# Salvation through Surrender: A Textual Analysis of Global Cultural Economy

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## ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to delineate the sometimes subtle, sometimes direct influence of transnational capital in the formation and transformation of the so-called "fifth generation" filmmaking style. Through a comparative textual analysis of two films made by Chen Kaige at different times, the author tries to capture the shadow of the global market—increasingly a shaping force for Chen's movies—as this is registered in the shifts and twists of the signifying processes in the two films. The claim will be that in the second film, Chen's desire to critically engage and intervene in the ambiguous and complex socio-cultural space of a China in historical transformation has been diminished, and redirected toward producing more obvious oppositions and thus toward greater stability of identities. The director's serious commitment to reform in the first film has dissipated in the second, where any possibility of real change is dismissed. The point is that the global market demands the stabilization of representation(s) of the quintessential Chinese, the eternal Orient, the cultural space of the "other." "Old China" need no longer be deployed as an historical moment for reflection in order that we may transcend it; it is now depicted as an aesthetic object for our enjoyment, our self-recognition through gazing at the fantastic otherness of a far-away culture.

## KEY WORDS

globalization
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The "fifth generation" directors and their movies have so far been the most discussed topics in western theoretical circles interested in mainland Chinese cinema, to the extent that this small group of films produced during a specific historical period are taken as the ultimate incarnation of the "national cinema" of China. The "fifth generation" is often described as a coherent, homogeneous and self-conscious group of filmmakers initiating and developing an aesthetic revolution to modernize Chinese film language. Such framing creates the myth that celebrates its ontological autonomy and canonical status on two levels. On the level of form, the "fifth generation" is praised for their original experiments in the technology of vision—their "spectacular" use of static shots, fascinating colors and unconventional editing. On the level of content, it is described as a group of disguised political dissidents, informed by the common experience of disillusionment in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, taking the detour of filmic representation of traditional Chinese culture to criticize the Chinese political system. What is mythological about such a discourse is not that it gets the facts wrong—incentives for stylistic reforms and critical reflections on recent Chinese history are indeed part of the mobilizing force behind the praxis of this group of young filmmakers. However, simply describing the "fifth generation" as a cinematic revolution carried out by socially concerned young film directors against the political and aesthetic *status quo* in China conceals the presence of a global process that influences and to varying degrees shapes the outcome of such a cultural phenomenon.

While new filmmakers were shocking the domestic audience with their uncompromising aesthetics, they began to attract the attention of the international art film market and theoretical circles. Tony Rayns' description of the coming into being of the new Chinese cinema is very revealing here. Not only is the significance of the films marked by the

fact that "the sales staff of the China Film Corporation found themselves with their first-ever palpable success" because of overseas orders, but also the birth date of the "fifth generation" is really April 12, 1985, when Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* was shown at the Hong Kong Film Festival and took the audience by storm—"It was the night that Chinese cinema came of age, and its echoes have been heard around the world ever since."[1] The emergence of a new cinematic awakening in China, it seems, is premised on the existence of an international audience. As Zhang Xudong observes,

> This suggests the importance of the gaze of the other for the making of a national genre. The laborious channeling of two realms of experience—a postmodern West and a postrevolutionary China—has been the underlying dynamism for the New Chinese Cinema [. . .]. The global symbolic network and the international market have been a constant presence in the coming into being of the New Cinema: it is under their gaze that the New Cinema has picked up the emblems of national culture.[2]

Obviously, the presence of a global force in the definition and construction of a national genre points at the burning question of how to conceptualize the contradictory and power-ridden landscape of globalization, manifested here in the realm of cultural production and representation.

George Lipsitz argues that the global flow of cultural products enabled by the power of commercial networks and technological innovations, though fraught with dangers of manipulation, distortion and control, presents real opportunities for cross-border alliances unbounded by geographical places and unhampered by lack of actual physical mobility. The contemporary conditions under transnational capitalism, though not entirely free from the "residual contradictions of centuries of colonialism, class domination, and racism," represent "fundamentally new geographical and economic realities."[3] The emancipatory power of global commercial culture, claimed by Lipsitz, lies in the

radical multiplicity of meaning-making and interpretations enabled by institutions of mobility (immigration, transnational corporations). The excess of meaning and unpredictability of interpretations foster the type of communication and understanding that can be resistant to domination and oppression. At the same time, however, he also acknowledges that the danger of irresponsible interpretation, of oppressive appropriation and of violent monopoly over meaning also arises from the same institutional source.

Calling the process of global cultural formation and transformation a "dangerous crossroads," Lipsitz avoids the dichotomy of either blindly celebrating the infinite manipulation of meanings or being totally dismissive of any potential for resistance. This position is similar to that of Appadurai, who claims that the global movements of people, money, technology, images and ideological discourses are better characterized as fundamentally disjunctive and chaotically complex, rather than easily explainable through theoretical thinking. While pointing out that the global process in its own contradictions can be made to serve resistance and liberation as well as domination and exploitation, he insists that the specific workings, interconnections and directions of these forces are "profoundly unpredictable."[4] If the only possible theoretical "take" on globalization is that and power formations and deformations which cannot be theoretically grasped and analyzed must be merely contingent, what is left is an eclecticism that assumes a radical randomness of interpretations and practices. Thus, by not accounting for the relative power relations among different modes of signifying processes, Appadurai ultimately severs the connection between enabling or limiting conditions and the types of discourses produced out of these conditions. Global capitalism almost becomes a neutral carrier through which indefinite varieties of signification activities take place, with no guarantee of the relative stability and hegemony of any particular formation of discourse.

This, nevertheless, cannot explain the actual existence of the hegemony of certain discursive fields over others, no matter how temporary, unstable and incomplete this hegemony is described as being. Stuart Hall reminds us that "we all write and speak from a particular

place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always 'in context,' *positioned*."[5] This positioning by "dominant regimes of representation" is underpinned by concrete, historical formations of economic, cultural and political powers, which mobilize palpable pressures to stabilize and naturalize hegemonic forms of representation. Moreover, the primary object of analysis by Lipsitz—popular music—with its relatively smaller degree of dependence on capital and institutional support, may lend itself more easily to the theorization of the flexibility and instability of cultural meanings. When looking at a technological and capital intensive medium such as film, it is harder to dismiss the limiting power of dominant institutions without whose support production could not take place, even for films which make no attempt to be "deviant" or challenging.

Despite the reasonable critique of his essentializing tendencies, Said rightfully warns against the easy satisfaction with radical fluidity and multiplicity of meanings and suggests that we dwell on the partial fixation of specific dominant discourses a little longer and study their conditions of existence and reproduction. For Said, the discourse of orientalism is not simply one false way of interpretation that can be corrected once the excess of meaning is laid bare and a counter discursive field made available by critical interventions like his. The tenacity of the discourse, as he observes, lies in its mutually enabling relationship with a whole set of institutions that construct, strive to perpetuate and justify the uneven power relationships, in his case, between the "West" and the "Orient." The "Orient" not only exists in the imagination of western people, but it takes up material forms in everyday practices mediated through institutions that have an investment in maintaining the present colonial or neo-colonial power relations.[6] Many have argued that globalization as an economic and cultural process does not necessarily result in the debilitation of national sovereignty or the elimination of difference(s) in culture. It is, ironically, dependent on certain forms of governmentality facilitating the flow of capital and on the construction of the "uniqueness" of national cultures that legitimizes their membership in global capitalism.[7] Thus it encourages production of local or national identities that are static and ready for ex-

change on the global image market. The real limiting power of the hegemonic discourse lies, therefore, in its ability to insist on simplicity, fixity and stability of meanings and identities. The paradigm of easy recognizability and clear-cut dichotomy reduces complex movements into identifiable objects and therefore renders them understandable and manageable. Given the disturbing history of China's traumatic encounter with the "West" and of its subsequent revolutions that constantly shatter and redefine not only a clear image of "China" but also the established terms that govern its relationship with the "West," there is a need on the side of the "West" to give "China" a more secure, stabilized, distanced and less frightening "identity."

The objectification of China, then, either turns it into the exotic "Other" whose radical difference from the "West" should be safely patronized and kept in its own place, or pictures it as the disturbing "Other" whose threatening force to transform the present power landscape should be contained or celebrated depending on ideological affiliations. On both readings the ontological status of the "Other" is reinscribed rather than challenged, which produces a force field in which any individual utterance is automatically mapped onto the supposed representation of a uniform identity of China as different from and opposed to the equally unproblematic "West." How then can we understand China as an internally complex, diverse and contradictory place, only "externally" related to the uneven global process of social transformation? Can there still be a discursive space in which a multiplicity of dialogues, critiques, interventions and reforms may take place? Such a space does exist, I would argue, but under extremely circumscribed and "pressurized" conditions; any such dialogues must face the powerful cry for stability of identity and transparency of meaning, the violent threat of reduction *via* cultural colonization.

In the following pages, I will compare and contrast two movies by Chen Kaige, a "fifth generation" director highly successful at major international film festivals in Europe and North America. My purpose here is to demonstrate, through highlighting a specific shift of signifying style from one movie to another, the partial or micro-process through which the director's initial effort to critically engage and inter-

vene in the ambiguous and complex socio-cultural space of a China in historical transformation is diminished, and redirected toward producing obvious oppositions or dichotomies, thus a greater stability of identities. Thus I will also be showing how Chen's serious commitment to the issue of reform in the first film is abandoned in the second, where the possibility of any real socio-cultural change is no longer recognized.

The coming into being of the "fifth generation" means the negotiation of various discursive and institutional forces—from the inertia of China's reforming institutions to the audience's resistance to new innovations in film language, to the selective support and pressure of major international film festivals. The urge to reform, as Rey Chow points out, has been central to the artistic endeavors of fifth generation filmmakers. Casting their penetrating cameras deep into China's history and its remotest rural areas, their movies offer a unique angle from which to re-evaluate traditional Chinese culture and the historical efforts toward change. The tone of early fifth generation films is highly ambiguous, imbued with both nostalgia for a past civilization and a strong desire for reform. The self-reflective style lays bare the contradictions and sufferings of history without jumping into hasty judgments, clear-cut categorizations and definite solutions. This however becomes offensive to the mainstream rhetoric that derives its legitimacy from a linear history of progress, and also alienates many film viewers who are used to seeing clarity of meaning and clear resolutions on the big screen.

The influence of international festivals has gradually become more prominent as "fifth generation" movies have become increasingly dependent on international recognition and the global market to thrive, given their unconventional moves vis-à-vis domestic institutional inertia and viewing habits. International recognition backed up by art-cinema distributors helps to counter-balance the domestic pressure dictating clarity of meaning from a film industry long invested in the aesthetics of socialist realism and an audience accustomed to the narrative structure of melodrama. Aesthetic innovations by the "fifth generation" that elude dichotomization and frustrate the desire for trans-

parent identification have thus been able to emerge and develop in China due to the rising desire for reform which is closely tied to China's increasing inclusion in global networks of power. So too international film festivals support experiments in deconstruction and ambiguity only to the extent that these counter-balance so-called "Chinese communism." The global commercial system demands its own stability of meanings that will secure marketability and reproducibility; this means carving out a space for the (orientalized) cultural "Other" that is China and Chinese art film. Thus the temporary tolerance of ambivalence cannot last long in the face of pressures to produce more recognizable and identifiable images and meanings.

The first of Chen Kaige's two movies to be discussed here, *Yellow Earth*, was the director's debut film; its success in Locarno and several other film festivals in 1984 marks the beginning of a continuous flow of Chinese "new wave" films into international festivals. It is also widely agreed that this movie, whose cinematographer was Zhang Yimou, opens a new space for the subsequent aesthetic innovation and exploration of the fifth generation.[8] The second film, *Farewell My Concubine*, produced in 1993, can be considered as marking the peak of Chen's career if it is measured in terms of success at international festivals. The movie collected the Palm D'Or at Cannes and the Golden Globe Award for Best Foreign Film, as well as getting an Oscar nomination for Best Foreign Language Film. His several movies in between were frequently nominated but fell short of winning any significant award. By contrasting these two movies, then, the first representing the initial effort of deconstruction and reform and the second the establishment of a new paradigm, one can see the process by which an aesthetic revolution, whose dynamic potential lies in its insistence on the mode of questioning and ambiguity, is gradually short-circuited by the reductive global commercial pressures toward simplicity of meaning and the simplistic dichotomization of West/China. Paralleling the obvious road to success in terms of fame and market recognition is that other, far more problematic and frustrating road of an aesthetic transformation moving not toward liberation but rather toward mere "reproduction."

The story of *Yellow Earth* is a simple one. A communist soldier goes to a remote village to collect folk songs and tries to pass on revolutionary ideas to the oppressed people there. The raw materials of the story are by no means unfamiliar. Countless films, books and dramas deal with the narrative of the liberation and enlightenment of peasants during the anti-imperialist war against Japan and the socialist revolution led by the Communist Party. In earlier artistic representations of that part of Chinese history, under the guidance of socialist realism, the class oppression, patriarchy and backward feudal mentality of peasants are represented and critiqued in the light of a clear, viable and inevitable future alternative (communism). Since this concrete image of the future has to be clearly visible within the work of art (e.g. the film), the artist must present social contradictions in their most transparent forms and guarantee to the viewers the overcoming of these contradictions at the story's end. The significance of *Yellow Earth*'s ambiguity has to be understood and appreciated against this background of a strong literary tradition that demands clarity. But what makes *Yellow Earth* unique and radically new is just its refusal to provide such simple clarity and closure. By dwelling on the contradictions and exploring their "mutual constitution" as well as opposition, that is, by insisting on an ambiguous attitude toward the relationship between the *status quo* and the forces of change, the movie demands an understanding of socio-political and economic contradiction as an ongoing and complex process rather than offering any comfortable guarantee of its solution. Its untraditional treatment of the traditional themes of oppression and enlightenment sets the film apart from others.

## Oppression

The peasants in the movie are certainly oppressed. The barren land on which they cultivate crops, the minimal and miserable quality of their life, and the expressionless faces and voiceless bodies of the Chinese peasantry all point to the conviction that something is wrong in the society. However, the movie refrains from identifying any definite source of these sufferings. At the beginning a voice-over tells the audi-

ence that vast areas of north China are still under the domination of the Nationalist reactionaries and that the peasants live a miserable life as a result. In the actual story, however, there are no evil landlords who mercilessly exploit the poor, defenseless peasants, as might be expected. All the film's characters live a diminished life. The only visible culprit is the infertile yellow earth, which is at the mercy of a capricious Yellow River. It could be read as meaning that the imperatives of human survival have put huge pressures on the local environment and have resulted in degenerated ecological conditions.[9] However, as presented by Zhang Yimou's aesthetically stunning cinematography, the land appears beautiful and dignified. The long still shots of the landscape, whose endless yellow earth and blue sky highlight the supposed origin of Chinese civilization for viewers who know their Chinese history, seem to be contemplating the longevity of the culture rather than condemning the destructive force of nature. To those who are less informed, however, the landscapes do not provide any easily recognizable cultural icon by which to anchor the image of "China," nor do they offer any convenient explanations for the human condition represented. The inconsistency between text and picture, the ambiguous attitude toward the human condition here depicted, successfully deconstruct the previous master narrative with its privileging of class oppresssion as the predominant if not only source of human suffering.

If class oppression is downplayed in this movie, the oppressive force of patriarchy plays a central role. Though Cuiqiao is forced by her father to marry in exchange for money, the film's refusal to mobilize technologies of identification and interpellation ultimately frustrates any attempt to establish a comfortable dichotomy between the oppressor (father) and the oppressed (daughter), or between the oppressor (father) and the liberator (Gu Qing). When Gu Qing challenges the custom of arranged marriage and tells the girl's family that women in Yan'an (the red capital city) are free to choose their own husbands, the father replies, "What? They just go away with men? With no money paid? How come they are deemed so worthless?" Gu answers, reminding Chinese viewers of scenes in which the young Communist teaches revolutionary ideas to the masses, "Our women are priceless, but they

are not for sale [. . .]. Uncle, things have to change. The south has changed. The north has to change, too. All of China has to change." Yet instead of stirring revolutionary excitement, the remark is responded to coldly: "Our peasants have their own rules." Just as we expect this exchange to establish the father as the recalcitrant patriarch, the medium shot of his weathered face and his quiet but dignified manner destabilizes this identification. The camera lingers on the father's wrinkled face for several seconds; the face is expressionless, signifying that he is not convinced by Gu's remarks and that there is great depth to this mind that cannot be easily objectified or essentialized in a single shot. The face is captured in its full integrity and conviction, like an oil painting, which makes it harder for the audience to feel that they have the right to be judgmental about him.

The complexity of the father is shown later in the movie, when he asks Gu whether what he has said about the liberation of women in Yan'an is true, showing that he himself is excited, though very much subdued and cynical, by the possibility that his daughter might have a better future. Before Cuiqiao's forced marriage, he explains to his daughter tearfully that half of the money he will get for her must be used to bury her mother and the other half to secure a wife for her brother. The helplessness of his situation makes it hard to make the simple, moralistic dichotomy between the "evil" father who merely makes a profit from his daughter and the daughter as victim of patriarchal tyranny. Something larger is binding both of them, making them both victims. To further destabilize the identification of the father with the evils of patriarchy, the folk song he sings for Gu before he leaves is about the suffering of a woman under the institution of arranged marriage. The bitterness of the tone expresses empathy rather than cold-hearted objectification of woman's experience as the "other".

Gu Qing, the "outsider," seems at first to have the most directly recognizable identity—he personifies the enlightened ideology, questioning, challenging, striving to lead the people out of the feudal institution of patriarchy. Throughout his interactions with the girl's family members he acts as an agent of intervention and change. Most of the "enlightening" conversations take place while he is laboring together

with the family. Cuiqiao is most impressed when she sees Gu Qing doing needlework, a "women's job" as she has always been told; this detail no doubt makes his description of new lifestyles in Yan'an more convincing to Cuiqiao and contributes to her ultimate decision to reject her feudal marriage and join the army. However, even Gu's position as the clear-cut challenger of oppression is not conveniently secured all through the narrative. When Cuiqiao stops him on his way back and asks to go with him, he declines by saying, "We have rules. You have to apply and get permission first." She wonders, "Can't rules be changed?" His response drives her into silence and despair: "We depend on the rules to gain victories." In this fleeting moment, Cuiqiao is turned from a passive victim into a challenger of the establishment while Gu Qing becomes the accomplice of a patriarchal *status quo* that continues to frustrate women's desire for self-liberation. The film thus blurs the lines between the old and new, conservative and revolutionary, feudalism and socialism. It interrogates history both in its breaks and in its continuity. Ambiguity opens the historical space and reveals its contradictions; rather than a celebration of certainty and closure there is an implicit cry for further change.

## Enlightenment

"Yellow Earth"'s skeptical treatment of (socialist) "enlightenment" has been its most controversial element when facing domestic pressures. Despite the soldier's efforts, his mission has largely failed. The majority of the (male) peasants seem to be utterly uninterested and untouched by Gu Qing's interventions. They continue to marry their daughters in exchange for money and pray for rain from the "dragon king"; Gu's brief stay has left no trace. An overriding feature of this film is silence. Besides Gu Qing, all the other characters are extremely reluctant to talk. There is little background music to give the audience a clear clue as to the mental state of the characters, who also lack vibrant bodily gestures and facial expressions. Gu Qing is often trapped in embarrassing situations where others are too indifferent or "distanced" to engage in any prolonged conversation with him. The withdrawal

from language (and thus, in effect, from culture) makes the mission of enlightenment difficult to achieve. It also makes the scenes ambiguous, difficult for the audience to interpret. Are the peasants scared by, not interested in, or critical of Gu Qing and the force of reform he represents? Or are they simply slow and subtle in showing that they are intrigued by him, like Cuiqiao and Hanhan? Instead of talking, the characters use singing to express their extended feelings, but the singing is mostly done without Gu present, even though the aim of his trip is to collect folk songs from which to extract the "voice" of the suffering people. Thus, when Hanhan laments Gu's departure and when Cuiqiao voluntarily tries to talk him into bringing her along and sings to see him off, we feel the communicatory gap is just beginning to be bridged.

However, the inclination of Cuiqiao and Hanhan to follow Gu, which could be read as the younger generation's propensity for change, remains forever incomplete. When Cuiqiao leaves to join the army we hear her singing a revolutionary song in the darkness; but then there is an abrupt silence, as if perhaps she has accidentally drowned, and can never reach her destination. Hanhan is the only one who leaves the giant prayer meeting and runs toward the soldier, who has appeared on the horizon. We see him waving his hand, running against the crowd and shouting something we cannot hear because the peasants are praying so loudly. After a shot showing Gu approaching the crowd, the next cut tells us that Hanhan is not making much progress in his effort to reach the young soldier. He is staying in almost the same position, his forward movement counter-balanced by the movement of those who are pushing him back in the opposite direction. Then the movie ends with a reverse shot of the empty yellow earth; Gu Qing has also disappeared. Hanhan's final reaching out toward the symbol of (his) enlightenment, the symbol of revolution and change is eternally suspended; the movie's own narrative gives it no final guarantee.

This is a very shocking representation of Chinese peasantry for both domestic Chinese institutions and the Chinese audience, who are used to positive eulogies of peasants shedding their feudal yoke and contributing heroically to the revolution. For many the film gives too much weight to the tenacity of historical and cultural inertia, signifying

an "indulgence of poverty and backwardness, projecting a negative image of the country";[10] it also unbearably postpones, within its own frame of reference, the possibility of (socio-political, cultural) enlightenment. Yet not surprisingly, its seeming evasion of "official" socialist narratives both aesthetically and ideologically is what boosts its visibility in the international market and intellectual discourse. However, this international appreciation is also not devoid of its own reductionist tendencies, so long as the film's celebrated ambiguity is not merely the rejection of a rigid, dogmatic account of historical change but has as well a vested interest in the necessity and absolute value of change at any cost. To tame and stabilize this "excess," a "reverse" interpretive framework needs to be generalized, as Yau reflects:

> The China that partakes in the world's market economy no longer operates in an "ideological context" that is uniquely Chinese (as it had during the Cultural Revolution). Inevitably (and maybe unfortunately), this changing, modernizing "ideological context" in China also informs the "avant-gardist" project of *Yellow Earth* which has focused its criticism only on the patriarchal and feudal ideologies of that culture. Arguably, then, *Yellow Earth*'s modernist power of critique of Chinese culture and history comes from its subtextual, noncritical proposition of capitalist-democracy as an alternative; it is (also arguably) this grain in the text that attracts the global-intellectual as well.[11]

Yet in fact there is little in Chen's film to signify that what is criticized is "uniquely Chinese" or that a critique of the *status quo* is necessarily an implicit desire for "capitalist-democracy." Such a reading by international audiences, as Yau points out to us, is performed within a loaded identificatory framework and tries to squeeze unfamiliar representations into clear-cut categories. Dichotomies are re-established with a vengeance here—West/China, democracy/patriarchy, modern/pre-modern. By reducing modernism to capitalism and China to feudalist pre-modernism, such a simplistic "international" reading of

the film forgets that socialism is a signifier closely entangled with the dynamics of modern social change, dynamics which are by no means exclusively "Chinese." The film's effort to interrogate the unity and mutual constitution of opposites within an already "modernizing" historical moment, and its implication that this "moment" is still alive in China and the rest of the world today, have been violently short-circuited by a discursive logic that strives to carve out an isolated space for "China," "feudalism," "pre-modern," "patriarchy" and, conveniently, also "socialism" (or "communism"), so that all interpretations and critiques, indeed any real appreciation of the film, can only come from the safe and uncontaminated vantage point of "the West," "capitalism" and "democracy." The later *Farewell My Concubine* can be seen to bear the scars of such ideological and discursive violence; it itself confirms that violence by its own logic.

*Farewell My Concubine* is the title of a traditional Peking opera. Two boys are trained to perform the roles of the king and the concubine respectively. After enduring the unspeakable hardships of training, they become stars. The "concubine" Cheng Dieyi absorbs himself entirely into the role he plays and hopes to stick together with his partner Duan Xiaolou, who plays the king, for the rest of their lives until "death does them part," as the moral of the play suggests. Duan Xiaolou, however, separates drama and reality more clearly. He marries a prostitute, Juxian; afterward the two "women" become rivals for the heart of the man. A sweeping representation of the upheavals of modern Chinese history from the 1920s to the end of the Cultural Revolution (late 1970s) accompanies their story and functions as the shifting background against which the drama of loyalty and betrayal is played out.

Several elements make this movie seem the perfect "oriental spectacle" when it is presented to international film festivals and circulated in international (mainly western) markets. Peking opera, the main thread of the film's story, is a highly stylized type of theatre that places supreme emphasis on forms. There are meticulous specifications of costumes, facial paintings, stage displays and body movements, to the extent that the formal arrangements visualize character types and emotional states. With only a minimal knowledge of the art form, the

audience will be overwhelmed by the exoticism of the clothes, the horrifically painted faces and the acrobatic stage performances. Considering the fact that the complexities of Peking opera and its overloaded historical and cultural meanings are alien to most contemporary Chinese as well, albeit to a lesser degree, its most significant function in the movie is an iconic one—to obviously signify "China". The allegorical function of the play itself in the narrative of the movie can only be fully picked up by audiences with more specialized knowledge and experience. Including representations of the performers' abuse by opera fans like the old eunuch and the warlords, the whole filmic space becomes one of oriental despotism, mysticism, sexual promiscuity and perversity. Even the punctuation of personal life by historical events in no way shatters the static image of "old China" as something almost identical with the bizarre melodrama played on the Peking opera stage. Traumatic events in Chinese history—the Japanese invasion, Civil War, Liberation Army entering Beijing, and Cultural Revolution—are used to reinforce certain turning points in the love triangle of the three main characters. Moving away from the serious concern with historical criticism and reflection characteristic of Chen's earlier films, history in this movie is epitomized as the changing *mise-en-scene* of an eternal love story. Days and events have become empty signifiers that discard their signified—the real violence of history. Dai Jinhua claims:

> Everything presented in the movie signifies "China" too obviously. However, it neither reaches toward the history of China—real or false, nor does it point at China's present. Everything is but a stained mirror image in the "oriental spectacle"; everything is but a necessary ingredient in Chen Kaige's beloved Cannes menu.[12]

Perhaps the success of self-othering techniques mobilized in the movie can be more convincingly verified by the following comments given by a western critic on the film's three central characters:

> Their journey would be story enough to sustain this

> film that was co-winner of the Grand Prize at the Cannes Festival, but something far more disturbing is going on here in the form of massive cross-cultural shock. The tale of the two boys details the awful brutality that permeates their training. The realization that brutality is the accepted norm washes over a westerner who waits and hopes in vain for some restraining force that never comes. What sets in is the chilling certainty that human life is valued very differently in the two cultures.
>
> Director Chen Kaige has directed an excellent cast in a grand historical drama, but perhaps his greater service is that he alerts Americans and Europeans to the profound differences that will confront us as two ancient cultures meet and begin to interact in the next millennium.[13]

It is hardly the orientalist arrogance of the western critic alone that produces this kind of reading; the film's self-orientalizing maneuvers have re-inscribed the west/China dichotomy strongly enough to secure the "right" type of interpretation. Ellis is also partially right in seeing that the film conveys a redemptive attitude toward violence, although this tolerance is not applied equally to all forms of violence inflicted by different historical players.

To find the dividing line between the "good" and "evil" practices of brutality, it is necessary first to discuss the "moral lesson" of the film. It is taught to the boys of the opera troupe by their teacher, after a grotesque show of violence. Dieyi and another boy run away from the troupe, not being able to endure the hardship and cruelty of the training any more. However, the scene of an established star being crazily admired by fans moves them so deeply that they go back voluntarily, knowing that what awaits them is a severe physical punishment. Too scared by the bloody spectacle of Dieyi being beaten, the other boy hangs himself. Without any condemnation of the brutality of the teacher, he is shown to teach the boys solemnly the true essence of the story *Farewell My Concubine*: "The Chu king is a great hero, but fate is against him and he is defeated by the Han army [. . .]. In the end, only

his horse and concubine are still with him. He asks the horse to leave, the horse refuses. He asks his concubine to leave, the woman refuses. She takes out the king's sword and kills herself. Human beings should be like this—to be loyal to One until the end of life. People have to know their places and carry out their duties." Thus the boy, not the teacher, is at fault because he is not loyal to the opera, not reconciled to the place (or lot) that fate has assigned him. His suspicion of the establishment and gesture of rebellion are punished by a violent death, even if at his own hands.

The teacher's violence is further redeemed by Dieyi's ultimate absorption into "Oneness" with the concubine he plays on stage and his obsession with Peking opera. The moral lesson, though brutally enforced, creates the "true human being" Cheng Dieyi with whom the film's sympathy clearly lies. Whereas his obsession with Xiaolou necessitates a series of fights with Juxian, finally forcing Xiaolou to betray both of them during the Cultural Revolution, his obsession with Peking opera sets him against different political currents in China and determines his consistent indifference to them as long as he is still allowed to perform.

Thus, a clear dichotomy is set up between the kind of historical violence that does not interfere and endanger Dieyi's practice of loyalty toward the "One"—Peking opera as his career and Xiaolou as his life partner—and the kind that does. The eunuch's sexual abuse of him, a rich fan's manipulation and even the Japanese army's invasion of China are all forgiven because "they understand and love Peking opera." In the court that accuses him of performing for the Japanese army, Dieyi claims with conviction and innocence, "If Aoki (the Japanese officer) was alive, he would have introduced Peking opera to Japan." The aestheticization of the invader's obsession with art cannot help but dematerialize the atrocities of Fascism. Such brutality is unreal and transitory as long as Dieyi can still live in the operatic world with integrity and regard the vicissitudes of the external world as illusory. Or rather, like the cruelty of the teacher, historical violence is part and parcel of the process of training and inculcation, through which Dieyi internalizes the lesson of obsessive loyalty to one person, to tradition, "art" or

any other incarnations of the "One."

It is the socialist revolution that ultimately destroys all possibility for him to manage a Oneness with his art and partner. Though the final showdown of betrayals happens during the Cultural Revolution, it already began with the victory of the Communists. In a meeting to discuss the reform of Peking opera during the early 50's, Dieyi insists on his "politically incorrect" view: "The problem with modern operas is that they are not beautiful. The traditional operas are beautiful, with their costumes, make-up and body movements [. . .]." A student of his poses a question in a threatening tone: "Why do you think operas that depict kings and concubines are beautiful while operas that depict the laboring masses are not?" In this scene's background we see a big screen on which flicker pictures of Beijing surrounded by red flags. Thus the message is unequivocal: the overwhelming redness and the "revolutionary" language of the student violently marginalize the opera star and the tradition he treasures.

Taking Juxian's hint, Xiaolou betrays Dieyi by supporting the proposed reform. Later, Dieyi tries to punish the student the same way his teacher has punished him, only to receive a hostile response: "It's illegal for you to physically abuse me in the new society!" The student then finally leaves his teacher by running into the street, from which (though we cannot see it) we hear revolutionary songs playing. Dieyi is left petrified in the yard, submerged in the rhythmic beat, the pulse of a "new society" that has no place for him. The same student, an orphan who had been brought up by Dieyi, is now out in the street celebrating the Communist takeover of Beijing, leaving his teacher alone in the coldness and pain of illness. He will later persecute his teacher during the Cultural Revolution. Thus, the narrative is neatly constructed to show an international audience that the successful rebellion of this opera student, unlike the tragic death by suicide of the previous one, is not to be embraced as liberating but rather condemned as treacherous.

Unlike *Yellow Earth*, which refrains from any clear "identification" in order to problematize and complicate the previously simple ways of understanding history, the juxtaposition of iconic images and music with narrative activities here serves to reinforce a certain clear-

cut interpretation of the segment of Chinese history being represented. The student's betrayal of his teacher and the subsequent violence of public humiliation are not redemptive at all: like the Han concubine once she is convinced of her king's defeat, Dieyi finally kills himself after the Cultural Revolution, seeing that his stage has been forever shattered into pieces. Different acts of violence are judged and categorized based on their association with "loyalty." Those that preserve "tradition" and the traditional humanist conception of the "essence of man" are aestheticized, while those that question, and perhaps try to change, such values or conceptions are condemned.

By highlighting this instance as primarily a test of loyalty (as opposed to disloyalty, betrayal), the film easily dismisses the question of reform as simply ridiculous, a source of violence that will not accommodate the obsessions of an artist. Reform is not merely condemned for its violent methods, the very "idea" of needing it in the first place is caricatured. The celebration of reform in Chen's previous movies is here simply reversed; its historical significance is simply denied. This is a big step backward from *Yellow Earth*, in which a particular discourse of reform is critically interrogated while its necessity is also explored. By setting up a clear dichotomy between loyalty and betrayal, and by identifying loyalty with "tradition" and betrayal with "reform," *Concubine* abandons the initial mission of the "fifth generation" to critically intervene in the process of social change, moving instead toward an aestheticization of the "eternal" and the "traditional" which, under the gaze of a Western audience (and West-centric, capitalized global market) seeking the Chinese "other," makes perfect sense. The original moral lesson is an explicitly "feminine" one—the concubine and the horse have to be loyal to One master. By identifying the icon of the nation uncritically and unproblematically with the "essence" of the moral, "China" is metaphorically represented as the exotic and feminine "Other" of the "West," which either keeps her eternally mysticized and fetishized image or awaits her salvation by a "different" civilization that breaks her endless cycles of historical violence.

It is perhaps ironic that with a film condemning betrayal, Chen Kaige's own betrayal of the aesthetic and critical agenda so brilliantly

displayed in *Yellow Earth* is rewarded with international acclaim and market recognition. Perhaps after his efforts to break down boundaries and problematize dichotomies were frustrated again and again, Chen came to realize that what is being asked for by the global audience, and so the global marketplace, is the reconstruction of the stable identity of the "local," the "national" and the "traditional," over against that of the "violent reformist." As Kuan-Hsing Chen observes:

> So while national cinema is partly threatened by the rise of international co-production, there is also an awareness on the part of Hollywood of the importance of the local. This might be characterized as a form of "global nativism," in which exotic images of natives and national local histories and signs are employed as selling-points in the world cinema.[14]

The double-edged sword that is the global cultural industry is, in fact, actively repressing and wiping out the vital expression of particular histories and cultural formations on the one hand, and selectively reproducing and valorizing "national" or "local" identities for the purpose of commodification (i.e. making money) on the other. That is, there is no fundamental contradiction between the tendencies of late-capitalist globalization and the discourse of the "nation" as a self-sufficient and readily available cultural entity. On the contrary, the latter is actively pursued and demanded by the former. Caught in a marginal space between the global and the local, real currents of socio-political and cultural critique, reform and transformation fail to be registered and supported. In the case of film, which is an art form and hugely big business that depends heavily on the intensive supply of capital and strong institutional grounding, the global market pressures on discursive formations are more clearly manifested. What is at stake, therefore, is not just the problem of knowing how meaning is constantly made and re-made, but more importantly the possibility of engaging in ways of transforming the institutions that underpin particular trajectories of meaning-making.

## NOTES

[1] Tony Chen Kaige and Rayns, *King of the Children and the New Chinese Cinema* 1–2. Though Rayns argues that the audience in the Hong Kong Film Festival were primarily Chinese, their appreciation of the film has after all to be "echoed" by other international festivals to be significant.

[2] Xudong Zhang, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms* 361.

[3] George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads* 5.

[4] Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy" 330.

[5] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" 392.

[6] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Rourledge, 1978).

[7] See Bauman Zygmunt, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (New York: Columbia, 1998); Kuan-Hsing Chen, "Taiwanese New Cinema" 557–61; Arif Dirlik, "Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism" 105–28; Immanuel Wallerstain, "The National and the Universal: Can There be Such a Thing as World Culture?" 91–106.

[8] Kaige Chen and Tony Rayns 28.

[9] Rey Chow, "Silent Is the Ancient Plain: Music, Filmmaking, and the Conception of Reform in China's New Cinema" 82–109.

[10] C. M. Esther, Yau "*Yellow Earth*: Western Analysis and a Non-western Text" 24.

[11] Ibid. 31.

[12] Jinhua Dai 273. The cited part is my translation of the original Chinese version.

[13] Joan Ellis, "Farewell My Concubine." <Http://ellis. nebbadoon. com/docs/joined_reviewfiles/FAREWELL_MY_CONCUBINE.html>

[14] Kuan-Hsing Chen, "Taiwanese New Cinema" 557–61.

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