

*HERO IN THE WEST AND EAST*

BY

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*HERO IN THE WEST AND EAST*

In examining the different perceptions of Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002) from American and Chinese popular press, this research considers western film theories, as well as the specific Chinese film ecology of the current decade 1999-2009. Reflections on the different readings of the filmic text are discussed with the focus on martial arts film genre and its political implications. A transnational perspective assists in revealing *Hero*'s real ambition, at the same time, it replaces the binary approaches, including western/eastern, observer/observed and dominance/sub-ordinance, to help appreciate some globalized films.

## CHAPTER ONE: CROSS-CULTURAL FILM STUDIES

[T]he image, the imagined, the imaginary—these are all terms which direct us to something critical and new in global cultural process; the imagination as a social practice.

Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*

Filmic images operate as images, as surfaces whose significance lies in their manner of undoing depth itself.

Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions*

### Approaching Film: West and East, Center and Margin, Inside and Outside

Edward Said (1979) argues that a long tradition of false and romanticized images of Asia and the Middle East in Western culture has served as an implicit justification for European and American colonial and imperialist ambition. The supporting evidence is found throughout Said's later book, *Culture and Imperialism*. Examining European literature and contemporary media coverage in an attempt to map a broad world-wide pattern of imperialism, the survey contends that "imperialism...lingers where it has always been, in a kind of general cultural sphere as well as in specific political, ideological, economic, and social practices" (1994, xii, 9). Said also argues that this imperialist attitude still permeates the Western media and even academia— in terms of how academic disciplines are structured. One particular discipline this study will focus on is film study, especially cross-cultural study of Chinese films between China and the United States. My propositions relate to the question of interpretive authority and how

ignoring specifics of the Chinese culture and audience limit the persuasiveness of Western scholars and critics who write about Chinese films.

### Approaching China and Chinese Films

Paul Cohen's study of Western historiography of modern China recognizes the dominance of "a Western-centeredness that robs China of its autonomy and makes of it, in the end, an intellectual possession of the West" (Cohen, 1984, p.151). Other scholars have also acknowledged problems related to international interactions. At one point in her classic work *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*, Rey Chow writes about what she calls "the deadlock of the anthropological situation" in cross-cultural exchange, summarized as, "we cannot write/think/talk the non-West in the academy without in some sense anthropologizing it, and yet anthropology and ethnography, atrophied in their epistemological foundations, remain 'very much still a one-way street' " (Chow, 1995, p. 177). This "deadlock" refers to "the inequality inherent to the binary structure of observer/observed premise," a restriction that the history of Western imperialism and colonialism places upon itself when approaching non-Western discourse. In the final part of her book, Chow points out China's status as an object of the gaze and claims that this "being-looked-at-ness, rather than the act of looking, constitutes the primary event in cross-cultural representation" (p.180). While recalling the time when the academic study of film was first introduced to American universities three decades ago, William Rothman admits "the field of film study in America simply annexed Asian cinema, as if it were its manifest destiny to do so." Under such assumption, Asian films are viewed and criticized only as "an object in

accordance with already established procedures and doctrines,” which “Asian films must yield to, not confront or challenge” (1993, p.262).

In the study of film texts, it is dangerous to make a cross-cultural comparison when a film from another culture is viewed as “raw material” by Western critics because these critics frequently start a unilateral interpretive process from an exclusively Western perspective. And by silencing Asian voices, voices that are different from Western voices, it is consequently “to suppress conversation between and among Americans and Asian” (Rothman, 1993, p.262). These set of problems will be examined at two levels: first, some major western theories that seem inappropriately to subordinate Chinese texts; and second, western popular press that report non-American actresses as the embodiment of classic Hollywood sensuality.

Some major positions in current critical approaches toward so-called “Third World cinema” are distinguished in Chow and Zhang Yingjin’s works. One of these approaches is “leftist masculinist,” which refers to Frederic Jameson’s national allegory, that is, “the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society (Jameson, 1986, p.69). Another is “liberal feminist,” referring to E. Ann Kaplan’s “heterosexual erotics,” which blends psychoanalysis with feminist theory to analyze the relationship among history, gender, and nationhood in the film Chen Kaige’s *Farewell My Concubine*. In an examination of two case studies of Chinese films, in which critics subordinate alien cultural texts to the Western film theories mentioned above, Zhang Yingjun finds such interpretive processes and frameworks to be unpersuasive because they are not specific to the other culture but only to reiterate what has been said in Western critical paradigms (2002, p. 125). Zhang’s

perspective can be appreciated by how he perceives the application of psychoanalytic film theory to *Big Road* (1988). According to Zhang, a Western critic may indulge too much in working out potential “narcissistic,” “sublimation,” “phallogocentric,” “lesbian,” or “pornographic” meanings to realize that the Chinese text is too alien for facile Western appropriation and that other interpretations of the text would be far more persuasive to Chinese readers. The psychoanalytic approach fails to account for the complexity of the Chinese audience and the historical specifics of these viewers. Another approach Western critics often rely on is the binary approach of Western /non-Western categories exemplified in Esther Yau’s “*Yellow Earth: Western Analysis and a Non-Western Text*,” in which Yau encourages critics to discuss foreign films in terms of presence and absence, dominance and subordination, and other pairs of antinomies against a set of predominant Western paradigms. Zhang Yingjin demonstrates how Yau’s application proves problematic, however, due to “the inherent power(lessness) of Western theory, because this critical practice, once outside of its frame of reference, will likely find its target completely unaffected by its ‘penetrating’ power” (p.128). One may wonder whether the Western rationale dominating the analysis and deconstruction of Chinese films in the last century is still the way most film scholars and critics process Chinese films in the new millennium. In other words, does Western theory continue its “will to power,” the will to register the text in one’s favorite theoretical construct? A more recent study concerning the reception of ethnic Chinese actresses proves that Chinese films and especially Chinese women are still read through an Orientalist lens (Gomes, 2008). Western film critics make intertextual references to their own feminist-cultural structure or rely on their knowledge of Hollywood’s treatment of ethnic femininity as a way to approach “foreign”

Chinese stars such as Michelle Yeoh, Maggie Cheung, and Zhang Ziyi. After demystifying the respective “glamour” in Asia and America and how Hollywood popular press have been glamorizing non-American femininity by describing them as embodiments of the glamour of a bygone Hollywood era, Gomes finds that the film critic’s “whitening” of Cheung and Zhang may be unconsciously intended to make their ethnicity more palatable and less threatening to Western audiences. Gomes further explains this point by bringing in an eco-political consideration: “China today has become the world’s fastest growing economy with almost every first world nation attempting to bask in the glow of Chinese economic success” (p.77). In view of that, “referring the Chinese face to a framework that looks to the past rather to the future” becomes a means by which to cope with the ever-increasing economic and political influence of China (p. 77). This seems to be a case of history repeating itself. In 1993, Bernice Reynaud observed in *Sight and Sound* that “it was through the depiction of *tortured yet glamorous* women in Zhang Yimou’s films that Gong Li was turned into an international celebrity” (p.12, my emphasis). Even Jen (Zhang Ziyi) in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, who fights impressively and beats many men, looks like a heroine in the feminist reading, yet she is not heroic according to the genre codes of the martial arts film. Unlike U.S. action or western films where heroism centers around “rugged individualism, often extolling the “gumption” of renegade cops, those on the fringe of society, and proverbial (and literal) cowboys” (Kim, 2006, p.1), heroism in Asian films comes from the ability to do for others— the group, clan or community—even self-sacrifice but not from self-glorification. As observed in Japanese samurai films, Hong Kong martial arts and contemporary mafia films, the core

concerns of loyalty and honor drive the heroic narrative and plot-advancement. (Kim, 2006, p.1)

Thus, cross-cultural criticism based upon Chinese “glamour” identified from a Western perspective while misreading indigenous cultural codes remains a problematic discourse that maintains the Occident’s hegemonic relationship with the Orient.

The unequal relationship that makes Chinese film subservient to Western theory when applied without an awareness of its limitations evades the practice of open cultural comparison, because Western theory is constantly assumed to be the unmarked center from which all other alternatives radiate. As Homi Bhabha puts it, “to enter into the interdisciplinarity of cultural texts means that we cannot contextualize the emergent cultural form by locating it in terms of some pre-given discursive causality or origin” (1994, p. 163). With that said, the field of cross-cultural or intra-cultural study that is marked by an imbalance of power and uneven development needs to evolve into new paradigms and perspectives.

### Real Cross-Cultural Analysis

Concerning the question of the interpreting process in the cross-cultural context, first of all, I acknowledge that a pure discursive space does not exist in cross-cultural analysis. Second, any critical act inevitably inflicts certain effects on the culturally specific text and audience. Third, the main concern of contemporary critics is more on institutional than intentional discourses, more on the interpreting power of critiques than the relation of different interpreting powers. My thesis will offer a more holistic alternative for the cross-cultural analysis of Chinese films that takes into account indigenous customs, codes and historic specifics as part of the interpretive process.

Returning to the question of how cross-cultural film analysis is pursued, Paul Willemsen argues that the “real challenge” facing cross-cultural film studies today is “to find ways of overcoming the limits of any cultural relativism, any fetishization of geo-political boundaries, and to elaborate a cultural theory worthy of the name” (2005, p. 98). Cinema, he argues, “is particularly well suited to provide a way into the question of how socio-economic dynamics and pressures are translated into discursive constellations” because cinema is a particular mode of cultural practice in which the relations between art and society and between the production and the consumption of culture may be studied. In other words, the task of comparative film study is not merely to compare and contrast the stylistic and narrative employment of cultural tropes but also to account for the socio-historical relations that have given rise to the cultural tropes. Similarly, in his study exploring junctions and differences in the current global cultural flows, Appadurai suggests that media flows “occur in and through the growing disjunctions among ethnoscaples, technoscaples, financescaples, mediascaples, and ideoscaples” (1996, p.37). In this regard, to better understand Chinese films today we must extend our investigation to include other sites of social, technological, economic, cultural, and political operations, a description that outlines the parameters of what I mean by the term “film ecology.” With that said, I want to map out other perspectives while paying close attention to the cultural specificity of China, and the historical experience of the audience (or film ecology in China), during the ten-year period of 1999- 2009. This decade has witnessed dramatic changes in the general eco-politics, technology, and demography of the domestic film industry.

### Eco-Political Changes

In 1978, Deng Xiaoping initiated the “Reform and Open-Door Policy,” a plan that can be summarized as socialism tailored to Chinese conditions with specific Chinese characters.<sup>1</sup> Deng and other pragmatic reformers have directed and grounded the growth of China’s economy and comprehensive national power by opening up international trade and foreign investment. By claiming the uniqueness of Chinese modernization, the rhetoric commonly known as “Chinese characteristics” can be explained as a diplomatically expedient way of avoiding issues such as democratization, constitutional modification, and civil rights.<sup>2</sup> The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) response to the political crisis in the late 1980s was to encourage rapid market expansion while holding tightly onto political control. Ever since then, the Tian’anmen Incident has been purposefully deleted from history textbooks, politics and from media discourse in the hope of erasing the memory of the event. Thereafter, the speed of change coupled with the social and political contradictions that it has engendered have produced a sense that it is better to maintain the status quo instead of pursuing political reform. Plenty of Chinese citizens, particularly those in the emerging middle class, agree that their government is not ready for democratization.<sup>3</sup> Chinese citizens are also aware of international factors and precedents that suggest the uneven results of dramatic change, particular the status of Russia following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Guided by the political direction previously mentioned, the film industry’s high profit margins and to ideological importance assured that it would become the subject of both commercial investment and government control. At the same time, the film industry has always been sensitive and adaptive to the new economic and political imperatives.

Significant shifts in policy were made when China was granted membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 and promised to:

- Increase from 10 to 20 the number of motion pictures for theatrical release on a revenue-sharing agreement on an annual basis;
- Allow foreign investment in joint ventures<sup>4</sup> for video distribution;
- Permit foreign investors to own up to 49% share in companies that build and operate cinemas;
- Reduce tariffs on films (from 9% to 5%) and home videos (from 15% to 10%);
- Protect intellectual property under the terms of the WTO Agreement on Trade Related Intellectual Property (TRIPS) (WTO, 2002).

This represents a dramatic change from previous policy, and the change has played out with resistance and compromise. The fundamental underpinning of American policy toward China today—and the promotion of U.S. style democracy in China—is economic engagement. The pressure exerted by the U.S. government and Hollywood<sup>5</sup> lobbyists as they seek to increase Hollywood visibility or even dominance in China's theaters is countered, however, by complex factors related to political resistance and enforced compromise. By the turn of the century, even though foreign companies have been permitted to establish joint ventures with Chinese partners to engage in the distribution of audiovisual products, the distribution of motion pictures became feasible only upon one

condition: that China retain its right to examine the content of audio and video products before they were marketed to the public. Essentially, China preserved a large degree of freedom with respect to the design of domestic regulation. Leaders chose this route partly for the reason that the reforms in this area would crucially affect the magnitude and distribution of profits and partly because the Party has been reluctant to relax its grip on an important tool for propaganda. In terms of content, films need to obtain multiple licenses under the dual regulatory authorities of the CCP and the government. Over-bureaucratization is thus another problem that is common in the cultural sector, and it works against implementation of long-term business strategies (Keane, 2006). To sum up, the momentum within China's film industry is moving gradually toward a profit-making ethic while remaining conscious of its ideological responsibility.

#### Domestic Adjustment

Competing against Hollywood films, Chinese films in the 1990s witnessed an enormous downturn and a decline that has continued over recent years. Shanghai, China's largest film market, saw a 23% drop in box-office revenue in 1997 from the previous year, with attendance off by 8.69 million. A further blow to the Chinese film industry came from the fact that foreign films accounted for a disproportionate percentage of the box-office nationwide. Since 1995, imported Hollywood films have reached up to 60% percent of China's annual box-office revenue. Domestic films lost one million viewers to foreign productions from 1995 to 1998.

There was a strong anxiety shared by professional film-makers, business people, and film officials in the late 1990s. They were seeking a sound industry structure to be established promptly to halt the low consumption of domestic films. In a conference

attended by studio heads in May 1998, Culture Minister Sun Jiazheng argued that without a healthy supply of domestic films, the Chinese film industry would be reduced to salesmen for Hollywood films. At the Film and Literature Conference in Chengdu in June 1999, Chen Kaige expressed his concern that China's film industry was at the crossroads between survival and collapse.

After recognizing Hollywood's unipolarity in the current international film market, at the industry level, a series of reforms were introduced in the late 1990s that focused on the consolidation and reorganization of the motion picture business at the corporate level, provincial level, and, gradually, at the national level as well.<sup>6</sup> To start with, production companies assumed partnership with distributors and with theater chains, and in so doing, created joint-venture entertainment conglomerates such as the China Film Group, Beijing Film Studio, Baoli Bona, and Huaxia. Cumulatively, the institutional reconstruction has eventually led to a situation where a few media conglomerates have monopolistic control over regional film distribution and exhibition. More to the point, China issued a new circular in early 2002 that allowed individual citizens who had the financial support to apply for a permit to make films, although the censor's approval was still required. The new reconstruction and regulation were designed to revive China's domestic production amid severe competition after entry into the WTO. At the textual level, a group of young film makers in Shanghai suggested that the industry should develop "a new mainstream cinema" with features like a low budget, urban themes, comic elements, and first-time directors in order to target specific markets and seek a quick return.<sup>7</sup> "The Manifesto: the New Mainstream Film: A Proposal for Domestic Films" published in *Contemporary Films* (Dangdai dianying) also encouraged new film-

makers to study the impact of new media, computers, video games, and cartoons.

Fundamentally, “it is proposed not merely as a theory but as a set of concrete procedures for commercial filmmaking” (Zhang Yingjin, 2002, p.325). Again, the goal was to increase indigenous production and distribution of films.

In many ways, Zhang Yang’s *Spicy Love Soup* (1999) and its follow-up, *A Beautiful New World* (1999) by Shi Runjiu embodied the new vision of small commercial films at the turn of the century. Composed of five narrative segments targeting different age groups (from retirees to high school students) but unified by the common concern of love and marriage, *Spicy Love Soup* is a light-hearted, and at times sentimental, urban film that performs “several functions simultaneously” (Yin Hong, 1999, p.27-8). These new filmmakers did not inherit the Fifth Generation’s heavy burden of historical consciousness.<sup>8</sup> They made no attempt to question the official views of Chinese history and culture and did not indulge in the alienation and self-exile typical of some younger directors of the early 1990s. They did, however, enjoy other distinctive features as Ni Zhen summarized, “first, they discarded tragic sentiments and embraced an optimistic outlook; second, they emphasized narrative, plot and provided a visual therapy for the troubled life; third, they preferred conventional camera work, bright color, and a smooth flow of images typical of TV commercials.” Collectively, they endeavored to satisfy the current audience’s demand “for entertainment film as cultural consumption and to merge with the gradually improving market economy and civil society” (Ni Zhen, 1999, p.72). Whether or not this is an improvement over the ideological interests of the Fifth Generation filmmakers is open to debate, but clearly the next generation is concerned with avoiding government ire and finding a wide audience.

Another emerging group of film-makers from the last ten years is thoroughly examined in the book *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of Twenty-First Century* where the term “Urban Generation” is chosen to categorize a number of contemporary film-makers such as Zhang Yuan, Ning Ying, Lu Xuechang, Jia Zhangke, Shi Runjiu, and to situate their creative engagement within a shared historical moment. Moving away from an older tradition-centered discourse that has informed the exploration of the Fourth<sup>9</sup> and Fifth Generation directors, films by these directors cover a wide range of urban, quasi-urban, and cosmopolitan subjects. Though by no means a self-declared cinema movement, this wave of urban-centered filmmaking uses diverse styles and approaches to capture the drama of urban transition, and raises significant social-cultural issues often avoided in everyday life or in the new mainstream films, issues such as traditional values colliding with modern trends and ideological conventions facing commercial pressure. These directors also try to make visible the migrant worker and other marginal urban subjects, by consciously exploring a combination of humanist and modernist concerns. By foregrounding realistic issues in urban transformation, these contemporary film-makers depart consciously from the more didactic tradition of Chinese films as a whole to embrace a more realistic position with a humble humanist touch.

By 1999, the government was ready to promote the new film-makers. In November, the Film Art editorial office organized a timely forum, cosponsored by the China Film Association, China Film Group, and the Beijing Film Studio. The term “young directors” was judiciously chosen to distance, if not totally dissolve, the disobedient undertone of the term “Sixth Generation,” which would have provided a verbal link to the ideological concerns of preceding generations of directors. Several of

the directors mentioned above and a few first-timers sent films to the screen, films such as *Postmen in the Mountains* (1998) by Huo Jianqi, *Lunar Eclipse* (1999) by Wang Quanan, *Suburban Dream* (1999) by Wang Xiaoshuai, *Women's Sky* (1999) by Wu Tiange, and *Shower* (1999) by Zhang Yang, to name a few.

### Demographic Change

The vast economic disparities, dispersed population, and geographical obstacles between provinces have all contributed to the uneven development of urban and rural areas. In light of that, as many scholars point out, the consumption practices and aspirations of Chinese citizens have altered greatly during the past twenty years while building up new socioeconomic layers and generational patterns (Donald, Keane & Yin Hong, 2002). Scholars writing about films and practitioners making movies in the film industry must recognize the new fragmentation of the audience group in urban China. The book length report *The Consumer Revolution in Urban China* details the new consumption patterns regarding domestic and foreign products, illustrating the waning political control over family expenditure and the ever-increasing role of social networks in urban life.

In the post-WTO era, Scholar Shi Anbin finds “global media have successfully developed a ‘brand loyalty’ amidst the ‘E-Generation,’ those who were born in the 1970s-1980s and grow up with computers, and later, the internet.” He further explains that:

To them, online news sources from *cnn.com* or *yahoo.com* (if accessible) appear more reliable and efficient than official mouthpieces like the *People's Daily*, China Central Television

(CCTV) or *xinhuanet.com* (the official Xinhua News Agency's website). Virtual heroes and heroines from Hollywood blockbusters, Japanese manga, or online videogaming have gained more potency and relevance than the "real-life" model Party members, who are rendered in a propagandist manner via mainstream media outlets (p. 34).

Labeled "E-Generation" or other names, this new demographic group shares some loosely-defined commonalities. These film consumers were all born during the 70s and 80s in the urban areas. They are largely uneducated about the Tian'anmen Incident, dependent on the internet as its primary information source, and are generally the only child in their respective families. Their buying power and consumption habits sometimes frame film production, marketing, and distribution because people in the E-Generation actively buy tickets for screenings, rent DVDs, and participate in online film forums.

#### Technological Changes

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, movie-goers were encouraged by relatively easy access to VHS and VCD to demand cheaper cinema entry prices and more diverse screenings. At the time, Hong Kong blockbusters were mainly consumed on video and VCD format. Because China placed numerous restrictions on movie-producing studios, and because of the low production costs of copying films, pirating became widespread without an attempt at regulation. This rampant piracy has not been limited to the street vending of bootleg DVDs; some Chinese television networks also air movies without paying royalties or obtaining the permission of the distributors. For example, China Education TV Station has been fined for airing some of China Central Television Movie

Channel's films. The current situation is that foreign films are most widely available through pirated DVDs and free downloading. Though this system presents problems for the industry, it does increase the visibility and availability of Hollywood films with speeded-up circulation and, ironically enables audiences to view recent Hollywood films on home video even before their theatrical release. As to the matter of legalizing film distribution channels, Chinese film-makers also have begun to put pressure on the government to increase the enforcement of copyright laws. One would hope that it will only be a matter of time before the Chinese government initiates a serious crackdown on film piracy.

For Chinese audiences, the greater degree of access to both foreign and domestic films recently has led to a profound change in expectation, perception, and consumption of films. By outlining the film ecology in the current decade, this chapter has tried to explain the elements that dramatically influence Chinese film access and film literacy in general, in hopes of delineating a broad contextual situation before a close textual scrutiny is applied. Chapter two will move from the film environment in China to broader theoretical frameworks present in the West and in the East.

## CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In attempting to address the multiple agencies involved in the cultural analyses of films, I am particularly concerned with how a film evokes the spectators' (either Western or Eastern) own viewing experiences, expectations, and even interpretations. The concept of "active readers" relates to reception theory in literary studies, mass communication and cultural studies. Reception study has undergone several stages of conceptualization in these traditions that will be outlined in detail.

### Explaining Artworks

Pure formalism focuses on the internal mechanics and general structure to explain how an artwork is constructed; for theorists and critics working within this tradition, an artwork's meaning is explored by analyzing the internal components and their various functions. While neo-formalists allow for a wider range of analytical approaches, and consider the cultural and historical elements of artworks, the work is, nevertheless, viewed as an object. As far back as 1970, Roland Barthes explored the cultural voices informing an artwork in *S/Z*. Barthes advocated unwinding the text's multiple structures in contrast to formalism's focus on the singular and conclusive meaning of an artwork. For Barthes, readers are not isolated subjects, but are the "plurality of other texts, of codes which are infinite or, more precisely, lost" (p.10). Though Barthes tried to hear the reader, however, he failed to find an approach to disentangle the voices in a text when reader's voices are mingled with other voices. Reception study advances a stronger method with regard to this issue by viewing the artwork (which could be a film, book, or a painting) as an unstable text, an experience open to different readings.

Most of the dominating theories in film studies in the 1970s and 1980s were based upon structuralist/formalist criticism or psychoanalytic criticism. Even though scholars gave some consideration to the experience of the audience, they tended to explore spectatorship ahistorically. In contrast, in 1992 Janet Staiger, after examining various cases of films and their reception by diverse audiences, contended that an “accurate” translation or reconstruction of an immanent meaning in a film is impossible. In other words, the meaning of a film is not fixed in a film itself. Instead, spectators activate meaning through their interaction with the film, and the spectators’ responses are not unified. Additionally, Staiger argues that contextual factors, more than textual ones, account for the experiences that spectators have while watching films and television shows. Spectators bring identities (consciously or unconsciously constructed) and interpretative strategies and schemata to approach films. These contextual considerations, including social formations, psychological components, and sociological dynamics, form the subject of reception. As for the question that Barthes failed to pursue: how do we disentangle the voices in a text when our own reading is mingled with other voices? Reception theory at this point offers a stronger approach by proposing a thorough examination of the concrete historical and sociopolitical interpretations surrounding an artwork. For reception methodologies, textual criticism or discourse analysis in a specific historical and cultural setting is the key constituent.

### Reception Study in Media Studies

Influenced by the Frankfurt School, in 1973 Stuart Hall put forward a theory of “Decoding/Encoding,” a paradigm that emphasized the role of an active audience, whose reception amounts to “an active process of ‘production in use’ that is always culturally

activated within specific contexts and local histories” (Machor & Goldstein, 2001, p.205).

Hall further developed the theory of negotiation and the “preferred reading,” arguing that television programs are open texts subject to diverse interpretations. Therefore, a process of negotiation between viewers and the text constitutes the viewing of television.

Dominant, negotiated and oppositional readings of a text are distinguished: a dominant reading goes with the interests of hegemonic culture and dominant ideology; a negotiated reading generally fits into the dominant ideology while putting the viewers’ own thinking into consideration; an oppositional reading runs against the dominant ideology when an audience actively appropriates a text (Hall, 1980). Hall’s reference here is to television programs, but his ideas are equally applicable to films.

Reception methodology then refers to “a comparative textual analysis of media discourses and audience discourses” (Jenson, 1991, p.139). In light of that, in order to effectively interpret texts and discover the “preferred reading” by the audience, we need to distinguish different levels of “text” and investigate their respective connotations.

Fiske suggests a cultural analysis of reception requires us to study three levels of “text”: The first level is the on-the-screen primary text produced by the cultural industry; the second level is a sublevel of texts produced by television criticism and comments; the third is those texts that viewers produce themselves (Fiske, 1992). Meanings, therefore, are relative and flexible according to historical, social, and cultural conditions.

While Fiske’s study focuses on reception of television programs, the assumption here is that this reception is comparable to that of films. This study focuses on the analysis of one aspect of the second level of film texts, namely, film reviews by the film critics.

### Into Contemporary Chinese films

Close examination of the settings surrounding any particular Chinese film can help support certain readings by asking relevant questions. Was a film truly an example of “orientalism” or of “anti-orientalism”? What is the evidence of it being so? Are the female characters still “feminists” in films where the context provides no analogous social movement to Western feminism? Such questions force film scholars, whether Western or Eastern, to examine their claims and to justify them. If any reading is based solely on the text vis-à-vis some complicated theories developed in the West, then what indeed is being “demonstrated” or “proven” in the film?

Thus far, I have discussed the unequal relationship between Western theories and Chinese films and briefly reviewed the historic specifics of Chinese film ecology from 1999 to 2009. In the first chapter, I found that what is missing in cross-cultural analysis is any consideration of what films mean to the Chinese themselves, either audiences or film critics. Following Li Tuo’s recommendation that “attention should be paid not only to the [Chinese] film texts themselves, but also to the ways in which Chinese critics interpret these texts and how and in what context their theoretical discourse is produced” (Sensel et al. 1993, xi), the following analysis of Chinese films’ reception cross-culturally will compare film reviews printed in both mainstream Chinese and American publications in hopes of outlining any fundamental interpretive differences and developing a more holistic theory for understanding the complex layers of meaning in films.

### CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The sample selected for this study is a set of film reviews published in mainstream newspapers and on websites in both the United States and China. The sources include: *New York Times*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Washington Post*, *Time Magazine*, [www.Salon.com](http://www.Salon.com), [www.filmcritic.com](http://www.filmcritic.com), and [www.dvdjournal.com](http://www.dvdjournal.com) in the United States. From China, I will focus on reviews from *Beijing Morning* (北京晨报), *Xinmin News* (新民晚报), *Nanfang Daily* (南方日报), which are the most popular and highest-circulation local newspapers in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou respectively, and professional film critics' reviews published in *New Cinema Magazine* (新电影杂志), and online film forums, [bbs.ent. 163](http://bbs.ent.163.com)(网易娱乐论坛), [www.mtime.com](http://www.mtime.com) (时光网), and [www.filmsea.com.cn](http://www.filmsea.com.cn)(银海网).

Since the project deals with the second level of texts produced by film criticism and reviews, it is worth noting here who produces criticism and what kind of censorship such criticism is subject to, especially in China. Most of the publications in the United States are either privately owned or are under the ownership of major corporations. There is seldom any interaction between the government and these publications, particularly with regard to editorial content including review. Given that almost all publishing corporations, newspapers, magazines and commercial websites in mainland China are, more or less, under state and Party control, the chosen sample is representative of the overall current condition of the mass media. The film reviews written by China's professional film critics and reporters, normally are located in the rather dissent-proactive entertainment or popular-culture sections. My research is composed of qualitative-oriented textual analysis, with the aim of finding out the distinguishing differences

between critics in the United States and China in the published readings of the same film, *Hero* (2002).

CHAPTER FOUR: APPROACHING *HERO*Why *Hero*?

Concerning Chinese films, if there is anything summing up the common interests of both Americans and Chinese, inarguably that would be “martial arts” and “Zhang Yimou.” *Hero* (2002) is a combination of the two, as well as the box-office record-maker in China from 1999-2009, the decade this research considers.

*Hero* tells the story of failed assassination attempts on the King of Qin, the First Emperor bringing the warring states under imperial control nearly three thousand years ago. Nameless (Jet Li), from Qin’s enemy kingdom of Zhao, is summoned to recount his alleged defeat of three powerful warriors: Sky (Donnie Yen), Broken Sword (Tony Leung), and Flying Snow (Maggie Cheung). In retelling the story through several flashbacks, Nameless is allowed to move increasingly closer to the king, and intends to finally kill Qin. However, the suspicious King eventually foils the assassination attempts. Furthermore he persuades Nameless to give up assassination in exchange for the appealing idea of a peaceful, unified China under all heaven.

There have been a number of movies by the “Fifth-Generation” directors on this story: Chen Kaige’s grandiose epic *The Emperor and the Assassin* (1999), and Zhou Xiaowen’s intriguing *The Emperor’s Shadow* (1998). Zhang chooses to set the story in the fictional martial arts world, a world presented within a film genre<sup>10</sup> that is an unequivocal expression of Chinese tradition that also enjoys international acceptance. From beginning to end, the film creates an elegant atmosphere of pre-modern Chinese tranquility in a watercolor-like setting. The image of abundant cultural icons (chess, swords, calligraphy, etc.) in the mise-en-scene and the presentation of peculiar social customs, establishes the ground rules of a mythical world of martial arts. The film also

follows some of the basic martial arts formula: the theme of a revenge battle between good and evil, extensive fighting scenes with stunning choreography and quick editing, period costumes and stock characters from martial arts novels or Chinese history.

Moreover, the emotional subtext is quite subtle in the relationship between Broken Sword and Flying Snow. Their relationship is one of silken restraint, gentle and platonic love, and includes the emotion of affiliation in the way the disciple Moon is attached to her master. Their love is built on unconditional respect and loyalty to the point of ultimate sacrifice. This might seem exasperating or implausible to non-Asian audiences, but it is part of a deep cultural expression of longing that is pleasurable and desirable in Chinese culture.

The internationally renowned director Zhang Yimou never fails to evoke rounds of discussion among film-goers, critics, and scholars in the international film community. As part of an indigenous critical enterprise, his early films, such as *Red Sorghum* (1987), *Ju dou* (1990) and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991)<sup>11</sup> undergo a prevailing negative criticism by Chinese journalists, critics, and film scholars. They blame Zhang for orientaling Chinese culture for the pleasure of the “Western” gaze by portraying the backward feudal tradition, and ugly rural primitivism (Dai Qing, 1993; Zha Jianying, 1993; Liu Tonglin, 2002), and allowing Westerners to revel in the films’ exoticism and brutality towards women (Dai Jinghua, 2002, p.57-59). In a similar vein, Zhang Yiwu says that Fifth Generation filmmaking totally strayed from Chinese tradition and ignored the history of Chinese film (Zhang Yiwu, 1994). Zhang Yimou also enjoys many critical supporters, most notably in Rey Chow, who regards his films as critiques of Orientalism and of Chinese historical traditions and current problems, particularly with regard to the

status of women. Chow argues that Zhang is showing a “China” that is at once subalternized and exoticized by the West by means of “capturing the remnants of a history that has undergone disasters” and thus “imparting information about ‘China’ to the rest of the world” (Chow, 1995, p.171; p. 38). Others agree that his previous films actually share a consistent theme: a critical examination of Chinese culture and problems with an earnest humanist touch.

In the 1990s, Zhang’s films went into the North American and European markets and gradually achieved western recognition by receiving some international film festivals’ nomination and awards such as Cannes and Venice. Looking at his films apolitically, “Zhang’s films might be described as dramas of desire and sensation. The intense visual energy, the pulsing surfaces of erotic desire, the joyous celebrations of life, the luminous images, and the portrayal of cultural worlds dense and rich in texture hold a special appeal to local as well as international audiences” (Tam and Dissanayake, 1998, p. 33). At the same time, in Western discourse, much has been made about how the representation of gender and domestic power relations acts as an allegory for the political state of modern China. Delamoire believes that *Raise the Red Lantern* provides “an important but disguised critique of repressive power relations in a totalitarian state” (Delamoire, 1998). David Neo reads the film as an allegory denouncing China’s “obsolete feudal and patriarchal system” and writes: “the film blatantly criticizes the ineffectual and repressive feudal and patriarchal system of China” (2003). Jerome Silbergeld uses “melodramatic masquerade” to refer to his early works, considering that *Red Sorghum* “restores popular melodrama in a variety of styles and structures. It infuses films of moral drama with cloaked identities” (1999, p. 238). For *Raise the Red Lantern*, Silbergeld

writes, “exactly what [the authorities] thought they were banning remains as much a melodramatic masquerade as the film itself; neither they nor Zhang dares to remove the mask” (1999, p.293).

To produce *Hero*, Zhang teamed up with an A-list production crew: cinematographer Chris Doyle, well-known for his work with Wong Kar-wai; costume designer Emi Wada, an Oscar winner for costumes for *Ran* (1985); top martial arts choreographer Tony Ching Sui Tung from Hong Kong; renowned music composer Tan Dun. According to *Box Office Mojo*, *Hero* grossed \$177,394,432 worldwide, of which the international box office accounts for 69.7% (\$123,684,413), of which the U.S. market takes 30.3% (\$53,710,019). In domestic China, *Hero* beat the global-powerhouse *Titanic* (1998) to the top of the box-office receipts in the entire history of Chinese cinema.

*Hero* stormed through China with massive media coverage, heated critical debates, and active audience response both in print media and on the internet. The film’s public life fulfills Hans-Georg Gadamer’s assumption in *Truth and Method* that both readers and critics of reading are internal to this process: “all encounter with the language of art is an encounter with an unfinished event and is itself part of this event” (2004, p.85). Also, all those interpretive encounters form crucial moments of the film’s reception and give rise to a writing of comparison that focuses on the constitution of the filmic text in an open-ended and unstable chain of interpretation rather than on a continuum of events driven by an inner structure. In fact, Zhang has never directly admitted any political messages behind his films. Like his other films, *Hero* suggests no particular reading, thus distributing authorship among audience, critics and film scholars from East or West.

### Major Findings:

A review of articles from the American and Chinese print media and internet shows that the film has produced a rather different reception among American and Chinese critics. First, a look at the critical reception among critics based in the United States:

#### Visual or Narrative

*Dvdjournal.com*'s critic Dawn Taylor grants the film four stars, praising it as a "sumptuous visual banquet" and "one of the most visually stunning motion pictures in recent memory" (Taylor D., 2004). The *Chicago Sun-Times*'s Roger Ebert acknowledges that "*Hero* is beautiful and beguiling, a martial arts extravaganza defining the styles and lives of its fighters within Chinese tradition," and goes on to say that the film "demonstrates how the martial arts genre transcends action and violence and moves into poetry, ballet and philosophy" (Ebert, 2004). The *New York Times* further analyzes the visual style and, particularly, the meaning of color in detail while perceiving the martial arts epic as a narrative in five sections, each dominated by a single color (Mackey, 2004).

Visually, *Dvdjournal* describes some scenes as "the most jaw-droppingly amazing segments ever committed to celluloid" (D. Taylor, 2004), Charles Taylor from *Salon* further praises the fighting scenes as lyrical and calls the film "a great adventure tale with both scenes of individual combat and battle scenes whose grandeur and geometric formations of troops recall Akira Kurosawa and the Stanley Kubrick of *Spartacus* (1960)" (C. Taylor, 2004). Other critics agree with the positive assessment of the visual style. Cinematographically, *Hero* marks a return to the director's previous luscious style

when tales played out “in lush tones and textures; the camera and color not only told the story, they were the story” (Corliss, 2002).

In general, this film is perceived by Western reviewers as a visually stunning feast and technically brilliant film whose segmented narrative, including repetitive flashbacks, is seen as most acceptable. The Western reviews privilege the film’s visual aesthetics over the narrative or, as *Time Magazine* puts it succinctly, “color creates context” (Corliss, 2002).

Chinese critics present a striking contrast. Zhou Ming from *Xinmin News* writes, “The major critique centers around the theme, characterization, narrative and imitation, not the visual effects” and “the most obviously fatal problem lies in the thematic implication of peaceful “Tian Xia”(all our land), proven too broad to present”(Zhou Ming, 2002). Shang Ke from *New Cinema Magazine* even feels that *Hero*’s praise of peaceful “Tian Xia” runs against the spirits of “loyalty and faith”, “rebellion and revenge ” in martial arts films. (Shang Ke, 2002). Besides, the ill-structured plot is unappealing to some Chinese critics, who are dubious of its imitation of Akira Kurosawa’s *Run and Rashomon*, the *Ashes of Time*, *The Emperor and The Assassin*, and *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* (Shang Ke, 2002).

Even though it is undeniable that the Zeng (an ancient musical instrument), calligraphy, chess, crystal clear water, dramatic conventions, the Great Wall, and the landscape are all representative codes of “Chineseness,” many Chinese critics believe some important elements are missing from the film. As Bie Menghan from *bbs.net.163* says: “the art of music, calligraphy, and chess also enjoy the comparability with the spiritual dimension of martial art, for both take much mental concentration and discipline

to reach the 'supreme state', a state of human perfection" (Bie Menghan, 2003); Yet, "the audience won't be satisfied or get it if they lack some knowledge of the Chinese culture, history and Zhuangzi philosophy" (Shu Ke, 2004). In contrast to the American critical preference of style over narrative, many Chinese critics feel that "the story is too weak, the only hero is Zhang Yimou himself, the protagonists in the films are nothing but warriors under Zhang's control" (Yang Qing, 2002). *New Cinema Magazine* finds the characters' progression "flat and sketchy, fleshless and emotionless" (Shang Ke, 2004). The ultimate failure of the film lies in "the fact that the form didn't quite convincingly deliver the substance of the story" (Bie Menghan, 2003). More concisely, Fang Zheng from *Nanfang Daily* claims "The story and characters are marginalized; instead form and style are emphasized" (Fang Zheng, 2002). Also, the film is criticized by *Xinmin News* for not living up to viewers' expectations of an "authentic" martial arts film due to its lack of "coherent plot-flow" and "spirit of Xia and Yi (Knights-errant and Justice)" (Zhou Ming, 2002). Compared with previous Hong Kong martial arts films, Fang Zheng concludes that *Hero* fails to meet the Chinese expectation that a good film must include thematic significance, coherent plot-telling, and a well-structured script.

To sum up, for Chinese critics, Zhang indulges himself to the maximum with the visual richness and stylish action scenes while leaving characterization soulless and plot advancement lifeless. These critics believe Zhang has lost his touch for effective story-telling; instead, he pushes a feast of artistic pretensions and emptiness, which obviates the essence of the martial arts film genre.

## The Disturbing Political Messages

The political implications of the film are uncomfortable for both American and Chinese film critics, yet in different ways.

The *New York Times* suggests that “The implication of the noble sacrifices various characters make in the name of a unified China” should be taken as a “nationalistic message” (Dargis, 2002). This perception is not hers alone: Brenner also agrees that the film includes a political polemic Zhang is pushing, pointing out the provocative message is about “comparative efficacies between tyranny and governance” (Brenner, 2004). Other American critics even regard the message of national unity and developmental stability above individual interest as a defense of the party line, a justification of the CCP’s aggressive approach. Stephen Hunter from the *Washington Post*, for example, relates the film to “the justification of all tyrants— tyrants in nations and tyrants in offices: particularly that the latter-day king of Qin named Mao” (Hunter, 2004).

In general, the sympathetic portrayal of the King of Qin is felt to rationalize the authoritarian approach as necessary. The disturbing message that indicates devaluing human life for the sake of so-called peace and unity strikes American observers. They find the nationalist and patriotic rhetoric inconsistent with Zhang Yimou’s previous political standpoint and humanist advocacy, thus they are curious as to why this outstanding director sacrifices so much of his talent and his integrity to reach for the coveted ring of commercial success. They also wonder why the director recently agreed to direct some state-sponsored works despite the fact that his previous feature motion pictures were initially banned in China.

On the Chinese side, Shu Ke from *mtime.com* thinks the director's intention is not to recall the historical facts but, rather, to foretell the future of Chinese cinematic art—a combination of martial arts and romantic visual style. *Nanfang Daily* views it more as a story of a hero than a history, but Shang Ke says that he could not help relating *Hero* to a political lecture or a historical class and got annoyed by the lecturing. Above and beyond, the director's conversion to commercial-oriented filmmaking, which puzzles American critics, incites even more controversy in China. *New Cinema* sees the commercial package as functioning only to hold the “drossy idea of blind loyal” and “slavish obedience” to the emperor (Shang Ke, 2002). Bie Menghan claims the all A-list crew is evidence of Zhang's ambition to obtain a larger market share. He writes that, “though, practically speaking, it does not quite adhere to the Hollywood narrative convention, the film brings some fresh air to the Chinese film industry and forms a marketable model, which is crucial to developing indigenous Chinese films industry” (Bie Menghan, 2003). Zhou Ming also welcomes Zhang's preference of commerce over art, because artistic films alone cannot boost the national film industry. YingZi from *filmsea.com* further details *Hero*'s marketing strategy and labels *Hero* as the first model of marketing Chinese films; he also recommends it for the further commercializing of the Chinese film industry (Ying Zi, 2003). Fang Zheng agrees *Hero* is a commercial hit, but writes that “it would be overreaching to regard *Hero* as either a lifesaver to the Chinese film industry or a new path into the international film market” (Fang Zheng, 2002).

Overall, Chinese critics report annoyance and discomfit at the explicit portrayal of the First Emperor to be an innocent, even heroic ruler. For that image seems conflict with the history educations where the King has been taught as the mixture of cruelty and

achievement. Even so, Zhang's conversion from art house icon to commercial pioneer fired much debate that will be further explored.

For American and Chinese critics, it is obvious they have dissimilar preferences regarding style/substance and perceptions of the political messages. In the following chapter, the underlying reasons behind will be discussed and explored.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

### Martial Arts Film Genre

The first difference concerns the relative importance of visual form or narrative form. I find myself agreeing with Miguel Salazar's explanation of the divergence—"the clash over the two perspectives is not about preference of form over substance" (2004, p.61). Instead, it results from the different degree of familiarity with the martial art genre, because "the familiarity and naturalization of the genre's idiom, its stock of imagery, narrative tropes, devices and techniques" (2004, p.61) is the critical factor that forms the basic narrative pattern for the audience to appreciate and discuss the genre.

He further elucidates this point by noting that the two sets of viewers are using two different aesthetic frames of reference, or schemas, for appreciating the martial arts film as part of a genre. In other words, the supposed oppositional critical receptions of visual and narrative are due to the different schemas that American and Chinese reviewers are using to assess the martial arts films' value.

For a Chinese audience, the martial arts memory is framed by the novels of Jin Yong, Gu Long, and films by Zhang Che, King Hu, Patrick Tam, Tsui Hark, and Yuen Wo-ping, who have been persistently exploring the spirit of Wu Xia—knightly chivalry. The spirit of Xia (knights-errant that could come from any social class) and Yi (justice and loyalty) are centrally rooted in the protagonists who roam around the country and use Kung Fu skills to right wrongs. Overall, martial arts films can be generally considered films of idealized masculinity that are powered by heroic male characters and invested heavily in the moral of Chinese patriarchal tradition and the honor code of heroes. According to the Xia code of ethics, peace does not necessarily have the highest value:

justice does. Peace without justice only indicates weak complacency. Therefore, Broken Sword and Nameless' decision to give up their goal for an unproven promise of peace seems to go against the ethos of the hero code. Instead, the female warriors like Flying Snow and Moon show great courage and deep love. By honoring their commitment and not being afraid to sacrifice for their belief, they replace males in demonstrating the spirit of Xia. This creates the first problem for martial arts purists in China.

The driving force that impels the narrative and characterization is the fundamental concern of loyalty and justice. Those clichéd action sequences—the sheer power and speed—in the filmic imagery only function to further accentuate the duty-bound heroic affection.<sup>12</sup> Despite creative and complex permutations of the genre, which sometimes incorporate light-hearted humor or have a folkloric flavor, the nature of these issues remains the same. Judging against the familiar conventions, a Chinese audience expects the genre to retain its core, but in *Hero* only finds the righteous nature of chivalry and the ideal freewheeling lifestyle disappearing into the romance, the emotionless fighting duels, and conformity to an untried and unproven peace.

On the other hand, their American counterparts assess films like *Hero* as prototypes of an unfamiliar genre, and these viewers and critics are impressed by the use of relatively unfamiliar tropes and idioms of the genre, rather than by the specifically skillful use of more familiar tropes by the directors. For Americans who are not enthusiastic about reading subtitles in a foreign film, *Hero*'s beautifully shot, lush cinematography might be sufficient to satisfy them. In general, Salazer finds that “foreign films are in a tricky position in the American film industry. For a foreign movie in search of the American Dream, foreign-language dialogue means deportation to the art-house

circuit. The American public is not enthusiastic about going to the cinema to read subtitles, and contrary to their counterparts in the rest of the world, they can get away with it” (Salazer, 2004). For that reason, the sheer visual excitement of martial arts fighting has been able to grab the audience’s attention and please the critic’s sensibility.

### Is the Message Political?

The movie’s sympathetic portrayal of the King of Qin, the epitome of the brutal Great Man, was uncomfortable for both Chinese and American critics, though for different reasons.

The presumed message of national unity and stability seems paramount to foreigners. They take it as a blanket endorsement of the party line, even a justification for the PRC’s aggressive posturing towards Taiwan. More specifically, the King of Qin can be read as the “embodiment of a new China in the past that can be translated into a powerful, peaceful, and united China” (Berry & Farquhar, 2006, p.166). This is not the first time Americans have read the message in a fictional film by closely referring to modern China’s politics. Empirically, after examining a large number of American press reports on Chinese films, it is obvious the Western media pays particular (if not exclusive) attention to censorship issues and Communist hard-line repression of artistic freedom (Zhang Yingjin, 2002, p. 27), such as which Chinese films are suspended in production, ordered to have excessive cuts, or banned from release, and which directors are engaged in independent, underground, or subversive filmmaking. Even films that have nothing to do with Chinese historical events, such as Zhang Yimou’s *Not One Less* (1999) and *The Road Home* (1999) concerning children’s education and the pure love between a man and a woman respectively have been criticized on political grounds that go beyond Zhang’s

tolerance. This sentiment is expressed in Zhang Yimou's letter to Gilles Jacob concerning Zhang's withdrawal from the 1999 Cannes Film Festival:

Whether a film is good or bad, each person can have his or her own way of looking at it, this is only natural. But I cannot accept that when it comes to Chinese films, the West seems for a long time to have had just the one "political" reading: if it is not "against the government" then it's "for the government." The naiveté and lack of perspective (lit. "one-sidedness") of using so simple a concept to judge a film is obvious. With respect to the works of directors from America, France and Italy for example, I doubt you have the same point of view. (Rist, 2002)<sup>13</sup>

Another political reading of *Hero* that I find inappropriate is the assumption that *Hero* indicates Zhang's political complicity with Communist authorities in order to avoid suffering censorship or an outright ban. Another film for which this is also the case is *The Emperor and the Assassin* (Chen Kaige, 1998), a film in which the dictator is portrayed in the decisively negative fashion that did not suffer governmental interruption or censorship but did suffer box-office disaster. Here, I am not accusing Western critics of "political correctness" the way conservatives have used the term or exonerating the director from political accountability. Rather, my purpose here is to reflect on the mechanism that constructs the reading, because I have found that common political

readings by western critics have been stereotyping China, stereotypes that played out not only in mass media, such as daily newspapers, and in American films.

A longitudinal study of coverage of China in the *New York Times* and the *L.A. Times* (from 1992 to 2001) finds the overall tone in stories remains consistently negative across time in both newspapers. The news is predominantly reported through negative political and ideological frames. These findings correspond with the results of previous studies: the prevailing themes in covering the socio-political climate in China are “tainted with an ethnocentric negativity,” despite the fact that there has been variation of reporting structures and frames during different historical periods (Dorogi, 2001, p. 79).

Throughout the history of American international journalism, there has been a “strong ideological inclination toward interpreting foreign cultures via domestic standards of evolutionary progression” (Dorogi, 2001, p. 79). These studies conclude that apart from political and diplomatic factors, ideological and cultural differences may account for a great deal of the negative frames used to portray on China in the news. By such standards, a political reading of *Hero* may be derived from American critics’ cultural privileges or rather a political responsibility the West must assume based on prior cultural readings.

Rothman once identified a moral and political responsibility for the Chinese cinema: Americans studying the Fifth Generations’ films found themselves “envisioning the events sweeping China as a grand historical melodrama” and indeed felt “called upon to play a role” in promoting new Chinese films in the international arena (1993, p.259).

Though this type of critical consciousness dates to the mid-1980s, when Fifth Generation directors stepped into international film festivals for the first time, it still seems relevant among film critics who regard themselves as active advocates for the advancement of

freedom, democracy, and human rights in contemporary China. By assuming such responsibilities, Rothman admits that it is also “to reject out of hand the possibility that Asian films may call for fundamentally different ways of thinking” (p.262).

#### Retelling History through a Contemporary Lens

On the other hand, for Chinese who have some knowledge of that history, the political implications of *Hero* (and other films telling this story) are felt quite differently. There is no doubt the Emperor of Qin put an end to centuries of bloodshed by establishing dominion over the seven feudal “Warring States,” effectively creating a “modern” unified China. He also standardized China’s coinage, measurement, and language for the first time. The Qin dynasty did not last for very long, and the succeeding Han dynasty depicted the King of Qin as a vicious, ruthless, and paranoid megalomaniac in order to justify its right to “The Throne of Heaven.” This negative representation is often the way Emperor of Qin has been depicted until recently. Hence, *Hero*’s sympathetic portrayal of the King of Qin, who seems to become an allegorical symbol of monarchy and actually an empathetic hero figure by the final scene, was felt by many Chinese to rewrite history too much.

In China, historical stories have been frequently rewritten in films or TV dramas for various reasons. Some argue that the appearance of many historical films is an inevitable result of the conflicts among officialdom, the film-makers, and film scholars. “Using the past to criticize the present” (*jie gu feng jin*) has been a traditional rhetoric strategy in literature, plays, and films. Yin Hong provides the following argument to explain the constant appearance of historical TV dramas in recent years, which I believe

could be equally applied to illustrate historical subjects that are frequently chosen either in “Royal Court” or “Jiang Hu” films:

History is distanced from all the controversial and sensitive conflicts and power struggles of contemporary China. It provides a rich selection of resources and a more open-ended narrative space. Moreover, the process of historical rewriting allows the respective social forces to construct a contemporary history that obviates the uncertainties and doubts associated with the past. History thus operates as a kind of political strategy for acquiring advantage. (Yin Hong, 2002, p.34).

Therefore, historical films do not need to burden themselves with responsibilities for accuracy in retelling history, because they are not realist documentaries but included in the fictional genre in which people can fly one mountain and in the next arrows can be shot miles away. In the case of a fictional martial arts film depicting the two-thousand-year-old story of the First Emperor and his assassins, it should be more of a story with contemporary concerns than a historical lecture. Because history has given its verdict, and enough time-distance permits the safety to retell and re-examine the story from a contemporary perspective.

Thus, as we have seen, because the two sets of viewers are using different frames of aesthetics and historical reference to appreciate martial arts films, Americans tend to laud *Hero*'s visual beauty and fantastic combat scenes, whereas Chinese cannot bear the limpness of the narrative and characters. Yet, I would argue that the political problems

surrounding *Hero* need to be read contextually rather than textually to arrive at the most persuasive and complete reading of the film, because I believe the critics from both countries in one way or another fall short of systematically framing a compelling argument about, first, how China's changing economic and political position in the global system is (re)shaping Chinese film culture and politics; and second, how historical stories have been constantly rewritten or adapted to construct a contemporary expectation and viewpoint in order to start new political or other ventures.

#### Hero's Real Ambition—Transnational Text

Jenny Kwok Wah Lau (2007) suggests that the political questions surrounding *Hero* should be considered from a global/local context (p.2). This approach is appropriate given that the filmmakers (producers and director included) made it very clear that their intention was to make a film that would be a global hit. Zhang once indicated that gaining international recognition through festivals did not help much in rescuing Chinese films from market decline, nor did it help move Chinese cinema into the center of world attention. In an interview with *South Weekend* (in Chinese), he made it explicitly clear that, "*Hero* is a commercial action film," made with an eye on the global market. In the same interview, Zhang's longtime friend and partner, producer Zhang Weiping recalled their discussion: "We must decide whether our films should target a general audience or the film critics, and finally we came to the agreement that, we need the audience's support, we need box office. So we made some accommodations while shooting *Hero* and *House of the Flying Daggers* (2004)" ("Zhang Yimou," 2004).

Zhang's shift of emphasis is shared with another prominent director, Chen Kaige, who also agrees that for Chinese cinema to continue to grow, the film industry must

strike a delicate balance between art and commerce. He says, “Our job now is to make the Chinese film industry bigger, and in order to develop our market here, we have to learn how to be businessmen” (Landreth, 2005).

The series of approaches reviewed in chapter two, aiming for restricting Chinese films either at the industrial or textual level, are not useful as a practical guide for boosting Chinese films to a position where they will be strong enough to compete with American blockbusters. Despite various marketing strategies, those small-budget urban stories are still dwarfed by the box-office dominance of mainstream Hollywood films. To be commercially successful, Chinese filmmakers have to respond to the two urgent issues: how to reassert control of the Chinese domestic market, and how to spread Chinese films’ popularity from the small circle of international festivals to the actual international marketplace.

At this moment of Chinese film history, the central question becomes: how can a culturally refined Chinese film serve as mass entertainment both for the Chinese and international audiences? The unexpected commercial success of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* has changed the entire scene and direction. The film proved that a sword-fighting film that has cultural appeal to Asian audiences, who are more familiar and nostalgic about the styles and conventions of martial arts, can also be marketable to Euro-American audiences, who can enjoy exoticism while remaining unenthusiastic about reading subtitles.

Negotiating these apparently conflicting objectives, *Hero* is based upon the deep-rooted philosophy that true bravery lies not in one's willingness to fight but in one's willingness to stop fighting. The notion of peace also powerfully resonates within

contemporary international discourse, especially in the United States, as Chinese Scholar Zhang Xudong credits the film's popularity in U.S. partly to the post September 11<sup>th</sup> "anti-terrorist content" (Zhang Xudong, 2003). This message, which delivers the premise of peace through constant warfare and bloodshed, is disturbing, however. A peace that builds on killing is not convincing and contradicts any notion of non-violence. Even though the aim of peace is national unity and security, if peace occurs by sacrificing individual life, it sounds feudal if not imperial to an audience with a modern, liberal point of view. Therefore, Lau situates the internationality of *Hero* in a place caught within the contradictions of narrow nationalism (security and unity) and self-conscious cosmopolitanism (world peace — "Tian xia" peace). Zhang then finds himself unable to please the Chinese audience. On the one hand, cultural essentialists and purists accuse him of making a martial arts film that dilutes the genre's tradition and that propagates an inaccurate representation of China and Chinese culture. On the other hand, anti-Orientalists blame Zhang for pandering to a Western desire for Oriental exotica and a Kung Fu stereotype.

To continue his way into international markets with his next two martial art epics, *House of Flying Daggers* (2004) and *Curse of Golden Flower* (2006), Zhang downplayed the disturbing political message to a pleasant and mutually-preferred level. His main points are: the government is corrupt while the rebels are virtuous, but it does not matter so much because we hardly know who is on whose side. At this point, the process of appropriating a Chinese masculine genre into mainstream consumption is an interesting phenomenon aimed at creating and maintaining a new film genre (though its longevity is unknown). The *Guardian's* Peter Bradshaw regards *House of Flying Daggers*

contextually as a work of transnational cinema, Sino-American, and writes that “if this Hollywood-ised wuxia is a new form of the genre, it’s all the more exciting for that. As for its alleged chauvinism, this movie’s content is much more ambiguous than [Hero]” (Bradshaw, 2004).

*Curse of Golden Flower* (2006) is even more palatable for Western viewers in terms of the story and narrative. This film is close to the Western concept of an epic film where large-scale historical movements are positioned in direct relation to the intrigues and the intricate relations of the royal court. Furthermore, its plot is directly reminiscent of a classical, Western-style tragedy, like ancient Greek dramas or Shakespearian tragic plots. In fact, in an interview at the film’s world premiere (taking place as part of the AFI fest in Hollywood), actor Chow Yun Fat expressed clearly that the crew were conscious of its resemblance to classical Western narratives and compared it to tragedies like *King Lear* and *Hamlet*. Because of its dramatic/tragic plot that is analogous to the classic Shakespeare narratives, the culturally specific backdrop becomes irrelevant and thus provides the cross-over ability for reaching global audience and maximizing its box-office revenue.

In the three films, every accommodating effort reveals important aspects of the dynamics of transnational considerations in filmmaking. The oppositional positioning of East versus West no longer applies because some transnationally-produced films pitch to international audiences in order to maximize commercial potential. The effort of cultural appropriation and reconfiguration in the global era permits re-writing of the martial arts genre. Furthermore, a strategy of flexible encoding assists the film in reaching a diverse audience. For Chinese audiences and film scholars, it is possible that the new

configuration of the genre can provoke an indigenous cultural search/critique of the Chinese nation, and also provide effective tools to address contemporary prospects and questions. At the same time I am discussing Chinese films, an Indian Bollywood film *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) has made a historic breakthrough—sweeping eight Oscars and the worldwide boxoffice, as well as provoking round after round of discussion on how “Hollywood” or “Bollywood” the film really is.

In search of a model for the Chinese blockbuster, a culturally specific and technically sophisticated film that will appeal to both East and West, Zhang continues to experiment with a global/local strategy. *Hero* and its follow-ups are made neither for a Chinese self-reflexive gaze nor for Western spectatorship; in other words, neither Chinese nor Western vision takes the central seat. This state of Chinese cinema could be named post-*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* for being “a new age of transnational Chinese cinema,” in which “it has become fashionable to mix stars from all three Chinas as well as from foreign countries, in part to generate audience interest but also to facilitate transnational packaging” (Zhang Yingjin, 2004, p. 260). The new package is a historic-specific product processed by the interplay of multiple forces, including Hollywood blockbuster supremacy, Chinese audiences’ demand, and Chinese filmmakers’ resistance and innovation.

## CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu (1997) has suggested that Chinese cinema, even from its inception, has been basically transnational in its means and modes of production. Today Chinese filmmakers are stuck between a strong demand for ethnic and cultural images from the West as well as a strong economic and political constraint at home, but they have never stopped reconsidering the very conditions of their existence and survival in the era of transnational capitalism.

Zhang Yimou's efforts at cultural appropriation and reconfiguration of the martial arts genre exemplify the Chinese filmmakers' accommodation to the new needs with its commercial success and public discussion. *Hero* provides a new tool to address and reflect Chinese culture, and at the same time, it embodies the dilemma of boundaries imposed on cultural texts when crossing from one culture to another. The critical discourse framed by a binary construction of East versus West is not ultimately suitable to *Hero*, however, since this is a transnational film targeted at global audiences. Also, with *Hero* we have a situation where a non-Western film gains a reputable standing compared with more conventional products of Hollywood without necessarily depending entirely on the publicity granted by Hollywood's global distribution machine.

While my discussion began with the inappropriateness of Western critics reading a Chinese text by locating it in a pre-conceived discursive paradigm, I end this study by returning to the new consideration of film ecology and historical specifics in cross-cultural analysis. Indeed, the term "cross-cultural" itself implies a real or imagined boundary line through which critics must negotiate their own positions with other discourses and practices. Through the concept of film ecology, we can arrive at a new

stage of cross-cultural analysis, a stage where Western theory may take a comprehensive view to consider the cultural and historic specificity of China, Chinese filmmakers, and Chinese audiences, an approach that will enable scholars to better understand not only other cultures but ultimately, their own as well.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See Deng Xiaoping's *Building Socialism with Chinese Characteristics*, an excerpt from a talk with the Japanese delegation to the second session of the Council of Sino-Japanese Non-Governmental Persons, published in June 30, 1984.

<sup>2</sup> For more debate over economic reforms between 1978 and 1989, see *Dilemmas of Reform in China: Political Conflict and Economic Debate* by Joseph Fewsmith. The major task of this book is to trace the emergence of China's economic reforms, the conflicts that accompanied them, and the sharpening of leadership disputes that led to the collapse of the reform process in 1988-89.

<sup>3</sup> This is true partly because post-Soviet Russia's weakening economy, social instability, declining national power make the prospect of radical change less attractive to many Chinese. It is true partly because many Chinese are deeply skeptical of the United States because of its mixed motives for promoting the idea of human rights. See the opinion poll conducted by Cheng Gang published in *Global Times*. The study, which supports the reasons stated above, surveyed Chinese citizens in the cities of Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Wuhan, and Chongqing.

<sup>4</sup> Investments in form of joint venture or equity investment must have prior approved by SARFT (State Administration of Radio, Film and Television). The Chinese company must get SARFT approval before it can enter into contract with any foreign investor/collaborator. Foreign companies or individuals are not allowed to film independently in China; they must have a SARFT approved Chinese collaborator.

<sup>5</sup> Hollywood is generally used here in two senses. First, it stands for the shorthand for the U.S. film industry and its products, movies which American producers intend to

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export in China and worldwide. Second, Hollywood refers to a specific model of film production and distribution, characterized by vertical integration and high capitalization.

<sup>6</sup> More details about this process, see Zhu Ying's book-length report, *Chinese Cinema During the Era of Reform*, p.145-149.

<sup>7</sup> More discussion of "The New Mainstream Film", see Zhang Yingjin's *Screening China*, Center for Chinese Studies: The University of Michigan, 2002, p.324-331.

<sup>8</sup> The term "Fifth Generation film" is generally used to refer to film production by the 1982 graduating class of the Beijing Film Academy, mainly referring to works by Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, Tian Zhuangzhuang, Wu Ziniu, He Qun.

<sup>9</sup> Fourth Generation normally refers to 1976 graduates from Beijing Film Academy, including Huang Shuqin, Zheng Dongtian, Xie Fei, Xie Jin and Zhang Nuanxin. They suffered through 1966-1976 Cultural Revolution and had to drop their formal education. It was not until the Gang of Four was brought down in 1976 that they had the chance to direct their own films.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Teo (1997) argues that martial arts films are divided into two categories: the Wu Xia (sword-fighting) films and the Kung Fu (fist-fighting) films. The former often feature heroes using swords and imaginary weapons in a fantastic pre-modern China, as in the films of Zhang Che, King Hu, Tsui Hark etc. Whereas the latter emphasize physical training to defeat the evil in the realistic society, such as films of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan and Donnie Yen. In this thesis, they are generally regarded as martial arts films.

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<sup>11</sup> Many of Zhang's early works were initially banned by authorities, who viewed them as subversive and anti-Chinese. *To Live* is still under ban for portraying the most turbulent period of China's history (1966-1976).

<sup>12</sup> For more discussion on martial arts film genre, see Stephen Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema*, 1997, and *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema: The Wuxia Tradition*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> The text was posted online by Dr. Dina Lordanova, Centre of Mass Communication Research, University of Leicester, 104 Regent Road, Leicester LE1 7LT, England. It is translated from Chinese, originally published in Beijing Youth Daily, April 20, 1999.

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## VITA

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In August 2007, she moved to Winston Salem, North Carolina, and became part of the Department of Communication at Wake Forest University, where she concentrated on media study. Her research interests include comparative film study and media economy. “Conscientiousness brings beauty to women in work, in romance and self-maturity” is her life-time belief.