

China’s “New Wave Cinema”: A Reflection of the Sixth-Generation Auteurs and Their Productions

Xiaoping WANG

Huaqiao University, China

Abstract:

Whether or not the sixth-generation directors have disappeared (or whether or not they have ever existed) is moot. However, we can ponder the following questions: In what circumstances did the group of auteurs emerge? What kind of social reality was transcribed, projected, and articulated in the movies they produced? The cinema that this generation created has been compared to Italian Neorealism and French New Wave, and to a certain extent could be regarded as China’s cinematic “new wave”. What are the similarities and the differences between these different cinematic movements? And, finally, by which conditions did China’s “New Wave Cinema” more or less reluctantly disintegrate and disperse? Let us begin our survey with a contextualization or better, historicization of this idiosyncratic cinematic phenomenon.

Key Words: New Wave Cinema, Globalization, Sixth-Generation Auteur

For quite a few days in October 2015, many readers in China were allured by the cover of the new issue of a popular Chinese journal *China Newsweek* (中国新闻周刊), which appeared in numerous newspaper stands across the streets and lanes. In the picture of the cover, the famed Chinese auteur Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯 (1970-), hugged by his wife (who is also his most-favorite actress) Zhao Tao 赵涛 (1978-), looks self-assuredly at the camera and implicitly the readers. His semi-attractive face becomes the focal point highlighting the appeal of this national celebrity (but not his wife as a second-rate filmic star), which itself shows the fact that this former “underground” director has become a well-known social elite in the country’s cultural world. But the more intriguing aspect lies in the contents of this special edition, which are not only dedicated to the director, but also to the group that he belongs to – or once belonged to – as well.

The caption of this cover-picture reads “(Where there is) Jia Zhangke, there are old friends in the world” (贾樟柯/山河有故人), which has two levels of connotation. First, it refers to his most recent 2015 movie *Shanhe Guren* (*Mountains May Depart*, 山河故人), which literally means “the mountains, the rivers, and the old friends.” Yet its second level of meaning, “old friends in the world are vanishing,” might be more significant, as it echoes the key feature article of this special edition. Entitled “Jia Zhangke and the Disappearing Sixth-Generation,” the last two paragraphs of this essay encapsulates the gist of its import,

Jia Zhangke believes that the so-called “sixth generation” has disappeared. After the commercialization of Chinese film industry around 2004-2005, the mission of this generation has accomplished. In general, the populace’s individualist concept has been awakened. “Their (the sixth-generation directors’) efforts were to transform themselves to be individuals, but not a ‘generation’ or a group,” he says.

The dispersal of the sixth-generation is not the disappearance of the spirit of a certain type of movie; but the directors who by chance had been included into that genealogy begin to seek the direction most fit for them. The collective group vanishes, and changes to be individuals experimenting (by) themselves. In reality, this is the more normal state of condition.¹

Whether or not the generation has disappeared (or whether or not it has ever existed) is moot. However, in this moment, at least we can ponder the following questions: In what circumstances did the group of auteurs emerge? What kind of social reality was transcribed, projected, and articulated in the movies? The cinema that this generation created has been compared to Italian Neorealism and French New Wave, and to a certain extent could be regarded as China’s cinematic “new wave”. What are the similarities and the differences between these different cinematic movements? And, finally, by which conditions did China’s

¹ Wan Jiahuan 万佳欢, “Jia Zhangke he Xiaosan de ‘Diliudai’” 贾樟柯和消散的“第六代”(Jia Zhangke and the Disappeared Sixth-Generation). *Zhongguo Xinwen zhouskan* 中国新闻周刊 (China Newsweek), Vol.16, No.39, Oct. 26, 2015.

“New Wave Cinema” more or less reluctantly disintegrate and disperse? Let us begin our survey with a contextualization or better, historicization of this idiosyncratic cinematic phenomenon.

1. GLOBALIZATION AND CHINA’S INTEGRATION INTO GLOBAL CAPITALISM

In his seminal paper “Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue,” Fredric Jameson affirms “the relationship between globalization and the world market,” seeing it as “the ultimate horizon of capitalism”. In other words, globalization is “an intrinsic feature” of the “multinational stage of capitalism.”² In this stage, we witness

the rapid assimilation of hitherto autonomous national markets and productive zones into a single sphere, the disappearance of national subsistence...the forced integration of countries all over the globe into precisely that new global division of labor...standardization on an unparalleled new scale...the worldwide Americanization or standardization of culture, the destruction of local differences, the massification of all the peoples on the planet.³

Indeed, globalization is the spreading of global (read western) financial capital into other parts of the world, mostly the third world, and has been surging forward since the 1980s. China began to embrace this process only after the 1990s, when the state decided to welcome the western market and import its economic model in order to reconstruct a market economy. Large-scale privatization, massive deregulation and rampant marketization have brought about grim economic and social consequences. In light of this fact, critics argue that “from the perspective of post socialist states, the term globalization often appears to be simply a label for the rapid, technologically enabled spread of capitalism into areas it had not previously penetrated – or had previously been kicked out of.”⁴ With global capitalism as the major catalyst of the spread of financial capital, some scholars believe that Western Europe and America have lost their monopoly on global power and are seeing the weakening of their economic forces. In this way, globalization is taken as a process of decentralization, or bringing about the absence of a “center”.⁵ In this ‘epochal tide’, the phenomena of “becoming cultural of the economic, and the becoming economic of the cultural” characterizes both globalization and

² Fredric Jameson, “Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue,” *The Cultures of Globalization*. Edited by Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi. Durham: Duke University Press, 1998, 34.

³ Ibid., 57.

⁴ Jason McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008, 14.

⁵ Lu Tonglin. “Trapped Freedom and Localized Globalism,” *From Underground to Independent From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*. Eds. Paul G. Pickowicz and Yingjin Zhang. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006, 123.

postmodernity.⁶ As Jameson aptly notes, “globalization essentially means unification and standardization.”⁷

With its economic reform policies in the early 1980s, China joined the global market, despite lingering reservations due to its residual socialist principles. Since the beliefs in globalization in the early 1990s, the Chinese government advanced a higher version of modernization, especially after Deng Xiaoping’s southern tour in 1992. Since then, globalization has decisively engulfed China with the establishment of market-oriented institutions and the so-called “modern enterprise system”. After three decades of “development”, China now apparently has “risen up” to be the self-styled “strategic partner” of the singular super-power namely the States; and the new English neologism “Chimerica” was created towards the end of the first decade of the new century to describe the new situation of economic symbiosis in international political-economic relations.⁸ Whereas in terms of the domestic class structure, an almost thorough replacement of Maoist socialist politics has also been completed:

If Mao had led the communist revolution in the first half of the twentieth century by mobilizing China's lower social classes and championing the cause of anti-imperialism, the CCP under Deng Xiaoping and his successor Jiang Zemin installed China's "digital revolution" from above by relying on the country's technocratic elites and rearticulating China's political economy with transnational capitalism, leading to the de facto formation of a hegemonic power bloc consisting of Chinese state officials, a rising domestic urban middle class, as well as transnational capitalists, foreign state managers and policy makers.⁹

From a leftist point of view, this “monopolization of China's basic political structure by capital and power is not at all a coincidence,” because the two processes, namely the “fall of the workers' state and the legal and political changes produced by China's adaptation to market economics,” are “inextricably intertwined.”¹⁰ Therefore, the challenging situation that China now poses to scholars around the world is “a poor country that has managed to rise up in the global capitalist order while dramatically increasing domestic class inequalities, and a nation with staggering ethnic, gender, urban-rural, and regional divides.”¹¹

⁶ Fredric Jameson, “Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue,” 3.

⁷ Ibid., 64.

⁸ This term was coined by historian Niall Ferguson and economist Moritz Schularick in late 2006. They suggest that the Chinese savings helped American overspending, bringing about a period of wealth creation leading to the financial crisis taking place in 2007–08. See Niall Ferguson, “The Trillion Dollar Question: China or America?” *The Daily Telegraph*. June 1, 2009.

⁹ Yuezhi Zhao, “The Challenge of China: Contribution to a Transcultural Political Economy of Communication for the Twenty-First Century.” In Janet Wasko, Graham Murdock, Helena Sousa, eds., *The Handbook of Political Economy of Communications* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 565.

¹⁰ Wang Hui, “Two Kinds of New Poor and Their Future,” Saul Thomas ed., *China's Twentieth Century: Revolution, Retreat, and the Road to Equality*. London and New York: Verso, 2016, 202.

¹¹ Yuezhi Zhao, “The Challenge of China,” 563.

Regardless of how we understand the so-called “China miracle”, it is without doubt that China’s successful story depends on its reliance on, rather than severance from, the existing game rule. In this light, we might say that this process confirms nothing but a “singular modernity,”¹² which also brings out a relentless commodification or marketization of all social relations including culture, resulting in a striking cultural logic. Jason McGrath has succinctly summarized this point, “the apparently diverse and disconnected phenomena that appear in the new, pluralized cultural field are in fact all related in that they are manifestations of the logic of marketization; capitalism,...thrives on its own occultation by virtue of becoming naturalized and invisible as a total system.”¹³

Still, we could not simply take the commodification of society (including labor relations and the modes of cultural production) as the direct result of marketization, as this would confound capitalism with the mechanism of the market, or conflate capital with the market system. Rather, it is the principle of neoliberalism or the so-called “Washington Consensus” which articulates the interests of the Capital that brings about the particular cultural-political dominant. This qualification will give us alternative vision and imagination regarding a differing world that might have existed in the past and might come into being in the future if not already existing in the present.

One significant reason for this alternative is the existence of the socialist ideas, which have not been officially repudiated by China’s ruling party; whereas among ordinary people, they still have tremendous influence. Left-wing intellectual Zhao Yuezhi thus believes that “China’s neoliberal elite’s inability to pursue wholesale neoliberalization in the past 30 years” is “due to the Chinese state’s communist legacies.”¹⁴ In particular, she observes that,

.....precisely because its political legitimacy is still based on its socialist pretensions, and because class struggle over its direction is by no means settled despite the ascending power of the bureaucratic, capitalist, and managerial strata, there is the danger that the reforms are reversible, with "the masses" threatening to "seek a restoration of their own unique form of class power" (Harvey 2005, 151), compelling the leadership to rearticulate the state's hegemony in favor of the low social classes to "live up to its revolutionary mandate against foreign capitalists, private interests, and local authorities" (Harvey 2005: 150).¹⁵

Zhao points out that “this unfolding struggle over the terms of the CCP’s hegemony, and the future direction of China’s ongoing transformation” is witnessed in the “elite and popular communication politics in China since the early 2000s.”¹⁶

¹² Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*. London: Verso, 2013.

¹³ Jason McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity*, 10.

¹⁴ Yuezhi Zhao, “The Challenge of China,” 562.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

It is in terms of this dialectical knowledge that the other dimension of the concept of “postsocialism” is instrumental for us to evaluate what has been and is taking place. In addition to referring to “a negative, dystopian cultural condition that prevails in late socialist societies,”¹⁷ generating “feelings of deprivation, disillusion, despair, disdain, and sometimes even indignation and outrage;”¹⁸ it also “comes as an imaginative and self-consciously risky experiment to critique the neoliberal embrace of capitalist globalization on the one hand and the residual assumptions of the Cold War and revolutionary legacy on the other;” as critic Ban Wang contends, which then “strives to transcend the classical, received definitions of capitalism and socialism” and “gestures toward an understanding of an ill-articulated social formation, both grounded in Chinese reality and responsive to the global market.”¹⁹

2. THE SIXTH-GENERATION DIRECTORS AND THEIR VISIONS IN THE NEOLIBERAL AGE

It is within this global expansion of the neoliberal tide/movement that China’s film industry underwent a profound transformation with its institutional framework completely overhauled, especially after its major turn in the middle of 1990s. Since then, “China’s mainstream visual culture has been implicated in the global expansion of capitalism and is becoming less and less concerned with understanding Chinese culture and history;” consequently, critics observe that despite “all its innovations, much of contemporary visual production may be at risk of eschewing realism and historical consciousness.”²⁰

But even before this new stage of reform has fully presented itself, a trend has arrived in the Chinese filmic world in the early 1990s, which goes by such names as films of the underground, the urban generation, the avant-garde, the “independent cinema;” or films made by the sixth-generation auteurs.²¹ Whatever the focus paid on this new cultural drive is, film scholars hold

¹⁷ Paul Pickowicz, “Huang Jianxin and the Notion of Postsocialism,” *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics*, eds. Nick Browne, Paul Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack, and Esther Yau. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 61-62.

¹⁸ Zhang Yingjin, “Rebel without a Cause? China’s New Urban Generation and Postsocialist Filmmaking,” *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010, 54.

¹⁹ Ban Wang, “Studies of Modern Chinese Literature,” Haihui Zhang, Zhaohui Xue, Shuyong Jiang, and Gary Lance Lugar eds., *A Scholarly Review of Chinese Studies in North America*. Ann Arbor, MI.: Association for Asian Studies, 2013, 388.

²⁰ Ban Wang, “In Search of Real Images in China: Realism in the Age of Spectacle,” *Journal of Contemporary China*. 17 (56), 2008: 497-498.

²¹ Based on Harry H. Kuoshu’s study, Richard Letteri has succinctly summarized the features of the six generations, which is worthy to be quoted here. “The First Generation filmmakers produced films in the 1920s are considered ‘pioneers’ of Chinese film...both they and the Second Generation of the 1930s integrated melodrama with a social or critical realist style to create socially progressive films...Once in political control, the Communist party-state employed the Third Generation of filmmakers to create Communist propaganda films that celebrated the glories of the Communist revolution, its leader Mao Zedong and its heroically drawn soldiers and peasantry. The Fourth Generation filmmakers, who were trained in filmmaking in the 1960s under the Communist state, did not begin the process of reassessing the Communist Revolution and addressing the social concerns of the Chinese people until the post-Mao era (1979-90). Graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in 1982, it was the Fifth

the consensus that its emergence “signaled the arrival of a new kind of cinema in Chinese film history, one truly derived from individualized experience.”²² The idiosyncratic novelties of these works have been widely acknowledged,

Aesthetically, they abandon the traditions of both Chinese melodrama and Hollywood commercialism and aspire to the status of innovative European art films ridden with existentialist crises. Ideologically, they forsake grand narratives and utopian ideas (national allegory, enlightenment, and revolution) and prefer marginalized people (rock musicians, alienated artists, mental patients, migrant workers, prostitutes, gays and lesbians) and their unconventional, uneventful, and un(der)represented lifestyles.²³

What is most noteworthy of this new cinema is its realistic move. Fixed frames, long takes and fragments or gaps in narration are often used to minimize directorial intervention.

The term “China’s New Cinema” was used to refer to Chinese films from the early reform era or those by the Fifth Generation directors; here, I would apply the term “China’s New Wave Cinema” to describe the films by the Sixth-Generation directors, which is known for its qualitatively-differing styles, contents, grammar and narrative architectonics; albeit the filmic products of the two generations generally share comparable realistic impulses. Indeed, depending on various shifting social-historical conditions, political circumstances, as well as artistic moves, realism is abundant in variety. When discussing the succession of various forms of literary realism, Jameson has ingeniously shown the dialectics between historical content and literary form,

Each successive realism can also be said...to have been a modernism in its own right. Each realism is also by definition new: and aims at conquering a whole new area of content for its representation. Each wishes to annex what has not yet been represented, what has not yet ever been named or found its voice...This is to say not only that each realism arises out of dissatisfaction with the limits of the realisms that preceded it, but also and more fundamentally that realism itself in general shares precisely that

Generation filmmakers...who brought international fame to Chinese cinema with their rural allegories that subtly hid critiques of the Chinese patriarchal state and society...Finally, after graduating from the Beijing Film Academy in 1992...the sixth Generation of filmmakers...began to experiment with a new realist style that focused on the economic and social conditions of everyday life in (mostly) urban China...” See Richard Letteri, “History, Silence and Homelessness in Contemporary Chinese Cinema,” 17-18. For detailed discussions of the various generations, see Harry H. Kuoshu, “Overview: The Filmmaking Generations.” Harry H. Kuoshu ed. *Celluloid China: Cinematic Encounters with Culture and Society*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002. pp.1-20.

²² Chen Mo and Zhiwei Xiao, “Chinese Underground Films: Critical Views from China,” *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*, eds. Paul Pickowicz and Yingjin Zhang, 148.

²³ Zhang Yingjin, *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010, 159.

dynamic of innovation we ascribed to modernism as its uniquely distinguishing feature.²⁴

Cast in this light, what demands our special attention is the new socio-economic-political reality in the new historical conjuncture that was inscribed by the sixth-generation directors into their films, which was taken by them to be “independent” – if not totally independent from the state facility then, at least from the “state ideology” as the directors deem themselves to be.

Fans of world cinema would immediately recall Italian Neorealism and French New Wave when they watch these “independent films” by the Sixth-Generation auteurs, which share many resembling features with the two monumental film movements; and the cinema itself thus could be taken as a peculiar “new wave” style. Many theorists of Italian neorealism regard it less as a consistent set of stylistic features and more as the relationship between film practice and the social reality of post-war Italy. For example, Millicent Marcus has elaborated on its lack of consistent film styles.²⁵ Likewise, China’s “new wave cinema” is neither made by an actual school, nor by a group of theoretically motivated and like-minded directors and scriptwriters; in actuality, it was a moment or trend within the Chinese film world. Both of the two cinemas explore the living conditions of the poor and the lower working class, with characters’ survival being their primary objective. Both cinemas portray their daily mundane and quotidian activities devoid of self-consciousness, with non-professional actors/actress and on-site performances. These similarities should be explored via the social-historical contexts. Italian neorealism films originated in the 1940s from the post-World War II Italian society, when poverty, oppression, injustice and desperation prevailed; these difficult economic and moral conditions engulfed the populace, especially torturing the poor and the disenfranchised working class. Thus, the directors aimed to represent changes in the Italian psyche and conditions of everyday life. Similarly, China’s “new wave cinema” also marked more than a decade of cultural change and social transformation since the 1990s and after, when globalization introduced the neoliberal credo to China, resulting in the massive privatization of SOEs (state-owned enterprises) with millions of workers being laid off and whose living conditions became lamentable. But we simultaneously need to take note the difference. Italian neorealist films were often shot in the streets because the film studios were damaged significantly during the war; on the other hand, the directors of early films of China’s “new wave cinema” could only shoot on location because they could not get support from the official studio. This occurred when the state still maintained its socialist system of production and distribution in the postsocialist era, before it fully participated the tide of commercialization in order to benefit from globalization.

In this regard, it is also helpful for us to compare China’s “new wave cinema” to French New Wave of the late 1950s and 1960s, which was subject to the influence of Italian Neorealism. It

²⁴ Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, 123.

²⁵ Millicent Marcus, *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.

is acknowledged that the socio-economic forces after World War II greatly affected this cinematic movement. The French New Wave rebelled against popular art forms in pre-war traditions, namely classical French film of a linear narrative, which was often adapted from traditional novelistic structures. Out of political necessity and financial difficulty during this time, France tended to fall back and rely on this older formula; but the directors of French New Wave believed that these forms could precipitate the audience to submitting to a dictatorial plot-line; thus, the type of high-minded, literary period films held in esteem at domestic film festivals, namely the French "cinema of quality", were especially among their target of criticism. By the same token, although never a formally organized movement, China's New Wave Cinema filmmakers were linked by their self-conscious rejection of the socialist realist movies which were "endorsed officially for decades as the primary, politically correct method of producing literature and art in China" and "has become formulaic and prescriptive, and symbolizes an authoritarian tradition."²⁶ They also disliked and repudiated their predecessors - the fifth-generation directors, who orchestrated legendary, fake folk customs to place stress on the "cultural myths and national identity" of the Chinese nation as a backfire against the officially-endorsed, dogmatic realism, the move of which, however, gradually became elitist and formulaic within itself.²⁷ Consequently, with the spirit of iconoclastic youth, both French New Wave and China's "New Wave Cinema" held the desire to film more current social issues on location, experimenting with various editing techniques, visual styles, and narrative structures. For instance, they often used portable equipment requiring little or no set up time, thus the way of filmmaking presented a documentary-esque style; in addition, fragmented, discontinuous editing and long takes were frequently used filming techniques; and the combination of objective realism and subjective realism created narrative ambiguity. In short, they both valued the expression of the director's personal vision in the film's style and content, as part of a general impulsion to break with the traditional and existing paradigms. Thus, most of the directors subscribe to the auteur theory which holds that the director's personal signature should be visible from film to film.

But the more recent, if not the most relevant, coordinate of comparison is the Taiwanese "New Wave Cinema". The first wave of this cinema unraveled in the start of the 1980's and ran through the entire decade, just before their contemporary Chinese group of auteurs emerged. Both China's "New Wave films" and the Taiwanese "New Wave Cinema" won many major awards in the international film festival circuit for their efforts to "explore social tensions and problems in cinematically compelling and often original ways, blending social realism with modernist innovation."²⁸ Although Taiwan's New Wave can be discussed from the perspective of a commercial competition with films from Hong Kong and home videos (because of which the Taiwanese government initiated a project to fund the new, indigenous directors – a move very differing from the case of China), it is better

²⁶ Zhang Yingjin, "My Camera Doesn't Lie?" 27.

²⁷ Ibid., 26.

²⁸ Douglass Kellner, "New Taiwan Cinema in the 1980s." *Jump Cut*. 42 (1998): 101-115.

to be placed within the cultural-political context of the island’s economic success in the 1970s, which displayed the rapidly changing ways of life and highlighted the dynamics between the rural and the urban, between the modern and the traditional, in a much more salient way than ever before. As the world was undergoing steady changes, socially conscious art house films placed an undaunted eye on the society and culture undergoing its painful metamorphosis, especially concerning the underprivileged and the weak. Just like China’s “New Wave” a decade later, Taiwan’s New Wave Cinema “carries out a rebellion against previous genre cinema … and attempts to produce a socially critical and aesthetically innovative cycle of films appropriate to explore contemporary Taiwan society;” and meant to “explore the conflicts between tradition and modernity and … deal with the concerns of the present moment — a conjuncture fraught with problems and perils, but also possibilities.”²⁹ In short, they are both cultural and political interventions in a critical moment of dramatic transformation, the most significant ones being the rampant marketization of culture, the swift erosion of the ruling ideology, and the fast commercialization of the once authoritative society. It is not unexpected that one of the most important figures in the Taiwanese New Wave, Hou Hsiao-Hsien 侯孝贤 (1947-), is the cultural hero and model for many China’s new wave directors (the most representative member being Jia Zhangke, who acknowledges his debt to Hou in numerous occasions), with his trademark of simple cinematic style of applying long takes with minimal camera movement and naturalistic, understated ways of acting, becoming the most-frequently endorsed.

The neo-realist feature films of China’s “New Wave Cinema” have received enthusiastic recommendations from critics. Some even argue that these works could be more real than straight documentary because “inserting drama into documentary increases rather than decreases the impact of reality;” and thus they could be “more effective in revealing the ugly truth…may infuse authenticity to the documentary, circumstantial traces” with “its narrative and psychic motivations.”³⁰ It is recalled that during the Mao era, directors attempted to show the historical truth through the ideology of class struggle. By contrast, this “new wave cinema” shows the naked, nasty reality by stripping down ideological representations that distort it. In other words, the cinematic products do not try to critique mainstream ideology but rather capture the unembellished street life, in order to unmask ideology while documenting contemporary China. In this way, through “recording and witnessing the twisted mindset, the drift of life experience, the loss of meaning, and the disintegration of the social fabric, these filmmakers seek truth against commercial technique, melodrama, and simulacra.”³¹

The directors, most of whom born in the 1960s and graduated from college in the early 1990s, have experienced their intellectually formative years during the 1980s, when the values of

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ban Wang, “In Search of Real Images in China: Realism in the Age of Spectacle,” 503.

³¹ Ban Wang, “Epic Narrative, Authenticity, and the Memory of Realism: Reflections on Jia Zhangke’s *Platform*, Ching Kwan Lee and Guobin Yang, eds. *Re-envisioning the Chinese Revolution: The Politics and Poetics of Collective Memories in Reform China*. Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2007, 211-212.

enlightenment were culturally dominant. Embracing the precepts of Western individualism, they then took up the social obligations of representing unofficial memories and projecting their artistic vision onto society. Thus, they often use documentary styles like improvisation, non-dramatic plot, fragmented narrative and images, natural setting and nonprofessional acting as alternative stylistic choices to support their attribute of truthfulness, which is believed to particularly exist among the daily lives of marginal subjects. But this “new wave cinema” had a gradual development: the first wave of the trend witnessed the urge of self-expression by self-styled “marginal” figures, such as performance artists and urban bohemians; whereas in the second wave, the “vulnerable groups” in particular and “the silent majority” in general came into their horizon, solely because these disadvantageous groups obtrusively appeared in reality as the casualties of the state’s pro-market agenda. Thus, the truth for them has a particular focus: the “normal” citizen life, which is shown in officially produced films, is taken to be covering up the deeper, real social problems. Observing this change in focus, Zhang Zhen suggests that the distinction between “the disaffected but nonetheless haughty urban bohemians” in early films of the cinema and “the ‘artisans’ (petty thieves or migrant amateur performers) in small towns” of the later products can be construed as “a visible marker for a paradigmatic shift within the Urban Generation in the 1990s.”³² But although early products of this “new wave cinema” were banned and prohibited from entering the public channel of distribution and were thus called by Western critics as “independent,” “underground” or “dissident” works; when the government extended its “olive branch” in the early part of the new century, most of the directors were willingly co-opted by the central authority and enticed to embrace the trend of commercialization. This study takes the cinematic productions before and after the co-option as a whole, for the reason that ideology and utopia (and to a certain extent aesthetic style and innovation) as expressed and displayed in them has no fundamental difference.

Unlike the Chinese government broadcasting the bright future brought about by its integration with the world market, China’s “new wave cinema” was seemingly suspicious of this new “christening” of globalization; additionally, its proponents were critical of the myth that globalism can be the ultimate solution to Chinese problems. For instance, in Jia Zhangke’s cinematic works, ostensibly there are oftentimes messages of anti-globalist, anti-capitalistic themes. One of the discernible examples is the film *The World*, in which Chinese peasants travel to the city to become migrant workers to escape poverty, only resulting in a failure to see the so-called “fruits of globalism”; and thus become even more lost and desolate, and even perish by following the “lies” of fortune and security. In this way, by “portraying...an underprivileged urban population,” films like this “debunk the myth of China as a success story of globalization.”³³

³² See Zhang Zhen, “Introduction,” *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Zheng Zhen. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007, 16.

³³ Lu Tonglin. “Trapped Freedom and Localized Globalism,” 124.

Yet after stripping down the ideological underpinnings, which now become unfit for reality, what is the new ideology that China's "new wave cinema itself expresses or articulates? Could it be exempt from ideological "distortions"? If not, what is the "false consciousness" in terms of the classical Marxian definition of ideology that it harbors? To answer this question, we need to ponder the particular circumstances in which the filmmakers emerged and developed. What is noteworthy is that "they are the first generation of Chinese filmmakers in the era of globalization,"³⁴ the significance of this timing means that "globalization has imposed a radical break between them and their parents' generation in terms of working environment, lifestyle, and value system."³⁵ Therefore, inasmuch as their "life experiences are shaped by China's integration into the global market" and even "their films are often sponsored by overseas investors,"³⁶ their cultural-political vision regarding the unprecedented transformations taking place, is also subject to the impingement of the historical sea change, in particular the onslaught of western knowledge and ideology in this divergent and incongruent historical time period.

3. IDEOLOGY AND UTOPIA IN CHINA'S NEW WAVE CINEMA

If, with the "intermediaries of the great, mostly American-based transnational or multinational corporations, a standard form of American material life, along with North American values and cultural forms, is being systematically transmitted to other cultures" including China,³⁷ and the directors themselves being the generation that had been christened by the "high culture fever" (namely the bombardment of various Western intellectual trends) in 1980s China, the question remains: are these young directors capable of resisting it?

No. Although globalization brought about commercialization of Chinese society, in which the directors witnessed the "impersonal modern society undermining older families and clans, villages, 'organic' forms," and the logic of consumption "tears through what is so often metaphorized as the fabric of daily life,"³⁸ what they are discontent with is still much less the western, bourgeois ideology coming hand in hand with globalization, than the domestic, residual socialist regime, which still appeared dogmatic at the time. Consequently, neither do they show any interest in socialist ideals and practices, past and present, nor do they express any perceptive indignation over the violations of the principles of the worker's state and suppressions of the worker-peasant's protests.

Instead, these directors usually brandish the statement "My Camera does not lie," and Zhang Yingjin has remarked that this claim can be understood as a self-positioning of these filmmakers by showing "my impression", "my camera" and finally "my truth," which was

³⁴ Ibid., 125.

³⁵ Ibid., 125.

³⁶ Ibid., 125.

³⁷ Fredric Jameson, "Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue," 64.

³⁸ Fredric Jameson, "Globalization and Political Strategy," *New Left Review* 4 (July/August), 49-68 57.

surmised to articulate the viewpoint of ordinary people.³⁹ But whether the “truth content” of this era can be fully and without distortion delivered by these filmic works is controversial. In order to be independent of official ideology (although not independent entirely of state institutions), in the later period the directors even avoided using direct realism, so as to (as they wished) present reality without a moral compass of sorts. Nevertheless, since the socialist ideology has long time ceased to become the dominant one, and any person living in the society could not be thoroughly excluded from these ethical-moral values, we need to ponder upon what their political, ethical, and moral convictions were? In any case, we must ask what is the official or “dominant” ideology in China nowadays?

To say that China’s “new wave cinema” decisively avoids any moral compass is equivalent to saying that they are politically immune, which is nothing but declining an analysis of ideology. What should be brought to our attention is that, to convey its specific message, the directors now believe that an absolute objectivity without emotional attachment, which was the earliest objective of this group, is impossible; thus, they can only claim a relative objectivity or an independent subjectivity, by which, they want to distinguish their vision of the truth from the “pretenses” of the prior generation. Their commitment to “subjective” and “personal” perspectives on China includes subjective recollections of Chinese history and personal explanations of Chinese society. While the fifth generation was concerned with shaping a national identity from a collectivist point of view, the sixth generation now introduces a break from this style by using the term “personal filmmaking.” Jia Zhangke once said, “The truth is not presented in front of us so blatantly. The truth comes to us through the feelings and the understanding of one person towards another. Only this way we can grasp the truth. Truth or truthfulness does not lay bare in the life. You have to possess a certain degree of sensibility so as to straighten out the logic of emotion and disclose the buried truth.”⁴⁰

But what is the truth in this era; or, what is the “truth content” of this era? This new cinema has been defined “by its recurrent exploration of public spaces, and of the individuals within them.”⁴¹ The contradiction of this paradigm, or rather, discourse of “public space”, also brings out the following arbitrary argument regarding the aesthetic characteristics of the cinema, which in my view is not always valid: “if independent Chinese film is engaged with a form of realist aesthetic, it can only be a realism of contingency, as argued by Luke Robinson, in which the primacy of *xianchang* dictates the progression and structure of the film.”⁴² It is known that

³⁹ Zhang Yingjin, “My Camera Doesn’t Lie? Truth, Subjectivity, and Audience in Chinese Independent Film and Video,” *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*, eds. Paul G. Pickowicz and Yingjin Zhang, Lanham. Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006, 40-41.

⁴⁰ **Lesley Yiping Qin and Jia Zhangke**, “Look Back in Anger- Interview with Jia Zhangke and Zhao Tao on *A Touch of Sin*.” <http://www.asiancinevision.org/look-back-in-anger-interview-with-jia-zhangke-and-zhao-tao-on-a-touch-of-sin/>. Accessed January 6, 2016.

⁴¹ Sebastian Veg, “Introduction: Opening Public Spaces,” *China Perspectives*, No. 81, 2010: 9.

⁴² Ibid., 10. *Xianchang* 现场 literally means "on the scene", referring both to the real scene "on the site" and the film set. Wang Chao thus would feel very surprised when he reads the following argument, “Reality is

one key figure in the sixth-generation group, Wang Chao 王超 (1964-), oftentimes writes his scripts based on an a priori idea, and by which he designates the plots and narrative structure. Accordingly, the binary opposition between the public (space) and the private (space), which was once (and perhaps is still) a popular paradigm in studying contemporary Chinese society, is inadequate if not totally irrelevant in this regard. However, the premise behind this Habermasian discourse of “public space”, namely its assumption of certain “shared humanity” or of an ‘imagined community’...in which each individual is free to air an opinion on matters of public significance,”⁴³ still applies for these sixth generation filmmakers.

Nevertheless, for the directors, to focus merely on the alleged universal “human nature” would not only take the risk of bypassing the inequitable political-economic issues of the society, but its predilection for sentimentality (oftentimes verged on a sort of cheap, bourgeois moralism, no matter how “zero degree” it would assume on the surface) could easily be co-opted by the state, for both now reject the Marxian notion of class struggle and repudiate applying the Marxist methodology of class analysis.

It is in light of this fact, that we can go forward discussing the ideology of the vision of “truth” held by this sixth generation group. As Jameson informs us, “ideology is not necessarily a matter of false consciousness, or of the incorrect or distorted representation of historical ‘fact’, but can rather be quite consistent with a ‘realistic’ faithfulness to the latter.”⁴⁴ Nevertheless, “the displacement of political and historical analysis by ethical judgments and considerations,” which is also witnessed in the works of China’s new wave cinema, is “generally the sign of an ideological maneuver and of the intent to mystify.”⁴⁵

Thus said, Jameson also urges us to realize the innate existence of utopian impulses in any contemporary works of art, either “those of high culture and modernism or of mass culture and commercial culture,” “albeit in what is often distorted and repressed, unconscious form.”⁴⁶ He confirms the fact that “genuine social and historical content must first be tapped and given some initial expression” in artistic works in order to let the content “to be the object of successful manipulation and containment” subsequently. Accordingly, he keenly reminds us,

...we cannot fully do justice to the ideological function of works ... unless we are willing to concede the presence within them of a more positive function as well: of ... their Utopian or transcendent potential—that dimension of even the most degraded type

unpredictable, and only by capturing its randomness can the director be true to the individuals who populate it and whose stories he is telling.” Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁴ Fredric Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,” *Social Text*. No.1 (Winter, 1979):145.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 146.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 147-148.

of mass culture which remains implicitly, and no matter how faintly, negative and critical of the social order from which, as a product and a commodity, it springs.⁴⁷

In another article, he decisively uses this concept of “utopia” to designate “the demands of a collective life to come, and (to) identify social collectivity as the crucial center of any truly progressive and innovative political response to globalization,”⁴⁸ which is taken as “our deepest fantasies about the nature of social life, both as we live it now, and as we feel in our bones it ought rather to be lived.”⁴⁹ This exploration is meaningful just because

To reawaken, in the midst of a privatized and psychologizing society, obsessed with commodities and bombarded by the ideological slogans of big business, some sense of the ineradicable drive towards collectivity that can be detected, no matter how faintly and feebly, in the most degraded works of mass culture just as surely as in the classics of modernism - is surely an indispensable precondition for any meaningful Marxist intervention in contemporary culture.”⁵⁰

Indeed, ideology or reification (of certain concepts) and utopia are the two sides of the same coin in relation to China’s “new wave cinema”, which requires our dialectic inquiry, and thus also becomes the working hypothesis and methodology of the present study. It is under this strategy that we acknowledge the fact that it does not matter whether or not the director really upholds a particular scheme within his mind and expresses it in his work, for our interpretation “results from specific reading strategies that, whatever their validity in relation to the text (or fact) under scrutiny, depend heavily upon the context of reading itself.”⁵¹

4. HISTORICITY OF THE FORM

When speaking of this double nature of artistic work, Jameson has further made a comparison between modernism and mass culture,

Both modernism and mass culture entertain relations of repression with the fundamental social anxieties and concerns, hopes and blind spots, ideological antinomies and fantasies of disaster, which are their raw material; only where modernism tends to handle this material by producing compensatory structures of various kinds, mass culture represses them by the narrative construction of imaginary resolutions and by the projection of an optical illusion of social harmony.⁵²

⁴⁷ Ibid., 144.

⁴⁸ Fredric Jameson, “Globalization and Political Strategy,” 68.

⁴⁹ Fredric Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,” 147-148.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ismail Xavier, “Historical Allegory,” Toby Miller and Robert Stam, eds. *A Companion to Film Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999, 341.

⁵² Fredric Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,” 141.

Judged by this contrast, what can be said about Chinese New Wave Cinema? Although it is viewed by most critics to be an art of the elite, to take it as a phenomenon of elite culture (or mass culture) is misleading. Likewise, to label its works as realism, modernism or postmodernism would incur many controversies, as the films bear all the complexities of the genres/forms. This idiosyncratic feature points to its unique historical situation.

China's new wave cinema's focusing on the social outcasts does not simply mean it values the underprivileged who have not been included in the official version of realism until that particular time. The term "diceng" (lower- or under-class) was created as late as 2004, which itself confirms that the underclass was only a newly emerged social stratum that began taking shape since the 1990s, a consequence of the social-political-economic structural transformations. It is of little doubt that in terms of critical consciousness, Chinese artists were earlier than Chinese scholars in discovering the gradually expanding social phenomenon. To be sure, they portrayed the dire and lamentable images of societies outcasts merely out of a humanistic spirit. However, the inclusion of these migrant rural workers living in urban areas (which currently composes the majority of China's industrial workforce) into the same class stratum as the "diceng" or underclasses of society, shows that what appears is not simply a marginal group. It is in terms of this new situation that we can argue that the birth of China's New Wave Cinema itself contains a kind of epochal truth.

What this contention entails is that we should also heed to the historicity of the form of China's "New Wave Cinema" itself. When discussing the historicity of modernism, Jameson has aptly noted that "the omnipresence of the commodity form determines a reactive stance, so that modernism conceives its formal vocation to be the resistance to commodity form, *not* to be a commodity, to devise an aesthetic language incapable of offering commodity satisfaction, and resistant to instrumentalization," which is "a symptom and a result of cultural crisis, rather than a new 'solution' in its own right;" rather, "the very terms of its solution – the conception of the modernist text as the production and the protest of an isolated individual, and the logic of its sign systems as so many private languages ('styles') and private religions – are contradictory and make the social or collective realization of its aesthetic project...an impossible one."⁵³

This argument gives us inspirational thoughts regarding China's new wave cinema, especially if we substitute it for the word "modernism". To be sure, China's new wave cinema's reactivation against commercialization is merely half of the story. The other half being challenging the socialist realism of the past, which was incapable of fitting in with the new social content. Thus, China's new wave cinema has a dual mission, which speaks of its nature as a product of postsocialist society. In this light, its aesthetic language, just like modernism, is also a "a symptom and a result of cultural crisis, rather than a new 'solution' in its own right;"

⁵³ Ibid., 134-135.

which explains why “the social or collective realization of its aesthetic project” is impossible to reach by its “private languages” or styles,⁵⁴ although the nature of the cultural crisis is now much different.

But Jameson goes further into the historical conjuncture to analyze the transformation,

...we must specify this development historically: the older pre-capitalist genres were signs of something like an aesthetic "contract" between a cultural producer and a certain homogeneous class or group public; they drew their vitality from the social and collective status...of the situation of aesthetic production and consumption, that is to say, from the fact that the relationship between artist and public was still in one way or another a social institution and a concrete social and interpersonal relationship with its own validation and specificity. With the coming of the market, this institutional status of artistic consumption and production vanishes: art becomes one more branch of commodity production, the artist loses all social status and faces the options of becoming a *poete maudit* or a journalist, the relationship to the public is problematized, and the latter becomes a virtual "public introuvable"⁵⁵

Also, following this rationale, we might argue that what China’s New Wave Cinema faced when it emerged was the older socialist genres, such as works of socialist realism and other forms of mass culture. These older genres implied an aesthetic contract between the Maoist cultural producer and the “homogeneous class or group public”, which was the masses of the socialist republic. This existing situation of “aesthetic production and consumption” was inexorably changed since “the relationship between artist and public,” being “a social institution...with its own validation and specificity,” encountered its ultimate disintegration with the vehement encroachment of marketization throughout society. This was a consequence of the state’s implementation of the pro-market policies and deconstruction of residual socialist institutions. Therefore, it is not necessarily the case that the older artistic productions were nothing but lies (although they might be dogmatic) whilst the new cinema shows nothing but the “truth”. Rather, it is the truth of a new era, which was destroying the existing social institutions and nullifying the previous social contract, that rendered the socialist cultural institutions to be old-fashioned and obsolete.

But Jameson perceptively notes that the modernism’s aesthetic ideology of “making it new” has no “critical or theoretical value,”

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 136-137.

...the strategic emphasis on innovation and novelty, the obligatory break with previous styles, the pressure—geometrically increasing with the ever swifter historicity of consumer society, with its yearly or quarterly style and fashion changes to "make it new", to produce something which resists and breaks through the force of gravity of repetition as a universal feature of commodity equivalence. Such aesthetic ideologies have to be sure no critical or theoretical value - for one thing, they are purely formal and by abstracting some empty concept of innovation from the concrete content of stylistic change in any given period end up flattening out even the history of forms, let alone social history, and projecting a kind of cyclical view of change...⁵⁶

Inspired by this teaching, we need to muse on the validity of the Chinese new wave cinema's declaration of itself as "new" and its proclamation that "My camera doesn't lie" (which implies that it would be authentic or faithful to the reality). To be sure, there are differences between modernism and China's new wave cinema, one of which being that whereas modernism's "strategic emphasis on innovation and novelty" and its "obligatory break with previous styles" was against the pressure of commercial culture, China's new wave cinema was mainly targeted against the rigescent yet disenfranchised political order and the "old-fashioned" aesthetics in the face of post-socialist reality. Nevertheless, this new cinema generally still followed the same path by "abstracting some empty concept of innovation from the concrete content of stylistic change," which resulted in "flattening out even the history of forms, let alone social history, and projecting a kind of cyclical view of change."⁵⁷ In accordance with this gesture, it also declines to reflect upon its own historicity and ideology, ignorant of (if not consciously denying) the existence of any false consciousness.

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