

**BREAKING BINARIES:
A CRITICAL APPROACH TO THE FIFTH
GENERATION CHINESE CINEMA**

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I certify that I have read this thesis and that in my opinion it is fully adequate,
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ABSTRACT

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May, 2008.

How to interpret the self-Orientalized representations in the Fifth Generation Chinese films remains an unresolved problem in cultural and film studies. This thesis underlines some of the major theoretical problems which have produced barriers for critical approaches to and understandings of the Fifth Generation phenomenon in Chinese cinema. By reconsidering the notion of power/knowledge in the Foucauldian sense, this work aims to challenge the assumed ontological relation between China and the West in rigid terms of binary oppositions and find an opening from this closure through which the complex and discursive interactions between the two can be critically examined. In this process of breaking the binaries, we are thus demanded to question the categories of culture, such as high vs. popular culture, art film vs. mass entertainment, etc., which take part in shaping our perceptual habits and interpretive politics.

KEY WORDS: power/knowledge, cultural re-appropriation, national cinema, the Fifth Generation Chinese cinema

ÖZET

İKİLİĞİ KIRMAK: BEŞİNCİ KUŞAK ÇİN SİNEMASINA ELEŞTİREL BİR YAKLAŞIM

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Beşinci Kuşak Çin sinemasındaki Uzak Doğu betimlemelerinin nasıl yorumlanacağı kültür ve film çalışmaları alanlarında çözülmemiş bir sorun olmaya devam etmektedir. Bu tez, Çin sinemasındaki Beşinci Kuşak olgusunun anlaşılmasına ve bu olguya eleştirel yaklaşımlarda bulunulmasına engel teşkil eden bazı ciddi kuramsal problemlere dikkat çekmektedir. Bu çalışma, Foucault'nun bilgi/iktidar nosyonlarını yeniden ele alarak Çin ve Batı dünyası arasındaki varsayılan ontolojik ilişkiyi bu karşıtlığın katı sınırları dahilinde sorgulamayı ve karmaşık ve düzensiz etkileşimin eleştirel olarak incelenebileceği bir açıklık bulmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu ikiliği kırma sürecinde yüksek kültür - popüler kültür, sanat filmleri - kitlesel eğlence gibi algısal alışkanlıklarımızın ve yorumlama ilkelerimizin şekillenmesinde rolü bulunan karşıt kültür kategorilerini de sorgulamak gerekmektedir.

Anahtar sözcükler: bilgi/iktidar, kültürel yeniden-kullanım, ulusal sinema,
Beşinci Kuşak Çin sineması

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INTRODUCTION

My motivation of this research originates from Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1994), a work that its theoretical problems will raise my major concerns about the representations in the Fifth Generation Chinese cinema and the power relations between the Chinese other and its Western spectators. In *Orientalism*, Said's main criticism is that the tradition of the Orientalist practice—exoticized, irrationalized, and romanticized depictions of the Orient—have been constituted to produce knowledge of and about the Orient and to justify the Western domination and intervention in the cultures, economics, and politics of the East, namely, its colonial and imperial interests. He suggests that the Orientalist discourse has dominated and homogenized the world's perception and understanding about the East (particularly the Middle East), established itself as the norm by subordinating the other cultures, and created a phenomenon in the academia in the fields of cultural studies, Middle East studies, etc. that even the scholarly works (done by both the Eastern and Western scholars) considered as the most objective are permeated by the bias of this discourse.

Undoubtedly, Said's work has raised the awareness on the issues of cultural representation and stereotype in the related fields of studies. However, his approach to this problem remains ambiguous and further leads to a general assumption and homogenized critique of the Orientalist discourse/practice and

produces an academic trajectory, particularly in the Third-World studies. Dai Jinhua's feminist Marxist criticism (discussed in Chapter 2) is one example of this academic phenomenon since *Orientalism's* first edition published in 1978 that the intellectual's persistent will to uncover the "truth" behind the Orientalized depictions and narrations of the Orient reveals an assumption that these images are fabricated to legitimize the West's dominating position over the East. And it is believed that, in a "corrective approach", the problem of (mis)representations and stereotypes about the Orient can and ought to be corrected by giving the Orient an agency to *speak for themselves*. Nonetheless, the problems arise in such approach are that it not only inevitably replicates the binary opposition which it criticizes but also produce another form of stereotype by revaluing the "positive" characters of a particular culture.

Even with the best intention, in an attempt to empower the Orient by bringing forth their true voice, such an approach to the problem of representation unavoidably perpetuates, what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls, in *Can the subaltern speak?* (1988), the "epistemic violence", since the Orient is once again doubly shadowed by the intellectual's (correct) representation (Spivak, p. 271-313). Said, for instance, has taken the position of a "representative"—an apparently legitimate position for him to fill with his Palestinian background—and spoken in the voice of the Palestinians/Arabs/Muslims, or even of the entire body of the marginalized minorities, that his act renders the fact that they have an agency, through his report, to speak for themselves. Spivak argues that, however, the subaltern does not have an agency to speak because the act of speaking belongs to the system of the dominant and the

privileged. She points out the problem of the double working of representation—*vertreten* and *darstellen*—that the subaltern is always doubly shadowed as both forms of representation merely “represent the non-represented” (Spivak, 1988). Therefore, for Said’s Orient, their agency has been robbed the second time (the first time by the Orientalist discourse) by his attempt to represent a correct image of the Orient.

The unresolved problem of representation in Said’s work further reveals a number of his assumptions and theoretical problems. Here, I will only discuss the few criticisms that are relevant to the project which I pursue in the following chapters. It is from this departure I intent to delve into the problem of representation in the contemporary Chinese cinema in its postcolonial, post-Cultural-Revolution context. By postulating the following criticisms on *Orientalism*, in this research, I aim at exemplifying the complexity of the constitution of the Orientalist subject, re-examining the power relation between the East and West, and identifying signs of difference and resistance within the Orient (in my case, the postcolonial China).

I shall point out three of the major assumptions in Said’s book that have been repeated in the academia as well as criticized by its critics: (1.) Orientalism as a homogeneous practice of the West to further its colonial/imperial interest, (2.) a complete success of colonialism/imperialism that its ideology has permeated into every level of the social structure of the Orient, and (3.) an ontological relation between the Orientalist discourse and the Orient.

First, the assumption of Orientalism as a homogeneous practice of the West overlooks and oversimplifies the unstableness and discursiveness of its discourse in the discontinuing historical and socio-political moments. Said's critics such as Lisa Lowe in *Critical Terrains* (1991) strongly opposes this homogenization and assumptions of Orientalism that it is a consistent, univocal discourse or practice and that it oversimplifies, (re)produces, and dominates cultural differences based solely on an attempt of establishing hegemony. Lowe emphasizes a necessity to reconsider Orientalism by examining its reconfigurations in specific cultural, socio-political, and historical contexts in which they take place. I have found Lowe's main argument, which is her emphasis on the heterogeneity of the Orientalist practice by the West (mainly the French Orientalism in her book), useful because it allows an opening through which we are able to recognize the differences from within the West. Elaborating upon Lowe's argument, but only to the extent that follows her main point, I will demonstrate, conversely however, by offering my readings of a selection of the Fifth Generation Chinese films, that Orientalism is not only a practice of the West, but it is also rearticulated and reconfigured by the Orient (in my case the Chinese) to further their cultural and political criticisms.

Second, a cultural critique such as Said's that tends to see the long history of colonialism/imperialism, even in the postcolonial Third-World, as a complete success of political rule and cultural intervention and distortion is to diminish the possibility of resistance from within the Other. Michel de Certeau argues in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) that it would be a mistake to consider

a European colonization over an indigenous culture as a mere success of cultural imperialism even if the natives appear to have accepted their subjection. The acceptance of the natives' subjection does not mean that they willingly conform to the imposed laws, practices, or representations. On the contrary, they are always on the watch for moments of "possibilities" when they can utilize the dominant order and subvert from within a given set of discipline at the same time without rejecting it. Therefore, their resistance may seem silent or hidden. To be able to illustrate de Certeau's notions of "anti-discipline" and "tactic" in my example of the practice of the Fifth Generation Chinese cinema, we must first understand Foucault's concept of power, which I will discuss shortly. My intention of following this Foucault/de Certeau concept is to argue against a common, superficial reading of the Fifth Generation films that their self-Orientalizing images are merely (re)productions of cultural imperialism. I hope my analysis of the films will offer a different understanding about this particular form of cultural and social practice during the transitional period of the postcolonial China.

Third, the ontological relation between the Western Orientalist and their Orientalized subjects described in Said's book creates an inescapable closure in which the former and the latter are rigidly fixed in their oppositional sides of the binary. This also implies that the Orientalist discourse has the absolute determination over its subject and that "[because] of Orientalism the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action" (Said, 1994, p.3). Again, my method of interrupting this totality is to employ the Foucauldian concept of power, which I think will allow me to identify signs of the Orient's

self-determination—meaning to be able to look into the West’s Other that their *silent* resistance is also a way of defining itself. And more importantly, I hope by examining the different representations of “China” in the Fifth Generation Chinese films from the 1980’s to present, I will be able to demonstrate the heterogeneity of the West’s Other (at least the postcolonial China).

Before approaching to the problem of the cinematic images in the Fifth Generation Chinese films, I would also like to point out Said’s misemployment of Michel Foucault’s philosophical concept of power as I think that this particular theoretical mistake further leads to other problems, which have been systematically ignored and overlooked in the fields of cultural, feminist, and Third-World studies. The danger in this misuse and misunderstanding of the Foucauldian terminology of power is that it reproduces an oppressed other as it merely over-emphasizes the dominative nature of the First-World/colonial/patriarchal domination and exploitation while it claims to aim at seeking equality and making difference. Rey Chow also suggests in *Writing Diaspora* (1993) that the repetitive pattern of falling back to the drama, trauma, and tragedies caused by the Western domination in writing (postcolonial and Third-World) cultural criticisms, in fact, is to fix the otherness as the center identity of the Other (it be Said’s Orient, or the Chinese in my study) and to “perpetuate the political centrism which lies at the heart of the violence that has surfaced time and again in the modern period” (Chow, p.93). I do not intend to discuss in-depth about the problems in each of the studies; rather, by indicating this banality in them, I want to refrain myself

from stepping into the pitfall of the mainstream postcolonial and Third-World criticism.

For Said, power, in the Orientalist discourse is strictly constituted in the form of institutions (i.e. the colonial government) and legitimized by a superior knowledge informed by the misrepresentation about the Orient. He recognizes power as a structure of a top-down imposition—the Western domination over the East:

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. (Said, 1994, p.3)

This cited statement demonstrates the contradicting point to the Foucaudian concept of power/knowledge (*pouvoir/savoir*) as it is originally written in Foucault's "Method" in *The History of Sexuality* (1980). Although Said has claimed to follow the Foucaudian path, on the contrary, power in his book is limited to the western European colonists' *ability to dominate* based on their *institutionalized knowledge* informed by the *misrepresentations* about the Orient.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her article *More on Power* collected in her book *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (1993) points out a common dogmatization, which we find in Said's work, of Foucault's philosophical concept that "[power] in the general sense is... a catachresis... the word is

‘wrested from its *proper* meaning,’ that it is being applied ‘to a thing which it does not *properly* denote” (Spivak, p.29). To understand what Foucault means by power/knowledge, we must know the original meanings in French as in English there is no exact translation for these two words. Indeed power/pouvoir means having the ability to do something, yet this *ability-to-do* must not be reduced to institutionalized knowledge with the aim of domination as overtly argued in Said’s book. The “corporate institution”, according to Said, makes up the condition that justifies its knowledge of and about the Orient and permits the authoritative position of the Orientalist discourse. However, in Foucault’s sense power refers to the “multiplicity of force relations... coded...” in a ‘complex strategical situation in a particular society’ rather than being reduced to a particular institution or a structure” (Spivak, 1993. p.26). This also means that power (pouvoir) is, to use Michel de Certeau’s word, “tactical” as its coding is not isolated in a proper (prpore) place (i.e. a colonial government) and one must constantly maneuver within the given situation and produce “possibilities” for resistance by manipulating events. The “complex strategical situation” *is* the condition where certain knowledge (savoir) is developed and formulated during the on-going process of maneuvering. And power (pouvoir) is dependent on this knowledge (savoir) as “if the lines of making sense of something are laid down in a certain way, then you are able to do only those things with that something which are possible within and by the arrangement of those lines” (Spivak, 1993, p.34).

To understand Foucault’s power/knowledge is not so much to know what power is, but to know where to look. My purpose of referencing Spivak’s

reading of Foucault's power/knowledge is to set the path for my later argument that the Fifth Generation Chinese cinema is a product of power/knowledge, and that its self-othering images should not be read on the superficial level as it would assume a total domination of the Orientalist discourse; instead, it must be understood as the Chinese filmmakers' "tactics" of subverting from within the "complex strategical situation" determined by the West. And it is inside the (Chinese) Other that I will investigate and try to identify the complex, constant working of the Chinese resistance as "resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (Foucault, 1980, p.93). Therefore, I propose a return to the Foucauldian concept of power and an application of de Certeau's notion of "anti-discipline" (1984) as I think this framework would allow an opening from the restricted economy that has been created since Said's work.

The subject of my analysis will be a selection of the Fifth Generation Chinese films from the 1980's to present made by the two most acclaimed and criticized directors, Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou. The reason of choosing their works is that I find in them a common pattern of representation that has generated equal amount of laudation and criticism. However, I do not mean to suggest that their works represent the entire body of the Fifth Generation or the motivations of its filmmakers. My interest in the investment in Chen's and Zhang's works is to examine the rise of the Fifth Generation, its becoming of a distinctive genre (Chinese national cinema), which was brought under the spotlight of the international film festivals, and more importantly, the politics of its representation and the interpretive strategy reproduced by academic

discourses, which takes part in governing our perception and understanding of this particular form of culture.

I shall clarify that the term of the Fifth Generation is only a way of describing a new trend of filmmaking in terms of its novel style of narrative, technique, visual representation, etc. It refers to a group of filmmakers who graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in 1982, the time when China began its process of a drastic social transformation, and whose films have reflected this new style and followed similar aspects of cultural and social criticisms. Their films have attracted more noticeable attention abroad than at home because audiences abroad are eager to see “China” whose culture that was/is so little known as during its closure since Mao’s rule in the 1950’s, information about China was very limited and almost inaccessible. China’s economic and socio-political transformations after the end of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1967-77) provided a condition in which the Fifth Generation filmmakers have an opportunity to explore the once forbidden subjects. Their films have become a distinguishable “genre” (known as world or the Chinese national cinema) since their primary themes are based on cultural and social reflections. They have also continually revised the image of “China” and forwarded the questions of nation, which was dominated by the socialist discourse for over three decades. Therefore, I will demonstrate in the following chapters that this image of “China” in the Chinese national cinema is not unchanging; it corresponds to China’s place in the world as its economic and socio-political transformations progress. This change is particularly evident in the Fifth Generation’s recent works of the 2000s. By studying the

different images of “China”, I want to understand the process of the constitution of an ethnic and national identity and “China’s” communication with the West through cinematic images.

This research is organized into three parts which are arranged in a chronological order beginning with the emergence of the Fifth Generation in the mid-1980s, its first transition into the international domain during the 1990s, and its most recent development in the international mass entertainment industry of the 2000s. By focusing on the notions of nation (nationhood, national identity, national culture, and national cinema) and cultural re-appropriation, I intend to exemplify that China, in the cinematic space created by the Fifth Generation, does not represent an unchanging or homogeneous collective of the Chinese nation, culture, or people. Instead, this idea of a “collective” is constantly challenged by tactical narrative interventions achieved through filming techniques, genre re-adaptations, etc.

In the first chapter, by looking at the films of the mid-/late-1980s, I will discuss, in reference to Homi K. Bhabha’s *DissemiNation* (1990), the event of *performativity* of the Fifth Generation’s ongoing and endless project of nation building by constituting a new language, which Chow (1995) calls a “new ethnography”. This examination is to demonstrate the subversiveness in the act of self-Orientalization as the filmmakers’ attempt to break with the socialist discourse.

My intention in the second chapter, instead of “close readings” of the films of the 1990s, is to contextualize the general question of culture and the problem in cross-cultural interpretation by examining a Chinese feminist Marxist Dai Jinhua’s criticism of the Fifth Generation’s shift toward a market-based mode of production. I will indicate the limitations of this particular approach to the Fifth Generation phenomenon that it tends to reduce the films as products of cultural commodity and cultural imperialism. Such essentialist and reductive approach not only limits the understandings of culture and the power relation between China and the West, but also reproduces a restricted economy, which I have mentioned in regards to the influence of Said’s work, in which difference and resistance tend to be overlooked.

To interrupt this ontological relation that has been taken for granted in the academia, such as in the fields of cultural and feminist studies, and search for an opening through which internal differences and signs of resistance can be recognized are my major aims in the last chapter. By focusing on the Fifth Generation’s practice of cultural re-appropriation (genre re-adaptation) in the 2000s, I intend to demonstrate how subversive discourses are constructed in the popular genre of costume drama. This chapter will challenge the binaries produced in Dai’s critical Marxist criticism discussed in Chapter 2 and propose an alternative way of approaching the Fifth Generation films which have become a part of the global mass entertainment industry.

CHAPTER 1

REWRITING CHINA

We are demanded to reconsider the notion of modern nation when studying the Fifth Generation Chinese cinema (or national cinemas in general) at this point when its cross-cultural and transnational features have continually exposed the difficulty, if not impossibility, and problems of enclosing its narrations into a *collective agency* through which the interpellated subjects can speak of the truth or reality of a nation. Indeed, the powerful immediacy achieved through cinematic effects and narratives make possible the visualization and render the concreteness of a present China. However, we must not take this presence accountable as it is always a reconstruction in a retrospective mode and in its form of representation it is never in its purity or finality. The present has to be narrated retrospectively because the activity of rewriting nation is always a practice that attempts to escape from or works against the previously established nationalist discourse(s). Thus, writing nation necessarily involves what Homi K. Bhabha calls in *DissemiNation* (1990) a “double-split” movement between “nationalist pedagogy” and the narrative strategy of performativity (Bhabha, p.293-297). Cinema as a project of nation building follows precisely this mode of narration through which it produces a “spatialization of historical time” (Bhabha, p.294). In this time-space, instead of a fixed and finite form, the idea of nation is extracted from the modern state discourse and re-articulated with an interventional performative narrative strategy.

Around the time when the international film circles began to pay attention and gave importance to national cinemas, the newly rising Fifth Generation in the mid-1980's was brought under the spotlight with its avant-gardism, or a new wave, which introduced a new China—one that broke away from the socialist realism by producing another sense of realism through depictions of the peripheral regions and people of China. The *truthfulness* of the Fifth Generation films was achieved through their distinct, persistent aestheticism in the form of *primitivism*, namely the nature, rural landscape, patriarchal feudal society, oppressed women, or other signs associated with backwardness, which Rey Chow (1995) calls the “primitive passions”. Chow characterizes the early works (up to the early 1990's) of this generation as an ethnographic self-display that their emphasis on self-exoticization through images of primitivism produced ethnographic effects, which not only intensified the immediacy of the films' visuality but also “turns everyone who watches into a kind of migrant” (Chow, 145).

What the Fifth Generation had achieved in its beginning stage, and continues to produce, was/is precisely the “time-space” that Bhabha describes when discussing Bakhtin's reading of Goethe's realist writing in *Italian Journey* (Bhabha, 1990, p.294-295). In this space, the filmmakers' collections of national ornaments such as the bare mountains in *Yellow Earth* (1984), the ceremony of worshipping ancestor of the brewery in *Red Sorghum* (1987), the archetechtral details in *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), and the Chinese opera costumes in *Farewell My Concubine* (1992) compose the same kind of

narrative structure in Goethe's realist writing of an Italian day that depicts a national time and space which tell the viewers that *the Chinese people really live(d) like that*. However, if we follow Bhabha's explanation of the double movement, or to use his words, the "temporality" between "cultural formations and social processes without a 'centered' causal logic" (Bhabha, p.1990, 293) in rewriting nation, we begin to see that the Fifth Generation's "China" is not quite in its fullness. The filmmakers' restoration of a past time necessarily constitutes a secular space in which takes place the distortion of the authenticity, continuity, and homogeneity represented by the modern state discourse. Thus, what we find in this very time-space is rather an ambiguous "China"—one that claims a transparency of national time such as a feudal China, though falls short on representing it in its fullness.

Fullness is indeed not the Fifth Generation filmmakers' ultimate agenda; instead, this time-space is kept open and must remain open because the project of rewriting China will never come to an end. Chris Berry (1998) argues, by drawing on Judith Butler's performative theory in *Excitable Speech*, that "the making of 'China' as national agency is an *ongoing, dynamic, and contested* project" (my emphasis) (Berry, p.131). Berry claims that each re-articulation of a national agency in Chinese cinema is necessarily a work of "citation" that "is part of a chain that links different times and places, making it different from the original it claims to repeat but simultaneously conditioned by that original it requires for the work of citation. In other words, each citation is necessarily a mutation" (Berry, 1998, p.145). Therefore, the method of performativity, whether it is through Butler's concept of "citation" and

“iterability” in performative speech or Bhabha’s narrative strategy in the practice of rewriting nation which consistently splits from the nationalist pedagogy, provides a critical way of reading the Fifth Generation’s texts that each re-articulation renders ambivalent ideas of nation, which once again disrupts the temporality produced by the nationalist discourse.

In this part, by following the aspect of the performative, I attempt to examine the method by which the Fifth Generation filmmakers constructed an interventional narrative not only as a means to break with socialist mode of representation of China, but also to criticize its discourse on national unity which is built upon the notions of *the people* and *modernity*. I argue that the filmmakers tactically drew on these notions, extracted them from the context of the socialist narration, and implemented them into a new context—a new ethnographic narrative—in which they constituted a different signification of “China” which was a disruptive and subversive force that reconfigured the official narration.

1.1 A “new ethnography” as a narrative intervention: the Fifth Generation’s avant-gardism (mid-1980s to early-1990s)

The first task that the Fifth Generation filmmakers undertook in their early stage of nation writing was to develop a new set of language that signified a different China, one that is free of the spectacle produced by the socialist discourse. Chow recalls vividly the popular media memory of China in the 1960’s that constituted and dominated the visual culture of the time. Her

recollection of the socialist image of China that is known around the world—“hundreds of thousands of Chinese people, in particular youths, gathering at Tiananmen and other public places, smiling, waving the ‘little red book’... shouting slogans in unison in adoration of Mao” (Chow, p.29)—was now confronted by images of rural landscape and lives of peasants and women who are equally oppressed within the patriarchal dominance. Chow calls this process as “decentering the sign” China by ‘returning to nature’—a mechanism in which signs of resistance are coded (Chow, p.29-52). “Nature” here is not in the sense of nature-loving, but as a signification contrasting with the notion of modernity, which itself is also constantly reconfigured and promoted in the narrations of the official discourse throughout the modern history of China.

In the early Fifth Generation films, “nature”, which comprises elements of *ethnic essence*, was the filmmakers’ narrative intervention to displace China in another time-space in which the symbolic order of the socialist discourse does not exist. Chow characterizes this novel and subversive narration/visuality as a “new kind of ethnography”, in which the Chinese cultural/ethnic significations are collected, rearranged, and represented in a form of collage to signify “China” (Chow, 1995, p.145). It is in this narrated filmic space that we see the split between the Chinese people as the historical and social objects based on whom the socialist discourse operates and the subjects that consistently attempt to erase the identity that has been given to them by this discourse.

Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* (1984), the film that marked the beginning of the Fifth Generation and its avant-garde movement which would soon end in the late 1980's when a period of commercialization began, his next work *King of Children* (1987), and Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* (1987) best exemplify this new form of "ethnography" as a way of intervention in this particular period. Chen's and Zhang's new styles of filmmaking immediately distinguished their works from the propagandist films produced under the supervision of the state industry from the last three decades. As Deng Xiao-Ping's new leadership after the Cultural Revolution (1967-77) launched radical reforms that led to drastic transformations in China's social, political, and most significantly, economic systems, the Fifth Generation quickly took up this opportunity and used cinema as a means for historical reflection and cultural criticism by exploring the forbidden subjects such as denouncing the political repression under Mao's rule and female sexuality.

This modified ethnographic narrative necessarily involved a touristic writing. For the Fifth Generation, who had lived through the Cultural Revolution, to reconstruct a historical time-space also means a process of root-searching—a desire or fantasy for a place that is before and outside the modern China. Such a place is constructed through the gaze of a "foreigner"—someone looking from the outside and obsessed with its primacy existing before/outside modernity and its exotic presence signifying an "origin" which is lost in the narrations of the modern nation. Chen's and Zhang's observations and representations of the rural and feudal Chinese lives thus are not so different from the Orientalist travelers' journals such as Bernardo Bertolucci's

recollections of his traveling experience in China when he made the film *The Last Emperor* (1987). As Chow quotes Bertolucci's remark from a published interview:

I went to China because I was looking for fresh air... For me it was love at first sight. I loved it. I thought the Chinese were fascinating. They have an innocence. They have a mixture of a people *before* consumerism, before something that happened in the West. *Yet in the meantime* they are incredibly sophisticated, elegant and subtle, because they are 4,000 years old. For me the mixture was irresistible. (As cited in Chow, 2006, p. 169)

Hence, the Fifth Generation's *foreign gaze* constituted themselves as the objects of their own ethnographic narratives while at the same time they must remain as subjects—observers from the outside. The filmmakers relied on the Orientalist emphasis of representing the ethnic essence as a narrative strategy as it is only in such a third place that the national subjects are divided and through this opening space a Chinese cultural significance can be made.

I shall now turn to the discussion of “nature” which constitutes the Fifth Generation's new ethnographic narrative as an intervention that disrupts the continuity of the official narration of nation. Nature as a national time-space, which had become a spectacle of “China” in the mid-1980s and early-1990s, in Chen's and Zhang's films is constructed by a number of consistent elements. In the following I will examine three major elements, the landscape (nature), people's struggle, and oppressed women in *Yellow Earth* and *Red Sorghum* and exemplify their function of re-articulating the Chinese nation.

1.2 The landscape, the people, and the women in the “new ethnography”

As mentioned earlier, the Fifth Generation's attempt in making a new ethnography is to decenter the sign China by moving toward the margins of the notion of nation. This is achieved through filming techniques (within the condition of constraining censorship and lack of technology), a manipulation of the state idea of "nation-people", which was based on a subaltern consciousness, and a re-appropriation of the element of "women's problems" in conventional melodramas. The films' depictions of the remote areas and those who live on the margins deconstructed (at least in the cinematic space) the socialist narration of modernity and unity and projected an exotic/exoticized image of "China".

Undoubtedly, *Yellow Earth* is the best place to begin this discussion since it had marked the beginning of the Fifth Generation. I will examine this film in regards to the first two elements of the new ethnography, which are, the *landscape* and *people's struggle*. The story is set in an unliberated, remote village in Shannxi province. Gu-Qin, a soldier of the Communist Eighth Route Army is sent to this village to collect folk songs that would be used to strengthen party and national solidarity as the Communist and Nationalist Parties aligned in fighting against the Japanese invasion. Upon Gu-Qin's arrival, a feudal wedding is taking place and he is invited to the communal ceremony where he is struck by the young bride's unpleasant silence and facial expression about her arranged marriage. He is hosted in the household of a widower who has a young daughter and son, and he participates the family's daily routine as he helps plowing in the field and fetching water from

miles away. Gu-Qin's encounter with the villagers and this family evokes a tension between the state ideology and the village's feudal tradition. The peasant's young daughter, Cui-Ciao, is fascinated by his stories of the urban life and pleads him to help her leave the village and join the army as she is not willing to accept her father's arrangement for her marriage. Gu-Qin turns her request down as he claims that he must first consult with his superior. Cui-Ciao then decides to leave on her own on a boat by crossing the Yellow River. In the ending scene, upon Gu-Qin's next return to the village, he witnesses the villagers performing a praying ritual for rain after suffering from a long period of draught. The film then ends when Cui-Ciao's young brother shouts out Gu-Qin's name and runs against the praying crowd trying to reach him who is watching on the hill, but he fails to reach him before he has left as his voice is overcome by the crowd's chanting.

First of all, the unfamiliar look of Shannxi's landscape in the film is a signification of the reversal of modernity, that is, the opposite of the state's vision of nation. The cinematographer Zhang Yimou begins with long shots of vast, bare mountains for a silent moment; the landscape seems to expend infinitely with the camera's horizontal movements. The exotic landscape creates a sense of displacement; a place outside the modern China, yet at the same time can not be correctly located in its history. Some scholars such as Esther C. M. Yau have compared this style of cinematography with Chinese scroll painting that the filmmakers consistently follow the tradition of Chinese art, or to be precise, Taoism, that such aestheticism seeks to pursue an ultimate

state of what Bhabha would call “non-metaphysical” (Bhabha, 1990, p.299).

Yau explains this mode of aestheticism in his analysis:

“non-perspectival use of filmic space that aspires to a Taoist thought: ‘Silent is the Roaring Sound, Formless is the Image Grand’...the ‘telling moments are often represented in extreme long shots with little depth when sky and horizon are proportioned to an extreme, leaving a lot of ‘emptyspaces’ within the frame. The tyranny of (socialist) signifiers and their signifieds is contested in this approach in which classical Chinese painting’s representation of nature deployed to create an appearance of a ‘zero’ *political coding*”. (emphasis added) (Yau, 2006, p.203)

Whether or not the filmmakers intended to pursue such aestheticism by following classical Chinese art, it is clear that the “emptiness” creates a “Chinese difference”. The spectacle of “zero political coding” has become a trademark of the Fifth Generation’s films, particularly those made during this period of avant-gardism. Whether they are the mountains of Western China or of the North East region, they have become a significant part of the narrative that shifted the sign of China from its modern space into a primal scene where traces of the socialist ideology are erased. Chen and Zhang’s resistance in this film is coded within this act of erasure—within the “emptiness” of the rural landscape.

Therefore, unlike the aesthetic codes promoted in the Chinese socialist films, in which the protagonist or the villain were required to be shot from certain camera angles or placed at certain points within the frame, or the classical Hollywood narrative structure, the Fifth Generation’s new style of film language, such as the unfocused framing, offered an unfamiliar visual pleasure

and distraction because the viewers' gaze could not locate a center point within the space (frame) which lacks a symbolic order. Consequently, it challenges the process of identification since "interpellation" is no longer the filmmakers' goal.

Second, the element of people's struggle and the subaltern consciousness are used here as a vehicle, not to form a collective of the nation-state/nation-people which is propagated in socialist realism or in the Party's slogans, but to denounce the incompetence of the Party. The aspect of peasants' struggles is extracted from the Party's rhetoric and given a new meaning which questions the process of modernization and liberation that the Party promised to deliver to the marginalized peoples and remote regions. This element is another *trademark* of the early Fifth Generation films which drew equal amounts of acclaims from the European film festivals and sever criticisms particularly from local critics and intellectuals for the films' *misrepresentations* of the Chinese people.

For instance the folk songs, which comprise lyrics of the hardship of the peasants' everyday lives, sang at the communal wedding and the performance of a praying ritual for rain are exhibitions of the Chinese people's lives in the remote areas that the Party had failed to liberate. In other words, it is a mockery at the state's notion of modernization. Chen's intention, therefore, is not simply to put the nation-people on display for visual pleasure or to discover what has gone wrong with China, but to challenge the assumed homogeneous collectivity (bounded by the idea of "people's struggle") which

forms the artificial surface of the nation. Thus, the images of the villagers, as well as the other elements in the new ethnography, demand an interpretation of their second order of meanings that Roland Barthes argues in *Mythologies* (1972). Like the Black soldier in French army uniform saluting at the French flag that Barthes observes on a magazine cover that at first glance it appears to portray an idea of nationalism. The images of the villagers' singing of everyday miseries and their praying at the totem of the Dragon King for rain in *Yellow Earth* may be read on the surface level that they make up the nationalist ideology that the vast majority of the Chinese population in rural places is still in desperate need for salvation. Nonetheless, on the connotative level a counter discourse is at work. Barthes indicates the second order of meaning of the picture that it may carry a critical connotation of the French colonialism. The images of the peasants' struggle and their consciousness about their suffrage imply Gu-Qin's (the Party's) failure of bringing answers to people's needs and the empty form of the revolutionary rhetoric.

Third, although the early Fifth Generation films follow the conventional melodramatic narrative that focuses on women's tragic lives in their feudal marriages which eventually cause their death and madness such as Cui Xiao's *plight* in *Yellow Earth*, the filmmakers' adaptation of such story line is not so much that they want to show the "women's problems" in feudal China, rather, women as an ideal agent for resistance. I shall discuss women's struggle as an important element of the new ethnographic narrative by examining Zhang Yimou's *Red Soughum* as his persistent investment in female body and sexuality overtly demonstrates his historical reflections and social criticisms.

This story is also set in a remote village of feudal China around the 1930s before the Japanese occupation; the unfamiliar look of the landscape of the eastern province once again appears on the screen signifying a secular space outside the socialist rule. The story is narrated in a third person's voice that tells a past-down story about his grandparents. This oral history begins with close shots of the narrator's grandmother Jiuer's face and hair as she is being pampered for her wedding day. She is to be married off by her father's arrangement to an older man with leprosy, who is the owner of a brewery. Her husband dies mysteriously right after the wedding. Since the wedding, series of flirtations have taken place between Jiuer and a worker of the brewery who later becomes the narrator's grandfather. After her husband's death, Jiuer takes over the brewery and with the same crew they run a successful business and make a good reputation of their red sorghum liquor. Towards the end of the story, the Japanese army occupies the village and forces the villagers to flatten the sorghum fields by foot for the purpose of building railroads. The workers of the brewery arrange an attack upon the Japanese troop's following arrival to the village. During the confrontation the villagers are killed by the Japanese machine guns including Jiuer who comes to deliver food to the ambushers waiting to attack in the sorghum fields. The film ends tragically with only Jiuer's lover and her son standing among dead bodies whose blood, the red sorghum liquor, and the red eclipse merge together and fill the screen with red color scheme.

The female figure, Jiuer, in this film is the site of the "double and split" between the modern state (the pedagogy) and the nation-people (the

performative) that is narrated through the exhibition of women's struggle and sexuality. Zhang repeatedly uses this tactical element throughout his films such as *Judou*, *Raise the Red Lantern*, and the most recent work *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006). Bhabha (1990) in his reference to Levi-Strauss argues that "[the] ethnographic demands that the observer himself is a part of his observation and this requires that the field of knowledge—the total social fact—must be appropriated from the outside like a thing... which comprises within itself the subjective understanding of the indigenous. The transposition of this process into the language of the outsider's grasp... then makes the social fact 'three dimensional'" (Bhabha, p.301).

Jiuer is first a bearer of the sign of the pre-socialist China that articulates a performative time-space external to the existing socialist order, that is, the first split from the modern state discourse. Within the ethnographic narrative, a second split takes place; she is both the *object* who is exploited by patriarchy and filmic visibility and the *subject* inscribes within her a criticism of this very exploitation. Therefore, Jiuer is the bearer of a "three dimensional" China that she is a part of the narrative structure and the system of signification that re-articulates a present China and she serves as an agent for cultural and social reflections and for criticizing the Orientalist gaze which eagerly searches for an exoticized Chinese female other.

Jiuer as a present China is achieved through the Freudian concept of Oedipalization. Her husband's mysterious death suggests the killing of the Father (the order of the state discourse); her affair with the brewery worker,

the narrator's grandfather, moralistically speaking, implies incest since he occupies a lower social status (being an employee of Jiuer's deceased husband). Therefore, in this process of Oedipalization, Zhang skillfully uses woman as a narrative strategy that constructs a sense of presence, but a presence in retrospective mode as the story is narrated by Jiuer's grandson. And this presence is a site where traces of modern China are negotiated, fragmented, and (partially) erased.

Jiuer as the site of the second split into the ethnographic object and the subjective self within this new ethnography that herself narrates perhaps can be explained by Chow's notion of "double gaze" (which I will discuss more deliberately in Chapter 3). Chow argues that Zhang's exhibitionism in the new ethnographic narrative is a tactical means to redirect both the gaze of the state's patriarchal domination and the West's Orientalist gaze. In the context of *Red Sorghum*, by putting on display the ethnic/social practice of arranged marriage approved by elderly male members against a young woman's will "amounts to an exhibitionism that returns the gaze that is the Chinese family and state's inhuman surveillance... [and] the gaze of the Orientalist surveillance that demands of non-Western people's mythical pictures and stories to which convenient labels of otherness such as 'China' can be affixed" (Chow, 1995, p.170). Thus, Zhang's investment in re-appropriating "women's problems" from the conventional melodramas is to constitute the new ethnography as a narrative intervention in which discloses a multi-layered resistance in response to both the state discourse and the West's Orientalism.

I have discussed so far the beginning stage of the Fifth Generation and their new ethnographic narrative, which amounted to an avant-garde movement or a new wave in the Chinese cinema that their films constituted a critical discourse and re-articulated the notion of the modern Chinese nation. This split from the state discourse requires a tactical intervention of performativity—a narrative structure that constitutes a pre-socialist China (a national time-space) through the practice of what Chow calls “modernist collecting” (Chow, 1995, p.145). The elements of “Chineseness”, namely the exotic rural landscape, people’s struggle, subaltern consciousness, and oppressed women are extracted from their proper historical, social, and political spaces and rearranged within the new ethnographic narrative structure. The acts of “modernist collecting” and rearrangement are precisely the “citation” and “mutation” that Berry (1998) discusses in his analyses on the contemporary Chinese cinema. The filmmakers’ performativity must be understood not simply as an act of nation as narration, but also a persistent and discursive way of resisting the dominative discourses which tend to homogenize a collective national agency by producing a central image and idea of “China”.

The self-exoticized images in the films thus must be translated as a dissent voice from inside the seemingly uniform body of the nation. They are significations of “China” as an internally heterogeneous nation/people who refuse to be interpellated or reduced to a homogeneous group by the official discourse. The three major elements of the Fifth Generation’s new ethnography that I have indicated shifted the notion of nation from the center

to the marginalized/margins and presented to us an alternative narration which is constantly suppressed by the language of the hegemonic force.

As we will see, The Fifth Generation's narrative intervention will continue to take on different forms, however, follow the same technique of the performative in their cinematic project of nation building. The movement of double/split may not always be so easily distinguished, in fact, they reveal a rather unresolved dilemma with the official discourse that it claims to break with. Thus, at this point I would question that, if the Fifth Generation's intervention relies on and itself constitutes the chain work of "iterability", is a state of "zero-political coding" possible since the narration strategy is inevitably conditioned by that "original" it needs for citation? By raising this question I want to point out that the process of distorting the authenticity, continuity, and homogeneity represented by the modern state discourse may not necessarily be a complete negation of "China". This means that the Fifth Generation films, while containing overtones of cultural and social criticisms, may still linger traces of the ghostly images of the modern nation that they attempt to erase. I will discuss more deliberately regarding this matter when I examine the Fifth Generation's most recent works. Nevertheless, the process of re-articulation "China" necessarily produces a movement of double/split in which the acts of negotiation, subversion, and disruption take place.

CHAPTER 2

THE PROBLEM IN READING THE FIFTH GENERATION FILMS IN CROSS-CULTURAL CONTEXT

How to interpret the self-Orientalized representations in the Fifth Generation films perhaps has been the most debated and still unresolved problem in film and cultural studies. This problem remains because our perceptual habits and aesthetic judgments often tend to be guided by a set of universal values by which art and culture are categorized into a hierarchical order. The difficulty in the tasks of aesthetic judgment and interpretation in cross-cultural context further reveal a more complex issue regarding the text-reader relation, which is my major concern in this subject matter. By *text-reader relation*, I do not mean an audience or perception study; I specifically refer to the method(s) by which critics and scholars examine the Fifth Generation texts and translate them into an understanding of the China-West relation, which has become a legitimized academic discourse.

My purpose of underscoring the problem in cross-cultural translation is twofold. First, by raising a general question on aesthetics, I would like to indicate that the universal aesthetic judgment (i.e. the Kantian aesthetic or modernist aesthetic theory), although for some it may provide a convenient guide for appreciation and evaluation, is in fact an obstacle which prevents alternative and critical approaches to and understandings of various forms of art and culture, in this particular case, the Fifth Generation films. Second, I

would like to further investigate the limitation of a universal language by which critics and scholars tend to rely on when examining cross-cultural texts and analyzing China's world position represented in films.

To discuss this subject in a more specific manner, I will take the Chinese feminist Marxist cultural critic Dai Jinhua's approach to the Fifth Generation films of the 1990s as a departure and to examine the difficulty in a cross-cultural reading which is based on the critical Marxist theory (i.e. the Frankfurt School of thought) and the language of Lacanian psychoanalysis. My argument is that an understanding of culture in general and the contemporary China-West relation in particular through these approaches and methods is rather partial and limited. My intention is not to negate the importance or validity of such approach; rather, I would like to point out the danger of which that its dependence on the theories of *mode of production* and *ideology* tends to reproduce a banal academic discourse, which overlooks and oversimplifies the conditions in which a certain form of culture or artwork is produced and diminishes the possibility for internal difference and resistance within the Fifth Generation films made during this period.

Before moving on to the discussions on the question of aesthetics and the problem in Dai's reading of Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* (1993) and Zhang Yimou's *Ju Dou* (1991) and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), I would like to first briefly review the condition of the Chinese film industry at this specific moment in which these works were conducted.

2.1 An overview of the Fifth Generation's transition in the 1990s

The Chinese film industry had undergone a period of decline during the 1990s as the country was adapting and adjusting to its economic reform policy toward a capitalized system. The industry reached its high point in 1992 with a production of 166 films (including co-productions with Hong Kong and Taiwan), but started to go downward in the following years in production, revenue, exhibition, and attendance. By the end of the decade, the production quote decreased to a number of, according to the official statistics, 99 films, however, some scholars indicated that only around 40 of the featured films were exhibited. This status quo continued to remain even in the beginning years of the new millennium; until 2002, the amount of annual production stayed below 100 (Y. Zhang, 2004, p.281-284).

The considerable drops in each of the areas of the industry were accompanied by a number of reasons. To name a few, the most significant factors perhaps, were, first, the Party's pressure on the industry to make "leitmotif films" that affirms the state reform policy and ideology. In the mid-1990s the Party implemented the so-called '9550 project'—a competition that intended to encourage studios to make propaganda films—with an annual quota of ten "exquisite films" (Y. Zhang, p.282) (also see Jihong and Kraus, 2002, p.430). Those that were selected would be rewarded by government funding. However, these films' failure at box offices proved the progress of social change that neither the government could any longer have the complete

control over the industry, nor the filmmakers and the audience were content with making and consuming such type of “entertainment”.

Second, around the same time, the import of Hollywood “mega films”—namely high budget productions which target at making maximum amount of profit—and the partnership of China Film Corporation with transnational film companies based on revenue sharing system to distribute imported films (including films from Hong Kong) affected the development of domestic films. The official’s intension of a more market-oriented industry reform (though not openly spoken) and loosening its regulation by allowing Hollywood’s entry (up to ten films annually) was to re-establish the credibility of cinema, attract movie attendance, and to stimulate domestic production to make “exquisite films”, which were required to include educational, artistically tasteful, and entertaining contents, that could compete with the “mega films” (Jihong and Kraus, p.430). A note should be made here that the Chinese officials initially referred to the “mega films” by their ‘aesthetic value’ and ‘technological achievement’ rather than their market and profit aims since such intention would not be considered legitimate according the state ideology (Dai, 1999, p.398-400). Although Hollywood’s entry did attract movie attendance immediately, it also had an effect on the domestic films’ performance at box offices since the Chinese audience now had a higher expectation on films. Without being able to make enough sales, domestic studios were facing serious financial difficulties that even the protection of governmental regulation, which required two-thirds of the theater screening

time to be reserved for domestic films, could not save the falling industry (Y. Zhang, p.284).

Third, the availability of other forms of popular entertainment such as the increasing household ownership of television sets, internet, etc. changed cinema's position that it was no longer the premier source of entertainment. Piracy was also blamed for the depressing domestic film sales and decrease in movie attendance. Since the government did not effectively control the production and distribution of pirated films, not only people could easily purchase them just about anywhere, the pirated copies had become more favorable when being compared to expensive movie tickets and relatively low quality domestic films (Y. Zhang, p.282) (also see Jihong and Kraus, p.421).

The future of the Chinese film industry seemed gloomy and survival was the issue at stake that the Fifth Generation encountered at this stage. Unwilling to submit to the official discourse by making "leitmotif films", the Fifth Generation looked for a way out of the Chinese film industry and found its alternative support from foreign companies, among these included companies and transnational corporations from Hong Kong, Japan, and Europe. For instance, Zhang Yimou's *Ju Dou* was co-produced by China Film Co-Production Corporation, China Film Release Import and Export Company, Xian Film Studio, and the Japanese based entertainment publisher Tokuma Shoten. The film also entered and received a number of awards and obtained welcoming feedbacks at international film festivals, particularly in Europe. Tian Zhuangzhuang's *Blue Kite* (1992), a critique of the Cultural Revolution

and also a co-production of Chinese and Hong Kong film companies, is another good example that followed such path and attained controversial attentions both from abroad and at home. Perhaps it was not so much the director's critical tone that put this particular work under the spotlight; rather, it was Tian's daring act of entering the Tokyo Film Festival and distribution abroad without the approval of the Chinese officials. As a result, this film was banned and himself was listed in the black list along with other "underground" filmmakers who also were prohibited to make films in China (Y. Zhang, p.284).

Despite the risks involved, the celebratory success of the Fifth Generation films abroad have provided a model for the Chinese filmmakers to follow, especially for the Sixth Generation and other independent filmmakers (or the "underground" filmmakers) who were/are also working along the edges of the strict governmental control and the declining industry. This venue enabled them to *smuggle out* their artistic efforts and their critical views about the Chinese history and politics which have not been appreciated by the officials. Thus, the West, or I shall say the European art film market, has become the Fifth Generation's "escape" in this crisis. However, Dai held rather negative views toward this shift of commercialization and accuse the filmmakers for pandering to the taste of the Western viewers by representing exoticized, orientalized, and sexualized images of China. She sees the Fifth Generation's escape as an "entrapment", "a submission... to the subjected position through the Western gaze" (hereafter, otherwise noted, my translations) (Dai, 1995, p.74).

The Fifth Generation in the 1990s found their way out of the declining Chinese film industry by focusing on making “festival films”, which not only attracted international attentions but also funds in supporting productions of national films. This was the Fifth Generation’s first transition into an international and market-based mode of production, which will be fastened as China’s social and economic transformations continued to progress in the following years. This mode of production undoubtedly generated debates among critics and scholars; the unsettling debates highlight the problem in reading the Fifth Generation texts that I want to discuss in this chapter.

2.2 The question of aesthetics and problem of cultural categorization

A symptom of cultural crisis was evident in the Chinese intellectual and art circles in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. Just as everyone was still trying to reconcile with the movement of modernization promoted by Mao’s government, Deng’s reforms, which led China’s step into global capitalism, engendered another shock as no one seemed able to predict to what extent and in what direction the Chinese culture would be impacted or restructured. In the late-1980s and early-1990s, when making films in China was still very difficult due to the lack of technology and the relatively tight restrictions and ideological control of the government, some filmmakers managed to overcome these obstacles and made their works known in other parts of the world. After a long period of interruption of the Chinese film industry since the Second

World War, this was perhaps the first time that the world knew that *China could make films*.

Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* is the often spoken film which set the example for the Fifth Generation's development during the transition into a commercialization period since it brought home the Golden Bear Award in 1988. In the same year, Chen Kaige's *King of Children* encountered a rather different feedback at Cannes Film Festival; it was selected by a group of journalists that it was the longest and dullest film, and more ironically, it was given a literacy prize by the UNESCO while the film's message was anti state culture and education (Dai, 1995, p.72-73). This interesting scenario of Chen's and Zhang's encounters in the European film festivals not only was a memo for the Chinese filmmakers who were in search for a new direction, but also for the cultural critics that this incident, which indicated capitalism and Europe to be the future, implies a rather leery prospect of the Chinese culture in general in the age of globalization that Eurocentrism seemed to be haunting at the door.

Dai characterizes the beginning stage of the Fifth Generation as a "cultural phenomenon" that it was a brief period of an "aesthetic revolution in the Chinese film history" that can not be resumed after the interruption of global capitalism (Dai, 1995, p.70) (also see Dai, 1999, p.247). The becoming more market-oriented economy in the early-1990s had/has not only put an end to this aesthetic revolution but also closed the door to the elite/high culture and turned everything into mass produced products of capitalism/Eurocentrism. In

this mode of production, works of art no longer reflect truth but merely represent the likeliness of truth which, according to the concept of Kantian aesthetics, is the end of art: “ [commercial] art belongs to art only by analogy”; like that of the animalistic mode of production, without reasoning or the pleasure of free will (Derrida, 1981, p.5). Her readings of *Ju Dou*, *Raise the Red Lantern*, *Life on a String*, and *Farewell My Concubine*, suggest that the social reality of China represented through cinematic narratives is precisely the product of this mode of production that its purpose is only for commercial exchange, and, therefore, contains lower value.

Although Dai makes no reference to any aesthetic theory, nor does she offer an explanation on her method of measuring the value of the examined films, it is clear that the point of departure in her criticism bases on a universal aesthetic theory, which legitimizes her argument of the Fifth Generation’s entry into the market as the end of an aesthetic revolution and the beginning of a cultural decline. The “value” that she attributes to the films, to my understanding, is determined by two things: their ability to allow the reality of the Chinese society or the idea of the artist to reflect itself through its form and their ability to constitute a language that critically reflects and responses to the language of the dominant. I will discuss the latter when examining her method of Lacanian psychoanalysis.

To understand the former aspect, I would like to briefly turn to Michele Barrett’s discussion in *The Place of Aesthetics in Marxist Criticism* (1988) on the art critic Max Raphael’s view on aesthetics and his distinction between

effective and *inferior* art in his studies of Cezanne's and Picasso's works. Raphael's "[artistic] *excellence* is characterized, on the one hand, by an engagement of the senses and the intellect and, on the other, by a fusion of materials and imagination" (Barrett, 1988, p.703). Based on technical observation in his evaluation of the paintings, Raphael characterizes Cezanne's *Mont Sainte-Victoire* as a more effective and meaningful work of art than Picasso's *Guernica* because Cezanne, without focusing on any particular viewpoint and by using certain aspects of natural appearance, he is able to express feelings/sensations that are constituted by the surroundings of Aix-en-Provence into the figurations in his painting, and through this medium the intensity of these sensations unfolds before the viewer. Whereas Picasso, by using black and white to produce the effect of shock, while it delivers powerfully a sense of 'destructiveness of a disintegrating society', he could only express personal feelings through such extreme figurations and colors, which do not reflect the real world that is composed by nature, society, etc. (Barrett, p.707).

Barrett's examination on Raphael's critique puts forward the question of aesthetic that the theory of sensibility—art as reflections of empirical experiences—tends to undermine the *meanings* of the artworks. The relationship between sensibility and meaning remains unresolved as the latter is often ignored in the aesthetic theory. Based on the former, Dai denounces the Fifth Generation's commercial films for falsely representing China in self-Orientalized images and degrading its early aesthetic achievement that had distinguished this Generation from any other period of the Chinese film

history. The aspect that I want to call to the attention here is her categorization of art and culture. Her heavy concentration on the emphasis of value, at the expense of understanding why certain properties of an art work is accounted for its assigned value as well as how and why certain perceptions may be formed, reproduces a hegemonic discourse that governs our perceptions and overlooks the social conditions that also take part in shaping them in discursive ways. This is one of the major problems in the critical Marxist theory that it tends to mystify the so-called high art or revolutionary art and underestimate the possibility of resistance in commercial cliché. Dai's categorization based on the films' sensibility not only inevitably overlooks the more important questions of aesthetic but also perpetuates the cultural hierarchy informed by Eurocentrism that she overtly criticizes.

2.3 The limitation in Dai's psychoanalytical approach in cross-cultural interpretation

Dai's critical Marxist and Lacanian psychoanalytic approaches to the Fifth Generation films made during its first transition into the commercialization period reveal two anxieties shared among the Chinese intellectuals and those in diaspora of the time. One is a reaction toward the uncertainties in terms of cultural and social changes caused by the force of global capitalism, which, according to Arif Dirlik (1994), enables the circulations of Western (Eurocentric) ideas in the "Third-Worlds". Dai's essays, *The Multiple Recognitions in the Chinese Art Films after 1989* (1995) and *Son of History: Rereading the Fifth Generation* (1999) are a part of the "academic

phenomenon” which Dirlik discusses in *The Post Colonial Aura* that since the mid-1980s, intellectuals of the “Third-World” origin in the “First World” began to reconsider the new world situation of the postcolonial and conduct criticisms to respond to Eurocentric ideas. Their attempt was to relocate the once marginalized narratives as the center. Like most of those critics, Dai uses the language (Lacanian psychoanalysis) that is familiar to the “First World” in order to attain legitimacy in the “First World” academic circles. Nonetheless, such criticisms often tend to return to the same state of essentialism and universalistic narratives, I would also add, the binary structure of the “First” vs. the “Third-Worlds”, which they claim to break away from (Dirlik, 1994, p.341-342).

The second anxiety, which comes from the reactionary response toward the postcolonial condition, is a rejection of the “Third-World” identity, and the Fifth Generation’s self-Orientalized portrayal of China becomes the perfect target through which the critics and intellectuals identify the West as a source of cultural contamination and blame it for its cause of China’s “cultural decline”. This is the *truth* that Dai so persistently try to uncover in her analyses. Nonetheless, Rey Chow (1995) questions this “deep habit of ideology criticism” in cultural, visual, and films studies that while it may provide a convenient means for deciphering the images, it at the same time limits our understanding of their meanings or significations which are constantly in flux and unstable. Unquestionably, in cultural and film studies, as Chow suggests, we are often told to be cautious about the *illusions* which are produced to deceive. Therefore, we tend to assume that there is something

called “truth” lying under the mask of illusion and feel obliged to undertake the task of unveiling it by looking under the surface of this illusion (Chow, 1995, 163-172). However, the act of uncovering the truth, in the particular case of reading the Fifth Generation texts in cross-cultural context, tends to reduce its meaning to essentialized and oppositional terms as we shall see shortly (and in Chapter 3 I have a more deliberate discussion on this subject).

Now, I shall turn to Dai’s discussions of the Fifth Generation’s “festival films” of the 1990s and point out the limitation in her psychoanalytical approach. She argues that the China-West postcolonial relation is reflected in the process of cross-cultural “misinterpretation”; the films’ self-Orientalized images, which are produced to attain recognition from European film festivals, are misinterpreted as a series of significations of a “Fatherless”, “feminized”, and “castrated” China. In this misrecognition of China through the Western gaze, the filmic images reaffirm the postcolonial world order in which Europe (the West) maintains its domination over China (the East). Therefore, in her view, the films project the Fifth Generation’s submission and acceptance of the assigned “Third-World” identity and position and revaluation of Eurocentrism (Dai, 1995 and 1999).

For instance, a *Fatherless* China in Zhang’s *Ju Dou*, as Dai explains, is produced in the process of misreading which reestablish the subordinated position of China. Through the repeated scenarios and scenes of father-son relations (i.e. the old master Qin-Shan and his nephew Tian-Qing, who has incestuous relation with his uncle’s wife; Tian-Qing and his illegitimate son

Tian-Bai, who kills both the old master and his biological father), allegorizes the repetitive pattern of the unchangeable social order of the patriarchal society in which the law of tradition always prevails. This allegory is accomplished in the *killing of the son*. When the youngster Tian-Bai who inherits the spirit of the deceased old master—the law of the patriarchal tradition—kills the disobedient *son* Tian-Qing, in the Chinese reading, this narrative insinuates the winning of the established law of patriarchy. She further suggests that Zhang uses this scene and translates the Chinese idea of *killing of the son* into *killing of the Father*. Thus, in the Western perception, this is a familiar scene of the Oedipus complex—a signification through which this story of a cultural and social criticism—a “national allegory”—receives its misrecognition in the event of cross-cultural reading (Dai, 1995, p.76-79).

In addition, Dai further discusses the events of mistranslation and misrecognition in *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Farewell My Concubine* that the classical Chinese melodramatic narratives of the jealous wives and concubines of Chen’s resident in the former film and the image of a ‘pure Oriental woman’ represented by the character Dieyi, a male Chinese opera actor trained to play female roles, in the latter constitute a “spectacle of the East” which invites a Western male subject position. In *Raise the Red Lantern*, the women of Chen’s residence become the central focus in the absence of the husband, whose face is never clearly shown in the frame. When the objective view of the camera shifts its focus onto the victimization among the women themselves, the view of the master—the Western patriarchal gaze—comes to occupy the voyeur’s position. Dai argues that in this process of identification,

the film language reinforces the secondary/subordinated status of the female gender (China in the “Third-World” position) and constitutes a signification of submission to the patriarchal order (Eurocentrism) (Dai, 1995, p.80-81).

Moreover, a similar process of identification also takes place in *Farewell My Concubine*. A feminized China is signified through the *castrated* character Dieyi when he is acting on stage in the costumes of female characters. The story covers three major periods of the Chinese modern history, the Kuomintang regime, the Second Sino-Japanese War, and the Cultural Revolution. According to Dai, Dieyi’s role in the film—a *castrated* man—signifies a victimized Chinese identity that in each historical event it once again bears the wound of oppression. This signification is constituted in several scenes throughout the film; when Dieyi is raped by the imperial eunuch Zhang Gongon, performing for the Japanese troops, later for the Kuomintang’s troops, and in the meetings of Chinese opera reforms during the Cultural Revolution, he is always in the female figure either in the full costume or with the operatic makeup on (Dai, 1999, p.266-267). In the cross-cultural reading, the story is not simply about an opera actor obsessed with drama and his role, beneath the veil of this mythical China it lies a signification of the Chinese identity based on which the misrecognition is accomplished. When Dieyi appears on stage/screen, he/she is the sign of a “pure Oriental woman”—a spectacle of the East—which, according to Dai, fulfills the visual pleasure of the Western patriarchal gaze, thus, once again, a reinforcement of the China-West postcolonial relation through the misinterpretation between cultures (Dai, 1995, p.85).

As mentioned, Dai's attempt in her analyses is to uncover the truth behind "the-East-as-spectacle" that it is not just an exotic depiction of the victimized Oriental women or the oppressive feudal China, but its meaning is to be understood in relation to Eurocentrism that China's "Third-World" identity and position are affixed and further reinforced by this film language. However, the problem with her persistent will in ideological critique tends to reduce this form of culture to nothing but sheer illusion. Her method of psychoanalysis, although enables her to find the connections that bridge the events of cross-cultural reading, can only provide partial understanding of the films' meanings. It is not that I reject the validity or the idea of using the Western theory of psychoanalysis in understanding the Chinese texts, but that this method is inadequate to explain the complex relations of China and the West, text and reader, or the gaze and the spectacle only in terms of the *phallus* and the *lack*. Perhaps this is one reason that Dai's critique repeatedly falls into the pitfall of a restricted economy composed by a series of binaries within which it does not allow internal difference and resistance.

Her approach to culture in general and the Fifth Generation's cultural practice/conduct in particular by following a universal set of aesthetic judgment and emphasis on the theory of *mode of production* exemplifies that the critical Marxist critique is outdated in the case of cross-cultural reading of the contemporary China-West relation. It also indicates an academic phenomenon in which a hierarchical discourse on culture tends to be reproduced. How to avoid this academic banality and find a critical way of

interpretation without reproducing essentialist or reductive theories remains an unresolved problem in the studies of the contemporary Chinese films. Perhaps Chow's suggestion of abandoning some of the interpretive habits and prejudices, which I have discussed so far, may enable us to find an alternative approach and understanding of the Fifth Generation texts. By following this aspect, I think we are able to examine the event of self-Orientalization not in rigid and limited sense of the success of Eurocentrism over the East, but as a tactical means of representation which challenges our perceptual habits and demands us to understand the projected images/ideas beyond the terms of the *phallus* and the *lack*.

Chapter 3
RETURNING TO ANCIENT CHINA:
THE FIFTH GENERATION'S CULTURAL
RE-APPROPRIATION IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBAL MASS
ENTERTAINMENT

China's transformation into a capitalist system, from its long process of implementing reform policies to finally joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, and the entry of Hollywood into its film industry since the mid-1990s have generated both positive and skeptical responses among the intellectuals and filmmakers. The tension between the conflicting responses and the various approaches that have been taken on this subject matter in cultural and film studies underscores the questions of how we should look at these culturally specific Chinese films that are becoming a part of the global mass entertainment and how we could analyze China's relation with the West in the postcolonial situation without oversimplifying and reducing these texts to mere products of reification or seeing them as complete success of capitalism and Eurocentrism over China as we see in Dai's feminist Marxist criticism. Indeed, there is no single straightforward answer that could fully explain such a complex issue. In order to more adequately understand the Fifth Generation phenomenon on the path of global capitalism, and later into the transnational, it requires examinations from various aspects.

As I have discussed in Chapter 1 that the event of the filmmakers' performativity by using inventory narrative interventions in rearticulating a

“Chinese” story inscribes subversive discourses that resist both the language/law of the Chinese authority and the Western Orientalist gaze. This subversiveness is often overlooked because of the tendency of understanding of power as an imposition of a superstructure and that a resisting force should come from an exterior oppositional position. Nevertheless, we are demanded to reconsider this discourse of power that has been banally repeated in (cross-)cultural studies, in this case particularly in the studies of the postcolonial China and the films produced within this context. In the introduction, I proposed a return to M. Foucault’s concept of *pouvoir* and *savoir* that the Fifth Generation’s narrative interventions such as the ethnographic style of filming in its early stage should be considered as the filmmakers’ ability to express their aesthetic pursuits and social criticisms within the given constraining socio-political situation (completely closed film industry monopolized by the state government at the time) in which they acquired certain knowledge to produce certain forms of discourse that could enable their works pass the Chinese censorship by choosing safe subjects and stories and deliver subversive messages to their audience in allegorical forms.

As China’s transformation has been fastened by its preparation for and entry into the WTO, the Fifth Generation faced an urgent need to adapt new strategies in all production phases from constructing narrative structures and styles to marketing in both domestic and foreign markets. The already declining Chinese film industry has become a highly competitive environment with the increase of Hollywood imports and takeovers of the market (from initially allowing ten films each year to be imported and screened based on

profit-share basis in the mid-1990s to fifty films by 1999 and opening up to forty percent of cinema investments to foreign investors) (Lau, 2007, p.3). The task the filmmakers undertake now was to make films that would meet both the Chinese and Western audiences' expectations. Although the Fifth Generation's "new ethnography" had served as a tactical narrative intervention to break away from the socialist image of China and attracted considerable attentions from the international film circles, those works, such as Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* and *Temptress Moon* and Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* and *Raise the Red Lantern*, were either banned in China or could only reach the small circles of "high art" at the American and European art houses. Such "reputation" of the filmmakers' "high aesthetic achievements" has in fact become the box office poison and could not attract the mass audiences abroad and other Chinese-speaking regions. Under this circumstance of global capitalism and Hollywood's take over, the Fifth Generation was forced, once again, to develop a new film language.

Coincidentally, or not, the reemergence of costume drama has become the predominant narrative of the Fifth Generation's blockbusters in the late-1990s and 2000s. The filmmakers readapt this popular genre as an effective vehicle to construct an innovative narrative, which serves to disrupt the pedagogical norm and ultimately challenges a series of binarism, namely, high vs. popular culture, avant-gardism vs. mass entertainment, the West/Self vs. the Chinese/Other, etc. (I will come to this point when discussing the films). The most acclaimed and criticized works are Chen Kaige's *The Emperor and the Assassin* (1999) and *The Promise* (2005) and Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002),

House of Flying Daggers (2004), and *Curse of Golden Flower* (2006). The responses toward these films circulating among critics and intellectuals are rather polemic than neutral; the negative reactions often target at the films' *misrepresentations* of the Chinese culture and history for reproducing Orientalized images of China and pandering to the taste of the Western mass audience.

Departing from this accusation, I would like to suggest a reconsideration of these popular texts that in their superficialities, namely the spectacularity and self-Orientalized images, lie the codes of multi-layered (silent) resistance. These codes are the tactical elements, which are added to and modified from the conventional genre to rewrite the pedagogical discourse(s), be it a discourse of the Chinese authority or one that is informed by a foreign influence. Therefore, in the following, I will first briefly discuss the return of costume drama and its role in the commercialization periods of the Chinese film industry that this genre has been readapted to respond to the impacts of Europeanization, Japanese Occupation, Hollywood entries, and global capitalism, which play(ed) roles in China's socio-political transformations. Second, I will exemplify how and what critical discourses are constituted through re-appropriations of this genre and one of its sub-genres, *wu-xia*, which is loosely known as martial arts, by a formal and narrative analysis on two of the biggest blockbusters of the Chinese film history, *Hero* and *Curse of the Golden Flower*.

3.1 Costume drama, preserving “Chineseness” and rebuilding nation

To clarify the term costume drama that I use throughout this part, I shall note that I refer to this genre in a restricted sense of historical costume drama, which is also known as period piece. It covers a range of other genres, which embody features of each other's; for instance, Chinese opera movies, martial arts, and period films taking place in ancient feudal and imperial settings. They are mostly based on official and unofficial historical texts such as classical novels, legends, etc. (Y. Zhang, p.38). Historical accuracy is usually not the primary concern in these fictional films; however, *misrepresentations* of the historical figures and periods often generate criticisms among critics and especially historians. The stories mainly follow the conventional plots of social turmoil during the falls and raises of a dynasties and power struggles among imperial members and different states.

This genre has become a preference for the filmmakers for a few major reasons. First, it is a convenient framework to deal with subjects concerning social issues, which can easily be coded in the characters and the chosen plot.

As Zhang Yimou states:

[Some] Chinese directors resort to this method when they have a story to tell. They simply trace the time backwards and place the story in a safe time period when it would be easier to make the film and would not cause them any trouble. So we have seen that this is our creation and it is not necessarily that we have special sentiments about a certain time period. Sometimes we pick a certain time period solely for the purpose of implementing a plan. (As cited in *Asia Source*, 2004)

In other words, a period piece functions as an allegory projecting contemporary social issues and avoidance from censorship. The second reason is that it guarantees an audience and even a box office success since the majority viewers, particularly from Chinese-speaking regions, is already familiar with the genre and its narrative in other forms such as literature, theater performances, and television episodes. Last, but not least, the concentration on (reconstructing) the essence of “Chinese identity” in this genre enables the re-articulation of “China” at the times when national culture is challenged or “contaminated” by social transformations accompanied by foreign influences.

The above reasons, I think, legitimately, though not fully, explain the reappearances and increased popularity of costume drama during the three commercialization periods of the film industry and major socio-political transitions of the Chinese modern history—post First World War commercialized and modernized China in the May Fourth Movement, pre Pacific War during the Japanese Occupation, and the post Cultural Revolution restructured system toward global capitalism. As documented in Y. Zhang’s *Chinese National Cinema* (2004), each of these transitions and their aftermaths were/are forces that engender(ed) the developments of such a “national genre”. An interesting pattern which I found in his historical/institutional analysis is that this genre has been used as a means to re-articulate traditional values/norms and national unity that were shaken by socio-political factors.

For instance, the first wave of commercialization began around the early-1920s when cinema was first established as an institutionalized, legitimate art form that gradually replaced the traditional popular entertainment of theater performances and functioned as an educational venue. The still immature “industry” controlled by the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang or KMT) heavily relied on technical supports from abroad. Under the influence of the May Fourth Movement in 1919, which eventually led to the founding of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921, the producers often chose subjects that could maintain films’ function of civilizing and elevating the nation. Foreign and Chinese stories that promoted good deeds were preferred rather than those exposing darkness and shortcomings of the human nature and society (Y. Zhang, 2004, p.28-31). A number of genres were experimented throughout this period; toward the mid and late-1920s, popular Western comedies, such as Charlie Chaplin, provided sources of inspiration and model for the comedy genre. This wave of Europeanization and the pressure of May Fourth Movement eventually lead to a “return of ‘Chineseness’” (Y. Zhang, p37-38). Costume drama and its sub-genre of martial arts in which traditional ethics and teachings are highlighted during the end of this decade were a response to the changing social values under the influences of Europeanization and modernization promoted by the May Fourth movement.

In addition, the costume drama genre made another return in the late-1930s and early-1940s during the film industry’s second wave of commercialization. Confucius ideas were the major feature during this time of Japanese Occupation and Hollywood domination of the industry (Y. Zhang, p.85-88).

The attempt of the return of this genre and emphasis on traditional values at this pre-war period was mainly to propagate patriotism and preserve national culture in resistance to the Occupation and Hollywood.

Furthermore, the latest return of costume drama is brought to its height on a global scale by the Fifth Generation's blockbusters in the late-1990s and 2000s. Despite the accusations directed at these high profiled films, I think one can draw parallels between the previous two instances and the current situation of the Chinese society and film industry in the age of global capitalism. This latest 'return of Chineseness' in the mentioned films, as well as other directors' works such as Feng Xiaogan's *The Banquet* (2006) and primetime television series, serves similar functions of re-articulating the Chinese nation/national culture and responding to different forms of socio-political impacts, be it the notion of modernity promoted by the Party, Hollywood' domination, Eurocentrism, Westernization, or the so-called neocolonialism.

The filmmakers transform this genre by adding innovative and tactical elements and modifying its conventional narrative with technological enhancements to project contemporary issues and construct critical discourses, which reflect social discontentment. I will now demonstrate how and in what condition the critical discourses are encoded in the process of re-appropriating the all-time popular genre of costume drama.

3.2 Cultural re-appropriation and the re-emergence of the wu-xia genre

Wu-xia, or loosely known as martial arts as a sub-genre of the Chinese costume drama, had been a popular literary genre throughout the twentieth century, particularly before the age of global capitalism when other forms of entertainment were still unavailable. However, this genre was banned in China by the Communist Party until after the Cultural Revolution around the early-1980s because it was considered as a source of social and moral corruption and obstacle for the nation's modernization. Numbers of wu-xia novels were later adapted into television series and films. This genre reached its prime time between the 1960s and the 1980s both in print and on screen. The stories are usually narrated in plots of historical periods of social turmoil. The figure of *xia*, literarily means a hero/heroine or a knight-errant, who practices and masters in *wu*, namely martial arts that focuses on traditional Chinese teachings of medicine and philosophy such as Buddhism and Daoism, travels around the country (often in exile by political or personal causes) and fights against injustice carried out by the strong and saves the weak. The act of fighting is not to justify the use of killing against wrong doings, on the contrary, it is considered as a form of art that requires sophisticated studies and a long process of self enhancement and meditation in order to achieve the highest state of *wu*. Therefore, one can say that this popular genre, which is in some ways similar to the Western genre, serves to project social problems of the time and the desires and fantasies for social justice.

After the 1980s, the wu-xia genre was no longer a preference of both the young movie-goers particularly because of its emphasis on the essentially Chinese ideas and the filmmakers since the markets were taken over by Hollywood's high budget films. However, with the Taiwanese director Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* in 2000, this genre made its return (modified by technological enhancement and adaptation of a melodramatic narrative) to the popular entertainment of the Chinese-speaking regions and successfully entered the Western markets. It was a small budget production of fifteen million U.S. dollars, but grossed one hundred and twenty-eight U.S. dollars in the United States alone and won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film (see detailed data on www.imdb.com). Yet, despite Lee's success overseas, his film was rather greeted by unwelcoming responses from Chinese-speaking audiences. One reason could be that the audiences who expected to see an *authentic* wu-xia movie were dissatisfied by this modified and romanticized wu-xia genre. Nonetheless, as the Fifth Generation was searching for a new direction of filmmaking that would enable them to attract interests from both domestic and foreign viewers, this film's box office success in Hollywood indicated the potential of this new genre—melodramatic wu-xia—that was yet to be experimented.

Later, Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002) also made its move into the Hollywood, but unlike Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, Zhang's film was able to make a domestic box office hit. It broke the record in the Chinese film industry for having the highest production cost of thirty million U.S. dollars for a single film, which was topped over by his latest film *Curse of the Golden*

Flower (2006) with a budget of forty-five million U.S. dollars. Zhang made it clear that this was a commercial film; its cast and crew consisted of the most popular actors and actresses of China and Hong Kong and the well-known Australian cinematographer Christopher Doyle and the same choreographer and music composer from *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. In 2004, it was finally released in the U.S. presented by Quentin Tarantino, the producer of *Pulp Fiction* (1992) and *Kill Bill* (Vol. 1 2003, Vol. 2 2004). The high profile and marketing strategies enabled Zhang's accomplishment in achieving his goal of making a Chinese film that could attain recognitions by both the Chinese and the Western mass audiences instead of a small circle of the high art (Lau, 2007, p. 4-5).

Zhang's adaptation of the Hollywood production strategies and re-appropriation of the wu-xia genre into a new form/style should not be dismissed or reduced to mere cultural commodity that his film's cultural and aesthetic values are compensated solely for commercial exchange or that its ideological function operates with the single aim of the culture industry. On the contrary, this is the "guerrilla tactic" which Michelle de Certeau (1984) describes that by using the tools of the strategical domain with additional implementations of tactical elements (i.e. genre re-adaptation, CGI images, or color symbolism as we shall see shortly), Zhang's work manipulates certain ideas of the conventional narrative and adds to it a critical overtone which negotiates with and subverts the dominant discourse. Thus, I argue that Zhang's move into the global mass entertainment could be considered not simply as a response to Hollywood culture, but also as an act of resisting to be

marginalized in the categories of “high art” and “Chinese cinema” that both terms carry a connotation of a “Third-World” production made *for* the West’s consumption in which its recognition relies on its very “Chineseness” that constructs the Western subject.

3.3 Modified wu-xia narrative as a subversive discourse

Hero, unlike the conventional wu-xia genre which mainly focuses on its visual style on the aestheticization of physical movements and the skills of fighting, puts more emphasis on the ethical and spiritual aspects of this particular form of art. By shifting the film’s aspect, Zhang not only maintains a Chinese essence of the film in terms of traditional values but also tactically uses this essence to create a film discourse that reflects the contemporary issues concerning both the Chinese and global audiences and their societies. The tactical elements that Zhang implements to formulate the film’s discourse are a re-articulation of the Chinese ancient history and color schemes that play the role of an agent in narrating a lesson of the traditional Chinese teaching.

The film has been criticized for its historical inaccuracy and misrepresentation of the Qin Emperor as a wise, moderate man, who is actually known as the most ruthless dictator in the Chinese history. However, as I argued in chapter one that (historical) accuracy is not the aim in the event of the cinematic nation building, and that each re-articulation of the so-called nation is to be seen as a revision of or break with a previously established discourse. Therefore, what the film achieves is what Bhabha calls the “split between the

continuist, accumulative, temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative” (Bhabha, 1990, p.297). History is an institutionalized knowledge/discourse that informs us of the world view, which is controlled and maintained into a certain format and represented to us as it is the unshakable fact. Yet, this knowledge/discourse is repeatedly challenged by the performativity of other (institutionalized) discourses, for instance, the ongoing, discursive cinematic project of nation building.

The goal of this fictional story, which loosely adapts the legend of Jing Ke’s assassination of the Qin Emperor, is to interrupt the continuity of our world view. But if Zhang’s intention is to rewrite or change the taken-for-granted historical fact and to convey a dissident message to those who maintain this fact, why is the Emperor not killed while his assassins, Nameless and Broken Sword, on two occasions have the perfect opportunities to kill him? Instead, they attempt to reconcile with the Emperor and to convince him that it is up to his decision that the wars can be stopped, hatred among people can be vanished, and peace can be brought to the world. Nameless and Broken Sword have not failed their mission of killing the Emperor as Jing Ke does in the legend story; rather, they abandon their missions because they have learned the ultimate state of human spirit—peace—that disarmament and forgiveness (the emphasis of *wu*/swordsmanship) are the keys to resolving conflicts. Nameless’s last words to the Emperor are, “[think of] those who die/died and... remember the highest state [of swordsmanship]”. Thus, Zhang’s rearticulation of this historical story and re-adaptation of the *wu-xia* genre, not only offers us a world vision—harmony and peace—that is different than the

one we live in, but also stresses and applies this very idea onto a larger scale of contemporary reality.

The political meaning of using the Qin Dynasty as the story background has been debated among critics even though Zhang claims “[the] objective of any art is not political. I had no political intentions” (*Guardian*, 2004). Zhang may not have intended a political message; however, he did reveal in an interview that he hoped to make this film meaningful and relevant to the current reality (Golden Dragon Pictures, 2007). He expressed his concern about the aftermath of the September 11 incident, which just happened the year before the film was first release in China, and the countless conflicts throughout human history, particularly the ongoing wars that were happening in the Middle East. He said that the central idea of the film in the Chinese phrase “all under heaven” and the message of peace refer to a vision of peace for the world (Golden Dragon Pictures, 2007). In relevance to the incident and aftermath of the September 11, which has become a global concern when the U.S. declared *war on terror*, some have interpreted the film and its central idea on a global level. Conversely, some perceive the fictional story of Qin as an allegory of the current Chinese situation that militaristic and hegemonic suppressions are justified in the name of (re)unification and the state’s stability. While the Taiwan, Tibet, and Xingjian issues were/are under the watch of international pressures, such reading of the film is natural and expected.

Given the historical and social contexts in which the film is made and perceived, both readings are equally valid. They also indicate the polysemic

nature of the film's meaning that can not be reduced to a single "truth" which tends to be believed as being masked beneath the technologically reproduced "illusion". Thus, it further explains the film's domestic and foreign box office successes as it allows various interpretations according to the contexts in which it is consumed.

Another tactical element in Zhang's re-appropriation of the wu-xia genre in *Hero* is his use of color symbolism that besides enhances the film's visual quality, organizes the film's discourse. In other words, the color schemes are the segments of the story in which a *message* is encoded. The red, blue, green, and white sequences of flashbacks narrate the different states of the spirit of *wu* or swordsmanship, and all together, they constitute a counter-discourse by a traditional teaching. First, the color red, as that we see in Zhang's previous films, *Red Sorghum*, *Ju Dou*, and *Raise the Red Lantern*, symbolizes an intense passion and love, however, in a negative sense, as it involves jealousy and determination for revenge. In this sequence, the Emperor finds Nameless's initial story unsound and does not take it accountable as he believes that the two "supreme warriors", Broken Sword and Flying Snow, who are lovers, are not narrow-minded people and would not be easily affected or separated by their emotions caused by simple matters of love and jealousy. The Emperor further indicates the fact that Sky, a proud master of swordsmanship, purposely looses the fight to Nameless so that Nameless could receive the imperial award to come face to face with the Emperor within ten steps distance out of the reach of the imperial guards and carry out the assassination. What this sequence insinuates and denounces is the conventional narrative of

the popular wu-xia genre that the majority works of which often base on stories of revenge caused by emotional or political unsettlements and justifies the event of violence and killing. Later in the story, this conventional narrative is re-written by an entirely opposite set of values that underscores bravery and personal integrity.

Second, Zhang designates the color blue to denote bravery, self-integrity, trust, and willingness of self-sacrifice for the good. In this sequence, the Emperor, once again, finds Nameless's story deceptive and comes to realize that Sky's and Flying Snow's self-sacrifices by trusting Nameless's skill of handling the sword that would only harm but without killing them in order to convince the imperial guards that he had terminated the most wanted assassins for the Emperor. This color sequence highlights and affirms the mentioned symbolic values, which are the fundamental state of spirit emphasized in the wu-xia genre. Yet, the determination for revenge (killing the Emperor) in this part of narrative is rather ambivalent.

In spite that the intelligent Emperor had recognized the purpose of the collaborations between Nameless, Sky, and Flying Snow, what he had not learned at this point is the highest state of the swordsmanship/*wu*—harmony. In the third color sequence of white, Broken Sword urges Nameless to abandon his mission of assassinating the Emperor for the good of *tian-xia*, literally means “all under heaven”, a Chinese phrase of saying “the world”, and aspires him to consider the true meaning of this phrase that violence

caused by hatred is intolerable. Therefore, white indicates the truth of harmony, the path that masters of swordsmanship must follow.

Finally, Broken Sword has given up his determination to kill the Emperor and eventually convinced Nameless to also abandon his mission since they both have learned to be able to achieve the highest state of living in peace by forgiving from the practice of calligraphy in which Broken Sword initially seeks to apprehend the perfect skills of swordsmanship. This ultimate state—peace—the central idea of the film is illustrated in different layers of green such as the green mountains and the still reflection of their profiles on the lake that merge into one picture of paradise where swordsmanship and violence do not exist as everything is in its simplest and most truthful form.

The last two color sequences are the turning point that subverts the wu-xia genre and accomplishes the film's discourse. Consider in a Western film, the cowboy does not draw his gun when he comes face to face with the enemy; instead, he forgives and reconciles with him to live in peace. When an "original" type of film is re-adapted into a new form (e.g. melodramatic wu-xia), viewers, especially fans, may not always appreciate such creativity, in fact, may be annoyed by it when they do not find the expected, familiar narratives that they have in mind about a particular genre. Lau (2007) suggests in his analysis that the tension between 'wen', literally means words, literacy, and culture, and 'wu' in this film is the cause of criticism among most East Asian audience. In the conventional wu-xia narrative, the figure of xia does not always follow the teaching of 'wen', which is considered as a form of

social norm (Confucianism), yet it is justice, rather than peace, has the highest value in this genre. However, *Hero's* shift of emphasis on 'wen' seems to imply a call for restoring social norm as the ultimate means for conflict resolution.

Hero's narrative discourse goes beyond subverting the conventional wu-xia genre. Its assertion of a traditional (Confucius) teaching and moral value not only serves to highlight and maintain the "Chineseness" of the film in resistance to be assimilated as a "Hollywood commodity" but also to redirect, what Chow (1995) calls, the "double gaze". Firstly, as mentioned, the Chinese film industry had been experiencing a major decline since the entry of Hollywood; Zhang's intention in directing *Hero* under such circumstance is to make a Chinese film that would attract Chinese-speaking and foreign audiences and make box office hits both in local and global markets. One way to explain Zhang's re-adaptation of the once popular wu-xia genre and emphasis on the essence of traditional Chinese teaching (inscribed in the white and green sequences) is that he seeks to challenge the stereotype of the wu-xia (or the so-called martial art) genre, which is generally known as action films without much depth and meaning, and make a distinction that this modified genre, unlike the majority of Hollywood action films which is mainly based on technologically produced visual effects, can be on the contrary artistically tasteful and meaningful. Another promising explanation could be that he attempts to change the impression of "Chinese films" as "art films" (e.g. *Red Sorghum* and Chen Kaige's *Temptress Moon*) that are difficult to understand by general audiences and are usually excluded from popular culture. Thus, I

argue that *Hero* is Zhang's response to the apparatus of the industry of mass entertainment that, on the one hand, marginalizes *Chinese films* into a small group of the so-called "high art", and, on the other, commodifies them into the loosely known martial arts or action films. What Zhang ultimately accomplishes is to deconstruct a set of binarism in which a cultural hierarchy is maintained.

Secondly, the film further functions as a response to the higher level of structure that governs the activity of the cultural/social practice of the Chinese cinema, that is, the Chinese political authoritarianism and the West's Orientalism. Chow, in her analyses of *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Ju Dou*, suggests that Zhang's display of "China" is a self-conscious exposure which is a play with the idea of exhibitionism in which he tactically uses the means of popular narratives; for example, the abused female body and oppressed female sexuality under patriarchy, to redirect the "machine of surveillance" of the "double gaze of the Chinese security state and the world's, especially the West's orientalism" (Chow, 1995, p.170).

Following Chow's argument, Zhang's exhibition of an ancient totalitarian China in his commercial film *Hero*, thus, ultimately, redirects this double gaze and exposes the brutality of it by means of displaying "China" that is ethnic and culturally different. On the one hand, we see the Chinese government's hegemonic force over its people in an allegorical form such as the smallness and insignificance of the individuals in contrast with the gigantic architecture of the imperial palace, the superior, unreachable status of the Emperor, and the

massive number of the imperial army and servants chanting and moving in uniformed actions. What this exhibitionism denounces is the cruelty of the surveillance of the Chinese authoritarian rule. For many Chinese people, I believe, the scenes of the palace and the army bring back the memories of historical moments, for instance, the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989. On the other hand, this exhibitionism redirects the Orientalist gaze that eagerly searches and marks the very otherness of “China” to assure its own position. Zhang’s self exposure by using the commercial clichés, which serve as convenient signs with which the West can identify “China”, tactically manipulates the idea of *being gazed*. His conscious self exposure in *Hero* is thus a way of making a political stance that he rejects to accept or internalize this gaze. Therefore, what Zhang achieves in the act of returning the double gaze is to create a cinematic space for dialogue and negotiation and to subvert from within the apparatus of the *surveillance machine*.

Indeed, one can argue that *Hero* is a work of the Fifth Generation’s and the Chinese film industry’s response to Hollywood’s domination of the global market. Yet, the previous examples show that this “return to Chineseness” is not only a contemporary phenomenon, but a site to which the filmmakers of different historical and socio-political situations tend to revisit. In each of these returns (of the costume drama/wu-xia), it is not necessarily that they attempt to reconstruct a past that can no longer be, rather it is more of a wishful thinking of *what could have been*. Therefore, what we see is not the same form of the genre or the “China” that is being represented; instead, it is

always, to use Chris Berry's (1998) words, a "citation" and "mutation" of a previously articulated version.

A legitimate question at this point is that in the event of performativity, is the process of re-articulation always necessarily a subversive action? Or can it entirely transgress the pedagogical narration? When the film exposes the brutality of the double gaze, is it possible that it also reserves certain attitude toward what it criticizes? This means that in between the official discourse (pedagogy) and the film's critical discourse (performative) there is a state of ambiguity, what H. Bhabha calls an "in-between-ness", which belongs to neither side of the narrations. Thus it raises the question of what possibly may be the unresolved dilemma that Zhang confronts in his cultural and social criticisms. I seek to answer these questions by a reading of his most recent film, *Curse of the Golden Flower* (*Curse* hereafter) as I think in this film's visuality and narrative explicitly unfolds a duality of the contemporary Chinese social dimensions.

3.4 Subversion or allegiance? The ambiguity in *Curse of the Golden Flower*

In *Curse*, Zhang continues the Fifth Generation's primary theme of cultural and social criticism by readapting the genre of historical costume drama. A critical discourse and unresolved dilemma are simultaneously at work in the film's narrative and visuality of excess and lavishness, which is a style found in the new "Chinese mega aesthetics". Anyone who has seen the film would

have noticed the extravagance of its spectacularity in terms of its uses of color in architectural and costume design, computer generated images, etc. This extravagance unmistakably, on the one hand redirects the overwhelmingly demanding double gaze, yet on the other, holds back its criticism towards the rigidity and severity of the Chinese authoritarian patriarchal rule. By foregrounding the film's central idea, *queju*, which means rule, order, or discipline, Zhang invites his audience to reconsider this fundamental principle of the Chinese culture and politics, yet leaves unresolved the question of its validity. In other words, Zhang does not provide a resolution that the viewers habitually look for when consuming a product of popular entertainment. Thus, similar to the *Hero* situation, they tend to feel dissatisfied by the film's unconventional narrative and ambiguous message. The film has also received polemic reactions. Again, its inaccurate historicity and overly exaggerated scenes are the targets of the negative responses mainly from the perspectives of the modernist critiques. However, what is yet more interesting is the in-between response which neither fully appreciates nor dismisses Zhang's method of creating such a Chinese mega. I think this undecided response further discloses the Chinese people's attitude toward the central idea of *queju*.

In the following I will examine some of the most discernible elements in the film's excessive visuality that narrates the problems of national unity and the central idea of *queju*. What Zhang wants us to see in these elements, I think, is the conflicting sides of the notion of national unity—the surface of narration that defines nation vs. the strategic means it undertakes to build up such a surface.

First, Zhang's color symbolism is once again at play in constituting the film's critical discourse. The primary color scheme of gold, such as the imperial attire, architecture, jewelry, army's armor, chrysanthemum being displayed in the palace square, and so on, is a signification that demands multiple ways of reading from aspects of different social dimensions. On one level, it signifies the prosperity and national strength of the Later Tang Dynasty (928 A.D.). On the other, it implies a centralized and corrupted system in which the distribution of wealth and social resources are concentrated in the few hands of the powerful. Therefore, if we apply this (allegorical) narrative to the modern day China, these significations seem to project the contemporary Chinese society which is undergoing a process of rapid economic development and to underscore the problematic idea of national unity in the capitalist system that is built upon an unequal distribution of wealth and power.

Second, Women in Zhang's films are a site of struggle and negotiation. In his previous films, such as *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Ju Dou*, the abused female body and suppressed female sexuality not only signify women as the ultimate bearer of the oppressive social order, but also actively seek to return the voyeuristic gaze and reveal the cruelty of the patriarchal traditions through a self-exhibitionism of the troubled femininity. In *Curse*, Zhang continues using this element of oppressed women to expose the inhumane gigantic system of surveillance by an over-exposure of their femininity. The Empress and the female imperial servants in the film, like Song-Liang and Ju Dou in the mentioned texts, function as an embodiment of the entire Chinese nation-

people whose actions are disciplined by this supreme system. However, in the film Zhang remains ambivalent on this subject matter as this element is given a doubled signification that its meaning, instead of being fixed, is constantly shifting in between the pedagogy and the critical discourse.

For instance, the overstated femininity, namely the spectacle of the cleavages in the opening scene, is a site of the unresolved dilemma toward the suppressive imperial rule, which projects the social discipline of the contemporary China. When the female servants are awoken and instructed to wash, dress, and apply make-up in rows by following the percussion sound of woodblocks, several shots focusing on their upper bodies present a spectacle of uniformity not only in terms of their appearances and rhythmic movements, but the unnatural looking cleavages forced by their corsets occupying the screen. This exaggeration of female essence in conformity, which I think resembles a militaristic performance, is a doubled signification that both denounces and extols the oppressive social discipline and dictatorial rule. Following Chow's argument of the *double gaze*, this aesthetic of excess/over-exposure unquestionably redirects the idea of being gazed by the Chinese authoritarianism and the Orientalists' search for images of the *Chinese despot's 'harem'*. Yet, in this act of subversion, it also seems to reserve certain attitude toward the brutality of the double gaze by pushing it toward another direction of the extreme, that is, in agreement with totalitarianism that only by which such uniformity is possible.

Moreover, the Empress's poisoned body and suppressed sexuality, which eventually leads to her insanity, is another site of negotiation of the justification of the film's central idea *queju*. Since the Emperor is aware of Empress's incestuous relationship with his eldest son by the former Empress who he claims has deceased, he secretly assigns the imperial doctor to put poisonous ingredient into her daily herbal drink to slowly kill her. The Empress being fatally punished for her individual (sexual) desire, again, opens up the debate about the inhumane authoritarian rule. Morally speaking, her intimate relation with her step-son is condemned by social norm; however, her character in the film tends to acquire the viewers' identification and sympathy because of her plight under the dictatorial control and her determination, despite self-sacrifice, of overthrowing the ruthless Emperor. According to Zhang's tactical narrative intervention with the element of oppressed women, the Empress's sexuality unmistakably resembles the idea of individualism; her punishment is thus a form of suppression of her individuality for the sake of maintaining social order. This seems to imply Zhang's hesitation in judging too quickly this social norm/order sustained by harsh rule.

The third major element that constitutes the film's ambivalence is a combination of the excessive scenes of the human casualties caused by military clashes, the speedily recovered imperial court after the bloodshed, and the celebratory event of the Chrysanthemum Festival all in the same eve. In the end of the confrontation between the royal guard and the rebellious troop led by the second Prince, Jai, the palace court is quickly repaired and rearranged for the Chrysanthemum celebration by a mass of the imperial

servants. Tens and hundreds of corpses and blood in the square are removed, washed off, and replaced by a carpet of golden chrysanthemum. As the eunuchs announce the beginning of the festival, all the imperial members and servants orderly march into the square and uniformly worship the Emperor. Despite the family and national tragedy in which the Emperor's first wife, oldest, and youngest sons are killed, he remains calm and insensitive as he sits on the platform restating the rule to the Empress and the second Prince who collaborated to overthrow him. This extreme insensitivity toward human lives and capacity of restoring (social) order in a considerably short time also require a doubled interpretation. On the one hand, the film's critical overtone is explicit in the conscious self- and over-exposure of the Chinese totalitarianism. Once again, this is a tactical manipulation with the idea of exhibitionism through which it responds to the Chinese system of surveillance and the label (the Chinese other) given by the West. One may argue on the contrary that the last scenes reflect a discourse that is pro-state or even pro-totalitarian. This argument suggests an allegiance between the film's discourse and the idea of *gueju* that a nation needs a commanding ruler who has the capability of committing to order and discipline even at times it requires sacrifices of individual freedom or lives. Both interpretations are indeed valid; however, I think, this excessive exhibitionism further unfolds the unresolved dilemma which is neither a fully subversion of nor in allegiance with the official discourse. It is rather a (visual) space that is open to debate and negotiation in regards to the issue of national unity and its fundamental principle of *gueju*.

Such political dilemma is indeed inevitable in the Fifth Generation's commercial/popular films while the filmmakers are demanded to take into considerations of the local and global market factors, the official censorship, and so on. The Chinese film industry of the 2000s has become a much more complex habitat, in which constant re-adaptations to new trends are required in order to survive in the competitions with Hollywood. Nonetheless, the subversive intention and potential of these commercial films must not be undermined or overlooked with any set of judgment informed by a cultural hierarchy (i.e. Dai's feminist Marxist criticism discussed in Chapter 2). This is not to suggest a celebration of the Fifth Generation films being a part of the popular culture; rather, it is to underscore the problems of the ways in which we approach to these cultural texts and the complex issues that are being dealt with, and, more importantly, to understand the interactive relation between China and the West which can not be oversimplified or reduced into sets of binarism.

The return of Chineseness in the Chinese mega films is thus a tactical narrative intervention that ultimately deconstructs a series of binaries, namely high vs. popular culture, China vs. the West, etc. It is always a distortion and reorganization of the structure that regulates our perception. To achieve this, the most effective method is perhaps by means of popular culture. Yet, this assimilation into the realm of the popular must not be reduced to mere commodity or sheer manipulation. As we see in *Hero* and *Curse*, the re-appropriations of the popular genre of historical costume drama is a novel trend of narration in which contemporary social issues and desires are

inscribed. As a final remark on the Fifth Generation's latest development in regards to Dai's criticism, their commercial films indeed reflect China's place in the postcolonial condition; however, in this condition, China's relation with the rest of the world, particularly the West, is in a continuous fluctuation that no binary opposition can be affixed. Whether the texts inscribe an overt subversive discourse or an unresolved dilemma, they are products of a certain knowledge acquired within the changing conditions in which the filmmakers are enabled to construct narrations in connection to the contemporary society.

Conclusion

Initially, when I began to conduct this research, instead of a “film study”, I was mainly interested in the politics of representation in the Fifth Generation Chinese cinema. Born and raised in Taiwan, but having ancestral connection with the mainland, the Fifth Generation films (particularly those made during the 1980s and 1990s), at least for me, no doubt served an “ethnographic” function which further provoked my interest and concern about what it means to *be Chinese*, a name that is problematically labeled by academic and political discourses. Therefore, I chose the Fifth Generation Chinese cinema as a medium to pursue a critical understanding of the constructs of *national culture* and *national identity* that are relentlessly contested in the narrations of the Chinese pedagogy, the Fifth Generation’s performativity, and the Western Orientalism.

Throughout my discussions, I highlighted the general questions and issues concerning the notion of nation (in Chapter 1, Bhabha’s *DissemiNation*), approach to (popular) culture (in Chapter 2, Dia’s feminist Marxist criticism), and concept of power/knowledge (in Chapter 3, the Fifth Generation’s cultural re-appropriation) in the context of the postcolonial China. My purpose in doing so was to expose some of the blind spots in cultural studies which tend to be ignored and overlooked by some of the most prominent academic ideas, namely, the study of national cinema, feminist and critical Marxist theories,

etc. Also, I intended to exemplify the possibility for a critical approach to the mentioned subjects by following M. Foucault's *pouvoir/savoir*. By no means I attempted to produce reversal views or to negate the already established academic discourses, rather, I wanted to propose a supplement by which I think we can break through the binaries reproduced by those discourses and create an opening to allow critical examinations.

Nonetheless, this research also has its limitations and demands supplements from other aspects and fields of studies. I shall clarify a few of which I may have left unanswered and ambiguous. First, I have discussed in Chapter 1 the Fifth Generation's performativity that by constructing a "new ethnography" it functions to break with the socialist narration of nation of the time in the post-Cultural-Revolution period. I should stress that the Chinese cinema or the idea of the Chinese nation must not be reduced to an oppositional relation between the socialist realism and the Fifth Generation as during the same time there were other types of films being produced, such as the Fourth Generation which had influenced the constitution and later development of the Fifth Generation. Due to the difficulty of obtaining materials produced before the Fifth Generation, I decided to narrow down my focus to examining the notion of nation, by following the concept of performativity, in regards to the emergence of the Fifth Generation's inventory narrative intervention during the crucial period in China's socio-political transformation in the 1980s. To find more information about the interplays between the narrations of the socialist realism and other performative practices, one shall turn to Yingjin

Zhang's *Chinese National Cinema* (2004) in which he provides detailed documentation with a historical/institutional approach.

In addition, as I have mentioned in the introduction that the terminology of the so-called "Generation" is only a description of a particular group of filmmakers (including script writers and actors/actresses) who share common features in terms of filming techniques, film narratives, themes/genres, and so on, and constituted a distinguishable and recognizable *style* amongst themselves in a specific period. However, such way of description and categorization leaves many gray areas unmarked, such as the way we describe the French New Wave or the Italian Neo-Realism, and sometimes tends to render a homogeneous body in which the internal differences are essentialized and reduced to one particular character. In my discussions, although I have only focused on Chen Kaige's and particular Zhang Yimou's works to demonstrate the ideas of performativity and cultural re-appropriation, neither did I mean to imply that they or their films represent the entire body of the Fifth Generation nor only their works are worth examining. There were two practical reasons that I chose their works as my study subjects. First, my purpose in underlining the commonalities between the two was to concentrate my thesis in a more specific manner when discussing the issues of nation building in filmic narration and cultural re-appropriation. Therefore, I took up the shared elements in their self-Orientalized representations to evoke questions and debates on the critics' and scholars' accusations, which have reduced Chen's and Zhang's works to mere products of culture industry or cultural imperialism. Second, although the Fifth Generation consisted of more

members, such as Tian Zhuangzhuang, one of whom also conducted controversial works in the 1990s and was prohibited from filmmaking in China for exhibiting *Blue Kite* (1992) in international film festivals without attaining official permission, Chen and Zhang are perhaps the only survivors from the declining Chinese film industry since the early/mid-1990s and competition with Hollywood. Thus, this also reflects the instability of the Fifth Generation phenomenon which requires an understanding of the broader context of the Chinese film industry and the economic, social, and political factors which take parts in determining the transformations (i.e. the three stages I have discussed) of the Fifth Generation.

Moreover, in the discussions of the films *Hero* and *Curse of the Golden Flower* in Chapter 3, my focus on the Fifth Generation's re-adaptation and re-appropriation of the costume drama genre was to demonstrate in a broad sense the function of this particular genre in the Chinese popular culture and in the global mass entertainment industry as a means to reflect contemporary social problems/desires and to create a cinematic space for dialogue and negotiation with the Chinese officials and the Western Orientalist gaze. However, this readapted genre must not be generalized as serving the single function of social criticism or national allegory. Various film narratives (discourses) are constructed by using common elements of self-Orientalized representations (i.e. inaccurate/unofficial historicity, excessive and lavishing spectacularity, etc.) which must be examined individually in relation to the historical and socio-political conditions in which they are articulated. For instance, Chen's fantasy story *The Promise* (2005), which combines modified elements of

action (martial arts), romance, and costume drama, explores the theme of human nature which differs from Zhang's persistent pursuit of social criticism in *Hero* and *Curse*.

Overall, by moving between concepts and theories in literature, philosophy, and cultural and film studies, I, like the filmmakers, also aimed at finding a *tactical intervention* which would allow a critical aspect in studying this subject. As a final remark, the more complex issues deriving from the study of the contemporary Chinese cinema such as the (re)constructions of Chinese culture/identity and the China-West relation require examinations which are not refrained by timeless or universalistic theories. In some cases, the most prominent academic narratives may in fact produce barriers which prevent our critical judgments and comprehensions of cultural phenomena.

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