

A CHINESE DIRECTOR AND HIS TRANSITION FROM CRITICAL BANNED
FILMMAKER TO BOX OFFICE SUCCESS

Haijing Tu

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A Thesis

Submitted to

the Graduate Faculty of

Auburn University

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the

Degree of

Master of Arts

Auburn, Alabama
August 8, 2005

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Master of Arts, August 8, 2005
(B.A. Lanzhou University, 1999)

92 Typed Pages

Directed by J. Emmett Winn

This thesis uses historical poetics to analyze Chinese director Zhang Yimou's film productions of the last ten years. Zhang Yimou has been famous for his leading position in the Fifth Generation of Chinese directors. Zhang started his film career as a cinematographer in 1982, and directed his first film *Red Sorghum* in 1987. Zhang continued his film career with ten more films with the most recent *House of Flying Daggers*. Before 1995, Zhang's films were often banned in China because of his focus on the social problems of poverty and ignorance in China. However, after 1994, none of his films were banned. At the same time, his recent productions, *Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers*, both achieved great box office success in China and the United States, and *Hero* still holds the record for highest box office in Chinese film history.

This thesis selects four of Zhang's films made after 1994 and analyzes the change in Zhang's film production in terms of thematics, constructive principles, and stylistics. The thesis concludes that Zhang's film career experienced great change during the 1990s and that his success in the new century contributed to his effort to transition from art cinema to commercial productions. With Zhang's transition from a critical banned filmmaker to box office success he has changed his filmmaking to suit a commercial audience and forsaken his past filmic ideals.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author thanks her chair, Dr. Emmett Winn, whose guidance and help made this thesis possible. Also, the author thanks Drs. Brinson and Plasketes, who were very kind in personality but strict in academics, for being her committee members. The author is very grateful to the education she has received at Auburn University, which is a precious experience in her life. Thanks to Dr. Brown, Dr. Sutton, and Dr. Worthington for their hard work in teaching classes, helping the author in her studies, and answering her questions. Thanks to Traci Frees, Jennifer McCullars, and Mary Bentley for their help in the author's teaching attempts.

Style manual or journal used: Publication Manual of the American Psychology Association, 5th Edition

Computer software used: Microsoft Word 2000

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I. INTRODUCTION

The groupings of Chinese film directors into generations, according to Ye (1999), is quite a controversial topic. The consensus is that the development of Chinese cinema consists of the contributions of at least six distinct generations of directors. Following the social unrest and societal changes from 1905 to the present, each generation of directors represents a unique time period in China's film history. Among these directors, the Fifth Generation is the most influential group.

The most famous of the Fifth Generation directors, Chen Kaige (*Farewell My Concubine*), Zhang Yimou (*Red Sorghum*), and Tian Zhuangzhuang (*The Blue Kite*), began their studies at the Beijing Film Academy in 1978, two years after the end of Cultural Revolution. This is an important time in China as it signaled new and more open cultural, economic, and political policies. Before the Culture Revolution, the Fifth Generation directors grew up in the dramatically changing society of the 1950s and 1960s. The chaotic social movements of these times contributed to the filmmakers' unique perspectives on Chinese society, affected their value systems, influenced their personalities, and shaped their films. According to Xiao (1995), one common characteristic of the Fifth Generation directors is that they "refuse to focus on evil individuals as the primary explanation for the tragedies experienced by the Chinese people" (p. 1215).

Zhang Yimou, born in 1950, is one of the most famous Fifth Generation directors. He has won many international awards with his brilliant movies. In a 20-year film career, Zhang Yimou reached a creative peak in the early 1990s with his films *Ju Dou* (1990), *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), and *Qiu Ju's Story* (1992). All these films achieved great international acclaim and won awards in Cannes, Hong Kong, Berlin, and Australia.

Zhang's early films heavily criticized traditional Chinese values and communicated defiance toward the mainstream social system. For example, R. Chow (1995) argues that the "trademark" of Zhang's style is the liberation of women from their traditional social roles. In his films, Zhang focused on the miserable fate of Chinese women under the old system of the "oppressively feudal China" (Chow, R., 1995, p. 143). Through the leading female roles in his early films, *Red Sorghum* (1987) *Judou* (1990), and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), Zhang communicates to his audience the excessively oppressive and absurd rituals and customs society forced on women during the feudal system in China's history.

Western interpretations of Zhang's films often read the movies as the portraits of the "real" China. Likewise, the early productions of Zhang Yimou were criticized by Chinese critics as catering to the "eyes of foreigners" and Western beliefs that China is backward and anachronistic (Chow, R. 1995, p. 155). Chinese critics accused the films of only exposing the poor aspects of Chinese society rather than praising the glorious aspects of its history and culture. Furthermore, negative critiques see Zhang winning international popularity by communicating a view of China as poor and undeveloped, which catered to the Western image of China and, therefore, caricatured China's society, culture and people. Because of these negative views, all of Zhang's early films were

quite controversial in China and many were banned by the government in China.

But a dramatic change took place in 1994. From then on, Zhang experienced a productive 10-year period that culminated in the release of *Hero* (2002) and *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), which are his most recent and most commercially profitable films. These movies are primarily martial arts films made in the Kung Fu style. From his early critical perspective to his later commercial productions, Zhang's films increased in box-office in China.

The Change in 1994

Of all the films directed by Zhang since 1987, *To Live* (1994) is the only film that reflects a 30-year historical period in China. According to Klawans (1995), *To Live* came closest to being a visual encyclopedia of Zhang's best production in the 1990s. It won the Grand Prize of the Jury and the Best Actor Award (Ge You) at the 1994 Cannes Film Festival. It was also rewarded the BAFTA Award for the Best Film by the 1995 British Academy Awards Committee, and was nominated for the Best Foreign Language Film at the 1995 Golden Globes Awards. It gained Zhang the most prestigious international fame, and it was believed to be a "superbly crafted and refined cinematic text worthy of critical attention" (Liang, 1999, p. 3).

However, Zhang Yimou changed his production method after *To Live* was banned in China. He was no longer permitted to accept foreign investment for his movies, and his movies were not allowed outside of China without Chinese Film Bureau approval (Tony, 1995, p. 74). According to Tony (1995), many films were banned by the Chinese Film Bureau because "they all spring from their makers' desire to deal with aspects of their own lives and experiences that they found either missing from or misrepresented by

the state's official art and broadcast media" (p. 77). According to James (1994), Zhang Yimou was not able to be present at the Cannes Film Festival in 1994 to receive his awards for *To Live* because of governmental travel restrictions. Although it was officially banned, *To Live* is valued by many Chinese people as his best movie. Many Chinese people were able to see the video has become widely available as a bootleg in China since 1995. Also some theatres publicly screened it despite its ban (Tempest, 1995, p. 64). The ability for the Chinese to see the movie prompted Zhang to say "everybody had seen it" in one of his many interviews (Tempest, 1995, p. 64).

The unofficial positive acceptance of *To Live* did not change the fact that the film did not earn Chinese box office receipts for its producers. Perhaps this is why Zhang made a turn to a more commercially profitable type of film production. Regardless his films changed and the result was that *To Live* became his last film to be banned by the government. Similarly, before *To Live*, *Ju Dou*, and *Raise the Red Lantern* were both banned for some time and then released later. After *To Live*, Zhang made a great effort to better the box office success of his later movies: *Shanghai Triad* (1995), *You Hua Hao Hao Shuo* (*Keep Cool*, 1997), *Yi Ge Ye Bu Neng Shao* (*Not One Less*, 1999), *Wo De Fu Qin Mu Qin* (*The Road Home*, 1999), *Xing Fu Shi Guang* (*Happy Times*, 2001), *Ying Xiong* (*Hero*, 2002), and *Shi Mian Mai Fu* (*House of Flying Daggers*, 2004).

This thesis is a textual analysis of Zhang's films that investigates their relation to his changing perspective on filmmaking and his increased emphasis on commercially acceptable movies since 1994. I analyze four of his movies made from 1994 to 2004: *To Live*, *Keep Cool*, *Not One Less*, and *Hero*. This thesis investigates Zhang's cultural transformation from banned filmmaker to box office success.

The Films

To Live tells a story of an unfortunate family and their 30-year struggle to make a living. This movie was adapted from Yu Hua's novel of the same name, but Zhang Yimou modified the plot, and made the movie quite different from the novel. The character Fugui (played by Ge You) lost his wealthy life and upper-class social status by gambling it all away. Afterwards he experienced a long miserable life as he subsequently lost his son, his daughter, and his friend. The movie used traditional Chinese art—shadow puppet theater—as an important motif, which was not present in Yu Hua's novel. According to Shi (1999), there are three interrelated elements in this movie: Daoist cosmology, social environment, and the human drama. The film was banned by the Chinese government because it communicated a negative view of China as backward, traditional, and oppressive.

Keep Cool is Zhang's first comedy. According to Page (2004, p. 13), *Keep Cool* was one of Zhang's "trilogy of 'little people' films with contemporary landscapes." A young urban man supports himself by selling books that he never reads. He loves his girlfriend, but he doesn't know how to win her back when she is wooed away by a new rich lover. The bookseller's passion turns into the hatred for his girlfriend's new lover after the bookseller is beaten by the rich man's agents. The film is an urban comedy. The young man in *Keep Cool* represents modern young urban people's spiritual loss and the growth of their material desire in 1990s. The leading actor was the famous Jiang Wen, who was the most acknowledged actor in China at that time. The social background is the continuous economic prosperity in China, especially in urban areas. The bookseller and the rich man are of different social classes and their conflict plays out in a comedy of

social difference and change in China.

Not One Less was shot in 1999. It was called another version of *Qiu Ju's Story* because there are similarities between these two movies in plot and style. According to Xu (2003), the hybrid film genre of *Not One Less* combines documentary with melodrama, therefore Xu calls it “docudrama” (p. 331). All the actors and actresses in *Not One Less* were amateurs, which made it a low budget film. A 13 year old country girl, kind and stubborn, goes to a strange city to look for her young student. The boy left the school in order to try and earn a living in the big city. Therefore, this young substitute teacher goes on a journey to the big city in order to save this poor boy from the tragic fate that awaits him. The social backdrop concerns the fact that children can not afford school in rural China, so they go to urban areas to make a living.

Hero is a commercial action-adventure movie that achieved the highest box office figures for any Chinese movie. Superstars including Jet Lee, Maggie Cheung, Tony Liang, Zhang Ziyi, and Chen Daoming are the actors in *Hero*.

Methodology

Historical poetics of cinema is an approach to film study introduced by film scholar David Bordwell. More than a methodology, historical poetics is an approach that covers a fairly large and diverse group of film studies, much like the term feminist film studies embraces many different feminist perspectives on film. Historical poetics has its foundations in the Russian Formalist critics of film. Formalist film scholars focus upon the structure or form of film; therefore, they put the formal aspects of film (narrative, cinematography, editing and *mise-en-scene*) at the center of their analyses. As Bordwell (1988) explains historical poetics analyses films to answer two questions: “1. What are

the principals according to which films are constructed and by means of which they achieve particular effects? 2. How and why have these principals arisen and changed in particular empirical circumstances?” (p. 371). It should be pointed out here that Bordwell is not referring to the empirical tradition of media effects research, but instead is referring to the particular results of the filmmaker’s choices in film construction as understood within the historically situated and observable circumstances of production. As White (1996) argues, “historical poetics looks at the ways in which [cinematic] aspects . . . have been used in different ways at different times for different reasons. It assumes that different options have been available (or forbidden) in various cinemas at various times in history” (p. 7).

For historical poetics, the pursuit of film research is an understanding of how the artist made his or her choices, what choices he or she made, and how were the choices effected by the options which were available to filmmakers at that time. As White (1996) explains, some filmmaking “options are imposed by the artist [through] . . . personal style. Others are imposed by rules of genre Some options are dictated by the needs of the industrial structure of a film industry . . . other options are the result of culture (national, political, ethnic, etc.)” (p. 10).

Given its focus on observable aspects of filmmaking, historical poetics makes its goal description and explanation rather than interpretation. As Jenkins (1995) explains, “historical poetics forestalls [the] search for meaning in order to ask . . . questions about how film narratives are organized, how films structure our visual and auditory experience, how films draw upon previous knowledge and expectations of spectators” (p. 101).

Specifically, historical poetics focus on three aspects of film: thematics,

constructional form (primarily narrative), and stylistics (cinematography, editing, sound, and *mise-en-scene*). As Jenkins (1995) explains “aesthetic principals are understood as historic facts to be documented and interpreted in the larger contexts of the film’s production, circulation, and reception” (p. 101). As White (1996) argues, historical poetics is not as “concerned with the ways in which film may or may not perpetuate capitalist, communist, sexist, religious, or any other sort of ideology It is concerned, however, with the ways in which these may affect films themselves” (p.10).

Therefore, using a historical poetics approach, I analyze four of Zhang Yimou’s movies made from 1994 to 2004: *To Live*, *Keep Cool*, *Not One Less*, and *Hero* in order to answer the following two research questions.

Research Questions

- 1) Based on these four films, how did Zhang Yimou’s films change during this 10-year period both in their formal aspects (style and content) and in their communication of perspectives on China’s society and culture?
- 2) How can a consideration of the political and economic aspects of filmmaking help to better understand changes in the acceptance of Zhang Yimou’s movies both in China and the United States?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Chinese cinema has as long a history as the other national cinemas, but developed differently than Western cinema. The early development of Chinese film was both transnational and transcultural (Lau, 2003; Lu, 1997). As an imported invention, motion pictures gradually spread throughout China and began to reflect the society. This literature review describes a brief history of the development of film production in China and illustrates how it changes through its long history. Like films in western countries, Chinese films are cultural artifacts that communicate views and perspectives of Chinese culture. As Carey (1989, p. 23) explains, communication is “a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed.” Therefore, Chinese film can contribute to our understanding of Chinese society and how Western countries perceive China as the result of international consumption of Chinese films.

During its centennial development, Chinese filmmaking can be divided into six periods each with its own groups of representative filmmakers. Each of these generations correspond to a certain historical period in China. The different generations of filmmakers present their own perspectives on China via their own styles. The grouping of the different generations also reflects the filmmakers’ ideological orientations. These differences are attributed to the filmmakers’ individuality and to the specific historical and political environment.

The First and Second Generations made films from the 1920s through the 1940s (Kuoshu, 2002). The Third Generation moved the main site of filmmaking from

Shanghai (the center of capitalism) to Yan'an (the birthplace of Mao's communist theory). There is an overlap in time between the Third Generation and the Fourth Generations, but they are distinct in their styles. The Third Generation maintained its style until 1978, the time when China began to promote its Open Policy. The Fourth Generation is a transitional generation between the Third and the Fifth Generation, and its period is primarily from 1978 to 1983. There is also an overlap because the Fourth Generation was trained in the 1960s and is still making movies. But their creative peak was in the beginning of the 1980s. The Fifth Generation directors began their film careers as young filmmakers and achieved impressive honors for themselves and for Chinese films. Their peak time was from 1983 to the early 1990s. After 1989, a new generation formed as the Sixth Generation. The Fifth and Sixth Generation directors dominate today's film industry in China.

The First Generation (1905-1937)

In 1896, one year after the invention of motion picture technology, the Lumière brothers brought their short-film program to Shanghai (Lu, 1997). The first Chinese film, *Dingjun Mountain* (Ren Jingfeng, 1905), recorded an act of the Beijing Opera performed by Tan Xinpei, the famous Beijing Opera performer in China. *Dingjun Shan* signals the start of the Chinese filmmaking industry, and the start of the First Generation of Chinese filmmakers. The first Chinese feature film, *The Difficult Couple*, was made in 1913 by Zheng Zhengqiu as a short family drama.

Beginning in 1905 and ending in 1937, the First Generation matured during the time of an ideological transition from traditional Confucianism to a Western ideology promoted by the May 4th New Cultural Movement in 1919. Being referred to as leftist

filmmakers, the First Generation was strongly concerned with the social and cultural crisis that China faced at the beginning of the 20th century (Kuoshu, 2002). Also, the screenwriters favored narratives that focused on accusations of social oppression by the traditional Chinese society and a desire for equality and freedom for the Chinese people.

In the 1920s, many Chinese film pioneers devoted themselves to Chinese film. According to the statistics, there were 179 registered Chinese film companies in 1927 (Zhang, 2003), and 650 films were produced between 1921 and 1931 (Kuoshu, 2002). Although the number of film companies dropped to 20 due to widespread bankruptcy of small companies after 1931, the companies made great strides in early Chinese film production.

One of the representative productions of the First Generation is *Street Angel* (Yuan Muzhi, 1937), which tells a story about poor people living in metropolitan Shanghai ghettos and is made in the mode (or type) and style of Classical Hollywood Cinema. Director Yuan Muzhi (1909-1978) was representative of the First Generation as he was labeled for his leftist inclinations. The other representative films of the First Generation are *Shizi Jietou* (*Crossroad*, Shen Xiling, 1937), *Yu Guangqu* (*Song of the Fisherman*, Cai Chusheng, 1934), *Shen Nu* (*Goddess*, Wu Yonggang, 1934), *Xiao Wanyi* (Sun Yu, 1933), *Chun Can* (*Spring Silkworms*, Cheng Bugao, 1933), and *Xue Lei Bei* (*The Tablet of Blood and Tears*, Zheng Zhengqiu, 1927). Famous actors and actresses such as Ruan Lingyu, Wang Renmei, and Zhao Dan became widely known at this time. Also, famous film studios like Mingxing, Lianhua, and Tianyi made profits and grew as the industry matured.

Western Cultural Hegemony

Before the emergence and popularity of Chinese national cinema, represented by the establishment of the domestic Mingxing Film Company in 1922, foreign films were the predominant movies seen in China. Although Chinese national film productions matured and grew in number in the 1930s, the national Chinese cinema, like many other Eastern cinemas, was pressured by Western imports that represented Western technology, ideology, and art. In 1929, the ratio of imported films to Chinese productions in China was 9:1 with 90% of the imported films from America (Clark, 1987).

After 1927, more Chinese national productions emerged and domestic film stars gained popularity with Chinese audiences. At the same time, imported films were limited or banned as the result of the resistance to a perceived foreign cultural invasion by the intellectuals, the public, and the government (Lu, 1997). To prevent foreign ownership of film studios and resist Western cultural hegemony, the Chinese government established a film censorship board and banned many Western films such as *Frankenstein* (1931) and *Top Hat* (1935) (Lu, 1997). According to Lu (1997), Chinese national cinema is “an indispensable cultural link in the modern Chinese nation-state, an essential political component of Chinese nationalism” (p. 5).

The Second Generation (1937-1949)

The year 1937 was the beginning of World War II in China. Japanese military attacks on the Lugou Bridge near the Chinese capital Beijing started the 8-year war. The Chinese War of Resistance against Japan (1937-1945) threatened film production in China, and Chinese filmmakers had to leave Beijing and Shanghai and flee to safer locales such as Hong Kong, Chong Qing, and Yan’an (Fu, 2003).

Chinese filmmaking was separated into several parts during the war. First, in Japanese occupied Shanghai and Beijing, filmmakers like Zhang Shankun were forced to make films such as *Eternity* (1943) to cater to the pro-Japanese ideology. Second, the studios controlled by the central Chinese government in Chongqing made nationalistic patriotic films. Third, studios like Tianyi stopped filmmaking in Shanghai and moved to Hongkong to make more commercial films. Tianyi studio evolved into the now internationally famous Shaw Brothers studio in the 1950s (Zhang, 2003). Fourth, a few filmmakers and actors went to Chinese communist-controlled Yan'an and started making communist inspired films.

The representative Second Generation films vary in style and narrative. *Ye Ban Ge Sheng* (*Singing at Midnight*, Ma-Xu Weibang, 1937) was the first Chinese horror movie, *Mulan Cong Jun* (*Mulan Joins the Army*, Bu Wancang, 1939) was a patriotic movie made in Japanese-occupied Shanghai, *Yi Jiang Chun Shui Xiang Dong Liu* (*Spring River Flows East*, Cai Chusheng, 1947) was a melodrama of war suffering made by the pre-war leftists who returned to Shanghai after the war. *Xiao Cheng Zhi Chun* (*Spring in a Small Town*, Fei Mu, 1948) was a mature and intelligent melodrama about a love triangle many critics consider one of the best films made in China because of the excellent performances of the actors.

Because the famous studios like Lianhua and Mingxing closed during the war, new studios such as Xinhua, Wenhua, and Kunlun emerged. Likewise government run studios controlled by Kuomintang (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) were established at this time. Kunlun Studio released films such as *Spring River Flows East* (1947), *Wanjia Denghuo* (*The Lights of Ten Thousand Homes*, Fu Shen, 1948) and *Wuya*

yu Maque (*Crows and Sparrows*, Zheng Junli, 1949), which exemplified critical realism traceable to prewar social realism (Zhang, 2003).

The Third Generation (1949-1978)

After the war with Japan, China experienced a civil war between the Communist Party (CCP) and nationalist government Kuomintang (KMT) from 1946 to 1949. It is also at this time that the Communist leader Mao Zedong's teachings spread throughout China. According to Mao's arts theory, the arts should be used as "weapons" in the revolutionary cause. With this theory in mind, the Third Generation of directors developed politically revolutionary ideas and new filmic characteristics after 1949. Xie Jin (b. 1923) represents this specific generation that was transcendent from the Yan'an branch of the Second Generation.

Social Realism

According to Thompson and Bordwell (2003), Social Realist artworks are supposed to educate the people and provide role models that serve the Communist Party. Social realism emerged among the First Generation filmmakers in China, especially the leftist filmmakers, and was revitalized after the war against Japan. The later period of the Second Generation overlapped the beginning of the Third Generation in their use of Social Realism in films such as *Spring River Flows East* (1947), *Crows and Sparrows* (1949), and *Three Women* (1949). But the popularity of Social Realism and the emergence of many films with Social Realism narratives are also found among the Third Generation filmmakers. Throughout the communist controlled countries in the post war era, most filmmakers made films in the Social Realism tradition. The reasons were rooted both in a need for government approval and for personal ideological stances.

The geographical locus of the Third Generation started in Yan'an, the center of Chinese Communist Party during the civil war (Kuoshu, 2002), but eventually moved to Beijing, Shanghai, and Changchun after 1949. Xie Jin, the director of the movie *Wu Tai Jie Mei* (*Two Stage Sisters*, 1965) and *Fu Rong Zhen* (*The Hibiscus Town*, 1986), represents the maturity and the highest cinematic achievement of the Third Generation. The main characteristics of the Third Generation films are an emphasis on the portraying of the idealist hero in wars or in daily life, the exaltation of the responsibility of the artwork as the moral leader of people, and the victory of social justice over evildoers. The employment of Social Realism further stamped these movies in a similar narrative style or formula.

The Fourth Generation (1978-1983)

The Fourth Generation is represented by the productions of the early 1980s with the theme of *rehumanization* (Kuoshu, 2002). The Third Generation had been sticking to revolutionary topics for 30 years and emphasized simplified human characteristics by categorizing people into only good and evil personas. The Fourth Generation decided to display complex experiences and feelings that cannot be judged simply by an ideologically driven right or wrong. Staying away from Social Realism, the Fourth Generation began to overrule the old filmic formulas by avoiding the depictions of “great hero” images.

Top filmmakers of the Fourth Generation are Wu Tianming (*Old Well*, 1986), Huang Shuqing (*Woman, Demon, Human*, 1987), and Zhang Nuanxin (*Sacrifice Youth*, 1985). The fourth generation is the transitional generation between the Third and the Fifth and exemplifies the employment of a humanist film language. With more

consideration of elements other than politics, the Fourth Generation created an art form that grew from a searching for personal memories with depictions of ethical, psychological, social, and historical situations in human characterization (Dai, 2002).

As the guide for the Fifth Generation, the Fourth Generation influenced the early productions of the Fifth Generation to a great extent. For example, Wu Tianming asked Zhang Yimou (a Fifth Generation filmmaker) to take the leading actor role in his movie *Old Well* (1986), and Zhang's talent as an actor was acknowledged as well as his skill in cinematography and directing. Furthermore, Zhang Nuanxi taught at the Beijing Film Academy, and influenced the Fifth Generation of filmmakers.

The Fifth Generation (1983-1989)

Although the time delineation of the Fifth Generation, according to Ye (1999), starts in 1983 and ends in 1989, this is primarily the period in which the Fifth Generation formed their style and achieved national and international popularity. Their filmmaking continues to the present time and still dominates the Chinese film market. Moreover, the Fifth Generation is the first group in Chinese film history to make huge profits from the lucrative foreign film market.

The directors of the Fifth Generation not only embraced the transition from the political dominated topics of Social Realism and the cinematic language of the humanists, but also broke through the ideological barriers imposed by communism and Mao's art theory. Furthermore, as the first group of directors to graduate from the Beijing Film Academy after the Cultural Revolution in 1982, the Fifth Generation represents and records the dramatic ideological changes and social ethos of the past 25 years.

Under the guidance and encouragement of the Fourth Generation directors such as

Wu Tianming and Zhang Nuanxin, the Fifth Generation began their cinematic exploration in China's rural northwest. Chow (1995) points out that returning to nature is the theme of the Fifth Generation films and that these diverse movies feature natural landscapes, rural life, and oppressed women. The desolate view of the land and the people's desires for a new life became the focus of the Fifth Generation's directors. *Yellow Earth* (Chen Kaige, 1984) collected the first international award and became the definitive declaration of the Fifth Generation's cinema. Kuoshu (2002) proclaims that it is "an artistic filmmaking that relies less on melodrama, dialogue, and didacticism and more on profound uses of image and sound and their concealed subtleties" (p. 11). Therefore, the stylistic elements of cinematography and sound are fore-grounded in these filmmakers' works as opposed to communist ideology in Social Realism and humanism in the work of the Fourth Generation directors.

From 1984 to 2004, the Fifth Generation directors dominated the cinematic style of Chinese film and its box office. Especially since the 1990s, when the government owned studios were no longer able to support avant-garde experimental films in the midst of economic reform and began to turn their directions to "meet the international demand for ethnic elements, glossy visuals, and polished narrative" (Zhang, 2003, p. 13). With the coming of the new millennium, diversified social prospects provoked diversified cinematic styles ranging from art film to commercial film including experimental and avant-garde filmmaking in China.

Also, the Fifth Generation is the first generation that aimed specifically at the international film market. The directors use international investments, take advantage of film techniques popularized abroad, and desire international recognition. From their

original focus on contemporary rural topics to their later observations on urban life, from ancient China to modern China, the Fifth Generation takes a unique filmic view of Chinese society. Likewise, they work in various modes such as art cinema and commercial films. As the most famous and internationally recognized of the Fifth Generation, Zhang Yimou has conquered the box office in both China and the United States with the recent success of *Hero* (2002) and *House of Flying Daggers* (2004).

The Sixth Generation (1989-present)

The Sixth Generation is the most recent group of Chinese directors. The Sixth Generation directors such as Zhang Yuan, Lou Ye, Wang Xiaoshuai, and Wang Quan, graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in the late 1980s and most were sponsored by the Fifth Generation directors. Because of the transition in the economic mode in China in the 1980s, the state owned studios could no longer afford the large investments in film production, and the Chinese film market shrunk in the middle of 1980s. Therefore, it is harder for the Sixth Generation directors to make films and explore their craft than the previous generations (Lau, 2003). Their primary problem is finding private investments for their films, which they must do by seeking financial and technical resources from abroad (Lau, 2003).

According to Lau (2003) there are three prominent characteristics that set the Sixth Generation apart from the previous generations. First, hero and heroism disappear in the Sixth Generation's films. Instead, they rely on realistic visualization to describe ordinary life. Second, there is an ideological disengagement in the films, which depict only non-political subjects with alternative narratives. Third, they are facing the free market of globalization. According to Dai (2002), the Sixth Generation is indicated as

“Chinese underground films” or “Chinese dissident films” in Euro-American, and “independent filmmaking” and “new documentary movement” in China. Under the title of the Sixth Generation, there have emerged diverse styles among the directors. As a generation that is still growing and developing, the success of Sixth Generation is uncertain.

Focus on the Fifth Generation and Zhang Yimou

Among the six generations of directors, the Fifth Generation is now the most influential group in China and the most respected in the international cinematic community. Their films dominate Chinese office box and will continue to do so in the foreseeable future. Compared with the Fourth Generation, the Fifth Generation tries to transcend the disjunction of history and culture, and their films traverse the rift between history and culture in the 1980s (Dai, 2002). Compared with the Sixth Generation, the Fifth Generation is better at making grand cinematic visuals while reflecting a deeper understanding of reality and history which is freer of Communist ideology.

Among the Fifth Generation directors, film critics and scholars agree that the top directors are Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige. The inaugural undertaking of the Fifth Generation was *Yige He Bage (One and Eight, 1983)*, directed by Zhang Junzhao, with Zhang Yimou as cinematographer. Next, director Chen Kaige made *Yellow Earth (1984)* with the cooperation of Zhang Yimou (cinematographer). One of the foremost characteristics of the Fifth Generation is the representation of the creative subject through camera work (cinematography) instead of through the narrative characterization or filmic narratives.

From 1980s to 2000s, the Fifth Generation influenced the Chinese audience the

most with the “the Fifth Stamp.” Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou, and Tian Zhuangzhuang are the big names of Chinese cinema, and *Yellow Earth* (Chen Kaige, 1984), *Farewell My Concubine* (Chen Kaige, 1994), *Red Sorghum* (Zhang Yimou, 1987), *To Live* (Zhang Yimou, 1994), *Horse Thief* (Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1986), and *Blue Kite* (Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1993) are the most important films made by the Fifth Generation in China in the last 25 years. New concepts and new formal aesthetics were employed to express the exuberate passion of these gifted directors. According to Dai (2002), “[t]he brilliance of the Fifth Generation lies in both the creation of a new cinematic language and in their revelation of the enigma inhabiting archaic Chinese history” (p. 28). According to Chow (1995), the preeminence of the filmmaking in the Fifth Generation is also caused by the awareness that film is, first and foremost, a visual medium instead of a political tool.

Zhang Yimou

In July 2004, Zhang released the highly anticipated *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), which tells a martial arts love story set in the 9th century Tang Dynasty. Featuring Hong Kong’s famous actor Andy Lau, Taiwanese/Japanese star Takeshi Kaneshiro and Zhang Ziyi, *House of Flying Daggers* achieved great success in Chinese film market. With the current popularity of *Hero* (2002) in the United States, Zhang Yimou has been promoted from a superstar of filmmaking in China to the premiere Chinese director in the Western world. In fact, *Hero* topped the United States box office receipts for several weeks in September 2004. Zhang’s success in both China and the U.S. invites a deeper analysis of his work and his life.

According to Zhang’s publicly known biography, he was born in Shanxi Province

of China on November 14, 1951. He is the son of a family that suffered politically for its association with the Nationalists because his father was an army officer in Kuomintang (KMT), the national party led by Chiang Kaishek, whose dominance was substituted by Mao's Communist Party after the civil war (1946-1949). Because of Zhang's family background, no matter how excellent his grades were at school, he was not allowed to join the Youth League, which is the most popular organization for children. The family was poor and Zhang wore torn and patched clothes when he was growing up (Magnier, 2004). Zhang grew up introverted, withdrawn and reluctant to reveal his innermost feelings (Ziesing, n.d.).

The Cultural Revolution erupted in 1966 when Zhang was 15, and his middle school education ended abruptly. Zhang recalls the Cultural Revolution as "a time when you could be locked up if caught with the wrong literature, and anything not officially approved was strictly forbidden" (Cheng, 2004). The only martial arts novel he could find was about an "Eagle-claw King," which he never dared to bring home (Cheng, 2004). Like many young Chinese of this time, Zhang was sent to a farm in 1969 and worked there for seven years until he was 25. Zhang bought his first camera in 1974, and often took photos for his working-class friends. In 1976, he came home and worked in a spinning mill factory for three years before he began his studies at the Beijing Film Academy.

It is regretful that Zhang's life before 1982 is not well documented, because the hard experiences must have enriched his life and influenced his film production. His aesthetic perspective and cinematic style seem deeply rooted in the environment in which

he grew up. For example, the dye mill he portrayed in *Ju Dou* is much like the spinning mill factory where he worked. In addition, Shanxi Province, where Zhang was born, is an old area with a history of thousands of years. Xi'an, the capital city of Shanxi Province, had been the nation's capital for many dynasties in Chinese history. Traditional rituals, traditional beliefs, and traditional life in this place may have deeply influenced Zhang's early life and his films. Consequently, his early films are closely connected to the old customs and traditions of Chinese society.

Zhang started his study of cinematography in Beijing Film Academy with great enthusiasm in 1978. It was not an easy beginning because his admission was originally refused by the Academy because he was too old. Zhang was 27 at that time, five years over the age limit set by the Academy. Zhang had to appeal to the Minister of Culture with a portfolio of his best photographs. With the help of the Minister, Zhang entered the Academy and started his film career (Ziesing, n. d.).

After graduation in 1982, he was sent to work as a cinematographer in Guangxi Film Studio, where he worked on *One and Eight* (Zhang Junzhao, 1984) and *Yellow Earth* (Chen Kaige, 1984). Then the Fourth Generation director Wu Tianming invited him to Xi'an Film Studio, where he started his directorial career. During the early years of Zhang's filmmaking experiences, he was the cinematographer for films such as *One and Eight*, *Yellow Earth*, and *The Big Parade*. He also played the leading actor role in the film *Old Well* directed by Wu Tianming. Zhang won the best male actor award at the Tokyo Film Festival in 1998 for his performance in *Old Well*. As an actor, Zhang also played the leading role in *Qin Yong* (Ching Siu-Tung, 1989) with actress Gong Li.

Zhang's relationship with Gong Li, the talented and beautiful actress who played

the leading roles in all of Zhang's films before 1997, began soon after Gong Li was discovered by Zhang as a sophomore at the Central Academy of Drama in 1987 (Feinstein, 1993). Zhang was married at the time, but he divorced his wife. Zhang and Gong became intimate as well as professional partners for nine years, beginning with *Red Sorghum* (1987) and ending with *Shanghai Triad* (1995). According to Chow (1995), Gong Li was Zhang's passion for his early films.

Red Sorghum

Red Sorghum (1987) is Zhang's first film as director. This is also the first Chinese movie that won the Golden Bear Award in Berlin. Since then, most of Zhang's films have won international awards. Rarely has a film director won so many international awards in China. Dai (2002) states that "Zhang Yimou created an elaborate and expressive national mythology aimed at superseding the cultural dilemma of allegorical self-entanglement facing the Fifth Generation" (p. 52). Dai (2002) believes that the phenomenon of Zhang Yimou is caused by his marginalization in China on one hand and his being the representative of mainstream Chinese films on the other hand, which Dai has described as the experience of "fleeing from one trap while falling into another" (p. 52). Therefore Zhang's success is also the result of a certain social process in which the Western views of China are based on the superior and condescending mindset that appreciates the transformed reality in Zhang's films.

Red Sorghum is adapted from the novel of the same title by Mo Yan. It tells the story of a young rural woman, Jiu Er, who has to marry a leper husband because her father owes the man a mule. The leper husband owns a winemaking workshop, but he dies after marrying Jiu Er. Jiu Er has an affair with another man, who accompanies her to

her husbands' home, and they manage the winemaking workshop together. The story takes place during WWII when Japan invaded China and was trying to dominate the country with military power. The invasion of the Japanese army in Jiu Er's village ruins Jiu Er's happy life, and Jiu Er is killed by Japanese soldiers on a broad Red Sorghum farm at the end of this film.

A unique domestic circumstance in 1980s China promoted the success of *Red Sorghum*. The accelerated urbanization, industrialization and the commercialization wave washed over China in the end of 1980s, and set this important era as the social context of Zhang's film. In the 1980s, the film industry was at a critical time of seeking international recognition, which was necessary for the further development of Chinese film industry because of a lack of domestic funding. With the shrinking of the Chinese film market in the 1980s, new and different films were needed to attract audiences back to the theaters. Zhang succeeded in pulling many Chinese back to the theatre to watch *Red Sorghum* after it won the Golden Bear award. Also, Gong Li made an excellent debut in *Red Sorghum*, and she became the leading actress for Zhang's films for the following 8 years.

From *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern* to *The Story of Qiu Ju*

The great success of *Red Sorghum* set the cultural backdrop for Zhang's early film productions such as *Ju Dou* (1990) and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991). Zhang's second feature, *Ju Dou* (1990), continued the style of his first film and also stars Gong Li. The story is about a young woman who is sold to a brutal old dye mill owner and has an affair with his nephew in her struggle to escape her husband's oppression. In his next strikingly emotional movie *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), Zhang had his third successful

cooperation with Gong Li. This story is adapted from Su Tong's novel, which tells a story about a young woman, Song Lian, who is sold to a rich landlord as a concubine.

According to Ebert (2003), *Raise the Red Lantern* is about sex enslavement because "the protagonist enters a closed system from which there is no escape, and life is ruled by long-established customs" (p. 4). The master of the house, who is the authority of the old norms, is rarely seen in the film, but the audience can sense that he is everywhere, along with the strict norms he represents. The film does not have close-ups of the master's face, and he is only on screen in shots filmed at a great distance or from behind, or when his face is blurred behind veils. In addition, his voice is never emotional, just like the huge cold iron-like houses in which he enslaves the concubines. Zhang produced a smothered environment in a way that audience could feel but could not see the oppression. The new concubine, Song Lian, finally loses her sanity when she sees the Third Mistress being murdered by the master.

Many people see a change in Zhang's subsequent works. According to Farquhar (2002), Zhang believed that his three early films (*Red Sorghum*, *Ju Dou*, *Raise the Red Lantern*) were too similar and he wanted to display his versatility through his control of different styles and topics. *The Story of Qiuju* (1993) changes the location to Shanxi, where Zhang was born. It tells a story of a pregnant countryside woman who struggles for justice for her husband, who was injured by the village chief during an argument. The film was favored both by the Chinese government and the Chinese audience.

To Live and Shanghai Triad

To Live (1994) and *Shanghai Triad* (1995) are Zhang's last two films starring Gong Li. With the ending of their relationship, Zhang's ten-year devotion to his early

style also came to an end. *To Live* tells a 30-year long story of the common people's lives in China through a period of social unrest. Also, it is the representative of the Fifth Generation because it does not attribute the miserable experiences of the common people to any evil characters.

However, *To Live* was banned and never released officially in China, but Chinese audiences are familiar with the movie via unofficial venues. The film censor bureau did not approve *To Live* because it dealt with a politically sensitive topic in Chinese history, and it is believed to reflect the darker side of Chinese society. You Qing (Ge You) spends his early life as the son of a wealthy landlord, but he loses all he has to Long Er by gambling. You Qing's wife, Jia Zhen (Gong Li), is disappointed with him for his gambling addiction and leaves him. But after You Qing loses everything because of gambling, Jia Zhen returns home with their two children. The family survives on You Qing's income from performing shadow puppet theatre. Unfortunately, tragedies occur one after another as the couple lose their son and then their daughter. At the end of the film, their grandson plays with a little chicken on the floor, which shows a generational new hope for this family.

Shanghai Triad is Zhang's attempt at "making a conventional film" after *To Live* was banned (Maslin, 1995, September 29). Set in the 1930s, the storyline develops around a powerful gangster and his mistress. The mistress is spoiled but not loved, and is finally killed by the gangster. Zhang turns the story into a tragedy and shows the audience a confused world.

Shanghai Triad was nominated for the Golden Globe award for Best Foreign Language film. It won the Los Angeles Film Critics Association Award and the New

York Film Critics Circle Award. Although it achieved many awards abroad, it did not arouse much attention in China. Compared with Zhang's early works, this movie is generally believed to lack his usual social criticism.

After the ending of the relationship with Gong Li during *Shanghai Triad*, Zhang began his search for a new style. With the development and commercialization of the Chinese society, the film market was also changing dramatically.

Film Productions after 1997

After 1995, Zhang continued his film production career with *Keep Cool* (1997), *Not One Less* (1999), *The Road Home* (1999; U.S. 2001) and *Happy Times* (2001). At the same time, stories about Zhang's private life begin to appear more often in the Chinese media. One of the most popular stories is his alleged affair with Chinese model Wang Haizhen in 2000 followed by another affair with Chinese actress Zhang Ziyi.

Keep Cool is Zhang's first comedy as well as the first film that he shot in a big city. He tries to magnify a small event to reflect a much larger reality and express his emotions through the use of black humor. Zhang said in an interview that he liked the sense of absurdity in the original novel, *Evening News*, written by Shu Ping (Jiao, 1998). The story begins as two strangers encounter one another and one of them, Zhao Xiaoshuai, accidentally smashes the other's laptop while fighting with a third man, Liu Delong, on the street. Zhao is obsessed with getting the opportunity to seek revenge on Liu Delong who was responsible for Zhao being dumped by his girlfriend. After the owner of the laptop, Zhang Qiusheng, finds out the criminal motive of Zhao Xiaoshuai, he tries to stop him from committing criminal acts but fails to do so. At the end of the film, Zhao Xiaoshuai is released from the jail and goes to see Zhang Qiusheng to thank

him for what he has done to him.

Not One Less is a mainstream film that focuses on a mainstream governmental program—the “Project Hope,” which is devoted to helping countryside children who cannot afford to attend school. This film had with very little investment. The actors in the film, including the leading actress, were not professionals. Although this film tells a simple story of a young country girl, Wei Minzhi, who works as a substitute teacher and has the responsibility to keep her pupils from going to work in the cities, it won the Best Feature award at the Sao Paulo International Film Festival, the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, and the Five Continents Award from the European Film Festival.

The year 1999 was a good time to release such a movie while many poor Chinese children could not afford school and their peers in rich areas enjoyed whatever they required. The film calls for a concern for the children in the undeveloped countryside. The movie demonstrates the hard life that faces these children at the bottom of society, shows the crisis in rural primary education, and extends the society’s concern for poor students and their families.

The Road Home gave Zhang Yimou another chance to showcase a new star. In this case, this star was Zhang Ziyi. Zhang Ziyi was 19 years old when she played Zhao Di in *The Road Home*. Zhao Di is a young country girl who falls in love with the village’s new teacher. *The Road Home* is Zhang’s last film shot in the countryside, and it also served as a stepping stone for young actress Zhang Ziyi to rise to international success.

Happy Times (2001) is another urban comedy filmed by Zhang Yimou after *Keep Cool*. It tells a story about how a group of out-of-work civilians help a blind girl who is being mistreated by her stepmother by fooling her into thinking she has a good paying

job as a masseuse. But this girl finally leaves these kind people after she finds out the truth. This comedy reflects the life of some civilians in today's Chinese society. *Happy Times* stars Dong Jie, another young actress who has certain facial characteristics similar to Gong Li and Zhang Ziyi, and who also became famous after shooting this film.

Happy Times was not widely praised in China probably because Zhang is not as good at urban comedies as he has proven to be at more traditional Chinese topics. At the same time, Martial-Arts films from Hong Kong like *Shao Lin Zu Qiu* (Steven Chow, 2001) dominated the mainland film market and little attention was paid to *Happy Times*. With this film, Zhang moved from a focus on everyday people to mythical heroes.

Hero and House of Flying Daggers

Hero, made in 2002, still holds the box office record in China with \$53,710, 019 domestic box office and \$122, 500, 000 oversea box office income (<http://www.officeboxmojo.com>). It is such a commercially successful film that no Hong Kong film can compete with it even though Hong Kong films are considered much more commercial than mainland Chinese films. *Hero* tells the story of an assassin who has decided to kill the first emperor of China after studying swordmanship for 10 years. But he finally lets the emperor live because he comes to understand the importance of a united China.

According to Romney (2004), *Hero* is an Asian fusion of Chinese mainland director sensibilities, Hong Kong film stars, and elements from the films of Japanese master Akira Kurosawa. On one hand, it celebrates Hong Kong swordplay in its most extravagant modes of Kug Fu, on the other hand, “[i]ts armies, banners flying in the wind, and its crowds of courtiers scuttling up the King's steps in beetle black, evoke Akira

Kurosawa's late epics *Kagemusha* and *Ran*” (Romney, 2004, p. 16).

House of Flying Daggers is Zhang’s most recent production. It was nominated for the Best Foreign Film award at the 2005 Golden Globe awards. Zhang expands his own style of Martial-Arts in this film with grand pictorials and a story line full of twists and turns. Zhang said in an interview with *The Times* (London) that he would like to show a modern love story that is different from tradition (Dalton, 2004).

According to Magnier (2004), Zhang’s success in film production creates films that are commercially successful both at home and abroad. This is a major accomplishment considering the difficulty in getting Chinese film distributed both domestically and internationally. Magnier (2004) states that 80% of the 280 Chinese films made in 2003 went directly to TV and DVD or were shown only at overseas film festivals with no theatrical releases in China. Therefore, it can be concluded that Zhang contributes greatly to the Chinese film industry, and his unparalleled success both at home and abroad makes him the brightest star of the Fifth Generation.

III. METHODOLOGY

This thesis uses historical poetics to examine the construction process and the effects involved in Zhang Yimou's films. Because of the obvious complexity of the films styles and topics, it is difficult to objectively critique Zhang and his films. Historical poetics is more interested in explanation than in interpretation, and it is primarily descriptive. In addition, how Zhang's films work to construct a perception of Chinese social reality will be discussed in this thesis.

According to Bordwell (1989a), the word "poetics" originated from Greek and means *active meaning*. Studies concerning poetics focus on the construction process of the finished artwork. Jenkins (1995) defines poetics as various areas that "focus on the processes and conventions through which artworks are constructed and evaluated" (p. 100). In this sense the word conventions refers to common practices used in filmmaking such as causal narrative development and continuity editing. The theoretical domains related to traditional poetics include thematics, constructive form (primarily narrative), and stylistics.

Historical poetics is rooted in the Russian formalist critics of literature and film (White, 1996). Using historical poetics as a methodology to explore cinematic productions has been a popular approach in the area of film study and research. Bordwell

(1989a) elaborates that “poetics” focuses on the process of the construction of the artworks and that “historical” is added to “narrow the field” because artworks are closely connected with deep historical themes (p. 371).

Nielsen (2004), quotes Bordwell stating that historical poetic focuses on “how . . . form and style exhibit patterns of continuity and change over time and how might we best explain these patterns” (p. 4). Also, historical poetics “looks at the ways in which aspects of theme, form, and style have been used in different ways at different times for different reasons” (White, 1996, ¶ 14). According to Bordwell (1989a), historical poetics answers two questions about cinema: First, “[w]hat are the principles according to which films are constructed and by means of which they achieve particular effects?” (p. 371). Secondly, it asks “[h]ow and why have these principles arisen and changed in particular empirical circumstances?” (p. 371).

Historical Poetics, Constructive Principle, and Convention

Bordwell (1989a) compares historical poetics with other theories such as Neoformalism, Grand Theory, and SLAB theory (Saussurean semiotics, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Althusserian Marxism, and Barthesian textual theory). The result shows that poetics is more problem- and question-centered, is conducting systematic research, and uses concepts to construct explanatory propositions. In order to relieve any limits on research set by conceptual schemes, historical poetics believes that every film constructs its own specific subject in a specific way. Bordwell calls this an ongoing process of “subject positioning” for the spectator (1989a, p. 381). In order to understand how this

works in a particular film, intersubjective data are collected during the process of historical poetics research.

There are a plethora of options faced by a filmmaker at any historical moment, but a filmmaker must choose certain options over others during the filmmaking process. That preference selection is the process that historical poetics tries to elucidate. Revision on the selection of the constructional options open to filmmakers at various historical conjunctures is the purpose of historical poetics. Principles, as underlying concepts, dominate the sort of materials to be used and the possible ways in which the films are shot (Bordwell, 1989a), therefore constructional principles of films are to be explored for each of the film's selected from Zhang's filmography.

The principles and effects of films are closely connected with conventions, which "lie at the intersection of logical distinctions and social customs" (Bordwell, 1989a, p. 373). Four aspects of conventions are examined by historical poetics: their constitution, functions, consequences, and historical manifestations. Convention is arbitrary only to the extent that it is determined forcefully by the rules of code like linguistics, and it is something that cannot be changed by human will. However, conventions in nonlinguistic fields such as visual representation have to rely on the culture environment and the perceiver's psychophysical capacities. Bordwell (1996) states that cinema is partly pictorial representation and involves a theoretical account of conventions. In other words, convention is not the equation of arbitrariness, and it is "neither wholly natural nor wholly cultural" because there are always other possibilities (Bordwell, 1996, p. 91).

As a theory, poetics is not omnipotent. Historical poetics confines itself to “descriptive accounts and prescriptive arguments” (Jenkins, 1995, p. 100). The general purpose of poetics is to describe and explain instead of interpret. It describes the conventions of the cinema’s constructive principles and explains the effects of film. Bordwell (1989a) sets the limits of historical poetics by delineating certain areas with which it is not involved. First, poetics does not interfere with political economy, which examines the economic patterns of film distribution, the social ideology, and the relations between the dominant ideology and the stylistics of film. Second, poetics does not produce critical interpretation, which is often the main task of other forms of criticism. Also, according to White (1996), historical poetics does not apply already-accepted academic approaches to the study of film, nor does it evaluate films based on similarities or differences with other art forms.

Historical Poetics and Interpretation

According to Bordwell (1989b, p. 252), “[c]ontemporary criticism, in aiming to interpret everything it can find, has usually set itself against theoretical principle by refusing to stipulate when something will not count as a valid interpretive move or as an instance of meaning.” Historical poetics, on the other hand, has tried to move away from interpretations as much as possible. Bordwell (1989b) has clearly distinguished between historical poetics and interpretations in his book, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*.

According to Bordwell (1989b), contemporary criticism is interpretation-centered and conservative-oriented. Ordinary criticism plays at least two roles: domestication or “the taming of the new,” and differentiation or “the reshaping of the known” (Bordwell, 1989b, p. 256). Both of the roles aid criticism in reaffirming existing conventions. Interpretation has encouraged the exploration of those conventions and set the tone for its reflection upon conceptual schemes. Generally speaking, interpretation is text-centered; it is cornered by existing aesthetic categories and is not able to produce new ones. Therefore, interpretation is not able to “reflect its theories and practices” (Bordwell, 1989b, p. 261).

Bordwell states, “[t]o interpret a film is to ascribe implicit or symptomatic meanings to it” (1989b, p. 247). Although interpretation studies motives, intentions, and ethical responsibility by explicating the artworks’ impacts on people’s feelings, actions, and thought, it does not work well in accounting for the constructive principles and the particular effects the artwork has on the audience. Bordwell (1989b) points out that the trend endangering interpretation is that it could be dismissed as “a rhetorical ploy for promoting one’s own interpretation” (p. 258) because interpretation of a film is implicit and symptomatic. While critics are using norms to search for the natural and invisible principles of the artwork, historical poetics concentrates on the process in which the conventions and skills are reflected and used.

Contradictory to interpretation, historical poetics believes that “[t]o make all films mean the same things by applying the same critical procedures is to ignore the rich

variety of film history” (Bordwell, 1989b, p. 267). Historical poetics, different from interpretation, does not suppose a set of universal principles that guide the process of construction. It instead believes in the uniqueness of every film, its production process, and its effects. The primary purpose is to describe the process of such a construction which enables every single film to come into being (Bordwell, 1989a, p. 269).

For many in the formalist tradition, historical poetics has become a new theoretical discipline invigorating film study. It works against interpretation in its insistence in exploring different sorts of meanings at different levels of concreteness. Poetics empirically collects the norms and conventions in the process of the artwork’s production and offers explanations to filmmaker’s option-taking. Bordwell (1989b) proposes that poetics “rests upon an inferential model, whereby the perceiver uses cues in the film to execute determinable operations, of which the construction of all sorts of meaning will be a part” (p. 270).

Historical poetics not only studies the practices of production but also those of reception. Using historical poetics, how people perceive the artworks is not determined by the way they are constructed. In other words, the practice of production does not dictate the reception of the artworks (Bordwell, 1989a). Historical poetics explains how viewers construct meanings of the artworks based upon certain principles which are not set by the producers of the artworks but by certain historical environments and filmmaking conventions.

Bordwell refined his thoughts on interpretation in his 1993 article “Film

Interpretation Revisited.” In it he explains that interpretation is examined under more detailed social institution and academic film studies. Since many believe that what film criticism should do is textual interpretation, that interpretation has become synonymous with film criticism. However, Bordwell (1993) insists that interpretation is a distinct practice within film criticism and it ascribes only “abstract and nonliteral meanings to the film and its world” (p. 96). To achieve this purpose, interpretation requires certain skills to make judgments on films and classify them into groups of different traditions, genres, or tendencies.

Interpretation is a completely subjective process because any statement made about the artwork could be seen as a form of interpretation. The results of various interpretations of the same piece of artwork are different. An interpreter has a set of basic expectations toward the speaker’s linguistic behavior (Vescio, 2001, p. 575). Vescio quotes the philosopher Wittgenstein, “do I really see something different each time, or do I only interpret what I see in a different way?” to support this concept (2001, p. 574). Wittgenstein continues “[w]hen we interpret we form hypotheses, which may prove false” (1953, p. 212), the efforts of interpretation are partially persuasive in demonstrating a specific point of view.

However, historical poetics is not involved in the process of making and testing hypotheses. There is unlimited possibility in the results of interpretation concerning one artwork, and the richness and variety of interpretations are the result of various conceptual schemata and semantic fields. It is impossible to test all the interpretations

before ultimately accepting or rejecting them. As such, Bordwell contends that interpretation is hardly the perfect way to record the process through which a film is made because it focuses too much on the conceptual schemata and semantic fields. Linguistic meaning, on the other hand, depends on various elements from the text itself to the receivers' conceptual schema, and it allows for various interpretations.

While the interpreter makes the film interpretable in a multitude of ways, historical poetics also examines the different effects of film. But historical poetics only does this in artwork-centered observation and records data from the real historical process. The historical account for the film's production is based on the empirical data with objective description. Not satisfied with simply exploring or comparing semantic fields, historical poetics develops the explanations for the process of comprehension in its own ways.

Reactions to Historical Poetics

Kaplan (1993) points out that film study is one of the more conservative disciplines mainly because it is new. According to Kaplan (1993), when examining a film, Bordwell's poetics pays close attention to the surface of a film and its history and links a traditional literary and film formalism with New Historicism. However, because of Bordwell's devaluation of interpretation, critical scholars argue for the correct estimate of the contribution of critical studies. Criticism believes that film means either the world-view of a particular filmmaker, or the dominant ideological assumptions in the culture as a whole, but historical poetics forestalls this search of meaning by not making

any evaluation. According to Telotte (1998), Bordwell has offered the most rigorous and revealing description of the various strategies that together comprise the practice of classical narrative, but Bordwell's approach had led him to a conservative view of the film types.

Bordwell (2001) expands historical poetics in order to avoid limiting it to studies of overall composition principles, spectatorial activity, and historical traditions. He explains that historical poetics inquires into social and cultural factors that influence the film (Bordwell, 2001). According to Bordwell (2001), film poetics asks us to "start with the principled regularities of form and style we can find in the films, and then to ask what real-world activities could plausibly play causal roles in creating them" (p. 9). Therefore historical poetics also asks the question "what circumstances make those principles and wholes emerge at some time rather than others" after asking the "how do the parts work together to create this distinctive whole" (p. 9).

On the whole, historical poetics is closely connected with culture and society as a film research methodology. Historical poetics is still an exemplary way to acknowledge the process of the construction of film. "Culturally constructed" has become a popular phrase in explaining human social phenomena. White (1996) indicates that historical poetics seeks to know more about the culture in which a film is produced in order to learn more about the film itself. Historical poetics, according to Bordwell (1996), is consistent with the general implication of the phrase "culturally constructed." However, historical poetics and "culturally constructed" are not compatible when the latter assumes that the

phenomenon is only specific to a particular culture since filmic conventions are widely known and used internationally. Bordwell argues that in general, “it is perfectly possible for a phenomenon to be culturally constructed and at the same time to be very widespread” (1996, p. 104).

Cross-cultural factors may be part of the representational process in many situations, and these factors are not meant to be used as such with phrases like “natural” or “biologically determined” in the perspective of historical poetics. According to Bordwell (1996), if we assume that culture has changed throughout history, we should also accept many similar or cross-cultural practices that have remained through the physical environment and interpersonal relationships. “The most comprehensive and powerful explanations of convention in any art would seem to be those which show them to be functional transformations of other representations or practices” (Bordwell, 1996, p. 105).

Historical Poetics and Zhang’s Films

Historical poetics does not have a clearly delineated methodology. Bordwell (2001) conceives poetics as “an inductive, empirical discipline that gives priority to the integrity of the given film, the particularities of the film medium, and the choices made by historical agents working within institutions” (p. 10). Much like classic formalism, it is a framework in which the critic works to analyze film. Historical poetics’ principals and questions inform the analysis in unique ways for each project. Bordwell claims that three areas in film study interest historical poetics: the study of form, the aesthetics of the

use of the medium, and the spectator and issues of how spectators understand films through the use of specific conventions (Nielsen, 2004). Bordwell also argues that there are four aspects regarding poetics which determine any filmmaking tradition or movement: overarching form, stylistics, spectator understanding, and historical poetics. This is in keeping with the theoretical domains related to traditional poetics which include thematics, narrative constructive form, and stylistics.

This thesis investigates three aspects of historical poetics in the study of Zhang's films since 1994. The first concern is thematics. I investigate how Zhang selected the topics for each of his films to cover specific historical periods and to communicate to the audience specific themes and how he explained the themes. In addition, this thesis also explicates the overall thematic changes that occur through Zhang's filmography.

The second concern of this analysis is the narrative constructive forms of Zhang's films and the principles of their construction. Cinematic norms and conventions are certainly the most important concern in Bordwell's theoretical frame for the study of cinema. The process of film construction results in the creation of a particular narrative, which subsequently explains the options from which the filmmaker chose. Also, the narrative contributes to the reception of the film by the audience. At the same time, cultural conventions also help in explaining the constructive process.

Finally, my analysis is concerned with the stylistic shift in Zhang's films that occurred during the past 20 years. The stylistics of a film, including cinematography,

editing, sound, and *mise-en-scene*, will be discussed for each of Zhang's films selected for this thesis. According to Bordwell (2001), the way movies look and sound is determined by craft traditions, which provides schemas—"the repeated patterns of shot composition, of lighting, of camera movement or editing" (p. 10). Therefore, the artistry of the director is examined together with craft traditions to explain what we find about the films at the level of the films themselves.

These three aspects are explored in this thesis, but that should not indicate that they are mutually exclusive. These three areas permeate each other and work together in examining "What are the principles according to which films are constructed and by means of which they achieve particular effects? How and why have these principles arisen and changed in particular empirical circumstance?" (Bordwell, 1989a, p. 371).

Moreover, Chinese films have their own semantic fields and conceptual schemata, which also lead to different processes and conventions through which Chinese films are constructed. The forms, styles, and spectators of the films are different from Western audiences.

In summary, this analysis focuses on Zhang's films from a perspective informed and guided by historical poetics and describes and explains the process under which these films were made. Furthermore, the principles which guided Zhang to make the films and his selection of specific conventions is also discussed. Finally, the analysis considers how and why Zhang's principles changed throughout his film career.

IV. ANALYSIS

An analysis of Zhang's films is also an analysis of Zhang's career as a filmmaker. What factors led Zhang, who was once a typical Chinese filmmaker, to adapt the filmmaking styles for which he is now famous? During a film career that has spanned more than 20 years, what principles has Zhang maintained or given up on? What determined the topics he chose, the stylistics he employed, and the colors he preferred? What is the significance of his choices?

Historical poetics allows us to reconstruct the process of film production and the ways in which the director makes choices at specific times. Using historical poetics as the methodology, this thesis explores the themes, narrative constructive forms, and stylistic choices of *To Live* (1994), *Keep Cool* (1997), *Not One Less* (1999), and *Hero* (2002). The textual analysis of each of these films reflects the changes and transitions in Zhang's film career.

Historical poetics is not concerned with ideology and critical interpretation. However, it is illogical to assume that films have nothing to do with the culture in which they are made. My analysis therefore is not only a description of the films themselves, but also of the social and cultural aspects which help shape the films' narrative and style. This chapter will also explore the cultural background of the constructive elements of the films.

Because of Zhang's personal success before the early 1990s, every film he has made since has received great media attention in an effort to satisfy audiences' interests and

curiosity about this popular filmmaker. This popularity has also given him the respect of the Chinese film industry. Therefore, Zhang's personal success, as an industry trademark, is also one of the elements that has contributed to the success of his later films. In other words, the great success of Zhang's later films is not only the result of the films themselves, but also because of the personal achievement and reputation of the director of these films—Zhang Yimou.

Thematics

Zhang's early films have three elements in common: Chinese countryside settings, the depiction of traditional Chinese lifestyles, and a focus on the cultural oppression of women in Chinese society. However, these elements gradually disappeared in his later film productions. In fact, Zhang changed his filmmaking topics after the mid-1990s. In an attempt to reflect a variety of lifestyles and an interest in various filmmaking styles, he moved to urban comedies, films designed for mass appeal rather than an art-film market, and a focus on the popular martial arts film.

To Live is a transitional film as it continues Zhang's interest in the social oppression of individuals, but he expands this theme beyond women's oppression. He extends his concern from a single woman's suffering caused by her family's oppression to a whole family's suffering. This focus on the negative aspects of Chinese life once again brought Zhang into conflict with the Chinese government. As a result, *To Live* became Zhang's last film to be banned in China.

To Live

To Live was made in 1994, a special time that saw the spread of commercialization and the invigoration of the Chinese film market. On the whole, the story of *To Live* continues

Zhang's examination of his early thematic focus on Chinese social oppression. The film leads the audience through all the ups and downs of a common family over a timeframe of thirty years. In the film, Zhang focuses on Chinese society's oppressive nature and the effect it has on the everyday people in China.

Oppression was a mainstay theme of Zhang's earlier films. From Jiu Er in *Red Sorghum*, Songlian in *Raise the Red Lantern*, to Qiu Ju in *The Story of Qiu Ju*, Zhang was concerned with the "little" people and their sufferings as protagonists by describing their experiences in their traditional families and society often through conflict with a powerful antagonist. Different from his previous films, however, there is no evil antagonist in *To Live*.

In addition, the original story, according to the novel *To Live* written by Yu Hua, takes place in the countryside, which is a favorite setting for Zhang Yimou who is an expert in depicting life in the countryside. But Zhang changes the setting to that of a small town for his film. This is a conscious choice made to promote his vision of this story. As can be seen at the beginning of the film, the small town is characterized by narrow stone streets lined with traditional architecture. The film opens early in the morning with Fu Gui's overnight gambling binge at the local gambling house coming to a close. Few pedestrians walk on the streets as Fu Gui is being carried by a female servant back to his home, exhausted after a long night of gambling. Fu Gui's father, who lost most of the family's property because of his own addiction to gambling when he was young, scolds Fu Gui for not returning home for the night, but soon forgets what he is saying as his wife interrupts him by washing his face. It's obvious he is too old to control his son, and this leads to the first tragedy in which the family loses their house and suffers from the death of Fu Gui's father.

The next tragedy starts when Fu Gui is forcefully drafted into the military. He has no contact with his family until the end of the war. When Fu Gui finally returns home, he learns of the death of his mother and his daughter's serious illness which caused her to become deaf and mute. In the following years, Fu Gui and his wife, Jia Zhen, work hard to support the family, but they end up losing their son and daughter, You Qing and Feng Xia, one after the other. You Qing dies after the head of the county, Chun Sheng, accidentally drives his car into a structurally unsound brick wall that then falls and crushes You Qing. Chun Sheng was Fu Gui's good friend in his shadow puppet troupe and also served with him in the army. Although You Qing's tragic death was an accident, Jia Zhen cannot forgive Chun Sheng. Chun Sheng later commits suicide out of shame for his actions.

In the end of the film, Fu Gui's grandson is playing with newborn chickens and dreaming about the possible benefits he could gain by raising the chickens. All living members of the family, Fu Gui, Jia Zhen, their son-in-law Er Xi, and their grandson, are having dinner together in the last scene. Jia Zhen is sick and has to eat in bed. Fu Gui hands her a bowl and a pair of chopsticks. Er Xi sets the table and helps with the cooking. Everyone is silent, and the theme music gradually fades in and dominates the scene. After all the ups and downs of life, the four people in the last scene finally look peaceful, which suggests the meaning of *To Live* is that for the everyday people there is only the struggle to stay alive, and the happiness in life is in struggling together.

Keep Cool

Keep Cool is Zhang's first film without Gong Li as his leading actress. It is also a well-known but commercially unsuccessful urban comedy. After shooting all his past films in countryside or small town settings, Zhang made a choice to move to the bustling city of

Beijing, a totally different world from the countryside, to shoot this film. The theme of the films concentrates on various relationships among modern people who live in the big city. People's roles in different relationships as lovers, strangers, and enemies and the development of these relationships are the main focus of *Keep Cool*.

Zhang's decision to move away from traditional Chinese society leads to the disappearance of many of Zhang's common filmmaking conventions. Without traditional norms and morals to conform to, the relationships in modern society are confusing by comparison to the structured social life of traditional rural China. By shaking the camera, employing quick camera movements and swish pans, and by shooting hand-held footage, Zhang expresses a feeling of confusion, impatience, noise, and ridiculousness of urban life. People who come from the countryside to make a living in the cities still catch Zhang's attention in this film, but even these people who live at the bottom of urban society as garbage workers and domestic workers become part of the chaos of urban life in this film. Zhang himself plays a garbage worker hired by Zhao Xiaoshuai to call his girlfriend using an audio amplifier in the shadow of several tall apartment buildings. Because Zhao's girlfriend, An Hong, tries to avoid seeing Zhao, the only chance Zhao could find to express his feelings to An Hong is to hire the garbage person to call her name and say "I miss you" loudly in front of her apartment building. The film also describes the cleverness of the garbage worker, a person who lives at the bottom of urban society. When the residents from the apartment buildings come out to complain about the noise, the garbage worker jumps on his three-wheel garbage cart and flees with 50 yuan of Zhao's money (about 6 U.S. dollars).

Zhang weaves a confusing world in the film. The relationship between metropolitan people, the way relationships begin and end and how the relationships change pose questions

both for the director and for the audience. As a superficial city girl, An Hong has a fickle attitude regarding relationships. Unlike any of the female figures in Zhang's previous films, An Hong does not have serious thoughts or hold to traditional values. She willfully determines her relationships, but she cannot control the people she desires. After romantically dumping Zhao Xiaoshuai, her prior boyfriend, An Hong is interested in a rich guy, Liu Delong. However, An Hong finds that it is hard to avoid being followed by Zhao, and she tells Liu about Zhao. Liu brings several thugs to beat Zhao in the street. As a result of Zhao's desire for revenge, Zhao is arrested by the police after trying to attack Liu in Liu's estate. An Hong feels some attachment for Zhao and offers Zhao some money as form of apology after she learns that Zhao was attacked by Liu Delong and goes to jail. The film does not pass judgment on An's lack of traditional moral principles or her superficial worldview. Instead, An constitutes the confusion of urban life that is void of traditional values expressed by the film.

In the scene in which An Hong goes to see Zhao to give him money, she tells Zhao that she is no longer romantically involved with Liu Delong, which means she would not object to dating Zhao again. Zhao immediately understands her implication and invites her out on a date. An Hong accepts Zhao's invitation and continues their relationship. However, the film does not explore why An Hong no longer dates Liu Delong after he attacks Zhao. There is a scene in which Liu is calling a girl to explain an affair he had with another girl, but the film does not identify which girl is An Hong. The audience can guess that Liu dumps An Hong because Liu, as a rich and shallow businessman, cares little for women's feelings. An Hong's mother expresses her dissatisfaction with An Hong's relationship with Zhao, but obviously her mother's traditional values are not important to An

Hong's choice. The film not only reflects the messed up relationships between young urban people, but also reveals the nice facets of these people. An Hong is not a malicious girl, and Zhao Xiaoshuai is also a kind person according to his attitude toward Zhang Qisheng at the end of the film. But the film never explains why they cannot "keep cool" when dealing with the crises in their personal relationships.

Not One Less

For the first time, Zhang made a film in accordance with the government influenced mainstream Chinese filmmaking. *Not One Less* is a film with an obvious docudrama style that combines the characteristics of both documentary and drama. Its topic, the Project of Hope, is a governmental agency whose purpose is to raise donations for rural children who cannot afford elementary education. Because of huge differences between rural and urban areas, rural children drop out very often. Donations to the Project of Hope are used to build "Hope Schools" for children in the countryside to help the children stay in school.

The 90-minute story describes how Wei Minzhi, a teenage substitute teacher, tries to keep each of her rural students from dropping out of school. The first half of the film tells how Wei Minzhi performs her duties as a substitute teacher. Because there is no other teacher in the school, her duties include teaching all the courses including Chinese Language, Mathematics, Physical Education, and Music, even though she can barely sing. The second half of the film tells how Wei Minzhi must go to the city to find Zhang Huike, one of her students forced to drop out of school and go to the city to make money. Despite her efforts, she is unable to find Zhang. Her salvation comes in the form of the head of a local TV station that is sympathetic to her plight. He invites her to appear on a TV show that reports on the hardships of those living in the countryside so she can tell viewers about her missing student.

The film begins with a beautiful scene of the countryside just before sunset. The light looks soft and warm as Wei Minzhi follows the village chief to the Shui Quan village to start her first job as a substitute teacher. It is obvious that they walk from Wei village, where Wei Minzhi is from, to Shui Quan village, and one can see that Wei's luggage is simply a rolled-up quilt. A donkey walks in the opposite direction in the scene, adding to the rural flavor of the film.

Mr. Gao, the school teacher, must leave for a month to visit his sick mother. He is not satisfied with Wei Minzhi as his substitute after he finds out that she just graduated from primary school and is only thirteen years old. Mr. Gao asks the village chief to find someone with at least a junior high school education. The village chief answers impatiently that there is no one with that qualification to be found in the area.

Wei does not know how to conduct class until the village chief tells her how to do so. The first thing she must do is to organize the children in lines and raise the national flag on the earthen playground. Everything appears to go well until Wei finds out that talent scouts from the city sport's school have selected one of her students to leave for the city and become an athlete. She refuses to let the student go because she has promised Mr. Gao that all of his students will be in school when he returns (not one less). The student finally goes to the city with the scouts, but Wei tries to keep her promise with the rest of the students. When she finds out that another student, Zhang Huike, has also dropped out and gone to the city to look for work, she decides to venture to the city and bring him back.

The story ends happily. After many difficult experiences in the city and putting forth a lot of effort, Wei finally finds Zhang Huike with the help of the local TV station. The film's most powerful scene is when the anchorwoman for one of the TV station's most popular

programs interviews Wei Minzhi. The anchorwoman is dressed in a nice pink shirt with a dainty necklace. She wears appropriate makeup, and her hair is nicely styled. Wei Minzhi sits beside her in a stark rural contrast, daring not to say anything when being asked the first question: “Can you tell us the situation at your school?” Wei looks innocent in front of the camera because she does not know what to say when confronted by this elegant and sophisticated woman. The question seems difficult to her and she looks around in vain trying to find an answer. The anchorwoman continues to speak to the audience: “Miss Wei is a little nervous.” Then she announces some of Zhang Huike's personal information and explains Wei’s purpose in coming to the city to find her lost student. She asks Wei: “What do you think are the reasons for students like Zhang Huike to drop out of school?” Wei thinks for a moment, and finally answers in a low voice: “Because they are poor.” Finally, the attractive anchorwoman asks, “Miss Wei, why must you find Zhang Huike?” Wei does not know how to answer. The anchorwoman continues to comfort her by saying, “We know how you are feeling, can you say something to our audience? Maybe Zhang Huike is out there watching you, look at the camera and talk to him.” Wei finally breaks down and talks as though she is talking to Zhang Huike, “Zhang Huike, where did you go? I’ve looked everywhere. I am so worried. Why don’t you come back?” Wei burst into tears as she talks, and the scene changes to Zhang Huike, who is wearing shabby clothes and wandering in the street begging for food.

Because of the station’s report on the incident, many donations are collected for students like Zhang Huike. With the help of the TV station, Wei finally finds Zhang and brings him home. At the end of the film, when Wei Minzhi and Zhang Huike come back to the village accompanied by the TV station reporter, the whole village comes out to welcome them. From the perspective of promoting the Project of Hope, the film successfully reaches

its aim by reflecting the poor status and potential crisis faced by the rural primary education system. With “Zhang Yimou” as the trademark “brand,” *Not One Less* became well known in the year it was released. But it soon disappeared in obscurity when compared with Zhang’s later productions such as *Hero*.

Hero

Hero was Zhang’s first martial arts film. As a pure commercial action movie, it has achieved unprecedented box office success in both China and America. The popularity of this genre is undisputed in Asia and also has a large fan base in the United States, but Zhang is able to transcend the normal audiences for martial arts films and win over audience members who do not typically watch martial arts films. Zhang deals with a heroic theme in this film by focusing on a mythical hero. Zhang’s hero is someone who can protect those who can’t protect themselves. This hero is common in martial arts films. *Hero* presents a group of heroic characters: an assassin, an emperor, and three warriors with the greatest kung fu skills in the world. These are the characters of this epic.

The three warriors support the heroic assassin who has the ability to kill anyone within ten paces of his sword. All of these heroes have a passionate hatred for the emperor because he attacked and destroyed their countries and their people with his mighty army. It becomes their quest to get revenge by killing the emperor. However, the assassin does not complete his quest because he abandons his feelings of hate after coming to realize the emperor’s grand scheme and realizing that the emperor’s plans will eventually benefit all the countries he conquers. The assassin, known as Nameless, dies at the end of the story so that a peaceful and united China is assured under the powerful emperor. Elsewhere, the fate of

two of the warriors is sealed as Flying Snow has a duel with Broken Sword after she learns that Nameless abandoned his mission.

The deaths of the three warriors clear the obstacles faced by the emperor to unite the country. Sky never touches her weapons again after the assassin fails. Flying Snow and Broken Sword die together, as they promised. Nameless is pierced by thousands of arrows and dies thus allowing the emperor to realize his dream of a united China.

Constructive Principles

Aesthetic norms, cultural conventions, and narrative paradigms comprise Zhang's constructive principles. This is expressed in a consistent cinematic style through the use of certain stylistic conventions in Zhang's films. What attracts many people to Zhang's films are not the unanswered questions as in a thriller or detective film, but the process whereby the films visualize and clarify the story. Zhang's early films tell their stories in chronological order, without dramatic shifts in space or time. Zhang's films share certain aesthetic norms, narrative paradigms, and cultural conventions, but all these elements are flexible and Zhang has many options in his repertoire.

To Live

To Live is a story that is hard to forget with its twisting plot and touching narrative style. From a wealthy master to a poor shadow-puppet play singer, Fu Gui (played by Ge You), the audience is taken on his journey to experience his miserable life. Although there is the ecstasy of reunion and the happiness of living with his family, Fu Gui loses his beloved son and daughter and experiences a life of poverty. There are thousands of ways to tell such a story, but Zhang selected specific cultural conventions, aesthetic norms, and narrative means to construct this film.

Shadow Play

All of Zhang's early films present traditional cultural Chinese elements such as Chinese opera, traditional art crafts, and privately owned workshops to portray a traditional Chinese lifestyle. *To Live* is no exception. Zhang chooses the shadow-puppet play to highlight the traditional cultural influence in the film. Also known as a leather-silhouette show, shadow play is an old, yet popular art that is still cherished by many Chinese people. All that is needed for a shadow play is a light, a screen and several puppets, which are usually made of ox leather. The puppet player sings while controlling the puppet and making it perform a variety of actions such as walking, dancing, or fighting. The audiences in front of the screen can see the shadows of the puppets on the screen as a result of the light coming from behind and casting the shadows of the puppets on the screen.

As a traditional art form, shadow play is becoming less popular in China. Even though it has a history of more than a thousand years, the shadow play is below most young Chinese people's cultural radar. The puppet generals, emperor, soldiers, and beauties are not as attractive to the young people as are modern popular culture icons. *To Live* reinvigorates the shadow play and brings it to the audience's attention. Shadow play is used several times in the film. First, while Fu Gui is still rich, he controls the puppets just for fun in the gambling house. He turns to shadow puppetry a second time because he is poor and must do this to raise money for his family. He carries the puppets from village to village and asks for money after performing the show. The third and final time he performs with the puppets is to save them from being destroyed in the Great Leap Forward, which is a movement advocated by the government to emulate the western developed countries in both agriculture and steel production. Because iron needs to be melted to produce steel, the puppets are in danger of

being destroyed because they are connected with iron lines and there are iron nails on the puppets' case. To protect the puppets from being destroyed and prove the value of them, Fu Gui performs the puppets again to encourage the workers' spirits on the steel production work site.

At the same time, Fu Gui sings a traditional form of Qin Opera when controlling the puppets behind the screen. Originating from Shanxi Province, which is located in the geographical center of China, and has thousands of years of cultural development, the tune of Qin Opera lasts very long and sounds desolate, yet it is full of historical implications and traditional connotations. Zhang's use of these traditional art forms shows his strong motivation to define and glorify the values represented by these traditional arts and their permanence in Chinese culture.

Aesthetic Norms

Zhang has established his individual aesthetic norms in the processes of his early filmmaking before he shot *To Live*. According to Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson (1985), an aesthetic norm is not a codified and inflexible rule, instead, "the aesthetic norms of a period are often felt by artists as constraints upon their freedom" (p. 4). Therefore, "the only goal of the aesthetic norm is to permit art works to come into existence" and it is not a negative act to break an aesthetic norm (p. 4).

While trying to keep to traditional elements, Zhang adds a few modern elements in *To Live*. Zhang deviates from the original novel and moves the location of the story from the countryside to a small town. Exact years are identified in *To Live* as the times in which the story takes place, and it matches audience's impressions of the specific historical periods from the 1940s to the 1970s.

Usually, for Zhang his lead female is stubborn, tolerant, and intelligent. Gong Li stands for the principles of Zhang's aesthetic norms in feminine beauty: being loyal, arduous, and tenacious in the face of a hard life. When Fu Gui is away, his wife Jia Zhen must take care of his father and her two children. She maintains a sense of responsibility to her family and the loyalty to her husband to the end of the story. Jia Zhen is the typical traditional-style woman that Zhang Yimou admires in his early films. On the whole, *To Live* is a film that reflects Zhang's early aesthetic norms based on his vision of traditional Chinese art and the stoic image (perhaps even stereotype) of the Chinese female head of the family.

Narrative Form

There are two basic aspects to telling a story in film: sequential (chronological) and spatial. *To Live* presents a typical sequential narrative paradigm. Zhang's system of cinematic time shows the entire story while following the ups and downs in Fu Gui's life. The specific sequential narrative follows every single change that occurs without any significant gaps in time or unanswered questions about the events depicted in the film. In other words, *To Live* is not presented in a cause-effect structure which first arouses the audience's curiosity at the beginning of the film and finally leads the audience to the answer or meaning in a step by step fashion as a mystery film. Instead, *To Live* upholds the narrative style of Zhang's early films: temporal sequential narration (chronological reasoning).

To Live is made up of four main sections, each beginning with a title specifying the period of time for that section of the film. It begins with the 1940s and ends in the 1970s. Immediate changes follow the direct and specific events in the film. Fu Gui's addiction to gambling leads to the loss of all his possessions, the death of his father, and his separation

from his wife. His situation only becomes worse, but the determination to make a living brings his wife back to him. However, their lives are drastically changed again when the civil war begins and Fu Gui is drafted into the army to fight for the nationalist KMT. After surviving the war, Fu Gui comes home and reunites with his wife and children only to discover that his daughter is deaf and mute. The family then experiences the death of their son and daughter in the following twenty year period, but they remain hopeful for the future as a result of their love for their son-in-law and grandson.

Fu Gui's life becomes this film, and this film is Fu Gui's life. Every single event in the film has a precursor, and every single moment is coherently connected to the others. The strict sequential arrangement does not allow for ambiguity, but the film remains interesting to the audience from the beginning to the end with its impressive display of events and twisting plot points.

Keep Cool

Keep Cool is a contemporary urban comedy, but it does not hinder Zhang's injection of traditional culture into the film. The film is different from all his previous films in its modern city setting and post-modern visualizations. Zhang's aesthetic norms and narrative paradigms change accordingly in the film.

Traditional Folk Music

In the film, Guan Xuezheng used to be a famous performer of Beijing Qinshu, which is an almost forgotten art form of folk music in the Beijing area. Beijing Qinshu uses Beijing dialect when singing in the Beijing flavored tune. The singer also beats a drum to stress the rhythm while singing the lines. The lines use oral language and slang and sound secular. The basic meaning of the line sung by Guan goes: "I grew up in Beijing as a local person, never

fought with people as a nice person. I look very cute as top one or top two. Why cannot I find a wife for myself? Isn't it bad luck that I dated six girls and none of them stayed with me?

Why does not anybody love me? What is wrong with me?"

Although *Keep Cool* is an urban comedy which aims at reflecting relationship among young urban people, the traditional art form reveals old people's views of these relationships as spectators. Compared with popular tunes like rock music, which is also used in *Keep Cool*, the traditional Beijing Qinshu shows Beijing as a city with a long history and a deep-rooted traditional cultural identity. The clash of the new and old tunes is similar to the clash of the old and new styles of relationships in the film. This is the first time that Zhang chooses to clash old and new cultural forms in one of his films.

Narrative Construction

Keep Cool is constructed with a postmodern camera style that has sometimes been called "MTV style" by film critics. The popular 1980s television show *Miami Vice* is a good example of an early use of the term to describe visually narrative art forms such as television and film. In *Keep Cool* the lens of the camera swings about dramatically to express a feeling of annoyance and impatience within the city. In the beginning of the film, the young bookseller Zhao Xiaoshuai chases after his girlfriend, who has already broken up with him and started a new relationship with a rich businessman. The audience is not told why the girl has turned him away, but they understand the situation through the development of the story. Zhao's old girlfriend, An Hong, is a superficial city girl who does not possess the characteristics of Zhang's earlier filmic heroines.

Zhao is attacked on the street by Liu Delong, his old girlfriend's new boyfriend, and becomes angry and decides to cut off Liu's hand. Zhao's criminal motivation is no longer

related to his relationship with his old girlfriend. He makes it clear that it has nothing to do with his girlfriend; instead it is his revenge for Liu's humiliation of him on the public street.

The sequential narrative in *Keep Cool* is congruent with Zhang's earlier style, but it is no longer as attractive to the audience who disliked the film. The middle 46-minutes of the 90-minute film are used to portray the two leading characters' argument about the morality of revenge in a shabby restaurant. It takes ten minutes for Zhang Qiusheng to find out that Zhao has the desire for revenge. It takes another ten minutes for Zhang Qiusheng to try to persuade Zhao to give up on his revenge but eventually fails. Then Liu Delong appears, causing Zhao to chase Liu in an attempt to catch Liu and achieve his revenge. Meanwhile Zhang Qiusheng is trapped in the restaurant's kitchen and humiliated by the cook. Zhang Quisheng becomes angry and is jailed. The scene is long and tedious in its chronology and works against the intended comedy. The result is a weak sequence that ruins any comedic effect for the audience. Although Zhang sticks to his sequential narrative convention that worked so well in his historical films, it does not fit this type of urban comedy and fails to entertain the audience.

Not One Less

Not One Less is another sequential narrative film. The title becomes clear at the beginning of the film: not one student will the teacher allow to leave class. To keep everybody at school and earn the 60 yuan payment promised to her by the village chief if she succeeds, Wei Minzhi has to rise above her lowly status and youth and go beyond her ability to save a boy. The film's purpose is to draw the audience's attention to the poverty and difficulties faced by those seeking education in the countryside, the living status of these

children and their parents, and the lack of teachers, facilities, and school supplies such as chalk.

Cultural Conventions

Not One Less is a low-investment film without a showcasing of traditional or modern arts. There is no shadow play, opera singing, or any traditional art to support or underscore the story. However, the film uses its rural versus urban settings to highlight the traditional lifestyle of the countryside and to juxtapose it with big city life. The difference between the city and the countryside, which is a prominent problem in today's China, is reflected through Zhang's camera. The film is aimed at arousing sympathy and concerns for the children who cannot afford schooling; therefore, Zhang describes the story from a spectator's perspective.

The road to the city signals a distinct change in scenery, one from a countryside setting to an urban area. The camera follows Wei Minzhi on her quest to the city and captures her view of the city's pulse which is symbolized by loud car engines, congested streets filled with people, and the heavily polluted air. Everything is so different from the small village where Wei comes from. The film displays this stark contrast using the language of the camera through sights and sounds.

This is only a small city, but it is already a different world to Wei Minzhi. She has nowhere to stay and no money to buy food, but she does not show timidity in her venture. With all her efforts, it still seems impossible to find Zhang Huike. She finally goes to the TV station in hope of putting an advertisement there. But the snobbish gatekeeper will not let her in because she has no ID. She waits outside for two days until the station head hears about her and comes out to see her. Wei's persistence touches the station head and moves the audience.

Aesthetic Norms

Not One Less is concerned with the status and condition of education in the rural Chinese countryside. The characters in the film are recognizable as everyday people in China. Zhang strives to make the film see and feel realistic. The school is a real primary school in rural Hebei Province. The students are all countryside children, not actors. *Not One Less* keeps the original idealism of Zhang's preferences in filmmaking. Zhang picks up details such as the carefully counted chalk and a school table with one short leg to reflect an accurate account of real life in the countryside.

Although the leading actress in the film is not a beautiful young actress, she does however display the stubborn characteristics and tough spirit that are typical of the lead females in Zhang's films. She does not give up when her quest is hard. When the boss of the brick factory refuses to pay the students for their labor, Wei argues with him with a firm attitude. "You have to pay us," she insists. "I won't give you a penny! Pay me!" says the brick factory boss because the students moved the bricks without his permission. "We don't work for free!" Wei cried. "What for? You broke most of them, why do you need money?" the boss replies. As one can see, the boss has a tough attitude as well. However, when he finally learns that Wei needs the money to go to the city to find her lost student, he gives in and pays her the wages.

Narrative Construction

The narrative of this story seeks to represent events in a temporally continuous fashion from a spectator's perspective. A docudrama is half documentary and half drama; therefore the camera attempts to be the "recorder" of the story rather than the mechanism of dramatic action (although there is an argument in the film community to the actual veracity

of documentary filmmaking). As “the spectator” the camera follows Wei Minzhi’s activities after she becomes the substitute teacher in the shabby village school. As half-documentary, the film uses actors from different job positions. The village chief is, in reality, a real village chief and Wei Minzhi is a real countryside girl. Even the head of the TV station is portraying his real position and lifestyle. This use of non-professional actors can be traced back to Eisenstein’s use of workers in his politically charged silent films of the Russian Revolution and the *Cinema Vérité* style of the Maysles brothers in *Salesman*. Regardless the idea is to disconnect film from the wholly fictionally dramatic style and to attempt to “reconnect” it to reality with documentary conventions.

The end of the story is not a surprise to the audience. But the narrative of Wei’s experience in the city is full of sarcasm and ironies detailing the indifference of the relationships among people in the city. The snobby gate-keeper would not let Wei in the TV station because she has neither an ID nor the amount of money needed to buy advertising space on TV. Every scene is consciously contrived to seem “true to life” and, therefore, (hopefully) increase the impact this film has on the audience. It could be argued that Zhang’s goal here is as much a type of political awareness as Eisenstein overtly undertook and the Maysles more implicitly attempted.

Hero

Hero is different from all of Zhang’s previous films because of its martial arts theme. With such a different theme for Zhang, there are also changes in film’s constructive principles. Zhang’s involvement in this samurai dream and the possibility of huge commercial profits motivated his desire to make the film and strengthened his devotion to the production of *Hero*. The film possesses exquisite visuals and a noble, patriotic spirit. From

cultural conventions to narrative paradigm, Zhang makes new choices that are dramatically evident in this film.

Cultural Conventions

The use of weapons has a long history in China. There are various types of weapons, from swords and knives, to spears and staffs. There are also different materials used in making weapons, such as iron, copper, silver, and even gold. The art of weaponry is a fundamental aspect of traditional Chinese culture. A convention in martial arts films is that the expertise a master displays in using a specific kind of weapon is in accordance with his or her identity. Like all the other martial arts films, *Hero* stresses the persona that weapons create for their wielders and warriors.

Weapons represent the dignity of their masters in most Chinese swordplay stories. At the beginning of the story, the seven masters of Qin ask Sky to identify himself by showing his spear. Sky's spear being broken at the end of his fight with Nameless means that Sky loses this fight. The particular weapon that a master is skilled at carries the same spirit as its master and is not to be humiliated. By the same token, Flying Snow's and Broken Sword's weapons cannot be separated because of the couple's promise to be together forever. As Moon says when she gives Broken Sword's weapon to Nameless while he is taking Flying Snow's sword, "They will never part, nor will their swords." The highlighting of traditional weapons shows a return to a focus on traditional Chinese cultural forms in this film.

Aesthetic norms

The historical setting of the story is the Qin Dynasty, more than two thousand years ago. However, there is no accuracy in any details of the historical period because martial arts films are designed for entertainment and fantasy rather than historical accuracy. The

temporal and spatial distances leave a blank slate for the filmmakers to imagine and conjure up both possible and impossible (even implausible) actions. Also, there are some modern concepts in the aesthetic qualities. The thousands of pieces of hanging and flowing curtains in the “green” section of the film may sound like a ridiculous and highly inaccurate design for a palace if it is examined from a historically accurate perspective. The weapons, expressions of love, and action scenes in the film are not designed to make a case for historical accuracy. They all serve one purpose in the film: stylistic beauty and inspiring choreography.

For Zhang, a great challenge in making *Hero* was to shoot action scenes because he was a novice in this area. He attempts to conquer this form of choreography with a combination of his old visualizations and the already mature and codified mode of action in martial arts films. The actions turn out to be congruent with the audiences’ expectations of martial arts and creative in establishing a new visual mode in the action scenes which won Zhang wide acclaim from both critics and audiences.

Maggie Cheung, who plays Flying Snow in the film, does not know much about martial arts. However, she is famous for her beauty and excellent acting skills and is one of the most well known actresses in Asia. In a martial arts film like *Hero*, she fulfills the action scenes with the help of camera tricks and great visual effects, which enrich and extend the physical boundaries of kung fu.

If Maggie Cheung’s performance represents Zhang’s ideas about kung fu from the imaginative perspective, Jet Lee (Nameless) and Donnie Yen (Sky), who are experts at Chinese kung fu, help Zhang to attract the devoted martial arts’ audience. Jet Lee has been famous as a martial artist for 20 years in China. He was educated in a kung fu school before

he became an action star. Most of the action choreography of Jet Lee and Donnie Yen is real and based on their real kung fu skills. For audience members expecting real martial arts with power and speed, *Hero* satisfies them with Jet Lee and Donnie Yen's performances.

Narrative Construction

The narrative in *Hero* follows a conversation between the assassin and the emperor. They are the narrators of three different versions of the same events. Zhang uses different colors as themes to identify the different versions of the story. Red is used to implicate envy and hatred, blue is used to identify peace and love, green refers to forgiveness and broad mindedness, and white represents purity and loyalty. It is not a new structure in telling a story, but it is an obvious innovation for Zhang as he has not use this convention in the past. It is also the first time he completely abandons sequential narration for a *Rashômon* (1950) type narrative.

With the popularity of samurai stories in China since the 1980s, there came a great market for martial arts TV series and films. Like fairy tales for adults, samurai stories always end with victory for the just. Although there is already a narrative convention for telling samurai stories, Zhang inserts new elements to enrich the content of *Hero*. He designs action scenes in unique ways—fighting in the mind (or imagination), as in the small chess club scene during a rainstorm where Sky and Nameless fight an imagined battle without getting close to each other. Sky fails when he sees Nameless cut his silver spear.

Zhang also puts patriotic themes above personal feelings in making his first martial arts film. As the daughter of a general in Kingdom Zhao, Flying Snow wants to kill the Qin emperor because her father died in the battle between the Zhao Kingdom and the Qin Kingdom. Accompanied by her companion and lover, Broken Sword, she finally breaks into

the Qin Palace. She asks Broken Sword to kill the emperor inside the center palace, as she defends him against the soldiers outside. However, during the fight with the emperor, Broken Sword realizes that they have to leave the Qin emperor alive, because only the emperor can unite the whole country and end the continuous fighting between separate kingdoms. He loves Flying Snow very much, but after he realizes that the Qin emperor is the one person to unite the whole country, patriotism overrides love.

Nameless prepared to kill the Qin emperor for ten years. After Broken Sword reminds him of the meaning of a united country, and he realizes how much the Qin emperor means to China, he gives up his assassination plot and pays for it with his life. Both Nameless and Broken Sword have chances to kill the emperor, and they both give up at the last moment for the sake of patriotism. Their personal hatred toward the emperor is replaced by the hope of a united and peaceful country.

Stylistics

Among thematics, constructive principles, and stylistics, the third element of historical poetics is most closely related to a director's personality because the director is in full control. Stylistics also encourages specific expectations of the audience toward films made by specific directors. A director determines the whole style of the film through his/her specific use of color, selection of costumes, appreciation of music, and requirements of acting, lighting, and the other stylistic elements of the filmmaking process.

To Live

The principles of Zhang's style emphasize every detail in every scene, and these details are the constituent elements of the specific atmosphere Zhang is trying to construct. The basic and most persistent feature of Zhang's early films combines the sumptuous use of

color, exquisite details full of implications, delicate and intuitive feelings, with intense struggle in mind. *To Live* is such a film with Zhang's personal style on one hand and newly developed elements on the other hand.

Mise-en-scene (setting, lighting, costuming & acting)

The costumes in *To Live* are historically accurate. Thirty years' time change is reflected by the different costumes which display certain styles of specific time periods. As the son and daughter-in-law of the wealthy landlord, Fu Gui and Jia Zhen are wearing luxurious, silk clothes in the traditional style. Fu Gui dresses in a long white robe with a standing collar and a dark green top embroidered with a Chinese decorative pattern. In contrast, the servant Chun Sheng wears a solid gray cotton shirt and sometimes has a white towel hanging on his arm while standing by the gambling table. The boss of the gambling house is wearing a typical old-style business dress: a black, silk, sleeveless top with standing collars and auspicious patterns over a dark colored long robe and a silk shell hat. At home, Jia Zhen wears a bright cheongsam top embroidered with green and red flowers and goldish-brown loose silk pants while waiting in front of a mirror with an ornate wooden frame for Fu Gui to come home. Their daughter is accompanied by the maid and wears a traditional red suit. The audience can tell from the clothes on each member of the family that they are living a good life.

With the deterioration of the family's situation over time, Fu Gui and Jia Zhen wear creased cotton clothes with plain colors and style. The change from silk to cotton symbolizes a drop in their social status. In addition, most people wear cotton clothes to signify their working-class (or worker) identity after 1949. Cotton clothes become a necessity if one is to be accepted in a communist society. For example, the town chief, Mr. Niu, is always wearing

an old, drab cotton jacket and worn shirts. His loose fitting slacks, a decrepit hat and cloth shoes indicate that Mr. Niu is a hard laborer as well as a town chief. As the key element in presentation, the costumes not only reflect ups and downs of Fu Gui's life, but also represent the flow of the time period from past to present.

Ge You, the leading actor in *To Live*, was honored with the Best Actor Award at the Cannes Film Festival in 1994. His acting is natural, and considered realistic by critics, and are in keeping with his character in the film. His presentation of a humble and obedient civilian is so impressive that the audience cannot help but be stunned by his vivid portrayal of Fu Gui in *To Live*. At the same time, Gong Li plays Jia Zhen, a traditional, hard working woman. It is as if such traditional characteristics and hard working spirit are in Gong Li's blood as her acting always seems very natural. As the daughter-in-law of the rich landlord, Gong Li plays a role like her role in *Raise the Red Lantern* as Song Lian, who enjoys a comfortable life but an empty spirit. After the family is broken-up, Gong Li plays a character that has to work hard all day to support her family. In this role, she has a plain hairstyle and a drab costume.

The setting of *To Live* reflects the reality perceived by most audiences regarding the living status in the different time periods. Its historically accurate style is aided by props that are highly characteristic of specific time periods. In the scene when Fu Gui takes You Qing to school on a bicycle, Zhang chooses an old style bicycle that immediately reminds the audience of the time period in the 1950s and the 1960s when all Chinese people rode bicycles of the same style. The presents Wan Erxi sends to Fu Gui and Jia Zhen look like actual products from the 1960s, even the shape and figure of the wine bottle is in the 1960s' style. From the dumplings for You Qing to the aluminum food container used by Jia Zhen,

from all the clothes worn by the actors to the old-style transportation, every detail in the film is as close to historical accuracy as possible. Zhang is obviously familiar with the products from the 1960s, and is meticulous about the details of these products when using them in his film.

The lighting in *To Live* is critical because it is also used to differentiate the various time periods. From a callous and lavish young man to a mature and humble father and husband, from being surrounded by bright lanterns and luxurious candles in the gambling house to the single smoky kerosene light behind the shadow play screen, Fu Gui's life is accompanied by different lighting styles.

Sound & Music

To Live starts with a sad rhythm played the Er Hu, this amazing traditional instrument plays a sad tune. Zhao Jiping, a well-known composer who has been famous since the early 1980s, composed the sad and tragic music for the film. Zhao's music was used in the 1980's TV series *Hong Lou Meng*, and was well appreciated by the Chinese. The melancholy rhythm is repeated in the film every time there is a change in Fu Gui's life and therefore sets a sad tone for the entire film.

Zhang inserts traditional opera in the movie when Fu Gui acts with the shadow puppets. The traditional drama *Old Man Heaven* is presented in the style of Qin Opera. Qin Opera is a local traditional opera in Shanxi Province, where Zhang's hometown is located. Both the Er Hu and Qin Opera are characterized by sadness and desolation in tones and tunes, and thus serve as a melancholy backdrop for the spectators.

Color

In the beginning of the film, Zhang uses a myriad of splendid colors to emphasize the luxurious life of Fu Gui. When Fu Gui comes back home from the gambling house, his room is elegantly decorated, his bed is covered in silk quilts of wondrous colors, and his wife and daughter are also dressed in rich colors. However, as time goes by, most of the scenes turn gray and colorless. When there are few colors used in the scenes, the film displays a simple life style and a poor quality of living. Rich colors and plain colors constitute the contrasting implications of the two life styles. At the beginning of the film, Jia Zhen is wearing red and green. When she reappears after Fu Gui loses all his property, she wears a simple top decorated with blue and pink squares, which is obviously made of cotton. When Fu Gui comes back from the war, everybody is wearing the gray and white of the poor.

Keep Cool

As an urban comedy, *Keep Cool* does not have exquisite use of color or lavish historical costuming. The two leading actors both wear very plain and simple clothes. The leading actress wears glowing and flashy clothes because she plays a modern city girl. For example, she wears a short gold skirt and sleeveless top while riding a bicycle on street. She also wears a pair of sunglasses and has short-cut hair. Her chic style is also represented by the make-up she wears. Her lips and eyes are heavily lined with cosmetics.

The acting in the film is supposed to be comedic. As an attempt to enhance the comedy, the character of Zhao Xiaoshuai is written with a speech impediment so that he stutters. The player Jiang Wen is famous for his talent in acting, but his stutter is not played to great comic effect. At the same time, Qu Ying (the actress playing An Hong) is blamed for not acting well in the film. Zhang Yimou plays a garbage man in the film, which is purely a gag, designed to make people laugh. Famous comedy stars in China, Zhao Benshang and Du

Xudong, also play two workers who are hired by Zhao Xiaoshuai to call An Hong because she refuses to see Zhao. Their acting is the best comedic acting in the film and compared with the leading actors, these supporting actors get more laughter from the audience.

The peasant worker played by Zhao Benshan keeps calling An Hong and reading a poorly written poem to her over a loudspeaker while Zhao Xiaoshuai is with An Hong in her room. Zhao Xiaoshuai is so embarrassed that he has to come down to stop the worker. However, the worker is not the one that was hired by Zhao Xiaoshuai, who instead gave the job to a new worker. Because this worker does not know Zhao Xiaoshuai, he refuses to stop singing even though Zhao Xiaoshuai asks him to cease. Zhao Xiaoshuai's best chance to stay with An Hong is thus destroyed.

Details of the setting in *Keep Cool* reflect a confused, noisy, and chaotic impression of the Beijing metropolis, where the story takes place. The yellow taxi was banned in 1999, but in the early 1990s, thousands of yellow taxis served as important methods of transportation for Beijing citizens. They used to be a special sight in Beijing akin to double-decker buses in London, but because of the pollution they emitted and the negative effect they were having on the city's environment, Beijing revoked permission for yellow taxis to operate in the crowded city.

Keep Cool marks Zhang's first use of rock music in a film. The film is also characterized by the ambient noises of the city. The whole film is filled with all kinds of noises: cars rumbling on the streets, people chatting in restaurants, and loud popular music in public locations. A band called 1989 plays the rock music and Guan Xuezheng plays the traditional Qinshu. The two dramatically different music styles in the same film also contribute to the comic effect of the film through a contrasting of high and low culture.

Zhang did not concentrate on using specific colors in this film. In direct contrast with his sumptuous use of color in his previous films with Gong Li, he gives up red and all warm colors in *Keep Cool*. The exterior scenes are pale in color in accordance with the noisy and messy metropolis. At the same time, the interior scenes are presented with changing of unstable colors such as red and orange in the restaurant which add to the sense of visual noise.

Not One Less

Zhang uses historically accurate stylistics in *Not One Less*, the docudrama for the Project of Hope, as everything is historically accurate in the film. Neither Wei Minzhi nor the students change their clothes throughout the whole film. The setting is in a real country school-Shuiquan Primary School in Hebei Province. The students in the film are the real students in this school. The actors are not professional, but they are very touching because they are playing themselves (in a sense). Basically, they wear their own clothes and play themselves in their own school.

The purpose of the film is to show the audience the sad reality of their living status as children in the countryside. The documentary style requires that everybody shows their “true selves.” The theme music is performed by the Asia Aiyue Orchestra, in the same desolate tone as used in *To Live*. There is no special presentation of color in the film. The depiction of the countryside is warm and peaceful at the beginning of the film, but soon that tranquility is substituted by the glaring poverty of the village and the village school. The lavish use of color in his previous films is abandoned for a stark “reality” devoid of sensuous colors that connote wealth and pleasure.

The muted and drab costumes that do not change during the course of the film, rural and poor settings, use of non-professional actors are used to communicate a sense of realism to the audience. The filmmaker adopts the conventions of a documentary filmmaker in order to help to audience see the importance of the poor social conditions that the students must endure. In this sense, the filmmaker is able to communicate realism and a documentary feel with the film—thus aiding the audience in understanding the plight of the students.

Hero

A martial arts film by Zhang Yimou was surprising news to the Chinese film audience. This director has been mostly known for a concern with the hardships of reality instead of flights of imagination and patriotic nationalistic idealism common to martial arts films. However, Zhang's determination to make a martial arts film overruled his critics and doubters. He placed a huge investment in this commercial film, and contributed to the screenplay. All his risks now seem justified by looking at the movie's total box office gross from both domestic and oversea film markets. *Hero* is a lavish historical martial arts film that broke cultural and taste barriers as well as box office records in the U.S. and China.

Mise-en-scene

To make this film impressive upon the first viewing, Zhang invited Jet Li, Maggie Cheung, and Tony Leung, all of whom are international superstars, to play the leading roles. He selected the most amazing natural settings scattered in the northwest, southwest, and east areas of China to shoot the film. Zhang also combined violins, operatic solos, choral arrangements, drums, and ancient music including bells and drums to increase and accentuate every emotion he wished to express in the film.

Emi Wada, a Japanese costume designer, designed the extravagant and beautiful costumes. Her sensitive taste with regards to the style of the clothes turned out to be very successful. In attempting to emphasize an aesthetic congruency in the film, the red, blue, green, and white costumes help Zhang to combine the look of the costumes with the film's other visuals to form a coherent as well as lavish style.

The greatest challenge to the actors in this film are the action scenes, which are the soul of martial arts. In a martial arts film, communication is primarily conducted through action. Jet Li and Donnie Yen are professional action stars. But the other actors such as Maggie Cheung, Zhang Ziyi, and Tony Leung are not formally trained martial artist actors; therefore the action scenes in the film were a challenge for them. The action director for *Hero*, Cheng Xiaodong, helped in making the action choreography both believable and beautiful to behold. In addition, Cheng made the actors untrained in martial arts look every bit as skilled as the professional martial artists in the film. Zhang admitted that he did not have experience in shooting action scenes before doing *Hero*, and that it was a totally new area for him. He had to learn what to avoid when shooting action scenes, and at the same time, he wanted to adhere to his own vision and style, which is to maintain his artistic conception and impressive visualization.

The film was shot in various scenic locations in China. From the lake in Sichuan Province, to the forest in Inner-Mongolia province, to the desert near Dunhuang, a city located in west Gansu Province, the scenes in the film are epic in scope and visually grand. Within these majestic settings, the film is a festival of geography for the eyes. Zhang seldom used long shots or displayed large landscapes in his early films, but *Hero* showcases quite a few splendid landscapes. This move to the grandeur of the long shot and the extreme long

shot is a noticeable change in Zhang's filmmaking style. In a way it suggests a move from the small and personal aspects of his early films to the grandeur of *Hero* and his next film, *Flying Daggers* (also a martial arts movie of epic proportions).

Lighting, sound, and music are extremely complex in *Hero*. However, they work together in keeping a coherent style in the film. Tan Dun, the winner of the Academy Award for the Best Music in 2001 for *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, is the music supervisor for *Hero*. The violin solos are performed by famed violinist Itzhak Perlman and the percussions come courtesy of Kodo from Japan. There are also traditional bells and drums. On the whole, the music style in *Hero* is similar to that in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. The music and color work together in the film to construct four different versions of the same story.

Color

The colors in *Hero* are full of implications. According to Christopher Doyle, the director of cinematography of *Hero*, Zhang has an intuition toward color and is very sensitive at grasping the implications of different colors (*Yuan Qi*, in the documentary that accompanies the DVD release of *Hero*). Red, blue, green, and white each become a theme for a different version of the same story and Zhang finally concludes the narration of the entire story with the white theme. The use of beautiful colors combined with beautiful scenery and melodious music contributes to the stylistic narration of the story. Zhang's own style of using sumptuous use of color once again resumes in *Hero*. With stunning visual effects, *Hero* carries Zhang's highest expectations since he started his film career.

The film starts with the fight between Sky and Nameless in the chess club. The fight is a story told by Nameless about how he wins Sky's silver spear, which symbolizes his victory in the fight. The scene is drenched in a hard rain. The colors are dark, consisting

almost entirely of black, dark brown, and gray. Combined with water falling from the rooftops, the figures of two men in dark clothes display a masculine strength and a feeling of seriousness.

In the second section, the thematic color red signifies the narrow minds of and betrayals between Flying Snow, Broken Sword, and Moon (a romantic triangle of sorts). The scene takes place in a calligraphy house in which all of the actors are wearing long red dresses. Broken Sword is envious of Flying Snow's relationship with Sky, so he has an affair with Moon as a form of revenge. Flying Snow kills Broken Sword after seeing him in bed with Moon, but soon she has feelings of regret. Moon wants to take revenge on Flying Snow, so she challenges her to a fight in the yellow forest. The yellow leaves on the trees are falling as the two women, adorned in flowing red dresses, fight with each other in the falling leaves. Being constructed of yellow and red, the scene is famous for its imaginative use of color and beautiful visual effects that signify the impressive performances of two women in red clothes fighting out of rage and hatred.

In the blue section, Zhang uses blue in contrast to red to emphasize the selfless attitudes of the characters. The broad love they have for each other is in direct contrast with that in the red theme. Flying Snow wounds Broken Sword intentionally so that Broken Sword will not be killed in his fight with Nameless. However, the fight between Broken Sword and Nameless does eventually take place on the mirror-like lake. Although they are serious, the fight is just for friendship and a comparison of skills, not for revenge. In the green section, Zhang uses hundreds of green veils in the palace as the background for the fight between Broken Sword and the emperor. The dropping of the green veils indicates the weakening power of the emperor because he has nowhere to hide and will soon be caught by

Broken Sword without the veils. Broken Sword has the upper hand but retreats at the last moment.

The last section is portrayed with the color white. The audience is given a scene of white garments flowing in the wind in the golden desert. White is used to indicate purity and loyalty. Flying Snow and Broken Sword disagree on the assassination, Broken Sword knows that the assassination is not appropriate, but he does not want to betray Flying Snow because of his love for her. When Flying Snow finds out that the assassination attempt fails, she cannot control her sadness and resorts to killing herself. Broken Sword dies with her under the background of the desert sunset. Their white clothes flowing in the whistling wind looks elegant yet simple.

Color is obviously the most emphasized stylistic element in *Hero*. The colors symbolize different versions of the same story, with the white version finally revealing the truth of the story. Zhang's emphasis on color bestows on the film a most impressive visual style. Zhang's ability to communicate with the audience through color, which does not require language, contributes to the overseas success of *Hero*.

Closing Remarks

This chapter is a textual analysis of the most significant elements of style and narration in four of Zhang's later films. In choosing the most significant elements to describe here, I have obviously left many detailed descriptions out. This type of judicious limiting is required given the scope of this Master's thesis project. The best reasoning for accepting my choice of significant elements is the fact that I have studied the films carefully and feel that my focus is justifiable. In order to make meaningful conclusions in the next chapter it is important to orient the reader to the specific elements that I find significant. Of

course, these texts are polysemic and other critics could very well focus on elements other than I have chosen, and arrive at different conclusions. However, according to historical poetics, as long as the analysis is grounded in solid textual evidence and the inferences made from that analysis are supported by the evidence then the critic has performed a valuable service and has helped to reach the goals of historical poetics.

V. DISCUSSION

In 2002, Zhang was invited by the Chinese government to direct a five-minute promotion film for China's application for hosting the 2008 Olympic Games. After the success of the application for hosting the 2008 Olympic Games, Zhang was invited by the Chinese government again to direct an eight-minute movie to show at the closing ceremony of the Athens Olympic Games. Compared with his past difficulties with the Chinese government as a banned filmmaker, Zhang is now a darling of that same government as a successful and government sanctioned cultural icon.

Zhang's recent mainstream success as a director is tied to his recent cooperation with the government. In the decisions that he has made in his recent films he has displayed an intention to avoid the type of controversial elements that got him into trouble with the Chinese government in his early years. Using historic poetics as the methodology, this thesis explores the changes in Zhang Yimou's later films in terms of thematics, constructive principles, and stylistics.

From a director of art-cinema to a filmmaker proficient in mainstream martial arts movies, Zhang's obvious changes in film production tell us a lot about Zhang's personal changes concerning his early idealism. Obviously, his latter films are more successful in terms of box office. According to *Forbes* ("Top Chinese Celebrities," 2005, March 9),

Zhang is ranked in the top 10 Chinese celebrities of 2005 with actors Yao Ming, Zhang Ziyi, Liu Xiang, Zhao Wei, and Faya Wang. Therefore Zhang is now an established celebrity instead of a banned director.

From *To Live* to *Hero*, Zhang took only 10 years to reach the pinnacle of his fame and celebrity. However, his talent as a serious director reached its peak ten years ago with *To Live*. In that film, Zhang demonstrated that he was a mature director and a master of his craft. He also had proven that he could successfully bring his personal idealism to his films.

With his decision to downplay social conflicts in his films and to replace them with commercially entertaining films, Zhang made his films appealing to a wider audience and more acceptable to the Chinese government. It is my feeling that although Zhang has achieved unbelievable international success, acclaim and box office for a Chinese director, he has also abandoned his commitment to his filmic ideals and his desire to comment on the social inequalities that he so strongly attacked in his early movies. Just as his international success has peaked and his audience is larger than ever, Zhang has silenced his social commentary more efficiently than the Chinese government could have ever managed.

Just like many writers who no longer write for inspiration or with enthusiasm after becoming famous, many directors give up their motivations to display their deep-rooted idealisms in their film careers. Both writing and film directing become tools for making a living, and the directors and writers become gladiators who strive for

fortune and fame. Being further away from the traditional culture, Zhang has gradually given up his idealistic filmmaking in order to compromise his craft for governmental and market approval—to use an American phrase, Zhang has sold-out. He has abandoned his everyday people as heroes for super stars of martial arts mythology. He has forsaken his concern for social oppression in order to embrace commercial entertainment.

Zhang's films have changed dramatically in both thematics and constructive principles and these changes are indicative of his change from idealistic filmmaker to commercial superstar director. Yet, Zhang has kept his brilliant stylistics the same --always making his films beautiful and lavish. Zhang's films continue to be visually stunning even if they are idealistically inept.

To Live—The Peak of Zhang's Talent

Zhang's previous films have one or more antagonists who are responsible for the horrible situations of those who are being oppressed. In *Raise the Red Lantern*, it is the master of the house. In *Ju Dou*, the master of the dye mill is to blame. In *Red Sorghum*, the leper husband and the Japanese army are the antagonists. But there is no antagonist to blame in *To Live*. In this film, a simple world of evil versus kindness, good and bad, is forsaken for the deeper blame is directed toward society itself, in which small people cannot find security and kindness is not rewarded with kindness. Zhang shows that human suffering is not melodrama—it is social oppression and humankind's inhumanity to humankind.

The change implies Zhang's attempts to lead the audience away from the old countryside stereotypes of women and men in his previous films and to establish a new angle from which to observe Chinese society. Before *To Live*, Zhang also used traditional operas in *Raise the Red Lantern* and *The Story of Qiu Ju*. But *To Live* makes the art form so unforgettable and touching that it becomes an essential element in the film. Zhang's love with the traditional art forms indicates his dependence on the traditional culture which cultivated his inspirations. The shadow play and the desolate tune of the Qin opera constitute the backdrop for the painful experiences that Fu Gui and Jia Zhen endure. As ordinary people, their lives are closely tied to the traditional art forms such as shadow play. When Fu Gui is performing with his the shadow puppets on the stage, he is also a puppet in the performance of his own life.

Zhang began to use less sumptuous color in *To Live* compared to his previous works. His early films (1984-1993) relied heavily on the extravagant use of color, especially red, which reflect both his aesthetic standard as a photographer and his feelings about traditional Chinese culture. But this focus on color was not as evident in *To Live*, although red was still an essential color. In this film, Zhang focuses more on rich textual meanings and grand scenes. The characters in the film are dressed in drab clothes most of the time however, their lives are colorful and meaningful no matter the situation.

Dai (2002) points out that Zhang's views on the salvation and survival of women in the traditional Chinese society is the trademark of the Fifth Generation films. Zhang obviously preferred to expound on traditional Chinese life and the unjust social

conditions it nurtured. In addition because of Zhang's preference for traditional settings, he was accused of making films for the eyes of western audiences. Finally, Zhang's efforts were defeated when the government banned *To Live*.

I believe that the government's decision to ban *To Live* is a direct reason for Zhang choosing to change the thematic and constructive principals of his films.

Another important influence was the commercial wave that was washing over China in the middle 1990s. *To Live* may be the most well known banned film in China. Zhang's film career did not end. Zhang persistently stuck to film production.

Keep Cool

Zhang sets the tone for the whole film with an expression of his own feelings of confusion toward the world in *Keep Cool*. Although *Keep Cool* is not one of Zhang's well-acknowledged films, it signifies the start of Zhang's change in thematics and principals of construction, a change which has lasted to this day.

As an urban comedy, *Keep Cool* is Zhang's attempt to move toward box office success. On one hand, it records Zhang's perception of the world and even his film career. He expresses his confusion towards his career and life through *Keep Cool*. On the other hand, it is a film trying to be successful by focusing on the urban life style and the urban relationships between men and women—a type of *Sex and the City* for Chinese urbanites. *Keep Cool* follows the style of the successful Hong Kong film *Fallen Angels* (1995) by Wong Kar Wai. It tries to cater to the commercial market that avoids sensitive topics that are not welcomed by the government and that are attacked by the affiliated film

ensorship bureau.

Sensitive topics could have prevented *Keep Cool* from being released as it may have been banned as Zhang's earlier films. Although Zhang pays much attention to lower class people, he approaches them from a comic perspective to increase the humor and enjoyment that the audience is able to derive from *Keep Cool*. There is no exploration of why there are so many poor countryside people flooding into the city to sell their labor. There is also no explanation on why they flee away when hearing that the police are coming. The film does not question the social system that oppresses the poor and uneducated in China. Instead, the film describes the social phenomena through a comic perspective. This type of stance is completely absent in Zhang's earlier films. He goes from socially conscious filmmaker to commercial comedian.

Not One Less

Zhang was wise in selecting the Project of Hope as his topic when making *Not One Less* because this is a Chinese government project. Therefore this film was considered a mainstream film, one which seeks to support governmental efforts to raise funds for a government project. The government officials were obviously happy with the film because they were in need of a film made by an influential director to ask the Chinese people to be aware of the needs of poor children. Although the government liked this film and it received critical success, the film was not a commercial success. Zhang must have realized that commercial success would require a more commercial subject matter.

Hero

Zhang denies that the success of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* motivated him to make an action film, but it is obvious that martial arts are the most profitable Chinese film genre. The function of martial arts is to entertain the audience with exciting action and amazing visualizations. It is also a good way to avoid any controversial elements in the films that might anger government censors.

In Hollywood, movie stars are an important aspect of filmmaking decisions. The Chinese film market appears to have the same symptoms nowadays. Many people question the necessity of Ru Yue's role in the *Hero*. Ru Yue, played by Zhang Ziyi, is just a maid to Flying Snow and Broken Sword, but she appears in the film for up to 15 minutes. The character of Ru Yue is added for the actress Zhang Ziyi. Some critics questioned Zhang Yimou's reasons for adding scenes for Zhang Ziyi. The reason is most probably because of her commercial potential and the benefits such a role would have in bolstering her fame ("Hero News 42—Zhang Ziyi Interview," 2002, January 29). Obviously, the concern for Chinese movie stars has become a dominant concern in Chinese filmmaking because of the commercial success stars can generate. It appears that the glory days of the screenwriter and the socially conscious filmmaker may be gone for good in China--a concern that is often voiced by independent filmmakers in Hollywood.

To emphasize the heroic theme, *Hero* leads the audience to believe that to kill a ruthless emperor would be wrong because the emperor has the great ambition to unite all

of China and to finally stop the wars between separate kingdoms. The meaning of a united country overrides any personal hatred or evil behavior. Therefore the ideological stance of *Hero* is one of Nationalism and patriotic fervor. Zhang tries to defend the ruthless king and justifies his living, because he is the first person to unite China despite his ruthless means and destruction of entire cultures.

At the same time of Zhang's emphasis of the patriotic theme, he tries to exaggerate the romantic elements in *Hero*. Despite his efforts to focus on his nationalistic theme, it is the beautiful action and romantic theme that prevails. *Hero* proves to be a success not because of its great theme, but because of its visually stunning martial arts. The American market was ready for *Hero* after *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, and it became the surprise hit of 2004 after being released by Miramax in America.

The thematic change from common people to super hero, from civilians to emperor, and from docudrama to pure mythic fiction shows Zhang's change in emphasis without him speaking a word. As one of the most acknowledged Fifth Generation directors, Zhang said in one of his interviews, "nowadays, many people only think about money; relationships among people are very utilitarian" (Chow, S., 1995, p. 68). Compared with the time in which Zhang grew up, Chinese society in the 1990s was facing the challenge of new values and principles, which were motivated by the desire for monetary gains and Zhang seems to have embraced that motivation in his filmmaking.

The whole change in Zhang's film career after 1994 is clearly identified through

the analysis of his four films: *To Live*, *Keep Cool, Not One Less*, and *Hero*. From small people to emperors, from countryside to urban areas, from a real China to a mythic China, Zhang transitioned from art cinema director to commercial director. On one hand, Zhang should be proud of his success in filmmaking as he has come to the center of the Chinese filmmaking stage and is more influential than ever. Zhang has become a trademark for his films as “Spielberg” is in Hollywood. However, on the other hand, Zhang should be aware that the success of his films in both domestic and overseas markets does not endorse a complete success. From a director whose films were banned for their bravery to a successfully commercial filmmaker, Zhang should be aware that he is losing something more important than fame, fortune, and celebrity.

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