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Studies of Chinese Art Films Since the 1990s

先锋影像：

中国20世纪90年代以来艺术电影研究

三晓平 著



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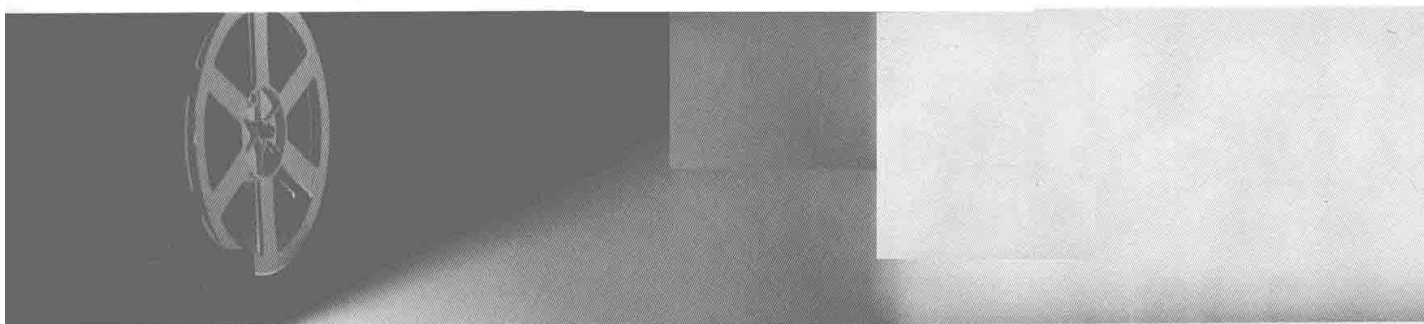
# CHINA'S AVANT-GARDE CINEMA:

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先后主持四项国家社科基金项目，一项国务院新闻办“中国图书对外推广计划”翻译资助项目。2013年入选教育部新世纪优秀人才、福建省新世纪优秀人才。先后获福建省第11届、12届社科优秀成果奖、厦门市第九次社科成果奖、厦门大学电信天翼奖教金等奖项。

# CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b> .....	1
<b>Part I Records of Epochal Vanguard</b> .....	19
Chapter 1 <i>Dirt</i> (1992): The Bildungsroman of Non-Mainstream Youth of the 1980s.....	21
Chapter 2 <i>In the Heat of the Sun</i> (1994): Remembrance of the “Era of Enlightenment” .....	34
<b>Part II Transcriptions of Youthful Passion</b> .....	51
Chapter 3 <i>Weekend Lover</i> (1995): Fable of Indulgence and Self-Annihilation .....	53
Chapter 4 <i>The Making of Steel</i> (1997): Why Steel Could Not Be Successfully Made.....	65
<b>Part III Middle Class Culture and Its Distinction</b> .....	77
Chapter 5 <i>A Room for Two People</i> (2008): China’s Middle Class and Its Cultural Life.....	79
Chapter 6 <i>Green Tea</i> (2003): Taste of the “Middle Class” and Its Historical Amnesia .....	88
<b>Part IV Postmodern Panorama and Simulacrum</b> .....	101
Chapter 7 <i>The World</i> (2004): Post-Modern Paradise or Post-Revolutionary Fantasy? .....	103
Chapter 8 <i>The Contract</i> (2006): The Chinese Version of “Pretty Woman” .....	118
<b>Part V Historical Introspection and Projection</b> .....	131
Chapter 9 <i>24 City</i> (2008): Orchestrating Workers’ Memories and National History.....	133
Chapter 10 <i>Eleven Flowers</i> (2012): Conservative Projection in the Memory of a Teenager.....	155
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	171
<b>References</b> .....	179

# INTRODUCTION

## China's Avant-Garde Cinema since the 1990s

After the 1990s, China's film industry underwent a profound transformation with its institutional framework completely overhauled, especially after the gigantic turn of the middle of the 1990s. Since then, "China's mainstream visual culture has been implicated in the global expansion of capitalism and is becoming less and less concerned with understanding Chinese culture and history"; consequently, critics observe that despite "all its innovations, much of contemporary visual production may be at risk of eschewing realism and historical consciousness."<sup>①</sup>

But even before this new round of reform unraveled its curtain, a trend has arrived in the Chinese filmic world in the early 1990s, which has been named films of the urban generation, of the avant-garde; or films made by the sixth-generation auteurs.<sup>②</sup>

① Wang Ban. "In Search of Real Images in China: Realism in the Age of Spectacle." *Journal of Contemporary China* 17.56 (2008), 497-498.

② Based on Harry H. Kuoshu's study, Richard Letteri has succinctly summarized the features of the six generations, which is worthy to be quoted here. "The First Generation filmmakers produced films in the 1920s are considered 'pioneers' of Chinese film... both they and the Second Generation of the 1930s integrated melodrama with a social or critical realist style to create socially progressive films... Once in political control, the Communist party-state employed the Third Generation of filmmakers to create Communist propaganda films that celebrated the glories of the Communist revolution, its leader Mao Zedong and its heroically drawn soldiers and peasantry. The Fourth Generation filmmakers, who were trained in filmmaking in the 1960s under the Communist state, did not begin the process of reassessing the Communist Revolution and addressing the social concerns of the Chinese people until the post-Mao era (1979-1990). Graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in 1982, it was the Fifth Generation filmmakers... who brought international fame to Chinese cinema with their rural allegories that subtly hid critiques of the Chinese patriarchal state and society... Finally, after graduating from the Beijing Film Academy in 1992... the Sixth Generation of filmmakers... began to experiment with a new realist style that focused on the economic and social conditions of everyday life in (mostly) urban China..." See Richard Letteri. "History, Silence and Homelessness in Contemporary Chinese Cinema." *Asian Studies Review* 34 (March 2009), 17-18. For detailed discussions of the various generations, see Harry H. Kuoshu, "Overview: The Filmmaking Generations." *Celluloid China: Cinematic Encounters with Culture and Society*. Ed. Harry H. Kuoshu. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002.



Whatever the focus paid on this new cultural drive, filmic scholars hold the consensus that its emergence “signaled the arrival of a new kind of cinema in Chinese film history, one truly derived from individualized experience.”<sup>①</sup> The idiosyncratic novelties of these works have been widely acknowledged,

Aesthetically, they abandon the traditions of both Chinese melodrama and Hollywood commercialism and aspire to the status of innovative European art films ridden with existentialist crises. Ideologically, they forsake grand narratives and utopian ideas (national allegory, enlightenment, and revolution) and prefer marginalized people (rock musicians, alienated artists, mental patients, migrant workers, prostitutes, gays and lesbians) and their unconventional, uneventful, and un(der) represented lifestyles.<sup>②</sup>

What is most noteworthy of this avant-garde cinema is its realistic move. Fixed frames, long takes and fragments or gaps in narration are often used to minimize directorial intervention. The present study looks into the content and form of this new trend in order to find its historical significance and cultural-political connotation.

### **What is China's Avant-Garde Cinema since the 1990s?**

Fans of world cinema would immediately recall Italian Neorealism and French New Wave when they come across the aforementioned descriptions. Indeed, China's avant-garde cinema shares many resembling features with the two filmic movements, and itself could be taken as a peculiar “new wave.” Many theorists of Italian Neorealism regard it less as a consistent set of stylistic features and more as the relationship between film practice and the social reality of post-war Italy. For instance, Millicent Marcus has elaborated on its lack of consistent film styles.<sup>③</sup> Likewise, China's new cinema is neither an actual school, nor a group of theoretically motivated and like-minded directors and scriptwriters; but a moment or a trend in Chinese filmic field. Both the cinemas explore the living conditions of the poor and the lower working class, with characters' survival being their primary objective. Both cinemas portray their daily mundane and quotidian activities devoid of self-consciousness, with non-

① Chen Mo and Zhiwei Xiao. “Chinese Underground Films: Critical Views from China.” *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*. Eds. Paul G. Pickowicz and Yingjin Zhang. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006. 148.

② Yingjin Zhang. *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010. 159.

③ Millicent Marcus. *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986.

professional actors/actresses and on-site performances. These similarities should be explored via the social-historical contexts. Italian Neorealism films originated in the 1940s from the post-World War II Italian society, when poverty, oppression, injustice and desperation prevailed; and difficult economic and moral conditions engulfed the populace, especially torturing the poor and the disenfranchised working class. Thus the directors aimed to represent changes in the Italian psyche and conditions of everyday life. Similarly, China's new cinema also betokened more than a decade of cultural change and social transformation since the 1990s and after, when globalization carried the neoliberal credo to China which caused the privatization of SOEs (state-owned enterprises) with millions of workers being laid off. But we simultaneously need to take note the difference. Italian neorealist films were often shot in streets because the film studios were damaged significantly during the war; while the directors of early films of China's avant-garde cinema could only shoot on location because they could not get support from the official studio when the state at the time still maintained its system of production and distribution before it fully participated the tide of commercialization in order to benefit from globalization.

In this regard, it is also helpful for us to compare China's avant-garde cinema with French New Wave of the late 1950s and 1960s, which was subject to the influence of Italian Neorealism. It is also acknowledged that the socio-economic forces after World War II greatly affected this cinematic movement. French New Wave rebelled against the forms popular in pre-war traditions, namely classical French film of straight narrative cinema, which was often adapted from traditional novelistic structures. Out of political necessity and financial difficulty, France at that time tended to fall back and rely on this older formula; but the directors of French New Wave believed that these forms could push the audience to submit to a dictatorial plot-line, thus the type of high-minded, literary period films held in esteem at domestic film festivals, namely the French "cinema of quality," were especially among their target of criticism. By the same token, although never a formally organized movement, China's New Cinema filmmakers were linked by their self-conscious rejection of the socialist realist movies which was "endorsed officially for decades as the primary, politically correct method of producing literature and art in China" and "has become formulaic and prescriptive, and symbolizes an authoritarian tradition";<sup>①</sup> as well as their predecessors namely the fifth-generation directors, who orchestrated legendary, fake folk customs to stress on "cultural myths and national identity" of the Chinese nation as a backfire against

① Yingjin Zhang. "My Camera Doesn't Lie?" *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*. Eds. Paul G. Pickowicz and Yingjin Zhang. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006. 27.



the officially-endorsed, dogmatic realism, gradually became elitist and formulaic by themselves.<sup>①</sup> Consequently, both French New Wave and China's avant-garde cinema, with their spirit of youthful iconoclasm, held the desire to screen more current social issues on location, experimenting with editing, visual style and narrative. For instance, they were both using portable equipment and requiring little or no set up time, thus the way of filmmaking presented a documentary style; in addition, fragmented, discontinuous editing and long takes were frequently used filming techniques; and the combination of objective realism and subjective realism created a narrative ambiguity. In short, they both valued the expression of the director's personal vision in the film's style and content, as part of a general impulsion to break with the traditional and existing paradigms. Thus most of the directors subscribe to the auteur theory which holds that the director's personal signature should be visible from film to film.

These neo-realist feature films emerged in China in the early 1990s have received enthusiastic recommendations from critics. Some even argue that these works could be more real than straight documentary for they could be "more effective in revealing the ugly truth... may infuse authenticity to the documentary, circumstantial traces" with "its narrative and psychic motivations"; because "inserting drama into documentary increases rather than decreases the impact of reality."<sup>②</sup> It is recalled that during Mao's era, directors attempted to show truth through the ideology of class struggle. By contrast, this avant-garde cinema shows the apparent reality by stripping down ideological representations that distort it.

Here, it is inspirational to muse on China's avant-garde cinema vis-a-vis the two key texts of theory of avant-garde, by Renato Poggioli (1907–1963) and Peter Bürger, respectively. Poggioli's view of avant-garde literature is located in "the dichotomy between conventional, clichéd language and experimental linguistic forms."<sup>③</sup> This focus on linguistic creativity is regarded as a "reaction to the flat, opaque, and prosaic nature of our public speech"; therefore, the hermetic language of modern fiction functions as "at once cathartic and therapeutic in respect to the degeneration afflicting common language through conventional habits."<sup>④</sup> But because Poggioli identifies the reason for avant-garde's skepticism towards language on the tensions of bourgeois-

① Yingjin Zhang. "My Camera Doesn't Lie?" *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*. Eds. Paul G. Pickowicz and Yingjin Zhang. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006. 26.

② Wang Ban. "In Search of Real Images in China: Realism in the Age of Spectacle." *Journal of Contemporary China* 17.56(2008): 503.

③ Jochen Schulte-Sasse. "Foreword." *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Peter Bürger. Trans. Michael Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984. viii.

④ Ibid.

capitalist society (which caused the commercialization and dequalification of language), it is hard for us to take this critical consciousness on language as a starting point for a theory of avant-garde, as the skepticism has a long history ever since the eighteenth century from Romanticism.

In short, Poggioli takes the cult of the novelty and even of the strange as “the basis for avant-garde art’s substantive and not accidental unpopularity”<sup>①</sup>; though he also acknowledges that this was “an exquisitely romantic phenomenon even before it became typically avant-garde.”<sup>②</sup> In general, he does not consider that these characteristics are applicable to the literature of an extensive period, and thus cannot function as the basis of a theory. As Jochen Schulte-Sasse aptly notes, Poggioli’s theory is “at best a theory of modernism that explains certain basic characteristics of artistic production since the middle of the 19th century.”<sup>③</sup>

By contrast, Peter Bürger “denies that the radical turning point conventionally set in the mid-19th century exists,” and points out that the assumption “obscures the much more radical shift from Aestheticism to the historical avant-garde at the beginning of our century.”<sup>④</sup> What he refers to is the important concern of the avant-gardists, who recognize “the social inconsequentiality of autonomous art and, ...to attempt to lead back to social praxis.”<sup>⑤</sup>

Here, we can see that the theoretical emphases of the two scholars are differing. Bürger are concerned with the differences between modernism and the avant-garde: “Modernism may be understood as an attack on traditional writing techniques, but the avant-garde can only be... an attack meant to alter the institutionalized commerce with art. The social roles are different.”<sup>⑥</sup> It is apparent that these avant-gardists have a revolutionary idea; they were politically progressive. The ideal of the avant-garde “juxtaposes the state of expropriation with a utopian state, in which dominated social groups reappropriate language, allowing it once again to become a medium for expressing the needs and material, concrete experiences of individuals and groups. It could thus counterbalance the powers that strives to dominate socially.”<sup>⑦</sup>

Insofar as they were “actively attacking the institution of art. Their effort was

① Renato Poggioli. *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Trans. Gerald Fitzgerald. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968. 50.

② Ibid.

③ Jochen Schulte-Sasse. “Foreword.” *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Peter Bürger. Trans. Michael Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984. xiv.

④ Ibid., xiii.

⑤ Ibid., xiv.

⑥ Ibid., xv.

⑦ Ibid., xvi.



not to isolate themselves, but to reintegrate themselves and their art into life.”<sup>①</sup> We might compare the efforts with that of the socialists, in particular Chairman Mao’s envisioning of the socialist art, especially when we note the fact that Bürger is “convinced that an avant-garde’s intention of reintegrating art into life praxis cannot occur in bourgeois society, except in the form of a false sublation or overcoming of autonomous art.”<sup>②</sup> But how about China’s avant-gardists of a new cinema ever after the 1990s? Were they concerned with aesthetic innovation as Poggioli explains, or aimed to bring their art back to the real life, to overcome autonomous art, and to reintegrate art into life praxis?

### **China’s Avant-Gardists and Their Social-Cultural Vision**

The directors, most of whom were born in the 1960s and graduated from college in the early 1990s, have experienced their intellectually formative years in the 1980s when the values of enlightenment were the cultural dominant. Holding individualistic concepts, they now take the social obligation of representing unofficial memories and projecting their artistic vision. Thus they often use documentary styles like improvisation, non-dramatic plot, fragmented narrative and images, natural setting and non-professional acting as alternative stylistic choices to support their attribute of truthfulness, which is believed particularly existing among the daily lives of marginal subjects. But this “new cinema” has a gradual development: the first wave of the trend witnessed the urge of self-expression by some self-styled “marginal” figures such as performance artists and urban bohemians; whereas in the second wave, the “weak groups” in particular and “the silent majority” in general came into their horizon, solely because these disadvantageous groups obtrusively appeared in the reality. Thus the truth for them has a particular focus: the “normal” citizen life, which is shown in the officially produced films, is taken to be covering up the deeper, real social problems. Observing this changing focus, Zhang Zhen suggests that the distinction between “the disaffected but nonetheless haughty urban bohemians” in early films of the avant-garde cinema and “the ‘artisans’ (petty thieves or migrant amateur performers) in small towns” be “a visible marker for a paradigmatic shift within the Urban Generation in the 1990s.”<sup>③</sup> But early products of this avant-garde cinema did not enter the public channel of distribution and thus were called by Western critics as “independent”; when the government extended

① Jochen Schulte-Sasse. “Foreword.” *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Peter Bürger. Trans. Michael Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984. xxxvi.

② Ibid., xli-xlii.

③ See Zhang Zhen. “Introduction.” *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*. Ed. Zhang Zhen. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007. 16.

its olive branch in the early of the new century, most of the directors are willingly co-opted by the authority and embrace the trend of commercialization. Yet the ideology and utopia (and to a certain extent the aesthetic style and innovation) as expressed and displayed in the cinematic productions before and after the co-option have no fundamental difference.

On the surface, unlike the Chinese government chanting the bright future brought about by its integration with the world market, the new cinema is suspicious of the baptism of globalization; or it is critical of the myth that globalism can be a solution to Chinese problems. For instance, in Jia Zhangke's cinematic works, ostensibly there are oftentimes messages of anti-globalist, anti-capitalistic themes. One of the salient examples is the film *The World*, in which Chinese peasants travel to the city to become migrant workers to escape poverty, only resulting in a failure to see the fruits of globalism; and thus they become more lost and desolate, and even perish by following these "lies" of fortune and security. In this way, by "portraying... an underprivileged urban population," films like this "debunk the myth of China as a success story of globalization."<sup>①</sup>

Yet after stripping down the ideological underpinnings which now become unfit for reality, what is the new ideology that the new cinema itself expresses or articulates? Could it be exempt from ideological "distortions"? If not, what is the "false consciousness" in terms of the classical Marxian definition of ideology that it harbors?

To answer these questions, we need to ponder the particular conjuncture in which the filmmakers emerged and developed. What is noteworthy is that "they are the first generation of Chinese filmmakers in the era of globalization";<sup>②</sup> the significance of this timing means that "globalization has imposed a radical break between them and their parents' generation in terms of working environment, lifestyle, and value system."<sup>③</sup> Therefore, inasmuch as their "life experiences are shaped by China's integration into the global market" and even "their films are often sponsored by overseas investors,"<sup>④</sup> their cultural-political vision regarding the unprecedented change taking place is also subject to the impingement of the historical sea-change, in particular the onslaught of Western knowledge and ideology in this peculiar historical period.

No matter how to understand the so-called "China miracle," it is without doubt that China's successful story depends on its reliance on, rather than severance from,

① Lu Tonglin. "Trapped Freedom and Localized Globalism." *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*. Eds. Paul G. Pickowicz and Yingjin Zhang. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006. 124.

② Ibid., 125.

③ Ibid., 125.

④ Ibid., 125.



the existing game rule. In this light, we might say that this process confirms nothing but a “singular modernity,”<sup>①</sup> which also brings out a relentless commodification or marketization of all social relations including culture, resulting in a striking cultural logic. Jason McGrath has succinctly summarized this point, “the apparently diverse and disconnected phenomena that appear in the new, pluralized cultural field are in fact all related in that they are manifestations of the logic of the marketization.”<sup>②</sup>

### **Ideology, Utopia, and the Historicity of the Form**

To say that the avant-garde cinema decisively avoids any moral compass is equivalent to say that they are politically immune, which is nothing but declining any ideological analysis. What should be brought out to our attention is that, to convey its specific message, the directors now believe that an absolute objectivity without emotional attachment, which had been the earliest objective of the group, is impossible; thus they can only claim a relative objectivity or an independent subjectivity, by which they want to distinguish their vision of the truth from the untruth of the previous generation. Their commitment to “subjective” and “personal” perspectives on China includes subjective recollections of Chinese history and personal explanations of Chinese society. While the fifth generation, which was also regarded as “avant-garde-minded,” was concerned with shaping a national identity from a collectivist point of view, the sixth now introduces a break from this style by using “personal filmmaking.” Jia Zhangke once says, “The truth is not presented in front of us so blatantly. The truth comes to us through the feelings and the understanding of one person towards another. Only this way we can grasp the truth. Truth or truthfulness does not lay bare in the life. You have to possess a certain degree of sensibility so as to straighten out the logic of emotion and disclose the buried truth.”<sup>③</sup>

But what is the truth in this era; or, what is the “truth content” of the era? The avant-garde cinema has been defined “by its recurrent exploration of public spaces, and of the individuals within them.”<sup>④</sup> However, the binary opposition between the public (space) and the private (space), which was once (and perhaps is still) a popular paradigm in studying contemporary Chinese society, is inadequate if not totally irrelevant in this regard. However, the premise behind this Habermasian discourse of “public space,”

① Fredric Jameson. *A Singular Modernity*. London: Verso, 2013.

② Jason McGrath. *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008. 10.

③ Lesley Yiping Qin and Jia Zhangke. “Look Back in Anger-Interview with Jia Zhangke and Zhaotao on *A Touch of Sin*.” <http://www.asiancinevision.org/look-back-in-anger-interview-with-jia-zhangke-and-zhao-tao-on-a-touch-of-sin/>. Accessed January 6, 2016.

④ Sebastian Veg. “Introduction: Opening Public Spaces.” *China Perspectives* 81 (2010).

namely its assumption of certain “‘shared humanity’ or of an ‘imagined community’ ... in which each individual is free to air an opinion on matters of public significance,”<sup>①</sup> still works for the filmmakers.

Nevertheless, for the directors, to focus merely on the alleged universal “human nature” would not only take the risk of bypassing the unfair political-economic issues of the society, but its predilection for sentimentality (oftentimes verged on a sort of cheap, bourgeois moralism, no matter how “zero degree” it would assume on the surface) could easily be co-opted.

It is in light of this fact that we can go forward discussing the ideology of the vision of “truth” held by the group. As Jameson informs us, “ideology is not necessarily a matter of false consciousness, or of the incorrect or distorted representation of historical ‘fact,’ but can rather be quite consistent with a ‘realistic’ faithfulness to the latter.”<sup>②</sup> Nevertheless, “the displacement of political and historical analysis by ethical judgments and considerations,” which is also witnessed in works of the new cinema, is “generally the sign of an ideological maneuver and of the intent to mystify.”<sup>③</sup>

Thus said, Jameson also urges us to realize the innate existence of utopian impulse in any contemporary works of art, either “those of high culture and modernism or of mass culture and commercial culture,” “albeit in what is often distorted and repressed, unconscious form.”<sup>④</sup> He confirms the fact that “genuine social and historical content must be first tapped and given some initial expression” in artistic works in order to let the content “be the object of successful manipulation and containment” subsequently. Accordingly, he keenly reminds us,

...we cannot fully do justice to the ideological function of works... unless we are willing to concede the presence within them of a more positive function as well: of... their Utopian or transcendent potential—that dimension of even the most degraded type of mass culture which remains implicitly, and no matter how faintly, negative and critical of the social order from which, as a product and a commodity, it springs.<sup>⑤</sup>

In another place, he decisively uses this concept of “utopia” to designate “the demands of a collective life to come, and identify social collectivity as the crucial

① Sebastian Veg. “Introduction: Opening Public Spaces.” *China Perspectives* 81 (2010). 8.

② Fredric Jameson. “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture.” *Social Text* 1 (Winter, 1979): 145.

③ Ibid., 146.

④ Ibid., 147-148.

⑤ Ibid., 144.



centre of any truly progressive and innovative political response to globalization”;<sup>①</sup> which is taken as “our deepest fantasies about the nature of social life, both as we live it now, and as we feel in our bones it ought rather to be lived.”<sup>②</sup> This exploration is meaningful just because:

To reawaken, in the midst of a privatized and psychologizing society, obsessed with commodities and bombarded by the ideological slogans of big business, some sense of the ineradicable drive towards collectivity that can be detected, no matter how faintly and feebly, in the most degraded works of mass culture just as surely as in the classics of modernism—is surely an indispensable precondition for any meaningful Marxist intervention in contemporary culture.<sup>③</sup>

Indeed, ideology or reification (of certain concepts) and utopia are the two sides of the same coin of China’s avant-garde cinema, which requires our inquiry in a dialectic way, and thus also becomes the working hypothesis and methodology of the present study.

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

Both modernism and mass culture entertain relations of repression with the fundamental social anxieties and concerns, hopes and blind spots, ideological antinomies and fantasies of disaster, which are their raw material; only where modernism tends to handle this material by producing compensatory structures of various kinds, mass culture represses them by the narrative construction of imaginary resolutions and by the projection of an optical illusion of social harmony.<sup>④</sup>

Judged by this contrast, what should we say about Chinese avant-garde cinema? Although it is taken by most critics as elite’s art, to name it as a phenomenon of elite culture or mass culture is misleading, just like to label its works as of realism, modernism or postmodernism would incur many controversies as they bear now and then all the complexities of the genres/forms. This idiosyncratic feature points to its peculiar historicity.

① Fredric Jameson. “Globalization and Political Strategy.” *New Left Review* 4 (2000): 68.

② Fredric Jameson. “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture.” *Social Text* 1 (Winter, 1979): 147-148.

③ Ibid.

④ Ibid., 141.

The Chinese avant-garde cinema's focusing of the social outcasts does not simply mean it cares for those underprivileged that had not been covered by the official version of realism till then. The term "diceng" (底层, lower- or under-class) was created as late as 2004, which itself confirms that the underclass is only a newly emerged social stratum that took shape in the 1990s, a consequence of the social-political-economic structural transformations. It is of little doubt that in terms of critical consciousness, artists were much earlier than the scholars in discovering the gradually expanded social phenomena. To be sure, the artistic workers portrayed the dire and lamentable picture merely out of a humanistic spirit, but the inclusion of the migrant rural workers living in the cities, which now composes the majority of China's industrial workforce, into the same class stratum of "diceng" shows that what appears is not a marginal group. It is in terms of this new situation that we can argue that the birth of the avant-garde cinema itself contains an epochal truth.

What this contention entails is that we should also heed to the historicity of the form of China's avant-garde itself. When discussing the historicity of modernism, Jameson has aptly noted that "the omnipresence of the commodity form determines a reactive stance, so that modernism conceives its formal vocation to be the resistance to commodity form, not to be a commodity, to devise an aesthetic language incapable of offering commodity satisfaction, and resistant to instrumentalization," which is "a symptom and a result of cultural crisis, rather than a new 'solution' in its own right"; rather, "the very terms of its solution—the conception of the modernist text as the production and the protest of an isolated individual, and the logic of its sign systems as so many private languages ('styles') and private religions—are contradictory and make the social or collective realization of its aesthetic project... an impossible one."<sup>①</sup>

This argument gives us inspirational thoughts regarding China's avant-garde cinema, especially when we substitute it for the word modernism in the sentences. To be sure, the avant-garde cinema's reactivation against commercialization is merely half of the story, with the other half being challenging the old-styled socialist realism which apparently could not fit in with the new social content. Thus Chinese avant-garde cinema has a dual mission, which speaks to its nature as a product of post-revolutionary society. In this light, its aesthetic language, just like modernism, is also "a symptom and a result of cultural crisis, rather than a new 'solution' in its own right"; which explains why "the social or collective realization of its aesthetic project" is impossible to reach by its "private languages" or styles;<sup>②</sup> though the nature of the cultural crisis is now different.

① Fredric Jameson. "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture." *Social Text* 1 (Winter, 1979): 134-135.

② Ibid.



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

...we must specify this development historically: the older pre-capitalist genres were signs of something like an aesthetic “contract” between a cultural producer and a certain homogeneous class or group public; they drew their vitality from the social and collective status... of the situation of aesthetic production and consumption, that is to say, from the fact that the relationship between artist and public was still in one way or another a social institution and a concrete social and interpersonal relationship with its own validation and specificity. With the coming of the market, this institutional status of artistic consumption and production vanishes: art becomes one more branch of commodity production, the artist loses all social status and faces the options of becoming a *poète maudit* or a journalist, the relationship to the public is problematized, and the latter becomes a virtual “public introuvable” ...<sup>①</sup>

Also following this rationale, we might argue that what China’s avant-garde faced was the traditional socialist genres (such as works of socialist realism and other forms of mass culture) which were signs of an aesthetic contract between the Maoist cultural producer and the “homogeneous class or group public” which was the masses of the socialist republic. This existing “situation of aesthetic production and consumption” has inexorably changed since “the relationship between artist and public,” being “a social institution... with its own validation and specificity” encountered its ultimate disintegration with the vehement encroachment of the marketization into the streets and lanes of the society. Thus, it is not necessarily that the older artistic productions were nothing but lies (although they might be dogmatic) whilst the avant-garde cinema shows the “truth”; rather, it is the new truth of the era exposed itself which destroyed the existing social institutions or the older social contract by rendering it look old-fashioned or obsolete.

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

...the strategic emphasis on innovation and novelty, the obligatory break with previous styles, the pressure—geometrically increasing with the ever swifter historicity of consumer society, with its yearly or quarterly style and fashion

① Fredric Jameson. “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture.” *Social Text* 1 (Winter, 1979): 136-137.