

THE COMMERCE OF POPULAR CULTURE: DID CHINA'S FIFTH GENERATION "SELL OUT"?

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¿LA QUINTA GENERACIÓN DE CHINA "CLAUDICÓ" ?

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PALABRAS CLAVES: Cine chino, quinta generación, integridad artística,
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RESUMEN

Hay un carácter específico en la "claudicación" que se da en la Quinta Generación. Zha apenas oculta su inculcación como ella se cuestiona retóricamente si "él [Zhang Yimou] debe su popularidad a la astuta comercialización de exotismo oriental hacia Occidente" (Zha, 1995: 94). Este proceso se caracteriza por el "marketing" de la mística de la mujer asiática que juega en las fantasías masculinas occidentales. Es así que, Gong Li se convirtió en una aclamada actriz porque tuvo la oportunidad de participar en muchos papeles de películas que ella obtuvo debido a su poder de ser una estrella. Se ve que la mayoría de los chinos nativos

creen que los tipos de películas producidas por la Quinta Generación son una representación auténtica de éxitos en sus carreras, no de lo que ellos sienten que su cultura debería ser. También se puede decir que "este tipo de películas es realmente un lanzamiento por el placer ocasional de los extranjeros" y cómo se puede ver Zhang Yimou le debe la mayor parte de su éxito al público extranjero que todavía se sorprende con su espectáculo en películas como Héroe (Ying Xiong, 2002) (Zha, 1995: 94). Éxito, también descrito como *minglishuangshou*: "que ha cosechado la fama y la fortuna", que es un término halagador a la del director filosófico.

ABSTRACT

There is a specific character to the "selling out" that takes place among the Fifth Generation. Zha barely conceals her accusation as she rhetorically questions if "he [Zhang Yimou] owes his popularity to the shrewd marketing of Oriental exotica to the West" (Zha, 1995: 94). This process is typified by marketing the mystique of the Asian woman as played out in Western male fantasies. Gong Li only became an acclaimed actress because she had the chance to practice in many movie roles she got, due to her star power. Already established is that most native Chinese

feel that the types of movies produced by the Fifth Generation in their later, more successful careers, are not an authentic portrayal of what they feel their culture to be. It can also be said that this kind of film is really shot for the casual pleasure of foreigners, as we can see that Zhang Yimou owes most of his success to foreign audiences who are still amazed by his spectacle in movies such as *Hero* (*Ying xiong*, 2002) (Zha, 1995: 94). This success, also described as *minglishuangshou*: "reaping fame and fortune," is a complimentary term to that of the philosophical director.

INTRODUCTION

The cinema of China, as it is known in international film circuits, has been profoundly impacted by the work of Fifth Generation filmmakers, notably Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou. Although their work has recently become highly acclaimed by international audiences, their artistic integrity has also come into question as their movies have become more grandiose and Orientalized, as Edward Said would define it. Thus, it is important to understand the integrity of the Fifth Generation filmmakers in China in order to fully appreciate the perceived cheapening of their films. As soon as China was emancipated from Mao Zedong,

the art of cinema began to surge with new life among the eager, yet hardened, youth who would become China's Fifth Generation. The filmmakers who make up the famed Fifth Generation graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in the 1980s. This rogues gallery included notables such as Zhang Yimou, Tian Zhuangzhuang, and Chen Kaige, among others. Fifth Generation filmmakers are famous for their unapologetic rejection of the ideological purity of Cultural Revolution cinema. In effect, their narratives focused instead on ordinary people's daily lives. Moreover, they maintained a political edge, taking into account social issues

rather than advocating tired ideology and recycled policy.

While Cultural Revolution films used character, these vanguard directors focused instead on psychological depth taking their queue from European cinema. In comparison to the recent past, China was experiencing a new kind of political and cultural liberalization, with “emancipating the mind” and reinventing an oppressed culture as their primary motivations (Zha, 1995: 86). The Fifth Generation of filmmakers were in a unique position to be the first generation that could explore the taboos and test the boundaries of filmmaking (although censors still admonished their material). Zha Jianying describes the

initial development of the Fifth Generation as “an act of rebellion against the artistic strictures of Maoism.” (Zha, 1995: 86) It is clear that Zha chose Chen Kaige as the premiere intellectual filmmaker of this emerging generation. She describes Chen Kaige as *zhelidaoyan*, or the philosophical director that would stick to his “strenuously experimental films”, no matter how poorly they would be received by the mass audience (Zha, 1995 p. 81). If one would consider filmmaking an art, this seems as if it is a good ideal to follow. Interestingly enough, this director is effectively used as an example to illustrate the transformation from artistic integrity to Asia-mongering that can be seen within the Fifth Generation.

THE FIFTH GENERATION AND THE BEIJING FILM ACADEMY: THE EXEMPLARS - *TO LIVE* (1994) AND *FAREWELL MY CONCUBINE* (1993)

Fifth Generation Directors, as mentioned previously, were the first to graduate from the Beijing Film Academy since the Cultural Revolution in China. The most notable of these directors were Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou. Chen Kaige’s first movie, *Yellow Earth* (*Huang tu di*, 1984), we argue, paved the way for contemporary Chinese filmmaking. Meanwhile, Zhang Yimou directed *To Live* (*Huo zhe*, 1994). A short note on *To*

Live (*Huo zhe*, 1994), despite its triumph as a cinematic piece that stands on its own - our only real objection to the movie is that it does not really reflect the spirit of the novel. Having said that, although the movie does not hold to the true spirit of the novel, it does not diminish the fact that Zhang Yimou is seen by many as China’s principal modern filmmaker. At the core of the movie (and the novel) is its unflattering depiction of Commu-

nism. Predictably, even if it was the Grand Prize winner at the 1994 Cannes Film Festival and recipient of the Best Foreign Language Film award at the 1995 BAFTA Awards, *To Live* (*Huo zhe*, 1994) did not do well commercially in China. The movie examines the rise and fall of one family's fortunes, set against the milieu of China's chaotic 1940s through to the turbulent 1970s. Fugui (Ge You), as in the novel, is the never do well son of a once-wealthy family whose compulsion for gambling as well as his unremitting bad luck causes him to finally lose his home in a dice game with Long Er (Ni Dabong). Jiazhen (Gong Li), Fugui's wife, leaves him, and he finds himself impecunious until Long Er hands him shadow puppets -- a major departure from the novel. Fugui studies the art of puppetry and becomes a traveling performer. While on the road, Fugui is arrested by Nationalist forces. The shift in narrative proves to be a distinct but productive departure from the printed narrative.

In the novel, Fugui is going into town to look for a doctor for his ailing mother. The impact of this is not felt in the movie. The loss of the mother is blamed on his not being able to get a doctor to help her, and the sudden departure of Fugui is seen as a return to his gambling -- which Jiazhen refuses to believe. Fugui is liberated by advancing Red Army factions; when he arrives home to

his wife and children, they adjust to the country's new leadership. Fugui effects yet another transformation in the movie much like he does in the novel. While once a lazy "player," Fugui promises to alter his ways. In the movie, he struggles to become a better worker and citizen. Conversely, in the novel, he struggles to become a better husband, father, and person. Fugui's problems are not over. The clan begins to realize that there is, looming just around the bend, the error of the Great Leap Forward. We argue that the movie is an examination of China's new regime being as corrupt and unfeeling as the Kuomintang.

As a form of resistance, this movie ranks second to none. *To Live* (*Huo zhe*, 1994) (along with other notable movies like Tian Zhuangzhuang's *Blue Kite* (*Lan feng zheng*, 1993) and Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* (*Ba wang bie ji*, 1993)¹, spoke out against the excesses of the Communist party. This critique resulted in the Chinese government banning several of these movies from the domestic box office upon release. Chen Kaige

¹ Perhaps one of the most hauntingly beautiful movies ever made. The movie is an examination of the strength of bonds created early in youth and the beauty that results from it. Leslie Cheung and Zhang Fengyi are magnificent as the two operatic wonders, and Gong Li plays the wife of Zhang Fengyi. Gong Li might play a small role but it is a pivotal one, and she does it with the range that she can draw from.

and Zhang Yimou shared a common rejection of the socialist-realist tradition, an act that was not popular among many previous Chinese directors.

Despite this almost heroic start, Fifth Generation Directors began making films that betrayed their socio-political roots. Inspired by the success of Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* (*Wo hu cang long*, 2000), Zhang Yimou began directing (although critically acclaimed) "Wuxia" movies such as *Curse of the Golden Flower* (*Man cheng jin dai huang jin jia*, 2006), *Hero* (*Ying xiong*, 2002), and *House of Flying Daggers* (*Shi mian mai fu*, 2004). These films were as far from the original critique roots as they could be. Instead, they exemplified images of

fantasy that carried no truths of Asian (in this case, Chinese) culture. Ironically, the blockbuster appeal opened the door for theater distribution in the West. This helped critics argue about falsely depicting Asian traditions to Western viewers. Since these were the only filmic images of "Eastern" culture, western viewers got a sense of what entertains but not what describes Chinese culture. There were no US theatrical releases of movies such as *To Live* (*Huozhe*, 1994), *Blue Kite* (*Lan feng zheng*, 1993), and *Farewell My Concubine* (*Ba wang bie ji*, 1993) – which had only limited release in film festivals. So, while these films brought recognition to Chinese cinema, it came at the cost of cultural misunderstanding.

FROM COMMERCE TO PROTEST, THEN A RETURN TO COMMERCE

There is a specific character to the selling out that takes place among the Fifth Generation. Zha barely conceals her accusation as she rhetorically questions if "he [Zhang Yimou] owes his popularity to the shrewd marketing of Oriental exotica to the West" (Zha, 1995: 94). This process is typified by marketing the mystique of the Asian woman as played out in Western male fantasies. Gong Li only became an acclaimed actress because she had the chance to practice in many

movie roles she got due to her star power. Already established is that most native Chinese feeling that the types of movies produced by the Fifth Generation in their later, more successful, careers are not an authentic portrayal of what they feel their culture to be. It can also be said that "this kind of film is really shot for the casual pleasure of foreigners" as we can see that Zhang Yimou owes most of his success to foreign audiences who are still amazed by his spectacle in movies such

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Despite Chen Kaige's original disdain for mass-marketing exoticized culture, he seems to have allowed himself to fit into this mold. Whereas Chen previously "denounced it openly as an era of hopeless cultural decline, when idealism was mocked, refinement and elegance shoved aside, and vulgarity reigned supreme," (Zha, 1995: 93) he has now proclaimed in his success that "when it comes to film making, money is the bottom line" (Zha, 1995: 97). It leads one to question if he, as an exemplar of the Fifth Generation, must conform to international mass market values in order to survive as a filmmaker. It is these reversals that call to question both Chen Kaige's and Zhang Yimou's artistic integrity. Others have vigorously argued against this reasoning stating that the current transformation, with its focus on aesthetics rather than social critique, carries its own integrity. Others argue that social critique is maintained. That does not seem to be the case, but in order to get recognized by international audiences, the filmmaker must, in the final analysis, sell to an audience.

The Cultural Revolution signified a period of individual strife and politbu-

ro repressive tactics, as Mao Zedong and his cohorts, including the terrifying Red Army, took hold of the country and imposed Mao's will upon the people of China. Life reflected what Mao desired, and entertainment, an especially important facet in the lives of the Chinese, was not excluded. Chinese films included a majority of works that portrayed the Maoists and the communist lifestyle in a celestial light, and, subsequently, "Chinese cinema often seemed to be one long reel of propaganda" (Zha, 1995: 86). Nonetheless, there existed a small contingent of brilliant, eclectic, and somewhat eccentric young filmmakers, who desired to "act [in] rebellion against the artistic strictures of Maoism" (Zha, 1995: 86). These Fifth Generation artists, as they are referred to, came after the "Fourth Generation" movement, one in which was emphasized a "focus of talk about China's distinctive history and heritage" (Zha, 1995: 86). The Fifth Generation movement, conversely, adopted a methodology that transcended the previously mentioned concept, reflecting a "general preoccupation with the true meaning of history and culture" (Zha, 1995: 87). Fifth Generational cinema worked to "challenge the way the Chinese viewed revolutionary history" (Kendall, 2000: 215). Mao had consistently utilized his own interpretation of historical events to exact his imperialistic will upon the people of China.

HAUNTED BY IDEOLOGY

After the passing of Mao, Fifth Generational filmmakers developed stories regarding Mao's methods to form their own alternative concepts about China and its rich history (Kendall, 2000: 215). Creative directors such as Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou were producing films that "challenged the dominant assumptions of Chinese history and explored new ways of presenting national and cultural identity" (Kendall, 2000: 216).

This movement undoubtedly upset communist ideological purists as Fifth Generational cinematic work condemned the Maoist period and looked glowingly on a Chinese society reimbued with Confucian philosophy. Additionally, a style that detached itself from the traditional propagandized works of previous decades and, now, emphasized a "preference for the grand gesture and [a] concern with the big picture", proved disconcerting to a society still influenced by a communist mindset (Zha, 1995: 87). Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou, however, transcended film and political barriers through their cinematic creations, such as *Yellow Earth* (*Huang tu di*, 1984), to give his Chinese audience an understanding of the new "open political environment" (Zha, 1995: 88). It is partially through their efforts that the slogan, "go to the world," became emblematic of a new

period within China (Zha, 1995: 88). On the one hand, one may look upon Fifth Generation filmmakers as sell-outs, so to speak. On the other hand, in defense of the Fifth Generation, they should also be lauded for their endeavors in helping to propel China into a new age of cultural and social development.

An analysis of the works of these Fifth Generation filmmakers warrants a further examination into how, exactly, these artists were affected by an age of alleged cultural enlightenment. How did the period in which Mao "ruled" impact the methods of Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, et al.? What life experiences did these Fifth Generation filmmakers endure to influence their distinctive approaches and styles? Finally, in what respect can one witness integrated elements of a once communist existence within recent Chinese film? One thing can be surmised: that the artists' personal understanding of the trials and troubles associated with the Cultural Revolution spawned an unparalleled and inimitable period of success within the Chinese film industry, and generated a new era of brilliant and revolutionary cinematic productions.

The Cultural Revolution was intended to generate an age of revolution and unparalleled progress when Mao first launched his foundational platforms of

change in August of 1966. Mao's rationale for initiating this sweeping reform was "to challenge Communist Party officials for their bourgeoisness and lack of revolutionary zeal" (Watkins). As the movement gained substantial ground, it "splintered into factions, all claiming fervent devotion to Chairman Mao" (Watkins). Thus, the dissection of the movement greatly contributed to a fragmented front typified by a lack of a centrally unified effort. What remained, consequently, was a

chaotic state in which power was seized by many Maoist conglomerates, while the pursuit of a united, cohesive People's Republic of China (PRC) was essentially abandoned. Subsequently, "disorder... emerg[ed] as different factions of the Red Guard and other radical movements fought each other for control" (Watkins). In turn, "the turmoil and disruptions of the Cultural Revolution led to a decline in industrial production of 12 percent between 1966 and 1968" (Watkins).

THE BOUNDARIES IMPOSED BY THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

While all aspects of Chinese life were dictated by the terms and conditions of the Cultural Revolution, film in particular was profoundly affected, primarily "because of two characteristic qualities: its origins and its popularizing potential" (Clark, 1983: 304). Mao and his Communist cohorts understood "film could not be taken lightly" as a powerful instrument of persuasion, chiefly because "it was the artistic form potentially most accessible to the greatest numbers and range of people" (Clark, 1983: 305). What occurred immediately after the implementation of policies associated with the Cultural Revolution was a complete forbiddance of any fiction-oriented cinema. Party officials, placed in charge of

"cultural policies" by Chairman Mao, devised "new notions of what film should be like," developing strict standards for cinematic works that prevented the dissemination of any material that challenged the principles of the Communist Party in question or even stimulated or aroused thought within the general population (Clark, 1983: 305).

Consequently, "the relative prosperity of film-making in the early 1960s was broken in 1964" as state criticisms regarding the nature of cinema brought "fiction film production in China... to a halt" (Clark, 1983: 305-306). Much of the overall discountenance displayed towards the filmmakers of China involved a personal distrust for Chinese film con-

glomerates (and any related individuals) and, interestingly, a party agenda to eradicate the careers of filmmakers and actors whom officials held vendettas against (Clark, 1983: 307). Subsequently, the state seized control of the Chinese film industry because “film circles were distrusted for personal and ideological reasons”; this distrust emanated from a commonly held Maoist belief in the causal effects of the Western world upon the mind-set of the filmmakers, whom Mao adamantly deemed to be apprentices of Western philosophy (Clark, 1983: 308).

Throughout this massive ordeal, approximately 3000 films: features, documentaries and foreign films, were sealed and stored in warehouses. The People’s Republic of China produced several polished ideological melodramas tailored as propagandized instruments to arouse deliberate sentiment within the public. The stranglehold exhibited upon the film industry of China eliminated any artistic integrity and created mechanical, unconscious, and seemingly emotionless cinematic works. Soon after the fall of the Gang of Four and the end of the

Cultural Revolution, it became apparent that the actions of Mao and his party officials had stymied the impressive progress that the film industry had made only fifteen years earlier.

Only two years after the demise of Mao, “a high proportion of the over 60 new fiction films were drawn from old scripts,” much to the dismay of the public, who expressed dissatisfaction with “the dull predictability of plot, the falseness of characterization, exaggeration of acting, [and] tedious pacing of exposition” (Clark, 1983: 312-313). Recognizing the utterly putrefied state of the film industry, the recently modified government of China, now led by Deng Xiaoping, developed a “policy of reform and liberalization,” a collection of modified guidelines that stemmed “from the 1978 meeting of the Central Committee of the C.C.P.” that “led to the reopening of the Beijing Film Academy” (Kendall, 2000: 215). This vital action would soon set in motion the rise of the Fifth Generation of filmmakers, a faction of the most talented and gifted screenwriters and directors yet.

WRESTLING WITH MAO’S GHOSTS

The overwhelming success of the Fifth Generation has much to do with the composition of themes imbedded within

the movement itself. The Fifth Generation is characterized by its ability “to act as something of a landmark -- breaking with

the binding didacticism of social realism, [and] encouraging discussions about national identity while contextualizing the formation of ethnographic knowledge" (Kendall, 2000 p. 216). This ability stems from the personal experiences of the filmmakers themselves; these individuals all endured a life manipulated and controlled by the strictures of a repressive communist regime, and a charismatic yet apparently delusional premier in Chairman Mao. In transcending the barriers established by the ruling party, they utilized the medium of film to convey the frequent difficulties that encumbered them as young individuals.

This methodology, however, presented for Fifth Generation members, a "two-dimensional contradiction: on the one hand [they] aimed to sweep the obstacles to modernization by disapproving traditional Chinese culture; on the other hand, it depended on the roots-searching to revisit the origins of national culture" (Ma, 2006). Likewise, semblances of Maoist principle, to some extent, remained ingrained within Fifth Generation members. For instance, although an overall approach in Fifth Generation film production involves confronting forces between the homogenizing official discourse *vis-à-vis* anti-establishment Western ideologies in the context of globalization, the Fifth generation has "played an unexpected role in promoting a new kind of cultural

nationalism", [one in which] makes them 'complicit' in the international arena" (Ma, 2006). The seemingly paradoxical nature of the Fifth Generation provides tremendous credence to its unparalleled success, as it works to remind people of the misfortunes of the past while, simultaneously, presenting hope for a unified society that can work to become a dominant force within an increasingly globalized society.

One comes to understand, through this cursory examination of the Fifth Generation, that "these films are, in reality, direct products of historic tragedy - the 'cultural revolution' and the 'educated youth movement'" (Yuankai, 2002: 2). In cinematic works such as *Yellow Earth* (Huang tu di, 1984), *Farewell My Concubine* (Ba wang bie ji, 1993), and *Raise the Red Lantern* (Da hong deng long gao gao gua, 1991), each possesses unique themes that speak to the personal youth experiences of the filmmaker while maintaining facets of optimism. It is the very event of the Cultural Revolution, which the filmmakers were subjected to, that "became imprinted on their consciousness in their youth... [and] predetermined their destiny..., [ultimately serving as a] source of inspiration that is reflected in [their] films" (Yuankai, 2002: 2). Nonetheless, it is not for the aforementioned reason alone that these Fifth Generation films are so revered, but rather for the inclusion of "innovative concepts" that incorporate con-

temporary “international aesthetic trends” and appeal to audiences of a global spectrum (Yuankai, 2002: 2). Thus, the *modus operandi* that has come to exemplify the works of the Fifth Generation involves a symbiotic approach, one that unites elements of modernity (in line with the methods utilized throughout Hollywood) with vital traditional aspects that represent the period endured under Mao and the communist ruling party.

A particularly phenomenal aspect of Fifth Generation films is the inclusion of strong humanistic elements within its contextual themes. The presence of these elements is significantly ironic, especially considering the “dehumanizing nature [of the Cultural Revolution], matched by few other events of history” (Lan, 2004: 193). Within Joan Chen’s *Xiu Xiu: The Sent-Down Girl* (*Tian yu*, 1998), the tale of a young girl who is “sent to work in China’s remote rural areas during the Cultural Revolution,” Chen works to illustrate the government’s extremely repressive and dehumanizing tactics (Lan, 2004: 193). In utilizing the figure of Xiu Xiu, Chen attempts to convey to the audience “how the Revolution destroy[ed]

what makes life worth living -- love, beauty, and youthful visions -- and how it reduces humanity to bestiality that preys on the weak and powerless” (Lan, 2004: 194).

Chen Kaige’s *Farewell My Concubine* (*Ba wang bie ji*, 1993) also acts to express the horrors of the Cultural Revolution, undertaking a “frank look at homosexuality”, and demonstrating the intolerance and cruelty displayed by Mao towards his own people (Ansen and Nickerson, 1993: 75). Chen’s anger at the execution of repressive policies throughout the Revolution impelled him to construct a film that “portray[s] the human cost of war and the constant political upheaval” (Rafferty, 2007). His exploration of human relationships within China during the reign of Mao questions one’s ability “to remain true to anyone or anything: an art, an ideal, a friend, a wife, oneself”, without falling victim to the oppressive devices of the Communist Politburo (Rafferty, 2007). This film remains one of the quintessential examples of the Fifth Generation movement and is indicative of an age marked by increasing tolerance, but not full liberality.

CONCLUSION

Despite the many obstacles faced by Fifth Generation members through-

out their careers, they have continued to circumnavigate the imposed political

and social boundaries to create transcendent films that speak to the global masses. Out of the ashes of one of the most oppressive eras in China's history evolved some of the most magnificent and inspirational artistic works ever. The Fifth Generation of filmmakers has undoubtedly been shaped and molded by the hardships suffered as a collective unit throughout the privation of the Cultural Revolution. The brilliant, exceptional, and eclectic cinematic works produced by the likes of Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou, and Tian Zhuangzhuang, etc. have left an indelible imprint upon the people of China; the inimitability of these films has elicited, within China, a multitude of emotions that are derived from one of the most turbulent and troubling periods ever. Although "films about the Cultural Revolution [have come] to seem increasingly irrelevant to the younger generation[s]," these works continue to be the archetypical evidence of a ruinous era for a resilient Chinese population ("Generation Five", 2005 p. 81). Moreover, despite "the economic changes that [are] taking place within China itself" that necessitates a "mimic[ing] [of]...Hollywood imports," many of the Fifth Generation filmmakers have been able to adapt to the pressures of demand and produce works that fall within the popular context of society ("Generation five", 2005 p. 81). No

longer can we simply pigeonhole the films of the Fifth Generation into a small categorical niche; rather, we must recognize the thematic universal language of these cinematic works and appreciate their comprehensive relevance to all of humanity.

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