeau, 140). The physical pains (e.g. excessive labor, getting beaten, starving) endured by the intellectual efficiently and effectively silenced the dissidents. The whole institution system was paralyzed.

The Cultural Revolution could be seen as a political carnival. Bakhtin’s theory of the carnival accounts for the differences between the normal life under the disciplined social order and the repressed pleasure of the subordinate. Stallybrass and White define the nature of carnivals “as symbolic inversions and transgressions in which the distinction between high/low, official/popular, grotesque/classical are mutually constructed and deformed. They draw on Bakhtin’s work to point to the ways in which the carnival involves the celebration of the grotesque body...in a world in which official culture is turned upside down” (Featherstone, 79). “Carnival...marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions” (Featherstone, 82). According to Bakhtin, there are three main cultural forms of folk carnival: “(1) ritual spectacles (2) comic (verbal) compositions—inversions, parodies, travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crowning and uncrowning (3) various genres of billingsgate—curses, oaths, popular blazons” (Featherstone, 83). All these

forms could be seen in the public trials initiated by Red Guards. The Red Guards' blind belief in Maoism and loyalty to Mao, their humiliation on the intellectuals, their curses to the dissidents and their oaths to be faithful to Mao, all these created a vivid picture of carnivals. As carnivals are a part of popular culture, they are less likely to be controlled by the government since any bottom-up movement will serve its own purpose eventually. Carnival constructs a world outside officialdom. If it lasts too long, it will threaten the officialdom. That is why most carnivals are short. Mao wanted to use carnival to destroy his opponents, not the government itself. Therefore the carnival must be under control. In order to use it as a long-term tactic and also make it as short as possible, Mao frequently sent the Red Guards down to the countryside to receive education by the masses. The center stage was always played by fresh Red Guards who would soon be replaced by a younger group before they got mature enough to understand what was going on! By this way, the game of popular culture was transformed into a weapon of the totalitarian culture.

How could Red Guards so easily tear down the entire institution system with no obstacle? One of the reasons is the dependence of the system on politics. The warlords and Nationalists could not destroy the intelligentsia as a whole in that the intellectual community at that time maintained its independence though actively involving themselves in politics. However, since 1942, the Communist Party began to systematically politicize the intellectual domain and transform it into apparatus of the totalitarian culture. Mao's "Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art" in 1942 set the tone of the Chinese culture for the next almost 50 years. In that article, Mao claimed that the aim of literature and art in China was "to ensure that revolutionary literature and art follow the correct path of development and provide better help to other revolutionary work in facilitating the overthrow of our national enemy and the accomplishment of the task of national liberation" (Mao, 69). As Susan Buck-Moss said, "If we were really to 'politicize art' in the radical way...art would cease to be art as we know it" (5). Following the same logic, if we were to politicize the whole academia in the radical way, the academy would also cease to be what it was. The

intellectuals originally intended to invite the masses to destroy Confucianism. Later they found that mass society could not only destroy the tradition of Confucianism but also disrupt that of modernism. The absence of independence largely weakened the intellectuals' influence on the younger generation. The unenlightened students had no effective tool that allowed them to resist Mao's magic power, under which their adolescent passion was quickly transformed into a destructive weapon. As Walter Benjamin said, "The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life. The violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its fuhrer cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values."¹⁹

Mao's magic power could be well explained by Walter Benjamin's Aura theory. The theory holds that mechanical reproduction destroys the aura attached on the works of art. In accordance of Benjamin, two polar ways to receive and value works of art are on the cult value and on the exhibition value of work. "Mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual... With the emancipation of the various art practices from ritual go increasing opportunities for exhibition of their products"(Walter Benjamin, IV, V). If Walter Benjamin is right, how to explain the sudden establishment of Mao's aura with the help of the mechanical reproduction? The modern technologies speeded up the process of dissemination, advertisement and glorification of Mao and his thoughts. Within eight months after the Culture Revolution, Mao's books were sold out five billions. His images, books and voices were everywhere. They became works of art, being exhibited, admired and worshiped.

If we analyze the Aura theory from theological and economic perspective respectively, we will find that the Mao phenomenon is not inconsistent with Benjamin's theory.

¹⁹ See "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" by Walter Benjamin, <http://www.student.cs.uwaterloo.ca/~cs492/Benjamin.html>

First, modern technologies were imported and therefore they could be in the hands of a few people. The public actually had no access to and control over machines, especially media equipment. Second, reproduction is always driven by a market economy. The economies of scale demand mass production. However, in Mao's era, market economy was extinct. Therefore there was no internal urge from the public for mechanical reproduction. Far from the market demand, the reproduction of Mao's image and thoughts were imposed on the public. People were forced to absorb the image and thoughts. Under such circumstance, the works of art could not be emancipated from their parasitical dependence on ritual. The authority replaced the authenticity of artworks to drive up their value to a priceless level. They were priceless because they were political-correctness-proof. The Mao phenomenon was a special case of Benjamin's Aura theory: unless mechanical reproduction is controlled by market economy, it will not destroy but enforce the cult value of work.

From this section we can see that before the Communist took over China, the left-wing intellectuals tried to establish a national culture to unite the diversified local cultures. After 1949, the same group of intellectuals continued the construction of national culture but gradually found what they helped to build up was in essence a totalitarian culture. Within the totalitarian culture, the original anti-government radical culture was transformed into the pro-governmental radical culture. The entire institutional system was destroyed by the totalitarian culture. After the Cultural Revolution, the intellectuals wanted to reestablish national culture to resist the totalitarian culture. Whatever they did in the past or are doing now, they always focus on macro-politics.

2.6 Art Film and National Cinema

After the Cultural Revolution, the sense of disillusionment and betrayal among the public drove the credibility of the Party down to its lowest level. The new authority had to reapply the old charisma of the intellectual to win the masses back. The

intellectual once again were invited back to the ideological sphere as a group of pivotal players. The Fifth Generation came into being in this particular historical moment. In this section, I will focus my research on the film circle of the 1980s.

Chinese radical artists, regardless in the literature community or the film circle, were among Chinese intellectuals who actively involved into politics. Many people said that politics was so influential in daily life that no one could simply escape from it. But that is not the whole picture. The artists, under the influence of totalitarianism, always worked at the macro-political level. The totalizing temptations had been “evident in Chinese political and cultural debates since the end of the nineteenth century; they are present in the intellectual and political projects that seek to formulate holistic systems, paradigms, and arguments for the salvation of China; they persist despite the relative decline of the official ideocracy” (Barme, 316). As the founders of national culture, the intellectual could not let it vanished. They could not shed the historical task to revive the whole culture and enlighten the entire nation. The Fifth Generation filmmakers, like other avant-garde artists of their time, grew up in a country wracked by political terrorism and cultural nihilism and hereby could not escape the historical burden of cultural revival. Seeing re-humanization as a crucial mean to revitalize arts and culture, they switched their focus from revolutionary fantasies to the down-to-earth life of ordinary people. However, they did not stop at the details of domesticity; rather they tried to “capture the psychological depths of realistic and believable characters” (Yau, 106), who carry a deep meaning of the society and the culture. Every tiny little story must serve a big political end. In *Yellow Earth* (1984), the tragedy of a girl who dies on the way to escape the arranged marriage is not a casual tale one usually hears on the street but rather a serious story with much deeper meaning about tradition, Confucianism and Chinese culture of the day.

Some of filmmakers were deeply immersed into their aesthetical egos, leaving little room for the reaction of the public. For example, Chen Kaige’s *King of Children*

(1988) sold only one copy and Tian Zhuangzhuang (director of *Blue Kite* (1993)) claimed that his film was made for the next century. These hardly comprehensive movies signaled the independence of filmmaking from the government control in the aesthetical domain. However, their political concern was still consistent with the reformists' government at that time. Re-humanization is not an approach to de-politicization of arts, rather it is a way to disclose the supposed ugly root of Chinese culture and to enforce the reasonability of official modernization. Noticeably, the Fifth Generation directors were usually concerned about the social conscience and justice instead of people's consciousness and pleasure. Entertainment films, first criticized by the film circle and later accepted as a complementary part of the industry, were never really seriously discussed, analyzed and researched within and without the academia. Even today, they are still not taken seriously by Chinese filmmakers. The Fifth Generation filmmakers, except for Zhang Yimou, rarely touched this "low-end" domain until very recently.

The totalitarianism has separated Chinese radical artists from popular culture. Actually most avant-garde arts are still excluded from popular culture. "Popular Culture must not preach" (Fiske, 183), therefore, the "preachy" Chinese avant-garde arts were unlikely to be merged into popular culture. The totalitarianism also has distinguished Chinese radical artists from their Western contemporaries. This does not say that Western radical artists are not under the influence of totalitarianism. The point is that the sermons of Chinese artists were so consistent with the government's high callings of modernization, social reform and abandonment of the Confucianism that one could not see them as an independent group who resists the state quo. Jointly, the artists and the government worked on the macropolitics of organized actions for modernization. Both held that that art should depict life, educate society and enlighten the people. The artists' tight adherence to national culture further differentiated them from their Western contemporaries. Except for a few avant-garde painters, most radical artists, more or less, wanted to impose their philosophic ideas on the masses. The only difference between the government and the artists was that the former

emphasized on political instillation while the latter worked on aesthetic and cultural domain.

The pro-filmic event advocated by the Chinese film circle in the 1980s is said in essence divorce of film from the totalitarian culture. The rediscovery of film's ontology replaced the politics' immanence with aesthetic immanence. The event culminated in a series of debates from 1979-1989, and included the debates on the theatricality of film, on the literary quality of film, on the new concept of film, on the nationalization of film and on the tradition and innovation of film. The first debate is on the theatricality of film. It calls for separation of film and drama. The second debate calls for separation of film and literature (not just drama). The third debate is the constitution of the first two. Once taken away dramaturgical and literary values, film is not a synthetic art, "film is film" (Yan, 59). From the first three debates one can easily draw a conclusion that the film elite were seeking independence. However, the departure from other art forms does not necessary mean divorce from national culture, let alone the independence from governmental control. Neither the totalitarian culture nor national culture abandons aesthetics.

The other three debates later on reveal what was really going on in China cinema. The forth debate is about nationalization of film. The supporters of nationalization believed that "nationalization is the objective principle in the development of the ideology and culture of a nation" (Semsel, Xia and Hou, 98). "Film is by nature national"(Zhang Dianfei, 103). Offenders emphasized on the truthfulness rather than on the imaginary community: the nation. However, if we read carefully, we could find that the offenders only intended to offer a new version of nationalism. Therefore, the forth debate is essentially about national culture versus the totalitarian culture. The fifth debate around 1986 is about exploration of how the Fifth Generation artists are markedly different from traditional Chinese filmmakers. The debate, apparently an intense debate between the Forth Generation and the Fifth Generation, is actually a discussion about which the true representative for the national cinema is: the old

Soviet model of the Forth Generation or the new experimental model of the Fifth Generation. The sixth debate is about entertainment function of film. For a long time, the entertainment function is overshadowed by the educational function of film. Noticeably, most critics were still concerned with the low taste in entertainment films. The real issue is to use entertainment as an effective way to educate and enlighten the masses. Here entertainment is treated as a mean rather than an end. The purpose is to educate the people. From the six debates of the 1980s we can find that the film elite, namely radical artists and critics, still clung to national culture though they urged to depart from the totalitarian culture. The debates served to define the new national cinema of China.

Chinese modern theorists and the filmmakers (including the Fifth Generation) follow Kracauer's reading of films. Kracauer's investigation on films "rests on something like an analogy, or the (loose) projection of an analytic framework designed to deal with individual human beings in terms of collective process...A presumably diverse national population is implicitly likened to an individual subjectivity; hence, Kracauer can link his account of the film texts to a nation" (Rosen, 74). The Chinese filmmakers in the 1980s tended to take a role of a "selective anthropologist" to "dislocate themselves within a re-visioned history and culture" (Yau, 107). A typical story setting is either in a minority area or in an ambiguous "once-upon-a-time" land/space. Both are simply explained as a cunning strategy to circumvent the Film Bureau's censorship while forming a national culture of the elites' own version. However, I think that Dru C. Gladney's analysis on representing nationality in China is more convincing in terms of frequent use of minority settings in Chinese films:

The objectified portrayal of minorities as exoticized, and even eroticized, is essential to the construction of the Han Chinese majority, the formation of the Chinese 'nation' itself. In other words, the representation of the minorities in such colorful, romanticized fashion has more to do with constructing a majority discourse, than it does with the minorities themselves. The minority/majority discourse then becomes pervasive throughout Chinese culture, art and media...the representation of minority and majority in Chinese art, literature, and media will be shown to have surprising parallels to the now well-known

portrayals of the 'East' by Western orientalists. This 'oriental Orientalism', and the objectification of the minority Other and majority Self in China, will be shown to be a 'derivative discourse'...stitched from Chinese, Western...and Japanese ideas of nationalism and modernity. (50)

Some filmmakers, such as Zhang Yimou, also like to use ambiguous historical settings in which no particular dynasty is identified. The ahistorical approach again confirms the legitimacy of the nation as a natural born, stagnant, time-proof body. In summary, an allegorical method of presenting the critical subjectivity of the filmmakers' is employed in which the nation is described as a body of collective unconsciousness.

Filmmakers like Chen Kaige put their stories in a clear chronological order of history. In Chen's *Farewell, My Concubine* (1993), for example, personal tragedies (arrestment, miscarriage, political persecution) are intertwined with national disasters (anti-Japanese war, civil war, Cultural Revolution). The historical approach, like the above-mentioned ahistorical approach, reconfirms nationalism because it takes a simple reduction to several particular historical moments in interpreting the everyday life of ordinary people. It is similar to Kracauer's analysis on German films, "Everything in post-war German film texts seems to lead to the Nazis and Hitler". Here Kracauer's teleologism could be seen as "one possible form of understanding differentiated, local, conjunctural historical phenomena—that is, not as a philosophy of history as such, but as a method not necessarily applicable in any individual case but sometimes useful for organizing historical temporality in relation to specific kinds of questions" (Rosen, 74).

Reading the films of the Fifth Generation carefully, one will find that most films, even if in an obscure ancient setting, refer to recent historical events, especially the Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution is used as the mental precondition necessary for the full introduction of modernism to China. As Kracauer defines a German cinema firmly rooted in middle-class mentality, China cinema of the 1980s was embedded in the intellectual youth's (Red Guards and leftist intellectuals) mentality. In the account of Fifth Generation filmmakers and critics of their age, the Cultural Revolution shaped

the whole social and psychological landscape of China. Such “a specifically historical generalization” (Rosen, 74) allows them to take the psychology of the intellectual youth the cultural dominance of that time because most of the youth were the major players of the various movements. The simple reduction to the Cultural Revolution leads to totalitarianism. The colorful personal stories depicted in the films of the Fifth Generation all unavoidably serve the purpose of Enlightenment of the entire nation, or faster modernization. In so doing, the radical artists and critics helped the government reestablish its legitimacy and credibility.

Most films of the Fifth Generation belong to national cinema. As Chen Kaige said above, they wanted to “single out and condemn the stupidity, backwardness, and ignorance of the Chinese people”, “see their internal perseverance” and eventually “stimulate the spirit of the entire nation”²⁰. The purpose of so-called root-seeking movement in the literature and film domain is to define or redefine the national identity, through which diverse texts could be pulled together into national cinema. National cinema is used to “interpret the discourse of a psychoanalytical patient...The diverse film texts under consideration would then originate in something like a national psyche, a national subject” (Rosen, 80). The peasants in the films of the Fifth Generation are not the peasants in the real life but the filmmakers themselves or else their own psychoanalytical reading of the nation as a whole.

It is not a surprise that there was a Freud “craze” in the 1980s. Writers and filmmakers saw the therapeutic value in both Marxism and Freudism. Freudism could be a cure for human illness, a popularly assumed reason for China’s backwardness and poverty. Another similarity of the two theories is their emphasis on hidden agenda beneath the surface. Marx excavated an unconscious hidden in economic production while Freud did it in human’s psychic drive. Both call for the “return of the repressed” though from different angles. The similarities between the two made possible for the

²⁰ See page 35 of the paper

popularity of Freudism. In addition, sexual potency is also linked to the “power of the people” against institutional organization and prohibition of desires.

In the psychoanalytical reading of films and literature works of the time, “sublimation is a major (theme)...Freud himself associated sublimation with narcissism” (Rosen, 80). In most Fifth Generation representative works, we can feel the strong sense of male narcissism and Han chauvinism, all packaged in the sublimed nationalism. A typical example is *Red Sorghum*’s self-absorbed pleasures for men. In this case, the Fifth Generation is nothing new but it “use(s) existing critical paradigms to address issues in Chinese society, culture and film”(Yau, 114). Sublimation usually serves utopianism and collectivities, the important parts of nationalism and national culture.

There is a common view that the Western culture values individualism while the Eastern cultures value the collectivism. Because of such difference, “in the Eastern tradition, the individual finds expression through the collective, while in the West, the collective finds its meaning in the individual” (Barne, 38). Following this logic, totalitarian culture has its roots in “traditional” collectivism. Such simple reduction is not well-established as it cannot explain the fascism in Germany and Italy during the 1930s. Individualism or collectivism is not a result of a particular culture but that of certain political/economic situation. Therefore, we cannot plainly ascribe the popularity of nationalism in the Third World to collectivism. Collectivism could exit in both the West and the East, so could nationalism.

Chapter III Globalization, Commercialization and the Rise of Popular Culture

Since 1991, with the collapse of the Soviet empire and the subsequent end of the cold war, the world has entered the era of globalization. The global flow of capital, digital data and labor links many countries into one global village. The emergence of the international dilutes national identity. Subcultures cross national borders, connecting people living in different countries or even continents. Anthony Smith defines globalization as “inevitable supersession of nation-states and nationalism by broader supranational, or global organizations and identities in the post-modern era. In

addition, mass communications and electronic technology are creating a global consumerist culture that is making national cultures increasingly permeable, similar and even obsolete” (214). Under the new environment of multiculturalism and multiethnic, the idea of “nation” becomes a questionable existence since it serves a culture of a relatively homogenous and stable entity with its shared roots. Imaginary or not: “culture is always a product of history, and histories become multiple, culture becomes unstable, impure, and hybrid; it becomes, in other words, not national” (Fiske, 57).

3.1 From Nationalism to Globalism

Chinese films’ participation in the international festivals and markets is the early sign of the global impact on the national cinema. Since then, the national cinema was no longer purely Chinese; rather it was a result of interaction between the global and the national. Between the late 1980s and the early 1990s, the Chinese film market was still closed to the outside world. International distributors had no interest in making commodity appeals to Chinese audience. However, during this time, the Communist world was collapsed and the land of China became one of a few survivors. The country’s negative politic environment aroused the curiosity of the world and made many Chinese radical art works desirable pieces in the international market because of their inescapable political overtone. Branded as political underground films or anti-state cinema, the films of the Fifth Generation were very attractive to the Western viewers. It was at this time that Chinese filmmakers found a new channel with which to finance their production: the foreign distributors in various international festivals. These festivals allowed Chinese films to be exposed to the Western market, and this in return also influenced film production in China. Take Zhang Yimou as an example. Before he won the Gold Bear Award for his debut film *Red Sorghum* (1987), he had to rely on domestic film studios to finance pre-production, production and postproduction. In addition, his film must be approved by censorship office in the Central government for public distribution and exhibition. After *Red Sorghum*, some overseas investors began to give him hard currencies for film production and at the

same time guaranteed oversea distribution. Zhang was emancipated from domestic supply chain. The only concern, if there was one, was how to send his film overseas with official permission. He once sent his film *To Live* (1993) to the Cannes Film Festival without approval from the National Film Bureau. The film was banned within China. Zhang quickly realized that he must follow the rules of the government if he wanted to shoot films in China. He wrote a self-critical letter to the government for his violation of official regulations. From then on, he cautiously took a middle path, pleasing overseas viewers while trying his best not to irritate the government.

Cross-subsidized funding in the Fifth Generation Chinese case, or in the case of those same directors post-Tiananmen, enables these filmmakers to raise non-PRC international co-production finance on the strength of their names as auteurs. Their success inspires many other artists, who also start to target at international festivals. Overseas festivals give the filmmakers an outlet out of the political and financial constraints but also push the domestic film theorists and critics into an awkward situation. One critical issue is who is to draw the line between the highbrow and lowbrow culture. In another words, who is authorized to define and judge the taste of the society? As Pierre Boudieu holds, taste is not rooted in irrationality of desire but rather rooted in the irrationality of social differentiation to the other. If the domestic elite lost their priority to define the taste, how could they maintain their elitism? That's why when Gao Xingjian won the Nobel price in literature, the whole domestic literature circle refused to promote him. For them, it is their priority to decide who the best Chinese writer is. They used to nominate Wang Meng for the Nobel price but their recommendation was neglected by the Western appraisers. Although Guo Xingjian did not catch the domestic critics' attention, his excellence in French and his anti-government stance made him the first Nobel Laureate in China. His success irritated the entire critic community in China. The film theorists and critics took the same attitude to filmmakers seeking overseas fortune. However, their criticism on filmmakers is far less influential than literature criticism on writers' due to the film industry's heavy reliance on the market. The capital-intensive nature of film

production requires a market financially large enough to amortize costs and generate profits. The filmmakers' inclination to lucrative overseas market encourages them to switch their attention from domestic criticism to international reactions.

A generally accepted principle of selection tells us that attendees who share the same cultural capital with the appraisers are more likely to win an award in the international festivals. Some filmmakers therefore tailored their movies to various overseas festivals. For example, Zhang Yimou sent *Red Sorghum* (1987) to Berlin instead of Cannes or Venice. The Nietzsche's primitivism is clearly revealed in the movie in which the voice-over's grandparents make love in the red sorghum field, and men in the winery drink to their hearts' content and sing at the top of their undecorated voices. As Zhang said, the film presents his fervent longing for the spirit of Dionysius, a noble savage free from social restraints. Such an anti-Maoism and pro-Nietzscheism tone won him much approval in Nietzsche's homeland, Germany. Following the similar strategy, Chen Kaige sent his sexy, seductive, homosexual film *Farewell, My Concubine* (1993) to Cannes and Zhang Yimou chose Venice as the exhibition site for *the Story of Qiu Ju* (1992), style and narrative of which seem to be deeply inspired by postwar Italian Neorealism. In this way, these filmmakers exiled themselves from the domestic audience and addressed international viewers. Gradually the educational /cultural capital of the West overshadowed that of China in the film industry. Domestic critics' position of indigenous authenticity was severely threatened by the overseas festival organizers/critics, for now foreign theories eschewed the Chinese elite's cultural protection barrier and start affecting the filmmaking directly.

Four reasons explain why Chinese critics gradually lose their explanatory power over domestic films since 1990. For one, film study in China has been regarded not as an independent discipline but a derivative of filmmaking since the beginning: "Chinese film theory, more often than not, is the summary and distillation of filmmaking practices and, in turn, directly affects how films are made. As a result, it has not developed a strict and methodological way of theoretical thinking, with its dependence

mostly on instinctive empirical judgments” (Luo, XV). Some critics attribute the practice-oriented film study to Chinese culture that is basically effective in the spirit of practice but not at abstract thinking. Others ascribe the practice-oriented film study to its major political function to maintain the control of the official ideology over film production. Whatever the reason behind it, the fact is that the “parasitical dependence” of the film study on filmmaking made it elastic whenever there is a minute change in film production. Most filmmakers had intensive training in film study while at school. They themselves later became film critics or befriended critics, who were usually their schoolmates. The whole film circle was an exclusive society. Second, film study had little influence on the audience. The practice-oriented characteristics of the Chinese film study made it difficult to distinguish film theory from film criticism. The truth is, many film theoreticians were also film critics. Critics worked directly with filmmakers and had little interest in and impact on the public. Today there are still no “two thumbs-up” type of critics in China. In a planned economy, film studios have no incentive to pay critics for film promotion. Journalists seldom touched film criticism due to their poor training in this area. For a long time film study had not been taken seriously in institutions except for a few film academies. This enforced the exclusiveness of the film circle. When I was an undergraduate in Nanjing University ten years ago, I took a selective course on film study. But the professor had no relevant experience in this field. The purpose of course was to see foreign films that could not be seen in theatres. Recently, along with the establishment of Communication departments or colleges in many universities, film study at last catches people’s attention and becomes a serious research field. Third, film exchange between China and the West went and still goes primarily in one direction: Chinese film study is always under the shadow of their Western contemporaries. “Contemporary film theory and criticism in mainland China, generally speaking, remains comparatively naïve” (Li, XIV). The heavy reliance on Western theoretical discourses made it hard for domestic film theorists and critics to handle the relationship between themselves and the ideology of Western capitalist countries: “As a result, they (domestic film theorists) unconsciously brought themselves into

interpretations based on relationships between the “First World” and the “Third World”. This was an embarrassing dilemma, for it meant they had to surrender their own subjective position in order to oppose the hegemony of imperialist discourses” (Li, XIV). Finally, following the success of the Fifth Generation, more and more important Chinese filmmakers sought to expose their movies to the overseas festivals and therefore paid more attention on the reactions of foreign critics. Domestic filmmakers’ focus on foreign viewers/ appraisers was the last straw for Chinese film theorists and critics. Their reliance on filmmaking and imported thoughts and their separation from the public left them no place to stand once the domestic filmmakers fled to the overseas festivals.

Important west theorists include Rudolf Arnheim, Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod I. Pudovkin, Bela Balasz, Andre Bazin, Seigfried Kracauer, Jean Mitry, and Christian Metz. Each of them has his or her day in China. In the Mao era, Eisenstein’s theory dominated the film industry. Montage was found a perfect tool to depict “realistic” socialism. After the Cultural Revolution, Bazin’s long take was highly valued as a powerful method against the fake, edited ‘reality’. Under the influence of American visiting scholars such as Bill Nichols, Vivian Sobchack, Nick Browne, Brian Henderson, Ann Kaplan and Janet Staiger, film theorists/critics started to extend their research to some new areas: semiotics, structuralism, psychoanalysis, feminism, Marxism and ideological theory and criticism. As a result, the aesthetic influence of Bazin and Kracauer began to decline, and was gradually replaced by the contemporary Western theories. Theorists readdressed the political and ideological issues. Two important fads in the film circle of the 1990s are Derrida’s deconstruction of language right after the Tiananmen Incident and Ferric Jameson’s Cultural Imperialism in the mid of the 1990s.

While the film theorists enjoyed their priority to select Western theories for explaining Chinese films, filmmakers started leaving the domestic film circle for international recognition. Noticeably, in the 1980s, the Fifth Generation was promoted by the

domestic critics for their experimental employment of various techniques and the insightful meanings embedded in their films. At that time, both the filmmakers and the film theorists/critics aimed to establish the film ontology and searched out the reasons of social problems. They all served national culture and the utopia of modernization. However, in the 1990s, the filmmakers tended to please the overseas audience or appraisers while critics still shouldered the historical burden of enlightening the public. Again critics saw nationalism as a powerful weapon against foreign aggression. They used theories of Orientalism and cultural imperialism to resist overseas influence on domestic filmmaking. However, critics' endeavor to establish the national cinema did not get much of a response from filmmakers. For the filmmakers, "the Chineseness" is a selling point for overseas markets rather than a core of national culture. Here, for the first time, the economic function overshadowed the political function of film production.

Noticeably, Europe, not America, is the first choice for most Chinese directors. Chinese filmmakers quickly realized that Europe was more interested in their films than Hollywood. The former promotes art films while the latter prefers genre films. "Art cinema has played a central role in the attempts made by a number of European countries both to counter American domination of their indigenous markets in film and also to foster a film industry and a film culture of their own. The discourse of 'art', 'culture' and 'quality', and of 'national identity' and 'nationhood', have historically been mobilized against Hollywood's mass entertainment film, and used to justify various nationally specific economic systems of support and protection" (Higson, 41). For a long time, the European film circle has tried to compete with Hollywood for the supremacy of the global film world: "the idea of national cinema has long informed the promotion of non-Hollywood cinemas. Along with the name of the director-auteur, it has served as a means by which non-Hollywood films—most commonly art films—have been labeled, distributed, and reviewed" (Crofts, 385). The Third World cinema becomes a battlefield for the Europe vs. Hollywood competition, in which the Third World cinema is not an active participant but a passive by-stander or even target.

Chinese filmmakers' favor throughout European film festivals is by no means loyal to art films. Art films were what Chinese filmmakers could afford at that time. Chinese filmmakers (not Chinese film critics) had no interest in resisting the international hegemony of Hollywood at the level of distribution, exhibition and marketing. On the contrary, they have tried to find a way to partake. Zhang Yimou is a typical example. He gained his fame in the European film festivals first and then got enough funding to make a big budget genre film for Oscar awards: *Hero* is just his first try. Now he is making his second martial arts movie: *All-sided Ambush*. A rumor is going around various domestic websites that he will make a film about Bruce Lee the next year.

While the filmmakers are making "national films" following a corporate strategy of brand-awareness or a cultural strategy of exoticism, the domestic film critics have a different approach to the national cinema. For them, the national cinema is a part of national culture which serves the image of national identity. With globalism's replacement of nationalism, critics gradually lose their centrality in the domestic film world.

3.2 Localism: Popular Culture or Folk Culture?

With the growing attention to international film festivals, domestic film criticism has been losing its 'taste-brokering' function. Local critics are becoming peripheral elites in national cinema. The public (the domestic audience) is all the elite have to resist the so-called cultural imperialism. Unfortunately, their fate is different from that of the elite in the 1930s and 1940s. Bourdieu's theory of "habitus" could explain the different fates of the two generations of intellectuals. A habitus is a social environment where the intellectuals live: "it is a product of both its portion in the social space and of the practices of the social beings who inhabit it. The social space is... a multi-dimensional map of the social order in which the main axes are economic capital, cultural capital, education, class, and historical trajectories; in it, the material, the symbolic, and the historical are not separate categories but interactive lines of force whose operations structure the macro-social order, the practices of those who

inhabit different positions and moments of it, and their cultural tastes, ways of thinking, of “dispositions” (Fiske, 155). In the mid of the last century, within and without China, there was a liking for anti-imperialism, through which nationalism could be easily accepted by the public. However, globalization in the 1990s invalidates the nation physically (national borders) and symbolically (national image/identity). Unlike the foreign aggression of the 1940s, globalization (new form of foreign aggression) is destroying “the national” from within. Globalization pluralizes the world by aggregating the local cultures into viable global markets, in which the value of cultural niches and local abilities is recognized or even highlighted. Locality raises issues of multiculturalism and resultant fragmentation of national identity. The prosperity of subcultures overwrites the priority of national culture since the establishment of a stable and coherent national identity in a huge country like China usually is brought about and maintained at the expense of suppressing internal differences, tensions and contradictions. Now the national is sandwiched between the expanding globalism and growing localism. Someday in the future there could be no space for the national. The dissimilar habituses of the elite of the 1940s and those of the 1990s determine their different fates. Chinese elites can no longer use nationalism to inflame the public. However, because of their inferiority to the Western elite, they cannot confront their Western contemporaries on the global stage. To maintain their social status under such circumstance, they have to be close to the local cultures. Local becomes the battlefield of the national and the global.

The global and the national have different approaches to the local. The former uses popular culture whereas the latter, folk culture. A nation is an imaginary community comprised of selected folk cultures and new cultures. Folk culture is an important part of national culture. Unlike the national, the global approaches the local via popular culture for the three reasons: first, global corporations promote local cultures as a business strategy for the segmented global market. As John Fiske says, “multiplicity is the strategy by which global marketing attempts to cope with localization” (64). Second, to achieve customer satisfaction, corporations favor local cultures, which are

important in their attempt to present society from the bottom up. Third, business strategies require products to be relevant to the customer. Popular culture therefore draws attention of the corporations since it is related to the people and their everyday life. The market culture/local culture interactions form the alliance of localism and popular culture.

As analyzed above, John Fiske helps me to understand that the national culture in China before 1989 was not popular culture since it did not really care about the micropolitics of everyday life but rather the mega-narrative of totality. It was an unhappy marriage between the radical arts of the left wing and the gigantic propaganda system under the tight control of the government. Through making the people into an abstract totality, political life therefore replaced everyday life. In addition, Fiske does not regard popular culture as folk culture. This view leads me to conclude that the folk arts frequently displayed in the films of the Fifth Generation are essentially a part of national culture.

Folk culture, “unlike popular culture, is the product of a comparatively stable, traditional social order, in which social differences are not conflictual, and that is therefore characterized by social consensus rather than social conflict” (Fiske, 169). The political neutrality of the folk arts makes them acceptable by both the government and the radical artists. Folk arts therefore were largely absorbed by national culture. Local folk songs are featured not only in some propaganda films such as *The Story of Liubao* (1957) but also in some avant-garde films like *Yellow Earth* (1984) and *Red Sorghum* (1987).

Some critics praised the Fifth Generation for their wise use of folk culture against the domination of the totalitarian culture. They held that folk culture entailed a set of negotiations between the center and the circumference. Therein the government was regarded as the center and the radical artists as the circumference. However, the center-vs.-marginal formula is persuasive in most surroundings but not this one. If it had been as such, folk culture would have shared the same fate with popular fictions

of the old times: being banned from public circulation. The truth is, folk culture has never really challenged the legitimacy of the power bloc, let alone threatened it. The uniqueness of a local art only creates an exotic sense. As John Fiske says, “folk culture outside the social conditions of its production is always theirs; popular culture is ours, despite its alienated origins as industrial commodity” (171). That tells why when I first saw Zhang Yimou’s *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), I was not really touched by the tragedy of Chinese women as a whole: rather, like most foreigners, I was attracted by the exotic quality of the “one-man-four-wives” story. The lives described in the movie are completely irreverent to the reality I dealt with every day in China. Between 1949 and 1989, polygamy was banned and even divorce was seen as a social taboo. The sense of exoticism embedded in folk culture not only attracted urban viewers but also helped the filmmakers survive under the tight control of the severer censorship. Y.C. Yau in her analysis on the Chinese films in the 1980s explained the role of a selective anthropologist taken by the filmmakers as a strategy to circumvent the film Bureau’s censorship. The filmmakers’ experience of rustication in China’s rural hinterland represented by their films is, for most part, on the periphery of an urban imagination and therefore is irrelevant for most citified viewers.²¹

What are the basic criteria that distinguish folk culture from popular culture? Based on Fiske’s analysis, popular culture is a product of an industrialized society while folk culture is not. I do not agree this simple classification. If Fiske’s theories were so, how would one define the martial arts fictions of the ancient time?²² I used to define popular culture as a product driven by market power. Popular culture sells, while folk culture, at least at first, is free of charge. However, taking selling power as a criterion of popular culture could not explain why, for instance, American country music sells, nor explain why the Maoists banned popular fictions of the old time. Therefore selling power should not be used as a criterion of popular culture.

²¹ People in the countryside did not have much access to films.

²² Martial arts literature belongs to popular arts, see 3.6 of the thesis

To answer these questions, I take “relevancy” as the basic, the most critical criterion to distinguish popular culture from folk culture. Actually I borrow this idea from Fiske’s comparative analysis between folk culture and popular culture. However he posits too many criteria, some of which may not qualify. For instance, as mentioned above, he holds that popular culture is a product of an industrialized society while folk culture is not. I agree with Fiske that relevancy is the marker of the two different cultures. His hidden agenda is that popular culture is relevant, while folk culture is irrelevant once leaving its production area or arena. Popular culture could unite diversified formations of local people regardless of their geographic locations while folk culture could not achieve the same. Therefore popular culture holds a potential force that militates against the unified allegiances of the power-bloc. Popular culture could also engender multiple readings against the singular texts of the power bloc because various people relate to a particular, relevant popular piece of work differently. However, folk culture fits the framework of singular texts due to its irrelevancy. A particular folk culture is the same for various readers outside that culture: mysterious, exotic and irrelevant

It is likely that the global will defeat the national and win the battle vying for the local. Folk culture is applied by the national to serve the universalism rather than localism. Localism often co-exists with popular culture instead of folk culture. Both localism and popular culture highlight the sense of “relevancy”. To be local is to be ours. A popular text originally might not come from “our” culture, but could become “ours” through consumption. Take rock music in China as an example: it is popular for three reasons. For one, spending nights in a disco has already become a part of young people’s everyday life; second, the rock music has been localized and become a music genre in China; third, rock music “that is played so loud that it can be experienced only in the body, not listened to by ear” (Fiske, 51). When our bodies move with the music, the distance between music and us is getting closer and closer, and the music and we are gradually merged into one. The music then becomes ours. In a word, rock music is “relevant”. Such a ‘force’ or ‘cultural entity’ could be a reason for social

gathering, which usually engenders dissidents and antagonists. Folk cultures might come from a particular locale, but once it is out of its geographic or historical domain, it becomes theirs (the other race, sex, region, nation, generation, era, etc). A Chinese consumer might be able to tell the difference between Tim McGraw and Julio Iglesias, but that individual still 'consumes' them the same way, exotic, foreign, and purely beautiful.

"A popular text should be producerly" rather than merely readerly (Fiske, 103).

Barthes connects the readerly text with popular literature and the writerly/producerly with avant-garde literature. According to Barthes, a readerly text invites an essentially passive, receptive, disciplined reader who tends to accept its meanings as already made while a writerly text invites the reader to participate the construction of meaning.²³ However, Fiske has a different view. He holds that a popular text is both producerly and readily:

The popular text is a text of struggle between forces of closure and openness, between the readerly and the producerly, between the homogeneity of the preferred meaning and the heterogeneity of its readings. It reproduces and recreates the struggle between the disciplinary power of the social order and the multiple resistances to this power, the multiple bottom-up powers that contest differently the more singular top-down power. (126)

Based on Fiske's analysis, a popular text is both producerly and readily while the folk one is readily only. Because a popular text is producerly, it becomes ours. Like a folk text, a popular text is accessible and popular; like an avant-garde work, a popular text usually has a winning minority appeal for those with discriminating tastes or for the insiders of a subculture.

Michel de Certeau uses reading and decipherment to describe the difference between a popular text and an avant-garde one. According to him, decipherment is learning how to read other people's language on their terms; therefore it requires a universal system of language. Training and education are necessary to get insight into the universal

²³See Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, Cape, London, 1975

system. In this way, decipherment is a part of strategic deployment of power. Reading, however, brings one's own culture to understand a written text. It thus makes an oral culture precede the scriptural one. With the absence of universal reference, oral language could only be used and understood within certain context. Reading is concerned with the everyday uses of language, not its system or correctness. It uses its uniqueness and contextuality to resist the generality, the normalization and the discipline of the official language system.

I would like to conclude that both a popular text and an avant-garde one require decipherment because oral language is also a language system with its own "codes", "jargons" and "terms". Popular culture is both inclusive and exclusive. It is inclusive because it is accessible and easy to understand; it is exclusive because it is based on certain contexts. As John Fiske says, "commodities produced and distributed by culture industries that are made into popular culture are those that get out of control, that become undisciplined" (104). However, for the people in a particular context, a popular text is 'disciplined' in their own specific way. Popular culture might have minority appeal.

There is a misconception that popular culture is the product of global homogenization. The truth is, globalization is by no means a singular integrated and unified conceptual scheme; rather it brings about the development of both the global and the local. The expansion of the two extremes (the global and the local) forms a new cultural landscape where we can see the co-existence of seemingly opposed and incompatible things such as globalism and localism, homogenization and fragmentation, to name a few. The typical phenomenon of the fusion of the global and the local is the prosperity of subcultures on a global scale.

3.3 Peripheral Elites in the Postmodern Era

The expansion of the global and the local leads to the contraction of the national. In China the unwillingness of popular culture consumers to passively absorb the

dominant cultural mythology of the nation provoke intensified and extremist nationalist reactions. However, elites who promote national culture usually find themselves fall into a postmodern trap: what they promote will quickly turn to be something else through popular reading.

In the mid of the 1990s, there was a totalitarian nostalgia within both the intellectual community and the government. Elites and the government reapplied Maoism and Confucianism towards the enforcement of nationalism. Intellectuals, in face of the external threat of Western elites and internal challenge of popular culture, found that their territory (national culture) was shrinking and disappearing. "Some writers called for a moral revival, identifying various devalued ideals of the past as a touchstone for the present... (Intellectuals) mourned the loss of their presumed positions as the cultural arbiters of the nation, their roles as the conscience of society... They were nostalgic for the grand purpose of history, their avowed role (as actor and/or victim) in it and longed for its return" (Barne, 316-317). Nostalgia is a condition of having lost to a familiar abode and being exiled from home. It "has politically often been used for extremist, particularly totalitarian and nationalist, ends" (Barne, 319). Intellectuals' pro-Mao nostalgia at this time is by no means pro-dictatorship but rather a longing for the memory of the strong nationalism in the old days. They had thought that the promotion of Mao could enforce national culture. The nostalgia was quickly transformed into the Mao cult by businessmen. However, contrary to the intension of the elite, the Mao cult did not effectively enforce national culture. Popular songs and old images in the Mao era were re-circulated among the people. Although the signifier (the old songs and old images of the Mao era) is the same, the signified has been changed. The public did not want the past to come back; they just consumed something relevant to their own past. Here the pleasure of the Mao cult consumers is the pleasure of micropolitics of everyday life. Fiske's analysis precisely describes the progressiveness of popular culture in face of the suppression of the dominant national culture:

The pleasures of micropolitics are those of producing meanings that are

both relevant and functional...Relevance requires that both the forces of domination (hegemonic, disciplinary) and the resistances to them be contained in the meanings produced as they are structured into the social experience of the individual subordinate. Functionality requires that these meanings be usable in making sense of everyday life and in affecting an individual's internal or external behaviors in that life. Pleasure results from this mix of productivity, relevance, and functionality, which is to say that the meanings I make from a text are pleasurable when I feel that they are my meanings and that they relate to my everyday life in a practical, direct way. (57)

Popular culture subjugates national culture through parody (e.g. excessiveness and cliché writing), pastiche, allegory, and other postmodern “tricks”. Similar to excessiveness, cliché writing is a naked ideological practice. In the Mao cult, the excessive use of Mao's image and cliché (of Mao's era) undressed the ideological meaning covered in the natural common sense. In this way, the status of ideology was no longer natural, therefore, no longer authentic.

The most famous representative of cliché writing is Wang Suo (novelist, critic and filmmaker). His novels were always the best-sellers. Most of his fans were teenagers and readers in their twenties, especially the Beijing Youth. One distinguishing characteristic in his writing is his deconstruction of all social values, even the moral value. Wang “shamelessly” showed up his “bad history”: got jailed twice for gang fights, and insulted an old intellectual (his neighbor) for fun, to name a few. By claiming that “I am a fearless hooligan,” the novelist relaxed himself from all existing social norms. Regardless of his antagonism, however, Wang was and is still excluded from the avant-garde society. I think that this is because Wang is opposed to national culture while the avant-garde is basically pro-national culture. In addition, Wang's scarcity in educational capital (a high school graduate) and his disrespect to the whole institutional system make him unacceptable by the avant-garde intellectuals and the whole elite community.

The following characteristics in Wang's novels show that his writings are in the sphere of popular culture: first, his excessive use of vernacular language (Beijing

dialect); second, his excessive use of clichés (Mao's words); third, his concern with everyday lives of local people in Beijing; forth, his non-condescending writings. There is no insightful end that concludes his novels. He mocks almost all forms of idealism, absolutism and totalitarianism. Wang calls himself "Pizi" (ruffian/riffraff) and his fictions "Pizi literature".

Noticeably, Wang's leveling down to the public is different from that in the proletarian culture of the Mao era. Unlike the elite, Wang never claimed himself as an agent of the people and he also had no intention to unite and educate the masses for a better future. He never preached, never asked people to follow him, or to understand him or make sense out of his books. He used a Brochet-type of wit to distance the readers from his words: "I can't just go out and lie to the people, can I? After all, I've tried and it doesn't work" (Barme, 69). Wang did not want the people to believe his words. In his writing, he is as untruthful as other ordinary people on the street: selfish, greedy, realistic and timid.

Unlike many other novelists of his time, Wang did not have a position in a magazine, a newspapers, a literature department of a university or other state-run organizations. In another words, he was jobless. He was one of a few writers who made living by "selling Chinese characters" (publishing novels) in the early 1990s. His stories were adapted for the screen (film and TV) and Wang himself established his own TV production company in the mid-1990s. Writers like him were called "enterprising authors." These writers usually have double roles in their creation/production: businesspersons and authors. As businessmen/women, they have to concern themselves with the market. Therefore enterprising authors usually cater to popular culture.

In February 1992, Wang cooperated with the screenwriter Feng Xiaogong and made a hot TV sit-com called *the Editors*. *The Editors* lampooned the old totalitarian culture and became the most pointed social and political satire on TV at that time. The popularity of the TV programs not only made Wang rich but also paved a smooth

career path for the screenwriter Feng Xiaogong. Feng's position in the media industry is similar to Wang's in the literature field. Never having received formal education in a film academy, Feng was excluded from the film/TV elitism. The self-taught filmmaker/sit-com producer did not get hired by any of the state-run film studios. However, he still made his way to becoming a successful director in China.

As an enterprising filmmaker, Feng Xiaogong could not make films without concern with box-office results. While the Fifth Generation directors could use their awards in the international festivals to attract domestic viewers, an independent filmmaker like Feng had no such a channel with which to send his films to the overseas festivals. To survive, an independent filmmaker must make profit from his or her own production. To make a profit, a film must attract the people; in another words, it must be popular. Feng's films belong to popular culture because of his excessive use of Beijing dialect and political cliché, and his focus on everyday practical culture of local inhabitants. His films' wisecracking leads played by the comic actors Ge You and Xu Fan (Feng's wife) joke about almost everything in the society: the totalitarian culture of the past and the capitalism of the present. Feng himself is not categorized as any "generation" in the official history but he is by no means marginal. He wins national fame through promotion on local culture (that is, Beijing dialect and Beijing culture). Now he is seeking to cooperate with Zhou Xingchi, a Hong Kong "Seinfeld" to make the funniest Chinese film ever. Both of these two are promoters of localism.

Popular culture hardly finds a position in the history of national culture. National culture legalizes the elite's taste and knowledge and maintains the existence of the whole institutional system. Who wants to pay tuition in exchange for educational capital if that education is worthless? The fact that nowadays many Chinese send their children to foreign universities shows the danger of bankruptcy of the domestic institutional system. According to China Central TV Station (CCTV), annually more than 25,000 Chinese students leave the country to enter foreign schools. The total number of students has so far reached 380,000 (Eastday.com, 02/05/2002).

The market culture/local culture interactions are always under the close watch of the nation-state. A nation-state usually tries to educate and employ its own ideological specialists and intermediaries for the creation of national culture. In the past, the Chinese government successfully aligned the national identity of its own version with that of the intellectuals via the high calling of nationalism. However, while the territory of the national culture is shrinking, various groups within the national culture begin to disagree with each other. Apparently, there is a constant conflict between the government and the intellectuals. But the conflicts within the elite community are more severe. Foreign observers usually see the Tiananmen Incident as the divorce of the elite and the government. The former supported humanism and the latter sanctioned bloody and ruthless murder. Such a binary approach is a well-used tool for many Western analysts. Chinese culture also has a binary system: the Ying-Yang formula. But within Ying there is Yang; within Yang there is Ying. The Ying-Yang system emphasizes on balance rather than opposition, and also highlights relativism rather than absolutism. Unfortunately, the theory of balance was replaced by Hegelian dialectic and later transformed by Mao Tse-tung into a weapon promoting class struggle.

The Tiananmen Incident is usually seen as a result of the government's unwillingness to carry out political reform and the intellectuals' touting of complete reform. At the beginning of the eighties, the two groups jointed together to form the mainstream ideology of modernization and create a new national culture for a stronger China. However, the government seemed to hesitate on political transformation and only focused on economic reform. Most intellectuals (even some "official" intellectuals) wanted a complete social change to realize the modernization. Students first stood up against the government and this eventually led to a large-scale national movement, which ended up with military suppression. I was among the students in the sit-in and hunger strike. Many years later, I met Yuan Zhiming, a hero of the Tiananmen Incident,

in a little church in Montreal again. He is a pious Christian now. That day he still preached, but the content was totally different from what he had said on the Tiananmen Square of 1989. Facing the audience, most of whom were new immigrants struggling for survival in a new continent, he no longer talked about social reform but how to invoke love and forgiveness in order to live through hardship. He told us that he had forgiven Deng Xiaoping and other Communist leaders who had persecuted him and his families. In my eyes, he had already transformed himself from a radical reformist to a gentle conformist. Heroism is a result of chance and he/she will be forgotten if the chance has gone. What we once so strongly and surely believed in turned out to be a sour and wordless experience of immaturity and irrationality, leaving us not the absolute truth but only beautiful and memorable friendship, romance and comradeship. Most exiled heroes of the Tiananmen Incident do not stay with their revolutionary cause. Some become Christians and others become businessmen. Only a few of them still involve into political activities. The people of our generation²⁴ could not conclude that China would be better than what it is today if the government agreed to carry out a complete political reform in 1989. The economic disaster in Eastern Europe during the early nineties proves that there was no easy conclusion or absolute truth in the human history.

Three years after the Tiananmen Incident, Deng Xiaoping initiated a complete economic reform that eventually abandoned planned economy and adopted market economy. If the eighties was a period dominated by aesthetics and literature in the academia, the nineties is the era of economics. New economists (who usually got their education in Europe, Canada or USA) replaced the poets, novelists and other avant-garde artists as the stars in the society. During this time, many poets committed suicide for the “unbearable lightness of being”²⁵. Some old economists (the supporters and founders of planned economy) also committed suicide. The displaced elites criticized the decay of social values brought about by market economy. What they

²⁴ Students who participated the Tiananmen Incident

²⁵ The title of Milan Kundera’s famous novel. It was the best seller in China in the early nineties.

really worried about was the “shunning the sublime” (Wang Meng) and subsequent cultural pluralism that threat the existence of national culture. The beneficiaries of the (new) market economy in the intellectual community are enterprising artists such as Wang Suo and Feng Xiaogang.

Inside the film industry, the film critics and the filmmakers ended their romantic relationship of the eighties. The filmmakers now wanted to make a national cinema of their own (not that of the government's or the critics'), following the trend of “international cinema” defined by Western critics. In face of the increasing influence of Western elites on domestic filmmaking, the film theorists/critics worried about the loss of their preeminence as the gatekeepers of aesthetic taste, and also as the arbiters of new cultural canons. Domestic theorists' guidance of cultural production is a tradition dating back thousands of years. They are always the most important gatekeepers of imported theories. To take root in China, any foreign concept, whether it be Indian Buddhism or Western thought, has to undergo transformations and assimilations to varying degrees. For example, Zen is the combination of Taoism and Indian Buddhism, and Maoism is the combination of traditional utopianism and Communism. Some imported theories were misunderstood, and others were largely modified to fit different situations. As a result of Deng's open-door policy, another fad of translation emerged after that in 1920s appeared between 1978 and 1989. Long-time banned philosophic books were reintroduced or introduced to the public. Chinese intellectuals acted not only as the introducers/ harbingers but also as the gatekeepers of foreign theories and concepts. The Western cultural capital, sifted through their magical hands, has become the Chinese cultural capital, with which the theorists remain as elites in the society. However, globalization suspends the theorists' guidance in cultural production. This is extremely apparent in the film industry. In addition, localism (through the prosperity of popular culture) also makes such guidance unnecessary because of its mockery attitude to and ignorance of the whole institution system. Furthermore, theory pluralism (the co-existence of various popular

theories) also dilutes the impact of theories on cultural production. In the past, there were only one or two imported theories dominating the society (e.g. Buddhism or Marxism). Now there are so many imported ideas and concepts, most of which are exclusive of or incompatible to each other. The juxtaposition of modernism and postmodernism created a complicated and confusing cultural landscape in the nineties. On the one hand, people were inspired by rational Enlightenment, especially the ideas such as individualism, humanism, self-consciousness, and the engagement with the high arts; on the other hand, they suspected any form of absolutism and doubted the existence of meta-language. For intellectuals who enthusiastically promoted Western theories, they lost their “ability to locate themselves historically” (Sarup, 146). Modernism used to help them create a national culture. Now they want to use it again to reestablish a new national culture but find that modernism is problematic and may be out-of-date. The whole Western world is entering a new epoch—the postmodern era, in which the people welcomed “the effacement of the boundary between art and everyday life; the collapse of hierarchical distinction between the high and mass/popular culture; a stylistic promiscuity favoring eclecticism and the mixing of codes; parody, pastiche, irony, playfulness and the celebration of the surface and “depthlessness” of culture; the decline of the originality/genius of the artistic producer; and the assumption that art can only be repetition” (Featherstone, 7-8). Under such circumstance, the best strategy is to put all possible concepts together and let the reader make whatever sense from them. Domestic theorists were degraded to theory “retailers” in the nineties. While more and more people got a chance to contact with overseas theorists, they relied less and less on the go-between theorists. Theorists gradually lost their leadership in domestic cultural production.

Globalism, localism and theory pluralism jointly free the imported theories from the tight grip of the domestic theorists/critics. The peripheral theorists/critics, in face of the threat of imported theories, have to turn to the theories that “originated in China”. There was a cultural renaissance during this period of time when Confucius was resurrected from the dark tomb and placed in the academic shrine again. In the 1980s,

the elite called for the complete Westernization, now they advocated the Chinese-styled modernization exemplified by the success of the Four Little Dragons (i.e. South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong). Many avant-garde theorists in the eighties like Li Tuo, after coming back from Western countries, became enthusiastic Chinese nationalists in the nineties.

3.4 Post-Fordism and Film Festivals

Under globalization, “in the social domain, the key issue is those of diversity and multiculturalism; in the economic domain, the emerging conditions can be characterized as post-Fordist; in the cultural domain, they are defined as postmodernist” (Fiske, 57). As film is a capital-intensive industry, to analyze it by post-Fordism is equally important. John Fiske says:

Under Fordism, capitalism tried to maximize its profits by making one commodity appeal to as many people for as long a time as possible. Its profits derived from what people shared, so it used its advertising and marketing skill to increase areas of commonality across all the sphere of its operation, and thus worked as a homogenizing social force. Through mass marketing, capitalism attempted to homogenize the social order and erase, as far as it could, differences of class, gender, race, and any other constituent of difference that might hinder the smooth circulation of its commodities. Similarly, it attempted to erase geographic borders and national or ethnic differences as it spread its commodities across the globe, and it attempted to slow the passage of time so that one form of the commodity could be reproduced for as long as possible. (57)

Mass marketing and mass production, along with the vast application of mass media (e.g. the internet and satellite) and the accelerated capital circulation, are bringing about a possibility of homogenization of culture. However such a homogenization argument “fails to take into account the fact that the supranational players operate in specific countries and use distinguished strategies” (Kotzias, 08/14/2002). It also fails to allow for the fact that information technology, while assisting mass communication, also fosters and enhances multiculturalism through a great variety of small projects. As Kotzias says, “a particular type of segmentation and fragmentation, of nationalism and of ill-perceived localism, are created as a result of the predomination of

globalization rather than as a result of its absence” (08/14/2002). Globalization does not really support the standardization of production; instead, companies usually choose a differentiation positioning to fend off their competitors, especially in the cultural industry where brand identity and image matter. Marketing focuses more on differences rather than on similarities among customers. Market segmentation replaces mass marketing. Correspondingly, operations move away from mass production to batch production and mass customization. For example, the most profitable national/local cinemas are in the USA, Hong Kong and India, all of which make use of genre film production—a modular production model similar to mass customization. Capitalism’s response to globalization is called post-Fordism. Post-Fordism seems to support the heterogenization argument. Combined with cultural theories such as Huntington’s culture conflict theory, post-Fordism resists and rejects the existence of a single global culture. Nevertheless, backers of the heterogenization argument usually cannot explain the asymmetry that some countries are more forceful globalization players than others, as a result of unequal development among countries. As a result, more and more people accept this dualism: globalization is both a driver of cultural homogenization and heterogenization.

Globalization fosters and enforces both globalism and localism. The two are inseparable. The national desires to destroy the alliance of the global and local. Chinese elites believe that such a coalition is temporary and the global eventually will take over the world. Noticeably, fashionable imported theories in China were cultural imperialism and Orientalism in the nineties. All of them tend to disclose the scheme of the monopoly of the global.

A government’s constant attention on GDP and GNP proves that business competition is always connected with political contest. More and more countries realize that cultural production and distribution can generate massive return (in terms of growth potential and potential employment) if managed appropriately. The entertainment industry is usually a major business in developed countries. 18%-25% of GDP in USA

is from its cultural production and distribution while in China the corresponding number is 0.75% (Liu, 09/24/2003). Canada has started to stress the role of the cultural industry under its neighbor's aggression. Australia considers its cultural industry as important as banking, energy and transportation. Europe's resistance to Americanization is not only a cultural competition but also an economic one. From economic point of view, the cultural industry of a country creates job opportunities, attracts foreign investment and generates huge profits. Therefore, it is natural for nation-states to defend national culture. Here the government's economic concern and the elites' narcissism jointly form a coalition against the global (not globalization but the global).

Almost all countries in the world are concerned about the protection of national culture. However, there is a minute difference between how the Second World and the Third World face foreign aggression. The former is worried more about the failing of their cultural industries and the resultant economic loss while the latter is concerned more about the extinction of nationalism.

Finish critics Hannele Koivunen and Tanja Kotro in their article "Value Chain in the Cultural Sector" reveal the typical issue of the Second World: how to make economic sense out of their national culture to resist the onslaught of American cultural products. By using value chain analysis on the cultural industry, the article tries to figure out which areas national culture producers/workers should focus on to fend off foreign competition:

The value chain in the cultural industry extends from the creative idea to the public or clientele and impact. It covers all the stages from creation through development, packaging, marketing and distribution to the end-user. There are many different actors contributing to the value chain, such as artists, producers, marketing professionals and the public...At the commercialization stage, Finland has problems with matching. Contentual expertise and knowledge of business rarely meet, which makes it difficult to define the intended clients and focus the product on the right public. In this respect, there would be a great deal to improve in attitudes, for artists often still shun entrepreneurship, and entrepreneurs and financiers have

stereotypic ideas of artists. Here cooperation would ensure that the special knowledge of both parties could be put to the best possible use without the artist having to turn into an entrepreneur. In Finland, we would need more agents whose marketing experience and economic know-how would ensure an income for artists.

More and more Western governments are gradually relaxing their centralized steering of culture in order to leave a larger room for economic growth driven by market force. Although some countries still use cultural subsidies, now they try consistently to attract cultural investments. In Hong Kong, which culturally and economically belongs to the Second World, the film industry has undergone a significant decline since 1993. Many film gurus have left for Hollywood while the next generation of filmmakers is still immature and less attractive to the audience. Financial institutions are therefore reluctant to invest in local film production because of its high uncertainty and little collateral. In an effort to halt the decline, “the Hong Kong Government in April 2003 introduced a film Guarantee Fund as an incentive to local banks to become involved in the motion picture industry ... (Relevant) legal documents are based on Canadian documents which have limited relevance to the local industry” (Cinema of China). The fund solves the problem of little collateral and secures certain percentage of monies loaned by banks to film production. From this case we can see the shift of a government’s role as a controller to a facilitator of cultural production. Governments nowadays are more willing to act as the go-between of various entities to maximize the productivity of the society as a whole.

Once a government relaxes its control over production, popular culture will take the place of previous national culture as the mainstream culture since popular culture is more related to market economy. Western elites, in response to the social changes, have started to shift their interest on macro-politics to micro-politics of everyday life. This is the most distinguishable difference between the Western elites and their Eastern contemporaries. Students who receive education on both sides will usually go through a painful transformation in terms of their own academic scopes and approaches. In the first few weeks of my days in McGill University, I was shocked at

my professors' enthusiastically talking about graffiti, garage sales and hair dressing. When it appeared that almost all of the students in the classroom also thoroughly enjoyed the topics, I totally got lost and did not know how to talk in such a "formal" surrounding. It is very hard for a student with only the tools of macro-political thinking to perceive the details of everyday life. Concepts like "the nationalization of trivialities" were, at first, beyond my understanding. I could not see any connection between trivialities and nationalization and was only able to either title-tattle the trivialities or discuss the nationalization abstractly. For example, in the TV Aesthetics Class, when discussing Jerry Springer's show, I spent two minutes on discussing the details of the show but could not link them to any theories I learned. My instructors at McGill University gave me great help transitioning the Chinese academia to the Canadian academic world. For example, Professor Will Straw likes to link the everyday consumption to cultural production. In his "Exhausted Commodities: the Material Cultural Music", he focuses his attention on "cultural waste and looks at those commercial and social institutions (such as the flea market and garage sale)."

Western elites actively adjust their position to the postmodern era, which is dominated by popular culture. Actually, such dominance does not really demand judgments in taste as much as beforehand. As Featherstone says, "while there is the capacity of commodities to break down social barriers, to dissolve the long-established links between persons and things, there is also the counter-tendency, the movement towards decommodification, to restrict, control and channel the exchange the goods...

Consumption and lifestyle preferences involve discriminatory judgments which at the same time identify and render classifiable our own particular judgment of taste to others" (17-18). Under such circumstances, the educational capital, which was used by the industrial middle classes (social groups of the elite) to fend off the competition of the equally developing proletariat, is still useful for current elites to guide patterns of consumption. The enjoyment of goods is related to both their physical and symbolical meaning. As more and more consumers care about the symbolic side of goods they buy, demand grows for cultural specialists and intermediaries to help customers spend

their money wisely. Elites could make money through consulting both the producers and consumers to make/buy “better” products. On the one hand, the elite help producers increase the level of the consumers’ willingness-to-buy by adding symbolic value to products; on the other hand, the elite help consumers tell whether a particular product is priced fairly as well as its appropriate use. “Knowledgeable” buyers are in a better position in price bargaining and product selection.

However, as knowledge, through mass marketing of products, is more accessible to wider audience, it is getting harder to maintain the prestige and cultural capital of the elite. The inflation of cultural/educational currency by “an over-supply and rapid circulation of symbolic goods and consumer commodities” on a global scale could “threat (en) the readability of goods used as signs of social status” and consequently lead to “cultural disorder” in many countries (Featherstone, 19-20). A typical example of cultural disorder is “the overwhelming flood of irrelevant signs and images” (e.g. MTV), which are bizarrely juxtaposed to “push us beyond the social”(Featherstone, 19-20). Cultural invasion through images is much easier and quicker than that through languages because it erases the necessity of time-consuming translation. Once cultural images are attached onto commodities and sold to other countries, they could have a much larger impact on the foreign population than ever before since they could cross the gate-keepers (local elites) and seep into the everyday lives of the people. Therefore, the defense of local elites in the Second World against the American cultural products is not just in the protection of the national economy but also out of their own interest. Koivunen and Kotro’s emphasis on the economic return of the cultural industry reflects universal mentality of the elite in the Second World. For them, national culture is more and more important in protecting a country’s own culture industry and their own social status and job opportunities.

Nikos Kotzias in his article “Dialectics of the Global and the National in the Sphere of Culture” criticizes narrow-mindedness of various cultural protectionists against American culture. Such bias is not simply of anti-globalization but rather of

“disintegration” (e.g. religion, regionalism, fundamentalisms, xenophobia or new nationalism), which is often “expressed via an idiosyncratic cultural nationalism” (14/08/2002). He first proves that “Americanized culture constitutes neither the global nor the globalized culture” because “it is neither ‘pure’ nor homogeneous in its own right, so it is unable to homogenize the rest. American culture...is not wholly predominant and hence it has and will continue to fail to homogenize the world and eradicate its cultural contrasts” (14/08/2002). He then attributes the popularity of American culture to its lack of homogeneity and constant absorption and assimilation of foreign elements. As a result of his analysis, the threat of Americanization becomes an exaggeration of some extreme nationalists. His analysis intends to establish the legitimacy of the leading position of American culture in the world: American culture is “the leading culture worldwide and has already acquired a wide global presence, particularly where the latest technological addition to mass cultural production is concerned; yet aspects of it remain dominated by expressions of non-American cultures”(14/08/2002). If so, the American values constantly expressed in Hollywood films are not part of national culture but a universal view of human beings. The open-minded American culture thus deserves true representatives of the global culture or globalized culture. Kotzia’s analysis is problematic in that his arguments eventually oppose his conclusion.

The truth is, competition in cultural production is getting fiercer. It is evident that some countries are more influential than others in the global cultural domain. As the value of a cultural product is determined by its clients, local critics/elites must take the position of opinion leaders so that they can effectively guide the public to consume “properly”. Only in this way can the value of a cultural product be created by local (usually domestic) social institutions. The elites of the Second World focus their attention to film festivals as a site through which to compete with large international culture production exporters on equal footing.

It is difficult to draw any international conclusions from the cultural policies of various Third World governments, owing to a lack of compatible classifications. However, developing countries usually are concerned more with the political function of national culture rather than economic for two reasons: first, the top-down economic reform/development in these countries demand stability and unification; second, the impact of the cultural industry on national economy and employment in these countries is much smaller than that in the First and Second world. Elites in the Third World are usually divided into two groups: those who could receive benefits from the festivals and those who could not. Producers/directors like to use festivals to promote their films and seek new partners and investors, while domestic critics are worried about the loss of their influence on national film production and the public. The former actually belongs to the Second World due to their frequent exposure to the international festivals and their reliance on the appraisers of the festivals and/or on the overseas investors. The latter represents the mentality of the Third World elite, who are going to be forgotten by both the Western elites and domestic population. Recently, critics/theorists in developing countries have started to pay attention on economic elements of the cultural industry. But their major concern is still how to use national culture to build up a richer or stronger country. Therefore, although elites in both the Second World and Third World call for the preservation of national culture, their focuses are different, and so are their approaches against foreign cultural invasion. The former sees national culture more as brand identity and the latter see it as evidence of nationalism.

As more national cultural products (e.g. films) go abroad, gradually the cultural industry will be globalized and marketized. Once national cinema frees itself from its geographic domain, it loses its connection to nationalism and creates its own brand identity via vivid generic narrative images. National cinema is a site wherein national culture meets with marketing strategy: “the idea of national cinema has long informed the promotion of non-Hollywood cinemas. Along with the name of the director-auteur,

it has served as a means by which non-Hollywood films—most commonly art films—have been labeled, distributed, and reviewed” (Crofts, 385).

As most non-Hollywood cinemas (except for Hong Kong and India) seldom produce genre films, it is very hard to promote these films in an area alien to the cultures out of which they emerged. More and more distributors and producers realize that “national cinema needs to be explored not only in relation to production, but also in relation to questions of distribution and exhibition, audience and consumption, within each nation-state” (Higson, 42). They tend to “relocate” national cinema at the site of consumption rather than of production, and focus on the activity of the national audience. As Higson says, “for what is a national cinema if it doesn’t have a national audience” (43)? In fact, awards in international festivals are more like effective advertisements for the domestic market. The reputation of world-class festivals could imply or even guarantee the quality of an award-winning product. In this case, there is no difference between producers of the Second World and the Third. All of them want to use the festivals to seek partners and investors, and expose their products to their own national audience and overseas markets. As Fiske says, “the sphere of consumption has become one of the key sites for the struggles over who controls social differences and whose interests they can be made to serve. Accounts of post-Fordism are often tinged with a postmodern optimism” (59).

3.5 Current Chinese Film Industry

Stephen Crofts in his “Concept of National Cinema” categorizes Chinese cinema as totalitarian cinema which dominates its local markets through regulatory means. These kinds of cinemas usually follow the rules of planned economy and focus more on the political function of arts. Producers under such a form of cinema are worried little about the box office result. If a film perfectly matches current policies, it will become popular through government’s forceful promotion. A recent example is *Kong Fansen* (1996), a film about a deceased Communist cadre who devoted his whole life to a better Tibet and Han-Tibetan relations. The film was a huge box-office success

but of the 30 million total revenue, “nationally only 5 percent paid their own way into theaters. In Beijing the figure was 0.5 percent; in Sichuan it was 0.2 percent” (Asianfilms.org). Most of the revenue was from the fringes of state-run units. In other word, your company paid the ticket for you!

As discussed previously, Chinese film industry is still seen as a part of national apparatus. Since the nineties, two new factors changed the landscape of the industry. The first factor is globalization, demonstrated as more film directors participating international film festivals. Another factor is market economy. It helped form a domestic film market, which usually encourages audience analysis and production of popular movies. As the purchasing power of domestic population is increasing, all forces in cultural production start to pay attention to the national audience. Films attracted the audience either through international exposure as art-house masterpieces or by simply making popular films that catered to the public. Art-house filmmakers distance themselves from both the public and the domestic critics for international recognition. They concern themselves very little with the public’s reaction on their films. They know that the public will buy their films anyway if they win awards in the international festivals. Luo Ye, the director of *Suzhou River* (2001) and *Purple Butterfly* (2002), said to the face of his audience that he did not care whether the domestic audience understood his film and refused to re-edit the film because it was the version for the Cannes Film Festival. Jiang Wen, a famous actor (*Red Sorghum* (1987)) and director (*In the Heat of the Sun* (1996)), sneered at the audience’s “amateur” questions. However, they are still seen as warranties of box-office success as long as they keep a good record in the overseas festivals.

As the domestic film market is getting more mature, enterprising filmmakers who are focusing on popular films gradually gain popularity in the domestic market. Enterprising filmmakers are the most enthusiastic supporters of complete reform in the film industry. The time-sensitive market is getting impatient with the slow process of censorship. Under the increasing competitive pressure, the film industry has to

make some changes accordingly. According to the CCTV report on November 5, 2003, since December 1 of the same year, filmmakers no longer need to send scripts for censorship by the Central Government (except for historic films of national revolution, government sponsored films, cooperation films and films about some political sensitive topics). Instead, filmmakers only need to provide 1000-character²⁶-long summaries to the local government instead of the script. Moreover, it is said that a rating system will be established in 2004 to respond to various market segments.

Popular culture's preference for vernacular, oral language forms a unique niche for the domestic market under the aggression of English-speaking films. While domestic critics/theorists still overlook popular culture, some of them, who usually have frequent access to Western elitism, have started paying attention to these popular films. Zheng Dongtain, a professor from Beijing Film Academy, suggests making films that "Hollywood is not able to make" (Asianfilms.org). A typical example is Feng Xiaogong's Seinfeld-esque comic *Big Shot's Funeral* (2003). The film, spoken in Beijing dialect, was a mega-hit during the lunar New Year holiday. Feng was therefore regarded by Dai Jinhua as the last barrier against Hollywood. Critics like Dai Jinhua interpret the popularity of films in local dialects as efforts to use linguistic rights for ethnicity assertion and cultural protection.

The domestic film industry is unhealthy for many reasons: poor production quality, lack of investment, strict censorship, the boom of the TV market, and video piracy, to name a few. Now the "wolf" is coming: an onslaught of Hollywood products will be unavoidable once the door has been completely opened to them. Even in Hong Kong, a base camp of genre movies, only "three of the top ten were not from Hollywood" (Asianfilms.org). To prevent the domestic products from immediate extinction, China restricted the number of Hollywood films that could be shown to ten per year. However, the "big ten" still obtain the lion's share of domestic market. With the aid of the American government as well as the media companies' aggressive marketing and

²⁶ Chinese character

distribution strategies, Hollywood insistently and consistently pushes China to change their quotas on American movies. Domestic filmmakers are afraid of whether their films can maintain a reasonable share of market as the number of Hollywood films entering China increases to 20, 30 or 40 per year. Even worse, once China relaxes its protection of its entertainment industry in 2004, there will be no trade barrier against any imported product at all.

American filmmakers aggressively seek possibilities of infiltrating into foreign film markets and eventually pervading amongst all of them. Jack Valenti, the chairman of the Motion Picture Association of America, was one those who devoted themselves to this mission. They lobbied the Chinese government to increase the official quota on American movies and pushed officials to relax their restrictions on foreign ownership of domestic film distribution networks and movie theatres²⁷. In addition to film distribution, recently Hollywood entered domestic film exhibitions. July 12, 2003 saw Time Warner go into Chinese domestic film exhibition channels. The media powerhouse wants to establish a national theatre franchise in China. A month later, high-level executives from CBS, Paramount and 20th Century Fox visited China for film marketing and exhibition. It was said that they were prepared to offer “5 billion dollars for an appropriate partner” (Chen and Gu, 24/09/2003).

Commercialization in the film industry has brought about a great change in cultural production. The most observable changes in the industry are the disappearances of filmmaking generations and the divorce of film studies and filmmaking. Older generations of filmmakers who had begun their careers in art film now have had to readjust their position to meet the market demand. The boundary between generations is getting blurry as two different generations compete for the same population of viewers. While older filmmakers like Zhang Yimou quickly assimilate to the reality and work hard to fit into the new market, there is little change in the domestic film critics' community. It takes time for them to absorb the changes since comparing to

²⁷ See the selective news from the Chinese Press, 02/04/199-08/04/1999

filmmakers they have had less access to the international market. In addition, they also react cautiously to the government's top-down economic reform. As a result, they still overlook the power of popular culture. Few of them systematically study the relationship between consumption and cultural production. For example, the industry still lacks professional film critics like Ebert and Siskel. There is no dialogue between cultural knowledge and business sense. Elites shun entrepreneurship and thus fail to help the producers define the market segment for intended clients and produce/distribute the right product to the right customers. Most elites (especially critics and theorists) still take the historical burden of preserving or developing a "meaningful" national culture. That is why when they saw Zhang Yimou's *Hero*, they could not read it as a commercial product and still connected the film with modernism and nationalism.

Filmmakers take a pragmatist yet flexible approach to various cultures that coexist in the world. They make whatever films for profitability. In addition to the local comedies enhanced by dialects, filmmakers now have discovered the attractiveness of martial arts films for both the domestic and the overseas market. The success of Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan and Ang Lee makes many people believe that the selling point of Chinese film is Kong Fu or Wuxia. Wuxia film (martial arts film) and Kong Fu film are appealing to the filmmakers for the following reasons, first, martial arts reflect the national spirit; second, martial arts literature and films have many domestic fans; third, martial arts films are gaining popularity in the overseas market as a kind of action films; forth, the interaction between video games and contemporary cinema is typically seen in their joint exploration of battles and fights.

3.6 Martial Arts Literature: Pop Culture of the Past, the Present and the Future

In this section I will discuss why martial arts genre is seen and used as popular texts in the past, at the present and possibly in the future. The market potential of the genre attracts many filmmakers, including art-house directors such as Ang Lee and Zhang Yimou. However, since the genre is usually seen as of bad taste, it is seldom taken

seriously by the domestic critic community.

Martial arts are defined as “any of several arts of combat and self-defense (as Karate and Judo) that are widely practiced as sport in *Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (713). Some Westerners define martial arts as “various methods of unarmed combat, originally used in warfare in East Asia and shaped by East Asian philosophical concepts, notably Zen Buddhism. The better-known forms include karate, kung fu, jujutsu, judo, aikido, tai chi chuan, tae kwon do, sumo wrestling, and kendo”(ACR home). Martial arts have evolved for thousands of years from techniques in the battlefield to skills on the competition floor.

Martial arts are self-defense techniques rather than military strategies. They were “mainly originated and developed in private wars among clans and families” (Chen, 2). Military strategies were used by noble men or Wushi (like Japanese Samurai) in a traditional battleground, which required techniques for attacks from a long distance, such as archery, horse riding, leadership, teamwork and battle array. A fierce duel or a group fight was usually seen in private combats, from which many martial arts skills and weapons developed. Because of its use for private battle, martial arts gained popularity among ordinary people.

Martial arts not only incorporate self-defense techniques but also extend to traditional theories of science, philosophy and religion, along with legends, customs, and pictographic symbols. Martial arts are generally divided into two groups, Internal and External martial arts. Internal styles (Qigong) limit the use of muscle strength and focus more on the integration of the body and mind while external styles (hard styles) use muscular strength and physical strength. Qigong are similar to meditation. They are simple exercises combining focused breathing, posture or movement and visualization to harmonize the body. A good martial arts practitioner usually knows how to manage his/her life force energy (Qi) to maximize the inner strength and power and improve health and well-being. Since regular practice of Qigong exercise help to increase one’s vitality, enhance the immune system, build stamina, develop

metal acuity and relieve stress, many non-martial artists apply Qigong to achieve health and longevity or attain peacefulness and inner clarity. Thai Ch'i is a martial art with emphasis on Qigong.

Some Qigong exercises are closer to sorcery than science. Since Qi is an abstract term with no fixed signified, it is therefore frequently connected with magic power. It was said that if a person controlled Qi, he or she could transcend space, gravity, the limitations of the body and the fears of the mind. Martial art novelists exaggerated the supernatural part of martial arts. For example, a Kong Fu master in a novel can fly on the roof or walk between bamboos with little difficulty. In the reality, sorcery sometimes is used as a psychological weapon (e.g. applied a curse to destroy enemies' spirit first and then their physical bodies). Such a weapon "empowered" its exercisers and increases their self-confidence. It also threatened and scared their opponents. Because of their connection to sorcery, martial arts used to be performed in rituals and later became various special art performances in theatre and ceremonial celebrations, such as lion dancing and dragon dancing. Many street performers were also martial artists. The performance in martial arts makes it easy to transform martial arts to a spectacular on film.

Since Confucius advised his followers to "respect ghosts and gods but keep aloof from them"(Confucius, 6.22), traditional elites connected meditation with religious believes rather than sorcery. Conventional religions such as Taoism and Buddhism were therefore engaged in martial arts practice to help practitioners gain the peace of mind.

The elite used martial arts to improve health and gain internal balance, but they despised professional martial artists. Professional martial artists had a low social status in China. They used to be "Lancelot" of their "King Arthur" during Zhou Dynasty (1027-221BC). People called them Shi, the traditional warrior class of the lower nobility. Shi were hired by kings to safeguard kingdoms. As small or weak kingdoms were conquered by bigger or stronger kingdoms one after another, many Shi lost their attachment and had to auction their skills for the highest bidder, who then patronized

them as his or her resident guests. From then on, Shi became profit-oriented Youxia (roving knights). After China was reunited by Emperor Qin Shi Huang, Youxia were condemned as a threat to social harmony and stability, a major concern of Confucianism. It was at this time that martial artists were eventually deported from the ruling elite. They had to absorb all walks of life to join their groups, or drifted into different places to attach themselves to rich and influential families. They were often assumed leadership in private armies, securities, secrete societies, guardianships, local governments or other organizations. When the martial arts literature first appeared in Tang Dynasty (618-907), martial artists had already been degraded to a very low status though admired by the public.

Martial arts literature has belonged to popular culture since the beginning. Traditional Chinese Literature falls into two categories: the highbrow and the popular (lowbrow) literature. Philosophical, religious and historical texts are included in the high end, as well as poetry. These writings use the classical language, well polished and highly stylized. They have been regarded as the standards for the orthodox literary tradition for a long time. The popular literature, also called the colloquial literature, consists originally of drama and fiction, which are written in a spoken vernacular language rather than in a classical literary language. The colloquial literature absorbed the living language of the people and thus became very popular during Yuan (1260-1368), Ming (1368-1644) and Qing Dynasty (1644-1912). Since majority people who preferred the popular literature were illiterate, it was spread through opera or a storytelling form instead of print. In the old time, people gathered at teahouses, taverns and restaurants to listen to a piece of Pingshu (story telling based on classical novels) or see an opera. Popular artists (story tellers or opera actors) personalized classical fictions or dramas and made themselves local stars.

The colloquial literature was developed into two distinguished and independent art forms: drama and fiction. The literature of the vernacular language first emerged as a

full-fledged art in the drama of Yuan Dynasty (1260-1368), using prose and verse of popular nature. Through centuries' transformation the art form evolved into various regional operas, among which Peking opera was the most popular one. Peking opera is a synthesis of music, singing, dialogue, dancing, acrobatics and martial arts. A qualified Peking Opera performer must be a performing artist, a singer, a dancer, an acrobat and a martial artist. Jacky Chan and many other martial arts movie stars have received intensive training in Peking opera schools. Their typical life is demonstrated in Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* (1993). Another form of colloquial literature is fiction, which first appeared as Chuanqi (Strong Legends), a prose romance in Tang Dynasty (618-907). Chuanqi tells marvelous and edifying tales in a vernacular form. It includes many elements found in the modern Wuxia genre such as vengeance, anomalous events and supernatural forces. Huaben tales emerged and then flourished in Song Dynasty (960-1279). Huaben is a script used by the storytellers. It applies simpler language but also features livelier action to attract the audience. At that time listening to a story on a street corner or in a teahouse or tavern was a daily routine for many commoners. The colloquial literature later developed into the novels of Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), and was gradually accepted by the intellectual class. It was said that some novels were anonymously by talented traditional scholars or lumpen intelligentsia such as jobless degree holders or failed examination candidates. However, most scholars and aristocrats still held that fiction and drama could only for entertainment while classical literature was the real culture capital for the elite. Therefore, the colloquial literature has not been promoted to the highbrow category regardless its attraction to the elite. Popular novels during this time were usually structured for story telling. Each chapter was relatively independent but also interconnected with main characters or plots. It always ended with a seductive ending that led to the next section (e.g. "if you want to know what happened to him/her, please come here the other day"). Sometimes, tales intersected and overlapped at key points but eventually these loosely connected people and plots will be put together and make the novel as a whole. This structure was nicely adopted by Wang Kar-wai in his *Chungking Express* (1994) and also inspired Q.T to construct his *Pulp Fiction* (1994).

Popular fiction consists of two genres: romance (Yan Qing) and martial arts (Wu Xia). Romance targets at female readers while martial arts stories usually attract men. Pornographic elements are absorbed by both genres. Violence is a theme almost in every martial arts novel. Martial arts novels are seen as adults' fairy tales. Wu Xia fiction appeared at the same time when fiction came into sight. Novels in Ming and Qing Dynasty set the standards for modern Wu Xia novels, which mixed together supernatural powers (e.g. *Pilgrimage to the West*), historical events (e.g. *The Romance of Three Kingdoms*) and Jianghu world (*The Water Margin*)²⁸.

Martial artists used to be called Wu Xia, but the "real" Wuxia is a literary imagination. Wu is of martial arts, war or the military while Xia refers to the type of protagonist. Gentle Wisdom made a good comparison between Chinese Wuxia (Chinese ancient swordsmen) and Western knights. First, "China's ancient swordsmen were outcasts in feudal society while Western knights were the backbone of the society" (Gentle Wisdom). Unlike European knight who was exclusively a member of the aristocracy, martial artists came from various backgrounds. Second, "Chinese swordsmen were tied together by brotherhood while Western knights were bounded by chivalry" (Gentle Wisdom). Chivalry was usually aligned to social code while brotherhood might require one to resist social values if necessary. For example, a man could kill his pregnant sister-in-law who betrayed his brother. Third, "Chinese swordsmen were loyal to those they deem worthy, regardless of rank and file while Western knights owed his loyalty to the king, lord or whoever was paying his salary" (Gentle Wisdom). Knights were earliest group of people upholding professionalism. For Wuxia, loyalty was based on the oft-ignored principle of reciprocity. "A Wuxia who was not treated with due respect did not feel any obligation to serve his patron with zeal" (Xia Value System). Fourth, Chinese swordsmen were typically motivated by revenge while Western knights were driven by pride and profit. "In the nutshell, the knights of

²⁸ All of the three novels, along with the *Red Mansion*, are considered the four masterpieces of Chinese literature.

Western folklore were generally conformists while China's knights-errant were not" (Gentle Wisdom, 01/19/2003). I disagree that China's swordsmen were non-conformists in essence though they might be outcasts in the stories. What made them different from typical conformists were their priority of friends over families and their sense of individualism VS. the mainstream collectivism.

Wuxia were heroes free from constraints of social status. The whole Jianhu world was opened to him/her as long as one wanted to be a part of it. Jianghu is a pugilistic world beyond the reach of the law. It is a habitat not only martial artists but also people from various backgrounds: adventurers, wronged aristocrats, ex-military officers, monks, priests, cultists, witch doctors, rebels, lumpen intelligentsia, the unemployed, peddlers, beggars, prostitutes, disbanded soldiers, gangsters, smugglers and other outlaws. All of them formed the society of the marginal people. In addition, Wuxia's Gypsy-type of lifestyle was seductive for people bounded to their fields in the agricultural society. Popular literature is pleasurable because of its "offensiveness to those class standards and their ideology" (Fiske, 59). However, such offensiveness is not divorced from social reality. Popular Culture never intends to eradicate the existing social code of mainstream. It is a result of negotiation between the power bloc and the bottom-up power of the subordinate. Therefore it is natural that Xia's values were almost entirely based on the mainstream ideology—the Confucian tradition. While Junzi exemplifies the four traits of a Confucian gentleman: benevolence, righteousness, loyalty and bravery, Xia embodies eight similar common attributes listed as "altruism, justice, individualism, loyalty, courage, truthfulness, disregard for wealth and desire for glory. Except for individualism, these characteristics typify the Confucian junzi (Gentleman)...In many respects the values of the Xia are merely an extension of traditional Chinese mores" (The Xia Value System). Individualism is seen mostly in the modern martial arts novels under the influence of Western philosophies.

Media plays an important role to disseminate popular novels. In the ancient time, stories were spread through story telling; therefore the novels were constructed for

story telling. When newspapers became popular in the 1920's, novels were edited for serialization. When films gained their popularity, writers started to make their novels film scripts. A typical example is Gu Long's novels. His novels are made up of dialogues.

Martial arts films gained their popularity along with the fame of the adopted novels. Now the situation is vice versa. Martial arts films combine the performance of Peking opera and modern martial arts literature. The earliest martial arts movie "Ding Jun Shan" (1916) is simply a Peking opera on the screen. As early as in the 1920s, some Shanghai based screenwriters started to adopt martial arts novels and created a new film genre: Wuxia Pian (Wuxia film). It was also called swordplay films or martial chivalry genre. The epic Shanghai Film "Burning of the Red Lotus Monastery (1928) became a pioneer of Wuxia films. This kind of movie is characterized by its fantasy component. With the help of flying daggers and wirework, the heroes in these movies look like supermen, floating on the cloud, leaping between roofs, scaling a cliff, etc.,. Noticeable in these movies, female characters are equally capable in martial arts skills. During the interwar period²⁹, many filmmakers relocated themselves from Shanghai to Hong Kong and then stayed there for the rest of their lives. Shanghai filmmakers brought Mandarin Wuxia Pian to Hong Kong. Mandarin Wuxia films were more like melodramas than action movies. They highlight the fantasy instead of violence. After Communist took over China, martial arts literature and films were banned in Mainland China. There are two major reasons for abolishment of martial arts films: first, the totalitarian culture required the unification of social voices; second, "popular pleasures and (the resultant) excesses of body—drunkenness, sexuality, idleness, rowdiness—were seen as threats to the social order" since they lied outside social control (Fiske, 75). Wu Xia as social wanderers was then eradicated from cultural production. Since the fifties, the genre films had been produced solely in Hong Kong and gradually became the mainstay of Hong Kong cinema. A colony like Hong Kong usually lacks both national culture and military power to fend off foreign aggressions.

²⁹ WWII and the subsequent civil war between communist and nationalist armies (1937-1949)

People who live in a colony use popular culture to resist and also receive colonist cultures imposed on them. HK martial arts movie, HK comedy and HK romance all belong to popular culture and target at various market segments. The success of Hong Kong cinema, Indian cinema and Hollywood follows the same industrial module: genre production.

In the early seventies, martial arts and martial arts film caught attention to the Westerners via some martial artists' individual endeavor. Bruce Lee not only introduced a new film genre (Kong Fu genre: bare-handed fight vs. swordplay in Wuxia film) but also martial arts itself to the United States. It was said that he was the most expensive instructor in the United States at that time. Average student needed to pay 100 dollar/hour to get Lee's training. Today martial arts have seeped into everyday life of America. In California, for example, almost every town has one or two martial arts training centers. Most people learn martial arts to promote health (e.g. Thai Chi') or learn some personal defense skills (e.g. Judo).

Right after Bruce Lee introduced Kung Fu films to the mass American audience, Hollywood producers quickly showed their interest but cautiously exploited the genre only in a B-movie niche market. A typical example is 1972's *Kung Fu* starred by David Carradine. Another representative actor is Chuck Norris. American interest also provided a tremendous boost to Hong Kong film industry. Hundreds of cheap Kung Fu films were imported into the United States between 1972 and 1975. However, between Bruce Lee's *Enter the Dragon* (1973) and Jackie Chan's *Rumble in the Bronx* (1996), Kung Fu films remained a cult affair appreciated mainly by aficionados and cineastes.

Thanks to Tsui Hark's creative endeavor in this genre, Wuxia Pian revived in the eighties and the nineties after a decade's latency. Heavily influenced by the sci-fi movies in the late 70's and early 80's (e.g. *Star War* (1977), *E.T.* (1982) and *Superman* (1978)), Tsui Hark reworked the old Wuxia films with the help the new technology.

His integration of flashy martial arts choreography and special effects popularized Wuxia Pian again. Comparing with the old Wuxia pian, the new Wuxia films have better visual and audio effects and more stylish editing and dialogues. However, the storylines remained the same: revenge on killing in the context of lawless Jianghu, or fighting for a mysterious weapon (as in *CTHD*) or a martial arts training manual.

At the turn of the 21st century, martial arts films, both Kung Fu films and Wuxia films, were introduced to the West through Jackie Chan, Jet Li and Ang Lee. Jackie Chan entered the Hollywood mainstream with two famous sequences: *Shanghai Noon* (2000)/*Shanghai Knights* (2003) and *Rush Hour* (1998,2001). Jet Li showed up in hip-pop martial arts movies such as *Romeo Must Die* (2000), *the One* (2001) and *Cradle to Grave* (2003). Both Jackie and Jet belonged to the Kung Fu tradition. Ang Lee brought Wuxia pian into an international phenomenon. Right after his success, many Wuxia films targeted for the international market. *Hero* was among these followers. As Chinese martial arts actors and directors marched to Hollywood, Hollywood also began to make their own martial arts fantasies in their futuristic films such as *The Matrix* (1999). Now it seems that martial arts films are leaving its B-movie cult segment and heading to the mainstream of the international film market.

Although some martial arts films talk about nationalism, for instance, Jet Li's *Once Upon a Time in China* (1997), the genre itself is in essence popular culture rather than a national one since it has roots in traditional drama (Peking Opera) and popular novel, both of which belong to popular culture. In addition, both martial arts practice and martial arts video game require participation instead of appreciation at a distance. Thus the martial arts movies are imbricated into their immediate historical and social setting and become a part of everyday life.

In 1999, "America bought over 215 million computer and video games. That's more than two games per household. The video game industry made almost as much money from gross domestic income as Hollywood" (Jenkins, 09/10, 2002). Recently I

observed several game centers in the United States ³⁰and found that there was always at least one about martial arts game. In addition, Hollywood film franchises are routinely translated into games while some games also make the move onto the screen. Under such circumstances, good martial arts films could be used for video games.

Video games belong to popular culture because they are often associated with our daily life. We are not merely observers but participants of these games. The pleasure of video game is physical. Intense concentration and force is required in video game exercises. This allows the body's momentary release from the social definition and control. Moreover, such a release is safe because we are unlikely to be punished for breaking social restrictions while game playing. In addition, video games also offer a fast "promotion" by rating or entering a higher level of practice. Games provide space for the subordinate who usually have no place to exercise their power or achieve their goals in day-to-day existence. This space encourages supernatural power, which is usually seen in a typical martial arts film. The interaction between the martial arts film and video game will become more frequent in the future.

Chapter IV: Case Analysis on the *Hero* Phenomenon

Globalization and commercialization since the nineties has greatly changed the cultural landscape of China. The foreign critics and local artists are invading and eroding national culture: the holy land of the elite. Under such circumstances, the elite are frustrated with anything going against the formation and maintenance of the nationalism. *Hero* is seen as a threat to national culture for the following reasons. For one, it alters history to serve the foreign viewers. Second, the elite fear that popular culture will take away the dominant position of national culture. Third, *Hero* is criticized as being an anti-modernism postmodern product by the intellectuals.

4.1 Cultural Imperialism

³⁰ One in a Best Buy store in Simi Valley, one in the local community college of Moorpark, one in the Edward theatre in Camarillo, one by the street of Alhambra and many of them in the hotels in Las Vegas

What annoys Chinese critics most is “Fredric Jameson’s blithe determination that all Third World texts are necessarily...to be read as...national allegories” (Crofts, 64). Many critics ascribe Jameson’s words to cultural imperialism. As foreign elites have little access to local/popular culture, what they glean from another country’s production is national culture created by the elite of that particular nation. Naturally, one reads this art work as nationalistic. In addition, the elite, albeit home or aboard, often distance themselves from everyday life. “Such ‘distance’ produces ahistorical meanings of art works and allies the works with a set of humane values that in the extreme versions of aesthetic theory. In this sense, the history is diluted or flattened for the sake of universal meaning and as a result, the history becomes allegories” (Crofts, 64).

Art house directors like Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige could not escape the fate of creating national allegories if they remain loyal to national culture. Radical artists (e.g. the Fifth Generation directors) intended to give up the old nationalism of the Mao regime and create a national culture of their own (this happened to match the mainstream values of the new government led by Deng Xiaoping). For these artists, the official version of the collective memories during the Cultural Revolution is in fact the “national amnesia and getting one’s own history wrong for the maintenance of national solidarity” (Hayward, 89). One of the methods utilized against Marxist/historical determinism is to push backward or even suspend history. In so doing, the history becomes a myth. In Zhang’s *Red Sorghum* (1987), the story about a grandma and grandpa is told by a voice-over, who has never seen his grandparents and only heard of their story from his father. *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) is packaged in a quasi-historical form. In such a way, Zhang Yimou takes an ahistorical approach to historical interrogation of the nation as a whole.

In *Hero*, there are three different versions of the history. These three versions are highlighted by three specific color tones. The colors draw a clear line between each two versions and make the story easier to understand. The first version is in red, which

signifies passion, either anger or desire. Blue matches the pain of sacrifice and separation in the second version. Green highlights the third version, which denotes a return to the truth and originality. However, different audiences may assign different meanings and motifs to one color scheme or another. The colors might not achieve the purpose of the director since the story could be comprehended differently by different viewers. The history, like the colors on the screen, is only the background of a faked story. In this sense, Zhang Yimou takes an ahistorical approach in *Hero*. In addition, although the story has no anti-narrative theme as that in *Rashomon* (1950), the narrator (Nameless) who speaks the truth dies in the end. His death implies that the truth will be untold and covered up, and the history could only be told/created/written by the survivor (the king) and his power bloc.

Zhang not only takes an ahistorical approach but also rewrites history. Although Chen Kaige's *Assassin* (1999) employs the same historical background as *Hero*, *Assassin* is based on "History" written by the famous historian Shima Qian. *Hero* is only based on Zhang's own imagination. The main characters in *Assassin*, the King and the assassin Jin Ke, are true people in the history. Flying Snow, Broken Sword, Sky and Nameless in *Hero* are not historical figures. In addition, the Qin King in *Hero* appears like a Buddhist. However, Buddhism was imported to China 200 years after the death of the king. Zhang actually creates a postmodern Qin King, who has a little bit of Bruce Lee's Kungfu, a little bit of Dalai Lama's Buddhism, and a bit of anti-terrorism philosophy.

Chinese directors try to tailor their works to particular festivals in order to gain international recognition. Under the principle of "like attracts like", attendees who share the same capital with the appraisers are more likely to win an award in the international festivals. Here I want to use comparative research in examining *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* (*CTHD*) and *Hero* to see the impact of Western cultural capital on Chinese filmmaking. Both films could be regarded as art-house endeavors. However, *CTHD* (2000) was far more successful than *Hero*. One critical

element for *CTHD*'s triumph is that the film is in fact an American story originally written in English by Ang Lee's NYU (New York University) college friend James Schamus and then translated and revised into Chinese by two Chinese scriptwriters from Taiwan. It was then re-translated back into English. As a result, *CTHD* has "higher" taste than *Hero*. The "problem" of *Hero* is that it fails to apply Western philosophies. Zhang Yimou is too honest to sell Taoism and Buddhism to the international viewers. He especially intends to advertise the "sudden enlightenment" in Zen. The basic idea is that achievement to a Buddhism believer is "an instantaneous act, like a leaping over a deep chasm. Either one makes the leap successfully, in which case one reaches the other side and thus achieves Buddhahood in its entirety in a flash, or one fails in one's leap, in which case one remains as one was. There are no intermediate steps between" (Fung, 250). In *Hero*, both the king, Broken Sword and Nameless reach a sudden enlightenment at a critical moment. It might be hard for the readers with no knowledge of Zen to understand the characters' unexpected change of mind. Ang Lee also sells oriental religion, but the religious thought in his film represent no absolute truth only exoticism. Viewers need little knowledge of Buddhism or Taoism to understand the characters in the film. Actually almost all the characters in *CTHD* are Feudists or Lacanists to the core with a little tint of Buddhism and Taoism, just like the scriptwriter James Schamus himself. Li Mubai (played by Chow Yun-fat) cannot transform himself into a real Buddhist even after years' meditation. He still wants revenge for the death of his master-father. One of the scenes reminds me of Lawrence Oliver's *Hamlet* (1948). In that scene, Li jumps onto Jade Fox and kills her with little mercy, while saying, "so you die". Li's Shakespeare-type of epilogue makes the Chinese audience laugh but touches many Western viewers.

Feminism embedded in *CTHD* attracts the Western elite. Basically *CTHD* is about a female-in-crisis while *Hero* is a men's story. All main characters in *Hero* are men. Female characters (Flying Snow and Moon) are only beautiful decorations. Compared with the male heroes Nameless, the king and Broken Sword, the women are fragile and out of control.

When *CTHD* was released in Canada in 2001, a literature PhD student told me that she loved the movie because the women kicked men's butts. The director gives a full attention to Jen (played by Zhang Ziyi), a true antagonist/feminist from modern/Western point of view and the one that (Western) audience is willing to align with and even show allegiance. Here I would like to use an interest essay on *CTHD* by Matthew Levie to analyze how Western elites read the film. It seems that Levie has more knowledge about Chinese traditional culture than many other Western critics. He takes a "Ying/Yang balance" approach to categorize the three female characters of the movie. According to Levie, "Shu Lien (played by Michelle Yeoh) has most effectively balanced her feminine and masculine sides" (Issue 33, 2001). She has a successful career as a safeguard while maintaining her femininity as a faithful lover. "Jen swings widely between the hyper-feminine and the hyper-masculine" (Issue 33, 2001) and her master Jade Fox is a woman with a faked male organ (man's power)—she obtains (steals) the secret manual of Wu Dan School (a symbol of man's power) but doesn't know how to read it. However, from what I know about the theory of Ying/Yang balance, none of these female characters is harmonious with the society they live in.

The essay, decorated by oriental mysticism, is in essence a feministic analysis. The author focuses his analysis on the main character Jen. He ascribes Jen's behaviors (e.g. stealing the sword, cross-dressing or beating anyone in her way) to her desire to be a man: her "fascination with masculine symbols is apparent when she first sees the sword Green Dynasty" (Issue 33, 2001). Although "she repeatedly appealed to Shu Lien to lead her back to her feminine side, the masculine in her is clearly stronger" (Issue 33, 2001). Then Levie feels that Lo's theft of a comb symbolizes Jen's lost of her femininity and her theft of swords implies her revival as a man. In the desert scene, we can see that Jen fights very hard to get her comb (femininity) back but such an endeavor is eventually proved to be futile. She symbolically turns herself into a transsexual. Before making love to Lo (played by Chang Chen), "she penetrates him with a stylus and he bleeds although she is the one being deflowered" (Issue 33, 2001).

The two wrestle fiercely on the bed for who is on top (a male position) and Jen finally gets the male position. From then on, “she is always on top in bed” (Issue 33, 2001). Jen’s fight for the top position signifies her struggling for her sexuality. Gradually she transforms herself. Instead of finding her lost femininity, she abandons it. Twice in the film, Jen leaves the comb behind with Lo when they depart. Nevertheless, unlike Li Mubai who doesn’t rely on the sword to prove his sexuality, Jen cannot be who she wants to be without powerful equipment. Her lack of genitalia forces her to hold the stolen sword (the symbol of male organ) still. When Li throws the sword into the lake, she jumps into the lake with no hesitation. The root of her doomed tragedy is her reliance on something not a part of her. In other words, her identity is a faked one. This eventually leads her to suicide. “She rues the damage that her excess masculinity has caused, but she is still unable to reconcile herself to femininity, particularly under the impetus of Shu Lien’s injunction “whatever you do in this life, be true to yourself.” Shu Lien’s advice is “the death sentence” to Jen since Jen has gone too far to return. She has rebelled and destroyed almost everything: her aristocratic family, her social role, rules of the Jianghu world and the code of master-discipline relationship. From Levie’s gender analysis we can see how a typical Western critic uses his/her cultural capital to interpret the film.

However, the original novel by Wang Dulu gives equal attention to all four characters instead of focusing on Jen alone. It was very hard to connect them to feminism. If completely following the original storyline, Ang Lee could not gain so many awards in the West. He skillfully westernized the script for global distribution.

Although both *CTHD* and *Hero* are categorized into the martial arts genre, they are more like art-house films. *CTHD* is basically a melodrama, lacing martial arts with two love stories between Li Mubai and Yu Shu Lien, and Jen and Lo. The real battles in *CTHD* are not those of physical strength but human heart. “Its characters are at psychological crossroads” (Perfect Serendipity, 01/19/03): Li Mubai is about to leave the Jianghu world for a normal life with his love Yu Shu Lien. At the same time, Jen, a

gentrified young woman, wants to enter the Jianghu world in order to escape the mundane life of a bureaucrat's wife. Both of them fail at last. Through combination of two popular art forms: martial arts film and melodrama *CTHD* distances itself from both genres and creates something new. *Hero* is also not a typical martial arts film in that it "goes beyond the 'it's either you die or I die'" framework by "using violence to present Buddhist philosophy of non-violence" (Ong, 1). In addition, the unique structure of *Hero* forces viewers to "appreciate it relationally through comparison of other works (e.g. Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon*), which is incompatible with immersion in the singularity of the work immediately given" (Bourdieu, 34). Both films could be seen as a director venture into popular culture. But in the eyes of the Chinese elite, the films are regarded as popular culture's invasion into the realm art-house film.

4.2 National Culture, Holy land of the Intelligentsia

Hero is criticized not only by the domestic critics, but also by the filmmakers who detach themselves from the domestic critics' community for international recognition. This situation occurs because both these filmmakers and critics are supporters of national culture. Take the Fifth Generation as an example. Driven by different financial resources, the Generation as a whole disappeared in the earlier nineties. Some of the filmmakers of the Fifth Generation started to support independent filmmaking. Tian Zhuangzhuang has retreated from the frontline of film production and now focuses on finding investors for the younger directors (the Sixth Generation). Some of them, like the Sixth Generation filmmakers, produce political underground films. Most of them remain in the aesthetic domain in order to make art-house films. Evidently, a few have turned themselves into enterprising filmmakers. There is still a clear line in China between highbrow and lowbrow culture in the domestic film industry. Within the film industry, many of the elite still insist the orthodox position of art-house films in China cinema. Jiang Wen (director of *In the Heat of the Sun* (1996)) made an open claim that he would never make a Wu Xia Pian. Ironically, Jiang said this during an occasion that was promoting a martial arts film (*Warriors in the Heaven*

and the Earth (2003)). Both Jiang and the director of the film told the audience of tom.com³¹ that the film was about martial arts heroes but it was not, in fact, a martial arts film. The critics intended to assure the quality of the film by labeling it as a “historical saga” instead of a lowbrow Wuxia Pian. Ignorance of popular culture is phenomenal in the intellectual circle of China. The Chinese elite never take martial arts films seriously and always exclude the genre from the official history of China cinema.

The elite’s disparagement on *Hero* reflects their concern for the future of national culture, which is threatened by the rise of popular culture. Actually until now many elite still exclude enterprising artists from their community. For a long time, Chinese cinema has been controlled by leftists and, later, was in the hands of the radical elite. Both groups are supporters of national culture. The Chinese elites’ passion for politics and their unconcern regarding the economic restrictions under a planned economy made it possible for them to distance themselves from everyday life. From an economic point of view, a planned economy makes the constraints of material necessity irrelevant to cultural production. Filmmakers under such an economic system usually get the same economic return (salary) regardless of box-office results. In addition, they cannot receive more investment for their future production if they made their films better. Everything is planned to meet political or ideological needs. Once free from the economic constraints, the elite could thus “construct an aesthetic which not only refuses to assign any value at all to material conditions, but validates only those art forms which transcend them. The critical and aesthetic distance is thus, finally, a marker of distinction between those able to separate their culture from the social and economic conditions of the everyday and those who cannot” (Fiske, 54). From political point of view, the Chinese elite place emphasis on the educational function of culture. In the past, the elite used Confucianism, later Communism and recently modernism as guiding theories to enlighten the nation. Proletarian culture

³¹ Tom.com is one of the hottest websites in China

during the Mao era was by no means a lowbrow culture though it leveled the taste to “match” that of the public. It was in essence the colonization or invasion of everyday life by the system, where the heterogeneity of popular culture gave way to homogenization of the proletarian/national culture. After the Cultural Revolution, the elite (including the Fifth Generation) tended to aestheticize rather than politicize national culture. However, they still distanced themselves from the public, taking the role of educators or preachers. Their films look like depictions of everyday life, but in fact these artworks only reflect anti-heroic life. Although both everyday life and anti-heroic life resists previous socialist heroic life, they are different in that the former deconstructs heroism while the latter merely redefines heroism in order to respond to social changes. While popular culture usually celebrates the life of a man without qualities, artists like Chen Kaige just want to use everyday life as raw material for investigating social meanings, in his words, to see the “stupidity, backwardness and ignorance (low quality) of the Chinese people” and then to “stimulate the spirit of the entire nation”³². Avant-garde artists’ spiritual adventures weave together accidental elements and inspired acts to impose coherence on the originally formless reality and thereby create an imaginary space: the nation.

It is natural that *Hero* is being attacked by both domestic critics and most filmmakers. They regard Zhang as a tasteless artisan of lowbrow culture. The only filmmaker who praised the film is the famous enterprising director Feng Xiaogong. However, for the domestic elite, commercial success is far less important than the existence of national culture. *Hero*, from its content to the ways it was produced, promoted, distributed and exhibited, violates all rules that a typical Chinese intellectual is supposed to follow.

The difference between Zhang Yimou and the rest of the filmmakers of the Fifth Generation is his attitude towards popular culture. Zhang never deliberately differentiated himself from enterprising artists. In earlier days, even when the

³² See Page 35 of the paper

domestic film market was still controlled by the government, he started to make action movies such as *Codename Cougar* (1989). Zhang did not turn himself into an enterprising filmmaker like Feng Xiaogang. He tried to increase his influence on the public by a combination of both his core competence as an artist and popular genres.

Zhang's international fame enables him to directly confront the onslaught of Hollywood movies by making films that Hollywood is making. He has gone through what a typical Hollywood businessperson goes through: stardom, anecdotes, scandals, news releases, Oscar ceremonies, a big international distribution company, etc. There are many reasons for *Hero*'s success in the box office. First is its use of stardom. The film boasts the hottest actors and actresses, including Hollywood Kung fu star Jet Li, rising mainland star Zhang Ziyi (*CTHD* (2000)), Hong Kong superstars Maggie Cheung (Best Actress of the Berlin Film Festival) and Tony Leung Chiu-Wai (Best Actor of the Cannes Film Festival). Second, it has a dream team of director Zhang Yimou himself, cinematographer Christopher Doyle (*Chung King Express* (1994)) and musician Dun Tan (*CTHD*). Third, it employed strict control over illicit VCD/DVD copies, which only appeared on the streets only four weeks after its premiere in Beijing. Forth, it rode on the success of (*CTHD*) after Ang Lee's Oscar victory a year before. Fifth, Miramax helped Zhang promote the film³³; most importantly, there was a marvelous marketing campaign. *Hero* had already become a legend even before its premier. Over "250 thousand people nationwide" (Zheng, 21/12/2002) flocked to local theaters for the first show.

4.3 Modernism: The Incomplete Task of the Intelligentsia

Hero negates modernism to favor postmodernism for it makes a pastiche out of different stuff together with little concern for coherence. For instance, individualism co-exists with collectivism; brotherhood with betrayal; and humanism with totalitarianism. All these incompatible things are juxtaposed within one text.

³³ With the help of Miramax, *Hero* is nominated as the best foreign film in Oscar of 2003.

Modernism is regarded as a weapon for nationalism while postmodernism for globalization. While more and more Chinese scholars apply postmodernism in their research, most of them still hold that modernism is more important for Chinese people who are now seeking modernization. Critic Wang Xiaohua argues that China lacks a system to effectively absorb imported theories. Domestic theorists gained their fame simply for introducing fashionable foreign concepts instead of combining the imported theories of the various situations and creating a culture system of China's own. Because of this, the most important assignment for the modern elite is to construct a system rather than to deconstruct other cultures' systems. According to Wang, any call for deconstruction is in fact escapism.

Between 1996 and 1998 I studied in Beijing University, the most prestigious university in China. I took some courses in the history, literature and politics departments respectively. Most professors (except for Dai Jinhua and Zhang Yiwu) openly criticized postmodernism and stressed the importance of modernism for China's modernization. Liberalism and individualism were seen as the most important values for modern Chinese people. Philosophers such as Heidegger and Nietzsche were more popular among students than Foucault and Lyotard. Nietzsche's "god is dead" and Heidegger's "seeking spiritual home"³⁴ all evoke the true meaning of liberalism. Another typical phenomenon is a re-emphasis on the spirit of May-Forth³⁵, exemplified by Lu Xu craze on the campus. Lu Xu is a major representative (also a liberal) of the movement. In Professor Wang Yuechuan's class, the then famous critic Yu Jie handed out his self-printed brochure about the spiritual meaning of May Forth. The book, entitled "Ice and Fire"³⁶, later turned out to be the best seller in China.

The theme in *Hero* is totally contrary to the mainstream academia. What Zhang Yimou

³⁴ Heidegger holds that being is objectless and that human nature does not exist until realized by act of free choice. Therefore, human being should seek their own spiritual home.

³⁵ Refer to the May Fourth Movement of 1919 for complete introduction of Modernism to Chinese people

³⁶ Perhaps Yu Jie is influenced by T.S. Eliot's works

sells here is the old totalitarian culture in which personal sacrifice and bloodshed are necessary for the greater social good. Following this logic, social antagonists (e.g. assassins in *Hero*) should forgo their power in order to strive for the unification of the nation. Intellectuals in China could not accept the so-called peace through non-violence method, in that this approach ignores the fact that the “peace” here is not for the subordinate masses but for the power bloc. Zhang confuses benevolence with servitude. However, he does not intend to create something ideological/political here. As he said in an interview, “I did what my creative urge and my passion prompted me to do” (Tan, 7). The truth is, *Hero* is basically a postmodern artwork where all popular signs and social codes are mixed together regardless of political correctness. Here different images are so seductive and overwhelming that viewers can only enjoy sensations of the images. Consequently, they are temporarily not allowed to chain the signifiers together in a meaningful narrative. Many viewers loved the spectacular scenes in Zhang’s craftsmanship.

Part V Conclusion

The unanimous disparaging of *Hero* by the domestic critics and filmmakers reveals the mentality of the contemporary Chinese elite who are trying to protect their national culture in face of the challenges from both the inside (popular culture/localism) and the outside (global culture/globalism). Chinese radical intellectuals were and still are faithful to national culture. At the very beginning, the domestic elite wanted to build the national culture upon imported modernism. But soon they found themselves in a marginalized position as their prestige and priority had been overcome by the Western bourgeoisie. To win the public’s support, the domestic elite had to replace the rational Enlightenment of modernism to the irrational revolutionary romanticism/nationalism. The incomplete introduction of modernism led to a series of social problems in the following years. Nationalism as used by the elite to unite the masses against the domination of Confucianism and the foreign aggression—was later used by the power bloc to suppress the voices of dissidents for

the sake of unification and social stability. National culture (1949-1989) encapsulated a marriage between the radical arts of the left wing and the gigantic propaganda system under the tight control of the government. Through making the people an abstract totality, particular, vivid and concrete individual voices were suffocated and silenced. Contrasted with the “sublimation” of mundane life, the elite culture of the intelligentsia was leveled down to meet the needs of the masses. National culture was “popular” not because it reflected everyday life but because everyday life was referred to political life. There was no private space, let alone liberalism, freedom and individualism. For example, during the Cultural Revolution, a couple got divorced because of their disagreement on a political viewpoint. Chen Kaige denounced his father after his father was classified as a capitalist. The traditional values of family and loyalty were all wiped out. Popular pleasures were prohibited in that they lay “outside social control and thus to threaten it” (Fiske, 75).

The intellectuals have complicated feelings on nationalism. On the one hand, it had once promoted the elite to the leading position in national movements; on the other hand, nationalism joined forces with Communism to form a totalitarian culture and dictatorship. This almost destroyed the entire intellectual community. After the Cultural Revolution, the painful introspection among intellectuals made it necessary to borrow external critiques to establish a new national culture in the face of the old totalitarian culture. As China’s incomplete and sporadic modernization led to a constant cry for a complete Enlightenment (a symbol of modernity); intellectuals wanted to use modernism to reshape the landscape of national culture and therefore objectively supported the government’s calling for the Four Modernizations³⁷.

The Fifth Generation and other radical artists and critics in the 1980s are a group of intellectuals who intended to dedicate their lifetime to the institution of the nation and the production of a national culture. The golden era of the Fifth Generation (1978-1989) was a period when hegemony was in transition, when the ideological

³⁷The modernization in industry, agriculture, national defense and education

domain was empty, and when social control was undisciplined. Such a historical and social condition allowed the cooperation between the reformist-dominated government and the radical artists engaged in cultural critique. The artists might appear as dissidents against government but they never formed a real social force to work against the hegemony. Instead, they reconfirmed the values of the power-bloc: unification, nationalism and modernization. In fact, they were part of the mainstream. In addition, the Fifth Generation ascribed the chaos of the Cultural Revolution to Chinese culture instead of socialist politics. In such a way, they assisted with the continuation of the Communist government. The Fifth Generation was not what outsiders had viewed as a group of avant-garde artists who were against status quo. Instead, they confirmed the status quo, albeit they were unwillingly. The Tiananmen Incident split the marriage of the elite (especially the avant-garde artists) and the government. Globalization and commercialization as a result of the government's further economic reform did not restore the romantic relationship between the two social forces. The elite's social status is again in danger, in that national culture is threatened by and sandwiched between localism and globalism. A typical problem is that now cultural production is heavily influenced by foreign elites and market power.

Although to form national culture, the radical intellectuals leveled their taste in order to make the people understand; they never worked for popular culture since they never seriously studied the micropolitics of everyday life. Nationalism is the essence of highbrow culture. As Fiske says, "radical art forms that oppose or ignore the structures of domination can never be popular because they cannot offer points of pertinence to the everyday life of the people, for everyday life is a series of tactical maneuvers against the strategy of the colonizing forces" (161).

Various domestic intellectuals might attack *Hero* for their own reasons. But the domestic intellectuals' unanimous disparagement of *Hero* reflects the intellectuals' deep concern with the colonization of both popular culture and the foreign elitism that has become a part of the landscape of national culture. *Hero's* anti-terrorism/

non-violence tone caters to the Western appraisers and distributors. As Hu Xiaoding says, *Hero* is a victory of commercial and political speculation but also the degeneration of the arts and the renunciation of the history. Here art and history refer to national art and history. The *Hero* Phenomenon vividly reflects the mentality/attitude of the domestic elite of China: dislike popular culture; protection of the national culture (including “the history”) and support of modernism. The film, as a popular film with anti-modernism and anti-history ideas, is unlikely appreciated by most Chinese intellectuals. Furthermore, the film’s inclusion in the Oscar Ceremony is an open move to ignore the domestic critics. No wonder it was severely criticized by the elite.

The global order could be conceived “as involving sets of non-isomorphic flows of people, technology, finance, media images and information, and ideas” (Featherstone, 118), all of which serve the market economy worldwide. Individual nation-states could promote, channel or block flows to some degree if they could control domestic popular culture effectively. Hong Kong is a typical example. Under the pressure of global commodification, organizations cannot afford to focus exclusively on creative and artistic concerns. They must face the reality where no investment equals no production. From various commodity concerns, we can see that “aesthetic hierarchies and developments are collapse with the mixing of genres and high art, popular and commercial forms” (Featherstone, 69). Elites under such circumstances should not see the growth of popular culture as a threat to national culture or highbrow culture. Rather they should engage themselves in the production and circulation of symbolic goods and colonize the domain of popular culture before popular culture colonizes the territory of national culture.

Recently many of the elite held a pessimistic view that intellectual and artistic activities have become commodified and lost the halo of high art. However they ignore the fact that art objects are essentially produced for ritual and therefore are embedded with symbolic meanings, which could be seen as means both for and

against price-setting. Symbolic values sometimes may triumph over the profane market and even prohibit exchange. Hence, “while there is the capacity for commodities to break down social barriers, to dissolve the long-established links between persons and things, there is also the counter tendency, the movement towards decommodification, to restrict, control and channel the exchange of goods”(Featherstone, 17). Elites should grasp the opportunities of such decommodification and play their part in popular culture as cultural consultants or opinion leaders.

The availability of high art products may bring about social disorder in which an overwhelming flood of signs and images juxtaposed together invalidate the disciplined correspondence between each pair of the signified and its signifier. Such a situation therefore threatens readability of goods used as signs of social status. However, the elite should be aware of symbolic capital (Bourdieu), which complicates the consumption process by putting it in a larger context. In this sense, it is not just about what to buy, but how to consume, with whom and in what occasion. The price of admission “was to be paid not in hard cash...but ideologically—the admission ticket was the adaptation of the middle-class values enshrined in the educational, improving function of the institutions” (Fiske, 79). What is vulgar is still vulgar. What is in poor taste is still of poor taste. In addition, the consumption of high cultural and mundane goods is different in that they target different populations and also have different profit margins. Such differences involve discriminatory judgments and also differentiate various lifestyles/tastes. As taste was used to mark the high and the low in the past, now it sensibilities encounter a more complicated task of precisely clarifying various different market segments. In this sense, the demand will grow for cultural specialists and intermediaries. Chinese society still favors those with educational capital.

Enterprising novelists and filmmakers are the earliest artists who tried to meet the new challenge of market forces. Now some auteurs like Zhang Yimou have also jumped on the bandwagon. Zhang’s *Hero* will not affect the society as greatly as the elite

believed. It is just one cultural commodity. Popular culture does not have the same universal impact on the public as the totalitarian culture did in the past. Some people buy this and others buy that, and they also consume it differently. What I am concerned with here is the attitude of the elite toward popular culture. They are forgoing a new cultural continent. Cultures that refuse to cross-fertilize with other cultures lose many chances of renewal and thus will become more inflexible to changes. A stagnant culture is a dying culture, despite its glorious past. Chinese elites' cultural protectionism could only accelerate the death of national culture.

This issue of art vs. politics vs. commerce is likely to remain the greatest obstacle to the development of the national film industry in the near future. I am deeply concerned that some directors like Hu Xiaoding still advocate undisciplined movies (anti-genre) as the sole correct way to compete with Hollywood. I deeply wish more and more filmmakers would engage in popular culture; and most importantly, more critics and theorists enter the domain of commercial culture.

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