

Globalized Chinese Cinema and Localized Western Theory

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Abstract: This study focuses on how Chinese scholars have taken concepts and notions from Western post-theories to criticize Chinese cinema that have gained international popularity and acceptance. These films are both criticized in China for catering to the foreign taste and praised in the West for their defiant spirit. The interpretative conflict, on the one hand, raises some interesting questions about cross-cultural politics of reception, and on the other, reveals a paradoxical correlation between global and local discourses. This study argues that the issues of cultural identity dominate readings of modern Chinese cinema, and the “Chineseness” of a piece of work, often matters more than filmmakers’ artistic achievements. The binary model for thinking about China/West interaction is inadequate because Chinese films are in fact situated in a zone of global/local interaction. [China Media Research, 2009; 5(1): 10-20]

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The time Chinese cinema grabbed international attention coincided with the People’s Republic of China’s determination to launch a modernization campaign and its concomitant “opening” to the West, as well as the general increasing trend of globalization. Since the mid-1980s, Chinese cinema, led by the so-called Fifth-Generation, has won many international awards and been widely circulated in the global market. Chinese cinema, however, has encountered oppositional criticism from both China and the West. Chinese cinema has become a hot topic in Western film criticism and has enjoyed international acclaim. Meanwhile, Chinese intellectuals and cultural/film critics have employed Western theories, such as Orientalism, postcolonialism, and postmodernism, to interpret Chinese cinema, and they claim that the images of China and the meanings of Chinese culture have been distorted and commodified to satisfy “foreigners.” In other words, they feel the Fifth-Generation films give an “inaccurate” picture of China.

From the mid-1980s to early 1990s, Fifth-Generation cinema was part of a broad, nationwide intellectual movement, paradigmatic of the predicament of Third World culture confronting globalized modernity. A number of Chinese critics have discussed “China’s unique conditions,” and “unique solutions to China’s problems” from a postmodern perspective. They insist on legitimizing the local knowledge derived from China’s historical context as a means to question established mainstream Western discourse. The discussion on the internationalization of Chinese cinema shows a tension that has long existed in China’s objective of modernization since the late nineteenth century. That is, the tension between learning from the West and resisting the West, between particularism and universalism, and between nationalism and internationalism.

This study focuses on how Chinese scholars have taken concepts and notions from Western post-theories

to criticize Chinese cultural products, specifically Chinese cinema, which have gained international popularity and acceptance. By analyzing their criticism of the internationalization of the Fifth-Generation films, especially those of Zhang Yimou, this study examines how Chinese postmodernists in the 1990s perceived their cultural predicament since the capitalist transformation of the 1980s. It argues that their solution to this cultural predicament reinforced the China/West binarism while their concomitant self-empowerment was inseparable from the international reception of these works. Chinese intellectuals’ struggle for a “Chinese modernity” as an alternative to Western cultural hegemony has strengthened the binarism they attempted to oppose. As such, the idea of Chinese modernity actually relies on the Western criterion of modernism to gain its legitimacy, while the Western criterion of modernity itself is of ethnocentric value.

The entrance of Mainland Chinese cinema into the global film market, led by Zhang Yimou, provided the occasion for many debates in Chinese cultural criticism. The case of Zhang Yimou is important in that his film career is synonymous with the internationalization of Chinese cinema. Moreover, his works have provoked controversies with regard to cross-cultural interaction and representation. Behind such discussions are the perceived crises in the development of China’s cultural spheres. Zhang’s international popularity is, in the eyes of many critics, dubious. He has been taken by some in China as an exemplary instance of the willful surrender of Third World cinema to the Orientalist gaze, as a classic case of the subjugation of Third World culture to Western hegemony.

To prove the argument that Chinese postmodernists’ cultural/film criticism is caught between two modes of ideological signification—the Chinese versus the West and the local versus the global—this study is divided into the following parts.

First, this study introduces postmodernism and its ties with postcolonial criticism and Orientalism. Second, it analyzes how Chinese intellectuals have appropriated postmodernism and have used an indigenized Western theory to “read” internationalized Chinese cinema and to perceive the Chinese cultural predicament. This study then introduces the historical and cultural context of the Fifth-Generation filmmakers and their works. Aside from the discussion of Chinese postmodernists’ critiques of Chinese films, this study also offers other ways of reading at both the level of the filmic text and the level of the film industry. Particularly, Rey Chow’s approach to cultural translation (1995) discusses the conflict between globalization and localization. Her analysis creates the possibility of a conversation between the local cinema and the global film market. Finally, this study concludes that Chinese appropriation of Western postmodernism downplays the dynamics of local cultural production that postmodernism itself attempts to inspire. Chinese postmodernists limit the meaning of what is Chinese. A restricted sense of “Chineseness” as a Chinese alternative model of knowledge becomes another Orientalist discourse. Thus, a supposedly self-empowered alternative is not only ironically trapped in, but also reinforces, a China/West binarism.

Postmodernism, Postcolonialism, and Orientalism

In spite of much argument and discussion, the concept of postmodernism seems to remain ambiguous, and it still seems difficult to specify what constitutes postmodernity. This study starts from Jean-Francois Lyotard’s “report on knowledge” (1984) to sketch the link between the collapse of “metanarratives,” and the emergence of “micronarratives.” Although the postmodern condition as Lyotard describes is clearly a Western phenomenon, and postmodernism is “primarily European and American (North and South)” (Hutcheon, 1988, p.4), Chinese intellectuals employ this theory to self-legitimate their local knowledge to build a new model of modernity. The postmodern condition, as Lyotard describes, is the condition of knowledge in postindustrial societies in which classical metanarratives of legitimation are declining. Lyotard considers “metanarratives” the grand ideologies that control the individual and thus he argues that there must be an attempt to recoup the power of the individual to tell his/her narrative to gain the access to the control of one’s own politics. Lyotard refers postmodernity to the situation of postindustrial societies in the West, where scientific research and knowledge, funded and controlled by the state and multinational corporations, engage in a language game of which the goal is “no longer truth, but performativity—that is, the best possible input/output equation” (1984, p.46). Research and knowledge seem to have nothing to do with

discovery, invention, or the advancement of learning. That is, postmodern knowledge is characterized not by acquiring new facts, additional information, or truth. Instead, there is a growing preference for “petites histories” or “micronarratives” that seek to delegitimize the grand narratives. Therefore, postmodern knowledge is about generating new paradigms as well as breaking the existing boundaries set by the “grand narratives.”

In other words, knowledge in the postmodern era can no longer be legitimated or sanctioned according to the “grand narratives” that have shaped Western knowledge to date, like the notion of progress embedded in the Enlightenment, or the notion of social liberation through history embedded in Marxism, or the release from unconscious trauma presented by Freudian psychoanalysis. Indeed, Lyotard regards such narratives as violent in their imposition of a “totalizing” pattern and a false universality on actions, events, and things. Instead, all one can do is to utilize local narratives to explain things; hence, knowledge can only be partial, fragmented, and incomplete. This is regarded as a radically new form of epistemological freedom, resisting the dominance of overarching patterns that appear to ignore different experiences.

Insofar as postmodernism is concerned with deconstructing what has been taken for granted, postmodernist ideas have overlapped with those interested in deconstructing the common assumptions of racial hierarchies. The dismantling of binary opposition of center and margin pervasive in postcolonial criticism has in many ways found intensification in postmodernism’s aim to deconstruct the authoritarian and logocentric master narratives of European culture (Quayson, 2000). Postmodernism has therefore prompted a renewed focus on non-Eurocentric cultural narratives, both in terms of the ways non-Eurocentric cultures represent themselves, as well as in a focus on the politics of the representations that Europe has made of its “others.”

As postmodernism has found an important ally in postcolonialism, many writers and theories have derived a large impetus from the work of one of the most influential theorists on this subject, Edward Said, who in *Orientalism* (1978) presents a strong anti-imperialist and anti-colonial argument. He contends that the Western intellectual tradition was completely bound up with the politics and interests of the West. In *Orientalism*, Said opposes Western discourse on the so-called Orient by showing how power and knowledge are inevitably combined and how discourses, values, and patterns of knowledge actually constructed the “facts” which impact scholarship. His discussion on the epistemological imperialism of the West is also the focus of his later work, *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), which lends support to the idea that a post-colonial period still involves cultural domination.

Said's groundbreaking work, *Orientalism*, was first published in 1978, coinciding with when China had just come out the Cultural Revolution. During the course of the Cultural Revolution, the official discourses of anti-imperialism, anticolonialism, antifeudalism, and anticapitalism were produced and propagated to justify the totalitarian rule. After the death of Mao, the Communist Party under Deng Xiao-Ping opened China to the outside world with sweeping reforms instituted in the late 1970s. The dramatic events of this process brought a sudden awareness of China's economic backwardness. Many intellectuals could not help asking why China was still so backward after thirty years of socialist revolution.

Some intellectuals turned to Chinese culture in an attempt to discover causes for its failure to modernize. As a result, there was a rise of "Cultural Fever" among Chinese intellectuals seeking ways to modernize China in the 1980s. The so-called "Cultural Fever," a nationwide discussion of notions such as culture, tradition, modernity, and particularly the meaning and implications of Western theories, emerged in China in early 1985 in the heyday of the economic reforms. Traditional culture was deemed an obstacle to China's modernization. The main theme of this movement was criticism of traditional Chinese culture, a process which can be characterized by terms such as "pro-Western complex" and "anti-traditionalism" (Zhang, 1994; Zhao, 1997). In addition, this phenomenon was accompanied by an enthusiastic call for "learning from the West," which was regarded as a total submission of China's intellectual pursuit to a more "advanced" Western conceptual framework during the 1990s. In many respects, the cultural critique of the 1980s continued the critique of China's past, which an earlier generation of Chinese intellectuals had started in the May Fourth movement in 1919. The critique of traditional culture in the 1980s, however, took on a special contemporary relevance, criticizing the more recent past of Mao's China, and ultimately calling for the transformation of China into a modern democratic society. As a backlash against the radical anti-Western discourse of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese intellectuals in the 1980s strived to emulate the Western model of modernization in order to revive China. The Chinese cultural critique of the 1980s emphasized Western Enlightenment values as an attempt to liberate the mind after a decade of suppression. Because of the difference in the political and cultural conditions in China and the West, Said's work was not appreciated by Chinese readers in the 1980s. Not until 1993, when Said's notion of Orientalism and Cultural Imperialism were discussed seriously by Chinese intellectuals, did his work begin to be accepted by Chinese academia (Xu, 1999, p. 99).

Chinese Appropriation of Postmodern Theory

In the very different cultural environment of the 1990s, Said, like many other postmodern and postcolonial theorists, has become quite well known on the Chinese mainland. His works inspired a serious debate about Western representations of the Orient but, more importantly, about the relationship between China and the West and the function of Western theories and critical concepts when they are introduced to Chinese readers and adopted by Chinese critics. Intellectuals in the 1990s tended to speak with a sense of being a new generation of critics who differentiated themselves from earlier critics of the 1980s whom they saw as being dominated by a misplaced trust in Western values and the efficacy of modernization. If the Cultural Revolution and its anti-imperialist rhetoric were discredited during the 1980s, critics of the new generation tended to take a revisionist view by opening up discussions of Orientalism and postcolonialism. On the other hand, as the economic reform gave rise to an increasingly complex interaction between local and global cultures in the 1990s, the resulting anxiety about national identity paved the way for the reception of postmodern and postcolonial theories in China.

Postmodernist criticism in China has brought into view the new goal of modernism and its manifestations in China. Postmodernism in the West was a reaction against principal features of modernism; against the totalizing discourses of or metanarratives of history; against a teleological belief in science; against a view of progress and development as inevitable and linear; and against a belief in the unified subjectivity of the rational individual (Hassen, 1985). When postmodernism became sinicized, Chinese intellectuals modified its reaction against modernism by emphasizing the Western affiliation of these principals. Therefore, Chinese postmodernism is logically intertwined with Third-World concerns about Western hegemony and the asymmetrical power/knowledge relationship between the First World and the Third World.

As Chinese postmodernists focus on the uneven power relationship between China and the West, they tend to consider particular postcolonial concerns. Chinese postmodern-postcolonialism is a nativist reaction against the Western-centered metanarratives of history, Western teleology of development, and Western concepts of enlightenment, human subject, and social progress (such as democracy and human rights). Thus the appropriation of Said's works in the 1990s serves to revamp the old discourse in China on imperialism, colonialism, and Western hegemony, and to react against the cultural critique of the 1980s, which is seen as reiterating the modernist discourse predicated on such Western concepts and values as freedom, democracy, and modernization itself. When Said's theory of Orientalism has been employed in the Chinese context, it is used to target the China/West

confrontation, in which sentiments of nationalism tend to be easily provoked, and vaguely conceived native values easily embraced as desirable alternatives. In this sense, discussion of modern Chinese history and culture is increasingly cast in the binary opposition between the East and the West, Third World victimization, and Western hegemonic imperialism.

The East-West dichotomy, however, works rather differently in Said's theory and its transformation in China. Due to Said's critique aimed at Western imperialism and colonialism, especially the discourse of Western scholars in Oriental studies that misrepresent peoples and cultures of the East, discussions of Said's works in China often target domestic cultural productions as a sort of self-colonization or shameful surrender to Western hegemony. The internationalization of Chinese cinema since late 1980s is a case in point for the discussion of self-orientalization.

Chinese Postmodernist Reading of the Fifth Generation Films

The recent debates on postmodernism and postcolonialism among Chinese intellectuals have brought an important dimension to the criticism of Fifth-Generation films and to the complex relationship between China and the West. As a backlash against "Cultural Fever" in the 1980s, whose main theme was anti-traditionalism, a different understanding of China and the Chinese cultural tradition has become the new starting point of Chinese intellectuals' re-evaluation of their own cultural identity and Western influences on it. Chinese intellectuals' reflexive approach to Western thought since the 1990s originated from their discussions of Edward Said's theory of Orientalism (Dirlik, 1996; Liu, 2002, Wang, 1994; Zhang, X., 1994; Zhang, Y., 1994, 1996; Zhao, 1997). Debates on Said's Orientalism have led to the introduction of postcolonial and postmodern theories into Chinese intellectual discourse. Some Chinese intellectuals claim that through its cultural hegemony, neo-colonialism, like old Orientalism, continues to dominate the Third World. This resulted in China's becoming "voiceless" in the 1980s, losing its own subjectivity against powerful Western discourse. According to some Chinese intellectuals, through the process of globalization, the Third World, to which China still belongs, has been reconstructed by the discourse of the First World: The local characteristics and native voices of the peoples of the Third World have been repressed or ignored; the histories of the nation, community, and self have been inscribed as an "exotic other" in contrast to the universal discourse of the modern West.

Having introduced the basic ideas of *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*, a critic writing in the widely read Beijing journal *Dushu* [Reading Monthly]

quickly turns his critique to works by Chinese writers and artists, and maintains that many artistic works, including films made by Zhang Yimou that have won a number of foreign awards, all try to:

... offer some unthinkable and improbable objects to make Westerners feel excited, intoxicated, or reeled, to produce what is called the "sense of the sublime" in the field of aesthetics for Western audiences.... It would perhaps be too cruel to blame them for deliberately catering to the taste of Western readers and audience and soliciting pity and money by exhibiting their wounds. The point I want to make is that the appreciation of these works by the Western public has something to do with the mode of Orientalism (Zhang, K., 1993, p. 7).

He insists that similar Chinese scholarly works are but mimicking Western Orientalist discourse by cursing their own ancestors, and by criticizing Chinese traditions as unscientific, conservative, illogical, and immoral (ibid.).

The Fifth Generation films are observed from the perspective that the cultural relationship between the First and Third worlds is one of asymmetrical power and thus are condemned for their "purposeful invitation of Western cultural baptism" and their pandering to a Western audience (Chen et al. 1994, p.127). These critics emphasize that "[t]he current cultural mutual penetration is not one of equal relationship, those developed countries with economic advantage also often occupy a culturally dominant position in this relationship" (ibid.: 126). They also argue that the scenes like adultery, promiscuity, and concubinage are not only foreign to the Chinese reality and national culture, but are making Chinese stories salable.

Chinese postmodernist criticism has provoked various echoes. One common resonance regarding Zhang Yimou's films points out that they have attracted a large international audience because they are viewed as authentically "national," "Chinese," and "Oriental." Yang Zhao, for instance, writes that the visual design of *Judou* is specially made to cater to those who are familiar with the established rules of American film culture, which is characterized by a kind of "tourist psychology" (1992, p.102-103). Dai Qing, who charges the crew of *Raise the Red Lantern* with taking "outrageous liberty with such details as décor, dialogue, and diction," writes that "this kind of film is really shot for the casual pleasure of foreigners" (1993, pp.333-337). Jane Ying Zha echoes this view by writing that "All my American friends love Zhang's movies, all my Chinese friends hate them. . . . Why? What offended the Chinese in these movies? . . . It could all summed up in one thing: selling oriental exoticism to a Western audience" (1993, p.329). In a similar vein, Zhang Yiwu says that Fifth Generation filmmaking is totally strayed from the Chinese tradition and ignores the history of Chinese film (1994).

Similarly, Tonglin Liu suggests that Zhang developed his model, which generally has three strategies, to win mainstream Western applause. This model is so successful that some other Fifth-Generation directors have followed. The first characteristic is women's oppression. The protagonist must be a young woman, who is always "sexually deprived, physically abused, and spatially confined" (2002, p.167). She is terribly oppressed by some strange tradition of feudal China, and the images of women's oppression have become a salable symbol of China's evil tradition. The second trademark is that Zhang's works are full of (re)invented pseudo-traditional Chinese rituals. For example, the carriers' merry jolting of the wedding sedan in the opening scenes of *Red Sorghum*, and the rituals of lighting red lanterns and foot massage before sexual intercourse in *Raise the Red Lantern*, among others, were inventions rather than based on ethnic customs. Liu writes that all these rituals serve as "signifiers of Chineseness for an international audience. Precisely because they have no reference point whatsoever in Chinese culture, the rituals function even more effectively visual signs of pure difference" (p.160). The third strategy is to imply that China is an iron cage with no exit. This cage represented by a traditional courtyard in Zhang's works, traps and confines the female protagonist, suffocating her dream of liberty and individuality.

As the internationalization of Chinese cultural production is so dominated by the Western economic power and discursive Orientalist discourse, Chinese postmodernists feel a strong need to define an independent position for themselves. It is this search for cultural subjectivity that underlines the Chinese postmodernists' readings of the Fifth Generation films. For Chinese postmodernist critics, the insistence on an authentic indigenous representation, the reassertion of a non-Western self, and the establishment of a Third-World discourse are the paramount tasks. The nightmare of the Third-World critic and the native artist is that there is no other way to express themselves than by resorting to Western theoretical discourse and Western artistic means. There seems to be no escape from the iron cage of the cultural hegemony of the West. In as much as uneven global power relationship persists, Chinese history and culture have no way to be comprehended on their own terms, but have to be interpreted by the Western discourse (Zhang, Y., 1995b; 1996). As such, the cultural exchange between East and West has always implied the demand on non-Western people to conform to Western standards and models, not vice versa.

These conditions tend to create an anxious desire to protect and enhance the Chinese nation economically and to maintain or increase its power, prestige, and cultural purity. An illustrative example can be found in

an article entitled "From 'Modernity' to 'Chineseness'," coauthored by three Chinese postmodernists, Zhang Fa, Zhang Yiwu, and Wang Yichuan (1994). They regard "modernity" and "Chineseness" as two different models of knowledge. Modernity is used to refer to a particular model of knowledge established under Western influence, which has reduced China to the status of the Other of the West. Faced with China's victimization by the idea of modernity, they feel the urgency to build a unique indigenous model of knowledge, which they term "Chineseness." According to them, the rise of the new model of knowledge, Chineseness, must be understood in the historical context begun in 1990, in which the political and cultural environment is different from that of the 1980s. Chineseness, through which consciousness of the new epoch is expressed, becomes the criterion of the newness for this historical era, because China is entering an age in which "[China] makes the decisive effort to move beyond her status as 'the Other' [of the West] and to reevaluate the idea of [Western] modernity" (p.14). Chineseness as a new model of knowledge in the new epoch opens new possibilities for a Third-World nation with a developing market economy to articulate its own voice (ibid.).

With this logic, Chinese postmodernist intellectuals, who grabbed and assimilated Orientalism, have become deeply suspicious about the universal applicability of Western modernity to the Chinese context. They have become conscious of the historical nature and cultural origin of modernity and have begun to locate modernity within a Chinese context in which Enlightenment universality is seriously challenged by postmodern and postcolonial consciousness. Refusing to accept the position assigned to their country in the Western-dominated global discourse and attempting to regain their lost subjectivity, Chinese intellectuals have advocated the idea of a Chinese version of modernity. This alternative modernity is premised on "Chinese reality," "China's unique condition," and would be a unique solution to the problems that arose in the process of China's modernization.

While many critics invoke postmodern and postcolonial theory to critique the Western-dominated modernization discourse, those who introduce Said's works to China are often educated in the West. They are mostly young scholars well informed of the latest developments in Western criticism, and they often speak with the sense of being a new generation of critics who differentiate themselves from critics of the 1980s who had inherited the legacy of the May Fourth movement in post-Mao China. Some critics, however, point out the conservative tendency of the Chinese following of Western post-ist theory.

Zhao Yiheng, for example, maintains that the cultural critique of Chinese intellectuals set up an opposition between China and the West. In so far as

cultural critique is a theoretical discourse, he argues that it should be a critique of “institution, the theorizing and rationalizing of the cultural status quo” (1995, p.150). In the 1990s, however, the spirit of such a cultural critique is lost in the tendentious discussion of postmodernism and postcolonialism on the Chinese mainland, which substitutes a China-West opposition for the critique directed at institutionalized culture or the status quo at home. From this perspective, then such a tendency is conservative culturally and politically because it comprises the cultural orthodoxy and political authorities in China. Similarly, Xu Ben (1995) argues that “Third World criticism” has become almost the only thriving new trend in culture and ideology after 1989 Tiananmen event. According to Xu, the problem with the so-called Third World criticism, as in what Zhao says about “postism,” lies in avoiding confrontation with the cultural establishment and political authority in one’s own country by shifting the aim of critique to the West, claiming that the primary task for Chinese critics today is to fight the cultural hegemony of the First World, that is, Western imperialism. As Xu points out:

The core of such Third World criticism in China is an emphasis on nativeness rather than rebellion against oppression as if the “discursive oppression” of the Third World by the First World were the major form of oppression in China today, and therefore it conceals and avoids, wittingly or unwittingly, the violence and oppression that do exist in real life in the Chinese society. (1995, p.17)

Other criticism indicates that Chinese native critics use “Western” postmodern and postcolonial theory to argue for cultural subjectivity and authenticity is an irony. An active “postist” or “Third World” critic in mainland China defends his position by saying that although postmodern and postcolonial theory obviously come from a Western academic background, Chinese appropriation and elaboration no doubt stimulates intellectuals’ ability of self-reflection and self-reevaluation (Zhang Y., 1995b). He also declares that those Chinese critics who do their theorizing from the perspectives of postcolonialism and Third World criticism “have completely changed the unconditionally subordinate position to Western discourse and the senseless infatuation with ‘modernity,’ which one finds in Chinese intellectuals of the 1980s who obsessed with the discourse of ‘Enlightenment’ (1995b, p. 132).

The Fifth Generation and Their Cultural Critique

The Chinese postmodernists’ efforts to situate a domestic cultural critique onto the global confrontation lead them to minimize the significance of the historical background that nurtured the cultural production of the Fifth Generation and to downplay the historical value of their works. However, to explain away their works

simply with an Orientalist discourse seems too convenient and would miss the point easily. As the historical transformation of Chinese society influences films content and production, the self-reflexive cultural critique out of the historical context embedded in and implied by such films should be taken into account. Therefore, the historical background of the Fifth Generation deserves to be mentioned here.

In 1966, Mao’s Cultural Revolution, out of hatred for the country’s educated class and traditional Chinese art, closed the Beijing Film Academy after it had graduated only four classes (Cui, 2005, p.112-113). Two years after Mao’s death in 1976 it was reopened and received thousands of applications from young Chinese. In 1982, after a sixteen-year hiatus, the Academy graduated its fifth class, whose members became the founding fathers of the so-called “new Chinese cinema” -- which soon styled itself the “Fifth Generation.”

Born immediately after the advent of the People’s Republic of China (1949), the Fifth-Generation directors grew up during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and most entered the Film Academy as members of the first directing class after it reopened. In the mid- and late 1980s, Fifth-Generation directors participated in a cultural critique of the Chinese nation with their film art. On the one hand, these filmmakers were the descendants of the May Fourth movement at the beginning of the century (Liu, 2002; Lu, 1997). That is, they took a radical anti-traditional stance to attack obstacles on the path of modernity. On the other hand, their historical and cultural reflection informed their subversive positions against communist ideology (Clark, 1991). Their early works contain the sentiments of searching for the roots, return and recovery of a Chinese culture, and history distorted by authoritarian rule (ibid.). Consequently, their subversive acts take on much broader and more complex cultural dimensions than the mere criticism of communist ideology.

In the case of Zhang Yimou, he situates his films as part of an indigenous critical enterprise. He himself places Fifth-Generation film and his own work within the broad movement of cultural reflection. He says:

The famous works of the Fifth-Generation directors are basically the awakenings of cultural reflection and cultural awareness in this broad humanistic background. From this standpoint, the artistic methods usually carry a necessarily rebellious spirit. Such a pursuit of ours is not only aimed at the innovation of cinematic language and methods, but also to meet the strong demands of social change (Luo, 1992, p.12).

As a result, he launched iconoclastic attacks on Chinese tradition, which he perceived as inhuman and repressive. In an interview he says,

What I want to express is the Chinese people’s oppression and confinement, which has been going

on for thousands of years. Women express this more clearly on their bodies...because they bear a heavier burden than men.... The Chinese people have for a long time confined themselves within a restricted walled space. Democracy is still very far off, and it will be slow in forming here. (Yang, 1993, pp. 301-302)

According to Zhang, the liberation of the self from oppressive tradition is still the unfulfilled task of Chinese modernity. The emancipation of the individual was also the goal of the May Fourth generation of Chinese intellectuals more than half a century ago, a goal for Zhang that is yet to be realized.

Other Readings of Films

Over the years, Chinese cinema has grown to be a key apparatus in the nation-building process (Zhang, Y., 2004). As a state-sponsored enterprise, it is an indispensable cultural link in the modern Chinese nation-state, a significant component of Chinese national identity. The effort to build a unified and unifying picture of national identity has been intense. Wimal Dissanayake (1994) suggests that national cinema in Asia can be observed at both the level of the filmic text or film aesthetics and the level of the film industry. As Dissanayake says:

At the textual level we can examine the uniqueness of a given cinema in terms of content, style, and indigenous aesthetics, while at the industrial level we can examine the relationship between cinema and industry in terms of production, distribution, and exhibition (pp. xiii-xiv).

With this logic, the section below explores other ways of reading at both the textual and industrial level, aside from the postmodern perspective. This section also analyzes how Rey Chow's idea of "cultural translation" bridges the gap between "the textual and the industrial" reading of the Fifth Generation.

At the Textual Level

While Chinese postmodernists whose textual analysis of the Fifth Generation film is mainly concerned with the representation of China in front of the international audience, there is a need to see how other readings situate the Fifth Generation films in a broader historical and cultural context. Some literary scholars have used critical theory to analyze issues of identity, gender, ethnicity, and nationhood in Chinese cinema. For example, E. Ann Kaplan (1997) blends psychoanalysis with feminist theory to analyze the relationship between history, gender, and nationhood in *Farewell My Concubine*. Shuqin Cui (1997) offers another such analysis when she traces some characteristics of gender construction in Zhang Yimou's films. She analyzes the main female characters and argues that an unconscious male desire searches for a

lost subjectivity and an emasculated sexuality. The principal female character is usually nothing but a confirmation of the psychical wound suffered by Chinese men under a repressive social system. Wendy Larson's (1997) analysis of another Fifth Generation filmmaker contends that women always play marginal roles in modern Chinese history, configured through the personal stories of males. In different ways, Kaplan, Cui, and Larson discuss the relationship between women, history, modernity, and nationhood in the works of male filmmakers of the Fifth Generation.

As for the representation of "the national," Wang Yuejin (1994) argues that Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* narrates a heroic past, a legend of an empowered masculinity freed from age-old representation. Chris Berry (1998), instead of focusing on a particular film, discusses the national projects embedded in the shared approach of the Fifth Generation films. He draws his theoretical inspiration from the feminist Judith Butler's theory, and suggests that given the fundamentally messy and dispersed attributes of Chinese cinema, its enunciation of the national must be examined at multiple levels—historically, typologically, and theoretically. Therefore, he proposes to reformulate China (or Chineseness) as a "discursively collective entity" (1998, p. 131).

While some interpret Chinese cinema with a feminist critique, or consider the issue of "national agency," others tend to read films allegorically. Certain critics have employed Fredric Jameson's reading of Third World cultural production to review Zhang's film art. In the now classic essay, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," Jameson theorized the linkage between Third World literature and national allegory (1986). That is, "all third-world texts" are dominated by the personal relationship to the nation and national history or are characterized by the national ideology. This kind of reading is exemplified by critics who are interested in exploring how Chinese directors' life experiences relate to their cinematic productions.

Vincent Brook's review of Zhang's film *Judou* remarks that:

Judou can be extended to Zhang's own life experiences, particularly his controversial romantic liaison with the film's star, Gong Li, and his contentious political relations with the Mainland Chinese regime. *Judou*, from this perspective, can be regarded as an intensely personal text" (1989, p. 921).

In a similar vein, Dai Jinhua (1994) argues that in *The Story of Qiu Ju*, the oedipal rivalry between fathers and sons does not remain on the level of the filmic text only. On another level, it expresses the difficult relationship of the Fifth Generation to the past. Members of this generation grew up during the Cultural Revolution in which Chairman Mao or the party

orthodox was the symbolic order of the Father. With the collapse of the Father in the post-Mao era, they feel like they are living in a state of cultural rupture and historical discontinuity, as a generation of lost children without a “father.” Driven by an oedipal complex, it is necessary to slay the fathers in order to stage their own appearance. This explains the Fifth Generation’s search for, as well as killing of, their father, which is in parallel to their ambivalent yet violent relationship to tradition, culture, and the nation.

To some degree, one may argue that Zhang Yimou defines himself historically, the way he presents his cultural reflection in his works also allegorizes his films in the way the international market expects. What cannot be denied is that literary scholars who adopt allegorical or critical readings of issues like gender or nationhood, affirm the historical value of the works in each of their own ways. They recognize the fact that the films were made during a crucial historical juncture: in the 1980s, in the immediate wake of the post-Mao era. From 1976 to 1984, China was preoccupied with making sense of the traumatic experience of the Cultural Revolution. From 1984 on, a somewhat critical distance was gained wherein people could look back and get a sense of starting anew.

At the Industrial Level

At the industrial level, however, an allegorical reading or a textual analysis collapses, for they cannot really explain why the Fifth Generation films are so internationally visible. In other words, the above critics in one way or another stop short of systematically elaborating on how China’s changing economic and political position in the global system is (re)shaping Chinese film culture and politics. Sheldon H. Lu’s article in his edited book (1997a) is an attempt to address this issue. He observes that the award-winning films are international co-productions—that is, “funded by foreign capital, produced by Chinese labor, distributed in a global network, and consumed by an international audience,” and thus, “the very process of reading, reception, and interpretation in these instances is always already of a transnational nature” (1997a, p.11).

He also rightly points out that under the condition of global capitalism, transnational capital is at once “a constrictive and a liberating force for Chinese cinema” (1997b, p.107). Before the emergence of the Fifth Generation films, almost all cultural productions were government-sponsored projects of mass education and propaganda. Since such films served partisan interest, the transformation of filmmaking into an internationally-sponsored enterprise was a sharp contrast, for it provided the new films with unprecedented opportunities and attempted to appeal to audiences of diverse interests (in China and overseas).

In other words, the filmmakers can carry out their project of “historical-cultural reflection” on the international front as a way to defy the domestic domination of the regime. In his article, Lu partially agrees that the Fifth Generation films (particularly Zhang Yimou’s) are an exemplary case of “cultural exhibitionism,” however, Orientalism “is also a strategy of survival and renewal for Chinese filmmakers” (p.132).

Aside from Sheldon Lu’s highlighting of the transnational nature of the Fifth Generation films, most of the related discussions omit the increasing importance of international production for filmmakers like Zhang Yimou, and thus are weak in explaining the significance of the international acceptance of these films. In the case of Chinese postmodernist critics, they are concerned about the capital investment from abroad in filmmaking, and believe that this kind of economic and commercial influence tempts Chinese filmmakers to tell stories the Western audience wants to hear (Chen et al. 1994, p.143). Nevertheless, transnational capital and teamwork has brought positive changes to the monopolization of Chinese film industry by the state. The new economic mechanism of production has loosened state-sponsored production and thus films can play a new role in the emerging public sphere and civil society in China.

Rey Chow’s “Cultural Translation”

When contemporary Chinese cinema started to be noticed in the global cultural market, confrontations between different ideological interpretations were inevitable. Rey Chow’s criticism (1995) bridges the gap between viewing the national and ethnic sensibility in Fifth Generation films and the global film culture. Rey Chow acknowledges that the common background of Zhang’s works is an oppressively feudal China in which the historical details expressed are blurred. Besides, what constitutes Zhang’s films is in many respects a kind of “new ethnography.” That is, “the use of things, characters, and narratives [are] not for themselves but for their collective, hallucinatory signification of ‘ethnicity’” (1995, p.144). Put another way, it is the spectacle instead of the complexity of Chinese society that wins the praise of such films in the West. Although Chow points out the typical characteristics of Zhang’s films and categorizes his works as a kind of “auto-ethnography,” a kind of self-anthropologization, she does not advocate viewing his works in an Orientalist manner. Instead, she suggests viewing Zhang’s works with the notion of cultural translation. That is, to increase global/local interaction, cultural products have to be constantly translated in order to be shared and exchanged in a global market. She argues that cultural translation is not surrender to Western cultural hegemony in one form or another, nor will it lead to the

dissolution of local difference. Chow emphasizes that contemporary Chinese films are products of cultural translations, which provide a process that “we must go through in order to arrive—not at the new destination of the truth of an ‘other’ culture but at the weakened foundations of Western metaphysics as well as the disintegrated bases of Eastern tradition” (1995, p.201). In this sense, in order for local cultural difference to be understood and accepted, Chinese filmmakers and critics alike cannot insist on their privilege of interpreting Chinese culture for the Chinese, but must learn to expect and appreciate a local conversation with the world in film as well as in scholarship. Chow also reminds us that cultural translation is not “a unidirectional, one-way process,” but “a ‘liberation’ that is mutual and reciprocal between the ‘original’ and the ‘translation’” (p.188). To apply this insight on contemporary Chinese films that are caught between two conflicting ideologies, the West and the Chinese, they can be seen as local cultural products that are not only shaped by constant international flows of social and economic capital, but also interact with the global with their local characteristics.

Concluding Remarks

Current debates on Chinese culture and cultural products have indicated the anxiety of Chinese critics about cultural or national identity that, they believe, is eroded in the process of “cultural translation.” The indigenization of Said’s theory of Orientalism is thus underscored by cultural nationalism. Having experienced Western imperialism in the past, and facing the neocolonial forces of globalization in the present, it is understandable that the reaction of national “self-strengthening” prevails. However, when Chinese self-affirmation has turned into “sinochauvinism” (Chow, 1998), it in no way improves the unbalanced cross-cultural interaction. The way nativist critics read Zhang Yimou’s films exemplifies how the exclusive focus on cultural identity in relation to modern Chinese cinema often leads to a cultural essentialism that merely replicates rather than successfully deconstructs Orientalism, and therefore nativists’ counterdiscourse to Western cultural hegemony more often than not reproduces and replicates the very dynamics that they seek to oppose (Shih, 2002).

In the specific political situation of mainland China today, a radically anti-Western rhetoric is never really radical, as it is likely to coincide with the official discourse of the political establishment. It is this political situation that one must take into consideration in examining the significance of Western theories in the Chinese context. When we examine Said’s theory, however, we would find that the book *Orientalism* itself is not all about or even intended to promote anti-Westernism.

According to Said himself, the “alleged anti-Westernism” is the misunderstanding in the reception of *Orientalism* that he most regretted and found himself “trying hardest now to overcome.” The misinterpretation of his theory, noted Said, usually argues that Orientalism is a “synecdoche, or miniature symbol, of the entire West,” and therefore “the entire West is an enemy of the Arab of Islamic or for that matter the Iranian, Chinese, Indian, and many other non-European peoples who suffered Western colonialism and prejudice” (1995, p.3). Said was evidently aware of this and felt uncomfortable with the fact that his work on Orientalism had been used in the Middle East and some other non-Western countries to legitimize the cause of fundamentalism and nationalism, and he refused to endorse such groups. From a theoretical position that rejects essentialist claims about either the East or the West, he dissociated his argument from any support of Islamic fundamentalism or nationalism. Nor did he want to reduce all Oriental or other area studies in the West merely to the products of cultural imperialism or colonialism: “It is benighted to say that Orientalism is a conspiracy or to suggest that ‘the West’ is evil” (p. 5). Therefore, to read Said’s theory as simplistic anti-Westernism is a mis-reading.

While Chinese intellectuals have utilized Western theories to define their relationship with the West and reinvent a new and localized cultural identity, their appropriation has led to the strengthening of nationalistic sentiments and further justification for the dualistic mode of China versus the West. A radical Western theory, such as Said’s Orientalism turns into a profound desire for self-validation at best. Yet such an eagerness for affirmation of Chinese values is ultimately inextricable from conservative cultural nationalism.

In a non-Western cultural and political environment, like that of China, the problem with the theories of Orientalism and postcolonialism is that they can be easily misappropriated to serve the purposes of cultural conservatism, nationalism, and sinocentrism. And thus the political implications of such misappropriation in one way or another would have discredited the significance of any articulation that calls for justice and equity.

It is understandable that we all need a sense of belonging, to establish an identity whether at the individual or collective level. However, an exclusive focus on cultural identity in relation to international cultural products not only replicates Orientalism but leads all to blame Western imperialist hegemony. Such a criticism pays little attention to the social conditions and political realities on the Chinese mainland and to the artistic accomplishments that the filmmakers have made through the historical transformation. The consequence is harmful to our understanding of global/local interaction, and is not

at all ideologically radical or liberating in the context of Chinese society.

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